

STRATEGY AS A GENERATIVE PRACTICE OF INTERACTION PROCESSES IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a synthesis of the development of the communicational process in strategy based on the approach of strategic practices developed by Parque Tecnológico Itaipu (PTI). This conception understands that the human interaction is evidenced as a significant factor for those practices. For the purposes of this paper, human interaction is noted by means of effective communication. Within these relations are founded the knowledge which enables people to interact with and understand the organization, its practices and structures, as well as its strategic movements. This article, based on the research findings of a case study with a descriptive methodology, shows that people become capable as the communicational strategy fosters the processes of interaction and vice-versa, and that it contributes for the advance of knowledge and organizational innovations. People in organizations create new concepts and approaches from those developed communicational processes. Influenced by proximity, people reconstruct values and conceptions that occur recursively in their new realities. From this reflection a new organization and new practices are reconstructed.

Key words: social practice; communicational practice; interaction.

RESUMEN

ESTRATEGIA COMO PRÁCTICA GENERATIVA DE PROCESOS DE INTERACCIÓN EN ORGANIZACIONES CONTEMPORÁNEAS

En este artículo se resume el desarrollo del proceso de comunicación en la estrategia basada en hacer frente a las prácticas estratégicas de Parque Tecnológico Itaipú (PTI). Esta concepción entiende que la interacción humana es evidente, como un factor importante para estas prácticas. Para efectos de este estudio se pone de relieve la interacción humana a través de una comunicación efectiva. Estas relaciones se acumulan los conocimientos que

permiten a las personas a interactuar y entender la organización, sus prácticas y estructuras que permitan la comprensión de sus movimientos estratégicos. El artículo, de los informes del estudio de caso de investigación con análisis descriptivo muestra que la estrategia de comunicación para promover los procesos de interacción y viceversa, permite a las personas contribuir al avance del conocimiento y la innovación organizativa. Las personas en las organizaciones de los procesos de comunicación desarrollados crear nuevos conceptos y enfoques. Influenciado por la gente se acerca a la reconstrucción de valores y conceptos que aparecen recurrentemente en sus nuevas realidades. A partir de esta reflexión, se vuelve a generar una nueva organización y nuevas prácticas.

Palabras claves: práctica social, práctica comunicativa, interacción.

Introduction

The current context demands pose challenges for organizations that may be considered as drastic movements, reduced temporality and multi-contextualized. In fact, they are provocations that require not only a consistent organizational dynamics but mainly a change in the way of dealing with organizational processes. Large attention must be given to the people, to the development of processes and practices, which in turn means the recognition of an organization within its own internal and external environments. This context evidences to the field of studies on strategy the idea that practices, with a large involvement of people (WHITTINGTON, 2006), become the main fundament of the organizational acting (MAGGI, 2006), and the organization and the acting subject are no longer seen as isolate.

In this context, this article aims at presenting and discussing the perspective of strategic practices as one of the contemporary options for the field development. Its first section, a theoretical background, emphasizes the studies, syntheses and seminal as those by Whittington (2002a,b,c), Jarzabkowski (2005), Abdallah (2005), Haag, Helin e Melin (2006), Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008), Brundin, Melin & Nordqvist (2008), Rese (2009), Canhada (2009), comprehending the organizational practices as a process for constructing the reality by means of social interactions in which micro-activities are essential. The second part presents an empirical study held at Parque Tecnológico Itaipu (PTI), where practical changes represent a socially constructed reality that demanded processes of interaction, knowledge and creativity on the stakeholders. This study also evidences a change of people's behavior and as such it means that a strategy practice, while interaction processes, brings about the reflection and expands the knowledge and innovation capacity of those individuals who naturally foster "communities of practice" (WENGER, 1993). The greatest contribution lies in the communicational practices revealed in the *strategizing*, when the interlocutors produce and share senses in a process marked by the interaction and by the

social-historical context (MAIA e FRANÇA, 2003). This is the understanding to have in relation to communication. Varey (2006, p. 194) conceives communication as acts of interaction and not as objects and artifacts. Interaction cannot be seen as an information process but a process for the “construction and negotiation of meanings (a communication process).”

Strategy as practice and the processes of interaction

The landmark of the concept of strategic practices as a social activity lies on the article by Richard Whittington (1996) in which the focus is turned to the process of constructing a strategy through people. For Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), there are three mandatory dimensions for understanding the strategy approach as practice: praxis (flow of activities socially performed), practices (cognitive, behavioral, discursive motivational and physical practices) and practitioners (actors who shape the practice construction by which they are what they are, how they act and the resources they use). *Strategizing* takes place at the confluence of these three dimensions.

The organizations exist so that people may perform activities that they would not perform alone (HALL, 2004). People, therefore, in processes of interaction start to construct socially an organizational reality. This means a consideration over communication as a constitutive process of that reality, which means moving beyond the conception of communication as a mere process of organization (PUTNAM e NICOTERA, 2009). In terms of constituents, strategy takes communication as one of its structuring elements (REIS et al., 2010, p. 169). Strategy is then seen as something people do, that is, “a social practice and not only a property of the organization” (BULGACOV e MARCHIORI, 2010, p. 150). Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008) suggest that routine practices lead to the formation of strategy as it takes into account the multiple actors in play. Activities may be understood as written texts, planning processes, or messages, in other words, instruments that are held as formal documents in

organizations. Added to this emerging process of strategy development is the involvement of multiple actors from diverse organizational levels as well as from levels external to the organization (JOHNSON, et al., 2007).

As for the organizational change with the involvement of people, emphasis is given to the quotidian, the habitual activities, the relationships, the learning, the exchange of knowledge, the moment of creation, discussion, dialogue, conflicts and the interactions. In Johnson et al. (2007) the relevance of small interactions between people make strategies potentially effective. According to Cheney et al. (2004), realities are actively constructed, dynamic and fluid, non-stable and unitarian. As people get involved they have a natural tendency to a better understanding of their own actions and to enable the growth and exchange of knowledge in the organizations. The strategic process takes place when people put in practice what they had in mind, in other words, the process is not complete if there is no practice, and practice takes place through experiences lived in the organizational quotidian.

Stakeholders influence the strategy making in the way Canhada (2009), based on the conceptions of Berger & Luckman, Geertz & Giddens, suggests to be the paradigm used to understand the strategy perspective as a social practice that is predominately interpretative and social constructivist. Thus, the organizational social reality and the strategy itself are two dependent instances in constant relationship that are constructed in a constant movement between the material world and the objectivity of the human conscience (BULGACOV e MARCHIORI, 2010). For Bulgacov & Marchiori (2010), the human interpretation made by the individuals occurs in a continuous movement as the subjective perception of the reality and the objective interpretation take place. Upon such movement, people lead themselves into social relationships in which they take part by the construction of meanings in common. These common meanings, intermediated by language and communication, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and practices, and form what we conceive as human culture (GEERTZ, 1989). Therefore, Canhada (2009) understands that models of strategy can be seen as a symbolic system that conditions social practices mediated by language and

human interpretation. The author also suggests that this is the vital key to understand why strategy, as a practice, validates the dominant discourses, models and strategic tools, as well as the interpretation the actors give of themselves and of their use in practice. Part of this context are the new interpretations that arise from the interaction processes among the interlocutors and that are re-arranged in the organizational context as they create meanings.

Within this perspective, the organizations and their strategies are socially constructed, legitimated and institutionalized upon social practices and interactions, and communication is an inherent reality of the process for strategy construction while a practice in contemporary organizations.

This theoretical framework is also supported by Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008) as they consider strategy an activity that is realized through communicative interaction by people. These conceptions highlight the perception of strategy not as something an organization has but something people make, constitute and, necessarily, realize (JARZABKOWSKI; BALOGUN; SEIDL, 2007). According to Haag, Helin & Melin (2006), practice is not just an engagement to certain activities but is also comprehends the talking and thinking about these activities. At the moment a practice takes place, a normative discourse about this practice is formed, and this discourse, seen as a communicational activity is a constituent part of such a practice (CRAIG, 2006 apud REIS et al., 2010, p. 182).

This theoretical reflection enables the observation of how these relations occur and how people become capable by the organizational practices as they are turned into "practice as the generative source of knowledge" (GHERARDI, 2009, p. 115). Knowledge is "an activity (a 'knowing'), and an activity that itself constitutes the practice ('knowing-in-practice')" (GHERARDI, 2009, p. 121). Therefore, a practice is not an asset of a community; it is created in the quotidian, in the doing, in the processes of interaction between those people who need to learn how to live in communities of practice. For sociologist Wenger (1993), communities of practice are informal groups of people who get

together because of common interests and shared repertoire, being essentially formed and managed by themselves and having as their end goal the collective learning and the development of knowledge. The social structure of an organization may consist of countless communities that “emerge spontaneously in response to particular interests, needs or problems” (HATCH, 2008, p. 129). The analysis lies on how shared understandings of the organizational reality are constructed and held by recurrent interactions of people in those organizations; an issue that the empirical study evidences as an effective practice and condition.

The method

This is a research work on a single case descriptive study which, as in Gil (2002), has the objective to present the characteristics of a given phenomenon by the observation, recording, co-relation and description of facts from a reality with no manipulation of data (TRIVIÑOS, 1987). For Yin (2003, p. 27), a case study “is the strategy of choice for the examination of contemporary events as far as relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated.” This present investigation comprehended fifty in depth interviews made with all the managers of the institution – including directors, managers and areas assistants, as well as managers of programs and projects of PTI and members of Communication Team. Data were also collected by direct observation and from institutional documents and minutes of meetings. All data were cross-checked for veracity.

PTI and the Construction Process of Communication Strategy

Based on the theoretical approach, the empirical data reveal that communication management, as in the case of PTI, has been following contemporary trends of the field and stimulating processes for interaction of the strategic practices, as shown in the report and analysis presented here.

Created in 2003 by Itaipu Binacional, the Parque Tecnológico Itaipu (PTI) has the mission to understand and transform the reality of the Iguassu Tri-national Region: Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, articulating and fostering actions oriented to the economic, scientific and technological development with a focus on solutions concerned with water, energy and tourism.

Located in the formers quarters of workers who built the Itaipu Plant, PTI is an innovate setting for the work on fields of education, science, technology and entrepreneurship. Being inside the largest hydroelectric plant of the world in terms of power generation, Itaipu also counts on the accumulation of a know-how acquired over two decades of plant operations.

PTI is oriented to the generation and distribution of knowledge at all levels in order to promote scientific and technological development and to generate employment opportunities and revenue. The actions are implemented by means of four programs: PTI Education, PTI Science & Technology, PTI Research & Development, and PTI Entrepreneurship. From this concept the area of communication perceived the need to expand the portfolio of activities and did not restrict it to the organization of events and press assistance. The managers of communication decided on the construction of a strategic plan of communication that could widen their field of action. The work was initially focused on global and detailed knowledge about PTI, its strategic plan and its projects structure.

The processes and the practices inherent to the communication proposal were based on the strengthening and development of four structuring programs of PTI such as: science and technology; entrepreneurship; research and development; and education. The Touristic Complex of Itaipu Binacional was also considered. The proposal took into account a comprehensive discussion with the communication team about the tracks to be taken toward the empowering of the team (eight people) at different hierarchical levels.

The work favored an attitude of proximity with the team and motivation to conversation, awareness of points of views, the thinking process and exchange of ideas so as to have the group improve in terms of knowledge of their own field and about PTI as a whole. At the same time, interviews revealed that the managers' understanding of communication was similar to what the team thought of it, that is, something more than just organizing events. They also understood that such expectation demanded more than just a back-up work as it is required for the development of different projects and programs. Among other opinions, we had: a guiding on how to deal with stakeholders; empowerment of PTI's identity and image; PTI's institutionalization at regional, state and national levels; and a more strategic communication action.

Next, the proposal came from the supposition of founding the communicational behavior of PTI. For that purpose, its mission, vision and objectives were thoroughly designed and formalized. PTI's communication mission: To articulate and support communication in relationship networks with the public, stimulating the knowledge about and development of PTI. The vision: To be a sustainable entity acknowledged by the public through the communicational dynamic of PTI's actors. The following objectives were thought of: To facilitate the communicational process among structuring programs, their projects and strategic partners, expanding the understanding of the Park dwellers; to articulate and support the internal and institutional communication processes and practices along with the public of PTI; to develop relationships that may widen the understanding of PTI as a model of Technological Park; to expand the relationships between ITAIPU and PTI all over the areas of work within the Park; and to strengthen the organizational identity, contributing for the solidification of PTI's image and reputation.

To these perspectives is added the need of the communication structure to follow the same path of PTI's own structure, making use of programs such as: information and publicity; relationship, proximity; and listening. The proposed structure gave flexibility to the communication team in terms of creativity and

attitude, providing for more possibilities of action. This is an innovative structure within organizational studies of communication.

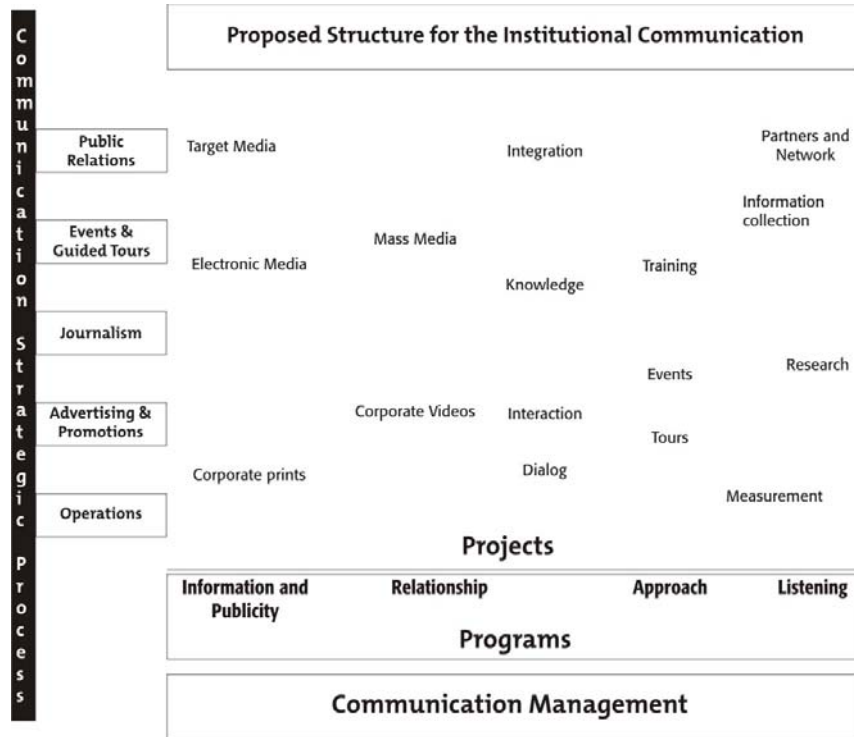


Figure 1 Proposed Structure for the Institutional Communication

Strategic guiding focused on three pillars: internal communication, external communication, and stimulus to relationship networks, as it would be fundamental for PTI to expand along with the stakeholders.

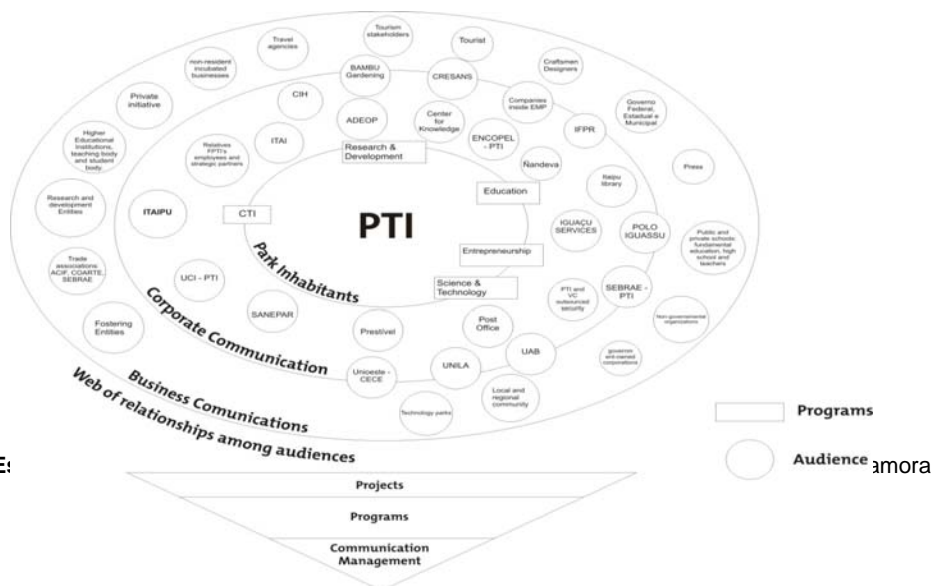


Figure 2 Stakeholders mapping

From that on, the studies allowed the creation of strategies involving the strategic thinking as practiced by the team. The strategies and scope related to the stakeholders were defined.

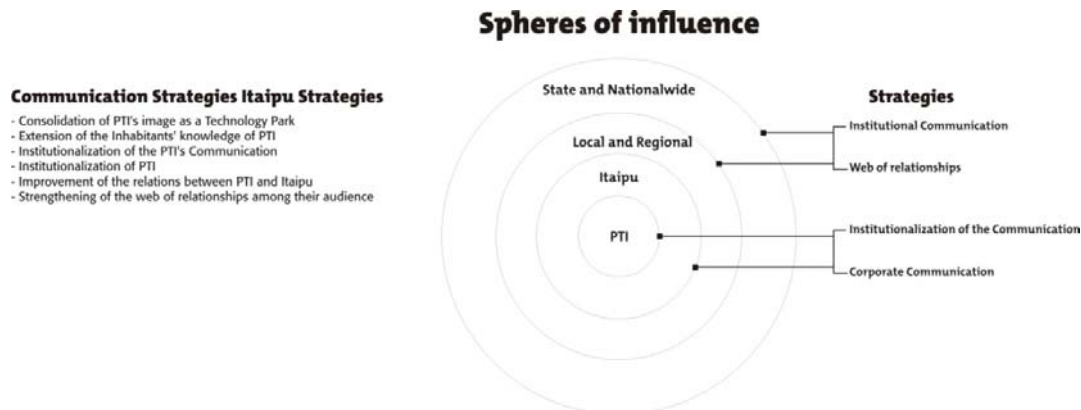


Figure 3 Spheres of influence

The whole proposal was central to rethinking communication as a strategic component for organizational development. For the final phase of the elaboration of the Strategic Planning of Communication, the team worked on the creation of indicators of PTI's attitude toward the objectives being measured at three levels of achievements.

Discussion of the Empirical Study

The data concerning the change movements show that the stakeholders and their practices have a significant influence over communicational processes as they further their own understanding of strategy making in the institution. The constructivist perspective provokes the subjective construction of interpretations

and understandings and that is what happens naturally in PTI. Both instances of a social reality that is constructed by its actors were verified upon a constant and dependent relation between the objectivity of an organizational strategic reality and the subjectivity of interpretation and human values. The common meanings constructed by the team were intermediated by concepts collectively architected by means of language and communication. The in-depth interviews evidence a share of senses naturally attributed by the individuals to the interpreted reality. In PTI's organizational environment, one can see values and meanings collectively operated both in the routine activities and in the constitution of activities for the transmission of the institutional purposes and practices. Longitudinal studies could measure and compare the current stage of strategic practice of communication at PTI. The activities that were developed collectively validated the discourses in the area as a whole as well as the flexibility in the use of models and tools for communication. The projects may demand countless possibilities of interpretations and consequently different practices, which may require different tools.

It is therefore confirmed that the activities that were socially constructed were legitimated and institutionalized upon social practices and interaction. At the same time, one may wonder to what extent this thinking can be found in the other areas of PTI. Communication is revealed in strategizing as interaction processes took place upon diverse dialogues between interlocutors in search of an identity for communication acting. As communication proves to be a possibility for the negotiation of meanings, it becomes mandatory in the process of strategy construction. The involvement of people reveals that it is essential to have a look at the micro-activities that are socially reconstructed due to interferences and are true evidences of communities of practice at PTI. Strategy is a social practice that makes multiples actors capable in their activities.

Concluding Remarks

From the data collected, it is concluded that whenever communicational practices are implemented in legitimate collective processes they can influence the whole strategic process of the organization. The activities or practices are not limited to some of the traditional activities of the organization, that is, they comprehend not only the conception of organizing but also the conception of constituting the organization based on the understanding and re-conceptualization of all its practices. As one talks and thinks about organizing conditions where there is a practice, a concept and a discourse turn into realities, and the interaction among individuals in processes of interlocution becomes essential. From these processes, the people in organizations form new conceptions based on different values and interpretations that occur in this diverse reality. Upon such reflection, a new organization and new practices are reconstructed. This study allows the conclusion that we must encourage more intense communicational practices by means of processes of interaction and we may also reconfirm the relevance of the small interactions among people which empower the great strategic effects (JOHNSON et al., 2007).

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