In this paper we develop a theoretical framework for understanding failure in processes of organizational strategizing. Drawing on an intensive, longitudinal field study of organizational decision making, we examine the attempts and ultimate failure of members of a British symphony orchestra to construct an artistic strategy for their organization. We argue that failure in organizational strategizing can be understood as resulting from the interplay of certain elements of organizational discourse and specific kinds of political behaviour. Specifically, we propose a model of organizational strategizing ‘episodes’ that comprises four distinct stages. We argue that for each stage, there are particular discursive and political factors that can lead to failure.

**INTRODUCTION**

Although recent strategy research has been dominated by a focus on the outcomes and effects of organizational strategy (e.g., Makadok, 2001; Mata and Portugal, 2000; Porter, 1996; Williamson, 1991), it is in the micro-processes of strategizing that managers and other organizational members are involved day-to-day, and these which determine the ability of organizations to formulate and implement strategies (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Pettigrew, 1987). Management research has also tended to focus its attention on successful, high-performance organizations with strong records of developing and implementing corporate strategy (e.g., Pettigrew, 1985, 1987; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Raynor and Bower, 2001; Teerlink, 2000). Thus, what we do know about the micro-
processes of strategizing largely reflects the practices of more successful businesses. An important and overlooked area of inquiry in strategy research concerns the organizational practices associated with the failures in strategic decision making that are commonplace in many organizations (Nutt, 1999). This topic is critically important because the majority of organizations are not high-performing, leading-edge or exemplary; most organizations face both success and failure in their strategizing processes. To understand how strategizing occurs in most organizations, we therefore need to investigate both its successes and failures (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991).

In this paper, we develop a theoretical framework for understanding failure in organizational strategizing. This framework draws on an intensive, real-time, longitudinal field study of the attempts and ultimate failure of members of a British symphony orchestra to construct an artistic strategy for their organization. The study investigates how and why, despite the considerable attention and energy devoted to the development of an artistic strategy, organizational members remained frustrated in their attempts to achieve this over a period of several years. We integrate our findings with existing research on organization discourse and politics to construct a framework that both lays out a set of key stages in organizational strategizing and identifies important factors that can lead to failure in this process.

This paper contributes to the study of organizational strategizing in three important ways. First, we develop an integrative framework for the study of organizational strategizing which highlights the interplay of organizational discourse and politics: we argue that strategizing can be conceptualized as occurring in episodes that involve a set of four identifiable stages, two of which are primarily political and two of which are primarily discursive. This framework adds to the existing literature on strategy process by providing a detailed theoretical understanding of the components of strategizing and their relationships to each other. Second, we delineate a set of factors which we argue will increase the likelihood that an episode of strategizing will fail to produce its objective, whether that objective is a strategic decision, a plan, a vision, or a strategy. By systematically examining causes of failure in organizational strategizing, this paper complements the existing strategy literature’s focus on best practice. Third, we provide a detailed and direct examination of organizational strategizing as it happened, offering a relatively rare portrayal of the micro-processes of strategizing in real time. The methodology we have employed in this study allowed us to directly consider the words and actions of those involved, avoiding the problems of hindsight bias associated with many retrospective studies.

We present this paper in five major sections. First, we review the existing research that has examined processes of organizational strategising in order to position this inductive study in the context of recent literature. Next, we describe the methods of data collection and analysis that form the empirical basis for the
paper. In the third section, we present our case study: an account of the processes aimed at developing an artistic strategy in a British symphony orchestra. Fourth, we present our theoretical framework. Here, we formalize our insights in a set of propositions that relate the likelihood of strategizing failure to aspects of the process and the context in which it occurs. Finally, we discuss the implications of our study for research and practice.

THE PROCESSES OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIZING

The concept of strategizing emphasizes the micro-level processes and practices involved as organizational members work to construct and enact organizational strategies, through both formal and informal means (Whittington, 1996, 2001). Taking this perspective on organizational strategy draws our attention to the set of organizational processes through which skilled actors engage in strategy and highlights the need for research methodologies that concentrate on such processes. In the study of organizations, the tradition of process research has evolved to examine the dynamic study of behaviour in organizations, seeking to understand how things evolve over time, and why they evolve in this way (Hinings, 1997; Pettigrew, 1997; Van de Ven and Huber, 1990). Critical to this approach is a focus upon sequences of incidents, activities and actions as they unfold, and a careful analysis of the contexts in which they are situated (Pettigrew, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992).

Examining strategizing from this perspective has number of advantages. First, unlike much economics-based strategy research that is focused solely on outcomes (e.g., Porter, 1996; Williamson, 1991), processual approaches to strategy highlight both the dynamics and the consequences of strategic action. Second, the focus of process research on action in context allows a much richer understanding of the multiple factors that influence strategic processes (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988), including the social, political, and economic contexts in which strategic action has occurred (Hinings, 1997; Pettigrew, 1997). Third, in contrast to studies which seek to construct a single account of change, process research accommodates the co-existence of competing histories and views (Langley, 1999) and attempts to assemble a rich description of organizational strategizing that is rooted in the actors’ own accounts of their actions. Processual studies of strategy are not, however, intended simply to present a variety of actor-based perspectives, but rather to allow for innovative and creative interpretations and theory development: ‘processual analysis centres on decoupling, classifying and recombining data to develop, redefine and create concepts which enable the presentation of new accounts (post-analytical description)’ (Dawson, 1997, p. 402). Thus, a processual approach to the study of organizational strategizing provides the potential for the development of theory which highlights its dynamic and contextualized nature, and builds on, rather than suppresses, the multiple perspectives that organizational life presents.

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Key Elements of Organizational Strategizing: Politics and Discourse

In this study we focus on two key aspects of organizational strategy which process research has highlighted: organizational politics and discourse (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Mangham, 1986; Pettigrew, 1973, 1983; Wilson, 1982). Although there is no single parsimonious set of concepts that can comprehensively describe strategy processes, we believe that, together, these two elements capture much of what occurs in and is most central to organizational strategizing. Studies of strategic processes reveal organizations as political entities where powerful stakeholders with competing interests seek to influence decision making (Hickson et al., 1986; March and Olsen, 1976; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981b). Power, whether stemming from the possession of scarce resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), from legitimate authority (Mintzberg, 1983), from coalitions (Murnighan and Brass, 1991), or from the right to speak on behalf of others (Hardy and Phillips, 1998), is a critical component of strategic processes in organizations. At the same time, the construction of organizational strategies is a fundamentally discursive process (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Mumby and Clair, 1997). Both the processes and many of the outcomes of strategizing involve organizational text and talk: meetings, memos, informal conversations, gossip, jokes and stories all contribute to strategy processes that often end up producing speeches, formal documents, presentations, and, of course, more meetings. We argue that, together, organizational politics and discourse constitute fundamental elements in organizational strategizing.

Our interest in the potential that strategic processes have to fail leads us to consider the role that politics and discourse might play in such a failure. Political studies of strategy process describe the variety of actions that managers use to enhance their power to influence decisions, including coalition building, lobbying, and the control of information (Mangham, 1986; Pettigrew, 1973; Wilson, 1982). Crozier and Friedberg (1980), for instance, describe organizations as ‘ensembles des jeux’, where shifting, multiple coalitions continually strive to influence different decisions. Because the politics of organizational strategy involve bargaining and compromise, the resulting decisions rarely reflect the preferences of a single group (Pfeffer, 1981b). Our perspective on organizational strategy focuses on the process; we are therefore interested in failures of process, rather than decisions or actions which lead to negative outcomes for the organization. Consequently, we need to be able to identify whether or not a strategizing process has failed. The political nature of strategizing means that any decision is likely to advantage some organizational actors while disadvantaging others. Thus, we argue that for a strategizing process to be considered a failure, it should result in no action or decision at all. Our research focus in this study, then, is the patterns of organizational politics that are likely to lead to a breakdown in strategic processes such that no strategic action or decision is produced.
Our interest in organizational discourse parallels our interest in organizational politics. We are concerned with patterns of organizational discourse that are likely to lead to a failed strategic process. Although the application of discourse analysis to organizational strategy is relatively novel (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Knights and Morgan, 1991), process-oriented studies of strategy and strategic decision making have long highlighted the roles played by forms of talk and text (Fiol, 1991; Johnson, 1990; Pfeffer, 1981a; Quinn, 1978; Wildavsky, 1979). In our examination of strategizing, we focus on two key elements of discourse that have emerged as central in studies of organizational discourse: concepts and objects (Fairclough, 1992; Hardy and Phillips, 1999; Parker, 1992; Phillips and Hardy, 1997). Concepts are abstract representations – they are the ‘sets of categories, relationships, and theories through which we understand the world and relate to one another’ (Phillips and Hardy, 1997). When concepts are brought into play to make sense of social relations or physical objects, then the discourse has constituted an object. Clearly, objects and concepts are closely related. The main difference is that concepts exist only as abstractions, while objects are concrete to the extent that they are connected not only to other sets of discursive elements, but also to material practices, relations or things. Simply put, we use the term object to refer to an instance of some abstract concept. So, for instance, in organizational discourse, the term ‘strategic plan’ represents a concept while company X’s strategic plan is an object. In this study, we examine the pattern of concepts and objects which are likely to lead to a failure in organizational strategizing.

METHODS

Research Context

Our study focuses on a major British symphony orchestra, referred to here as the ASO, which employed 100 musicians and an administration team of approximately 25. It was primarily involved in giving concerts in its home city and other nearby towns, and had a tradition of large scale symphonic repertoire. It was a very well-established part of the city’s cultural life and had long had a loyal audience, many with annual subscriptions. Approximately 20 per cent of the ASO’s budget came from government funding, in the form of a core Arts Council grant. The organization was therefore also highly dependent upon ticket sales in its home town and external concert engagements for its income.

In the few years prior to the study, the ASO had been marked by considerable upheaval, including changes in a number of key roles. New appointments had been made to both the Chief Executive and Principal Conductor positions, both these individuals reporting to the Chairman of the Board. As is common in conductor appointments, the Principal Conductor did not join the orchestra as a full-time member. Rather, he committed to conduct the orchestra for several
weeks per year, the rest of the time essentially operating as a freelance conductor, working with other orchestras as opportunities arose. Throughout much of the year, however, he would be involved, albeit at a distance, in the full range of artistic decisions, from musician appointments to repertoire planning. Quite unusually for a British orchestra, the ASO’s Principal Conductor was given final say on all programming decisions, including concerts to be performed by visiting conductors.

The Principal Conductor arrived at the ASO with plans to revitalize the orchestra artistically, which he was granted the formal authority to do by the Board of Directors. From the beginning, he introduced a variety of repertoire into the ASO concert series, much of which was not popular with traditional ASO audiences. Ticket sales began to fall, and the Chief Executive was asked to leave. At the beginning of the study period, a new Chief Executive had been in post for several months. He did not have an arts management background, and one of his priorities was to appoint an Artistic Director who would report directly to him. This new Artistic Director was to bring increased artistic expertise to the administration team and, crucially, to draw back artistic decision-making power from the Principal Conductor.

Data Collection

This paper is based on an intensive, real-time, longitudinal field study of decision making conducted by the first author. The data on which this paper draws were gathered as part of a larger study of decision making in British three orchestras, in which decision processes were followed as they unfolded in real time. The focus of this larger study was to understand how decisions were made, and to identify and explain the patterns of involvement for a variety of different stakeholder groups. Data collection was undertaken using a range of qualitative methods, including direct observation of meetings and rehearsals, interviews with orchestra managers, players, Board members, and other key actors, and extensive documentary analysis. In the study of the ASO, over 60 meetings were observed over a two and a half year period, including meetings of senior management, of the Board, between players, and meetings between orchestra leaders and those external to their organization. Throughout each one, the first author noted verbatim, as far as possible, what was said and by whom. Over the same time period, 40 formal interviews were conducted with a wide range of ASO stakeholders, including all members of the administration, key board members, the Principal Conductor, and the musicians who represented the orchestra on the Players’ Committee and the board. Musicians who had previously served as representatives were also interviewed. In these interviews, participants were asked to talk about key issues or decisions currently facing the orchestra, and to describe their role in the process, and their perceptions of the process. The interviews included
repeat interviews with key informants – in particular, the Chief Executive, Chairman of the Board, and player representatives of the orchestra – throughout the study period. In addition to these largely tape-recorded and transcribed interviews, an even greater number of informal interviews were also conducted, often taking place in corridors, bars, and restaurants. A wide range of archival documentary materials were also collected, including internal strategic papers and other documents, several sector-level policy reports, and copies of minutes from meetings both that the first author had and had not been able to attend.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study comprised three main stages. In the first stage, we developed a ‘decision story’ (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988) of approximately 20 single-spaced pages that chronicled the process. This was constructed by tracing through all the chronologically-ordered raw data (interview transcripts, observation notes, archival documentation) to identify every time the issue of artistic strategy in the ASO arose, and then selecting and ordering quotations from these data to describe the process. The decision story that was built described all of the significant events associated with the ASO’s attempt to develop an artistic strategy, how they came about, when they happened, who was involved, and their major outcomes. A condensed version of this story is presented in the next section of the paper.

In the second stage, we analysed the story, attempting to identify possible reasons for the strategizing failure. To do this, each author separately carried out open coding on the decision story (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), tracing through the text to identify ‘first order’ quotations and observations (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) that could begin to explain the actors’ failure to develop artistic strategy. Working together, we then conducted categorical analysis, grouping pieces of text that related to similar concepts to build broader, ‘second order’ categories. The result of this step was the identification of two broad explanatory themes: (1) the way in which actors talked about the artistic strategy they sought to develop; and (2) the political activities of key individuals.

The third stage involved an iterative process wherein we developed the conceptual framework which we use to interpret and explain the events. At this point, we worked inductively from the themes and descriptive categories developed from the data in the previous stage, and, in addition, drew on concepts from discourse theory and organizational politics. Analysis in this stage thus involved working between the data, our own emerging conceptual framework, and existing literature on organizational politics and discourse. This highly iterative process continued as we worked back and forth between the data and the emerging patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989; Sutton and Callahan, 1987) to develop the conceptual framework presented at the end of this paper.
ARTISTIC STRATEGY IN THE ASO

Until only a few decades ago, an orchestra was regarded as a British city’s most significant cultural entity and was a great source of pride for its citizens (Hoffmann et al., 1993). As a result of the significant societal and cultural changes that have taken place in recent times, however, the art forms produced by such organizations are now often considered outmoded and irrelevant (Lebrecht, 1996). British orchestras, long reliant upon public subsidy and local interest, have increasingly been driven to demonstrate their value to the communities which support them. They are subject to growing pressure to produce art that is considered both relevant to their communities and distinctive in the ever more competitive ‘entertainment’ marketplace (BBC/Arts Council, 1994; Robinson, 2000). In the mid 1990s, Britain’s major public funding agency for the arts, the Arts Council, recognizing both the artistic and commercial pressures on these organizations, began to demand that they demonstrate a clear and coherent artistic ‘vision’, and that they support their grant applications with a strategic statement and business plan.

December, 1996[1]: Criticism from Outside the Organization

One of the first documented criticisms of the ASO’s artistic direction was in the Arts Council’s 1996 appraisal report. In it, the Arts Council, which was the ASO’s primary funder, drew attention to the nature of the orchestra’s programming and its artistic direction since the appointment of the new Principal Conductor some years earlier. The report first provided some positive feedback, suggesting a vitality and creativity in the orchestra’s new programming:

Since [the Principal Conductor]’s appointment, there has been a notable change in the artistic direction of the [ASO]... his primary intention has been to revitalize and enhance the artistic programme of the [ASO] through the inclusion of high quality, new and adventurous work but also the maintenance of the [ASO]’s long commitment to [its traditional] repertoire.

The report went on, however, to suggest a number of problems in the ASO’s programming: as the repertoire had become more adventurous, audiences had declined; further, the distinctions between the repertoire played in the orchestra’s three concert series had become blurred, creating uncertainty about the organization’s overall artistic direction. The report argues:

... that it is important to have clearly defined programme strands which can be aligned with target audiences and audience development initiatives...
And to achieve this, the Arts Council argued for serious change in the leadership of the orchestra, reducing the Principal Conductor’s responsibilities:

The Team strongly recommends that the Chief Executive should take overall responsibility for the artistic direction of the [ASO] . . . (all quotes from Arts Council appraisal report, ASO, 1996)

In recommending that the Chief Executive take responsibility for the organization's artistic direction, the appraisal team implied that these problems had arisen because the ASO had lost control of its programming and artistic policy to its recently appointed Principal Conductor.

By the start of the study period in late 1997, external criticism of the ASO had become more widespread. Managers of other orchestras, as well as some national music critics, were making negative comments about the kinds of music the orchestra was playing, and also about the standard to which it was performing it. Some of these people suggested that the Principal Conductor had been an inappropriate appointment; others observed that the ASO was being led by a Chief Executive with no experience of arts management, and were unsure that he would be capable of bringing about the necessary change.

1997: Growing Criticism Within the Organization

Following the Arts Council appraisal report, a variety of groups and individuals within the ASO increasingly discussed the orchestra’s problems, often expressing a concern with its lack of an artistic ‘strategy’, ‘policy’, or ‘direction’. At the first meeting observed in this study (Chief Executive/full orchestra meeting, 9/97), the Chief Executive was asked by one musician, ‘Three months ago we decided we had no artistic policy. What has changed?’ The orchestra’s musicians were frustrated with issues around the focus and ownership of the ASO’s artistic strategy. At the same meeting, another player suggested that the lack of time the Principal Conductor spent with the orchestra was problematic: ‘Perhaps the artistic policy shouldn’t be driven by someone who’s only here twelve weeks a year’.

While the players were openly critical of the orchestra’s artistic direction and its control by the Principal Conductor, the ASO’s Chief Executive presented the situation as more ambiguous and less of a crisis. The conflicting views are chronicled in the minutes of an Artistic Advisory Sub-Committee meeting, attended by representatives of the players, management and Board. The player representatives are reported as questioning the organization’s artistic identity:

The Committee felt that the programmes for the [1998/99] season did not appear to have an artistic identity at a time when a number of orchestras were presenting cycles [of works by a particular composer] . . .
The Chief Executive defended the programmes, arguing:

\[ \ldots \] that [the Principal Conductor] had not talked about having a series of concerts built around one composer but this did not mean that the [ASO] did not have an artistic strategy . . .

The players insisted that:

\[ \ldots \] there had been no clear artistic direction over the past two years and that this had clearly affected ticket sales.

In response, the Chief Executive:

\[ \ldots \] reported that he is in the process of appointing a new Director of Artistic Planning who would own the Artistic Policy in future . . . (all quotes from minutes, Artistic Advisory Sub-Committee, 10/97)

Despite the relatively calm position taken by the Chief Executive, most other members of the senior management team echoed, in interviews, the players’ concerns about the orchestra’s artistic direction and policy. The newly appointed Marketing Director identified a ‘lack of clarity about artistic statements’ as one of the key problems facing the ASO, suggesting that this made it difficult to sell the orchestra. Similarly, the ASO’s Finance Director identified the artistic policy as ‘the most immediate problem’ facing the organization. He was less concerned with the exact artistic message given out by the ASO, than that it should be commercially viable. In his opinion, the development of artistic policy required someone: ‘who has sufficient commercial grasp to know the effect of what they’re doing, and appreciates the need to create a programme for [the ASO home city] that will also apply in [other regional towns]’. Another Director argued that the present Principal Conductor had no artistic direction, but had all the control. The Deputy Chief Executive commented that the artistic policy seemed to be ‘the property of [the Principal Conductor] and [his Artistic Advisor]’ and that the orchestra’s programmes seemed to be planned with little thought for either the costs or the income they generated.

Despite the considerable concern over the problem of artistic policy and direction, the Principal Conductor and his Artistic Advisor appeared quite confident of the general approach they had adopted. The Artistic Advisor explained:

Obviously I think we’ve been doing the right thing . . . One of the criticisms we’ve had is that we’ve gone too far too soon, been too innovative, and my feeling is that that’s the way you find out the best way forward: you need to try as many things as you can to see what will and what won’t work, otherwise it makes for a very, very long process. (Artistic Advisor, 11/97)
As far as there was a problem, he suggested it was partly due to a ‘clash of ideals’ with the previous Marketing Director, who ‘went off in her own direction, without considering what [we] were trying to do’. He felt this had resulted in mixed messages going out to the public and in the media, giving the appearance of a lack of artistic coherence. The Principal Conductor saw his critics as either arguing from formulaic programming principles, or simply confused:

What we have done since day one, since I’ve been here, is to bring in a sense of balance into the repertoire. It’s difficult . . . we’ve been criticized for having such conservative programmes. On the other hand I’ve been severely criticized for having such adventuresome programmes. (Principal Conductor, 12/97)

January, 1998: Whose Job Is It Anyway?

In an interview four months into the study period, the Chairman-Elect of the Board gave his perception of how the organization had lost its way artistically. He observed:

If you look at the main [home city] concerts, something has happened there, and we’ve lost our thread, because we had three distinct series. Whether you lay that at [the Principal Conductor]’s door, [the Artistic Advisor]’s door . . . [or] the fact that we’ve had a change of Chief Executive . . . So I think the [ASO], represented by the Board and the senior management, has a duty to make sure that the repertoire actually fulfils the artistic strategy. (Chairman-Elect, 1/98)

When asked who was involved in decisions concerning the artistic strategy, he replied:

We haven’t got one . . . The people struggling to find one are: the conductor, the Chief Executive, the Artistic Advisor, and the band. (Chairman-Elect, 1/98)

In an interview the following day, the first author asked the same question of the ASO’s Chief Executive. He responded:

The technical answer is that the Board should have the artistic strategy. The reality is that [the Principal Conductor] sort of produced repertoire by sparking off [the Artistic Advisor], [the Deputy Chief Executive], and [an external consultant with knowledge of the ASO] . . . Emerging out of that process . . . is ultimately [the Artistic Advisor] producing rolling drafts of the repertoire that responds to a strategy that was not well articulated, and now, we still don’t have a properly articulated artistic strategy and I’d like to see [the new Artistic Director] looking at the one that [the Marketing Director] wrote when she arrived, and try and get that fleshed out better . . . (Chief Executive, 1/98)

With the arrival of the new Artistic Director in February 1998 came the strong expectation within the orchestra that there would soon be an artistic strategy. In his first few months, the Artistic Director made some significant changes to the programme plans for the following season. He identified cost savings of £100,000, while ensuring that the revised plans made a strong artistic statement. These modifications were made with the Principal Conductor’s consent, as were quite substantial changes to the kinds and content of the ASO’s various concert series. While managers and board members saw these alterations as important, however, they were construed more as urgent trouble-shooting for an impending season, than as future-orientated in any long term, strategic way.

In July, the ASO’s senior management held an ‘away day’, the stated purpose of which was: ‘. . . to brainstorm where we believe the Orchestra should be in the medium term’ (document, senior management strategy away day, 7/98). The away day began with an extended discussion of a vision for the ASO: whether it should aim to be a very good community orchestra, or one of world class international standards. The ensuing debate covered a variety of topics, including the Principal Conductor, finances, the playing standards of the musicians, the public perception of the orchestra, and its future structure. Despite the formal mandate for the day and the continuing concerns expressed about a lack of artistic strategy, however, relatively little was said about the artistic product itself, in terms of the kind of repertoire they envisaged the ASO performing in the medium term.

Other groups, meanwhile, continued to press for the development of an artistic strategy. The week after the away day, the Marketing Sub-Committee of the Board met to consider the sales and marketing aspects of the ASO’s operations. At the end of the meeting and after much wide-ranging debate, a new member of the group requested of the ASO management: ‘a short position paper which sets out the economic and artistic framework’. Reflecting on the committee’s attempts to develop a marketing strategy without knowing some of the orchestra’s basic artistic goals, he argued that: ‘you can’t consider these things in a vacuum’.

August–December, 1998: The Search Continues

In August 1998, after six months in post, the Artistic Director observed: ‘The big issue really is to get the policy together to see where the hell we’re going for the next five years’. In a senior management team meeting two and a half months later, the Chief Executive spoke of the progress that had been made in a number of areas, including the players’ pay settlement, some orchestral appointments, and the development of corporate sponsors. He commented, however, that the artistic side still needed work, and told his team: ‘we need to now produce a strategy and get a document out’ (senior management meeting, 10/98).
At the Board meeting the following week, members were informed of a Board away day that was planned for December. The memo that was distributed stated:

At its last meeting the Board agreed that it would be helpful to have a day put aside to receive presentations about the workings of the various [ASO] departments and to provide a forum for discussing some of the strategic issues facing the [ASO] . . . (memo to Board members, 10/98)

The Chairman-Elect explained to his fellow directors:

The Board accepted a Strategic Framework last year. If we measure what we’ve been doing, we don’t score too badly. The glaring thing we have failed to do is develop a three year strategy, artistic and financial. This meeting [the away day] will examine that aspect of it. (Board meeting, 10/98)

Another Board member responded: ‘. . . the Framework is a weak document. I think we must address this, or the away day will be chatting and nothing else’ (Board meeting, 10/98).

For the rest of the autumn, the discussion of a need for artistic strategy continued. In a Consultative Committee meeting (11/98), the Chief Executive reminded player, manager, and Board members of the committee: ‘[The Artistic Director] has a weighty responsibility to set the artistic agenda’. The Artistic Director agreed: ‘We need a long term vision of where we’re going’. The players were still concerned about issues of ownership. At this meeting, one enquired: ‘Would you agree we own our own artistic policy in future . . . irrespective of whether his [the Principal Conductor’s] contract is extended?’.

January, 1999: The Board’s Strategic Away Day

The Board away day planned for December was delayed until January. The Chairman opened the day with an overview of the ASO’s current situation:

We’re accused of losing coherence in what we do and who we are. A compromise of what [the Principal Conductor] wants and what’s financially possible is what happens. It’s impossible to create good concerts and certainly a long term strategy.

He concluded his presentation by saying: ‘The root of most of our problems is the artistic strategy: what we do and how we do it’.

The Chief Executive of one of the local Regional Arts Boards told the participants about the Arts Council’s perception of the ASO as ‘managerially and...
artistically weak in its vision’. A Board member who worked for a major management consulting firm then made a general presentation on ‘strategy’, emphasizing the need for something clear and guiding. He commented: ‘We talk about music policy . . . we need to be able to define it. The Directors have got to pick up the ball and take their responsibilities’. He stressed: ‘We need agreement, even if it’s not exactly to everyone’s liking’. After lunch, the Artistic Director addressed the Board, explaining the care needed in developing a new artistic strategy: ‘The musical direction needs to be carefully controlled . . . We are trying to change, but it’s very slow to change direction. We need to have a strategy for five or six years’. He then added: ‘I’ve been here for one year and I don’t think I’ve made any impression at all’. Although the Artistic Director went on to speak of his hopes for the future and discussed items from the following season’s repertoire, the day ended in much the same vein as it had begun, with the Chairman making a final appeal: ‘The key thing is artistic. We have very real and presentation problems with our artistic strategy’.

And So On . . .

In February, 1999, the Chief Executive described, in an interview, the discussions the Board was then having with the Principal Conductor: ‘The sticking point is: who has control over the artistic agenda, and what does that mean?’. At the Consultative Committee meeting in March, the Chief Executive described his preparation of a business plan, which was being produced to accompany an application for an Arts Council education grant. He told the Consultative Committee, ‘It’s a working document at the moment – it’s without a marketing strategy and without an artistic strategy for the next three years’. But, he added, somewhat incongruously, ‘It’s setting out an agenda for what we want to do’.

The draft business plan was presented at the Board meeting the following week. Mapping the ASO’s aims, objectives and actions up until the year 2002, it clearly revealed the orchestra’s lack of progress in developing an artistic strategy. Under the heading of ‘artistic’, four aims were presented, the first and main one of which was: ‘To create an artistic policy owned by the whole organization and to be shared with our stakeholders’. Key objectives listed under this aim included: ‘To formulate a written artistic policy linked to written policies for education and equal opportunity’, and ‘Each series within a season to have a recognizable artistic profile and clear thematic content and move towards an objective of one repertoire concert per week’. Beneath such objectives were listed actions, including: ‘Form a management group to formulate a written artistic policy . . .’ and ‘Form an artistic advisory group . . .’ (draft business plan, 3/99).

The search for the ASO’s artistic strategy was set to continue.
UNDERSTANDING FAILURE IN STRATEGIZING

In this section, we draw on our analysis of the ASO’s struggle to construct an artistic strategy to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which organizational processes aimed at developing strategy can fail. A great strength of process-oriented research has been its focus on rich descriptions of organizational life (Dawson, 1997; Hinings, 1997; Pettigrew, 1985). We argue, however, that for research on strategizing to advance, it will be necessary to establish a set of core concepts and relationships that can be used for description and explanation across a wide variety of organizational contexts. For our analysis of failure in strategizing, we develop the concept of an ‘episode’ of strategizing, which we define as a set of political and discursive processes oriented toward the production of a specific strategic object, such as a vision, plan, strategic framework, or marketing strategy, that is tied to material practice. A failure in strategizing, then, would occur whenever these processes stopped short of producing such a discursive object. We acknowledge that declaring a process a ‘failure’ is both subjective and time-dependent: while one person may judge a strategizing attempt to have failed, another may see it as simply moving slowly. It has been argued that strategic change should be studied over a period of many years (Pettigrew, 1990); perhaps we would have seen failure turn to success had this study continued for several more years. Based on the data gathered over two years, however, numerous respondents from a range of different stakeholder positions described themselves as being involved in a process which had for some time been failing to achieve its goal.

Our conceptualization of an episode of strategizing comprises four essential elements. We argue that a strategizing episode begins with the politics of taking positions in response to a strategic issue (Dutton and Jackson, 1987; Gioia and Thomas, 1996); this political process emerges out of an episode’s history which includes both its discursive and political context. In the next stage, which we refer to as defining the concept, organizational members define the class or category of solutions (e.g., marketing strategy). Next, a political process ensures in which organizational members assign responsibility and accountability for developing a specific instance of the concept. Finally, the episode of strategizing ends with the discursive construction of the strategic object (e.g., organization X’s marketing strategy).

Figure 1 provides an overview of our conceptualization of a strategizing episode and its four stages. Although we refer to these elements as ‘stages’, and number them from one to four, we believe that episodes of strategizing often happen in a non-linear manner, involving loops back from one stage to a previous stage and causal links that run in both directions (Mintzberg and Waters, 1984; Mintzberg et al., 1976). As illustrated in the figure, we argue that what happens at each stage is significantly determined by the outcomes of the political and discursive stages that

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Events in the first stage are influenced by that stage’s pre-existing political and discursive pre-history. In the remainder of this section, we examine each of the four stages in detail: we discuss what each stage involves, describe the events that occurred in the ASO at that point, and explore the political and discursive factors that might lead to a breakdown in a strategizing episode at that stage.

1. Engaging with and Taking Positions on the Issue

In the first stage of our conceptualization of a strategizing episode, actors engage with an issue, and take positions on it that reflect their needs and interests.
To do this, they first identify an issue through environmental scanning (Dutton and Jackson, 1987), and bring it onto the organizational agenda using a variety of means. As actors begin to discuss the issue, both formally and informally, it becomes a strategic organizational issue—an event, development or trend that is seen as having organizational implications (Ansoff, 1980; Dutton and Ashford, 1993). Organizational actors do not, however, interpret issues from a neutral position; issues represent a forum through which the concerns of individuals and groups are expressed, negotiated, and protected (Dutton et al., 1989; Lyles and Mitroff, 1980; Thomas et al., 1994). Hence, when actors engage with an issue and bring it onto the organizational agenda, the way in which they frame that issue will be politically determined. This first stage of strategy development is a crucial one: whether and how top management and other key actors engage with an issue is critical in determining the shape of future organizational actions (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton and Jackson, 1987; Dutton et al., 1983; Keisler and Sproull, 1982; Thomas and McDaniel, 1990).

In the case of the ASO, members engaged with the issue of ‘artistic strategy’, using it to explain the organization’s problems, and interpreting it in a variety of ways that were related to their backgrounds and their positions in the organizational structure. By framing the root of the orchestra’s problems as the lack of an artistic strategy, ASO members were both able to identify a solution to their difficulties (getting an artistic strategy) and at the same time, engage with it in such a way as to deflect responsibility away from themselves and their own areas of accountability. Thus, those associated with programming complained that they did not have a commercially viable strategy, while those working in the financial domain attributed the organization’s problems to its incoherent artistic product. As we see in the early part of the story, the Principal Conductor’s Artistic Advisor defended the artistic coherence of the concert series, but blamed the previous Marketing Director for going ‘off in her own direction’ when it came to promoting them. The current Marketing Director, meanwhile, complained of a ‘lack of clarity about artistic statements’, which, she claimed, was making it hard for her to do her job of selling tickets. At the same time, the Financial Director of this debt-laden organization saw the artistic policy as ‘the most immediate problem’, arguing that the orchestra was not in a financial crisis, but an artistic one. The musicians also spoke out: while they had been criticized for poor playing standards, they laid blame at a higher level, arguing that the orchestra’s artistic strategy had neither coherence nor commercial viability. Thus, members of the ASO increasingly engaged with the ‘artistic strategy issue’, each actor and group framing it in a way that minimized their own accountability for the organization’s difficulties.

In contrast to the case described here, pre-existing political positions and resources can produce circumstances under which strategy would not be identified as an important organizational issue, thereby causing a strategizing episode to fail at the very first stage (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). The importance of pre-
existing organizational politics is captured in the arrow labelled ‘1A’ in Figure 1. Actors’ interpretations of issues are shaped by a variety of individual, group and organizational level factors, including organizational mission and identity (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Thomas et al., 1994). Members of the troubled ASO were motivated to engage with the issue of ‘artistic strategy’ because it provided a valuable resource with which to explain the organization’s difficulties and, importantly, to deflect criticism away from themselves. Had it not been in the interests of key actors to interpret the issue as strategic (Thomas et al., 1994), or had a different set of circumstances made other issues in the environment more salient (Mitchell et al., 1997), it is unlikely that the members of the ASO would have engaged with the artistic strategy issue. It would not, therefore, have been given such a priority on the organizational agenda (Reichers et al., 1997). The potential for a strategizing episode to fail at this point leads us to our first proposition:

**Proposition 1a:** An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when key actors do not interpret the issue as relevant to their situation and as having the potential to further their own interests.

Another potential source of failure at this early point in a strategizing episode is rooted in the pre-existing discursive resources (illustrated by the arrow labelled ‘1B’ in Figure 1). The process may fail at this point if actors do not construct an issue in a way that has legitimacy in the prevailing discourse of their organization (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Hardy and Phillips, 1999). The notion of ‘artistic strategy’ was quite familiar to those associated with the ASO; the orchestra sector and the arts in general existed in an ever more competitive environment that was increasingly subject to the corporate and managerial discourses of ‘visions’, ‘missions’ and ‘strategies’. Moreover, the Arts Council report of 1996 introduced the idea that a lack of artistic coherence and direction lay at the root of the orchestra’s problems, increasing the salience of these concepts for ASO members. When legitimate discursive resources are unavailable to stakeholders, they are less likely to engage with an issue in a way that permits it to make it onto the organizational agenda (Mumby and Clair, 1997). Our second proposition is therefore:

**Proposition 1b:** An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail if the issue is not interpreted and labelled in a way that is legitimate within the existing organizational discourse.

### 2. Defining the Concept

The second element in a strategizing episode involves the discursive construction of a concept. More specifically, at this point in strategizing, organizational actors...
attempt to define in abstract (conceptual) terms what they understand to be the appropriate response to the issue to which they are reacting. This does not involve creating a solution, such as writing a mission statement for the company (which we describe below in terms of constructing an object). Rather, this stage is concerned with defining a class or category of potential solutions, which might mean, for example, deciding that what the company needs is some kind of mission statement and defining the concept of a mission statement in abstract terms. We are not suggesting that organizational actors are necessarily engaged in lofty, conceptual discussions at this point, but rather that the ways in which they talk about the issue and how it might be addressed provide an implicit definition of the concept. We argue that defining a concept is an essential part of any episode of strategizing because it allows organizational members to then pursue the construction of an instance of that concept.

In the ASO, the concept that was defined grew out of the positions members took in reaction to the prevailing criticisms of their organization and the sector-wide discourses that highlighted the need for orchestras to be both artistically distinctive and financially viable. From the interaction of internal politics and sector-wide discourses, the concept of ‘artistic strategy’ emerged as comprising three distinct elements. The first concerned the extent to which the orchestra had a distinct identity in the music it performed. ASO players, amongst others, contrasted their programmes unfavourably with those of competitor orchestras, complaining that their own lacked identity or ‘coherence’. Other members argued for more distinctive programming strands within the ASO’s overall artistic statement, such as the Chairman-Elect of the Board who commented in an interview: ‘we’ve lost our thread, because we had three distinct [concert] series’. The concept of artistic strategy was also discussed in terms of commercial success. An interesting aspect of this was that commercial success was not put forward as being in opposition to artistic coherence and identity, but rather as inherently linked to it. For example, the minutes of a sub-committee noted that ‘. . . there had been no clear artistic direction over the past two years and that this had clearly affected ticket sales’ (minutes of the Artistic Advisory Sub-committee, 10/97). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Finance Director drew on the commercial discourse in his explanation about the development of artistic strategy, commenting that it required someone with ‘a sufficient commercial grasp to know the effect of what they’re doing’ (interview, 11/97). While these first two themes were based on artistic and commercial discourses, the third – the formal articulation and presentation of the artistic strategy – drew on a more managerial one. Here, the emphasis was on producing a visionary statement that would delineate the artistic plans for the ASO. Quite early in the process, the Chief Executive argued that the Principal Conductor was ‘never able to articulate what he was doing’, and that the proposed repertoire highlighted ‘a strategy which was not well-articulated’. With the passing months, this theme became still more dominant, as in October 1996, when the
Chief Executive told his management team ‘to produce a strategy and get a document out’. Artistic strategy in the ASO did not seem to be simply about doing certain things, but also, and importantly, about articulating them in an appropriately packaged way, preferably in writing.

Although organizational actors in the ASO did not agree on the precise meaning of the concept they were defining, their definitions did not preclude or deny those of other actors. Instead, the concept of artistic strategy emerged as a composite of artistic identity, commercial success, and a visionary statement. This highlights one of the important ways in which concepts are defined – through some form of collective development of a broadly shared definition. A compromise or collectively created definition is not the only way a shared concept might emerge, however. Where some organizational members dominate an episode of strategizing, they may be in a position to impose a definition of the concept, which then becomes shared, at least for the purposes of that episode (Fairclough, 1992). Thus, we argue that defining a concept as an element in an episode of strategizing may be most likely to fail where the political aims of the actors involved are so incompatible that they are unable to reach any compromise definition, and at the same time no single actor has the power or authority to impose a definition that can move the process forward (illustrated by arrow ‘2A’ in Figure 1). Such a situation is not uncommon in episodes of strategizing that rely on collaborative, rather than hierarchical or market-based, relationships (Lawrence et al., 2002). In these cases, the actors involved often come from different perspectives and need to reach a shared definition of the concept through ambiguous and uncertain negotiations (Gray, 1989), which can together stall the process.

Proposition 2a: An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when the organizational politics preclude agreement on the definition of the concept, and there exists no actor powerful enough to impose a definition.

A second important issue with respect to the potential for failure at this point involves the relationships among the pre-existing discourses of the parties involved (arrow ‘2B’ in Figure 1). Even where actors may not be in significant conflict with each other, their understandings of the world may still be rooted in discourses which are highly incompatible. In a study of innovation, for instance, Dougherty (1992) found that employees in different departments had different meanings of the term ‘market-oriented’. In R&D, it meant product specifications and technical features, whereas for those in manufacturing, it meant durability and reliability, which translated into fewer features and simpler specifications. These incompatible discourses resulted in a failure to innovate because the various groups were unable to develop a shared definition of this key concept (Dougherty, 1992). In the present study, actors may have differentially emphasized various aspects of an ‘artistic strategy’, but they nevertheless shared a language that incorporated
both its musical and the commercial aspects. As a result, ASO members were able to move forward to the next stage. The potential for incompatible discourses to shut down an episode of strategizing at this stage leads to our next proposition.

Proposition 2b: An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when the pre-existing discursive resources of key actors are highly incompatible.

3. Assigning Responsibility and Accountability

In the third stage of a strategizing episode, responsibility and accountability are assigned to construct the strategic object. Even with a shared understanding of an issue, action will proceed only if an individual or group of stakeholders accepts responsibility for moving that issue forward (Ashford et al., 1998; Howell and Higgins, 1990). There are a number of ways in which responsibility and accountability may be assigned. For example, managers may decide to ‘sponsor’ or ‘champion’ the issue themselves in the organization (Andersson and Bateman, 2000; Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton, 1993), promoting it actively and vigorously and garnering support and resources for action (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Schon, 1963). Alternatively, they may encourage others in the organization to become involved, empowering their subordinates or other stakeholders to take on a key role in the process (Kirkman, 1999; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996). Whoever ultimately accepts responsibility for the activity, this element of the strategizing episode is profoundly important: if no one is willing to take primary responsibility for an issue, it may remain on the organizational agenda, but strategizing is unlikely to develop beyond the concept definition phase (Floyd and Lane, 2000).

In the case of the ASO, this stage involved assigning blame for the organization’s problems as well as searching for someone to move the process forward. An obvious candidate for blame might have been the ASO’s Chief Executive. He largely escaped, however, because, as a business man, he had never been regarded as possessing artistic expertise. Some fingers pointed to the Marketing Director, who was duly asked to resign. A large number of people, however, laid the blame squarely at the door of the Principal Conductor. He had, after all, been hired to bring new artistic vitality to the orchestra, and, on this basis, had been paid a considerable amount of money. Moreover, as a prominent and influential outsider, he made an obvious target for blame. Casting blame for past failure on the Principal Conductor did not, however, help clarify who should be responsible for developing the orchestra’s future artistic strategy. This uncertainty could have led existing ASO members to grab the opportunity to influence the direction of their organization, as political decision making and stakeholder theories would suggest (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997; Pettigrew, 1973). However, the complex concept of artistic strategy constructed by organizational members presented a
rather daunting task that neither the Chief Executive, Board Chairman-Elect, nor any other individual felt ready to tackle alone. ‘Artistic strategy’ had been defined as a very special entity; its creator needed to have artistic vision, commercial acumen, and the capability to articulate an inspirational strategy statement. Furthermore, it was important that it be created without further involving the Principal Conductor, the individual blamed for the organization’s current difficulties. Consequently, the ASO undertook to hire an Artistic Director, who would, in the words of the Chief Executive, ‘own the artistic policy in future’.

In contrast to the case described here, an episode of strategizing could fail at the point at which actors attempt to assign responsibility and accountability for constructing the object. This could happen, for example, if actors position themselves in relation to the issue in a way that makes the assignment of responsibility impossible (designated by arrow ‘3A’ in Figure 1). In the ASO, the positions taken by members led them to scapegoat the Principal Conductor. Had the politics in the ASO been so conflicted that they had precluded agreement on who was responsible for the organization’s problems, and who could be responsible for a solution to them, it would have been harder to agree where accountability should lie for constructing the artistic strategy (Denis et al., 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). The strategizing episode would therefore have broken down at this point. This leads to our fifth proposition:

Proposition 3a: An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when organizational politics do not allow for the assignment of responsibility and accountability in a way that benefits key actors.

Another potential cause of failure at this third stage of a strategizing episode stems from the way in which the concept is defined (arrow ‘3B’ in Figure 1). Although the ASO succeeded at this stage, their experience highlights the potential impact of the definition of the concept on political assignment of responsibility and accountability. The artistic strategy concept developed by ASO members was complex, multi-faceted and internally inconsistent. Consequently, they found it difficult to assign responsibility for constructing an object based on it: no one inside the organization felt able to take responsibility and so an outside person was brought in specifically to do this. Although there was widespread agreement among ASO members regarding the importance of constructing an artistic strategy, the complex and conflicted nature of the concept made it a daunting challenge for anyone to take on. These dynamics are summarized in our next proposition:

Proposition 3b: An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when the concept definition is highly complex and internally inconsistent.
4. Constructing the Object

The final element in our framework involves the discursive construction of an object. This is the ultimate point of an episode of strategizing: the construction of some sort of plan, strategy, campaign, proposal, budget, design, or any other concrete instance of the concept defined earlier in the episode. The key aspects of a discursive object are that it exists in discourse as an element of text or talk, and it is connected to some feature of the material world (Hardy and Phillips, 1999), whether that feature is a physical entity or a set of social practices. Discursive objects are critical endpoints for episodes of strategizing because of their connection to organizational action. We argue that objects provide the foundation for organizational action: connecting material practices and entities to elements of discourse allows organizational members to communicate sensibly about those practices and entities (Boje, 1991; Gephart, 1993; Weick, 1995), and consequently to act collectively in regards to them (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991).

It was at this point, the construction of the discursive object, that the strategizing episode in the ASO broke down: the artistic strategy was never constructed. It is important to emphasize that the problem was not simply that the ASO failed to produce a written strategy document. Such a document on its own does not constitute a discursive object, which must both exist in discourse and be connected to material practices. Had ASO members produced a strategy document without it being linked to what the organization did, they would still have failed to construct an artistic strategy as a discursive object.

We argue that this strategizing failure occurred for both political and discursive reasons. Looking first at the political assignment of responsibility and accountability, we see the onus was ultimately placed upon the Artistic Director to construct the artistic strategy. His failure stemmed from a number of sources, including the personal resources he had at his disposal, the kind of working relationships he developed, and his ultimately unsuccessful impression management activities. At the beginning of his term, the Artistic Director made significant artistic and commercial decisions, changing existing programme plans in order to save the organization £100,000 while attempting to ensure a strong, coherent artistic statement. Despite these valuable changes, what the Artistic Director did not do was connect those changes to the concept of artistic strategy or develop a formally documented vision for the orchestra. As time went on, the Artistic Director worked to develop a powerbase, building numerous alliances and taking on additional responsibilities within and outside the orchestra. Although the Artistic Director increased his influence, the cost included becoming so busy that the matter of artistic strategy was postponed in favour of more tangible problems, such as player appointments and concert bookings. In spite of the Artistic Director’s hard work and dedication, he
was unable to achieve what he had been hired to do: develop an artistically coherent, commercially successful, formally documented strategy.

Critical to understanding a breakdown of this type are the bases of power, political skills, and domain-specific expertise held by organizational actors who are responsible for constructing the discursive object, and thus resolving the strategising episode (as illustrated by arrow ‘4A’ in Figure 1). The necessary power and expertise will, of course, vary tremendously across episodes of strategizing, but what is key is the match between what is required and what is possessed by the actors involved. Some episodes may, for instance, require the commitment of top managers, who have the authority and perspective to construct an overarching corporate strategy (Burgelman, 1983; Hamel and Prahalad, 1989). In other cases, it may require the work of middle managers who are able to synthesize issues coming from above and from below (Nonaka, 1988; Westley, 1990). More specific to this case, research on orchestra governance has highlighted the benefits of sharing power across two or three positions, rather than concentrating it in one individual (Allmendinger and Hackman, 1996). Because ASO members were seeking to reduce the Principal Conductor’s contribution to artistic decisions, and also because of the relatively small proportion of the year he spent with the ASO, the Principal Conductor was rarely present at Board or management meetings where artistic strategy was discussed. The appointment of the Artistic Director meant that input was obtained from an artistic professional; he was also involved in discussions with the Principal Conductor to clarify issues of programming and could draw on these to make his contributions. Nevertheless, strategizing in the ASO might have profited from the addition of the Principal Conductor’s unique artistic skill set. The importance of matching the assignment of responsibility and accountability with the required set of skills leads to our next proposition:

**Proposition 4a:** An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when the actor(s) assigned responsibility for constructing the object lack political skill or domain-specific expertise.

The failure of a strategizing episode at this final stage is also potentially rooted in the discursive definition of the concept (arrow ‘4B’ in Figure 1). As the ASO’s case illustrates, some conceptualizations of an issue seem doomed to thwart an organization’s ability to construct a solution. One aspect of the ASO’s concept of artistic strategy was particularly important in contributing to the orchestra’s failure: the themes associated with the artistic strategy concept stemmed form perceptions of the ASO’s weaknesses – lack of artistic identity, commercial uncertainty, no statement of vision. Since the construction of an object involves establishing an element in discourse that connects to and convincingly represents some material entity or practices (Fairclough, 1992; Hardy and Phillips, 1999), this immediately
disconnected the concept of artistic strategy from the orchestra’s material practices. To clarify the importance of this discursive process, consider an alternative approach where organizational members might identify what the orchestra did particularly well and construct their concept of artistic strategy on this basis. Such an approach would fit with models of strategy that emphasize working from an organization’s strengths, such as a core competencies approach (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990) or appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999). This leads to our final proposition:

**Proposition 4b:** An episode of strategizing will be more likely to fail when the concept has been defined in terms of the organization’s weaknesses rather than its strengths.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have developed a theoretical framework for understanding failure in organizational strategizing. This framework is rooted in the experience of members of a symphony orchestra, as they attempted and failed to construct an artistic strategy. It also draws on theory from studies of discourse and the politics of decision making. Our framework suggests that strategizing occurs in episodes with four distinct, though highly interrelated, stages: engaging with and taking positions on the issue; defining the concept; assigning responsibility and accountability; and constructing the object. For each of these stages, we have proposed a set of conditions that are likely to lead to failure. We conclude the paper with a consideration of its limitations and a discussion of the implications of the theory for the study and practice of organizational strategizing.

The study described in this paper of course has its limitations. One is that it examined just one instance of strategizing, occurring in a symphony orchestra. However, because we have also drawn on theory and research that is rooted in a wide variety of contexts, we do not believe that the characteristics and dynamics of the strategizing episode examined here are unique to this organization, or that they are peculiar to orchestras or other arts organizations. Focusing on a transparently observable instance of a process – in this case, strategizing failure – can be very valuable in the development of theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1990). At the same time, however, future research could usefully examine the generalizability of the model presented in other strategizing situations, and in other contexts. A second issue concerns the theoretical lenses we used to examine and explain strategizing failure. The nature of our data and our interest in understanding the social construction of strategy led us to emphasize discourse and politics. Had we chosen alternative frames, our framework would doubtless have taken a different form. For instance, other researchers might have approached the case explicitly in terms of decision making or organizational learning, and pro-
duced interesting insights from these perspectives. Despite these limitations, however, this study has some important implications both for research and practice.

The first implication for research involves the nature of strategizing as an organizational process. The theoretical framework presented here suggests that strategizing in organizations derives from the interplay of both words and action. Studies of strategy development and implementation have typically shown the significance of examining what managers do when they attempt to develop strategy, but have paid less attention to the way in which they talk about and conceptualize the activity (e.g., Burgelman, 1994; Floyd and Lane, 2000). At the same time, a range of studies have highlighted the importance of organizational language, such as stories (Boje, 1991, 1995), metaphors (Palmer and Dunford, 1996), and rhetoric (Watson, 1995). But not all words lead to action: patterns of language in organizations both enable and constrain action (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984; Hardy et al., 1998). In this paper, we argue that it is the relationship among elements of organizational language and sets of political actions that defines organizational strategizing. In the ASO, initial political positions led in large part to the words that defined the concept of artistic strategy, which then provided a basis for action and at the same time contributed significantly to the difficulties faced by members as they worked to construct their own artistic strategy. We suggest, therefore, that in order to study organizational strategizing, researchers need to understand it as a process that is both discursive and political, and consequently employ methodologies that can capture both political and discursive action.

The second research implication of our framework concerns the relationship between strategizing as a process and strategic outcomes, such as organizational performance or innovation. If strategizing is to have a significant impact as an area of organizational research, researchers will need to demonstrate its relevance for those who are more concerned with results than with process. We believe that the framework developed in this paper could make a valuable contribution to studies that aim to link strategy processes and outcomes. For instance, it is well known that strategic outcomes such as innovation and creativity depend significantly on the processes and practices used to achieve them (Dougherty, 1992; Drazin et al., 1999). In organizational strategizing, where creativity is an important goal, we believe that breaking down the process into episodes and examining the relationships among specific stages within episodes could help researchers understand innovation processes more clearly. Understanding the relationship between the discursive practices associated with defining a concept and the politics of assigning responsibility could help clarify the roles of innovation champions (Howell and Higgins, 1990) and what allows them to be successful; for concepts that are defined as overly complex, for example, it may be difficult to find champions. At the same time, some issues that we have highlighted as potentially leading to failure in organizational strategizing, such as conflict, incompatible discourses,
and complex conceptualizations, may be important positive factors in fostering innovation (Jehn, 1995, 1997; Murray, 1989). Thus, our framework and the theoretical relationships we have proposed could provide a useful connection between studies of organizational strategizing and research on organizational innovation.

Finally, this study has implications for managers interested in developing strategy. First, it highlights the need to understand the impact of organizational discourse in strategizing processes. As managers embark on a strategizing episode, they should be aware that how each party talks and writes about what they are trying to do will significantly influence the way in which the rest of the strategizing process unfolds. In the study described in this paper, organizational members sought to develop an artistic strategy that incorporated artistic, commercial and managerial dimensions. While this goal may have been laudable in the abstract, it made it virtually impossible to identify a suitable person who might try to attain it. It also rooted the strategizing episode in three major weaknesses of the organization. A second implication involves the politics of strategizing. Our framework highlights the importance of political resources, especially in the assignment of responsibility and accountability. For instance, strategizing episodes will only reach successful conclusions when responsibility has been assigned to those who possess adequate domain-relevant knowledge and political skill. In the ASO, while the Artistic Director was committed and willing to develop an artistic strategy, he lacked the key personal resources to allow him to do so. In summary, our framework suggests that the practice of organizational strategizing requires managers to have an awareness of their discourse and organizational politics, and especially to appreciate the links between them.

NOTES

*The authors would like to thank members of the ASO for their generosity in participating in this study.

[1] For the purposes of anonymity, the dates of events in this study have been disguised. Their sequence and relative time spans are accurately represented.

REFERENCES


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