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USING VISUALS IN FRAME ALIGNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Research that pinpoints the influence of frame alignment when developing a strategy in a municipality context is limited. This paper draws attention to the contested frames practitioners encounter during strategy work and demonstrates how the use of visuals could help practitioners align their contested frames.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy-as-practice (SAP) has focused on social practices, discourses, and sensemaking decision making in strategy work, as well as on bridging the micro- and macrolevels, practices and micro-foundations, and practices and institutional logics. SAP research has called for studies that a) “*apply and further refine the dialogical view on organizational change*”; b) “*go further in terms of analysis and comparison of antenarratives and storytelling in specific contexts*” (Vaara and Tienari, 2011: 387); and c) give “*multiple voices to organizational processes at multiple levels of analysis to better understand stability and change*” (Vaara et al., 2016: 32). Hence, antenarratives, which are small stories or story fragments (Vaara et al., 2016), can be utilized to understand the contesting frames. Antenarratives can reveal multiple, heteroglossic voices from the organization (Bakhtin, 1981) and therefore provide information about contesting frames. Frames can be both competing and contradictory, which in turn may play a significant role in the practice of strategy, in both the formulation and execution phases (Vaara & Tienari, 2011). The linguistic aspect and both ante- and grand narratives play a significant role in SAP research (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Mantere, 2013). Only a handful of studies have utilized the antenarrative approach in strategy research, and the present study is one of the first to study frames in strategy work by analyzing antenarratives.

Recent studies in SAP have emphasized the role of strategy tools in knowledge production during strategy work (Paroutis, Franco, & Papadopoulos, 2015). Some studies have explored the utilization of strategy tools by actors (Molloy & Whittington, 2005). Other research has highlighted the missing link to social sciences (Latour, 1992) and argued that strategy research has “marginalized the materiality” by neglecting the role of material tools and artifacts in strategy work (Whittington, 2015: 14). Paroutis et al. (2015) suggest that affordances, which strategy tools enable, can shape strategic interactions. Similarly, strategy tools have a visual dimension that operates as a model of discourse and meaning construction. Prior studies have

emphasized the role of visualization in meaning construction (Garreau, Mouricou, & Grimand, 2015; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & van Leeuwen, 2013). However, the existing research on strategy work lacks studies on the role of specific strategy tools in shaping and integrating different cognitive frames that small stories can convey from within the organization.

Consequently, the present study intends to contribute to the cognitive research stream in SAP by studying framing contestation through antenarratives, and the visual mode of meaning construction by using a strategy map as a visual tool of strategy to bridge the different frames. We ask *how does the use of the strategy map incite people to act and influence meaning contests when actors make sense of events?* By doing so, we intend to contribute as follows: 1) describing the framing contests that can be alleviated or accentuated; 2) adopting an antenarrative approach to examine the framing contests that emerge during strategy work; 3) conceptualizing visualization as a mode of discourse that can act as a carrier of meaning construction and reconstruction.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes longitudinal, multilevel data from a case organization, ethnographic research, and observations from over 100 strategy workshops, in addition to 32 interviews and analysis of strategic documents over a 7-year period (2012-2018).

RESULTS

During the initial data analysis, we intended to determine the antenarratives that would reflect the multiple frames in the city organization, and as we repeatedly listened to contrasting small stories, multiple tensions became apparent. Through our observations, interviews, and analysis, we could distinguish three contesting frames that we coined: the energy capital of the Nordic, wellbeing, and happiness, and the cradle of culture. Our data analysis revealed a significant number of small stories that reflected these frames. Figure 1 places these antenarratives into a timeline and depicts their emergence during the period of this study, which represents a transition stage where the new management team established the vision of Vaasa as the energy capital of the Nordic and set out to align their strategy and operations with such a vision.

Energy capital of the Nordic: We determined this frame from the antenarratives that reflected the desire of some politicians and officials to develop the city by building on its main source of income, i.e., the energy-related manufacturing companies that export most of their products. This strategy builds on a cluster of energy-related technology companies, which have operated for a long time in the city, created a significant number of jobs, and pay a considerable amount of taxes. During the strategy work over the years, the role of technology companies in increasing the attractiveness of the energy cluster was one of the strongest antenarratives along with the dangers of losing one of the larger firms and the need to find additional companies. One of the important priorities of the newly selected management team was to increase the attractiveness of the city by growing its size (municipality mergers; using a commuting area-sized municipality as a target). The main methods to accomplish this were to improve the agility and speed of decision making and to provide land and building plots to new companies that will open new jobs, which in turn will augment the population of the city.

Figure 1 about here

Wellbeing and happiness: We outlined this frame based on an important antenarrative raised by many during our strategy workshops. During this time, Finnish municipalities faced strong institutional pressure following the collapse of public funding after a lengthy period of low economic growth and as a result of the increasing healthcare costs (mainly due to an aging population and the small demographic of working people). In this context, the antenarrative of a social and healthcare sector that was too expensive grew and strengthened to contest the antenarrative of the welfare state and wellbeing of citizens, although the latter is entrenched in the identity of the Scandinavian state, which tends to persist despite the institutional pressures underlying the need for cost-cutting. The cost-cutting pressure contrasted with the welfare state argument: Are we forgetting the importance of the wellbeing of the people? What is our role as public servants? Why does everything seems to be about companies and the energy cluster? However, the cost-cutting pressures provided a bridging argument to the conflict – we gain higher company taxes by strengthening the energy cluster.

The cradle of culture: This final frame emanates from the historical heritage of Vaasa as the Finnish capital of culture. This is a status that many credit to the omnipresent Swedish community (approximately 30% of the total population and with strong ties over the Bothnian gulf to Sweden) and the internationalism of the city (populated by three international communities: engineers, students, and refugees), which in turn translates to multilingualism (a population speaking over 100 languages), a third cultural element that makes Vaasa one of the most international cities in Finland. One of the cultural antenarratives underlies the cultural heritage, contrasting the emerging urban culture. This is aligned with the contrast between the high-culture theaters and the city orchestra with and the sports stadiums; these debates are common to many cities.

Figure 2 about here

During seven years of strategy workshops, we identified the three strong cognitive frames, illustrated above, and the existing tensions across them. During the strategy process, we observed how the use of a strategy map as a visual tool enabled discussion and provided a platform for officials and politicians to raise concerns, explicate arguments, alleviate tensions and find some shared understanding of the city strategy. Seven years of strategy workshops resulted in incorporating various strategy tools ranging from capabilities through the value curve to a strategy map and finally synthesizing targets, measures and investments/development initiatives in a table format. During the strategy workshops, we encouraged the participants to identify the capabilities and components of the value promise. The results of these two exercises were then drawn together by utilizing the strategy map as a visual tool. First, the participants identified the targets and measures for success, then developed the components of the value promise for the three customer segments, and finally synthesized the value proposition considering better utilization of resources and competencies through specific key processes and

activities. We note here that the lowest section in the strategy map was coined as resources and competencies throughout the process, unlike that proposed in the original work by Kaplan and Norton (2000), who coined it learning and renewal. This redefinition of the dimension enabled us to create a strategic logic, where the organization must consider 1) how they would measure success, 2) how they cocreate value for customer segments, and 3) how they keep their value promise using processes and activities to create customer value from resources and competencies. Hence, the strategy map enables an organization to make the core strategic logic (activity system) explicit. After creating the map, a final table was developed that synthesized the main targets, measures, and strategic investments/development initiatives. The affordances of the strategy map made it the primary tool utilized during the strategy (Paroutis et al., 2015). This process was designed together with the researchers by the city management team and then implemented from the city level to divisions and from divisions to different result units. The process was conducted on a yearly basis by evaluating and updating the strategy over different rounds. The vision of “the energy capital of the Nordic” was created as a result of the participative work, where it became clear that this should be the vision. The vision was finally synthesized by the city management during the first full year of strategy work.

DISCUSSION

This study explores strategy through a sociological lens to understand framing contests in strategy work over time and how the use of a visual could bridge the contested frames. Our intention is consistent with the foregoing SAP research that acknowledges and studies strategy work through a sociological lens and sees strategy work as a political process of interaction, laden with various interests and heterogeneous interpretations of reality (Kaplan, 2008). Accordingly, these differences often engender tensions and contests that call for interaction, if not consensus. Previous research reveals that strategy tools have a positive impact on the negotiations of political interests and reduction of anxieties and contests due to their ability to supply a social atmosphere that is essential for interactions in strategy work and realignment of views (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). The present study combined research on visuals in management (Warren, 2009) and utilized a strategy map as a visual artifact to understand the affordances it offers to bridge the tensions between the practitioners of the strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015).

Our study contributes to the prior literature in SAP by examining the contesting cognitive frames by studying small narratives told within the city organization, which we found to reflect and shape the existing collective frames. The present study contributes to the literature on framing contests in strategy work (Kaplan, 2008) by studying the role of visual tools in bridging the contesting frames. The present study contributes to the literature on visualization in SAP (Paroutis et al., 2015) that is mainly concerned with the performativity of visuals (Meyer et al., 2013). We conceptualized a strategy map as a visual artifact that represents means for meaning construction to mirror and reconstruct reality – a specific visual mode of meaning construction (Meyer et al., 2013).

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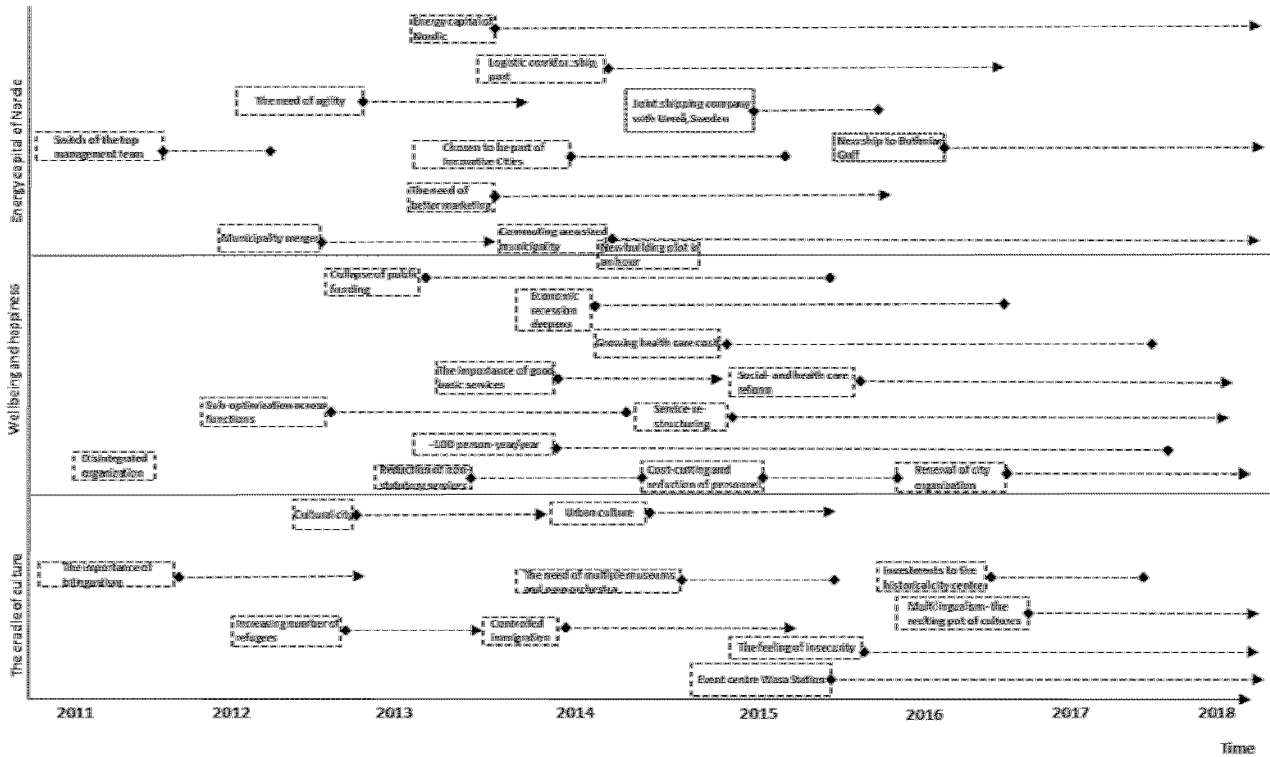


Figure 1. Antenarratives of strategic change in a timeline.

Targets	POPULATION GROWTH >100,000 INHABITANTS BY 2021 	TAX REVENUE One of the TOP 6 cities in Finland 	EMPLOYMENT >75% 	BALANCED ECONOMY Accrued surplus at the average level of large cities
Customer values	INHABITANTS Super Vaasa Multilingual Vaasa Well-being from junior to senior Safe Vaasa	COMPANIES The cradle of professionals Logistical flagship The energy leader of the North Building plot in an hour	COMMUNITIES Your and My Vaasa Active partner Fast experiments	
Processes	High-quality basic service production Electronic services Active marketing Crossing administrative boundaries Vaasa Events	Proactive land policy Fast decision making Invest, dare, act Direct search for companies Investments in energy Culture of experimentation	Active inclusion Forum for associations Coordination of the associations network Electronic platform Accessible cooperation	
Resources and competence	Leisure opportunities Diverse customer-oriented services Skilled personnel Efficient service network	Strong university city 20,000 students Start-up activities Land assets	Trust An excellent setting for events Community energy Proactive organisations	

Figure 2. Strategy map as a visual tool to bridge the frames.