

**EXPLORING MIDDLE MANAGERS' STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING ROLE  
THROUGH PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE**

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**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to better understand the way middle managers contribute strategically to the development of an organization by examining how they perform in the strategic roles allocated to them, with particular reference to strategic change. The paper draws on sensemaking theory and the concept of practical knowledge. Through vignettes drawn from the authors' current research, a framework is developed showing that two activities: "enacting conversations" and "enrolling networks", are critical in the accomplishment of the middle manager strategic sensemaking role. The paper also shows how these two skilled activities are underpinned by middle manager semantic and sociocultural knowledge, and that it is this practical knowledge that enables the middle managers to draw people into the change as they go about their day to day activities.

**Keywords:** middle managers, strategic sensemaking, strategy-as-practice

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<sup>1</sup> *Trajectories, Paths, Patterns and Practices of Strategizing and Organizing*, JMS Conference, Ste-Anne's College, Oxford, 23-25 september 2008.

## Introduction

Despite some early seminal works (Bower, 1972; Burgelman, 1983) showing that middle managers can have an important strategic role, research has only recently begun to take this seriously. There is now a burgeoning literature on the role middle managers play in both the formulation and implementation of strategic change (see, for example, Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004 & 2005; Currie, 1999; Currie & Proctor, 2005; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1994 & 1997; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Guth & McMillan, 1986; Hoon, 2007; Huy, 2002; Rouleau, 2005; Schilit, 1987; Sims, 2003; Westley, 1990), which shows middle managers to be more than passive linking pins, transmitting senior manager instructions unquestioningly down the organization. They are critical mediators that facilitate organizational adaptation by both shaping senior manager strategic thinking and orchestrating the deployment of senior manager plans. Middle managers are therefore important because of the way they knowledgeably connect the operational core with the upper echelons in a way that shapes strategic direction. However, existing research, in general, remains silent on the ways middle managers put their roles into action, and *how* middle managers perform their strategic roles on a daily basis. This is the focus of this paper.

There is increasing evidence from existing research on both senior and middle managers of the need for managers to be politically able if they are to exercise strategic influence and affect the course of events they are involved in (Buchanan, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Balogun et al, 2005; Balogun, Pye & Hodgkinson, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Hoon, 2007; Sims, 2003). Skilled managers are able to use their knowledge of their organisational context, colleagues and senior managers to influence those around them to adopt their point of view. This research also shows how this can involve use of particular context-sensitive language and

behaviour, that extends beyond the general to being quite specific based on the individual or group of people the manager is engaged with. Such sensemaking behaviour is underpinned by cycles of interpretation and action. Mangham & Pye (1991) refer to these cycles of “reading context” to decide what to do, and “acting to have impact” as “sense reading” and “sense wrighting”. The managers have to use their knowledge of their context of action to develop a performance (actions, words) most likely to deliver the desired meanings and responses in that context and with that particular person / group of people.

More recently Rouleau (2005) has also highlighted that for middle managers this interpretation and action is underpinned by practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is about the unspoken or the invisible structure of a situation which is acquired through time (Baumard, 2001). It is what we know without explicitly knowing we know it. Whilst this could also be true for more senior managers, this paper argues that it is particularly important to explore how *middle managers* use practical knowledge in their daily activity because their strategizing roles are often informal, lacking the authority of those who carry more formally recognized strategic roles. Others working within the strategy-as-practice perspective also highlight the need to understand practitioners and the resources they draw on to perform their work (Balogun et al, 2007; Jarzakowski et al, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Johnson et al, 2003; Whittington, 2006). In particular, research needs to focus more on what it is managers actually *do*, the activities they engage in, when carrying out their strategic roles (Johnson et al, 2007). Yet no research has as yet taken this argument seriously enough to explore the relationships between a middle managers ability to act strategically, their practical knowledge, and their ability to develop context sensitive interpretations and actions. This is what this paper seeks to do.

This paper is exploratory using empirical vignettes drawn from existing research on middle managers involved in implementing strategic change. These vignettes provide insight into how middle managers accomplish their strategic assignments and contributions in practice. They lead to the development of a framework which captures the practical skills underlying middle manager actions within the context of change implementation. This framework shows that two activities, enacting conversations and enrolling networks, are central to the way middle managers perform their strategic roles, and that these two activities are underpinned by semantic (language & symbolic representation) and socio-cultural (taken-for-granted ways of doing things) knowledge. These findings also contribute more broadly to the sensemaking perspective. Much research on sensemaking has focused on the conditions and context of sensemaking, with a primary concern for organizational processes of sensemaking (for example, Gioia & Longenecker, 1994; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). As a result less is known about how individuals perform their sensemaking roles, and it is this gap this research starts to address. The focus on this individual performance shows how individuals reciprocally act within and shape their sensemaking context through their practical knowledge. This also enables the findings to contribute to the strategy-as-practice research agenda since we are starting to unpick the linkages between strategic action, skills and performance. This issue is central to the strategy-as-practice agenda, with its concern for how strategists do this work. The research shows the need for further exploration of reciprocal linkages between context, action, sensemaking and practical knowledge.

This paper first reviews what is known about middle managers, sensemaking and practical knowledge. It then lays out the research methods and findings. And last, it discusses the importance of looking at practical knowledge in order to better understand how middle

managers make sense of the change in their daily course of action and concludes with a consideration of the contributions of the research and the implications for practice.

### **Middle managers and their strategic roles**

Since the end of the 1980s numerous authors have recognized the strategic contributions of middle managers, and recent interest in strategy as a social practice has also emphasized the importance of acknowledging and understanding the strategic role of those outside the upper echelons (Balogun et al 2003, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al 2007; Johnson et al 2003 & 2007; Whittington, 2006). The growing body of research on middle managers emphasizes the particular importance of their sensemaking capabilities in terms of interpreting the intent to change, transmitting information, and gathering and diffusing new ideas. Sensemaking is a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction that enables individuals through interacting with others to collectively create, maintain and interpret their world (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Pye, 1995). Some, such as Balogun (2003), make this middle manager sensemaking activity quite explicit. Others are less explicit, yet describe activities consistent with a sensemaking perspective, such as *synthesizing information* (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), *detecting new ideas* (Dutton et al, 1997) and *combining macro and micro information and unifying individual visions* (Nonaka, 1988; 1994).

Building on the sensemaking perspective, a theme in recent middle manager research is the notion of middle managers as skilled performers (Balogun et al, 2006; Rouleau, 2005; Hoon, 2007) deliberately using knowledge of their context of action to influence others to gain acceptance for projects they are involved in. Again, whilst this theme is explicit in only a few studies, it underlies many more. Floyd & Wooldridge (1997) and Hoon (2007) illustrate how

the way middle managers champion and synthesize is underpinned by their knowledge of who to talk to and how. Dutton et al (1997) show middle manager issue selling activity to be based on their reading of favourable and unfavourable contexts. Currie and Brown (2003) highlight the importance of middle manager contextual knowledge through the use of narratives.

The notion of skilled performance echoes earlier work on senior managers from sensemaking, political, and dramaturgical perspectives (for example, Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Mangham, 1978, 1979, 1986; Mangham & Pye; 1991; Pye, 1995; 2002). Sensemaking is not a politically neutral activity. To get their view accepted over that of others, individuals will engage in skilful sensegiving (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005), stage management and front and backstage activity (Goffman, 1959; Mangham, 1979 & 1986; Pye, 2002), so they can link their interests with those of others to draw the others into their own agenda (Balogun et al, 2005). The distinction between sensemaking and sensegiving has become commonplace (e.g. Maitlis 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), particularly in terms of describing leadership behaviour at times of change. It reflects a broad distinction between cycles of interpretation and action.

Mangham & Pye (1991) describe sensemaking alternatively as a dual, cyclical and on-going process of sense reading and sense wrighting to better portray the aspect of skilled practice concealed within sensemaking and sensegiving, “We settled, finally, upon the notion of the executive as artist/scientist/craftsperson, someone who 'reads' the circumstances in which he or she finds himself/herself and someone who 'wrights' in the sense that a playwright 'wrights' and a shipwright 'wrights'. Someone, that is, who shapes the material with which he or she works; someone who inherits and is shaped by a tradition and yet remains capable of going beyond that tradition and of shaping *it*.” (27-28: emphasis in the original) This distinction nicely captures the

notion of individuals engaging in intertwined cycles of interpretation and action, where interpretation shapes action and vice-versa in a reciprocal relationship through time, which is also intertwined with, and influenced by, the simultaneous cycles of interpretation and action of others. Thus, intertwined and mutually reinforcing multiple processes of individual sensemaking shapes the processes and outcomes of organizational sensemaking (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Yet whilst concepts such as sense reading and wrighting enable us to capture the interpretation and action aspects of what middle managers do when fulfilling a strategic role, they do not help us develop an understanding of the types of *practical* knowledge on which this is based (Rouleau, 2005). The social processes that underpin sensemaking are still relatively unexplored (Maitlis, 2005; Fairhurst, 2007). This is the focus of this paper.

The concept of practical knowledge can be seen in the work of John Dewey. Dewey spoke of “the unity of knowledge” by which he meant that knowledge and doing are inseparably linked (Menand, 2001): knowing is bound up with action and vice-versa. However, practical knowledge is also tacit knowledge, in the sense that “we know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966:4), and is consistent with Ryle’s concept (1949) of “know-how” versus “know-what”. For Polanyi, knowing involves “skilful action” since knowledge is not something independent of human action (Tsoukas, 2005). “*All knowing is personal knowing – participation through indwelling*” (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975: 44 emphasis in original).” Tacit knowledge is embedded in and “reciprocally constitutive” with practice (Orlikowski, 2002), consisting of both “situational responses” and “intuitive judgment” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos (2004) argue that “individual understanding is not so much in the head as in *situated practice*: the individual understands and acts in the world through drawing on sets of socially defined values, beliefs and cognitive categories within particular material and social

circumstances.” The argument is that “tacit and explicit knowledge are mutually constituted ... inseparable” (Tsoukas, 1996: 14); knowledge is “enacted in people’s practices” (Orlikowski, 2002 : 250).

Thus here the term “practical knowledge” is used to capture the notion of knowing as something intimately linked to and wrapped up in doing, consistent with Polanyi and Ryle. The paper is therefore concerned with extending what we know about how middle managers fulfil their strategic roles from a sensemaking perspective through viewing the middle manager in terms of what Orlikowski (2002) calls “knowledgeable performance”, or “effective action”. This helps to emphasise the nature of the practical knowledge seen in sensemaking behaviour but rarely examined in detail.

As we argue above, since middle managers often lack the formal authority of those more typically associated with strategic work, such as members of upper echelons, they are potentially more reliant on their ability to sense read and wright, typically lacking other forms of persuasion or sanction that accrues to those with hierarchical resource based means of influence. Yet no research has as yet taken this argument seriously enough to explore the relationships between middle managers’ ability to act strategically, their practical knowledge, and their ability to develop context sensitive interpretations and actions. This is what this paper seeks to do. It seeks to understand more about 1) the extent to which the strategic role of middle managers can be understood by looking at practical knowledge, and 2) the ways in which different forms of practical knowledge underpins the skilled performances of middle managers when they are daily making sense of strategic change.

## **Methods**

Practical knowledge, precisely because it is tacit, is hard to study (Tsoukas, 2005). To

investigate how middle managers use their practical knowledge in implementing change therefore raises some methodological challenges. Among others, practical knowledge is tacit and cannot be fully articulated (Tsoukas, 2005). Given it is not possible, according to Tsoukas (2005), to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, the best way to learn about skilled practitioners is to become an “apprentice”. However, he also argues that this does not mean that it is not possible to discuss “skilled performance”. Practical knowledge is displayed and manifested in what people do. Therefore it can be got at by drawing each other’s attention to how we relate to others and the world around us.

Given this research is essentially exploratory, this paper does not rely on new empirical data. Instead it draws on existing data coming from two research projects established to provide data on middle manager practices in change situations. The paper focuses on middle managers<sup>2</sup> dealing with change as organizational change situations constitute natural experiments (Dunbar & Starbuck, 2006). It is in situations of change that the unconscious rules and routines are often surfaced in what individuals do as they struggle to make sense of the change and the impact on themselves (Brown 2000; Weick 1995). One project focuses on the transformation of middle managers’ identity in organizational restructuring and the data were collected through a specific type of life story which Bertaux & Delcroix (2000) call narratives of practices (Rouleau, 2006). The other research project explores how middle managers charged with delivering change across organizational boundaries operate and relies on data interviews and focus group (Balogun et al, 2005).

Of course, these research projects were not explicitly designed to elicit the practical knowledge of the middle manager respondents. However, by examining how middle managers

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<sup>2</sup> Consistent with others we define middle managers as hierarchically located below the top managers and above the first-level supervision in large bureaucratic organizations (Currie, 1999 & 2005; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1994 & 1997; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Guth & McMillan, 1986; Huy, 2002; Schilit, 1987).

talk about their actions, when encouraged in narratives of practices or in focus groups to describe specifically how and what they do in detail, they will surface to some extent the practical knowledge they are drawing on to act within their context. Specifically, narratives of practices and focus groups are two research methods that allows the researcher to dig into the “lifeworld” of actors, here middle managers, in order to capture the taken for granted streams of routines, meanings and interactions that constitute their practices. In fact, biographical methods such narratives of practices, have the advantage of building up the detail of the individual and allow for more in depth probing of the practical knowledge individuals are drawing on both from their immediate context and their broader experience. Interactive discussion groups allow the researcher to know more about the values, attitudes and beliefs that managers have, shared and negotiated in real time (Balogun et al, 2003). Their strength lies in the snowball effect as individuals in their storytelling encourage deeper reflection from each other. In terms of practical knowledge, their potential lies in the possibility of encouraging attendees to “start recursively drawing our attention to how we draw each other’s attention to things” (Tsoukas, 2005: 158).

Drawing on these data sets, this paper first develops stories of middle managers that capture the way they implement strategic change in their daily activities. In developing these stories from these two research projects the focus is on individuals and their strategizing activity as this is consistent with the study of individuals and their practical knowledge. To study middle managers’ practical knowledge in strategic change it is necessary to be located at the micro-level in order to see how it works in action (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Obviously, it is also critical that to examine the activity of the middle managers in context. As a result, the stories of the middle manager experiences were written in a way which locates their actions

within their context of operation. Whilst each of the research projects affords the opportunity of developing many middle managers stories, here the focus is on individuals for whom we had the richest and greatest depth of data in terms of both actions and their reflections on those actions. As is the case with all respondents, the ones drawn on here revealed a differential ability for self-reflection. In each research project, the focus is on two middle managers to document and analyze four stories illustrated here under the form of vignettes (see next section).

As is common with qualitative research, the stories are analysed through repeated iterations between theory and data looking for evidence of the practical knowledge the middle managers are drawing on (Langley, 1999). The starting point was to seek to understand the linkages between interpretation and action, broadly defined as sense reading and sense wrighting, consistent with a sensemaking perspective, within the middle manager change action. Whilst it wasn't possible to specifically extricate the cycles of interpretation and action it was possible to establish an understanding of what the middle managers did and said and why they did things / said things this way. The what gave the action and the why the interpretation underpinning the action.

This analysis led to the development of the first part of the framework shown in Figure 1. We were able to identify two sets of interrelated activities, that we label "Enacting Conversations" and "Enrolling Networks". Enacting conversations relates to the mediation role middle managers carry out through formal and informal conversations with their peers, subordinates, superiors and customers or other stakeholders, to engage these individuals with their agenda. As is already known, it is the daily conversations between peers, with stakeholders and customers that constitute the privileged vehicle for developing interpretations of what change is about (Balogun & Johnson, 2004 & 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Hoon, 2007). This

communicative process is ongoing and anchored in the way middle managers are relating to others. Enrolling networks is to do with the fact that middle managers know many people disseminated at different places inside their organization and also sometimes outside, and they need to mobilize these networks to enroll and engage others with their agenda, to build alliances and coalitions. Enrolling networks is to do with this activity.

***Insert Figure 1 about here***

From examining what the middle managers said about their actions to do with enacting conversations and enrolling networks we were able to see that they were based on particular ways of interpreting and acting. When enacting conversations, the middle managers were mobilizing particular types of *language* to determine the *how* of the conversations: to trigger linkages with *taken-for-granted and accepted ways of doing things in the organization* to build acceptance of their position from others. So for example, middle managers were using specific words and referring to local language to link themselves to the culture of their organization and therefore mobilize people for their cause.

When enrolling networks, the middle managers were mobilizing predominantly their knowledge of the *social & cultural systems* to determine *who* they should be having the distributed conversations with and *when*, or in other words what forum and format. However, it wasn't as straightforward as that as they were also relying on the mobilization of knowledge to determine the *configurations* of the different stakeholders they needed to involve. In other words, they might need to use *different symbolic / verbal representations* (different conversations) with different stakeholders, which fed into the format of the conversations and the constellation of stakeholders present.

Thus the middle managers appeared to be drawing on two types of practical knowledge as they went about interpreting and acting. We associate the mobilization of language with semantic practical knowledge and equate it with symbolic / verbal representations as does Castillo (2002) and Rouleau (2005). We associate the mobilization of taken-for-granted ways of doing things with sociocultural practical knowledge, again consistent with Castillo and Rouleau, and label this identifying social / cultural systems, such as an emphasis placed on bottom-line performance to the exclusion of virtually anything else, or power dependencies, or social networks. As Figure 1 attempts to show, although we can identify semantic and socio-cultural knowledge, and associate the former broadly with enacting distributed conversations and the latter predominantly with enrolling networks, the two dimensions interrelate so that they are connected through practice.

The next section of the paper presents the four vignettes and uses them to illustrate how we derived our framework. As explained above, the vignettes are drawn from two different studies. For each study the context is explained first, and then the two vignettes on the change projects of two middle managers are presented to illustrate how middle managers practically perform roles as explained in Figure 1. In addition, Table 1 presents an analysis of the quotations from the vignettes to show how they illustrate the underpinning of enacting conversations and enrolling networks by semantic and sociocultural knowledge.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

### **The doing of middle managers' strategic sensemaking roles**

#### ***Restructuring Radio-Canada: the cases of Mary and Robert***

One research project involved thematic narrative studies of life stories that focused on work experience and professional trajectory. The research project was designed to better

understand how middle managers' identity is performed and transformed through organizational restructuring (Rouleau, 2006). The types of restructuring examined in this research project involved change projects aimed at increasing organizational flexibility while reducing production costs in organizations from different activity sectors (private, public and non-profit). The middle managers interviewed were mainly in charge of implementing change projects designed by the top management of their organizations. Here we develop our cases of two individuals, Mary and Robert, two middle managers involved in the restructuring of Radio-Canada.

Radio-Canada is the French division of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, mandated to broadcast Canadian culture. At the beginning of 2000, this public trade-unionized organization had to face a new competitive environment characterized by deregulation and revolutionary technological change. In a context of government budgetary cutbacks, the top management team wanted to reduce production costs, transform the hierarchical bureaucracy into a more flexible organization, and privatize part of the technical operations. In order to achieve this, the public enterprise underwent a major restructuring involving process re-engineering and downsizing, while attempting to improve workforce flexibility.

Each of Radio-Canada's services has two directorates: a Program Production Directorate in charge of program organization, which handles everything from the management of artists, costumes and settings to the editing of shows, and a Technical Production Directorate in charge of operations related to picture, sound and lighting. Traditionally, there is a very strong rivalry between the two directions.

*"In meetings with the Program Production people, I'm always fishing for information. When I can, I ask what's new, what the upcoming projects are... and I also subtly take the opportunity to tell them what's coming up in my department. I can't be at their beck and call like before."*(Mary, M1)

*“The other day, the producer of a variety show wasn’t happy with a few guys who are usually in my team. I told him, ‘you have to understand my guys, they’re also artists ... they’re “technical-artists.”’ They’re not really artists, they’re technicians, rational Cartesians, but they take part in making an artistic product. They don’t see us in the right way, it’s not easy to make them understand.” (Robert, R1)*

At the heart of the restructuring was Radio-Canada’s plan to reorganize the Technical Production Directorate. Historically, Technical Production had to have on hand the human and technical resources necessary to meet the Program Production Directorate’s requirements when they arose (which was costly and not very efficient). With the cutbacks, the two directorates now had to jointly plan their activities, which was not easy since they were anchored in identity logics linked to different modes of work organization. Mary and Robert were two middle managers in charge of the transformation of the Technical Production Directorate: Mary as manager of this unit in the general TV sector, and Robert as coordinator of technical services in the information sector. In order to succeed in this difficult task, Mary and Robert needed to strategically draw on their practical knowledge to make sense of these internal transformations.

### ***Mary***

Mary had been working at Radio-Canada for 9 years. She began her career as an administrative assistant at Radio-Canada and rapidly became a middle manager in the TV Program Production Directorate. Mary was promoted as part of the organizational restructuring to the role of Technical Production Manager, (General TV sector), which comprises over 500 employees. Historically, this directorate had always been managed by people with technical backgrounds. Aiming to change the way things were done, Radio-Canada’s top management appointed a person associated with Program Production to the head of the Technical Production Directorate. This decision might not have given the results anticipated. As the following quotes

will reveal, what saved Mary was her ability to find the right words to talk to the technicians and to rely on the right people.

One of her mandates was to make the production studios profitable, which among other things involved reorganizing technicians' assignments. Mary knew nothing about the technical side of things and found herself as manager of a directorate where credibility is based on the technical knowledge acquired over time. Hence, she was confronted with this situation immediately on her arrival. *"When I arrived, they said, 'What's she doing here? She doesn't know anything about technical production.' I knew nothing about it, I came from Program Production. The first think I did was put my cards on the table, saying, 'Listen, I'm not here to repair the camera downstairs. I'm here to structure, to organize things, and I want it to work because we've had budget cuts for 5 years now, and with the retirement boom, there's almost no one left with any experience.'" (M2)* From the start, she admitted her weaknesses and replaced the technical expertise discourse with a discourse of change anchored directly in the problems that the technicians were facing day-to-day. She thus positioned herself as one of them rather than as spokesperson for the directorate and used a language that helped rally the technicians because it directly targeted their problems.

In addition, the fact of putting someone who was not from the technical side at the head of Technical Production clearly reflected, according to Mary, the new direction that Radio-Canada wanted to take. And she tried to give meaning to this new direction in the course of her daily activities. *"We had to start all over, it was chaos. In those first meetings or when people came to see me in the beginning, I listened to what they had to say to me. I used that to find the right words to get the message across. If someone talked to me about his job, it was the job we talked about until he understood that we could look at the problem from another angle." (M3)*

Not only did Mary prioritize her relationships with the people working on her supervision, she also based her management on transparency and integrity. Thus, Mary states, *“I like to deal with people. I always listen to what they have to say. However, with me, they know things are clear. I never say something for nothing, and I expect them also to tell me the truth. I can get angry as well.”* (M4)

In the restructuring, she devoted a large part of her time to writing reports of the production meetings she attended. *“Even though I had lots of meetings and I solved lots of problems in a day, I spent at least 10 to 15% of my time making summaries of my production meetings. I showed them to lots of people, everyone had to be part of it.”* (M5) In a bureaucratic organization like Radio-Canada, these reports are later used to arbitrate both internal and external conflicts, with the Technical Coordinators and the Program Production people. By discussing these reports with her colleagues and her employees, she was also able to consolidate the compromises that were made between Program Production and Technical Production.

The new manager’s ability to *“get the message across”* was rooted in the fact that she regularly visited the sets of the TV shows. Thus, she says, *“I go and ask, ‘How are you?’ I say, ‘Hello’ to everyone, and after the show is over, I come to see if everything was ok. Bosses don’t usually do this but it’s essential.”* (M6) It was through casual discussions with all these people that she learned what it was to make a TV show. It also enabled her to get to know the employees and at the same time gave her credibility when she was in negotiations with them.

And getting to know people was, as Mary says, one of the key elements that made her success in this hostile environment. By surrounding herself with the right people, Mary was able in large part to overcome her lack of technical knowledge. *“You have to go looking for people, the right people, people who know the field, people you can trust and who will trust you... Since I*

*had been going to the sets for years, I knew the cameramen and the technical guys. When I needed advice, I went to see them.” (M7) Not only did Mary know how to surround herself with people who had the technical knowledge but she also knew who to turn to for the administrative knowledge. Thus, she says, “There’s also Francine who helped me, she’s an administrative assistant who’s been at RC for more than 25 years. She helped me a lot by giving me cues like ‘be careful about such and such thing;’ ‘that person’s been in the department a long time;’ ‘you can’t say it like that, you’ll get in trouble.’ Without knowing it, she helped me a lot.”(M8) In this way, Mary showed that she was able to listen to the people she worked with and understand the organizational context in which she acted. Radio-Canada is a unionized corporation with a long history in which experience plays an important role.*

Mary was also able to cultivate her networks with the members of management. The person who appointed her had worked with her previously and knew her well. According to Mary, *“I was not alone making all these changes. I worked in a team with John (her immediate supervisor). We complemented each other like a couple. He knew the collective agreement that had to be renegotiated and he was on good terms with senior management. I knew how to make a TV show; I knew how to sell my ideas. He knew the people in Toronto and even coast to coast. I knew several people in the corporation by their first name. Between us, we had everything we needed.” (M9) Behind this comment, Mary is expressing the idea that to make her way in the organization, it was important to be in contact with the English-language section, the CBC, where the power was. The fact that she was a woman in a largely male management world was not a minor factor either. In this comment, she therefore shows the importance of networking relationships and her practical knowledge of the social frameworks on which they are based.*

In addition to restructuring the Technical Production Directorate internally, Mary cultivated her collateral contacts, for example, to make the production studios profitable. As secretary of a communication and broadcasting executive's association, she set up a studio rental service for private producers outside of peak hours. "Now," she says, "*Radio-Canada is no longer only self-contained, we're also in production companies, and that's a big network in a small world.*" (M10) In this comment, Mary indirectly suggests that privatization is based in part on Radio-Canada's ability to work in and renew networks.

### ***Robert***

When the restructuring occurred, Robert had 12 years experience at Radio-Canada. Some years previously, Robert had been in charge of organizing the technical team for the new specialized news and information channel (RDI) created at the end of the nineties. As part of the restructuring, the news production staff of the general television sector ("channel one") had to be renewed. The job was entrusted to Robert who was returned to his previous duties even though his title changed. He became coordinator of technical services for the channel, supervising approximately 50 technicians (switchers, boom operators, camera operators). Due to the budget cuts, he was also put in charge of the technical equipment (cassettes, cameras, and so on). It was in part due to his abilities to deal with people day-to-day and to mobilize informal networks that Robert succeeded in creating meaning in order to renew the links between Program Production and Technical Production Directorates.

Robert's team had a bad reputation and was experiencing serious problems with absenteeism. Within the organization, it was seen as a "little mafia." On one hand, the technicians, especially the most senior and the most experienced, used their professional

expertise against the establishment, even “terrorizing” the people who worked on news show contents (journalists, producers, etc.). On the other hand, they tended to negotiate individually what they needed (vacation, equipment, etc.), but when one of their member’s work was threatened or criticized, the pressure of the group protected him or her. With the budget cuts, Robert had to streamline the work and job assignment processes while ensuring the flexibility needed for the unpredictability of televised production. In addition, he worked to reconcile technicians and program production employees.

Robert was the man for the job. He had his own management style, largely based on flexibility and the importance of talking together. *“In my family,”* he says, *“we always had renters. I bought my first house at 22. My first management experience was with my renters. It’s not the same but that’s where I learned to deal with people, learned the respect you have to have for others in what you say and the way you say it, I learned that there. I learned you had to be accepted by people. When someone’s unhappy, I learned you can’t fly off the handle, you have to deal with people.”* (R2) Along with the technical expertise, Robert was aware that the capacity to be accepted by the technicians was fundamental to getting anything done. He says that his principal management tool was a deck of cards. *“People come to see you, talk to you, you get to know them. Then, when they come to ask you something, you know if it’s credible or not. And when you give them something, they owe you one.”* (R3) This excerpt is revealing of the group’s sub-culture (card game as an embodiment of the mafia-like activity) at the same time as it shows how, in this context, informal conversations constitute a way to evaluate what is credible while permitting the construction of a negotiation space.

This did not stop Robert from being known for his frankness, particularly when talking with his supervisors. *“Since we’re in the communication business, we ought to talk to each other*

*from time to time. They know me, I'm not shy. I'm also capable of saying what I have to say even if it's harsh sometimes. Sometimes, you have to make waves to be heard. With the voice I've got, it helps.*" (R4) By saying out loud to management what everyone was thinking, Robert positioned himself as the spokesperson for the technicians he supervised, which increased his legitimacy in his unit. In this comment, Robert uses irony to subtly denounce the fact that management was also partly responsible for the prevailing problems in the technical teams.

Robert's legitimacy was also the result of the network of internal contacts he had throughout the organization. Thus, he says, *"Of course there's the official network, we know who's in charge of what. But the informal networks are often more efficient and that's not written anywhere. Without these networks and the knowledge of these networks we can make assignments that make no sense and will cost a lot."* (R5) The composition of the technical teams was a key issue in Robert's work that required him to know "who" could work with "whom" on the same show. Moreover, the production of news and information shows is unpredictable, creating daily technical problems that have to be solved quickly. *"I worked at several different areas in the corporation as a technician, I know the workings of each area very well. When we had a problem, I was able to say to the guys, "Call here," "call there," and "call him," and they'd get on the phone and it would be solved. If you want it to work, you have to call the people you need directly, it's faster."* (R6) In these comments, Robert clearly expresses the need to have a good internal network to coordinate the team of technicians. In addition, Robert implies that without these many contacts, one would have to go through the hierarchy and that is not as efficient.

Robert's ability to mobilize internal networks in a crisis was demonstrated in the 1998 ice storm. The city was covered in ice and he had to find technical employees to do the outside

broadcasts. Robert relates<sup>3</sup>:

*“My boss, the Production Manager had spent a day trying to get people. He sounded like this on the phone:*

*PM = Hello, this is P. L., the Production Manager.*

*T = Who’s that... What do you want?*

*PM = Can you come in please, we need people.*

*T = Nope, not available.*

*I said: ‘Never mind, I’ll call them, I know them, I’m close to them.’*

*Robert: Hi, how are you? Have you got a fireplace, enough wood? ... Listen, we’re in a bind, do you think you could give us a hand for a few hours?*

*Within 15 minutes, I put together a team. I know just about everyone here. I knew who I could call. I knew who was more or less in the power outage and I knew how to convince them to come in.” (R7)*

This comment by Robert is a good illustration of his relational approach, which contrasts with the senior executive’s and shows both the importance of knowing “what” to say and knowing “whom” to call in an emergency. He knew the technician’s personal situation (where he lived, if he owned a house or rented, which was important in a winter weather disaster), and he first began by finding out how the technician was coping in the ice storm. Then, he appealed to team spirit and used the difficult situation to convince the technician to come to work.

Beyond managing problems and unexpected events, Robert worked daily to create meaning around the new vision of partnership between Technical Production and Program Production, both in his team and with his colleagues. Thus, he says, *“The guys got on board when I stopped saying, ‘This group is responsible for this, that group is responsible for that.’ Since then, I’ve tried to get my people to say, ‘The service was given; Radio-Canada gave the service.’ You have to move toward positions that bring unity. You have to work together, tell yourself that we’re all on the same wavelength. (They’d be happy to hear me say that upstairs!)* (R8) Despite the fact that Robert does not always agree with Radio-Canada’s senior management, he understands that to change things, to change the culture, the meaning of the

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<sup>3</sup>To clarify, the distinction between the people talking is as follows: PM = Production Manager; T = Technician.

message also has to change. He also made this effort with colleagues from Program Production as the following excerpt shows: *“One day, I said to a producer: ‘That cameraman you want, I can’t assign her to you’... She got back to me in an email saying, ‘You know in my collective agreement I have the right to choose my close collaborators.’ Rather than saying, ‘OK, let her decide herself if she’s not happy’ like it used to be done, I had to meet the person, talk to her, reassure her, tell her that we’ll provide someone just as competent, make her understand that if she works with us, it will help her on the set, it will help everyone and no one will lose out.”* (R9)

This comment once again shows how Robert’s discursive skills are fundamental to giving meaning to the change and in this way modifying the relations between the groups in the organization.

Despite the cutbacks and the difficult climate in his team, little by little Robert managed to make the technicians’ work more flexible and to cut production costs. One way he did this was by training editors so they could do audio and boom operations. He also delegated part of the financial management of the equipment to the technicians and consulted them more and more about assignments. As a result, the absentee rate and equipment costs were reduced.

### ***Delivering Change in a Multi-National: the cases of William and Jane***

The other research project (Balogun et al, 2005) involves longitudinal real-time tracking of change projects and the middle managers involved. A number of organizations were involved in this collaborative research since it was part of an on-going research agenda conducted with a consortium of companies in sectors as diverse as pharmaceuticals, consultancy and automotive, all interested in issues associated with the management of change. The change initiatives were equally diverse, including post-merger integration, exploitation of across-business synergies and

implementing more integrative structures. The boundary spanning practices of the managers involved were explored in context to enable an appreciation of the contingency of their emergence and development. Here, we develop our vignettes from two individuals in just one of the organizations called Engco but working on different change projects.

Engco is a multi-national engineering company, with several diversified divisions reporting into a corporate centre located within the UK. The divisions operated in a traditional silo based way of working where each division acts autonomously of each other rewarded for and only answerable to the centre in terms of performance:

*“There is a way of thinking that is probably consistent, how to do things with the least amount of resources possible. Bottom line, cost focused is probably the cultural identity” and “I think there is a mistrust of anything that is not money, money, money ...You have a group of accounting people and a group of engineering people who want very quantitative things. Cash and profit are things you can identify” (William, W1)*

*“It’s a very delicate balance because the divisions within Engco are all powerful, they have all the resource, we have no resource. So a lot of it is about persuasion really, saying to them ‘we are trying to make sure that across the whole of Engco we have a good pipeline of ideas in all of these horizons.’” (Jane, J1)*

Despite these differences, Engco was also running change projects aimed at creating cross-business synergies between these diverse business divisions as part of a more general move toward synergy building between their diverse portfolio. The research at Engco focused on two individuals - William and Jane - involved in these projects. It highlights how these individuals drew on their practical knowledge to succeed at making sense of their respective projects in what was a very difficult context. Engco provided no central mandate for its centrally initiated change projects, despite the fact that the divisions within Engco traditionally operated as autonomous silos resisting change originating from the centre. As such, to succeed, William and Jane both needed to use their understanding of the context to engineer divisional support for projects that would otherwise fail.

***William***

William, the group head of remuneration and benefits, was examining across business practices in areas such as pensions with the aim of creating common procedures and using common providers where possible to reduce costs. He was relatively new having joined Engco within the last year. The vignette shows, however, how William uses his networks and his position as an HR expert to influence the board through clever use of language. Through his knowledge of their interests (the bottom line) he was able to generate a dialogue linking his projects to their business concerns.

William is aware of divergent interests and identities across the divisions and the lack of a central mandate and therefore the need to bring divisions together, but also that this requires a message that cuts across interests *“it was very clear even back then that we don’t have a central mandate, which I found very clear as a real cultural thing, it’s like “no no divisions are very autonomous”, so we’ve really put a lot of effort together in putting an attractive package together, a lot of analysis that says here’s a really really good way to do it, here’s how much you would save if you do this and this ... pull this lever save this much, this plan design will get you this, that kind of thing. Really presenting that to the group to get them to come together as a body, over three meetings now we’ve come a long way. So we’re getting that group together then presenting to our HR folks, getting them aware of it and our next phase is executives.” (W2)* He also understood the need given his lack of mandate to provide those he worked with a means of “selling” the message not “telling”, *“They have to believe it because they have to sell it, and it is not a pleasant message for them to hear. So we start off by saying we did good last year and made a lot of progress but now things are tougher we need to take another step. I didn’t just say*

*we have to save x million, it was more selling than telling, but not sugar coated. Profit is up, earnings down so we have margin issues, it is business reality.”* (W3) He estimates that he spends at least half his time *gathering intelligence* or else ‘*crafting*’ his presentations to senior management. In particular, he is quick to link his agenda to the perceived need for change in view of external exigencies (‘margin issues’ and ‘business reality’). We can see from the quotes W1 and W3 that to draw people in he relies on symbolic and verbal representations relevant to Engco – regularly referring to things such as bottom line, cost focused, balance sheet, margin, money, cash, profits.

We can also see that to enact conversations William uses his sociocultural knowledge of the divisions to inform who he brings together and how, such as the autonomy and diverse identities of the different divisions and the importance they placed on this, “*It was interesting at the international leadership conference because you could tell which group was which. They do have very different identities and they like to reinforce that.*” (W4). His sociocultural knowledge also informed the way he staged the conversations *and* their purpose. For example, William wanted to get non-financial objectives included in the reward and performance assessment of senior managers so that he could use this to push his objectives, “*There is no flexibility (in reward packages). None of this - there are no moving parts basically.*” (W5) And “*The reward systems themselves are actually perpetuating the same thing, and actually the remuneration committee is not that thrilled about making any changes, I mean we want to put a 10% weighting on an management by objective component and it’s going to be a tough sell..*” (W6) Thus he used his connection to the board through his boss to take his case for a change in the remuneration systems to include some non-financial objectives alongside the financial ones to the board preparing a presentation designed to appeal to them, “*I put together the proposal and*

*went to the board meeting and presented .. they almost closed me down before I got to my slide. I said, 'excuse me, if we could just go through the logic before you make a final decision' So we did and a couple of people actually said they agreed. Some still said they didn't but there was enough support."* (W7) As such, some conversations were not directly related to what he wanted to do, but had to be staged to subsequently *enable* what he wanted to do. He was using his sociocultural knowledge to position himself as working in a business partnership with the board rather than just being there to "report" by linking what he did to their concerns, *"I think what I am doing now is a lot more connected to the business ... because of the implications for the balance sheet. I am in the boardroom a lot more than I was before. It is a different role, rather than just reporting on our results ... this is more about how we reduce our risk and liability, what are the cash flow implications, etc. It is much more business focused."*(W8) Similarly his recognition of the need to "sell" rather than "tell" (see W3) exhibits sociocultural knowledge as it shows an understanding of the relationship between senior managers, such as himself, working from the centre and divisional managers.

William knew the importance of enrolling networks of support to facilitate his work. He understood the need to create a joint decision making process with the divisions which overcame suspicion of the centre, *"... there was a lot of sort of mistrust at the centre. Just being very open and repetitive about its not a mandate we want to develop a logical framework and have a process for doing this is really helpful. As people would have said oh okay so it is transparent you're not trying to do something to us, we're making decisions. So having them participate and sort of leading them to a rational conclusion that they are going to buy into. While looking through some of the political turf issues, just within the group because of course they don't want to loose their positions and they want to protect their turf and do things their own way ... so*

*that's been the biggest hurdle.*" (W9) He also made a point of opportunistically linking his agenda to theirs to enable this, *"It is almost like herding cats to begin with, to get people together and create some common purpose and some common trust and with a series of meetings we have had .. we have done that as businesses worsen people are a little more focused on the cost control aspect ... So no mandate from the top, but at least now we have interest, we have a little more common purpose, this group in the middle, so we can start putting proposals forward"* (W10) In addition, he worked to create networks that could spread his message for him through forming personal contacts and relationships, *"having done a lot of traveling last year and meeting a lot of people has helped so I don't have to do so much of that anymore. I can now rely on one part of the network and get them to spread it out. I reinforce it a bit but I don't have to go and communicate to every single person in my network."* (W11) And he set up a subgroup within HR in the UK as well as a Benefits Committee at grass roots level.

To reach individuals he has an appreciation of other peoples' agendas, *"I guess you try and find out what is in it for them ... Try and find out how reluctant they are. Are they reluctant because someone else is? I had this issue in the US with one of the guys who was very bright and capable but very resistant and it turned out that it was his boss who was resistant and not him. So then I had to find ways to appeal to his boss and sell the message as if I was talking to his boss but through him."* (W12) and has a policy of working with people individually when necessary (*"the ones who are probably the most vociferous, resistant or have the most personal power"* (W13)) to get them on his side before calling individuals together to progress things as a team. He would also try to build linkages when he first met people, by talking about football if he knew them to be interested in this, or a shared Welsh ancestry, for example. Furthermore, William's boss had a dotted line to all the HR directors and to the CEO. These chains were now

being used. In addition, as William developed his networks within, he widened his access to include the bosses of his clients, which enhanced his access to decision makers and his role context. William also tightened the communications linkages. When he ran meetings he made it clear that it was the responsibility of the HR people present to communicate back to their divisions – and that their HR Directors had already been communicated with and knew of their responsibility.

### ***Jane***

Jane was running an innovation project to encourage the development of new business ideas from the divisions. She had less board access than William and was therefore more reliant on her project sponsors to facilitate support. However, like William, she use her practical knowledge of the way the organization works to be supported for her project

As with William's initiative, there was no formal mandate forcing businesses to engage with Jane's group and take up the ideas – it relied on individual's (mainly divisional coordinators) being released to take things forward – and that could be counter cultural. And Jane knew this. (See J1 above.) In this context, her role was to oversee that process and to work with those local facilitators and the different review groups. To achieve this, she developed a full range of ways to be in close contact with them to create a group feel – predominantly through enacting distributed conversations, *“Well there were a number of mechanisms to sort of keep them together ...there was the monthly audio conference, and then two or three times a year actual physical get together which also happened to overlap with other meetings ... so at night you would have a dinner with everybody ... that was a way of basically trying to use the group to develop the process.”* (J2) However, this vignette shows that these distributed conversations do

not have to be verbal and face-to-face. Whilst Jane saw the face-to-face meetings as very important, she also used monthly audio conferences, and one-to-one phone conversations, and many other mechanisms, *“We had other things like newsletters which we would send out to divisional co-ordinators but also to all of our local facilitators to put it on notice boards ... so that became more the sort of chatty things, oh by the way, this company here has just had a launch and these people ... here are the prizes they have won .. and in between divisional co-ordinators ... I would email them, either individually or collectively on a number of different issues and a lot of it was done by phone call and just personal contact ... I would go and talk to them.”* (J3) Acknowledging the distributed nature of the organization and the need to create a self sustaining network she organized a roadshow, *“We have had to say, don’t talk to us, talk to each other. Like we organized a roadshow recently, which basically is just five big black cases, it opens up into a big stand, and we have had five of them in different languages and we deliberately have organized it so that it is like a hand me on type of activity, so we sent it to the first location in a given country. Gave everybody who was to receive it a timetable and they were the next person in the chain and said, right, get on with it, use whatever transport links you already have, just do it, and remarkably it has actually worked very well.”* (J4)

These distributed conversations were again underpinned by network activity and sociocultural knowledge. Jane recognized the *“balancing act”* (again see J1 above) and that her point of persuasion was encouraging the organization to *“think about the future”* through a *“pipeline of ideas”* and through such means *“drag the organization away - even one degree - from its straight and narrow operational performance focus.”* (J5) She persuaded senior managers by, for example, *“parceling the future of her projects in order to sell its short term benefit”*, or *“nurturing ideas to identify who to sell them to”* (J6). She also recognized that aside

from the operational focus, the existing social and cultural systems were all divisional and silo based, so she had to generate a flow of conversations that created alternative connections – such as the roadshow. Whenever she wanted someone to do something she was in competition with their division – there was a constant battle “*releasing resources and finding funds*”, “*the fact that the power base within the divisions is sort of general managers the ones who actually allocate resources are not the same group of people as being asked to take these initiatives forward, so it is like the responsibility without any of the authority to make decisions. So that is obviously a problem.*” (J7) And “*We have some very good people at steering level, we have ideas bubbling bottom up primarily, but to make this whole process work we need to make sure that the people who are effectively running individual business units buy into the process, see the benefits to them of the process.*” (J8) She commented that, “*the power that you have is that you have the steering committee and some of the main board directors and senior guys from the divisions on that committee, therefore you are acting with their goodwill ... but at the end of the day if the division decides they are not going to work on any of the new ideas there is not a lot you can do.*” (J9)

This last quote clearly shows the link between enacting conversations and enrolling networks. Again, because of the nature of the centre-division relationship, Jane has to rely on others to promote the innovation project, and in particular draw on senior management sponsorship when it is available – such as the innovation summit, “*We had an 'innovation summit' last year and invited about 100 people who were involved in the process to come to Cardiff and our CEO turned up and gave a speech and it spread like wildfire around the place. All of a sudden everyone comes back much more energized.*” (J10). She also drew on her personal networks, again showing the importance of creating and maintaining these networks, I

*found that helped enormously (using own personal networks). If I had a problem I'd ring up them, need a bit of help, and from my own personal benefit that has been very supportive.” (J11)*

## **Discussion**

This paper examines the extent to which the strategic sensemaking roles performed by middle managers are underpinned by their practical knowledge, and how different forms of practical knowledge underpin this sensemaking role. In order to develop the argument, the paper draws on existing data to derive a framework that captures the basic dimensions of how middle managers perform their strategic sensemaking roles in practice within the context of strategic change. This framework shows that two activities are critical in that performance: “enacting conversations” and “enrolling networks”. The analysis also shows that to perform these activities middle managers need to draw on their semantic and sociocultural knowledge as they go about their day to day activities to draw people into the change. Figure 2 provides an overview of the results.

### **Insert Figure 2 about here**

As the vignettes illustrate, enacting multiple distributed conversations means that middle managers in diverse circumstances know what to say; they are able to use the right words and formulate the appropriate phrases in order to get their message across and influence the recipients in the way desired. It is about the competence of “crafting” the messages by using specific language in accordance with the reality of people surrounding them. For example, William and Jane use language such as “margin” and “cost”, to link to the performance, bottom-line culture of their organization and therefore mobilize people for their cause. In some ways, “enacting conversations” refers to a constructive verbal exchange which attempts to reconcile

divergent demands and interests coming from upper and operational levels, or from different parts of the same organization. It is an ongoing communicative practice anchored in the way middle managers are relating to others. It is in these distributed conversations that middle managers perfect their communicative devices, each time creating language game opportunities towards the change which is necessary in a context where multiple and conflicting interpretations are important (Leitch & Davenport, 2005; Denis et al. 2005).

“Enrolling networks” refers to the capacity of middle managers to mobilize people around a change project in order to make sense of it and build an alliance working towards the change, even if it is for different reasons. More specifically it refers to the knowledge of who to contact, who to bring together and who to use to influence things. In strategic sensemaking, middle managers have to mobilize others, to draw them in to their cause, to enroll their lateral colleagues and their subordinates. Among others, by surrounding herself with the right people, Mary was able to overcome her lack of technical knowledge. This competence in building alliances and coalitions is also exercised with their superiors as William did particularly well. Activating their networks gives the managers studied new opportunities for making the different meanings and interests that exist mutually compatible around the change. It also provides them with legitimacy for acting as change agents.

“Enacting conversations” and “enrolling networks” does not just refer to the knowing of *what* to say and *who* to enroll but also to the knowing of *how* to sell ideas and collectively put different stakeholders groups together. Once middle managers have identified how to get the attention of people by drawing on the right symbolic/verbal representations, they need to draw them in through different processes. The way they position things and themselves, the stage management of the meeting, the way emotions and attitudes are displayed through language all

enhance conversations. Then the enacting of the conversations is the “on stage performance”. Of course, the action may not be precluded by obvious time spent consciously deciding on the who, the how and the what.

It is the same for enrolling networks, middle managers not only decide who to engage with and draw in, but also the appropriate means to reach these people (e.g. one on one, phone call, meetings). Enrolling networks is then putting this into practice e.g. issuing invitations to meetings and running the meeting, or getting an item put on a meeting agenda at a particular meeting, or writing reports and discussing them with people, or inviting someone for lunch or to play golf, or “bumping into” someone in a corridor. In other words, setting up the occasions in which middle managers intend to “enact a conversation” allow them to enroll networks. The skilled middle managers we examined in this paper appeared to do this almost “automatically” or intuitively. It is only in retrospective reflection that they were able to draw out some of the things they may have been doing without conscious reflection at the time. Therefore “enacting conversations” and “enrolling networks” are discrete yet connected through practice, since they co-occur in a performance that has been stage managed among a particular group of people to deliver a particular effect.

The way middle managers enact conversations and enroll people in networks cannot be understood without taking into account the knowledge middle managers have of others (for example, their interests, issues and loyalties) and their organizations (for example, the rules, routines, assumptions, and language uniting yet dividing those within). Middle managers not only mobilize specific verbal expressions and symbolic representations, they implicitly draw on their deep knowledge of organizational codes and sociocultural rules. When Robert was “playing cards” with his employees, for example, he was using symbolic representation that had meaning

in the “mafia” organizational climate in which he was intervening. To help others make sense of or relate to a new activity, or to sell ideas to top management, middle managers need to talk with words that, and / or link their discourse to verbal representations that, have meaning for others in a way that managerial or strategy language typically does not. They need to use verbal representations that reveal more than they actually say. New managerial demands, such as the new pensions program, have to be symbolically anchored in the internal rules and the way managers position themselves in the social rules in order to create sense and influence others. As such, it is also hard to separate the use of semantic knowledge from sociocultural knowledge. The two are inter-dependent as are the two activities of enacting conversations and enrolling networks. One would be ineffective without the other and for accomplishing one, the other is needed.

### *Contributions*

Rouleau (2005) highlights the significance of middle manager practical knowledge, and identifies the role of semantic and sociocultural knowledge. However, her study is within the context of middle managers influencing external stakeholders. Thus this paper is able to show that her findings are equally applicable to the way middle managers fulfil their strategic sensemaking roles internally. Furthermore, the paper builds a deeper understanding of how middle managers’ semantic and sociocultural knowledge underpins their ability to have influential “conversations”, and the interlinked activities of enacting conversations and enrolling networks within this. This also extends the findings of Balogun et al (2005) as to how middle managers enroll networks to build support for their change initiatives by moving beyond notions of symbolic power to the practical knowledge that underpins this.

The focus in this paper on practical knowledge connects practical knowledge with a capability to act politically, and notions such as episodic and systemic power (Buchanan, 2008; Lawrence et al, 2005). It illustrates that to act politically middle managers need to be sufficiently socialised within their context of action to understand the semantic and sociocultural rules and norms, but that this is not some abstract / cognitive understanding, since it is connected with and embedded in situated practice relevant to a particular context. Middle managers can only be politically skilled within a particular context of action. This connects to research by Currie & Proctor (2005) who argue that middle managers need to be socialized into new roles at times of role transition to be effective. This research shows the need for socialization beyond role expectations.

This research also contributes to the general literature on sensemaking by showing in detail how sensemaking is inextricably linked to contextual understanding. The paper argues up front that sensemaking underplays the political aspects inherent to sensemaking and sensegiving. Existing research (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia and Longenecker, 1994; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Mangham & Pye, 1991; Pye, 1995, 2002; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005) details various performances and the need for contextual understanding to perform in a skilled way, but it does not unpack the detail of that contextual understanding as we do here. This research by comparison reveals that the power effect in sensemaking whereby some voices have more impact than others (Brown, 1985) in part comes from a manager's semantic and sociocultural practical knowledge, and not just formal role power, and therefore that the "power" of the actor to act resides in their practical knowledge, and therefore is embedded in situated practice.

Much sensemaking research focuses on processes of organisational sensemaking (for example, Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia and Longenecker, 1994; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) with a lesser concern for individuals' roles as skilled performers within this. There is a lack of appreciation of how *individuals* perform sensemaking and giving within a strategic role, such as change implementation, to generate broader organisational sensemaking processes. The focus here on the individual moves this individual performance from the background to the foreground to reveal the relevance of issues others have noticed but not described in detail. Gioia and Longenecker (1994: 380), for example, argue that “symbols are the medium for both sensemaking and influence and these two processes are inextricably linked.” This research strengthens this argument, but shows how symbolic manipulation is enacted through practical knowledge of both the symbolic code in an organization and the socio-cultural structure.

Finally, a strategy-as-practice perspective is interested in developing a better understanding of the skilled strategic practitioner (Whittington, 2003 & 2006; Denis et al., 2007). Skills in general and social skills in particular, are the apex of the iceberg in terms of practical, tacit knowledge. The findings of this paper show that studying strategic sensemaking in practice is important because it provides an opening towards a better understanding of the skilled strategic middle manager. By explicitly looking at action, skills and performance it highlights the need to explore linkages between context, action, sensemaking and the practical knowledge through which these are enacted, to appreciate “knowledgeable performance” and “effective action” (Orlikowski, 2002). The research answers the calls in the SAP perspective to identify the actual activities managers engage in to accomplish their strategic work (Johnson et al, 2003 & 2007).

It has also become common to conceive of the SAP research agenda in terms of the practitioner, their praxis and wider practices (Whittington 2006; Jarzabkowski et al, 2007), and for research to focus on two of these aspects at any one time with a lesser concern for the third. The research presented here suggests a need for a more holistic treatment of these three aspects since they are all interconnected and enacted through the practitioner's practical knowledge. It is important to explore the work of strategists at this level because it is the fundamental key to grasping what skilful action is and involves.

### **Conclusion**

This piece of research advances what is known about how middle managers contribute strategically within an organization, showing the importance of practical knowledge for a middle manager to be able to make an adequate contribution when asked to, or needing to informally, adopt a strategic role. It is quite possible that the findings extend beyond middle managers to more senior managers. Just as the skills explored here remain under researched for middle managers, they are also under explored for more senior managers (Fairhurst, 2007). We would argue, however, that it is equally valid to examine these skills for middle managers given the strategic role they are increasingly acknowledged to play.

In order to develop the framework presented here, the research has developed vignettes extracted from previous research on four middle managers. Thus a weakness of the research is that it was not devised to specifically capture data on our topic of inquiry. However, since the research explores sensemaking and practical knowledge, which in some ways are ubiquitous concepts, the fact that the framework has been derived from different contextual situations supports the relevance of the findings. Moreover, the fact that the four cases differ markedly in terms of change context and managerial work, and in terms of sociocultural frames they belong

to (eg.: two men, two women; private and public organization) reinforces the analysis. Despite these differences, the analysis reveals systematic similarities in the multiple ways those middle managers enact conversations and enroll networks. The details presented in Table 1 for the four cases presents very similar empirical evidences about the way those middle managers draw on their practical knowledge which reinforces the components of the derived framework.

To develop the research started here further, this study needs to be extended out from the implementation of change to other contexts where middle managers play a strategic role to identify if there are other generic activities in addition to the two that emerged here and extend our exploration of the practical knowledge involved.

However, the study of activities such as “enacting conversations” and “enrolling networks” and the practical knowledge underpinning them raises some methodological challenges and suggests the need for the development of appropriate and new ways of gathering data. Of course, the best way to learn about this is to become an “apprentice” as Tsoukas (2005) suggests, but this is also hugely time consuming (Balogun et al., 2003). Thus more innovative ways of doing research are needed. For example, work sociologists have developed techniques for gathering data by putting the informants in a role of instructors. It consists in following one worker (here a middle manager) during a work day asking him to tell you everything you need to know in order to be able to accomplish his work (Gherardi, 1995; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000). Another valuable approach to grasp practical knowledge would be to use videos and photographs of middle managers in action and then looking at this material with them in order to grasp the hidden sense of their practices (Stroncz, 2005)

The findings do also have practical relevance. There are already calls for organizations to rethink the way they develop the skills base of middle managers (Balogun, 2003; Floyd &

Wooldridge, 1994). The research here emphasizes the importance of socializing middle managers into their context of operation to enable them to “play the game”, but also provides insight into how to appreciate which middle managers are likely to be more effective than others.

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Figure 1: Practical knowledge and strategic sensemaking

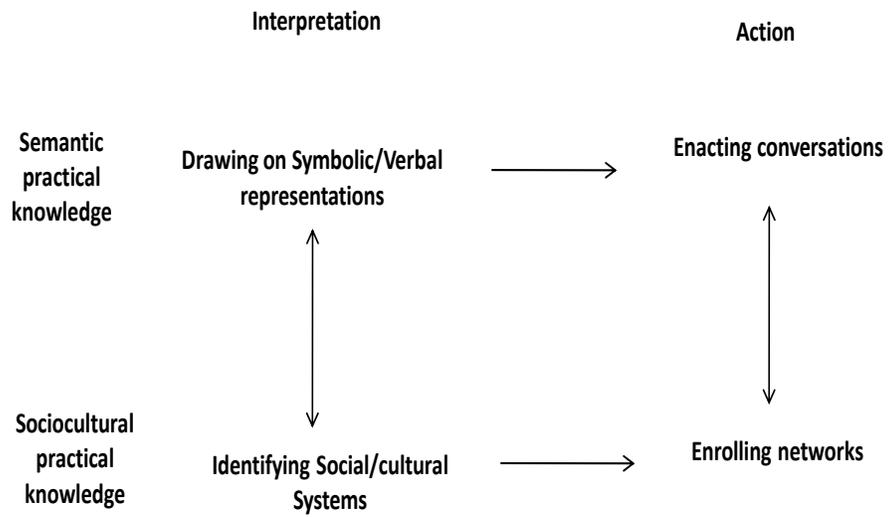
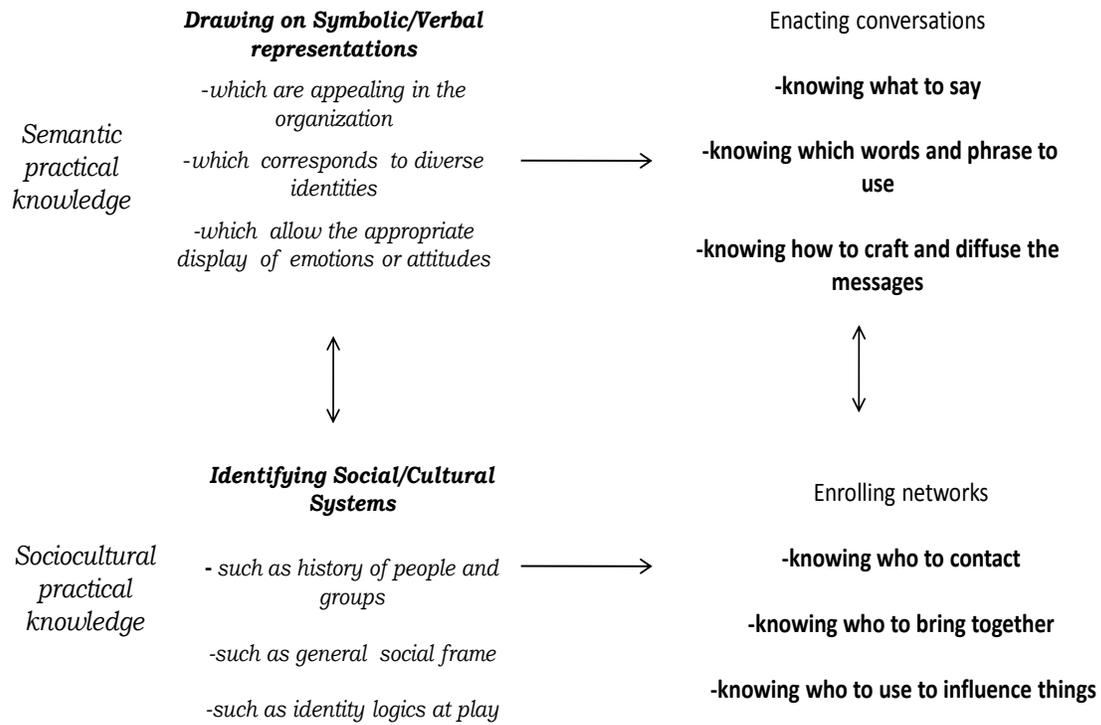


Figure 2: Practical knowledge and strategic sensemaking in practice



Legend: *Interpretation*   **Action**

**Table 1: Sensemaking regarding the types of practical knowledge (Mary, Robert, William, Jane)**

	<b>Enacting Conversations:</b> Knowing what to say, the words and phrases to use, the messages to get across, about “crafting”		<b>Enrolling Networks:</b> Knowing who to contact, who to bring together, who to use to influence things, and the forum / process in which to do it
	<b>Semantic</b>		<b>Sociocultural</b>
<b>Mary</b>			
M1	Asks questions Indirectly provides the information needed to make future decisions	M1	Recognizes the importance of being in contact with the other directorate to manage her own directorate Draws on her knowledge of identity logics in Program and Technical Productions
M2	Crafts the message in accordance with the reality of people Constructs a rallying discourse	M2	Positions herself as a member of the team by “putting her cards on the table,” a typical metaphor in this directorate (see Robert)
M3	Uses what people say to find the right words and get the message across		Encourages meetings and discussions with employees
M4	Listens to what people say Is transparent	M4	Likes to deal with others Implies that historically, management’s messages were more ambiguous Has a people-focused management style (maternal) while using a firm attitude suited to a male-dominated world
M5	Conscientiously writes reports of meetings	M5	Uses her reports to reinforce the compromises between different groups with divergent interests Recognizes the bureaucratic organizational world
M6	Says “hello” to everyone on a set		Creates ties by visiting production sets before and after filming
M7	Asks advice of people	M7	Surrounds herself with the right people (technical knowledge, trustworthy and trusting)
M8	Knows how to listen to others to learn what to say and how to say it	M8	Surrounds herself with the right people (administrative and collective knowledge) Recognizes the organizational context in which experience matters
M9	Knows how to “sell” her ideas Calls people by their names	M9	Recognizes the importance of internal and external hierarchical contacts and connections Sees herself and her supervisor as a “couple”: metaphor that recognizes the importance of gender (The Program Production Directorate is more female and Technical Production is male dominated). “Coast to coast”: Implies the importance of ties with the English-

			language division of CBC
M10		M10	Uses external contacts Emphasizes the local character of the French-language division Recognizes the importance of privatization
<b>Robert</b>			
R1	Uses a new compound word to provide an image that can be understood by the producer (technical-artists)	R1	Evokes the ties between the units that have to work together Draws on the two traditional identity logics
R2	Speaks respectfully (right words and right way of saying things)	R2	Draws on cultural knowledge acquired through previous business relationships Draws on the need to be accepted by the group (informal cultural unit rule)
R3	Creates occasions for talking with employees (playing cards) Creates negotiation spaces through conversation Evaluates the credibility of demands	R3	Creates ties with the technicians Draws on the internal unit culture (give and take)
R4	Positions himself to management as a spokesperson for the technicians Uses his frankness and his voice to be heard by his superiors	R4	Hints at the communication difficulties with his superiors
R5		R5	Uses his informal contacts to assign employees to teams Knows “who” can work with “whom” Hints at the heavy bureaucracy of the organization
R6	Communicates his knowledge of the organization Uses the telephone to reach people rapidly	R6	Uses his networks to solve technical emergencies Knows “who” to get in touch with in case of problems Hints at the heavy bureaucracy of the organization
R7	Knows “what” to say to mobilize the technicians: first, he asks about the person, then he appeals to team spirit	R7	Draws on his contacts and his knowledge of the personal situation technicians
R8	Recomposes the content of the messages he sends to his technicians about their relationship with Program Production Directorate Integrates this message in the routines of his unit	R8	Evokes the importance of ties within his unit and with management Relies on the group culture (same wavelength) Recalls his position of resistance to management
R9	Says what reassures people Refers directly to the issue of technical competence to convince a colleague	R9	Convinces his colleague that she should work in collaboration with technical services
<b>William</b>			
W1	Use of specific language (bottom line, cost, profit, margin) (See also W3)	W1:	Understands the cultural identity of people he is working with, both generically and specifically within the company’s context, “accounting people and engineering people ... want quantitative things”, “money men”.
W2	Development of message that appeals to all in its language e.g.	W2	Understands the autonomous nature of the division, yet common

	“save this much”		<p>priorities that can be appealed to, but also the need to bring cross-divisional groups together with commonalities beyond the “bottom line” focus e.g. HR</p> <p>Need for substantial and thorough analysis of facts presented given quantitative nature of individuals, creating a “package”</p> <p>Generically, understands the need for repeat meetings to gradually build buy-in and understanding from a resistant group</p>
W3	Use of crafted messages containing specific language to sell not tell “we did good last year ... another step ... “profits up, earnings down ... margin issues”, as well as reach across diverse groups	W3	Recognition of no central mandate to impose, and of the nature of his relationship with the divisional managers which requires him to sell not tell.
		W4	Different identities of groups
		W5,6,7	<p>Recognising constraints of existing system and who will / won’t help to change them.</p> <p>Knowing which contacts to use to access those who can enable the desired change</p> <p>Being in the boardroom more to enable a business working relationship with the directors rather than just a reporting relationship, and therefore enhance influence</p>
W8	Linking his work to their concerns e.g. the balance sheet, risk, liabilities	W8	Understands the need to change the relationship he has with the board by changing the perception of his role from one to do with reporting to one more connected to the business if he is to exert more influence / have his views accepted.
W9	Designing a process which reinforces “no mandate”, and appeals to managers involved since it is a “logical framework”	W9	Suspicion of centre: need for joint decision making process, participation, acknowledgement of political turf issues
W10	<p>Crafting of a common purpose, and thus like “herding cats”</p> <p>Linking agendas e.g. business worsening, more focus on cost control</p>	W10	<p>As above, but also building on early successes to make networks stronger, acknowledging sociocultural dynamics but also simultaneously changing it and then exploiting those changes</p> <p>Generically understanding the need to gradually build networks and groups across the business with a common agenda to facilitate future change through a series of linked meetings</p>
		W11	Need to travel to recruit people across different bits of the business

			Generically understanding importance of face-to-face to build relationships
W12	Specific messages to align himself with / build rapport with those he is meeting, e.g. addressing the agenda of a boss, talking about rugby or a shared Welsh ancestry first	W12	Using other people’s agendas and interests to influence
W13	Picking resistant influencers off individually with tailored conversations	W13	Recognising those who are resistant or key influencers
<b>Jane</b>			
J1	Use of persuasion	J1	Divisions are “all powerful”
J2	Use of different media – audio conference, get togethers, etc.	J2	Knowing that face-to-face best way to engage but that other media can help, e.g. audio conferences, newsletters
J3	Publicising the work with announcement of prizes		
J4	Enabling coordination through different languages, timetables	J4	Recognizing how difficult it is to communicate across divisions
J6	Parcelling benefits	J5, 7	Divisions have narrow operational focus, power base lies with general managers
J10	Conference attended by appropriate sponsors e.g. the CEO	J9, 10	Drawing on senior managers, but even they are limited in their power over the divisions