Making sense of strategising: the process and practice of participation during strategy formulation

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Abstract

Strategy As Practice (SAP) scholars have been called to explore the strategy work of individuals outside the senior leadership team as part of the “open strategy” concept.

Within this, participation is a way to elicit the input, contributions and feedback of actors across the organisation, resulting in a better-quality strategy. While participation practices have been explored in relation to isolated episodes or actor groups, previous research fails to consider how participation is used across different strategising activities by different actors and over time. There has also been a lack of understanding of the broader process of strategising, particularly concerning sensemaking as a social, collective process.

This thesis examines the process and practice of participation from frontline personnel during the strategy formulation of a single organisation (Charity Ltd.). In doing so, it evaluates how senior leaders used participation as part of a strategising process, how enablers and constraints affected participation in strategy formulation and identified the practices used to facilitate it. A single case study approach conducted 16 interviews with nine senior and middle managers selected based on their involvement with a strategising process from within a British organisation between 2017-2019 during the formulation of a new strategy. Interview data were triangulated with 26 hours of direct participant observation across 11 strategy workshops and archival analysis of 281 documents and artefacts.

The study found that participants and facilitators use participation activities to form, explore and confirm their understanding of strategy in a continuous,

iterative sensemaking process. Six influencing factors were identified: board direction and existing strategy, appropriate timing, stakeholder and process legitimacy, leadership competence, organisational restructuring, and available time and resources. These either required alignment, had a reinforcing relationship, or existed in tension. Five practices were used in combination by strategy practitioners to facilitate participation: creating the space for participation, developing multiple narratives, selection and privileging of information, the use of ambiguity, and using materiality to fix strategy discourse. An emergent issue was also identified where participation diluted middle managers' contribution, leading to a feeling of being marginalised in the process.

This thesis adds an essential dimension to the established body of knowledge on sensemaking by explicitly identifying participation as a sensemaking process. It forwards a framework of participation in strategy formulation, identifying a set of practices to facilitate participation. Practitioners looking to implement participation in a strategising process can use the knowledge of enablers, constraints, and relationships to better design activities and have a greater awareness of when, where and how participation will be effective. This research enables SAP scholars to articulate the process of participation in strategy making, using the framework to explore the nature of participation in other strategy environments. Scholars wishing to build on this thesis could explore the nature of narrative concerning participation, confirm the influencing factors in other environments, and further explore the role of middle management in participatory approaches to strategy formulation.

Statement of originality

This thesis and the research to which it refers are the results of my own efforts. Any ideas, data, images or text resulting from the work of others has been identified as such within the thesis and attributed in the text and bibliography. This thesis has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other academic degree or professional qualification. Early findings of this research were presented at the British Academy of Management 2019 Research Conference and parts of the thesis were published in the Conference proceedings[1].

Ashley Garlick

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Table of Contents

Table of figures

Table of tables

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

No single CEO or strategy team can know it all. Organisations are beginning to understand the value of involving others in creating strategy, facilitating a movement towards the opening of strategy work (Vaara, Rantakari and Holstein, 2019; Whittington, 2019). There is mounting evidence that opening the strategy process to a broader audience through greater inclusion and transparency can significantly benefit firms (Mack and Szulanski, 2017). Participation increases commitment to strategies (Laine and Vaara, 2015), while an absence of participation harms the quality of the resulting strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). Despite the benefits, there is currently a minimal understanding of how participation informs and shapes strategy work in organisations (Hutter, Nketia and Füller, 2017; Tavella, 2020). Inconsistent use by scholars means the concept lacks a clear definition. This thesis addresses this by conceptualising participation in strategy formulation and presents this in the form of a new framework.

The concept of participation has many different interpretations (Macpherson and Clark, 2009), with the term participation often used interchangeably with inclusion (Mack and Szulanski, 2017). Participation refers to the elicitation of input, contributions, feedback, or buy-in to strategic decisions during strategy formulation. While participation can refer to the involvement and practices of senior actors at the executive or board level, i.e. those expected to ‘own’ strategy (Fiegener, 2005), it is more commonly used as a term to refer to the inclusion of a more comprehensive set of actors including middle management (Ketokivi and Castañer, 2004), frontline employees (Balogun, Best and Lê, 2015), external practitioners such as strategy consultants (Seidl and Werle, 2018), or broader

stakeholders (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). The “open strategy” concept integrates the wider and more inclusive practices (Birkinshaw, 2017), and therefore participation could be considered part of inclusion. Hautz *et al.* (2017) argue that inclusion is more than mere participation, requiring sustained stakeholder interactions and a sense of community. It is variable and contingent, dependent on supportive circumstances and reliant on practices such as controlled agenda-setting and issue-framing. In papers that place participation separate to inclusion, participation is a term usually used to refer to a set of specific practices or behaviours (Gegenhuber and Dobusch, 2017), such as Chief Executive Strategy presentations, ‘jams’, and wiki conversations (Dobusch, Dobusch and Müller-Seitz, 2019).

Participation has received relatively little attention in the strategy literature (Vaara, Rantakari and Holstein, 2019). Historically, research has seen strategy as the top management team’s domain and has consequently failed to consider participation beyond considering how personal demographic or professional backgrounds impact participation between top managers (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007). Henry Mintzberg would pioneer the idea of emergent strategies (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), developed further by processualists such as Andrew Pettigrew (Pettigrew, 1985) and Robert Burgelman (Burgelman, 1983), which would begin to recognise the influence of people outside the top team. The literature separates the resulting directions into four main perspectives: participation as a non-issue; participation as a part of strategy process dynamics; participation as produced in and through organisational practices; and participation as an issue of subjectivity (Laine and Vaara, 2015).

While the process perspective developed into a field of research, many would suggest that the distinction between process and strategy-as-practice (SAP) perspectives is, to some extent, arbitrary (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). MacKay, Chia and Nair (2020) argue that neither process nor practice research alone provides a satisfactory explanation of strategy actions in organisations. Increasingly researchers are drawing these two fields together (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018). This study considered both process and practice equally essential and sought to conceptualise participation in strategy formulation with both these perspectives in mind while principally positioning itself within the SAP field.

Participation of middle managers (and others) is time-consuming and resource demanding. While managers give prominence to employee involvement and generating consensus during the implementation phase, they still prioritise external analysis and macro-environmental factors when formulating strategy (Köseoglu *et al.*, 2020). For this to change, there needs to be a clear understanding of the value participation has to the final realised strategy and clarity for managers regarding what participation does and how they can 'do' participation effectively. The exploration of participation forms a crucial part of the three "masses" of strategy identified by Richard Whittington (2015):

1. Increased involvement in strategy of actors beyond the Senior Management Team through *mass participation* activities.

2. The renewed focus of the use of *mass bearing* material artefacts in strategy work; and

3. The proliferation of these material artefacts being everyday objects of *mass production* (such as flipcharts, sticky notes or PowerPoint decks).

The three masses are intertwined. Mass-produced and mass-bearing objects enact mass participation. Exploring this nexus of strategy provides a mechanism to explain how practices, objects, and episodes facilitate participation in a strategising process. A way to delineate this complex nexus is by considering three central concepts: practitioners, practice and praxis (Whittington, 2006).

Practitioners – organisational actors and structure

Studying participation in strategy work allows for considering multiple actors and different practices drawn upon for strategy work (Laine and Vaara, 2015). Studies have explored the influence of hierarchy, finding that a 'low organisation hierarchy' is an enabler of middle management participation in strategic development (Carney, 2004) and that development of 'division-level strategy teams' during the corporate strategising process leads to increased proactiveness (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007). Jarzabkowski (2008) finds that organisational structure influences the effectiveness of different strategising practices, finding that a highly institutionalised strategy requires a simultaneous pattern of interactive strategising (such as discussions and meetings) and procedural strategising (such as planning, control and monitoring of change). In contrast, a weakly institutionalised strategy requires a sequential pattern of interactive, then procedural strategising. Therefore, scholars must consider structure, hierarchy and the relationships between different actors and actor groups, especially when this spans beyond the Senior Management Team.

Most of the work that considers involvement in strategy outside the Senior Management Team has focused on middle management. Middle managers play a crucial role in translating strategic meaning to frontline workers, communicating operational context to senior leaders, implementing and, monitoring and

evaluating strategy in organisations (Surju, de Metz and Davis, 2020). Middle managers interpret actions, rumours and gossip to develop a shared understanding of strategic change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004) while also building and leading informal strategic networks (Kodama, 2005). Middle managers' autonomous behaviour constructs emergent strategies through mobilising more comprehensive support for projects and altering the structural context for their embeddedness (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014, in Laine and Vaara, 2015, p. 620). Inclusion in strategy motivates and energises middle managers to dominate or co-determine some aspects of the conversation (Westley, 1990). In comparison, Marginson (2002) contends that the values, purpose, and direction of the organisation communicated by top management enhances the proactiveness of middle management. Understanding the crucial role that middle management play is essential; however, to fully explore participation, a study should also consider actors beyond senior and middle managers.

A limited number of studies consider other actors in strategy, primarily consultants. Kornberger and Clegg (2011) found that consultants and strategy experts could control which issues were defined as strategic, and therefore diminish the strategic agency of other participants. However, only a few studies have examined the involvement of other internal or external stakeholders in strategy work beyond the top and middle management (Laine and Vaara, 2015). In a large-scale statistical analysis of participation in strategic planning, Ketokivi and Castañer (2004) found that participation reduces position bias and the likelihood that employees engage in their sub-goal pursuits and do not integrate the strategy. Participation, therefore, leads to greater integration and more negligible diversification of goals (Laine and Vaara, 2015). The use of

participation can also be a way to prepare internal and external actors for impending strategic change, through a “readying stage”, which encompasses: a) developing and educating employees; b) setting a sense of direction and repeating that message; and c) nested and continuous communications with internal and external actors (Ates, 2019). These kinds of issues, and the lack of established academic literature exploring them, highlights the importance of further study into the environment around participation and how different factors influence the strategising process.

Practice - Mass produced and mass participation

People in organisations often routinise actions and behaviours to the point where they become accepted practice. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and Savigny (2001, p. 11) define practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding”. The key to this definition is that those affected by them must share the understanding to be considered a practice. Individuals achieve this understanding by embodying and materially mediating their actions in discursive and socio-material ways (Orlikowski and Scott, 2015). Practices are, therefore, commonly categorised as either being discursive or socio-material.

The sophistication of different types of practice has developed alongside the understanding of practices within research. Research has explored discursive practices in themes such as the use of narrative (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013; Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016); rhetoric and metaphor (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008; Sorsa and Vaara, 2020); as well as discursive practices linked to specific actor groups such as middle managers (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). Scholars have also broken down socio-material practices into those that look at

material artefacts (Werle and Seidl, 2015); epistemic objects, such as cognitive strategy tools (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013); and temporal episodes such as strategy workshops or meetings (Seidl and Guerard, 2015).

Not all practices are participation practices; some may include participation within a sub-set of practices. The general practice field has considered related areas, such as exploring practices within a collaborative environment (Alpenberg and Scarbrough, 2021). However, some research has identified participation practices as a type and explored this in isolation, for instance, as three modes with varying degrees of participation: broadcasting (revealing relevant strategic information to external audiences); dialoguing (revealing strategic information while simultaneously soliciting opinions and engaging external audiences in an open conversation); and including (external audiences' participation in decision-making through democratic mechanisms) (Gegenhuber and Dobusch, 2017). However, there has yet to be a study that considers practices that facilitate participation across an entire strategising process.

Praxis – The use of objects and episodes

If practices are routinised behaviours, then praxis is the live actions and behaviours within them (Reckwitz, 2002). They represent what people do. As such, studies seeking to understand praxis are usually concerned with how and why actors use material objects, artefacts or conceptual tools within their situated environment or specific strategising episodes. Therefore, the issue of sociomateriality frames these studies. Laine and Vaara (2015) argue for the furtherance of sociomateriality research about participation, understanding the impact of material artefacts, technologies and embedded practices that enable and constrain participation. Post-structuralist research identifies strategy as being

discursively co-constructed. The nature of this phenomenon means that, despite the structural intent of strategic practice in organisations, the actors' actual discursively driven behaviours create strategy. The implication being that praxis and practice are, therefore, of equal importance.

While the body of knowledge around materiality is more developed than other areas, the challenge is that much of the research is highly contextualised and often dependent on specific episodes or environments. A common way to theorise beyond the specific case is to link praxis to practice and then conceptualise it to a higher level. For example, Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke (2011) identify five discursive practices used by the Chair of strategy meetings to create consensus: bonding, encouraging, directing, modulating, and re/committing. Teams also use five discursive practices to develop shared views around strategy in meetings: re/defining, equalising, simplifying, legitimising, and reconciling (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak, 2014). These studies further illustrate the inseparable relationship between praxis and practice and how they combine to form a process of strategising.

A lot of the extant literature focuses on how strategists use tools and artefacts. However, much less research explores how practitioners' internal logic shapes their understanding and actions concerning strategy (Wright, Paroutis and Blettner, 2013; Burke and Wolf, 2021). In line with the wider 'practice turn' in strategy, more significant social theory as a lens to explain the relationship between understanding and behaviours can address this deficiency (Whittington, 2006). There is a range of broader social theories that can help frame an understanding of participation in strategy. Sensemaking has emerged as one of the most useful in exploring the relationship between an individual and collective

meaning (Bencherki, Basque and Rouleau, 2019). Sensemaking acknowledges the socially constructed nature of meaning while also reflecting that practices take place as a process over time. This thesis argues that sensemaking is the most appropriate social theory to be applied to participation in strategy formulation through exploring a range of alternatives.

Sensemaking

There is a need to explain better how organisations create a shared view of strategy through participation by different actors in space and time, building on the current research that looks at the co-construction of understanding (Laine and Vaara, 2015). Central to this idea is that participation facilitates alignment between individual and collective meaning, accepting that ambiguity of meaning can still be present during meaning construction. There is also a need for greater recognition of participation in different institutional and cultural contexts, as research to date tends to assume that issues of participation would be similar across different industries and institutions, which may or may not be the case. Applying social theory conceptualises the specific context at a higher level which addresses the limitation in knowledge.

As the dominant theoretical approach to meaning and interpretation in mainstream organisational studies, Cornelissen and Schildt (2015: 348) describe the logic of applying sensemaking within SAP, as it has developed into an umbrella construct relating to the formation of shared understandings and the "coevolution of actors and the environment they inhabit". Previous studies have looked at either sensemaking within a single organisational level (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012) or sensemaking across boundaries (Maitlis, 2005; Mantere, Schildt and Sillince, 2012). However, few papers have considered this as part of a single

process that occurs over time. As such, current research fails to recognise that sensemaking must both occur within and across hierarchical levels. Despite the most common sensemaking application being within strategy and organisational change studies, very few studies try to compare sensemaking efforts “within and between different types of sensemaking episodes” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S21). Therefore, there is still limited awareness of how sensemaking occurs or the relationship between participation and sensemaking (Bencherki, Basque and Rouleau, 2019). This study explored the application of sensemaking to a participation strategising process.

1.2 Problem statement

Original work must claim a contribution by constructing and connecting to the existing literature while also problematising that very literature. Doing so carves out a space for the original contribution to knowledge and positions the work within the field of what is currently known. Following the example set out by Dittrich, Golden-Biddle, Feldman, and Locke (2015), this thesis sets out that the existing literature is both “incomplete” and “inadequate”.

The existing literature is incomplete because SAP research has, to date, focused too much on describing practices and ignored how practice is created (Rasche and Chia, 2009). The strategy formulation literature’s preoccupation with content means a gap in the literature that considers how the content fits within an overall strategising process. More specifically, there is a gap that considers how participation in strategy formulation influences the broader process of strategising. Instead of analysing participatory practices as a set of practices at a singular point in time or single process, this longitudinal research fills a gap in the literature by exploring the nature and role of participation in strategy making as

part of an entire strategising process. Furthermore, the nature of participation acknowledges that both sensemaking and sensegiving are social activities, so there is a need to develop a greater understanding of how individual sensemaking translates into a collective understanding of strategy.

The literature is inadequate because there has historically been a focus on how strategising uses tools and artefacts, but a lack of knowledge about the internal logic applied by actors. There needs to be recognition of how material objects interact with human activity to inform understanding and aid collective sensemaking. Importantly, research is needed to consider the interaction between, within, and across different roles and levels within the organisation. The theory is developing on participation strategies. However, there needs to be more work to contextualise the current work to understand how and where these theories apply. The following research questions address these deficiencies:

1. How is participation used as part of a strategising process?

2. What factors influence participation in strategy formulation, and how do they enable or constrain strategising?

3. What practices facilitate participation in strategy formulation?

In order to answer these research questions, this thesis sets out with the following aim and objectives:

Aim

The thesis aims to produce a framework of participation strategy formulation that explains how practitioners can use practices, objects and episodes to facilitate participation in a strategising process.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the relationship between the process and practices involved in participation strategy work.

2. To examine a single case of new strategy development that uses a participatory approach.

3. To identify the practices used to facilitate participation during strategy formulation.

4. To evaluate the enablers and constraints that affect participation during strategising.

5. To synthesise practices, episodes, enablers and constraints together to allow the development of a framework of participation in strategy formulation.

1.3 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes an original contribution to the topic of participation in strategy formulation within the strategy-as-practice field. Participation in strategy formulation is conceptualised in a new framework that explains how practices are mediated through episodes as part of an iterative three-stage strategising process. The framework visualises a crucial theoretical contribution containing a process model of participation strategising, exploration of the enablers and constraints (including the relationships between them) and identifying specific practices that facilitate participation. This framework has value to both practitioners and scholars. The framework provides a guide to how strategy practitioners can effectively implement participation approaches in strategy

formulation. Scholars benefit from a more advanced understanding of the relationship between participation, strategic practices, episodes and the strategising process. Also, this thesis demonstrates the value of single case studies to SAP research, providing a methodological approach that future studies into participation could adopt. It contributes to other studies exploring strategies at different levels and considering the specific practices that different actors use.

1.4 Context of the study

This study takes place within a single national charity based in England, U.K. (Charity Ltd.) during the formulation of a new organisational strategy. Although an increasingly professionalised environment, third-sector organisations are often reliant on a volunteer dominated workforce. The increased agency of volunteers means they must be more strategically aligned with the organisation for whom they operate (Lindberg, 2007). Volunteers make a conscious choice on which organisations to be involved with and are more easily able to walk away. Therefore, volunteering organisations must make more effort to ensure that personnel are on-board with the company's strategic purpose. For these reasons, this is an ideal context for exploring Whittington's (2015) 'massification' of strategy, where engagement in strategising is often expanded beyond the SMT, making use of everyday material objects to help capture and shape the understanding of actor groups.

The study of third-sector organisations is typical across both the management and strategic management literature (for a review of the use of general strategic concepts in third sector organisations, see Kong, 2008). However, there is minimal research specifically within the SAP field that considers the third sector (Al-Mansour, 2021). Examples include exploring the openness of strategy in

Wikimedia (Dobusch, Dobusch and Müller-Seitz, 2019) or including a charitable organisation alongside several other cases when looking at ritualisation in strategy workshops (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). Balogun, Best and Lê (2015) use a heritage non-profit organisation as their case to argue that volunteers and frontline employees are more invested in strategy than once thought. Jarzabkowski, Giulietti, Oliveira, and Amoo (2013) include non-profits as a variable in their more exhaustive quantitative study of adopting strategy tools. More broadly, authors have studied third sector organisations concerning models of strategic management (Moore, 2000), values and strategy (Frumkin and Andre-Clark, 2000), strategic planning (Reid *et al.*, 2014; Wu Berberich, 2015), volunteer management practices (Hager and Brudney, 2015).

Existing studies of sensemaking and change in more traditional commercial sector firms often overlook that sensemaking is a team-based process (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). The nature of volunteer-dominated environments increasingly drives organisations to adopt a participative approach to strategising. Historical involvement with the organisation as a volunteer means that the author became aware of the impending strategising process before it officially commenced. The forewarning of the strategising process enabled the exploration of participation in ‘real-time’. Data collection was able to track the process as it happened and explore historical documents and participant accounts.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, the thesis continues with the following structure:

Chapter two

Chapter two begins with an overview of the SAP literature's historical development and the emerging convergence of practice and process research. In considering the process of strategising, this chapter considers the application of social theory and argues for the appropriateness of applying sensemaking to participation. It explores participation in strategy research, introduces the open strategy concept, and explores the role of practitioners and episodes. Strategic practices are discussed, separated into two constituent types: discursive and sociomaterial.

Chapter three

This chapter explores the methods employed in this study. Social constructivist philosophy is justified against alternatives, after which there is an outline of the single case study approach. The chapter explains the data collection techniques of archival data, participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews before outlining the inductive composition analysis method.

Chapter four

After introducing the case organisation, chapter four begins exploring the data using a "thick description" which provides a temporal account of the strategising process. The findings present a graphical timeline of critical events to summarise two key phases. Following this, the chapter explores the process of strategising, before introducing the enablers, constraints and practices employed during the process. It ends by discussing the role of middle management.

Chapter five

The discussion chapter is structured around three main research questions. It first considers how participation is used as part of a strategising process, then discusses how enablers and constraints impact participation before considering

the use of practices. It ends by identifying an emerging theme of middle management marginalisation. The conclusion to the discussion summarises the key points as a visual framework of participation in strategy formulation.

Chapter six

Initial conclusions draw out the essential findings and highlight the theoretical, practical and methodological contributions to knowledge. The chapter explores the limitations of the study before summarising recommendations for both practice and theory. The thesis ends with a reflective account of the research journey.

Chapter Two: The process and practice of participation in strategy making

2.1 Introduction

Through a review of the existing literature, this chapter will explore the complex relationship between the process of strategising, the organisational actors who do it, and the practices they employ to achieve their goals. Whittington (2015a) provides an overview that strategy has been "massified" in three ways:

- the materialisation of strategy through weight-bearing artefacts
- the increased use of popular mass-produced objects
- the opening of strategy to the masses through mass-participation

Although listed separately, they are over-lapping and highly interrelated concepts. Social theory will be used as a lens to interpret micro issues and allow strategising to be conceptualised at the macro level. Therefore, this chapter will explore the theoretical relationship between strategy process and practice, providing important context to understand the empirical data.

The chapter begins by situating the thesis within the broad discipline of Strategy-as-Practice (SAP), placing it alongside other schools of thought within the management literature. Within SAP, there is a gap in current literature that considers practices over time, bridging the divide between practice and process research. Following this, participation in strategy making will be explored in more depth, as the central pillar of this thesis, considering how practitioners and episodes are used as part of a participation strategising process. It will argue that in order to conceptualise SAP research better, there is a need for better application of social theories, allowing findings to be broadened to a more

abstract level. Specific practices used as part of a strategising process are split into discursive and socio-material categories. Discursive practices are explored in relation to power and legitimacy, ambiguity, discursive ability and the use of narrative; Sociomaterial practices to materiality, epistemic objects, tools and artefacts.

2.2 Strategy-as-Practice

The Strategy field formed in the 1960s as senior management determined long-term goals and chose the appropriate actions to meet them (Chandler, 1962). Moves by academics such as Ivor Ansoff (1965) would introduce consideration of external factors. Tools such as Andrews' (1965) SWOT analysis aimed to match organisational resources (strengths and weaknesses) to environmental opportunities and threats. The 1980s saw a focus on Michael Porter's competitive positioning and generic strategies, introducing his five forces and value chain frameworks and the diamond model of competitive advantage (Porter, 1980, 1985 and 1990). Simultaneously, the need for more globally practical strategies saw the development of the 'Resource-Based View' of the firm, which shifted the focus back from external to internal factors. This view argued that competitive advantage could be created by having valuable, difficult to imitate, not readily obtainable and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). As strategic planning gave way to strategic management, changes towards open markets, mobile labour, and information abundance reflected an increasingly changing and uncertain world (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003), necessitating a move away from the traditional resource-based view (Barney, 2001). As the pace of change made sustaining competitive advantage difficult, industries began to question the strategic planning process's value (Prahalad and Hamel, 2007).

Despite this, the Positioning School continued to provide widely-used strategy tools into the 2000s (Hunter and Shannassy, 2007), which still forms the backbone to most strategic management courses taught in business schools today (Furrer, Thomas and Goussevskaia, 2008).

With a focus on strategy as something organisations have, institutional theorists often consider organisations as distinct entities in themselves, a collection of parts that coalesce to form a whole - ignoring the role that people play in creating the norms, rules and structures that make organisations a socially constructed collective. Much of the literature still assumes that strategy is decided at the top and cascaded down a hierarchical structure (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). The new century would shift from looking at the environment (whether internal or external) to considering how and why strategy is done. What began as 'micro strategy and strategising' in a special edition of the *Journal of Management Studies* (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003) developed into what is now called 'Strategy-as-Practice' or SAP. Strategy cannot be separated from those within the organisation; text may articulate strategy, but that text should guide decision-making, management action, and the staff's organisational behaviour. The SAP perspective embraces the idea that strategy is something an organisation *does* rather than something it *has* (Whittington, 1996; Seidl and Whittington, 2014). SAP sees strategy as a socially constructed phenomenon that relies on a shared understanding between all the actors involved. Put more simply, Johnson et al., (2007: 7) defines SAP as *"a concern with what people do in relation to strategy and how this is influenced by and influences their organisational and institutional context"*.

Essential in understanding SAP is the need to understand how strategy manifests itself across the organisation and how workers at all levels choose to engage with the strategy creation and strategy implementation process. Whittington (2015) highlights a call to investigate further and acknowledge the societal context in which strategy is developed and implemented, as well as the impact on those outside the senior management team (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Balogun, Best and Lê, 2015). Vaara and Whittington (2012) highlight the need for further research on the micro-aspects of strategy. Within the SAP field, researchers have responded in a way that has taken the literature in several different directions: evaluating processes (Regnér, 2003); investigating the tools used (Jarzabkowski, 2004); investigating the people (Mantere, 2005, 2008); how people make sense of strategy (Balogun and Johnson, 2004); and how people interact through discourse (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Paroutis, Heracleous, and Angwin (2016) outline the value of understanding the discourse in an organisation; *"By paying attention to the language employed by and in organisations, we can gain insights into why agents act as they do. Insights which can also inform our understanding of organisational actions."* (p.96).

Studying the practices of those people directly engaged with strategy allows us to achieve that rare combination of furthering the theoretical understanding of strategic practice while also producing valuable knowledge to practitioners (Golsorkhi *et al*, 2015:2). Vaara and Whittington (2012: 3) define practice as "*accepted ways of doing things, embodied and materially mediated, that are shared between actors and routinised over time*". Simpson (2009), taking the particular influence of the works of George Herbert Mead, defines practice as "*the conduct of transactional life, which involves the temporally-unfolding, symbolically-mediated interweaving of experience and action*" (2009, p. 1338).

Both these definitions agree that practice revolves around social actions that people and material objects mediate. Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni (2010), following a review of practice definitions across the management literature, take a less detailed, more abstract view, finding research to either define practice as empirical objects or as a way of seeing things – however, they acknowledge that SAP, as a field of research, fits more appropriately in the former. Studying practice is as much about what people do as it is about the outcomes of their actions and is an integral part of organisational studies (Alpenberg and Scarbrough, 2021).

2.3 Participation in strategy work

Pressures for external legitimacy and internal commitment in public and non-profit organisations often result in decoupled planning documents with little substantive content but are designed to please outsiders (Stone and Brush, 1996, in: Abdallah and Langley, 2014, p. 3). Participation in strategy work increases commitment in organisations, which helps strategic implementation (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Vaara, Rantakari and Holstein, 2019). A lack of participation in strategy formulation, as well as being a sign of organisational inequality (Knights and Morgan, 1991), can lead to poorly developed strategies (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000), dissatisfaction in excluded groups (Westley, 1990) and difficulties in implementation (Mintzberg, 1994). Not a single or fixed concept, participation could be consultation on a specific issue, involvement in decision making, or more generally as a mechanism for information exchange (Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel, 1998). Breadth, timing and mechanisms of participation are all components. These would encompass involvement and participation in strategy development, access to strategic information, perceived exclusion from

strategic decision-making, and the type of formal and informal communication channels within the organisation (Carney, 2004). As strategising becomes increasingly inclusive and transparent, it embraces the concept of Open Strategy, which sees strategy and strategic decision making exposed to the broadest possible range of people. It presents a new and emerging avenue for research and is *"simultaneously macro phenomenon and micro instantiation"* (Hautz, Seidl and Whittington, 2017, p. 2).

Studies have found that organisational predisposition impacts participation (Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel, 1998) and structure (Carney, 2004). It is less likely to occur in highly rule orientated organisations but is more likely to occur in organisations with lower past performance than those with higher past performance. Flatter hierarchies enhance downward communication flows, which permit more involvement in strategy development. In contrast, more complex (or taller) structures tend to exclude people from strategy and have more inadequate communication and a lack of access to information. Participative strategies more consciously and intentionally used to actively resist the traditional hegemonic discourses (Mantere and Vaara, 2008). However, hegemonic strategy processes may become self-destructive in contexts calling for comprehensive organisational support. Therefore, discourses can reflect prevailing organisational praxis and legitimise or delegitimise particular practices or people (Tavella, 2020). Multiple discourses can be helped by having ambiguity in strategic plans, as ambiguous texts can accommodate different perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Abdallah and Langley, 2014). Strategic planning, therefore, serves to develop consensus and promote commitment among organisation members and play an essential role in legitimising the organisation and its strategy with external stakeholders.

Knowledge-sharing among employees is critical to strategy as it can be a source of competitive advantage (Neeley and Leonardi, 2018). As knowledge sharing is a core component of "*doing strategy*" (Jarzabkowski, 2004, p. 529), this adds to the argument for increased participation in strategy. However, much of the work that looks explicitly at participation tends to focus on a limited context such as a specific actor group (Andersson, 2020), sub-concept (Tavella, 2020), or type of participation activity (Dobusch, Dobusch and Müller-Seitz, 2019). What is lacking in participation research are studies that look at the process of participation in strategy holistically across different groups and activities over time. Considering participation in this way would recognise that participation in strategy can occur in different organisational spaces, including those that people do not consider to be strategic such as casual, personal or non-work-related interactions.

Amrollahi and Rowlands (2019) identify both trust and IT literacy as critical facilitators to open strategic planning exercises and the diversity of participants. Neeley and Leonardi (2018) argue that social media can serve as a "social lubricant" that can help people initiate and maintain interactions and view work contexts and communication exchanges, which helps facilitate the development of trust. Trust creates an environment where workers can share knowledge or seek help from colleagues or identify helpful contacts. Paradoxically, however, social media can also inhibit knowledge sharing in some circumstances due to a tension created by the use of work and non-work-related content. Either way, "*the study of episodes of technology-mediated strategy practices comparatively across time or across organisations… offers exciting opportunities"* (Whittington, 2014, p. 90). The use of social media platforms, both internal and external, dramatically increases the scope of who can be involved in strategising and

opens up the process to increased scrutiny. Authors often link these concepts to the broader “open strategy” concept, of which participation is a part.

Open Strategy

The different dimensions of Open Strategy are transparency and inclusion (Hautz, Seidl and Whittington, 2017). Transparency refers to the internal or external visibility of the information about an organisation’s strategy. Inclusion refers to the internal or external consultation and includes participation. Each of these is a continuum found in organisations that adopt an Open Strategy approach to varying degrees, but this suggests the inclusion of a broader range of internal and external stakeholders and better access to strategic information and decisions (Morton, Wilson and Cooke, 2015). Strategy-as-Practice research has consistently recognised the value of local accounts of strategising activities in specific episodes (Hendry and Seidl, 2003) but has grappled less with strategy practices that have the capacity, as Open Strategy does, of transforming organisational relationships and responsibilities more widely in society (Whittington, 2019). Therefore, an inclusive and transparent approach to strategising can produce open strategy practices, such as Chief Executive strategy presentations, ‘jams’, and wiki conversations.

Transparency is a highly contingent variable, depending on such circumstances as a deviation of strategy from industry norms and market maturity. Transparency varies in terms of its use of technology, the extent of access, range of permitted topics, freedom from moderation and whether it is mandatory or voluntary. Inclusion is variable and contingent. Hautz et al. (2017) find inclusion dependent on supportive circumstances and reliant on practices such as controlled agenda-setting and issue-framing. The organisation needs to have sufficient reflexive

capabilities in order to integrate the feedback into organisational structures. Inclusion comes in varying forms and is more than mere participation but requires sustained stakeholder interactions, developing a sense of community (Hautz, Seidl and Whittington, 2017). There are many dilemmas within Open Strategy, including process, commitment, disclosure, empowerment, and escalation. These present both benefits and drawbacks to an open strategy approach. Inevitably, a focus on participation in strategy making must consider whom it is involved and, therefore, the role of practitioners in strategising.

2.4 The process of strategising

Scholars have explored the idea of strategy as a process since the 1970s (Pettigrew, 1977). However, current thinking acknowledges that SAP and process research are complementary rather than competitive (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018). Kouamé and Langley (2018) explain that strategy process and practice research share a concern with a broadly similar phenomenon, where “process” and “practice” are used as labels for different forms of theorising. Process research shows temporal linkages of events over time. These can be split into process theories but also variance theories that express relationships between variables. Practice research comes with a different set of theoretical and ontological assumptions, seeing actions as socially situated and mutually constructed. SAP shares many characteristics of the strategy process literature but seeks a better understanding of the micro-level processes and practices constituting strategy and strategising (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Hughes and McDonagh, 2021). While the starting points may be different, the two approaches are very closely related:

> *"One can relate processes and practices empirically in at least two ways. First, long-term processes of strategy development over time may embed multiple practices or multiple enactments of the same practice (e.g., repeated management meetings). Second, particular practices can have distinctive processual structures (e.g., a particular instance of the practice of "strategic planning" can be viewed as a process that plays out as a sequence of events). In other words, the empirical concepts are distinct, but highly interrelated. Mobilising both concepts in a study is possible, though rare" (Kouamé and Langley, 2018, p. 562).*

The unification of practice and process acknowledges the inseparability of actions with temporality. Time has been shown to significantly impact strategic decision making and change (Crilly, 2017; Kunisch *et al.*, 2017) and is a "fundamental characteristic" of the processuality of strategy making (Myllykoski and Rantakari, 2018). Time is a source of tension between different organisational actors (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013) and links to the materiality of strategic decisions (McGivern *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, this thesis sets out to consider practices enacted over time, something rarely considered in SAP research to date.

Through a review of the literature, Kouamé and Langley (2018) identify three ways to link micro-practices with organisational outcomes: correlation, progression, and instantiation. The latter (most commonly linked with SAP research) applies the logic of embeddedness, which represents a shift from how micro-activities predict macro-outcomes (correlation) and how micro-activities interact recursively with macro-level factors over time (progression) toward what it is that micro-activities accomplish. For example, where scholars examine specific events or series of events to show how individual behaviours in interaction contribute to constituting or "performing" strategy at the micro-level (Rouleau, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). The strength of instantiation is that it promotes a deep understanding of micro-level interactions that are often understated or forgotten. However, Kouamé and Langley (2018) also argue that

it does not continually develop a broader, longer-term assessment of macro-level outcomes beyond the moment or period of the studies microprocesses.

Many process studies that adopt a progression linking strategy incorporate cyclical or recursive temporal linkages, reminiscent of structuration process (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000; Denis, Lamothe and Langley, 2001; Jarzabkowski, 2008). Researchers adopting a progression linking strategy will often decompose timelines into blocks or phases described in structuration as “temporal bracketing” (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). “The progression strategy is better adapted to literal replication where cases are used to show similarity in processes across different settings rather than to explain differences” (Kouamé and Langley, 2018, p. 571). This thesis will look to combine progression with instantiation. By first identifying the strategising process timeline (progression), it will explore the specific practices employed at critical points in the timeline (instantiation).

Seeing strategy and organisational structure as being closely interwoven, Jarzabkowski, Lê, and Balogun (2018) highlight the important and established link between strategy and organisational structure in ensuring competitive advantage, especially during a period of radical mandated change. Exploring the social practices that help co-evolve both strategy and structure during a period of mandated radical change results in a rare study that considers different individuals and groups’ actions throughout the entire organisation. Their study finds an iterative process by which actions by managers to perform the espoused strategy have unintended consequences. Managers reinforce these consequences, who confirm that their actions are consistent with the mandated change. However, these then escalate until the change process breaks down, triggering a reflective stage where managers consider the mandate and engage

in new actions and modify the espoused strategy. The study focuses on mandated change forced upon a company, limiting the generalisability to environments where the espoused change is not mandated. However, the broad idea of an iterative cycle of performance, break-down, and reflection is consistent and logical with other process models (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018; Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous, 2018). The difference is that failure in the change or amending the intended result was not an option in Jarzabkowski, Lê, and Balogun (2018)'s case. An unforced change would likely impact actions taken (or not taken) by those within the organisation, such as resistance to the espoused strategy found elsewhere (Hardy and Thomas, 2014; Kunisch, Menz and Ambos, 2015).

With several previously disparate themes, Burgelman et al. (2018) provide a combinatory framework for strategy as process and practice, which synthesises aspects of both approaches (see figure 2.1). The framework presents the strategy formation process as an iterative cycle between a strategising episode and the realised strategy. Short or long-term issues trigger strategising episodes. Actors (such as managers, consultants or employees) enact these and achieve the realised strategy through practices, enabling or constraining the realised strategy. Practices may be macro or micro and could be discursive or sociomaterial. All this takes place over time. This framework provided a supporting framework for the first phase of this research.

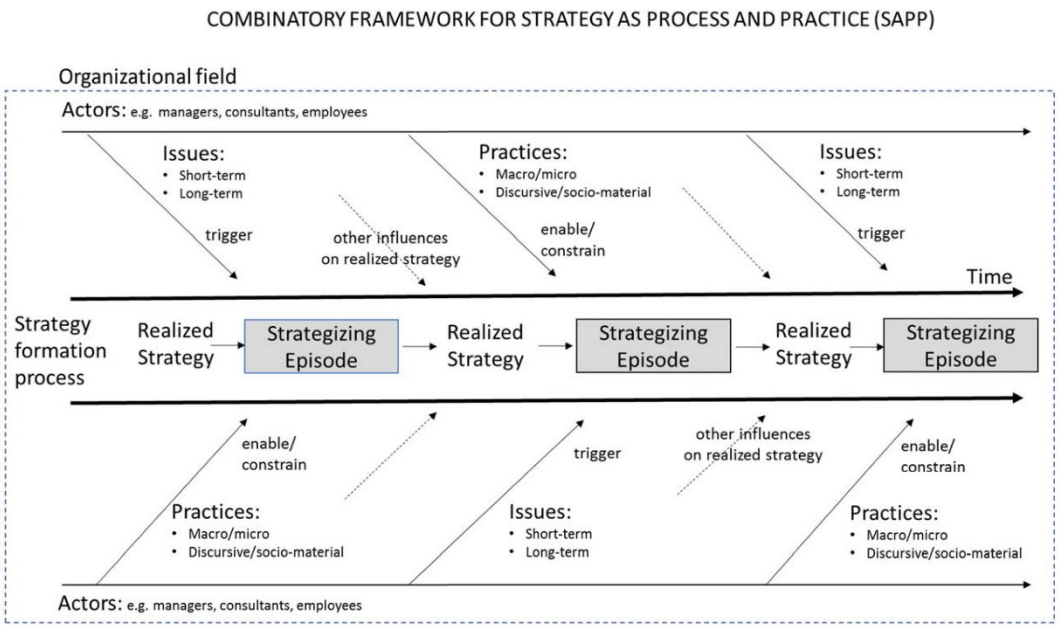


Figure 2.1: Combinatory framework from Burgelman et al, (2018)

The framework generally looks at a strategising process. However, in this case, it was used to understand participation in strategy making. Furthermore, the case analysed the strategy formation process using social theory, an increasingly common tool to conceptualise strategising.

Application of social theory to explain the process of strategising

There has been a persistent and growing call for increased use of social theory to be applied to strategy, particularly to conceptualise what goes on within organisations in a more abstract theoretical way (Whittington, 1992; Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). A regular criticism of the SAP perspective has focused on micro-actions without linking them to macro theory (Hughes and McDonagh, 2021). As Corradi et al. (2010) state: *"Acknowledging the origins and resuming the sociological tradition that has conceptualised what constitutes 'practice' enables theoretical breadth to be given to empirical research on practices"* (p.277). A practice-based approach should have a strong link between the micro and the macro (Chia and MacKay, 2007). Using social theory

provides a way to conceptualise issues beyond the organisational level and provide the required link between micro-activities and macro-phenomenon. Therefore, the application of social theory is an ideal way to explore the process of strategising.

The SAP perspective has begun to open the 'black box' of strategy by applying social theory to the practice and praxis of organisational actors. As part of a wider 'turn' in contemporary social theory, a practice perspective is neither new nor restricted to strategy (Whittington, 2006). Alongside rational choice theory (often characterised within economics) and norm-orientated theory (seen as the classic approach to sociology), practice is a type of cultural theory that exists within the everyday life and actions of individuals and social groups (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 245). Unlike the two former approaches, a practice perspective acknowledges the role of human agency and the emerging nature of specific actions (Simpson, 2009, p. 1331). In short, it is concerned with what people do.

Described as a "*broad church*" with many partially overlapping concerns (Chapman, Chua and Mahama, 2015, p. 265), practice theory is originally attributed to Wittgenstein (1951). However, the latter part of the twentieth century has seen theories of social practices developed by many influential theorists: Pierre Bourdieu looked at the nature of practice, introducing his concepts of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990); Michel Foucault explored the relationship between structure and agency in situated contexts such as hospitals and prisons (Foucault, 1963, 1977, 1984); Bruno Latour developed an area of science studies with a focus on mediated understanding (Latour, 1991); and Anthony Giddens linked structure and agency through a theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984). What has set practice apart from other developments in social

theory is the interrelated nature of actors, their actions and the systems or structures in which they exist. The SAP field, which tends to use the terms practitioners, praxis and practice, views these three aspects as parts of a whole that interact and relate to one another, rather than discrete entities to be looked at independently (Whittington, 2006).

The agency of people, even within an organisation, is an essential feature of practice research. Agency is particularly relevant in a volunteer field, as there could be a higher agency level, given the relative lack of traditional management controls (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Hodari *et al.*, 2020). Different lenses of social theory have allowed researchers to understand better how these concepts work together and conceptualise strategy at a broader level. Bourdieu's focus on agents as social individuals operating on the broader field helps to re-frame the ontological position of research and bridge the gap between the macro and the micro (Gomez, 2015, p. 188). It also provides an opportunity to focus research on the practitioner, investigating the accumulation and use of capital. Chia and Holt (2009: 159) use Bourdieu's frame to reconceptualise strategy-making as "wayfinding" rather than "navigating", suggesting that the former is a more emergent rather than purely planned approach. However, the focus on the individual means that a Bourdieusian approach portrays habitus and field as entirely cognitive constructs and neglects the influence of the material. While some acknowledge the role of objects and materiality through symbolic violence, this is under-developed. While discourse developed in other areas, Bourdieu saw this as merely a consequence of capital. Gomez (2015) aligns Bourdieu's work with other theories of practice concerning the importance of agency. Similar to Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and other social practice theories, there is a clear argument that action is due to an iterative process. While in Bourdieu's theory,

habitus takes on a privileged position, it is similar to the use of meaning in Symbolic Interactionism. "*In a permanent interaction, habitus shapes practice, but in turn is restructured and transformed through practice*" (Gomez, 2015, p. 187). This similarity across different theories emphasises the importance of including iteration as part of any framework showing a strategising process over time.

Practitioner upbringing, education, and prior professional experience all foster a preference or aversion to some practices over others. For example, elite managers with high economic, cultural and social capital rely on sensibility and information drawn from their social networks to inform decision making, whereas 'Engineer-MBA managers' tend to focus on quantitative analysis and textbook frameworks (Pratap and Saha, 2018). However, this helps consider the influences on the individual limited in its application to socially constructed meaning. Whittington (2015b) contrasts Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and capital with Gidden's Structuration Theory. For Bourdieu, habitus and capital are seen as the drivers of agency – and as largely opportunistic. However, the similarities are more significant than the differences, with a particular focus on resources drawn upon by the individual, whether that is Gidden's allocative/authoritative resources or Bourdieu's social, symbolic or material capital. Perhaps the most significant departure of Bourdieu from Giddens is their view on the reflexivity of the actor (Gomez, 2015, p. 194). Bourdieu rejected the idea that agents take an objective view of their actions. Giddens, on the other hand, supported this reflexivity – something shared with a SI approach. Mead advocated the ability of the actor to adopt an objective view of the self (Simpson, 2009). Although Blumer (1969) played this down, it is still present in his work. What can be taken from Bourdieu's theory is the complexity of the relationship between macro and micro

and agency, structure and actions. However, what is clear is the critical influence the actor's role brings to the understanding of a strategising process.

Contributing towards an understanding of what people do is the influence of Goffman, particularly ideas around framing (Goffman, 1974) and performance (Goffman, 1959). While not explicitly directed towards strategy or organisations, (Mueller, 2018) argues for the potential contribution to SAP research. Although it has many different interpretations in organisation and management theory, Performativity has become a more relevant and used concept (Bourgoin, Bencherki and Faraj, 2020; Idoko and MacKay, 2021). They are embracing the basic principle of *doing things with words*. It brings together four ideas that have been emerging in broader organisation and management theory: the idea that discourse can co-constitute external social reality; the rise in the 'practice turn' of what organisational actors do; the rise in the 'process turn' in seeing organisational phenomena as fluid; and interest in the sociomaterial nature of knowledge constitution. (Gond *et al.*, 2016, p. 443).

Structuration takes a more holistic view, recognising that micro-practices are often reflective of macro-institutional structural principles (Whittington, 2015a, p. 150). Like Giddens, Bourdieu's theories attempt to move beyond simplistic dichotomies, seeing structure and agency as purely opposing forces or the mutual exclusivity of planned versus emergent strategy. Gidden's places emphasis on resources, rather than meaning, as the force driving agency. It provides us with an alternative to the dualism of structure and agency as opposing forces. Instead, it provides a sense of 'duality', as forces being mutually dependent on one another. Whittington (2015b) acknowledges that Structuration Theory is often combined or informed by other social practice theories. It is

perhaps a strong foundation for other practice-based theories, emphasising the strong parallels in the field. He calls for more research that uses “mid-range” theories, such as sensemaking, as well as research focusing on neglected groups, such as lower-level employees as “*consumers of strategy*” (Whittington, 2015a, p. 158). There is, however, a space between structure and agency where humans create shared meanings – something explored much more significantly within the area of sensemaking.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a cognitive process by which actors understand the strategy and enact their reality. Understanding is based around a socially constructed schema of information but influenced by an individual’s interpretation of symbols. While there is no universal definition, Brown, Colville and Pye (2015, p. 266) describe sensemaking as the *“processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events*”. It is distinct from interpretation, as the actions generated by a person’s understanding feeds back and shapes their world view. Karl Weick (1979) developed the concept to explain the subjective interpretation of objective reality and is the dominant theoretical approach to meaning and interpretation in mainstream organisational studies (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015; Bencherki, Basque and Rouleau, 2019). It is based on assumptions of schemas or cognitive frames and their enactment through recursive interaction between actions and interpretations (Weick, 1988). While its prominence has grown in recent years, its use has changed from a specific theory to more of an umbrella construct.

> *“When we say that meanings materialize, we mean that sensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language, talk and communication. Situations, organisations and environments are*

> *talked into existence" (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).*

While the original conception of sensemaking contained an ontological position of subjective interpretations of objective reality (Weick, 1995), Cornelissen and Schildt (2015) highlight that more recent literature – particularly in the SAP field – has adopted a more social constructivist approach, which does not accept an objective physical or social reality. Instead, a broader interpretation of sensemaking is the "*formation of shared understandings"* and the "*coevolution of actors and the environment they inhabit*" (2015, p. 348). In effect, it has become a broad term to describe "talking and thinking about strategy". Readers should take caution in considering studies that may refer to sensemaking, but in effect, focus on 'thinking and talking' about strategy. When identified in more ambiguous terms, papers tend to treat sensemaking as a specific episode of meaning construction instead of a "*continuous and basic feature of organisational cognition and behaviour*" (2015, p. 356).

Sensemaking is one of four theoretical lenses, among discursive, political and institutional (Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd, 2015). Unsurprisingly, different authors tend to link outcomes of sensemaking depending on their particular theoretical background (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015). For example, they link to practice and habitus (Rasche and Chia, 2009) or crafting narratives (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Within sensemaking, there is a growing area of the literature that considers a more bottom-up approach, including the idea of sensegiving to individuals. These approaches could be looking at alignment within levels (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), or sensemaking/sensegiving from higher levels to lower levels of the organisation (Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Mantere,

Schildt and Sillince, 2012), or the mechanics of sensemaking across levels (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005). Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) identify a need for more work looking at how sensemaking may shift over time, regardless of whether the talking and thinking refer to the future. Both the strategic sensemaking and sensegiving literature has drawn out different dimensions of change, developing process models involving information seeking, meaning ascription, and action – showing how managers can use these to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty (Rouleau, 2005, p. 1415).

There are tensions in the sensemaking literature. Early work on sensemaking tended to see meaning as being constructed though assigning environmental cues to prior cognitive frames, making sensemaking a retrospective process. More recently however, there has been a move toward meaning construction "*in and through the exchange of language, or any other symbolic signification process*" (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015). This move suggests that, rather than adapting a prior schema, the interpretation occurs by constructing an entirely new, socially constructed frame – shared between individuals and groups. Whereas Weick (1979) argued the assumption that language prompts the retrieval of a previously constructed schema, more recent studies have increasingly considered that interactions – both discursive and physical – actually shape the construction of a cognitive frame. That is, "*interpretations are in effect constructed through interaction with material objects*" (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015, p. 349), which can help break through a lack of shared knowledge among individual actors as they create common imagery and common ground. This view has recently been taken further, with sense as being made and given simultaneously, where every human attempt at framing is itself already *enframed* (Introna, 2019).

The process of sensemaking

Inspired by Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of words and claims depends on shared rules of a language game, language is both an enabler and product of social interaction (Mantere, 2015). The discourse that individuals use is an influential factor in establishing their organisational identity (Mantere and Whittington, 2020). Specific groups of actors can share the same meanings to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their exposure to the same conversations and acceptance of the same background assumptions (Seidl, 2007; Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018).

Sensemaking is a team-based process. To understand uncertain and ambiguous situations, organisational actors draw on prior experience and knowledge to frame strategic decisions (Kaplan, 2008). The frame repertoires of individuals can influence decisions over who is selected to be involved in strategic decisions (Seidl and Werle, 2018), suggesting that it might not be as simple as formal roles that dictate involvement. The diverse nature of organisations, and the teams within them, results in a broad range of frames that may have different meanings associated with them (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). Different interpretations need alignment. Individuals achieve alignment through discursive and sociomaterial practices. Strategic concepts, or "linguistic expressions, words, or phrases with at least a partly shared meaning", make up institutional vocabularies, capturing organisational-level rather than field-wide patterns (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). Strategic concepts allow the rapid communication and processing of complicated issues, reinforce certain beliefs through continued use, and structure knowledge by embodying tacit beliefs and shaping new knowledge and decisions. Because meanings do not need to be shared entirely, this allows for a significant amount of ambiguity to be present and

still mobilise actors toward strategic goals. Furthermore, sensemaking can be broken down into two co-occurring but distinct sub-processes: meaning making and legitimation. Meaning making involves concept shaping, whereas legitimation involves concept mobilisations.

Meaning making includes the creation of meanings, challenging and maintaining meanings, and discursive embedding. These would create “common ground” (as opposed to consensus or shared views), suggesting that meanings can be partial and temporary (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) present a process model that conceptualises specific practices against macro phases within a design company context. Their model included three second-order themes: linking material cues and abstract categories, integrating and refining emerging mental structures, storing, sharing, and retrieving mental content. Unfortunately, the context (formulation of design ideas, not strategy formulation) ignores the implications of the impact that strategy has on wider stakeholders and, therefore, the influencing impact that affirmation/disaffirmation practices have and the importance of ‘sensegiving’ in engendering buy-in from wider organisational actors. The perception or anticipation of a sensemaking gap triggers sensegiving. This gap could be stakeholder perceptions of an issue being important or the leader lacking competence, or leader perceptions that an issue is highly uncertain, or that the stakeholder environment is complex (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

Seeing decisions, choices, and individuals as legitimate emerges as a standard requirement for sensemaking. Legitimation, or the construction of a positive, necessary or otherwise acceptable action or choice, can be viewed as a sub-process of sensemaking. It has many forms: focusing attention on specific issues

and initiative, justification of choices and actions, and ideological legitimation (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). While some studies identify general sensemaking practices, such as *justifying the change* or *translating new orientations,* used to give legitimacy to strategic choices (Rouleau, 2005), others explore specific discursive strategies such as rationalization, authorization, moralization and mythopoesis (Vaara and Tienari, 2008). Sociomateriality affects understanding because the production of strategic texts in the form of strategy documents or presentations would 'fix' or 'freeze' a strategic concept and shared understanding for a while (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). Practitioners are increasingly using digital content, including social media, to legitimise strategies. Using digital content illustrates that sociomateriality is not confined to a physical space (Glozer, Caruana and Hibbert, 2019).

Sensemaking occurs within and significantly *around* formal strategising episodes and activities through informal and casual interactions. Sensegiving, on the other hand, tends to occur primarily during formal occasions arranged by leaders (Maitlis, 2005). Sensegiving is enabled by discursive ability and process facilitators. Stakeholder sensegiving capacity is enabled by opportunities for sensegiving (process facilitator) and issue-related expertise combined with perceived legitimacy (discursive ability). Issue-related organisational performance (process facilitator) and issue-related expertise (discursive ability) enable leader sensegiving capacity. A situated practice grounded in and dependent on specific organisations' social and physical technologies goes beyond simply storytelling, as they must be supported by expertise, opportunity, and legitimacy (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

The sensemaking literature reveals the importance of practices in facilitating the generation of personal and collective meaning, acting as a conduit between the two. Some of these practices, specifically related to the sensemaking literature, are shown in table 2.1. This section has revealed sensemaking as a process involving the creation or adaptation of meaning, followed by the legitimation of that meaning. It achieves this through discursive and sociomaterial practices that occur in formal and informal strategising episodes.

Table 2.1: Summary of sensemaking practices

Author	Type	First Order	Second Order	Notes
Jalonen et al (2018)	Sensemaking	Creation of meanings, challenging and maintaining meanings, and discursive embedding (1). Focusing attention on specific issues and initiative, justification of choices and actions, and ideological legitimation (2)	1. Meaning making; 2. Legitimation.	First and second order sub-processes of sensemaking found in strategic texts.
Rouleau (2005)	Sensemaking	Translating the new orientation, overcoding the strategy, disciplining the client, justifying the change		Practices of middle managers directed to a specific single external stakeholder group (clients)
Stigliani and Ravasi (2012)	Sensemaking	Bucketing; frame working; story-building.	Linking material cues and abstract categories, integrating and refining emerging mental structures, and storing, sharing and retrieving mental content.	Second order themes based on formulation of design ideas.

Maitlis and Lawrence (2007)	Sensemaking	Stakeholder enablers: 1. Opportunities for sensegiving, and 2. Issue related expertise combined with perceived legitimacy Leader enablers: 1. Issue-related organisational performance, and 2. Issue-related expertise.	1. Process facilitators 2. Discursive ability	Sensegiving

Much of the previous research has overlooked the emerging view that sensemaking is a team-based process (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). While previous studies have looked at either sensemaking within a single organisational level (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), or sensegiving across boundaries (Maitlis, 2005; Mantere, Schildt and Sillince, 2012), few papers have considered this as part of a single process that occurs over time – recognising that sensemaking and sensegiving must both occur within and across hierarchical levels. This thesis sets out to address this by exploring the sensemaking practices within a third-sector organisation during the emergence of a new strategy. However, there remains a lack of understanding about how a participation process uses these practices. Using this understanding of the relationship between practitioners, meaning, practices and episodes, will be fundamental to the output of this study.

2.5 Factors that influence strategising

Role and structure

Most SAP research adopts the understanding that the meaning attached to strategy is socially constructed, and therefore it often focuses on specific groups rather than individuals (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Senior executives are often seen

as strategy generators, while middle managers as implementers. Balogun, Best and Lê (2015) consider how frontline workers use objects to bring strategy to life through their everyday activities. Regnér (2003) identified the importance not only of role but also the distance of the individual from the centre of control, finding that the closer managers were, the more formal and '*deductive*' the strategy-making process became; those further out adopted a more '*trial and error*' approach. Mantere (2008) considered the role expectations of middle managers in having a strong influence on what these managers did. Understanding that strategy extends across both levels and actors is essential in deepening our understanding of the organisation; it requires research that acknowledges the plurality of both actors and levels of analysis (Johnson *et al.*, 2007, p. 13).

The position of individuals within the organisational structure impacts agency and decision-making autonomy (Hodari and Sturman, 2014). The awareness of agency's role has coincided with an increased focus in SAP on the role of middle management in strategising (Whittington, 2015a, 2015b), recognising that everybody can make a difference in strategy. Much has developed in middle manager's strategy work since early studies by Balogun and Johnson (2004, 2005). However, Rouleau (2005, p. 1414) argues that "research on strategic sensemaking and sensegiving has mainly had a macro-process orientation, centred upon iterative and sequential models that culminate in the interpretation of strategic discourse". Rouleau, Balogun, and Floyd (2015) advocate five main challenges that need addressing: the requirement for more theoretical depth by drawing on social practice theories. The need for more innovative methodologies. Increased consistency and coherence in collective research. A lack of research examining how middle managers practices are embodied and materially

mediated. Finally, a greater degree of critical reflection on research and discussion on its practical relevance.

Globalisation, growth of companies and increasing use of technology have resulted in a growth in the numbers of middle managers in organisations. Middle managers are essential for their ability to synthesise information, champion strategic ideas, and facilitate adaptability and change (Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd, 2015, p. 599). Acting as 'linchpins' between the top and lower management, they must interact across departments in a "boundary spanning" capacity (Sahadev, Purani and Malhotra, 2015). Much of the current research ignores what enables and constrains middle managers from fulfilling role expectations, and therefore there needs to be an increased understanding of middle manager agency (Mantere, 2008). Rouleau (2005) identifies four micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and introduces the idea of sensegiving (see table 2.1). These practices reflect the dual role that middle managers adopt, in terms of interpreting the strategic decisions of senior managers, and reinterpreting strategy into terms that make sense to lower-level employees. She directly anchors sensemaking and sensegiving practices in the tacit knowledge of managers, identifying that "this use of semantic tacit knowledge matters as much as formal discourse in gaining legitimacy for implementing strategic change" (Rouleau, 2005, p. 1416).

Communication technologies have changed the way middle managers interact with superiors, subordinates and their peers. While there is a natural focus on the upward and downward activities of middle managers sensemaking activities, Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd (2015) highlight the importance in the literature given to their lateral and multi-level relations when making sense of change.

Rouleau (2005, p. 1416) argues that the way middle managers participate in strategic change is different to top managers because, “given their hierarchical position, they do not share the same level of consciousness of corporate strategy” and that much of their activity focuses on operational and practical issues. However, she does not ignore the broader real-life contexts in which actors exist and acknowledges the impact things such as gender, ethnicity, and profession have on their meaning creation. Beck and Plowman (2009) show how middle managers encourage divergence in interpretations across hierarchical levels during the early stages of a strategic change initiative, yet they tend to blend and synthesise divergent interpretations (Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd, 2015, p. 603).

While most research expanding beyond the senior management team focuses on middle management, lower-level managers and employees’ ideas are vital to organisational knowledge creation (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Ideas from lower-level managers help organisations adapt strategies in changing environments (Lovas and Ghoshal, 2000). The inclusion of people outside the typical strategic players is especially the case for new CEOs, as constraints on changing senior leadership mean they are more likely to develop “strategic leadership constellations” which include individuals from the top tier, middle and lower levels (Ma and Seidl, 2018). Exploring the interactions across all three levels of senior, middle and frontline employees, Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun (2018) identify a three-stage, iterative cycle of performing actions, reinforcing actions, and then (following a breakdown) reflective actions that lead to new performing action cycles. While this was in response to mandated change, there are significant implications for participation in strategy formulation that involves levels beyond senior management.

Given that participation entails multiple actors, it is difficult to explicitly identify who could be called a strategist in a participation approach from different levels and different roles. To address this, Mantere and Vaara (2008) instead deal in three types of subjectivity that can co-exist simultaneously: mythicizing subjectivity, concretizing subjectivity and dialogizing subjectivity. The mythicizing subjectivity has the most significant congruence with leaders in organisations. Concretizing subjectivity is most congruent with the experts. The dialogizing subjectivity shows the most substantial congruence with managers. However, (Dameron and Torset, 2014, p. 316) identify that it is "necessary to go further and to analyse how individual discourses from different strategists may construct a discourse of strategy that is in fact a body of knowledge".

There are "interpretative communities" within actor groups with their cognitive frames who therefore interpret change differently. Balogun, Bartunek and Do (2015) identify these frames of reference as shared history and performance, business context, and most importantly, the nature of managerial roles. These are applied in two contexts: relational and interpretive. Relational contexts are whom the SMT sense makes with, usually due to colocation and frequent personal interaction. Practitioners reach a common understanding through processes of affirmation or disaffirmation. Interactions with individuals more distant in the organisational hierarchy can also affect shared understandings. Interpretive contexts are the frames of reference used to construct the meaning of change events and actions, bound by cues and interpretations available to the collective. It includes shared assumptions drawn on to interpret and understand how to respond to events. These contexts mean that managers do not just embellish a central organisational narrative about change but also actively construct alternatives (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015).

Strategic episodes

Episodes refer to specific moments in time that deal with strategy, defined as a "*sequence of communications structured in terms of its beginning and ending*" (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, p. 176). These can include formal strategy workshops or regular meetings that deal with strategic issues. Hendry and Seidl (2003) looked at tangible strategic episodes, such as workshops or away days and identified these as strategic "episodes". They argue that "*strategies are recursively reproduced by the very practices they produce*" (p.177). There is a recent surge of literature investigating the roles of meetings in strategy (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008), how meetings change or stabilise strategy and create shared views (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak, 2014), how meetings enable 'strategic talk' and the production of strategic text (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011), how emotional displays influence strategic discourse (Liu and Maitlis, 2014). However, only a limited amount considers explicitly the role of workshops, which may be considered distinct from meetings (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). Some focus specifically on 'strategic meetings' (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak, 2014), while others consider that all meetings can have strategic uses (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008).

Meetings are both temporally and spatially delimited from broader organisational activities. Seidl and Guerard (2015) identify five functions for meetings: coordination, sensemaking, political, symbolic, and social. Strategy workshops, a particular type of meeting taking place outside regular organisational routines, tend to be dominated by senior management. While workshops can be beneficial for creating new ideas, these seldom transfer back into the organisational structure, in part due to the structural decoupling role that strategic episodes play (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). Meetings allow for the suspension of ordinary

structures and routines, allowing participants to communicate in new ways and give a platform for reflexive strategic discourse. Johnson et al. (2010) find that decoupling creates a liminal experience, leading to new ideas driven by ambiguity and social limbo. Three required criteria determine the extent to which the liminal space is created:

1. The workshop must be ritualised.
2. Specialists and liturgy must be perceived as legitimate.
3. Figures of authority must signal the suspension of structural roles.

Strategic episodes can incorporate other material elements and practices, helping to mediate and frame the strategic discourse. For example, the introduction of physical artefacts into strategic workshops helps actors visualise and craft strategy (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008), or use stories and narrative as a discursive practice to help actors illustrate strategic intent and meaning (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013).

Power and legitimacy

Research often identifies power as an essential factor that intertwines with discourse; however, it is not well understood. There is a need for research into sensemaking with enhanced sensitivity to power, which Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) argue has been hitherto ignored. Hardy and Thomas (2014, p. 338) found that talk and texts would repeatedly refer to practices as tools to create a clear and consistent ‘program’ or ‘strategy’ and include the presence of ambiguity over what some of the talk and text meant. Unsurprisingly, identification with the discourse developed and increased over time. They state, “a discourse has to be intensified through material and discursive practices that normalize and extend its reach” (Hardy and Thomas, 2014, p. 342). Discourse (including

alternative discourses) is a resource that individual actors can use to support or resist strategy, but they must be widely adopted to affect the strategy significantly. The importance of multiple practices by multiple actors accumulates over time, and "strategy is located within, and generated from, multiple discourses" (2014, p. 342).

Power influences sensemaking. Although the relationship is still poorly understood (Balogun *et al.*, 2014), power can invariably affect subjugating agents and influences the discourse and meaning that are more likely to take hold within collective understanding (Schildt, Mantere and Cornelissen, 2020). Individuals can use their expertise to generate a discourse that significantly influences strategic decisions (Andersson, 2020), reflecting how individuals can use discourse to gain power during strategising. A more intangible phenomenon than role, power becomes harder to study and understand, not least in participation approaches to strategy, where those with power have opened up the process to those seemingly without. The use of power and the resistance to it can impact the communicative processes that occur within dialogue (Thomas, Sargent and Hardy, 2011), leading to strategic inaction and sense-censoring (Whittle *et al.*, 2016). Schildt et al. (2019) blur the lines between sensemaking and sensegiving but introduce the concept of sense breaking, where individuals use power is used to prevent sensemaking.

Discursive practice may impede or promote participation in strategy work by legitimising individuals, approaches or specific discourses. Mantere and Vaara (2008) find that mystification, disciplining and technologization reproduce non-participatory approaches by restricting access to documents to make the strategy more 'secret', constructing hierarchies or command structures, and reducing

individuals to objects or measures and thus facilitating ‘them and us’ discourses. These practices legitimise those in power and the discourses they espouse and therefore impedes participation. On the other hand, self-actualization, concretization and dialogization can promote participation by encouraging people to find individual meaning in strategic purpose, demystifying vague practices to allow individuals to find strategic roles, and integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches through organised social dialogue. This view aligns with research that considers discursive legitimation more generally, which finds that legitimacy is important in the dynamics of strategic decisions (Erkama and Vaara, 2010). Glozer et al. (2019) explore discursive legitimation and present a three-stage model of authorisation, validation and finalisation in a “never-ending” process of organisational discourse.

Through discourse, actors can legitimise specific conceptions of strategy work and constitute themselves as distinct categories of actor – called a “subjectivity” (Dameron and Torset, 2014). The right and opportunity to engage in decision-making, autonomy as organisational actors, and their identity as respected and important organisational actors form a subjectivity (Laine and Vaara, 2007). Vaara and Tienari (2008) identify that legitimation has both a ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ direction, in that there is first one group or individual seeking legitimacy and a second group providing it. Legitimation strategies link legitimation and ideology and act as “specific ways of mobilising specific discursive resources to create a sense of legitimacy or illegitimacy” (Vaara and Tienari, 2008, p. 987). This results in four general strategies: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis (defined as creating narrative structures to indicate past or future relevance).

On the other hand, Dameron and Torset (2014) produce a paradoxical framework that brings together two views of strategy: transcendent and immanent. These views align alongside the planned and emergent concepts of strategy, respectively. However, transcendent and immanent views are neither mutually exclusive nor is one preferable to the other. Instead, they can co-exist, and the role of the strategist is to balance the paradoxes that this creates. Their view is not like much of the prior research, which tends to adopt an 'either/or' view.

2.6 Practices-in-use

Central to this thesis is the use of practices to facilitate participation. Therefore, it is essential to explore specific practices in more depth, which will now occur over the following sections. These sections will separate practices into their two main types: discursive and sociomaterial, including discussing the role of episodes in strategising. These practices are shown in tables 2.2 and 2.3, respectively.

2.6.1 Discursive practices

Strategy work inevitably involves words in both their verbal and written forms. Words materialise in strategy documents, vision or mission statements, or used in meetings, workshops or informal gatherings, emails or 'water cooler' talk. Whatever form they take, words are among the most potent resources for making and signifying an organisation's strategy (Balogun *et al.*, 2014). The literature explores these themes in discourse studies, which study the physical, social and psychological world by analysing talk and text (Fairclough, 2003). Given that understanding needs to be articulated, it is not surprising that discourse plays a crucial role in research (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Paroutis, Heracleou and Angwin, 2016). Mantere and Vaara (2008: 341) define discourses as

"*linguistically mediated constructions of social reality*". They state, *"language does not merely reflect social reality but is the very means of constructing and reproducing the world as it is experienced*" (2008, p. 343). However, they maintain that discourses are always associated with other social and material practices, including administrative, episodic and discursive practices. While discourse alone is essential, individuals mediate their words through cognition and material practices. People use discourse to construct concepts, objects, and subject positions (Hardy and Phillips, 2004).

Table 2.2: Summary of discursive practices

Author	Type	First Order	Second Order	Notes
Abdallah and Langley (2014)	Discursive	Structural duality; linguistic equivocality; content expansiveness	Ambiguity	Forms of ambiguity
Brown and Thompson (2013)	Discursive	Polyphony; equivocality		
Dalpiaz and Di Stefano (2018)	Discursive	(1) serializing, anthologizing, curating; (2) refocusing, augmenting; (3) ennobling, prophet-making, iconizing, anathematizing	1. Memorializing; 2. Revisioning; 3. Sacralising;	Three sets of narrative practices
Dameron and Torset (2014)	Discursive	Mythicizing; concretizing; dialogizing		Presented as subjectivities, and therefore a perspective representing multiple practices
Kupers et al (2013)	Discursive	Discursive struggles over 'hot' words, the de-sacralization of strategy, and recurring rituals of self-sacrifice		Three embodied narrative practices used in strategy workshops
Mantere and Vaara (2008)	Discursive	Mystification, disciplining, technologization (1). Self-actualization, dialogization, concretization (2).	1. reproducing and legitimising non-participatory approaches; 2. promoting participation	

Rouleau and Balogun (2011)	Discursive	Performing the conversation, and setting the scene		Discursive practices that determine the competence of middle managers sensemaking abilities.
Sorsa and Vaara (2020)	Discursive	Voicing own arguments; appropriation of other's arguments; consensus argumentation; and collective 'we' argumentation.		Rhetorical arguments
Vaara and Tienari (2008)	Discursive	Authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis	Legitimation	Four practices of legitimation used to mobilise discursive resources

Mantere and Vaara (2008, p. 353) note that different discourses co-existed and overlapped in some organisations and that "*strategy involves internal tensions around agency and identity*". Mantere and Whittington (2020) build on this further, identifying that SAP has developed a discursive perspective for understanding the identity construction and social agency of strategists. They argue that individuals use discourse to protect and enhance their identity and agency by positioning themselves as important actors in the strategic process. Dameron and Torset (2014, p. 295) view discourse as "*communicative actions where strategists give sense to the very concept of strategy, their strategising activities, and reflexivity to themselves as subjects…These reflexive discourses participate in the building of power position and legitimacy*". People, therefore, discursively represent themselves to demonstrate power and construct their legitimacy. Balogun *et al.* (2014) view discourse as both a sensemaking and sensegiving activity and call for further research that links discourse with other kinds of literature concerning strategy (specifically naming sociomateriality, sensemaking and power) across three realms – institutional, organisational and episodic –

which are comparable to levels identified in other fields of research (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Mantere, 2013).

Research adopting a discursive lens has focused on verbal negotiations between middle managers and their superiors during particular strategy episodes (Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd, 2015). They are often poorly anchored in language or other practice theory, with notable exceptions being Fauré and Rouleau (2011), who take a Giddensian view of communication, and Thomas, Sargent and Hardy (2011) and Hardy and Thomas (2015) who use a Foucauldian approach. Balogun *et al.* (2014) identify several directions that the discourse literature has taken. It includes poststructuralist approaches, such as Foucauldian discourse analysis, which demonstrate that discourse can be a source of knowledge and power, and Critical Discourse Analysis examining how individuals mobilise discourses as strategic resources to promote or resist change. However, they find the focus of discourse studies and strategy to date has mostly been the language of strategy and its communication. It has largely ignored the relationship of language to physical, social and psychological concepts. Future research must place strategy discourse in context and "acknowledge the social practices of strategising in which such language is embedded" (Balogun *et al.*, 2014, p. 176).

Ambiguity and discursive ability

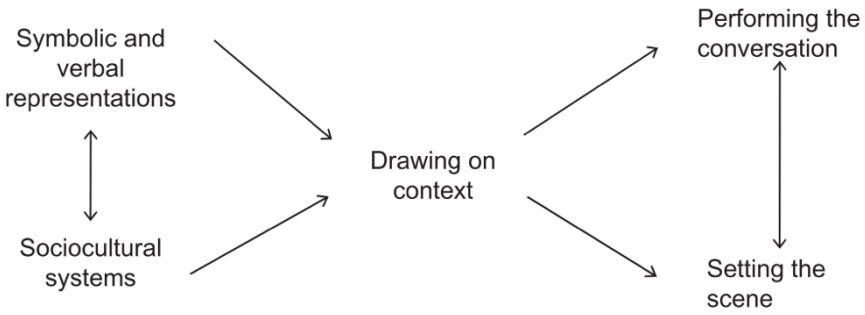
Some authors have been paying attention to the precision (or otherwise) of strategy discourse. Specific texts and discourses may include a significant degree of ambiguity that could enable or constrain them, particularly in a pluralistic organisational context. Ambiguous statements can resonate differently for different individuals and groups (Balogun *et al.*, 2014). Abdallah and Langley

(2014) explore this ‘double edge’, finding that this ambiguity can help enable different interpretations of strategy to co-exist in the early stages; however, it can lead to internal contradiction overextension over time. In the writing of strategy, the authors see ambiguity as a potential positive, rather than negative, by promoting “unified diversity”. Ambiguity allows shifts in goals while preserving a sense of continuity, which helps communications maintain consistency and “avoid loss of face when circumstances change” (Abdallah and Langley, 2014, p. 3). In the reading of strategy, ambiguity allows for diverse interpretations of the exact text and different strategy’s resulting practices. Ambiguous texts can be reconstructed in different ways and exploited by individual readers. The ‘dark side’ of ambiguity emerges in the enacting of strategy, as too much can lead to confusion, indecision and resistance. Consensus is essential in ensuring successful change initiatives. (Sorsa and Vaara, 2020) identify how practitioners can use rhetorical arguments to manage a process of initial contestation through gradual convergence to an increasing agreement. By either voicing their arguments, appropriation of other’s arguments, consensus argumentation, or collective ‘we’ argumentation, strategists can allow ambiguity to exist while consensus develops.

Managing contradictions and ambiguity is a significant challenge in organisations. Dameron and Torset (2014) argue that different perspectives on strategy are often presented as dichotomies and challenging to combine. Strategic actors use paradoxes (defined as accepting two individual but inconsistent elements) as discursive resources to build agency and identity (Dameron and Torset, 2014). Allard-Poesi (2015) sees strategy as discourse but goes further in seeing it as a way to influence and control the behaviour of others. This view introduces the

concept of ‘unfolding’, which sees strategists use discursive practices to communicate their intentions, creating a shared sense of meaning.

The setup of strategy conversations impacts middle managers’ sense of inclusion (Westley, 1990; Mantere and Vaara, 2008). Rouleau and Balogun (2011) explore how the discursive competence of middle managers affects their sensemaking abilities. Two activities: ‘performing the conversation’ and ‘setting the scene’, are underpinned by the ability to draw on symbolic and verbal representations and the sociocultural systems they belong to (see figure 2.2). Despite many studies focusing on sensemaking as unidirectional, it is multidirectional – both in terms of middle managers having to influence upwards, downwards and sideways, and being an iterative, cyclical interpretation process of action and reinterpretation. Because middle managers do not usually have the formal authority to act strategically, they are even more reliant on their ability to “sense read and write” (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011, p. 956).



The discursive activities of middle managers in strategic sensemaking

Figure 2.2: Model of discursive competence from Rouleau and Balogun (2011)

Liu and Maitlis (2014) consider the relationship between discourse and emotions through a micro ethnography of strategic meetings. While their conclusions are limited to verbal exchanges in single real-time events, they found that different

emotions can either draw together or drive apart team dynamics and that urgency is a critical factor in influencing emotional dynamics. This is supported further by (Netz, Svensson and Brundin, 2020), who highlight the value of emotional and affective dynamics in decision making, identifying that extreme time pressure leads to more affective managerial decision making. On the other hand, Wenzel and Koch (2018) look at non-verbal body language in the context of keynote speeches, exploring the relationship between bodily gestures and discursive practices. However, once again, this is constrained to a single type of interaction.

Use of narrative in strategy

Scholars regard storytelling as practically advantageous for adopting strategic plans and the communication of strategic intent throughout the organisation because it makes the content of the strategy more easily understood (Mitchell and Clark, 2021). Stories allow organisational actors to express emotions, values and meanings (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013). A term like 'storytelling' involves the formation, reification, and objectification of a set of practices (Mantere, 2013). This definition leads to the development of organisational narratives as "temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social and organisational sensemaking and sensegiving" (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016). An intense negotiation of meaning characterises the inherently temporal nature of strategic change. Narratives must captivate attention by balancing the use of novel and familiar events; however, they are not often fully-fledged stories or accounts. Novelty and familiarity can be contradictory but interdependent. Novelty increases interest but reduces credibility, whereas familiarity increases credibility while reducing concern, curiosity and excitement.

A narratological approach helps orient scholars to the prominence of multiple "strategies" rather than a singular "strategy" in organising practices. A challenge has been to explain how a relatively coherent, integrated strategy narrative forms from the "morass of different, sometimes overlapping, often initially conflicting, texts and conversations that characterise organizing" (Brown and Thompson, 2013, p. 1153). One strategy document may spawn many nuanced strategy narratives, even among those senior executives who contributed most to its authorship. As Human beings are agents in the narratives they produce, value, interact with, and use to communicate, the "narrative work" is re-created and reworked in its reception, interpretation, and corresponding interaction and transformation (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013, p. 86). Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) support this and outline a process in which texts become increasingly authoritative and legitimate through each stage in a planning cycle, with their content becoming incrementally more fixed, terminology agreed, nuances understood, and agreement of stakeholders assumed.

> *"Yet our versions of who did what, why and with what purposes and consequences are always incomplete. We cannot know everything, are forced to make selections from complex data sets, silencing some, privileging others, always questing for a storyline that is seemingly sufficiently complex and robust to be plausible while also coherent and simple enough to convince. That is, what we refer to as 'causes' and 'outcomes' are at best 'quasi-fictions', reflecting and incorporating cultural assumptions, institutional bias and personal prejudices" (Brown and Thompson, 2013, p. 1150).*

This extended quotation provides a good overview of the complexity of the strategy-making process, emphasising the importance of the concepts of polyphony and equivocality in strategy practice. There has been a tendency in the literature for SAP scholars to "simplify, marginalise and exclude multiplicity, and to rely upon sequential, single-voiced stories" (2013, p. 1148). Instead,

strategising is about synthesising disparate voices into a sufficiently coherent whole to promote coordinated activity. However, once authored, even a single narrative is immediately reinspected and reinterpreted. Often in the complexity of strategy making, there are multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations – or equivocality, which is something more likely when there is more ambiguity in the scenario.

Balogun, Bartunek, et al. (2015) find that senior managers construct two sets of interwoven and interacting change narratives over time. The first evaluate broader organisational change efforts, and the second construct a response as to what they should do locally. These result from a complex dual role, as both change leaders require a local change narrative and as change recipients requiring evaluation of the broader organisational change effort. Meaning constructions of the effort do not directly translate into local actions. Instead, senior managers mediate this through local change narratives. Küpers, Mantere and Statler (2013, p. 84) state: “rather than the single voice of a CEO strategist, organisational storytelling is practiced by multiple, interconnected narrators, and strategy takes place through their voices”.

Exploring storytelling as a narrative practice in developing strategy among workers from different levels in a strategy workshop, Küpers, Mantere and Statler (2013) identify three embodied narrative practices: discursive struggles over “hot” words, the de-sacralisation of strategy, and recurring rituals of self-sacrifice. Words and concepts are loaded with power that individuals can use to “own” strategy and exercise authority. Participation means different actors can struggle with each other to demonstrate ownership of crucial terms. For individuals to participate, there was a need to de-sacralise (or de-mystify) the strategy process.

Having strategy “owned” and only open to a select few ‘enlightened’ individuals may help organisational stability, but it is not helpful when trying to broaden participation. Finally, there was a need for self-sacrifice to get out of ‘locked’ paths of action in order to “rise again” like the proverbial phoenix (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013, p. 94).

Words can do things, meaning they are more than just statements of truth or fiction. In order for the words to be performative, Gond et al. (2016) argue there are two pre-conditions: first, that the context and individual speaking must have the authority and legitimacy to do so, and second, that the intent of the words must be serious (i.e. Not parody or irony). Intent can be complex, especially if considering words uttered as a statement of fact without intent that has unintended consequences (e.g., if taken as a warning that subsequently changes behaviours). The result is words that do not just describe the world but create it (Idoko and MacKay, 2021).

Narratives can put positive, negative or ambivalent ‘spin’ on change, and tap into shared values to encourage employees to embrace change (Rindova and Martins, 2021). Dalpiaz and Di Stefano (2018) identify three distinct sets of narrative practices: memorializing, revisioning, and sacralising. Memorializing constructs a familiarity of change, helping prevent resistance to it. Serializing prevents resistance by framing it within a consistent overarching story and mobilises advocacy for change through complementary levers. Revisioning stimulates attention and generates interest. These work in a self-reinforcing cyclical nature. Dawson and Sykes (2018) further explore the importance of time and temporality in the storytelling and sensemaking literature. They critically evaluate the place of time in developing theoretical frames for understanding

storytelling and sensemaking and caution against a strict application of a temporal sequence of events. This research recognises that multiple narratives can develop simultaneously and that retrospective sensemaking can also influence narratives.

2.6.2 Socio-material practices

Physical artefacts act as mediating objects in strategy and are imbued with continuously changing knowledge (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013). Studies have looked at tangible strategic episodes, such as workshops or away days (Hendry and Seidl, 2003), objects such as PowerPoint (Kaplan, 2011), numbers (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2006), maps (Doyle and Sims, 2002; Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013) and even Lego bricks (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008). Socio-material elements shape the strategising process by helping actors situate and locate strategy in the organisational context (Balogun *et al.*, 2014; Paroutis, Heracleous and Angwin, 2016).

Table 2.3: Summary of sociomaterial practices

Author	Type	First Order	Second Order	Notes
Arnaud, Mills, Legrand and Maton (2016)	Socio-material	Enacting local control to develop shared support for the global strategy; Transforming employees' work into strategic figures/indicators		Used by Middle Managers
Heracleous and Jacobs (2008)	Socio-material	Creating metaphors of strategy		Linked to crafting with Lego
Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015)	Socio-material	Legitimation		Linked to use of tools
Jarzabkowski, Burke, and Spee (2015)	Socio-material	Collaborative work; private work; negotiating work		Linked to specific space design
Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets (2013)	Socio-material	Physicalizing, locating, enumerating, analysing and selecting		Linked to epistemic objects

Johnson et al (2010)	Socio-material	Reflexive strategic discourse		Linked to a strategic episode
Kaplan (2011)	Socio-material	Collaborating; cartography		Linked to use of PowerPoint
Knight et al (2018)	Socio-material	Depiction; juxtaposition; salience	Strategic visibility; strategic resonance	Linked to use of visuals in strategy making
Seidl and Guerard (2015)	Socio-material	Coordination; sensemaking; political; symbolic; social		Linked to meetings

Materiality

Recent studies have begun to emphasise the role of materiality in strategy practices (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013; Dameron, Lê and LeBaron, 2015; Leonardi, 2015). However, this concept remains difficult to pin down due to the inconsistent way in which it has been used (Arnaud *et al.*, 2016). Orlikowski and Scott (2015) versus Hardy and Thomas (2015) reflect the debate. While the latter defines the material aspects as including bodies, spaces, objects and practices, Orlikowski and Scott (2015) assert that practices are not a distinct aspect of materiality because they are inseparable from bodies, spaces and objects. The argument is important as it highlights a debate over whether research can separate discourse from materiality or whether discourse is "materiality enacted in practice" (p.700). While Jarzabkowski et al., (2013) focus on epistemic objects, they also identify artefacts, tools and episodes as other aspects of materiality. Acknowledging the 'messiness' of the research, Dameron et al., (2015) develop this further with a typology of tools, objects, technologies, built spaces, and bodies as strategy materials. Instead of a single definition of materiality, there are three 'views': object focus, object and subject, and entanglement (p.S6). The difference between these views comes down to an ontological view of the material in use, with the object focus adopting the view of

the material as a neutral physical artefact, object and subject a more pragmatic view of separate, but mutually dependent from meaning and sociality, and finally entanglement reflecting a relational view that the two are inseparable.

While it is difficult to find complete consistency in using specific terms across the literature, there are patterns in their use. Objects here will be used in a broad sense to refer to a subject of interest. Objects, therefore, encapsulate the other categories, and the term used to distinguish between practices, space and bodies (Hardy and Thomas, 2015). Objects can be both material and cognitive, as behind any physical manifestation lies a ‘conceptual schema’ that helps generate meaning and understanding (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Indeed, Werle and Seidl (2015) specify the term “epistemic object” in acknowledging that objects can hold fluid knowledge, suggesting that the material properties and underlying schema are not permanently locked and may be different between different actors and can change over time (Knorr-Cetina, 1997).

To assist in strategic decision making, actors can produce tools (Belmondo and Sargis-Roussel, 2015). Many tools have been conceptualised at the field level, influencing industries and now taught in strategic management courses (Wright, Paroutis and Blettner, 2013). Inevitably even epistemic objects and tools will in some way be materially mediated using talk, text or practice. Artefacts refer to physical items used to represent or mediate meaning and strategic action. These are the weight-bearing or mass-produced objects referred to by Whittington (2015a). How practitioners use these objects to construct and shape their understanding is little understood (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012) and requires further research.

Epistemic objects and tools

Physical artefacts act as mediating objects in strategy and are imbued with continuously changing knowledge (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013). The situated and unstable nature of the object makes them epistemic (Werle and Seidl, 2015). When used to help bridge syntactic, semantic or pragmatic boundaries, they can be used as 'boundary objects' to help share and develop new knowledge among different actor groups (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Nair and Tandon, 2015). Other cognitive constructs, such as vision, mission and values, are used as objects to generate shared meaning in a specific environment (Corbett *et al.*, 2013). Organisations materially construct them as text produced in strategy documents (Leonardi, 2015) or through presentations (Whittington, Yakis-Douglas and Ahn, 2016).

Actors, objects and intentions combine in a complex bundle of practices. Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets (2013) identified five practices linked to specific objects: physicalizing, locating, enumerating, analysing, and selecting, which used pictures, maps, data packs, spreadsheets and graphs. They see these as the 'doing of strategy with stuff'. The focus was on how managers use the objects and the action they generate. Managers would embed objects in the practices, which would therefore reflect the characteristics of the object. For example, the enumerating practice would draw on the available numerical data in spreadsheets to ascribe value to assets. Without this numerical data, an enumerating practice could not materialise. This case demonstrates the importance of the local context (in a particular form of knowledge work) and the availability of artefacts for use in strategy work. The study highlights the importance of the meaning attached to an object rather than the object's properties.

The different aspects of materiality are challenging to separate. Jarzabkowski, Burke, and Spee (2015) provide an integrated discussion of bodily, material, and discursive elements of strategy work, giving an enlightened view of the complex relationship between these different elements. Their ethnographic micro-analysis pays attention to the rarely studied, complex behaviours that characterise everyday work. However, the ethnography does not explore the meaning or motives behind the actions in much depth, leaving it unclear if both reinsurers and brokers had a shared and mutual understanding of what each space was and meant. Actors create different spaces – either mutual, restricted or dialogic – to facilitate the different kinds of work (collaborative work, private work, or negotiating work). This action emphasises the importance of the physical space and the impact on practice.

Tool is a generic name for frameworks, concepts, models or methods in strategy. Managers use tools to support situational analysis and evaluation of strategic choices in a rational strategic decision-making process (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Some of these tools, such as PESTLE, SWOT or Porter's Five Forces, have become conceptualised to the point of being taught across management courses as ways of understanding strategy (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013; Wright, Paroutis and Blettner, 2013). Researchers have explored how and why tools are selected (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009), used (Wright, Paroutis and Blettner, 2013; Berisha Qehaja and Kutllovci, 2020) and not used (Roper and Hodari, 2015), as well as the contextual factors that impact use (Hodari, 2009).

Tools are not neutral objects, as they privilege some information over others and direct management decisions in particular ways. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) find tools are selected based on ease of use and familiarity (over and

above appropriateness to the situation). Tool use is influenced by how embedded the tool already is within the organisation and its perceived legitimacy. Affordances, defined as a combination of material properties, design intent and interpretation of the context of use, are essential in enabling and constraining the use of objects. Tools create a common language about strategy, help actors make sense of the world and demonstrate mastery in strategy making. Tools can be mobilised to legitimate particular positions or viewpoints and form part of a political process of influence. However, Rengarajan, Moser and Narayanamurthy (2021) highlight the challenges senior leaders face in making appropriate tool selections and use. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) propose a framework of tool selection, application and outcomes that iterates between the agency of the actors involved and the affordances of the tools-in-use.

Practices involving artefacts

Material objects can mediate strategy discourse and facilitate strategising. They do this by enabling actors to select and prioritise which issues to focus on and simplify otherwise complex situations in a more easily digestible form. Doing so facilitates a strategic conversation, helping individuals generate shared meaning and understand the strategic intent. These conversations help the espoused strategy evolve and develop. Kaplan (2011) explores the use of PowerPoint in strategy making as a technology embedded in discursive practice, identifying the key practices of collaborating and cartography. PowerPoint is used to create a space whereby participants can negotiate meaning and evolve ideas, allowing collaboration across individuals and groups. However, the nature of the technology allows it to easily define parameters for discussion by selecting some information over others and including some participants over others.

Building on earlier studies looking at mass-produced materials, Knight et al. (2018) explore the impact of visuals on meaning-making in strategy. Instead of viewing PowerPoint as a backdrop to discourse, it is more integrated and interactive with discourse. Through the process of strategic visibility, the visual elements would trigger conversations between participants. In turn, these conversations would evolve the espoused strategy through the process of strategic resonance. The process is presented as an open triangle (figure 2.3), representing the iterative nature of the model. Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) introduce the practice of crafting metaphors of organisations and strategy using Lego bricks. Much like the studies on PowerPoint, materially mediating the strategy conversation meant that facilitators could draw out and represent pertinent and vital issues, allowing a shared understanding to develop. Simultaneously, the use of metaphor created an environment that allowed the conversations to take place without much of the politics and power-play that can be associated with more traditional forms of strategising.

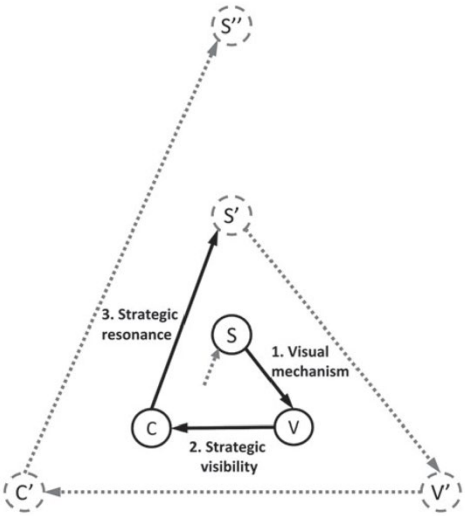


Figure 2.3: Strategy meaning-making as an ongoing visual semiotic process from Knight et. al. (2018)

Arnaud et al. (2016) explore the relationship between written text and strategic practice, finding that written text can mediate strategic intent and enact different practices in employees and managers. There are two forms of strategic practice that middle managers use to mobilise different categories of text. First, practices that enact local control to develop shared support for the global strategy. Practitioners would use texts to provide an opportunity (or even just the impression) of shared agency and collective control. Secondly, practices to transform employees' work into strategic figures and indicators. This practice allowed middle managers to make the work of employees more tangible and gain the power to negotiate the implementation of the global strategy. This research adds to the considerable body of literature on sociomateriality in strategy, particularly the practices involved. Combining sociomateriality with the discussion on discursive practices, sensemaking, and participation creates the proper foundation for empirically exploring participation in strategy formulation.

2.7 Conclusion

The essence of participation means the inclusion of others in the work of strategy. Considering who these others are is essential, as well as the episodic spaces in which they inhabit. The research reveals that it is not quite as simple as specific named roles or job titles. The managerial level is vital (Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Mantere, 2008), as is the distance from the organisational "centre" (Regnér, 2003). However, background and previous experience influence the frame through which leaders see and interpret strategy (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). Different individuals' different subjectivities are related to legitimacy (Dameron and Torset, 2014), but perceived legitimacy influences who is involved (Mantere and Vaara, 2008). Those involved have an influencing effect on senior

management decisions through an iterative cycle. This view is consistent with a sensemaking perspective, and as such, this chapter has argued that sensemaking is the most appropriate social theory to be applied to participation in strategy formulation.

Therefore, the challenge is to understand how practitioners use practices and strategic episodes to develop personal and collective meaning in strategy making. This task is not simple, especially as the issues and concepts at work are complex and interrelated, such as problems created by conflicting discourses presented by different organisational actors, especially when considering the social position, background or hierarchical position. Mantere and Vaara (2008: 356) suggest further studies that draw on sensemaking, "*but extend the sensemaking framework by explicating the role of discourse among other practices impeding or promoting participation*". Therefore, the empirical phase of this research bridges process and practice by exploring the practices used to facilitate participation.

This chapter has explored the complexity and interrelated nature of the concepts and means that any resulting framework must incorporate both process and practice. Participation results in different interpretations of strategic concepts. Practices help manage the inherent ambiguity present in participation activities. Words matter, and as such, discourse is a crucial tool in maintaining power and legitimacy. However, discourse is inseparable from sociomateriality, which means practices incorporate talk, text and physical artefacts. Finally, the role of narrative and ambiguity are vital in allowing multiple interpretations of strategy to co-exist while the participation activities go through a process of meaning alignment.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will outline the methodological approach, methods, data collection and analysis techniques deployed in the research (summarised in table 3.1). The research resides within the broad philosophy of social constructivism, one of many research philosophies applied in strategy-as-practice studies. After exploring research philosophies, the abductive and longitudinal approach is described, followed by a discussion of the appropriateness of qualitative studies and single-case studies. Like other case studies, this study uses three data collection techniques: archival data, participant observation, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Following details of the ethical tests and data analysis techniques, the chapter discusses relevant reliability and validity issues before concluding with an overview of the case study organisation.

Table 3.1: Summary of methods

Philosophy	Social constructivism
Approach	Abductive
Time horizon	Longitudinal
Method	Qualitative multi-method
Strategy	Single case study
Data collection techniques	Participant observation Semi-structured, in-depth interviews Document analysis
Data analysis techniques	Inductive composition

3.1 Research philosophy

The philosophical system underpinning the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs holds implications for research design decisions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It is essential to identify and explore these issues to ensure

coherence between philosophy and method. Theories of social practice, including SAP research, have developed along different tracks, but all share an underlying philosophy of constructivism (Grand, von Arx and Ruegg-Sturm, 2015). The theories consider reality as something created rather than 'given', and all challenge the "unquestioned dichotomies" in the social sciences (2015, p. 79). In a challenge to the historically dominant Positivist philosophy of management science, constructivism evolved from an Interpretive paradigm of sociology, which emphasises that the social world is "no more than the subjective construction of individual human beings who, through the development and use of common language and the interactions of everyday life, may create and sustain a social world of intersubjectively shared meaning" (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 260). The concept of the 'organisation' becomes a source of social structure, allowing people to make sense of the world. Therefore, this section explains the social constructivist philosophy before comparing it to the other main branch of constructivism, empirical constructivism. Two branches of realism, critical realism and agential realism, will be discussed as alternatives that were not adopted to position this within the philosophical landscape.

This research aligns with a social constructivist approach (Grand, von Arx and Ruegg-Sturm, 2015), which adopts a relativist (rather than realist) ontological position (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). Interaction with objects constructs individual meaning, which in turn influences action through meaning construction. People situate objects within their environment, where shared meanings can develop within social groups. These assumptions form the basis of the ontological position of this study and reflect the nature of strategy-as-practice research. This position rejects the positivist philosophy, which would instead advocate that the reality of objects exists externally to actors. The nature

of this study considers how senior leaders use practices to create a shared understanding of strategy. If meanings can be individual and shared and interactions with objects and individuals create shared meaning, this research sets out to understand how this occurs. This perspective is the very heart of social constructivism, and as such, this study.

> *"The social interaction of actors is a crucial element of social constructivism and it is this aspect which has inspired the practice turn in social theory" (Rasche and Chia, 2009, p. 715)*

Social constructivism is not the only perspective within the philosophy of constructivism, another influential paradigm being empirical constructivism. The differences between sub-categories of constructivism are nuanced and fragmented (as well as inconsistently argued in the literature). There is no consistently clear consensus on how separate or overlapping they are, not least because some of the "grand" influencing theorists are common across multiple perspectives (Grand, von Arx and Ruegg-Sturm, 2015). However, the distinctions are important to consider, as they involve the relationships between structure, agency, and materiality, central to this thesis topic. Therefore, the following sections briefly explore the main alternatives to social constructivism.

3.1.1 Alternatives to social constructivism

Empirical constructivism, primarily developed by Bruno Latour, is most commonly associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

> *"Latour argues that no phenomena can be adequately described unless scholars abandon artificial distinctions between lines of thought, and direct their attention to the empirical reality that people, ideas, objects, artefacts, nature, and the like are all joined together in an intricate network of associations that develop momentum over time." (Leonardi, 2013, p. 61)*

With a basis in empirical constructivism, ANT disassociates strategy with the agency of individuals. It provides what Chapman, Chua, & Mahama (2015: 266)

call “a more sophisticated concept of agency”. Disassociating agency allows for more focus on material objects. Distributing agency between humans and material objects means they can be considered equally important. Actants acquire their form, existence and influence on others when viewed with other entities, in a concept of ‘relational materiality’. While social constructivism is the same in this respect, the point of departure comes with the agency of non-human actants. Actor-Network Theory views these as having a capacity to act, called ‘generalised symmetry’. Both theories agree that actors (or actants) can have multiple interests (and this idea sets it apart from a traditional economic view of strategy). There is, however, a subtle difference between each theory in how they view multiple interests. Actor-Network Theory sees interests as multiple but indeterminate (Chapman, Chua and Mahama, 2015, p. 270), whereas social constructivism accepts multiple interests by recognising that actors exist in many different environments, which are not necessarily indeterminate (Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010).

Before the emergence of constructivism as a mainstay philosophy within organisational studies, realism was the most commonly adopted stance (Mir and Watson, 2000). The post-positivist research philosophy has increased influence and adds an extra layer of complexity in considering the differences between belief systems. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2018) provide an update to their influential 1994 article (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and introduce critical realism as part of a post-positivist philosophy. In an alternative view to constructivism, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) discuss the difference between constructivism and critical realism, calling them linked epistemologies.

Critical realism

Critical realism is an alternative to traditional agential realism. Mutch (2013: 33) argues it offers more value, providing “conceptual clarity about the nature of the world”. Leonardi, (2013) asserts strong parallels between critical realism and symbolic interactionism, as both accept that, while there can be only one empirical ‘reality’, there can be multiple perceptions of reality which change over time as a result of interaction. There is a need to separate the conditions of action from the action itself (Herepath, 2014). Scholars can study materiality as part of structure by accepting an analytical duality between structure and action. Social interaction occurs in what he describes as the ‘realm of action’. Things become sociomaterial over time through a process of imbrication.

However, what makes constructivism a preferable approach is an allowance for pluralism which is not present in critical realism. The inclusion of pluralism is a crucial distinction in sensemaking studies, as constructivists would regard different constructions of meaning as being equally valid, whereas realism would accept different understandings and meaning, but view this in a frame of one of them being more ‘correct’ than the other (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Agential realism

In a deliberate shift away from social constructivism, agential realism does not distinguish between the social and the material – there is only sociomaterial (Leonardi, 2013, p. 65). It is a practice-based approach within Information Systems, attributed initially to Karen Barad (Scott and Orlikowski, 2013). Using agential realism, they describe practices, not as tasks undertaken by people in roles, “but material-discursive practices enacted through apparatus that simultaneously constitute and organise phenomenon” (Scott and Orlikowski, 2013, p. 78). While trying to distance itself from social constructivism, there are

strong parallels with empirical constructivism, and the influence of Latour is evident.

The conflation between action and structure represents a clear departure from those theories influenced by structuration, which would see these as ontologically different. Leonardi (2013) is particularly critical and identifies this as creating several problems: firstly, it does not provide the power to explain phenomena because this conflation leads to descriptive studies of what things are, rather than explanations of why things appear to be as they are. Secondly, he identifies that agential realism overlooks how practices are sustained and changed, as it does not allow for a theory of temporality (2013, p. 66). This approach is valid, given the iterative nature of strategising processes and the centrally of time within such a process.

This extended exploration of the various philosophical perspectives is essential in explaining the fundamental assumptions underpinning this research. The research design of this thesis relies upon the fundamental philosophical idea that individuals construct their reality, which means there can be many interpretations of the world. Each of these is equally valid, but together they contribute to a shared worldview. However, this worldview is fluid and evolves with time. This approach is the foundation of social constructivism.

3.2 Approach and time horizon

Research approaches usually are either inductive or deductive. Inductive research develops theory as the result of the data. Deductive research tests established theory using the data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). However, this research includes elements of both these approaches and could

therefore be called “abductive” (Morgan, 2007, p. 71). An abductive study constantly moves back and forth between induction and deduction, converting observations into theories and then assessing those theories through action. The iterative, multi-stage nature of this research means that it is possible to use existing theory to inform the research while at the same time allowing early data collection to re-inform following data collection. For instance, the framework from chapter two was the basis for the interview structure in phase one. However, the data from these interviews revealed directions tested back against the theory before re-informing the themes explored during phase two.

Abduction is appropriate for case study research, especially those based on constructivism (Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010). It is an approach shown to have worked in studies of strategic sensemaking (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018), as well as studies involving different organisational participants (Mantere, 2008), and those that include prominent discursive elements (Laine and Vaara, 2007). Abduction helps link empirical data to theoretical ideas when dealing with qualitative data (Lee and Cassell, 2013). This link allows for qualitative data to be theorised in a “conceptual leap” through a process of “abductive reasoning” (Klag and Langley, 2013, p. 151). Abduction, therefore, suits the nature of this study, particularly in conceptualising the phenomenon in a more abstract, theoretical way.

Chapter one identified a knowledge gap that requires research considering multiple activities conducted over time as part of a whole strategising process. Therefore, it is appropriate that this is a longitudinal study. Data collection took place between November 2017 and November 2019, including repeat interviews with participants spaced approximately one year apart. While the formal aspects

of the strategising process commenced in March 2018, it quickly became apparent that activities as far back as June 2016 were significant. Archival data and retrospective questioning in interviews allowed these in the study. Therefore, the unit of analysis is the entire strategy formulation process, which ran from June 2016 to June 2019. As the research project tracked the formulation and implementation of a new strategy as it developed, the research could be considered ‘real-time’ (Langley and Stensaker, 2012). Real-time research has the advantage of allowing for a closer analysis of what is happening and a greater awareness of ambiguity in meaning, something that can be challenging with retrospective sensemaking (Balogun, Huff and Johnson, 2003). Considering the phenomenon over time enhances the internal validity of the study (Tight, 2017), as these types of ambiguities can be identified and resolved.

3.3 Method

Increased use of social theory has also seen more meaningful use of associated methods, which means a move away from more rigid positivist approaches relying on large samples and fixed questions. More in-depth interpretative studies tend to focus on one or a small number of firms (Whittington, 2015a, p. 156). Although quantitative methods have historically dominated management research, there is a long and established tradition in using qualitative methods delivering high-quality research (Lee and Cassell, 2013). The strategic management literature has benefitted from organisational studies using ethnographies and case studies to generate impactful research (Pettigrew, 2011). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) caution on the subtle difference between qualitative research and simply using qualitative data, stating that genuine qualitative research should address questions around how social experience is

created and given meaning. Therefore, qualitative research best aligns with social constructivist philosophy.

This research adopts a qualitative multi-method, bringing together interviews, observations and archival data. An advantage of qualitative research is creatively exploring complex and interrelated issues within an organisational setting (Jarzabkowski, Langley and Nigam, 2021). The situated nature of meaning and understanding required that these be understood qualitatively. Kouamé and Langley (2018) provide a strong justification as to why qualitative methods are valid in SAP organisational research; “Generalization in qualitative research always relies on contributions to theory rather than on statistical regularities” (2018, p. 571). They recognise this limits generalisability but instead suggest it offers transferability instead. Transferability means that this study’s findings can still be applied in other settings with similar characteristics, retaining a high level of validity in the study.

Qualitative research has the ability to deeply explore phenomena in a way that quantitative approaches cannot. It can understand the nature of things, considering contextual influences. Klag and Langley (2013) recognise the difficulties in codifying theoretical contributions in qualitative research, but they state it can capture “situated specificity” and link to broader conceptual issues. Johnson, Langley, Melin, and Whittington (2007: 52) advocate for in-depth qualitative data because they are best suited to the nature of SAP research: “dynamic, complex, involving intense human interaction”. This approach has regularly been successful in the SAP literature (Regnér, 2003; Roper and Hodari, 2015; Santos, Tureta and Felix, 2021). The only logical alternative would have been a mixed-method, which would have combined both qualitative and

quantitative data. This method was not adopted because the nature of the phenomenon limits the value that statistical generalisability would bring. However, it does not rule out future quantitative studies which could confirm findings from this research.

3.4 Strategy

This research is based on a single case study and uses a qualitative multi-method. Yin (2018: 15), who pioneered the case study as a research method in its own right, defines a *case study* as a method that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context and relies on multiple sources of evidence". He advocates using prior theoretical propositions to help guide design, data collection and analysis, and converging data through a process of triangulation. Case study research adopts a more holistic view, considering everything rather than a limited number of variables or factors that are often the focus of other types of research, resulting in oversimplification (Tight, 2017). The situated nature of sensemaking within an organisation makes a case study an ideal choice for this topic (Gillham, 2000). As such, case studies "provide a good understanding of how sensemaking and sensegiving are socially constructed through time" (Rouleau, 2005, p. 1415).

Case studies recognise the complexity and "embeddedness" of social truth (Tight, 2017, p. 30). Adopting a case study strategy confines the context to a single case, enabling a more holistic consideration of how different theoretical concepts fit together. Therefore, it may be possible to consider how sensemaking, practices, discourse, and materiality work together. The research can consider how institutional language projects onto local, episodic contexts (Balogun *et al.*, 2014, p. 193). Case studies are among the best bridges from

qualitative evidence to mainstream deductive research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). They explore the challenges and opportunities for developing new and existing theories when using case study research. This research has the role of “creating or advancing the conceptualisation and operalization of a theory” (Tight, 2017, p. 158) or a “contextualised explanation”.

The close collaboration between the researcher and participants found within a case study is the source of strength within the strategy that makes it a valuable tool to be used. Baxter and Jack (2008: 545) state that you should use a case study when you want to address ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, you cannot manipulate the behaviour of participants, and understanding the context where this behaviour takes place is important. While ethnography can also contribute much to these kinds of concepts (Cunliffe, 2015; Liu, Jarrett and Rouleau, 2021), reflected in the participant observation method used, the inclusion of other more traditional methods means that this study could not be considered ethnography purest terms. A case study was more appropriate in the circumstances and more established in the SAP literature (Balogun, Beech and Johnson, 2015).

Case study research is bounded, which keeps the research pragmatic and feasible (Tight, 2017). While the boundaries between the phenomenon of study and the context of the case are often unclear, bounding the case (i.e., defining the scope of the project) can be challenging. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest doing this in three ways: by time and place, by time and activity, and by definition and context, which results in identifying the unit of analysis (Tight, 2017). Doing so also allows for the rejection of information and data that is not relevant to the study, making the research more feasible. In this case, the unit of analysis considers the practices and episodes related to participation (definition and

context) within a specific strategising process (activity) for a single organisation (place) between June 2016 and June 2019 (time).

Single-case study

This study adopts a single case design (Yin, 2018). That is a holistic study with a single unit of analysis within a single case. The single-organisation case study is a proven approach, perhaps most famously by Pettigrew's (1985) study of ICI, but also more recently in SAP research about practices (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013), sensemaking (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015), and participation (Splitter and Whittington, 2019; Tavella, 2020). This research investigates participation in strategy making within a single third-sector organisation. Addressing the potential weaknesses of this approach, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) advocate theoretical sampling of cases, over and above the need for the case to be representative or generalisable. While multiple case studies may provide an opportunity for more robust comparative analysis, single-case studies still offer prospects to compare cases, as those comparisons may yet to be undertaken (Tight, 2017).

Advance notice of the impending formal strategising process gave the researcher a unique opportunity to gather data in real-time while strategising activities were occurring. This case was principally selected because it is an unusual and exemplary case of participation in strategy formulation. Although identified as increasingly important (Whittington, 2015b), it is not common for organisations to involve large numbers of people in strategy formulation. Participation is more common in third-sector volunteering environments than traditional firms because of the increased need to ensure volunteer engagement with the organisational purpose (Tucker, Thorne and Gurd, 2013). Strategy development also does not

happen continually. Therefore, finding an organisation that happens to be starting on a new strategy development process that involves elements of mass participation is not the easiest of things, especially as this allows for real-time, rather than retrospective, data collection.

A case is also suitable where a situation arises that was previously unavailable to researchers, thereby making the case revelatory (Yin, 2018). Access to the 'black box' of strategy is not something open to just anyone (Chia and MacKay, 2007). One of the biggest challenges in researching within a 'closed' setting, such as an organisation, is gaining access (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The particular access opportunity to the case organisation for the researcher (primarily due to their historical and continued involvement within the organisation) is a valid reason for its choice (Silverman, 2013). A single-case is also more justified when collecting data at multiple points in time, thereby making the case-study longitudinal. As an iterative study that considers both strategy formulation and strategy implementation, having continued access to the case over a long period further justifies the appropriateness of the organisation's choice (Yin, 2018).

A single-embedded case study design, such as by introducing sub-units of analysis, such as along the lines of stages (e.g., strategy formulation and strategy implementation), or participant groups (e.g., senior management, middle management, frontline roles), was not adopted. While this would have broken down the study into convenient parts, doing so would have obscured potential findings in the data, given the impact each sub-unit has on the others. For instance, had the entire process not been considered holistically, then the vital impact of early work before March 2018 (which was not considered strategy formulation) may have been ignored. Also, much work on strategic sensemaking

acknowledges the importance of sensegiving between different participant groups (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009, 2011; Franco and Sotirios, 2011), and therefore to restrict the study to only a small number of groups considered to be “strategists” would have been inappropriate.

3.5 Data collection

A combination of archival data, interviews and direct participant observation were gathered in this study, enabling cross-referencing of different data sources using the principle of triangulation (Yanow, Ybema and van Hulst, 2012), leading to a closer approximation of ‘truth’ (Brotherton, 2015). Three different sources of data can check internal validity and verify findings from more than one source, providing richer insight into the phenomenon in question, as it can consider multiple perspectives. The three different sources of data were:

1. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine individuals from senior and middle management roles, resulting in nearly 13 hours of transcribed interview material,
2. Direct participant observation amounting to over 26 hours, with detailed field notes taken. Field notes included supplementary notes from additional informal conversations with personnel from all levels within the organisation that occurred around the observation episodes, and
3. Finally, document analysis of 32 formal documents and over 245 emails about strategy work within the organisation.

Other studies have used this combination of data sources (Le Coze, 2021), including participation studies (Tavella, 2020). However, this study adopts a more holistic view of the strategising process. Data were collected over two years, from November 2017 to November 2019, with retrospective access to email and document archives.

3.5.1 Interviews

Interviews are among the most widespread methods used to understand participants' experiences and a central technique in qualitative research (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012; Langley and Meziani, 2020). They are often the primary form of data collection in case studies, especially when exploring strategic decision making (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). They are a highly efficient way to gather rich, empirical data, "especially when the phenomenon of interest is highly episodic and infrequent" (2007, p. 28). Interviews have been used extensively in case studies, including about strategic capabilities (Simon *et al.*, 2017), materiality (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013), sensemaking (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015), and studies that look across multiple levels within organisations (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007).

Interviews were undertaken in two phases. The first followed the conclusion of the strategy workshops in May/June 2018 and consisted of eight interviews with actors identified as being involved in the strategy formulation due to their role. The second round took place approximately 12 months later, in June/July 2019, following the annual ceremonial event to launch the new strategy officially. Phase two consisted of eight interviews, seven of which were with the same individuals as the first round, with the remaining interview with the new Chief Operations Officer (COO). The actors identified are summarised in table 3.3. Interviews took place within the respondents' work environment using private office space. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Each interview lasted on average 49 minutes and resulted in 12 hours 58 minutes of interview transcription.

Sampling

Interview participants were chosen based on their role or involvement in the strategising process (summarised in table 3.2), an approach known as purposive

sampling (Brotherton, 2015). These were primarily the people who were responsible for guiding the Board of Trustees and Senior Management Team in the strategic direction of the organisation (CEO/CC/CB), the individual with direct management responsibility for the design of the strategy formulation process (DS), as well as four middle managers who would be responsible for implementation in national regions (MM1-4). Phase two included the Chief Operations Officer (who joined during the process). Given the study focused on participation across all levels in the organisation, frontline personnel could have been interviewed. However, the distance that frontline individuals had from the process design would limit the value of interview data, particularly as the content of interviews would not result in information that could be generalised across the organisation. Besides, the study observed the involvement of (and engagement with) frontline personnel during episodes. During these, many informal conversations took place and were included in the field notes.

Table 3.2: Interview participants

Phase 1 interviews (May – June 2018)	Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Director of Strategy and Communications (DS) Chief Commissioner (CC) Chair of the Board of Trustees (CB) Middle Manager 1 (MM1) Middle Manager 2 (MM2) Middle Manager 3 (MM3) Middle Manager 4 (MM4)
Phase 2 interviews (June – July 2019)	Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Chief Operations Officer (COO) Director of Strategy and Communication (DS) Chief Commissioner (CC) Chair of the Board of Trustees (CB) Middle Manager 1 (MM1) Middle Manager 2 (MM2) Middle Manager 3 (MM3)

Interview protocol

In the first phase, a protocol of questions provided a similar structure for all interviews (see Appendix 1). This approach is known as a semi-structured, in-depth interview. Interviews used three central questions, each designed for a specific purpose, summarised below in table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Phase one interview questions

Question	Purpose
When you started in your role, how did you go about making sense of the organization and its strategy?	Used to explore the individual sensemaking process of each respondent.
Could you describe when you first became aware that the new strategy was to be formulated, and how you have been involved in the process to now?	Used to help identify specific strategising episodes not known to the researcher and the specific involvement of the respondent.
Could we explore some of these episodes you have identified in more detail? Beginning with [x].	Used to examine the specific characteristics and features of the episodes identified in the second question.

Within each question, prompts explored the triggers, enablers, constraints, and influencing factors for respondents' points. This structure was informed by Burgelman *et al.* (2018) and re-stated from chapter two below in figure 3.1. However, the nature of in-depth interviews allows for deviation where other issues emerged during the interview or exploration of some areas in more or less depth depending on the respondent's answers. An individual familiar with (but not directly connected to) the process or respondents took part in a pilot interview. The pilot allowed for refinement of the question wording to ensure their clarity during interviews. The pilot interview resulted in greater emphasis on the individual sensemaking process in the first question and a broadening of the third question linked to the answers provided in the second (instead of a prescribed list of known events).

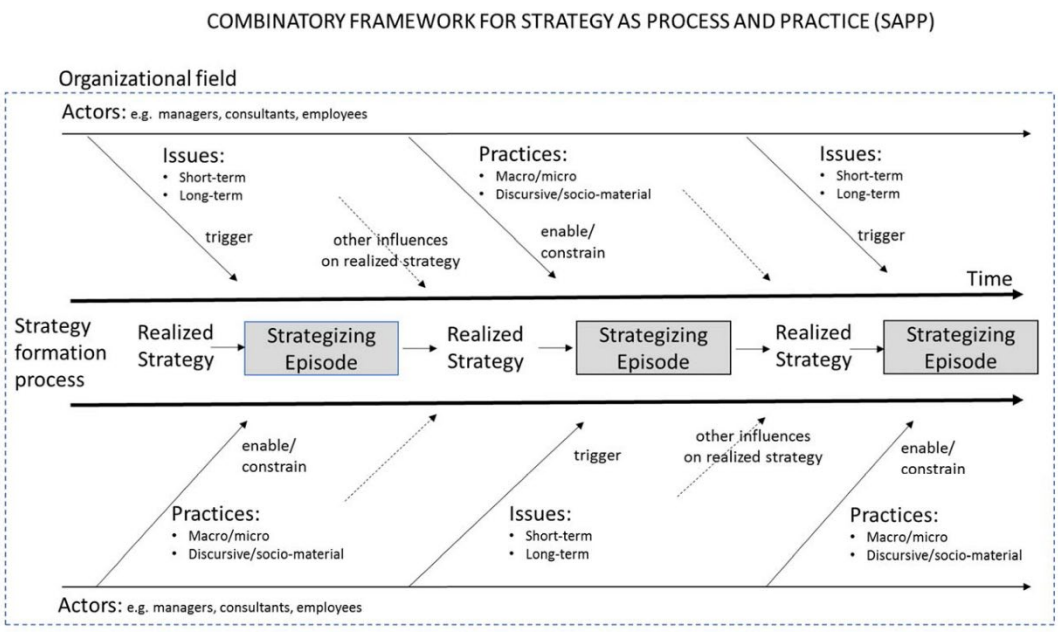


Figure 3.1: Combinatory framework from Burgelman et. al. (2018)

Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) advise of the risk that interviews can sometimes give rise to retrospective sensemaking and impression management. Corroboration with other data sources can mitigate this risk. A focus on data sources who are highly knowledgeable and from different places also helps to limit bias. Undertaking this research in 'real-time' and completing interviews in stages to capture 'before and after' views further reduced risk factors. Preliminary analysis of the archival data's findings, observations and the first round of interviews allowed early correspondence with the literature and the development of the protocol for the second round of interviews (found in Appendix 2).

3.5.2 Observations

Observations are valuable because they provide an unfiltered view of action and behaviour, allowing more direct access to organisational phenomena. Generally considered a method used in ethnography, they are common in practice research (Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Rasche and Chia, 2009; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). If strategy is considered something an organisation does, it follows that a

researcher should try to observe what organisational actors do (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, observations are instrumental in this study.

A pilot observation (W1) corresponded to an early pilot of the strategy workshop. This abbreviated session took place within a more extended one-day forum for volunteer managers in the organisation. It provided both the researcher and facilitator an opportunity to refine their approach and practice the overall structure the workshops would adopt. Following this, ten strategy workshops were observed between 5 April 2018 and 3 May 2018. These workshops took place across seven geographical locations (summarised in table 3.4). An example set of observation notes is in Appendix 3. There were three workshops that the researcher was unable to attend. However, the strategy team passed data captured to the researcher for comparative purposes. Each workshop lasted from between two to three hours, resulting in 26 hours of observation data.

This study used overt participant observation of 11 strategy workshops, whereby the researcher openly adopted the role of both participant and observer and disclosed this to other participants. To reduce any potential impact on the data, the researcher adopted a position of involvement that did not alter or influence the proceedings but would allow the opportunity to interact with people in attendance. Involvement included assisting in logistics (such as moving and arranging furniture as directed by the facilitator) or participating in small group activities and discussions (through asking questions or talking about personal experiences). This kind of role is “participant as observer” (Brannan and Oultram, 2012). This approach facilitated a deeper level of access into the ‘inner workings’ of each episode and allowed for building rapport with participants, which encouraged them to be more open with the researcher. This approach also felt

more natural and acknowledged the researcher's active (but separate) involvement with the organisation, as some of the individuals attending knew the researcher by face or name. Therefore casual and friendly interactions were the appropriate social response in the situation.

Table 3.4: Observation episodes

Workshop identifier	Date and time	Location	No. of attendees	Facilitator
W1 (pilot)	10 March 2018 2-3pm	Birmingham	60	DS
W2	5 April 2018 6.30-8.30pm	Southampton	26	DS
W3	11 April 2018 7-9pm	Stockport	18	DS
W4	12 April 2018 3-6pm	Sheffield	42	DS
W5	12 April 2018 6.30-9pm	Sheffield	11	2 Senior Directors
W6	18 April 2018 2.30-5pm	Huntingdon	34	CEO
W7	18 April 2018 6.30-9pm	Huntingdon	20	CEO
W8	24 April 2018 3-5.30pm	London	38	CEO / DS
W9	24 April 2018 6.30-9pm	London	64	CEO / DS
W10	2 May 2018 6-9pm	Birmingham	24	CEO
W11	3 May 2018 6-8.30pm	Bristol	35	DS

Observation protocol

The workshops followed a similar structure. Following an introduction, the facilitator asked participants to write down words that summarised how they felt in response to a statement. After discussing in small groups, participants called out answers, which the facilitator captured on a whiteboard. Two similar activities followed, where small group discussion led to the facilitator summarising points on a whiteboard. Detailed field notes were taken during the observations and later transcribed into NVivo for processing and analysis. Field notes would describe the observed actions, behaviours, and quotations from individuals (Saunders,

Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Based on themes in the literature, the observations would mainly focus on five areas:

1. Details of the environment, including the physical layout of furniture, ambience and factors such as time of day and number of people present.
2. Observations on the type and demeanour of attendees, including balance of volunteers and employees and mood of the group.
3. Details of materiality, including artefacts used and the output they generated.
4. Discursive practices of facilitators, which would often result in notes of what was said, and how this was received.
5. Details of responses by participants, including both verbal and non-verbal content.

In addition to this, the workshop 'outputs' were captured and digitally stored. Outputs included Post-It notes used by participants and the words written on whiteboards during the activities. Outputs were also transcribed or transferred into NVivo to assist with data analysis.

As well as the formal workshop observations, the nature of the 'roadshow' delivery of multiple workshops in different geographical locations meant the researcher would often travel with the workshop organizing team. This arrangement allowed for a significant period of 'downtime', where there were opportunities for informal conversations and discussions. Therefore, notes of these informal discussions supplemented the field notes and were just as informative as the core observation episodes (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 349).

3.5.3 Document analysis

Archival research looked at 281 strategic documents. This form of data can be more readily available at a much lower cost than other forms of qualitative data (Lee, 2012). The close involvement of the researcher within the organisation provided access to the internal communication channels, which allowed for the collection of company-wide communications material from before, during and after the formal strategising programme. Documents included organisation email correspondence, memos, FAQ sheets, and published transcripts of senior leadership speeches. Immediate access to the documents meant sources of information could guide the direction of further research. Document gathering continued throughout the study as new documents were created or identified as being of relevance.

Senior leaders produced several multimedia methods to engage people during the study, such as video interviews and webinars and were included as sources of evidence. Further documents provided during the process, such as during the interviews, were also included. The study therefore analysed:

- 32 documents,
- Four videos, and
- Over 245 email correspondences.

These were imported into the qualitative data analysis platform NVivo for processing and analysis.

3.6 Ethics

The overriding philosophy behind the ethical considerations of research is ‘do no harm’. While most social sciences research, including this topic, is unlikely to

involve any activity that would pose physical harm to any individual or group, studies must consider all potential risks. Research that involves people, either as individuals or groups, needs to consider the possibility of psychological or reputational harm to those taking part (Holt, 2012). Consideration also extends to the organisation as an entity, as reputational damage can sometimes occur by disclosing information that might otherwise be considered sensitive. All organisations would be rightly concerned about the potential impact of published research on their reputation, especially when the research involves access to the inner workings of the company. Ethical guidelines are available to guide good practice in organisational case study research. Tight (2017: 151) summarises these into four critical codes applied in this research:

1. Any person involved gives their consent, having been informed what they are consenting to.
2. No person involved will suffer harm or disadvantage as a result of their involvement.
3. Persons included will have the right to discontinue or withdraw at any time.
4. Persons involved have the right to confidentiality and will not be identified unless they want to be.

All interview participants signed a written information sheet explaining the project (see Appendix 4). For observation and archival data, any attributable data was discussed with the individual involved, and their direct permission to use sought. No personally identifiable data was collected during observation events, as contributions were (by the design of the workshop) anonymised before collection. Most workshop attendees were not the focus of the observations; therefore, written consent was not gathered from all individuals. Where a contribution was

deemed relevant, individuals were directly approached at the time for their permission to be included.

The nature of a topic considering aspects of business performance, such as strategy, would generally be considered sensitive by an organisation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 223). However, the focus of this study was not on the business strategy itself but on how strategic tools and practices are used and understood. Therefore, this study contains no evaluative judgment on business performance. This focus means that harm or disadvantage is unlikely because of the design of the study. Sensitive data encountered during the project's data collection phase was not relevant to the research, meaning it was kept confidential and not included in the findings. The researcher's involvement in the organisation proved invaluable, as the organisation trusted the researcher with confidential information not otherwise available to 'outsiders', trusting that this information could be kept separate from the usable data before use.

Meaningful consent means participants agree their data can be used only once they have been briefed as to what, why, how and where it will be used, as well as who will see it (O'Reilly, 2012). Participants provide consent at the beginning of the research process; however, this is not a fixed position. There is always a risk that research participants may withdraw their consent at a later stage if they feel uncomfortable with the research content. However, if managed well, it can protect the integrity of the data and assure all those involved. Simons (2009) advocates bringing participants into the research process as an effective way to maintain trust and protect the long-term viability of the data. Seeing those involved as participants in the research rather than subjects is an excellent way to build trust. Giving participants a say over what is included and how it is used

means they are more likely to want to be involved. Following the interviews, participants were sent their transcript and provided the opportunity to correct, revise or withdraw any element of their contribution. Feeding back the transcripts achieved three things:

1. It strengthened the integrity of the data; by reading and revising their transcript, participants could ensure that the recorded data truly reflected their intended meaning.

2. It allowed for negotiation over what precisely was and was not included; where a participant was concerned over the inclusion of a point, this point alone could be excluded, which reduced the risk of the participant withdrawing their entire data. If a point was considered essential to the research, it was possible to negotiate its inclusion with additional layers of anonymity – separate from the attributed data.

3. Seeking participants' agreement and involving them throughout the process doesn't eliminate the risk of withdrawal, but it does lessen the risk that consent is withdrawn at the end of the process, potentially invalidating the entire project.

To protect the right to confidentiality, the starting point of this research was anonymity by using pseudonyms for the company and any participants. However, the researcher's involvement and the single-case study approach means that it still may be possible to identify the organisation – such as Hofstede's 1984 research into IBM (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 129). Therefore, complete anonymity was not guaranteed, and the implication of this was carefully discussed with participants. However, complete confidentiality was offered within

the research setting, meaning that all participants were free to say things they could later edit, correct or retract completely. While direct quotations are generally linked to their role, where participants wished for an additional layer of anonymity, these were either unattributed or attributed only to their level (e.g., Senior Management or Middle Management).

The consent form signed by research participants outlined the purpose and approach of the research. The form also explained how data would be collected, processed, and stored. Interviews resulted in digital audio recordings, typed transcriptions and notes written at the time of the interview. Observation data included written field notes, digital transcriptions, and digital images of workshop content. Documents were either captured digitally at the source or scanned. All digital data was stored electronically using a secure system that was encrypted and password protected. Handwritten notes were securely stored at the researcher's home. In line with University of West London guidelines, raw data was stored for five years after completing the research before being destroyed.

The ethical approach and methods were presented before the University Research Ethics Committee before the empirical phase of the study, where clearance to proceed was provided (UWL/REC/SHT-00134).

3.7 Data analysis

Analysing the data used a two-step approach. The first step involved a careful reading of the data to inductively identify practices, process or influencing factors employed in strategy. The second was to abductively move between theory and data to verify findings against both other data sources and the theory. This approach is not unusual in SAP research (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Werle and

Seidl, 2015). In the first step, the approach meant that the data was not bias in terms of looking for specific findings because of the theory, and therefore not seeing something because it did not fit a particular theoretical model. The variation and difference in different practices identified in the literature also meant that many practices could be identified differently depending on the theory employed. An abductive approach meant that where the analysis identified similar practices or concepts across different theories, they could be grouped into a second-order theme. This iteration continued until a saturation point, defined as “when additional data and/or additional analysis no longer add new theories or interpretations regarding the topic”, was reached (Tight, 2017, p. 106). Triangulation ensured data integrity, where multiple sources of data were used to verify ambiguous findings (Yin, 2018).

Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) identify the challenge of presenting and analysing data in qualitative research. In a single case study design, they advise presenting a relatively complete rendering of the story within the text, using key illustrative quotes from informants intertwined with the theory. This approach can be described as “thick description”, and is a common approach in both strategy and organisational research (Ravasi and Canato, 2013; Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015; Hydle, 2015). Following Berends and Deken (2021), results are initially presented using an inductive composition. Findings are presented chronologically as an un-theorised recounted narrative. Doing so maintains the temporal coherence essential in qualitative process studies (Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999). Data was also composed into a visual timeline of events to aid interpretation in presenting the sequence of events.

3.8 Reliability and validity

There are four standard design tests: credibility, trustworthiness, confirmability, and dependability. However, constructivist research often uses alternative measures for assessing the quality of research (Tight, 2017). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) advise four measures: trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Denscombe (2014) advocates the addition of respondent validity by asking respondents to comment on findings, something even more pertinent when exploring the meaning of individuals, and therefore helpful in managing potential researcher bias. Respondent validity was achieved by returning interview transcripts to participants for comment and exploring some of the early outputs in phase two interviews.

Trustworthiness can be assured by managing for any researcher bias. The close involvement of the researcher with the case organisation makes this especially important. Trustworthiness was managed by looking for contrary findings in preliminary data (Yin, 2018). Credibility was managed through robust design decisions to ensure the validity of the research. Purposive sampling ensured that participants were relevant and qualified to take part. The design features of longitudinal data, respondent validation, and triangulation of data sources mitigated for spurious results, the impact of researcher or responder bias, and "anecdotalism" (Silverman, 2013). As an exceptional case, there is no requirement for generalisability. However, transferability allows the conceptualisation of the findings beyond the single case context. The application of social theory (in this case, sensemaking) facilitates the transferability of the findings, allowing application at a more abstract level (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). Transparent and open processes with instruments that are available for scrutiny achieves confirmability. These measures facilitate replication of the study, which

could confirm the results and improve reliability. Looking for coherence with the established literature also assures confirmability. Therefore findings are discussed in direct relation back to other known findings.

3.9 Role of the researcher

Inseparable from the research project is the role and involvement of the researcher within the case organisation. The researcher has been involved with the case study organisation as both a frontline volunteer and low-level manager for approximately ten years. However, during this time, they had no direct involvement with strategy formulation and therefore has been distinct from the most relevant areas to the topic until the commencement of the research. This position affords the researcher a degree of separation and impartiality. Qualitative research often seeks to obtain the 'insider perspective'. It is increasingly embracing the researcher as having an active role in the research environment (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2013). Close involvement with the subject of study presents challenges; however, more and more researchers appreciate the strengths of this kind of involvement (Tietze, 2012). Being a part of the research setting facilitates awareness of pertinent areas that inform the study, such as being aware of existing practices, routines, and processes and having already established relationships with key participants. When operating in a familiar research environment, a robust reflexive approach can address potential conflicts that can occur. The researcher would regularly stop and consider potential influences and account for this (Haynes, 2012). A reflective account maintained throughout the project (see Appendix 6 for an example) informed ideas summarised at the end of this thesis.

In a practical sense, the researcher's role within the case allowed for an increased level of involvement that would not otherwise be available and a more comprehensive identification of valuable data. For example, being 'in' the organisation meant the researcher received the everyday and regular communications sent out from senior and middle managers. Therefore, communications that a participant might not have otherwise identified as strategic (and therefore not flagged for analysis) could be informally picked up by the researcher and included in the study. Without this informal access, many of the archival data documents would not be included in the research.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has explained and justified the research design, methods and analysis techniques employed within the study. The unit of analysis is the practices and episodes related to participation within the strategising activity that led to the production of Charity Ltd.'s organisational strategy 2019-2022. Within case study research, context alone does not constitute an original contribution. However, exploring participation within a more extreme environment allows research to shed theoretical light where it otherwise may not have been seen. The adopted methods, therefore, enhance the original contribution established by the theoretical focus of the topic. The empirical evidence uses 16 interviews, 26 hours of observation and analysis of 281 documents. These are analysed using triangulation and abductively moving between data and theory to generate the following findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study. After providing details of the case organisation, results are presented using an *inductive composition*, where findings are provided chronologically as a recounted narrative that is not yet theorised (Berends and Deken, 2021). Doing so provides an overview of the entire strategising process (see figure 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 for a visual summary) and maintains the temporal coherence necessary in qualitative process studies (Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999). Following the timeline of the process, the findings continue by exploring several thematic areas in more depth. First, the trigger of the strategising process is identified as board level restructuring. Next, participation is explored as a sensemaking process. Following this, five participation practices are identified and explored. Six enablers and constraints to participation are then introduced before finally the issue of middle management marginalisation is discussed.

4.1 Details of the case organisation

The case study organisation, Charity Ltd, is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee that has a history spanning over 150 years. Based in England, U.K., it operates community services for young and vulnerable people, funded by a commercial operation that sells training and other services to public and private organisations. In 2019, it collected an income of £102.1m, used to fund charitable output. It operates as a wholly owned subsidiary of a parent charity and is governed by a Board of Trustees who are legally responsible for the governance and management of the organisation. The Boards of both parent and subsidiary operate collectively as two Boards (although they meet jointly).

The Board of the parent charity delegates the responsibility for setting the organisation's strategy and policies to the Board of Charity Ltd.

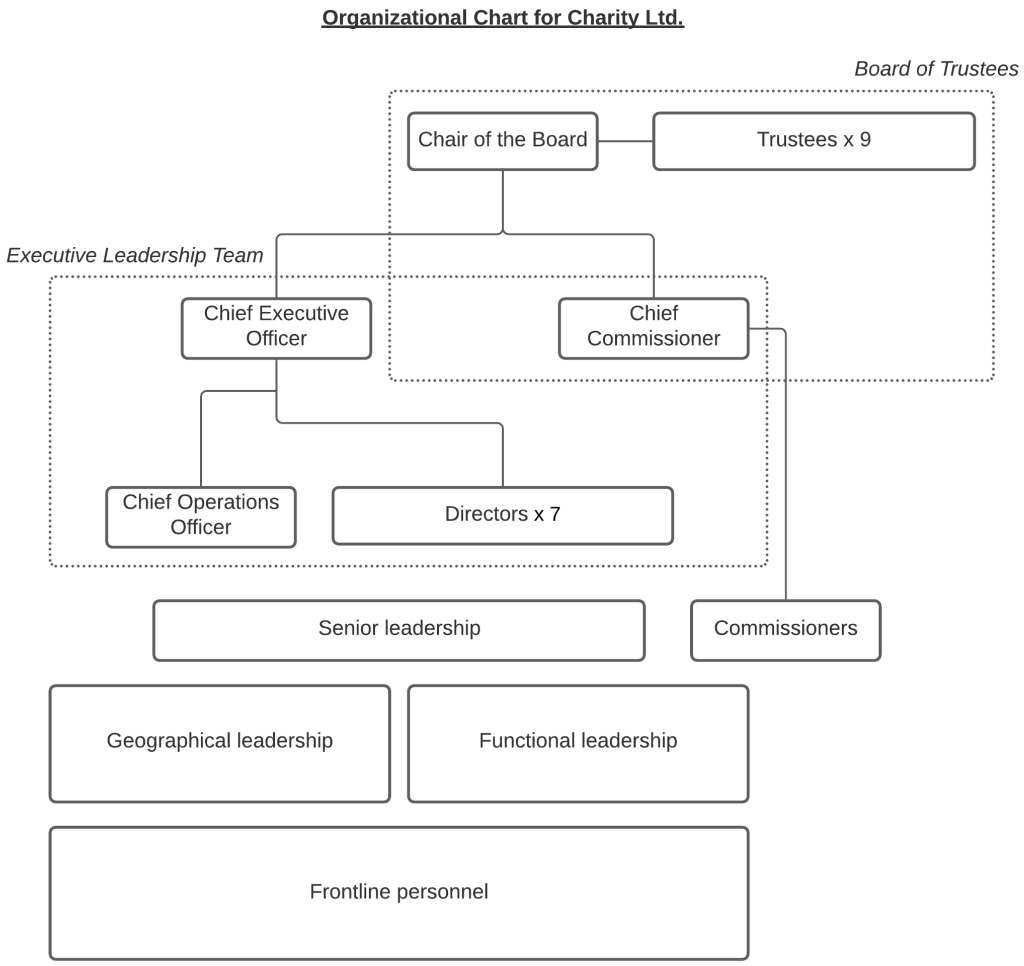


Figure 4.1: Organisational chart for Charity Ltd.

Figure 4.1 shows the organisational structure of Charity Ltd. The Board of Charity Ltd. comprises eleven Trustees. Four are ex officio trustees, including the Chairman and a Chief Commissioner acting as the volunteer advocate on both the Board and Executive Leadership Team (ELT). The Chairman leads the Board, and the remaining seven are independent Trustees. A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) leads an Executive Leadership Team of nine people.

The organisation has a volunteer headcount of about 24,000 people and employs around 1,792 staff. Operationally, the company has four geographical regions representing approximately a quarter of the country (North, South, East, and West). A team of middle managers, made up of both employees and volunteers, lead the regions, which each have circa 5,000-8,000 volunteers in frontline, lower- and middle-management roles. Seven central functions, which are primarily led by employees, support the delivery of commercial services or charitable output.

4.2 Timeline of the process

The unit of analysis that is the subject of this study is the strategising activity that led to Charity Ltd.'s organisational strategy 2019-2022. The work to develop this strategy took place between June 2016 and June 2019, and it is this three-year time period that is the subject of this research. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 present the relevant activities that took place during this time. The figures present a timeline in two phases. The first phase tracks the process from June 2016 to June 2018. It identifies the initial trigger that identified the need for strategising, the formal mass engagement activities that constitute the bulk of the participative strategising, and concludes with an announcement of interim vision and value statements. The second phase picks up from the announcement of the interim vision and value statements and covers the period that took the outputs from the participation activities and turned them into the final strategy. The second phase (and this study) concludes with the formal public announcement of the resulting strategy in June 2019. Before exploring the key findings from this study, a brief chronological summary of the strategising activities provides a temporal account of the process.

Figure 4.2: Phase one timeline, June 2016-June 2018

4.2.1 Phase one

A new Chair of the Board of Trustees began their term in office in June 2016. An initial listening exercise in his first months in office identified a strategic disconnect in the organisation:

> *We needed to realign ourselves and bring back a commitment to charitable output, led by volunteers, and to therefore have a strategic discussion to decide what chartable output that should be.*

The tenure of the new Chair coincided with the appointment of two new Trustees and, in the months that followed, several other personnel changes at the Board and Executive level. These changes included the appointment of a new Head of Strategy (who would later be promoted to the Director of Strategy) and the addition of a new Chief Commissioner (an Ex-Officio Trustee). At the time of their appointment, the Chairman also learned of the CEO's intention to depart. The latter's exit followed the completion of a restructuring process running from March 2016 to October 2016. This restructuring programme had looked to realign the Senior Management Team and functions with a five-year strategy covering 2015-2020. An interim CEO took charge for six months, whilst the Board recruited the new CEO.

Like the Chair of the Board of Trustees, each new appointee spent time learning about the management of the organisation and listening to frontline level employees and volunteers about their experiences and understanding. In email correspondence, interviews or face to face conversations, it would be common to hear the phrases such as: "You listen to the mood", "I have taken these first six months to listen", "What I felt I needed to do was to ensure I understood better the needs, the challenges, successes etc." when embarking on a new role in an organisation.

2017 Away Day

The restructured Board ushered in a more participative approach to strategising activities, illustrated by comparing descriptions of the annual Trustee strategy away days in 2016 and 2017. The Chairman had identified a strategic disconnect within the organisation. This view framed the 2017 away day where, for the first time, both Trustees and the ELT came together to "discuss where the organisation should place itself in the 21st Century" (Chair of the Board – Annual Address). The outcome of this event would define parameters for the new CEO. The 2017 day signalled a departure from the format of the 2016 event, described in an internal memo as a selected number of staff undertaking stand-up "presentations and papers outlining progress towards the 2020 Strategy". Senior staff present would describe them as "passive reporting" to the Trustees, principally looking back at the organisation's performance. The 2017 Away Day instead brought together senior leaders in a facilitated session to discuss and debate the future direction and purpose of the organisation. Whilst not scripted, the Away Day tested whether the priorities of the Chair aligned with the views of Trustees and the SMT:

> *You get lots of ideas together, you start to look to coherence. It rather depends whether or not the Chairman knew what outcome he wanted before he went into the room… That's exactly what I had. I knew what the mood of the organisation wanted. I had a pretty clear instinct what the outcomes should and would be. (Chair of the Board)*

Participants discussed the direction they thought the organisation should take over the next ten years in round table and small discussion groups. Discussions involved collaborative idea development using flipchart paper and Post-It notes. This process led to the identification of themes and priorities which would become the basis for more comprehensive strategising sessions in the organisation:

> *A lot of the themes that came up in that session are the types of things we are talking about now. They've been crystallised and shaped but we're not disembarking from what was discussed in July [2017] by the Trustees (Director of Strategy).*

The output from the strategy Away Day led to the generation of an internal document with an accompanying presentation slide deck circulated to select senior individuals to stimulate discussion around potential future directions. At the same time, further restructuring saw a new CEO and the Chief Commissioner appointed to the ELT. In consultation with the new CEO, the Director of Strategy developed plans for a "mass engagement exercise", which would involve individuals from beyond senior management in the strategising process.

Announcement of strategy review process

A formal strategy review process was announced on 8 March 2018, with a proposed programme and timescales the following week. Throughout the strategising activities, senior leaders would communicate directly with personnel via several different channels. An announcement would normally accompany organisation emails on the company intranet. The CEO and Director of Strategy supplemented this with several video messages, and the central communications team would coordinate social and other digital media messages to support the senior leader messaging. Questions were posed either by email or during the online webinar sessions, and answers collated and transcribed into an 'FAQ' document available to download from the intranet.

Strategy Roadshow Workshops

The flagship key set-pieces were 13 'Strategy Roadshow' workshops. These were held across eight different locations and open to any employee or volunteer to attend. A senior leader facilitated the workshops; four by the CEO, six by the Director of Strategy, two by both the Director of Strategy and CEO and one by

two director-level senior staff. The events were scheduled to last two hours and timed either in the afternoon or evening. Three core questions structured the sessions:

1. What makes you proud to be part of the organisation?
2. What is our impact for beneficiaries, people and communities?
3. What do we need to do well to get to where we want to be?

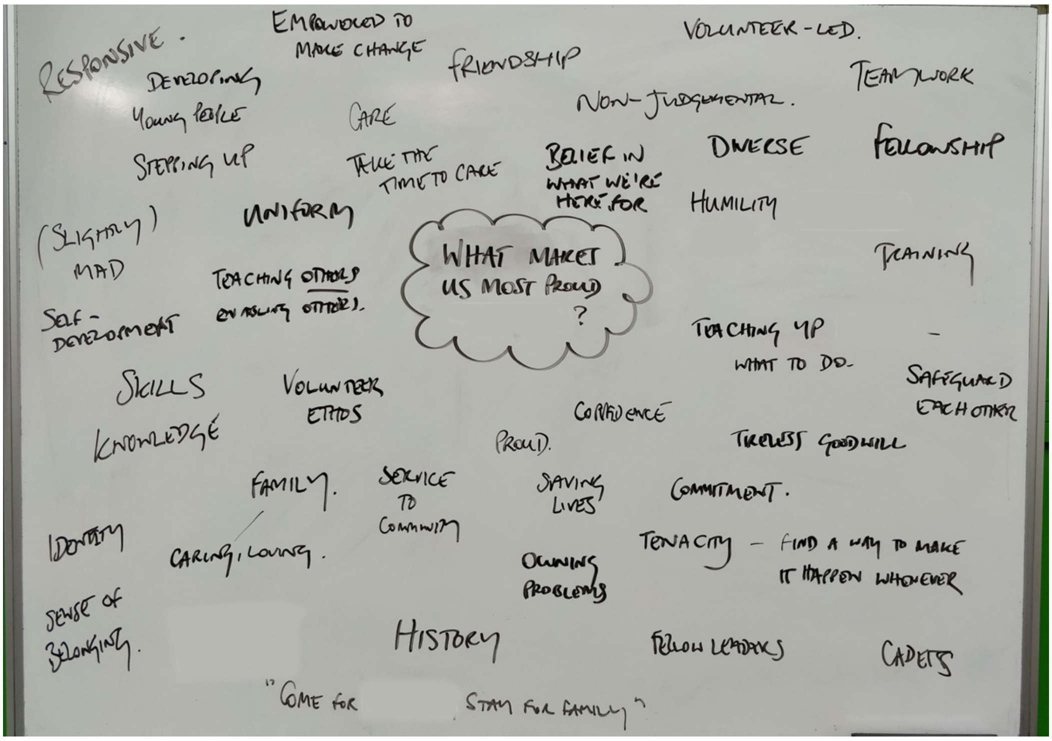
Depending on the physical room layout and anticipated numbers, furniture was arranged either in theatre style or cabaret style with between four to eight people around tables. On the tables (or chairs in the theatre style rooms) were placed pens, Post-It notes, and pre-prepared branded “story cards” (about the size of a postcard, with most of the space blank for writing). Participants were encouraged to use the story cards to share personal anecdotes and advised that these would be collected by staff and shared more widely within the organisation as part of a communications campaign. Rooms also had at least three spaces on which the facilitator (or scribe) could write: whiteboards, flipcharts, or wipeable wallpaper.

After a short period of informal conversation, participants sat down, and the facilitator opened the event by providing some overall context about the purpose and format of the workshops. Introductions would usually include a personal introduction of the facilitator and a personal story or anecdote. The facilitator would then introduce the three questions that provided the structure for the workshop. Participants discussed the questions on their tables (or those sitting near them for theatre style rooms). They were encouraged to use the Post-It notes to capture their thoughts (see figure 4.3 for examples). Senior and middle managers were also present at the workshop. They would be spread around the different groups and usually act as informal scribes to capture the nature of the

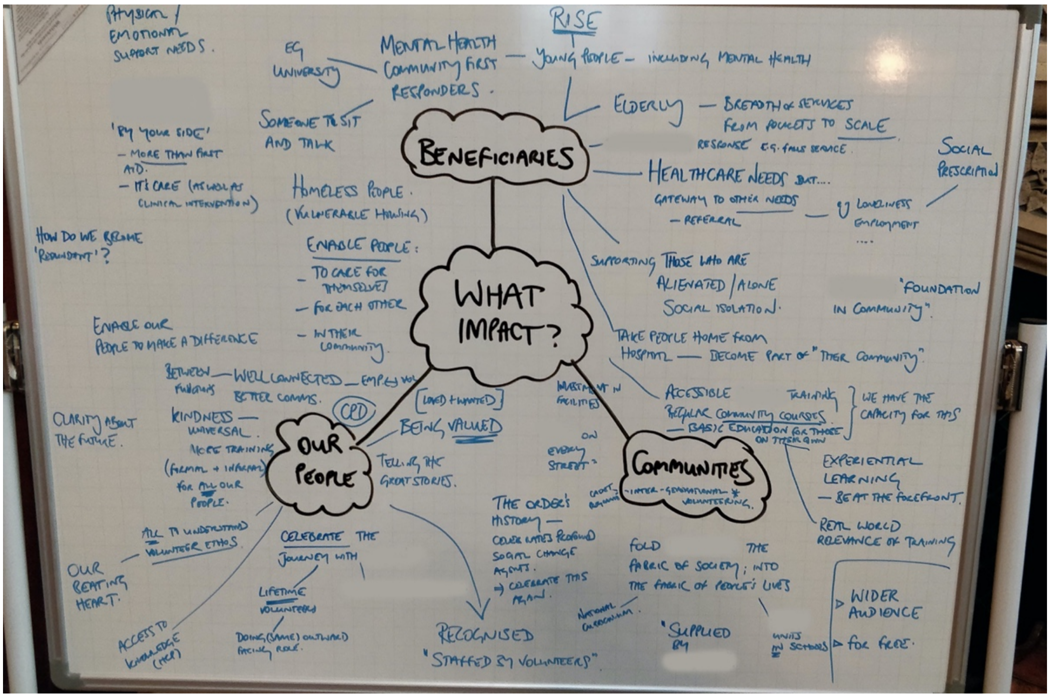
conversation on paper. At the end of the small group discussions, each group would be invited to feedback their conversations, where either the facilitator or someone scribing for them would write words or phrases on a whiteboard to summarise (see figure 4.4).

Figure 4.3: Photograph of example Post-It notes from "Proud" exercise

While all roadshows adopted the same format, content from earlier workshops was re-introduced at later workshops, shaping the nature of the discourse through phrases such as "we've *heard that consistently in other workshops*" (workshop six), or "*there are some really clear consensus themes coming out from across the country*" (workshop eight). As the series of events progressed, facilitators refined themes, often by taking a comment made by a participant (such as a specific phrase) and then re-phrasing it back to the audience in a language that would mirror the language used in other workshops and thus generating a shared discourse (workshop ten).



WHAT MAKES US MOST PROUD ?
RESPONSIVE.
EMPOWERED TO MAKE CHANGE
FRIENDSHIP
VOLUNTEER-LED.
DEVELOPING YOUNG PEOPLE
CARE
NON-JUDGEMENTAL.
TEAMWORK
STEPPING UP
TAKE THE TIME TO CARE
BELIEF IN WHAT WE'RE HERE FOR
DIVERSE
FELLOWSHIP
HUMILITY
(SLIGHTLY) MAD
UNIFORM
TRAINING
TEACHING OTHERS ENABLING OTHERS.
SELF-DEVELOPMENT
TEACHING UP WHAT TO DO.
SKILLS
VOLUNTEER ETHOS
SAFEGUARD EACH OTHER
KNOWLEDGE
CONFIDENCE
PROUD.
TIRELESS GOODWILL
FAMILY.
SERVICE TO COMMUNITY
SAVING LIVES
COMMITMENT.
IDENTITY
CARING, LOVING.
OWNING PROBLEMS
TENACITY — FIND A WAY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN WHATEVER
SENSE OF BELONGING.
HISTORY
FELLOW LEADERS
CADETS
"COME FOR STAY FOR FAMILY"



WHAT IMPACT?
BENEFICIARIES
OUR PEOPLE
COMMUNITIES
RISE
PHYSICAL / EMOTIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS.
EG UNIVERSITY
MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNITY FIRST RESPONDERS.
YOUNG PEOPLE — INCLUDING MENTAL HEALTH
ELDERLY — BREADTH OF SERVICES FROM POCKETS TO SCALE
RESPONSE E.G. FALLS SERVICE
'BY YOUR SIDE'
— MORE THAN FIRST AID.
— IT'S CARE (AS WELL AS CLINICAL INTERVENTION)
SOMEONE TO SIT AND TALK
HOMELESS PEOPLE. (VULNERABLE HOUSING)
HEALTHCARE NEEDS BUT....
GATEWAY TO OTHER NEEDS
— REFERRAL
LONELINESS
EMPLOYMENT
SOCIAL PRESCRIPTION
HOW DO WE BECOME 'REDUNDANT'?
ENABLE PEOPLE:
— TO CARE FOR THEMSELVES
— FOR EACH OTHER
— IN THEIR COMMUNITY.
SUPPORTING THOSE WHO ARE ALIENATED / ALONE
SOCIAL ISOLATION.
"FOUNDATION IN COMMUNITY".
ENABLE OUR PEOPLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
TAKE PEOPLE HOME FROM HOSPITAL — BECOME PART OF "THEIR COMMUNITY"
BETWEEN FUNCTIONS — WELL CONNECTED — EMPLOYED
BETTER COMMS.
CPD
[LOVED + WANTED]
BEING VALUED
INVESTMENT IN FACILITIES
ACCESSIBLE
TRAINING
REGULAR COMMUNITY COURSES
— BASIC EDUCATION FOR THOSE ON THEIR OWN
WE HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR THIS
CLARITY ABOUT THE FUTURE.
KINDNESS — UNIVERSAL.
MORE TRAINING (FORMAL + INFORMAL) FOR ALL OUR PEOPLE.
TELLING THE GREAT STORIES.
ON EVERY STREET
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING
— BE AT THE FOREFRONT.
INTER-GENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERING.
THE ORDER'S HISTORY — COVER WITH PROFOUND SOCIAL CHANGE AGENTS.
→ CELEBRATE THIS AGAIN.
REAL WORLD RELEVANCE OF TRAINING
ALL TO UNDERSTAND VOLUNTEER ETHOS.
OUR BEATING HEART.
CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY WITH
LIFETIME VOLUNTEERS
DOING (SAME) OUTWARD FACING ROLE.
ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE
FOLD THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY; INTO THE FABRIC OF PEOPLE'S LIVES
NATIONAL CURRICULUM.
RECOGNISED "STAFFED BY VOLUNTEERS".
"SUPPLIED BY
UNITS IN SCHOOLS
▷ WIDER AUDIENCE
▷ FOR FREE.

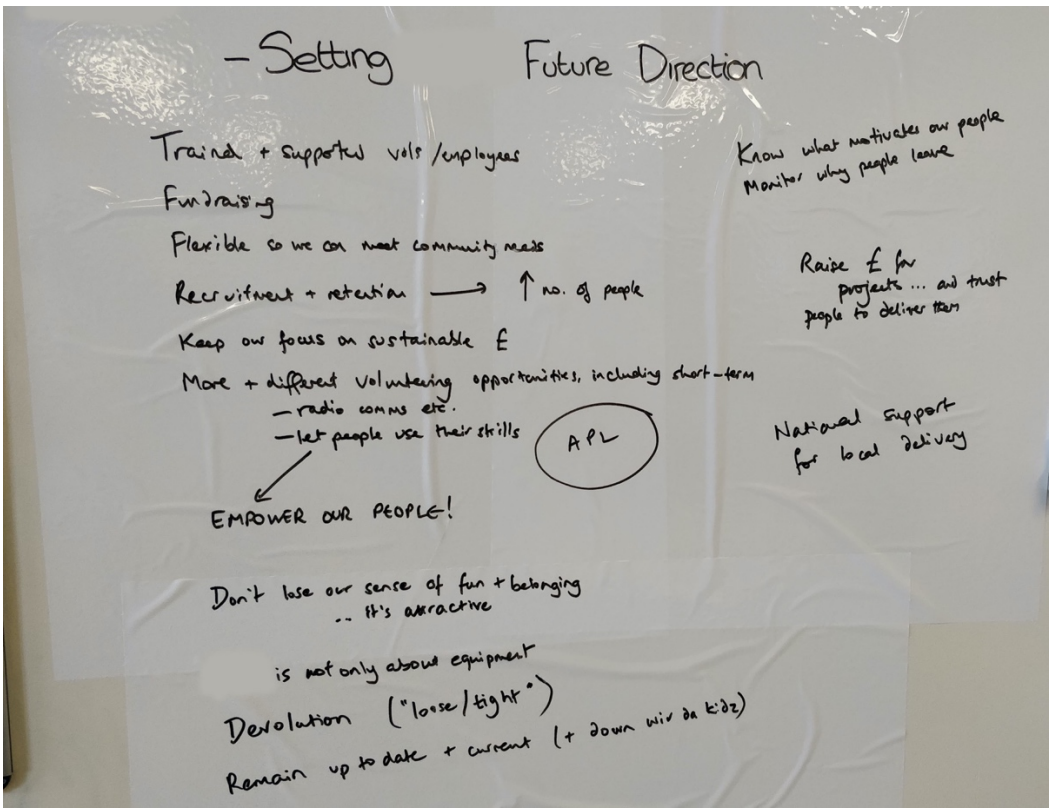


Figure 4.4: Photographs of whiteboard outputs from each activity in workshop

Local strategising events

Twenty-one local events run by middle management supplemented the national series of roadshows. Hosted by the most senior regional middle manager, the events followed a format based on the national events. The localised nature of the event meant the content was more tailored to their local context. In addition to the two different types of roadshow events, eight online webinars lasting approximately 30 minutes and hosted by the Director of Strategy took place during the period 14 to 18 June 2018. The webinars fed back responses received at the roadshow events and gathered additional feedback from those unable to attend:

> *With so many people getting involved and giving feedback, we've had huge volumes of input and are working hard to pull all the information together from which to create a new shared vision and mission… Before then, we want to share the key concepts that have emerged and how things are shaping up. This will give us the opportunity to gauge your reaction and comments and*

> *give you the opportunity to ask questions and give any further feedback (Internal memo promoting webinars).*

In addition to the formal strategic episodes, roadshow events and webinars - video messages were posted on the intranet as a communicative tool and informed viewers of the purpose of the events. They generated awareness of the process and instructed people on how to get involved.

Interim vision and mission statements

The engagement process culminated in the production of new vision and mission statements which the CEO used to redefine the strategic purpose of the organisation:

> *If you're going to define purpose, the accepted formula for defining purpose, is vision, mission and values. And that these are healthily rehearsed mechanisms, into defining the first articles of strategy.*

These were formally announced to the public on 23 June 2018 at a large set-piece annual ceremonial event. This marked the transition from phase one to phase two, where the outputs from the mass engagement activities would be processed and used to produce the final resulting strategy document.

Figure 4.5: Phase two timeline, June 2018-June 2019

4.2.2 Phase two

The set-piece moment of the organisation's Annual General Meeting created a natural moment that meant senior leadership felt the need to show output from the formal strategising activities. Therefore, while the final strategy was far from complete, the early findings were used to generate a set of vision and mission statements intended to act as "guiding principles" informing the strategy and directorate sub-strategies. While it was not clear if the senior team intended the interim vision and mission statements to carry forward unchanged into the final strategy document, it is interesting to note that the final document did not include explicit vision and mission statements. The final document adopted some of the same language in the form of a "charitable promise", but it was only informed by the narrative's interim statements helped produce.

Organisational restructuring

What followed was the identification by the CEO that the current Executive Leadership Team and associated organisational structure was not suitable for the emerging strategic narrative. Informed by a desire for a reduced Executive, combined with a desire to rebalance the structure of the organisation, there followed six months of senior-level restructure (summarised in Appendix 5). The executive-level restructure included recruiting three out of the (now) eight members of the ELT, including a newly created Chief Operating Officer (COO) role. The COO would lead the largest of the directorates and pick up a number of the direct reports, which would previously have reported to the CEO. The structural changes resulted in a need to recruit approximately a quarter of the director level roles.

Further restructuring of the directorates followed the recruitment of the new senior staff. Newly appointed staff undertook individual sensemaking activities, not

benefiting from the previous year's formal strategising workshops. Activities included the COO operating several 'hackathon' workshops. While more operationally focused, the questions and ideas discussed were not drastically dissimilar from the roadshow events. For instance, part of a hackathon event addressed the organisation's vehicular fleet needs (vehicle types, numbers and operations, etc.). However, to address this operational need, the beginning of the exercise talked about what the organisation does well and what kind of organisation those present felt they needed going forward.

Development of local supporting strategies

As the restructures were undertaken and the new structure finalised, senior staff began developing local supporting strategies that would underpin the (as yet unwritten) primary organisational strategy. While the driver for these was often an immediate operational need, they had the impact of operationally "road testing" the emerging strategic narrative against the actual day-to-day actions of the various directorates. This point is illustrated here by one middle manager, who emphasised that a lot of this work was generally completed "behind the scenes" and subject to senior and middle management eyes only:

> *The work that happens below the publicised space has taken things to a level of detail far beyond the actual scope of the strategy, but it's probably being used to validate the strategy's direction of travel. So, effectively, we've conceptually walked the first few miles of the strategic journey.*

Alongside the work developing the sub-strategies, the CEO sanctioned several specific projects intended to deliver rapid positive outputs. These "basement projects" were designed to provide quick wins that could coincide with the launch of the strategy and demonstrate tangible change and action in a much faster timescale than if the projects had lagged behind the strategy.

With the restructuring essentially complete, there was a renewed effort on finalising the strategy. In June, the fixed calendar entry of the Annual General Meeting provided additional incentive to show tangible output and provided the launch deadline for the final strategy. A financial scenario planning exercise supplemented the emerging strategic narrative; The output used to help inform a two-day joint Trustee and Executive away-day, which an external agency facilitated. The away day would cross-reference the output from the engagement activities with the subsequent planning exercise to validate the strategic narrative. Trustees were then presented with this strategic narrative and signed off the overall direction of travel.

Development of the final written strategy text

Following the away day, having been permitted to proceed by the Trustees, work began producing the final written text of the strategy. The Director of Strategy facilitated an ELT strategy exploration exercise, which led to a long-form strategy document. This document would not form part of the final strategy but would facilitate one-to-one conversations between the Director of Strategy and each member of the ELT. The Director of Strategy used these conversations to deeply explore and distil the narrative to the short-form document recognisable as the strategy. The final stage of the process was a "closed shop" wordsmithing of the final document, where iterative versions were shared solely between the CEO and Director of Strategy.

An external agency tested the final document for messaging before receiving final sign-off from the Board of Trustees. The strategy was publicised through the production of two different strategy documents, using the same language but different designs. The first was the public strategy "brochure", made available

online and sent with an accompanying letter to key stakeholders by the CEO. The second was an internal version explicitly produced for the organisation's volunteers, with a physical copy being posted to 24,000 individuals and designed to arrive on the same day as the launch of the strategy.

Through this chronological account of the unit of analysis, several key themes emerge that will now be explored in more depth. After discussing the initial trigger, the chapter links the strategising process to sensemaking. Following this, the specific practices, enablers and constraints related to participation are considered before finally the emergent issue of middle management marginalisation.

4.3 Initial trigger of Board level change

The findings traced the initial trigger for the strategising process to the Chair of the Board of Trustees' arrival, which took place two years before the formal strategising activities. As the person ultimately accountable for the strategic direction of the organisation, the Chair identified a need for strategic realignment:

> *I am here at a period of leadership for which that particular task seemed proper and appropriate. If I had come in at a time when this is what we were doing, I may well have said, great, absolutely lovely, I don't have to go through this transition myself.*

The separation of the Board from the Executive limited the extent to which the Board could translate any intent into operational activity. However, the Board were able to set the tone and direct the selection process for the CEO. The result was an informal strategy review process within the Board of Trustees. This process did not identify direction but acknowledged the need for change while at the same time accepting that the process would need to be led by the new CEO:

> *Trustees were keen to reflect that in July 2017, they had undertaken a strategy review process, and they had set out some parameters. Which they would argue lead to the recruitment of me as Chief Executive. (CEO).*
>
> *The question that was written at the output, of the importance of the Chief Exec owning this, was explicit and we [therefore] made progress but not to an end goal. (Director of Strategy).*

While it is unclear if pre-existing views reinforced the themes that emerged in the early board-level discussions or if it was a led process, what is clear is that the emerging themes went on to inform future decisions. For example, the priorities identified in July 2017 informed the recruitment process of the new CEO. These priorities are illustrated in the framing of the conversations after the CEO took up his post in January 2018:

> *From day one, I made it clear that it was important that the precepts that I'd set out in my interview, were clear to everybody in the organisation…And so I used that conversation piece, talking about my experience of being interviewed, entering the organisation, and why I thought I was hired, to set up conversations. And that created a very dynamic narrative about historic perceived failures, opportunities and where the shared beliefs were. (CEO).*

While the CEO and Director of Strategy developed the process, the participative approach was influenced and sanctioned by the Board of Trustees because of the type of CEO selected and also because the Board themselves permitted such an approach to be adopted, reflecting their position as the "owners" of the organisation's strategy:

> *And in the end, I suppose somebody might say, okay, who are the guardians of the organisation? (Chief Commissioner)*

The Chair of the Board, Chief Commissioner, and CEO were united in their view that Trustees, as the "guardians" of the organisation, must be the ultimate owners of any strategising process. However, while a Trustee Board had ultimate accountability, its separation from the Executive and independence from

operational decision-making meant that the owner needed to be explicitly acknowledged by the executive team. The CEO recognised the challenge this created when the Executive is always thinking and talking about strategy, compared to Trustees who will inevitably be thinking about other things most of the time. Therefore, the CEO ensured this was something addressed:

> *One thing that I was very keen to make clear to senior management, was that the trustees are the owners of the strategy process. And that senior management has a delegated role in that process.*

The work of the CEO reinforced the role of the Trustees as owners of the strategising process, providing them with authority to deal in strategy. However, while Trustees have the authority to act, they must also have the legitimacy to do so. In this case, the Chief Commissioner identified that, in order to have the legitimacy to "own" the strategy, Trustees needed to possess experience, expertise and a willingness to listen:

> *My natural inclination is to say it should be the Trustees, as long as the Board has sufficient experience and expertise on there and is willing to listen to the experts around.*

While Trustees were generally considered to have expertise and experience by being appointed to their role, the separation from the operations means Trustees can be seen as lacking legitimacy when it comes to explicit knowledge of the organisation. Trustee experience of the organisation was primarily influenced by how long they had held their position, as newer individuals inevitably have less direct experience. However, new individuals are more likely to ask questions that established people might otherwise take for granted to challenge the status quo. In the words of one senior leader: "*When you have established people in post for a long time…I think there is a tendency to continue to do what you've always done. And you sometimes need this catalyst to shoot you forwards or sideways*".

Importantly, however, self-awareness and leadership competence were identified by one middle manager as being used by competent individuals to mitigate this effect by recognising and using their status as new individuals:

> *If you haven't got that level of competency, then you shouldn't be engaging in this type of activity, unless you introduce yourself very clearly as someone who's new, and new to the position, and "you tell me about that problem". And that comes down to that same competency, doesn't it, knowing who you are, where you are, and whether you do or don't know about day care provision, then you've got to go there to be educated in a different way.*

This view was identified at Board and Executive level in people either new to roles or new to the organisation. Here, the Chief Commissioner explains how they were acutely aware of a need to listen and learn but also a need to be seen to be listening and learning:

> *As an individual what I felt I needed to do was to ensure that: 1. I understood better the needs, the challenges, successes etc, etc, of the whole organisation across England, and 2. That people saw me out there in a learning capacity.*

What emerges is that individuals secured legitimacy by adopting participation practices that allowed them to listen and learn about the organisation. This listening and learning frame of mind meant that individuals actively sought to hear people's views within the organisation, more so than incumbent personnel. The culture of challenging by new executives in a post also had a reciprocal effect on subordinates, who became more willing to express their views to incumbent senior managers who invited responses:

> *I don't know whether they felt freer because it was a new CEO, and perhaps could talk more openly, rather than behaving in what they perceived as perhaps the correct and expected way with an established CEO. I don't quite know how to answer that, but I think they felt free.*

The 'newness' of an individual in a role also affected how individuals' views could be perceived, whereby newer managers were more likely to perceive views with

less historical judgment. In the following extended extract, a middle manager illustrates this point through a rhetorical example that reflects their experience of how established colleagues perceive a point raised by a subordinate versus the perception of a new colleague:

> *My time served with the organisation shapes the lens: I'm hearing perhaps some of these arguments for the first time and I say that comparatively. So, some of my other colleagues in the same roles repeating the same activity would be less likely to ascribe meaning to something if perhaps they're saying, "oh well this is Ashley coming in here and he's been talking about this for ten years and I've been with him for ten years, and, you know what, it's no more relevant now than it was ten years ago". Whereas I've never met you before, Ashley, and I think your opinion is valid and important and reasonable so I'm going to listen to it more intently and record it and ascribe more meaning to it. There's probably a malaise in that.*

While new managers were more likely to question the status quo, existing managers with more experience in the organisation did not because they have already developed views and are required to operate in the reality of the 'day-to-day'. Another middle manager here reflects on how it was sometimes difficult to see alternative pathways:

> *We all run the risk of becoming part of the problem, because once you've become tolerant to what it takes to operate on a day-to-day basis, you somewhat compromise your ability to see how things could be, because you can't tease yourself every moment of the day with what it should be like versus what it is like.*

The Trustee Board, separated from the Executive, was limited in the ability to define direction. However, they were able to set the tone of the process and guide the recruitment of executive officers. The Board used recruitment to ensure individuals are selected to lead the right type of strategising process and subsequently create the right culture for participation. However, the limitations of the Trustee Board, coupled with the newness of critical individuals, created a situation whereby they had the intent and authority for strategic change but

lacked the legitimacy to pursue it. Aware of this dilemma, the decision of the Executive and Trustees to adopt a mass participation approach to strategy formulation provided the required legitimacy and reinforced the role of the Trustees. A strong belief in the importance of a strategy owned by Trustees rather than senior management, combined with a Trustee Board keen to listen and be seen to be listening, created the right conditions which allowed the development of a process. The mass participation process resolved the tension created by Trustee ownership, where Trustees lacked the legitimacy to act. In the words of the Director of Strategy:

> *And that then became a conversation around, so how do we make sure this is trustee led? So that is the first interaction. How do we make sure this is genuinely engaging; it is genuinely about people voicing and giving thoughts and ideas and being part of the journey? And so is born a process. But out of that idea that this is a mass engagement process.*

4.4 Participation as sensemaking

Interactions in sensemaking are based on meaning. However, interactions also shape meaning, which then changes future interactions. This chapter will show that participation creates meaning, shaping future strategising activities, shaping individual understanding of strategy. Therefore, presenting the argument that participation is a sensemaking process. However, it is essential first to note that sensemaking is not restricted to participation. All individuals, particularly on starting a role, need to internalise the organisational strategy, even if the role is not ‘strategic’. Here a Middle Manager explains how they initially researched the strategy before they started in their role, but how they then need to confirm that information before internalising it before it eventually becomes embedded within their operational identity:

> *I obviously had that lens as a start point. What you then quickly do in an operational role is you start to, sort of, sense-check those assumptions against the operation as a whole and you start to reflect on the operation as it moves forward, and that kind of stuff. And your understanding of strategy almost becomes more tacit, less free of mind. It becomes more familiar and then eventually, over time, it becomes forgotten about.*

The difference during a strategising process is that Senior Management are trying to determine what the strategy should be and then to ensure that other people understand what they have determined. Therefore, if sensemaking is ultimately talking and thinking about strategy, then participation makes the ideal vehicle through which that process occurs. This study has identified that sensemaking took place through a three-stage iterative formulation, exploration, and confirmation process.

Formulation

Participation inevitably tends to focus primarily on planned strategising episodes. However, sensemaking is an ongoing and continuous process happening all the time. While the strategising episodes provided a helpful way of concentrating the gathering of feedback at a critical moment in time, the Chair of the Board illustrates here how individuals would receive information both within and around these episodes:

> *You listen to the mood, and it comes all over the place. It comes in letters, it comes with sidebar conversations at meetings, it comes with people who want to tell you what you think, and it came every single hour of the day from different corners.*

The Chair of the Board was not the only one to have this experience. Many different sources informed individuals, some explicitly developed as part of the strategising process, and some were not. For instance, during an informal conversation, a middle manager described how the results of a volunteer motivation survey influenced the structure of the roadshow events as the Director

of Strategy "*had a theory to test, which was that there was a disconnect between what volunteers wanted to do and what we were asking them to do*". A continuous process was not restricted to participation activities. Individuals in the organisation (and new to it) would inevitably draw on prior experience and knowledge informing their views. Prior knowledge and experience meant that individuals would ascribe more meaning to viewpoints they agreed with, prioritised and emphasised in the resulting process. The privileging of information would inform a fundamental practice of participation (explored further in section 4.6) and is described here by a middle manager:

> *I'm far more likely to give precedence to the things I agree with and personally based on the way I ascribe meaning to strategy.*

The case revealed that both the CEO and Director of Strategy were keen to try and build different perspectives of potential strategic directions, in part because of an awareness of a potential strategic disconnect within the organisation:

> *I was very clear that I would get a probably fairly predictable narrative from the Senior Management Team. It's always in the interest of the Senior Management Team to impress the new boss. And so, they tend to give you a favourable report. It tends to be seen from a policy and process perspective. And I determined that I wanted to see it from a people perspective. (CEO).*
>
> *So repeated questions from Trustees that get answered in one way that doesn't actually answer the question and understanding what the real question is behind it. (Director of Strategy).*

The CEO perceived a clear mandate from the Board of Trustees, shared through the Chair of the Board, that the Trustees were looking for strategic change. The change was needed because the Trustees felt that the Board had lost the volunteers' goodwill and that volunteering was being side-lined. Trustees' direction would reinforce the CEO and senior team's approach, as the enactment of the Trustee will win back volunteers through engagement. However, it also

illustrates how prior interactions and experiences shape future actions. The message from the Trustees provided important structure to the process.

The selection and prioritisation of some views over others is inevitable and unavoidable. However, participants viewed the results positively and negatively. The downside was that some participants and middle managers interpreted the selection as bias, which undermined confidence in the exercise as being genuine. Others (including middle managers, participants and senior managers) recognised that it was an essential part of the process as it gave structure to what might otherwise be a completely open (and unmanageable) process. Indeed, interview respondents and personnel during observations identified it as a critical component of leadership. An argument put forward by the Director of Strategy:

> *If it's too much confirmation bias then it's not actually a genuine engagement and, over time, won't feel like it. But it needs to be led. This isn't a free for all. And you think about one of the key points by which it's being led is to, very explicitly, make it an affirmative process through live questioning, through the feel and the tone. That in itself is signalling. It's signalling change. It's signalling future-looking… It's not just, here's a blank sheet of paper. Tell us what you think.*

The result was a consequence of sensemaking; The generation of, if not a wholly shared understanding, at least a general basis on which discussion was built. Mutual understanding was essential at senior, middle and frontline levels, resulting in greater acceptance and buy-in of the resulting strategy. It was interesting to note that the production of common ground is not always immediately apparent – and therefore, the impact is subtle. A point here illustrated by the Director of Strategy concerning the involvement of Trustees:

> *The best measure you can find of Trustee involvement in a process was the bump in the road when we were away with them in April, where there was a feeling from within the room that they were disappointed that there wasn't anything brand spanking*

> *new that they've never seen before. And there was a moment of, "Oh. But that's a good thing because it says that, well of course there's nothing new because you've been doing this with us for best part of two years".*

The process shows individual understanding and collective meaning converging over time. Individual meaning evolved due to multiple interactions with many different actors, each going through their own sensemaking process. Even when different points of view were encountered, there was a degree of retrospective sensemaking, where individuals looked back and selectively viewed their experiences through the lens of their current understanding. Senior leaders would commonly show retrospective sensemaking in the extent to which senior leaders would frame their understanding as being consistently represented by participants, even though complete consistency could never be the case:

> *It's not "Oh and I can remember that Pete mentioned X and that's of course why that's there". Because it wasn't just Pete anyway. It was a hundred people, and they were all saying the same thing.*

Sensemaking is typically understood as an individual process. However, each individual undertakes sensemaking at different times but all within a communal space. Therefore, this communal space contains multiple actors who may be at different stages of sensemaking co-existing together. Individuals at different stages allowed the sharing of information and views, helping others to formulate their view:

> *So, whilst they're doing that strategy, I'm building up my own, going through my own discovery phase, doing my own research internally and externally. And then reflecting that back to the executive (Middle Manager).*

Both within these episodes and through casual interactions at other times, participation practices are used as affirmation or disaffirmation practices to validate decisions or viewpoints. As the series of events progressed, facilitators would refine themes, often by taking a comment made by a participant (such as

a specific phrase) and then re-phrasing it back to the audience in a language that would mirror the language used in other workshops and thus generating a common discourse (Observation notes – workshop eleven).

While strategy is a collection of parts that coalesce to form a whole, not all of these parts formulate simultaneously. Therefore, some early statements were 'locked in' before the conclusion of the engagement process. The locked-in aspects were introduced into later episodes as being agreed (but, as will be discussed in the next chapter, in such a way that would not present it as a fait accompli):

> *"We've now crystallised about three of our key vision statements and the 'SoH' line will be the first value we state in our values". (Director of Strategy – Observation notes reporting a conversation with the Director of Strategy, workshop eight).*

Exploration

Exploration can occur both in and around formal engagement activities. The CEO would bring together different individuals and teams in either formal or informal strategising settings.

> *And so, I've met with them. You know, round tables, open conversation, open question. I've also addressed whole departmental structures. I've been to departmental structure away days, spoke to them.*

This exercise of "getting around" would facilitate the exploration of a range of different viewpoints. The CEO used exploration to get different perspectives, use the time without agenda, ask questions, and explore issues before committing to any strategic decisions. While senior management described this phase as a "genuine listening exercise", it was clear that it was as much about conversation and exploration as about listening for those involved. In both organised and

informal interactions, senior management engaged through questioning and discussion to explore the meaning behind points.

It was as important for senior managers to listen as frontline staff to feel that senior managers were listening. Being seen to listen is just as important as listening, but for different reasons. The questions and discussion demonstrated that managers were listening. There was, however, a small number of participants who negatively viewed this. While the strategy workshop was described by one participant as a "*purely listening exercise*" that had been deliberately designed to "*sell the strategy back to the volunteers in a language they have been consulted on*", this view did not stop them from participating and engaging with the activities, despite only attending "*to hear what the CEO had to say*". What is striking here is that the activity appears to work as intended, irrespective of whether viewed positively or negatively. Indeed, it will likely (as one middle manager describes here) lead to increased levels of engagement:

> *Like with a lot of organisations you need to keep your people on board, and you need to listen to them. I think we had a pretty good idea organisationally what we wanted to say before we went in the process but there is something about bringing your people with you and listening to them and allowing them to feel heard.*

Exploring meaning through participation exercises has a performative effect. Not only did it allow individuals to explore strategic meaning, but the exercise itself engendered engagement with individuals – which was equally important. The two were not mutually exclusive, and neither did one negate the value of the other. They happened together at the same time.

When exploring meaning, participants drew on pre-existing knowledge and understanding to help consider their view. Existing knowledge meant that

different individuals (and teams) would explore strategic issues through their particular lens, described here by the CEO about the finance team and subsequently his work with the Chair of the Board to develop the strategic narrative:

> *The finance committee worked through these financial scenarios and validated the numbers. The fundraising committee looked at what is the scale of ambition, is this an achievable ambition that, a plan that built on that. And I think there was a huge amount of work one to one with me and the Chair and taking the chair on the journey and invigorating the Chair around the journey to the narrative.*

Through explorative discussions, individuals consolidated their point of view. For the senior leadership team, this meant considering the many different sources of meaning in many different episodes (and therefore iterations):

> *Lots of things came into play together. Paper up on [the intranet] and questions on there. And people being invited to put their pennyworth in, and all of that's been distilled by the Director of Strategy now funnelling it down, funnelling it down, more stuff being presented to the trustees.*

Bringing information together resulted in a chance to play this back to other individuals and groups in the final stage of confirmation:

> *There was a willingness to actually test what were clearly some emerging ideas and calibrate them against people who might reasonably be expected to put them through the sniff test.*

Confirmation

Coming out of the exploration phase, individuals then sought to confirm that their view matches, or at least aligns with, those of other people. To look for the reassurance of travel direction and ensure there is coherence in terms of messaging. While the final stage of the process, confirmation is not confined to the end of strategising. As an iterative process, confirmation may happen many

times before strategising concludes, illustrated here as part of the early Trustee Away Day conducted by the Chair of the Board:

> *I had picked up the flavour of the organisation and simply had to see whether or not the Trustees and the SMT also worked out that that was the direction in which we needed to go. I did not end the day disappointed.*

Confirmation could be across the distinct stages of the strategising process and within a series of similar episodes, such as the national roadshow events. While they all adopted the same format, the content from earlier workshops was re-introduced at later workshops, shaping the nature of the discourse through phrases such as "*we've heard that consistently in other workshops*", or "*there are some really clear consensus themes coming out from across the country*".

A key question is what would happen if the prevailing view was disaffirmed during this stage. The case suggests that disaffirmation would cause the individual to revisit their meaning through more exploration, potentially recalibrating the meaning to something different. For example, the CEO talked about a meeting with Trustees and how, although there was disagreement, there was not a complete lack of consensus. Had there been a complete lack of consensus, both the CEO and Director of Strategy agreed that the date to launch the strategy would have been "scrubbed", and additional engagement exercises completed to understand and potentially change minds. Sensemaking theory does not distinguish between a 'correct' and 'incorrect' meaning. Therefore, meaning either affirmed or disaffirmed does not change the sensemaking process. However, it would change the resulting meaning as the individual goes through another iteration of the cycle.

> *If what was being said was totally at odds to what had been thought by, in the initial stages, the Trustees and the SMT, I think*

> *we may be in a different place now. I would hope we'd be in a different place now because you cannot… We would have had to have different discussions. The fact that they were mutually supportive allowed it to move forward easily. (Chief Commissioner).*
>
> *Reaffirming things about directional travel. Things like community connectedness, the importance of volunteers. They're obvious things but actually the warmth of the reception to just voicing it demonstrated that we're hitting a connection. (Director of Strategy).*

So, while the overall process was not subject to change, disaffirmation has the impact of potentially delaying or adding time while individuals consider the implications of the disaffirmation and, subsequently, may lead to different future actions. Illustrated here by the Director of Strategy during an informal conversation, having been asked whether the content of the workshops was important:

> *I think the content is important. If we had come along and people were telling us something radically different from what we were talking about then we would have to change the process entirely. If there was disagreement, then we'd be going from a change process to a conflict process.*

The downside to this is its perception as manipulative; Senior management deliberately guides the discussions through questioning to reach a pre-determined outcome. Allowing people to say what they want and agree with them – but proceeding the pre-determined view, with the reason being to raise engagement and satisfaction of those involved – not because people are being listened to, but because they are being agreed with. A middle manager questioned whether this might be the case:

> *Are we giving everybody the impression that whatever they think is the right answer to the question of why, but that can't possibly be the case in terms of whatever the outcome's going to be?*

This view identifies the critical practice of using ambiguity in strategic discourse (discussed in more detail in section 4.6). However, it also illustrates that

sensemaking and sensegiving co-occur. The confirmation process is a two-way one, where sensegiving enables others to confirm that what is said is the correct message. As well as achieving this through confirmatory language identified above, it occurred outside the formal sessions in communications sent to individuals. These develop narratives and present messages that the senior team were looking to reinforce:

> *Engagement with our 'Stepping Forward' process has been amazing. The more I hear from employees and volunteers, the surer I am that our future is one focused on community impact, delivered directly through our people. (Email from CEO to all personnel)*
>
> *With so many people getting involved and giving feedback, we've had huge volumes of input and are working hard to pull all the information together from which to create a new shared vision and mission, ready to start sharing (Email to all personnel)*

The data, therefore, suggests that participation is a sensemaking process. Through their interactions with other people, individuals develop their strategic meaning through a three-stage formulation, exploration, and confirmation process. This process occurs at the individual level, with all individuals sensemaking at their own pace in parallel. Individuals go through this process many times during strategising. As participation includes more and more people, meanings begin to align, and shared meaning of strategy emerges.

4.5 Enablers and constraints to participation

The research findings in terms of the enablers and constraints to participation are grouped around six areas. Three main enablers and three constraints to participation emerged. These enablers and constraints have impacted the participation in strategy in this particular case. Appropriate timing, leadership competence, and stakeholder and process legitimacy enabled participation in

strategy. Constraints to participation were Trustee direction and existing strategy, available time and resources, and organisational restructuring. Each of these enablers and constraints will now be explored in more detail.

1. Appropriate timing

Involving others in strategising is a choice. That choice needs to be suitable for the circumstances in which the organisation finds itself. This qualitative decision on the part of those who would sanction the process was taken by the Chair of the Board:

> *I am here at a period of leadership for which that particular task seemed proper and appropriate.*

Multiple members of the senior management team made clear that a strategising process was needed to recapture a new or a revised sense of purpose for the organisation and that things had somehow 'gone off course'. This strategic position is a particular (but not unusual) one for an organisation to find itself. The position aligns with a participation approach, but that is not to say that other positions would also work with participation in strategy. For example, in the words of one middle manager:

> *It depends on what you're trying to do in any given era. If you're financially struggling, if you've got regulators all around you, your strategy might just be we're going to write it because we need to…The strategy is "get rid of that side of the business. Cost a lot less money and sack a load of people". There's your strategy. You don't need to consult on that, you just need to do it.*

In this case, enough senior leaders perceived that the organisation's circumstances were such that a participative approach to strategising was the right thing to do. Therefore, the timing was appropriate for a participatory approach to strategising to be successful. Had the circumstances been different,

or the approach been instigated too soon or too late, the approach adopted may not have been successful even within the same organisation.

2. Leadership competence

One of the clearest enablers of participation was articulated across all levels, from managers and participants, including from the Director of Strategy:

> *Leadership. Strong, effective leadership. Good prioritisation, clarity of message, really good feedback loops. But ultimately it comes down to leadership. It comes down to that.*

However, leadership is a complex construct. Within such a broad concept lay many specific practices interpreted as leadership, some of which are identified here by a middle manager:

> *If you're unable to stand up in front of an appropriately sized group of people, or sit down with them at a table, and engage them in a well-structured professional dialogue… then you fall at the first hurdle. You know, you've got to be self-assured, confident, and you've got to be able to respond to what you're hearing on the day.*

The situation of leading a process of participation presents a paradox. Sessions allowed participants to air their views. However, there were concerns that this might create a perception of leaders seeking opinions because they do not know what to do themselves. As illustrated by a middle manager in the following extract, there was a delicate balance between going into the workshops able to demonstrate leadership competence while also allowing people to have their say:

> *You've got to have a script, you've got to have some key things you're going to do, and you've got to have some key messages that you know will signal to the participants that we understand what's going on; We already know what the top three things that are of concern to you, because this isn't the first time, we've thought about talking to you.*

These extracts identify that people show leadership through interaction with others. Furthermore, it is too simplistic to suggest that listening alone engenders participation. While not specifically strategic, the organisation had several other well-established mechanisms to allow frontline people to express their views (such as forums, discussion boards, working groups, and consultations). Despite this, on returning from a workshop, a facilitator noted:

> *It was great, I went to a roadshow tonight and one of the people in the audience said "it's the first time in six years I've had an opportunity to say what I think and be listened to"*

This quote highlights that the perception of being heard is as important as the act of listening. In the words of one middle manager, what seemed important was both that it was the senior leadership team leading the listening activity, but also that they were mainly affirming what was being said by participants:

> *Whether it's because this is the first time somebody at that level has listened or whether because the leadership of the organisation is not only listening, it's largely agreeing with what's being said and asserted to them, but the danger with that is what people interpret as I'm being listened to is actually, oh, I'm not being challenged or disagreed with, the leadership are going, "yes, I entirely agree, we should do more of that".*

Therefore, the discursive ability of senior leaders was vital in facilitating the strategising workshops. Discursive ability appeared to be a two-way process, requiring actual ability in the leaders and subordinates' perception that leaders are competent. Indeed, as described by another Middle Manager, the perception of a lack of competence could harm leader sensegiving abilities:

> *Confidence in the leadership to be able to, first of all, be technically knowledgeable about what's possible and what's appropriate. Nobody wants leadership that's going to ask you your opinion because they don't know what's happening, or because they don't know what to do. Engagement because of an absence of a plan is not encouraging.*

Although the desire on the part of leaders was to engage as widely as possible, this did not mean that involvement should be uncontrolled. By having a measure of structure, participation is used as a form of leadership of the strategising process, reinforcing the credibility of those running it. The senior team deliberately engaged the opportunity, and it was a design feature intended by the Director of Strategy:

> *It needs to be led. This isn't a free for all. And you think about one of the key points by which it's being led is to, very explicitly, make it an affirmative process through live questioning, through the feel and the tone. That in itself is signalling. It's signalling change. It's signalling future looking. And it's a technique, obviously, to get great engagement and to prepare people for what's coming. But I think also it is actually a leadership thing.*

Many of the leadership characteristics described focus on the discursive ability of leaders to interact and communicate with participants. These abilities directly impacted leader sensemaking and sensegiving capabilities. Within the case organisation, support for a participatory approach was present among key senior individuals and sanctioned from the top of the organisation. Having a critical mass of like-minded individuals allowed for a culture to develop that embraced the involvement of others:

> *It's got to be a collegiate approach that the team and the organisation want to take forwards. No individual should impose a strategy. Approach, you have to spend a significant period of time listening, and if it existed, you would study the existing strategy and determine why the organisation considered that was the right direction, and to determine, in consultation, whether that is still the right direction…just because you're the Chairman of the Board does not mean to say that you are the fount of all knowledge.*

As has already been explored, a cascading restructure was used to bring together like-minded individuals, sharing a similar subjectivity of strategising. The data illustrates subjectivity in a consistent theme of individual leaders across the senior management team believing in the importance of listening and responding

to others. These people coming together resulted in a constellation of critical individuals whose approaches aligned and allowed for a mass participation approach. The recruitment (or restructure) or individuals sharing these leadership characteristics not only came from senior leaders looking for these during recruitment (as already noted in the recruitment process for the CEO) but also in those individuals looking to be recruited, as reflected here by the Director of Strategy in discussing what attracted him to the role in the first place:

> *I had various documents in advance of even starting which were presented as, 'this is our strategic thinking'. And part of applying and part of being interviewed was critiquing where the charity was and therefore what do I perceive to be the gaps and the challenges. In some ways that's the attraction of being here in the first place; it's that, on an individual level I'm not a status quo person. I'm a change agent. And I wouldn't be interested in working for a charity, or rather, an organisation that is well set and in that other phase of strategy, which is clear direction, really delivering, kind of motoring through the gaps. That doesn't actually hold much attraction. So, from a personal level, I was looking for a charity, or an organisation like this which, to my reading, lacked strategy.*

Having a new CEO and other senior leaders commencing in a role meant that the participation activities were often directly conflated with the first opportunity to engage with the new boss. Many participants saw the strategy workshops more as a "meet the CEO" session. During workshops not hosted by the CEO, some participants would express disappointment at their absence. The difficulty of having a national series of events closely associated with a single individual was acknowledged by both the CEO and Director of Strategy, not least because of the practicalities of the CEO attending every event (which was not possible). They recognised the draw of having the CEO attend while designing a process that could work with or without the CEO present. This design inevitably impacted messaging, which capitalised on the excitement associated with the CEO coming

into the role, shown here in an email to all personnel advertising the roadshow events:

> *The recent message from our new CEO has already got people talking about stepping forward into the next chapter for the organisation. And the discussions got well underway at the volunteer forum on 10 March where volunteers spent time sharing their thoughts on how our charity can grow and have an even greater impact in our communities in the future.*
>
> *This is an exciting time, and we want everyone to have the opportunity to join the conversation and have their say. We are holding a series of roadshows throughout April and early May and we'd love you to come along and take part in these important discussions. The roadshows will be led by [the CEO] and/or [the Director of Strategy].*

Therefore, the recruitment of critical senior individuals with complementary leadership capabilities was key to enabling participation to occur, both in attracting participants to attend the events and ensuring participation was managed effectively during the workshops.

3. Stakeholder and process legitimacy

Strategists need to believe in the value of participation. Participants need to perceive those same individuals as legitimate. Empty rhetoric would not result in an authentic process, and a process that was not authentic would not facilitate a positive response from participants (and would therefore harm the message). It was evident from observing senior leaders undertaking participation activities that they were genuinely committed to the process. The language adopted (e.g., *"We want to have this conversation as a whole. It is a shared vision")* was both delivered and received in earnest. The firm belief in the value of participation was evident in the executive team. Participants, middle managers and other senior leaders would offer a view that the success of the process was down to an alignment of approaches between the CEO, Director of Strategy, Chief

Commissioner and Chair of the Board. This “alignment of the stars” was seen as a significant factor by others. Each individual shared a passion for the value of participation. Summed up by a statement made by the Director of Strategy to workshop participants:

> *This is not something you cascade. You need direct contact with every person.*

For many in the organisation, this signalled a change in management style. This signalling in itself was a helpful factor in generating interest in the participation activities. Senior leaders going out “into the wild” and having open and frank conversations “*sparked an interest*” and stimulated people to get involved. Therefore, legitimacy of process in the form of a belief in the value of participation by senior leaders is an essential enabler of participation in strategy formulation, again represented here by the Director of Strategy:

> *So that is the first interaction. How do we make sure this is genuinely engaging; it is genuinely about people voicing and giving thoughts and ideas and being part of the journey? And so is born a process. But out of that idea that this is a mass engagement process.*

4. Board direction and existing strategy

The Board of Trustees is accountable for the strategic direction of the organisation. They had to approve (and had the power to veto) the proposed approach to strategising proposed by the executive. Therefore, the structure and guidance they provide is a constraining factor on strategy formulation participation in strategy formulation. The constraint would manifest as a drive to ensure Trustee agreement and would influence all senior leaders, including the Chair of the Board:

> *My hands weren't tied other than to take the organisation forwards with the Trustees in the way that this volunteer-led organisation should do so.*

The structure provided by the Board would implicitly influence the ordering of activities and the messaging surrounding them. It was clear that the process would start and end with the Trustees, as they were the ultimate 'owners' of the strategy:

> *This is something I've been discussing with the Senior Management Team and Trustees; and I now want to start that conversation with everyone. (CEO via internal memo).*

The constraint of Trustee permission would continue to influence the CEO throughout the process as a desire to "re-own" key elements when presented back to them at Board meetings:

> *There was a sense in which we'd taken the narrative to them, "yes that all sounds great" and they needed to re-own it, so they sort of seized control and repeated back what they'd agreed previously.*

This point is significant in highlighting the importance of retaining Trustee ownership when using participation in strategy. Ownership may feel stripped away when they hand over the role of shaping the message to another group (i.e., the participants of the strategising activities). Direction from Trustees provided the CEO with a framework for designing the participation activities, such as the decision to focus participation on volunteers and employees (as opposed to focusing on, or including, external stakeholders):

> *That meant having discussions about how do we determine what the strategy is that the Trustees want to own? And the conclusion of that conversation, at senior management level, was well, this is a strategy that intrinsically needs to be owned by the members [volunteers and employees] …and so we determined that an engagement process was necessary.*

This point illustrates how understanding based on ascribed meaning shaped future actions and how actors with the power to shape decisions provided permission and structure to the resulting process. It was interesting to note that, by the end of the strategising process, the Director of Strategy would reflect that more clarity about this constraint would have been beneficial to the process and participants:

> *If a framework has been set, we haven't necessarily been crystal clear that that's the framework, work in these parameters. So, it's been a little bit too free and loose at the bottom.*

However, there was recognition by other members of senior management that having some form of framework around the process was essential in ensuring it remained a manageable task to control the volume of potential information, illustrated here by the Chief Commissioner,

> *By trying to do that with 30,000 odd viewpoints, narrowing down could take one hell of a long time and you could have so many variations that it becomes difficult to know what the priorities should be.*

Therefore, while influential stakeholders are a constraint to participation, it could be argued that this constraint provides needed structure to what might otherwise be an uncontrollable process.

Another critical constraint to participation is any predecessor strategy, i.e., what has come before. More specifically, is the identification by senior leaders of dissonance between existing strategy and the organisational position. It was interesting to note in this case that both senior and middle management talked about an absence of strategy or a strategic void. This absence of strategy was interesting because this was despite there being a “2020 Strategy” document, produced in 2016, which contained five key messages and an accompanying

briefing document (see figure 4.6). What appeared missing was a clear supporting rationale for the strategy and a perception that the strategy did not align with the desired direction of many people within the organisation. One middle manager described the document as “a business plan, not a strategy”.

25/02/2016

[redacted]2020 Strategy outlines what we want to achieve over the next five years to help us deliver our vision that:

[redacted]

Having a clear direction and planning our journey between now and 2020 reflects the strong position of our organisation. This is as a result of the hard work and dedication of our volunteers and employees from all areas [redacted]

We all play a vital role in successfully implementing our strategy through our contributions. We have three main goals to achieve, as well as five key outputs to focus our activities. More information about this, can be found here (/about_us/Strategy/Pages/2020-strategy.aspx).

[redacted]

The key briefing below gives an overview of our 2020 strategy.

The key briefing (/about_us/Strategy/Documents/[redacted]) for the 2020 Strategy.

Figure 4.6: Internal memo to all personnel sent on 25 Feb 2016

That there was no clear rationale accompanying the written strategy only served to reinforce the narrative that the strategy no longer matched the emerging direction of the organisation. Senior leadership sought to remedy this by developing a process that would give them a clear supporting rationale for whatever strategy would replace it. Should there have already been a clear strategy that was perceived to be still relevant, there would likely have not been a perceived need to complete an extensive participation strategising exercise

(with the time and resources needed to execute it). Therefore, an existing strategy is a constraint to participation. However, the context in which the existing strategy exists also has an influence, discussed here as timing.

5. Available time and resources

In addition to board direction and existing strategy, available time and resources are a constraint to participation in strategy. Inevitably, there is only so much an organisation can achieve in the time it deems to be available. Time (which is also impacted by restructuring) was a self-imposed deadline to achieve the strategy by a previously published timeline.

> *There's always a time and a resource constraint. It's less resource…it's kind of, whatever it takes. It's never actually that expensive to do this. It's more a physical, logistical thing of how long do you want to spend doing this? And that's then the key constraining factor. Because you don't want to spend a year having a big conversation. You could spend a year having a big conversation and actually, in general terms, it's too long. People quickly get switched off.*

Of note here is that the constraining factor is not a simple as a lack of time, but of spending too much time on participation. Senior management recognised the importance of linking strategy formulation to implementation through the emergence of tangible change in the forms of "quick wins" and was a key factor influencing the "basement projects" identified earlier. Too much time spent on participation in the strategy formulation process would risk delaying the inevitable implementation. Therefore, available time and resources constrain the use of participation in strategising.

6. Organisational restructuring

Organisational restructuring was used as part of a sensegiving process, illustrating the complex relationship between process and practice. The CEO

used the emerging organisational structure to communicate the likely strategic direction to the broader organisation. The creation of a major new division led by the COO sent a powerful signal to people about the intended priorities, strategic intent, and expected resource allocation (for a summary of structural changes, see Appendix 5). Therefore, the structure was, in itself, used by the CEO as a strategic tool, which then subsequently impacted the discourse that took place during strategising activities:

> *Instead of a set of equal directorates, I created a division and put a Chief Operations Officer in charge of that division, which clearly created a hierarchy. It set out a scale of operation that said there is a part of this organisation that is bigger and more important than any other part…It set quite a powerful statement up about the future of the strategy because it said these operations are going to be at the heart of this strategy… So, if we think about strategy in its rawest form as an aspirational statement about the future, I think strategy came first. Because I think that relatively early on in my tenure, I formed a view that what the Board was telling me and what the stakeholders internally were telling me was that the voluntary endeavours in communities was the aspiration.*

The desired intent of the CEO to influence the discourse around strategic direction worked, as intent illustrated here in the experience of middle management:

> *The appointment and formulation of the executive team around the kind of ideas of what things are going to be. So, that, for me, says, what things are important in the organisation and therefore, what things need senior-level management? The subsequent appointment of a chief operating officer and the operating officer's division.*

Inevitably, however, this meant that individuals entered the organisation after some of the strategising activities had taken place, reinforcing the co-dependent relationship between restructuring and strategising. When individuals joined later in the process, they still went through their own period of sensemaking. When in a senior position, they undertook additional sensegiving activities. Where

restructuring and strategising took place in parallel, this resulted in repeated earlier activities, if at different scales. For instance, the Chief Operations Officer, appointed after the formal strategising workshops had taken place, developed a series of similar events as a tool to use participation to engage internal stakeholders:

> *So, I had no knowledge of it at all. There'd been events called "stepping forward events". And I fell over those by referring to something I was doing and saying, well, look I think we've got to start consulting with people about what people want to do.*

Restructuring, in addition to the constraining effects outlined previously, also impacts the engagement of individuals in participation activities. As new individuals come into the organisation and are immediately directly involved in the strategising process, this translates into a sense of enthusiasm and feeling of momentum, illustrated here in the experience of a middle manager:

> *There actually is a certain sense of enthusiasm, because by the very nature of turning a lot of that stuff around, you've brought in a lot of new personnel, who have a new sense of engagement with the organisation. So, there's a lot of positivity and drive coming from that.*

However, the enthusiasm of new individuals was tempered by a degree of uncertainty felt by those existing personnel who had been subject to restructuring processes. This uncertainty resulted in an emotional impact among some existing personnel and a negative perception of the strategising activities, highlighted across multiple levels within the organisation:

> *Structurally that always creates a certain amount of uncertainty, a certain amount of distrust, a certain amount of emotional upheaval. One of the teams that my new role has inherited are very much displaying a lot of the signs of change fatigue, a lot of the signs of the kind of emotional impact of losing trusted senior managers and not feeling like they can trust the organisation, a lot of disaffection with the organisation as a result. (Middle Manager).*

> *We've actually lost or are losing those people that have got organisational memory, have got relationships and have been around a bit. (Senior Manager).*
>
> *People are unsettled because there are redundancies, there are reviews of roles, changes in structure, people applying for their jobs, and bringing people in without a corporate history. (Chair of the Board).*

It began with the recruitment of a Chief Executive tasked with delivering strategic change, without identification of what that change should be, described here by the Director of Strategy:

> *So, a clear voiced view from Chairmen and Trustees that we don't have a strategy, that we are not thinking about impact. And the asking of questions that aren't answerable. And its time-lined with an opportunity in change at the top. And the timing is that but actually the impetus is led in the way it should be, which is Trustees. And then a new Chief Exec arrives. I've got a vision. I've got ideas. We need to do this. I'm here to set vision and direction. What you've been kind of talking about since July; what you've been kind of playing with, okay, we're here now to do it.*

It has already been identified that the Board set the tone of impending strategic change by selecting a new CEO (responsible for initiating the strategising process) who aligned with the broad parameters they had set. Here the CEO discusses how the process of exploring those parameters during recruitment allowed them to direct the narrative as they commenced their tenure:

> *From day one, I made it clear that it was important that the precepts that I'd set out in my interview, were clear to everybody in the organisation… And so, I used that conversation piece, talking about my experience of being interviewed, entering the organisation, and why I thought I was hired, to set up conversations. And that created a very dynamic narrative about historic perceived failures, opportunities and where the shared beliefs were.*

However, the developing narrative led to a cascade of restructuring down the senior levels of the organisation, as the Chief Executive reformed the executive team to align with the emerging (and as yet informal) strategic direction. This restructuring created a constraining effect on strategy development while it took

place. The constraint was caused by the desire of the CEO for new team members to be involved in the process, but also the constraining effect that role insecurity had on individuals:

> *The number one constraint was a decision that SMT was dilute [too big] …And me saying, at the first Senior Management Team, "there are currently 13 reports, and by the end of this year there will be fewer line reports into me as chief executive. And I will work with you on determining what those roles are". [This] meant that the Senior Management Team were all on guard from day one. Because some people were going to lose their status, if not their role.*

What is difficult to separate is the restructuring of roles and introduction or removal of individuals. The data suggests that the restructure was as much about getting the right personalities in place as it was about realigning the role structure of the senior management team. Restructuring affords the forming of a team of like-minded people amenable to impending strategic change, noted here by the Chair of the Board:

> *I think it's just getting the right structure and the right people together. It's the people that are making the difference…I think the team the CEO has working with them is about the team and the individuals rather than a structure and I suspect there are various ways it could have been modelled that would still result in the same strategy.*

While participants may have viewed this as a manipulation of the environment in order to create one that is familiar and comfortable for the CEO to manage, it had the effect of creating the right environment for strategising to take place and was noticed by those in middle management positions:

> *I can see why certain people have been recruited. I can see how they are looking at the circumstances and trying to hammer the circumstances into a shape that makes sense and will take us forward.*

The impact of a cascading restructure added significant time to the strategising process. Not only did it take time to review, change and implement new structures

(including recruiting and selecting new individuals), but these individuals needed time to both understand the organisation and, as would be expected in a participatory approach to strategy making, to become fully involved in the strategising process. Therefore, restructure acted as a constraint to participation in strategising, as it cascaded down the organisation and impacted organisational networks. Reflecting on the process, the CEO here identifies the impact that restructuring had:

> *One of the big things that shifted in the twelve months was an aspiration to have landed most of the strategy by January, so to have six months after that, and it took a full year. And I think that with the benefit of hindsight, that's realistic, in particular because my senior team didn't arrive until the beginning of December. And [there was] a real desire that those individuals were deeply owning the strategy.*

This point reflects a paradox: needing enough strategic direction to be able to select individuals capable of taking the strategy forward, while at the same time needing enough latitude and flexibility for those individuals to shape and inform the process and outcome, a sentiment most succinctly articulated by the Director of Strategy:

> *It wasn't the right people on the bus to deliver the new direction so there was a necessity for different people. And at that point you can't then create a strategy without those people putting their stamp on it and in fact what we wrote in December 2018 does not now stack up…I don't think it would have happened without the people that joined but it's really the introduction of time that allowed it to happen.*

4.6 The discursive and sociomaterial practices of participation

This study identified five critical practices throughout the strategising activities as being relevant to participation in strategy formulation. That is not to say that these were the only practices used, nor that other practices may help participation that

this study did not identify. However, in this particular case, creating the right space for participation, using multiple narratives, selecting and privileging information, using ambiguity, and using materiality to fix the strategic discourse were critical in influencing how participation was used in strategy. Each of these practices will now be explored in turn.

1. Creating the right space for participation

In this case, the national series of workshops acted as a flagship to a series of smaller, local roadshows, online webinars, an online submission survey, and informal conversations happening in meetings, casual interactions, and social media. The CEO saw these conversations to have been triggered by the prominence of the workshop series:

> *I think it required the impetus of the roadshows to get people engaging.*

The advantage of formally organised workshops is that facilitators can plan specific activities and design the environment better than informal interactions. The workshops' structure and design were deliberately intended to facilitate participation by creating the right conceptual environment to allow participants to contribute. This practice manifested itself in four ways:

1. Through manipulating the physical environment.
2. Discursively guiding proceedings, facilitators would de-couple the strategising space from the routine organisational setting.
3. Facilitators would draw on physical environmental cues and adapt their discourse to contextualise the activity to the audience.
4. Through discursively linking different activities together, facilitators would encourage a holistic view of strategising process.

The design of the workshops created a strategising space that was separate (de-coupled) from the routine operation of the organisation. Facilitators achieved this by manipulating the physical environment and the specific activities included in the programme. For instance, the initial “what makes you proud” exercise, followed by the “where do we want to be” exercise, encouraged the participants to think about words with positive connotations; pushing them to think in a more positive, future-focused way and become less bogged down in operational concerns.

> *It's important to get people in the right space to contribute and focus on the future. It's very easy to get caught up in the negative day to day and so starting with what makes us proud gets people to think about the good. (Informal conversation with CEO).*

While it was observed to be sometimes unsuccessful in stopping participants from introducing operational (rather than strategic) ideas, the structure of the exercises provided an anchor point whereby facilitators could pivot conversations to a strategic level. It was also noted in observations that the proud exercise did create a positive environment, where individuals focused on what made them feel good about the organisation.

The room’s physical setup was a deliberate consideration on the part of the facilitators, intended to signal the right kind of atmosphere. During an observation, the Director of Strategy recounted an experience some years before where a room had been set up in an open circle format to facilitate discussion. When the (now previous) senior team arrived, they introduced a table in such a way as to create a physical and metaphorical barrier to the dialogue. This experience stuck with DS, and as such, they were keen to ensure the physical set up of the room during the workshops did not reproduce this effect. Therefore

the furniture was laid out as groups of chairs facilitating a small group or whole group discussion.

The layout of the furniture was noted to have a tangible impact. On two occasions, the physical constraint of the venue and the number of participants attending meant that chairs were set in a more formal 'theatre' style, which impacted participant engagement. For example, during workshop eight, that there was less informal discussion and debate at these workshops:

> *The impact of the physical environment impacts the language and discourse, but also how people communicate. The chairs in this session are more formally laid out. When it came to the small group discussions, participants seemed reluctant to move the chairs, and this led to more stymied discussions.*

Facilitators would use verbal cues to encourage participants to "*think outside of the box*" in an "*imagining space*" (workshop ten). These would typically be provided during the workshop's introduction to set "ground rules" for participants. The cues would focus on trying to get participants to think beyond everyday operational concerns:

> *"For this evening, try not to be constrained. Try not to focus on why it wouldn't work. Instead think about why it would be great" (Workshop two).*
>
> *"Scrub your mind of the day-to-day gripes that we have and the lack of resources. Don't focus on those. Play with the world. Suspend your disbelief". (Workshop three).*

However, non-verbal cues would also signal to participants that the workshop presented a space where the usual 'rules' of the organisation need not apply. Vocalised during workshop six by the CEO:

> *"I've taken my tie off as a symbol of informality"*

These extracts highlight the importance of de-coupling the strategising space from the regular organisational routines to facilitate strategic thinking, but it also

demonstrates how basic environmental cues can enable or constrain strategic discourse. The nature of a ‘roadshow’ series of events also means that differences in physical facilities create minor variations.

Workshop facilitators drew on environmental features and cues to tailor their language and approach to the audience to encourage participation. This practice of contextualising the workshop facilitated participation activities. This practice might include subtle details, such as introducing a recurring theme of history during the introduction to a workshop taking place in a grand historical room (workshop eight) or emphasising the vital contribution of behind-the-scenes support staff during a workshop involving a majority of support personnel (workshop four). When asked informally during a workshop about how deliberate and conscious the CEO is of the environment, they stated:

> *Very. You can't ignore it. But more than that, I am also very aware of who is in the room… I tailor what I say to connect with them and create the right environment for them to want to contribute… For instance, I see that we have slightly more employees than volunteers today, so I will say employees before volunteers.*

The closely entwined relationship between sociomateriality and discourse is reflected through the physical environment influencing the choice of language. This case found that adapting discourse to the environment and the participants was a tool used by practitioners to enhance people’s participation.

Senior leaders would often draw links between and across episodes and activities to develop a more holistic view of strategising. Discussion of specific practices is usually related to a specific episode or episode type. However, these findings revealed the relationship between and across different episodes and how facilitators used practices more holistically. Different episodes, over time, were used to develop a strategic narrative. While strategising took place within the

episodes, the episodes themselves were used as part of a discursive practice where strategists talked about historical episodes or the content produced to facilitate a greater level of engagement from organisational actors. This practice was used both in-person during interactions or more widely communicated to the organisation, such as the all-personnel email examples here:

> *How's the future shaping up? Finding out how our future is shaping up and having the chance to ask any questions has never been easier! The Director of Strategy is coming to you via Skype Broadcast over the next few days. They will be sharing the key concepts that have emerged from the conversations you've all been involved in about the future during our roadshows, local workshops, meetings and the online survey. Don't miss out - book your place now! (Email 13-06-2018)*
>
> *Giving your feedback online. If you don't get the chance to attend a roadshow or local workshop, we still want to hear from you. You can have your say by completing our online survey either on your PC or mobile. (Email 11-04-2018)*

These email communications were used to elicit additional engagement by positioning this against previous opportunities, encouraging those who have 'missed out'. They illustrate the relationship between different episodes and how previous events can be leveraged to facilitate further participation.

2. The use of multiple narratives in strategy formulation

The focus of strategising tends to highlight the strategic narrative that emerges from activities. However, this study has identified that multiple narratives were a critical practice in a participatory approach. Specifically, in addition to the strategic narrative (i.e., the actual strategic direction that was emerging from the discussions), three narratives were identified:

1. A narrative of participation
2. A personal narrative to develop legitimacy
3. A narrative of consensus

A narrative of participation

Across different episodes, discussions and online feedback opportunities, the organisation directly engaged with over 1,000 individuals (CEO speech, 23 June 2018). Although impressive, this is a fraction of the 32,000 personnel. Given that it was not practicable to involve every single individual, it was necessary for the strategising activities to at least appear to be accessible to everybody in some way in order to ensure the perception of an open process. Doing so increases the perceived legitimacy of the process, as even if individuals chose not to be involved, they could have is what is important. Described here by two different middle managers:

> *The idea that such consultative sessions take place is a reassurance to those who are prepared to live by the charity's strategy, prepared to live by the rules, as long as they think those rules have been made up and that strategy's been set by people who've taken some sort of input, that's calibrated it, and kept it relevant, etc.*
>
> *I'd say it's more important to people that want to feel like they are consulted with. I'd say it's more important to people who ascribe a sense of meaning to their own involvement in a process.*

The Director of Strategy quickly identified the importance of the perception of the process. While it was not possible to reach everyone, the goal was to "*both engage as many people as possible and also demonstrate that you're serious about engagement*". They achieved this perception by creating a comprehensive programme of activity designed to create momentum around engagement and participation. By having a range of different activity types, including local engagement sessions, online webinars, videos and feedback questionnaires, the desire was to create a "*sense of, we're working as best as we can to provide you with multiple options to have a voice*" (Director of Strategy). A narrative of openness and engagement was reinforced through the tone of messages being sent out through internal communication channels (see table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Extracts of different messaging using a narrative of participation

Our roadshows to get people talking about the future have got off to a great start. We had a good turnout in Southampton last Thursday with a wide range of volunteers and employees coming along to join the conversation.	Company intranet article – 11 April 2018
Have you booked your roadshow place? We're in Stockport today and Sheffield tomorrow - we still have some space available, so it's not too late to book a place if you want to come along.	Internal memo - 11 April 2018
Thank you to the hundreds of people who have come along so far and been willing to engage in discussions about how we can have a greater impact in our communities.	All personnel email from internal communications team – 27 April 2018
Engagement with our 'Stepping Forward' process has been amazing. The more I hear from employees and volunteers, the more sure I am that our future is one focused on impact, delivered directly through our people.	Email from CEO to all staff and volunteers – 1 May 2018
One of the key foundations for our future is knowing what makes us feel proud about our charity, and this was the starting point at all the roadshows and workshops and a key question in the survey… We also saw an outpouring of pride in the stories that you have been willing to share.	All staff email - 31 May 2018
The Trustees have listened carefully to you all and heard the voice of our people.	CEO speech at 2018 AGM

The production of a narrative of participation is a practice made of both discursive and sociomaterial elements. The discourse of participation in emails, memos and speeches, is underpinned by material elements – even if these material elements are only discursively described. The words written on Post-It notes, or stories written on story cards, become tangible evidence that participation has taken place. This evidence of participation could engender the support of those present (by participants being able to see a tangible output of their discussions) and not present (by showing other people what came out of the sessions). In the words of the Chief Commissioner:

> *They were successful in gathering, I believe, the emotional support of folk. They can have their say, they've been heard, because it's been put up in tangible stuff. It's writ on the wall and*

> *will also be used in some of the documents that are being presented.*

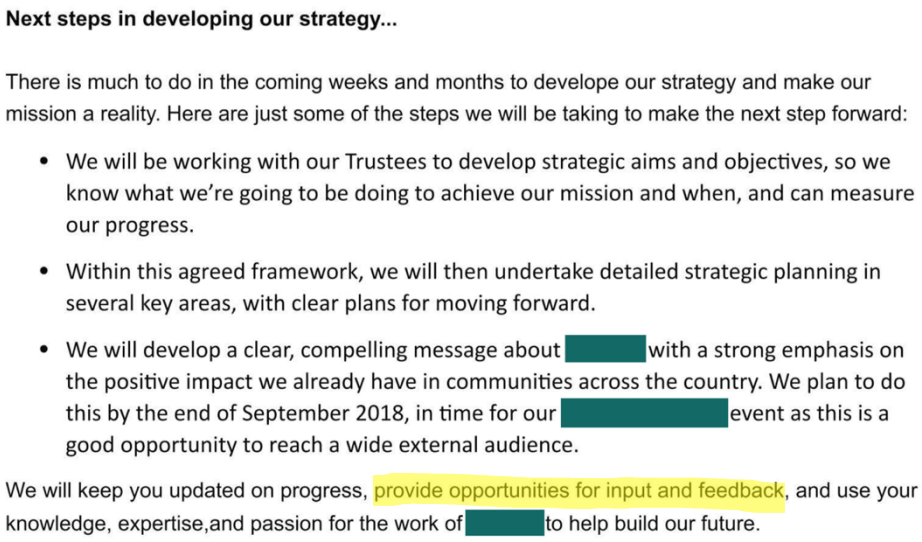
The sensemaking process is represented materially in the evolution of language that came out of the workshops and later appeared in the document text. The CEO and Director of Strategy intended this in the process design, regularly explaining to participants:

> *When you read what we eventually come up with you should be able to hear your voice in it.*

This narrative continued through to the publication of the final strategy document. Participation allowed the internal final strategy document to link its formulation to the participation activities (see figure 4.7). In the workshops, some participants would occasionally perceive this as manipulation, described by one as enabling the ELT to “sell the strategy back to the volunteers in a language they have been consulted on”. However, what was apparent was that even those who tended to view the process in negative terms were still keen to participate to have their voice heard. Therefore, even a negative perception of the participation narrative did not necessarily reduce the extent of that participation.

Figure 4.7: Extract from internal strategy leaflet

The messaging was as much about developing a narrative of engagement as the engagement itself. Doing so would ensure that, should an individual not have been directly involved, that would have been by their own choice – a subtle but significant difference. However, the narrative of inclusion and participation was not always a fait accompli. Senior management talked about the participation as always being intended as front and centre activities, but material produced earlier did not reflect this to the same extent in earlier material. Figure 4.8 (sent in September 2017 before the formal process was designed – highlight added) shows that, while opportunities to provide feedback were included, they were very much a minor inclusion.



Next steps in developing our strategy...

There is much to do in the coming weeks and months to develope our strategy and make our mission a reality. Here are just some of the steps we will be taking to make the next step forward:

- We will be working with our Trustees to develop strategic aims and objectives, so we know what we're going to be doing to achieve our mission and when, and can measure our progress.
- Within this agreed framework, we will then undertake detailed strategic planning in several key areas, with clear plans for moving forward.
- We will develop a clear, compelling message about [redacted] with a strong emphasis on the positive impact we already have in communities across the country. We plan to do this by the end of September 2018, in time for our [redacted] event as this is a good opportunity to reach a wide external audience.

We will keep you updated on progress, provide opportunities for input and feedback, and use your knowledge, expertise,and passion for the work of [redacted] to help build our future.

Figure 4.8: Internal memo sent in September 2017

The prominence of participation reflects the realistic expectations of what was achievable at the time. However, the increasing prominence of participation that occurred illustrates the performative effect of a narrative of participation. As the narrative for participation built among senior leaders, so too did the aspirations and plans for a more extensive level of engagement. Moreover, as one middle manager identified, by saying you are going to do it, you then have to follow through:

> *The promise was that all the organisation would have their voice represented in the strategy. So, that's a very powerful statement to make. So, you're not going to make that statement unless you've sought out the views. Because otherwise, you're going to look very foolish very quickly.*

Therefore, developing a narrative of participation both had the performative effect of creating participation opportunities and signalling to participants and the broader organisational community that participation is happening, thereby generating process legitimacy. The narrative means that episodes were essential even when they were not generating new or different content from other episodes, most pertinently illustrated by the online webinars, which took place after the main workshop series. They were designed to feedback and tested

some of the emerging themes. Described by a junior member of the team as being “cobbled together” due to time pressures, they described the importance of them going ahead despite a feeling that they would not contribute very much:

> *To an extent it was a distraction, however it had to go ahead - even if it didn't really have anything new to say - to maintain the momentum of the process, demonstrate that people (in the workshops) had been listened to and because DS had promised action.*

Therefore, a narrative of participation is vital in generating a feeling of engagement because participation activities are as much about a feeling of consultation as they are about actual consultation, even when viewed negatively. However, there is also a performative element in that the narrative contributes to creating participation activities because the narrative demands this. The practice of developing the narrative is discursive but underpinned by the materiality of the activities. The activities do not necessarily need to contribute new or different information because they, in themselves, contribute further to the narrative.

Using personal narratives to develop legitimacy

The second narrative used as part of participation in strategy is a personal narrative. Facilitators used their personal narrative to show authenticity, helping them develop their legitimacy as strategists (but more specifically, as legitimate organisational actors). Facilitators used a range of stories, usually when introducing themselves, most commonly creating a link between the organisation and their personal experience. While the stories would vary depending on the individual facilitator, they would have a common theme of emotional, personal experience that illustrated what the organisation meant to them.

The use of physical story cards and inviting participants to share these stories with the group encouraged storytelling as a mechanism through which to explore

strategic meaning. By materialising the stories via the physical cards, it provided personal narratives that could later be shared more widely through internal communication channels – further spreading the narrative experience – and contributing to the participation narrative explored above.

Personal legitimacy and authenticity were illustrated best in the workshop that stood out as different from the rest – the only workshop not to have been facilitated by either the CEO or Director of Strategy. Workshop five could best be described as a "facsimile" of earlier sessions (Observation notes – workshop five). The ingredients were all there – it was clear the facilitators made an effort to record and repeat some of the components of the earlier session they observed (particularly the introduction of each task). However, it felt like something was missing: an authentic passion in the process. The observation identified the different tone of delivery and posed several questions, which are difficult to answer definitively but speak to the broader importance of personal narrative:

> *"We've got to move away from the here and now" – The facilitator made a point about not getting wrapped up in operational concerns but struck a very different tone to DS in the earlier session. Not as aspirational. Not as authentic. Could this be influenced by DS' relative newness in role (23 months)? Does this make them more open to listening? The Facilitator here is an established senior staff member, and therefore potentially seen as part of the establishment and more likely to have developed a complacency about knowing what the issues are.*

The facilitators were passionate about the organisation, its people and its future - however, the Director of Strategy and CEO were equally passionate about the process. This passion would be a logical expectation, as they designed the process. However, an authentic belief in the importance of participation influences communication delivery and affects attendees' perception of the workshops. The passionate delivery creates a perception in participants of the

authentic belief in the importance of participation and gives the executive team greater legitimacy. This view acts as a counterbalance to the one that sees the workshops as just "lip service" and does not yield tangible impact.

A narrative of consensus

The third narrative used as part of participation in strategy was for senior leaders to develop a consensus narrative. A recurring message was put out both within and outside strategising sessions that, over time, everybody was beginning to say the same thing and accept the prevailing discourse. However, several issues should first be acknowledged that explain why it could be considered a narrative of consensus rather than consensus itself.

Firstly, the narrative of consensus did indeed reflect consistent themes emerging from the workshops, and therefore, the narrative was not a false one. What was less clear is the extent to which the consistent themes emerged naturally or were deliberately privileged using the affirmatory practices discussed in the next section.

Secondly, it is unknown (nor was it known by senior leaders at the time) the extent to which the consensus themes emerging were either universal across the organisation (as the workshops were not representative) or that the interpretation of the messages matched the interpretation of the participants.

The purpose of the participation could never be to incorporate every single different view of every individual. Generating a narrative of consensus manifested at several levels. Firstly, it could be used within a single strategising session to facilitate consensus among individuals within the session, particularly following

small group discussions (here shown in an observation extract from workshop three):

> *Facilitator highlighted the "powerful statement" of a particular service - through a show of hands, the whole room indicated their view that people would be willing to support the delivery of the service - generate consensus within the room, but is it an accurate view, or did people feel obligated to raise their hand? Would it be representative of the wider organisation?*

Interestingly, this practice was not restricted to the facilitator, as it would often come directly from participants themselves, emphasising where discussion within one sub-group agreed with another, seen here from workshop one:

> *Feeding back after the discussion, the final group to speak highlighted that they agreed with all the other groups and emphasised the common themes that have emerged in the discussions.*

At a higher level was developing a narrative of consensus across strategising activities by talking about the content of other episodes. This practice included the sharing of stories told by participants at previous events or using affirmative language to indicate similarities between episodes:

> *"A good thing, from my point of view anyway, is that this isn't different from what the people in Cumbria said last night and the south before that. The same message is coming out across the country" (Facilitator - Workshop four)*
>
> *"A really important message we are hearing not just here, but around the country" (Facilitator - Workshop eight)*

These extracts indicate the influencing effect that earlier events can have on later episodes, as inevitably, information cannot be shared across events until it has been generated. Additionally, where points had not come up, they could be introduced into proceedings:

> *"There was a phrase used at one of these events a while back" (Facilitator - Workshop eleven)*

> *When feeding back to the whole group, a small group discussion facilitator introduced a view that had not come up in the discussion, but that "came up in an earlier session". They talked about community affection and described their own personal experience. This prompted the main facilitator to add the phrases "community affection" and "enjoyable/fun" onto the whiteboard. (Workshop five)*

In the second of the two examples above, it is difficult to determine when information introduced into a workshop could also be considered output. The small group facilitator, who is also an actor within the organisation and therefore entitled to hold a point of view, introduced new information that influenced the workshop's material output through the inclusion of words and phrases on the whiteboard. However, that those in attendance did not dispute the point of view would suggest that those participants accepted it and therefore reflects a legitimate output of the second workshop. That it did not naturally emerge from participants but was 'planted' by the facilitator will not be shown in the output, but that does not necessarily mean that it is not legitimate. What is unclear is the extent to which the facilitator's power (from either their role in the workshop or position within the organisation) would influence the likelihood of participants to challenge the point of view if it did not align with their own. The example illustrates how facilitators used power to influence the direction of strategising activities.

3. Selection and privileging of information

Facilitated discussions provide the opportunity to be selective about which points of view are provided attention and which are not. Inevitably, this means that some points are captured, while others are not. Information selection would occur during strategising episodes, both within small group discussions and plenary discussions with larger groups. This research found that facilitators would privilege points building on the emerging strategic narrative. For instance, a trustee discussion at the strategy Away Day before the workshops focused on

whether the organisation should be “broad and good” or “focused and excellent”. The consensus result in this discussion was broad and good. During at least two separate workshops, facilitators seized upon points related to the organisation’s breadth of opportunities. The following extract is from the observation notes from workshop two:

> *A small-group-discussion facilitator summarised back to the workshop-lead a five-minute conversation that produced a list of things. The small group facilitator highlighted a view that the organisation could be more generalist in what it does, rather than being a specialist. This view seemed quite minor when made by the participant, and was the opposite view made by another individual during the discussion. The opposing view was not mentioned by the facilitator. Was this jumped on as it has been an issue already discussed and decided upon?*

Workshop facilitators would use discursive affirmative practices to direct the selection of points for inclusion on the whiteboards. They highlighted certain concepts or themes as being more important than others, reflected in the level of emphasis given by facilitators alongside confirmatory statements such as:

> *"Let's capture all this, because it's good"*

This affirmation signals to the participants the direction of travel and reinforces the point as being “correct”, contributing to a shared consensus. Equally, facilitators used the practice to redirect conversations to the emerging themes through questioning and subtle direction:

> *"I hear very clearly that there is a desire to do more. It’s a big question. But, if you open that floodgate, that becomes difficult, as if you try to be everything you end up as nothing”.*

However, it is too simplistic to suggest the content of the whiteboards aligned entirely with the views of the facilitator. Instead, writing something on the board served to signal the capture of a view, feeding into some unspecified later consideration. In essence, to be later accepted or rejected, but not at that moment

in time. Doing this allowed for the forward momentum of the workshop to be maintained:

> *Writing something up on the flipchart had the impact of progressing the conversation, in a sort of way that said 'yes, we've captured that - now we can move on' (Workshop six)*

While the mechanism of selecting ideas that contributed to the emerging discourse was frequent, the whiteboard was a flexible tool that also allowed for the inclusion of the dissenting or contradictory view that signalled to the participant that they had been heard and listened to (even if the view would not be progressed or carried forward).

The content was not collected verbatim during workshops, meetings and discussions. This approach created opportunities where interpretation took place:

1. The individual stating the point made it so as their words reflected what they intended to say.
2. The facilitator interpreted the intended meaning correctly and ascribed the same meaning to it (including ascribing sufficient importance to the point to warrant attention).
3. That the words selected to represent the viewpoint adequately reflected both the intended and received meaning.

Reflecting points in this way was further complicated by there being multiple, sometimes conflicting, views held by multiple actors in a single session, shown here in an observation extract:

> *A small group discussed use of the word "charity" in the organisation mission or vision. This was rephrased by the facilitator back to the wider group, which is then picked up on by another small group who provide a different and contradictory perspective on the meaning of the word in relation to the organisation. The second contradictory point is the one chosen by the facilitator to be summarised on the whiteboard. Would the*

> *point have been captured had the original conflicting point not been presented back to the participants?*

The selective use of concepts introduced by participants provides a revelatory example demonstrating that participation in strategy did not necessarily mean the resulting strategy's democratisation. Whether deliberate or subconscious, strategists inevitably interpreted, selected and emphasised some points of view over others, and these will have more of an influence on the strategic discourse. This practice demonstrated the sensemaking process in action, as actors heard, interpreted, and then fed that interpretation back to others in the space of a single interaction. The rephrasing of words and phrases back to participants was a common practice by facilitators:

> *DS consistently adopted a practice of repackaging to repeat what he has heard - is this about demonstrating that he is hearing what people say? Adding legitimacy to the idea that this is a listening exercise. Listening, by its definition, required interpretation. (Workshop four)*

The rephrasing practice provides several benefits to the facilitator. Firstly, it was a way of demonstrating listening in an active way back to participants. However, it could also be viewed as an exercise of power, as it also demonstrated the control of the narrative by the facilitator, as they were able to manipulate the point to fit their meaning better.

Those individuals with greater power were able to direct and influence strategising activities through discursive practices. For instance, the CEO was more likely to direct conversations during the workshops than the Director of Strategy, through the offering of their opinion – noted in this observation extract from workshop six:

> *"I think that part of that is that we need to be a health organisation, not a social organisation." Why did they say this? Was it to see if it shapes a response? This is more influencing than DS.*

The above illustrates how the head of the organisation, having the legitimacy to make decisions, was more likely to voice direction 'on the fly'. However, they would also confer legitimacy on others by inviting them to specifically contribute to the process, as shown below from the same workshop:

> *The CEO invited the Chief Commissioner (who had not played a central role to this point) to add their thoughts to the conversation. Given the CEO would already know these views, was this to re-affirm the views and/or to ensure the Chief Commissioner was afforded a more influential role?*

These interactions highlight how the legitimacy of the workshop facilitator was necessary. Legitimacy was also starkly demonstrated during workshop five. Two senior managers (without direct responsibility for strategy) led this workshop instead of the CEO or DS. Introducing the session, they presented a video introduction from the CEO to participants. However, apart from the video, the session was structured in the same way as for the other workshops:

> *There is an intangible difference in tone and mood of the room. What can be best described as an anti-climactic feel.*
>
> *Did the video undermine the legitimacy of the facilitators? Lead facilitator introduces the session but makes a concerted effort to emphasise their role as being one that will feed the information back to the CEO and DS: "We'll try and be very quiet".*

4. The use of ambiguity

By eliciting the feedback of such a large number of people, it was inevitable that there would be many different interpretations of what was said. The national, local, and online workshops allowed people to have a say and capture their thoughts. There was also a stated intent to ensure that everybody could "hear their voice" in the resulting strategy. For this to work, the text would need a

sufficient level of ambiguity to allow multiple interpretations of a single text. This ambiguity was found in many different ways, including in the discourse used during the strategising episodes. In designing a workshop structured in such a way as to give as many people as possible a voice that would be captured and reflected in the strategy, it was necessary to implement a tone of consensus building and affirmation. This narrative required the facilitators to capture content in a way perceived as agreement. Prominent words and phrases captured in sessions were played back in strategic text or through deliberately introducing strategic phrases that senior leaders knew would feature later in the strategy. The strategic texts themselves would also feature ambiguous text. Texts were produced following the strategising activities, whether these be temporary 'discussion' documents or the final produced strategic text. The introduction of ambiguous words and phrases was both an accidental consequence of different interpretations and deliberate decision by the Director of Strategy:

> *Inspiring is deliberately both an adjective and a verb. Because it covers both the work that we directly do which should be inspiring and the fact that we are trying to inspire.*

The interpretation of discourse by participants and the reading of strategic texts creates a significant opportunity for ambiguity. Once authored, even a single narrative is immediately subjected to reinterpretation and reinspection. However, this presented a risk that can occur in the implementation of strategy, something identified by a middle manager:

> *Are we giving everybody the impression that whatever they think is the right answer to the question of why? … Are we going to pretty much say, "whatever your interpretation of the organisation is, crack on". In which case we'll have a lot of very happy people, but four or five years down the line, we're in a similar situation where we can't afford to do what we do, we don't look and feel the same everywhere, and it's all fragmented.*

Somewhat paradoxical is that, in strategy, ambiguity is often found in simplicity. The pattern in an organisation's behaviour is inherently complex and multifaceted. Reflecting this complexity in even a long-form document was difficult, particularly when written in a way accessible to strategists, senior managers, operational personnel and external stakeholders. The CEO outlined his approach was to produce a document written in short, simple and easy to access language:

> *Someone once said to me, make the main things the plain things and the plain things the main things and I think that's true. And the risk that you run in writing a strategy that does just that - has three plain English statements that anybody can read. In fact, another Chief Executive said this [the strategy] is a triumph of clarity and it's deeply humble to have him say that. But I genuinely believe I could put those three statements in front of any human being in Britain who reads English and go "I get it. I understand what you're going to do".*

However, the simplicity of the language meant that it was even more open to many interpretations by different readers. The concern was that, as people interpret the text in multiple ways, each reader will feel they can more clearly understand the meaning as they find their interpretation of meaning within it. Reflected here by another middle manager:

> *I think we are all very lucky in that the strategy is not, A, strategically detailed enough, or, B, conceptually controversial enough that it generates mass resistance… I think it creates a very headline document in terms of its text, which, I think, is okay. It doesn't pin down people to a lot of specifics, which potentially offers lots of opportunity for ambiguity. But then it also, at the same time, creates a very easy to buy into narrative.*

5. Materiality as fixing discourse

The discussions around strategy inevitably became represented through the text written in physical and digital documents. However, these constructs had varying degrees of permanence, which influenced how long the discourse remained

fixed. For example, during the strategising workshops, Post-It notes and words written on whiteboards would be used to either generate consensus or temporarily fix the discourse so that the discussion could move on to other topics. Position papers, emails and other written documents would fix discourse for more extended (but still temporary) periods, often being used as a framework around which a strategic discussion could occur or that the outcomes of a strategic discussion could be reported. Finally, formal strategy documents would use official statements of strategy (including vision and mission statements) to impact fixing discourse for the most prolonged period – culminating in the launch of the formal new strategy, which fixed the strategic discourse for three years.

Strategic text, discourse and sociomateriality were so closely related that all three concepts worked together simultaneously. In the following example, the CEO communicates via the medium of email to share the contents of their 2018 AGM speech, in which they outlined the interim vision and mission for the organisation. This example demonstrates how the CEO used the strategic text to frame a conversation:

> *In my speech, I outlined our future intent based on a new vision and mission. While we have yet to develop strategic aims and objectives and detailed plans to deliver these, I hope you can recognise the input you provided and how it is helping shape our way forward.*

The CEO acknowledged the cognitive artefacts of vision and mission in 2018 as the correct tools for leading a strategic conversation:

> *If you're going to define purpose, the accepted formula for defining purpose, is vision mission and values. And that these are healthily rehearsed mechanisms, into defining the first articles of strategy. And I contested that it was difficult to deliver a business plan, if there was no strategic plan. And the strategic plan's first principles were, vision, mission and values.*

Interestingly, the revised vision and mission initially developed and referred to here was subsequently replaced in the final strategy document. This example demonstrates a strategist using established tools to temporarily secure the discourse to facilitate discussion while recognising that discourse is constantly changing, and as such, these statements can also be subject to change. This approach is instrumental when a lack of materiality (through, for example, only communicating these statements in digital form) means they are easily changed. The interim strategy statements lacked the prominence, finish and permanence, that the final strategy text document enjoyed, as they were not printed in physical form.

The CEO deliberately used the practice of materially representing the current discourse in order to stimulate a conversation on many occasions, showing how they used materiality to fixed discourse in order to move the conversation on or around which to frame a discussion:

> *With trustees, I wrote a brief clear report about how I saw things unfolding, where I saw things going. And for the Senior Management Team, I wrote a strategy challenge document about where I perceived the vision, mission, values, to have come from and going to. So, I used both of those documents to create the debate.*

Facilitators also used this practice within the workshops. As a temporary fix is needed, the materiality can also be temporary and make use of physical artefacts to help visualise strategy. In this case, whiteboards captured the output from each discussion, illustrated in workshop two:

> *"Let's connect everything together with one question. If that [points to whiteboard] is what defines us, and that [points to another whiteboard] is where we want to be. What should we be*

> *great at doing?" DS then walks to new whiteboard ready to capture comments.*

The temporary nature of the whiteboards juxtaposes against the permanence of the final strategy document – a physically printed, glossy brochure that was consciously produced in two different designs based on audience (internal and external) and posted (at considerable financial cost) to all personnel in the organisation. This symbolic act conveyed the significance of the document for the organisation:

> *I think it was in part about the way that we communicated the strategy both initially and in an ongoing way. So, we made a decision that the collateral that would land on the doorsteps of the 24,000 [internal personnel] would not be the strategy brochure, it would be a brochure that articulated how it was your strategy, you have written this, you have articulated this, you are going to deliver it. (CEO)*
>
> *It's a statement. You can't deny it's a statement. And not a statement we've done before or are likely to do again for three years… I think the act of doing it that way. The totemic thing about mailing everyone. It's made that obvious… It's a big deal. (Director of Strategy)*

The physical strategy brochure's production and design effort gave it importance over anything else produced during the strategising process. It is this combination of things that helped secure this strategy text as the final, fixed version. Therefore, the case has shown how practitioners can use materiality in varying ways to fix the strategic discourse to facilitate conversations around strategy.

4.7 Creating the issue of the marginalisation of middle management

What unexpectedly emerged from the research findings in this case study of participative strategy formulation was the issue of middle managers feeling marginalised. The perception of marginalisation was influenced by both the organisational restructuring and middle managers' reduced influence on the

strategising process. Despite this, middle managers recognised the importance of participation and understood the vital role they had to play, especially in implementing strategy. The 'translating' role that middle managers adopted meant that the local strategising activities mitigated marginalisation.

Early in the research, several middle managers identified that the process meant that they did not have "a particularly loud voice". A year later, this had crystalised into a feeling of being marginalised in the process:

> *A lot of the people that actually lead and instigate change across the organisation are the middle and senior employees… they are the ones that are employed to get all sorts of stuff done and I know they're not feeling valued and appreciated… I do think that middle management was skipped over.*

However, it is more complicated than to say that participation was the sole cause of the feeling of marginalisation. While senior leadership were identifying the strategic disconnect and developing a course of action to address it, middle managers perceived a lack of direction coming from the strategic void:

> *I thought I'll concentrate on what I think I need to do because something's not quite right… I describe it as, 'I had to come in and tidy my house'. I've spent nearly two years doing that. I have said occasionally in those two years, at some point I will finish tidying and now I need to know what I am supposed to do because I can't tidy forever.*

Unfortunately, middle managers are responsible for operational activity and therefore do not have the luxury of inaction while strategic decisions are made. The organisational structure allowed for a significant amount of autonomy in the role of the middle managers at that time, and therefore they recognised the responsibilities this entailed:

> *My job is to run a quarter of the country. I can't sit around waiting for people to tell me what to do. Therefore… I should be in a*

> *position where I have some ideas of my own and have the ability to make them happen. As do my colleagues.*

As the senior structure took shape and a centrally formulated participation process was formed, it imposed a top-down process on middle management. The imposition of the process meant that middle managers became subject to it, rather than shaping it:

> *In the traditional rational hierarchical approach, I was minimised compared to that. However, you could take it on the chin and say I was democratised, so, I became one voice among many.*

However, alongside the participation activities was the organisational restructuring that was also taking place. Restructuring compounded marginalisation because it resulted in a broad centralization of functions that removed some of the organisational reporting lines to a tier of middle managers.

> *The role was massively marginalised. If you consider what was needed seven years ago… Everybody was recruited by and reported to the regional director… One by one the direct reports were peeled off. The regional director's job went from almost near total autonomy to gradually letting go and moving into the much maligned but genuinely advanced matrix working.*

Middle managers viewed a degree of marginalisation as inevitable, or at the very least, a necessity created by broader organisational changes. It was difficult to determine to what extent the marginalisation was created by restructuring or participating in strategising because of the intertwined nature of structure and strategy. What was clear, however, was that middle managers felt marginalized as a result of participation, but as part of a broader marginalisation of the middle manager role:

> *I think that's not a reflection on the role of RD. That's a reflection on lots of things have shifted. But I don't think they've shifted because of the strategy. I think they've shifted because the nature of the organisation was beginning to change… I think that would've happened anyway without the strategy.*

Despite this, middle managers understood and acknowledged the importance of participation. To an extent, any dissatisfaction was perhaps reflective of middle managers' historically autonomous and influential position. It was possible for them to simultaneously feel marginalised while also understanding why this was the case:

> *At the moment I will be a recipient of that strategy. I'm not much of a player. There's no petulance in that statement, but the reality is I'm not very much a player currently. I'm, like everybody, waiting to hear what that looks like, and it feels like it's being done elsewhere by other people and being heavily influenced, quite rightly, by our frontline personnel.*

While the main programme may have diminished their voice, the local strategising activities provided middle managers with an opportunity to shape and interpret the message, especially where they were using input from participants to inform either feedback to senior leadership or operational decisions:

> *As a facilitator I think if you were pulling the operational plan or something like that, then I can say, yes, my own personal insights clearly shaped thinking. But that document in itself, I was one voice among thousands and then a facilitator of further hundreds to add their voice to the thousands, if that makes sense.*

While not explicitly intended to reduce the role of middle management, the 'democratisation' of voices had the impact of reducing the weight of the input of middle management. This approach presented a challenge to middle managers, as while being restructured and feeling marginalized, they were also expected to engage with the local activities. The result was that middle managers had to present an outwardly positive message, even if personally conflicted by the activities, further influencing the feeling of isolation:

> *As it was, I made the active choice to echo that message… It was never my message to generate. It was my opportunity to soundboard and underline that message. So, yes, in a lot of ways it was isolating of my role and authority and, yes, input.*

The ability to run local strategy workshops allowed middle management to fill a boundary spanning role, which gave them a privileged position to interpret the voice of frontline people and feed this back to senior management. Despite feeling marginalized, the optimistic view of the critical role characterised the view of middle management:

> *I'm actually kind of in a sort of gifted position almost where I can perpetuate that meaning because I have a platform. So, I am a Director. I have a large team of people in front of me. I've actually then been directly asked to go and participate in consultation about that strategy. So, as a result, I am able to apply my own lens to the conversation about that and, subsequently, the content and feedback that I get back.*

Therefore, while marginalised, middle managers were not wholly removed of their more significant influence and still filled a valuable role. This role was recognised and illustrated in this extended extract by a middle manager who also understood that their role would become increasingly important as formulation turned into implementation:

> *There's an element in my role of being pragmatic. My role is very much to influence upwards but to ultimately implement what the organisation commissions me to do. In the absence of that, what's likely to happen is the status quo remains…I need to understand it, I need to understand the rationale about it, and I need to be able to influence how that manifests itself within my part of the organisation so I can then, with authenticity and passion and pride, ensure that I deliver in the region on the aspects that are going to help the strategy achieve its overall bits.*

Therefore, while the marginalisation may have been more perceived than real, it did not make it any less important to those experiencing it. Even in a more centralised environment, middle managers would remain critical when it came to the implementation of the strategy (after the end of this study), especially when it came to translating the strategy into messages easily understood on the front line:

> *The new role is actually quite a straightforward answer in that respect, because then it becomes about translation. So, you translate that strategy into probably one of three things. Either digestible messages for disengaged audiences, direct actions and tasks for audiences that are professionally engaged, or you translate it into the ways of delivering it. So, you translate it directly into a plan to actually turn around and make it happen.*
>
> *It's your job to construct a narrative, I suppose, around the strategy that coherently envelopes the work that we want to do, while also, perhaps, isolating some work that we may not want to do.*

To conclude, while participation helped improve the buy-in of those involved, it presented a risk of making middle managers feel marginalised. Marginalisation would potentially become an issue when required to exercise their essential boundary spanning role. *Middle management marginalisation* is an issue that should therefore be managed during and after the development of a strategy.

4.8 Conclusion

The data has explored a three-year strategy formulation process in the development of Charity Ltd.'s 2019-2022 strategy. Using (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018)'s framework as a guide, the findings draw on interviews, observations and document analysis to provide a nuanced understanding of a complex concept. The results provide an insight into the 'black box' of strategising within the organisation. Within the data, several key areas were highlighted:

1. Firstly, the timeline reveals a complex process of human interaction that involved many different forms of dialogue using different mediums, materials and artefacts.
2. The process of aligning individual and collective meaning attached to strategy is a vital part of participation. This process can be explained using

the social theory of sensemaking. In essence, participation is a sensemaking process.

3. Practices form the tools that practitioners use to facilitate participation. These practices are used in and around formal strategising episodes. Practices are used both individually and in combination.
4. Various factors influence participation in strategy formulation, either enabling or constraining the process. These factors are not isolated from one another, leading to a complex relationship.
5. Participation does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore creates issues including the marginalisation of middle management. Therefore, participation may have knock-on implication for later stages of strategising, particularly the implementation of the strategy.

The study will now discuss the significance of these findings concerning the existing body of literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings of this study in relation to the literature explored in chapter 2. It is structured around the research questions presented in chapter 1. Beginning with a discussion of the process of participation, it then moves on to discuss the enablers and constraints to participation in strategy formulation. Following this, there is a section exploring the practices used to facilitate participation in strategising before discussing the role of middle managers. These elements come together in a visual framework of participation in strategy formulation, which was the aim of this study.

5.1 The process of participation

> *I genuinely can't say where most of this [strategy document] actually comes from. I genuinely don't know. But I know it didn't come out of my head. Or at least it didn't come out of my head two years ago… There's nothing I could have read about the organisation anywhere because we don't work that way, we don't have that… It's because people have said it. It's because it's been generated. (Director of Strategy).*
>
> *"Situations, organisations and environments are talked into existence"* (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

This section begins the discussion by exploring the process of participation in strategy formulation. A short first section identifies the initial trigger covered within the unit of analysis. Following this, a more extensive section relates the process of participation to the theory of sensemaking. The process is visually conceptualised as a framework of participation in strategy. This framework is partially represented in this first section but completed in the concluding section of this chapter. This section addresses the question: How is participation used as part of a strategising process?

Initial trigger of Board level change

Strategising and sensemaking are ongoing processes within an organisation (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). However, when studying a defined period in time, it is possible to identify initial triggers to processes. The unit of analysis in this study (the strategising activity related to the development of Charity Ltd.'s 2019-2022 strategy) meant it was possible to identify the initial trigger as Board level change. This change commenced with the new Chair of the Board's appointment two years before the formal strategising activities took place. The introduction of a new chairman and new trustees triggered a realignment in strategy as new individuals identified a dissonance between the existing strategy and desired organisational direction. This realignment, in turn, had implications for structure. Broad parameters of strategy were needed to identify the required organisational structure. The Board used the new CEO's recruitment as a strategising tool to signal strategic intent to stakeholders. These findings are consistent with the idea that describes strategy and structure as "co-evolving" (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun, 2019). Co-evolving strategy and structure requires planned and emergent views of strategy to co-exist, balanced by strategists, addressed in research through concepts of transcendent and immanent views of strategy (Dameron and Torset, 2014). While research supports the idea that board-level change is likely to trigger strategising, the results of this study suggest that new boards are more inclined to use participation in subsequent strategising activities.

The senior-level organisational restructuring provided the opportunity and authority to consider strategic issues. However, the newness of individuals in roles potentially reduced their legitimacy in doing so. Adopting participation approaches to strategising can mitigate the reduction in legitimacy and therefore

make strategising activities more effective. For strategising to be effective, individuals must have serious intent (opportunity) and the authority and legitimacy to be speaking about strategy (Gond *et al.*, 2016). Studies have identified the inherent tension between Boards and their CEOs/Executives in terms of the ownership of the strategising process (Nadler, 2004). To “own” the strategy, new Trustees (including the Chair) needed to possess experience, expertise and a willingness to listen. While Trustees came into the role with the first two, it was the participation that allowed them to listen and therefore gain legitimacy to make strategic choices. Through this, new starters challenged or resisted traditional hegemony through participation practices (Mantere and Vaara, 2008) and facilitated strategic renewal. The ability to gain legitimacy and challenge the traditional hegemony is why restructuring at the board level is likely to trigger participation in strategy formulation.

Participation as sensemaking

Participation is an action that generates understanding, which produces reactions that change and develop that understanding. This process occurs over time. The evidence from this case illustrates how participation in strategy-making informs and re-informs personal views of strategy. The Director of Strategy illustrates this best in the quote at the start of this chapter. The Director of Strategy, who (in conjunction with the CEO) was the principal author of the final strategy document, clearly articulates how the only possible source of the contents was the participants’ strategising activities. Tangible evidence of a social process is often challenging to find. However, there was a striking illustration in the case with the initial production and subsequent evolution of the organisational vision and mission statements. The early strategising activities led to the development of an interim set of statements. However, by the time the final document was published,

these statements had been entirely replaced. While the language was similar, the statements had evolved. Neither the CEO nor Director of Strategy referred to the interim statements as “interim”. Early interviews signalled an intention to include the statements in the final strategy. However, later interviews revealed the evolution came about due to their interactions with individuals and groups during the process that led them to conclude that the interim statements needed to change. In line with (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005)’s response above, the revised strategy had been “talked into existence” by participants.

The example above illustrates how individual understanding of strategy developed in two senior leaders. However, the same process was evident across different levels in other individuals. Interviews with middle managers show how their understanding evolved through engagement with strategising activities. Observation data revealed how individuals from the frontline, middle and senior management changed their understanding within strategising episodes. Each individual’s understanding of strategy would be different; However, the impact of strategising as a social process means that, over time, these different meanings would begin to converge, and a collective understanding would emerge. These results illustrate how participation allows for creating the meaning of a complex and ambiguous idea – which aligns with the very definition of sensemaking (Colville, Pye and Brown, 2016). Participation creates meaning “*in and through the exchange of language”* (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015) and addresses a lack of shared knowledge among participants, creating common imagery and common ground. In short, sensemaking is both an individual and collective process.

Sensemaking occurs within and (significantly) *around* formal strategising episodes and activities through informal and casual interactions (Maitlis, 2005). Therefore, social processes are not fixed to single strategising episodes or stages. People complete multiple instances of a sensemaking cycle within or around a single interaction or episode. For example, whilst individuals made sense of strategy during the formal strategising episodes, interviewees also understood strategy during informal gatherings, casual communications, and interactions prompted by (but not necessarily an official part of) the strategising programme. Therefore, the sensemaking process underpins all activities and is not fixed to any single point.

The integrated way participants described what they took from various activities suggests that sensemaking is more complex than a single linear individual process. Multiple individuals sensemaking simultaneously, but not necessarily in the same way, impact and influence each other; Sense as being made and given simultaneously, where every human attempt at framing is itself already "enframed" (Introna, 2019). For example, frontline personnel, middle managers, and senior leadership all attending the same strategy workshop were sensemaking simultaneously. The formal activities designed to facilitate participation concentrate this into bounded moments of time and space, but it is essential to recognise that not everyone in these spaces will be at the same sensemaking stage. For instance, senior leaders operating in a strategising space from the beginning of the process were further along their sensemaking journey than someone attending the workshop and thinking about strategy for the first time. Equally, a senior or middle manager "sensegiving" to another individual by explaining their interpretation of the emerging strategy narrative was simultaneously still evolving their understanding of strategy as they interacted

with different individuals during the process. Therefore, spaces of participation comprise multiple actors, moving through iterative stages of sensemaking in parallel – but not necessarily at the same pace. This argument reflects sensemaking and sensegiving from within and across different levels of the organisation (Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Mantere, Schildt and Sillince, 2012). This thesis, therefore, presents sensemaking within participation as an individual, iterative process.

Comparing the sequence of events with observations of episodes and comments from senior and middle managers provides an insight into the intertwined nature of process and practice when it comes to strategy work; The results illustrate multiple bundles of practices enacted over time and further supports the view of emerging SAP research which argues that the process and practice of strategy cannot be separated (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018; Kouamé and Langley, 2018; MacKay, Chia and Nair, 2020). However, when viewed holistically, these findings begin to diverge from previous studies by seeing an iterative, rather than linear, process (such as Burgelman *et al.*, 2018). This study suggests that the formation of the strategy proceeds through an increasingly wider cycle of participation and aligns with a sensemaking perspective, illustrating that views can change over time but are re-informed by the interaction with others (Maitlis, 2005). The result is an oscillation between individual and collective sensemaking, mediated through episodes, which provide an opportunity for participants to explore issues together in a protected space. The episodes, and the sociomaterial contents of them, act as boundary objects (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Nair and Tandon, 2015), facilitating the sharing of strategic meaning across different individuals, groups and levels within the organisation.

Sensemaking is ultimately an individual process but one that occurs in a social context. Therefore, during participation activities, multiple individuals are constantly sensemaking in parallel. So, while the process is an individual one, multiple parallel processes will be co-occurring within the organisation during strategising activities. This concept is consistent with existing SAP research that identifies how participation facilitates the alignment of individual meaning and collective understanding (Laine and Vaara, 2015). However, by exploring participation through a sensemaking lens, it is possible to explain that this occurs through the iterative process where individual meaning creates action, which is informed and re-informed by the consequences of those actions with others. When multiple actors undertake this process, over time, these individuals' meanings begin to align.

The process consists of a three-stage iterative cycle of formulation, exploration, and confirmation. Beginning with the Chair of the Board, individuals involved in the strategising process went through formulation, exploration, and confirmation stages. First, people formed views of strategy using pre-existing knowledge of the organisation or prior experience. They then explored their views through discursive and socio-material practices to develop into a coherent and mutually understood message. Finally, they confirmed meaning through affirmation or disaffirmation practices against a wider audience. Individuals could compare their meaning to the collective understanding and then choose to adapt and adjust their actions accordingly. The results illustrate the evolutionary change of cognitive frames and their enactment through recursive interaction between actions and interpretations (Weick, 1988).

As a continuous process not restricted to participation activities, individuals in the organisation (and new to it) would inevitably draw on prior experience and knowledge informing their views, a process already explored by (Kaplan, 2008). However, using language as an enabler of social interaction, participants explored meaning through the strategising episodes in a way similarly identified by Mantere (2015). Conversations facilitated creating a shared institutional vocabulary, in line with Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara (2018). However, this thesis highlights how these meanings can be temporary and evolve in an ongoing continuous process, which introduces arguments put forward by Cornelissen and Schildt (2015) in seeing sensemaking as an on-going and continuous process happening all the time.

Finally, the three-stage process incorporates participants looking for reassurance of travel direction and ensuring there is coherence in terms of messaging. This process can give legitimacy to strategic choices, a vital requirement identified by Rouleau (2005). The three stages of formulation, exploration and confirmation align with sensemaking's theoretical foundations and further demonstrate the close alignment between participation and sensemaking.

By looking at how sensemaking occurs both in and around a series of different strategising activities, rather than focusing on a single episode, this thesis addresses the need raised by Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) to explore how sensemaking shifts over time. This case forwards the argument for participation as a sensemaking process. The process involving information seeking, meaning ascription, and action, showed how managers could cope with ambiguity and uncertainty, reflecting findings by Rouleau (2005). Building on the significant studies that explore sensemaking more generally in management practice

(Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015), this study identifies that participation directly facilitates sensemaking, both within and between strategising activities. Not only does participation help generate shared meaning between different actor groups through a process of sensegiving (Maitlis, 2005; Mantere, Schildt and Sillince, 2012), but it also allows individuals to evolve their understanding of strategic concepts and test them against the understanding of others. This argument has implications for practitioners wanting to use participation to enhance sensemaking and sensegiving during strategising and improves the theoretical understanding of how sensemaking works within the organisation. By applying the logic of sensemaking to the iterative nature of strategising, the process can be visualised according to the framework presented in figure 5.1.

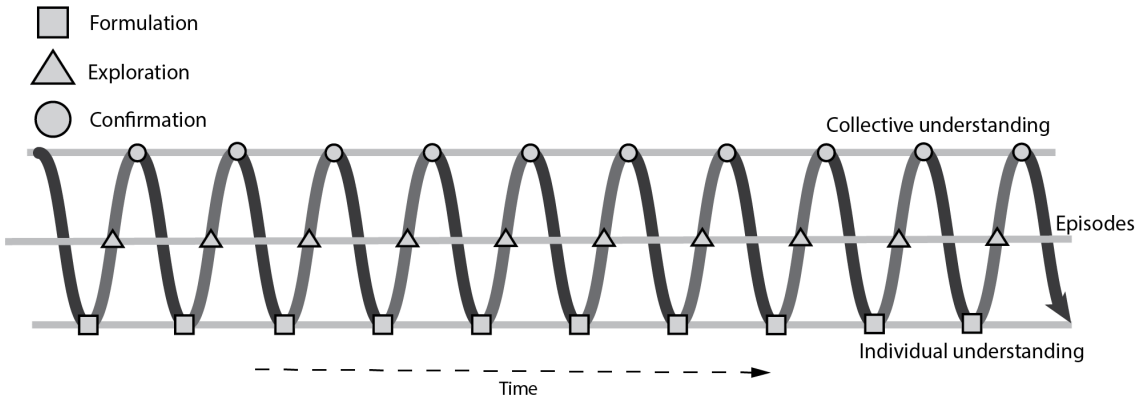


Figure 5.1: Iterative model of participation strategy development

The framework illustrates how strategising episodes mediate individual understanding and collective understanding. However, it also presents the process as a continuous, iterative one. This process means that individuals pass through sensemaking cycles at their own pace, possibly multiple times in a single episode. An individual sensemaking journey takes place in parallel with others, each going through their journey and interacting to evolve the collective view. The arguments presented here demonstrate the alignment between the process of

participation and sensemaking. Participation is more than just an interpretation of the organisation and its strategy. Instead, this study presents participation as a sensemaking process; that participation is sensemaking.

7.1.3 Summary

- Participation is a sensemaking process that allows individuals to develop meaning about strategy, shaping future action.

- Board level change triggers participation because the new members of the Board need to listen to the organisation to gain the legitimacy to make strategic decisions.

- Sensemaking in participation is an iterative, three-stage recurring cycle of formulation, exploration and confirmation. Individuals pass sequentially in the production of meaning, but multiple individuals proceed through the process in parallel at different times.

- The parallel process means that participation activities support multiple stages and multiple iterations of the sensemaking cycle, allowing individuals to inform and re-inform meaning.

5.2 Enablers and constraints to participation in strategy formulation

This research has identified three enablers and three constraints to participation in strategy formulation. While existing literature has identified that enablers and constraints form a part of the strategising process (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018) and have identified enablers and constraints about other related areas such as

sensemaking in general (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) and specific actor groups (Mantere, 2005), there has yet to be the identification of enablers and constraints to participation in strategy formulation. This section considers these and asks: What factors influence participation in strategy formulation, and how do they enable or constrain strategising? In doing so, this section discusses the relationship between the factors identified in the results.

Appropriate timing and Board direction and existing strategy

Appropriate timing requires that the organisational context is ready, willing and able to adopt a participatory approach to strategy making. Appropriate timing, therefore, includes the organisational predisposition first identified by Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel (1998) and includes organisational environmental factors such as an external force mandating a particular strategy or approach to strategising (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun, 2019). In this case, following a period of significant organisational change some years before, a relatively new Board (including a new Chairman) identified a disconnect between the current strategic direction of the organisation and the mood of their internal stakeholders. Deciding a participatory approach was appropriate in the circumstances was essential in ensuring the process took place as it did (and is reflected in the constraint of Board direction). However, it was as important that it was the right decision in the circumstances. Balogun and Hailey (2008) identify that a participation approach to managing change is appropriate when the change recipients are both ready to receive and capable of coping with the change. The Chair of the Board's assessment expressed during interviews and statements made by middle managers and the situation created by senior management restructure all support the idea that participation was an appropriate course of action within the case study.

Appropriate timing, as an enabler to participation, seems at first to be stating the obvious. It stands to reason that a participatory approach would need to be the appropriate course of action sanctioned by the Board. However, there are many complex and interrelated factors working together, such as external environmental factors and internal power or politics impacting Board decisions, which means that previous research does not explicitly identify timing as an enabler. The challenge is that SAP research inevitably focuses on individuals' actions and often excludes the role of external factors. The concepts of organisational predisposition put forward by Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel (1998) and subjectivities discussed by Mantere and Vaara (2008) each deal with a similar idea. However, these studies deconstruct the concept to lose the simplicity of the logic that a particular approach is a right and appropriate thing to do. Including appropriate timing as an enabler to participation acknowledges that, in certain circumstances, there are right and wrong decisions that would impact the success or failure of specific initiatives. However, for this to be a helpful finding within SAP research, it must link to actions within the organisation, which (in this case) is the constraint of Board direction and existing strategy.

The direction given by the Board to senior leaders must support using participation in strategy formulation because direction can influence the extent or nature of the participation used. A supportive organisational culture and leadership have long been identified as necessary for change in general (Pettigrew, Ferlie and McKee, 1992). However, this research extends this by relating specifically to participation in strategy formulation. Whether boards give direction for participation in strategy formulation is influenced by the existence and fit-for-purpose nature of any existing strategy. Therefore, this thesis identifies board direction and existing strategy as a constraint to participation in developing

new or successor strategies. When senior leadership perceives a strategy as appropriate and fit for purpose, this perception reduces the likelihood that participation will be adopted. Where leaders perceive dissonance between existing strategy and the organisation, participation is more likely to be adopted in new strategy formulation. Some types of strategy also lend themselves to being developed and implemented using a participation approach. There was a clear expression in interviews around an absence of a clear strategic direction from senior and middle management levels. While document analysis revealed that a strategy officially existed, senior and middle managers dismissed it as more business plan than strategy. The Board identified this feeling, and led by the Chairman, gave clear direction for strategising activities using participation as a theme.

The constraint of board direction and existing strategy is closely related to the enabler of appropriate timing. These two factors can cancel out the impact of each other if they do not align. Boards have the power to veto particular approaches to strategising. As such, boards that do not believe in the value of participation are unlikely to view it as the appropriate course of action in any circumstances. Likewise, boards that already agree with the existing strategy are unlikely to take the chance of inviting a differing, conflicting view and therefore may not wish to adopt a participatory approach.

Conversely, boards who implement a participation approach to strategy when it would not be appropriate, such as during a crisis (Balogun and Hailey, 2008), would likely see the initiative fail. While this relates to the organisational predisposition explored by Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel (1998), the evidence from this case develops this further by arguing that this alone is not sufficient.

What appears from the data is that the enabler of appropriate timing and the constraint of Board direction and existing strategy interact with each other in a complex relationship that requires both to align in order for participation in strategy to be effective. Therefore, these factors **require alignment**.

Leadership competence and stakeholder and process legitimacy

For participation to be adopted and promoted, there needs to be an environment that enables it. The environment is created by the individual leadership capabilities at the executive level, permitting participation approaches. *Leadership competence* is a concept that incorporates many related concepts. It refers to how well organisational leaders facilitate and manage participation in strategy. This concept includes a leader's individual subjectivity towards participation (Dameron and Torset, 2014; Laine and Vaara, 2015) and the discursive competence of individuals undertaking strategising activities (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Whittle *et al.*, 2016). Closely related to discursive competence are the individual leader sensegiving capabilities, which also form a part of leadership competence. These capabilities are similar to the enablers to sensegiving in general (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). However, while these studies break down leadership into constituent parts, the study participants identified leadership as necessary in a more holistic way. While explicitly addressed by the Director of Strategy, the theme of leadership emerged during observations and raised by many senior and middle management participants. Therefore, this thesis proposes leadership competence as an enabler that incorporates a range of related ideas found in other studies.

In enabling participation in the case, leadership competence incorporated the ability to deploy various practices effectively. However, it also comprised other

factors, such as discursive competence, which influenced the deployment of practices. For instance, the CEO used storytelling and narrative to express emotions, values, and meanings (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013; Mitchell and Clark, 2021), which is also explored later as a practice of participation. What is critical to note here is that the ability to use these practices was essential in enabling them to be used effectively. Emotional dynamics are crucial to strategising in several papers (Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Netz, Svensson and Brundin, 2020). Upbringing, education and prior professional experience all foster a preference or aversion to some practices over others, including the use of participation in strategy (Pratap and Saha, 2018). These reflect a range of factors that, collectively, could be incorporated into the leadership competence concept. As such, this thesis puts forward a more holistic concept that better reflects the respondents' view in this study.

Discursive ability was a vital leadership characteristic that, along with organisational predisposition, facilitated leader sensegiving capability. These characteristics needed to be consistently present across the senior team to create the right conditions for participation. Many of these would align with what Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) refer to as discursive competence, reflecting leader abilities in interactions with others and the legitimation concept put forward by Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara (2018). As a part of leadership competence, discursive competence is used to produce alignment of meaning during the participation process and contributes to the identification of strategists (Mantere and Whittington, 2020). While it is the actions of individuals that form organisations, people often view the organisation as a single entity. Mantere (2013) argue the need for linguistic "family resemblances" between groups within the organisation and the organisation as a whole. The requirement for board-level

support for participation has already been identified as a constraint. However, more generally, there needs to be leadership across multiple levels (and particularly among those facilitating strategising sessions) that is amenable to participation. The idea of “organisational predisposition” and has already been linked to enabling participation in strategy through characteristics such as rule orientation and the tallness of the organisational structure (Ashmos, Duchon and McDaniel, 1998), as well as strong organisational performance enabling leaders to spend more time on strategising processes (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). However, when participants talked about leadership during interviews, it directly related to the actions of individuals or groups (such as the Board showing leadership). The juxtaposition of research conceptualising phenomena at the organisational level against data linking the actions of individuals or groups becomes challenging to reconcile. By viewing this as part of leadership competence, it becomes easier to understand as the actions of individuals rather than the more abstract organisation.

In short, the leader of a participation strategising process must be articulate, believe in the value of participation, and be perceived by subordinates as legitimate. These leader attributes enable participation to take place. However, leadership competence also directly impacts other factors, highlighting that it cannot be looked at in isolation. Specifically, leadership competence was a key generator of stakeholder and process legitimacy, as subordinates at both frontline and middle management level had more faith in leaders they perceived as competent and the processes they developed. Therefore, the enabler of leadership competence is directly related to stakeholder and process legitimacy. Stakeholder and process legitimacy refers to the perception of legitimacy conferred by participants onto both those running activities and the overall

process. Legitimacy is an essential concept to strategising and open strategy in general (Hautz, Seidl and Whittington, 2017), strategy workshops (Johnson *et al.*, 2010) and sensemaking (Brown, Colville and Pye, 2015). The findings add to this by identifying the importance of legitimacy during participation and further this by specifying perceived legitimacy in both the individuals participating (stakeholders) and the employed process (process). Furthermore, this thesis found that legitimacy in facilitating participation activities is created, in part, through leadership competence. Therefore, these factors work together to enhance one another.

To enable participation in strategy to occur, those people designing the process must value the input of the individuals invited to participate. Across interviews, observations and documents, the central importance of both volunteers and employees was made clear. The Trustees already identified that they felt they had lost the goodwill of volunteers and wanted to win this back. All senior and middle managers identified that they valued the input from the people within the organisation. Without this view, it is unlikely that the process would have been designed to facilitate participation. Even if it had, if the output from such activities was not valued, senior leaders not likely take the activities seriously. This argument further supports Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), who identify the legitimacy of stakeholders engaging in sensemaking activities as an essential enabler. Therefore, this thesis also identifies stakeholder legitimacy as an enabler to participation in strategy work.

Senior leaders identified the need for legitimacy during interviews as well as in other data. In many respects, the ability to live up to the responsibility conferred on a senior position was seen, particularly by middle managers, as an essential

facet of leadership. It stands to reason, therefore, that these factors would be closely related. However, it further emphasises the importance of considering enablers and constraints as connected and influencing each other. Leadership competence enhances legitimacy, while simultaneously, legitimacy contributes towards leadership competence. Therefore, these factors are identified as being **reinforcing**.

Available time and resources and organisational restructuring

All strategising activities require time and resources. Participation, not being essential to producing a strategy, requires a conscious choice to expend time and resources on such activities. Prior research has already identified that a participatory leadership style is more difficult when there is a lack of time available for strategising activities (for instance, crises) (Balogun and Hailey, 2008; Netz, Svensson and Brundin, 2020). The constraint of available time and resources was identified most strongly by both the CEO and Director of Strategy and had a clear impact on the design of the strategising activities. They intended to engage as many people as possible, but only within a reasonable amount of time (which was also driven by the date of the Annual General Meeting) and without expending limited resources. While this is entirely logical, the relationship with other factors makes things somewhat more complicated, and as such, furthers the argument that enablers and constraints cannot be considered in isolation.

Restructuring takes time, which creates a paradox where participation is enabled by increased time and resources while simultaneously constrained by requiring more time for a change in structure to place. Other strategy research has found time as simultaneously enabling and constraining strategy in a temporal paradox (Myllykoski and Rantakari, 2018). The beginning of this chapter identified that

strategising has a co-dependent relationship with structure, triggering a restructuring of the organisation. Time allows for the recruitment of individuals with aligning views which can be a part of the strategising process. The timeline developed in the case illustrates a period at the beginning of 2019 where strategising activity appeared to stop, while significant restructuring took place. While identifying organisational restructuring as a constraint to participation has not been explicitly explored in previous research, several studies have indirectly explained why restructuring occurs.

Researchers have identified that organisations need to have sufficient reflexive capabilities to integrate the feedback into organisational structures (Hautz, Seidl and Whittington, 2017), which explains the sequence of actions in the timeline. To develop these capabilities, new CEO's are more likely to develop collaborators drawn from outside the top management team and subsequently reform new senior management networks (Ma and Seidl, 2018; Lynch and Mors, 2019). Document analysis suggested that recruited individuals would align with the emerging strategic narrative, also supported by data from the CEO and Chair of the Board. It was very much the case that, as the strategic intent began to take shape, the structure of the organisation deliberately evolved to better align with the emerging strategic narrative.

The CEO and Director of Strategy emphasised the impact of time on the extent to which participation was made possible. This impact extends existing knowledge that explores the effects of time on strategising, which research shows to significantly impact decision making and strategic change (Crilly, 2017; Kunisch *et al.*, 2017; Netz, Svensson and Brundin, 2020). Time creates tension between different organisational actors, particularly in terms of time pressures

leading to decreased levels of innovation (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013). However, these findings identify a tension between time and participation in strategy, where increased participation needs more time, especially when restructuring has taken place. However, organisational restructuring constrained participation by taking away time and resources that could have been spent on participation. Also, newly recruited or restructured individuals needed to go through their sensemaking process to understand the existing or emerging strategy. When this extends to senior leaders, they also need to participate in strategising activities, which could cause further delay. Where formal activities have taken place, some participation activities would occur specifically to enable the sensemaking of new individuals. In this case, the new COO developed a series of engagement events to understand the organisation and the strategy/operations relationship. This thesis supports more general research that identifies a co-evolving relationship between strategy and structure (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun, 2019) but extends this specifically to a participation approach. Specifically, this study finds that available time and organisational restructuring are factors **in tension**.

The three examples above illustrate the vital role that enablers and constraints play in participation in strategy formulation and the importance of considering the relationship between them. While prior research has explored enablers and constraints with sensegiving (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) and championing activities of strategy (Mantere, 2005), these studies neglect how enablers and constraints interact with each other, creating a much more interrelated web of activities and behaviours. Triangulating different sources of data in this study has allowed for a more complex picture to emerge. Three types of relationships have been identified: factors that require alignment, self-reinforcing, and factors that are in tension. While not necessarily an exclusive list of factors or relationships,

this extends our understanding of the nature of enablers and constraints concerning strategising and identifies how enablers and constraints affect participation in strategy formulation.

5.2.1 Summary

- Appropriate timing, leadership competence, and available time and resources are enablers to participation in strategy formulation.

- Board direction and existing strategy, stakeholder and process legitimacy, and organisational restructure are constraints to participation in strategy formulation.

- Enablers and constraints cannot be viewed in isolation. Three types of relationship are alignment, reinforcement and tension.

- Appropriate timing and Board direction, and existing strategy require alignment. Leadership competence and stakeholder and process legitimacy are self-reinforcing. Available time and resources and organisational restructuring are in tension.

5.3 The practices of participation

The study revealed five practices that practitioners used to facilitate participation in strategy formulation. These practices are both discursive and sociomaterial because the complex relationship between them makes it difficult to separate bodily, material and discursive elements of strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015; Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous, 2018). Discourse provides one of the fundamental concepts that underpin strategy work and a means by which social reality and identity are constructed and reproduced (Mantere and Vaara,

2008; Mantere and Whittington, 2020). The data analysis showed that talk, text and physical artefacts used in strategising informed the meaning participants apply to different concepts, and this meaning determines likely engagement with the resulting strategy.

Importantly, this thesis considers episodes both individually and holistically as they have performative features that relate, inform, and influence each other. The following discussion considers how information is selected and participants' views are interpreted and privileged by facilitators, including the role of power in influencing sessions. Much like how PowerPoint is a technology that mediates strategy discourse (Kaplan, 2011), this study finds that both traditional communication platforms such as email and company memos, as well as new mediums such as social media, can be used to facilitate strategic conversations. They achieve this by providing complex information in a more easily digestible form and developing the shared meaning of strategic concepts. Bringing these practices together addresses the question: What practices facilitate participation in strategy formulation?

1. Creating the right space for participation

Participation in strategy can take place anywhere. However, the principal places where participation happens are formal strategising episodes. This research found examples of participation in many different informal settings such as sidebar conversations, non-strategic meetings, emails, social gatherings and social media. While some of these may not be explicitly strategic, that does not stop them from having strategic uses (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). Within the formal episodes, facilitators were able to deliberately design the session and space to maximise the effects of participation. Also, the formal strategising

episodes were more significant than informal interactions as the episodes would often act as the trigger to informal conversations, enabling the production of strategic talk and text (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011).

Creating a suitable space for the exercise facilitates the work (Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015). Practices that manipulate the physical environment can create the right space for participation to occur. This practice manifested itself in four ways:

1. Through manipulating the physical environment.

2. Discursively guiding proceedings, facilitators would de-couple the strategising space from the routine organisational setting.

3. Facilitators would draw on physical environmental cues and adapt their discourse to contextualise the activity to the audience.

4. Through discursively linking different activities together, facilitators would encourage a holistic view of strategising episodes.

This study furthers existing research on the importance of strategy workshops as being de-coupled from the routine work of the organisation. Doing so facilitates the proper physical and social environment that allows for the exploration of strategic issues. Some research argues that, while workshops can be beneficial for creating new ideas, these seldom transfer back into the organisational structure due to the structural de-coupling role that strategic episodes play (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). However, this case's participative approach meant the design of the workshops was such that information was captured and fed into the

development of the resulting strategy. Also, as identified above, the content of the de-coupled spaces was found to influence interactions within the routine organisational space. Therefore, this thesis argues for a more fluid relationship between strategising and routine workspaces.

Despite a more fluid relationship, it was still crucial for workshop spaces to be de-coupled from the familiar environment. Manipulation of the physical environment enhanced de-coupling. Meetings allowed for the suspension of the ordinary structures and routines, allowing participants to communicate in new ways and give a platform for reflexive strategic discourse. Creating a space that enables exploration of strategy and the generation of new ideas requires that workshops must be ritualised, specialists and liturgy perceived as legitimate, and figures of authority must signal the suspension of structural roles (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). The case's sub-set of practices that manipulate the discursive and sociomaterial environment are vital in furthering these requirements. Therefore, in addition to linking these requirements to workshops in general, this thesis argues they are equally crucial in facilitating participation specifically.

Existing research has already identified local context as important in determining the practices used as part of strategising and the availability of artefacts for use (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013). This thesis further argues that contextualising content to the local environment is vital in facilitating strategy formulation. It does this in similar ways found elsewhere by creating a more stable strategic discourse (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak, 2014). Doing so allowed facilitators to establish a more secure relationship with attendees and translated strategic discourse into a more accessible language to non-strategic participants.

2. Developing multiple narratives

While strategising is taking place, the narrative of the resulting strategy is yet to emerge. That does not mean, however, that no other strategic narratives are contributing to the process. Narratives are an essential component of strategy (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016) and critical to sensemaking in organisations (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Considering strategising through a narrative lens recognises the complexity of strategy requires multiple narratives to co-exist. The polyphony of strategic discourse was represented in the case through three separate but parallel narratives: the narrative of participation, using personal narratives to achieve authenticity, and developing a narrative of consensus. Each of these was used during the strategising process to underpin the eventual strategic narrative that emerged.

Narrative of participation

It was not practical for every single person in the organisation to be involved in strategy work. A narrative of participation maximised the impact of the activities that occurred. This narrative was necessary for communicating the intent of senior leaders to engage as widely as possible, which is effective elsewhere (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013). Given that, in terms of the representative nature of the participation, more people were not directly involved than were, this study argues that the narrative of participation is more influential on engendering support for the new strategy than the participation itself. However, a narrative of participation cannot develop without having the activities. Therefore, participation activities are a pre-requisite to developing the narrative.

The extent to which the participation activities influenced the resulting strategy (while essential and explored elsewhere) is largely irrelevant to the narrative, so

long as the perception of influence is present. Senior leaders achieved this by referring to the outputs of the participation activities in strategy text communicated to a broader audience. By directly linking the strategic text produced in documents during and after the strategising process to the content of the workshops, managers were better able to develop shared support for the strategy, even if the opportunity for agency and control was more illusionary than real (Arnaud *et al.*, 2016).

The narrative of participation has a performative effect on participation activities. Many activities took place because they were talked into existence. Ideas that had been spoken would be delivered to demonstrate a clear intent to provide opportunities to participate, even if the value of the activity was limited. Existing literature explores the performative nature of discourse in organisations generally (Gond *et al.*, 2016). This study found that this extends to participation. A narrative of participation helped facilitate participation activities and develop a sense of legitimacy in the process. However, once spoken, action must follow. The resulting action made the narrative of participation a performative act because there needed to be tangible evidence that supported the narrative. Therefore, the engagement had to be seen as authentic and legitimate – and the easiest way to do that was for it to be an authentic process.

Using personal narratives to develop authenticity

Introducing a personal narrative was a helpful tool used by facilitators to develop authenticity with participants. It reflects how strategists can use emotion to improve legitimacy and influence strategic discourse (Liu and Maitlis, 2014). Facilitators used a range of stories, usually when introducing themselves, most commonly creating a link between the organisation and their personal

experience. While the stories would vary depending on the individual facilitator, they would have a common theme of an emotional, personal experience that illustrated what the organisation meant to them. This action reflects the interwoven narratives that senior managers construct over time (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). A personal narrative served to set not only personal legitimacy but also share imagery and articulate emotion. Using personal stories allowed facilitators to demonstrate to participants their connection with the organisation and communicate their strategic intentions through emotions, values and meanings in such a way that is more easily understood, particularly by those who may not typically have a strategic mindset (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013).

Stories would interweave with the emerging strategic themes to embed the organisation's narrative and make the strategy more meaningful (Dalpiaz and Di Stefano, 2018). The practice illustrates how storytelling can be used effectively in strategising and further supports existing research in this area (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013; Mantere, 2013). However, this study takes the ideas put forward in these papers in a different direction because it finds leaders use personal narratives to open up the strategy process instead of restricting access. This study shows how leaders used a personal narrative to generate power by establishing facilitators as credible strategists in participants' eyes, which has also been found elsewhere in research (Andersson, 2020). Overall, this emphasises the vital role that personal narrative plays in strategy work.

A narrative of consensus

The final narrative identified was a narrative of consensus. A consensus narrative contributed to coherence in the emerging strategic themes by discursively

cultivating the idea that themes being discussed by participants were shared both within individual strategising sessions but also across different sessions and in different areas (geographically and structurally across different levels). This practice reflected narrative as a multi-faceted structure (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016) and was achieved through affirmation and disaffirmation within the sessions and in organisational communications.

The narrative of consensus did not automatically require there to be an actual consensus – indeed, it would have been almost impossible to demonstrate complete consensus within the organisation. What was key was an impression of consensus to maintain forward momentum in the strategising process and engender buy-in from both participants and non-participants, who subsequently believed that the resulting output represents a majority view (even if it does not represent their personal view). This argument represents a departure from other research that emphasises the importance of consensus (Sorsa and Vaara, 2020), suggesting that only a perception of consensus is required at the formulation stage.

While research has historically tended to be too simplistic by focusing on a single strategic narrative (Brown and Thompson, 2013), this study extends more recent research that finds strategy is made not from a single coherent narrative but multiple co-existing ones (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). The nature of a participation strategising process is that these multiple narratives are vital in substituting and supporting the strategic narrative while forming and emerging from the participation activities.

3. Selection and privileging of information

Senior leaders and workshop facilitators used information selection to privilege discourse that fit with the strategic narrative. This practice allowed leaders and facilitators to influence a strategic discussion or move on to maintain momentum in strategy sessions. Selecting and privileging information exercises power, and as such, the practice is only open to senior leaders and facilitators (Tavella, 2020).

The nature of participation in strategising introduces a complex interwoven set of interpretations and meanings. Strategists used discursive and sociomaterial practices to help navigate and align these while maintaining the engagement of participants. The practices could, if misused, create discord among participants who viewed the activities as superficial or meaningless. However, many different views mean strategists must inevitably silence some and privilege others (Brown and Thompson, 2013, p. 1150). This thesis builds on existing research by showing how facilitators navigated the multiple, incomplete viewpoints introduced by workshop participants. While existing research has already identified that sociomaterial artefacts can highlight certain aspects over others (Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous, 2018), this research demonstrates how leaders used artefacts to close down the discussion and progress a strategising activity.

Individuals who hold power within organisations can direct the prevailing discourse, impacting individual interpretation and meaning (Schildt, Mantere and Cornelissen, 2020; Tavella, 2020), which appears to be further supported by this case. These findings align with the idea of “language games” (Mantere, 2013), which strategists use to wield power. It is impossible to separate power from the discursive elements of strategising (Balogun *et al.*, 2014). Strategists used

discourse through which to exercise power and control the narrative. Doing so through talk and text facilitated the alignment of meaning and reduced the impact of ambiguity. Over time this developed greater consensus within the discourse (Hardy and Thomas, 2014).

Strategy meetings tend to be dominated by senior management (Seidl and Guerard, 2015). However, this case included situations when the senior leaders facilitating workshops made fewer direct contributions than participants. Although senior leaders spoke less, when they did speak, they had everyone's attention. Besides, for many participants, a key motivation to attend was to hear the view of senior leaders. At times this created a paradox, whereby the facilitators were asking for input from participants, while at the same time, the room was looking to the facilitators to tell them what they thought.

The earlier discussion has identified that the legitimacy of those involved is essential. While the legitimacy of new leaders was uncertain, the legitimacy of the participants was never in question. The nature of the workshops (and associated activities) meant the invitation to participate legitimised participant involvement. They were, in essence, provided with legitimacy by the decision of the CEO and DS to adopt a participation approach (Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Erkama and Vaara, 2010). Legitimacy was questioned in some of the facilitators, particularly where they did not have ownership of the process. As such, the participants questioned the legitimacy, which impacted the quality of the participation (Laine and Vaara, 2007; Glozer, Caruana and Hibbert, 2019).

4. Ambiguity

The skilful use of language in the workshops allowed facilitators to direct the discussions and capture themes that could later be reflected in the strategy's text. The narrative work is re-created and reworked in its reception, interpretation, and corresponding interaction and transformation (Küpers, Mantere and Statler, 2013). Often in the complexity of strategy making, there are multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations – or equivocality (Brown and Thompson, 2013). However, this can be an advantage, as it allows multiple interpretations to co-exist, and the same text can resonate with many different people in unified diversity (Abdallah and Langley, 2014; Balogun *et al.*, 2014). This case has identified the importance of ambiguity as a practice of participation in strategy formulation.

Ambiguity was a powerful tool in engendering buy-in and support from those involved in the strategy process. Ambiguity allowed shifts in goals while preserving a sense of continuity, which helped communications maintain consistency and "avoid loss of face when circumstances change" (Abdallah and Langley, 2014, p. 3). The same research also warns of the risk that can occur in implementing strategy when too much ambiguity is present, which leads to a lack of clear direction and multiple different interpretations of the strategic intent. Ambiguity in strategic talk and texts facilitated multiple strategic narratives, which was inevitable when participation drew a diverse range of views. This thesis establishes the importance of ambiguity in allowing the co-existence of multiple narratives (Abdallah and Langley, 2014). Ambiguous talk and text allowed different interpretations of strategy to exist without de-railing or slowing down the process too much. Statements would use ambiguity both within strategising episodes and within the text produced during the process. Ambiguity helped

lubricate the strategising process. However, as identified by (Abdallah and Langley, 2014), this presented a potential problem for implementing the strategy.

Managing contradictions and ambiguity is a significant challenge in organisations. However, used skilfully, it can be an essential mechanism through which an organisation can build individual identification with strategy and ensure broad organisational support (Dameron and Torset, 2014). Leadership deliberately used ambiguity, but it was also found in the interpretation of strategic texts by participants. Adopting this practice allowed the co-existence of multiple interpretations of strategy talk, ensuring participation activities could occur with minimal disruption.

Material representation of strategy in strategy text can mitigate the impact of ambiguity. This practice can fix strategic discourse for a while, allowing for exploration of the strategy through discussion. Existing literature has already identified how materiality can fix strategic discourse (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). However, this study extends this by emphasising the importance of this when employing participation in strategy making. If ambiguity is an essential practice in ensuring the multiple views of participants can co-exist, then using materiality to fix the emerging discourse (even for a temporary period) is a necessary counterbalance. Therefore, these two practices are both needed.

5. Materiality as fixing discourse

The ambiguity created through the strategising process requires a counterbalance to protect against the risk of multiple interpretations causing problems. Leaders achieved this balance using socio-material constructs of strategic text that fixed discourse for a time; a phenomenon that is found beyond

participation (Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). Therefore, using materiality to fix strategic discourse was a critical practice, both individually and with the practice of using ambiguity. Materiality acts as a counterbalance to the risks created by ambiguity in strategy formulation. While this practice exists in other literature, it has never been explicitly linked to ambiguity in this way.

Even established tools can have varying degrees of permanence. The substantive nature of the strategic text is driven by the document in which it is contained (Leonardi, 2015). Interim text and documents were necessary measures in facilitating strategic conversations. When considered as 'boundary objects', they helped share and develop new knowledge among different actor groups (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009). Importantly, they were used to trigger conversations between participants through a process of strategic visibility (Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous, 2018). When a temporary fix is needed, the materiality can also be temporary and make use of physical artefacts to help visualise strategy (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008). In this case, whiteboards captured the output from each discussion.

In addition to triggering conversation, materiality moved the conversation on during strategising episodes and thus maintained momentum within strategising sessions. Workshop facilitators used materiality to influence strategic discussions, which they could do because of the power to select and privilege information. This power was, in part, generated through their use of personal narrative. Therefore, the case highlights how practices cannot be considered in isolation because they are used in combination and practice influence each other. This idea represents an extension of our current understanding regarding the influence of materiality on strategy talk.

Texts became increasingly authoritative and legitimate as the strategising activities progressed, with their content becoming incrementally more fixed, terminology agreed, nuances understood, and agreement of stakeholders assumed (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). This point was most evident in this case with the progression of materiality – from the temporary materiality afforded by the whiteboards and Post-It notes, through to formal documents shared in the form of company memos and emails, and finally, the physical production of a glossy strategy brochure. This progression presents a significant contextual difference that shows how strategy practitioners need to match materiality with the appropriate point in the strategising process. Formally designed content produced too early in the process risks destabilising the participation activities.

5.3.1 Summary

- Five practices facilitated participation in strategy formulation; Creating the right space for participation, developing multiple narratives, selection and privileging of information, ambiguity, and using materiality to fix strategic discourse.

- Practices were used in combination to maximise participation.

- Some practices, such as ambiguity and using materiality to fix strategic discourse, provide a counterbalance to the effects of one another.

5.4 The role of middle management in participation

The role of middle management in strategy formulation has been frequently considered in previous research (Westley, 1990; Ketokivi and Castañer, 2004; Laine and Vaara, 2007; Thomas and Ambrosini, 2015; Surju, de Metz and Davis, 2020). When it comes to participation in strategy, chapter 2 identified that most

research focuses primarily on the involvement of middle managers to the exclusion of other groups (Laine and Vaara, 2015). Much of this research emphasises the importance of middle managers as vital to producing more effective strategies and ensuring more commitment in subordinates (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). Therefore, it is essential to understand where and how participation may negatively impact middle managers. This section explores this and asks: What is the role of middle managers during participation in strategising?

Much of middle managers' work focuses on operational and practical issues (Rouleau, 2005), meaning they are vital in turning strategic intent into operational activity. This position is somewhat unique in organisations, as they are simultaneously expected to autonomously operate a distinct area of the firm while at the same time being subjected to the direction of senior management (Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd, 2008). During the first phase of interviews, middle managers illustrated this most strongly when discussing how the absence of strategic direction created before the commencement of the strategising process did not absolve them of their operational responsibilities. They were required to maintain 'business as usual' while waiting for the strategic direction to emerge from senior leadership.

Middle managers played critical dual sensemaking and sensegiving roles, which reflected their everyday function outside of strategy formulation (Surju, de Metz and Davis, 2020). The local strategising episodes illustrated how middle managers were able to influence strategic discourse through both translating senior management intent to participants while also interpreting the content of the episodes when feeding the information back to the senior team. During

everyday operations, middle managers had to interpret the strategic direction from senior management and translate (or re-interpret) this to their subordinate teams, something commonly associated with the middle manager role (Rouleau, 2005). Middle managers, who were regional leaders responsible for a geographical area equivalent to one-quarter of the country, continued this approach throughout the strategising process and acted as "champions" for the activities led by senior management (Mantere, 2005).

Middle management were required to instigate local activities in “boundary-spanning” roles (Ravasi and Canato, 2013; Sahadev, Purani and Malhotra, 2015). In describing their approach during interviews, Middle Managers demonstrated how they were reliant on their ability to “sense, read and write”, showing sensemaking as multidirectional (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). They would translate strategy language coming from senior management into language that had operational (or contextual) meaning to frontline personnel or explaining the operational implications of strategy talk to senior leaders. This approach required discursive competence – perhaps more so than senior management.

Although middle managers do not have the formal authority to act strategically, they are central in facilitating adaptability and implementing change (Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd, 2015). Therefore, while participation reduces their direct influence, it does not diminish their important sensegiving role. Whilst this might not have been evident in the formal national workshops (where middle managers had no formal role), it is worth noting that middle managers had significantly more access (compared to frontline personnel) to the senior leadership team *around* the formal strategising activities. Non-strategy meetings, one-to-

ones, sidebar conversations, written communications, and the local strategy workshops all provided middle managers opportunities to influence the senior team's view in explaining the operational significance of strategic conversations.

However, to ensure the process aligned with the Board's wishes, senior leadership decided to adopt a centralised participation process. In consultation with the new CEO, it fell to the Director of Strategy to design a series of activities that would provide an opportunity for every person within the organisation to participate should they choose to. This approach was then subsequently approved by the Board. A centralised process helps guide the action of middle managers and help to integrate goals. However, it can be changed where resistance is encountered (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009). The instruction to organize local strategising activities, led by middle managers, illustrates how a centralised process can be adapted to accommodate local, contextualised elements.

The advantage of centralising a process is that it reduces the likelihood of unintended outcomes, which can occur when middle managers are given more autonomy in strategy development (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Multiple change narratives developed by multiple actors cause unintended outcomes, especially when interpreting local action against broader organisational contexts (Balogun, Bartunek and Do, 2015). In this case, a centralised process meant senior leadership were able to control the narrative more tightly. Previous research has found that power can be a subjugating agent to select which discourse takes hold and which do not (Schildt, Mantere and Cornelissen, 2020) and how discourse can increase strategists' power (Andersson, 2020). In this

case, the design of the centralised process secured the position of senior leaders in the process while reducing that of middle managers.

A consequence of senior management controlling the strategy narrative through the imposition of a centrally managed process was that it created a feeling of marginalisation among middle managers. The role of middle management in strategy formulation has been frequently considered in the SAP literature (Ketokivi and Castañer, 2004; Laine and Vaara, 2007; Thomas and Ambrosini, 2015). However, elsewhere in the general management field, participation is a threat to the autonomy of middle managers (Musson and Duberley, 2007). The interviews from middle managers expressing a feeling of being marginalised would support a similar conclusion within the specific context of participation in strategy formulation. By centrally designing a process explicitly intended to involve a wide range of people, senior leaders reduced the influence that middle managers had on the strategic narrative.

While not explicitly intended to reduce the role of middle management, the ‘democratisation’ of voices had the impact of reducing the weight of the input of middle management. Floyd and Lane (2000) identify how this can result in role conflict within middle managers, and as such, requires them to make an active choice to engage in the process. This point was certainly the case within this study. Despite feeling marginalised, it was clear both during interviews and observations that middle managers made a conscious choice to engage in strategising activities positively. What was particularly striking is that this engagement was when the same middle managers would become at risk of redundancy due to the cascading restructure discussed elsewhere. During interviews, all four middle managers explicitly expressed support for

the *principle* of participation. It seemed that feeling marginalised was a price they were prepared to pay in the process of engineering a better-quality strategy that took on board the views of frontline personnel.

t is difficult to definitively identify the extent of the impact of marginalisation, not least because of the number of other variables (such as restructure) also impacting middle managers during the period of research. However, of the middle managers interviewed, two left the organisation during the research period, and two were re-assigned into other roles of equal or higher seniority. The feeling of being marginalised, combined with uncertainty around restructuring, led to a feeling of diminished responsibility. There is a risk that middle managers, with all their knowledge and understanding, will be lost shortly before the crucial period of strategy implementation when they are needed most.

The process of participation led middle managers to feel marginalised, even though they retained a critical and integral role (Surju, de Metz and Davis, 2020). The feeling comes from a lessened sense of autonomy in driving the strategising process (Mantere, 2008). The result is a process that is better controlled by senior leadership and provides them with a greater level of legitimacy in participants' eyes. In light of the minimal impact that feeling marginalised had on middle management engagement in the process, this would seem to have been the right decision to make. However, it is worth noting that the implementation of the resulting strategy was outside the scope of this study. Given the weight of research that identifies the central role of middle managers during strategy implementation, it is not to say that marginalising middle managers at this point will not create problems at a later point not covered during the period of data

collection. Therefore, it is crucial to consider middle management marginalisation as an essential factor during participation in strategy formulation.

Local strategising activities led by middle managers can mitigate the feeling of being marginalised. The local workshops that middle managers led provided them with a significant opportunity to be seen by frontline personnel playing an important strategic role and influencing the senior leadership team. This action had the impact of reducing or limiting the feeling of marginalisation. Limiting middle managers' marginalisation is vital because they still have a significant (and unique) role in strategising. Besides, even if not directly participating, middle managers play an essential role in encouraging (or discouraging) frontline personnel to become participants. Other studies have explored the potentially negative impact that resistance can play in strategising (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009; Mantere, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015). There was no evidence found in any of the data that suggested that middle managers tried to block or undermine the strategising activities of senior leadership, and the extent of their attitude to participation would support the conclusion that this was not the case.

Therefore, this thesis argues that participation in strategy formulation creates a marginalisation in middle managers, especially when the process is centrally mandated by senior leadership and designed to gather the views across all levels within the organisation. While marginalising middle managers does not harm the quality of participation during formulation, it could negatively impact the implementation of the resulting strategy. The impact of marginalisation can be mitigating through the development of local strategising activities that middle managers lead. Where this takes place and where middle managers are

committed to the principle of participation, they will still engage in the process, even if the feeling of marginalisation remains.

5.4.1 Summary

- Middle managers play a meaningful "boundary spanning" role during and after participation in strategy formulation, translating strategic talk into operational activity.

- Participation in strategy creates middle management marginalisation, a consequence of senior management controlling the strategy narrative through the imposition of a centrally managed process.

- Feeling marginalised does not diminish the critical sensemaking and sensegiving role that middle managers play in strategy, especially in later stages when formulation becomes implemented. Local strategising activities led by middle managers can mitigate middle management marginalisation.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the process of participation by first identifying that participation strategising activities are triggered by Board level restructure. It has put forward the argument that participation is a sensemaking process, formed of an iterative cycle of formulation, exploration, and confirmation. Following this, enablers and constraints were identified and discussed. Notably, the relationship between them revealed that enablers and constraints could require alignment, be self-reinforcing, or in tension. The relationships between enablers and constraints create a complex, interwoven environment in which participation takes place.

Finally, five specific practices were deployed by senior and middle managers in facilitating participation in strategy formulation.

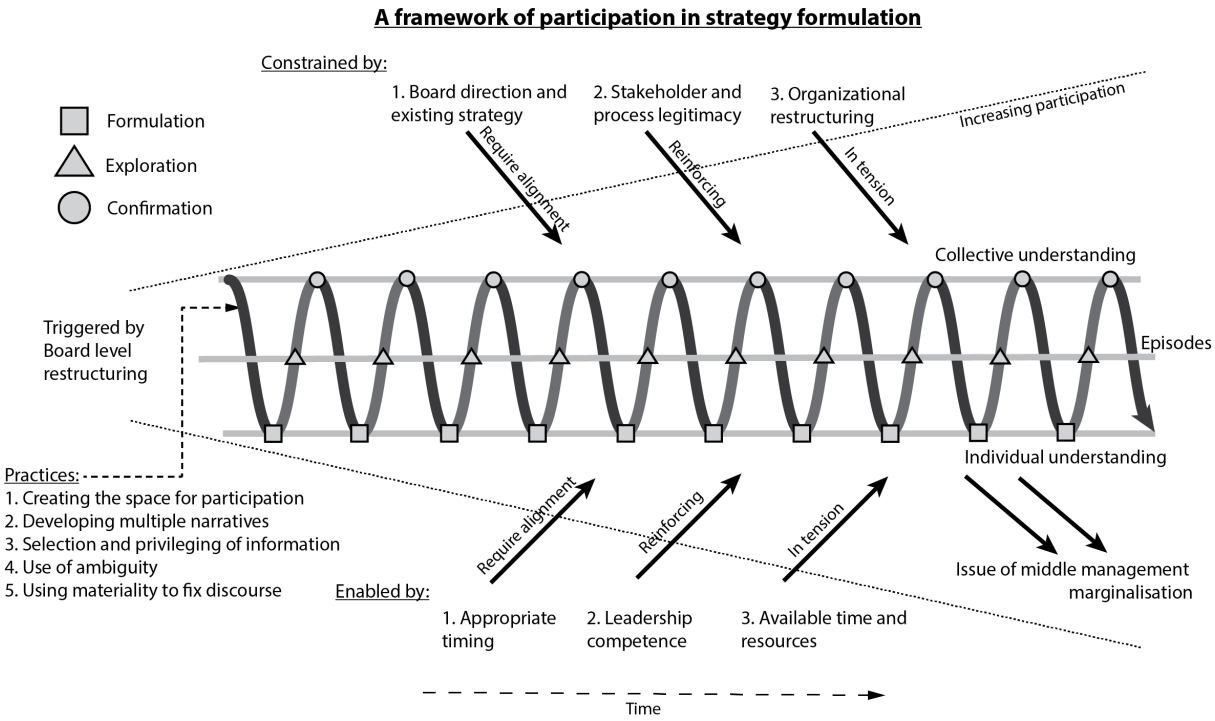


Figure 5.2: A framework of participation in strategy formulation

Drawing together the findings from across this study allows us to visually summarise participation in strategy formulation in a framework illustrated in figure 5.1. It reflects an evolution of the frameworks developed by (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018) and (Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous, 2018), enhancing four critical areas:

1. Firstly, participation in strategy is an iterative, cyclical process triggered by Board level restructuring. Individual and collective understanding are mediated through strategising episodes and activities where individuals formulate, explore and confirm the meaning they attach to the strategic narrative using discursive and sociomaterial practices.

2. While this is an individual process, over time, participation increases the number of actors and, therefore, the potential parallel individual co-occurring processes.

3. Six specific participation related enablers and constraints are related to each other in three different ways.

4. Five defined practices are deployed by practitioners individually and in combination to facilitate participation in strategy formulation.

5. Finally, the issue of middle management marginalisation emerges from the participation process.

The presented framework visually brings together the key ideas across all three research questions and illustrates the active working of a sensemaking based process within strategising. The framework can in itself be seen as a contribution to knowledge, as it represents a new and original interpretation of the process of participation in strategy formulation.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Following a brief overview of the study, this chapter outlines the critical contributions to the SAP field that the research has generated. These research contributions define participation as a sensemaking process, identify influencing factors and the relationships between them, propose a unique set of participation practices, and identify the issue of middle management marginalisation. Following the contributions to knowledge, the chapter discusses several further contributions to practice and methodological advancements. Finally, the study identifies limitations and opportunities for further research before the thesis concludes with a short researcher reflection.

Participation will become an increasingly common tool in strategising as organisations recognise the value of bringing more people into a previously closed process. Also, as the open strategy concept receives increasing attention from scholars, so too will the desire to fully understand how participation works within the spectrum of strategy practices. Indeed, academics are already calling for more understanding of participation in strategy (Laine and Vaara, 2015; Whittington, 2015b; Hutter, Nketia and Füller, 2017). Therefore, this study makes a much needed and timely contribution to furthering professional practice and scholarly understanding.

This study has made some crucial discoveries by exploring a single organisation developing strategy over time. The case study approach has allowed for the nuanced and contextualised details to be expanded and understood at a depth not available in more traditional quantitative studies. While the approach has

some drawbacks from a generalisability point of view, the results provide a good opportunity for transferability to other contexts and expand our theoretical understanding of how participation works within strategising. Different data sources, collected over two years, gives this study a fuller understanding of an entire strategising process conducted over time. As such, it has addressed the gap in the literature identified in chapter one.

This thesis sought to produce a framework of participation strategy formulation that explains how practitioners can use practices, objects and episodes to facilitate participation in a strategising process. The study achieved this aim by answering the following research questions:

1. How is participation used as part of a strategising process?

2. What factors influence participation in strategy formulation, and how do they enable or constrain strategising?

3. What practices facilitate participation in strategy formulation?

This study set out to explore the nature of participation during strategy formulation. Several important theoretical contributions are resulting from this study.

6.2 Theoretical contribution of the research

Using a clear visual summary, this study makes a significant theoretical contribution to knowledge by developing a framework that bridges process and practice research. The result is a model that presents an iterative process that is more dynamic than previous studies show. Not only does it show the attributes

of participation but also the relationships between them. While grounded in existing theory (particularly Burgelman *et al.*, 2018), this framework builds on Burgelman *et al.,* (2018)'s model in four specific ways:

1. Defining participation in strategy formulation as a sensemaking process

Defining participation as sensemaking changes our understanding of participation and requires scholars to move away from simplistic linear processes to more iterative approaches. This study explicitly identifies participation as a sensemaking process. Sensemaking is a continuous iterative process of interaction where personal meaning aligns with collective understanding. A more holistic approach recognises that participation, and as such sensemaking, takes place both within but also around formal strategising activity. Future scholars must, therefore, reconceptualise what activities they define as strategic more holistically.

The research that considered the process of participation was either not directly related to participation (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun, 2019) or fragmented by considering different aspects in different ways (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara, 2018). Considering participation as a sensemaking process brings together these separate concepts under a single established theory.

The participation process, in this case, was triggered by board-level change because new board members used participation to gain legitimacy to talk about strategic issues and to challenge the traditional hegemony. Using participation like this demonstrates how individuals use sensemaking to generate a shared collective understanding around complex strategic issues. Being a sensemaking

process means that participation is most appropriate when generating a new strategy, rather than simply getting employee buy-in to the existing strategy. Understanding the triggers and environment in which participation occurs helps evolve our theoretical understanding of how participation works.

In addition to furthering the practice literature, this study also contributes to the sensemaking literature by demonstrating this widely used theory working in a new context that research has not explored using this lens until now. While sensemaking is the dominant social theory applied in organisational studies (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015), this study represents the first research to link sensemaking to participation explicitly. Therefore, sensemaking scholars now have additional research to widen the application of this crucial theory and add a new dimension to the sensemaking body of knowledge.

2. Identifies specific enablers and constraints and the relationship between them

This study recognises that enablers and constraints do not exist in isolation and can influence each other.

- Appropriate timing and board direction, and existing strategy *required alignment*.

- Leadership competence and stakeholder and process legitimacy were *self-reinforcing.*

- Available time and resources, and organisational restructuring, were *in tension*.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of enablers and constraints within the SAP literature. These relationships are helpful to future scholars who might apply them to other enablers and constraints, both concerning participation and other environments.

Previous studies that looked at enablers and constraints were fragmented (Mantere, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). The interrelationships between factors make for a more complex environment than previous research suggests and makes the impact of individual circumstances more challenging to predict. Adopting a more complex view of enablers and constraints pushes the boundaries of knowledge and encourages researchers to reconsider previously simplistic conceptualisations of factors that influence strategy. We now know that appropriate timing, leadership competence, and available time and resources will facilitate organisations wishing to use participation in strategy formulation. Board direction and existing strategy, stakeholder and process legitimacy, and organisational restructuring will challenge them. We also know that these factors influence each other in three distinct ways.

3. Proposes that participation uses a unique set of practices

Linking a unique set of practices to participation in strategy formulation constitutes an original contribution to the literature. For the first time, this research presents five practices as being key to participation in strategy formulation. This unique combination of practices extends the current research exploring practices used in other areas of strategy. While practitioners can deploy each practice individually, their relationship makes the package of practices both individually and collectively important. While the practices themselves are not original, having

been explored elsewhere in similar forms, existing research has yet to associate them with participation directly.

Most of the existing literature distinguished between discursive and sociomaterial practices (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Mantere, 2013; Bencherki *et al.*, 2019). Such a distinction limits our understanding of how practitioners use practices in organisations. We now know that practices are both discursive and sociomaterial. Bringing together these two aspects of practices opens up opportunities for scholars to explore SAP in new ways without the constraints of previous dichotomies. Considering practices in such a way represents a paradigm shift in our view of practices.

Research has tended to explore practices in isolation (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Abdallah and Langley, 2014; Seidl and Guerard, 2015). However, practices are used in combination by practitioners to maximise their use-value. Practices are like tools in a toolbox, which practitioners can use as and when needed individually and in combination. For example, creating a suitable physical space can enhance the development of a personal narrative. Using materiality to fix discourse can offset the impact of ambiguity or be combined with selecting and privileging information to move the strategic conversation past content that does not match the merging narrative. Such a view helps encourage research to consider individual practices and practice sets and how practices interact with each other. Therefore, this study furthers practice research by adopting a more comprehensive and sophisticated view of practice interaction.

4. Identifies the emergent issue of middle management marginalisation

Participation in strategy formulation creates middle management marginalisation due to the imposition of a centrally mandated process. This issue adds to an area of research that is of great interest to SAP scholars. We already know that middle managers play a vital role in implementing strategy (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Surju, de Metz and Davis, 2020). They translate the strategic narrative into operational terms for subordinates and communicate the operational implications of strategic decisions to senior leaders (Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Ravasi and Canato, 2013).

Increasing the number of people involved in strategising can have unintended consequences on other actor groups. We now know that marginalisation of middle management is a potential disruptor to their boundary spanning role when using participation in strategy formulation. We also know that the perception of feeling marginalised is as important as actual marginalisation from the process. The vital role of middle managers should be protected, and therefore it is essential to mitigate the feeling of marginalisation. The inclusion of locally-led strategising activities can mitigate the marginalisation of middle managers.

6.3 Contribution to practice

The framework that is the outcome of this research provides valuable theoretical insight into how participation in strategy formulation can work. However, in addition to theoretical contributions, several practical implications can be drawn out from this study. These implications enable practitioners to use participation more effectively and to design participation processes better when undertaking strategising activities. Therefore, the contributions here inform specific

recommendations for both the case organisation and organisations in general that appear later.

The first implication of these findings is that factors can enhance or inhibit participation. Participation must be the right approach for the circumstances, competent leaders must lead the process, and there needs to be sufficient time and resources for the participation to occur. Board direction and existing strategy can block participation, which can also be constrained if participants do not perceive stakeholders and processes as legitimate. Finally, strategising is likely to trigger a cascade of organisational restructure, which will constrain participation. Understanding how participation in strategy works means that strategists can ensure their organisation is adequately prepared and equipped to adopt participation before using it in strategising.

Practitioners looking to implement participation in a strategising process can use the knowledge of the relationships between enablers and constraints to better design activities and have a greater awareness of when, where and how participation will be effective. Understanding the relationship between available time and organisational restructure means that practitioners could design a multi-stage approach to strategising, including a period specifically intended for organisational restructuring. Knowing that facilitators require both leadership competence and legitimacy enables better selection of the people leading strategising activities. Understanding the appropriate timing and board direction and existing strategy requires alignment, making it easier to predict when participation in strategy formulation is likely to work and be used as an approach.

Practitioners can use the findings from this study to better implement participation in strategy formulation. A greater general understanding of the practices allows facilitators of strategy to expand their tool repertoire and deploy them more effectively. Practitioners who are adept at using practices will skilfully manage situations where they need to manage participant interactions. Practices allow facilitators to cope with ambiguity, move strategy discussions, and facilitate the narratives that make participation effective. Knowledge of these practices allows practitioners to identify when and how to deploy them for maximum effect.

Defining participation in strategy formulation as a sensemaking process is revelatory in showing that participation helps generate a better resulting strategy and valuable in helping align the understanding of strategy and increase the buy-in of organisational actors. Therefore, this study emphasises that participation is valuable in generating a collective understanding of strategy and increasing the buy-in of organisational personnel. Understanding that participation fulfils a sensemaking function provides a powerful argument for practitioners to adopt participation, even if not persuaded by the case for a better-quality result. Where participation is not adopted, senior leaders will have to undertake additional sensemaking activities to ensure that organisational actors clearly understand what the strategy means.

By understanding that participation is likely to cause middle management marginalisation, senior leaders can mitigate this effect by ensuring they design locally-led activities within the process. The knowledge of cause and effect allows practitioners to predict potential middle management marginalisation and adopt strategies to mitigate the effect. Furthermore, this study emphasises the vital sensemaking and sensegiving role that middle managers play, which

practitioners can use to enhance strategy formulation and strategy implementation.

6.4 Methodological contributions

This study set out with the aim of producing a framework of participation in strategy formulation. While a single instance can never provide definitive and generalisable conclusions, the framework provides a basis on which future work on participation can draw. Through this framework, researchers can extract issues surrounding specific practice use, environment contributing factors, and the social forces at work in strategising. The thesis began by arguing that the existing literature was inadequate due to a lack of a clear understanding regarding the relationship between participation, practices and how they inform a strategising process. It can now conclude by addressing this gap with a clear theoretical contribution and practical implications.

In addition to the theoretical contribution made by this research, there are two significant methodological contributions. Firstly, while strategy research has used single case studies for many decades, their value as a valid methodological approach has grown significantly in the 21st Century (Tight, 2017; Yin, 2018). Combined with a growing acknowledgement of the potential that more qualitative based studies have in organisational research, the case study continues to be a valuable tool in the researcher's box. This study further highlights the value of a deep dive into a single context within a single organisation and illustrates how this approach can give much-needed nuance that is sometimes lacking in other more conventional methods. Alongside other forms of research that allow for increased comparison, the single case study will continue to be a vital part of the

research landscape. Researchers can use this study as an example of the case study as a method in the SAP field.

Secondly, this study serves as an example of the value that more ethnographical methods can bring to strategy and management studies. Being deeply embedded within a case organisation allows for a depth of study that exceeds other approaches (Vesa and Vaara, 2014). This depth reveals a phenomenon in detail and nuance that brings an important focus and granularity, providing an important extra dimension to more generalisable quantitative studies. SAP Research has previously used ethnographical methods (Pratap and Saha, 2018). However, the potential contribution ethnography could have has not yet been fully realised (Cunliffe, 2015; Liu, Jarrett and Rouleau, 2021). While not fully ethnographic, the method's ethnographical elements enhance the study and illustrate the potential benefits of ethnography in the SAP field.

6.5 Limitations of the research

All research comes with limitations, and this study is no exception. Reading this research should take into account some limitations:

1. As a single case study, caution must be exercised in terms of the generalisability of this research. The approach to leading change and developing strategy will be different depending on the organisational context (Denis, Lamothe and Langley, 2001). The difficulties of generalising from a single case study are well known (Yin, 2018) and as such, this study does not attempt to extrapolate probabilities to other environments outside of the case. Readers should expand their understanding of the theories explored and be cautious in

extending the findings to other environments. This study adds contextual nuance to the established body of knowledge.

2. Within the context of a single case study, it is essential to acknowledge that the nature of the organisation may impact how and to what extent senior leaders used participation during strategising. As identified in chapter 1.4, third-sector organisations (especially those involving volunteers) have stronger motivations to adopt a participatory approach to strategising to increase commitment to the organisation and retention of people (Lindberg, 2007; Balogun, Best and Lê, 2015). The increased likelihood of finding participation in strategy formulation was a key reason for selecting the case. However, this study recognises that different types of organisations may well do things differently and this may be influenced factors such as nature or ownership structure. While the empirical findings of this research must inevitably be restricted to the case alone, there is much that can be learnt and transferred from one context to another if due consideration is given to the potential impact of the nature of the organisation.

3. This case study focused on a single occurrence of strategising within a single organisation. The findings can, therefore, only be applied to this instance. Contextual factors are essential in influencing strategising and an important factor influencing the receptivity to change in general (Newton *et al.*, 2003). Multiple organisations, or instances of strategising, would have allowed a greater degree of comparability of results. However, more cases would have reduced the depth of the research, which may have impacted the quality of the findings. Therefore, while not perfect, the single case study approach is still considered the right decision in the circumstances.

4. Some degree of researcher bias is inevitable in almost all research but can be especially apparent in research involving participant as observer data. Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher will interpret the findings according to their current frame of reference, which may impact what and how concepts are discussed (Silverman, 2013). However, some argue that the close involvement of the researcher provides strength to the research, as they are better able to situate the findings in the organisational context (Tietze, 2012). To mitigate the negative impact of researcher bias, the design of this study used triangulation to confirm findings from one data source with other data sources, increasing the reliability of the results. Also, the abductive nature of the study meant that it could verify findings against other research, which further improved validity.

5. Even with unlimited time and resources, it would be impossible to capture and observe all activity related to strategy within the case organisation. Significant interaction occurs around formal episodes and activities and is unlikely to be explicitly identified as strategising and included in the research. Therefore, it is not impossible that important information was missed and not considered. However, the strengths of the researcher as participant-observer make this less likely, and the deep-dive approach into a single case is one of the most effective approaches for a thorough and comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2013; Tight, 2017).

6. Finally, this study did not set out to capture all the factors at play out in this strategising process, only those identified as relevant to participation. Therefore, it does not provide an exhaustive list of enablers, constraints or practices in use. There are papers available that provide a more comprehensive

exploration of enablers and constraints of sensegiving (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) and championing strategy (Mantere, 2005). Therefore, readers should view this research as part of a complex landscape that fills just one small part of a broader picture.

6.6 Recommendations for practice

A single case study should identify specific recommendations pertinent to the case organisation. The resulting strategy explored, in this case, was designed to apply from 2019 to 2022. Therefore, the work to generate what comes next will inevitably need to begin. In pursuing the successor strategy, the case organisation might want to consider the following recommendations:

1. The participation activities took considerable time and organisational resources to execute. The senior leadership team considered the time and money appropriate because they felt they had lost the goodwill of volunteers. The organisation should first identify if they have achieved this before embarking on such activities again. Therefore, the organisation should explore organisational buy-in to the new strategy to determine how successful the participation approach was in eliciting personnel support.

2. The Board sanctioned participation because they perceived a strategic disconnect within the then-current strategy and used participation to challenge the prevailing strategic view. If the Board no longer feels this is the case (i.e., they feel the current strategy remains current and fit for purpose), participation may not be the most appropriate course of action. Adopting a participatory approach has the potential to generate an outcome that is different from the status quo. Therefore, if the Board want to retain the status quo, it may not be worth the risk

of adopting another participative approach to strategy formulation. Therefore, the Board should undertake early strategising activities to determine their view on the 2019-2022 strategy's appropriateness.

3. If senior leadership determine that a participative approach is necessary – whether because there remains strategic dissonance or because of the sensegiving benefits – then there are ways in which the process could be better designed. Additional time should be allowed for a restructuring of roles to align with the emerging strategic narrative to account for the relationship between strategy and structure. This study identified about six months of restructuring time. As such, six months would appear a logical period to allow for in subsequent activities.

4. Finally, senior leadership should retain the components that worked well. Recognising the performative effect of a participation narrative means that this must be followed through with action if senior leadership promises participation. Action includes maintaining a variety of mechanisms for participation, even if they may not contribute new content. Materiality can also assist in developing the strategic narrative, including the use of a physical strategy brochure to ensure the final strategy remains fixed as the accepted, resulting narrative.

When adopting a participatory approach to strategy formulation, several recommendations are particularly relevant if embarking on future instances of strategising. While these are, of course, relevant to the case organisation, they also have broader relevance to organisations in general:

1. Firstly, this study highlights that participation in strategy formulation provides critical sensemaking and sensegiving functions. Therefore, this can be an essential tool in itself during future strategising or change initiatives. However, it may not be the most appropriate course where there is an already accepted strategy by the Board or that the Board specifically direct a different approach. If adopted, the organisation should allocate sufficient time and resources to the endeavour, including time allowed for potential restructuring that occurs during the process.

2. Where participation is employed, those facilitating it must have a high level of leadership competence and be perceived by participants as legitimate in their role. Those involved must perceive the process as legitimate. While this may result in a limited number of senior leaders (i.e., those perceived as being responsible for strategy) facilitating activities, it is essential to also allow for the involvement of other senior leaders in another way because they too need the opportunity for sensemaking.

3. Recognising that restructuring at the Board level is likely to trigger a strategising process provides helpful information to strategy practitioners and the executive team. This information enables them to predict when a desire for strategising activities might emerge and allow senior leadership to understand the implications of high-level restructuring in organisations.

4. Strategy practitioners using participation can use ambiguity in strategic talk and text as a valuable practice to facilitate the strategising process. However, they must be mindful of the impact this can have on the implementation of the strategy. Materiality, of varying degrees of permanence, can either temporarily or

permanently fix the strategic discourse to facilitate participation activities. The final strategy needs to be enshrined in a fixed material document, recognising the multiple forms the discourse could have taken to that point.

5. Identifying that participation in strategy making can lead to middle management's marginalisation provides essential information for practitioners, who should carefully manage the issue in the organisational setting. This study identifies that senior leadership can mitigate the impact through local strategising activities led by middle managers. Therefore, the importance of these local activities should not be understated – even when, to senior management, the value may not seem immediately apparent and additional local activities may seem like an unnecessary use of time and resources. It may also be that there are other measures that senior leaders can implement to ensure that middle managers continue to feel engaged in the process, and senior leaders can give emphasis to middle managers on the upcoming vital role they will play during the implementation of the resulting strategy.

6.7 Opportunities for future research

In addition to the recommendations for practice, there are a number of opportunities to build on this study in further research that could be explored:

1. Researchers could develop a study exploring the nature of consensus in strategising. The study could explore whether the narrative of consensus needs to reflect the wider audience or how much the narrative influences participants. This kind of study would reflect a growing area of research, specifically exploring the role of narrative in strategising.

2. Explore the link between strategic development and implementation and follow through with this case to look at how the strategic discourse made its way into the actual strategy. A study of this kind could make valuable contributions to the discourse literature.

3. Identify if the enablers, constraints and practices used in this context can be found more generally in organisations or the extent to which they are context-specific. Particularly exploring the difference between not-for-profit organisations that are accountable to Trustees and those run by a Board of Directors. The principal difference being that Trustees tend to be non-executive, while Boards can be exclusively executive, non-executive or a mixture of both.

4. Further research exploring the impact that organisational structure has on participation. Charity Ltd.'s centralised structure meant that most of the processes and activities were designed and developed by senior leaders at the centre. While this is a typical structure, it is not the only structure. Further research could explore whether the process would be different in a decentralised organisation to provide an additional comparison.

5. Evidence suggests that middle managers express dissatisfaction even in traditional non-participatory approaches to strategy formulation (Westley, 1990). Therefore, a better understanding of the extent of feeling marginalised is needed. Therefore, the overall impact could still be a net positive, not least because middle managers are participating somehow, which generates a better-shared understanding of the resulting strategy (Ketokivi and Castañer, 2004).

6.8 Researcher reflection

I have made much in this study about the importance of looking inside the 'black box' of strategy, not least because it is something quite rare in research. Outside of the top tier of academic scholars, organisations are reluctant to throw open their doors and reveal their inner workings to outsiders. The advance notice of impending strategy formulation needed to plan a research project is difficult to find. This study, therefore, stands as a testament to the benefits of being at least a partial insider and of the benefits that case studies and more ethnographical methods can bring to Strategy and SAP research.

The study came about due to a chance coffee meeting with the newly appointed Head of Strategy in December 2016, when I was exploring the possibility of a very different looking research project. In themes that I would also find in the data, his newness in the role meant he was more open to the idea of someone not from the senior team having an insight into the inner workings of strategy. Over the year that followed, it became increasingly apparent that significant strategic change was coming – perhaps most symbolically illustrated in the change in CEO. Responding to these changes, I evolved the topic to reflect the concept of participation that was emerging. Recognising that something important was about to happen (or perhaps just out of courtesy), the CEO gave the same level of support to the project that I had enjoyed from the Director of Strategy. This support was vital in engendering the cooperation of all others in the organisation and ensuring the success of the data collection phases.

The (now) Director of Strategy and I would later reflect that the company's buy-in would have been much less likely without the executive-level changes. This thought drew attention to a feeling that had been a significant driver for me from

the very beginning: that chance and circumstance had provided a rare opportunity to track live strategy formulation from the inside in real-time. I had to make sure that I did not miss the opportunity.

The challenge of studying a planned process is keeping pace with events that are going ahead irrespective of any research project's status. As I raced to feel comfortable with the relevant literature in the field, I was acutely aware of the fast-approaching roadshow workshops, which would form a significant element of the data collection. Unlike interviews and archival data, these observation events would not be delayed if I was not ready. The experience highlighted the importance of maintaining flexibility and open-mindedness in research, not least because it always feels like there is more literature to explore or that you will never feel truly ready to start data collection. The abductive nature of the study came to be a significant strength in this research. There was a need to continually revisit literature between different data sources to verify the theoretical validity of what I was seeing. This approach reflects a more realistic account of a pragmatic research project taking place in a real-world environment.

From the very beginning, I was aware of the need to strike a delicate balance when operating as a participant-observer in my research. Discussed at length during the ethical approval process, I sought to mitigate the potential limitations while maintaining (as I still do) that the potential strengths far outweigh the negative impacts. My significant historical involvement with the organisation meant that it would be impossible to view data through an utterly impartial lens and more likely to interpret data in a positive light. However, the more I understood the advantages of a case study, the more I recognised that using exemplars is good practice in research as it can bring out otherwise theoretically

obscure phenomena. By remaining aware of my bias, my in-depth understanding of nuance and context within the organisation could enhance the validity of my findings. Furthermore, while my previous involvement would also affect how my research participants responded to me, I hope that it improved the trust between researcher and participant and allowed them to speak more freely; knowing that my intentions were not to portray them in a negative light but to improve our theoretical and practical understanding of this critical concept.

My close involvement with the case organisation gave my research a solid ethnographic feel. This approach would prove invaluable when exploring a topic as intangible and abstract as strategy can often be. Outside of the formal strategising episodes, I quickly became aware of the amount of activity that, while not explicitly strategising, was informing the strategy formulation process. Having consistent access to company emails and the internal intranet significantly increased the number of documents considered part of the study. I identified two hundred eighty-one documents as relevant; however, I considered many more, which might have otherwise been missed. In addition to this, casual conversations that might not otherwise have taken place identified a myriad of informal interactions; they further reflected how strategy embeds itself in all actions of an organisation and its people.

Finally, the role of being a participant observer makes the sharing of critical practice more meaningful. Management and strategy research has long sought to ensure it remains applicable in the real world and results in practical applications that can benefit organisations and people. However, this function is even more rewarding when you can continue to see the positive impacts, especially when in a setting for which you have a personal connection. While the

theoretical contribution to Strategy as Practice is essential, it's the benefits to the case organisation that fill me with optimism for making a positive contribution to practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Phase one interview protocol

Interview protocol

Introduce the project and researcher. Thank the participant for giving up their time.

Explain that the project is doctoral level, and has been through ethical clearance. Provide the participant consent form, and go through information points.

Ask the participant if they have any questions, and if they are happy to proceed.

I would like to begin by thinking about you as an individual. When you started in your role as [state role], how did you go about making sense of the organization and its strategy?

- Triggers
- Enablers / constraints
- Other influences

I would like now to move to the new strategy currently being developed. Could you describe when you first became aware that the new strategy was to be formulated, and how you have been involved in the process to now?

- Overview of the process
- Identify specific episodes

Could we explore some of these episodes you have identified in more detail? Let's begin with [x]: what happened here?

- Triggers
- Enablers / constraints
- Other influences
- Actors involved

Is there anything that you feel we haven't covered, that you would like to add?

Explain what happens next, and how you would like to interview the participant again in about 8-12 months' time.

Thank them for their time.

Appendix 2: Phase two interview protocol

Phase 2 - Interview protocol

Introduce the project and researcher. Thank the participant for giving up their time.

Explain that the project is doctoral level, and has been through ethical clearance. Provide the participant consent form (if they have not signed it before) and go through information points.

Ask the participant if they have any questions, and if they are happy to proceed.

Can I pick up from June last year, where we launched a revised vision and mission statement. Could you talk me through how we got from there, to where we are now?

- What happened?
- What were the key events or episodes that you are aware of?

What has been the influences of the structural changes that have been made to the organization, on the final strategy?

- How has this different between different role?
- Identify specific episodes

How do you ensure that your understanding, or your intent, of the strategy is the same as the understanding of others?

- How important is the time or place you do this?
- How does this change depending on who you are doing this with?

How do you achieve legitimacy within the strategy?

- How do you generate normalization or stability of the strategy as it emerged?
- How do you manage resistance to the strategy?
- Did you consider doing any of the following:
    - Encouraging people to find individual meaning in strategic purpose
    - Demystifying vague practices to allow individuals to find strategic roles
    - Integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches through organised social dialogue

I would like to consider the text and language used in the strategy. What do you feel are the most significant elements of text or language used?

- For example, the new documents have moved away from the common practice of having a visions and mission statement. How significant is this?

I would also like to consider the physical artefacts themselves, such as the strategy pamphlet, and the volunteer mailout. What do you feel are the most significant elements of these?

- What impact do you feel they will have? And why?
- What role do you feel these artefacts have in the process of developing the strategy?
- Are there other material or digital artefacts that have been produced?

How do you feel the involvement of others has impacted the stated strategy as it is now?

- How about your own involvement?
- How did it influence the process?

Was there anything you, or somebody else, did that you feel particularly helped the participation of others in the strategizing process?

- Why was this?

Was there anything you, or somebody else, did that you feel hindered the participation of others in the strategizing process?

- Why was this?

What will you do differently, next time?

- Would you change anything about the recent process, if you could?
- Why is that?

One of the things I have developed is a timeline that shows the progression of the development of the strategy from June 2016 to June 2018. Looking at this now, do you feel this is a fair representation of the key sequence of events? Is there anything you feel I have missed?

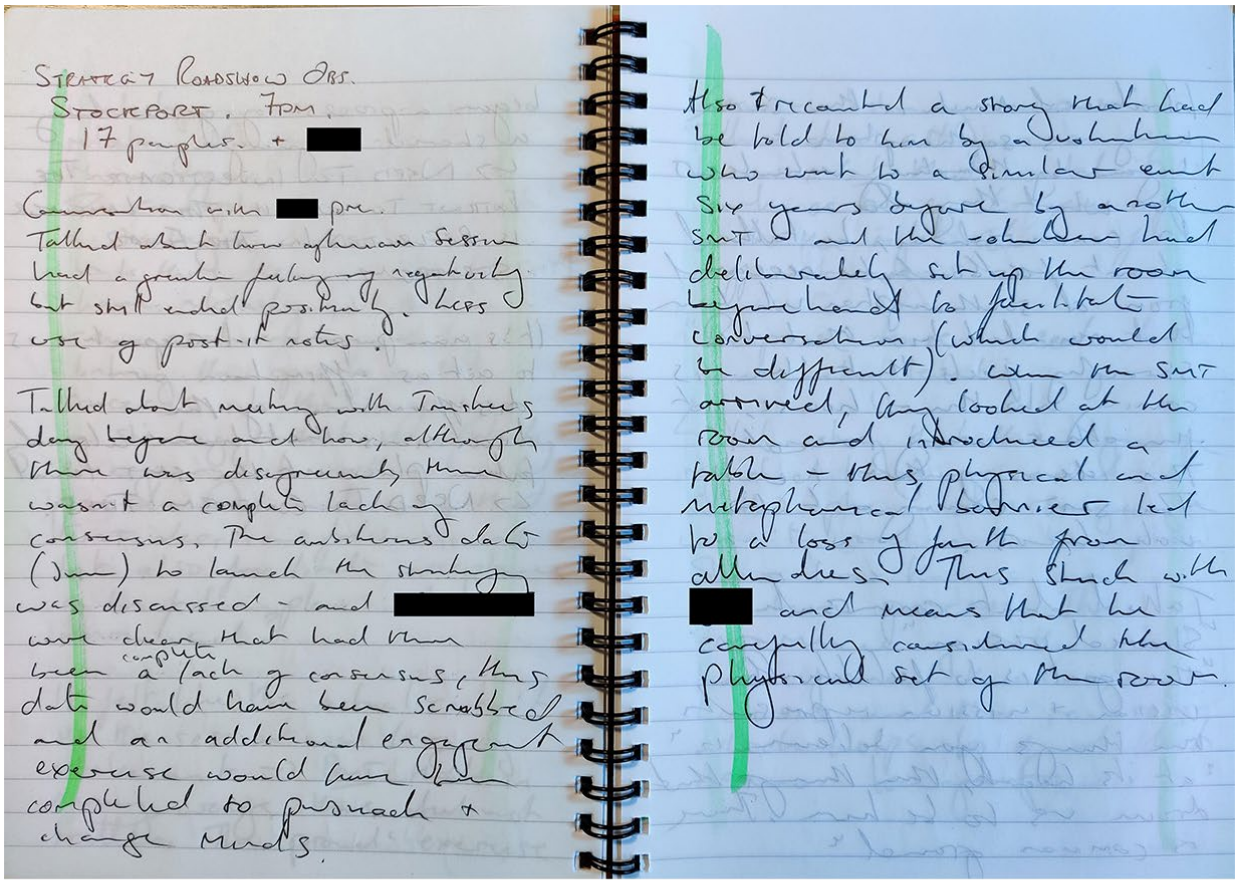
- Show the timeline and explore

I would also like to share with you this model of participation strategy making that I am developing. It illustrates an iterative cycle of sensemaking, made up of a three-stage process of formulation, exploration and confirmation. Discursive and sociomaterial practices are mediated through strategic episodes, where meaning is explored and aligned, bringing together individual and collective meaning. Do you think this model fairly represents your own experience of strategizing?

- Show the model and explore

Explain what happens next, and what they should do if they have any questions. Thank them for their time.

Appendix 3: Example observation notes

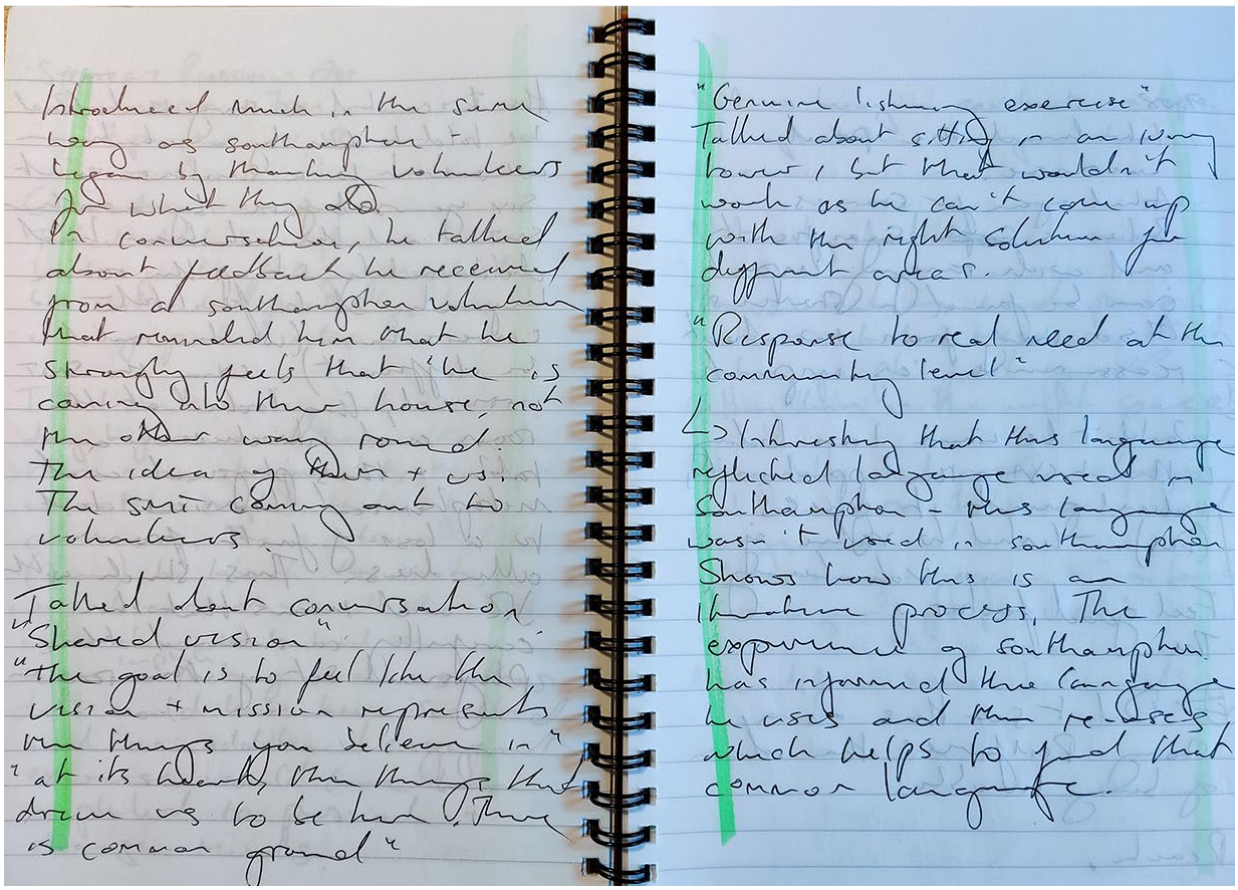


STRATEGY ROADSHOW OBS.
STOCKPORT. 7PM.
17 people. + [redacted]

Conversation with [redacted] pre.
Talked about how afternoon session had a genuine feeling negatively but still ended positively. Less use of post-it notes.

Talked about meeting with Trustees day before and how, although there was disagreement, there wasn't a complete lack of consensus. The ambitions date (June) to launch the strategy was discussed - and [redacted] were clear that had there been a lack of consensus, this date would have been scrapped and an additional engagement exercise would have been completed to approach + change minds.

Also recounted a story that had been told to him by a Southampton who went to a similar event six years before by another SMT and the volunteers had deliberately set up the room beforehand to foster better conversations (which would be difficult). When the SMT arrived, they looked at the room and introduced a table - this physical and metaphorical barriers led to a loss of faith from attendees. This stuck with [redacted] and means that he carefully considered the physical set up of the room.



Introduced much in the same way as Southampton - began by thanking volunteers for what they do.
In conversation, he talked about feedback he received from a Southampton volunteer that reminded him that he strongly feels that 'the' is coming into the house, not the other way round. The idea of them + us. The SMT coming out to volunteers.

Talked about conversation "Shared vision"
"the goal is to feel like the vision + mission represents the things you believe in"
"at its heart, the things that drive us to be here. There is common ground"

"Genuine listening exercise"
Talked about still in an ivory tower, but that wouldn't work as he can't come up with the right solutions for different areas.

"Response to real need at the community level"
↳ Interesting that this language replicated language used in Southampton - this language wasn't used in Southampton. Shows how this is an iterative process. The experience of Southampton has informed the language he uses and the re-uses which helps to find that common language.

7.08
Introduced the proud exercise.
Asked again for stories.
Believes ~~stuff~~ significant and wide ranging impact can be found in stories.
Also story from [illegible] about reassurance as important.

(1) Wouldn't be where I am today without [redacted] – the opportunity + development it gives (DM). – linked to value of volunteering.
Feel good factor.
The

Didn't see this as a story. Reinforces the idea of being humble.

Reach.

[redacted] as being a constant in life. Always there. Everyone knows it.

Not only about [redacted].

The conversations made people smile → is this exercise about making people feel good? Getting them in the right space.

Lots of talk about positive changes and volunteers who have turned things around.
"increasing engagement" on board
"managing people well".

Moved from stories to words.

Earlier conversation with [redacted]
↳ Asked about how the volume of words comes up. Lots of repetition of some, but will get equal representation as some different words that don't come up as often eg. [redacted].

[redacted] had also mentioned that the further ~~stuff~~ discussion had to focus around whether the organisation should be broad + good or focused and excellent. The consensus result was broad + good.
When a point about the breadth of opportunities + things we do came up, [redacted] immediately jumped on this and put it on the board

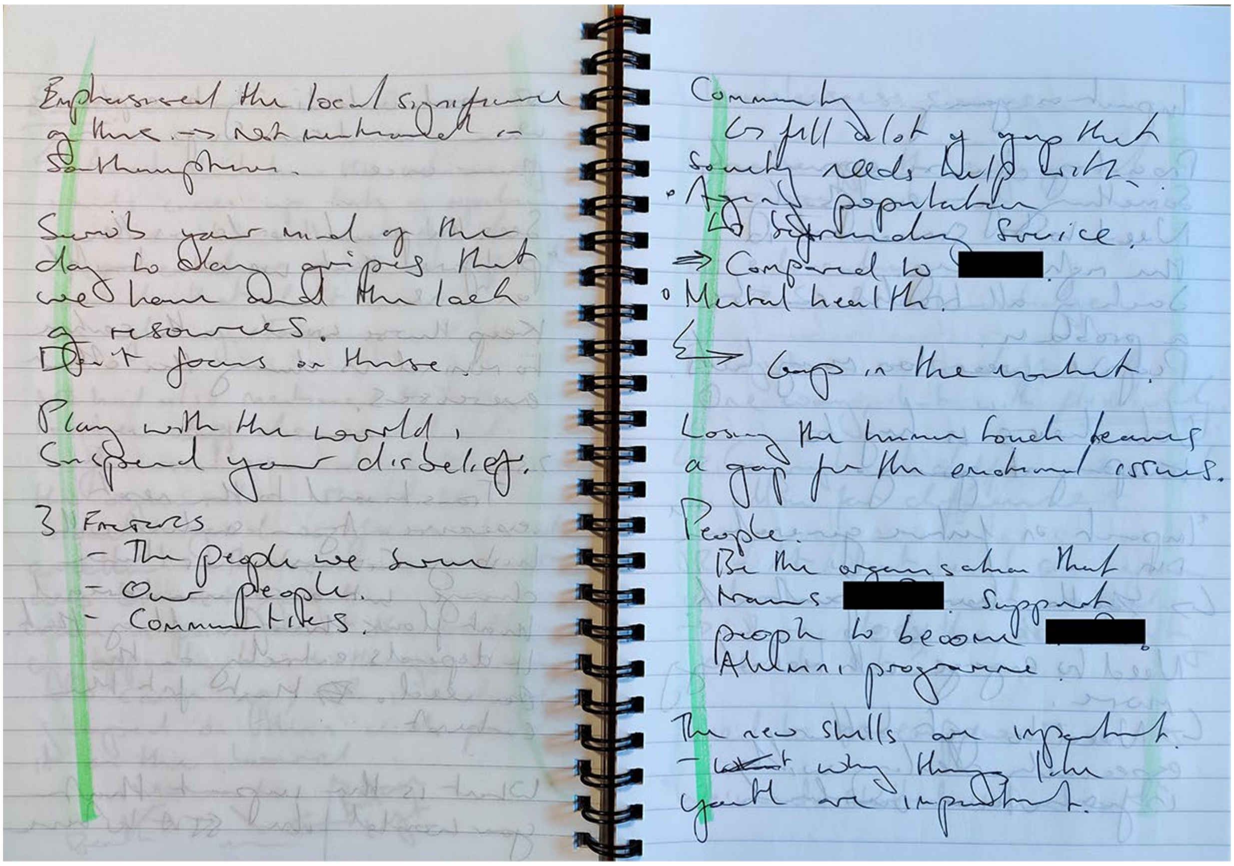
What we do → Breadth ↘ Bottom left

[redacted] used underlining to emphasise when a word came up more than once.

Sees the proud words as the "platform that we can build on". JR.
Keep those words in the centre to remind us during the other exercises.

7.37.
Transitioned to the next exercise. Again started with history. Circumstances have changed, but a common thread that flows through all of that. It depends entirely on the need. Must fit the context.

What is the impact that you would like [redacted] to have


Emphasised the local significance of these -> not mentioned in Southampton.

Switch your mind of the day to day gripes that we have and the lack of resources.
Don't focus on these.

Play with the world, suspend your disbelief.

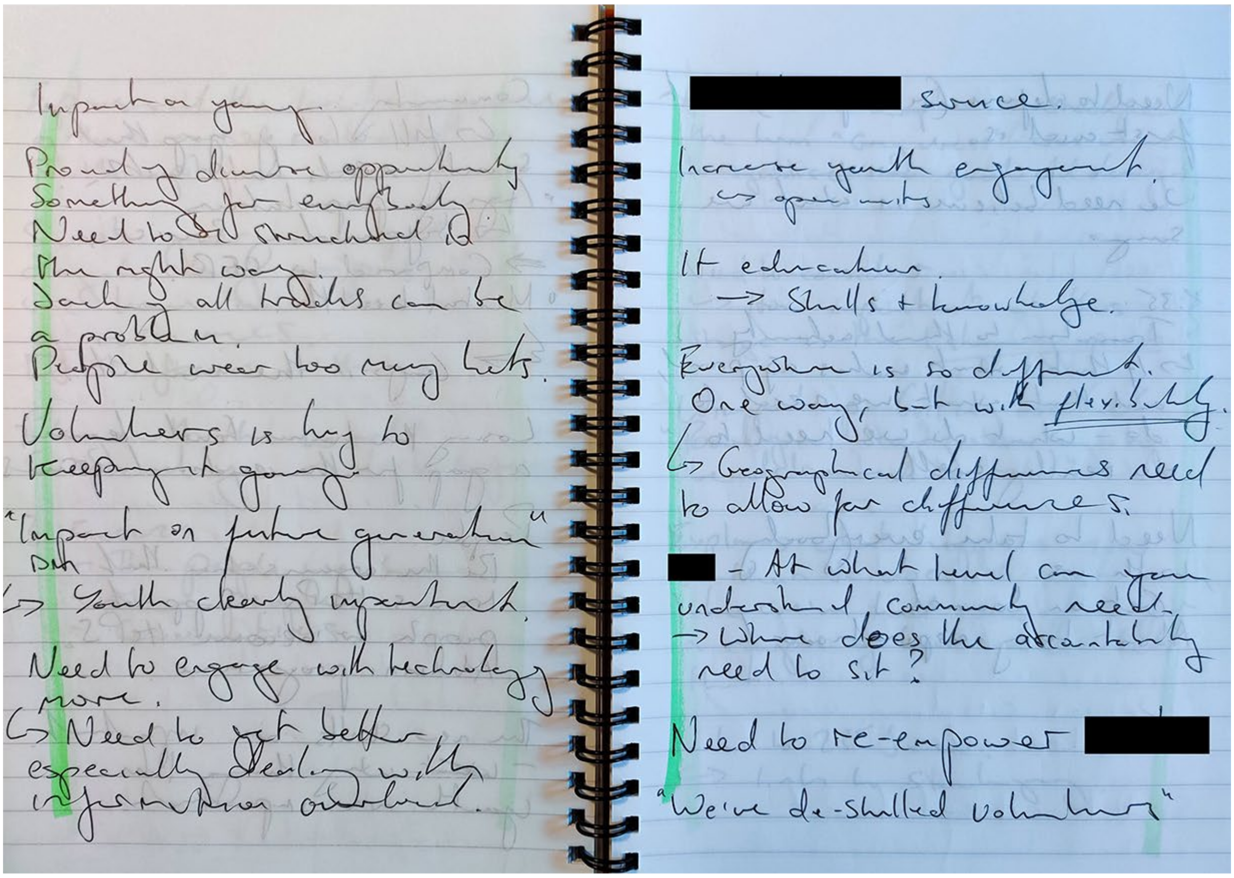
3 Factors
- The people we serve
- Our people.
- Communities.

Community
↳ fill a lot of gaps that society needs help with.
· Ageing population
↳ [illegible] service,
=> Compared to [redacted].
· Mental health.
↳ => Gap in the market.

Losing the human touch leaves a gap for the emotional issues.

People.
Be the organisation that trains [redacted]. Support people to become [redacted].
Alumni programme.

The new skills are important.
- why things like youth are important.


Impact on young.

Provide diverse opportunity
Something for everybody.
Need to be structured in the right way.
Jack of all trades can be a problem.
People wear too many hats.

Volunteers is key to keeping it going.

"Impact on future generations"
↳ Youth clearly important.

Need to engage with technology more.
↳ Need to get better especially dealing with information overload.

[redacted] service.

Increase youth engagement.
↳ open units

IT education
-> Skills + knowledge.

Everywhere is so different.
One way, but with flexibility.
↳ Geographical differences need to allow for differences.

[redacted] - At what level can you understand community needs.
-> Where does the accountability need to sit?

Need to re-empower [redacted]

"We've de-skilled volunteers"

Need to define (re-define?) what [redacted] is.

We need believe in what we sing.

8:35.
Transition to third activity
↳ If that's what makes us proud, and that what we need to do – what do we need to do really well.

Need to take everybody with us.
Get on board.
About being aspirational.

At both Southampton + Stockport, the term "[redacted]" was used to symbolise the good old days.

Need to consider
↳ How important at this stage is the listening part?

Wrapped up. Getting excited.
"[illegible]! Start wanting to be delivered + told".

Explains what happens now so that it doesn't just seem like we've had some fun for a couple of hours and that's that.

Links to 23 June.
↳ links to strategy.

Gathering these thoughts.

"There isn't massive clear difference between the voices"
"Feels like coming home"
"Expressing what this charity actually is"

* "This is not something that you cascade"
↳ Need direct contact with every person.

Look at stuff online.
↳ Submit thoughts online.

"Wagons circling around a central idea"

Start to articulate it.

"A drum beat."

Part of a journey.

"A tah-dah would not feel authentic at all".

A shared collective vision that we have all contributed to.

Closed at 8.50.

Conversation with [redacted] post Stockport.

Asked whether the content of the session was important:

"I think the content is important. If we had come along and people were telling us something radically different from what we were talking about then we would have to change the process entirely. If there was disagreement, then we'd be going from a change process to a conflict process"

[redacted] talked about why it is important for him to engage volunteers - because volunteers will often stick around, even if they don't necessarily like the direction of the organisation as they are more heavily emotionally invested than

many paid employees. Used the analogy of a bus journey. A trustee had argued that the strategy is like the destination of a bus - people get on and off, & and if the destination changes they can just get off. [redacted] argued that this is not the case with volunteers. They stay on the bus.

[Confirmation versus affirmation?]

[redacted] stressed the importance of this being a shared vision!

Need to ask about formal strategy tools.

There was clearly an enhanced level of apprehension before the first Stockport session. The expectation was that the dynamic would be different because of the nature of the audience, being made up primarily of the support back office functions,

Appendix 4: Participant information and consent form

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The Career University

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

Project team

If you have any question, at any time please contact the lead researcher:

Ashley Garlick, Senior Lecturer, London Geller College of Hospitality and Tourism, London, University of West London: ashley.garlick@uwl.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, they can be directed to the lead Supervisor for this project:

Professor Alexandros Paraskevas, Chair and Director, International Centre for Hospitality and Aviation Resilience Management London, University of West London: alexandros.paraskevas@uwl.ac.uk

Project description

Title: Making sense of strategizing - Understanding the process and practice of participation in strategy making

Summary: Based in the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) field, this thesis aims to produce a framework of participation strategy making that explains how practices, objects and episodes are used as part of a strategizing process. Increasingly, the value of bringing together process and practice fields of research is being acknowledged. Doing so allows for the consideration of practices over time, by different actors in different episodes. Sensemaking provides a logical lens through which the process of participation in strategy can be understood. Using s single-embedded case study design, this study combined semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior and middle managers, with direct participant observation of strategy workshops, and archival research. It uses these to develop an understanding of how participation is used as part of a strategizing process.

This research is a doctoral level piece of research, and will be used to inform a PhD thesis, and will contribute to scholarly publications. The findings of the study will be available to you on request. You are asked to take part in interviews and be observed during some meetings. Interviews are expected to take place twice, and last approximately one hour.

Participant Information

1. Your participation is on an entirely voluntary basis and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Should you withdraw, any unprocessed information will be destroyed.
2. All personally identifiable information will be anonymised during the transcription process. You may be identified in the thesis by your role or level in the organization (e.g. Senior Management/Middle Management/Frontline volunteer).
3. Data will be protected by keeping transcripts and interview recordings in a secure place. Data will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. After completion of the project, the data will be kept for five years and then destroyed.
4. The project has received ethical clearance from the University of West London Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

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CONSENT FORM

Symbols of strategy – understanding the meaning of strategic objects in organizations

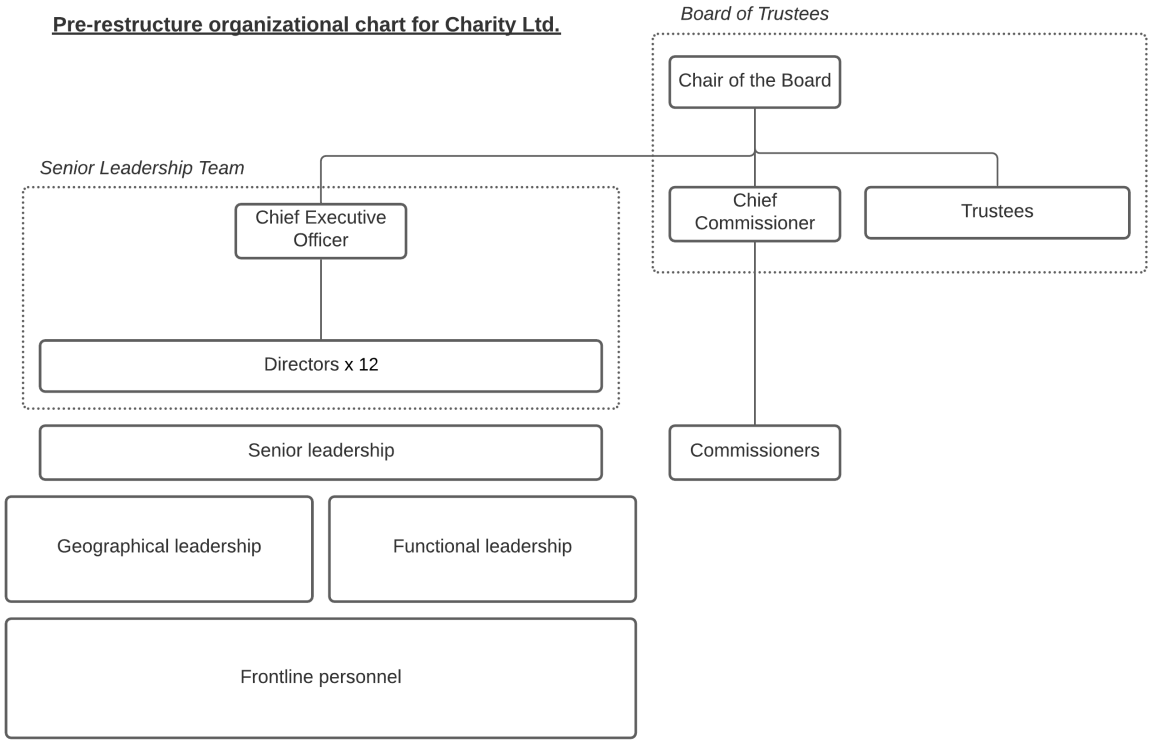
Ashley Garlick, Senior Lecturer, London Geller College of Hospitality and Tourism, University of West London, Ashley.garlick@uwl.ac.uk

	Please initial box	
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	☐	
3. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐	
	Please initial box	
	Yes	No
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	☐	☐
5. I agree to the findings reported being attributable to my role or level through the use of quotes and understand that I may choose to have any specific content completely anonymised or redacted by request with the researcher.	☐	☐
6. I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research for a period of five years after this project.	☐	☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Ashley Garlick	24.06.2019	
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

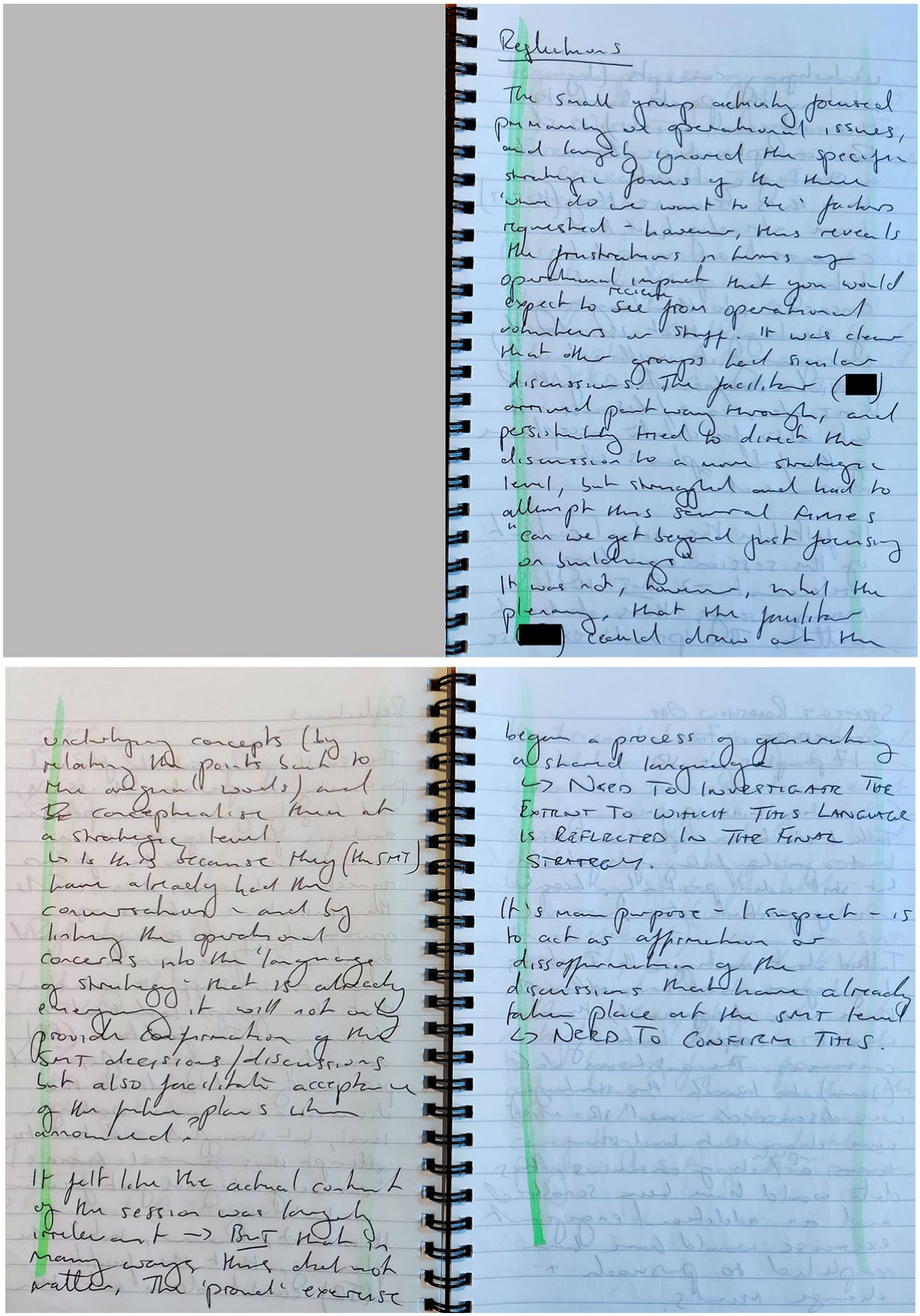
University of West London
St Mary's Road, Ealing, London W5 5RF / W uwl.ac.uk / T 0800 036 8888

Appendix 5: Summary of organisational restructure



Level	Change	Period
Trustee Board level	Appointment of new Chair of the Board	June 2016
	Appointment of two new Trustees	July 2016
	Appointment of new Chief Commissioner	March 2017
Executive level	Appointment of new CEO	January 2018
	Chief Commissioner appointed to ELT	December 2017
	Promotion of Director of Strategy	April 2018
	Restructuring of ELT, including reduction in direct reports	May – December 2018
	Appointment of COO role along with new Operations Division	November 2018

Appendix 6: Example of reflective journal entry



Reflections

The small group actually focused primarily at operational issues, and largely ignored the specific strategic forms of the third 'what do we want to be' factors requested - however, this reveals the frustrations in terms of operational impact that you would expect to see from operational members of staff. It was clear that other groups had similar discussions. The facilitator ([redacted]) arrived part way through, and persistently tried to direct the discussion to a more strategic level, but struggled and had to attempt this several times "can we get beyond just focusing on buildings"

It was not, however, what the planning [redacted] team could draw out the underlying concepts (by relating the points back to the original words) and to conceptualise them at a strategic level.

Is this because they (the SMT) have already had the conversations - and by linking the operational concerns into the 'language of strategy' that is already emerging, it will not only provide confirmation of the SMT decisions/discussions but also facilitate acceptance of the future plans when announced.

It felt like the actual content of the session was largely irrelevant → But that is many ways this did not matter, the 'power' exercise began a process of generating a shared language

↳ NEED TO INVESTIGATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH THIS LANGUAGE IS REFLECTED IN THE FINAL STRATEGY.

It's main purpose - I suspect - is to act as affirmation or disaffirmation of the discussions that have already taken place at the SMT level

↳ NEED TO CONFIRM THIS.