

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Sajasalo, Pasi; Auvinen, Tommi; Takala, Tuomo; Järvenpää, Marko; Sintonen, Teppo

Title: Strategy implementation as fantasising – becoming the leading bank

Year: 2016

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © 2015 Taylor & Francis.

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Sajasalo, P., Auvinen, T., Takala, T., Järvenpää, M., & Sintonen, T. (2016). Strategy implementation as fantasising – becoming the leading bank. *Accounting and Business Research*, 46(3), 303-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00014788.2015.1112764>

Strategy implementation as fantasising – becoming the leading bank

In this empirical case study we explore the fantasy nature of strategy work and propose fantasising as a framework contributing to the nascent literature dealing with the previously overlooked fantasy nature of strategy. More specifically, our interest is on examining how the meaning of official strategy gets constructed as it is being implemented, as well as and how and why the perceptions may evolve during implementation. Our data consists of official strategy documents and interviews from Finland's largest financial services group and its largest unit. The interviews cover all organisational levels, enabling us to reveal the variations of perceptions of strategy as it is being implemented. The data analysis is carried out by means of qualitative interpretation. According to our findings, the main goal of becoming the leading bank, as outlined in the official strategy, had been adopted throughout the organisation hierarchically. However, conceptions of what would constitute 'a leading bank' varied, especially horizontally. The plausibility of the official strategy is constructed through rational techniques (e.g. numerical 'objective' accounting information) intertwined with storytelling. As a result we propose that strategy implementation may best be understood as fantasising involving two forms: functional (explicit, short-term-oriented) and symbolic (metaphorical, long-term-oriented). We offer fantasising in these two forms as an addition to fantasy-oriented strategy literature for further exploration to better understand the nature of strategy work.

Keywords: fantasy, strategy, sensemaking, storytelling

Introduction

The majority of the mainstream strategic management literature has paid little attention to how strategy may change during the implementation process as it is affected by different organisational actors trying to make sense of the official strategy. Instead, strategy is seen to remain constant assuming that stability, orderliness and predictability would prevail in social life, and as if human behaviour would be characterised solely by rationality (Boedker 2010). This is most often not the case in organisations, nor in social life more generally.

However, rational discourse with its logical-rational reasoning has persisted in organisation and management research (Schipper 2009; Weick & Browning 1986; March 2006; Klikauer 2013). Mainstream management literature has operated in a rational paradigm that emphasises the importance of numerical information perceived as objective facts. Chua (1986, p. 617) explains this firm belief in numbers fittingly: “Numbers are often perceived as being more precise and “scientific” than qualitative evidence”. However, managers may best be seen fundamentally as storytellers that resort to their beliefs and emotions in their work (McCloskey 1992; Taleb 2007; Pihlanto 2002). Instead of being walking calculators or divine experts and foreseers with the coherent and objective truth about strategy, managers as strategists, are sensemakers, as are the other members in the organisation (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; O’Toole, Gailbraith & Lawler 2002). In this paper, we will take a closer look at strategising by looking at its salient elements, both those generally perceived as objective/rational (numerical) and those often seen as subjective/irrational (interpretative).

We build on the practice orientation found in both management accounting and strategy literatures (see e.g. Ahrens & Chapman 2007; Whittle & Mueller 2010; Vaara & Whittington 2012) to examine the perceptions and meanings attached to strategy and numerical strategic targets (e.g. key ratios) at different organisational levels. According to Boedker (2010), the relationship between accounting and strategy has traditionally been one

with a linear pathway: the role of accounting having provided controls suitable for tracking and supporting strategy implementation (Kaplan & Norton, 1996, Micheli et al. 2011).

However, the prevailing understanding of how accounting information may shape strategy and transform organisational reality is still too narrowly understood. In effect, by operating at the crossroads of two traditionally separate, yet closely connected fields of management study we are responding to Chua's (2007, 493) call to rediscover accounting and strategy as "contingent, lived verbs rather than abstract nouns". Hence we are able to benefit from ideational cross-pollination while doing so.

The meaning of strategy is constructed as it is communicated throughout the organisation. Sensemaking (Weick 1995; 2001) provides us an ideational starting point for dissecting how strategy becomes meaningful in the flux of interpretations. Thus, we use sensemaking, traditionally understood as a largely retrospective approach, to construct, interpret and recognise meaningful features of organisational reality (Gephart et al. 2012; see also Thurlow & Helms Mills 2009). In terms of the overall strategy process, we are concerned especially with implementation-related sensemaking of which scholars have relatively little understanding (cf. Jarzabkowski 2008). While we are using the classic and much debated divide, described in terms of planning versus implementation in strategy work (see e.g. Mintzberg 1990; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel 2005; Clegg, Carter & Kornberger 2004; Leonardi 2015), here we only use it to clarify our focus, without any intention of delving into the debate itself.

Instead of treating strategy as a top-down process, where senior management creates a full-blown, detailed, yet simple strategy ready for implementation, the strategy as practice thinking (see e.g. Whittington 1996; Vaara & Whittington 2012) departs from the managerialist ideology pertinent in the traditional strategy literature. It perceives strategy as a non-hierarchical, reflexive and discursively oriented phenomenon. When discussing strategy

in this article, we build in particular on the discussions found within the strategy as practice literature (e.g. Laine & Vaara 2011; Vaara & Whittington 2012) with a view of distancing ourselves from the traditional strategy literature and its positivist assumptions (cf. Chua 1986; Clegg et al. 2004; Kakkuri-Knuuttila, Lukka & Kuorikoski 2008; Kaplan 2007).

In line with the strategy as practice literature, we will, in what follows, be taking the linguistic turn in strategy scholarship seriously as a way forward in strategy research, as suggested by Vaara (2010). Our point of departure is discursive and, in particular, narrative. We see the use of language as having a central role in constructing and conveying meanings in organisational reality. The primary form this meaning construction takes is narration; a cognitive process that arranges human experience in meaningful episodes (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 1). We define a story as an oral or written communicative act where particular events occur over time; therefore, all stories have a chronological dimension (Søderberg 2003). Furthermore, we follow Polkinghorne (1988) and Czarniawska (2004) in using the terms story and narrative interchangeably. Therefore, strategy can also be understood as storytelling with emplotted action (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), directions for activity embedded with numerical financial and non-financial information (such as key ratios and figures) or fantasising.

However, in this sense, we are interested in the resonance and durability of the fantasy itself (strategy) rather than single strategic (financial) ratios or figures per se. In this paper, we will focus on illustrating how strategising – meaning strategy implementation in particular – can be understood as fantasising; a form of organisational sensemaking (cf. Kets de Vries & Miller 1984) that takes place in functional and symbolic planning, and how numbers and “number talk” as a particular form of discourse (cf. Chua 1986, 1997) are intertwined in these organisational processes.

We contribute to the practice-oriented management accounting and strategy literature

(e.g. Ahrens & Chapman 2007; Chua 2007; Jørgensen & Messner 2010; Skaerbaek & Tryggestad 2010; MacIntosh & Beech 2011; Vaara & Whittington 2012) and to future-oriented sensemaking discussions (e.g. Clegg, Carter & Kornberger 2004; Gephart et al. 2012) by empirically developing the concept of fantasising.

Research task

Strategy is present in everyday organisational routines but it only becomes existent for organisational members through the use of language; in other words, organisational discourses (Vaara & Laine 2011). For the purposes of this study, we are interested in how the ultimate strategic goal is made sense of in organisational discourse and how numerical accounting information performs a role in strategy-related sensemaking. In particular, the focus will be on the implementation of strategy, involving fantasising.

In the context of strategy, sensemaking is best understood as a prospective (future oriented) manner of understanding organisational discourse because strategic planning and plans orient to the future. In effect, any strategy document or official strategy statement of an organisation is brought about by strategising, the process where prospective sensemaking related to the future in the form of fantasy and fantasising takes place. Thus, we focus on the perceptions and meanings attached to official strategy in different echelons of an organisation to better understand how and why strategy may assume evolving manifestations while being implemented. It is a matter of dissecting different conceptions about strategy adopted among organisational members and how these conceptions are related to everyday language usage and numerical accounting information. Addressing these issues helps us better understand how the conception of strategy evolves in the implementation process and how numerical information and storytelling are intertwined in attempts to amplify the message contained in the official strategy and to concretise the abstract.

Theoretical framing

In the following, we intend to draw out the discussions and central concepts we will use to build our argumentation and to support the analysis of our empirical data. We will first briefly outline connections between strategy as practice and the recent practice-oriented management accounting literature, and explain how these will be utilised to support our analysis.

Likewise, we will sketch out how we bridge different strands of sensemaking literature in our study to allow the use of various temporal perspectives in conjunction to facilitate our analytical purposes. Moreover, we will present a condensed discussion on how fantasy and fantasising – both neglected and empirically underdeveloped concepts in the strategy literature (McIntosh & Beech 2011) – offer insightful ways to enrich our understanding of strategy-related sensemaking, especially concerning strategy implementation.

While the concept of fantasy is akin to the concept of fiction used for example by Barry and Elmes (1997) and Bubna-Litic (1995) in their conceptual work in an attempt to undrape strategic management's more fictitious nature, we resort to fantasy instead. We take fantasy to be a more inclusive concept and use it to support our description and discussion of strategy-related sensemaking. Moreover, while the abovementioned contributions are important explorations into the narrative nature of strategy, they differ from our focus by being purely conceptual/theoretical in their orientation.

Practice orientation in strategy and management accounting

Both strategy and management accounting literatures have embraced practice orientation as a way forward in understanding how organisational reality unfolds and how everyday micro

activities at different levels of organisations actually play an important role in organisations and their functioning (see e.g. Vaara & Whittington 2012; Whittle & Mueller 2010; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara 2011). The practice orientation recognises the limits of rationality and planning orientation, which are the taken-for-granted assumptions in much of the modern management literature and the approaches it promotes. In fact, practice orientation may be seen to reintroduce ideas dating back to such thinkers as Charles Lindblom (1959) with ‘muddling through’, and Herbert Simon (1947) with ‘bounded rationality’ as the guiding principles of both individual and organisational decision-making and resultant behaviour.

The fallacy of both rationality and stability as guiding principles in organisational life has been acknowledged recently in the strategy as practice literature. As a result, an increasing concern for the micro-dynamics of strategy-making may be observed (see e.g. Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl 2007; Whittington 2006). As Kaplan (2007, 988) outlines, “[s]trategy as practice is an interpretive approach in which the world cannot be understood independently of the social actors and processes that produce it”. Therefore, strategy as practice research can be said to be operating within the interpretative research paradigm (Burrell & Morgan 1979; Chua 1986), which is in line with the current study’s orientation.

Instead of discussing ‘strategy’, many of the strategy as practice scholars have adopted the notion of ‘strategising’ to cover the myriad of activities through which rather abstract strategic ideas or objectives are made sense of and enacted upon by organisational members who, in turn, shape and develop these ideas (Jørgensen & Messner 2010). The viewpoint of the strategy as practice approach clearly contrasts with the traditional strategy literature in which strategy-making has been portrayed as a process led by rational analysis and decision-making in which managerial agency traditionally has supremacy in shaping what takes place (Wilson, Branicki, Sullivan-Taylor & Wilson 2010). Both the rationality and

managerial supremacy assumptions have been heavily questioned, and established as unfounded (cf. Wilson 1992).

Furthermore, accounting regimes may play a key role in defining the “added value” of ideas, with implications for how business strategies are formulated (Whittle & Mueller 2010). Moreover, Tillman and Goddard (2008) have pointed out that in order to better understand the relationship between strategy and accounting we should take a closer look into the sensemaking around management accounting and strategy. In addition, Jordan and Messner (2012) recently pointed out how accounting numbers may be imperfect for management situations, but they still may provide the stimulus for different kinds of sensemaking processes in organisations. In addition, accounting and strategising have been recognised in recent literature (Jørgensen & Messner 2010; Skaerbaek & Tryggestad 2010) as having potential for studying accounting as a practice (Ahrens & Chapman 2007).

Focusing on ‘strategy-accounting talk’ (Chua 2007, p. 492) allows, for instance, for the discussion of how accounting is woven into strategic considerations and debates, as well as how accounting concepts are mobilised when crafting strategy (Jørgensen & Messner 2010). Thus, there seems to be growing agreement between strategy and management accounting scholars that a closer connection of the two fields would advance our understanding of how and by which means strategy is made sense of in organisations, and what is the role assigned to “numbers talk” in strategy-related sensemaking.

Numerical accounting information may be thought of as having an important role in the construction of strategy by alleviating the built-in problem in strategy. Strategy is aimed at promoting an illusory singular order through planning, which would require participants to become accomplished in suspending disbelief and being able to fantasise positive futures, heroic outcomes and defining victories (MacIntosh & Beech 2010). What numerical information is providing for strategy is an alleviation of its profoundly illusory nature due to

future orientation, and at least a partial relief of the uncertainty of strategy by introducing supposedly rational, allegedly factual reference points for otherwise obscure and uncertain, even highly imaginary futures (c.f. Burchell et al. 1980, Hines 1988; Ditillo 2004; Marginson & Ogden 2005; MacIntosh & Quattrone 2010; Messner, Goretsky & Jordan 2013).

As part of the “factualisation” of strategy, actual numbers, such as key ratios, play an important role in modern organisations in both setting targets and gauging progress towards them (Kaplan & Norton 1996, Micheli 2011). There is a craving for numbers, which are thought to indicate objectively and factually (Burchell et al. 1980, Hines 1988; MacIntosh & Quattrone 2010) where the organisation stands at any given time, and what is its standing in relation to the set goals. The craving for numbers is so great that if numbers are not provided, they are made up to be able to make sense of the prevailing situation based on numbers conceived to hold true and able to forecast progress towards the ultimate goal, as will be later shown in our analysis of our case organisation. In general, numbers may be more powerful in strategising than thought of, as Denis, Langley and Rouleau (2006) have demonstrated in their study of the strategic reformation of the healthcare system.

Sensemaking and narration: past, present and future orientations

According to Weick (2001), sensemaking is about the construction of meaningful events based on seven properties: (1) social context, (2) personal identity, (3) retrospect, (4) salient cues, (5) on-going projects, (6) plausibility, and (7) enactment (ibid., p 460). These properties emphasise the social, individual, interactional, temporal, situational and practical aspects of sensemaking.

Of these properties, in what follows we will focus on plausibility alone (Weick’s sixth property) in our analysis. This is a conscious choice and our intention is not to say that the other properties do not matter, quite the contrary. Plausibility is just the most profound of the

properties, essentially the culmination point in making sense of events and phenomena building on the other properties outlined by Weick (2001). As plausibility is what it all boils down to, especially when the concern is on future events (i.e. prospective sensemaking), we concentrate on plausibility and deal with other properties only where they appear especially relevant.

Sensemaking is temporal in the sense that it is usually portrayed as retrospective (the third property). The world is lived and perceived before it is understood. While in the Weickian¹ approach to sensemaking, retrospection is one key property, it can also orient to the future (Gephart, Topal & Zhang 2012; Maitlis & Christianson 2014). Our attention focuses on strategy, which is inevitably a future-oriented entity. However, while strategy is about future events and is forward-looking in orientation, it is typically based on retrospective and current information, complemented by forecasts and best guesses, even if typically presented as highly analytical and fact-based. Therefore, sensemaking can also be perceived as prospective when people try to imagine events taking place in the future (see Ricoeur 1994; Boje 2008).

Furthermore, as Thurlow (2010) argues, organisations require rules that focus on social practices determining the ways in which individuals organise and the manner for how things get done. Such rules set limitations on individual sensemaking and actions, and from that perspective, rules (e.g. accounting-based key ratios utilised in decision-making) provide a pre-existing sensemaking tool that contributes to the plausibility of an interpretation or the likelihood of a cue to be extracted as meaningful (Thurlow 2010); for example, in situations involving negotiations, decision-making or strategising, as in our case. Moreover, accounting might be seen as a special type of organizational rule. This rule type nature of accounting is actually pointed out for example by Burns and Scapens (2000).

¹ Weickian sensemaking can be extended to a mixture of retrospect and prospect used to answer practical questions such as “now what?” that addresses the future (Gephart et al. 2012, p. 277).

Fantasy and fantasising

Fantasy, unlike numerical information, has not been a typical framework in strategy or management accounting literature (for rare exceptions see e.g. Lukka & Modell 2010; MacIntosh & Beech 2011). However, fantasy has some recognition within organisation studies and thus also holds promise for strategy and management accounting literatures. According to Manning (2000), fantasy has emerged in risk management literature. For instance Clarke (1999) has proposed fantasy documents as a framework for preparing for crisis situations and disasters. Gephart et al. (2012) have applied Clarke's framework for future-oriented sensemaking in their work on institutional legitimation. Gabriel (1995, p. 479), as a renowned organisation theorist, states that the chief force in the unmanaged organisation is fantasy, and its landmarks include jokes, gossip, nicknames, and above all, stories (cf. Barry & Elmes 1997 for a strategy-as-story perspective). Gabriel (ibid.) stresses the view that fantasy can offer a method for an individual, which amounts neither to rebellion nor conformity, but to a symbolic refashioning of official organisational practices in the interest of pleasure, allowing a temporal supremacy of emotion over rationality and of uncontrol over control.

Fantasy, which is required in the creative process of strategising, is produced by the human imagination. To clarify the connection between fantasy and imagination, we refer to Ricoeur (1994, pp. 118–120), who distinguishes four uses for the concept of imagination. All the uses deal with the ideas of presence/absence and existence/non-existence. First, something which is absent here but present somewhere else can be called/brought to be here through the imagination. Second, some things (e.g. artwork), which have physical existence here, can function to represent something which is existent somewhere else. Third, through imagination we are able to bring images which are not only absent here, but also non-existent elsewhere to our minds. This is exactly what fiction does: it creates scenes, events, and

landscapes that have no present and physical existence anywhere. Fourth, imagination makes illusion possible. In a certain incident it is possible to create phenomena, which call for the present audience to believe that they are reality.

Of these four uses outlined by Ricoeur (1994), we would like to maintain the following issues. First, plans, figures and various other documents and artefacts brought about by strategising exist here and now, but represent ideas desired to be realised in the future (the second use of imagination outlined by Ricoeur). Second, considering strategising as a creative process, as we do here, imagination is an essential part of it. Because strategising is always future oriented, and the future is unknown, we have no other choice but to imagine it. In strategising it is a matter of creating future scenes and events, with no existence anywhere (the third use of imagination outlined by Ricoeur). Third, strategic fantasies need to be “sold” to the members of the organisation to build commitment for the strategy to be implemented. The fourth Ricoeurian use of imagination suggests that imagination enables the creation of an illusion making the realisation of the fantasy plausible. Thus, imagination in this sense helps to merge different associations of strategy into a shared fantasy – inter-subjective meanings close enough to allow coordinated action (cf. Maitlis & Christianson 2014, pp. 66–67). Moreover, all of these issues leave the question of the realisation of the products of imagination unresolved, leaving the future state of fantasies created by imagination in strategising open.

Furthermore, dictionaries define fantasy as: 1) ‘something that is produced by the imagination: an idea about doing something that is far removed from normal reality’ (Merriam Webster), or as: 2) ‘the faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things’ (Oxford English Dictionary). The former definition does not exclude the possibility of fantasy becoming real while the latter explicitly emphasises the impossible or improbable nature of such imaginings portraying it as “pure fiction”.

Gabriel's (1995) orientation towards fantasy above is in line with Merriam Webster's definition, having a rather positive tone in regard to fantasising. Weick, however, in discussing the seven properties of sensemaking (2001, p. 462), unlike Gabriel, warns us not to mix fantasy with plausibility. Therefore, it could be argued that Weick displays a traditional, functionalist orientation to fantasy and fantasising that is also reflected in the Oxford definition above.

Gephart et al. (2012) discuss distinguishable forms of fantasy in organisational sensemaking. They propose two general types of planning: functional and symbolic. "Functional planning ... requires a meaningful history to estimate probabilities of events. If decision makers cannot assign definite probabilities to events, planning becomes symbolic and "fantasy documents" are often created since events are uncertain. Fantasy documents are imaginative fictions about what people hope will happen. One cannot know if the promises made by the documents can be fulfilled until ... plans are implemented. Thus fantasy documents are a "form of rhetoric, tools designed to convince audiences they ought to believe what an organisation says"" (ibid. p. 283). We can assume that different levels of management will use different kinds of rhetoric in order to manage, control, and persuade various organisational members.

As becomes apparent from the previous discussion, fantasy has several meanings and applications in the literature. Hence, as a synthesis, we have decided upon a particular operationalisation of fantasy to support our analysis on strategy implementation. The two distinguished definitions used in this study are as follows:

- (1) Fantasy as eligible reality: A desired status quo, which at the moment is far from present reality, but for which there is no apparent reason for stopping it from being realised, hence this sort of fantasy holds probability of being actualised and the fantasy thus appears plausible.

- (2) Fantasy as utopia: A desired but purely imagined reality; a fabulous dream, which is impossible to materialise and hence the fantasy appears implausible.

To sum up, for the purposes of this study we use the term fantasy document to describe strategy, and fantasising to describe its implementation. Furthermore, fantasising can be distinguished in functional and symbolic planning. That is, it is the process that involves (hierarchical) sensemaking.

Methodology

The research strategy chosen for this study is an interpretative case study, more specifically, an embedded single-case design (Yin 2009, p. 46). This methodological choice is deemed appropriate for the current study on the grounds that the case study method is suitable for situations characterised by 1) the type of research questions posed (how, why), 2) the extent of control the investigator has over actual events (none), and 3) the degree of focus on contemporary events (on-going) (Yin 2009, p. 8). Moreover, the case study as a methodological choice has gained increasing acceptance and an established position within both the management accounting (cf. Ahrens and Chapman 2006, Kakkuri-Knuuttila et al. 2008, Lukka & Modell 2010) and strategy as practice literature (see e.g. Sugarman 2014; Kornberger & Clegg 2011); therefore, connecting our study to established research traditions in the field.

Case organisation and empirical data

Our case organisation is a fairly large financial institution located in Finland, Helsingin OP Bank Plc (hereinafter HOP Bank). It is part of the OP-Pohjola Group Central Cooperative (hereinafter OP-Pohjola), which is among the largest financial groups in Finland employing some 12,000 employees with total assets of 99,769 billion EUR (OP-Pohjola annual report 2013). HOP Bank is the single largest bank within OP-Pohjola, employing over 700 people.

Having secured access to the organisation, the research team ventured out to find out how the members at different levels of the organisation made sense of HOP Bank's strategy, values, strategy communication and goals. Early on in our interviews it became clear that HOP Bank had one ultimate strategic goal: that of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025. This goal was openly declared, and therefore, it became the centre of attention in our initial round of interviews within HOP Bank as the theme popped up in almost every interview.

We conducted altogether 23 informant interviews in two rounds between December 2012 and February 2014 covering all organisational levels: OP-Pohjola Group top management (hereinafter Tier 1), HOP Bank top management team (Tier 2), middle management (Tier 3) and the operative personnel (Tier 4). All the interviews were conducted in the offices of the informants or otherwise at the premises of HOP Bank and its branch offices. To select our informants, we resorted to purposeful sampling (Patton 2002) to include in our data organizational members from all echelons involved in strategising. The method used to identify the informants was the snowball sampling procedure (Laumann & Pappi 1976), where the initial interviewees, representatives of the senior management of HOP Bank were asked to identify individuals representing both Tier 3 and Tier 1 for further interviews. Tier 3 representatives then were further asked to identify Tier 4 individuals to contact for interviews. All interview candidates identified through the snowball method agreed to be interviewed. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours each and were audio recorded resulting in some 30 hours of interview speech and 466 pages of transcription text (single spaced). The identity of each interviewee is hidden and codified for ethical and confidentiality reasons. An overview of the empirical data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. An overview of empirical data: The number of informants belonging to different organisational levels (tiers), audio recordings (hours), transcriptions (pages) and other documents

Interviews	Informants (number)	Recordings (hours)	Transcript (sheets)
TIER 1: OP-Pohjola Group Top Management	2	1.5	20
TIER 2: HOP Bank (CEO + Top Management Team)	6	12.3	166
TIER 3: Middle management	8	10.6	184
TIER 4: Operative staff (bank clerks)	7	5.8	94
Total	23	30.2	466
Organisational documents			
Official strategy (2012) documents provided by HOP Bank's management			42
Sketches drawn by the interviewees during interviews			18

The themes in the semi-structured interviews related to the work history of the interviewee, the description of organisational strategy (emphasising the interviewee's subjective perspective), the meaning and role of numerical information in organisational strategy, the communication of strategy within the organisation and the forms of influence used by the management in making the strategy known within the organisation.

Besides interviews, we were provided the official strategy documents (altogether some 40 pages), which were used in the analysis. However, since the information is strategic and partially confidential, the key ratios and any actual figures presented to the research team or appearing in interviews, have been modified.

The data analysis was organised in two separate phases. In preparation for codification and to avoid misinterpretation of the data, each transcript was read thoroughly by all the researchers involved, thereafter the research team held a group discussion regarding the interview, and at that point interpretations were cross-checked between the researchers.

We then compared data from other interviews to identify similarities and differences. Only after this did the research team codify the data using the Atlas.ti software (ver. 7.5.2). Thus, in the first phase, before and during the codification, we circulated the data within the research team in several rounds with a view to making sense of the material in order not to miss anything of importance in our data with regard to the coding scheme to be followed. In the second phase, we further analysed the content of the data based on the codes chosen, focusing particularly on the meanings associated with strategy and the role of numerical information. By utilising the tools offered by the Atlas.ti software we were able to condense the data mass and make it more readily available for further detailed analysis by distilling interview excerpts with most relevance for our research purposes from the otherwise extensive transcription. Hence the first phase of analysis could be understood in terms of qualitative theme analysis while the latter phase was about qualitative content analysis since this involved a deeper interpretation of the data (Eskola & Suoranta 1999; Boje 2001; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2009).

Empirical part: Analysis of strategising

The analysis is divided into two parts: we first introduce the official strategy and address the variance of perceptions of key strategic goals among organisational members in different echelons. Second, we explore the adopted conceptions of leading bank at different levels of the organisation and business lines. By doing this, we illustrate how the strategy-related sensemaking among organisational members can be understood in terms of fantasising.

Part I – Setting the scene: the official strategy of HOP Bank

To establish our analysis of the discourse on strategy, we will briefly outline the most important elements of the official strategy statement of HOP Bank as it serves as a starting point for our analysis and discussion. The official strategy statement of HOP Bank is

essentially a carbon copy of that of OP-Pohjola with only one important specification noted below. OP-Pohjola's strategy has been publicly disclosed and the key elements are therefore described here (OP-Pohjola 2014):

Mission: We promote the sustainable prosperity, well-being and security of our owner-members, customers and operating regions through our local presence.

Core values: A people-first approach, Responsibility, Prospering together

Goal: We are the leading financial services group in Finland. We will grow faster than the market rate.

Customer promise: We offer the best loyal customer benefits.

Competitive advantages: Comprehensive financial services offering, best loyalty benefits, close to customers, cooperative basis, Finnish roots, stability

The only differences to the above in the strategy statement of HOP Bank are related to the important regional role of HOP Bank within OP-Pohjola and a set date.

Goal: We are the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025.

The use of language in strategy discourse: Narration and numerical information

We begin by addressing how narration and numerical information appears in language use related to strategy within the organisation. The Executive Vice President (hereinafter EVP) of HOP Bank (Tier 2) explains the use of an illustrated narrative, which he had utilised repeatedly as a vehicle of discussion in internal annual operating planning meetings to communicate the ultimate strategic goal of HOP Bank – becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 – to the members of the organisation.

The *story* took about 35 minutes. The end result of it was that at the bottom [of flipchart] is 2025, and that has been so deeply inscribed in peoples' minds over the past two years, that the date is all that is needed. They know the rest that goes with it. Then, in the middle [of flipchart] words commission earnings. And here at the top [of the flipchart] I place Loyalty Customer ... the *story* boils down to [20]25 being the strategic goal of HOP Bank. That has not changed a bit ... I began my *story* with the growth objective and I ended with it.

The centrality of one numerical expression – 2025 – is accentuated as the one single number needed to communicate the strategic goal of becoming the leading bank for the organisation's members. The year 2025 appears to the EVP as a widely shared understanding within the organisation, bearing strong implications and evoking directed action towards the set goal without any need to specify the details. In effect, the number 2025 seen in this respect is analogous with what Mintzberg (1987) refers to as “strategy as perspective”: a widely shared mental frame, or ingrained way of perceiving the world. The meaning conveyed by 2025 would then assume the role of a guiding principle for the members of the organisation in the EVP's thinking; it is perceived to distil the essence of what is sought after by the organisation as a whole.

In addition, the excerpt above serves as an example of the symbolic nature of the bank's official strategy. As the EVP himself said, he narrates the time span for reaching the organisational goal. Hence, his illustration can be understood as a narrative – an emplotting of strategy involving agents (the staff, other relevant stakeholders), the temporal dimension (2025) and an outcome (leading bank). In addition, the narrative contains rhetorical techniques in the domain of accounting: commission earnings are used for legitimisation and concretisation purposes. Furthermore, in terms of critical and prospective sensemaking (cf. Thurlow 2010; Gephart et al. 2012), this is an apt example of how a manager uses the legitimised pre-existing rules offered by widely-used accounting terminology (forthcoming earnings and the consequential remunerations to the staff) to add the plausibility of the

sought-after sensemaking within the organisation as suggested by Thurlow (2010) to get things done in his organisation. It appears that while the intention of the EVP was to resort to a functional approach to implementation, above all, the excerpt is about symbolic planning. Functional planning would require a meaningful history to estimate the probabilities of events; however, when the situation does not permit that due to the uncertainty and ambiguity brought about by a long time horizon, symbolic planning assumes its place (cf. Clarke 1999).

Another illustrative example of how numerical information and narration are involved in implementation comes from middle management (Tier 3). A middle manager in the corporate customer banking business line aims to concretise the milestones towards 2025 for his subordinates. Since he feels that it is too far in the future to have any concrete meaning, he resorts to “making up” numbers in an attempt to make the goal more comprehensible. He, for instance, uses ratios (e.g. annual growth, turnover) – established management accounting concepts – in his attempts. He even describes himself as a “numbers guy” in how he communicates the goals to his subordinates:

If I think about the issue of being the leader from the corporate customer banking perspective, it's not that clear ... I have tried to piece it together so that if our business volume in my own business unit is a bit over [x] billion, for us to be the leading bank in the metropolitan region that would mean it would need to be at least three-fold in 2025... I even break the total to individual account managers so that they know what I am expecting from them on a yearly basis.

Therefore, in this case, the narration is about emplotting long-term goal attainment by providing “concrete” measurable milestones while some of the figures and ratios utilized are rather imaginary. According to his colleague, and also his superior (responsible for corporate customer banking) such numerical information, in fact, does not exist yet, since the management information system (MIS) does not contain all the relevant information required for such calculations. Furthermore, the CFO at HOP Bank (Tier 2) also recognises that the

numerical information used for future-oriented purposes is not absolutely true and accurate. This, however, does not necessarily undermine its importance in sensemaking, as numerical information, while containing assumptions and best guesses, holds plausibility for him and he seems rather convinced that this applies to the middle management (Tier 3) as well.

... now, if you start making forward-looking calculations or finding justifications for your arguments, they always inevitably contain assumptions, so that they are not anymore necessarily fact. They are only best estimates of what may happen and what you should do ... it is the best estimate of how by doing this the bank will reach its goal. We are talking about annual goals here. In the next forum the discussion is on how, by achieving these goals this year, we are able to move toward the ultimate goal. All this should be well known at middle management [Tier 3] level; that all these [forward-looking calculations] are simply best guesses about what we should be doing.

Therefore, it appears that forward-looking calculations in combination with attempts at formal planning would be important pieces in the puzzle of laying out the steps toward becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025. Next, we will focus on the meanings associated with the ultimate goal itself.

Unified diversity? – The leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025

During our initial round of interviews, when asked about the central theme in HOP Bank's strategy, many of the middle managers (Tier 3) could cite the ultimate strategic goal of the official strategy word for word, or at the very least, the central idea. In a sense, the EVP's and management group's (Tier 2) intended and underscored message seemed to have penetrated Tier 3. Therefore, it would appear that 2025 did in fact carry a powerful and animated message for the middle managers, which they were able to communicate to their subordinates as reflected in one middle manager's comment.

... the strategy of ours, becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025, has concretised for many of us the fact that OP-Pohjola as a group cannot do well without us

becoming the leading bank ... But still, we are quite small here [in the metropolitan region] and it's here where the growth has to happen.

While the strategic goal appeared to have been somewhat unanimously accepted among Tier 3 interviewees, some hesitation was still evident whether the strategic goal was HOP Bank's or that of OP-Pohjola as is evident in the following remark from a middle manager:

... really, no-one knows more about the strategy. We know what the strategy of OP-Pohjola as a group is; that both private banking and merchant banking are the focus. What that means in practice, no-one knows, it's all hazy.

Given that HOP Bank's strategy statement is essentially identical with OP-Pohjola's declared official strategy, confusion is not inconceivable. However, despite the critical tone, the middle manager's (Tier 3) statement above about the group's strategy being known would indicate the ultimate strategic goal having been received and not questioned. What is put in doubt is by which practical means it is to be achieved, as the path and intermediate steps toward it remain abstract and unspecified at the middle management level.

Not only had the leading bank idea penetrated the middle management, but Tier 4 representatives also echoed the central message. Apparently, the ultimate strategic goal of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 was rather unanimously accepted by the operative personnel members (Tier 4) as the undoubted future state for HOP Bank:

... we have this strategy, leading bank in 2025, so growth is what is sought after, and that has been pretty well hammered into our brain.

The evident conviction reflected in HOP Bank CEO's (Tier 2) statement of this being the case appeared to be well-founded:

... the leading bank in the metropolitan region, that is known by everyone here, that's how all presentations start ... the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 and all activities are aimed at it.

With only a few discomfiting notes to the rather unified perception of the leading bank as the future state of HOP Bank, diversity in sensemaking related to the stated goal could be seen as a rare exception to the rule. At all levels of the organisation the ultimate goal of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 appeared somewhat inevitable and was not questioned. Therefore, sensemaking related to the ultimate goal is in line with type 1 fantasy in our typology (eligible reality). In all, it would appear that leading bank status in the metropolitan region in 2025 was perceived as highly plausible by the members of the organisation at different levels, and a firm belief that the goal was within reach in the set timeframe was present. It would appear, based on the above, that the symbolic part of the strategy had been effectively communicated throughout the organisation.

Part II – Divergent unity? Seemingly uniformly shared conception frays at the edges

While the ultimate strategic goal of becoming the leading bank seemed almost unanimously agreed on at all organisational levels, when digging deeper to understand what the conception of 'leading bank' carried with it, and how the organisation would be able to gauge progress towards the stated goal, interesting variations in sensemaking began appearing. Diversity began emerging at different organisational levels, and especially between lines of business.

As noted above, we were gradually awakened during the first round of interviews to the fact that while the idea of a 'leading bank' appeared to be of paramount importance within the organisation, in relation to its future state – almost a cherished artefact – its meaning remained obscure, vague and varied. Initially, we assumed we had just overlooked the obvious, and so, returned to the theme during the second round of interviews with the

intention of simply finding out what exactly did leading bank mean for the organisation's members.

However, contrary to our expectation of “finding out a simple overlooked fact” the recurrent strategic goal-related discourse within the organisation of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025, began to take varying shapes as we drilled in on what the conception of being the leading bank means exactly. On the surface, the goal setting and especially the stated year 2025 appeared to have penetrated the organisation throughout as discussed above. However, as the excerpts below demonstrate, even within the upper echelons of the organisation, the concept of leading bank started blurring and took varying meanings at least partially appearing to emerge from the context of each different business line.

Excerpt, CEO:

... it's not an explicit definition, and it can't be, because we would need to chop it up first – the leading retail bank or the leading private bank, or the leading bank in personal customer banking or in corporate customer banking? For us it means that we are the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 when our market share in personal customer banking business is larger than Nordea's [market leader].

Excerpt, EVP:

In plain Finnish it means that we are also the biggest actor here, and the size measured whether or not we are considered the primary bank for our customers. And bank means also the insurance company. The leading bank 2025 is an excellent crystallisation in my opinion. Its weakness is the word 'bank'; it obscures the importance of insurance, and that's why my message is that the leading bank 2025 means that we are the largest actor here [metropolitan region], we are the biggest insurer, and we are the biggest bank. The size-issue is measured by the customers' perception of who their primary bank and primary insurer is.

Excerpt, Tier 2:

Now, that's an excellent question - I don't know, because no one else does either. It's a highly subjective issue ... if we are perceived by the customers to be their primary bank ... if customers don't name us when asked about their main bank, then we are not the leading bank. If we ourselves think that we are the leading bank just because we have shovelled out money through doors and windows, nothing good will result from that in the long run.

The defining features of 'leading bank' assume different characteristics: perceived as variably verifiable as market share, relative size to main competitor, or even something as abstract as individual customer perceptions. The ease or difficulty in defining how leading bank is to be made sense of appears to be attributable to differences in the everyday realities faced by the business lines. This reflects Weick's (2001) first property of sensemaking (social context), since the sensemaker's business line seems to bring about varying flavours. The differing social contexts and the attendant implications for sensemaking appear to be especially clearly present in how private banking is talked about in relation to the leading bank concept by the EVP and another top management team member representing the private banking business line.

Excerpt, EVP:

In private banking it [leading bank] has been crystallised slightly differently ... the owner will tolerate us not being necessarily the absolute biggest, but we have to be around the same level that the biggest operators roam ... in private banking slightly more room has been left. That's because there we have the biggest handicap. Nevertheless, a very ambitious growth target has been set for private banking also.

Excerpt, Tier 2:

... we are now, you could say the size of a mosquito, if we now have less than [x],000 private banking customers ... we are miniscule compared to Nordea. So if we managed to reach some 60% of their customer count, then I would consider us *noteworthy*. At that point we have visibility in the market and we will be talked about in the metropolitan region ... to be *noteworthy* we need to get this close to Nordea [referring to a presentation slide].

Even if the ultimate strategic goal of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 was, in principle at least, common to HOP Bank as a whole, the top management

interviewees were clearly willing to cut private banking some slack with respect to the “leader role” in this particular business line, as both the EVP and senior manager of private banking eased up on the goal of being the leader in this business line in 2025. Instead, moderation in the use of the term leading was made and ‘noteworthy’ replaced leading to describe private banking’s aspired status in 2025.

The need to moderate goal setting was justified by the EVP and senior manager by describing HOP Bank’s private banking (backed up by numbers for added plausibility) as the underdog in need of serious catch-up efforts with relation to its main competitor. This discourse is an example of how accounting-based numerical information influences strategy-related sensemaking, and may be used as a rhetorical technique for legitimising a claim or its suggested “factual” base. The use of numbers adds plausibility in this case (as suggested by Weick’s sixth property of sensemaking). In this instance, the numbers are used as a vehicle of persuasion for the utopian nature of the fantasy of becoming the leading player in private banking in the metropolitan region (i.e. in the sense of type 2 fantasy: fantasy as utopia, in our typology). As the goal seems outright unattainable in the given timeframe due to such a sizeable competitor, the leading rhetoric is replaced with less definitive rhetoric justifying the likelihood of nonconformity with the goal well in advance.

This is in clear contrast with the perception of the chairman of the administrative council at OP-Pohjola (Tier 1) who outlines HOP Bank’s ultimate strategic goal to be the leading bank in all business lines, while some hesitation with regard the “due date” is expressed:

... being the leading [bank] in our different business lines – market shares, they need to be number one ... at some point that means that HOP Bank also needs to be the number one in every single business line.

However, another Tier 1 manager resorts to a different kind of elucidation for the meaning of the ultimate strategic goal, being the leading bank:

...it is about gaining and retaining mental air supremacy.

These two statements clearly represent different rhetorical means: the former is more rational, explicit and established also in terms of accounting; market share appears more concrete and objective, something which can be measured. However, the latter represents rather metaphorical rhetoric with reference to air warfare.² Gaining or retaining mental air supremacy is by no means possible to measure, neither is it intended to be. As he himself describes the idea of strategy, it is about addressing the direction of actions among all organisational members. As both informants were among those formulating the official strategy of HOP Bank, this makes their statements important in the following respect: the different perceptions reflect the fantasy nature of the official strategy. The former represents functional planning, while the latter is clearly symbolic in nature.

While the date 2025 appeared to be widely received and well-remembered by the interviewees at all levels, giving the year 2025 the appearance of an unquestioned future state against which all development would be mirrored within the organisation, the perceived absoluteness of the temporal dimension received a less fixed definition from the chairman of the board at HOP Bank, as he explains:

... a given year [2025] was set to mark the time by which we want to achieve the goal. It really doesn't matter if the goal is reached in that exact year. 2025 is there more to symbolise that we believe the goal is achievable within some reasonable timeframe.

Therefore, while the rest of the organisation had perceived the year 2025 rather unanimously as “a binding contract” by which date the ultimate strategic goal had to be realised, and therefore, all activities were clearly guided by the future state 2025, the year 2025 appeared

² The NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions explains air supremacy as “That degree of air superiority wherein the opposing air force is incapable of effective interference.” (NATO, 2015)

to be just part (albeit a very central one) of the overall organisational narrative; that of becoming the leading bank. The central role in the fantasy was offered to HOP Bank from the top by the owner, OP-Pohjola, as an inspiring long-term future state, an eligible reality to realise through the strenuous effort of the organisation.

Eisenberg (1984) has proposed that ambiguity can be used strategically to foster agreement on abstractions without limiting specific interpretations. At first glance, the recurring theme of the leading bank appeared as if it might have been deliberately created to contain ambiguity so that there would be room for both individual and organisational sensemaking to decide what exactly leading bank means in terms of action in a given business line at HOP Bank. However, while this was our initial impression, this clearly was not the intention at HOP Bank. Instead, the top management had undertaken a painstaking exercise in the form of a strategy road-show throughout the organisation visiting every single HOP Bank branch office during spring 2013 in order to communicate the strategy in as unified a form and with as coherent a message as possible.

While the intention of the strategy road-show may be inferred to have been to force a unified idea of the strategy and strategic goal – essentially the top management's perception – onto the rest of the organisation in a traditional top-down fashion, the intention was not fully realised. Again, the symbolic part of the strategy (e.g. leading bank, fixed timespan, 2025) would appear to have been rather effectively diffused within the organisation as the goal of becoming the leading bank seemed unquestioned at all levels of the organisation. In terms of the functional part of the strategy, the question of what constitutes a leading bank seems particularly challenging (or even impossible) to delineate. How is the organisation to know whether or not the leading bank position has been attained (i.e. how to measure and verify it)?

As discussed above, the leading bank concept had penetrated the organisational echelons and it remained relatively constant during both rounds of interviews, and as such,

the constancy reflects the aspect of unified diversity. However, as will become evident with the following excerpts from the second round of interviews, the middle management interviewees clearly add their own flavour of sensemaking related to what the concept of leading bank actually means for them. This reflects the dispersing nature of sensemaking: the aspect of divergent unity in sensemaking related to the attempts to operationalise the symbolic part of strategy into more concrete terms by resorting to functional rhetoric and terminology. Multiple conceptions surface here related to cues by which the target of being the leading bank would emerge as actual or imminent.

The following excerpts reflect the multitude of meanings associated with the conception of leading bank within the middle management (Tier 3). Unlike the top management (Tier 2), numerical information related to the goals to be achieved by 2025 played a clearly more important role for the middle management (representing different business lines) in their strategy-related sensemaking.

Excerpt, Tier 3 (personal customer banking):

That means that, in market shares, customer volumes, we are the number one here [metropolitan region]. Growth is what we're after, in both business lines and customer volumes ... Now, what does the leading bank mean – it means that we have achieved the goals set to us, that market shares in different business lines are at the level we want them to be.

Excerpt, Tier 3 (private banking):

Leading bank most likely means that our market shares should be on track, and also customer volumes ... our market share is somewhere below [x]0% and Nordea around 45%, so that's our target to nibble away ... currently we have something like under [x],000 customers, so we need to get to closer to [x]0,000 customers if we want to be the leading bank in private banking [in the metropolitan region].

Excerpt, Tier 3 (corporate customer banking):

[Leading bank] means that the customers perceive us to be their primary bank. That's what it means in my opinion ... market share, how customers see it ... we must hold 51, or 50.01 share

to be the leading bank. Or rather, a bit thoughtless of me, just the largest market share is enough. Like if we now have [xx] and Nordea has 60, that needs to be reversed.

For middle managers, the signification of leading bank emerges through market share in different business lines, size of customer base, and business volume, again backed up with numbers to gauge against the main competitor in the metropolitan region. For middle management (Tier 3), the numbers clearly play a more important role in making sense of the “leader” concept than for the top management as a means of concretising strategy and directing action towards goal attainment. For the middle management, as way of making sense of the strategy and overall goal of the organisation, this appears to be a highly important means of relating the organisation to its main competitor against which all activities are directed in order to become the leading bank in the metropolitan region.

Furthermore, as with the top management team, resorting to a numbers rhetoric in making sense of the strategic goals and legitimising the need for growth to reach the leading bank status may be seen to serve the purpose of resorting to the perceived factual and objective nature of numbers to justify the necessary action. Furthermore, to add still another organisational layer in sensemaking related to the strategic goal we present some excerpts that illustrate sensemaking at the operative level of the organisation.

The importance of including the operative personnel as strategy-related sensemakers stems from the fact that it is at the operational level and daily operative reality of any organisation where strategy becomes “real” and “materialises” as activity, which does or does not bring about the aspired future state for the organisation. Therefore, micro-level activities springing out of strategy-related sensemaking are of utmost importance in achieving the goals of any organisation, and the sensemaking of what needs to be done in daily work to accomplish the goals is of instrumental importance for the functioning of organisations, although this aspect is most often neglected in strategy research (cf. Mantere 2005). The link

between strategy and daily operations seemed somewhat thin judging from the front line, as the following two remarks made by operational personnel demonstrate:

Excerpt, Tier 4 (corporate customer banking):

.. it [strategy] has been said, or the leading bank has, I really don't know if it is the same as the biggest, may not be ... Because we are most likely not able at any time to be competing in terms of size with Nordea or Danske Bank, but anyhow, here in our own [metropolitan] region we want to be one of the leaders in corporate customer banking.

Excerpt, Tier 4 (private banking):

What else goes into the strategy, that's not too well known, but the big picture at least is. And that's growth, and we have a set date for being the biggest ... Most likely that springs out of the strategy that growth is a must. To be the most successful in Finland, the biggest bank in the metropolitan region in 2025, we must achieve growth. And what's the driver behind growth?... personal targets set. How they are reached gets monitored on a weekly basis.

Discussion and conclusions

The strategy document in this study is understood as a fantasy document involving two forms of fantasy, (1) eligible reality; prospective future state of affairs, and (2) utopia; desired but unlikely to be realised future state of affairs. Furthermore, as outlined above, the implementation of strategy in this paper is referred to as fantasising, which takes place via two forms of planning: (1) functional, and (2) symbolic. The functional form refers to traditional, rationally-oriented strategic planning (cf. Mintzberg 1994) that typically focuses on the use of numerical accounting information (e.g. key ratios such as growth rate, market share). Numerical information is needed to locate the current position and to project the future progress. The symbolic form typically means such devices as visioning, metaphorisation and inspiring organisational members to move towards a common goal. The actual meaning of strategy needs symbolic communication such as in the metaphor of “air supremacy” which has no explicit reference point and cannot be verified in terms of

numerical information. Both functional and symbolic forms of planning are intertwined in fantasising – directing the organisation towards the set goal by creating necessary action and activity at all levels.

To illustrate our findings related to strategy as a fantasy document and implementation as fantasising, we have condensed them into Figure 1: A Route to a Fantasy Document. In Figure 1, the X-axis indicates time, while the Y-axis displays indicators thought to reflect the ultimate goal sought by the strategy. Above the X-axis are the objective and measurable oriented conceptions of what a leading bank consists of (functional form), while below it are the unmeasurable, subjective conceptions among organisational members (symbolic form). We will utilise Figure 1 as a vehicle for discussion in what follows to explicate our findings further.

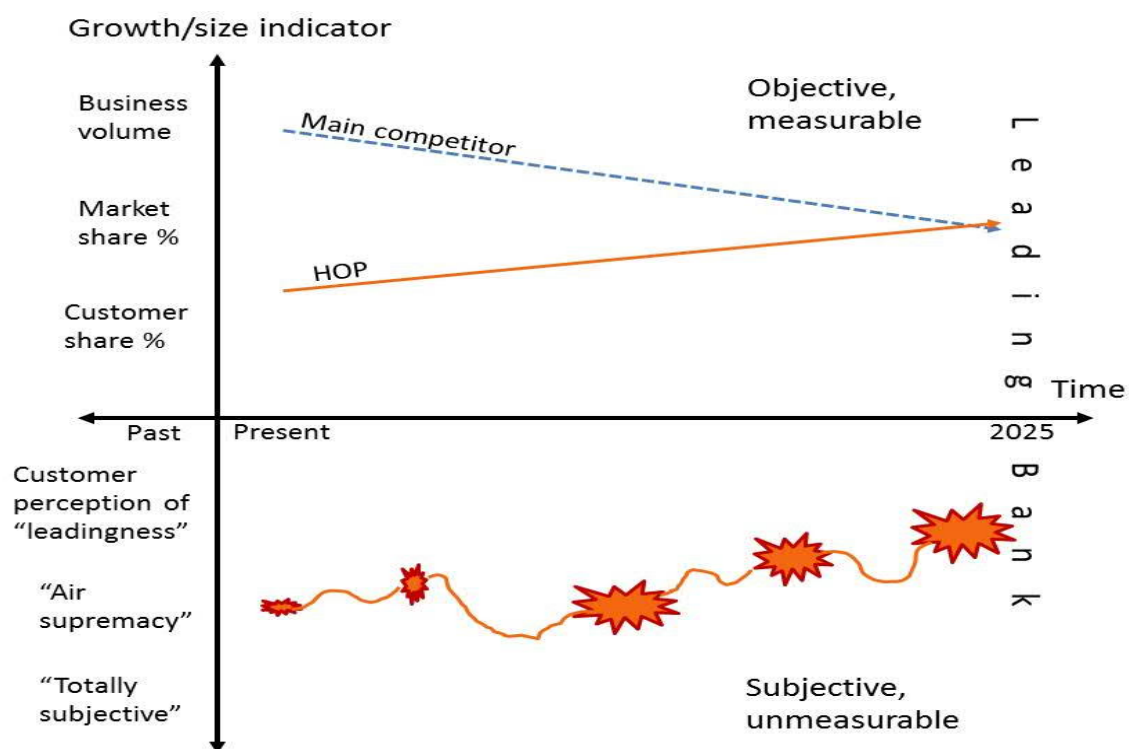


Figure 1. A Route to a Fantasy Document

We may infer that the highest level fantasy document is that of the official strategy of HOP Bank containing the central idea of becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025 as the ultimate goal. The fantasy is narrated as plausible by resorting to both functional planning rhetoric (objective, measurable numerical information and various key ratios) and symbolic planning rhetoric (highly subjective, either hard or impossible to measure issues).

For the most part, HOP Bank's strategy may be understood as a type 1 fantasy; an eligible reality for which there is no apparent reason stopping it from becoming reality. In terms of hierarchy the ultimate goal of becoming the leading bank had penetrated all levels of the organisation. However, the fantasising itself differs to some extent. According to our findings, top management (Tier 1 & 2) resorts more often to symbolic planning rhetoric and utilises widely metaphorical indicators (e.g. "mental air supremacy"). Middle management (Tier 3) on the other hand resorts to functional planning rhetoric in order to make things happen and gauge progress, while operative personnel (Tier 4) utilise micro-level numeric information due to the nature of their daily work, being filled with Excel sheets and score cards guiding activity, and consequently, conceptions of strategic goals (cf. Burchell et al. 1980, Hines 1988; Kaplan & Norton 1996, MacIntosh & Quattrone 2010, Jørgensen & Messner 2010, Micheli et al. 2011). Thus, for tier 3 and 4 representatives, the management accounting-based numerical information plays a highly relevant role in their daily activities and in understanding their relation to the goals set in the official strategy. Therefore, overall we may infer the fantasy nature of HOP Bank's strategy to be type 1: fantasy as an eligible reality, in our typology. While challenging and stretching, firm belief in its attainment was present, and the fantasy remained coherent throughout the organisational hierarchy. The coherence of this fantasy, however, is challenged horizontally between lines of business. The most important exception we are able to discern, and take to represent the simultaneous existence of the two types of fantasy is identifiable in the horizontal consideration. A case in

point of the type 2 fantasy – a utopian and imagined future state which is impossible to realise – is the private banking business line becoming the market leader.

While there are both types of fantasy simultaneously present seemingly contradicting one another in a way that would appear to cause the fantasy as a whole to crumble, this clearly is not the case with HOP Bank. By utilising Weick's (1995; 2001) ideas as they relate to sensemaking, we are able to fathom why. As Weick (2001) explains, sensemaking is about the construction of meaningful events encountered in the world by people: it is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. It is about coherence; that is, how events hang together; it is also about the certainty that is sufficient for existing purposes and credibility. Thus, human beings do not rely primarily on accuracy when making sense of an event.

Weick's idea may extend to prospective sensemaking in our case. While we are able to find contradicting elements in the overall fantasy of becoming the leading bank – private banking being referred to as becoming 'noteworthy' instead of leading – this contradiction does not seem to make any noteworthy fracture in the overall fantasy. Instead, the overall story hangs together supported by other plausible cues offering it credibility and perceived certainty for the members of the organisation for the existing purpose of mapping out the otherwise unknown future by establishing it as the almost "inevitable" future state outlined in the official strategy. In the case of HOP Bank too, strategy-related or prospective sensemaking may thus be said to be driven clearly by plausibility, not accuracy, as suggested by Weick (1995; 2001).

As is addressed above, the strategy of our case organisation itself is highly ambiguous: instead of a strategy it could more fittingly be referred to as a vision. Basically, what the official strategy statement of the organisation outlines, is a broadly set future state for the organisation in the distant future, not much else. What is communicated as if it were

the strategy throughout the organisation – the leading bank in the metropolitan region – therefore displays vision-like characteristics.

While the top management aimed at “forcing” a unified view of the strategy upon the rest of the organisation in a top-down fashion by delivering a strategy road-show to the furthest corners of the organisation – involving the top management team in the process to push the unified message through the organisation in their respective business lines – in an attempt to reduce any ambiguity related to the strategy, this kind of managerial orientation aiming at one shared view of strategy worked almost the opposite way. Instead of forming a unified worldview within the organisation, it created the opportunity/possibility for multiple conceptions within different echelons and different business lines within the bank. Our case has proven to be a strategising process in line with recent strategy as practice theory (e.g. Vaara 2010; Laine & Vaara 2011): organisational actors make sense and judge what is significant in their actions in the sensemaking process related to the ultimate goal (leading bank), which will be actualised through fantasising.

Both the timeline, which is rather long and hence hard to conceive for an individual human being, and the core idea of the “strategy/vision” is made sense of in a multitude of different ways within the organisation instead of the one coherent conception aimed at by top management. It appears that unified diversity (Eisenberg 1984) has been achieved in our case organisation to a significant degree unintentionally, or at the very least, counter to the intentions of the top management. The “story” of the leading bank in the metropolitan region is a theme that penetrates the whole organisation. However, what constitutes a leading bank assumes multiple meanings within the organisation.

The conception of strategy is adopted among organisational members through implementation, which is about fantasising involving both storytelling and “rational” (numerical) information. From the wider perspective, the strategising taking place within

HOP Bank can be seen as storytelling since there is a certain temporal dimension (time span, 2025 in this case), actors (organisational members), a plot (growth, especially at the expense of Nordea) and an aim (becoming leading bank during the time span). However, the story contains a myriad of rational elements. Numerical information, such as accounting figures, are needed and used mainly in two senses. First, as the CFO (Tier 2) stated, numbers in a bank are simply needed. They bring about credibility and perform a legitimate role while proclaiming ideas and also leading people. Second, as a middle manager (Tier 3) states, they are needed to identify current progress, locate the present standing in relation to the market and the main competitors, and also to conceive, determine and concretise the operations needed to reach the goal.

Furthermore, in terms of the time span, the role of functional planning is emphasised in rational, objective accounting figures presented on such occasions as annual operating planning meetings and strategy road-shows by the top management. This is the part of fantasising Clarke (1999) calls imagined planning documents aimed to stimulate short-term activity. However, when it comes to the ultimate goal (leading bank in 2025), the time span is more than a decade making assigning probabilities to such far removed future events impossible. This is why the nature of such far-reaching plans become symbolic and the persuasiveness of accounting figures fade and their place is assumed by, for example, metaphors that carry more powerful messages regarding the aspired future than numbers.

Moreover, despite the human tendency to believe that numbers talk in rational, objective and factual terms, many numbers utilised in strategising are not true per se as revealed in the analysis. Therefore, our study, which builds on earlier works by Burchell et al. (1980) and Hines (1988), contributes particularly to recent accounting as practice literature (Ahrens & Chapman 2007; Chua 2007; Jørgensen & Messner 2010; Skaerbaek & Tryggstad 2010; Boedker 2010; MacIntosh & Beech 2011) by providing the concept of a fantasy

document having two forms, functional planning and symbolic planning, and exploring the role of numerical accounting information as a rational technique in providing a sense of plausibility for strategy interwoven with storytelling. Addressing these issues helps us better understand how the conception of strategy evolves in the implementation process, and how numerical information and storytelling are deeply intertwined in attempts to amplify the message contained in an official strategy and to concretise the abstract.

In summary, we contend that strategising is on-going and future oriented (also referred to as projective; cf. Helms Mills 2003) sensemaking by nature, and inevitably involves fantasising. Making sense of something that is not real in the present requires imagination (cf. Ricoeur, 1994). Traditional approaches have esteemed more logical-rational reasoning, argumentation and objectivity, but we propose, intuition, narration, subjectivity and even foolishness (see e.g. March 2006) must also be recognised as important parts of strategising. In the domain of strategy, functional and symbolic planning are the intertwined and inseparable fantasising vehicles that construct and convey meanings, significance and plausibility. Strategy must resort to fantasising in order to materialise as an actual path with direction for organisational members navigating their organisation into the future.

Moreover, the importance of numerical accounting information for strategy implementation (fantasising) is twofold: micro-level ratios themselves in isolation have little relevance for the ultimate goal of the organization (becoming leading bank in 2025), but the micro-level phenomena become understandable by reference to meso-level or macro-level structures or systems (such as Basel III regulation). We suggest that by connecting the micro and macro level explanations in future studies, as proposed by Seidl and Whittington (2014), and by combining flat and tall ontologies in empirical research would take the SAP literature a step forward.

To conclude our findings on fantasising, we refer to Mason's (1969, B-403) thoughts on imagination and strategy presented nearly five decades ago, and which are still valid today:

Man lives by his imagination. This is as true of the modern organisation as it is for the individual. The particular set of beliefs or assumptions about the world that an organisation adopts guides its activity and dictates its success or failure. This is especially true of an organisation's strategic plan.

The constant oversupply of information and ideas characteristic of present-day organisations (and life in general) makes guiding beliefs and assumptions, such as those offered by strategy, of heightened importance for organisations and their members. To understand strategy as a form of fantasy created by the imagination offers us a valuable additional way of perceiving it, and opens up further avenues of exploration in the spirit pointed out by Mintzberg and Lampel (1999), in seeing strategy as a creative interpretation of the future – in essence – a fantasy that can only be actualised in implementation, i.e. fantasising. Strategy can only be partially operationalised in functional planning using accounting numbers. Accounting numbers can, however, provide an important source of plausibility combined with storytelling, metaphors, and other vehicles of symbolic planning to provide “certainty” and substance to strategy sufficient for the purpose of its execution.

References

- Ahrens, T. & Chapman, C. S. (2006). Doing qualitative field research in management accounting: Positioning data to contribute to theory, *Accounting, Organizations & Society*, 31(8): 819–841.
- Ahrens, T. & Chapman, C. S. 2007. Management accounting as practice. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 32(1–2): 1–27.
- Barry, D. & Elmes, M. 1997. Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse. *The Academy of Management Review*, 22(2): 429–452.
- Boedker, C. 2010. Ostensive versus performative approaches for theorizing accounting-strategy research. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 23(5): 595–625.
- Boje, D. M. 2001. *Narrative Methods for Organization and Communication Research*. Sage: New York, NY.
- Bubna-Litic, D. 1995. Strategy as fiction. Paper presented at the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS) July, 1995, Turku, Finland.
- Burchell, S. & Clubb, C. & Hopwood, A. & Hughes, J. & Nahapiet, J. 1980. The roles of accounting in organizations and society. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 5(1): 5–27.
- Burns, J. & Scapens, R.W. 2000. Conceptualizing management accounting change: an institutional framework. *Management Accounting Research*, 11(1): 3–25.
- Burrell, G., & Morgan, G. 1979. Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life. London: Heinemann.
- Chua, W. F. 1986. Radical Developments in Accounting Thought. *The Accounting Review*, 61(4): 601–632.

- Chua, W. F. 2007. Accounting, measuring, reporting and strategizing – re-using verbs: A review essay. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 32: 484–494.
- Clarke, L. 1999. *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clegg, S., Carter, C. & Kornberger, M. 2004. ‘Get up, I feel like being a strategy machine’. *European Management Review*, 1(1): 21–28.
- Czarniawska, B. 2004. *Narratives in Social Science Research*. London: Sage.
- Denis, J-L., Langley, A. & Rouleau, L. 2006. The power of numbers in strategizing. *Strategic Organization*, 4(4): 349–377.
- Ditillo, A. 2004. Dealing with uncertainty in knowledge-intensive firms: the role of management control systems as knowledge integration mechanisms. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 29(3-4): 401–421.
- Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. 2008. *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*. London: Sage.
- Eskola, J. & Suoranta, J. 1999. *Johdatus laadulliseen tutkimukseen*. Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino.
- Gephart, R. P., Topal, C. & Zhang, Z. 2012. Future-oriented Sensemaking: Temporalities and Institutional Legitimation. In Hernes, T. & Maitlis, S. (Eds.) *Process, Sensemaking & Organizing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gioia, D. & Chittipeddi, K. 1991. Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6): 433–448.
- Golsorkhi, D., Rouleau, L., Seidl, D. & Vaara, E. 2011. Introduction: What is Strategy as Practice? In Golsorkhi, D., Rouleau, L., Seidl, D. & Vaara, E. (eds.) *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–20.
- Helms Mills, J. 2003. *Making Sense of Organizational Change*. London: Routledge.

- Helms Mills, J., Thurlow, A. & Mills, A. J. 2010. Making Sense of Sensemaking: The Critical Sensemaking Approach. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 5(2): 182–195.
- Hines, R.D. 1988. Financial Accounting: In Communication Reality, We Construct Reality, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 13(3): 251–261.
- Jarzabkowski, P. 2008. Shaping Strategy as a Structuration Process. *Academy of Management Journal*, 51(4): 621–650.
- Jordan, S. & Messner, M. 2012. Enabling control and the problem of incomplete performance indicators. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 37(8): 544–564.
- Jørgensen, B. & Messner, M. 2010. Accounting and strategising: A case study from new product development. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 35: 184–204.
- Kakkuri-Knuuttila, M.-L., Lukka, K. & Kuorikoski, J. 2008. Straddling between paradigms: A naturalistic philosophical case study on interpretive research in management accounting. *Accounting, Organizations & Society*, 33(2-3): 267–291.
- Kaplan, R.S. & Norton, D.P. 1996. *The Balanced Scorecard. Translating Strategy into Action*. HBS Press, US.
- Kaplan, S. 2007. Strategy As Practice: An Activity-Based Approach, by Paula Jarzabkowski. London: Sage, 2005 (Book Reviews), *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2): 986–990.
- Kets de Vries, M.F.R. & Miller, D. 1984. Group Fantasies and Organizational Functioning. *Human Relations*, 37(2): 111–134.
- Klikauer, T. 2013. *Managerialism, A Critique of an Ideology*. Hampshire: Houndmills, Macmillan Publishers Limited.
- Kornberger, M. & Clegg, S. 2011. Strategy as performative practice: The case of Sydney 2030. *Strategic Organization*, 9(2): 136–162.

- Laine P-M & Vaara, E. 2011. Strategia kuuluu henkilöstölle. In Mantere Saku & Suominen Kimmo & Vaara Eero (Eds). *Toisinajattelua strategisesta johtamisesta*. Helsinki: WSOYPro Oy, 29–42.
- Laumann, E. O. & Pappi, F. U. 1976. *Networks of Collective Action*. New York, NY: Academic Press
- Leonardi, P. M. 2015. Materializing Strategy: The Blurry Line between Strategy Formulation and Strategy Implementation. *British Journal of Management*, 26(1): S17–S21.
- Lindblom, C. 1959. The Science of "Muddling Through". *Public Administration Review*, 19(2): 79–88.
- Lukka, K. & Modell, S. 2010. Validation in interpretive management accounting research. *Accounting, Organisations and Society*, 35(4): 462–477.
- MacIntosh, N. & Quattrone, P. 2010. *Management Accounting and Control Systems. An Organizational and Sociological Approach*. 2nd ed. West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons.
- MacIntosh, R. & Beech, N. 2011. Strategy, Strategists and Fantasy: A Dialogic Constructionist Perspective. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 24 (1): 15–37.
- Maitlis, S. & Christianson, M. 2014. Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1): 57–125.
- Mantere, S. 2005. Strategic practices as enablers and disablers of championing activity. *Strategic Organization*, 3(2): 157–184.
- March, J. G. 2006. Rationality, Foolishness, and Adaptive Intelligence. *Strategic Management Journal*, 27(3): 201–214.

- Marginson, D. & Ogden, S. 2005. Coping with ambiguity though the budget: the positive effects of budgetary targets on managers' budgeting behaviours. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 30(5): 435–456.
- Mason, R. O. 1969. A Dialectical Approach to Strategic Planning. *Management Science*, 15(8): B403–B414.
- McColskey, D. 1992. *If You're so Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Messner, M. & Goretzki, L. & Jordan, S. 2013. *Accounting numbers and the management of uncertainty: A micro-level study of a forecasting process*. Paper presented at 36th Annual Congress of European Accounting Association, 2-5 May 2013, Paris, France.
- Mintzberg, H. 1990. The design school: Reconsidering the basic premises of strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 11: 171–195.
- Mintzberg, H. 1994. *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Mintzberg, H. & Lampel, J. 1999. Reflecting on the Strategy Process. *Sloan Management Review*, 40(3): 21–30.
- Mintzberg, H., Ahlstrand, B. & Lampel, J. 2005. *Strategy Safari. A Guided Tour Through the Wilds of Strategic Management*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Micheli, P. & Mura, M. & Agliati, M. 2011. Exploring the roles of performance measurement systems in strategy implementation, *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 31(10): 1115–1139.
- NATO 2015. AAP-06 Edition 2013 (NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions). (http://www.wcnjk.wp.mil.pl/plik/file/N_20130808_AAP6EN.pdf) [cited 6.2.2015]
- OP-Pohjola 2014. OP-Pohjola Official Website. OP-Pohjola Group's mission, values, goal, and customer promise (www.op.fi/op?cid=161012420&srcpl=3) [cited 4.3.2014]

- O'Toole, J., Galbraith, J. & Lawler, E. E. 2002. When Two (or More) Heads are Better than One: The Promise and Pitfalls of Shared Leadership. *California Management Review*, Vol. 44 (4): 65–83.
- Patton, M. Q. 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Pihlanto, P. 2002. Rationaalisen toimijan myytti taloustieteissä, yritysmaailmassa ja yhteiskuntapolitiikassa. *Niin & näin – Finnish Journal of Philosophy*. 2: 74–77.
- Ricoeur, P. 1994. Imagination in discourse and in action. In Robinson, G. & Rundell, J. (eds.) *Rethinking Imagination*. London: Routledge, 118–135.
- Schipper, F. 2009, Excess of Rationality? Rationality, Emotion and Creativity. A Contribution to the Philosophy of Management and Organization. *Tamara Journal*, 8(3–4): 160–175.
- Simon, H. A. 1947. *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision Making Processes in Administrative Organization*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Skaerbaek, P. & Tryggestad, K. 2010. The role of accounting devices in performing corporate strategy Accounting. *Organisations and Society* 35(1): 108–124.
- Sugarman, B. 2014. Dynamic Capability Seen Through a Duality-Paradox Lens: A Case of Radical Innovation at Microsoft. *Research in Organizational Change & Development*, 22(1): 141–190.
- Taleb, N. 2007. *Musta joutsen: erittäin epätodennäköisen vaikutus*. Helsinki, Finland: Terra Cognita.
- Thurlow, A. 2010. Critical Sensemaking. In Albert J. Mills & Gabrielle Durepos & Eiden Wiebe (Eds) *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. London: Sage.
- Thurlow, A. & Helms Mills, J. 2009. Change, Talk and Sensemaking. *Journal of Change Management*, 22(5): 459–479.

- Tillmann, K. & Goddard, A. 2008. Strategic management accounting and sense-making in a multinational company. *Management Accounting Research*, 19(1): 80–102.
- Vaara, E. 2010. Taking the linguistic turn seriously: Strategy as A multifaceted and interdiscursive phenomenon. In Baum, J.A.C. & Lampel, J. (Eds.) *The Globalization of Strategy Research* (Advances in Strategic Management, 27): Emerald, 29–50.
- Vaara, E. & Whittington, R. 2012. Strategy-as-Practice: Taking Social Practices Seriously. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1): 285–336.
- Tillmann, K. & Goddard, A. 2008. Strategic management accounting and sense-making in a multinational company. *Management Accounting Research*, 19: 80–102.
- Weick, K. E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weick, K. E. 2001. *Making Sense of the Organization*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Weick, K.E. & Browning, L.D. 1986. Argument and Narration in Organizational Communication. *Yearly Review of Management of the Journal of Management*, 12(2): 243–259.
- Whittington, R. 1996. Strategy as Practice. *Long Range Planning*, 29(5): 731–735.
- Whittle, A. & Mueller, F. 2010. Strategy, Enrolment and Accounting: The Politics of Strategic Ideas. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 23(5): 626–646.
- Wilson, D.C. 1992. *A Strategy of Change*. London: Routledge.
- Wilson, D.C., Branicki, L., Sullivan-Taylor, B. & Wilson, A.D. 2010. Extreme events, organizations and the politics of strategic decision making. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 23(5): 699–721.