Making Strategy Work Through Staff Agency in Times of Change

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Abstract: This article examines how staff at a university of applied sciences experience strategic change and understand their own role in implementing the chosen organisational strategy. Previous research on strategic management has often focused on strategy formulation, organisational structures, leadership tools and performance outcomes, while less attention has been paid to employees' everyday experiences of strategy. In knowledge-intensive organisations, this is a relevant question, as strategy must be interpreted and applied across different professional roles and work contexts. The research question is: How do staff at a university of applied sciences perceive their opportunities to influence the organisation's strategy and to implement it during a period of strategic change? The study uses a mixed-methods case study design. The main dataset consists of interviews with staff members working in expert and managerial roles. These interviews are complemented by two rounds of survey responses on employees' opportunities to influence strategic development and work in accordance with the chosen strategy. A third dataset, consisting of regional innovation ecosystem interviews, examines related questions from the perspective of cross-boundary collaboration. Together, the three datasets provide complementary perspectives on staff experiences and the organisational conditions that enable or constrain strategy implementation. The article contributes to the strategic management theme by examining strategy implementation as a process that takes shape in everyday professional work. Staff's commitment to strategy appears to be closely related to perceived inclusion, the clarity and credibility of strategic priorities, and the extent to which strategy can relate to staff members' own work. The regional innovation ecosystem requires shared goals, cross-boundary collaboration, and practices that enable staff and external stakeholders to participate in strategic development. For higher education leaders, the study points to the importance of creating practical conditions in which strategic priorities can be understood, discussed, and carried into daily practice.

Keywords: Strategy implementation, Staff agency, University of applied sciences, Staff experiences, Regional innovation ecosystem

1. Introduction

Strategic change is usually introduced through formal strategies, objectives and organisational structures. However, strategy does not become part of organisational life simply because it has been formulated or communicated. Strategy-as-practice research has shown that strategy is enacted through everyday activities, conversations, routines and decisions (Whittington 1996; Jarzabkowski 2004). It must be interpreted, connected to existing work and translated into everyday practices by the people who are expected to implement it. This makes implementation a particularly important question in knowledge-intensive organisations, where employees often work with considerable professional autonomy and where strategic priorities must be applied across different professional roles and work contexts (Alvesson 2004).

Universities of applied sciences form a relevant context for studying these dynamics. Their staff work across teaching, research, development, innovation activities, administration and regional engagement. Consequently, the same strategy must become meaningful in several professional contexts. In addition, universities of applied sciences operate as regional innovation actors whose strategies extend beyond the internal organisation to collaboration with companies, public organisations and other stakeholders. Implementation therefore involves both internal alignment and collaboration across organisational boundaries, where trust, shared goals and boundary-spanning practices become important (Kaplan and Norton 2006; Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite 2013).

This article examines strategy implementation from the perspective of staff agency. The focus is on how staff members experience their opportunities to influence the strategy and to put it into practice during a period of strategic change. Staff agency is understood here as employees' perceived ability to contribute to strategic goals and influence how they are enacted in practice (Mantere 2008). The study is guided by the following research question: How do staff at a university of applied sciences perceive their opportunities to influence the organisation's strategy and to implement it during a period of strategic change?

Empirically, the study combines staff interviews, two rounds of survey responses, and regional innovation ecosystem interviews. The article shows how strategy implementation is shaped by the relationship between formal strategic direction and everyday professional work. Staff agency develops where employees have opportunities to understand, influence and enact strategy, supported by time, resources, and a clear mandate for action.

2. Theoretical Background

This study approaches strategy implementation as an everyday organisational process rather than the mechanical execution of a predefined plan. Strategy-as-practice research helps examine implementation as everyday strategising, carried out through activities, conversations, routines and decisions (Whittington 1996; Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003; Jarzabkowski 2004; Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007; Rouleau 2005). In practice, staff members interpret strategic priorities, adapt them to their own work, and take part in carrying them out.

Implementation is more likely to succeed when organisational members can make sense of strategic priorities and connect them with their own tasks, responsibilities and professional identities (Noble 1999; Hrebiniak 2006; Mantere 2005; Vigfússon, Jóhannsdóttir and Ólafsson 2021). This is particularly relevant in knowledge-intensive organisations, where employees often work with considerable professional autonomy and where strategic change cannot be achieved through formal plans alone (Alvesson 2004).

Strategic change also requires sensemaking. Sensemaking refers to the process through which people interpret ambiguous situations and construct plausible understandings of what is happening and how they should respond (Weick 1995; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). In strategy implementation, employees need to understand the purpose of the strategy and how it relates to their everyday work. Communication matters because organisational change is also shaped through language and everyday talk, which influences how staff interpret the change (Thurlow and Helms Mills 2009). Earlier research on higher education mergers has shown that clearly expressed strategy, purposeful goal setting and flexibility can support employees in making sense of new organisational goals and cooperating across previously separate organisational boundaries (Palo-oja and Juvonen 2024). This perspective is useful for analysing how staff understand strategy and their own possibilities to act on it during strategic change.

Strategy work is also mediated by middle managers and boundary-spanning actors. Boundary spanners, brokers and bridges can connect otherwise separated groups and support the flow of knowledge across organisational boundaries (Long et al 2013). Middle managers, in turn, translate strategic intent between top management and operational work, communicate meaning across organisational levels and help make strategic change intelligible and actionable (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992; Rouleau and Balogun 2011). However, strategy implementation is not a simple top-down process. Employees and managers actively reconstruct strategic meanings in informal interactions, and these interpretations may produce both intended and unintended outcomes (Balogun and Johnson 2005; Christie and Tippmann 2024). Thus, strategy is continuously shaped as it is interpreted and enacted in practice.

Staff agency provides the main concept for analysing employees' perceived room for action. Agency refers to the capacity of actors to make choices, take initiatives and influence action within given organisational conditions (Giddens 1984; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Here, staff agency refers to employees' perceived ability to contribute to strategic goals and influence how they are put into practice. This ability is shaped by the conditions under which people work. Research on strategic agency shows that organisational structures, role expectations, resources, time, support and legitimacy may either open up or restrict opportunities for strategic action (Mantere 2008). Research on organisational change adds a psychological dimension to this view: meaningfulness, psychological safety and self-efficacy can support employees' willingness to engage with change and act proactively (Albrecht, Furlong and Leiter 2023). Employees may therefore be willing to promote strategy, but if they lack practical and psychological conditions for action, strategy may remain distant from everyday work.

Staff agency is also linked to strategic alignment. Formal strategy may emphasise collaboration, regional impact, or multidisciplinary development, as in the case organisation of this study, but implementation requires objectives, resources, indicators, and everyday practices to support the same direction (Kaplan and Norton 2006; Hrebiniak 2006). Recent research also suggests that employees are more likely to act strategically when they can clearly see and understand organisational strategic goals (Hu et al. 2025). If strategic goals and operational systems point in different directions, employees may nevertheless experience a gap between strategic talk and organisational action. In such situations, strategy can become difficult to translate into practice even when staff members understand and support its general aims.

The theoretical framework combines strategy-as-practice, sensemaking, staff agency and strategic alignment to examine how staff understand strategic priorities and how organisational conditions enable or constrain action.

Figure 1 summarises these relationships and the mediating roles of middle managers and boundary-spanning actors.

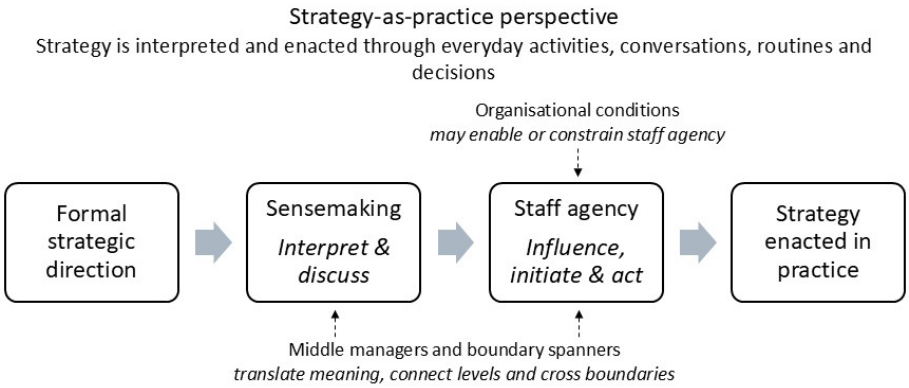


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of strategy implementation through staff agency during strategic change

3. Methodology

The study was conducted as a mixed-methods case study (Yin 2018). This design suited the study because it allowed us to examine both individual interpretations of strategic change and broader organisational patterns in perceived agency. The aim of the study is not to measure the success of the strategy numerically, but to understand how employees interpret the strategy through sensemaking and how they perceive their opportunities to implement it in their everyday work.

We utilised data triangulation (Denzin 2009) and combined three complementary data sets. Combining these materials made it possible to examine barriers to strategy implementation across groups, time points, and operating environments. The staff interviews form the primary empirical basis of the study, while the survey responses and ecosystem interviews are used to contextualise and extend the analysis.

Semi-structured interviews with experts and managers. The primary dataset for this study consists of 18 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in 2022-2023 with staff members in leadership and expert roles at a university of applied sciences. The participants were divided into a “Pre group” of 13 participants and a ”Post group” of 5 participants, depending on whether they had joined the organisation before or after the major strategic change and organisational merger. This research design enabled us to examine how work history shaped sensemaking around the new strategy and personal agency during organisational change. In the following section, interview data are referred to as “Pre” or “Post” and numbered sequentially.

Two-wave survey data, May and October 2024. The qualitative interview data were complemented by open-ended responses from a strategy survey administered to all staff members of the studied University of Applied Sciences at two time points: May 2024 (N=76) and October 2024 (N=81). The survey data focus on staff members’ experiences of the statement: “I am able to contribute to the achievement of the organisation’s strategic goals in my work.” This two-wave design enables us to examine how strategic understanding and barriers to everyday agency were articulated at different stages of the change process, although the observation period was relatively short, covering approximately six months. In the following section, these data are referred to as “Survey, May” or “Survey, October”.

Regional innovation ecosystem data. The third dataset consists of 16 interviews conducted in 2026 with senior executives, middle managers responsible for external stakeholder cooperation and results, and managers working in the customer interface. Their experience in their current positions ranged from two to over twenty years. The interviews explored practices and challenges in regional innovation ecosystem development and extend the analysis to boundary-crossing strategic agency. The dataset is included because the case organisation’s strategy links staff agency to regional collaboration and boundary-spanning development. These interviews are referred to as “Eco”, and the interviews are numbered sequentially.

The Pre and Post groups are temporal rather than role-based categories and are used primarily to examine staff agency and sensemaking across expert and managerial roles, while the ecosystem interviews provide perspectives on managerial and boundary-spanning strategic work across organisational boundaries.

The data were analysed using abductive, theory-informed thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded iteratively between data-driven observations and the selected theoretical framework. In the first phase, the interview data (Pre/Post) and the ecosystem data were coded openly. Particular attention was paid to how experts articulated the clarity of the strategy, the relationship between their own work and strategic objectives, and the structural resources and barriers encountered in everyday work.

In the second phase, the codes were grouped into broader themes by drawing on the Strategy-as-Practice framework, the role of middle management in sensemaking, and staff members' strategic agency. At this stage, a comparative analysis was also conducted between the Pre and Post groups to identify how historical organisational cultures shaped attitudes and practices.

In the third phase, the qualitative interview findings — such as siloed practices, lack of resources, and the mismatch between words and actions — were triangulated with the open-ended survey responses. In the analysis, the survey data were used to assess whether the themes identified in the interviews were also visible in wider organisational responses.

4. Findings

This section examines how staff at a university of applied sciences exercise strategic agency and implement strategy in the context of organisational change. The analysis identifies three key themes that highlight tensions between strategic expectations and the realities of everyday work, both within the organisation and in the regional innovation ecosystem.

4.1 The Tension Between Freedom and Resources in Everyday Work

Staff describe their opportunities for influence as contradictory: they are expected to advance strategic initiatives but often lack the practical conditions to do so. As one expert who had joined the organisation before the strategic change observes, the new strategic objectives are massive, but the practical means to achieve them are missing:

> *"You've kind of got, like, a team with really ambitious goals? But you don't have any chips to play with... Hopefully they don't end up feeling that kind of frustration, like, 'there's no way this result can actually happen." (Pre1)*

The data suggest that ideas remain fragile unless staff have the resources and structural support needed to take them further. In the ecosystem data, this is described as "freedom to start without dedicated resources". Experts experienced a constant need to negotiate and plead for resources, which weakened their sense of genuine agency and influence.

The survey responses further suggest that this is a cross-cutting organisational problem, adding to the burden of everyday work:

> *"Results are expected, but they don't give you the time or the tools to deliver them." (Survey, October)*

> *"Smaller ideas and suggested initiatives would, in my view, support the strategy, but the work would have to be done on your own time — or you'd have to spend an unreasonable amount of time justifying the whole thing." (Survey, May)*

The ability to influence strategy implementation in everyday work is stifled by heavy bureaucracy and the rigidity of support services. In the interview data, particularly in the Pre group, expert work is described as having become detached from interpersonal interaction and increasingly reduced to feeding information into systems:

> *"It's not, like, personal — it's not work between people, but more like between systems. A person asks something from somewhere, then gets some little piece that they take into a system." (Pre3)*

The Post group participants, who had joined the organisation after the strategic change, were particularly vocal about the need to shift the management paradigm from resource allocation towards expert enablement, bottom-up initiative, and greater attention to the content of strategic work rather than quantitative targets:

> *"I would change the fact that people are seen as resources... we should flip that mindset so that people are thought of as experts. That they don't just appear as hours and as a resource to get things done." (Post2)*

The strategic priority of building regional partnerships also runs against this problem. The ecosystem data emphasise that the lack of structural resources leaves implementation dependent on goodwill alone:

> *"We need to provide credible resources for the work. It will not happen through voluntary effort alone... That would mean that nothing overrides the work — it would have to be your number one priority." (Eco1)*

4.2 Challenges of Sensemaking and the Mismatch Between Words and Actions

Communication and the creation of a shared understanding are important for putting goals into practice. When communication remains abstract, staff describe strategy as something given above, with weak links to broader organisational goals.

In the Pre group, strategy is often experienced as a top-down "implementation" exercise, where translating broad objectives into one's own unit and work is seen as burdensome.

> *"I'm not really a fan of that whole 'cascading it down' thing myself. — The event [where the strategy was revealed] was basically like: it [the strategy] was handed down, and there were these four little bullet points, and they were still in English at that point." (Pre3; quotation marks added by the writers)*

This lack of inclusive sensemaking during the strategy formulation has led to a persistent culture of passive waiting, particularly among the Pre-group. Because the strategic narrative was perceived as dictated rather than co-created, these staff members often hesitate to take proactive ownership, feeling they lack the explicit mandate to act across organisational boundaries:

> *"In a way, we've kind of been waiting, not for a direct assignment, but for some sort of backing to just go ahead and do it... You don't always know who you are supposed to talk to and so on." (Pre5)*

In contrast, the Post-group managers recognise this passivity as a major cultural barrier to strategy implementation. They stress that the organisation cannot reach its ambitious goals if staff wait for top-down operational models instead of exercising active agency:

> *"We will never reach the finish line if we don't take an active grip on these things... we can't just sit around waiting for someone from above to drop a ready-made model on us." (Post5)*

The rationale for the strategy and the "why" questions have remained unclear, which is directly reflected in the survey responses as frustration with abstract management rhetoric:

> *"I still don't understand all the corporate fluff in the strategy, and of course I can't influence everything." (Survey, October)*

> *"For cascading the strategy down, I'd hope for concrete, jointly agreed actions and practical guidelines that would support my own work and development in line with the strategy." (Survey, October)*

The ecosystem data points to an imbalance between talk and action: visions and models are discussed at length, while practical implementation remains absent.

> *"We develop a new model on paper and then hand it over by saying: 'Here it is, now go and implement it.' But do people really commit to it?" (Eco2)*

This pattern was also visible in the Post group, where ideas and discussions did not always lead to implementation because of everyday pressures and the absence of clear operating models.

> *"Everyone liked the idea very much in the meeting… but then it just somehow disappeared." (Eco5)*

4.3 Goal Conflicts, Siloing, and Workplace Tensions

Internal organisational challenges become visible when organisational structures and metrics steer action in a direction that differs from the strategic intent set by management. In a matrix organisation, these structures may produce unintended consequences.

The theoretical concept of strategic alignment is severely challenged when top-down strategic goals, such as multidisciplinary collaboration, conflict with operational control systems, such as unit-specific financial targets. Both Pre and Post participants identified this contradiction as an important barrier to cross-boundary innovation. Participants described how unit-specific targets encouraged them to prioritise their own units' results, even when this worked against the organisation's broader strategic aim of multidisciplinary collaboration. As one Post-group manager explained:

> *"We have somewhat contradictory goals, and that naturally always leads to people primarily looking after their own target first, and right now, that does not serve this joint effort in the best possible way." (Post1)*

A similar concern was expressed in the Pre group.

> *"Multidisciplinarity can't be increased if the metrics are set up in a way that basically tells you not to do multidisciplinary work... 'we need this result now'... The way things are measured should be made into something that genuinely supports multidisciplinarity." (Pre2)*

This rapid, aggressive drive for results has raised concerns about quality. The survey data emphasise that quantitative metrics are taking precedence over human considerations and the broader strategic perspective:

> *"The goals aren't realistic in terms of implementation. Of course, there always need to be goals, but everything in moderation. Unreasonableness can lead to work motivation fading — and in the worst case, to people changing jobs…" (Survey, May)*

> *"There's quite a bit of speed blindness in the institution, though, and that doesn't exactly support that responsible growth." (Survey, October)*

The Trust in Collaboration theme in the ecosystem data emphasises that trust is not merely an attitude, but an operational capability.

> *"At the interface where companies are also involved, there should be people who are able to work together, trust each other, and find sensible ways of operating across organisational boundaries." (Eco8)*

Within the organisation, the trust is undermined by constant changes in direction and the launch of new strategic concepts, such as teams, core teams, and growth platforms, without clear role definitions. As trust in continuity weakens, employees begin to safeguard their own core responsibilities instead of actively contributing to the advancement of change.

> *"The whole deck is really all over the place right now. They're trying to build momentum from really far out... At some point, with some of these things, it might have been a good moment to just leave it alone and let people do their work." (Pre1)*

5. Discussion

This section discusses the findings through the lenses of strategy-as-practice, sensemaking, strategic alignment and staff agency. In the case organisation, staff agency is closely tied to the practical conditions that make strategic action possible. When experts face resource constraints, rigid bureaucracy and fragmented support structures, strategy remains difficult to connect with everyday work. Apparent freedom without adequate resources may therefore create frustration rather than agency. In this sense, a staff agency is shaped by the organisational conditions through which strategy becomes possible in everyday work.

The analysis also points to the limits of one-way communication. Staff need opportunities to discuss, interpret, and translate strategic priorities into their own professional contexts. This was particularly visible in the Pre group, where strategy was often experienced as a one-way process in which employees were expected to implement objectives without genuine participation in shaping them. The Post group showed stronger expectations of proactivity and ownership but also became frustrated when ideas did not turn into action. Participation therefore matters for commitment and for making strategy understandable enough to guide action.

Another central issue is the alignment between strategic goals and operational systems. The case organisation's strategy emphasises multidisciplinarity and ecosystem-level collaboration, yet unit-specific performance targets and budgets may steer staff toward protecting the interests of their own units. In this sense, the matrix organisation produces unintended consequences: instead of supporting shared strategic direction, its control systems may reinforce siloed behaviour, internal competition, and suboptimization. If management wants to promote collaboration, indicators and resources must also reward collaboration and its quality.

The ecosystem data show that these tensions also appear in cross-boundary collaboration. Strategic development across organisational boundaries requires shared goals, trust, coordination, and credible resourcing. It cannot rely only on the most proactive individuals. While such individuals may create new openings and take ownership of development work, they may also become overburdened if they are expected to

compensate for structural gaps. Sustainable strategic change therefore requires conditions that allow a wider group of experts to contribute, rather than leaving development work to the most active individuals.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how staff at a university of applied sciences perceive their opportunities to influence the organisation's strategy and to implement it during a period of strategic change. The commitment to strategy appears to depend on whether staff experience it as meaningful, credible and actionable in their everyday work.

Agency is shaped by the practical conditions of work. Time, resources, and organisational support are needed if strategic priorities are to become part of professional practice. Staff also need opportunities to discuss what the strategy means in their own work, rather than receive it only as a top-down message. Organisational structures, indicators, and goals must support the forms of action that the strategy seeks to promote. Otherwise, strategy may remain a formal framework with only limited influence on everyday practice.

Putting strategy into practice also extends beyond the internal organisation. Regional innovation ecosystem development requires shared goals, trust, coordination, boundary-spanning collaboration, and credible resourcing. Staff agency is therefore relevant to how the organisation aligns its internal work and how it contributes to regional development.

The study is limited to a single-case organisation, and the datasets represent different groups, time periods, and perspectives. The results are not intended for statistical generalisation. However, the mixed-methods design provides a rich understanding of how strategic change is experienced and enacted in a knowledge-intensive organisation. Future research could compare similar processes across several universities of applied sciences or follow how perceived agency develops over a longer period of strategic change.

The main conclusion is that strategy works through people, but not through people alone. Staff agency becomes a strategic resource when employees have enough time, support, mandate and will to connect strategy with their own work and act on it. For higher education leaders, this points to the importance of credible practices that connect strategic priorities to professional work, collaboration, and regional development.

Ethics Declaration: The study followed the principles of responsible conduct of research and was conducted with the permission of the case organisation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of the data. The data were handled confidentially, and the quotations have been pseudonymised to reduce the risk of identifying individual participants.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used to support language editing, translation and the refinement of academic wording. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and remain fully responsible for the content, interpretation, analysis and conclusions presented in the paper. AI tools were not used to conduct the empirical analysis or to make research-related decisions.

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