Strategy as Communicational Practice in Organizations

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Communication is well established and recognized in the traditional literature of strategy as a functional mechanism of coordination (Srikanth & Puranam, 2011). This perspective has been involved in economic approaches adopted in studying company strategy. On the other hand, the relatively new phenomenon of the communication and strategy process and the growing complexity of organizational processes offer a context in which to examine a central question in the study of organizations: how communicational practices contribute to the construction of strategic practices. To see why strategy can be understood as a communicational practice and as a concept, this chapter will examine this phenomenon in the Itaipu Technological Park during the period 2008–2010.

The communication process is closely related to the notion that organization is a process of constant creation. Insight into this process can come from examining strategic practices as revealed within organizational environments. People create and modify everyday strategies based upon their interactions, meanings, and thoughts, while inserting new actors, resources, and environments into the process. The contemporary perspective on strategy is that it results from “the dynamics of sense making resulting from quotidian interactions” (Reis, Marchiori, and Casali, 2010, p. 173).

Interaction is a necessary condition for organizational existence (Cooren, 2006). Within the organizational context, strategies’ meanings are constructed through the permanent relationships that exist in the organization: between the organization and people, and also by and between the people themselves, from the perspectives of communication and strategy. Organizations are built through interaction and relationships (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn & Ganesh, 2011). People, when learning about a new activity, making a decision, dealing with conflict, forming alliances, effecting change, or dealing with differences, are necessarily creating, stimulating, and developing processes. Furthermore, daily communication practices, the so-called “informal” ones, are the very substance of organizing (Mumby, 2011). “Organizing requires process thinking . . . replace static notions of organization(s) with a vision of continually evolving processes” (Hatch, 2011, p. 96).

Thus, this case study follows a course in which reality is inter-subjective and organizational behavior and strategy are socially constructed. Therefore, communication becomes a fundamental element for the creation, development and practice of strategies, when people interact. In order for the significance and practices revealed to be recognized as fundamental and strategic, it is first necessary that the participants recognize them. This recognition emerges with the consideration that communication is what brings a strategic process to life: “strategy has communication as one of its structural elements; in other words, communication is a constituent element of strategy” (Reis et al.,
2010, p. 169). Taylor and Roubichaud (2004, p. 398) argue “communication plays a key role in both the genesis and accomplishment of an activity, as well as in making sense of it.”

It is from an organization’s internal and external participants, based upon their capacity for agency, that strategy is constructed. Everyday practices and communication both enable and constrain social action in the sense that they are both created and modified by strategists through the sharing of meaning. In order to participate people need a series of continuous interactions (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) that allow for the construction of meaning. It is this continuity that gives life to the process and reignites in the nature of exchange the spaces for action. Individuals interact through communicative acts. Based upon this, it should be noted that actor agency during communicational processes, as well as during strategic practices, is an important element for analyzing strategic processes when both implementation and interpretation are considered.

In this manner, a strategic practice is conceptualized as a “socially accomplished activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007, p. 5). The theoretical contribution of this chapter is to integrate and distinguish among communicational processes and strategy as practice by delving into the contributions of each of these, and empirically presenting the case of the Itaipu Technological Park in Brazil, which incorporated strategy as communicational practice in its communication department. The primary contribution of this study is to reveal and define the communicational practices that make up strategic practices at different organizational levels. In this matter, this study’s question is how communicational practices contribute to the construction of strategic practices. Our goal is to enhance understanding of strategy as communicational practice as a concept that reveals that communication is constitutive of strategic practice, due to its procedural and interactive nature, in the reality of a Technological Park.

Specifically, the research objective is to reveal how communicational practices established and comprised the strategic practices of the Itaipu Technological Park during the period 2008–2010. It seeks to understand the communicational practices within a field of dialogue in which the coexisting strategists foment the creation and recreation of dynamic strategy. We shall start by discussing the concepts of strategy as practice and communication, and then delve into strategy as communicational practice before addressing the ways in which communication is part of strategy construction. The case study brings these ideas together by displaying the structure of organizational communication and changes in activities through interactional processes. Finally, a conclusion provides closure and encourages reflection on the possibilities for a future agenda of research in strategy as communicational practice.

Theoretical Foundation

*Strategy as Practice and Communication*

Whittington (2006) suggests that special attention must be given to participants in any given strategy’s participants, as well as to the development of processes and practices. This in turn requires the examination of an organization within its own internal and external environments. Such context suggests to the field of study of strategy the idea that practices, through the involvement of people, become the main basis of organizational actions. This precludes the organization and actor-agents from being examined in isolation.

Organizational practices are understood as a process for constructing reality by means of social interaction in which micro-activities are essential (Whittington, 1996, 2004, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Haag, Helin & Melin, 2006; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2008; Canhada, 2009). McAuley, Duberley, and Johnson (2007, p. 39) summarize this accurately: “What we perceive is a process in which we are active participants, not neutral receivers or passive observers.” For Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) there are three mandatory dimensions for understanding the approach of strategy as practice: praxis (the flow of socially performed activities), practices (cognitive, behavioral, discursive motivational
and physical practices) and practitioners (actors who shape the construction of such practice by who they are, how they act and the resources they use). *Strategizing* takes place with the convergence of these three dimensions.

Organizations exist so that people may perform activities they would not perform alone (Hall, 2004). People, therefore, construct organizational reality and strategy through social interaction. This requires the consideration of communication as a constitutive process of that reality, which means moving beyond conceiving communication as a mere organizational process (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Communication is a fundamental process for the construction of strategy. It is a formative process that can challenge people’s knowledge and it is the main process for individuals to build strategies through interaction. Communication therefore contributes to strategizing beyond finding ways to practice strategy. Strategy is then seen as something people do; that is, “a social practice and not only a property of the organization” (Bulgacov & Marchiori, 2010, p. 150). Strategy as a social practice implies the need to view it as a daily activity, and not as an eventual outcome (Reis et al., 2010, p. 273). Spee and Jarzabkowski (2008) suggest that by taking into account all of the participating actors, strategy can be seen as developing from routine practices. Activities may be understood through examining an organization’s formal documents, such as written texts, planning practices, or messages, among others. Added to this emerging process of strategy development is the involvement of multiple actors from diverse organizational levels both inside and outside the organization (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007).

As for the organizational change stemming from the involvement of people, emphasis is given to the quotidian: habitual activities, relationships, learning, knowledge exchange, discussions, dialogue, conflicts and interactions. In Johnson et al. (2007) the relevance of small interactions between people makes strategies potentially effective. According to Cheney et al. (2011), organizations’ realities are actively constructed, dynamic, fluid and unstable. As people become more involved, they have a natural tendency to understand their own actions better, which enables the growth and exchange of knowledge in an organization. The strategic process takes place when people put into practice what they had in mind; in other words, the process is not complete if there is no practice. Practice is experienced through an organization’s daily activities. These ideas embrace strategy as a practice made up of “interaction (communicational) between people” (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2008).

**Strategy as Communicational Practice**

Based upon the works of Berger and Luckmann (1966/2003), Geertz (2008) and Giddens (2003), Canhada (2009) suggests that how stakeholders influence the development of strategy can be used as a paradigm to understand the perspective of strategy as a social practice from a predominately interpretative and social constructivist perspective. Social construction is concerned with how people produce meaning from their contexts (Westwood & Clegg, 2003). The process of constructing meaning can also be seen as a social activity (Gergen & Warhus, 2001). Interlocutors develop and stimulate knowledge, information and significance by interacting within an organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Thus, the organizational social reality and the strategy itself are two dependent aspects in constant association that are constructed through constant transition between the material world and the objectivity of the human conscience (Bulgacov & Marchiori, 2010). For these authors, the human interpretation individuals make occurs in a continuous movement as the subjective perception of reality takes place. During such movement, people lead themselves into social relationships in which they take part in the construction of meanings held in common. These common meanings, intermediated by language and communication, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and practices, and form what we conceive as human culture (Geertz, 2008). Therefore, Canhada (2009) understands that models of strategy can be seen as a symbolic system that conditions social practices.
mediated by language and human interpretation. The author also suggests that this is a crucial key for understanding why strategy, as a practice, validates the dominant discourses, models and strategic tools, as well as the interpretations the actors give of themselves and of their use in practice. The new interpretations that arise from the processes of interaction among interlocutors and that are rearranged in the organizational context as they create meanings, are part of this context.

Therefore, it can be assumed that a communicational practice, due to its procedural and interactive nature, constitutes strategic practice. It must be noted that this communication–strategy relationship is essentially dependent on the interlocution held by and between those involved with the process. Strategy as a practice is a translation of such a reality once it is understood to take place in micro activities. Strategies are essentially processes of interaction and construction of meaning whose expressiveness comes from communication and language. As a process, communication has its own momentum, and once it becomes a continuous process it cannot have a defined beginning, middle or end (Marchiori, 2010). Communication processes emerge and are made multi-dimensional and multi-directional due to differences of interests found in organizational contexts. Thus, it is fundamental that these differences be observed in contemporary society as this dynamic allows strategy to be seen as a practice, as “the opposite meaning of production of already crystallized meanings” (Pinto, 2008, p. 88), which highlights the differences of organizations and makes them essentially unique.

Therefore, the main argument is that communication is constituted by strategic processes and contexts. Organizational practices that take place in and by communication are a “generating source of knowledge” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 115), and are a type of active knowledge that constitutes knowledge in practice itself.

**Research**

This study follows an inductive and unique case study (Yin, 2003, p. 27) on strategy and communicative practices. The Itaipu Technological Park was a particularly suitable organization for a case study because its key strategic decision makers could be interviewed, and organizational practices observed, during decision-making activities. The other aspect that makes the case interesting is the nature of the Technological Park itself. Created in 2003 by Itaipu Binacional, the biggest hydraulic power plant company from Brazil, the Parque Tecnológico Itaipu (PTI) has the mission of understanding and transforming the reality of the Iguassu Tri-National Region: Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. It does so by articulating and fostering actions oriented towards the region’s economic, scientific and technological development, all with a focus on solutions related to water, energy, and tourism through several integrated organizations such as university extensions and laboratories.

Located in the former quarters of the workers who built the Itaipu Plant, PTI is an innovative setting for work in the fields of education, science, technology and entrepreneurship. Being part of the world’s largest hydroelectric plant in terms of power generation, Itaipu also counts on the accumulation of know-how acquired over two decades of plant operations.

PTI is oriented toward the generation and distribution of knowledge at all levels in order to promote scientific and technological development and to generate employment opportunities and revenue. Actions are implemented by way of four programs: PTI Education, PTI Science & Technology, PTI Research & Development, and PTI Entrepreneurship. From this inception, the communications department perceived the need to expand the portfolio of activities and did not restrict themselves to events organization or public relations. Communication managers decided to construct a strategic plan for communication that could widen their field of action. The work was initially focused on complete and detailed knowledge about PTI, its strategic plan, and the structure of its projects. This process was the primary focus for this study, which investigated each step in the decision-making process and their respective implementation.
The research was conducted in three phases. The first consisted of document analysis of secondary data. The second involved field observation and in-depth interviews. There were 50 in-depth interviews of all of the organization’s managers, including directors, managers and area assistants, as well as PTI program and project managers and communication team members. Having good relations with the managers and executives, the interviews were conducted in all of the organizations represented in the Park and the entirety of the communication department group and were conducted privately and regularly during a three-month period. Content analysis (Triviños, 1987) was used to treat the data. The third phase was used to triangulate all of the data in order to provide for objectivity, adequacy and validation.

In order to establish a reference for analysis, the research sought to observe any practices that emerged or were modified, as well as identify involved parties. The entrance and exit of new participants were seen to bring new elements of understanding of meanings to individuals and the group. These elements justified actions, as well as practices that were of interest to the involved group. Special attention was paid to individuals with greater power and to any events that instigated change. While observing the different sources of influence on practices, no clear rules for dynamics between individuals were either observed or established. Another methodological aspect uncovered during the first observations was that the communication process observed was multilevel due to the fact that the regulative aspects existed at international, national, regional, local, and organizational levels. The organization is also still in the process of defining its roles. However, greater emphasis was placed upon the regional and organizational levels.

**Findings**

The processes and the practices inherent in the communication department’s proposal that the strategic managers made were based on strengthening and developing four structuring programs at PTI: science and technology, entrepreneurship, research and development, and education. The Itaipu Binational Tourist Complex was also a consideration. The proposal took into account a comprehensive discussion with the communication team about the steps to be taken towards empowering the team of eight participants at different hierarchical levels. As three veteran managers who dealt frequently with communication practices noted:

> We do not have a communication plan. We are trying to build it. We are building a bridge to foster new practices and mechanisms of communication. The newspaper for instance is great, the speech is clear and oriented to people in general.

> Communication practices is not the exclusive responsibility of the department of communication. The programs and projects have to be in the vein of everyone.

> We have to say it. The actual practices of communication are a way behind the strategic plan of PTI. The PTI Communication Plan has to understand the PTI dynamic and its velocity of change.

Workplace culture favored an attitude of team intimacy and motivation for conversation, awareness of points of views, the thinking process and exchange of ideas so as to have group members improve in terms of knowledge of their own field and of PTI as a whole. As the communication management team observed: “Communication has to be seen as a whole for the organization. This will be represented by the speeches, expressions and instruments of communication, practices in general, and mainly by the maturity of the communication team.”

At the same time interviews revealed that the managers’ understanding of communication was similar to what the team thought of it; that is, something more than just organizing events. They
also understood that such an expectation demanded more than just background work; it required the development of different projects and programs. The following outcomes of communicational processes that developed organizational strategy were observed: a guide for dealing with stakeholders; empowerment of PTI’s identity and image; PTI’s institutionalization at regional, state and national levels; and further strategic communication measures.

Next, a proposal was made to establish PTI’s communicational behavior. For this purpose, its mission, vision and objectives were carefully designed. PTI’s communication mission, after several group meetings, was described thus:

To articulate and support communication in public relationship networks, stimulating knowledge about and development of PTI. The vision: To be a sustainable entity acknowledged by the public through the communicational dynamic of PTI’s actors. The following objectives materialized: to facilitate the communicational process among structuring programs, their projects and strategic partners, and expand the understanding of Park residents; to articulate and support PTI’s internal, institutional, and public communication processes and practices; to develop relationships that may widen the understanding of PTI as a model Technological Park; to expand the relationships between ITAIPU and PTI over all work areas within the Park; and to strengthen the organizational identity, contributing to the solidification of PTI’s image and reputation.

In addition to these perspectives, it was deemed necessary that the communication structure follow the same path of PTI’s own structure, based upon defined projects. Therefore, the communications team, after considering which programs could lend support to the numerous PTI projects, decided that the following programs were the most imperative: “to inform and communicate with the public; to develop and manage internal and external relationships; and to approach and listen to stakeholders.”

As shown in Figure 12.1 the proposed structure—developed, discussed, and defined by PTI managers and employees—gave the communication team flexibility in terms of creativity and attitude, thus providing more possibilities for action. The proposed structure was not fixed and limited within the traditional areas of communication, such as journalism, public relations, and propaganda, but changed depending upon the priorities of actions to be placed into practice by the group. This certainly promoted a continuous exchange between the areas and the further maturation of the team, the processes, and the practices that emerged or were practiced at PTI. This perspective is believed to be an innovative structure within organizational studies of communication.

The strategic guide focused on three pillars: internal communication, external communication, and stimulating relationship networks, as it would be fundamental for PTI to expand together with the stakeholders, as seen in Figure 12.2.

The whole proposal was central to rethinking communication as a strategic component for organizational development. For the final phase of the elaboration of the strategic planning of communication, the team worked on the creation of indicators of PTI’s attitude toward the objectives being measured at three levels of achievements.

Discussion

The data concerning change show that the stakeholders and their practices have a significant influence over communicational processes as they further their own understanding of strategy-making in the institution. Based on the theoretical approach, the empirical data reveal that communication
management, as in the case of PTI, has been following contemporary trends from the field and stimulating processes for the interaction of strategic practices, as shown in the report and analysis presented here.

The constructivist perspective provokes the subjective construction of interpretations and understandings; something that happens naturally at PTI. Both instances of a social reality that its actors constructed were corroborated by a constant and dependent relationship between the organizational strategic reality and the subjectivity of interpretation and human values. Marchiori, Contani, and Buzzanell (2011, p. 18) suggest that “success in strategic interaction guided by dialogic principles means that humans can engage in processes of relevantly relating to others.” We can see that these processes involve interaction and also construction of meaning.

Figure 12.1 Proposed Structure for Institutional Communication
Authors’ own work (reproduced with permission from Daniela Veronesi of Parque Tecnologico ITAIPU—PTI)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication strategies and Itaipu strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Consolidation of PTI’s image as a technology park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extension of the inhabitants knowledge of PTI</td>
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<td>Institutionalization of PTI’s communication</td>
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<td>Institutionalization of PTI’s communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement of the relations between PTI and Itaipu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strengthening of the web of relationships among their audience</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 12.2 Spheres of Influence
Authors’ own work (reproduced with permission from Daniela Veronesi of Parque Tecnologico ITAIPU—PTI)
The common meanings the team constructed were mediated by concepts collectively structured through the means of language and communication. Interviews provided evidence of shared senses, naturally attributed by the individuals to the interpreted reality. In PTI’s organizational environment, one can see collectively operated values and meanings both in the routine activities and in the constitution of activities for the transmission of institutional purposes and practices.

It is important to highlight that the communication process at PTI is diversified, with different logics for action, but with a shared, significant and inter-subjective communication process constructed so that all participants have the same opportunity for action and interaction. As such, when also considering the theoretical approaches included in this chapter, it was observed that the construction of shared meaning through the communication process offers a common workspace for relatively individualized
knowledge which in some ways hinders collective action. It isn’t part of the participants’ logic. The collective action of constructing strategic meaning can be identified as a result of dynamic communication. What emerges is that some aspects of understanding strategic and communicational processes are maintained, others are modified, and different references emerge in the context under analysis.

This study provides evidence of changes in people’s behavior and as such it means that strategic practice, through interaction, brings about reflection and expands the knowledge and innovation capacity of those individuals who naturally foster communities of practice (Wenger, 1993). The greatest contribution lies in the communicational practices revealed in the strategizing, when the interlocutors produce and share sense making in a process marked by interaction and by the social-historical context (Maia and França, 2003). This interpretation could be used also in relation to the concept of communication as an organization process. Varey (2006, p. 194) conceives communication as acts of interaction and not as objects and artefacts. Interaction cannot be seen as an information process but as a process for the “construction and negotiation of meanings (a communication process).”

Conclusion

The purpose of this work is to describe and define the communicational practices that make up strategic practice at different levels. We have sought to reveal how communicational practices have influenced strategic practices at Itaipu Technological Park, specifically during the years 2008–2010. Our work was based in theory with the rationale of understanding communicational practices within the field of dialogue in which a coexistence of and with strategists allows the creation and recreation of a dynamic strategy. It understands that communication is a process of interaction and the negotiation of meanings.

The research was oriented towards the premise that the dynamic between communication and strategy is recursive. Inter-subjectivity could be observed through strategic practices consolidated by means of communication, building strategic senses developed and modified during the study. This study suggests that strategy as practice is revealed in communicational practices that construct meaning between different interlocutors, making these subjects practice processes they created and that certainly contribute to the existence of numerous and diverse environments, with meanings specific to those involved in their relationships. Looking at strategy as a communicational practice reveals that the contexts, history and interactive dynamics constitute the environments and meanings for these interlocutors, establishing the existence of diverse organizations in contemporary society. Therefore, the construction and negotiation of meaning is an interaction, understood by Varey (2006) as a communicational process and not as an information process.

The data concerning change show that the stakeholders and their practices have a significant influence over communicational processes as they further their own understanding of strategy-making in the institution. In the study, this was verified when, each time a participant entered or exited an event, the altered communicational conditions required a new understanding of what was happening, often resulting in modification of strategies, as was the case for defining external participants, as seen in Figure 12.2.

In this manner the team built common meanings intermediated by concepts that were collectively structured by language and communication. It is therefore confirmed that the socially constructed communication practices legitimated and institutionalized strategic practices based upon social interaction.

This study also revealed changes in people’s behavior. A strategic practice that is part of the process of interaction brings about reflection and expands the knowledge and innovation capacity of those individuals who naturally foster “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1993). The greatest contribution lies in the communicational practices revealed in the strategizing, when the interlocutors produce and share senses in a process marked by interaction and social-historical context.
(Maia & França, 2003). This emphasizes the importance of micro-actions and activities that happen day-by-day, minute-by-minute inside organizations, in which “human actors shape activity in ways that are consequential for strategic outcomes” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

New research opportunities that take our findings into consideration might start by mapping organizational practices based upon pre-existing meanings, in order to verify how changes in communicational processes interfere with these meanings. Another aspect that might guide future research regards the differences between strategic practices and their communicational precursors. Future studies might develop multi-level, quantitative methods to analyze the positioning of communicational properties at different organizational levels, in order to verify and deepen understanding of those that relate to more stable strategies.

References


