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Paula Jarzabkowski, jarzabpa@aston.ac.uk and David Seidl, seidl@bwl.uni-muenchen.de

Meetings as strategizing episodes in the becoming of organizational strategy

Despite their pervasiveness and significance in organisational life meetings have received comparatively little serious academic attention as organisational phenomena. Even those few studies that have discussed the organizational role of meetings (e.g. Schwartzman, 1987; 1989; Huff, 1988; Weick, 1995) have remained rather vague on the ways that meetings come about, how the ongoing processes outside the meeting influence the processes within, and what impacts meetings have on the organisational processes. In this paper we maintain that a study of meetings as strategizing episodes can add to our understanding organizational strategy as a process of becoming.

Meetings are particularly conspicuous in the strategy process. They are scheduled on a regular basis, being part of the stabilizing of strategy, for example in the strategic planning cycle. However, they are also turned to during critical strategic incidents, calling forth a meeting whenever an important strategic issue arises. Meetings can thus be understood as focal points for the strategic activities of organisational members, inherently associated with the stabilizing of strategy into recurrent patterns but also its evolution during times of crisis or change.

Drawing on the conceptualisation of meetings as episodes in the flow of organisational activities (Hendry and Seidl, 2003) and based on empirical data of 51 strategic-level meeting observations, this paper elucidates the episodic nature of strategic meetings in shaping organizational strategy. In line with the concept of strategy as an ongoing flow of organizational activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al, 2003; Spender, 1995) our study is based on an ontology of 'becoming' rather than an ontology of 'being' (Luhmann, 2000; Sztompka, 1991; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Accordingly we start from the assumption that 'stabilities' in the social world cannot be taken for granted but need to be explained as particular achievements (Chia, 1999). In this sense we will equally focus on meetings as episodes in stabilizing strategy as well as its change.

The paper is in four sections. First we outline our perspective on organisational strategy as a process of 'becoming' and the concept of strategy meetings as episodes within that becoming. Second, the methodology is laid out. Third, our empirical material of 51 strategic-level meeting observations is presented and analysed with regard to its implications for strategic stability and change. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their contributions.

The paper makes a contribution in three ways. First it extends Hendry and Seidl's (2003) concept of strategizing episodes, adding to our empirical and theoretical understanding of meetings as strategizing episodes. In particular, we may understand such episodes as micro variation and selection mechanisms involved in shaping the wider flow of strategy. Second, it responds to Tsoukas and Chia's (2002) research agenda, contributing empirically and theoretically to a processual view of strategy as an organizational activity that is always in a process of becoming, subject to stabilizing and changing influences occurring in the micro-details of organizational life (Chia, 1999). Finally, it contributes to the broader strategy as practice agenda, which proposes that we study how the micro details of strategy practice shape strategy as a process of strategizing and organizing (Jarzabkowski, 2004; 2005; Johnson et al, 2003; Whittington, 2002; 2003).

See authors for references