

**Achieving Strategic Consensus through Individuals' Social Practice: The Perspective of  
Kuwaiti Managers**

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## **Abstract**

It has been established that successful communication and implementation of organisational strategies is highly relevant to the understanding and commitment of internal stakeholders to this strategy. Termed strategic consensus, research in this area has quantitatively suggested that the concept is material in nature and can be simply controlled and aligned with other constructs including strategy implementation processes (Aranda and Arellano, 2010; Edh Mirzaei et al., 2016). However, there is limited research available in the literature on the social practice roles of both top and middle managers in achieving strategic consensus and their commitment to such understanding in terms of driving strategy. In this study, we explore the role of top and middle managers in forming a shared understanding of strategy during the communication and the implementation processes from a social practice perspective. Particularly, the focus of this investigation is to understand how a shared understanding is socially practiced and achieved between top and middle managers, and the consequent implications this might have for strategy communication and execution. A qualitative approach with a single case study was applied with a total of 27 interviews conducted. We argue that whilst strategic consensus as a factor affecting various business areas, the overall effect is not wholly dependent on the factor in and of itself; rather, the social interaction of both top and middle managers in reaching a shared understanding and their commitment to such an understanding plays a critical role in the extent to which strategies may be successfully realised.

**Keywords:** Strategic consensus, Strategy process, Strategy implementation, Social practice, Top managers, Middle managers

**Word count:** 6, 998 (excluding tables, figures, and references)

## **Introduction**

Within a dynamic environment, a world of uncertainty, and unpredictable changes surrounding organisations, managers are required to be flexible and open minded when adapting to such changes (Hitt et al., 1998). These changes require managers at different organisational levels to be willing to accept opposing opinions and be able to form a shared understanding among themselves in order to achieve the required objectives. In practice, shared understanding does not occur incidentally, but is rather an incremental process of a social practice performed by individuals on a routine basis. Therefore, providing a definite solution to align organisational strategy with managers' commitment to such a shared understanding sounds somewhat unrealistic. Promoting shared understanding, commitment, values, and perspectives among individuals forms the basis of the 'consensus' concept (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Rapert et al., 2002; Kellermanns et al., 2005).

From an organisational perspective, implementing strategy seems to be highly dependent on the understanding of the various managerial levels regarding such strategy and how committed they are towards such an understanding (Boyer and McDermott, 1999; Kellermanns et al., 2005). In many studies on strategic consensus, this understanding was treated as a tangible and an objective factor that could easily be promoted, tracked, and controlled. The foundation of these studies and others were built around this argument and were further extended to measure the effect of strategic consensus on other business areas and concepts. For instance, the effect of strategic consensus on the manufacturing strategy process (Edh Mirzaei et al., 2016), on marketing departments (Rapert et al., 2002), on link structure (Aranda and Arellano, 2010), on organisational performance (Kellermanns et al., 2011), and on operational strategy (Boyer and McDermott, 1999) have all been considered in the literature.

These empirical research efforts have produced mixed findings and therefore their results seem somewhat inconsistent and inconclusive. As a neutral and a widely researched example, some researchers have produced results on the effect of strategic consensus on organisational performance that are entirely consistent with each other (Pagell and Krause, 2002; Rapert et al., 2002), while other researchers have found entirely inconsistent results (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990; Ramos-Garza, 2009). These studies were quantitatively conducted using bivariate association. Equally, other researchers have measured the relationship between the two constructs using multivariate association and indeed found mixed results (Knight et al., 1999; Michie et al., 2006). The extensive adoption of quantitative methods in this area has led to a major gap in examining the strategic consensus from a qualitative perspective. Furthermore, studies in the area of strategic consensus have also extensively examined the concept of the

characteristics of one homogenous group (West and Schwenk, 1996; Camelo et al., 2010; Tarakci et al., 2014) and for individual cases between different job roles (Edh Mirzaei et al., 2016). However, the effect of this examination does not clearly reflect how it helps form both the strategy communication and the strategy implementation processes.

Based on this brief background, in this paper we argue that whilst the extant literature treats strategic consensus as a material factor that can be controlled, there is a paucity of understanding as to how strategic consensus is actually practiced and agreed between the two managerial levels in the first place. Since we believe that individuals' interactions within organisations reflect their social practice with each other, our purpose is to empirically examine the level of strategic consensus practiced between top and middle management teams from a social practice perspective. Furthermore, it is of the utmost priority to understand how such practice regulates the communication and the implementation of organisational strategy. Thus, in order to facilitate this purpose, we address two main questions: 'How is strategic consensus socially practiced between top and middle managers?' and 'How does strategic consensus enable the communication and the implementation of organisational strategies?'

## **Background and Theory**

### *Understanding Strategic Consensus*

Strategic consensus is a core element in the organisational strategy process, enabling organisational members to facilitate daily decisions (Boyer and McDermott, 1999). Research into strategic consensus is not a new area, and over the last decades a growing body of literature addressing this concept has built up (Ramos-Garza, 2009; González-Benito et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2013). In general, the literature suggests that a higher level of strategic consensus should lead to better decision-making, cooperation, and consequently organisational performance (Kellermanns et al., 2011). Ensuring strategic consensus among organisational members is further desirable during the strategy implementation phase (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Although there is no unified definition of the concept, there is a general agreement of its importance in aligning individuals' understanding of organisational strategies with their actual execution (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989; Nobel, 1999; Kellermanns et al., 2005).

As a workable definition, strategic consensus can be considered a shared understanding of strategic priorities within organisations between internal stakeholders including managers at the top, middle and/or lower operating levels (Kellermanns et al., 2005). It can be further

defined through key qualities including, for instance, shared understanding, agreement, commitment, and shared perspectives (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Rapert et al., 2002). However, even with this general agreement of the definition of strategic consensus, the literature lacks agreement as to how consensus emerges, how it can be examined, and further how it can be addressed in strategy practice (Rapert et al., 2002). This has resulted in a number of research efforts incorporating the concept in various areas, and from various perspectives. These include, for instance, the level of consensus itself (Dess, 1987), consensus as an outcome (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989), consensus as a process (Knight et al., 1999), consensus as the outcome of a decision-making process (Kellermanns et al., 2011), and the level of consensus on manufacturing strategy process (Edh Mirzaei et al., 2016). These intensive efforts could provide an explanation for the mixed results obtained from the research in the area and the ambiguity of its outcomes across business disciplines. It further contributes to the lack of shared understanding of how strategic consensus is socially practiced so as to have an impact on these disciplines.

One of the arguments that provides an explanation for such mixed results is a lack of identifying appropriate methods for distinguishing the multiple dimensions strategic consensus can take at different organisational levels (Tarakci et al., 2014). Most recent research has focussed on the concept within a homogenous group of internal stakeholders, which is essentially focussing on the degree of within-group consensus (Markoczy, 2001; Aranda and Arellano, 2010; Kellermanns et al., 2011). However, we suggest that such focus actually represents an obstacle to a comprehensive analysis of how consensus can occur between two heterogeneous groups of internal stakeholders (for instance, top and middle managers). Since the strategy process is a teamwork process that involves the cooperation of organisational members from different organisational levels, it becomes necessary to empirically investigate how strategic consensus is socially practiced between top and middle managers with different positional powers.

### ***Dynamics of the Strategy Processes***

Studies in the strategic management field focus on either the strategy formulation or strategy implementation stages. Some have argued that research into strategy formulation has received greater attention than the implementation stage (Bruton et al., 2004; Elbanna, 2008); other researchers have focussed more on the strategy implementation stage than the formulation (Sorooshian et al., 2010; Hosseini et al., 2016; Katsuhiko, 2017). However, the link between

strategy formulation and implementation processes is not clear and has been sufficiently demonstrated (Aldehayyat and Anchor, 2008; Leonardi, 2015). In a similar vein, Sorooshian et al. (2010) and Sorooshian and Dodangeh (2013) concluded that the recent focus on strategy implementation is due to the lack of understanding of the process between the formulation and the implementation stages. This in turn has created some considerable tension among researchers in the field.

The difficulty in communicating the strategy between the strategy processes is linked to how individuals interact within their own context. The available literature on strategy processes has conducted research at the organizational level with no clear indication of how the lower levels could communicate and contribute to the strategy process. For instance, Noble (1999) found that most of the views were related to the top level of management and called for more studies to explain the individual and managerial levels' commitments towards strategy communication and implementation. Equally, Okumus (2003) suggested that more qualitative and quantitative research was required at the top, middle, and lower levels of employees. This was found to be in line with Aldehayyat and Anchor (2008), who recommended that new research was needed to clarify the role of line as well as administrative managers to gain a clear understanding of how strategy is performed inside an organization. By such investigation, a rich understanding would be gained regarding the strategy process and how strategies are communicated between individuals and can yet be implemented.

### ***The Role of Social Practice in the Strategy Process***

Social Practice theory goes far beyond other theories (i.e., resource-based theory and organizational theory) in terms of offering an alternative approach that explains how humans interact given a specific set of environments (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). In social practice, the focus is more on the dynamic activities of managers with respect to their strategy practices in their organisations (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). The theory relies on three fundamental elements, namely social interaction, mutual constitution of relations, and duality of relations (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). Giddens (1984) viewed social interaction as a dynamic construct, that is, it relates to the production and reproduction of social norms that affect individuals' actions. Equally, Bourdieu (1990) viewed social interaction as the generative principles that reactivate the sense objectified in institutions (habitus) among individuals. As for the mutual constitution of relations element, Giddens emphasized the relationship between agency and a certain set of structures, and even Bourdieu acknowledged

that assumptions of individual practice, habitus, and field all interact with one another to create a set of shared practices. With respect to the duality of relations, Giddens emphasizes the mutual duality of agency and structure, while Bourdieu emphasizes the inseparability of the subjective and objective dimensions.

Just like many other applications of Social Practice theory, strategic management studies have received considerable attention (Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2008; Golsorkhi et al., 2010). However, approaches to the application of Social Practice in the strategy field are quite disparate (Nicolini, 2012). For instance, Whittington (2006), and equally Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), have provided a descriptive approach that focusses on the analysis of the practitioners, their practices and interactions with each other, and the praxis of the context in which they act. On the other hand, other analytical approaches have been taken to provide an explanation for the behaviour and motivation of individuals on the personal, as well as the collective, levels (Gomez, 2010). As argued by Wooldridge and Floyd (1990), the involvement of various groups of individuals in the strategy process creates an opportunity for ‘shared strategic understanding and commitment’. Therefore, there is a need to understand the theory from a cognitive perspective, that is, the complicated relationships of individuals.

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample and Data Collection***

Since this study is exploratory in nature, focussing on understanding how strategic consensus is manifested between top and middle managers by revealing their social practice, a qualitative approach was adopted. With a single case study on one public organisation in Kuwait, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide answers for the research questions (Roulston, 2010). The sample was drawn from participants who currently hold managerial positions in both top and middle management teams, in which there were 10 top managers and 17 middle managers. Therefore, we adopted both purposive and snowballing techniques as this study targets a specific group of internal stakeholders who are believed to have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience to enrich the research findings (Noy, 2008). The interview protocol was designed to ensure effective coverage of the social phenomenon under investigation, including, for instance, communication framework, managerial interactions, objectives agreement, strategy execution loop, and strategic priorities agreement. Moreover, questions were directed at both top and middle managers to ensure satisfactory representation of responses in relation to strategic consensus practices.

The fieldwork was carried out in Kuwait over a period of four months. The organisation chosen to represent the public sector is a ministry that is entitled to provide public services. The rationale of this choice was built on two facts. Firstly, it accommodates a large number of individuals from both top and middle management and from different geographical backgrounds. Secondly, it interacts with other ministries and public organisations in executing a number of strategic objectives and projects. These two reasons positioned the selected ministry to suit the research objectives and concerns under investigation. Prior the main interview process, five pilot interviews were conducted and, as a result, three questions were revised to ensure the clarity of the questions and terms used in the interview protocol (Saunders et al., 2016). Upon the completion of the pilot phase, an additional 22 interviews were conducted providing a total of 27 interviews. As for the validity, respondent validation was adopted to validate the interview scripts. Furthermore, ethical clearance was granted prior the interviews to comply with the research ethical guidelines, and therefore interviewees were assured of anonymity.

### ***Data Analysis and Coding***

Upon finalising the scheduled interviews, collected data were analysed manually. The analysis and coding process started by assigning interview questions with open codes, which were then broken down into sub-codes to create a sense of meaning. As for the open coding, we coded all instances in which both top and middle managers identified their own interactions as enablers or as obstacles to strategy sharing and consensus. This was followed by categorising the interactions' dispositions into two main stages, namely strategy communication and strategy implementation for both top and middle managers. Phrases and key words identified for top managers were coded to include, for instance, statements about communication mechanism, strategy control, social norms and values, ownership, openness, and cooperation. Equally, statements and key words for middle managers were coded to include for instance statements about agreement, confliction, understanding, sociability, priorities, and reciprocity. Table 1 shows the code commonalities across the interviewees.

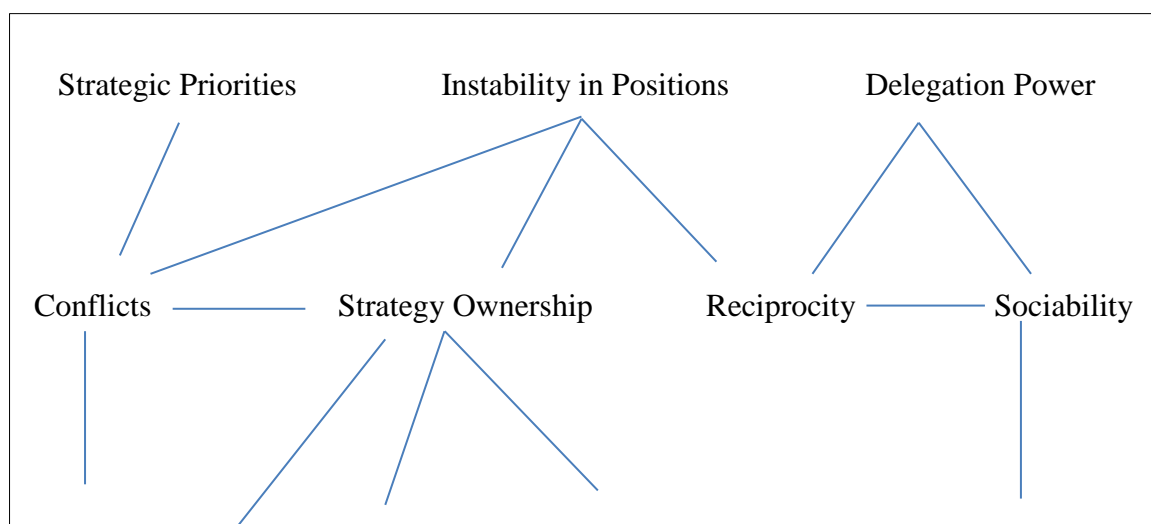
Table 1: Code Commonalities across the Interviews

Serial	Code	Respondents	Similar Words	Interviews
1	Strategic consensus	20	No agreement, disconnected, different strategies, deny promises,	1-8, 10, 12-14, 16-20, 24-26



			lack of strategic joining, strategy changes	
2	Instability in positions	18	Frequent changes, different faces, sudden movement, high rotation, supervising various departments	1-4, 6-10, 13-18, 20, 22, 24
3	Delegation power	17	Centralization, one-man show, individual power, work depends on individual managers, lack of teamwork, lack of task distribution	2-7, 9-11, 14, 16, 18, 20-22, 24, 27

The data were therefore analysed following the six stages of thematic analysis approach introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach is widely adopted in qualitative research in comparison to other known approaches, thematic analysis can be easily applied within the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical frameworks underpinning qualitative research (Lyons and Coyle, 2016). Furthermore, thematic analysis also provides researchers with the opportunity to compare theory and practice (Hudson et al., 2001). Within the process of analyses, a large number of codes was recognised and it was vital to report all possible codes to ensure consistency and rigorous analysis. Thus, after compiling and coding the transcripts from the 27 interviews, which accounted for one hundred and sixty-two pages, more than 50 sub-themes have been identified. Consequently, the data reduction process was started in which commonalities were linked together as well as irrelevant themes being excluded. It is worth noting that excluded themes were not wasted, and can be further utilised in future research in the field. Considering the data reduction process, only two main themes were identified. Figure 1 represents a sample map of the associated data coding.



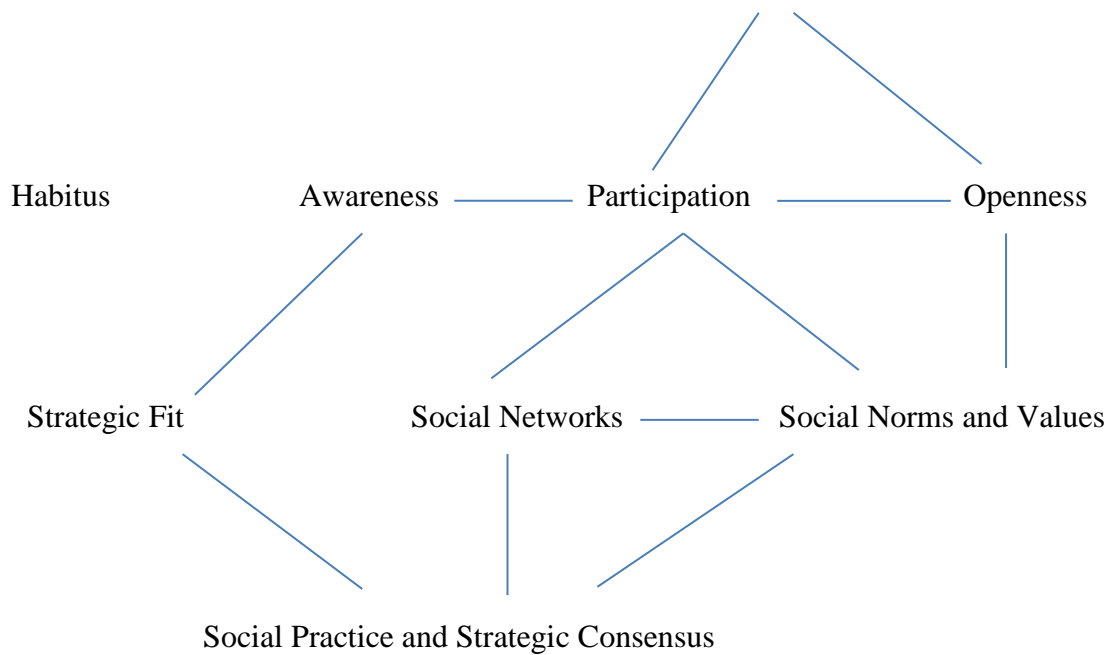


Figure 1: Sample Map of the Data Coding

### Empirical Data and Findings

The findings show that the positional role of both top and middle managers does indeed influence the way in which they communicate and execute strategies. This role regulates the social interactions of both managerial groups in forming strategic consensus and shared understanding regarding the intended strategy. However, even with this regulation, it was found that a shared consensus among internal stakeholders over the strategy content is insufficient for effective strategy communication and execution to occur. This finding was shared across representative quotes from 22 interviewees out of the 27. After aggregating the relative codes, three sub-codes emerged from the interviews' responses, namely strategic priorities, frequent change of officials, and delegation power. Table 2 shows the interviewees' awareness and participation in the various strategy stages.

Table 2: Interviewees' Awareness and Participation in Strategy Stages

Managerial Level / Dimension	Awareness of the Intended Strategy	Participation in the Strategy Formulation Process	Participation in the Strategy Implementation Process	Participation in the Strategy communication Process

Top Management Team	<i>Yes (10)</i> <i>No (0)</i>	<i>Yes (5)</i> <i>No (5)</i>	<i>Yes (0)</i> <i>No (10)</i>	<i>Yes (2)</i> <i>No (8)</i>
Middle Management Team	<i>Yes (4)</i> <i>No (3)</i>	<i>Yes (3)</i> <i>No (14)</i>	<i>Yes (5)</i> <i>No (12)</i>	<i>Yes (9)</i> <i>No (8)</i>

Drawing from Table 2, below are some of the direct quotes that show the direct influence of the positional role of both top and middle managers in regulating strategic consensus among themselves.

*“I think that convincing the staff to understand any strategy must start from the top positions including the minister, his undersecretary, and the assistant agents... issues always arise in understanding or not... and unifying or not... the outlines of the required strategy... Out of 10 strategic objectives, some managers might see the first three projects as priority, however, others might have different opinions!”.* (I-10-MM)

The above excerpt demonstrates that the top management team have considerable responsibility in standardizing the strategy requirements across organizational members. Agreement over strategy is viewed as an integral part of the strategy communication and implementation processes. The commitment to the strategy seems to be subjective in nature rather than a systematic process in the sense that each group of both top and middle managers may prioritise the objectives according to their own [subjective] perceptions. Changing the priorities of a strategy content that has already been implemented may result in rendering the targeted objectives unachievable. on an ongoing basis. Consequently, this practice results in continuous confusion amongst employees with regards to implementing the required tasks.

According to 20 interviewees, the lack of agreement as to unified strategic objectives between top and middle management from one side, and within the same level of managers from other seems to be a result of improper planning by decision-makers at both managerial levels. This view was stated by one of the heads of department, where she claimed:

*“Challenges are many between the start and the end of the strategy. One of the most important challenges is the lack of proper and valid planning. I mean taking a sudden decision to accomplish a certain objective requires extensive effort and great*

*preparation for the fieldwork... it's a bit chaotic... we always feel that our strategy is senseless and disconnected at some point". (I-3-MM)*

This interviewee described lack of planning as one of the crucial challenges facing the strategy process. Clear communication and a stable strategy will have positive consequences on the understanding of the roles and the responsibilities of the staff and the requirements of top management. Changing the strategic objectives at any time will result in unnecessary distractions amongst employees and task execution might be difficult within such a disorganized environment. The interviewee used terminology such as 'senseless', 'chaotic', and 'disconnected', which clearly imply that there is inconsistency in the organizational strategy between the two groups of managers.

When (I-24-TM) was asked about the reasons for the inconsistency in communicating strategy, a top manager shared his experience by saying:

*"We can't stick to one required strategy for a logical certain period of time and we simply ask our staff to adhere to it as we are not alone... strategizing needs experts in the field and they do nothing other than formulating strategies and ensuring their smooth operation... this is not all we only do as we found ourselves solving operational issues which take time and effort, also if strategy is to be consistent, then outside collaboration needs to be consistent". (I-24-TM)*

Manager (I-24-TM) clearly argued that the process of unifying what is required is a challenging task facing the decision makers. He further noted that specialists in the field may not be available to the organization. He also emphasized that it is important to maintain a strategic consensus on the content as well as among those whom the strategy will be shared. This give the impression that the nature of top managers' jobs is not limited to formulating strategies, but can be further extended to affecting day-to-day operational activities. Top manager (I-24-TM) supports the view of assuring that the strategic consensus does not rely purely on top management and the organization's internal conditions, but also depends on the assurance of the external environmental changes. Even though strategic consensus is ensured among the top managers, this might not be the case at the operational level.

Additionally, 18 interviewees revealed that frequent change in managers' positions had a negative effect on how the strategy was communicated to other managers. The instability of appointing managers left staff members unaware of their required roles and responsibilities,

which in turn made the organizational strategic objectives difficult to achieve. This was further illustrated by one of the middle managers (I-15-MM):

*“No one has the right to criticize us or any employee if we don’t receive clear guidelines and from a specific person... we do come here for five days a week, we know where our offices are, we know our working time, but we are not sure of what we should exactly do as we are not sure who will be our new manager as each one is different. I do not mean here my direct manager in particular, but I mean the one who give us guidelines... they just keep moving and moving around and we are lost in this loop”.*  
(I-15-MM)

The excerpt confirms the assertions that frequent changes in managers’ positions is linked to staff distraction when it comes to understanding the strategy, and yet still being expected to perform their required tasks. The quote seems to be associated with the process of strategy formulation, strategy communication and the way the strategy objectives are assessed. Instability in such positions results in a continuous divergence in the management process. Further, there was a link between managerial instability and loss of knowledge amongst staff. Every manager may have a different view, rule and agenda. In this case, the staff play a much less critical role when they are exposed to impulsive changes by their supervisors. It was also noted that changes in position were not limited to the operational level with direct managers, but could also occur for top managers. In the same vein, one of the unit heads (I-9-MM) shared his experiences by saying:

*“I understand that working hard and putting efforts are expected from everyone and especially from us as managers, but why should we go extra mile as all of our efforts will be wasted in a second and by one decision, we could be asked to supervise another department or be delegated to another role... I would rather give minimal effort to avoid disappointment”.* (I-9-MM)

This situation could result in managers becoming ‘disloyal’ to their organizations due to feelings of being under threat of being moved at any time. It was made implicit that prior effort will not be considered by the new manager as they would introduce different guidelines. Although the interviewee acknowledged some of the key qualities required to be appointed to a managerial position, only minimal requirements are sufficient to manage the department. Having said that, an unsecured position may discourage the idea of innovation, as was clear when the interviewee questioned the point of going the extra mile for the organization.

Interviewee (I-6-MM) posited that reasons behind the instability could be due to the over-criticism of the ministry by the media and the influence of the National Assembly; the interviewee clearly argued that organizations are not separate as entities from the community. The external environment constitutes a considerable effect on the changes which occur within the organizational context. Moreover, it can be understood that managers may pay considerable attention to public opinion. In such scenarios, managers may work in favour of external powers rather than focussing on the interests of the organization itself, as represented by its objectives and staff responsibilities and welfare. Instability in managers' positions may lead to a negative effect on the performance of the organization in the long run in terms of required objectives and the staff's perception of the directed strategies. This is exemplified in the comments of (I-6-MM):

*“We, as a ministry, do not work separately from the external environment. Managers are careful to what the national TV channel announces; also, to our member of parliament's perception... movements in high sensitive level positions are obvious here... what is going outside raises alert to changes inside the ministry which I think is not healthy for the stability of objectives and the management of manpower over years”.*

(I-6-MM)

It was also interesting to note that from 17 managers, the term delegation was limited and undermined in the sense that the strategy was not being translated smoothly to the related organizational members if any of the associated managers were absent. Delegating tasks was also found to be a key element in the strategy process. Some reasons such as the centralization approach and the way of management have been significantly linked to the interviewees' answers. For instance, (I-18-TM) emphasized the importance of delegation for a flexible strategy transition; this is reflected in the following excerpt from by one of the managers at the top level of management:

*“I think many staff may not be aware of what they do in case their line manager is absent for any reason. You know how it is in the public sector, the official may take the centralized pattern in decision-making or in managing his own department or unit, he may not delegate anyone in his absence as they feel they just don't want to, staff will be unaware of what is going around, and projects will be halted for so long... we try to change this behaviour, but as I said a manager in a public sector is a decision maker”.*

(I-18-TM)

From the above quote, it was made implicit that delegation is not being implemented effectively and this leaves the staff unaware of what tasks need to be completed. The interviewee took the view of encouraging the use of delegation to ensure the continuity of the work. Officials need to be flexible in the sense of relinquishing some of their authority in order to benefit the organization. The halting of projects was linked to the absence of a person with the authority to sign the appropriate official documentation and permissions. The absence of the responsible manager could be understood in the sense that the decision is the responsibility of only one person, as a centralized managerial approach is practiced. It can be understood that a senior manager in the public sector is a very powerful person within their organization. Although managers seem to resist the idea of delegation, efforts have been directed towards delegation among decision makers. Delegating to others seems to be one of the required skills that slip between the boundaries of content and practice. The interviewee's answer also clearly shows the absence of clear instructions to be followed in a manager's absence or, indeed, the misuse of such guidelines. In the same vein, (I-5-TM) shared his experiences:

*“Let me give you a real example on our daily work; we work currently in a pure technical department, we feel that our direct manager tends to tight our responsibilities and we find ourselves useless sometimes, as we cannot do anything without referring back to him and sometimes he does not show up when needed... can you imagine that all the department stops just because person x or y isn't present? Do they have the right to do so in this governmental institution?” (I-5-TM)*

The interviewee was critical to the term delegation as he clearly referred to direct supervision at the hierarchal level. He further mentioned how complicated the delegation could be in facilitating staff tasks and in driving projects forward or hindering them. Delegation seems to also be a way of encouraging staff and giving a sensible feel of responsibility. This quote is similar to the first excerpt as both have agreed that when a manager is absent, there will be no proper way of transiting the strategy across the employment levels. Further, delegation is seen in this context as a principal source of information and way of making the strategy workable. This may also reflect the fact that subordinates may not be involved in a given decision-making process. It seems that in this context, delegation is not valued by senior managers. Furthermore, the refusal to delegate to others gives the impression of being in control and provides the managers with a feel of personal satisfaction as it shows how important they are to the process of transiting the strategies.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This section discusses the findings of the research in line with the guiding theory. Despite the mixed and conflicting results of the strategic consensus literature, our results support the importance of understanding how a shared understanding is socially practiced between managers in the first place. It is based on this understanding and assessment of social practice at various managerial levels, the future association between strategic consensus and other business disciplines that can be highly reliable in theory and practice alike. The findings of this research suggest that the role of both top and middle managers in strategy communication and implementation appear to be highly complex within the context of strategy practices. The focal point is not the complexity itself, but the nature of this complexity in enabling both managerial levels to form a consensus with regards to the organizational strategy. The social role of managers in communicating strategies further resonates with the findings of Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) who suggested that stakeholders with different roles within organizations can make divergent choices as a result of various processes that can occur. This further suggests that a shared consensus can be seen to be one of the fundamental bases in strategy practices at different stages. The lack of strategic consensus among top and middle managers can be understood as arising from several reasons, which are further explained below.

### *Priority of Strategy Objectives*

The agreement over shared strategy between and within the two managerial levels was non-existent. Both managerial levels have conflicting views over the priority of the strategy objectives. This supports the assumption of Powell et al. (2011) who emphasized the importance of aligning both individual- and group-level cognition to allow comparison among different groups, and to distinguish the overall fit in an organization. The agreement over shared strategy is not only an integral part of strategy implementation, as suggested by Wooldridge and Floyd (1989), Nobel (1999) and Kellermanns et al (2005), it is also vital to the strategy communication process.

This disagreement causes a major divergence from the intended strategy and, as a result, the lower-level employees are misled in terms of associated tasks due to the conflicting directions they receive. This demonstrates the importance of agreement over strategic priority between



top and middle management, and not only within a particular managerial level. In contrast, the recent literature only focusses on the strategic consensus within a particular managerial level (for instance, Kellermanns et al., 2008; Tarakci et al., 2014). The fact that the strategy is a collaborative process which requires consensus over the objectives that need to be achieved sheds light on the importance of the leadership construct that can integrate the stakeholders' practices within the strategy process.

### *Stability in Positions*

Stability in positions allows managers to build a shared understanding of strategy content among each other within the organization. A lack of strategic consensus between top and middle management can be strongly correlated with the stability of their positions for a reasonable length of time. The high rotation rate amongst managers results in the miscommunication of the intended strategy due to changeable decisions. The collective turnover rate has been shown to have a negative impact on unit-level outcomes (Hancock et al., 2013) and on organizational performance (Meier and Hicklin, 2008). The common concern with respect to the research findings is the low stability of top and middle managerial positions making it difficult for them to convey the organizational strategy in an appropriate manner. It is worth noting that strategy practices are the production of shared norms, values, policies, and procedures, which guide stakeholder groups in the realization of organizational strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Therefore, with this kind of instability in managerial positions, it is difficult for strategy to be effectively communicated and implemented.

Most managers find it difficult to direct their units, communicate strategy, and achieve the organizational objectives if they are rotated shortly after being assigned to a given position. Consequently, the other unit members may need further time to accommodate each such turnover event. This remark is further in line with the findings highlighted by Messersmith et al. (2014) who argued that it takes time for new managers to learn specific job functions, routines, and unit-specific skills and knowledge; also, it takes time for mutual socialization with their subordinates to take place. A rotation event may further lead to managers being 'disloyal' in terms of their effective contributions to the organizational strategy due to their constant impression of being under threat of rotation at any given time during their assignment.

### *Different Understanding of Strategy*

The absence of strategic consensus was also found to be due to different understandings of the strategy itself, which in turn causes continuous confusion. This is also echoed by Balogun and Johnson (2004) who concluded that conflict among managers may arise as a natural result of different interpretations of the same organizational strategy. This conflict is also found to be linked to the mentality of the managers in the direction and practice of organizational strategy. Maintaining an inflexible mindset reflects the personality and independence of managers, which may hinder other employees' engagement with the strategy communication and implementation processes. Inflexible mindsets are associated with a lack of specialty and age differences among managers themselves, which makes it difficult to convey messages in any unified manner. In Social Practice theory, Bourdieu (1990) argued that 'in the interaction between two agents or groups of agents endowed with the same habitus (Say A and B), everything takes place as if the actions of each of them (Say  $a_1$  for A) were organized by reference to the reactions which they call forth from any agent possessing the same habitus (say  $b_1$  for B)' (p. 61). This explanation emphasizes the idea that the personal characteristics play a significant role in regulating the strategic practices of managers.

Even in the strategy-as-practice concept, the critical role of top and middle managers is recognized in the strategy process due to their positional power in the organization and their initiatives towards change (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006a; and Johnson et al., 2007). However, in this research it was found that smooth communication is avoided by certain managers in order to avoid the potential 'risks' that might be associated with new ideas. This in turn has influenced newly appointed managers not to share ideas if they have a different mindset from their longer-serving line managers. These findings are similar to those of Keating and Heslin (2015), who suggested that managers with a fixed mindset are unlikely to attempt to expand their mindsets with their staff if they are likely to be exposed to any associated challenges. Moreover, employees are not willing to go the extra mile for the organization if they feel that their managers are not being supportive or not acting in a reasonable manner (Heslin and van de Walle, 2011).

### *Social Networks*

The level of social networks of managers at both levels was found to affect the ability to reach a shared understanding of the intended strategy. Within the practice perspective, the strategy is viewed as a situated and socially accomplished activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Due to these networks and levels of connections, some managers may be disinterested in engaging with the strategy process; rather, they venerate their line managers' connections above all other aspects

in order to secure a healthy relationship within their personal working environments. Consequently, loyalty to the relevant line manager is of greater concern than the organizational strategy. This was found to maintain a high degree of personal satisfaction, but which could negatively affect the consensus and transition process. The abuse use of social networks over functional networks can affect the alignment of strategic consensus and consequently hinder the effective transition and execution of strategy.

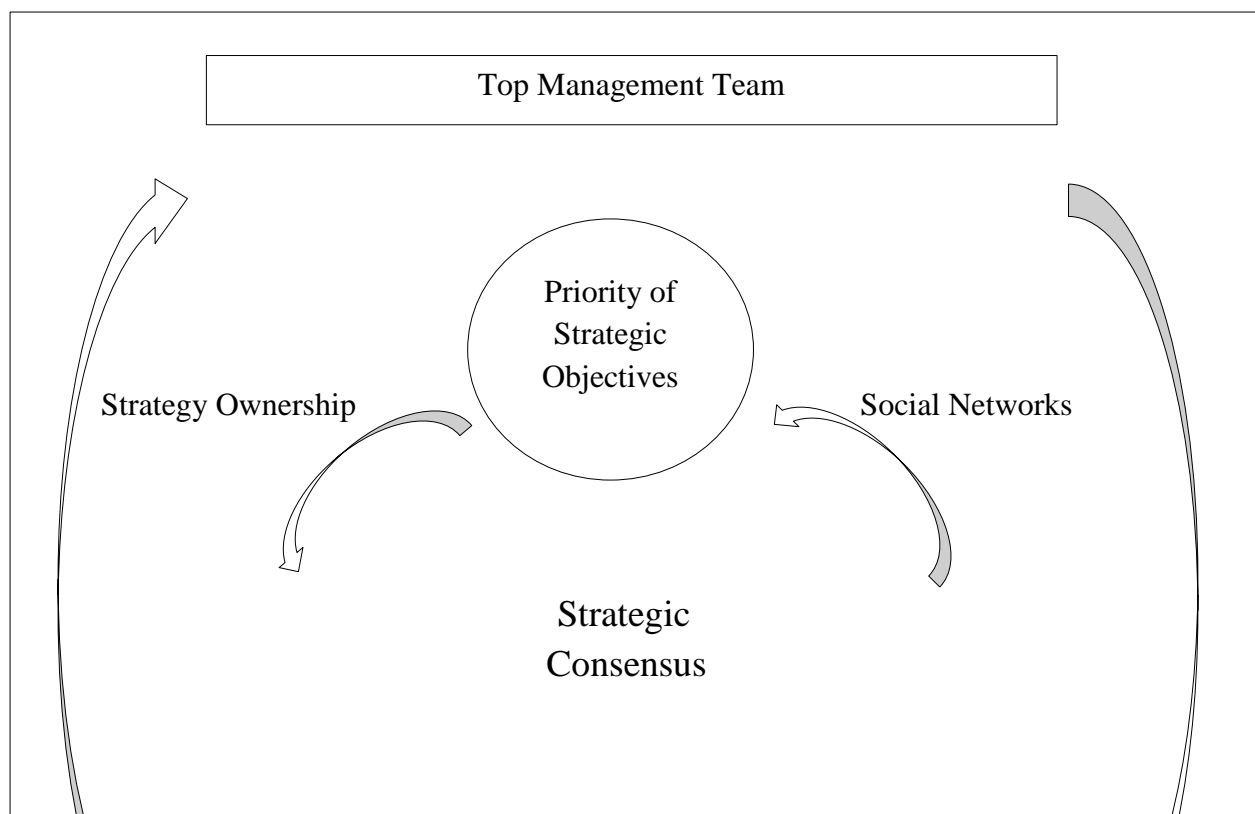
Building networks and connections is a complicated task, and indeed concept as a whole, in the public sector as relations have been found to secure individual positions to a greater extent than the applicable system. Managers with strong relation ties and social networks are even seen to be good leaders by their subordinates, and therefore hold a strong influence in terms of what they communicate to others. Anderson (2008) found that the characteristics of social networks can affect information exchange among stakeholders, and this effect is stronger for those managers who are willing to benefit from such networks. Furthermore, public sector managerial positions are seen to serve mutual interests with those of other managers inside and outside the organization. This was further observed by Rogan and Mors (2017), who argued that managers who invest principally in individual resources within their relationships are generally exposed to a greater diversity of information, have a greater autonomy within the organization in which they serve, and their contacts are more willing to provide resources in return. Therefore, social relations cause top and middle managers to 'drift' the organizational strategy as opposed to what was originally planned, which in turn results in a lack of strategic consensus.

#### *Belief in Strategy Ownership*

Part of the lack of strategic consensus among top and middle managers was due to the belief that top managers held strategy ownership. This in turn leaves other groups of managers either unaware, or aware to only a limited extent, of the strategy. Consequently, the associated lack of consensus creates an asymmetry in information among the groups of managers. What is interesting in this finding is that not only top managers that show characteristics of strategy ownership, but that middle managers may show even more powerful characteristics in this regard than top managers. This research has revealed that specific strategy guidelines are owned and shared among the top management team only, while general guidelines are communicated to middle managers, who are required to explain these to their employees. In practice, middle managers were left unaware of the majority of the technical details of what they needed to perform. It seems that performing all organizational activities within one

managerial level is unrealistic. As suggested by Rigby et al. (2002), senior managers often do not understand what they are in fact implementing, which is due to their assumption that they are aware of all the strategy processes.

The need for different stakeholders' engagement in strategic change was also highlighted in the findings of Kash et al. (2014). The top management team needs to be more responsible and effectiveness in communicating strategy to individuals, and middle managers in particular. Strategy ownership in this research was not related to the level of stakeholders' engagement, but rather with top management practice, where they promote themselves as key players in communicating the strategy within the organization. In Social Practice theory, Giddens (1984) explained such practice by advocating that 'what actors practice, are events which would not have happened if those actors had behaved differently, but which are not within the scope of the agent's power to have brought about' (p. 11). Drawing from this, the findings confirm that maintaining a strategic consensus among stakeholders between, and within the same, managerial levels is crucial in determining the conceptualization of the strategy communication process. Consequently, shared understanding should be considered a social practice which cannot be isolated from the stakeholders' interactions. Figure 2 represents an interactive framework of strategic consensus between top and middle managers.



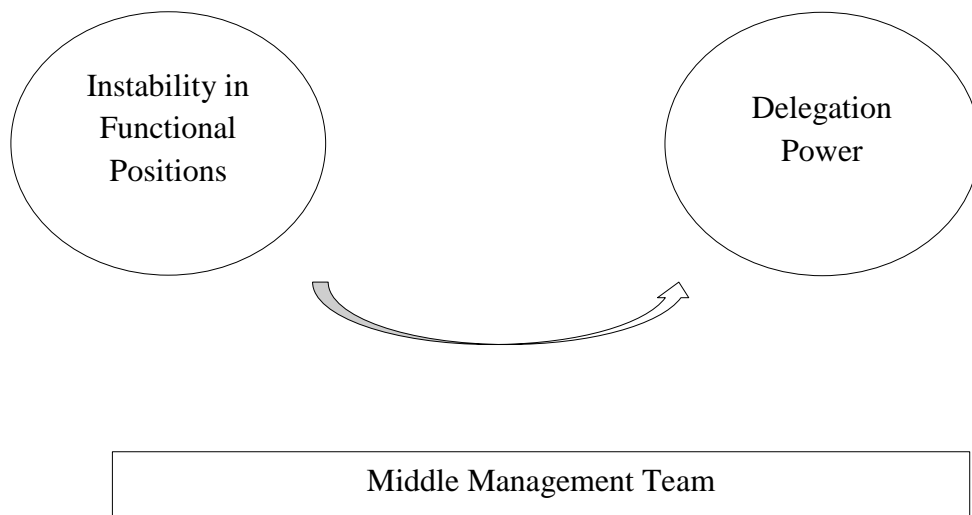


Figure 2: Interactive Framework of Strategic Consensus between Top and Middle Managers

## Conclusion

The aim of the study was to identify the role of top and middle managers in forming a shared understanding of strategy during the strategy communication and implementation processes from a social practice perspective. Based on the above findings, our research can be said to have extended the knowledge of strategic consensus research in three ways. Firstly, it has shown the importance of strategic consensus towards strategy communication and implementation processes depending on the perceptions of the various managers in the various organisational levels. More specifically, our research has demonstrated that a shared understanding is a success factor in terms of aligning similar individuals' characteristics during the strategy process. Secondly, we provided qualitative evidence for a strategic consensus – social practice relationship. We were able to reflect that strategic consensus is not a material object that can be predicted and controlled; it is rather the accumulation of social interactions between organisational members. Thirdly, our exploration represents a vital contribution to the under-researched area of strategic consensus at two managerial levels. Moreover, it is worth noting that, to our best of knowledge, our study has been the first to examine how strategic consensus can be established between two managerial levels based on qualitative data.

## Directions for Future Research

Future researches should consider focussing on strategy consensus research in different ways. For instance, it should focus on the strategy formulation phase and process, which was not

examined in this research. Furthermore, this work can be extended to test the generalizability of strategic consensus so as to include other employment levels (for instance, front-line managers and front-line employees). Moreover, since the business environment is highly dynamic in nature, requiring interactions with the external environment, future research can be extended to explore how strategic consensus can be aligned between the internal and the external environments. Additionally, further studies are encouraged to integrate the strategic consensus literature from the strategy-as-practice perspective to gain inclusive insight of this dynamic. Also, this study was applied within the public sector but can be further extended to application in the private and voluntary sectors, examining the same managerial levels to allow for direct comparison.

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