Working paper

Strategy as a virus

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Abstract

This article is based on virus theory (Røvik, 2007, 2011), and proposes to develop a framework that defines technology as a virus that penetrates the organism of an organization. The framework develops a new vocabulary, which can help in analyzing technologies and their negative effects on actors and organizations. In this paper, the virus theory is used to analyze a strategy process in an organization as an example of a technology. It shows how the strategy over time creates a memory loss, where the managers who are exposed to the virus forget their critique of the new strategy concept. The article also shows how resistant can be understood as being immune to a virus, since the strategy concepts bears resemblance to a former strategy concept. The article also argues that there should be more focus on the negative impacts of management tool and especially how organizations and managers are dealing with these negative effects.

> "An idea is like a virus, resilient, highly contagious.
>
> The smallest seed of an idea can grow.
>
> It can grow to define or destroy you."
>
> From the movie Inception

Introduction

The idea for this article came while I had a conversation with a immunologist, which is a doctor with a special in disorders of the immune system, and we talked about the impact of strategies on organizations and potential links to virus theory. Røvik (2007, 2011) has written about using viruses as a metaphor when describing how ideas behave in an organization. They penetrate, they incubate and they can even mutate. Røvik notes that the metaphor can be perceived negatively and that it is not his intention. This article argues, however, that the virus theory actually is an analogy of a greater problem since the virus not only acts in a certain way but also affects its host in different ways.

The purpose of using such an analogy is to make it possible to study, analyze, and discuss primarily the negative effects of the strategy on the members of the organization from a new and different perspective. In the mainstream part of the literature on technology, it seems that resistance to a certain technology is considered to be solely negative and thus a barrier to be overcome, so the technology can proceed to influence the organization in a positive way. The virus perspective, however, argues that resistance can be seen as part of the immune system and therefore a positive reaction, because it helps the organizations to function and survive even though it is attacked by all sort of malicious viruses. Consequently, this article suggests that the accepted truth should be turned around by defining technology as something negative and resistance as something positive.

The literature focuses on both the intended as well as the unintended effects of technologies. The unintended effects have been given the neutral name emergence. This article proposes to add a further distinction, by distinguishing between positive and negative effects. We lack the differentiated concepts to describe, analyze, and discuss both the positive and negative effects that a technology has on the members of an organization. One way of building literacy in the field is by learning from the field of virology.

This article starts by asking, "what is an idea" thus reminding us that a technology is an idea. It uses strategy as an example of such a technology. The article then moves on to describe the many facets of strategy and reiterates that are in the literature and its effects generally are defined in a solely positive way and resistance is defined in an exclusively negative way. It seems unlikely, however, that there would be no negative side effects from resistance, so therefore there is a need for an analytic framework to aid in the study of this. The chosen framework in this article is virus theory. The article introduces examples of how a strategy infects an organization from the public sector and how it affects the managers in that institution in different ways. The article concludes by encouraging more research into the negative effects of technologies and the development of new ways to explain the well-documented resistance against technologies.

What is an idea?

The concept 'idea' is used as a generic term for attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, concepts, norms, and organization recipes without having a common definition, but focuses on how they spread, transmit, and diffuse or how they are translated. The concept idea's epistemological status is not defined and is categorized in various ways (Campbell, 2004; 120). In this article, the definition of an idea is taken from Røviks virus theory (2007, 2011). It defines the concept in terms of its properties, which are comparable to a virus "spreading contagious, immunity, adoption and effects." (Røvik, 2011, 635)

Ideas in organizations have been studied in various ways. In this context, it is useful to distinguish between the material and the immaterial, since it is highly debatable whether an objective epistemology is possible when it comes to something as intangible as an idea. It is relatively easy to study the spread of a piece of technology such as a laptop, while the major changes an idea undergoes when it is travelling or is translated before it ceases to be the same idea can be critically discussed. It is difficult to get a complete overview of all the idea's components. This is because there is no connection between the name and the content. In the material world, it is easier to discuss whether a laptop is still a laptop if the screen is removed during the journey than whether the Balanced Scorecard is still a Balanced Scorecard, if you

replace some elements with others.

Røvik uses the term handling to describe how organizations respond to ideas (2011). This term covers both diffusion (Rogers, 2003), travel (Czarniawska, 1996, 2005), transfer (Birkinshaw et al, 2010; Szulanski, 1996), translation (Czarniawska & G. Sevón, 1996; Callon, 1986, Latour, 1987; Røvik, 1997, 2011), and fashion (Abrahamson, 1996, 2011; Esposito, 2011; Bort & Kieser, 2011).

These approaches assume that the organization has a high degree of autonomy in terms of how ideas should be handled to fit the organization. Although organizational ideas share attributes with viruses, virus theory challenges the assumption of autonomy, since it is not the host that controls the virus. From a virus perspective, the idea has its own life and interacts with the host. The host did not choose to become infected, is not necessarily aware of the infection before the negative effects are noticeable and cannot predict what's going to happen as a result of it. Some might question the claim that we carry ideas unconsciously. Here it can be argued that we do not know what happens when an idea goes from one person to another. It can be an advantage or it can be a disadvantage. We do not know how it will influence the existing ideas of the other, if the effects on or in its host will be positive, negative, or maybe both in different areas.

The organization as a host
In this perspective, an organization becomes an organism. It turns around the conventional truth that the strategy should be seen as something positive and resistance as something negative. Therefore, the perspective gives an eye for immunity (Røvik, 2011). Some of them are congenital and others are acquired. The more viruses an organism has experienced, the better the immune system has become at fighting back against similar viruses.

The many facets of strategy
The phenomenon of strategy has been defined and studied in various ways (Mintzberg, 2009) including: as a plan (Ansoff, 1965), a process (Mintzberg, 1994), a practice (Gerry et al, 2008; Whittington, 2001), decisions (Martin, 2010), a discourse (Vaara, 2010), or politics (Pettigrew, 1977). The point here is that the theoretical perspective influences how the

phenomenon is defined and studied. Therefore, these various perspectives should be seen as complementary to each other by focusing on different facets of the phenomenon 'strategy'.

It seems that these listed perspectives assume that actors have a high degree of autonomy in relation to how the strategies are employed in the organization. Since it is not the host that controls the virus, the virus perspective challenges this assumption. A virus has its own life and interacts with the host. Therefore, the host did not choose to become infected and is not necessarily aware of its own infection before the symptoms become noticeable and severe and therefore the host cannot predict how the virus will mutate or impact it. Some will surely question the assumption that we are unconscious carriers. Here it can be argued that we do not know what happens when the strategy goes from one person to another. It can be an advantage or it can be a disadvantage. We do not know how the strategy will influence the existing ideas, discourse and practices of the host or if the impact will be mainly positive or negative.

Although a strategy has clear targets, no one knows what will happen when the strategy begins to infect and spread in the organization as a whole because it can mutate over time. Mintzberg calls this emergence, but does not address whether the unintended effects are positive or negative.

Resistance

The literature on strategy mainly treats resistance as something negative. (Kotter, 2008; Piderit, 2000; Johnson, 1992; Thomas et al, 2011). Some want to explain why resistance occurs, how it is exercised, and how it can be avoided or minimized (Thomas & Davis, 2005; Oreg et al, 2011). This article, however, defines resistance as something positive, because resistance protects the existing organization and is an essential part of trying to prevent damage to the system. It can be compared to a proper immune response. This gives a view on immunity to strategies (Røvik, 2011). Some of it can be innate and other parts are acquired. The logic is that the more viruses an organism have experienced, the stronger the immunity to similar viruses has become.

Strategy as a virus

Røvik has written about the virus theory, and reminds us that it is only a metaphor. This article uses the virus theory as an analogy, because there are great similarities between the way a virus and a strategy behaves once it has penetrated an organization and begins to interact with its host. It is based on the 6 characteristics of viruses, as Røvik mentions: infectious, immune, replication, incubation, mutated, and hibernated viruses (Røvik, 2011.646).

Firstly, a virus infects only a living host. In the same manner as a strategy needs to interact with the actors, a virus requires cells that it can infect. The members of the organization are like these cells.

Secondly, one can acquire immunity against a virus. This feature is particularly interesting when it comes to strategic work. In the strategy literature resistance is perceived as a negative factor, but from a virus perspective, it is something positive. The resistance can be considered to be part of the internal immune response that protects against the potentially damaging effects of the virus. When a new strategy has similarities to a strategy of the past that caused problems – there will be resistance. This is not because of change, but because there are actors who remember what happened last time that a similar strategy was present in the organization, and these actors are trying to prevent the repetition of the damage or problems, that the earlier strategy might have lead to.

In addition, there are the mechanisms in an organization, which, as is the case with the outer immune system of the body, i.e. the skin, prevents the strategies penetrating into the organization. It may be legislation, systems, or models that can calculate the effects of a strategy before it takes place.

The virus replicates itself. This is to be understood that the strategy is expanding within the organization in the same manner as a virus spreads in an organism. The ambition of the strategy is to set the agenda in the organization and that possibly affects anything and everything. In other words, it is difficult to restrict the effect the strategy has to certain areas of the organization. This is because the strategy problematizes the knowledge or practice which everyone takes for granted. It presents not only the desired future, but also very

fundamental and potentially problematic questions: – who are we, why are we here, and what are we doing (Lilley, 2001).

The virus can incubate. This characteristic refers to the time perspective in strategic work. Usually it is assumed that the strategy is active as soon as it is adopted and communicated within the organization. The point of incubation is to understand that there might be periods where the strategy is inactive, and then suddenly breaks out again and shakes the organization.

Viruses can also mutate, i.e. experience changes in genetic structure. This is known among other places from different kinds of the common flu. This means that the virus can spread to organisms, which hitherto have not been in danger of being infected. Strategies can also mutate and, combined with replication, strategies can penetrate into hitherto untouched parts of the organization. This process can also be described as a translation, but unlike the translation the mutation is uncontrolled, and thus is difficult to predict the final results. As Røvik describes, this gives the virus the possibility of not being recognized by the immune system (2011). In the organizational context, it may be a mutational change in a concept or concept name. When there is no consistency between the name and the content then it makes it all the more difficult to recognize and compare concepts. (See, e.g., Ax & Bjørnenak, 2005). Therefore, the name of the strategy remains the same throughout the organization, but the contents can vary significantly by department.

The virus can go dormant: it no longer causes symptoms, but is still present in the organism. This is reminiscent of strategies that still exist even though they have been replaced, and sometimes show up and give rise to symptoms such as confusion, because nobody knows how to handle this strategy.

It is debatable whether the host is aware that it is infected. It can be argued that a carrier of an idea will try to persuade others to think positively about that idea. Some may also argue that at some point, the idea can no longer be perceived as man-made but as natural. This can be assumed to influence in cases where the host is aware of the infection that he or she subject others to.

The virus affects its host in various ways. Some can be weakened a lot by a cold, while others hardly react at all. The remarkable thing is that a strategy can affect one part of the organization in one way, while another part of the organization experiences the strategy in a remarkably different way. This is in contrast to what the most popular books in strategy declare: That the strategy can be used anywhere and by anyone who wants to succeed more.

Examples on infections

When strategic work is analyzed through virus theory it gives a different understanding of the negative aspects of working with strategies. It is debatable whether it is the strategy itself that creates the negative effects or the people who perform it that are responsible. This article does not distinguish between the two, as it acknowledges that it is difficult to define a clear line between what strategy contains and how the people are affected. A virologist utilizes a microscope to separate the virus from the rest of the organism, but in the immaterial world and in strategic work there is no access to such a piece of equipment. However, there can be a distinction between carrier that deliberately is trying to infect others, those who are infected and those who have not yet been infected with the virus. The objective is to gain a greater understanding of how strategies affect different parts of the organization negatively. This was done by participant observations in a public organization from 2011 to 2013 and by interviewing 12 top and middle managers. The focus was to study how the managers reacted on and talked about a new strategy concept. The interviews as well as the participant observations were coded in Nvivo using closed coding where the codes were from virus theory.

Presentation of the case

The chosen organization has introduced a strategy concept that comes from performance management theory, which focuses on the organization's impact on society. The core of the concept is a value chain where the organization must describe the means they use to achieve the desired goals. If one ignores the fact that it is difficult to separate the organizations impact on the goals from other organizations' influence on the same goals, then the concept had a strong appeal to the top management in the organization. The earlier concept of performance contracts was abandoned because, as the person responsible for working with the strategies

stated "... we would like to be better to work long term, where the performance contracts and management tools that we have had so far, might have been too short-term." Here is that the intention of the new idea is to displace the old. The fact that this intention was not realized will be described later in the article

The CEO told the story on how the idea came into the organization:

Interviewer: "How did you get the idea of working with strategy this way."
CEO: "It started three, almost four, years ago. Back then, we used the performance contracts as a management tool to control performance, like all other state institutions did and still do. The performance contracts are one-year contracts, with a typical range of objectives, which are defined at the beginning of the year and then at the end of the year we have typically reached a large number of targets. And we have used this instrument for many years, we have experimented with it, tried to refine it as a management tool. But, now I express my own opinion, we have never been quite happy with the way it has worked. So three or four years ago I attended a course for executives, and there I was, along with the other students, introduced to a large number of cases from private companies, which were about how private companies use strategy. And which strategy, explicitly or implicitly, led to the very successful businesses. And I started asking myself, why not do this in the public sector. So when I came back to the organization, we had a discussion in the management group, and I told them as well as I could about what it was that I had learned, and asked if it was something we should try to work on. And since then we have worked with it and it has gone through several, how should I put it, attempts to make strategies this way. And I would like to emphasize that I would call it experimental, and I would say that what we do is still experimental, because practice shows that it is enormously difficult to make it work."

The idea came into the organization as the CEO had been on a course where he had been exposed to the concept and thought that it should replace the former model consisting of performance contracts. This can be described as an infection where the idea behind the concept has infected the decision maker in the organization, who then again deliberately tries to infect the rest of the organization. Note that the CEO used the word "attempts" to introduce the new concept. The interpretation is that nobody knows what is going to happen, which is

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why he describes it as an experiment. It could be thought of in medical terms, where the guinea pig is injected with a virus so the effects can be studied.

The CEO was also talking about the time perspective. According to him, the organization had at that time been working on this concept for almost four years. But the first meeting where the external consultants presented the concept to representatives of the organization happened two years ago. One possible explanation is that the preparation, or incubation period, lasted two years, a period in which the CEO had meetings with the rest of the top management group about this concept.

Another aspect is that the concept originated from private companies. The CEO was told that firms had success primarily because they have a specific strategy concept, and therefore wanted to use the same strategy concept. He did, however, not have any reflection on how the conditions in a public organization are different to those in a private company. Here it can be seen that the virus via the rhetorical wrapping of success is largely infectious. When I asked about this aspect, the CEO gave the following response:

Interviewer: "What is your reflection on the fact that you have imported something that is developed in the private sector to a public organization?"

CEO: "I believe that what we've imported is the way of thinking. What we have in the ministry is more some thoughts and ideas on what I subjectively remember from the course. We have no textbook that says a strategy is this and this is how we implement it. In a sense I think what we have is very home-made. I think that if the excellent teachers I had in on the course… if they came and saw what we were doing, they would see something that they cannot recognize. Or, hopefully maybe they would recognize some philosophy in it, but we have not chosen a specific tool. And the cases from the course show that there is no such tool that every successful private companies use, far from it. What I got home, it was more of a realization that a lot of the successful companies have a strategy. And that they know what it is makes them competitive. And if you have it, and you also are very competitive, then you will become a successful private company."

Here is a mutation. The CEO did not use a virus terminology, but spoke about the philosophy and that it was home-made. It was not clear which parts of the idea they changed, when he spoke of a logic that directly assumes that if the organization has a strategy then it becomes competitive and by way of said strategy are lead to success. One could assume that he was not himself aware of how they changed the concept. This can be seen when he still spoke of competitiveness, which is not a condition for a public organization that has to corporate with other public organs. That very aspect was criticized by the managers in the beginning of the process, because the organization cooperates with many other organizations in order to achieve their goals. However, the concept that the CEO incorporated works from the assumption that the means to achieve the goal lies within the organization itself.

Meeting the idea

In the beginning of the process the managers received assistance from an external consulting company. The consulting company organizes study tours for public managers to foreign countries where the public sector has been working with performance management for a longer period of time than in Denmark. Many of the key managers in the organization have been sent on such a study tour. This can be described as a source of infection, where the majority of managers who return from the such a trip is filled by an enthusiasm about the concept. The first official meeting of the organization where the new concept was on the agenda was attended by a strategy group consisting of managers representing different areas in the organization and two consultants from the external consulting company.

A manager told the following about her encounter with the concept.

Interviewer: "Do you remember what you thought when you first heard that you had to work that way?"
Manager: "Yes, but now I'm not very objective because I'm actually one of the first that started working that way and I have been here for a long time, and I was very excited."
Interviewer: "What was it that made you excited?"
Manager: "It was that…how to put it… if you took the old way of working with performance contracts…you sat down every year and asked "what should we do", and then you formulated some goals but it was not really goals. It was what we wanted to achieve before a certain

deadline. Or before 1 February we should have done this and that, and it is okay that you must achieve something before a certain deadline, but nobody cared if it made a difference. Nobody cared that you should do something that could make a difference and that made it meaningless"

She continues to talk about her experience with the strategy concept:

Interviewer: "When did employees heard about the concept the first time, or how did the employees hear about it the first time? The strategy and value chain and effect on society... "

Manager: "I actually believe that for those I have worked together with for a long time it happened when I came home from that study thing, we all took part in the first time and where I was completely excited and thought, this is a clever way to work. And I remember we sat, the top manager and I, and made the first attempt with it on the way home on the plane. We were both very excited by the thought that we could work this way. And, in fact, I think that it was very captivating. After a while, you always find that it is not so easy, but it can be a bit tempting because the idea is so pure. And so, it is about just trying to get the idea to fit in, so it might be flexible enough in relation to the political part of the organization. You cannot just take it and put it in, because nothing works that way."

From a virus perspective, the interpretation of the manager's response is similar to that of the first symptoms of an infection, enthusiasm, but the virus' effect is weakened when it meets the organizational reality. The remarkable thing is that the first carrier, a top executive, delegated the daily responsibility to a manager, which in turn has delegated responsibility to an employee. This insulates the CEO from the reality that apparently neutralizes the enthusiasm for the strategy concept.

The virus also has a feature that increases its ability to infect: An appealing rhetorical wrapping, as this manager noted:

Interviewer: "Are there any word in the strategy, which seem wrong to you?"
Manager: "The words in the strategy are put in very general terms, so no."

Interviewer: "How are they general?"

Manager: "It's very hard to disagree with any of it. The terms are too general. It only happens when we ask what actions we should do. When we do that, there are a lot of discussions."

This manager saw that there is a difference between the rhetorical packaging and the content. It is difficult to disagree with the wording of the strategy itself, while there may be disagreement about the concrete actions that will lead the organization to achieve the goals. This affects the organization in a way that results in the use of plenty of resources on meetings, discussions, negotiations, presentations and all the other activities the implementation of a new strategy entails. So, the strategy leads to a higher level of activity and the resources used for this activity will be taken from other activities. This was also mentioned at the first meeting between representatives of the organization and the consultants who were assigned to explain the concept to the representatives. The managers mentioned that the last time they had to work with a new concept for managing they almost forgot to do some of the tasks that they were required to do by law. This led to criticism from the National Audit Office. This meant that some of the managers were sceptical and immune to the virus, as they had previously experienced a virus somewhat like it.

However, not all involved behaved like they were struck by a fever. This caused some problems for those who were not infected, and therefore saw themselves as clear-sighted among a majority who had hallucinations. There were no places in the organization that were free of infected individuals, and they were usually in large numbers or they were in powerful places in the organization. A manager talked about this experience:

Interviewer: "What do you do when you have doubts, do you say something to someone or do you keep it to yourself?

Manager: "I keep it to myself. Because the train has already left, and there is no reason to say it, because we've been told that we need to work that way, we must identify areas where we can create effects. And then we make a strategy and then we test it, so it's an experiment. But we tried that last year, in 2010 and it did not work at all. And the directive is that we should try it. Well, fine, then we try it. Well, I cannot say that I think it is a dangerous theory because

then my boss will tell it to the CEO and say we'd better not do it. It's not worth it."

The manager shows signs of being immune to the new strategy because they have already tried implementing new strategies before and it did not work. He thinks the strategy is dangerous because they waste the resources doing something that does not work. This he could not tell anyone, since the virus has already infected the decision makers. It turns the world upside down, because it is the healthy, and not the infected as we know to be normal from the hospitals, that are isolated.

Although the intention of the new concept was to replace the performance contracts, it turned out that the performance contracts were more tenacious, and the new idea could not kill them. It makes the job of the managers difficult when they have to deal with two contradictory ideas. A manager voiced how it had affected the daily work:

Interviewer: "Has your job become easier or more difficult after the strategy was introduced?

Manager: "It has become more difficult."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Manager: "Because the intention is that the strategy should replace our performance contract. But it has not happened. We still have our contract and now we have the strategy too."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Manager: "So we have to do all these things, and so it must result in all these effects. So, there are a lot more goals now than before."

Interviewer: "Okay. Do you expect the performance contract to disappear?"

Manager: "Yes, it is the plan that it will."

Interviewer: "But you do not know when?"

Manager: "Yes. But I do not know when we are ready for it.

Interviewer: "What is most important to you, the strategy or the performances contract?"

Manager: "The performance contract is definitely important. Because, how can I put it, we are a factory. And the contract is our production schedule. It says how much we should make of it and ... So how many blue blocks and how many yellow bricks and how many kilometre ropes, we have to make, and how thick it should be. So, we do not know what we should do if we didn't have a contract. And then we are also measured by it ... So, all activities are giving points, and it is a performance measurement."

There are two viruses in the organization that influence it in different ways. One has effects and the other has production goals. Although one should eliminate the other, they live side by side, which makes the manager's work more difficult. However, it seems that the performance contract at that time was the strongest viral idea, because it simultaneously served as a production plan and a strategy. It binds itself to the organism in symbiosis, where it creates and provides order so long as the organization continues to produce production goals and work towards achieving them. It is interesting that the manager expects that the performance contract will disappear, though he does not know when it will happen. A critical interpretation would compare this with the infected person that is hoping that the disease will disappear by itself, but who is not able to put an exact date on when this will happen. The manager does not contemplate the possibility that the idea might be or lead to a chronic state. It should also be noted that on the one hand he says that the performance contract will disappear, but on the other hand he also says "... we do not know what we should do if we do not have a contact." At that time, he has no alternative to the way of organizing work that the performance contracts use. Therefore, it can be argued that the performance contract cannot be dispensed with until there is an alternative that can tell them how they should organize their work.

The first meeting about the concept

A group of managers was formed with the purpose of producing strategies for the organization, which were intended to be in accordance with the new concept. This group of managers encountered the new concept at a workshop conducted by external consultants. There were eight participants from the organization and two external consultants present. The head of the group was the manager from the department that had the responsibility for the performance contracts. The other participants represented all the different agencies of the organization. The head of the group stated that "The purpose of the workshop was to create a language and a concept (for strategy), that we all can understand.". The meeting began with a presentation of the participants, including the two external consultants who were in charge of leading the meeting. One of the consultants started the meeting by explaining that due to the time restrictions on the meeting a clear focus on discussing the concept which would be the next version of the performance management tool would be necessary.

One of the participants asked, "At what level is the concept supposed to influence our organization? We already have models that work." The head of the group said, "We must discuss how deep the concept will go."

After the consultants had explained the key ideas in the concept as KPIs, output, performance, and effectiveness and value change, the participants had two types of questions. The first type was questions about what separates this concept from the one that they already had. The second type of question expressed doubt that it was possible to make a value chain, as the social impact of their work depended on actors outside the organization. This doubt was addressed with a statement from one of the consultants:"It's not an exact science – it is a tool that enables us to talk about whether we are doing the right things. It's a way to have a managerial dialogue about what we do." The head of the group had no doubt that it could be done, and talked about how they at a later point would create what he called performance budgeting, where they linked the strategic and financial goals together so they could know the cost of the effects. The chief consultant said that no one had been successful in doing this, but the head argued that "We should be ambitious in this work."

Following a discussion of the key points in the concept, the consultants presented their ideas of a concept, which was inspired by a concept used in another ministry. The head of the group stated that the concept should be simple. The consultants asked, "Which elements of your current models do you want to keep?" There was no answer. Then the consultants left the meeting and the remaining participants continued the discussion, which mainly focused on the risk of the concept. The participants made statements like "It's good to make room for individual differences. We can understand the top management's fascination that we all work towards the same goal, but that's just not possible." And "It doesn't make any sense that we all should agree on all the goals."

The participants were sceptical of the idea that it was possible to formulate universally common goals. Several participants mentioned that the last time that they made a concept for performance managing it took so many resources that they almost got the National Audit Office on their back for not doing the tasks that they should. This debate ended without conclusions and the head of department finished the meeting of by arranging a new meeting

date.

After the meeting, a task group was established would meet regularly to give each other feedback and share knowledge.

One and a half years after the first meeting
In the beginning the group met regularly, but as time went by they didn't meet so often. One and a half years after the first meeting with the group, there was an important meeting where they had to look at the quality of the two strategies. It had been six months since their last meeting. In the meantime there had been a change of government and the new government had made organizational changes with the creation of a new agency and a new head of the department. The head of the group was not present since he attended a meeting about the new agency. The new head opened the meeting by stating that he was now in charge. He also informed the participants that he might have to leave the meeting early due to another meeting about the new agency.

The managers from the agencies presented their business strategies, and during the presentations the head left the meeting. After the presentations, the discussion began.

The participants were still focused on the KPIs, and used indicators as a synonym for or as an elaboration on the KPIs in the same sentence. Their doubts about the concept were no longer at a fundamental level but at an operational level.

The questions about the participants' doubts were presented to a senior consultant from the department, and he could not provide any answers that seemed to satisfy the participants. They asked no questions about why they should use the concept, but how they should operationalize it. Nobody questioned the fundamental ideology of the concept; whether it is possible to create a value chain and whether it is possible to distinguish between the influence of the organization and external actors on a given target. However they asked questions about how to get the concept to work in practice. Of course it can be argued that it was not surprising that there were no objections at the meeting because of the change in power relations. Participants had been working on this for so long that they knew what was

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legitimate and not legitimate to ask questions about. An interesting finding, however, was that neither the head of the division nor the top manager was present when the discussions began. The senior consultant represented the department and therefore it can be argued that the discussion was not among equals. These explanations are plausible, but the interesting part is the development that had occurred since the first meeting.

The participants asked for answers from the department on how to solve the problems they experienced, and this can be considered to be indicative part of the power game between the agencies and the department. This can be interpreted in at least two ways, each of which depends on partly the awareness of the participants of the power relationship and partly on the situation at the last meeting.

The first interpretation is based on the assumption that managers are not infected. In an elegant way they place the responsibility for the strategies on the department leadership level. Their questions imply that the department must have the right answers, since they are the ones who initiated the work. They play the role of managers who just do what they are told, and when they find it difficult to do what they are told, their commissioner must help them. The managers are fully aware of that the department doesn't have any solutions, but they impose on them the responsibility to find them. And so, they appear cooperative and submissive. But this interpretation is based on the assumption that participants are aware of the power relationship, and they want to level the asymmetry.

The second interpretation is based on the assumption that the managers are infected. They can no longer remember their objections and their doubt is gone. Unlike at the first meeting, there is no longer an opposition to the concept. Nobody asked critical questions about the concept. They were interested in how they could make the concept work. It seemed that they had collective amnesia, and could no longer remember their professional and logical arguments against the concept to begin with.

Conclusion

This article proposes the use of virus theory as an analytical framework for strategic work in organizations. It focuses on the negative effects that strategy has on the organization. In this

example, it is a CEO who is infected by the virus, which has the form of a concept for a strategy. Then the CEO consciously infects the rest of the top management group, which decides that the strategy concept is to replace their existing strategy concept called performance contracts. It seems that the first symptom of infection is an excitement that is later neutralized by the encounter with concrete organizational realities. After one and a half years a memory loss has emerged, where the infected managers forget their critique of the concept, and become solely concerned with getting the concept to work. There are also examples of managers who are immune to the new virus. This is because the strategy concept bears resemblance to a previous concept. There were no positive effects at this earlier instance, and therefore the managers are resistant to implementing the new concept. Finally, the intention was that the new concept should replace the old one. This was not the case as the old concept remained in use when organizing the tasks of the departments. As a result, some managers felt that their work had become more difficult as they had to deal with two types of management tools simultaneously.

This virus perspective on strategy raises not only a discussion of the negative effects of strategies in an organization, but also of the fact itself that technologies can and should be studied as viruses. Therefore, it is debatable which diseases technologies inflict on their host. Is it comparable to polio, rabies or just a relatively harmless common cold? Another aspect of this perspective is the question of how an organization grows immune to certain viruses. What happens on an institutional level, where certain technologies cannot live in some organizations, at the system level, where there are systems that prevent certain types the infection of certain systems or concepts, and at the individual level, where key decision makers are immune, because of past experience? A third aspect is how technologies exchange properties the same way two viruses may mutate when both are present in the same host. The fourth and last aspect is the built-in feature in technologies to multiply in an organism. Some viruses, such as the common cold, spread rapidly and are detected immediately, while other viruses, such as HIV, spread slowly, and entail the risk that the host will only discover it when it is far too late.

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