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[Title, Ch. 16] **Participative Strategy Work in a High-Growth IT Company**

[Subtitle] Not Absolutely Sure How to Make it Happen... Let's Try it out Together

Calling all Passengers! Mind the Gap between Now and the Future

We are surrounded by global turbulence, in the midst of what has been called the third industrial revolution (see *The Economist* 2012), which has similar or more profound effects on organizations and society than the two previous industrial revolutions combined. In the prevailing business environment, companies need to rethink the ways in which they organize themselves, how they are managed and how strategies are crafted and executed so that the goals set are achievable. Constant change poses a challenge to many established views on how work is to be carried out within organizations in the future. Some go so far as to claim that current and future changes will render much of the received management wisdom irrelevant (see e.g. Collin et al. 2017).

While organizations would fare better by seeking advantage in the new competitive landscape expressly through creativity, structural reforms and strategy reconstruction, many seem to have regressed to a traditional, hierarchical, managerialist orientation towards strategy-making, with tightened accountability and decreased autonomy (cf. Bandura 2002; Sohlberg et al. 2007). This tendency, however, is clearly counterproductive for securing future success, since less hierarchical control and greater employee autonomy are sources of organizational creativity and efficiency (see e.g. Teittinen and Auvinen 2012; Pfeffer 2016).

To cope with competitive pressures, organizations are striving for change and renewal (cf. Brown and Eisenhard 1997; D’Aveni 1995) and are, on the whole, aware of the need for faster strategic responses. Among others, Doz and Kosonen (2008) draw attention to the need for increased strategic agility in the face of intense competition. Achieving this agility in strategy work¹ would require a new orientation towards strategy-related practices (cf. Whittington, Molloy, Mayer and Smith 2006), especially in terms of easing managerial control over strategy work. This chapter focuses on a high-growth IT company that has radically rethought its ways of performing strategy work by deliberately abandoning a hierarchical organizational structure, which meant eliminating the traditional middle-management role and the top-down approach to crafting strategy.

In this way, the case organization has placed special emphasis on the greater involvement of organizational members beyond the traditional movers and shakers of strategy work: top management (as suggested by Laine and Vaara 2011, among others). After all, even the best-conceived strategies are of little value and will eventually fail if they are not effectively implemented (Noble 1999).

Why is it, then, that turning strategic plans into action that realizes the aspirations of organizations seems to be riddled with difficulty? Obviously, the rate of change and increasing

¹ By “strategy work” we mean the diverse practical activities that various organizational members engage in, in order to formulate strategy and turn it into action. The term is an umbrella concept to cover the myriad traditional analytical approaches to strategizing/organizing, and practices aimed at implementing, coordinating and controlling strategic and organizational initiatives having more non-analytical qualities, such as the deliberate use of symbolic artefacts for communicating strategy (cf. Whittington et al. 2006).

complexity of the business environment play a role, as do changes in the competitive setting alluded to above. Similarly, the increasing complexity of modern organizations themselves and the various forms they may assume affect the situation.

Against this background, it is increasingly difficult for members of organizations at all levels to make sense of what is going on. Moreover, assigning this crucially important sensemaking task, and the related task of sensegiving (see Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991), solely to top management would demand almost super-hero qualities of these leaders. Further, it potentially widens the thinker–doer divide (Mintzberg 1994, 223) by setting the thinkers (top management) apart from the doers (the rest of the organization’s members), whose contribution is nevertheless critical.

This is why a different perspective on strategy work is taken in this chapter. Building on the ideas presented in strategy as practice (SAP) discussions (see e.g. Whittington 1996, 2003; Jarzabkowski 2003), we present and discuss the means by which the viewpoint and participation of the rank and file members of a high-performing IT company were incorporated into strategy work. The organization in question has made deliberate attempts to encourage the active participation of and give voice to its members in true bottom-up fashion, in order to break down the hierarchical exclusivity of strategy work (cf. Bryant, Darwin and Booth 2011).

There are benefits to participation: it helps organizations become more alert, responsive and flexible, encourages those involved to be emotionally part of the organization and instils a feeling of being a shaper of one’s own destiny (Bryant et al. 2011). While the traditional strategy literature has built on the idea of managerial supremacy and rational orientation to strategy work,

the ideas springing from the practice turn of strategy research have challenged these traditional, deeply embedded notions and turned attention on other organizational actors as important contributors to strategy work.

Already two decades ago, Hamel (1996, 75–77) pointed to a need to expand the “franchise” of crafting strategy beyond top management so as to harness organizational capacity to think creatively about strategy-related issues; simultaneously, however, he recognized the inherent challenge in doing so:

Despite of years of imploring people to bring their brains to work, to get involved ... senior managers have seldom urged them to participate in the process of strategy creation. ... Inviting new voices into the strategy-making process, however, is not enough. Senior executives must ensure that they don't drown out people.

In what follows, our discussion revolves around strategy work, organizational communication and strategy-related sensemaking as a shared practice of the members of an organization, to discover how the case organization manages not to drown out its people but to actively draw them into participation in strategy work. We adopt the term *participative strategy* of Chirico, Sirmon, Sciascia and Mazzola (2011) to describe the shared practices involved in strategy work and the ways in which it is practised in the present case organization.

When using the term, we intentionally extend its scope from that of Chirico et al. (2011), who studied the participation of family members – as owners – in strategy work. In the present study, participative strategy includes all organizational members, regardless of their role or position.

This study is portrayed as a journey to discover how unconventional strategy work may be effectively carried out, by answering the following questions as they relate to the case organization, Vincit. How is it possible to implement a strategy that does not exist, at least in a formally structured way? Who are the central actors steering the organization into the future? How has Vincit succeeded in emerging as the highly profitable growth company (EBIT 21.3%, 2015) it is, while going against much of the received wisdom of management literature?

In the present study, data were acquired through seven semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author of this chapter during a four-week period in early 2016. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face at the case organization's Tampere headquarters and two via Skype, owing to scheduling issues. Two informants were female and five male, and all were aged between 22 and 38 years. The informants represented a cross-section of the organization. The interview recordings totalled approximately 315 minutes.

Not only the non-existence of formal strategy, but also the elimination of middle management make Vincit an interesting organization for gaining an insight into participative strategy work and into the ways in which organizational communication, often relying on storytelling (see e.g. Boje 2008; Gabriel 2000), may aid in making sense of the putative future.

Once more, we would like to remind our co-travellers to ‘mind the gap’ between now and the future.

All Aboard! Destination Indeterminate

Vincit (currently Vincit Group) was founded in 2007 as a two-man start-up in Tampere, Finland, where it is still headquartered. By early 2016, when the data for this study were acquired, Vincit had grown to employ over 200 people, and its pro-forma turnover was EUR 26.1 million, up by 284% from EUR 9.2 million in 2014. Vincit currently has three locations in Finland and two in the US (Vincit 2017a), employs some 300 people and is listed in the First North Finland marketplace (Nasdaq 2017), having expanded its ownership base to 5,300 shareholders (Vincit 2017a).

The driving philosophy of Vincit’s operations and HR policy derives from the idea that satisfied staff will excel in their work and thereby are the key to customer satisfaction – an important indicator that informs all activity within the company. The centrality of customer satisfaction is reflected in Vincit’s 100% customer satisfaction policy: if the customer is unsatisfied with the software/service project it has delivered, Vincit promises a full refund (Vincit 2017b).

The emphasis put on staff and customer satisfaction in Vincit over the years has materialized in a hands-on experimental approach in organizing, decision-making and in the ways the company operates overall to create value. It has worked out ways to improve staff and customer satisfaction through numerous experiments that give staff ample opportunities to participate in issues involving their work, ways to improve working conditions and personal/professional

development. Such experiments have led to lasting changes in the ways work is done within the organization and, at the same time, the evolution of its HR policy.

This active experimental approach has won Vincit recognition for its development efforts, most notably as the *Best Workplace* in Finland (2014, 2015) and in Europe (2016) awarded by the Great Place to Work Institute.

Vincit has been known throughout its existence for its particularly open and unrestrictive organizational culture. The company has removed middle management, data on salaries are open to organizational members and the traditional numerical targets for work performance play no role in Vincit's operating culture. Moreover, the company had no officially declared, formal, coherent strategy, mission or vision statements at the time of the present study. Instead, these traditional tenets of strategy literature – the must-haves for any organization – had been replaced by what was referred to as the “Vincit Dream”, the result of a co-creative process among its members.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Next Stop: Vincit Dream

Vincit was going against the trend and received managerial wisdom, partly owing to the deep-rooted experimental ethos of the company and partly to a perceived need to foster agility in the fast-changing environment of information technology (IT). A top management team member of Vincit explains the reasoning:

We don't have traditional strategy written somewhere, saying 'This is our strategy for a next year or three years'. Instead, we react fast to the changes and do things that bring us closer to the dream. The Vincit Dream, being created from the employees' dreams, supports the goals in everyday work projects, inner motivation and the feeling of meaning. This creates commitment, and people start developing things and progressing without artificial gimmicks.

While strategy in the traditional sense does not exist, the Vincit Dream – “Vincit is a Finnish top-tier expert organization, which others try to imitate, and whose customer everyone wants to be” – nevertheless offers a sense of direction. This shared dream, which has distinctively vision-like qualities, was co-created through a participative bottom-up process. At first the staff members were invited, in informal gatherings, to voice their personal and professional dreams and to think about their own dreams together with their teams. The dreams were then combined as the common shared dream of Vincit. A related photography project was set up to visualize the teams' dreams. The visualizations are on display on Vincit headquarters's “dream wall”, making them readily accessible to staff and visitors alike.

The images serve the purposes of concretizing the otherwise abstract aspirations, working as a collective memory for the organization and illuminating the future-related development path through engaging visual images that resonate within the organization by encapsulating the individual dreams and stories of those involved in producing them. Even employees who did not work for Vincit at the time the Vincit Dream was crafted knew its provenance:

I've heard that the Vincit Dream isn't just something that they came up with at the top, but instead people had this gathering where they thought about it together ... I didn't work here at that time ... we have these photos and their contents were decided in some kind of groups and they represent what would be the dream Vincit or dream workplace. (Specialist A)

Obviously, denying the existence of strategy and using alternative expressions such as a "dream" does not change the fact that even a dream needs concrete manifestations to ultimately turn it into action. Regardless of the term used to guide an organization, a common goal or vision state is needed, as noted also by a top management team member of Vincit:

It could be said that there isn't any strategy. We don't make budgets. Our decision-making is based on the dream, so we work towards it. What does it mean? We don't know exactly. This company may change, but that dream remains true tomorrow.

Although there have been calls to expand the strategy franchise beyond the top management and anecdotal evidence of the benefits of wider involvement (cf. Hamel 1996), not much progress has been achieved in the corporate world. Earlier literature has referred to strategy work with wider involvement as distributed (e.g. Bourgeois 1980), entrepreneurial (e.g. Dess, Lumpkin and Covin 1997) or participative (e.g. Chirico, et al. 2011). Despite the message of inclusion implicit in the terms used, they have tended to refer to the involvement of those at the top, be they

managers, entrepreneurs or owners, which leaves most of the members of an organization without agency in strategy work.

Vincit took a different route. As part of the organizational culture, open communication regarding everything that was happening within the organization was an important means of involving staff in the development of their work and that of the whole organization.

This place was born out of the idea that people are in charge of their job satisfaction. It's always better to speak out about the problem and then try to come up with solutions than just whine about it. I mean, naturally you should say so if you have a problem, but this is a place where there is no middle management or supervisor who can solve your problems. Employees solve them together. That's how we can have a common dream that becomes stronger all the time. (Top management B)

Vincit's approach to participative strategy work thus builds on a few basic realizations related to how organizations and the people making them up operate. Involving people in the shared story of a journey into the future gives them ownership of their work and their achievements and thereby a strong sense of purpose. Furthermore, being part of something bigger, something that was created together, provides a sense of direction for performing everyday work to achieve the aspirations of the Vincit Dream.

While We're en Route ... Let Us Have an Open Dialogue

An integral part of strategy work and all organizational activity is communication in its various forms (cf. Marchiori and Bulgacov 2012). Besides official communication, thought of carrying factual information (cf. Sajasalo, Auvinen, Takala, Järvenpää and Sintonen 2016), organizational communication may assume various other forms, such as anecdotes, rumours and storytelling (cf. Boje 2008; Denning 2005; Gabriel 2000), forming the basis for both sensemaking and sensegiving, crucially important for the functioning of organizations (cf. Weick 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

Realizing the importance of communication, Vincit embraces active and open dialogue. The three characteristics of its internal communications are 1) sincerity and activity, 2) building genuine dialogue, and 3) abundance and unrestrictiveness.

The present study found that sincerity and activity were present in Vincit, in that all information was provided for members as soon as it became available, including pending issues. The tone of communication could be characterized as relaxed and unofficial.

We talk about everything, like now, the whole listing [to First North marketplace]. People have brought up the issue and we've been discussing what we think about it. But then again, if you forgot to make the coffee, people will definitely react to that as well. You can pretty much can talk about and share anything. (Specialist B)

Dialogue was clearly an important part of everyday activities. Open dialogue allowed staff an equal opportunity to participate in the ongoing discussions that supported organizational

sensemaking. The goal was not make everyone agree but to share ideas and opinions freely; not to give the impression of involving staff in issues that had, in truth, already been decided by top management. Vincit thus operated in the spirit outlined by Varney (1996, 30–32) and Johannesen (1971, 375) as genuine dialogue: issues were open to debate and anyone's voice would be heard.

Abundance and unrestrictiveness were present in the choice and multiplicity of communications channels. None of the discussions in any of the channels was filtered or moderated. Channels were selected to fit the organizational culture of Vincit and to meet staff needs. In addition to the more traditional channels, a popular channel was the internal social media app, Slack. Its use rendered the amount and quality of information uncharted, but at the same time, encouraged participation. There were no specifics regarding what kinds of issues in or out of the organization were to be discussed in Slack. All staff had an equal say in all issues they felt needed attention.

The issues are brought up as early as possible in a state when they are not yet finished. I really like the fact that we can talk it over and create a plan together.
(Specialist B)

Another specialist commenting on the organizational dialogue on issues that were still pending and the pervasive experimental approach of Vincit further adds:

The general culture is that people are keen to talk about things that are wrong, and the people in charge react to it. Like, if something is still unclear, the answer might

be ‘we don’t know yet’ or ‘let’s talk about it together and see what conclusion we come to’. (Specialist A)

An important feature of the organizational communication culture of Vincit was that the top management themselves actively engaged in open discussion with the staff and kept lines open to everyone. They were present in many communication channels and keenly encouraged conversations by commenting on and supporting employees’ remarks, as well as being available for face-to-face discussions. The CEO’s work station was located in the same open-plan office as everyone else’s, to enable chance meetings and impromptu conversations.

Openness and willingness to engage organizational members in dialogue not only expanded the franchise of strategy work but also, more importantly, narrowed the traditional thinker–doer divide (cf. Mintzberg 1994). This helped in more readily turning the Vincit Dream into action to materialize the shared future aspirations of the organizational members. As a specialist comments:

Talking with the CEO and founders is really laid-back. There are no managers as such: the roles come from what you actually do. And then you can ask anyone anything you want to. (Specialist C)

A top management team member explains the deliberate choice of engaging in dialogue on a level playing field to tear down traditional barriers of organizational hierarchy:

We have promoted dialogue on purpose. If someone takes a stand on something and suggests something new, we say something like ‘that seems like a good idea’.

We want people to take more responsibility, and that’s why we have encouraged it.

If someone is critical, we try to acknowledge it by saying ‘good point, thanks for bringing this up’. (Top management A)

In Vincit, the emphasis put on inclusive communication reflected a genuine attempt to create two-way communication allowing personnel the feeling of being part of the organization (cf. Bryant, et al. 2011), which, in turn, affected employees’ willingness to participate even more.

We even have this random cat video channel [in Slack] to promote communication ... because, if only work-related talk were permitted, that would just discourage discussion. When people are free to talk about anything, really, they are more likely to talk about the important stuff too, and discussion becomes a natural way of communication. (Top management A)

Active discussants and commenters were also accredited for their involvement. Members of the organization themselves selected the “winner” of an internal recognition, which further contributed to the openness and transparency of communication. Such encouragement had an enabling effect within the organization, making genuinely open discussion more likely and attracting more participants.

We reward people for being critical. We have a so-called ‘not bad’ channel in Slack. If something you have done or said is mentioned there three times with a ‘not bad’ hashtag, we reward the person who has done or said the thing with a certificate. (Top management B)

My Newfound Friend, Have You Heard the Story ... ?

Stories and storytelling feature in Vincit as part of everyday organizational communication. Storytelling was not adopted as a conscious choice but rather reflected a tendency to present things in a story form to give them more appeal and memorability. This form of communication fits software development too, as it offers the possibility of communicating ideas, for example about abstract software products. Furthermore, stories have the benefit of promoting sensegiving about the otherwise unknown future and giving meaning to the importance of work more effectively than communication that has less emotional appeal (cf. Gabriel 2000).

Moreover, organizational stories and storytelling are powerful means of creating a company culture and team spirit (cf. Denning 2005), and were found to be used in Vincit by the management for various purposes, such as building organizational identity through “myth-of-origin stories”. A specialist reflects on the use of stories and their attraction:

There are a lot of stories [circulating] within the organization about how Vincit was founded, but I’m not sure how true they really are. I think probably the stories have been embellished, but they [top management] tell them well. Having earlier worked

in big companies and become tired of management by diktat, the whole storytelling angle is kind of appealing. (Specialist D)

Organizational culture has an impact on how strategy – or the Vincit Dream, in this case – affects everyday work and organizational reality (cf. Weick 1995). For Vincit, the Dream informs the concrete choices by staff. Therefore, the organizational culture enables the strategic choices Vincit makes in its chosen experimental ethos, being based on active, open communication through which shared assumptions, values, norms (see e.g. Schein 1985) and ways of working can be shared and debated. Further, Vincit's organizational communications and culture are supportive of staff taking initiative in terms of exercising influence, expressing their opinions and taking part in decision-making. All staff have a say and the authority to make decisions about their own work and targets, as well as bigger issues and changes in the company.

The use of a particular material object illustrates how any individual is given decision-making power on any issue s/he feels need attention: the object is a wooden gavel originally awarded to the CEO of Vincit by the local chamber of commerce in recognition of his outstanding entrepreneurial success. A blog by a top management team member explains:

The idea is simple – each month a member of the organization gets to make a decision on the nod with the gavel. It gets automatically implemented. No budget, no rules, no guidelines. The only limitation is that the decision needs to make Vincit an even better workplace ... could this turn out to be expensive for the

company? The answer is: yes. Someone may decide to give everyone a month off or build a spa downstairs. However, we decided to take that risk. (Vincit 2017c)

The gavel was later virtualized in Slack and given its own channel in the app. In the gavel channel, anyone could propose anything they wished, and if the proposal attracted three “likes”, it was carried out. Even the decision to virtualize the formerly material gavel was made by the staff, as were the changes to the rule about voting through “likes”.

People have proposed things like board games and a bigger coat stand. If some totally crazy idea were to appear, people would be like ‘what the hell?’ and not support it. I mean, there’s some group pressure involved. (Top management A)

The gavel practice is an example of how people’s judgement was trusted in Vincit. Furthermore, although there were “no budget, no rules, no guidelines”, staff did not “go crazy” and abuse their decision-making power. Instead, they clearly exercised moderation, as a specialist notes:

Small decisions are a good way to give responsibility to everyone. For example, we just bought a textile cleaning device for anyone to use at home to clean sofas, carpets or whatever. (Specialist B)

The gavel practice may seem trivial and irrelevant at first. The opportunity to get involved in making decisions touching the whole work community, however, had an effect on how staff participated in issues concerning their work. Clearly, the perceived “group pressure” had a self-

disciplining effect, as did the responsibility attached to the decisions made for the rest of the work community, but these features undoubtedly prompted the individuals to take the wider implications of their decisions into account, inducing more thorough deliberation that paved the way for taking part in decisions about more business-critical issues and discussions.

For instance, decisions on a merger and listing to the First North marketplace were influenced by the frank and honest views of staff. Thus, the staff became active participants in strategy work through gradual learning in decision-making, ultimately including major decisions concerning the future of the organization. It may be inferred that this step into a decision-making role has taken place not by chance but by design.

Keep Your Eyes Peeled and Stay on the Track – Detours Allowed ...

As is evident from the previous discussion, much of Vincit's operational logic was found to be based on being alert to changes in the environment and working out ways to respond to them flexibly, using an experimental approach to maintain customer satisfaction. Vincit's orientation could therefore reasonably be labelled agile (see Doz and Kosonen 2008). Although Vincit did not have a formal strategy, the amalgamation of its employees' dreams, career goals and professional passions provided strategic direction.

The learnings related to Vincit's strategy work (or the Vincit Dream) in terms of participative crafting and execution may be divided into two themes: 1) strategy as action and 2) the omnipresence of strategy in day-to-day organizational life. Essentially, the strategy both shaped and was shaped by the activities of everyday operations through constant experiments and

developments to learn what produced results. A specialist comments on the essence of Vincit's strategy:

I feel that strategy changes through whatever we are doing at the moment. It's formulated in everyday work. If something doesn't work in projects, then we'll come up with a new direction. (Specialist B)

The keys to this agile approach to strategy work are staff who are passionate about their work and ways of organizing work that not only allow but virtually "mandate" extreme freedom for them to work their way towards their personal goals and motivations – their personal dreams. This obviously requires the management to give up one of the core principles of managing: control (cf. Fayol 1949). While processes, procedures and policies are at the heart of traditional managerial thinking, Vincit was found – once again – to go against the grain in this respect:

We don't focus on anything useless. There's no useless bureaucracy. If there's something that should be different or needs to be changed, we just change it.
(Specialist D)

Another specialist echoes this sentiment:

I like the fact that I don't have a supervisor. I'm free to choose my work and how I do it ... you don't have to ask permission. You're trusted to make your own

decisions. I mean, you'll only get frustrated if things are done stupidly just because some process dictates so. It's not good for your motivation. (Specialist D)

Although the Vincit Dream was not constantly touted within the organization, it was still an important part of work practices embedded in everyday work through self-assigned professional development objectives and an absence of performance appraisals or set numerical performance targets. Moreover, middle management and supervisory positions had been dispensed with in the organization. A specialist describes the goal-setting:

We set our goals by project: when a project starts, everyone says what they want to learn and what they have dreamt of doing. How much you can charge is secondary because satisfied employees do better work. (Specialist B)

The organization's responsibility was simply to provide the opportunities and support for staff to set and meet their own goals. This represented an expression of trust in the staff that often reflects back on the organization in positive ways. Conversely, denying these important aspects of participation would only erode trust. The trust placed in the staff in Vincit contributed to their wanting to be part of and contributing to organizational development initiatives. Development ideas could spring up anywhere within the organization and end up being rolled out as self-initiated experiments that would take root more widely, as described by a top management team member:

Today someone suggested in Slack that a ‘friend scheme’ for newcomers was needed. The newbies would have a friend to help them get know the organization and people and show them the ropes. Then someone from our Helsinki office told us that they had just decided to implement this practice. (Top management A)

If such bottom-up emergence of ideas is nourished and encouraged widely within the organization, as in Vincit’s case, it allows individuals to feel that they are playing an important and respected role in the organization’s goal attainment. The message from the management is that their contribution is appreciated, which encourages further innovation and cooperative development, as noted by a member of the top management team:

Sometimes you have to pass the puck back: ask people to think what could make their idea possible, or encourage them to talk to others to see what they think. This means that people don’t just throw requests around, but they become part of making them a reality. (Top management A)

By getting practice in bringing nascent ideas to fruition collaboratively in smaller-scale projects, people are able to prepare to tackle larger issues, such as those involved in participative strategy work. Engaging in dialogue enables people to combine their abilities and achieve ideas that would not be achievable alone (Varney 1996, 30). Furthermore, as Päril (2014, 190) points out, active dialogue based on mutual respect is crucial for promoting organizations’ ability to cooperate and innovate. Both are of crucial importance in fast-changing and unpredictable environments such as the IT industry and increasingly many other industries as well.

This is the End of the Line: Please Remember to Take Your Personal Belongings with You

Now that our journey is drawing to conclusion and it is nearly time to alight, a backward glance at its twists and turns is in order to tot up what we learnt along the way. It appears that the organizational culture and, within it, the communication culture of an organization plays a crucially important role in making participative strategy work possible.

For instance, Denison (1990) and Denison and Mishra (1995) outlined four dimensions of organizational culture conducive to organizational effectiveness: adaptability, consistency, involvement and mission. By adaptability, they mean the degree to which an organization is able to alter its behaviours, structures and systems when faced with changes. By consistency, they mean the extent to which beliefs, values and expectations are shared over time by the members of an organization. Involvement refers to the level of participation in decision-making of the organization's members. Mission refers to the existence of a shared understanding of the organization's purpose.

These four dimensions provide a framework evaluating how participative strategy work was practiced in the case company. Adaptability or agility – the ability to move flexibly and fast with a focus on enabling the organization to keep up with changing circumstances it has no control over (Green 2014, 21) – features strongly in Vincit's culture. Experimentation with minimal constraints to avoid the limitations of traditional strategy work based on planning (see Mintzberg 1994, 5–23) is the *modus operandi* of Vincit. The commitment to employees' freedom to live out

their dreams and a committed ownership of one's work formed the basis for the company's agile experimental orientation to work.

The dimensions of consistency and mission are closely intertwined, and were displayed in the firm belief of the organizational members in the Vincer Dream and its power to guide the organization towards the state to which they aspired. In many respects, the Vincer Dream appeared to be an article of faith for the staff: it was not questioned, but rather cherished, resembling what Mintzberg (1987, 16–17) termed “strategy as perspective”. The collectively co-created Vincer Dream provided an embedded way of perceiving both the organization and the world around it – a shared mental frame of reference, in which the customer is king and in which all organizational activities are geared at pleasing the quirky royalty at all costs, including making the “sacrificial offer” of a money back guarantee.

Involvement was clearly the foundation of Vincer's organizational culture, and staff had responsibility and authority to make decisions, from small decisions regarding the individual (e.g. what to work on, where and when) to decisions concerning the team (e.g. how to organize project work) and those relating to the whole organization (e.g. whether to merge with another company, list, or not). The most notable contribution to this culture was, of course, the co-creation process of the shared Vincer Dream, the aspirational future identity of the organization built on the dreams of individuals and teams.

Although the formation of the Vincer Dream could be said to emerge as a philosophy and practice from the modus operandi of the organization, this did not happen by itself, entirely

spontaneously without a plan. Rather, the Vincit Dream and the process leading to it was target-oriented emergence initiated by the management. The process aimed at engaging the organizational members in a participative process, in which the act of constructing meanings of particular significance related to their professional interests, or dreams, such as becoming a world-class expert, being a trailblazer or working with intriguing customer cases, would be in concordance with the early start-up spirit of the organization. In combination with the driving philosophy of producing value and outstanding customer satisfaction as a result of having satisfied staff, the Vincit Dream forms a fluid framework originally crafted by the management, whose practical beauty derives from the empowerment of individual members of the organization.

The company's financial performance, especially in combination with customer satisfaction ratings (100% Net Promoter Score) and staff satisfaction (94.72% satisfied with their own project) (Vincit 2017d), show that Vincit has been highly successful in its strategy work, avoiding the potential pitfalls of strategic agility through its chosen participative approach. It would, however, be reasonable to ask how suitable a similar approach would be to some other organization wishing to engage in participative strategy work.

Much of the management literature stresses the supreme importance of having a strategy that is unequivocal and communicating it logically and repeatedly so that the staff will internalize it and, after internalizing it, will be able to implement it in their everyday work. The reality is, however, that this assumption neglects the importance of sensemaking in organizations: each member interprets strategy differently, no matter how often or however consistently it is decreed

from above (cf. Laine and Vaara 2011). This means that strategy is always polyphonic in essence, being based on varying positions of power, containing different viewpoints (cf. Rauhala and Vikström 2014, 278), and cannot therefore be forced upon staff from the top. This was also the case in Vincit. Though polyphonic – an amalgamation of all the voices within the organization – the Vincit Dream was far from cacophonic. Staff sang in tune from the same song sheet, each person having the feeling of being the soloist fulfilling his or her own passion.

Therefore, it would appear that operating with an inexplicit strategy to maintain agility in a fast-changing environment requires genuine acceptance of the fact that people have differing interpretations of the phenomena – such as strategy – they encounter in their organizational life. Only by truly engaging in dialogue to explore these interpretations is agile, participative strategy work possible.

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