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Top Management Team and Middle Managers

Making Sense of Leadership

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This study provides insight about the process of top management teams' (TMTs') sensemaking about leadership of middle managers—a process that has so far been neglected by researchers. In a longitudinal case study design, the authors analyzed observational data from 23 TMT meetings and transcripts from interviews with TMT members. Results indicate that TMT sensemaking consisted of images of middle managers, the TMT self-image, and reflection on action and action planning. Furthermore, the importance of TMT unity in actions toward middle managers is highlighted as an important aspect of TMT leadership. It is suggested to incorporate TMT sensemaking about leadership, as well as actual leadership actions toward middle managers, as processes for explaining how TMT composition influences organizational performance.

Keywords: *top management team; middle managers; case study; sensemaking; leadership*

During the 1980s, both scholars and managers started to emphasize the importance of top management teams (TMTs) for steering strategic decision making and influencing organizational performance. Different

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from other types of teams, a TMT has been defined as “the aggregate informational and decisional entity through which the organization operates and which forms the inner circle of executives who collectively formulate, articulate, and execute the strategic and tactical moves of the organization” (Klenke, 2003, p. 1024). Predominantly drawing on upper-echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), a vital stream of research has emerged that relates TMT characteristics to strategic decisions and organizational performance. Although this research has succeeded in underlining the general value of a team-based approach to strategic decision making, reviews have repeatedly concluded that findings are inconsistent, especially concerning the relationship between TMT composition and organizational performance (Cannella & Holcomb, 2005; Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004; Certo, Lester, Dalton, & Dalton, 2006).

Critics of upper-echelons research have diagnosed two interrelated areas of concern: TMT researchers’ reliance on databases and large-scale surveys and the related neglect of processes that link TMT composition and decision making to organizational performance (Pettigrew, 1992; Priem, Lyon, & Dess, 1999). To gain more insight into these processes, qualitative and longitudinal research methods have been advocated, the use of which should lead to a more realistic picture of how strategic decisions are made in real-world firms (Cannella & Monroe, 1997; Carpenter et al., 2004; Samra-Fredericks, 2000). This article aims to respond to both concerns by presenting a qualitative study of a process through which TMTs influence organizational performance.

We used a case study design to study the TMT of a medium-sized Dutch public organization. The first author attended 23 TMT meetings during 6 months and conducted in-depth interviews with individual TMT members. She was also allowed full access to the organization’s documents and the minutes of TMT meetings. We expected that the TMT would use its meetings to exchange information on various strategic issues, to discuss different courses of action, and to make decisions, but an unexpected theme emerged that, without being formally scheduled, repeatedly turned up during the meetings and also appeared unprompted during the interviews. This was the TMT’s responsibility for ensuring decision implementation through the next echelon. Intrigued by the obvious importance of this leadership task for a TMT, we decided to follow this thread more thoroughly.

The concept of sensemaking is used to explain how the TMT understands and acts on its leadership role (see Weick, 1995). More specifically, we analyzed how TMT members collectively make sense of their relationship with middle managers (MMs) and reason how this can be expected to influence

decision implementation. In the following parts of this article, we describe the role of TMT leadership toward MMs and identify the absence of a relational dimension between TMT and MMs as a gap in existing TMT research. Then, we emphasize TMT sensemaking as a key process and formulate our research question. Thereafter, we describe our research methods and analysis of the qualitative data. Finally, we present our results, discuss these in light of existing theory, and formulate suggestions for further research.

TMT Leadership Toward MMs

Leadership can be defined as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2006, p. 8). The concept of strategic leadership, more specifically, is used to designate leadership at the top of organizations and has been described as a strategic and relational activity between leaders and their immediate followers (Hambrick & Pettigrew, 2001; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Upper-echelons theory has focused on strategic leadership as a team-based activity and has emphasized the strategic aspect of the TMT task. However, this theory tends to downplay the role of relational aspects of leadership (Cannella & Monroe, 1997). This relational aspect of strategic leadership has been extensively studied on the level of the individual CEO, for example, by investigating the effectiveness of transactional and transformational styles (see Yukl, 2006, for an overview of leadership styles). As this research illustrates, relational aspects of top leadership are key for ensuring decision implementation and organizational performance.

TMT researchers have mainly focused on intra-TMT factors, such as the team’s composition or decision-making process, and have studied how these factors relate to organizational performance (Certo et al., 2006). With this strong internal focus, it seems almost as if upper-echelons research has conceived of the TMT as an independent, not to say omnipotent, entity that directly influences organizational performance without any intermediary process. Realists, or those with senior executive experience, might find this all the more surprising, as the political reality within organizations clearly shows how much TMTs depend on MMs (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Currie & Procter, 2005). As stated by Weick (1979), it is the pattern of relationships within organizations, not the fact that “great men” sit at the top of them, which makes it possible to exert influence and enhance organizational performance—a statement that is clearly in accord with relational views of power in organizations (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006).

Managing the interface with MMs can be considered an important aspect of the TMT task because of the catalytic role that MMs play in the implementation of strategic decisions (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In this article, the term *middle manager* (or *MM*) is used to denote the management layer between the TMT and first-level supervisors (i.e., managers of divisions or subsidiaries; Dopson, Stewart, & Risk, 1992). MMs are important for creating alignment in organizations and influencing organizational performance (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Currie & Procter, 2005; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). They are also found to be able to redirect strategies, delay implementation, reduce the quality of implementation, and sometimes even sabotage it completely (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). This can occur in situations where MMs' self-interest is at stake, when they perceive the new strategy as flawed, or when they are incapable of implementing it (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). Thus, to be effective, top managers have to find ways to gain MMs' commitment or, at least, their compliance.

TMT Sensemaking About Leadership

Strategic leadership on the TMT level implies that the process of influencing others to achieve shared objectives is carried out by more than one person. Thus, TMT leadership contains an extra, collective dimension as compared to leadership on the individual-CEO level. TMT members will have to coordinate and align their individual ideas and actions to develop a common understanding of their leadership approach that they carry out collectively. However, to our knowledge, no studies have reported how TMT members understand this leadership aspect of their task. In our initial observations, we observed that leadership issues were indeed surfacing during TMT interaction, and we decided to study this issue more systematically. To understand and describe how leadership issues play a role in TMT interaction, we use the concept of sensemaking.

Sensemaking is a process through which individuals make sense of uncertainties in the environment through interaction with others (Weick, 1979, 1995). This way, they negotiate among themselves an acceptable account of what is going on. This process of interpreting events to create meaning is triggered by perceptions that events are somehow ambiguous, surprising, or confusing (Maitlis, 2005). Because TMTs must comprehend a great deal of vague, ambiguous, and often conflicting information from many sources (Edmondson, Roberto, & Watkins, 2003), including information related to MMs, sensemaking seems an adequate concept to capture characteristics of TMT interaction about leading MMs. Recent research

shows that a team context is particularly suitable for sensemaking, as the interdependence and team identity create a setting in which team members interpret their collective experiences and construe attributions of those experiences (Robertson, 2006).

Sensemaking is intimately connected to action: Action both precedes interpretation and meaning giving and follows it. Weick (1995) has used the concept of enactment to describe the phenomenon that when people act according to the sense they see, they construct parts of their environment. Thus, sensemaking is an iterative process of meaning giving and enactment (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Moreover, characteristics of the sensemaking process are consequential for the actions that follow (Maitlis, 2005). Sensemaking is also adaptive over time when truths of the moment change, develop, and take shape over time: It is only when the content of sensemaking is both believed and doubted that systems are able to learn and update their actions and meanings in ways that adapt to changes in the system and its context (Weick et al., 2005).

TMT sensemaking has been studied during strategic change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), in the context of shared cognitions about strategy (Knight et al., 1999), and in terms of the interpretative ambiguity that results from cognitive diversity (Kilduff, Angelmar, & Mehra, 2000). However, TMT sensemaking about leadership has, to our knowledge, never been addressed in previous research. The fact that sensemaking is a social process implies that at least two dimensions can be distinguished: the content and the process of sensemaking. We will focus mainly on the content of sensemaking (i.e., what sense is made) because we are interested in the concrete substance of a TMT's understanding of its leadership role. Therefore, we come to the following research question: What is the content of TMT sensemaking about leading MMs, and how can this be expected to influence decision implementation?

Method

We studied the TMT of a public organization in the Netherlands using a longitudinal case study design (Yin, 2003) with a 6-month period of observation. This qualitative approach for studying TMT interaction is in accordance with suggestions from several TMT researchers (Carpenter et al., 2004; Samra-Fredericks, 2000). In our case, a qualitative approach was especially appropriate because we were interested in TMT sensemaking and the TMT members' understandings of their leadership role (Brown & Gioia, 2002).

As noticed by Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002), in-depth case studies of top managers in action are inherently risky because they require high-quality access to senior people and often highly confidential data over time. Because gaining access to TMTs is difficult, we used the researchers' personal contacts to approach the TMT. We asked if one of the researchers could attend its weekly board meetings for 6 months and sought each member's cooperation in being interviewed about the functioning of the TMT. We informed them about the goal of the study, stating that we were interested in strategic decision making in TMTs and the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the team. We gained approval to conduct observations and interviews under strict conditions of confidentiality.

Our focal process of interest, TMT sensemaking, is inferred from observations collected during the weekly meetings as well as from the individual interviews. Although sensemaking activities cannot be expected to be limited to official meetings, we are confident that we have covered the most substantial part of this process, as the observed TMT's weekly meetings were very extensive, lasting for 4 to 6 hours, and because managers indicated that a substantive part of their interaction took place during these meetings.

The TMT and the Organization Under Study

We promised anonymity for the organization as a condition for reporting, so we refer to the studied organization as Alpha and will not reveal any details regarding the type of organization or the content of any of the strategic topics that the TMT discussed. Although this is a disadvantage for the reader (Yin, 2003), we think that even without this information, the study provides unique and valuable insights into TMT interaction.

Alpha has about 3,000 employees and operates in the public domain in the Netherlands. The organization can best be characterized as a professional bureaucracy, which implies that Alpha relies, in its structural configuration, on the skills and knowledge of its operating professionals (Mintzberg, 1983). This structure is common in general hospitals, educational institutions, public accounting firms, social work agencies, and some production firms (Mintzberg, 1983). Although Alpha operates in the public domain, the TMT has considerable freedom and opportunity for deciding on strategy, budget, size, and activities. The environment in which the organization operated during the research period can be characterized as rather turbulent: Government regulations for the industry in which the organization operated were subject to major changes that affected the choice of appropriate strategies with which to survive the turbulence.

The executive board of this organization was a TMT consisting of three members: the president, the vice president, and the chief operating officer (COO). All were male and roughly around the age of 50. Given the size of the organization, the size of this TMT is not uncommon in the Netherlands. Previous research on the top 30 companies in the Netherlands (which have an average number of employees about 10 times larger than Alpha) indicated that even in these companies, the average TMT size is five (Glunk, Heijltjes, & Olie, 2001). In this team, only the COO had reached his current position through a career within the organization. The other members had entered from outside. This TMT operated as a social entity and could, therefore, be studied as an intact team. The TMT reported to the supervisory board of the organization. Although the president had the final responsibility, the team functioned on a basis of equality. This structure, where power is shared between members of the TMT, has become increasingly popular in organizations (Yukl, 2006).

The tasks of the TMT at Alpha, as stated in official organizational sources, can be described as having the final responsibility for the policy of the organization, including appointing key personnel, taking the initiative for major organizational changes (e.g., growth and restructuring), and managing finances and centralized staff functions. At the beginning of the observational period, the team had been working together for about 1 year. The president was mainly responsible for the external contacts of the organization, the vice president for finance and human resource management, and the COO for the internal operations of the organization. MMs in Alpha were responsible for divisions of the organization. Within the limits of general rules and procedures, these units operated with considerable autonomy. MMs formed the link between the TMT and their operational divisions, having to combine demands from the top and from the bottom.

Data Sources

Direct observation. The first author observed the 23 weekly board meetings of the TMT during 6 months in the period from January to June 2005. Since tape or video recording was not allowed, the researcher took detailed notes during the meetings. These notes consisted, as far as possible, of verbatim records, following recommendations of Bachiochi and Weiner (2002). To ensure accuracy and internal validity, the notes were checked with the meeting's secretary, which resulted in quasi-verbatim transcripts of the meetings. In addition to these transcripts, general impressions of each meeting were written down during and immediately after each meeting.

Information about one meeting that could not be observed was gained from the minutes of this meeting as well as through oral explanations from the meeting's secretary.

TMT meetings were held weekly and lasted about 4 to 6 hours. In addition to the three TMT members, a secretary and the head of the strategy department attended the meetings. An agenda, typically consisting of about 15 to 20 items, structured the course of the meetings. During most of the meetings, discussion of all items on the agenda was completed. Sometimes, items were adjourned to the following week, usually when a TMT member was absent. Agendas were always structured in the same way. First, the minutes of the previous week's meeting were reviewed and approved. Second, strategic issues were discussed, which might involve discussing a document, preparing for a meeting or talk, sharing information about events that had occurred, or discussing scenarios for the future. Further agenda items were scheduled according to topics relevant at that moment, either by TMT members themselves or at the request of others. Regularly, other people, including MMs, were invited to the TMT meetings to attend to a specific agenda item when a particular contribution was required. To coordinate their actions and activities, the TMT members also took time to review and question each other's agendas for the upcoming week, illustrating the importance placed on knowing each other's activities as well as maintaining a sense of collective responsibility.

In observational research, it is possible that the presence of an observer will influence the situation under study. We are confident that this effect has been minimized during actual observations for several reasons. First, strict confidentiality contracts had to be signed by the researcher that prohibited revealing any sensitive information about the TMT meetings. This increased the likelihood that the TMT members would feel confident enough to follow their normal behavior. Second, because of the large number of meetings that was observed, it would have been extremely inefficient for the team to not act sincerely during the meetings and adjust decisions afterward, without the presence of the researcher. Third, the meeting's secretary, as well as the head of the strategy department, independently indicated that TMT interaction during the observational period did not differ from earlier TMT interaction.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with each of the TMT members at two points during the study. The first round took place after five TMT meetings had been observed. These interviews lasted about 1 hour. This timing allowed us to test initial observations during the meetings and to

gain knowledge about the way in which TMT members understood past developments and current issues. Interviews were semistructured to ensure that some core questions were addressed on each occasion. For example, we asked each member to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the TMT as well as how effective he considered the team to be. The second interview round took place 4 months after the observational period. During these interviews, preliminary ideas about events and interpretations were discussed with each of the TMT members to check whether they matched the views of the team members. An initial report was presented to the TMT members for comments about 1 month after the second interview. We incorporated the comments in a first version of the article. This was presented to the TMT about 1 year after data collection was completed and elicited no further comments.

Minutes of meetings and other organizational documents. The minutes of the meetings were examined to assist in the analysis of TMT sensemaking. These documentary sources both provided a context for the researcher to understand the issues dealt with and acted as a formal record, in a minimal manner, of the understandings achieved by the participants themselves. We drew on these documentary materials to frame, verify, and occasionally deepen our understanding of the data. In addition to the observer of the meetings, a second member of the research team was allowed full access to Alpha's archive, which ensured a thorough knowledge of the history of the agenda items as well as background information for the meetings.

Data Analysis

To study the content of sensemaking from the TMT's interaction, we followed an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), using the qualitative software package NVivo to code the transcripts of all 23 meetings. It should be noted that most of the meeting time was spent on sharing information, discussing strategic alternatives, and making decisions on important strategic issues. Leadership sensemaking was usually embedded in these discussions. However, in four meetings, the TMT explicitly discussed leadership issues involving MMs, which illustrates the importance and relevance of this topic for the TMT.

Because of the confidentiality of the data, the TMT did not allow us to make use of more than two coders. In the first round of coding, we selected relevant text fragments by searching via NVivo for fragments that mentioned the term *middle manager(s)*, the name of one of the MMs, or the

organizational units led by MMs. Assuming that these fragments would comprise implicit or explicit views of the relations between the TMT and the MMs, they are labeled *episodes of leadership sensemaking*. All of the 23 meetings contained at least one episode of leadership sensemaking, and in total, 79 such episodes were identified. The term *middle manager* and the names of the individual MMs were mentioned 264 times in total in these episodes.

In the second round of coding, we wanted to structure and classify these episodes. Thus, a categorization system was developed that was grounded in the data. Two researchers separately went through all episodes to develop initial ideas about appropriate categories. These initial ideas were compared and discussed until agreement was reached. For example, agreement was reached to have no more than two levels in the categorization system for the categories to contain sufficient units of analysis for an adequate coverage of content. Then, several sensemaking episodes were coded by the two researchers separately at the beginning, middle, and end of the observational period to check the reliability of our categorization system. After some adjustments were made, agreement was reached on a final categorization system, which consisted of a category relating to images of MMs, a category for TMT self-image, and a category relating to action. Using this categorization scheme, all episodes were coded by both researchers; differences were discussed until agreement was reached. Because 1 episode could contain different categories, the total number of times we used a categorization label (241) is higher than the total number of 77 episodes. Table 1 shows these categories, the number of times the category was mentioned in the episodes, and representative examples of text fragments.

Having categorized the episodes, NVivo could generate a matrix that showed for all categories and all meetings the coded text fragments. This allowed us to inspect in detail for every meeting and over the course of the observational period how TMT sensemaking developed over time.

We also analyzed the transcribed interviews to trace the TMT members' individual perspectives on leadership toward MMs. Again, we used NVivo to search for fragments that mentioned the term *middle manager(s)*, the name of one of the MMs, or the organizational units led by MMs. This resulted in 12 episodes in which specific matters that related to leading MMs were discussed. Additionally, we identified 9 episodes in which leading MMs was mentioned more implicitly. For example, when a TMT member talked about the relationship between the TMT and other organizational actors in general, without specifically mentioning MMs, we included this as an episode. All TMT members spontaneously mentioned

Table 1
Categories of Top Management Team (TMT) Sensemaking With Representative Text Examples

Category	# Units	Representative Examples
1. Images of middle managers		
a) as idiosyncratic individuals	77	<p>He locks himself into a position he can't get out of anymore. . . . He is getting himself into trouble. That's right, he's the one we want to keep on board. I see it differently . . . he has a hidden agenda. The . . . in his organizational unit is giving him a headache. His unit is not the easiest . . . I think that [name of middle manager] is doing a tremendous job.</p> <p>Organizational units are very independent. If you propose something that's within the scope of your responsibility, they dig their heels in. I agree, but if you want to get break out of that . . . I don't know . . .</p> <p>What strikes me is that if middle managers don't agree on something, it can drag on and on. . . . They can do whatever they want, but we might come up with something totally different.</p> <p>Middle managers don't want to pull the wagon, so that's why we have to do it and then they dig their heels in.</p> <p>Yes, this is about structures, but not about puppets.</p> <p>I agree.</p> <p>Yes, middle managers must anticipate that they will be closely watched by the TMT. I have talked to . . . He told me that he controls his middle managers by cutting off and opening up the money flow. I find that difficult. It sounds like blackmail and just arbitrariness.</p> <p>Here we are, three people who tend to want to control things. I predict that this is not going to work out very well. As Alpha, we're so busy talking to each other.</p> <p>More for less control!</p> <p>I would consider this a defeat for Alpha when. . . .</p> <p>It's great how things seem to be going, but we're just holding our breath.</p> <p>We are of two minds sometimes.</p> <p>Our task—and especially your task, P—is to establish the contacts and give them the tools, but then we have to pass the ball to the organizational units.</p>
b) as a barrier to decision implementation	41	
c) as organizational element	12	
2. TMT self-image	37	

3. Action	51	<p>I want to warn him that he's underestimating the problem. This is a bit suspicious. We really have to talk with [name of middle manager] about this. Most important is the note about Let's listen to what the middle managers have to say about this.</p>
a) planning		<p>Then, let's prepare what we're going to say to [name of middle manager]. We have to find out how he feels about Maybe we should get the middle managers around the table here monthly or so. This has to be worked out within the organization.</p>
b) reflection	23	<p>In this letter, we need to be sharp. I don't want to give away any control . . . at the same time, you hit a sore spot. What can we do about this? Except talk, talk, talk? We do go into the organizational units with many issues. I can well imagine that leads to stubbornness. Do we want too much? To what extent do we want to interfere into . . . ? Is this because of the way we have started this procedure?</p>

the relationship between TMT and MMs as being important, and all interviews contained at least 2 episodes.

Results and Discussion

In this study, we wanted to identify how a TMT made sense of its leadership role toward MMs as well as make inferences about how this influences decision implementation. In the following section, we describe the analysis of the interviews with TMT members and the transcripts of the meetings. We also discuss the results in light of existing theory and answer the research question.

Results From Interviews: TMT Unity in Actions

During the interviews, the relationship between the TMT and MMs was mentioned in several ways. First, TMT members mentioned the importance of TMT unity in actions toward MMs (6 of 21 episodes). For example, the president noted the importance of consistency in action among TMT members: "Everyone should do the same things in every situation. Otherwise, if you don't operate as a team, middle managers play off the TMT members against each other." Along the same line, the vice president pointed out, "If your employees get the impression that if you say 'turn left,' it can easily be 'right,' because another TMT member might say that, your decisions will not be readily implemented." The vice president also described an example of a situation where he got the impression that the president had said things to MMs that were contrary to what the TMT had decided earlier. His reaction was to immediately confront the president with his impressions, indicating the importance he put on unity in actions by the TMT.

Second, it became clear that all TMT members perceived decision implementation through MMs as an important, yet sometimes problematic, TMT task (5 of 21 episodes). For example, the COO noted, "Decision implementation is often a problem in Alpha. When middle managers don't want something, it is just not going to happen." As the best way to handle this, he stated, "Therefore, it is so important to keep on massaging things and have many bilateral consultations, in order to achieve legitimization for your decisions." He specifically advocated influencing people through one-to-one contacts as compared to formal meetings with all the MMs. The president mentioned a desire for more power sharing between the TMT and MMs. He would like to work with all MMs on the TMT level: "This way, your

decisions will be broadly based, which is beneficial for decision implementation. Now, middle managers perceive themselves as each others competitors.”

The remaining 10 episodes from the interviews dealt with various topics, such as the advantage of having a TMT in place instead of a single manager for dividing tasks: “You can sometimes make a few adjustments to the various roles of the TMT members. If, for example, one member can’t deal with a certain middle manager too well, you could switch certain issues and tasks around.” Furthermore, the COO mentioned, “The TMT has too much on the agenda and actually should make more room to include the people around us.” Despite the limited number of episodes in this analysis to base conclusions on, it seems that leading MMs was a topic that was in the minds of the TMT members. Furthermore, the importance of decision implementation through MMs was mentioned by all TMT members, who also advocated TMT unity in actions toward them for achieving this.

The importance of such unity in action for a TMT is intuitively appealing: To successfully lead MMs, TMT members should be consistent in their actions and act as one to the outside world. Yet this intuitive logic has not been reflected in scientific knowledge on teams. As outlined before, TMT researchers have mainly focused on factors inside the team or external to the organization (Carpenter et al., 2004) and seldom on the relationship between TMT and lower echelons. Research on nonmanagerial teams has also mainly focused on internal team factors (Cohen & Bailey, 1997), and when external activities have been taken into account (e.g., Ancona & Caldwell, 1992), a detailed analysis of how team members coordinate their actions toward others is missing. Some indication for the importance of such a construct exists in Jarzabkowski and Searle’s (2004) concept of TMT collective action, but they, too, neglect the relationship between TMT and others. Although relatively absent in research, the notion seemed important for the TMT we studied. Therefore, we propose to use the term *TMT unity in actions* to designate the process whereby TMT members coordinate their actions toward others in such a way that the team is perceived by others as a unified whole. In the results of the analysis of TMT interaction during the meetings, the importance of TMT unity in actions will be emphasized once more.

Results From Observations: TMT Images of Leadership

The elements of TMT sensemaking that appeared from our categorization (see Table 1) were the images of MMs, the TMT self-image, and action planning and reflection. Below, we will describe these categories in more detail and reflect on their implications.

Images of MMs. The TMT expressed images of MMs in three different ways: generalized images of MMs as a barrier to decision implementation, images of idiosyncrasies of specific MMs, and images of MMs as strategic organizational elements. Sensemaking of MMs as a barrier to decision implementation often occurred as a means to explain why decision implementation did not go as the TMT members would have liked. Thus, it is not surprising that when the TMT talked about the MMs as a group, they were rather critical and perceived the MMs' behavior as resistance toward TMT initiatives. A metaphor that appeared repeatedly clearly illustrates this perceived resistance, namely, the image of the MMs as people who "dig their heels in" as a reaction to TMT initiatives. The president was the first to use it in Meeting 2 in the context of a new project that was launched by the TMT: "When you propose something that is entirely within the scope of your responsibility, then they dig their heels in." Later, in Meetings 11, 12, and 19, the metaphor was mentioned again by the COO and by the head of the strategy department when the TMT members were reflecting on past events and issues that did not go as well as they had expected. Moreover, the TMT assumed that the MMs felt that they "always had to come running up" and that they had a "deeply rooted distrust" of the TMT.

Thus, the TMT, in making sense of MMs' perceived behavior, referred to MMs as one group to understand why decision implementation in Alpha did not always go exactly as the members would like. This observation is in line with the fact that sensemaking occurs whenever the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world (Weick et al., 2005), which was also the case for this TMT. Talking about the MMs in a generalized way implies that the members saw the cause of the MMs' resistance more in the position of the MMs in the organization than in the MMs personally. This can be illustrated by the COO's bringing up the proposition that "middle managers are torn" or "caught in the middle" between the TMT and their organizational units.

In addition to talking about MMs as a group, the TMT discussed the *idiosyncrasies of specific MMs*. Thirty-seven of the 77 units in this category explicitly dealt with one specific MM in the organization about whom the TMT kept worrying because he seemed frequently not to act as the TMT wanted. The remaining 40 units dealt with other MMs, some more than others. In talking about specific MMs, the TMT discussed possible intentions, emotions, and behaviors of the MMs, for example, saying that an MM "did not operate sensibly" or "was disappointed." Where the images of MMs as a barrier to decision implementation were mostly generalized across time and situations, images of individual managers were more closely linked to

certain situations or persons at a specific time. For example, when the TMT wanted an MM who “did not operate sensibly” to be kept within the organization during earlier discussions, members stated that they were willing to let him go later, should that prove more beneficial to the organization as a whole.

Talking about individual MMs focused TMT members’ attention on the human side of these managers as people whose behavior, cognitions, and emotions were at issue. Sometimes this was triggered by negative evaluations of an MM. In another case, when the TMT member perceived an MM to be disappointed with a certain issue, he specifically stated that he had to “manage his expectations” because he wanted to keep him within the organization. Focusing on MMs as individuals during sensemaking can thus lead to tailored actions from which decision implementation could benefit.

TMT members also discussed the function of the MMs as *strategic organizational element*. For example, when a new MM had to be appointed, TMT members discussed the specific requirements for the new appointment. Working on their vision for the organization, they expressed that it would be beneficial to appoint an MM with certain characteristics as well as to design the MM’s organizational function in a certain way. Furthermore, they discussed the future MM position after the restructuring of an organizational unit. In this process, some MMs were perceived to be afraid that their level of responsibilities and involvement in power relations would be reduced to an unacceptable level. The TMT members discussed their need to make clear to these MMs that they did not want this to happen. Discussing MMs as strategic organizational elements allowed the TMT to, once in a while, rethink the position of MMs in the organization. For example, the TMT considered changing the MM position and the specific contents and requirements of the job, if necessary, to adjust to a current or future situation.

Self-image of the TMT. In addition to the TMT’s images of the MMs, our analysis showed references to its self-image. TMT members discussed their identity as a TMT with regard to their leadership role, addressing questions such as “Who are we as a TMT? What should we do as a TMT? Where do we want to go in future?” In doing so, TMT members made sense of their tasks and roles vis-à-vis MMs. For example, they stated that the TMT’s task is to “establish contacts, give them the tools, and then pass the ball to the different departments.” A metaphor that was often used, and is representative of the content of this category, is that the TMT is supposed “to pull the wagon.” This implies the idea that if the TMT does not move the organizational

wagon, no one will do it. Combined with the analysis of the interviews, the self-image of the TMT seems to center on being a couple of very hardworking people, trying to pull everyone in the organization forward. This is considered to be necessary, as the TMT sees the environment as changing in ways that MMs sometimes do not. The fact that this TMT self-image emerged from our categorization as a central concept confirms once again that we have indeed observed sensemaking, as the establishment and maintenance of identity is a core preoccupation in sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Combination of TMT self-image and images of MMs. The TMT members would only rarely make explicit references to a specific leadership approach. However, their dominant ideas about leadership are evident from the images they exchanged. The images of the MMs and the TMT self-image imply views on how to best lead MMs. The main metaphors used—the wagon that the TMT wants to pull and the MMs who dig their heels in—suggests a relationship of two opposing forces in which the TMT keeps on pulling and the MMs resisting. Several times, the TMT members expressed their wish to be supported by MMs in pulling the organizational wagon. In the absence of this happening, the TMT members thought they had to take the lead, something boosted by their self-image as “three people with a tendency to control.” Their orientation to control is further illustrated by some remarks in which they stated that they “do not want to hand over control.” These images of having to take the lead and wanting to be in control point to a preference for a directive leadership approach. When discussing the idiosyncrasies of specific MMs, the TMT referred to a father–child type of relationship. For example, TMT members noted that an MM “is getting himself into trouble, and we have to get him out of it” or that “we should have a firm talk with these organizational units.” This exemplifies a paternalistic leadership notion.

It is interesting that TMT sensemaking about leadership also included discussing what members thought might be the preferred leadership style by the MMs. For example, they assumed that MMs found it an ideal situation when the TMT was on vacation, which was pointed out during the meetings as well as in the interviews. Contrary to the TMT’s own preferences of rather directive and paternalistic leadership approaches, members assumed that the MMs wanted a more laissez-faire type of leadership. These assumptions about the MMs’ preferred leadership approaches are also in line with the perceived resistance from MMs and the expression that MMs have a “deeply rooted distrust” toward the TMT. The discrepancy between the TMT’s images of leadership (directive, paternalistic) and the leadership model the TMT assumed to be desired by MMs (laissez-faire)

was an important trigger for TMT leadership's being a recurrent theme in the meetings and formed the need for continued sensemaking.

Thus, it appears from our observations of the TMT meetings as well as from the interviews that the TMT members exchanged images of MMs and themselves to construct shared images that helped them to make sense of their leadership role. They did not explicitly discuss these images. Usually, a certain image would be mentioned by a TMT member in the first place, after which the expressed image (e.g., the corrective father-child notion or the directive idea of the wagon that has to be pulled forward) was readily accepted by the other team members. When analyzing the observations over time, we saw not only that certain ideas were proposed and evolved into shared images but also that certain images reappeared at later moments. Thus, we noted a tendency among TMT members to invoke established images to make sense of ongoing events.

It is interesting to note that we did not observe changes in images of the MMs or the TMT itself nor indications of changes in the leadership role. Yet we would think that such changes might occur in situations that can no longer be explained from the established images. Sticking to such images might be counterproductive, especially in situations of change or crisis (Weick, 1979; Weick et al., 2005). This focuses attention on the question of how the TMT responds to discrepant information. In our case, we saw that the TMT noted some discrepancy between what MMs would have preferred but did not use this information to adapt their views and leadership approach. We saw the COO more often referring to what he assumed to be the desired leadership style of MMs (*laissez-faire*) than the others. The other members seemed to trust his perspective given his internal career and used the perceived discrepancy to insist on their own preferred leadership approach. To better understand the dynamics and implications of this process, we will first discuss the enactment part of the sensemaking process.

Action planning and reflection on past actions. A typical feature of sensemaking is its iterative nature with meaning giving and enactment. In analyzing episodes of TMT interaction that related to actions toward MMs, we saw two temporal foci: planning for future actions toward MMs and reflecting about past actions and their results.

Concerning action planning, one conclusion stands out as the most clear: In the view of the TMT, action toward the MMs often necessitates talking. This can be illustrated by the fact that 24 of 51 units of analysis explicitly mentioned that the TMT planned to talk to one or several MMs. Ten other units mentioned a specific strategy to be followed when talking to MMs.

Conversations with MMs were prepared in detail during TMT meetings. The TMT discussed the goal of the conversation, the tone of it, and sometimes, the specific division of roles, which points at the importance of coordinating future actions toward MMs, labeled earlier as TMT unity in actions. That is, to everyone outside the TMT (including MMs), it should be clear that the TMT is unified in its ideas and plans. Even though discussions take place within the boardroom, none of that should be visible externally.

Other action planning units involved writing memos or, on a more complex and abstract level, designing evaluation and incentive systems. In these episodes, action planning included a focus on developing standards with which organizational units could be evaluated and to which incentives could be linked. The prevalence of this type of action planning increased over the course of the observational period. This course of action was mainly triggered by the TMT's images of MMs as a barrier to decision implementation and thoughts about how to overcome resistance and motivate MMs to achieve decision implementation. Several times, TMT members expressed a wish to use more incentives, a transactional leadership notion, with which they hoped to gain MMs' support.

The TMT not only planned future actions but also reflected on past actions. This occurred in 23 units. Reflections were on past actions or behavior of the TMT itself ("I don't think we have endless discussions"; "Shouldn't we have done more here?"), their expectations from MMs ("Maybe we should not expect this from them"), and how they had approached MMs in certain issues ("We have presented that as a possibility, which is different from . . ."). Reflecting about past actions was regularly followed by expressing intentions for the future in terms of planning to communicate better and making things more clear.

In both action categories, we saw the emphasis on direct contact and unity in actions as being the TMT's generic leadership approach. The *directive leadership* image came back in the team's preference for explaining and imposing as compared to listening when preparing its meetings with MMs. The paternalistic image was reflected in subtleties, such as when talking about the tone of voice that would be used in meetings with MMs. Furthermore, the intention to install incentive structures and evaluation mechanisms as means to direct and correct suggests an image of *transactional leadership* as an effective way to achieve decision implementation (Yukl, 2006).

These observations regarding the enactment part of the sensemaking cycle confirm the view that emerged from the analysis of the TMT's images. The TMT appears to act in accordance with the image it holds of its leadership

role. Reflecting on the results of its actions, the TMT confirms the images of the MMs and of itself, deciding to persist in the leadership approach associated with it. Again, looking for trends over time, we were not able to perceive any changes. Discrepant information, in particular about middle managers resisting the approach, seemed to strengthen the earlier adopted patterns of meaning and associated action, rather than to change it.

TMT Sensemaking About Leadership

On the basis of the foregoing, we can answer the first part of our research question (“What is the content of TMT sensemaking about leadership of middle managers?”). As we have illustrated in this article, sensemaking about leadership contains three elements: (a) images of followers and their leadership expectations, (b) self-image and preferred leadership approaches, and (c) the relationship between the two as a basis for action. Consistent with the view on leadership as a relational activity (Vera & Crossan, 2004), TMT sensemaking includes elements from both sides of this relationship: the MMs and the TMT. The category of action is indicative of the fact that meaning giving and action are closely linked in an iterative sequence (Weick, 1979). The presence of the TMT self-image as a category illustrates that identity construction is a basic function of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Our analysis revealed clear links between these categories—between the images of MMs and the self-image, between the two temporal foci for action, and between the images and action categories—suggesting that they form a coherent set of ideas that can be understood as the TMT’s understanding about its leadership role. It was also found that the categories were reiterated over time, with images and actions confirming each other, and that there was a strong agreement between TMT members that was maintained over time. In some cases, we could observe how an image proposed by an individual member was accepted and upheld by the TMT as a whole. Furthermore, the TMT’s preference for directive and transactional leadership was also reflected in its actions, even when the results of its actions were not as the members had desired.

The second part of our research question (“How can this be expected to influence decision implementation?”) can be answered only partially, as our observations did not extend to the actual process of decision implementation in the organization. If we confine ourselves to what did, and did not, happen in the TMT, we see two points to make. First, sensemaking as a process of gaining a shared understanding enables the TMT to “speak with one voice,”

which can enhance the effectiveness of its interaction with the MMs. The importance of such TMT unity in actions toward MMs was also advocated in the interviews and was put into practice when the TMT prepared meetings with MMs by coordinating and clarifying in detail how it would act.

Second, we have noted a clear self-confirming tendency in the sense-making process. The TMT's views and preferred actions remained the same during the observation period of 6 months, even though MMs were perceived to be resisting its decisions. Occasional discrepant information, showing that the approach taken had limited success, resulted in opting for "more of the same"—that is, "talking more" and "explaining even better"—rather than changing views in a new sensemaking effort. It is also interesting to note that as far as we are aware, the images of the MMs—and those of the TMT itself—were never discussed in contacts with those MMs. This points at the closed nature of the images, which prevents them from being adjusted in case of poor fit. What this implies for decision implementation can only be inferred.

Although TMT unity in action might be seen as an antecedent of effective decision implementation and achieving shared understandings through sensemaking might contribute to this, a self-confirmatory pattern of sensemaking may pose a risk when maintained over a longer period of time. There is an extensive body of literature about the need for vigilant information processing and renewed sensemaking for continuous learning and adapting (Janis, 1982; Weick et al., 2005). The theory of organizational learning (Argyris, 1999; Senge, 1990) makes similar points. These general notions also apply to the TMT and its relationship with the MMs. If the TMT fails to pick up signs of discrepant information from the side of MMs, decision implementation is most likely to suffer. Given the powerful role of the middle managers, as mentioned by Currie and Procter (2005) and Floyd and Wooldridge (1997), one would expect that self-confirmatory sensemaking will undermine decision implementation in the long run. In Figure 1, the central concepts that emerged from our analysis are summarized. As such, this figure should be understood as an overview of our research rather than as a well-grounded theoretical model. However, it may serve as a tentative framework for more rigorous testing and theory development. We also included in the figure the concepts of TMT composition and organizational performance, as these are often the central variables in upper-echelons research, and we wanted to show how our model describes a mechanism through which these variables might be related. TMT composition is proposed to influence sensemaking, as characteristics of the TMT members will influence what and how they make sense (see also Weick, 1995).

Content and process of TMT sensemaking are proposed to influence the TMT leadership style, TMT unity in actions, and, subsequently, decision implementation and organizational performance.

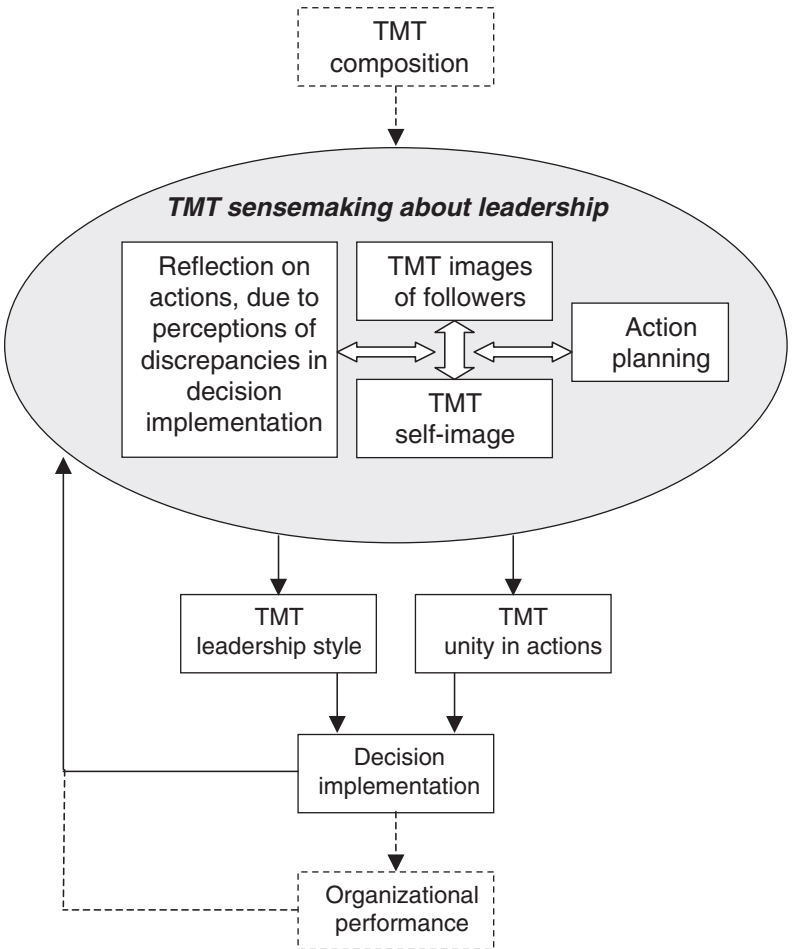
Implications for TMT Research and Limitations

The TMT literature of the past few years has shown an increasing number of studies on processes happening within the TMT (Carpenter et al., 2004). However, attention for interactions between the TMT and others in the organization has been limited thus far. Conspicuously lacking has been the interaction with MMs, who fulfill a crucial role in implementing decisions of the TMT. In our study, we have been able to study a TMT during a 6-month period, collecting and analyzing data on its relationship with MMs. We have demonstrated that transcripts of meetings are a useful source of information and that content analysis, especially when supplemented by a temporal analysis, can provide information on the TMT's sensemaking regarding its leadership role toward MMs. We expect that further research using these methods can shed more light on how TMTs think about and interact with MMs. There are a number of issues that require further study.

First, we recommend further study of TMT sensemaking with regard to content and changes in content over time. In our study, we did keep track of what was said in meetings, but we believe the recording could be refined. Once detailed recordings are available, analyses could be done that give a deeper insight into the social dynamics of the sensemaking process, which is especially important for understanding how shared meaning is created. Such analyses might also shed more light on the iteration of meaning generation and enactment over time and on changes in views that could be taken as signs of team learning. Along the same lines, it would be useful to replicate our way of categorizing content. Although the set of categories that we have developed seems to be reliable and exhaustive in the case of the TMT we studied, it may have to be complemented or modified in other cases, especially when TMTs in organizations with another structure or another history of power relations are examined.

Future research should also include the MMs' perceptions of the TMT—individually and collectively—particularly as they evolve over time. This would deepen our understanding of how effective the TMT is in handling the primary part of the decision implementation process. At later stages, research might be expanded to include the actual interactions between the TMT and the MMs. This would open a way to study the adequacy of the way

Figure 1
Summary and Suggested Model: Top Management Team (TMT) Sensemaking, Leadership Style, TMT Unity in Actions, and Decision Implementation as Mechanisms That Link TMT Composition and Organizational Performance



in which the TMT defines and enacts its leadership role. Also, this could shed light on the relationships between TMT sensemaking, TMT unity in actions toward MMs, decision implementation, and organizational performance.

Our results and suggestions should be understood in light of some limitations of this study. As outlined before, we had to rely on handwritten information for our recordings, because no audio or video recording was allowed during observations and interviews. Although these accounts were checked with the meeting's secretary to ensure internal validity, some aspects of TMT interaction will have been missed because of the high speed and long length of TMT interaction during their meetings. Doubtless, real-time recording electronically would provide the best data.

A second issue is that we have used the personal contacts of the researchers to gain access to the TMT. Inasmuch as TMTs are often not very willing to allow an observer into their board meetings, using personal contacts might be one of the best possible ways to access them. However, the fact that this TMT did allow access could indicate that this team was special in some respects: It was interested in hearing the observations of a researcher, it probably felt confident about how it performed, and it was open to suggestions. Yet even in this TMT, with a particular interest in reflection, we observed a tendency for a self-confirmatory pattern of sensemaking. This would mean that our results would be an underestimation of the degree to which TMTs show such a pattern.

Finally, as with all case study research, we do not know how generalizable our findings are to other settings. We have studied the TMT of a Dutch public organization, and certain aspects of the team naturally will be influenced by aspects of Dutch culture and the type of organization. Although these aspects can and will be a source of differences in TMT dynamics, we think that our resulting theoretical interpretation is not too prone to this effect. Because we have combined the data with existing theories, the conclusions and implications for further research should be valuable across cultures and organizations.

Conclusion

The starting point of this study was to find evidence for TMT sensemaking about leading MMs while enriching TMT research with a qualitative account of a TMT in action. Transcripts of TMT meetings and interviews were analyzed to see how a TMT made sense of its leadership task toward MMs. This has resulted in several key constructs: images of leadership during TMT sensemaking (directive, transactional, paternalistic), characteristics of the sensemaking process (self-confirmatory), and TMT unity in action as determinant of decision implementation.

More specifically, our results indicated that TMT sensemaking was organized along one dimension for understanding MMs' behavior, one for understanding its self-image in relation to MMs, and one related to the enactment of its understandings. By considering sensemaking as an iterative process, we concluded that sensemaking in the TMT that we studied could be seen as self-confirmatory: The TMT expressed an image about leading MMs, enacted this image, and persisted in its approach, even when it encountered discrepancies in its images and those of MMs. Additionally, the importance of TMT unity in actions was emphasized as a key success factor for leadership on the TMT level.

Thus, it seems that sensemaking can be seen as a process that facilitates the development of shared understandings, yet when such sensemaking leads to self-confirming cycles, decision implementation is likely to suffer. By analyzing TMT sensemaking in a qualitative and longitudinal design, we have provided insight in a so far neglected aspect of the TMT task: the relationship between TMTs and MMs as a key mechanism for ensuring decision implementation and organizational performance.

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