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Fostering strategic awareness at an organization's boundary

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of strategy messages emanating from both top and middle/supervisory managers regarding five different aspects of strategy on strategic awareness among boundary personnel.

Design/methodology/approach – The results come from a survey of bank tellers and customer service representatives within a single large regional bank.

Findings – The findings support a differential main effect on strategic awareness among boundary personnel depending on the source of messages, whether top management or middle management. More interestingly, there appears to be an interaction effect between the two sources regarding which will be the dominant information source for boundary personnel.

Research limitations/implications – The survey data were collected within a single banking institution at one time point.

Practical implications – The results provide useful information concerning the efficacy of messages concerning strategy from middle and top management in organizations.

Originality/value – The paper extends past research by investigating different levels of strategic understanding within the firm across different levels and determining information dissemination strategies for increasing the level of strategic awareness among boundary personnel.

Keywords United States of America, Banks, Customer service management, Management strategy, Strategic awareness, Boundary personnel, Information dissemination

Paper type Research paper

While primary responsibility for strategic planning activities and strategy formulation are typically vested with top management personnel, appropriate implementation of strategic activities is predicated on the actions of lower-level organizational members, with particular emphasis placed on the tasks performed by external boundary-spanners. Boundary-spanning roles are defined as positions which act as an interface between the organization and its external customers (Buttle, 2004), and these organizational members are responsible for managing the customers' relationship with the organization. Modern marketing thought holds that one of the more important functions in managing customer relationships is the customer contact role (e.g. Liao and Mahesh, 2008). Since boundary personnel directly interact with the organization's key constituency, its customers, and provide an all important interface between the organization and its market environment (e.g. Crosby et al., 1990; Donaldson and Hilmer, 1998), they are critical to the successful implementation of strategy (Singh and Rhoads, 1991).

A key task for management is to effectively convey the organization's strategic priorities to boundary personnel. Considerable theory and some research suggests that when organizational leaders engage in the sharing (information) of strategic intent, individuals' awareness and group consensus regarding organizational strategy will be enhanced (e.g. Bourgeois, 1980; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1998; Lindman et al., 2001; Rapert et al., 2002; West and Schwenk, 1996). A clear and effective dissemination of messages should foster a closer agreement between top executives' view of strategy and the views of lower-level organizational participants, notably boundary-spanners. A lack of understanding or awareness among lower level organizational members about top executives' view of strategy may inhibit the implementation of the organization's intended strategy at the organization's boundary (Nobel, 1999).

Drawing upon sensegiving theory (Weick, 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), we propose that the strategy pursued by top management and the information-processing structure being used directly impact the understanding, interpretation and subsequent activities of employees (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Consistent with the concepts of sensegiving theory (Weick, 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), we examine the effects of intraorganizational messages from top and middle managers and how these messages interact in influencing the development of strategic awareness among boundary personnel responsible for the implementation of strategy. To the extent that boundary personnel fail to receive frequent and useful messages regarding the full scope and content of the strategies being pursued, a lack of consistency between managerial intentions and employee actions could develop. As a result, effective implementation of functional tasks could be placed at risk (Donaldson and Hilmer, 1998). We expect that in the absence of clear messages across organizational levels (i.e. both top and middle management) as to the content of the strategy to be pursued, significant gaps could arise between what top management plans or intends as strategy and what is perceived or realized at the operational level.

Literature review

Sensegiving and sensemaking

Sensegiving and sensemaking are two inter-related processes found in organizations that explain the interpretive activities engaged in by top managers, middle managers, and employees (Dervin, 1998, 1999, 2003; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). In terms of the current study, both sensegiving and sensemaking processes appear to be present in the focal phenomenon of building strategic awareness among boundary spanners. Sensegiving is the process by which managers give or assist in giving explanations for previously ambiguous phenomena (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Research on sensegiving tends to illustrate the way managers deliver sense-invoking information concerning an

ambiguous phenomenon rather than the process by which that information is translated into an interpretation of the phenomenon (e.g. Fiss and Zajac, 2006).

In contrast, sensemaking is an ongoing, retrospective, interpretive process that helps individuals and groups deal with ambiguity, adjust to their changing environment, and impose understanding on a previously misunderstood event (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, sensemaking is viewed as both a theory for understanding phenomenon (e.g. Weick, 1995) as well as a methodology for studying phenomenon (e.g. Dervin, 1999). The previous definition applies to both the theory and the methodology. From a theoretical perspective it provides an explanation for how individuals enact, select, and retain interpretations of ambiguous events in the environment. From a methodological perspective, the same enactment, selection, and retention process unfolds as the researcher attempts to understand the focal phenomenon.

For this study, we invoke the theoretical perspective and focus on the necessity of boundary spanners to make sense of messages concerning strategy provided by both mid- and top-level managers. Although the emphasis of much of sensegiving and sensemaking theories has been on events that occur in the environment (Weick, 1995), it is believed that messages from management may also exert considerable influence on the interpretation process of employees concerning strategy (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). An organization's strategy is typically represented by statements of intention that reflect management's perceptions of key issues as well as the way in which they share the goals, vision, and mission of the organization across various important organizational functioning domains (Thomas and McDaniel, 1990). Thus, managers' messages are often intended to focus the attention of employees on particular strategic issues and priorities (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and to guide or "give sense" to lower-level participants' interpretation of strategy (Thomas et al., 1994). In this sensegiving process, messages from top- and mid-level managers are intended to shape the level of strategic awareness and consensus possible among an organization's employees, including external boundary personnel. After "giving sense", or rather attempting to do so, through messages concerning strategy, it is incumbent upon employees in the boundary spanning roles to engage in sensemaking in an attempt to develop an interpretation of the espoused strategy that they can enact, select, and retain in their work processes.

Strategic awareness

Effective strategy implementation is predicated on the assumption that organizational members have a clear, common understanding, or awareness, of the content of the organization's current strategies (Berthon et al., 1995/1996; George, 1990; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Following Hambrick (1981), strategic awareness is defined as an individual-level construct and refers to the extent to which focal individuals possess an awareness of the top management team's strategic priorities. In contrast, the term strategic consensus refers to the level of shared cognitions (Ensley and Pearce, 2001) or agreement within a group about what strategy is or should be with investigations usually focused on members of an organization's top management team or TMT (cf. Dess, 1987; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1994; Nobel, 1999). (For a review of the literature on strategic consensus, see Kellermanns et al., 2005.) Thus, both the meaning of the terms awareness and consensus, and the unit of analysis on which they operate are not identical.

Consistent with the preceding, strategic awareness refers to the degree to which the perceptions of the organization's boundary-spanners (e.g. tellers and customer service representatives), with regard to organizational strategies, are in agreement with those of senior management (e.g. the membership of the focal organization's strategic planning committee and CEO). When the perception of organizational strategy is not in agreement with that of top management, then it is believed that the boundary-spanner is less strategically aware.

A majority of research in the areas of strategic awareness and consensus has focused on an examination of simple bivariate relationships between the extent of consensus among top managers as to the organization's strategy and/or goals, and its resulting performance (Kellermanns et al., 2005). In general, research findings have tended to support expectations regarding the benefits of shared perspectives among the organization's leadership on the importance of competitive methods. The exact nature of these relationships, however, has been found to vary according to the specific means/ends content of the involved strategy dimensions. Conjunctively, the findings of previous research (e.g. Bourgeois, 1980; Lindman et al., 2001) suggest two conclusions that have important implications for managers:

- (1) that consensus on means is separate and distinct from consensus on ends (i.e. objectives) or other attributes (e.g. environment); and
- (2) that achieving a consensus on the organization's set of competitive means (i.e. its set of tasks or methods) should be a primary objective of management.

While the results of previous investigations provide substantial evidence supporting the benefits that raising strategic awareness and within-group consensus have on performance, their contribution to the objectives of the current study is rather limited. In fact, much of the research has viewed the concept of strategic awareness too narrowly, focusing only on strategic awareness among the chief executive officer (CEO) and members of the top management team (TMT) (Bourgeois, 1980; Lindman et al., 2001; West and Schwenk, 1996). It has long been suggested that the examination of this topic should be extended beyond the confines of the top management team to include the level of strategic awareness held by operative-level or boundary personnel responsible for the implementation of strategy (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1994). Furthermore, as previously noted, prior research has been largely focused on measuring the extent of consensus between an organization's members while neglecting to investigate possible modalities for achieving the desired consensus.

Intraorganizational messages and strategic awareness

It has been argued that organizational "process" modalities, such as communication, provide an effective means of transmitting ideas and direct thinking about the organization and its position in the marketplace (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983; Fiss and Zajac, 2006). Internally, such communication facilitates the awareness among employees about management's desired sense of strategic direction. A review of the organizational communication literature (cf. Cheney et al., 2004; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010) generally suggests that the ability of employees to develop a higher level of shared awareness of strategy may be influenced by communication of information from managers and supervisory personnel.

A review of the literature on strategic awareness and consensus reveals two suggested avenues or modalities through which managers can assure that the vision of strategy is being appropriately and consistently perceived by personnel operating at the organization's boundary (Menon et al., 1999). In the first view, strategic awareness is achieved via the imposition of structural arrangements, such as the formalization of rules and procedures, the centralization of authority, and the application of coordinative mechanisms (St John and Rue, 1990). Managers are seen as structuring the organization in such a way as to enhance strategic awareness and subsequent implementation of strategy.

The second view, one consistent with sensegiving theory (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), suggests that "process" modalities, such as intraorganizational messages, offer an effective means of transmitting ideas and directing thinking about the organization and its position in the marketplace (Harrison and Pelletier, 1997; Menon et al., 1999; Rapert et al., 2002). Managerial processes, particularly intraorganizational messages, are a primary mechanism for the control and coordination of work efforts in organizations

(George, 1990). Such messages facilitate the transference of knowledge that instills a consciousness in employees about the desired sense of strategic direction (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Strategy information sharing directed from the organization's strategic decision-makers (i.e. the top management team) to its boundary employees must be operating effectively if these latter personnel are to achieve the high quality service delivery requisite for successful exchanges with external markets (customers). With the possible exception of the study by Rapert et al. (2002) on the effects of frequency of contact between top management and marketing executives on group consensus, to date, there has been a void of research examining the effects of intraorganizational messages, on the development of strategic awareness among boundary personnel.

The current study suggests that developing an awareness of strategy is contingent upon the effective dissemination of strategy-specific information by involved managers (DiSanza, 1993; Frankwick et al., 1994) resident at various managerial levels (Thomas et al., 1994) to boundary personnel. Consequently, this study was devised to capture specific information about the role of perceived clarity of message between top (TMT) and middle management (MM) personnel in enhancing the extent of strategic awareness evident among boundary role personnel. To the extent the information conveys strategy specific information and is of high clarity (i.e. frequency and usefulness of the message), strategic awareness should be positively enhanced. Consistent with these notions we propose the following:

H1. An individual boundary spanner's level of strategic awareness will be positively related to the perceived clarity of managerial messages.

A second, and perhaps more intriguing, question concerns the relative impact of top management versus middle management messages on the development of strategic awareness at an organization's boundary. Here, the concern is with which source of intraorganizational messages provides maximum impact on strategic awareness at critical operational levels – top level executives who formulate the strategy and then delegate its implementation, or the middle managers charged with the responsibility of overseeing its implementation? The evidence regarding relative influence is inconclusive. Some evidence suggests that top managers are uniquely positioned to use their position and expert power, gained partly through effective information gathering and dissemination, to transmit strategic ideas and values (Kets de Vries, 1998; Skivington and Daft, 1991). Conversely, “functional managers, may rely more on reward, coercive, and legitimate power within their hierarchical structures, leaving such communication skills less developed” (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1984, p. 179). These lines of reasoning would support the argument that top management dissemination of information should enhance the extent to which a shared strategic understanding is evident at the organization's boundary more directly than would messages addressing similar content from middle managers.

Others argue that interactions with middle and supervisory managers are more conducive to creating a collective heart and mind among boundary personnel because of their ability to recognize strategic problems and opportunities (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990) and because they serve as “linking pins” (Likert, 1961) whose position enables them to transmit information from top to bottom in the organization. Furthermore, the control that middle managers exercise over feedback, goal setting, and social cues (Tziner and Latham, 1989) leads one to expect that messages from front-line supervisors may more directly influence strategic awareness among boundary personnel than top managers. Consistent with sensegiving theory (e.g. Thomas et al., 1994), the organizational information process structures and managers' proximity in the organizational hierarchy, may lead middle managers to play a more pivotal role than top managers in developing strategic awareness among boundary personnel. Cumulatively, the preceding arguments suggest the following hypothesis:

H2. An individual boundary spanner's degree of strategic awareness will be influenced to a greater extent by the perceived clarity of messages from middle managers than those emanating from top management.

Intuitively, multiple sources of messages may be complementary in increasing the overall effectiveness of disseminating the strategic message (i.e. sensegiving), hence enhancing the recipients' awareness of various components of the organization's strategy. However, the above arguments propose that strategic awareness among an organization's boundary personnel will be enhanced primarily as a result of receiving high clarity messages from middle management. This line of reasoning suggests that attempts by top managers to communicate their business models concurrently with middle managers may not additively affect strategic awareness among boundary personnel. In effect, embracing two major information sources (top management and middle management) in parallel could lead to suboptimal understanding among target populations (e.g. boundary personnel). Sensegiving theory (e.g. Thomas et al., 1994) suggests that these additional messages by top management may be redundant, confusing, or misleading and may create ambiguity among employees (Weick, 1995) concerning their awareness of the organization's strategy in relation to their day-to-day behaviors. This would occur because the less preferred sources' lack of legitimacy may undercut the message, possibly cause information overload which may confuse organizational participants, confront recipients with managerial and organizational problems, and lead to increased information processing costs. That there might be a dysfunctional interaction between sources of strategic information dissemination within the organization's hierarchy that lowers overall message efficacy at the organization's boundary is the basis for the following hypothesis:

H3. When the perceived clarity of messages from middle managers is low, rather than high, then the perceived clarity of messages from top managers will more positively influence the strategic awareness of boundary spanning personnel.

Methods

Data collection and measurement of variables

Study setting. The data presented here come from a field study of strategic information dissemination on strategic awareness in a single, large (multi-billion dollar), regional, multi-location retail bank, headquartered in a metropolitan city. Typically, retail banking institutions interact directly with consumers, providing services such as savings and checking accounts and personal loans, at branch locations for account holders. External boundary spanners are especially important in service organizations, such as banks, which actively interact with and are heavily dependent on the consumer market they serve. For example, in banks, external boundary spanners, such as tellers and customer service representatives, are expected to develop and maintain knowledge of the company's products and services, its administrative policies and procedures, and to directly and continually interface with the bank's customers so as to support customer relationships and build customer loyalty (Schneider et al., 1980).

Strategic awareness. Consistent with Kellermanns et al.(2005) recommendations for research on awareness (and consensus), the items used to tap strategic awareness among the organization's boundary personnel was developed following a multi-step process. Initially, the investigators met with the CEO to develop a rapport and further contacts with the bank. As a result of meeting with the CEO, the investigators were invited to be observers at a corporate planning retreat intended to update and revise corporate planning documents prepared by the "retail strategy committee", which consisted of the bank's top 13 managers (including the CEO). In addition to observing the planning process, the investigators

interacted with individual members of the retail strategy committee. Based on these observations, the investigators developed a draft survey instrument.

Following the recommendations of Hambrick (1984) for developing a strategic taxonomy to capture the dimensions underlying an organization's overall strategy, the draft survey instrument consisted of strategy items identified by the authors from the literature (Davis et al., 2002; Dess and Davis, 1984). The wording of these items was reviewed by several members of the retail strategy committee for appropriate phrasing and terminology consistent with the industry context and bank use. The revised instrument was then sent to a random sample of middle managers and boundary spanning personnel for their comments and suggestions. The result of this face validity assessment process yielded a set of 29 items that was used to assess strategic awareness. Having established face validity for the survey instrument, we then proceeded to the data collection phase.

The main study included administering two waves of a questionnaire directed to top management (identified by the CEO as consisting of himself and 12 members of the bank's retail strategy committee), middle management (all managers not represented by the CEO and the members of the retail strategy committee), and a stratified (across geographic regions) random sample of boundary personnel. Overall, a 57 percent response rate (118 of 207) was obtained from tellers and customer service representatives comprising the organization's external boundary personnel.

The directions to each individual respondent were to "indicate the level of activity that you believe is currently taking place" in the organization. Respondents used a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1 = rarely" to "7 = always", to indicate his or her perception of the extent to which each of these 29 items were emphasized as part of the bank's current strategy. A taxonomy consisting of five specific task dimensionalities (eigenvalues .1) underlying the overall business strategy of the bank was established using principal components factor analysis with an orthogonal rotation. Following Rummel (1967), a cut-off of 0.40 was used to retain 20 items as indicators of five individual factors or strategic dimensions. An individual respondent's score on each of the five dimensions of strategy was computed by summing the raw scores for the items loading on its representative factor.

A review of the items comprising the content of each factor suggested their identification as critical dimensions underlying the bank's strategy of customer service, sales and promotion, products and services, competitive environment, and administrative and coordinative activities. For the sake of brevity, in the balance of the paper, these dimensions are referred to as "CUSTAWARE", "SELLAWARE", "PRODAWARE", "ENVIRAWARE", and "ADMINAWARE", respectively. Dimensions similar to those identified here have been reported in the literature (e.g. Dess and Davis, 1984; Helms et al., 1997; Rapert et al., 2002). Table I reports factor loadings for each of the five strategy scales developed from the factor analysis, along with their Cronbach's α values, which were well within acceptable ranges for exploratory research (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Following the identification and development of the five strategic content dimensions, a second analytical step was carried out in arriving at a measure for perceived strategic awareness among boundary personnel. For each boundary person, strategic awareness was estimated by calculating the absolute value of the difference between the aggregate score for the focal individual on each of the five strategic dimensions and the mean score for the members of top management on that same strategic dimension. The results of these calculations were five scores, one for each of the five strategic dimensions, and reflective of the degree of strategic awareness on the part of the focal boundary person relative to that particular dimension of strategic content. Previously, strategic awareness was defined as agreement between an individual boundary personnel and the aggregate top management as to the content of specific

strategy dimensions. Hence the closer an individual boundary spanner's score is to that of the TMT, the more aware that individual is with the top managers of the organization concerning the organization's strategies.

Clarity of message content. The present study focused on the perceived clarity of messages about organizational strategies as received by personnel at the organization's boundary (e.g. tellers and customer service representatives). A variety of methods have been suggested for the assessment of clarity of message content (e.g. Spector, 1997). Here, we chose to focus on two indicants:

- (1) frequency; and
- (2) usefulness.

These and similar indicants have been used by communication researchers (e.g. Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979) to investigate the relationship among such components as the clarity of messages, marketing strategy making, and firm performance (Menon et al., 1999). Logically, one could expect that, as task-specific communication becomes more infrequent, boundary role personnel are more likely to view the information provided as inadequate to obtain sufficient clarity for implementing complex strategy tasks. Consequently, as frequency of communication is reduced, boundary role personnel's awareness of strategy would also be lowered. Similarly, the more communication is seen as conveying useful, task-related information, the more managers will be seen as providing clarity sufficient to support the information needs of their employees. Consequently, providing useful information may be important in increasing the boundary role personnel's awareness of strategy.

Operationally, message clarity was measured using twenty items, divided according to the frequency and usefulness of the messages as related to each of the five designated strategic tasks that the involved boundary personnel had received from each management source (i.e. top management, middle management) during the preceding two months. Message frequency was measured using a seven-point, Likert-type scale reflecting the reported interval between messages received from top and middle management regarding each of the five previously identified strategic task dimensions. Frequency scores ranged from a high of 7 (daily messages from the focal source) to 1 (messages were rarely or almost never received from that source).

The usefulness of messages received from each source (i.e. top management, middle management) for each of the five strategic tasks, was similarly rated using a seven-point scale, ranging from "1 = not at all useful", to "7 = very useful". Message clarity was then computed as a multiplicative index of each individual boundary spanner's scores on the message frequency and usefulness variables, as received from each of two management levels (i.e. top management and middle management), for each of the five strategy dimensions. The result was ten indicators of message clarity, one from each of the two information sources – top managers and middle managers on each of the five strategic dimensions.

Analysis procedures

The research hypotheses posed in this study were assessed through the application of multiple regression analysis, to include interaction between sources (i.e. top management and middle management) followed by split group analysis. For each boundary role person, strategic awareness measures for each of the five strategic task dimensions were regressed on the measure of message clarity from top management and middle management and an interaction term representing the multiplicative relationship between these two message sources. The occurrence of a significant interaction effect, in conjunction with its minimal main effects, suggested that the message clarity from middle management plays an important moderating

role in the observed relationships. Following the recommendations of Howell et al. (1986), the subjects were subsequently dichotomized into high and low groups and reanalyzed to further investigate this relationship.

Results

Contained in Table II is a list of descriptive statistics (i.e. means and standard deviations) and zero-order correlations between study variables. Top management message clarity was positively correlated to only one component of strategy (ENVIRAWARE, $r = 0.22, p < 0.05$), whereas middle management message clarity was positively related to three components of strategy (CUSTAWARE, ENVIRAWARE, and ADMINAWARE, $r = 0.22, 0.17, \text{ and } 0.17$, respectively, $p < 0.05$). The initial correlation analysis results provide tentative support to H1, which stated that both top and middle management messages would be positively related to strategic awareness. The pattern of correlations suggested that middle management messages would be more strongly related to strategic awareness. This possibility was further examined using regression analysis.

The results of the multiple regression analysis performed to examine the research hypotheses are presented in Table III. The regression analyses provided a more refined interpretation of results than that afforded by the correlation analyses. As is indicated, several significant main effects were observed, partially supporting H1. In terms of the effects of top management messages, three significant and positive main effects on strategic awareness were found for two of the five components of strategy: SELLAWARE and ENVIRAWARE. Consistent with H1, these results would support the clarity of top management messages as conducive to enhancing strategic awareness among boundary personnel concerning selling and market research, respectively. In contrast, with the sole exception of SELLAWARE, the results addressing the direct effects of middle management message clarity on strategic awareness were not evident. A comparison of the main effects of communication from top- and middle-management provides support for the arguments by authors such as Kets de Vries (1998) and Skivington and Daft (1991) that dissemination of strategy-related messages from top management are a productive modality for building strategic awareness among an organization's personnel. Two observations support this conclusion. First, two of the five observed top management driven beta coefficients were found to be significant ($p < 0.05$), while only one such effect was found in the case of the middle management driven effects. Secondly, of the four positive beta coefficients for top management messages, all were stronger in comparison to those associated with the effects of middle management messages. These results suggest that the influence of the perceived frequency and perceived usefulness of messages emanating from top management predominate messages initiated from middle management in affecting strategic awareness among boundary role personnel, offering partial support for H2.

However, the finding of significant interaction terms suggests that the two sources do not act independent of each other. Thus, these initial results should be approached with considerable caution. As shown in Table III, significant interaction effects were observed in association with the two significant main effects, as well as with administrative awareness.

The question of interaction effects between the two sources of messages (top and middle management) was the subject of H3. In order to develop an improved interpretation of the nature of this interaction, we performed a split-group analysis on the basis of a median split of the middle management message clarity variable. In doing so, the intent was to examine the effects of the top management team's message clarity on strategic awareness among boundary personnel, while controlling for any possible confounding effects of middle management message clarity. The results of this split group analysis are shown in Table IV.

The results shown in Table IV indicate that the clarity of messages existing between the boundary personnel and middle management plays an important moderating role by neutralizing (Howell et al., 1986) strategic awareness among the boundary personnel. Two pieces of evidence are important in interpreting the results. First, results indicate that, in the presence of low-clarity of middle management messages, messages from top management tend to positively affect strategic awareness among boundary personnel on four of the five strategic activities, however, none of the effects rise to the level of statistical significance used in the current study. Conversely, in the presence of high-clarity middle management messages, messages from top management negatively affect boundary personnel strategic awareness on all of the five strategic dimensions. These effects are significant ($p < 0.05$) for ENVIRAWARE and ADMINAWARE. While this is suggestive of support for H3, the lack of statistical support at the required level leads us to reject this hypothesis.

Discussion and conclusions

Focusing primarily on the perceived frequency and usefulness of messages from management to boundary personnel (e.g. bank tellers and customer service representatives), we examined the extent to which an organization's vertical dissemination of information fosters strategic awareness. Our review of prior theory and empirical research led us to hypothesize (H1) that the clarity of management's message about specific strategic activities would play an important role in influencing strategic awareness among boundary personnel. Furthermore, it was hypothesized (H2) that employees' awareness of strategy would be more strongly affected by the clarity of messages emanating from middle managers (e.g., front-line supervisors) than from top management. Finally, we hypothesized (H3) that the perceived clarity of messages with middle managers would influence the ability of top management to disseminate messages of strategic importance to affect strategic awareness among boundary role personnel. However, the results only partially support the hypothesized relationships. Nevertheless, the relationships that were not statistically supported may suggest that, whenever the boundary role personnel perceive poor clarity from middle management, messages from top management can at least partially increase the level of strategic awareness.

Among the most striking findings emerging from the study, and contrary to expectations (H2), was that top management messages were considerably more effective than middle management messages in developing strategic awareness among boundary personnel. In fact, middle management messages were found to exert almost no affect on boundary personnel strategic awareness. While it is tempting to do so, these results should not be viewed as supporting a single information source imperative. For example, organizational support theories suggest that managers and supervisors (i.e. mid-level managers) are often perceived as agents of the organization by employees (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). As such, it is possible that mid-level managers serve as a transfer mechanism for top management's message dissemination on strategy. Future research could investigate the degree to which mid-level managers act as agents of the organization and provide indications of top management strategy.

Further, interpreting the relative impact of top versus middle management dissemination on strategic awareness was clouded by the presence of interaction effects between the clarity of top and middle management messages with the boundary personnel. We observed that while middle management messages did not appear to directly influence strategic awareness among boundary personnel, it did interact with top management messages, suggesting that middle management message dissemination may be acting as a moderator variable (Howell et al., 1986). Indeed, the results of the split group analysis provide evidence that the directionality and strength of the effects of top management messages on strategy awareness among boundary personnel depend on the clarity of the messages these individuals reported with middle management.

Two important insights were gained from the split-group analysis. The first was that when a focal individual's clarity of messages from his or her supervisors and middle managers is poor (i.e., low clarity), then the top management team tends to play an important role in generating an increased awareness of the organization's intended strategy. Among these front-line personnel, the poor clarity of their message dissemination relationship may become personally discouraging even becoming entangled with the formal relationships they have with middle managers. It may be that utilizing less proximate sources of strategic information (i.e., top management) allows these individuals to resolve ambiguity and minimize certain social, psychological, or organizational costs of embarrassing themselves or jeopardizing their performance and evaluation by appearing uninformed or incompetent to supervisors, peers, and/or customers.

The second important implication emerging from the split group analysis concerns the situation in which the clarity of messages between middle management and boundary personnel is good, at least according to involved personnel's assessment. Here, the results suggested that boundary personnel become less receptive to messages from more organizationally distant sources (i.e. top management). Perhaps, as messages from middle management to boundary personnel become more frequent and useful, the receptivity of boundary personnel to messages along alternate pathways (e.g. from other organizational sources) are being attenuated.

While it may be intuitively appealing to assume that involving more message dissemination sources would produce an increased understanding of strategy content, our results indicate otherwise. Paradoxically, when the clarity of messages with middle managers is high, it appears that acquiring more information than they can effectively use may lead to an information saturation effect. Perhaps, having obtained all necessary and relevant information from supervisors, the receiving of additional messages from top management regarding strategy may result in information overload (O'Reilly, 1980). Alternatively, when messages with middle management are perceived to be of a high clarity, messages received from other sources (e.g. top management) may be subject to substantial bias or distortion, particularly if they contain conflicting or disconfirming information compared to that received from more immediate supervisory personnel. Hence the observed negative effects of top management message dissemination. The net result for these individuals may be that in utilizing multiple sources of information they could come to have a less accurate understanding of the organization's strategic intent.

Further insights into the findings come from sensegiving and sensemaking theory (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995), which suggests that the same internal stimulus (e.g. message dissemination) may be interpreted quite differently by managers within the same organization. To the extent that middle managers serve as information conduits regarding strategy content, the messages that boundary personnel receive from top and middle management could differ in their content. Of course, the fact that middle managers are one step removed from the formulation of the strategy could make the information they provide concerning strategy content less accurate and complete than that provided by top management. Additionally, boundary personnel may prefer information from middle management sources for reasons other than factors associated with their expertise (e.g. accessibility, familiarity, trustworthiness, proximity). Indeed, there is abundant evidence that individuals in organizations are noticeably biased in their procurement of information, often preferring to rely on the most accessible sources while ignoring other, perhaps more accurate sources (O'Reilly, 1982; Zimmermann et al., 1996).

In summary, the most important contribution of this research is the empirical test of the impact that messages stemming from various levels of management (i.e., top, middle) have on the strategic awareness of boundary personnel. The study augments

prior research on information seeking behavior among lower echelon employees that showed that they typically rated front-line personnel and middle managers as their preferred and most informative sources of role information (Ibarra, 1993). While some preference for messages stemming from middle managers and supervisors may exist, the evidence provided here supports a differential effect for top managers in creating and fostering strategic awareness at the organization's boundary depending on the relationship boundary personnel have with middle managers.

Implications for practice

Managers should understand that dissemination of strategy related information is an important instrumentality in strategy implementation. Consistent with research on sensegiving and sensemaking (Berthon et al., 1995/1996; George, 1990; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), the clarity of received messages links boundary spanners to those who formulate and oversee the strategy and enables the development of a shared awareness among organizational members about strategic content and priorities. As the results suggest, middle management acts as a moderator in the relationship between top management and boundary personnel. Thus, it is incumbent on top management to be aware of the message clarity that exists between middle management and boundary personnel. If the clarity is poor, then top management should assume a greater role in communicating to boundary personnel as a route to creating greater strategic awareness among boundary personnel. Under these conditions, the primary responsibility for increasing boundary personnel strategic awareness shifts from middle management to the top management, which must now ensure that strategic directions are distributed throughout the entire organization, from top to bottom.

In contrast, when the clarity of messages between middle management and boundary personnel is good, then middle managers become the primary information conduit for providing strategic information to boundary personnel. This effect may compel a choice for top managers, whether to distribute information directly or indirectly, via middle management, their strategic foci and priorities. In this situation, there is reason to question the incremental benefit of top management endeavors to directly disseminate strategic intent beyond the middle management level. Thus, at each respective level of management (i.e. at both top and middle management) managers need to be aware of the effects that their overall clarity of strategic messages with subordinates have in creating strategic awareness.

Implications for research and limitations

In this study we used a regression approach to examine the effects of strategic information dissemination between top management and boundary personnel groups on the latter's strategic awareness while controlling for the state of messages between the boundary personnel and middle management. Although we have illustrated the implications of messages for advancing strategic awareness, we have clearly not exhausted the research possibilities. Further advancement will come via additional testing that is needed to refine and extend our understanding of theoretical relationships among intended strategy, information sources and processes, individual and organizational attributes and performance outcomes.

The current findings raise important questions not only about information dissemination and differential source effects but also about those who differ in strategic awareness. An important limitation of this study is its focus on individuals' strategic awareness, that is, it did not directly assess strategic awareness at other levels of analysis. Studies comparing strategic awareness across different organizational levels are clearly needed. In addition, future work should endeavor to unravel the differential impact that messages from various intraorganizational sources (e.g. top management, middle management, even peers) as well as external sources (e.g. customers) might exert on individuals' understanding of strategy within the context of the organization. Perhaps, individuals' relationships with particular information sources (e.g.

extent of trust) may make some individuals resistant to information emanating from certain sources within the organization.

Another goal of future researchers might be to use a sample from multiple organizations. To assure generalizability, it is important that the issues examined here be examined in different organizational settings, as the results from this study are only generalizable to organizations which share similar characteristics to those of the studied organization. In addition, differences in the structural properties of organizations (e.g. centralization, formalization) also may affect message characteristics, reducing or distorting the significance of a message. Arguably, the degree of influence of middle management moderation would be greater in larger organizations with more levels of hierarchy and less in smaller organizations. For instance, in the present study, boundary personnel (bank tellers and customer service representatives) were observed to have a relatively small amount of daily personal contact with top management. This may be an important reason for the ambiguous effects of top management messages on strategic awareness. Perhaps, in situations where the nature of the work setting affords closer contact between those at the periphery of the organization and its decision-making core, stronger effects for top management messages might be observed.

One general limitation of the present study that future research could address is the generally small sample size and the focus on a single organization. Although we performed a split group analysis and power analyses suggested adequate power for such statistics, the sample was smaller than desirable for adequately testing the effects of top management and middle management messages on strategic awareness. This is partly due the focus on a single large organization. Future research should consider gathering data from multiple organizations thus enhancing both sample size and overall generalizability. Although the current findings provide interesting insights into the relationships shown, further research of this nature could clarify the extent to which these issues play out in other sectors of industry and among different roles within various organizations (e.g. boundary spanners versus line workers, etc.).

Another limitation is based on our use of communication as one-way, which is conducive for sensegiving, but not sensemaking. Rather, the inference of sensemaking is based on the increased levels of strategic awareness that were exhibited by individual boundary spanners who reported higher levels of perceived clarity of communication from management personnel. Future researchers may wish to further study the role of two-way communications in order to more effectively capture sensemaking from the boundary personnel.

Finally, while research has demonstrated a relationship between performance and strategic awareness or consensus among managers, particularly at the top management level (e.g. Bourgeois, 1980; Lindman et al., 2001), additional research is needed to reveal the impact that increased or decreased messages with and among boundary personnel has on individual and unit performance, perhaps extending to relationships with customers and other organizational stakeholders. Hopefully, the results obtained here may serve to stimulate research aimed at demonstrating how information dissemination and other processes affect various performance outcomes.

Table I. Items, reliabilities, and factor loadings for the derived strategy scales

Strategy scale	Factor loading	Strategy scale items
Customer service awareness (CUSTAWARE) ($\alpha = 0.88$)	0.76	(1) Taking time to provide individualized service
	0.67	(2) Employees develop knowledge and skills to win customer trust and confidence
	0.76	(3) Employees taking time to listen to customers
	0.69	(4) Informing customers in language they understand
Sales/promotion awareness (SELLAWARE) ($\alpha = 0.81$)	0.63	(1) Selling products to current customers
	0.67	(2) Customer service representatives taking time to sell products
	0.61	(3) Branch employees taking time to refer or sell products
	0.58	(4) Emphasizing the sales of checking accounts
	0.48	(5) Selling as many accounts as possible to each customer
Product/service awareness (PRODAWARE) ($\alpha = 0.81$)	0.46	(1) Providing products/services that customers perceive as unique
	0.72	(2) Having low fees for checking accounts and other customer services
	0.77	(3) Offering high interest rates for checking and other accounts
	0.61	(4) Offering packages of services priced less than if purchased separately
Competitive environment awareness (ENVIRAWARE) ($\alpha = 0.63$)	0.77	(1) Doing informative market research about bank customers
	0.71	(2) Monitoring the actions of competitors
Administration/coordination awareness (ADMINAWARE) ($\alpha = .070$)	0.58	(1) Having rules and procedures that always apply
	0.67	(2) Having employees specialize in specific tasks
	0.57	(3) Requiring most decisions to be approved by top management
	0.56	(4) Using groups or committees to encourage cooperation among employees
	0.64	(5) Having informal, unwritten rules that guide employees' actions

Table II. Means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix for studied variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CUSTAWARE	-0.025	1.00						
2. SELLAWARE	-0.010	0.99	-0.04					
3. PRODAWARE	0.008	1.00	0.05	0.02				
4. ENVIRAWARE	-0.025	1.01	0.03	0.05	-0.02			
5. ADMINAWARE	0.003	1.00	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	-0.01		
6. TMCOMM	49.12	53.99	0.07	0.09	-0.09	0.22**	0.07	
7. MMCOMM	80.09	72.22	0.22**	0.03	-0.01	0.17*	0.17*	0.47**

Notes: TMCOMM, top management communication clarity; MMCOMM, middle management communication clarity; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table III.
The clarity of messages from top and middle management on strategic awareness among boundary spanning personnel

Dependent variable ^a	Top management (TM)	Middle management (MM)	Interaction (TM × MM)	F-value	p-value	R ²
CUSTAWARE	-0.03	-0.11	0.20	1.86	0.140	0.046
SELLAWARE	0.68 ^c	0.37 ^c	1.05 ^c	3.11	0.029	0.075
PRODAWARE	0.16	0.01	0.25	0.58	0.628	0.015
ENVIRAWARE	0.46 ^b	0.04	0.78 ^c	6.07	0.001	0.136
ADMINAWARE	0.48	-0.01	0.74 ^b	4.84	0.003	0.111

Notes: CUSTAWARE, customer service activities; SELLAWARE, marketing/sales activities; PRODAWARE, products/services attributes; ENVIRAWARE, competitive environment; ADMINAWARE, administration/coordinative activities; ^aawareness of specific strategy dimensions; ^b $p < 0.05$; ^c $p < 0.01$

Dependent variable	n	Low clarity of middle management messages				High clarity of middle management messages				
		β	F-value	p-value	R ²	n	β	F-value	p-value	R ²
CUSTAWARE	64	-0.07	0.27	0.604	0.004	50	-0.07	0.26	0.609	0.005
SELLAWARE	55	0.24	3.24	0.077	0.057	64	-0.20	2.53	0.101	0.039
PRODAWARE	55	0.10	0.56	0.457	0.013	59	-0.13	0.94	0.336	0.016
ENVIRAWARE	58	0.21	2.53	0.103	0.043	54	-0.28	4.60	0.037	0.080
ADMINAWARE	56	0.13	0.97	0.329	0.017	59	-0.29	5.28	0.025	0.083

Notes: Since strategic awareness was previously defined as agreement between individual external boundary spanners and top management as to the content of specific strategy dimensions, the signs were reversed so that a positive sign indicates that increasing the Clarity of communication with the focal source increases strategic awareness among the boundary personnel, while a negative sign suggests the opposite. Variations in sample size are due to missing values

Table IV.
The effects of top management communication on boundary spanners' strategic awareness for low and high levels of message clarity with middle management

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