

# Managerial Succession and Strategic Change

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In this paper different explanations for the apparent connection between the appointment of new managers and organizational reorientations are outlined. These explanations range from assuming that strategic and managerial change is caused by the same factor(s); presuming that environmental expectations may induce the newly appointed leader to initiate change; maintaining that the leadership change produces a change in organizational commitment and beliefs that, in turn, produces organizational reorientations; to arguing that leadership succession gives the organization additional resources that will enable strategic changes to take place.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is a major controversy in the organization theory literature concerning whether organizational actions and outcomes are externally controlled (or at least severely constrained), or the outcome of managerial actions (Pfeffer, 1981; Astley and van de Ven, 1983). The population ecology in particular (Hannan and Freeman, 1984), but to a considerable extent also the resource dependence perspective (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), argue that organizations have very limited possibilities to influence their situation. On the other hand, the organizational behavior and strategy literature (e.g. Chan-

dler, 1962; Tushman and Romanelli, 1985) asserts that organizations are able to carry through transformations and indeed occasionally do so.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, there is a division in the literature on leadership between those who state that leaders have little impact on organizations as their behaviors are largely constrained (Pfeffer, 1981; Hannan and Freeman, 1984), and those who maintain that leadership is of paramount importance for organizational functioning (Tushman et al, 1986).<sup>2</sup> It is therefore of little surprise that there is debate about the extent to which managerial successions have any impact on organizational strategy. Some theorists argue that successions have very limited effects on instrumental action (Pfeffer, 1977; 1981), and that managerial successions predominately have a symbolic function as replaced leaders serve as scapegoats for organizational failures (Gamson and Scotch, 1964).

However, in this paper we maintain, based on a number of empirical studies that are outlined in the next section, that managerial successions are not seldom associated with strategic organizational change.<sup>3</sup> The question of why managerial replacements tend to coincide with strategic reorientations will be examined. Thus, we will not attempt to evaluate whether the changes have adverse or positive consequences for the organizations, but rather elaborate on why there is a covariation between strategic changes and managerial succession. Surprisingly, organizational theorists have not paid much attention to this question; our aim is to begin filling some of this gap in the literature by presenting possible explanations for the relationship between leadership and strategic change. We will discuss different ways in which these two kinds of change may be causally related as well as examine the possibility that the covariation does not imply a simple causal relationship.

## 2 STUDIES OF MANAGERIAL AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

A variety of research has shown that substantial organizational changes often coincide in time with change of management.<sup>4</sup> Gilmour (1973) provides one of the first case documentations of the connection between managerial succession and strategic change. His study of three divestments made by US firms revealed that, without exception, the divestment decisions were preceded by the appointment of a new corporate executive. The new managers perceived a discrepancy between the goals of certain organizational units and their performance, and they soon became committed to the idea of divesting the units. Eventually they were able to rally support for this idea. None of these firms had previously divested any organizational unit. Another study of foreign divestments made by US companies also revealed that the divestment decisions were usually initiated by newly appointed managers (Torneden, 1975).

Similarly, in a study of Finnish firms, Björkman (1989a) reports that a change of organizational (or divisional) strategy towards carrying out foreign direct investments in manufacturing units in several cases followed shortly after management replacements had been made. He also found a negative correlation between the time that managers had held their positions and their propensity to engage in foreign direct investment decision making.

Tushman et al (1986) found that in only 6 out of 40 cases did a current CEO initiate and implement strategic reorientations. They conclude that externally recruited executives were more than three times more likely to initiate strategic changes than were existing executive teams. Grinyer et al (1988) report that in 55 per cent of the 25 strategic change processes in British business organizations, the processes were triggered by new CEOs. In another thirty per cent, CEO replacements constituted parts of the change processes, and several reorientations were stimulated by the appointment of new managers at lower hierarchical levels. Additional descriptions of the linkage between managerial succession and strategic change are provided by, among others, Biggart (1977), Starbuck et al (1978), Grinyer and Spender (1979), Donaldson and Lorsch (1983), Rosenfeld et al. (1988) and a number of case studies reviewed by Hoffman (1989).

In sum, a review of studies of strategic change indicates that organizational reorientations are often associated with the appointment of new managers. Obviously, the proximity in time between management and strategic change may in some cases be accidental. Given that both management replacement and strategic change occur with certain intervals, they will sometimes concur. However, the empirical studies cited above indicate that the frequent co-occurrence of leadership and strategic change is not the result of random variation, and we must therefore search for other ways to explain this correlation.

The business press is abundant with examples of newly appointed leaders who have been able to carry through successful strategic reorientations. These stories, epitomized by Lee Iacocca at Chrysler and Jan Carlzon at SAS, are based on a belief in the «heroic» leader, who is appointed in times of trouble, evaluates the situation and then takes action. The heroic leader is also supposed to take the blame for failures, and leave the organization if it is not performing satisfactory. Hence, a widespread belief in the heroic leader is not dependent on improved organizational performance but, somewhat paradoxically, will also be reaffirmed every time a leader, when faced with failure, leaves the organization.

Stories about heroic leaders typically explain strategic change by reference to their personal qualities. In this paper we examine other possible explanations for the relationships between managerial succession and strategic change. First we propose that management replacement may result from the same factor(s) that causes organizational strategic change. Thereafter we discuss situations in which the leader for some reason takes action leading to organizational change. Our examples deal with environmental constraints and expectations on the new leaders. Finally, in two separate sections, we examine the possibility that the new leader causes something to happen that in turn results in strategic change. In the first example, an increase in the organizational resource base due to the leadership change is seen as resulting in strategic change. In the other examples, we assume that leadership replacement leads to changes in organizational commitments and beliefs and that this may bring about strategic change.

### 3 MANAGERIAL SUCCESSION AS A PART OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PROCESSES

One way to explain the co-occurrence of managerial succession and strategic change would be to show, first, that the same factor(s) cause both managerial succession and the process leading to strategic change, and second, that the leader has a limited role in the shaping of the new organizational direction. Thus, it would not be necessary to analyze managerial ideosyncracies in order to explain strategic shifts of the organization. Attention should instead be paid to factors that produce both managerial and strategic change. It should be pointed out that as managerial changes typically require shorter implementation time than do strategic change, the new leader may sometimes appear to be the change agent.

Grinyer and associates (1988) describe several cases that seem to be in line with this explanation. They found that thirty per cent of the strategic reorientations that they studied had been initiated, but not fully implemented, prior to a change of CEO. In these cases, obviously the new CEO did not cause the strategic change. Grinyer et al (1988) provide the reader with little information about the initiation of the organizational change processes and about the background for the change of CEO, but it is conceivable that both kind of changes may have been the outcome of the same process without being causally linked.

Both managerial succession and strategic change may, for instance, be the result of processes of intra-organizational political conflicts. This view is at least partly congruent with the basic assumptions made within the resource dependence perspective (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). This perspective builds on a model of organizations as political systems (cf. March, 1962; Cyert and March, 1963), whose strategic actions are to a considerable degree determined by the distribution of power and influence in the organization. The resource dependence perspective also downplays the role and discretion of individual organizational leaders (see also Pfeffer, 1981). It seems to us, however, that when Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) specifically discuss managerial succession, their treatment is somewhat at odds with the way in which they generally downplay the importance of organizational leadership (see f.i. Ch.1). Namely, when discussing organizational change, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, 252) state

that »executive succession is a very important process by which organizations become aligned with their environment». They argue that environmental contingencies affect the power distribution in the organization, that in turn affects executive succession that, finally, influences organizational action and performance. The executive, according to this view, has some albeit limited discretion.

According to the resource dependence perspective, managerial succession in organizations with a stable political power structure will generally *not* be associated with strategic change. Institutionalization of the power structure will lead to longer leadership tenure even in difficult situations (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, 240), and when a new manager is appointed, the dominant political coalition tends to be able to choose the candidate from within the group. This pattern fits well with reports that internal succession is less likely than external recruitment to lead to radical strategic changes (Carlson, 1962; Helmich and Brown, 1972; Tushman et al, 1986).<sup>5</sup>

Case studies of organizational change (Normann, 1971; Biggart, 1977; Johnson, 1987; Rosenfeld et al, 1988; see also Tushman et al. 1986) have shown that strategic reorientations often are associated with changes in the organizational power structure. Individuals and groups favoured by the existing power structure will resist attempts to radically change organizational operations. When substantial changes do take place, they are usually preceded by periods of unsatisfactory performance, leading to changes in the power structure, followed by the appointment of new managers and initiation of processes of strategic change. Alternatively, the attention of powerful organizational constituencies may for some reason, for example because the unit does not meet its performance targets, be turned towards the operations of a unit which previously has operated fairly independently.<sup>6</sup> Ownership change may have a similar effect. Two interpretations representative of the dualism found in Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) work can be proposed. One possibility is that new leaders do make a difference and that external recruitment is likely to lead to greater organizational change. We will return to this interpretation in later sections. An alternative interpretation, in line with the reasoning in this section, is that the recruitment of a new external leader often is little more than the outcome of organizational pow-

er conflicts; conflicts that by themselves eventually would lead to strategic organizational changes.

#### 4 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS AND EXPECTATIONS

In the previous section it was presumed that some factor(s) different from the newly appointed manager brought about the organizational reorientation. However, research cited earlier in this paper showed that often the newly appointed manager initiated strategic change.<sup>7</sup> But why do newly appointed managers set out to undertake strategic change as studies have revealed that managers involved in strategic decision making usually consider the personal benefits of being right as well as the risks and effects of being wrong (Bower, 1970; Carter, 1971).

In this section, we will argue that the existence of explicit and implicit constraints and expectations on the manager may explain why newly appointed managers attempt to initiate and carry through strategic changes.

First, there is considerable evidence that managerial succession often occurs as a response to poor organizational performance (e.g. Grusky, 1963; Pfeffer and Leblebici, 1973; McEachern, 1975; Lubatkin et al, 1989; but see Samuelson et al, 1985) or an unstable and difficult managerial situation (Salancik et al, 1976, quoted by Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Helmich, 1978).<sup>8</sup> The occurrence of »learned helplessness» (Klein et al, 1976) and »threat-rigidity» effects (Staw et al, 1981) in crises situations may have been among the reasons why organizational constituencies see it necessary to change manager in the first place. It seems logical that a manager who is appointed when the organization is in a predicament often is explicitly expected to, and will in fact try new courses of action in order to improve organizational performance. In a crisis situation, radical changes in strategy may also be necessary in order to convince external groups about the survival potential of the organization.

Second, embedded in our society is a general notion that managers are expected to »make a difference». That is, new managers are expected to carry out new strategic action because »(T)he ideology of new management... associates managers with the introduction of new ideas, new organizational forms, new technol-

ogies, new products, and new moods» (March, 1981, 153). Similarly, people tend to explain organizational performance by reference to leadership actions (Meindl et al, 1985). Hence, even if the organization is not in a predicament, new managers may attempt to enhance their own legitimacy by changing the strategy of the unit for which they are responsible. It is possible that the propensity to attempt strategic reorientations will be highest among middle and general managers for whom future career development depends on an ability to demonstrate that they are capable and dynamic executives. In times with increasing environmental volatility and shorter managerial tenure, arguably the ability to rapidly initiate strategic changes will be increasingly important for managers' future career prospects. Simultaneously, there will be less need to pay attention to future consequences of the changes that are initiated.

#### 5 RESOURCE ATTAINMENT

In the present and the following section we consider different ways in which an intervening variable may account for the relationship between leadership and strategic change. The leadership change causes something to happen that in turn causes strategic change. Here, we present resource attainment as a possible intervening variable; in the next section we focus on organizational commitment and beliefs.

A possible explanation for the relationship discussed in this paper is that change of leadership may enable the organization to gain resources that it otherwise would not obtain. These resources may be utilized by the new leader or by other organization members in efforts to change organizational strategy. The new leader may directly through his/her connections, or through the enhanced external recognition and/or legitimacy of the organization, be able to get additional financial funds. The extra funds will, in turn, create slack resources that will enable members of the organization to experiment with new operational activities (Cyert and March, 1963). For organizations in a financial predicament, on the other hand, the additional resources may enable the organization to implement new ideas that because of insufficient financial reasons have not been possible to carry through.

The appointment of a »figurehead» as a new

leader may also have a positive impact on the human resource base of the organization. If the new leader enhances the status of the organization, this may attract new organization members with ideas about the kind of operations that the organization might undertake, thus constituting a first step towards organizational change.

Further, managerial succession can be used to signal to the environment that organizational problems are recognized and that past mistakes are rectified. Although it may be difficult to link previous organizational actions directly to the ex-leader, this person may nevertheless be given the blame for the problems that the organization has had. Through its symbolic effects, the occurrence of a leadership change may therefore enable the organization to obtain resources necessary for survival and change (Pfeffer, 1981).

## 6 ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENTS AND BELIEFS

A number of studies have revealed that individuals are liable to become committed to a course of action even if negative feedback about previous action is received (see Staw and Ross (1987) for a review of the commitment literature). By adhering to the already existing course of action, managers can engage in »impression management» towards the environment in order to show that previous decisions were »right».<sup>9</sup> New managers are not bound by previous organizational actions in the way that their predecessors were, and can therefore easier propose strategic changes. These changes may evidently be required if the organization due to development of commitment to a course of action has not responded to significant changes in the environment. The absence of commitment to existing organizational units on the part of new managers was seen by Gilmour (1973) and Torneden (1975) as the reason why these persons triggered divestment decision making processes. Thus, the crucial point from a commitment perspective is to get rid of the old leader who is reluctant to make necessary organizational changes.

McEachern (1975) and Salancik and Pfeffer (1980) found that privately owned firms lead by a member of the owning family (leaders/owners) had three times longer tenure than publicly held companies. de Vries argues that lead-

ers/owners not seldom develop a belief in their own indispensability and a fear that a new leader will distort what they have accomplished (i.e. they are committed to the current course of action) and they will therefore not want to bring up the issue of their own retirement. A number of examples show that even when the issue of retirement is discussed, and a new leader chosen, the owner/leader may postpone the date of retirement (Sonnenfeld, 1986; de Vries, 1989). A longer period of tenure, in turn, increases the likelihood that the successor will be an outsider (de Vries, 1989), who is more likely to initiate strategic changes.

It may in some instances be easier for a new manager to implement changes. The new manager is not like his/her predecessor affected by the outcome of bargaining processes of the past, which may have hindered strategic change. Additionally, especially if recruited externally, the new leader is not bound by social relationships within the organization, which may have induced the previous manager not to attempt changes with adverse consequences for some organization members. In particular if the person has a successful background, the new manager may have the clout needed to champion new ideas through in the organization. Furthermore, he/she has probably been appointed based upon the suggestion of superiors or interest groups who therefore may feel obliged to support the manager's change efforts. In this situation, superiors will probably be reluctant to decline the first ideas that are presented to them. Thus, in order to facilitate strategic changes the important thing is to replace the old leader; the problem is not that the old leader does not want to make changes, but rather that he/she is unable to implement these changes because he/she is part of a structure that inhibits change.

New managers, in particular if previously not belonging to the organization, often have beliefs about the organization and its environment that differ from those held by their predecessors. Given that potential leaders have fairly stable conceptions of how an organization should operate, leaders when entering new organizations will tend to try to change aspects that differ from his/her beliefs about the operations of a »good» organization.<sup>10</sup> For example, Starbuck et al (1978) describe how, after Electrolux had acquired Facit, the new management discovered several product lines for which demand exceeded the company's production volume:

»What Electrolux did was to reconceptualize Facit and Facit's environment» (Starbuck et al, 1978, 133—134). Similar examples are provided by Starbuck et al (1978), Donaldson and Lorsch (1983), and Rosenfeld et al (1988).<sup>11</sup>

The displacement of the old leader with a new person with different beliefs and with a »hand-off» style of managing the organization may enable extant organization members to implement ideas that the previous leader would not accept. For example, Björkman (1989a) describes how the president of a Finnish firm refused to accept the opinion of his subordinates that a newly developed product had great potential for international operations. After his displacement, the persons responsible for the new product soon got the approval to start overseas production, which the company previously had not had.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

Currently we know surprisingly little about the linkage between managerial succession and strategic organizational change. We do know that they often coincide, but we are not in a position to present any firm conclusion concerning why this is the case. Different explanations for the apparent connection between the appointment of new managers and organizational reorientations have been outlined in this paper. These explanations range from assuming that strategic and managerial change is caused by the same factor(s); presuming that environmental expectations may induce the newly appointed leader to initiate change; maintaining that the leadership change produces a change in organizational commitment and beliefs that, in turn, produces organizational reorientations; to arguing that leadership succession gives the organization additional resources that will enable strategic changes to take place.

Further empirical studies are needed in order to investigate the empirical validity of these explanations. In our view, this task requires longitudinal case studies. Recent longitudinal studies of organizational evolution and change (e.g. Pettigrew, 1985; Johnson, 1987) have augmented our knowledge of strategic change processes, but these investigations have not focused on the relationship between organizational and leadership change. We encourage future research on strategic change to pay more

attention to the nature of the linkage between managerial succession and organizational reorientations.

Assuming that the newly appointed leader plays a significant role as change agent, there is a variety of factors that would lead us to expect a decreasing propensity over time on the part of managers to instigate strategic reorientations. Development of commitment to the current course of action and evolvment of beliefs that are congruent with the existing mode of operations are among the factors that would tend to gradually increase managerial inertia. It is conceivable that the ability of a manager to obtain resources from the environment will decrease over time. For instance, the leader of a non-profit organization may initially be able to get non-recurrent, large donations, which the organization later will not receive.

On the other hand, there are also some factors that may increase the ability of managers to carry out organizational changes. There might, for example, be situations in which a leader's ability to obtain resources improves during his/her tenure. This may be the case if he/she manages to develop improved relationships with resource sources whose support is crucial for strategic change. Further, for several reasons a considerable tenure period may sometimes be needed in order to rally support for change efforts. First, it may be necessary for an externally recruited leader to gain a profound understanding of the current organizational belief systems in order to present change suggestions in a acceptable way. Second, it may take some time to learn the way in which decisions are made in the focal organization. Third, it may be necessary for the manager to develop intra-organizational socio-political networks and/or enhance his/her own credibility before it is possible to obtain the support required to radically changing organizational operations. The correlation between management tenure and the propensity of organizations to go through strategic changes should be investigated in future studies. Another research task would be to study the conditions under which the propensity of a new leader to trigger strategic changes increases or decreases over time.

## VIIITTEET

1. There has also been some attempts to develop a dialectic view of organizational action and change.

Zeitz (1980) argues that organizations construct major portions of their environments through the production of resources and through their control of interaction networks. The structures that they thus develop contain the seeds to conflicts, crises, and future organizational changes.

2. »Leader» and »manager» are used as synonyms, meaning that the person in question is the head of an organization or organizational unit.

3. By »strategic» changes we mean changes that are of great importance to the organization or organizational unit in question. Some researchers (Watzlawick et al, 1974; Argyris and Schön, 1978) have distinguished between instances of »first-order» and »second-order» change. First-order change means incremental modifications within the existing system, whereas second-order change is a radical, discontinuous shift, leading to a system which is qualitatively different from the old one. On a continuum between these types of change, the strategic changes discussed in this paper are closer to the latter than to the former.

4. Some studies have attempted to determine the impact of the environment, the organization, and its leadership on measures of organizational performance. Lieberman and O'Connor (1972), Salancik and Pfeffer (1977) and Thomas (1988) concluded that the influence of executive leadership was less than the effects of environmental and organizational factors. However, the leadership variable explained more than 50 per cent of the variance unexplained by the other variables, and in samples of homogenous firms leadership appears to have a greater impact on organizational performance than in heterogenous samples (Thomas, 1988). Thomas (1988, 399) concludes that »it will require very considerable additional research before we can offer a general assessment of the impact of leadership on organizational performance», but it should be pointed out that studies of Methodist ministers (Smith et al, 1984) and baseball coaches (Pfeffer and Davis-Blake, 1986) revealed that the appointment of leaders with a successful track record was associated with improved organizational performance.

5. On the other hand, some theorists argue that it is easier for internally recruited leaders to implement strategic changes (Dalton and Kesner, 1983; Lorsch, 1986).

6. Research has shown that organizations that exhibit poor performance are more likely to choose outside CEOs (Samuelson et al. 1985; Schwartz and Menon, 1985; but see Dalton and Kesner, 1985). Schwartz and Menon (1985) found no difference between the propensity of small and large failing US firms to choose new leaders externally despite the fact that large organizations in general are more likely than small ones to replace top managers from inside (Dalton and Kerner, 1983; Furtado and Rozetti, 1987). It is conceivable that a power shift, for instance to financial institutions, often takes place in failing organizations regardless of their size. The new dominant organizational coalition will then tend to push for strategic changes, whereby the choice of a new external leader is a part of this pursuit.

7. Contextual factors may obviously reduce the manager's latitude for action. In the previous section, the influence of the dominant coalition was mentioned. Other factors include significant external regulation, lack of slack resources, strong organiza-

tional belief systems (culture) that predefines action (Gupta, 1986), and the existence of high exit and entry barriers (Porter, 1980).

8. For an overview of factors related to CEO succession, see House and Singh (1987)!

9. An alternative explanation for the creation of commitment to a course of action is that individuals infer their values, preferences, and beliefs from prior behavior. In other words, people actually come to believe that their decisions/actions were »right» (March, 1978; Weick, 1979).

10. Given that potential leaders have different beliefs about organizational operations that they attempt to implement, there are no universally »good» and »bad» leaders, only different leaders. The successful leader will be the one that is hired by an organization that, perhaps by change, needs the kind of operational model that the person can offer.

11. For an overview of research on the linkage between organizational beliefs and strategic reorientations, see Björkman (1989b)!

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