Analyzing strategic conversations over time

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Strategic planning as communicative process

- The strategic planning literature views communication as part of disseminating a firm’s strategic direction once a plan is created (Beer and Eisenstat 2000; Kotter 1996; Mintzberg 1994, et al. 1998).
- We suggest that strategic planning is conceptualized as communicative process (Robichaud et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 1996), which consists of a recursive notion of talk and text (Ricoeur 1981). Through such interplay strategic planning comes into existence.
  - Talk = any orally expressed discourse.
  - Text = any talk or ideas materialized through writing.
- To analyze strategic conversations over time, we drew upon Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of utterance.
Research setting

- A medium-sized UK-based university (Unico).
- 10-month longitudinal study, consisting of audio-recorded meeting observations, interviews, documents and e-mails.
- We studied the construction of Unico’s strategic plan – 11 versions - which were expressed in documented form (PowerPoint, Word) and amended over 25 sequential strategy meetings.
- The plan’s production cycle occurred in five distinctive periods which included multiple individuals ranging from top management to newly appointed members of staff across academic and non-academic groups.
Focus: An additional objective was added to Unico’s strategic plan

- Enhancing Unico’s visibility in the local media (Version 7)

Senior management strategy away day (period II)

- Questions that meeting delegates were tasked with:
  - How can we make this aspect of our work recognized on the international stage?
  - What should we focus on to develop further our offerings in this area?
  - How can we profitably grow our engagement activities?
  - What actions are needed in the next year?
  - Actions for the long term?

Senior administrator: ... we really ought to have a push and emphasize raising our profile in the city and the region through better marketing and promotion. I know we need to do this more widely, but we should have a push on the local and the region.
Newly appointed staff strategy away day (period II)

Deputy Secretary: … We identified quite a few possibilities, work that’s going on in psychology which is about people, so that’s generally interesting to people outside universities. But also with the plans for the new halls of residence, perhaps getting people in to talk about the alternative power technologies that we’re going to be using on those.

…

Junior administrator (Department A): … we know that we are very strong on communicating with students and getting students to come to open days. And we thought that communicating with businesses in the local area, so setting up open days for businesses to come and visit us and tell them about the facilities we have at [Unico]. Because they’re probably sitting thinking how can [Unico] help them.

VC: … And I think more open days, research and sort of industry engagement open days for businesses in the region, but also you can invite more distant research partners too, would be good. I don’t think we show off enough, we need to show off more and more broadly.
After these two strategy away days

E-mail from the Deputy VC to the VC:

… Our weakness are local marketing/visibility with businesses and that is where we can benefit from advice from the Council.
Council strategy away day (period II)

Questions that meeting delegates were tasked with:

- How can we promote/market ourselves more effectively?
- What actions should we take to raise the profile of the University significantly, locally and amongst businesses?

*Non-executive Council member:* ... Just very quickly, there’s a difference obviously between marketing, publicity and raising the profile. And one thing that I think [Unico] doesn’t do locally is to present itself to the city centre, who’ve got a massive international […] motorway coming through, verging on the edge of our campus, and the first thing you see when you drive past [Unico is Competitor University]… We’re missing the boat on marketing to the local people, to the local press [about Unico], what we do, how excellent we are, and it just needs to be mentioned the name [Unico], on the expressway, to promote ourselves to those areas. And there’s a difference between marketing and publicity, yes, but we’re missing the boat and I think we should invest in that this year.
Top management team meeting (period III)

Questions that meeting delegates were tasked with:
  - Is there anything missing?
  - Do we need to re-formulate?

*Departmental Head A*: What about visibility in the local media as a bullet point there?

*VC*: Yeah.

*Deputy VC*: Sorry?

*Departmental Head A*: Visibility in the local media.
Conversational patterns: a model

- **Initiation**
  - Single
  - Recurrent

- **Responsive act**
  - No response
  - Single immediate response
  - Multiple immediate responses
  - Delayed response

- **Context**
  - Two types of actors
  - Type of meeting
## Findings on conversational patterns

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Questions & Answers