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2008 : September 2008 - Fast Moving Fronts : Julia Balogun & Gerry Johnson

FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2008

September 2008


Julia Balogun & Gerry Johnson talk with *ScienceWatch.com* and answer a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Economics & Business.


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Article: Organizational restructuring and middle manager sensemaking

Authors: Balogun, J; Johnson, G

Journal: ACAD MANAGE J, 47 (4): 523-549 AUG 2004

Addresses: City Univ London, Case Business Sch, London, England.

City Univ London, Case Business Sch, London, England.

Univ Strathclyde, Grad Sch Business, Glasgow, Lanark, Scotland.

SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

Our paper is highly cited as it fits within several different research conversations. First it is a paper about sensemaking and is, therefore, relevant to other research in this area. However, it is also a paper about middle managers and strategic change and is therefore also cited by the growing body of work which explores the strategic role of middle managers.

In addition, it is relevant to research in the recent field of Strategy as Practice. This body of work explores strategy as something an organization does as opposed to something an organization has and, as such, puts the research focus on what it is strategic actors in organizations actually do to deliver strategy (See Johnson G, *et al.*, special issue of *Journal of Management Studies* 40[1], 2003, and Balogun J, *et al.*, "Editors of Special Issue: Strategy as Practice," *Human Relations* 60[1], 2007, and the book: *Strategy as Practice: Research Directions and Resources*, by Gerry Johnson, Ann Langley, Leif Melin, and Richard Whittington, Cambridge University Press, 2007.)

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

It doesn't describe a new discovery, but it does use novel methods in the form of research participants' maintained diaries and also focus groups. It is one of the few recent studies that track the implementation of strategic change on a real-time, longitudinal basis.

SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

The significance of the paper lies in that it shows:

- 1) The important and active role middle managers play in how strategic change actually develops on the ground.
- 2) Whereas senior managers are usually credited with the meaning making around change, in fact they become ghosts in the sensemaking of others; rather than being active directors of change, they act more as agents of indirect infection influencing organizational

meanings through the presence of their actions and words in stories, rumors, and gossip shared by others.

3) Therefore, it is the actions, behaviors, gestures, and language of peers, and their shared personal experiences, that have a more direct impact on middle-manager interpretations and change outcomes.

4) The focus to date on vertical interactions between senior managers and others has obscured the importance of horizontal interactions within organizations.

"...it is also a paper about middle managers and strategic change..."

SW: How did you become involved in this research and were there any particular problems encountered along the way?

This was based on the Ph.D. of the first author which was explicitly designed to explore the gap that existed on the role middle managers play in strategic change.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

Both authors remain actively involved in research that explores strategic change, and other strategic practices such as workshops and strategic planning, from the strategy as practice perspective: in other words, research that focuses on how strategists, be they senior or middle managers, accomplish their strategic work.

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

No. However, in terms of managerial practice, there are implications for senior managers to do with the way they conceive of change recipients (as passive as opposed to active), the way they think about how they communicate change, and the way they intervene. For more on this, see: Balogun J, "Managing Change: Steering a Course between Intended Strategies and Unanticipated Outcomes," *Long Range Planning* 39[1], 29-49, 2006.

Professor Julia Balogun
The Professor Sir Roland Smith Chair in Strategic Management
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK

Professor Gerry Johnson
Professor of Strategic Management
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK

Keywords: strategy as practice, sensemaking, middle managers, strategic change, strategic actors in organizations, implementation of strategic change, middle-manager interpretations, agents of indirect infection influencing organizational meanings.



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