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'We don't know who is in charge of direction': Strategising as enacted team improvisation in projects

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Abstract

Practitioners are increasingly faced with serious challenges in managing projects. This paper argues that project strategy is limited by the dominant discourse and practice of current 'project management' rather then of strategic management. The former relies on specific knowledge assumptions which include the identification of milestones and predetermined moments of highest project vulnerability that should be avoided through strategic action. Moreover, it is seen as owned by only few individuals while its definition is meant to be 'given' once the project has started. This underestimates the role of project teams as crucial strategic actors in the ongoing situation. This paper introduces a narrative perspective linked to ethnographic research and focuses on a project team's strategising as the *'shifting of conversations'* enacted in narratives of group improvisation. This impromptu was crucial in order to unlock viability and mitigate emergent risks, creating a highly situated project strategy in a drifting project environment.

Keywords: project strategy, micro-strategising, project teams, collective improvisation, narratives, risk management

Project strategy is as yet conceptually underdeveloped. The field of strategic management does not necessarily engage with the exploration of strategy in projects due to its main focus on firms and corporate strategy. Similarly, researchers in the field of project studies tend to not venture into conceptualising strategy definition and strategy making. Artto *et al.* (2008), for example, carried out a review of literature from multiple perspectives to specifically ask "what is project strategy?", concluding that it has an ambiguous existence in research. It is then somewhat unfortunate that they end up stressing the "obvious fundamental issue" (ibid.: 5) for defining project strategy in a rather limited manner. It would be based mainly on the interaction of two dimensions: the degree of a project's independence from a parent organisation dictating project strategies or its existence as an autonomous project, and the number of crucial stakeholders involved. Project strategy is thus defined as "a direction in a project that contributes to success of the project in its environment" (ibid: 26). Hence, the project's level of embeddedness within or without the firm becomes fundamental to understand the dynamics of strategy. Whilst such definition certainly helps to identify environmental aspects that impinge on strategy, it does not engage with more fundamental questions being raised both by scholars and 'sceptical' practitioners regarding knowledge assumptions and claims about projects and project management (e.g. Hodgson, 2004; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil *et al.* 2009).

Hence, we need to shift to another vantage point to shed light on project strategy. One particularly wonders about its actual relation with corporate and business strategy. Overall, the latter are seen as having little direct application to projects (Anderson and Merna, 2003). The 'translation' of corporate into project strategy has been portrayed as necessary but complex. For this reason, there is an increasing effort to extend the impact of project management methodology beyond projects, into wider strategic management processes (Morris and Jamieson, 2005). Project strategy should not be concerned just with the front-end of strategy creation, but comprise the entire project life cycle to bring about wider integration with business strategy (ibid.: 48). It is of interest to note that this does not coincide with efforts to explore in more depth assumptions underlying project strategy, but to find new applications for project management methodology. Acknowledging such 'state of the art', this paper contends that rather than invoking the discourse of strategic management, project strategy is created and shaped through the dominant discourse and practice of current project management.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the mainstream view of project management with the aim to question its knowledge claims as absolute standards

for effective practice. The second section conceptualises project strategy as a team improvisation enacted in narratives. The third section describes the team's context of action, followed by an explanation of the narrative analysis performed to shed light on different forms of micro-strategic action. I then present three narratives of team improvisation when facing emergent project risks. These narratives are firmly grounded in ethnographic research. The last two sections sum up the merits of using ethnography combined to the narrative perspective for understanding project strategy whilst emphasising the positive role of team improvisation when strategising in drifting environments.

Questioning the dominant view of project management

"Project management and projects have seemingly been accepted by many both within and outside the field as natural, self-evident, and indispensable" (Cicmil *et al.* 2009: 81). The main tenet is not only that they are increasingly used, spreading in all areas of our work and society; they are build upon a constant "dichotomisation of bureaucracies and projects" (Cicmil *et al.* 2009: 81). As if projects – with their emphasis on temporariness, autonomy, and flexibility - would be disconnected from other forms of organisation or institutional influences and cultures. The widely accepted function of project management is to accomplish a specific work, on time, within a certain budget, and to an agreed specification (e.g. Meredith and Mantel, 1995; Turner, 1999). To achieve these objectives, knowledge in projects should be distinct. It would require special competencies from various 'professionals'. Project teams, for instance, are applied to create the 'right' kind of knowledge, to integrate their competencies, and to be skilled. Project management is systematically constructed as a discipline and a coherent body of thought (Hodgson, 2004) which has led to a relentless standardisation of its practice (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Project tasks and goals are assumed to be clear; work allocation should be 'broken down' systematically from programmes into manageable groups of activities whilst a plethora of tools will lead to successful outcomes if applied properly (Cicmil *et al.* 2009). Project strategy is part of this 'cascade' of activities and phased rigidly: "while there is a strong management of the interaction between corporate/business plan and program/project plan pre-project approval... Most of the evolving strategic interaction is on the front-end: once moved into implementation, strategy is taken more as a given" (Morris and Jamieson, 2005).

In such context, project strategy is treated as yet another type of knowledge to add to the list of 'process issues' and 'knowledge areas' to update regularly in manuals and handbooks, and not as an everyday practice and human experience of project participants in relation to other stakeholders, programmes, and values (Nocker, 2005). The dynamics of strategy definition and development in project environments are thus not sufficiently considered. Yet, since long we know that strategy often is characterised by unpredictable change (Eisenhardt, 2002; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000), unintended strategic outcomes (Balogun, 2006; Stacey, 1996), and that we need to make sense of strategic decisions in a more ongoing manner (Stensaker, 2003). This is certainly exemplified through the team's narratives discussed in this paper when facing project risks.

Strategic knowledge in projects is predominantly understood as 'attribute' of few individuals legitimated to act strategically (Nocker, 2005, Nocker, 2006a) although the importance of different strategic actors has been stressed (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). It is common view to "pushing risk responsibility down the hierarchy" (e.g. Burke, 2005: 255) to a single point of decision-making – the project manager. Project teams are thus mainly seen to execute pre-given strategies. However, they do not just 'deliver' the project; they are crucial in providing innovative strategies (Cleland, 1999). This paper stresses the role of project teams creating and sustaining strategic action. Whilst their strategic competences are neglected in the dominant project management model, strategic management studies focus mainly on top management teams (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002) which are not acting in projects.

This paper contributes to understand project strategy in action on the basis of ethnographic research and from a narrative perspective. It focuses on narratives of *in situ* strategising as the group improvisation of an inter-organisational project team when faced with emergent project risk conditions. The use of the narrative approach allows us to understand better how situated strategy is created, rejected, or 'aligned' and how it relates to the underlying 'master-narrative' of project management. This resonates with Hendry's (2000: 957) view of a "conceptualization of strategy itself as a form of social practice, a central feature of which is the discourse…" and of strategic action understood as the "framing [of] possibilities" being of "instrumental importance" without persisting with a rational approach (ibid: 963).

Strategy making and the collective improvisation of narratives

It has been pointed out that "…strategy only exists as an object constituted by a certain practice; however, the practice itself is not a priori or beforehand strategic in any respect" (Veyne, cited in Carter *et al.* 2008: 92). Indeed, the team narratives presented here shed light on what *may* become 'strategic' and how. In the context of a rationalist approach to project management, project teams can certainly not be described as attaching particular value to improvisation; neither would any formal project strategy contemplate it as relevant for bringing about strategic outcomes. A possible reason why it is neglected as a 'legitimate' mode of action may be "due to the assumption that there is no skill and quality to improvisation, or at least none that can be taught" (Crossan and Sorrenti, 2002: 29). It is understood as lack of efficiency, as being dysfunctional in nature, and a deviation from 'proper' action. Another reason may be related to the human experience of engaging in the actual practice of improvisation. In this paper, the team improvises, however the actual experience of such impromptu is often difficult and 'unwelcome' although necessary for team members. This is rather different from what has been said at length in relation to improvisation of other kind of groups. Notably, jazz bands *explicitly value* extemporaneous action which is a crucial for accomplishing skilful performance and mastery of art (Hatch, 1997; Barrett, 2000).

Improvisation in music is described variously as the "playing extemporaneously,… composing on the spur of the moment" (Schuller, 1989: 378) and the "flexible treatment of pre-planned material" (Berliner, 1994: 400). Such extemporaneous nature of activity can also be seen as the rapid processing of information or "intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way" (Crossan and Sorrenti, 2002: 29). Perhaps against our common sense, intuition and spontaneity may not necessarily be decisive for the development of improvisation. Such focus would be a "simplistic understanding" because it "obscures the actual practices and processes that engage them. Improvisation depends, in fact, on thinkers having absorbed a broad base of musical knowledge, including a myriad of conventions that contribute to formulating ideas logically, cogently, and expressively" (Berliner, 1994: 492).

In order not to get locked into definitional debates, the present paper tends to agree with Berliner's view and represents an effort to not 'obscure' practices and processes in relation to a project team's strategising. We need to consider how narratives are enacted in the moment as well as how they are simultaneously produced and mediated by a dominant

discourse. Furthermore, we can certainly deconstruct the myth of improvisation taking place only in defined professional or special settings. It is part of the very fabric of our lives (Bateson, 1989), supporting ordinary activities such as cooking, travelling, or learning a language (Weick, 1998). We can thus retain the idea of improvisation as an at least *possible* practice amongst others. In this paper it becomes particularly apparent how pervasive improvisation can become for strategising in the context of projects. The project team's enacted narratives effectively constructed new ways of knowing in the project. These were not part of any collective repertoire already 'possessed' by the team or foreseen in the official project strategy. Strategising emerged from the team's active engagement in the ongoing situation and in communication to a variety of project stakeholders and issues, and from their individual or negotiated narratives of what it means 'to be professional' in managing projects. If the team's sense of agency was enhanced by its way of constructing new narratives for strategising, experience was neither homogenously positive nor negative. As such, strategising as improvisation refers beyond the metaphorical view or an individual behaviour displayed on the basis of a shortage of skills. It is an emergent and collectively accomplished narrative performance by a project team. It is not the 'opposite' of strategic action. It becomes the actual source of a team's *in situ* strategising in a drifting project environment.

The background story and case context

This paper is drawn from ethnography of a multidisciplinary project team of one of the five largest global management consultancy firms (here called Blooming). The initial project team consisted of eight Blooming management consultants and a representative of the recruitment agency Dill UK (all names fictitious). Blooming consultants were part of the information and communication technology services of a global management consulting firm with over 30 subsidiary geographical practices and around 150 offices throughout the world – a Big 5 management consulting firm in the UK. The client representative in the team was a senior regional manager, not a management consultant, and was seconded to the project team full-time because of her longstanding experience in the company. The team's mandate was to work on a front office information systems design project for the client 'Dill UK', one of the UK's leading secretarial recruitment agencies. Of the initial project team not all remained in the team until the project ended. As typical in project teams, some members left at different stages or continued working on *ad*

hoc basis in the areas of technical and functional design, infrastructure supply, and in the set up of the network in the recruitment agency's branches.

Regarding the project's client, established in the 1980s, Dill UK expanded into fifty-five branches across the country, employing up to 500 people. It supplies temporary and permanent staff to UK-business companies. It was a subsidiary of 'Giant US' – the project sponsor – one of the world's leading global recruitment corporations with a presence in the USA and Europe. Within the UK, Giant US did not carry its own name but was branded autonomously as Dill UK. During the research period, the larger 'Ride US' corporation took over the project sponsor Giant US and this takeover soon brought the UK project to a halt. The reasons for the project set up were Dill UK's operating procedures. These were not standardised between company branches and there was no electronic network in place. The initial business case provided the scope for the design, prototyping and development of a front office system and the rollout of networked computers to Dill's recruitment branches. It was planned that design and prototyping would extend over six months, after which the system should be implemented (coinciding with the start of a new project/phase).

For initiating the project, the project team had to consider the potential modification and implementation of 'O2K' – a software application already being used overseas by Giant's US recruitment business. Blooming consultants believed that the application was a reasonable functional fit, though they still needed to confirm its feasibility and make the necessary changes to the source code to meet Dill's requirements. The main team story tells about how O2K became an object of contention and continuous negotiations between the project team and its 'counter-parts' at the sponsor's headquarters in the USA. The US team of consultants and a couple of executives refused to cooperate and 'give away' the software code for the application to be implemented in the UK. This became the main scenario in which the project team improvised micro-strategic action in order to be able to proceed with the project at Dill UK. While it was creating various modes to face the situation, only two months into the project, the sponsor Giant US was taken over by Ride US – a leading global recruitment corporation. This came at a complete surprise and initiated a time of unprecedented uncertainty in the project. For a while, the team retained hope of being able to continuing its project. But project activities had to be drastically reduced, and soon, the team was only completing tasks. The next section presents the complete framework for narrative analysis. It identifies the scene, the actors involved, and the team's strategising in particular project periods and as a collective story over time.

Organising the story and composing the narratives

This paper argues that the narrative perspective offers several advantages for understanding (project) strategy. Narratives are “an instance of discourse, of linguistic action” (Onega and Garcia Landa, 1996: 8) having “communicative purposes” that produces different “discourse situations” (ibid.). To account for them, we need to make sure to have all story elements in place, which refers to the narrative’s temporal positioning of action by specific actors in a situated space of communication (e.g. Burke, 1945; Ricoeur, 1991; Gabriel, 2000). The method used to analyse the project team’s story is borrowed from Burke’s (1945) dramaturgical approach. *Act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose* are the elements of the so-called pentad in ‘dramatism’ (ibid.). In the search for meaning, it allows us to interpret the motives of human conduct. In Burke’s view, all story elements are at play when social action occurs but different types of action emphasise different elements (e.g. the scene, the actors, or the act), which are always related to each other. Dramaturgical concepts such as role or actor are often deployed in organisational and management theory but “they are typically used to describe static relationships and not the dynamic and perpetual ongoing in organisational settings – the acts carried out, the roles performed and the scripts executed” (Kärreman, 2001: 89). This paper seeks to overcome such limitation by applying the narrative approach to the dramaturgical method - describing dynamic processes over time, the main transformations and shifts of team action and shared experience. Indeed, the pentad is capable of organising story elements in different kinds of narratives (Kohler Riessman, 1993: 19). The advantage of this perspective is to offer a complete framework for analysis, and thus “a rich, imaginative and generative way of looking at organisational phenomena” (Kärreman, 2001: 108) which here serves to depict how different modes of team strategising were emerging.

The project team’s narratives are reconstructed below along two main coordinates. The first is longitudinal. It helps to define specific periods of change in the project and in team experience which were identified empirically from team members’ actions and accounts. The second (vertical) coordinate represents the dimensions of the story that give depth to events, activities and practices. As explained previously, these story elements follow the classic structural approach originally derived from drama that can also be applied to stories. The resulting narrative composition helps us position the relevant shifts enacted in the team story which carried strategic consequences in this project. These were

generated through *in situ* group improvisation and not foreseen in any official project strategy. Table 1 shows the complete framework.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Project strategy as enacted narrative of team improvisation

Next, I present the three narratives. "Slowing Down" espouses the risk-avoidance strategy created by the team in the face of unexpected resistance from stakeholders to cooperate. The second narrative, "Detours", looks at how the previous attempt to mitigate risk needed to be changed to gain viability and autonomy which brought about the team's effort to manage its boundaries more explicitly. Following a client's take-over that would soon bring the project to a halt, in "Unfreezing" the team could not maintain any of the risk management strategies that were laid out before. In a time of high uncertainty about the project's destiny, it became paramount to unlock the situation through decision making even without any knowledge of the actual risk conditions. The project was rapidly 'dissolving' in the immediate situation.

"Slowing Down"

This narrative shows the necessity for the team of "learning to strategise" (Whittington, 2001). At the start of the project, the team's priority was to 'capture requirements' for the front-office system that were not already available, but had to be accessed through a software source code (O2K). This could only be obtained via the collaboration of US consultants at the client's headquarters in the USA. The team had to quickly incorporate in its habitual master-narrative of project management a view of the political dimension of relationships in order to proceed and not to jeopardise the project.

The scene and the actors

The team was so trying to find a way to establish its action space under considerable resistance. Its focus was on the manipulation of procedures and technical

feasibilities. As this is a routine activity in projects, the team did not question its approach initially. In the situation, changing assumptions and actions turned out to be a very difficult endeavour. Getting access to necessary information required to start building positive relationships as a matter of urgency or the project would not really ‘take off’. The team needed to engage with stakeholders much more intensively than expected, attending to relationships with more awareness than liked.

> “… Well, the first thing we needed to do was to work out what the US agenda was, what intentions they had ….you know, that's an intellectual property, and that's their intellectual property, so they weren't obliged to give it to us but we couldn't do anything with O2K unless they do.”

But the idea to adopt the software application O2K for Dill UK caused the team to worry about the technical functionality of the software application for the UK.

> “I don’t think it’s a good idea to use O2K, to use the American application. I don’t think that’s a good idea…There are technical flaws in O2K that I’m not happy about leaving Dill UK with because they essentially run the risk of investing a lot of money in an obsolete product.”

On this background, the project team planned a visit to the client’s headquarters in the USA with the goal of communicating directly with US consultants and executives. The level of collaboration at Giant’s headquarters turned out to be unsatisfactory. Gathering technical requirements was tied to unexpected corporate politics which forced the team to review its action strategy. The main challenge became how to face the US consultants’ resistance. The reason for the latter was that the US consultants had already implemented an office system at headquarters which was based on O2K. The US consultants felt they ‘owned’ the project and saw the UK team as a competitor:

> “These guys have been working on this project for a long time in the US. They have a very strong ownership of this software, a very strong ownership of the project…. they were very helpful but they were trying to make us realise that “we have the procedure”… So at that point they'd give us a lot of warnings that things may not be as easy as we thought.”

Further, the project supervisor was backed in his preferences for Blooming consultants by another top executive at Giant US (here called Shawn), which seemed to irritate the US consultants even more. In the project manager's account, the team's action strategy was therefore to be attentive and convince US consultants of their expertise for the project but they were not really able to defuse the competitive stance:

> "The other issue is that these guys encourage us to take O2K. We have concerns about 02K, absolutely. However, if we don't take it… it would be embarrassing for these guys and would be embarrassing for Shawn ... So, there is a political dimension as well as a technical dimension to our decision..."

Gathering requirements could therefore not be pursued in a 'straightforward' way on the basis of technical information considerations; it became only possible through a sounder understanding of the complex corporate relationships at Giant US' headquarters.

Action

In this situation, the goal became satisfying the stakeholders' expectations and temporarily suspend definitive answers regarding the choice of the software to implement for the client Dill UK. The endeavour was realised by slowing down the entire process (of information gathering and negotiation), refraining from putting competing US stakeholders under pressure. The team therefore had to quickly incorporate in its habitual practice a view of the political dimension of project work in order to not jeopardise the project.

> "If it wasn't for the politics we'd be saying that now but … what we will say is we have got some reservations; we need to search for other alternatives and make a final decision in about a month so; we are giving them a watered down message. To say 02K is rubbish, we won't do it, it would be suicide for everyone! The project would probably collapse. So even if he [a business developer] is right technically, we don't manage the communications like that. We have to take a slower process and manage more carefully."

Careful communication to maintain relationships becomes paramount for the team and the only way to 'manage' the knowledge exchanges between the different stake holders. In this context, the team started to consider various options simultaneously and

comes to the decision to pursue certain activities in parallel. They wanted to evaluate the situation and generate alternatives for action. Alternatives were not given; they needed to be generated and supported through targeted action.

> “So what we've decided to do is, over the next week, we're going to summarise the findings from the process, technical and infrastructure, and then suggest some steps in parallel, so that may involve package selection. The other answer is to take the current software development as we'd originally planned. A third option is to wait and build the infrastructure… So there are the main options. In terms of what we will recommend, we are not sure yet.”

The team felt it did not have enough knowledge for deciding on a particular type of alternative nor was it allowed to do so freely. Hence, they shifted perspective and instead of focusing on O2K they accelerated the requirements gathering via users – a crucial move for justifying the team’s choices. The generation of alternatives was therefore based on the creation of various options that postponed the final decision on the choice of the software application.

“Detours”

The team continued to be heavily affected by US responses. It temporarily ‘lost’ its objectives because of opposing views. The story is about the difficulties in ‘getting on route’ again, albeit not on the previous one of designing and prototyping the front office system. “Detours” is about coordinating the actions within the team and with other actors in order to carry on with the project. In this narrative what really is at stake is ownership and legitimacy.

The scene and the actors

The US consultants were continuing to refuse taking on board the project team’s reservations about O2K. So the UK-team searched for another way to satisfy the client’s front office system requirements better than the contested application. The ‘way out’ was to seek alliances that could support the team’s strategy at Giant’s European corporate management in Paris.

> "Well, the European management are meeting in Paris... we've got to communicate the findings… is part of our communication strategy for getting this information to the United States… and may help us to get some stuff done. So this way we go to Paul Ardenne right on top and any other route, it would stop on a level under the top."

Rather than implementing O2K, the team would now set up the process for software package selection. This decision would further be validated by the users in the recruitment agency. The project scope was not anymore as originally laid out. The team aimed to become pro-active by searching support and alliances at the European management to be able to implement and alternative front office solution for Dill UK. This marked a fundamental change of perspective in the project. Overall, it was seen as a positive step by the team but it still needed to be 'internalised' by all team members as noted by the project manager:

> "Listen, I think it's a quite fundamental shift of the project, which was all around design, all around O2K… so we can manage our own idea."

In this sense, drawing boundaries involved taking stock of the current situation regarding decision-making and the state of relationships in this project. The solution envisaged was to start being more pro-active and clarify roles and responsibilities between the team and the client.

The action

Seeking alliances for rendering solutions viable was not just a matter of 'knocking on doors' of the European corporate management. The strategy involved attending to problems with the main referents for the team: the project supervisor appointed by the project sponsor Giant US and the client's CEO. Until then, the team had followed the supervisor's preferences regarding project actions but now the relationship started to change as a result of a number of issues. Concerns were never addressed by the project supervisor. As a result, the team found itself in an ambiguous position regarding its actual

role. The team decided to draw boundaries: reciprocal expectations should be made clear at this point. Also, for the team it was time to clarify the project scope with Dill UK.

> Charles: "Let's be clear, we are not kind of reengineering Dill UK… let's keep the boundaries tight!"
> Julie: "Bill needs to be made aware of that and because as far as he is concerned he's putting in that."
> Charles: "We can't… I mean, if we redesign the whole business it would be a lovely job to do but it's not in the scope, you know."

For the team, managing boundaries meant to start pushing the client, to take on its responsibilities in this project.

> Charles: "OK, that's fair, I wouldn't want to recommend cause we are not sure if he wants this."
> Phil: "Is exactly what I was going to say, I do not feel qualified to write a letter of intent."
> Charles: "So, Arthur has to write it himself."
> Phil: "Yeah."

In order to prevent backlashes from the US, the team accelerated some steps and this required a higher degree of coordination. It became necessary to introduce certain procedures and common rules for documenting and speeding up joint activities. It also meant revising the project plan and centralising communication in this project. Formalising was also tied to a general reinforcing of teamwork procedures. This was not taken on board by all team members in the same way. In particular, the joint project manager as client representative in the team was ambivalent over the use of common procedures.

> "Is it possible, OK, to walk through all the stages, when I should be reading, when I shouldn't be reading? ... like documents and stuff like that… or email, sensitive. I need to sit down and have a walk through something! You guys are going off to meetings. I feel I have to try and catch up all the time for knowing what to chase up. I mean, if there's something I should be doing. I do not

actually know where you're focussing on. You guys know the processes and what you're supposed to do… It makes me become very frustrated!"

Thus, the knowledge gap experienced by some participants regarding habitual professional practice was widened in this period due to the tightening effect of formalisation. This emphasises the space of organising by "regulation and binding" (Hernes: 82). The coordination activities simultaneously point at strategising through the creation of new relationships and the extension of existing ones, both within and without the client company. The narrative tells of boundary spanning and the particular way it was achieved as well as the individual differences in sharing the experience.

"Unfreezing"

The last narrative tells how the project team was taken by surprise by the announcement of the project sponsor's take-over in the USA. Giant US was soon to be to be owned by a larger corporation called Ride US. This firstly posed a serious thread to the project in the UK and subsequently, brought it to a halt. In "Unfreezing", the mode of ordering is based upon scenario planning and sense making about the immediate situation. In these circumstances, a bounded view of the already complex situation at the client organisation was not enough for understanding the wider implications of the take-over for this project.

The scene and the actors

The 'hard won' team strategy to pursue an alternative route to implementing the contested software application O2K for the client Dill UK could not be pursued any further after the take-over of the project's sponsor in the USA. Once again the team had to 'figure out' their role and the expectations of new stakeholders. The first task was to redefine the project's scope following some high-priority goals from the top management. Goals and strategies shifted: to select a software package was not priority anymore; however to gather all requirements for the hardware and network infrastructure became urgent now. The take-over as a completely unforeseen major event, felt for the team as if someone was 'playing dice' with the project. The uncertainty experienced by the team about the future existence of the project also increased:

> Julie: “We don’t know if we have a project, not really!”
>
> Charles: “We have, we’ve definitely got an infrastructure project and we’ve definitely got a front office project. The front office project I think could have a gap while we resolve the extent of Ride’s influence on the options … And then, it’s go again!”
>
> Julie: “Do you think it will just slow down and stop to delay for a while?”
>
> Charles: “I could imagine that happening. No one is suggesting actually kind of formally delaying it and stopping.”

In this context, the team tried to ‘work out a route forward’ through the completion and documentation of the ‘requirement capture’. What was at stake for the team now was not just a particular software solution but the project itself since a new powerful stakeholder had entered the scene and the team needed to take that into account. The project’s complexity increased sharply since Ride US’ recruitment corporation seemed to have a completely different software solution from those explored by the team already implemented:

> Charles: “But then there’s the interesting question of where the Ride want to go... And also, they had a quick look at O2K and think it’s tremendous! This is interesting… So at the moment, they’re taking the view, it’s not clear whether Ride will adopt MAX, OLE or migrate to O2K. All is clear, is they don’t want to go down a package route in Europe because they had a look at it a year ago….”
>
> Phil: “Hang on, sorry! Ride is for O2K in the US?”
>
> Charles: “Well, yeah.”

It seemed that O2K – the contested software application – was ‘back again’. Furthermore there was no clear indication about who the other stakeholders or competitors would be either:

> Phil: “How does our relationship go with Ride US?”
>
> Charles: “Again, there's lack of clarity. It is not sure if it's Reach or Hack Consulting. It's not sure if they're just advising only on the bid or if they're dealing ongoing IT stuff. We don't know, basically.”

The team's effort to improvise a tentative strategy after the US take-over, meant to reframe the project scope in the light of ongoing activities but also to imagine scenarios involving speculations and attempts at identifying stakeholders and potential competitors as critical referents.

The action

Wanting to break free from a sense of disillusionment and powerlessness, during the first meeting after the take-over, all of a sudden the team improvised a stakeholder analysis for identifying referents, trying to find out the kind of relationships between new stakeholders, the client and potential competitors. This sense-making strategy was enacted in the absence of any real knowledge of who the project's stakeholders at Ride US were.

> "… Then somehow we need to get into Ride US and work out who is in charge of IT Europe and say "Here are our requirements. We'd had a look at O2K, and O2K didn't work. We thought off-the-shelf packages did. In your view, what options should we now be considering?" And try to work out a direction. We don't know at the moment who is in charge of direction."

In order not just to 'wait for direction' the team was aware that some decisions could have been taken already but that they were systematically postponed by the client. The priority to complete the document about infrastructure requirements for instance pointed to the need to address top managements behaviour, particularly regarding the state of relationships between the project supervisor and the company's CEO. The idea was to bring them to agree at least on policies affecting users at Dill UK.

> Julie: "I don't think we have any resolution on the whole training issue."
> Charles: "To continue that training thread, to confirm the training arrangements, we need to have the policy around e-mail and get that. We got some decisions we've got to get made basically, OK? What do we need to do to get those decisions made, have we progressed that?"
> Phil: "We need to get to meet Arthur and Bill. So far we never managed to have Bill and Arthur in the same room!" and later: "We cannot just keep bouncing backwards and forwards, try it!"

Hence, the state of relationships between the main referents in this project now directly influenced team actions.

> "Julie, I think, if you could push Arthur and Bill to make sure we get to understand what our options are and get the chance to look at those options at an early point, cause that seems to be where we are running into a wall. We don't know what our options are and we can't look at them, you know…"

Therefore, knowing how to facilitate decisions was based on setting criteria in the process. For the team it was paramount to 'unfreeze' decision-making from top management in order not to 'get stuck' in the project. The team experienced this as highly relevant now because it was aware about possible repercussions on users. The team planned that the set up of a viable training strategy around the e-mail system could be a viable goal to pursue - the only one left that seemed not to be changing due to the take-over.

> Charles: "We still got the e-mail, so I think that's the strongest thread that we're definitely go ahead without delay as far as I'm concerned."

The project team was thus engaged in improvising a 'route forward', against all odds. It mainly engaged in what I here call 'prospective sense-making'. Sense-making is generally understood to be only retrospective (Weick, 1995). Through a collective reframing of the own action space, the team actively worked out a strategy to aid the survival of the project. Yet the project was soon to be brought to a definitive halt by the new American owner Ride US which would not continue financing the project in the UK; any hope of the team to resume work was vanishing. Other personal narratives of team member in this research tell about the considerable frustration and reflections of 'living in drifting environments', but this would make it necessary to add yet another story…

Improvising to shift group conversations

This paper started out with the aim of expanding our view of current understandings of project strategy, and of the benefits of using the narrative perspective for

strategy research. The study has accounted for how strategising has been accomplished by an inter-organisational project team through enacted narratives as collective improvisation. These espouse how the team engaged with emergent risk conditions in a highly volatile project. The project team did not just 'implement' a project strategy as conventionally understood; it (re)defined its ongoing meaning through the construction of narratives that produced novel ways of engaging in the situation. This study contributes to identify in detail the actors involved, their experience of participation, and the specific context dynamics for the generation, sharing, and contesting of enacted narratives.

I have focused on the re-presentation of three narratives. These have been presented on the background of a narrative analysis applied to the dramaturgical approach. The first narrative shows the problem of thinking of strategic knowledge in merely functional terms. Indeed, the team could not just 'capture' the technical requirements of the software application for the client because the competitors were not ready to share that knowledge. This forced the team to engage in micro-strategic action consisting in the 'slowing down' of communication processes with relevant stakeholders to enhance the political climate in the project. This kind of move is generally not considered as being part of project strategy. The second narrative tells us about how, in order to extend the own space of influence and authority, the team started to manage its boundaries and other's expectations. In an attempt to maintain the preferred action strategy, the team accelerated and intensified the coordination of communication, negotiating *ad hoc* alliances. This was a matter of different understandings about project management practice within the team showing us how emergent narratives were being contested. Finally, in the third narrative, the team improvised by focusing on immediate priorities in the absence of top management direction. This was the only way to develop 'actionable' goals, even if these were transient. Questions about the project's identity and the own (team) role under the new 'virtual' project owners emerged while potential relationships with key stakeholders and strategic referents were played out in narratives of possibility (for action). Although these were not fictional, they were very much part of imagination.

Counter-acting the 'master narrative' of strategising in projects

Taken together, the narratives in this paper illustrate how project strategy was enacted through *in situ* coping, probing, and experimenting within the boundaries of a collective story. The latter can be summarised in the team's constant search of a viable

narrative to achieve a minimal commonality with other actors in order to be able to work on the project. Similarly to the concept of "minimal structures" in jazz that create a sense of direction (Barrett, 2000), the team's narratives constituted a way to not exclude possibilities of variation in its own strategic action. The team was fully aware that preferred narratives could be changed by other actors, but was adamant to manipulate them to bring about the own strategy. When formal structures in the project were falling apart, those narratives became the 'soil' for strategising. This is here seen to exemplify the management of risks which could not be foreseen on the basis of laid out plans or the intervention and characteristics of particular managers; it emerged through the team's construction of new narratives in order to be able to proceed.

Further, these micro-strategies were not only stemming from a response to unfamiliar and unforeseen events that were triggering improvisational action. Inclusion and exclusion of actors were prominent dynamics of the team's performative space of action (Nocker, 2006a). They were provoked by differences in sharing the narrative of joint action and of ongoing working assumptions. As such, improvising takes on more than one layer of meaning. The matter is not just how to cope with externally induced pressures, but learning to engage with others' narratives in the presences of complex relationships, expectations, and different identifications of project participants. Project team members were often 'caught up' in enacting the functional 'master-narrative' of process that limited their awareness of those emergent identifications. These were strongly shaped by the dominant discourse and practice of mainstream project management which influenced the team's capacity to learn or un-learn processes of collaboration.

The narrative perspective used in this paper is particularly useful for espousing the complexity, the uniqueness, chaos, and surprise of lived experience (Bruner, 2002; Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). Team narratives were "actuated by the ensemble of movements" (De Certeau, 1984: 115) in a highly drifting space of action. Those movements *became* a team's strategic thinking and acting. They were unforeseen and not being contemplated in 'tools' or habitual practice. Strategising can thus be seen as the 'shifting of conversations' enacted in team narratives. A focus on the usual practice or routines of strategy-making would not have allowed us to make sense about the often surprising transformations in the emergent team story. However, the narratives presented can only be partial and incomplete. What is accounted for is the main story of strategising with the project team as focal actor. Other stories could be told, for example, about different facets of strategising through more elaborated personal narratives of shared

experience and how they impacted on professional identities or the potential alternative accounts of other stakeholders. In this sense, strategy becomes a "perennially unfinished *project*" (Knights and Mueller, 2004: 59 – emphasis in original) and the narratives could also be 'told differently'.

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