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► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Carol. Change management in complex organizations: the Strategy-as-Practice perspective in the implementation of the National Forestry Office's Objectives and Performance Contract 2016-2020. Doctorial Colloquium of European Academy of Management (EURAM), Jun 2018, Reykjavik, Iceland. hal-03515223

**HAL Id: hal-03515223**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03515223>**

Submitted on 6 Jan 2022

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**“Change management in complex organizations: the *Strategy-as-Practice* perspective in the implementation of the National Forestry Office’s Objectives and Performance Contract 2016-2020”**

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**Abstract:** The new road map adopted by the French National Forestry Office (ONF), charged with managing public-owned forest, has raised critical questions for its staff who have voiced concerns about a profit-driven approach to forest management. To what extent will public forests be sacrificed for the greater interest of productivity and commodification? And, is profitability genuinely in the public’s best interest? This scenario of ‘organizational dissonance’ represents a unique case study with which to explore and test the theory of *sensemaking* developed by Karl E. Weick relative to the collective meaning and the dynamics its construction. The process of collectively constructing meaning, the cornerstone of organized action, takes place essentially through communicative interaction in social situations. It is through interactions with each other that agents of the ONF reach agreement about the meaning of a given action. This work integrates a complementary theory to operationalize key concepts involved in the *sensemaking* process. The *Strategy as Practice* (SAP) theory and its three core concepts, *Praxis, Practices and Practitioners*, was selected for its distinctive approach of focusing on the actors, their actions, their interactions and the context within which strategic micro-actions take place. According to this theory, strategy is not “something that an organization has but something that its members do” (Golsorkhi, 2015). Relatively few studies have addressed the role of middle managers in the strategic sense making process: are they merely transmitters of information between top management and operational teams, or are they themselves meaning makers acting as partner of the top management team? Aimed at providing new insights on this critically important question for the strategic management of an organization, the present work studies the role of ONF territorial unit managers in collective meaning construction.

**Key words:** Strategy-as-Practice, Sensemaking, National Forestry Office, Middle managers

**Expected feedback on core issues:**

- Articulation and relationship between *Strategy-as-Practice* perspective and *Sensemaking theory*
- Relevance of the proposed methodology
- Recommendations for improving the project and preparing the main investigation phase

## **The National Forestry Office faces challenges of an economy driven by environmental and social sustainability**

The National Forest and Wood Program (PNFB) 2016-2026 put in place under the French law on the Future of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (LAAAF) signed 13 October 2014, the Act of 17 August 2015 on energy transition and green growth and the Strategic Contract for the Wood Sector (CSF Bois) signed 16 December 2014 reinforce more than ever the level of commitment of the French Government has made towards supporting an ambitious forestry policy. The forest-wood sector, described as an eco-cycle model, is seen as a major lever for developing economic growth driven by ecological and social sustainability. The capacity of forests ecosystems to capture and store carbon, the multiple uses of wood as a resource that is renewable, recyclable, environmentally friendly and source of value-added products and employment, all point favorably to overcoming the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalization.

The National Forestry Office, as a public Establishment of an Industrial and Commercial nature (EPIC) is a key player in the implementation of forest policy across the French territory. Charged with managing public forests owned by the central and local authorities, the ONF must respond to the context of the current crisis of the welfare state and uphold its duties by supporting both public service initiatives and commercial activities. More specifically, the ONF must overcome four major challenges: adapting its management practices to address the issues of climate change; responding to the needs of the wood sector with a continuous supply of wood; providing forest recreation activities for the general public; and preserving forest biodiversity. A new roadmap was adopted on 7 March 2016, which the ONF signed jointly with the French National Federation of Forest Communities (FNCOFOR) and the State, called the Objectives and Performance Contract (COP) 2016-2020. Six strategic priorities were identified as the following:

1. Increase the wood supply in response to the needs of wood sector stakeholders and create employment;
2. Address issues related to climate change and biodiversity conservation;
3. Respond more effectively to specific expectations of both the State and the general public;
4. Adapt management practices that consider characteristics and constraints specific to overseas departments;
5. Stabilize the workforce and support changes to existing job profiles;

6. Improve the overall sustainability of the ONF model and strengthen its financial balance.

The recurring controversy, widely publicized by the media, surrounding an agency accused of being a mere “wood factory” bent on sacrificing public forests in the interest of economic liberalism (Barroux, 2011) draws particular attention to the first strategic axe. Since its inception in 1964, the productivist orientation of the ONF, established by its EPIC status, has elicited serious concerns and even sharp criticism about forest management centered on profitability. Should the objective of sustainably managing public forests be paired with profitability? Is profitability in the public interest? And, where do the two objectives of meeting economic objectives and developing missions to benefit public interest intersect?

The first strategic axe is structured more precisely around the following priority objectives:

<b>State-owned forests</b>	<b>Communal forests</b>
Expanding forest management planning to new surface areas and simplifying management plan <sup>1</sup> for forest stands covering less than 200 hectares	Expanding forest management planning to new surface areas to target 98% in 2020 versus 90% in 2014, and simplifying management plan for forest stands covering less than 200 hectares
Maintaining PEFC certification (Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes) <sup>2</sup> and testing FSC certification (Forest Stewardship Council) <sup>3</sup>	Maintaining PEFC certification and testing FSC certification
Supplying the wood energy sector	Supplying the wood energy sector
Targeting 6.5 Mm <sup>3</sup> sales of standing timber <sup>4</sup> by 2020 versus 6.3 Mm <sup>3</sup> sold in 2016 ensuring harvesting compliance with forest management plans and silvicultural prescriptions	Targeting 8.5 Mm <sup>3</sup> sales of standing timber by 2020 versus 7.7 Mm <sup>3</sup> sold in 2014 ensuring harvesting compliance with forest management plans and silvicultural prescriptions
Developing the production of shaped (cut) wood <sup>5</sup> to target 50% of the volume marketed essentially by supply contracts in 2020	Developing the production of shaped (cut) wood to target 30% of the volume marketed essentially by supply contracts in 2020

<sup>1</sup> A management plan is a "study and document ensuring that the forest is sustainably managed. It draws on analysis of the natural environment and the social and economic context and sets objectives and desirable interventions (cuts, forestry operations, etc.) for a period of 10 to 25 years" (Dubourdieu Jean, 1997 cited by Benoit Boutefeu, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> PEFC is an international non-profit, non-governmental certification system which attests to the sustainable management of forests or compliance with ecological, environmental and socio-economic management criteria.

<sup>3</sup> FSC is an environmental label which ensures consumers that their wood products come from sustainably managed forests.

<sup>4</sup> Standing timber refers to trees designated by ONF agents for exploitation and removal by the buyers.

<sup>5</sup> Shaped wood refers to timber that has been logged, transported and made available for buyers by ONF agents. .

Terminating wood sales tailored to individual needs by 2020 to favor block trade transfers	Increasing the size of the management units by encouraging local communities to regroup forest parcels
Enriching hardwood forest stands lacking in softwood	Proposing a three-year cutting program for forests covering less than 200 hectares in a manner promoting visibility of potential volumes that can be mobilized in the short term
Integrating into silvicultural itineraries species potentially better adapted to climate change	Terminating wood sales tailored to individual needs by 2020 to favor block trade transfers
Scaling up investment in forestry operations (100 M€ per year)	
Streamlining land tenure of forests or regrouping parcels by fostering exchanges with the private owners or local communities	

These strategic decisions have raised concerns and have become contentious within the organization itself. The journal “Le béret qui fume” (the beret who smokes) published by the SNUPFEN (Syndicat National Unifié des Personnels des Forêts et de l’Espace Naturel), the ONF’s main trade union in terms of membership and representativeness, played a key role in revealing the level of tension generated by these decisions. The first pages of the September 2016 issue alerted readers to the urgency of the situation, as seen in this extract: “**Stop plundering our forests!** It is high time we wake up and accept what has been made all too clear; we are plundering our forests. We are all partly responsible! We need to open our eyes and look at the state of our stands! How long can we continue with this rhythm of harvesting? One or two passes at thinning and what’s left? It has all been calculated and mapped out for the sole purpose of removing wood”. (Le béret qui fume, No.91/September 2016, p.4). In line with the environmentalist movement, the SNUPFEN defines itself as a “forest defender” at the service of citizens and it is vehemently opposed to the new strategy outlined by the ONF. The union is widely covered by the media and receives important support not only from the public and elected officials, but from ONF managers and agents alike. The first strategic axe, however, is subject to constraints implicit of the second axe” addressing issues related to climate change and biodiversity conservation”. In other words, satisfying the needs of industry, local communities and the ONF itself is conditional in terms of upholding principles of sustainable management in a context of climate change (2016-2020 ONF Objectives and Performance Contract, p.6). Following this condition, what would allow for a clear

understanding of this divisive dynamic and the extent of uncertainty surrounding measures aimed at reconciling environmental requirements with profitability? How do ONF agents themselves view these juxtaposed objectives with dual requirements, which are not prioritized? Are they viewed as representing conflicting interests, as the SNUPFEN points out? What specifically leads to these developed perceptions or how are they constructed? Who are the “meaning makers”? What behaviors and actions do these subjective representations induce and what is their impact on the ONF strategy?

### **Sensemaking, an interactive approach to understanding organizational dynamics**

The theory of sensemaking developed by Karl E. Weick (1936-), Professor of Organizational Behavior and Psychology, addresses key elements of the above questions. Inspired by the theoretical perspective of interactionism, sensemaking is the ongoing process by which people give meaning to a situation or their own actions, so that a collective action system emerge and persist (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003). The collective construction of meaning takes place in “cycles of interlocked behaviors” (Autissier *et al.*, 2006), or through situations involving interpersonal interaction. It is through interaction with others that organizational actors agree on possible interpretations of a given situation. A shared vision of the objectives is not necessary for joint actions. A consensus on the ways and means used to satisfy personal interests is sufficient. This is only achievable, however, if words used have equivalent meanings, in that even if they are not identical, they elicit equivalent behaviors (Donnellon *et al.* Cited by Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003). The conversations themselves represent “building blocks of order and disorder, as imprints of the coordinated action. Organizations are constructed, maintained and activated by the medium of communication. If the communication is poorly understood, the existence of the organization itself becomes fragile” (Autissier *et al.*, 2006, p. 163). Two structures of “interlocked behaviors” have been identified by Karl E. Weick (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003):

#### ***1. The mutual equivalence structure***

The mutual equivalence structure results from an interdependence between actions that lead to consummation and actions of instrumental individuals: the consummatory act of A would be dependent on the instrumental act of B, and the consummatory act of B would be dependent on the instrumental act of A. For example, A is a mayor of a rural commune who solicits the support of B (instrumental act B1) to manage a forest (consummatory act A2). The mayor will then pay a sum

of money (instrumental act A1) to B to obtain A2, and B receives the money required (B2) for managing the forest (B1). The system of coordinated actions would not be reliant on shared objectives (managing a forest versus receiving money), but rather on reciprocal predicted behavior of both A and B.

## **2. *The collective structure***

The formation of a group of people is based on a shared vision related to ways and means used to satisfy individual motivations or interests rather than pursuing a common set of objectives: “Individuals will, in effect, form a group not because they have mutual needs, shared values or common objectives, but because each believes that they can benefit from another, and holds a vision similar to the other members as to the means to achieve that” (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003). The representations of the objectives relating to, among other things, preserving the group could intersect with time (by fixing standards, categorizing members and action plans, etc.). This convergence could be followed by a divergence relative to the members’ visions of attitudes and actions to be adopted, which would represent a stage where the group dissolves and the systems of actions become fragmented.

The system of actions can ultimately be understood “not as a system of shared ideas and joint representations, but as a point of intersection and synchronization of individual utilities, the somewhat fortuitous place where micro-motivations of individuals are transformed into macro-organizational behavior” (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1988) (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003, p.97-98).

The micro-macro structuring operates in the articulation between two levels:

- *Inter-individual subjectivity* characterized by organizational actors sharing perceptions, intentions and feelings through conversations (Weick, 1995, p.71);
- *Generic subjectivity* or “formal rules of assemblies ” comprising procedures, instructions, roles and planning guidelines issued by the organization with a view to selecting cycles of interactions adapted to the coordinated action (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003; Autissier *et al.*, 2006).

The dynamic interrelationship between inter-individual subjectivity and generic subjectivity would allow organizational actors to agree on behaviors to be adopted and the actions to be carried out. This dynamic and interactive approach to organization, as such, leads to a series of questions: what specific type of situation would favor communicative interactions around the first strategic axe of the 2016-2020 ONF Objectives and Performance Contract? Are the ONF agents not sharing values

and common objectives? If not, what are the personal interests or negotiated measures that would lead to group consensus? What interpretations would be reported as to the generic subjectivity? And finally, what might be the expected influences of strategic axe 5: “Stabilize the workforce and support changes to existing job profiles”. According to Karl E. Weick, cycles of interrelated behaviors at the heart of sensemaking activities, as well as generic subjectivity, constitute a reserve from which the organization draws solutions as needed to apply to a range of situations, ordinary (routine) or unique (unexpected). Routine situations would be conducive to standardized modes of operation or to the formal rules of assemblies. Unexpected events would cause the action to be interrupted, and likewise would disturb associated expectations, generating in effect ambiguity and uncertainty. Ambiguity is characterized by multiple interpretations of the same situation. Individuals therefore have trouble identifying the deciding factors underlying a situation, and consequently the necessary actions to undertake. Ambiguity is for the author the principal component of an organizational situation. Uncertainty, conversely, is distinguished by the absence of an interpretive schema with which to address the situation: “People lack understanding of how components of the environment are changing (uncertain state), or of the impact of environmental changes on the organization (uncertain effect), or of the response options that are open to them (uncertain response) (Miliken, 1987, cited by Weick, 1995, p.95). Ambiguity and uncertainty would require individuals to develop their ability to interpret a situation, or in other words, the ability to engage in communicative interactions. The interplay between inter-individual subjectivity and generic subjectivity allows the organization to adapt itself continuously to its environment. It is, quite simply, the heart of organizational resilience.

The process of sensemaking situated in micro-level interactions and aimed at reducing the perceived ambiguity of a given situation consists of seven distinctive properties:

### ***1. Grounded in identity construction***

The construction and maintenance of identity is at the core of the sensemaking process. The individual as sensemaker continually shifts among multiple definitions of self, and represents “an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate. (...) Once I know who I am then I know what is out there” (Weick, 1995, p.20). A given situation would be defined as a function of the image of self in relation to others. Loss or damage to a significant aspect of the self would trigger sensemaking activities.



## ***2. Retrospective***

Contrary to cognitive approaches wherein actions are reduced to a simple causal declination of thought, Karl E. Weick placed action at the heart of the sensemaking process. “(...) the creation of meaning (as) an attentional process, but it is attention to that which has already occurred” (Weick, 1995, p.25-26). The action or experience would provide information or the basic elements that would then be subject to interpretation and reinterpretation during the communicative interactions. The meaning would then be a reconstruction of the past action to fit the context of the present situation, or the situation at hand. The present would not be neutral, and would make it possible for the individual to extract pertinent experiential cues. The primacy of the action in no way presupposes a reversal of the order of factors or devaluates the thought of benefiting from the action. Karl E. Weick considers the thought and the action in terms of circular causality: from the thought is born the action and the thought is reborn in the action.

## ***3. Enactive of sensible environments***

Individuals are immersed in a continuous experiential stream, in which the complexity of a situation exceeds the level of comprehension. Attentional focus would then be directed to fractions extracted from this flow (“bracketing”) and then reassembled to construct an output meaning (“punctuating”). More specifically, the meaning would result from an established relationship (equal to, not equal to, the cause of, a consequence of, etc.) between data collected in the present situation and cognitive maps or mental schemas constructed from experience, learning or communicative interactions. Karl E. Weick identifies here six causal maps that would guide attention, extraction and processing of available cues: ideologies, organizational premises, paradigms, theories of action, traditions and stories. The distinction, or boundary, between these different vocabularies would be porous and fluid. Nevertheless, it is important to note that each plays a different role in the process of constructing meaning.

## ***4. Social***

Sensemaking is not a solitary activity but a social process. It is in the interaction or interrelationship where the meaning of action is constructed. For Karl E. Weick, “(...) what a person does internally is contingent on others. Even monologues and one-way communications presume an audience. And the monologue changes as the audience changes” (Weick, 1995, p.40). Attention should then be

given to words, speeches and conversations which would set the scene of roles, expectations, standards, causal maps, instruments, etc.

### ***5. Ongoing***

Sensemaking is a continuous process that neither starts nor stops. Understanding that is to understand the manner in which individuals isolate moments and extract cues. Karl E. Weick invites his readers to remain mindful of this notion, that sensemaking should not be viewed as a result but rather as a spotlight focused on particular moment within the process (Weick, 1995).

### ***6. Focused on and extracted by cues***

Cues that are extracted, filtered and treated derive from unexpected stimuli such as “things that are novel or perceptually figural in context, people or behaviors that are unusual or unexpected, behaviors that are extreme and (sometimes) negative, and stimuli relevant to our current goals (...)” (Taylor, 1991, cited by Weick, 1995, p.52). The context is a central variable in the process since it dictates which cues are extracted and how they are interpreted. For Salancik and Pfeffer (1978, p.233, cited by Weick, 1995, p.53), it is the social context that “(...) binds people to actions that they then must justify, it affects the saliency of information, and it provides norms and expectations that constrain explanations”.

### ***7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy***

Sensemaking does not rely on accuracy but on plausibility. It is about plausible interpretations that allow individuals to make retrospective sense of whatever happens. It is about accounts that are socially acceptable and credible enough to ensure commitment in action. For Karl E. Weick, “it would be nice if these accounts were also accurate. But in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help, either” (Weick, 1995, p.61).

The seven properties of sensemaking are interdependent and intertwine with each other. They occur sequentially through the process that can be summarized as follows: “people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances.” (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p.409). (Weick, 1995, p.18). These seven aspects lead to new

questions applied to our case study: What disruption would be caused by the first strategic axe? What consequences should be expected of this interruption in terms of how it affects the agents' definitions of self (who they are or who they wish to be)? What definition of the situation best coincides with their chosen identity? What are the different coexisting interpretations, if any? What specific cues related to past experiences will the agents select and interpret to make sense of the present situation? And, what causal maps would be adopted to support the sensemaking process, and why?

As much as the sensemaking process offers a range of theoretical resources, both useful and relevant for understanding the process of how meaning is collectively constructed at the ONF, it also comes with certain limitations. The first being the somewhat weak articulation between its concepts and the difficulties in testing them empirically. For N. Giroux (Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003, p.44), "it represents a network of 'loosely coupled' concepts and is highly suggestive in the way it guides the creativity of readers: these are concepts that stimulate thought more than they act as guides for research". Kark E. Weick leans toward ignoring or minimizing the following aspects in his observations of discursive practices: 1) "the enacted", (a term borrowed from Bradet, cited by Autissier *et al.*, 2006), or in other words, the structures which impose strong limitations on the rules underlying the interplay between actors in interaction; 2) "the enactor" (a term borrowed from Bradet, cited by Autissier *et al.*, 2006) or the actors with multiple identities, subjectivities and intentions. Bradet references Bourdieu, calling for "a better understanding of the 'rules of the institutional realm', issues and cooperative or competitive games, mobilized capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic) and the habitus or tendencies created therein linking trajectories to the positions of the 'agents'" (Autissier *et al.*, 2006, p.86). Lastly, the action itself remains vague as a concept, and is both imprecise and confusing in that it simultaneously refers to language ("How can I know what I think till I see what I say?" (Graham Wallas, 1926, p.26, cited by Weick, 1995, p.12)) and the act of individuals in situations. No particular consideration is given to language, however, and the study of the action is confined to behaviors in only ambiguous situations. The activity is not considered in its entirety: "Lacking, here, is the systematic analysis of individual or collective work, and a study of human activity in the context of daily functions. It might be more appropriate to say that the word 'action' used by the author refers to behavior outside the context of the activity, when the actor is pulled away from his or her activity due to special circumstances or events" (Autissier *et al.*, 2006, p.67).

A complementary theory is needed, however, to address these areas of limitations by specifying, better articulating and operationalizing the ‘loosely coupled’ concepts associated with the sensemaking theory. The Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) perspective and its three core concepts, *Praxis, Practices and Practitioners*, has been identified as a relevant approach to support our analysis of how collective meaning is constructed at the ONF.

### **Strategy-as-Practice: a strategy as an ongoing process rather than a one-off exercise**

Strategy-as-Practice became increasingly popular in early 2000 in management science by making practitioners, their actions, their interactions and the context in which micro-level strategic actions are put in place the center of the concerns. Its core purpose is to “understand how actors engaged in a social activity with different temporalities, predispositions, strategies and interests come together to form systems of actions capable of building, sustaining and developing a strategy, but also how these same systems of actions either aggregate or interact with each other under varied terms and conditions to give shape to an organizational “output”, that in the abstract and disembodied sense, leads to strategic content” (Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.14). Strategy is then defined as a “social activity that develops through the actions, interactions and negotiations between multiple actors and the practices they engage in given situations (Jarzabkowski, 2005) which influence the directions and results of an organization” (Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.2). D.Seidl, J. Balogun and P. Jarzabkowski further specify that “the actors, in micro-level situations, do not act in isolation but use the modes of ordinary action, defined at the social level, which emerge from the multiple social institutions to which they belong” (Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.2). Strategy-as-Practice would thus respond to the general dissatisfaction caused by models built in macroscopic and microeconomic frameworks favoring the “why” of the strategy over the “how”. The strategy then comes to be defined not as “a socially inert object” separate from the individuals it comprises and their activities, but something that its members do (Golsorkhi, 2015). The macroscopic is thus reconciled with the microscopic.

Strategizing as the “doing of strategy” to, in this case, construct meaning, is the point where three elements intersect: 1) *Praxis*, which involves “the interconnection between the actions of individuals and various or dispersed groups, and embedded social, political and economic institutions that individuals act in and contribute to” (Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.3); 2) *Practices*, which are defined as “routine type behaviors composed of several interconnected elements: forms of

physical activities, form of mental activities, “things” and their use, cognitive resources in the form of understanding, know-how, emotional states and purposeful knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2002, p.149, cited by Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.3) and 3) *Practitioners*, those “who use the practices and perform actions” and who “influence the strategic activity depending on *who* they are, *how* they act and the resources they draw upon (*what*)” (Balogun *et al.*, 2006, p.4).

According to D. Seidl, J. Balogun and P. Jarzabkowski (Balogun *et al.*, 2006), these three elements cannot be simultaneously investigated. Instead, focus should be placed on the interconnection between only two key elements: praxis-practices, praxis-practitioners, or practices-practitioners. The construction of strategic meaning by organizational actors through communicative interactions in situations necessarily leads us to consider the practitioners. The role of senior-level managers as practitioners has been widely explored in the literature on management. They are responsible for setting strategic direction, creating organizational frameworks and managing change (Volger *et al.*, 2006). The role of middle manager described as “the coordinator between daily activities of the units and strategic activities of the hierarchy” (Volger *et al.*, 2006), has to date been less explored and is less clear. For E. Volger and A. Rouzies (2006), middle managers are more than mere implementers of the top management’s strategy. The observation of work practices led these authors to formulate at least two hypotheses:

- middle managers play “a participative role in strategic thinking, occasionally in direct decision making, as partners to senior management” (Volger *et al.*, 2006, p.118);
- strategic conversation<sup>6</sup> is the “linking tool between micro-level realities of middle managers and macro-level realities of high-level managers” (Volger *et al.*, 2006, p.124). It is the central instrument for developing strategy.

T. Colin, B. Grasser and E. Oiry (Colin *et al.*, 2013) confirmed the hypothesis that middle managers occupy a central place in strategizing through their observations that not only do they implement strategy, they contribute to its redefinition. Further, middle managers rely not only on their own knowledge and experience, but also on the human resources management framework. These new insights into a somewhat opaque literature need further development to enrich and consolidate existing knowledge. The present work, therefore, focuses on middle managers as the principle unit of analysis. They will be examined not in an isolated manner but in their interactions within the

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<sup>6</sup> Strategic conversation is defined by authors as « verbal interactions between supervisor and subordinate about the strategy” (Westley, 1990).

organizational context and, more widely, in their institutional environment. Middle managers at the ONF are the territorial unit managers (responsables d'unité territoriale), hereby referred to as RUTs. These actors represent the first level of operational management and are in charge of heading and coordinating the activities carried out by a team comprised of an average of ten forest technicians in a predefined perimeter. RUTs are attached hierarchically to a territorial agency that organizes and coordinates territorial unit production. A focus on the collective construction of meaning leads us to consider in particular “cycles of interrelated behaviors” in situations. In other words, analyzing sensemaking as a process within the ONF necessarily includes an analysis of practices within which micro-interactions occur. The question is then what specific practices favor communicative interactions between the RUT and the forest technicians? Timber marking has been identified as an ‘opportunity’ potentially conducive to micro-interactions. This operation involves agents working collectively to designate trees and stems for cutting by loggers. Its objective is twofold: renewing or improving the forest capital for future generations and supplying timber for the wood and energy industries. These combined dynamics support the premise that timber marking as a practice plays a key role in the meaning construction process. The question then is, how do the macrostructure influence the collective process of constructing meaning during micro-interactions in timber marking situations? This leads us to examine the fifth strategic axe “stabilize the workforce and support changes to existing job profiles” to understand the dynamic interrelationships between inter-individual subjectivity and generic subjectivity.

**Therefore, this study aims at investigating the role and practices of RUTs in the collective meaning construction process by using a Strategy-as-Practice approach to allow for a better understanding of the concerns and opposition generated internally by the implementation of the ONF first strategic axe:” increase the wood supply in response to the needs of wood sector stakeholders and create employment”.**

The field perimeter for which the Great East territorial department (direction territoriale du Grand Est, or DT) of the ONF oversees (eastern region of France) is the location context of this study. This choice was motivated by two essential reasons, the first being that this region is characterized by a particularly large surface area of public forests and faces significant or major challenges (planning report issued by the National Forestry Office for 2016-2020). The second is that in practical terms, its location offers uniquely favorable field methodology conditions. Its geographical proximity to the AgroParisTech Center in Nancy offered the obvious advantage of

reduced transportation time and costs. The longstanding tradition of collaboration between these two institutions further helped in terms of establishing contacts and facilitating field access.

The guiding hypotheses of the data collection and analysis are as follows:

- senior managers and RUTs are both strategic sense makers;
- strategic axe 1 is causing an interruption in behavior sequences of forest agents;
- this interruption is sourced in ambiguity and questions the agents' identity;
- the view of the actions to be undertaken collectively is constructed through communicative interactions that take place in timber marking situations;
- the human resources framework constrains the interplay between actors in interaction;
- forest agents do not agree with the objectives but do agree on the ways and means used to satisfy their personal interests;
- the shared vision on the ways or means to be deployed results from an established relationship between cognitive maps or schemas based on past experience and the present contextual situation;
- the shared vision of measures to be adopted is plausible rather than exact;
- the RUTs are intentional actors each with multiple identities and subjectivities;
- this plurality of identities, subjectivities and intentions is the source of contradictions in the practice of constructing meaning.

### **A qualitative approach to constructing collective meaning at the National Forestry Office**

#### ***A case study for understanding the uniqueness and the complexity of strategizing***

For F. Allard-Poesi, "because it is done in interactions within the local contexts and specific individuals, because it evolves over time through uncertainties and concrete problems (...), because it is shaped to the purposes of the actors (...), strategizing is locally situated and therefore singular". Thus, the most adapted point of entry for research on strategizing are case study which focus on ethnographic and longitudinal approaches (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2012). C. Ravix confirms as much by specifying that using case study may be the only possible option for exploring an evolutionary phenomenon of which very little is known, or for make it possible to refute a theory (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, this work relies on a case study to observe and analyze the roles and practices of RUTs in the process of collective construction of meaning.

The DT Grand Est is a new structure which groups three formerly regions of Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne together with 10 departments<sup>7</sup> in accordance with the new administrative map issued by territorial reform legislation for the Republic passed on August 7, 2017. Charged with steering the implementation of the COP 2016-2020, the DT Grand Est relies on 14 territorial agencies and 95 territorial units (UT); 2 forestry work agencies composed of 16 production units; and 1 research agency composed of two production units.



Informal exchanges with former ONF engineers who now teach at AgroParisTech helped to identify selection criteria. The first being the number of communal forests and state forests managed by territorial units: prevailing state UTs, prevailing communal UTs and joint state-communal UTs. The resources available and management practices would depend largely on the principal owner of the managed forests. The second criterion is the DT to which the UT is attached (prior to the territorial reform passed in 2015): DT Alsace, DT Lorraine and DT Champagne-Ardenne. Each region was characterized by a singular economic, social and cultural identity. The third criterion concerned the forests' location, with preference given to suburban forests, or those in areas under urban influence. Forests encompass a wide range of expectations and serve different interests, and similarly, can ignite conflicts related to use. How then is the increased mobilization of wood currently being negotiated in these forests which are viewed as a strong representative of social and environmental issues? How does this affect the interplay between actors and the resources deployed? The fourth criterion is the size of the UT, where preference is given to larger units to restrict the range of options. The fifth and last criterion is the profile of the territorial unit manager:

<sup>7</sup> Ardennes, Aube, Marne, Haute-Marne, Meuse, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Vosges, Moselle, Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin



- a forester with relatively high seniority, strong technical expertise, having received support from the human resources management framework;
- A recently graduated engineer with more general knowledge, having received support from the human resources management framework.

Both of these “selected” profiles are based on the premise that experienced forest workers would be less open to change and, therefore, more difficult to mobilize than young engineers. The relevance of these criteria was confirmed by the heads of the DT Grand Est. The specificities of meaning and strategic practices as applied to communal forests under the supervision of elected officials with potential conflicts of interest will be given particular attention here. The comparison of state forest management and communal forest management seemed appropriate in terms of the possibility of generalizing results at the national level. Biogeographical diversity of managed forests will not be considered as a selection criterion for two reasons. First, the objective of increasing mobilization of wood resources has been adjusted to specific local constraints (as specified in the planning report issued by the National Forestry Office for 2016-2020). In other words, the objectives relating to wood mobilization were set according species currently being exploited, the preceding management situation which determined the fixed margin of progression, and the expectations of the local market, etc. And second, one of the supporting premises is that the meaning that RUT assign to their practices and the practices that construct meaning are not dependent or related to the geographical distribution of species.

***Data collection: the semi-structured interview and participant observation***

This project’s core focus is on the meaning of actions surrounding the first strategic axe of the 2016-2020 ONF Objectives and Performance Contract, which is constructed through communicative interactions in situations and affects the way of being and acting of ONF agents. In other words, it looks specifically at actors acting and interacting. The researcher should be therefore positioned, “as close as possible to situations in which these actions and interactions unfold so that they may be retraced (historian), observed (observation, participant observation) or to allow the researcher to act in concert with the subjects being studied (research-action)” (Dumez, 2013, p.7). Semi-structured interviews combined with participant observation were selected for being the most appropriate data collection methods given the nature of our questions.

*The semi-structured interview* is one of the most widely used qualitative methods for collecting data in management sciences. It is an interpersonal and interactional verbal exchange around predefined themes: the data collected is then co-generated and reconstructed (by interviewees and the interviewer). This particular relationship offers the advantage of direct access to the meanings actors attribute to their own actions and events with which they are confronted. It also allows us to understand their interests and the existing relational systems. A dozen interviews with RUTs were conducted during the preliminary exploratory phase in 2017. The objective was to both test the relevance of our research proposals and to explore possible additional lines of reflection as they emerged. This initial sample size will then be reduced for the main investigation phase and enlarged according to the first results related to forest technicians, agency heads of service, agency directors, forest management planners and union representatives. Projective techniques may be used by respondents. M-L Gavard-Perret, D. Gotteland, C. Haon and A. Jolivet (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2012) distinguished four main techniques: 1) the screen of awareness where deeper motives underlying behaviors may not always be expressed; 2) the screen of irrationality which leads respondents to formulate or even invent logical explanations for their behaviors (ex-post rationalization); 3) the screen of tolerance where individuals are aware that their behavior is misaligned with the expectations of a given environment and justify their position; and 4) the screen of politeness characterized by the expression of socially acceptable thoughts and feelings. These internal or “hidden” negotiations which can respond to the respondent’s need for recognition or legitimacy should be taken into account in order to increase the objectivity of this type of exchange.

*Participant observation* involves the researcher participating in the activities of the actors being observed. It allows for direct access to discourses, practices and modes of operation within the organization. The sample territorial units, selected according to the criteria described earlier, will serve as the field of observation. Particular attention will be given to two types of practices:

<b>Type of Practice</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>Where</b>
Production	Programming forest operations Programming cutting works Leading cutting programs Team management	RUT/Agency director/Agency heads of service	UT/Agency

Production	Timber marking Preparing stands regeneration or maintaining forest plots	RUT/Forest technicians	UT
Human Resources	Lifelong training Resources and collective tools being proposed to support managers in their daily missions (professional co- development, individual and group coaching, etc.)	RUT/Agency director/Agency heads of service	UT/Agency

To avoid the risk of circularity and to allow the emergence of new topics, “floating” observations will be also carried out. Given the nature of the interactions between the researcher and participants being observed, a constant self-reflexive critique on how the data will be and are collected is required. Six biases inherent to the practice of observation have been identified : 1) selective attention with the risk of ignoring secondary signals indicating the potential presence of important phenomena; 2) confirmation bias by only considering information which confirms the theoretical proposals; 3) reconstitution bias a priori or establishing causality linkages between facts that originally had no link ; 4) empathy bias by focusing more on one actor or actors at the expense of the others; 5) charisma bias whereby certain words or actions of an actor are considered as more important than others; 6) adjustment bias where actors’ behaviors are modified to meet the (perceived) expectations of the researcher (Dumez, 2013, p.170-171). This reflexivity that will be conducted throughout the process of data collection “may constitute a criterion of the quality of the research as the transparency it implies effectively gives the reader the means for critical review” (Dumez, 2013, p.170-171).

### **The first results of the exploratory study**

Two floating observations in a timber marking situation were carried out on two sites with the objectives of i) familiarizing researcher with the practice; ii) testing the relevance of the initial research proposals, and of iii) refining the interview grid. Fifteen RUTs were then selected from the DT Grand Est based on the criteria described above. Fourteen semi-structured interviews (1 non-response) with durations ranging between 2 and 4 hours were conducted from July to August 2017. The recorded audio data collected (approximately 35h) was then transcribed and coded according to the predefined themes identified in the literature review and to themes that emerged

from respondents' individual responses. Finally, the data was synthesized into a comparative table to facilitate analysis.

### ***Result 1. Converging views on the first strategic axe (1)***

The first strategic axe (“increase the wood supply in response to the needs of wood sector stakeholders and create employment”) was unanimously viewed through an economic prism. It consists of augmenting timber harvesting to i) feed the forest-wood supply chain or to develop the local territorial economies, ii) provide the necessary means for the ONF to conduct its missions, and iii) encourage local authorities to develop their own sources of revenue.

*“Because we are a part of a sector, we are here to maintain an activity and we are not putting the forest at risk” (RUT, ≥ 40 years, Lorraine)*

*“The aim is in part to finance the ONF. As far as the government is concerned, it could also mean that the communes get the financial resources they need that they're not currently getting (...). In any case, the government has had enough of paying for communes who don't put their own wood on the market for the industry. So, this is probably also about supplying the industry. And creating jobs...” (RUT, <40 years, Champagne-Ardenne)*

There is general adherence to the organization's strategy. It is, however, subject to constraints of a sustainable forest management.

*“Increasing wood mobilization is also important in the framework of sustainable management. Given the challenges posed by climate change today, we can't afford to keep overcapitalizing forests, local communes continue to refuse to harvest timber in their own forests because doing that means decreasing the forests' response capacity” (RUT, <40 years, Lorraine)*

*“If that allows us to produce more and create more volume, than that's good. If this is about production per basal area and if we're currently unable to create more volume than what we used to, that's not likely to change. We're going to stay with the basal area that guarantees long term sustainable management.” (RUT, ≥40 years, Lorraine)*

### ***Result 2. Diverging views on the means required to achieve the first strategic axe***

Increasing mobilization of wood resources cannot be translated into an intensification of wood harvesting in the territorial units of all respondents. Indeed, harvesting in state-owned forests is conducted in compliance with the general requirements specified in forest management plans. The amount of wood collected from what is available in communal forests is at the discretion of each commune and subject to approval by municipal councils. Any estimated additional volume, stipulated by national level objectives, should therefore be sourced from overcapitalized areas (with

a surplus of timber resources) that were not impacted by the storm of 1999 and from areas that are difficult to “work” or present operational challenges (slopes or mountains).

*“There are probably a number of areas which may not have been harvested. These are either in mountain regions where you may find unexploited stands or places where roads just don’t exist to extract the timber. So yes, there are probably forests that could potentially be logged to increase mobilization. It’s our lowland forests which often already have sufficient road access that have reached optimal production levels.”* (RUT,  $\geq 40$  years, Alsace)

*“In any case, as to the objective and the areas logged by the UT, we follow forest management plans when we harvest timber. The forest is being exploited. If there’s a surplus to mobilize, around here, it’s in the steeper zones.”* (RUT,  $< 40$  years, Alsace)

The majority of respondents fail to identify with the alarmist discourse put forth by the media and trade unions.

The first strategic axe is, for a certain number of respondents, subject to multiple and differing interpretations among many forest technicians. This ambiguity stems largely from i) the respondents’ perceptions of forestry and forest management, and the fact that new management practices aimed at, among other things, increasing the adaptive capacity of forests to climate change (e.g., by transitioning from a dark and dense forest to a clear and diffused forest) have not been assimilated by all forest technicians; ii) the gap between expectations and perceived reality (e.g., efforts of increased harvesting have been made and the forests are relatively clear); and iii) a general mistrust of top management as a result of successive reorganizations. Increased harvesting would therefore be translated as “decapitalization or plundering” of public forests, a sentiment supported and widely relayed by trade union press media.

*“When you say to a field forester whose seen 30 years of dense dark forests, when we regenerated a stand - and we’re talking about large parcels, not the diffused sort of thing they want to do now – what you’re really telling him is that he has to cut more to reduce the capital in order to have a more open forest. So, there were some mixed interpretations and for about the last 15 years, field foresters have understood that what they’re being asked to do now is decapitalize the forest. (...) these new rules and methods are just not appropriate.”* (RUT,  $< 40$  years, Alsace)

*“It’s their leitmotiv, they’re stuck on that “We’re destroying the forest”. We need to be able to prove to the team that what we’re going to be doing is actually moving in the right direction, so they can get on board. (...) It’s just a matter of working with them to show them that new techniques can actually be good (...)”.* (RUT,  $\geq 40$  years, Lorraine)

### ***Result 3. Diverging views on the means to be deployed to meet individual interests***

The changes effecting the profession of RUTs are not fully meeting the expectations and needs of the respondents interviewed. Tension points relate mainly to:

- reduction of field work;
- burden of management activities;
- heavy administrative burden;
- increased workloads and increased work pressure;
- loss of flexibility and time following computerization of practices;
- general malfunctions, the lack of ergonomics and the ever-changing IT applications.

The result is a loss of attractiveness of the profession and problems in recruiting internal staff.

*“There is definitely a problem with human resources management at the ONF, (...). They haven’t managed to handle succession and positions as currently established have nothing to do with the head of technical group positions we held before as senior technician. RUTs positions are not the same thing at all. It involves a lot more pressure, more responsibility managing larger teams, and the profession itself is under pressure.”* (RUT, >=40 years, Champagne-Ardenne)

*“Yes, you join the ONF because you’re interested in the forest, it’s not because you want to be a manager. (...) If that’s your interest, then study in a forest school for managers t...(…) It’s impressive, though, how quickly RUTs are leaving, could mean another sector should open up”* (RUT, >=40 years, Lorraine)

*“(…) what really bothers me, actually, is spending all day in the office. By the end of the day, I’ve had enough. I can handle the morning, but the afternoon, I’m fed up”* (RUT, <40 years; Alsace)

This divergence cannot, however, be explained by a difference between generations, as tensions and dissatisfaction were expressed by the two profile types. It appears to be sourced primarily in respondents’ initial understanding of the profession.

### ***Result 4. The key “sensemaking” moments***

Timber marking was presented by all respondents as a privileged moment of exchange between the RUT and their forest technicians

*“At the same time, we talk a lot and there is a lot of information that we share with each other informally. While we’re timber marking, or working as a team and marking trees...”* (RUT, >=40 years, Lorraine)

*“Definitely. It is the most important team activity. I spend a lot of time in the office processing requests from the local communes and the agency, there’s a lot of administrative work too, so*

*timber marking for me is the moment when I'm with the whole team. I see people and talk to them. (...). That's the moment when I can get a sense of what's going on with the team. That's the time I see everyone at the same time.*" (RUT, <40 years, Lorraine)

Timber marking is, however, not the only enabling situation for communicative interactions and sensemaking activities. . More formal practices have also been identified in the statements made by respondents, such as the following:

- the monthly steering committee meetings where RUTs, heads of service and the agency director meet to present, exchange and discuss ongoing and upcoming activities ;
- the annual assessment reviews where RUTs meet individually with the agency director and discuss or negotiate the road map of the UT;
- the monthly UT meetings bringing together RUTs and their forest technicians to inform, exchange updates and decide on current and future actions at the UT level.

***Result 5. A strategic sense giver role that has to be developed***

The respondents unanimously see themselves as implementers and transmitters of information between the agency and the technicians: they ensure the coherent application of directives, file requests and report operational problems encountered in the field. Less than 50% of those interviewed evoked a "creating meaning" role to convince their team to adhere to the guidelines.

*"The large strategic applications are beyond my scope or it's only for the intellectual pleasure. My job is to implement the ONF strategy."* (RUT, >=40 years, Lorraine)

*"We need to find a way to sell the message and reassure the team that what we will be doing is not bad for the forest (...). We need to prove to the team that what we're going to do is headed in the right direction that they should get on board."* (RUT, >=40 years, Lorraine)

*"When we have to implement decisions from the hierarchy, we need to be able to explain those decisions to the team so that they're well accepted. It's also important be able to inform upper management of problems the agents report."* (RUT, <40 years, Lorraine)

Their main driver would then be to substitute economic terminology or quantitative language describing the agency's directives by technical language.

Paradoxically, the majority of respondents have, themselves, only a vague understanding, even confused, about what the ONF's new strategic directions actually are.

*“I briefly went over it before our meeting, because we don’t have time for that sort of thing during the workday.”* (RUT, >=40 years, Champagne-Ardenne)

*“I don’t really know. (...) It’s pretty vague. In fact, it’s not a subject I think about that much because my UT pretty much runs itself.”* (RUT, <40 years, Alsace)

This apparent paradox is based on different views about the strategy itself: the UT’s road map that sets the objectives and actions to be carried out is not the COP 2016-2020, a 4 year term, but is instead management plans that cover a period from 10-20 years.

*“Because I’ve got a forest management plan that is going to be my focus for the next twenty years at the forest level.”* (RUT, >=40 years, Lorraine)

*“It’s the base foundation of the profession, implementing forest management plans that are developed with specific science and which also considers the directives that come from ONF management.”* (RUT, <40 years; Alsace)

This leads us directly to look more closely at the status of these management plans, and their articulation with the Objectives and Performance Contract as applied over a period of 4 years.

The first results of this exploratory phase, considered together, led us to explore and test the conceptual model of collective structure developed by Karl E. Weick to explain and understand the concerns, even oppositions, sparked internally by the first strategic axe of the 2016-2020 Objectives and Performance Contract. Can the convergence criteria underlying group formation be reduced to individual interests? Are individual values or motivations not initially shared by all as seen here, for example, when many of the interviewees expressed feeling passionate about forests? The role of the RUTs should also be positioned in the following collective structure: forest technicians ↔ RUT ↔ territorial agency. Is the essential role of the RUTs to ensure better alignment between individual motivations and collective objectives? And are they, in the end, creators or re-creators of meaning (in line with Lev Vygotsky’s concept)?

## **The National Forestry Office, a promising scientific ambition for the future**

### ***A project which responds to the issues of contemporary science***

This research project proposes a singular and innovative approach to forestry for the benefit of scientific, professional and educational communities alike by examining the process of forest strategy implementation. It consists more specifically in establishing a link between an observed



phenomenon (which must be explained), namely the disunity surrounding measures aimed at increasing the mobilization of wood resources, and its possible causes (which explain) (Dumez, 2013). A parallel objective of this study is to test the sensemaking theory, particularly the concept of collective structure in a new and underexplored area: the French National Forestry Office. Using the Strategy-as-Practice perspective as a complementary approach proved valuable for providing empirical data and testing its validity, data which today remains relatively limited despite the growing success of this perspective on the international scene (Balogun *et al.*, 2006).

### ***A project aimed at improved action***

By focusing on micro-activities of practitioners, the Strategy-as-Practice perspective not only fills an academic void but it also responds to the needs of managers seeking more practical solutions (Allard-Poesi, 2006). As highlighted by G. Johnson, L. Melin and R. Whittington, “(...) the research agenda matches the lived world of organizational actors. At least potentially it therefore provides the opportunity to translate research findings into organizational action more directly. As academics, we may make a bigger impact at the micro level than at the traditional macro level” (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). Expected deliverables will include the following:

- management tools that will help to ensure better alignment between the strategy and its implementation;
- an operational change management program adapted to the ONF specificities.

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