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Abstract

Purpose - This essay arises from an increasing concern that our understanding of strategic change is not delivering meaningful, relevant and true process wisdom that allows researchers to enrich their academic discourse and practitioners to effectively realize strategic change imposed by hostile business markets. Our goal is to challenge fundamental assumptions of our field's dominant discourse in performing research and generating theories for strategic change under *real contexts*, and redirect attention to a mindful organizing perspective to understand process elements of strategic change that really matter. We thus suggest a 'provocative change research avenue' elaborating on the role of mindful organizing in order to bridge the relevance gap in this area. This advances a richer and more relevant framing in order to elevate theorizing in the area of strategic marketing and management beyond existing avenues, which not necessarily reflects organizational life's equivocality, interdependencies and intricacies. We thus call for the field of strategic marketing (and management) to adopt a discourse grounded in complexity-based assumptions.

Originality/value - Our intended contribution is to advocate a deeper and richer process understanding of strategic change by advancing mindful organizing as an epistemological and praxeological perspective on strategic change, thereby bridging the relevance gap (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Weick, 2001) and enriching our field's strategic change theories. Epistemologically, mindful organizing offers a useful perspective by stressing the change process' complexity, interdependence and emergence. Praxeologically, mindful organizing represents an adaptive organizational capability that allows organizations to develop higher awareness of their strategic change processes.

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

Design/approach – This paper is an essay based on theoretical reasoning. We address the relevance gap in the strategic business marketing field by focusing on one specific gap: the study and understanding of strategic change. To illustrate the relevance of a mindful organizing perspective for closing this relevance gap, we focus on the processes of mindful organizing identified by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) and argue how these organizational processes contribute to a better understanding of strategic change while implicitly assuming a complexity-based perspective on organizing. These five processes moreover address the identified limitations of present approaches, i.e., formative causality, pre-interpretation and independent linearity.

Practical implications – Although the paper is mainly written for *researchers* of change processes and innovation in industrial companies, practitioners will get inspiration as several viewpoints for mindful organizing will help them in building a more realistic and viable change approach.

Introduction: The challenge of the relevance gap in industrial marketing and change research

In strategic (business) marketing we face a *relevance gap*, defined as the limited “degree to which a specific manager in an organization perceives academic knowledge to aid his or her job-related thoughts or actions in the pursuit of organizational goals” (Jaworski, 2011, p. 212). The relevance gap has been signaled in marketing in general (Jaworski, 2011), in some sub fields such as marketing modeling (Lilien, 2011) and industrial/business marketing (Matthyssens and Vandenbempt, 2003). Strategic management scholars have discussed the relevance gap at large (Weick, 2001; Starbuck, 2004; Ghoshal and Moran, 2006; Fendt and Kaminska-Labbé, 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). These contributions show that what academics and their theories prescribe and what managers actually do might be two worlds apart. Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) claim that the question “do we have anything meaningful to say?” should be more placed on our research agendas.

Interpretations for this relevance gap are diverse and multiple, and include, among others: lack of communication and collaboration between scholars and practitioners (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), the structure of the academic world (Pfeffer, 2007), the high degree of standardization and lack of diversity in organizational research and publishing (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013), lacking to capture the empirical complexity of contemporary organizations (Suddaby, Hardy and Huy, 2011), and overreliance on rationality (Starbuck, 2004). Proposals to bridge the gap are propagated at the same levels of diversity, including calls for focus on problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), polymorphic research (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013), practical rationality (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), evidence-based management (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006), engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), or relational scholarship (Bartunek, 2007).

This paper builds on the following thrusts to close the relevance gap:

- 1) A “cognition-in-context” lens (Matthyssens and Vandenbempt, 2003), exemplary for the nexus between process, content and/or context issues (Ketchen et al., 1996), necessitated by complex interactions in high velocity business markets.
- 2) An interdisciplinary lens (Starkey and Madan, 2001), necessitated by the complexity of change processes.
- 3) A sensemaking perspective (Weick, 2009; Neill et al., 2007) given the importance of perception and interpretation when market signals are vague.

The paper focuses on *strategic change*. This is deemed an interesting focal case since issues of change are widely linked to and touched upon in industrial marketing literature. Overall, contributions address the impact of technological changes (Chou and Zolkiewski, 2010), changing buyer-seller relations (Hansen 2009), business market complexity (Neill et al., 2007), and industrial companies’ continuous search for differentiation through innovation and service addition efforts (Matthyssens et al., 2009; Gebauer, 2011). All these issues imply often dramatic changes within the companies (so called “internal alignment”) in order to ensure viable and durable implementation of the revised the market strategy in the long term. Henceforth, strategic change is as high on marketers and marketing researchers’ agenda as it is on management scholars’ agenda. B2B Marketing executives experience a constant need for transformational change given the high level of market turbulence they face (Wiersema 2013). However, the field of strategic change is in itself affected by the relevance gap (Self et al., 2007).

In this paper we put up a reasoning on how fundamental changes to our dominant discourse on strategic change might be needed in order to close this relevance gap. We question the fundamental assumptions of our field’s dominant research approach towards strategic change under *real contexts*, and redirect attention to a mindful organizing perspective to understand

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandembemt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

meaningful process elements of strategic change. We thereby intend to be *provocative* and offer an alternative change research avenue elaborating on the role of mindful organizing and complexity theory. The processes of mindful organizing identified by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) will act as thrusts for our essay.

First we identify the characteristics of the present “dominant discourse” on strategic change. In the second section, a mindful organizing approach will be proposed. In the conclusive section the main thrusts of a new approach towards mindful theorizing on strategic change and its implications for academic research will be made explicit.

The dominant discourse on strategic change

Strategic change is a highly complex and equivocal process that continues to receive a lot of attention from strategic marketing and organization/management researchers. These fields’ understanding of the processes that enable organizations to successfully change their strategies, remains nevertheless suboptimal. Failure rates of change programs are generally deemed very high. Indeed, the 70% failure rate put forward by Beer and Nohria (2000) is widely cited. Somehow, one should not be surprised, given that most strategic change theory has mainly been produced under the discourse of mainstream organization theory – the field’s ‘dominant discourse’ according to Stacey (2011) – and, as a consequence “we do not know enough about how change is actually accomplished” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 568).

Change research’s dominant discourse is grounded in a series of essential ontological and epistemological assumptions, focusing on stability, rational choice, system predictability and a dualistic logic (Stacey, 2011). As a result, current thinking within this field does not sufficiently capture the reality of strategic change (Chia, 1999). Examples include planned change theories such as Lewin’s three-stage model of change (Lewin, 1947), as well as

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

punctuated equilibrium models of change (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). We highlight three shortcomings that are particularly narrowing our genuine process understanding of strategic change.

First, the dominant discourse assumes formative causality whereby the relationship between cause and effect is linear and simple. Assumptions about causality have important implications for the field of strategic change: “how one thinks about causality will have an important impact on how one thinks about strategy and organizational change” (Stacey, 2011, p. 35). Phenomena are assumed to be linear and scholars have developed a “penchant to linearize” (Begun, 1994, p. 330): “organizational scholars seldom come to grips with nonlinear phenomena. Instead, we tend to model phenomena as if they were linear in order to make them tractable” (Anderson et al. 1999, p. 233). These assumptions do not fit the dynamic and complex process reality of strategic change. The dominant discourse does not characterize strategic change as emergent, unpredictable, simultaneous and eventually resulting in unintended consequences, though rather as planned, predictable and intentional (Stacey, 1995; Stacey, 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Second, as a result of the misfit between dominant assumptions and organizational reality, many strategic change theories are irrelevant to practitioners standing on the frontline when it comes to changing their organizations or divisions for the better or to re-aligning them to a new market strategy (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Begun, 1994; Hambrick, 1994; Starbuck, 2004; Vaara & Durand, 2012). As argued by Starbuck (2004, pp. 1245-1246), the field continues to be “inundated with statistically significant, but meaningless noise” and according to Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 569) “we are lacking the vocabulary to meaningfully talk about change as if change mattered”. As a result, they argue, change programs crafted in the dominant discourse do not produce change at all. Approaching strategic change with this ‘meaningless noise’ and inappropriate vocabulary results in categorical knowing and

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

automatic labeling processes, whereby the dominant logic's assumptions rule change agent's interpretation processes. The dominant discourse adopts a macro perspective on strategy processes, overseeing critical process determinants in building accurate interpretations, such as sensemaking, conversation, emotion and identity. Notable exceptions in the business marketing field are Neill et al. (2007) and Matthyssens & Vandenbempt (2003), which claim for the uncovering of marketers' cognitive frames and sensemaking interpretations when studying changes in market strategies. The discourse thus adheres to a dualistic logic based on paradox elimination and uncertainty avoidance, interpreting the future as an already unfolded implicate order.

Third, espoused equilibrium assumptions sound esoteric in today's dynamic and complex environments (Gebauer, 2011): "simple, equilibrium model assumptions force us to be insulated from reality, particularly as the pace of change in organizations and social forces quickens" (Begun, 1994, p. 331). Organizations are perceived as systems consisting of independent individuals acting as objective observers of the system. In the B2B marketing literature, this 'simple' reality view had been challenged by many authors (see for instance, Håkansson et al (2004). Moreover, IMP-research has clearly demonstrated that business markets display features of networks where companies at different stages of the supply chain are linked to each other with their activity system, resources and solutions, thereby stressing the complexity and unpredictability of reality (see for instance, Ford et al. 2003). More in general, Tsoukas (1998) criticizes the field's discourse for pursuing a "decontextualized ideal" (p.295), searching for universal, general, predictable, and timeless change processes. As such, an objectivist, mechanistic and instrumental approach is applied, favoring abstract models that approximate reality. It is obvious that this dominant discourse gets in the way of a more sophisticated understanding that is crucial for making sense of the interdependent and non-linear nature of strategic change.

Guiette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

Being both highly equivocal and paradoxical (Weick, 1979), strategic change comes with complex interdependencies: unintended outcomes, unexpected twists, simultaneity of different change waves, paradoxical perspectives of change agents and change recipients, and separation in time and space of causes and effects of strategic change, to name a few (Balogun, 2006; Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, & Willmott, 2005; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Chia, 1999; Chia & Holt, 2009; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Van de Ven & Sun, 2011). Mainstream theorizing as depicted above allows little room for focusing on these unexpected effects and unintended consequences that are highly characteristic of strategic change and managerial life (MacKay & Chia, 2013).

This critique on the dominant discourse is also aired by Weick (2011, p.8), stating that “(w)hat is often ‘absent’ in change management is a vivid picture of the flux associated with first-hand experience. Also missing are concepts and hunches that preserve small, subtle details whose foregrounding can produce large consequences” and recently reiterated in a 2013 Academy of Management Journal Special Issue calling for crafting better process theorizing: “the messy, equivocal, and mutually causal nature of organizational situations is systematically reduced to key decisions, actions, events, and states that provide convenient conceptual “resting points” for theoretical causal explanations.” (MacKay & Chia, 2013, p. 208).

In sum, the field’s dominant discourse presupposes predictability, plannability, independence, intentionality, causality, categorical knowing, linearity, and controllability. We rather adhere to complexity theory’s assumptions of emergence, moment-to-moment awareness, interdependence, unintentionality, a-causality, perceptual knowing, non-linearity, uncontrollability and highlight unintended outcomes, surprise, equivocality, emergence, simultaneity of change processes, and path dependence (Burnes, 2005; Carlisle & McMillan, 2002; Chia, 1999; Griffin, Shaw, & Stacey, 1998; Stacey, 2011; Weick, 2009). As such, a

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandembemt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

complexity perspective yields a more accurate representation of the process and dynamics of complex phenomena such as strategic change (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Since we emphasize the descriptive rather than predictive power of theory, realism and pragmatism of underlying assumptions are pivotal. The bottom line is that dynamics of strategic change processes are better depicted by complexity-based assumptions of mindful organizing, leading to theories of change that are relevant for (marketing) managers.

Mindful organizing for a better process understanding of strategic change

Mindful organizing refers to a set of adaptive organizational capabilities focusing on enhanced distinction making through awareness and attention, preventing shifts from perception to conception which threaten rich awareness of discriminatory detail (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Mindful organizing is characterized by processes of paying attention and anticipating weak cues, and countering dominant ways of thinking. It further entails rising awareness of system interdependencies, learning from and bouncing back after failure, and proactively stimulating decision making process flexibility.

Mindfulness, rooted in both Western and Eastern conceptualizations, is defined as “a state of consciousness in which attention is focused on present-moment phenomena occurring both externally and internally” (Dane, 2011, p. 1000). Mindfulness is characterized by unbiased receptivity; nonconceptual, nondiscriminatory and nonjudgmental awareness; and present-oriented flexible consciousness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). ‘Mindful organizing’ then refers to a set of adaptive organizational capabilities focusing on enhanced distinction making through awareness and attention, preventing shifts from perception to conception which threaten rich awareness of discriminatory detail (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006, 2007).

Guiette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

We advance ‘mindful organizing’ as a core perspective in order to thoroughly understand the process of strategic change. In fact, based upon research in ‘high reliability organizations’ (HRO), Weick and colleagues have developed the organizational level of analysis construct of collective mindfulness. Collective mindfulness builds on the assumption that any familiar event is known imperfectly and contains novel elements, unveiling the complexity and reality of impermanence in organizing (Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999). A series of at least five processes for mindful organizing that “provide the cognitive infrastructure that enables simultaneous adaptive learning and reliable performance” have been identified (Weick et al., 1999, p.81). We pull extant organizational mindfulness research out of its HRO and safety context - such as nuclear power plants or wildland firefighting and apply the perspective to strategic change processes. Mindful organizing represents an insightful and under-researched area that may prove extremely helpful in generating insights in complex processes (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012) such as the alignment of the organization towards more value added offerings (Matthyssens et al. 2009) or the establishment of new business models (Teece, 2010; Chesbrough, 2010). The entrance and acceptance of mindfulness in the strategic marketing field is however particularly low. Groundbreaking research by Karl Weick and colleagues did not proliferate yet.

To illustrate the relevance of mindful organizing on process understanding of strategic change, we focus on the three anticipative processes and two reactive processes of mindful organizing identified by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) and argue how these organizational processes may contribute to this endeavor, while implicitly assuming a complexity-based perspective on organizing. These processes are processes of paying attention and anticipating weak cues (*preoccupation with failure*), countering dominant ways of thinking (*reluctance to simplify interpretations*), rising awareness of system interdependencies (*sensitivity to operations*), learning from and bouncing back after failure (*commitment to resilience*), and

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

proactively stimulating decision making process flexibility (*deference to expertise*) (Vogus, 2011; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick, et al., 1999). Particularly, in the case of market strategy and business model innovation in business networks, these mindfulness triggers seem appropriate. The case of business networks, a cornerstone of the industrial network approach (IMP) is illustrative for this. A business marketer has to interpret the network and draw a network picture (Ramos et al. 2013) based on weak cues given their continuous and unpredictable evolution and unidentifiable boundaries (Abrahamsen et al. 2012). Power balances and communication lines are continuously shifting, and actors are increasingly intertwined, leading to the necessity to be sensitive to interdependencies. In these nets, change management implies the attraction of new actors, a re-shaping of liaisons, and new influence strategies and deepening out of ties. Recent studies show that business and industrial markets need to interpret, realign and re-shape their business networks when implementing radically new business models (Van Bockhaven et al. 2013). We will now look at each of these processes more in detail.

First, mindful organizing is about focusing organizational attention to weak cues, unexpected events and discriminatory detail (Weick et al., 1999). B2B studies show how, for instance, the dynamic capacity of industrial companies need to be enhance in order to initiate value innovation (Berghman et al. 2012). Scholars pinpoint how marketers overwhelmed by a multitude of stimuli and information that is presented daily and are challenged to select those cues to respond, and construct their field of perception (Wiersema, 2013). Rather than *reacting* in automatic ways, mindful organizing entails a deeper awareness and choice as to what cues are important to *respond* to. In processes of strategic change, mindful organizing and its capability to focus on weak cues highlights the emergent nature of strategic change, by directing attention to potentially unintended consequences and unanticipated events. Even though strategic change programs are planned by management teams, its implementation is

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

fraught with issues, bottlenecks and opportunities that are emerging during the change journey. These may present themselves initially as weak cues prior to developing into crises. Being mindful of capturing soft signals determines how the strategic change process unfolds over time. Mindful organizing induces “the capability to comprehend unexpected events that evolve rapidly in unexpected ways” (Weick & Roberts, 1993, p. 366) and expands knowledge of the “imagined deemed possible” in contexts of strategic change (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). By being mindful of unexpected outcomes of change and simultaneously ‘anomalizing’ expected outcomes, which over time may have become less desired than initially planned, a mindful organizing perspective adds a better process understanding of strategic change.

Second, Tsoukas and Chia (2002, pp. 571, italics added) argue that “only a *direct perception of reality* will enable one to get a glimpse of its most salient characteristics – its constantly changing texture, its indivisible continuity, the conflux of the same with the different over time.” A mindful organizing perspective overcomes simplifications, ‘pre-interpretation’ of the universe, tendencies to normalize unexpected events, the grip of the *invisible hand* of expectations, as well as blind spots created by expectations. Bottom line is that mindful organizing prevents shifting from perceptual processing to conceptual processing and from applying irrelevant mental frameworks to novel situations. A mindful organizing perspective suspends automatic labeling processes by forcing awareness to stay in the present situation. This perspective helps in adopting a beginner’s mind that has no access to existing constellations of recipes that predicted action in past circumstances. Especially in business markets industry recipes have to be broken when companies seek value innovation (Matthyssens et al. 2006). Rather, with its mindset on the complex and emergent nature of organizing (Weick et al., 1999), a mindful organizing approach surfaces taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in organizational schemata and calls for assessing whether these assumptions fit the situation and context faced, opening the door for unlearning (Day, 2002;

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

Sinkula, 2002) irrelevant assumptions and marketing practices adopted in the past. Adopting a mindful organizing lens to strategic change leads to a better understanding of the impact of expectations on change processes, as well as a deeper cross-understanding (Huber & Lewis, 2010) of change agent and change recipient in aligning their mental models during the change process. In this sense, mindful organizing is susceptible to cultivate cognitive complexity among organizational members and to broaden their thought-action repertoire. Scrutinizing underlying assumptions of an organization's habitual way of doing things, mindful organizing will reveal the impact of collective emotions (Huy, 2012) on strategic change processes. Mindful organizing represents in this context a moderating capability to surface underlying assumptions that affect both cognitive and affective processing in strategic change processes. So far in business marketing a cognitive information processing approach prevailed in marketing orientation literature with few but notable exceptions (Neill et al., 2007).

Third, mindful organizing reminds organizations of their system's strong interdependency and complexity, and recognizes that organizations are fuzzy systems that are tightly coupled and prone to continual interruptions. Mindful organizing fosters situational awareness, a collective mind that includes the collective knowledge or an integrated big picture of relevant operations (Vaughan, 1998; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). By placing a premium on detection, differentiation and watchfulness, mindful organizing promotes deep understanding of interdependency between various organizational systems. Enriched awareness of organizational interdependencies becomes highly relevant to grasp the simultaneous nature of change and to better understand how different change processes, initiated in different places and at different times, can either cross-fertilize or disrupt each other. Realizing the interdependence between organizing and strategic change, mindful organizing points to cultivating a higher awareness of how change processes generate impact beyond their intended outcomes. A mindful organizing perspective focuses attention on the intricate

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

intertwining or interconnectivity of elements within a system and between a system and its environment. In the context of managing change, organizations require a thorough understanding not only of the complexity of change but also of the deep underlying structures that talk change into existence into the organization. Being sensitive to these complex deep structures of change sensemaking, enables an organization to be situationally aware of how change is enacted throughout the organization. Sensitivity to operations means being responsive to the messy reality in which organizations operate (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), it implies seeing what is actually happening, giving undivided attention to interruptions. Or, as argued by Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 579): “managers need to refine their sensitivity to be able to *perceive* subtle differences.” (*italics in original*).

Fourth, for organizations to be committed to resiliency means to be able to cope with surprises, to bounce back from failure and to be capable of absorbing change (Weick, et al., 1999). When change is viewed as a linear process of implementing a rational plan with intended outcomes, resiliency proves to be of little use. However, adopting a more mindful stance on strategic change, i.e. acknowledging its fuzziness, equivocality, unexpected outcomes and troubled sensemaking, the ability to improvise, to deal with surprise and recover from unintended outcomes becomes pivotal in implementing strategic change. “To focus on resilience is to acknowledge that surprises will occur that are not of your own making, that unintended consequences will always occur, that nothing stays the same, and that pleasant experiences are short lived.” (Weick & Putnam, 2006, p. 285).

Finally, underspecification of structure that allows for deference to expertise, allows the emergence of flexibility by introducing episodes of organized anarchy (Weick, et al., 1999). As such organizations move towards a garbage can model of decision making, recognizing the impermanence of hierarchical and control-inducing decision making structures. In a context of strategic change, highly equivocal realities cannot be management optimally by

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

rigid structures. As such, mindful organizing creates a flexibility in decision making processes that reflects the complexity and messiness of change processes.

The adoption of a complexity-based perspective to strategic change – as reflected by mindful organizing - is nevertheless challenging. A classic example of this difficulty is illustrated through the experiences of Michelin when developing its Michelin Fleet Solutions in the beginning of this decennium (Renault, Dalsace & Ulaga, 2010) . This strategic move entailed an in-depth reorientation of its B2B market strategy and the development of a new business model. From a traditional change perspective, this strategic change seems rather straightforward with Michelin moving from a product supplier to a service supplier. From a complexity-based perspective, one starts to focus on the difficulties encountered during the period of change. The five processes discussed earlier need deliberate managerial attention in order to break through existing frames, and involve a difficult shift of awareness from the center to the periphery. For a number of years before the change, the industry of tires was heavily commoditized with shrinking margins and increasing service costs. With hindsight, it was evident that there were signals that companies should change and reinvent themselves in order to become profitable again. However, these “strong” signals were overlooked by the traditional tire companies making sense of the market trends through an equally strong conceptual perception of customers, suppliers, distributors and competitors (we sell “tires”; we are a “tire” company). The newly developed customer proposition (we sell “kilometers”; we are a “solutions” company) failed initially to materialize. It was only when management changed the internal organization and mindset, through experimentation and empowerment, that Michelin came to grasp the full complexity of the new market offering (including the interdependencies between Michelin and its traditional partners in the industry). As from that moment, the effectiveness of the new Michelin organization took off. Michelin fleet solution is nicely illustrating the importance of adopting a mindful perspective during change process.

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

For theory development, this allows for better understanding and framing of the micro processes of change. For practitioners, it gives a more complex recipe for action and attention when changing complex social systems such as organizations.

At this current stage, a mindful organizing perspective could offer our field a picture of “what might be” (Burnes, 2005, p. 86), paving the way for constructing and enacting novel perspectives. As managers and practitioners look at academic scholars for help in making sense of the complexity of strategic management & organization (Schultz & Hatch, 2005), theories should enable managers and organizations to choose from different lenses on strategic change and allowing the creation of meaningful images of organizations.

Conclusion: implications of mindful organizing for relevant academic research

For theorizing on strategic change to become managerially more relevant, attention needs to be focused on its underlying micro-processes. We proposed that the organizational capability of ‘mindful organizing’ focuses attention on these micro-processes of change and as a consequence unveils the complexity of change processes. Moving away from mainstream perspectives of ‘managing change’ to more processual ‘mindful organizing’, relaxes the dominant ‘controllability’ assumption. This opens the door to more ‘on the spot’ interpretations of the situational and contextual equivocality induced by strategic change as well as to interpretations that are decoupled from cognitive frames imposed by the field’s dominant assumptions. As such, mindful organizing emphasizes the becoming of change, the change work, the change processes, the interpretation and sensemaking of organizational actors, the lived reality of managers. Cultivating mindful organizing “is a more effective approach for dealing with the unintended consequences of action in a messy and constantly

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

changing world” (MacKay & Chia, 2013, p. 226). Theorizing on change that “invites us to acknowledge, rather than reduce, the complexity of the world” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010, p. 3), likely results in more practical and relevant theories for managers coping turbulence and unpredictable situations. In sum, mindful organizing gives ‘managing’ change a different dimension; one that is inspired by the complexity and equivocality of change processes as faced by organizational actors and managers. Mindful organizing brings back attention from rationalizing, conceptualizing, predicting, planning and forecasting to what is emerging here and now. Mindful changing focuses on the intrinsic nature of events as they occur, on the unfolding of phenomena while respecting and conserving their equivocal nature. And it is through mindfully leveraging this equivocality that strategic change can be accessed, sensed and understood. Theorizing on strategic change from this mindful organizing perspective enables managers to grasp the equivocal mess that is characteristic of the becoming of organizational alignment, as well to relax “the artificially-imposed structures of relations; the loosening up of organization” (Chia, 1999, p. 211) that contributes to the relevance gap.

In order to advance the field of strategic marketing, management and organization in producing in-depth process understanding of strategic change we advance a series of important implications for academic research.

Theorizing under a complexity discourse. In theorizing on the process of strategic change, we urge scholars to adopt complexity-based ontological and epistemological assumptions on the nature of organizing and change. We thus not only advocate a complexity-perspective in terms of the systems studied, though also second-order complexity (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001) as a frame to organize strategic organization’s thinking on strategic change. A major implication lies in the further adoption of **narrative modes of thinking** and research methods to theorize on strategic change. Developing meaningful process understanding of strategic change rests on adopting research methods that allow for ‘**thick descriptions**’ and richness of

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandembemt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

process data. Approaching strategic change as a shift in conversations, discourse and the creation of new organizational speech (Ford, 1999), strengthens the call for narrative and interpretive approaches in research on strategic change processes. To produce stronger process theories that are more relevant for practitioners, scholars need to focus more on **dialectical process models** that are associated with a dynamic social constructivist view (Langley et al., 2013) following an **abductive logic**.

Sensemaking during the process of strategic change. Research on sensemaking of strategic change is not novel. Its focus, however, was predominantly on sensemaking of upper echelons on the sensing and interpreting of external environmental changes that would cause strategic change programs to be developed. We strongly advocate to balance this research by better understanding the sensemaking process *during* the implementation of the change process, and understand often paradoxically **emerging dynamic sensemaking processes** of both change agents and change recipients. How do employees make sense of imposed and emerging change? How does this sensemaking process affect the outcome of strategic change? How do change agents make sense of unintended and unexpected hiccups along the change journey? To what extent are organizations aware whether their initial change program still yields the desired consequences? These questions are essential in theorizing on strategic change in order to develop theories that are interesting and relevant for practitioners.

A mindful organizing perspective to theorize on strategic change. The field should leverage extant mindful organizing research to advance its process understanding of strategic change. First, in researching strategic change, scholars should focus more on processes of **attention direction** of organizational members during unexpected market events. To what extent and how early in the process do organizations recognize emerging, unplanned and unexpected events? How do organizations respond to emerging events? Second, **interpretation of change processes** should play a much more protagonist role in strategic change research:

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

understanding how organizations and their members truly interpret change processes, while unraveling underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of strategic change and exposing these assumptions to scrutiny. Third, any research on strategic change should acknowledge the interdependent, path dependent and self-emergent nature of strategic change processes. This requires departure from too simplistic linear causality assumptions that decontextualize the change process researched, towards narrative methods that reflect the richness and intricacies of the strategic change process.

Adopting a mindful organizing perspective to strategic change recognizes that strategic change emerges from local interactions without a plan or blueprint and therefore focuses on the emergent process that unfolds during implementation of strategic change. And this is in line with Mintzberg's assertion that: "managing is firstly and fundamentally the task of becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing, chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention. It is creating order out of chaos." (Chia, 2005, p. 1092). This is what a mindful organizing perspective has to offer for producing richer and more relevant theories on strategic change.

Finally, theorizing that takes a mindful organizing perspective seriously acknowledges the importance of practical wisdom above predictive power. Our field's dominant discourse predicates theorizing that fully articulates and predicts organizational phenomena. From a managerial perspective, this is highly unrealistic. Adopting mindful organizing as guiding principle for theorizing, scholars need to acknowledge the fact that our knowledge is inherently limited (Tsoukas, 2005). Acknowledging this indefinite, contextualized and temporary character of knowledge, theorizing on strategic change can focus on **understanding and describing the deeply rooted micro-processes of change** in order to help managers in understanding and making sense of change's complexity, contextuality and equivocality in a perceptual and mindful way.

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

Overall this essay highlights that closing relevance gaps in our field cannot be done with *quick fix* recipes. The endeavor implies a fundamental re-framing of the way we look at firms and managers. It also implies different theoretical underpinnings and more interpretive research approaches to tap the richness in real-life business settings. By focusing on one area we have shown how such an effort might proceed. Surely, this is also the biggest limitation of this essay: we focus on one sub domain only and cannot claim having addressed nor closed *the* relevance gap in strategic business marketing.

Guette, A., Matthyssens, P., Vandenbempt, K. (2014). Organizing mindfully for relevant process research on strategic change. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29, 610 - 618

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