

Voices

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Voices and strategy-making

Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) scholars study strategy as a socially accomplished phenomenon, given shape through professionals' sayings and doings. One lane of SAP research firmly grounds its analyses in communication and approaches strategy as fundamentally dialogical, meaning that a strategy's formation and eventual stabilization depend on "the way people do things together [in] the interactional space where they act collectively" (Létourneau et al., 2023, p. 147).

Within that lane of work, a recent trend toward examining communication's constitutive powers for how strategy takes shape can be observed in major outlets of the field (e.g., Bencherki et al., 2021; Nathues, Endedijk and van Vuuren, 2023), including calls to adopt a Communicative Constitution of Organisation (CCO) perspective on strategy-making (Vaara and Langley, 2021; see also **Moments of strategy**). Moreover, we can observe a growing interest in the *voices* that participate in strategy-making and their role in how strategy comes about. Researchers increasingly recognise that organisations are made up of "distinct people with distinct identities, interests, roles, fields of expertise, authority, tasks, etc." (Benoit-Barné and Martine, 2022, p. 1) and that whenever someone speaks, it is potentially also all those heterogeneous elements that express themselves. Already a single utterance can incorporate several perspectives, such as when a department head speaks not

only for herself but also for her employees and clients, as well as for the values, principles, and other seemingly intangible aspects she finds important. Indeed, as the Russian linguist Michail Bakhtin noted, dialogue is not only an exchange between people but may imply the voices of many others that express themselves either directly or through the present speakers.

Studying strategy-making with these ideas in mind requires acknowledging that multiple voices always coexist in organisations and that each of these voices can carry additional ones in *polyphonic* ways. We must, therefore, closely observe *who or what gets a say* in strategy-making, keeping in mind that a voice does not necessarily correspond to a human speaker. Yet, it is as important to consider *which voices we do not hear* because they are silenced, drowned out, or remain hidden. For a coherent strategy to form, some sort of unity is needed, and even in the most open, participatory, and polyphonic settings, different voices must eventually be pieced together. As we study strategy-making and voices, we hence also need to wonder how such integration is accomplished.

This entry covers three key themes relevant to strategy-making and voices: *plurivocity*, *participation*, and *power*. Moreover, we suggest methodological and analytical ways of capturing voices. We end with potential ideas for future research.

Key themes: Plurivocity, participation, and power

Plurivocity

Focusing on voices in strategy-making means paying attention to the various voices involved in shaping, adapting, and stabilizing strategy. In that sense, a first concern for researchers is *plurivocity*, that is, acknowledging that many voices make up organisational realities (see also **Polyphony**). For example, a CEO's voice might ring through all budgetary briefs, the voices of vision and mission statements might continuously remind all members of an organisation's aims, and the voices of customers might have a significant say on what the

latest innovation will be. Similarly, in strategy-making, the field's move toward **Open Strategy** and more inclusive set-ups (e.g., world cafés or storytelling workshops) essentially aims at multiplying the participating voices. Here, we encounter the voices of actors across hierarchical layers and professions next to the typical strategist and managerial voices. More abstract entities and principles may also express themselves, such as the voices of experience ('Based on my experience, financial stability should always be our most important concern') or rationality ('The only sensible thing to do is to include ethical and sustainable considerations in our new strategy'), invoked by interactants as they try to shape strategy. We might also hear people speaking in the name of their entire organisation ('As a company, we must prioritise monetary savings'), thus on behalf of many and with the power of a crowd.

However, not all voices are always made explicit, and some of them may be more difficult to identify because they remain obscured behind others and show solely through a subtle hint 'between the lines' of what is said and done or because identifying them is only possible after having obtained a profound knowledge of a study's broader context. Previous works attest to this. For example, when strategy meeting attendants speak with a collective 'we,' researchers' role is to unpack the many individual, organisational, team, and other voices that lurk in this 'we' and thereby contribute to strategy-making as well as those that are excluded from doing so (Nathues et al., 2023). Especially when many voices need to integrate into one for a coherent strategy to form, some voices might dominate and *participate* more than others.

Participation

Strategy-making has traditionally been an exclusive process reserved for select voices. Consequently, for a long time, matters of **Participation** have not received much attention. However, as studies increasingly showcase strategy-making's plurivocal nature and

new initiatives emerge resting on ‘the wisdom of the many,’ *participation* has matured into a “key issue in strategy research and practice” (Mantere and Vaara, 2008, p. 341). More than formally inviting people to a strategy event, studying participation requires observing how voices are enabled to express themselves and become of matter in strategising. Put differently, attention to voices—rather than to people—necessitates a more precise level of granularity for participation beyond the mere presence of someone in a physical or virtual room as not all voices may have the chance to be equally articulated (Bencherki, 2021). People from marginalised communities may be wary of expressing themselves, people with a disability may need computer interfaces or other means to amplify their voices, multilingual settings may create language barriers, and some experiences, such as trauma, may be unspeakable (Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

Managers, consultants, and even researchers can act as allies by being attentive to voices that may be more difficult to hear and ensuring that all voices are given equal opportunities for expression. Amongst others, attention must be directed to the interactional practices and tools put in place so that all *matters of concern* can, indeed, matter and become *matters of authority*. Materiality, in that sense, is important: the **Artefacts** used during meetings (flipcharts, slide presentations, etc.), the ability for people to write down their ideas, the ways that turns of talk are handled and opinions invited—all of these can make a difference in how voices materialise and become relevant, or not.

It is thus essential to examine not only who gets invited into strategy-making but also *how* their voices can be heard. We also need to scrutinise which voices get written out of a strategy. As we will see in the next section, when many voices need to merge into one, participation dynamics in strategy-making might move from invited divergence to forced convergence, with non-participation slowly taking over under the disguise of participation. This leads us straight to our final theme: *power*.

Power

Ultimately, questions of strategy-making are also questions of who or what gets a say. However, as noted, not all voices get the same chance to contribute. Thus, when we consider strategy-making and voices, we must also look at questions of *power*.

Communication is inherently political and power-imbued: within what is said and done, we can find subtle or not-so-subtle norms and expectations that authorise some to speak more than others. Along these lines, Nathues, Endedijk and van Vuuren (2023) show how speaking with a collective team voice is not an option equally available to each team member; instead, “a group’s voice can be asymmetrically appropriated by only some members” (p. 702). These members gain the **Power** to disconnect other members’ voices from the team’s collective one, resulting in a much larger say on the team’s eventual strategy. Similarly, in their Nordic city case, Vaara and Rantakari (2023) reveal the mayor’s power in “editing out” (p. 21) aspects not in line with his ideas—in the end, what became the city’s new strategy continued to lie primarily in the mayor’s hands and those of a few key actors.

While such ‘editing out’ is generally understood as exclusionary and oppressive, sometimes people purposefully exclude themselves or choose to remain silent as a way of resisting. As Bigo (2018) writes, “if silence excludes, it can exclude all sorts of things, including undesirable things” (p. 121). For instance, breaking one’s association with a group can underscore an actor’s disagreement with and resistance toward a strategic path so that even a ‘wiped out’ voice can have performative effects through its absence (Nathues et al., 2023). Similarly, a voice that never joined strategy-making despite being invited can reveal important but easily overlooked details. When we consider voices, strategy-making, and power, we thus need to move beyond a simplified conception of voice as positive and silence as unfavourable—both exist on a spectrum from powerless to powerful, and it is our responsibility as strategy researchers to unpack these nuances with as much granularity as

possible. Undoubtedly, especially identifying those voices that are simultaneously absent and present is a complex task, as the line between chosen or forced silence is often blurry at best. Innovative methodological and analytical approaches beyond studying typical strategy interactions become paramount for such endeavours.

Methodological and analytical approaches: How to listen closely to the voices that express themselves in strategy-making

To address questions about voices and strategy-making, qualitative approaches such as **Critical discourse analysis**, **Conversation analysis**, or **Ethnography** are generally well-suited. For instance, observational and ethnographic research can be conducted during strategy workshops, strategy meetings, or online strategising sessions. It is also beneficial to gather relevant documents, such as a rolling base of strategy drafts.

At the same time, a researcher interested in voices will also want to look beyond designated strategy settings and documents. With the objective and responsibility to tap into as many voices as possible, gathering rich, multi-faceted, and polyphonic datasets is essential. Besides observations of strategy *and* non-strategy events, there is a case to be made for collecting data through methods like interviews and reflective conversations, particularly when it comes to voices not typically heard in strategy-making. Even anonymous surveys could be considered, creating a safe space where more voices feel comfortable enough to speak up. We see strategy researchers' responsibility in this as two-fold. First, analysts must acknowledge and thoughtfully engage with the fact that there can and likely will be voices that are silenced in the interactional dynamics of strategy-making. Second, as analysts, we also need to begin recognizing that voices might be silenced not by those we study but through our own practices (just think of our field's tendency to focus on managerial voices). We carry some complicity in the issue of which voices are heard or silenced, which makes it

an even bigger responsibility for us to ensure that our studies, methods, and techniques become more inclusive, reflective, and complete.

From an analytical perspective, fine-grained communicative approaches such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EM/CA; see, for instance, Samra-Fredericks, 2010), as well as CCO's *ventriloquism* (Cooren, 2010) are particularly suitable for exploring questions around strategy-making and voices. EM/CA draws attention to how people participate in a shared activity, such as composing a strategic plan, through the details of how they engage in a conversation. For its part, the concept of ventriloquism highlights the different voices people can bring into a conversation. Just as a ventriloquist makes their puppet speak, organisational actors can speak on behalf of others, such as their supervisors, organisations, or rules they must follow. These additional voices are considered active conversation participants, joining the present humans on the interactional floor of strategy-making. Hence, a ventriloquial analysis (Nathues et al., 2021) can enable researchers to pay close attention to the various voices heard and silenced in interactions and better understand their potential influence on the emergence, stabilization, or transformation of a strategy.

Possibilities for future research

Future research on voices in strategy-making may consider how voices themselves are shaped and how they distinguish themselves from the speakers who carry them. In that sense, not only does the interaction of voices shape strategy-making, but participating in specific strategising exercises may shape individual, organisational, team, and other voices. Indeed, strategy results from but also constitutes identities, interests, and values, as well as the voices that express them. **Polyphony** makes this question more complex, as we may wonder how organisational and team voices, for instance, incorporate and exclude other voices, such as

those of customers, competitors, regulators, or society at large (as in **CSR communication**)—and how those other voices contribute to that of the organisation or team.

This first question raises two combined ones: those of the authority and legitimacy of voices and how they are established and contested in strategy-making. For example, how do strategy-makers claim and justify their authority to speak for, or on behalf of, a collective? How do they resist or comply with the authority of other voices? Future research will, therefore, need to consider how some voices may become more or less authoritative or legitimate over time, possibly at the expense of others, depending on circumstances and challenges, or at different phases in the strategy-making process.

See also

CCO; Moments of strategy; Open Strategy; Participation; Artefacts; Power; Critical discourse analysis; Conversation analysis; Ethnography; Polyphony; CSR communication

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