

## **The flip sides of strategy**

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### ***Abstract***

Although a strategy, in theory, should help the organization to move in the same direction by showing a direction for the organization, in practice the strategy increases the number of possible paths, as managers translate the strategy into their own context. This increases the number of strategies in the organization, and it becomes difficult to get an overview of the interaction and relationships between the translated strategies.

The managers distinguish between the different parts of the strategy, such as the abstract words or intention, and the concrete as targets and projects. Managers use the various parts of the strategy in different contexts, but still speak about "strategy" even if they have changed dimension like the words and KPIs.

Another dimension is that the managers also perceive the strategy as correct, but irrelevant, which is linked to their distinction between the abstract and the concrete in the strategy. The abstract dimension is perceived as being true, while the effect of the strategy may be irrelevant for certain managers.

The strategy is also used as documentation for senior management intentions. This allows other players to gain insight into top management's thinking, take

countermeasures, resist in an elegant way, or just prepare to argue his case within the logic of the strategy.

## **Introduction**

A strategy can normally be defined as a plan, which tells the recipient what he or she must do to achieve or work towards a goal. Therefore there is a risk that the strategy is treated as a monolithic unit, which is read the same way by all.

However this paper describes how leaders in three Danish ministries distinguish between different dimensions of a given strategy, and how these dimensions are translated into their local context in four different ways. The theoretical lens is translation theory, which has the following points. A text consists of many parts, and therefore offers many different ways in which the text can be understood. Secondly, a text as a strategy has to be translated to be understandable and useful in a different context than the one where the strategy was written. This means that a strategy is not translated in its entirety, but the text is divided in its entirety and each word, sentence and reference must be analyzed to decide how to make the best translation. This is also true in strategic work, where managers reads the strategies in different ways, and apply this knowledge in a way that fits into their everyday practices.

## **About the study**

The analysis is based on text analyzes, observational studies and interviews with 35 managers from three Danish ministries. The strategies are studied from a translation theory perspective that offers a different sensitivity to context and a different eye for strategy than existing perspectives, such as described by Mintzberg et al, 2009.

## **Approaches to strategy**

Part of the strategy literature describes the strategy as a management tool that allows management to control the rest of the organization by creating a plan that sets a direction or provide a framework which tells managers and employees how to act, make decisions and prioritize (Chandler, 1962; Ansoff 1965, Martin, 2010). In this perspective, the strategy determines the human actions. There is also a part of the strategy literature that describes the process around the strategic work. The focus is on the production process or how humans use the strategy in practice (Pettigrew, 1977, Mintzberg, 1994, Whittington, 2001, Jarzabkowski et al, 2005). In this perspective, the human actors determine the non-human actor. None of these perspectives are dealing with, which parts of the strategy, the humans use when the strategy has been adopted, which is what translation theory can help us describe and understand.

### **Translation theory.**

Translation theory deals with how translators change a text from one language to another, and the concept “translation” is being used in organizational research (Røvik, 2007; Callon, 1986, 1991, 2004; MacLennan, 2011; Kaplan & Norton, 1996 , Mouritsen & Hansen, Forthcoming). The concept of translation varies depending on who uses it. This paper uses translation inspired from the science of litterateur.

Translation theory has four kinds of schools, which defines the good translation in four different ways, which also can be called a translation models (Pym, 2010).

The first translation model is a purely linguistic translation. The translator translates only the words and their linguistic meaning. This kind of translation is known from machine translations. The second is a cultural translation, which takes account of cultural factors in the text. (Lefevere, 1992, Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990) The third is a functional translation, in which the translator emphasizes the text's function rather

than words (North, 1997; Reiss, 2000, Vermeer, 1989). The fourth is an ideological translation, where the translator focuses on continuing or changing the ideology of the text in a translation (Niranjana, 1992, Venuti, 1995, Maier, 2007).

There is an increased freedom for the translator to change text as you move from the linguistic translation to the cultural and a functional translation to an ideological translation.

This paper gives examples of all four types of translation in the way managers work with strategies in three public organizations. The managers only translate the strategy, if they consider it to be relevant to they daily tasks.

#### **Four ways in which managers handle the strategy**

The study shows that managers will select various elements of the organization's strategy and denote those elements as the strategy. The managers divide the strategy into two categories. The abstract part, which tells what the goal is, and the concrete, which tells how to achieve the goal. The abstract is typically the intention or wording such as "Our work must have a positive effect on society." Most people agree in the abstract parts of the strategy, but may disagree when describing the means to achieve the goal, since they dependent on the context in which the departments contribute and what functions this department has. Not everyone is aware of which part of the strategy they talk about. Therefore, the discussion at a management meeting can become quite complex when they discuss "strategy". A part of the explanation is that they do not agree on which part of the strategy they are discussing. In practice this means that some of the managers are asking questions about the abstract part, and other give answers from the concrete part.

Once the strategy is divided into these two categories the managers handle the strategy in four different ways. The first is that they translate those parts of the strategy they consider to be correct and relevant to their tasks. The managers translate strategy by producing a new text that suits their context. They call this new text for their strategy. Here are the different considerations that affect translation. These considerations may be of professionalism, career and other management tools such as performance contracts, local targets, legislation and budgets. The primary consideration is what the managers consider to be a help to perform their daily tasks.

The second approach is that they don't do anything because they consider the strategy to be correct but not relevant to their tasks. This may be due either to have other management tools that meet their needs or that their job is not mentioned in the strategy. This approach is particularly interesting because there are examples of managers who do not tell their employees about the strategy, because the manager believes that the employees are already working according to the strategy and therefore the managers won't use resources to tell the employees about the strategy.

The third approach is that they consider the strategy to be incorrect, but cannot ignore it because the strategy affects their work in the wrong direction. Therefore, they try to sabotage the strategy, and neutralize it.

The fourth approach differs from the other approaches because the manager is not capable of reading or translating the strategy. Therefore they remain silent because they do not know what to do with the strategy. It may be that the manager does not understand what the strategy is all about or do not know how to translate it to their employees, as it is written in the wrong language and uses wrong words.

The remarkable of this approach is that the strategy may be relevant for the employees, but the manager does not know how the strategy can be translated. Therefore, employees are not familiar with the strategy regardless of whether they are already following it or not. One example is a manager who has had an unread mail with the strategy document lying in her mailbox in 8 months: *"And I also read my boss's mail for the first time the other day which said that it is important and I should pass it on to my staff. And I have not done this yet. When I read the strategy I think that it makes no sense to try to communicate it to my employees. Not in this language it is written in now. it's simply too boring. And there is too much nonsense, which will not be interested to my staff. The five focus areas and the drawings are too difficult to understand. So I have not."* The thought provoking in this example is that the manager believes that the strategy's theme is very important to the department, as they spend many resources on this theme. The manager explains further: *"We are really far ahead here with the strategy topic, but I should probably be sorry and say that I do not think there is a single employee here who feel they are part of the overall strategy."*

It's a judgment call if employees should feel like a part of the overall strategy. However, it is interesting to note that the employees are not familiar with the strategy, even though the subject is so close to their daily tasks. This is because the manager does not translate the strategy in some ways as described below. The manager has an expectation that the strategy can be passed on in its original form, and when this form is not suitable for the employees the strategy remains in an unread mail.

In the three ministries be managers and staff is involved in the production of the strategy, which means that participants read several versions of the same strategy. The study suggests that managers quickly decide how they will translate the strategy,

but few have read the final version of the strategy because they believe they have gained a good insight into the strategy in previous versions. A good question would be which version the managers relate to because the different versions seem to have merged into one in the memories of the managers.

### **Linguistic translation**

Strategies are produced centrally with input from the rest of the organization. This means that the language of the strategies is influenced by the professionalism of the authors. The language is academic and / or discipline-specific, such as written in the IT, governance or management terminology.

A manager tells us about his thoughts on the language in the strategy and how he translates it "*...So the strategy is not a bestseller among the employees because the strategy uses many words that are of English terminology, and even many abbreviations that I even just beginning to understand ... And I must admit I prefer to use Danish words, and in our communication with our employees, we all use the Danish words, when we could get away with it.*"

The consequences are that some people within the organization have difficulties understanding the words in the strategy if they are not translated. The strategies are written in Danish, but are written in professional or academic terms. This means that the content can be easier or more difficult to read and understand. In one of the interviews a manager tells me what she does, if there are words that are difficult to understand:

Interviewer "*What do you do if you don't understand about some of those words or phrases?*"

Manager: "*I ask my manager.*"

Interviewer: *"Okay. Have you experienced that he agrees that some of those words is somewhat academic, or ...?"*

Manager: *"No, he is a master of law, so I don't think there are words he doesn't understand. So we google it. It's always helpful to google something."*

People can google the words that they do not understand, but it does not mean that they come to an understanding of the strategy. Others make a linguistic translation of the words so for example "interaction" becomes "cooperation".

### **Cultural translation**

The cultural translation is understood as to change the words in the strategy so they are a better match to fit the tasks of the department. This is done by producing a new strategy, which is based on the abstract formulations of the strategy of the organization, but expressed more concretely based on the tasks of the department. A manager with a cultural translation model explains. *"The strategy makes sense if it is something that is compatible with our work. It may also well be a challenge in the way that it does not just fit. It may well be something where we really need to work to make it fit. But if it is meaningful, then we are happy to do it."*

The cultural translator takes a greater degree of freedom in the translation than a language translator. It is not always easy for outsiders to understand that there is a relationship between the central strategy, and the cultural translation of the strategy.

### **Functional translation**

This type of translation adds a functional twist, where the manager asks himself how he or she can use the strategy. There are two possibilities for functional translation. The first is that the manager condenses the strategy and extracts what he or she considers to be the intention of the strategy. They will not produce a new strategy if

the intention of the strategy is already present in either their work or in another management tool. If they produce a new strategy, it is not words that are translated, but the intention. As is the case with a cultural translation, the translation strategy looks radically different to outsiders, but for those involved there is a clear connection between the two strategies. There is an example of a manager who reads the managers and says it's about legal security:

*"It's not all [of the goals in the strategy] that are relevant for me. But I've chosen the one of the goals that is important to us. It is legal security. We are very focused on this goal. We focus on it and talk a lot about when there are new regulations: How does it affect the legal security. So this is the way we work with the strategy. Without thinking about that it is actually a vision or strategy. So we say that it is important, for example, that legal certainty is in focus, and it's a recurring theme for the work we do. So we pick some things out and say that it is relevant to us. That we have a special obligation and there are some specific expectations to us in that area. So we have an extra focus on it in our work."*

The manager has not talked with anyone but his employees about that the strategy is about legal security. One can only speculate on how many of this type of functional translations that exist in organizations and how much variation exists between the translations.

The other possibility is that managers ignore the strategy because the function of the strategy is fulfilled by another management technology such as legislation, budgets or announcements from the minister.

### **Ideologically translation**

The strategy is also used as documentation for the ideology of the senior

management. This allows other players to gain knowledge about how the top management is thinking. If they disagree, they can take countermeasures, and provide resistance in an elegant way, or just prepare to argue their case within the logic of the strategy.

An example of this is when a manager was sent a series of PowerPoint slides on the strategy to be presented to employees. The manager says that she commented on the presentation:

Interviewer: *"Can you give an example of such a comment ...?"*

Manager: *"Yes, it could be, for example it here with [name of action point in the strategy]. Will it impact us? What can we expect that it will have of influence on the work we do? Are there some of the employees that have to move from the department? And there is a risk of it, and how can we get rid of it. Can we perhaps doing some things to avoid it. And I got acceptance from my employees that I took some other tasks into the department so we avoided to provide resources to the [specific department]. We said if we optimize our help to those who are not as good at [specific task], and so instead delivered something then we could avoid to deliver to the [specific department]. So we try to see how we can help the organization, so that we will not be moved, by giving them an offer they can't refuse."*

By knowing the strategy the manager can make moves that dismantling the parts of the strategy that could threaten her department.

## **Conclusion**

On one hand, it is surprising that so many managers consider it necessary to produce new strategies to help realizing the strategy of the organization. On the other hand, the strategy of the organization is written in abstract language to secure

that as many as possible from the organization may consider the strategy to be right, which most do. There are far fewer who see the strategy as relevant if they do not translate it, so the strategy matches their tasks. It could give the impression that the management tool that, popularly speaking, is said to ensure that the organization is going in the same direction instead is making the people to produce new strategy documents, which increases the number of strategies that might compete with each other.

### **Perspectives**

The conclusion problematizes what can be called a strategic plan in an organization and the function of this strategy.

Is the assumption that the strategy can describe the direction of the organization correctly correct when it apparently needs to be translated before it is a relevant help to solving the daily workload?

Another relevant question one can ask is whether it is possible to create a hierarchy, where the strategy is at the top, or whether the strategy really is just one of several management tools such as budgets, contracts, laws, or just other strategies? If the latter is the case, which role should a strategy play in an organization when the function of strategy is fulfilled by other management technologies?

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