

THE CONSENSING APPROACH TO
STRATEGIZING
The Dynamics of Dialogue in Public Sector
Digital Transformation

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Digital Transformation

KRISTIAN NORLING
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Department of Applied Information Technology
University of Gothenburg

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of consensing, a process of cognitive consensus-building through the mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, in digital transformation strategy formulation within the Swedish public sector. It introduces the novel concepts of consensus surplus (a shared understanding that exceeds the requirements for action), deficit (insufficient shared understanding to support strategy implementation), and debt (the accumulation of unresolved issues due to a lack of consensus-building). The study argues that consensing plays a critical role in aligning strategic intent and shared understanding among stakeholders, leading to these varied outcomes. This process is enabled by the organizational infrastructure of dialogue, which encompasses generative, diagnostic, and integrative dialogue types that facilitate the development of shared understanding.

Drawing upon a critical realist stance and an abductive and retroductive research approach, this study offers a nuanced perspective on the cognitive dynamics of consensing based on an in-depth analysis of qualitative data from interviews, surveys, and document analysis. It challenges prevailing notions and encourages a more collaborative approach to strategy formulation. The thesis conceptualizes consensing as a mechanism for aligning strategic intent with shared understanding, a novel approach in the formulation of digital transformation strategies.

The thesis contributes to digital strategizing literature by highlighting the role of consensing in bridging the gap between intended and realized strategies. It proposes actionable strategies for fostering effective dialogue and mitigating status quo bias, thereby facilitating more dynamic and inclusive strategy formulation processes. The research also outlines potential avenues for future inquiry, such as exploring the impact of organizational culture on consensing processes and examining the role of digital platforms in facilitating consensus-building.

By presenting consensing as a vital tool for organizations navigating digital transformation, this research enriches the discourse in digital strategizing and organizational practice. It advocates for a deeper understanding and application of consensing to enhance the efficacy of strategy formulation in the public sector, with implications for both theory and practice.

Keywords: consensing, cognitive consensus, consensus debt, dialogue, dialogue inertia, digital transformation strategy, digital strategizing, alignment, shared understanding

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“Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously.”

EPICETUS

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At the end of this transformational experience, I am grateful for living a good life, every day. Thanks to everyone who made this possible.

PREFACE

“The journey is the thing”
HERACLITUS (FRAGMENT 85).

My two-decade career in the public and private sectors has given me a multi-faceted view of digital transformation. I have held various roles, from communications officer, market communications director, and project manager to IT strategist, business owner, and manager. These experiences have enriched my perspective, further broadened by my journey as an executive doctoral student, balancing the diverse roles of an entangled practitioner and researcher.

In my professional life, I have often been described as too theoretical for practical settings, while in academic circles, I have sometimes found myself overly practical. This duality resonates with the adage: in theory, practice and theory are the same, but in practice, they are not.

A typical theme extracted from countless conversations during my years as a manager and strategist within digitalization, communications, and IT goes like this: staff blames IT for the lack of helpful technology and support in using the technology. IT blames management for the lack of resources and strategies. Management blames IT for an insufficient understanding of organizational needs, lack of speed, and staff for their weak motivation to change and lack of digital skills. For me, it all boils down to a lack of shared understanding, leading to bad strategy (Rumelt, 2011a, 2011b), and a lack of skills to strategize, the doing of strategy. During my managerial years, I learned that plans and strategies are useful until they are not. My primary motivation for pursuing a Ph.D. is to make an impact by contributing to improved strategizing practices in the public sector.

One question has always intrigued me as a practitioner: Why do organizations fail to implement strategies? My research on shared understanding has given me a partial understanding of this complex issue, moving beyond simplistic

answers like ‘It depends’ or ‘It is complicated’. While my current understanding is still in its infancy, therefore considered only partial, I have found an area of research that intrigues me and, therefore, a path I must explore further in practice and theory. Hopefully, down the road, it leads to *phronesis*, practical wisdom,

The vision of my employer, Region Västra Götaland, is ‘A good life’, a philosophy that aligns well with Stoic principles of living in accordance with nature and virtue (Aurelius, 2005; Epictetus, 2008; Irvine, 2009; Pigliucci, 2017; Seneca, 2004) is personally significant to me. My years as a Ph.D. student have given me a balanced and intellectually fulfilling life because of all the learning. The more I read and reflect, the more comfortable I have become with the Socratic paradox: “I know that I know nothing”¹. It is liberating. Plus, a great motivation to read a lot of interesting papers!

One of my most fulfilling experiences has been disseminating current research to the Swedish public sector. The dual role of being a practitioner-academic lends weight to my words, fulfilling my aspiration to act as a boundary-spanner between academia and the public sector. Based on my experiences from disseminating research, I firmly believe that the public sector should cultivate a cadre of Ph.Ds who can apply deep domain knowledge to research while continuing their practice. This belief was validated when my academic department enrolled a cohort of 12 externally employed Ph.Ds from the public sector in one go.

Being part of a research group has been fundamental to my academic journey. The research consortium Digital Governance at the Swedish Center for Digital Innovation (SCDI) has given me a context. In this space, my focus on digital transformation in the public sector is shared with other researchers. It has taught me how everything is connected as a complex adaptive system, making it almost impossible to understand anything fully.

I will continue to contribute to research because *the journey is the thing*.

¹ The phrase is not recorded to have been said by Socrates. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_that_I_know_nothing

INDEX OF FIGURES

Figure 1. How discontinuities affect strategy formulation.....	50
Figure 2. Relationship among the methodological principles. Adapted from Wynn & Williams (2012)	120
Figure 3. Public sector digital culture framework based on Schein (1988)	134
Figure 4. Strategic Direction and Culture Mapping based on Cameron and Quinn (2011) and Norling et al. (2022)	136
Figure 5. The concepts and their relationship	142
Figure 6. Simplified consensing process.....	146
Figure 7. The mechanisms and their relationships	152
Figure 8. The strategic dialogue model (Norling, Crusoe et al., 2024) ..	153
Figure 9. Consensus outcomes: deficit, surplus, optima and threshold .	171
Figure 10. Conceptual consensing framework.....	198
Figure 11. Propositions	224

INDEX OF TABLES

Table 1. Definitions of concepts underpinning consensing.....	96
Table 2. Levels of analysis.....	117
Table 3. Overview of data collection methods.....	120
Table 4. Definitions of the consensing mechanisms.....	145
Table 5. Definitions of the dialogue mechanisms	151
Table 6. Overview papers 1-3.....	229
Table 7. Overview papers 4-6.....	230

CONTENTS

PREFACE	13
INTRODUCTION	27
1.1. The motive.....	29
1.2. Aim and question.....	30
1.3. Positioning.....	31
1.4. List of included papers	32
1.5. Other publications.....	33
1.6. Thesis structure	34
STRATEGIZING IN FLUX	37
2.1. Digital transformation	37
2.2. Strategy in brief.....	39
2.3. Strategic discontinuities	39
2.4. Strategic dissonance	40
2.5. Dialogue in brief.....	42
2.6. Cognitive consensus in brief	43
2.7. Synthesis and identification of research gaps	44
2.8. Consensing in brief.....	46
2.9. Dialogues and consensus: Establishing strategizing success.....	47
2.10. A tale of strategic missteps with dire consequences (fictional).....	48
2.11. How dialogue and consensing could have helped.....	48
2.12. Summary of strategizing in flux.....	49
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF CONSENSING	53
3.1. Integration of three research streams	54
3.2. Dialogue	54
3.3. The role of dialogue in organizations and strategy	56
3.4. Consensus.....	60
3.4.1. Consensus is multifaceted.....	61
3.4.2. Consensus as process and outcome	64

3.4.3. Cognitive consensus	65
3.4.4. Presumed consensus.....	67
3.4.5. False consensus	69
3.4.6. Consensus in strategy	71
3.4.7. Strategic consensus	74
3.5. Strategy	76
3.5.1. Strategizing and digital strategizing: What is the difference?.....	77
3.5.2. Strategy as craft.....	78
3.5.3. Intended and realized strategy.....	79
3.5.4. Strategy definition	80
3.5.5. Digital transformation strategy	81
3.5.6. Strategic intent	82
3.5.7. Strategic context	84
3.5.8. Strategic climate	86
3.5.9. The relation between strategic context and strategic climate.....	87
3.5.10. Strategic assumptions.....	88
3.5.11. Status quo bias in strategic assumptions.....	89
3.5.12. Strategic assumptions frame strategy.....	91
3.5.13. Strategic assumptions in digital transformation.....	92
3.6. Summary of theoretical underpinnings of consensing	93

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ETHICS, PARADIGM, AND METHODS	99
4.1. Assumptions	99
4.2. Research motivation and introduction to my ethics framework	99
4.3. Ethical guidelines and codes of conduct	102
4.4. Data management	103
4.4.1. Data management plan	103
4.4.2. Found data	104
4.4.3. Made data	104
4.5. Data storage and organization	104
4.5.1. Data access and sharing	104
4.5.2. Data preservation and archiving	105

4.5.3. Ethical and legal considerations	105
4.6. Funding	105
4.7. Paradigm.....	106
4.7.1. Paradigm-person-researcher-fit and ethics	106
4.7.2. Stoic virtue ethics	107
4.7.3. Utilitarian ethics based on pragmatism	108
4.7.4. Critical realism bridging method and ethics.....	109
4.7.5. Critical realism as methodological principles and paradigm	110
4.8. Mechanism-based theorizing.....	110
4.9. Mechanism-based theorizing and critical realism.....	111
4.10. Critical junctures in the research journey	113
4.11. The initial hunch	113
4.11.1. Transition to the retroductive phase.....	113
4.11.2. The role of dialogue and consensus-building.....	114
4.11.3. Leveraging experiential knowledge.....	114
4.11.4. Refinement through feedback and reflection.....	115
4.12. Literature review: The hermeneutic way	115
4.13. Object of analysis.....	117
4.14. Levels of analysis in the conceptualization of consensing	117
4.15. Research design.....	118
4.16. The use of fictional tales as vignettes.....	121
4.17. Paper research methods overview	122
4.18. Future ethical dilemmas	122
4.19. Summary of ethics, paradigm, and method.....	123
4.20. Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process	123
CONTEXT OF THE SWEDISH PUBLIC SECTOR.....	125
5.1. Public sector at large	125
5.2. External pressures.....	126
5.3. Co-creation versus winning: divergent philosophies in the public and private sectors.....	127
5.4. The inherent slowness of public sector strategizing	129
5.5. Swedish public sector	130

5.5.1. Swedish organizational culture.....	132
5.5.2. Swedish organizational culture and digital transformation	133
5.6. Strategizing with the culture	136
MECHANISMS OF CONSENSING AND DIALOGUE.....	139
6.1. History of consensing	139
6.2. Foundation: Organizational culture	143
6.3. Context: Strategic climate	143
6.4. Mechanisms of consensing.....	144
6.5. Mechanisms of dialogue.....	147
6.5.1. Dialogue mechanisms and related theoretical frameworks.....	148
6.5.2. Diagnostic, generative, and integrative dialogue.....	149
6.6. The mechanisms illustrated	152
6.7. The strategic dialogue model: Actors, forms, and forums	152
6.8. Consensing as a balancing mechanism	154
6.9. The centrality of cognitive conflict in consensing	155
6.10. Consensing and the adjacent possible.....	156
6.11. Balancing and integrating intended and realized strategy.....	157
6.12. Consensing and temporality: Balancing speed and depth	159
6.13. Consensing and temporality: Complexities and tensions.....	160
6.14. Summary of consensing	162
OUTCOMES OF CONSENSING.....	165
7.1. The consensus compass: A tale of navigating the digital depths (fictional)	166
7.2. The consensus whirlpool: A tale of digital stagnation (fictional)	166
7.3. The key lessons of the tales.....	167
7.3.1. The tale of navigating the digital depths (fictional).....	168
7.3.2. The tale of the consensus whirlpool (fictional)	168
7.4. Consensus deficit, surplus, and debt.....	169
7.5. Different forms of debt in digital transformation	170
7.6. Consensus debt.....	172
7.7. Consensus surplus and deficit: Identifying and addressing the imbalances	

in consensing	175
7.7.1. Consensus surplus: Recognizing and reducing overemphasis on consensus	175
7.7.2. Mitigating a consensus surplus.....	176
7.8. Consensus deficit: detecting and addressing lack of shared understanding	177
7.8.1. Mitigating a consensus deficit	178
7.9. Summary of consensing outcomes	179

APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSENSING FRAMEWORK..... 181

8.1. A slow cooking consensus: An inspirational tale (fictional).....	183
8.2. Rushed consensus: A cautionary tale (fictional).....	184
8.3. Seven key learnings from the two tales	185
8.4. Boundary conditions of the consensing framework.....	186
8.5. Implications for practice	188
8.5.1. Embracing cognitive conflict	188
8.5.2. Maintaining balance in consensus outcomes.....	189
8.5.3. Aligning strategic intent with organizational climate.....	190
8.5.4. Managing temporality in strategizing.....	191
8.5.5. Harnessing the power of dialogue.....	191
8.5.6. Summary of implications for practice	191
8.6. Guidelines for applying consensing in strategy formulation	192
8.7. Leveraging digital tools	195
8.8. Theoretical implications.....	196
8.8.1. Reconceptualizing consensus	196
8.8.2. Integrating cognitive conflict	196
8.8.3. Enriching strategy process research	197
8.8.4. Bridging organizational communication and strategizing.....	199
8.8.5. Highlighting the role of temporality	200
8.8.6. Implications for the understanding of strategic climate.....	201
8.8.7. Summary of theoretical implications.....	201
8.9. Summary of the consensing framework.....	202

THE DARK SIDE OF CONSENSING	205
9.1. Practitioners beware!	207
9.2. Dialogue inertia	208
9.3. The Lindentown loop: A tale of breaking the cycle (fictional).....	209
9.4. Types of dialogue inertia	210
9.5. Dialogue inertia in practice	212
9.6. Summary of the dark side of consensing	212
PROPOSITIONS	215
10.1. Summary of the propositions	225
THE PAPERS IN BRIEF	227
11.1. Summary of all the papers	240
DISCUSSION	243
12.1. Research question and significance.....	243
12.2. Conceptualization of consensus	244
12.3. Methodology and theoretical perspective	244
12.4. Alignment.....	246
12.5. Challenges of responding to unfamiliar problems.....	246
12.6. Discrepancy between decisions and actions.....	247
12.7. Comparison with related concepts	248
12.7.1. Dynamic capabilities	249
12.7.2. Consensus-building	249
12.7.3. Sensemaking.....	250
12.7.4. Strategic consensus	251
12.8. Consensus outcomes.....	251
12.8.1. Consensus surplus and deficit	252
12.8.2. Consensus debt.....	252
12.9. Practical implications	253
12.9.1. Fostering a culture of consensing	253
12.9.2. Managing consensus outcomes	254
12.10. Contributions	256
12.11. Limitations	256

12.12. Future research.....	257
12.12.1. Antecedents of consensing	258
12.12.2. Consensing mechanisms and outcomes	258
12.12.3. Boundary conditions and temporal dynamics	260
12.12.4. Balancing strategy formulation speed and depth	261
12.12.5. Integration and extension	261
12.12.6. Methodological considerations	264
12.12.7. Summary of future research	265
CONCLUSION	267
REFERENCES	273

THE PAPERS

PAPER 1: RHIZOMATIC STRATEGIZING IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: A CLINICAL FIELD STUDY.....	315
PAPER 2: DIGITAL DECOUPLING: A POPULATION STUDY OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES IN SWEDISH MUNICIPALITIES.....	327
PAPER 3: STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE COVID PANDEMIC: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF SHIFTS IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY.....	339
PAPER 4: STRATEGIC DIALOGUE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY STUDY	351
PAPER 5: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OR DIGITAL STANDSTILL? STATUS QUO BIAS IN SWEDISH PUBLIC SECTOR STRATEGIES.....	371
PAPER 6: COGNITIVE CONSENSUS IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY FORMULATION.....	395

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control.”

EPICETUS DISCOURSES, 2.5.4–5

Recent research suggests that the direction of digital transformation strategies in Sweden is focused on internal efficiency (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, 2024b). The studies portray internal efficiency as the dominant strategic intent, highlighting the bureaucratic bias towards efficiency and the lack of emphasis on innovation and strategic renewal. However, this intraorganizational focus does not look deep enough internally, as the core assumptions on which the strategies are formulated are not presented in the published strategies (Norling, 2024a). This begs the question of whether the strategic assumptions are challenged in the strategy formulation, the importance of which previous research has argued (Amason & Mooney, 2008; Lyles & Thomas, 1988; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). A lack of dialogue about implicit assumptions affects the quality of strategy formulation. This thesis delves deeper into shared understanding and how it can resolve the inclusion of a requisite variety (Seidl & Werle, 2017) of perspectives and shift existing assumptions, thus improving the quality of strategy formulation.

In this thesis, *digital* refers to technology that processes data in binary form, profoundly altering established norms and paradigms, creating new value propositions and organizational identities, and changing how organizations function and operate (Baiyere et al., 2023). *Digital strategizing*

refers to the influence of digital technologies on the content and process of strategy-making in organizations (Morton et al., 2022). Digital creates new opportunities, capabilities, and challenges and alters the strategizing practices (Morton et al., 2022). The framing of digital within this thesis is grounded in the practice-oriented perspective of strategy-making, focusing on digital transformation strategy formulation, emphasizing the necessity of integrating digital into the very fabric of organizations.

Here, *digital transformation* is perceived as a dynamic process rather than a static outcome (Hanelt et al., 2020), introducing significant challenges to organizations and their traditional strategy formulation processes. This shift, transformation, can create *strategic discontinuities* (Hedberg & Jönsson, 1977), defined as profound changes in how organizations interpret and engage with their environments. Such discontinuities arise when there is a misalignment between an organization's *strategic intent* (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989) and actual actions or capabilities, a phenomenon termed *strategic dissonance* (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). This dissonance arises from differing worldviews, necessitating a collective shared understanding, affecting strategy formulation in organizations.

Central to this thesis is the exploration of shared understanding. Transitioning from established perspectives to new ones requires a *cognitive shift* (Carrington, 2017). In other words, a change in worldview represents a new collective shared understanding encapsulated in the notion of *cognitive consensus* (Mohammed, 2001). An alignment of strategy builds on the alignment of cognition, i.e., cognitive consensus, through *consensus-building* (Innes, 1996, 2004; Innes & Booher, 1999a), or more specifically, *cognitive consensus-building*, which refers to the process of aligning and cultivating a shared understanding amongst stakeholders using dialogue. Throughout the thesis, I use the following definition of stakeholder: "Stakeholders include individuals, groups, and other organizations who have an interest in an organization's actions and the ability to influence it" (Savage et al., 1991, p. 61).

Sweden's public sector, characterized by its managerial tradition of consensus (Gustavsson, 1995; Salminen-Karlsson, 2013; Styhre et al., 2006), is a pertinent backdrop for this investigation. Drawing from this tradition and existing research on cognitive consensus and consensus-building, I re-introduce and adapt *consensing* (Abonyi, 1978) as the process of cognitive consensus-building. *Consensing* can resolve outdated assumptions and address strategic dissonance. Although consensing offers a pathway to reconcile paradoxical tensions and inform incremental and fundamental strategic decisions (Etzioni, 1967, 1986), it is not without challenges. Potential pitfalls of consensing include groupthink (Janis, 1971; Whyte, 1989), the illusion of unanimous agreement by false consensus (Haug, 2015; Krueger & Zeiger, 1993; Pope, 2013; Ross et al., 1977) or presumptive consensus, inertia (Barr et al., 1992; Hedberg & Jönsson, 1977), information overload (Ackoff, 1967; Edmunds & Morris, 2000), and paralysis by analysis (Langley, 1995). Moreover, I will delve into the *outcomes of consensing*, specifically the notions of *consensus debt*, *deficit*, and *surplus* (see chapter Outcomes of consensing).

1.1. THE MOTIVE

My primary motivation is to make an impact by practically contributing to improving strategizing in the public sector. I do this in two ways: first, through the published papers in this thesis. I respond to the call for more empirical studies on digital transformation, especially within the public sector (Mergel et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2018; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Weritz et al., 2020). Second, through this kappa, I answer the calls for more research on digital strategizing (Morton et al., 2022) and managerial consensus (Tallon et al., 2019).

1.2. AIM AND QUESTION

This thesis aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of consensing in digital strategizing and provide practical guidance for organizations navigating the challenges of digital transformation. The primary theoretical contribution is the development of a conceptual framework for consensing, addressing gaps in the existing literature on consensus-building and strategy formulation in the digital age. The framework was developed through a mixed-method research approach, complemented by abductive reasoning through retroduction.

The research is situated in the Swedish public sector, where the need for effective digital transformation strategies is paramount, given the increasing demands for efficiency, transparency, and citizen-centricity. By focusing on this specific context, the thesis aims to provide insights and recommendations that are relevant and actionable for public sector organizations.

The thesis adopts a normative and prescriptive approach, seeking not only to describe and explain the phenomenon of consensing but also to offer guidance and support for organizations in their digital transformation journeys. Drawing upon Hanisch's (2024) argument for the value of prescriptive theorizing in addressing grand challenges, this thesis aims to contribute to the development of effective strategizing practices and provide practical solutions for organizations.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: *How does cognitive consensus-building unfold in digital transformation strategy formulation?* By addressing this question, the thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of consensing and its role in shaping digital transformation strategies.

This thesis explores the critical role of consensing, a process of cognitive consensus-building through the mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, in aligning strategic intent and shared understanding among stakeholders during digital transformation strategy formulation in the Swedish public

sector. It argues that consensing, enabled by the organizational infrastructure of dialogue, leads to outcomes such as consensus surplus, deficit, or debt. By investigating how cognitive consensus-building unfolds in this context, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of effective digital transformation strategizing and offer practical recommendations for organizations navigating this complex process.

1.3. POSITIONING

Over the years, various studies have been conducted on the use of dialogue and the importance of consensus within organizations in different fields. However, these studies are scattered, and there is a need for a synthesis of the research. As a result, this thesis is broadly positioned within information systems, public administration, and strategic management. By bridging these disciplines, the thesis offers a comprehensive view that is both theoretically and practically significant. It explores digital transformation strategies and strategy formulation in the Swedish public sector. It follows a long tradition of interdisciplinary approaches in information systems in drawing from literature outside the discipline (Webster & Watson, 2002), thus including insights into strategic, organizational, and social aspects pivotal to understanding consensing. More specifically, the thesis is situated at the intersection of research on *digital transformation*, *strategy*, *dialogue*, and *consensus*.

By integrating insights from information systems, public administration, and strategic management, the thesis offers a comprehensive view that is both theoretically and practically significant. It explores digital transformation strategies and strategy formulation in the Swedish public sector, drawing from literature outside the information systems discipline to gain a more nuanced understanding of the strategic, organizational, and social aspects pivotal to consensing. This interdisciplinary approach enables a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics involved in consensing, considering the specific context of the Swedish public sector and the challeng-

es of digital transformation. By synthesizing insights from these diverse fields, the thesis contributes to a more holistic understanding of how consensing unfolds in practice and its implications for strategy formulation and implementation.

1.4. LIST OF INCLUDED PAPERS

This thesis builds on the six papers included in the thesis. I used the suggestion to theorize about digital strategizing proposed in the fourth (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024), fifth (Norling, 2024a), and sixth papers (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024) by theorizing about consensing and providing a conceptual framework for future research. The papers are as follows:

1. Magnusson, J., Khisro, J., Lindroth, T., Nilsson, A., & Norling, K. (2022). Rhizomatic Strategizing in Digital Transformation: A Clinical Field Study. *Proceedings of the 55th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, <https://doi.org/10.24251/hicss.2022.777>
2. Norling, K., Lindroth, T., Magnusson, J., & Torell, J. (2022). Digital Decoupling: A Population Study of Digital Transformation Strategies in Swedish Municipalities. *DG.O 2022: The 23rd Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research*, 356–363. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3543434.3543639>
3. Norling, K., Magnusson, J., Lindroth, T., & Torell, J. (2022). Strategic Responses to the COVID Pandemic: Empirical Evidence of Shifts in Digital Transformation Strategy. *AMCIS 2022*. https://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2022/sig_dite/sig_dite/2
4. Norling, K., Crusoe, J., & Berbyuk-Lindström, N. (2024). Strategic Dialogue in the Public Sector: An Exploratory Survey Study. (*Manuscript submitted for publication*).

5. Norling, K. (2024). Digital transformation or digital standstill? Status quo bias in Swedish public sector strategies. (*Manuscript submitted for publication*).
6. Norling, K., Lindroth, T., & Berbyuk-Lindström, N. (2024). Cognitive Consensus in Digital Transformation Strategy Formulation. (*Unpublished manuscript*).

1.5. OTHER PUBLICATIONS

During my time as a Ph.D. student, I authored several related publications not included in my thesis. Instead, they are listed as other publications, as they have contributed to my understanding of the empirical context. They are listed below.

1. Lindroth, T., Magnusson, J., Norling, K., & Torell, J. (2022). Balancing the Digital Portfolio: Empirical evidence of an ambidextrous bias in digital government. *DG.O 2022: The 23rd Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research*, 307–314. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3543434.3543641>
2. Norling, K. The Iron Cage of Internal Efficiency: A Content Analysis of Digital Transformation Strategy Direction in Swedish Regions. in *Qeios preprint* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.32388/bo865k>
3. Lindroth, T., Norling, K. & Magnusson, J. (2021). *Hinder för Digitalisering i Västra Götalandsregionen: Ett styrningsperspektiv*. <https://www.digitalforvaltning.se/rapport/hur-hanterar-man-styrningsarvet/>
4. Norling, K., Magnusson, J. & Lindroth, T. (2022). *Regionernas digitaliseringsstrategier: riktning och konsekvenser*. <https://www.digitalforvaltning.se/rapport/sveriges-regioners-digitaliseringsstrategier/>

1.6. THESIS STRUCTURE

The thesis is structured in the following chapters. First, I introduce the thesis, including the aim, the research question, and the publications. Then, I explore strategizing in flux, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and consensus in overcoming the discontinuities posed by rapid technological change. Next, I review related literature on consensing, situating it within the broader context of digital transformation, strategy, dialogue, and consensus. This is followed by an explanation of my integrated approach to ethics, paradigm, and methods, emphasizing the critical realist stance and the abductive and retroductive research approach.

I then explore the specific context of the Swedish public sector, highlighting its governance structure, organizational culture, and strategic implications for digital transformation. Building on this foundation, I delve into the mechanisms of consensing and dialogue, explicating the core processes of sensing, synthesizing, and balancing, and the role of cognitive conflict. Subsequently, I discuss the outcomes of consensing, introducing the concepts of consensus surplus, deficit, and debt, and illustrating their practical implications through fictional case examples. This is followed by a chapter on the applications and implications of the consensing framework, offering guidelines for practice and discussing theoretical contributions.

I also dedicate a chapter to exploring the dark side of consensing, providing a balanced perspective on potential pitfalls and unintended consequences, such as dialogue inertia and groupthink. Based on the conceptual framework, I then propose a set of testable propositions and suggest methodological approaches for future empirical validation.

In the discussion chapter, I synthesize the key insights and contributions of the thesis, acknowledging limitations, and outlining avenues for future research. Finally, the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGIZING IN FLUX

“All is flux, nothing stays still.”

HERACLITUS

Cognitive consensus-building exists at the intersection of digital transformation, strategy, dialogue, and consensus. The concepts briefly introduced in this chapter set the stage and place consensing in context. For an in-depth literature overview, see the next chapter, Theoretical underpinnings to consensing.

2.1. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Digital transformation, here viewed as a process rather than an outcome (Hanelt et al., 2020), is a complex and multifaceted process that involves the integration of digital technologies and strategies into various aspects of an organization to change how it operates and delivers value fundamentally. It is a response to the rapid advancement of digital technologies and their potential to disrupt traditional business models (Vial, 2019). Digital transformation encompasses a wide range of activities, including adopting digital tools and platforms, reimagining organizational processes, developing new operating models, and cultivating a digital culture within the organization (Grover et al., 2022; Hanelt et al., 2020; Hartl, 2019).

Digital transformation presents organizations with a range of challenges and considerations. These include building organizational resilience, adapting to digital disruptions (Tim & Leidner, 2023), and preparing workplaces and employees for the changes brought about by digital transformation and digitalization efforts (Hallin et al., 2022). Furthermore, digital

transformation requires organizations to address barriers that hinder and drivers that influence their success. Barriers include resistance to change, lack of digital skills, resource constraints, and lack of strategy (Jakob & Krcmar, 2018; Tangi et al., 2020). On the other hand, drivers of digital transformation include ambidexterity, agility, the emergence of dynamic capabilities, the pursuit of innovation, and strategic renewal (Iden & Bygstad, 2021; Magnusson, Khisro, et al., 2020; Magnusson, Päivärinta, et al., 2020; Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Foremost, organizations must challenge their assumptions to formulate new strategic problems for which the strategy is the answer. This process involves critically examining existing beliefs, practices, and assumptions within the organization and questioning their validity and relevance in digital transformation. By challenging assumptions, organizations can identify new opportunities, anticipate potential risks, and develop innovative strategies that align with the changing digital landscape (He et al., 2022). This requires a willingness to question established norms, embrace uncertainty, and adopt a learning mindset (Trenerry et al., 2021). By challenging assumptions, organizations can break free from traditional thinking patterns (Gegenhuber et al., 2022). The process of challenging existing assumptions (Mason, 1969; Mitroff et al., 1979) is essential in digital transformation, as it enables organizations to adapt to the dynamic and disruptive nature of digital technologies and leverage them effectively to drive organizational change and success by emphasizing the assumptions of digital culture (Knecht & Hund, 2022). Questioning assumptions also helps organizations navigate power dynamics and interpretative repertoires that can influence digitalization efforts (Hallin et al., 2022), and organizations can come closer to their stakeholders (Tallon et al., 2022). Challenging assumptions is an essential aspect of dialogue processes that can create more creative and innovative outcomes (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). Digital transformation emerges as a pivotal strategic shift, and organizations must understand its implications and the broader changes that can influence the formulation of strategies.

2.2. STRATEGY IN BRIEF

The concept of strategy in the context of digital transformation is foundational for this research, highlighting the dynamic interaction between strategic discontinuities and strategic dissonance and the critical role of dialogue and cognitive consensus. Strategizing is framed as an active collective effort that extends beyond the mere formulation of strategy to encompass both intended strategies, what organizations plan to do, and realized strategies, what they do (Mintzberg, 1978; Whittington et al., 2017). This dual focus acknowledges the gap between formulated strategies and their implementation, which can lead to strategic dissonance when assumptions do not align with the organization's context and capabilities. The iterative and engaging nature of digital strategizing is influenced by various external and internal factors, highlighting the importance of continuous adaptation and learning (Eisenhardt et al., 2010; Innes & Booher, 2003, 2016).

Discontinuities introduced by digital transformation challenge traditional notions of strategy, prompting a reassessment of strategic assumptions and necessitating strategies that are dynamic and responsive to rapid technological changes (Matt et al., 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017). This approach to strategy as action aligns with Kornberger and Vaara (2021). The collective nature of strategizing is underscored by the concept of strategy as a participatory process (Hautz et al., 2017; Heracleous, 2019), involving a wide range of stakeholders in a continuous dialogue to develop a shared understanding and address high-stakes challenges (Rumelt, 2022a; Tavakoli et al., 2017).

2.3. STRATEGIC DISCONTINUITIES

Strategic discontinuities refer to significant shifts or disruptions in an organization's strategy that deviate from its previous trajectory or established patterns (Hedberg & Jönsson, 1977). These discontinuities can arise from various internal and external factors, such as changes in the external environment, technological advancements, customer preference shifts, or new

competitors (Hautz, 2017; Vermeulen et al., 2016). They often require organizations to reassess their existing strategies and make substantial changes to adapt to new circumstances (Hautz et al., 2017; Heracleous, 2019; Pregmark & Berggren, 2021; Tallon et al., 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2016).

Hedberg and Jönsson (1977) explored the concept of strategy formulation as a discontinuous process. The authors discuss the nature of strategy formulation and its implications for organizations. They argue that strategy formulation is not a linear and predictable process but a discontinuous and dynamic one, arguing that it does not follow a smooth and continuous path but involves sudden shifts, changes, and disruptions. Various factors, such as changes in the external environment, technological advancements, or market conditions, can cause these discontinuities. Hedberg and Jönsson (1977) emphasize that understanding and managing these discontinuities is crucial for organizations to formulate and adapt their strategies effectively. While strategic discontinuities highlight the shifts and disruptions in an organization's strategy, it is equally important to address the potential gaps between the intended and realized strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), often manifested as strategic dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). These strategic discontinuities can lead to misalignments between an organization's intended strategy and its actions, resulting in strategic dissonance.

2.4. STRATEGIC DISSONANCE

Strategic dissonance is a misalignment or inconsistency between an organization's intended and realized strategy or actions (Dobusch et al., 2019). It occurs when there is a disconnect between what the organization plans to do and what it does in practice. This can happen due to changes in the external environment, technological advancements, internal conflicts, or the inability to execute the intended strategy.

One of the leading causes of strategic dissonance is the dynamic nature of the external environment. Organizations operate in complex and uncertain environments where conditions can change rapidly. As a result, the initially formulated and planned strategy may no longer be suitable or effective in the current context. This can lead to misalignment or inconsistencies between the intended and realized strategies (Burgelman & Grove, 1996).

Strategic dissonance can also hinder organizational learning and adaptation, limiting the organization's ability to learn from its experiences and make necessary adjustments (Levinthal & March, 1993). When there is a misalignment between the intended and realized strategies, the organization may fail to achieve its goals and objectives. It can also create confusion and demotivation among employees, as they may not understand the direction or purpose of their work (Schwenk, 1995).

Therefore, organizations must regularly assess and align their strategic goals with their capabilities to address strategic dissonance. This is similar to Chanas et al. (2019), who emphasize iterating between doing and learning as the key to a digital transformation strategy. This involves evaluating the effectiveness of their current strategy, identifying gaps or inconsistencies, and making the necessary adjustments. It also requires effective communication and coordination among stakeholders to ensure alignment and shared understanding of the strategy (Villiers & Molinari, 2022), further emphasizing the importance of strategic dialogue (Bourgoin et al., 2018). Organizations may need to invest in developing or acquiring the necessary resources, capabilities, and relationships to support their strategic intent (Shepherd et al., 2020; Teece et al., 1997). To address strategic dissonance and align intended strategies with realized actions, organizations can leverage the power of dialogue to foster shared understanding and facilitate strategic alignment.

2.5. DIALOGUE IN BRIEF

In the realms of organization and strategy, *dialogue* is not just a method of communication but a fundamental process that shapes knowledge collaboration, leadership, strategy-making, and decision-making. It is characterized as “the flow of meaning” (Bell, 1996, p. 20) and deemed essential for effective collective action, where internal crowdsourcing can democratize strategy dialogue to integrate organizational members' knowledge and create shared understanding (Schein, 1993; Stieger et al., 2012). Despite its critical importance, the potential for dialogue is often underutilized in organizations, leading to a lack of shared understanding and assumptions, which are vital for strategic social interaction processes (Kent & Lane, 2021; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Rouleau, 2005). Open strategy, which supports the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in strategy development, further underscores the value of dialogue in enhancing strategy through transparency, inclusivity, and collaboration (Hautz, 2017; Hautz et al., 2017).

Dialogue is used in this thesis as an active verb, and refers to engaging participants in discussions to resolve problems (*New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2010). This aligns with the notion that the purpose of strategy is to overcome challenges (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Rumelt, 2022a). The strategy process, especially when addressing wicked problems, is viewed as an argumentative process where understanding problems and solutions emerge through critical argument and dialogue (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Strategy-making thus becomes a conversational link between intent and learning, as well as the external environment and internal capabilities (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). The political, strategic, and tactical dimensions of dialogue in strategy emphasize the necessity of different dialogue forms (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024) to bridge the different phases of strategy formulation and implementation, similar to connecting policy with tactics (Bourgoin et al., 2018; Kornberger & Vaara, 2021).

Dialogue is distinguished from traditional communication by its interactive, regenerative nature, promoting mutual understanding and co-creation

of meaning (Isaacs, 1999; Kent & Lane, 2021). It acts as a transformative agent, challenging established assumptions, fostering creativity, and developing fresh insights and strategic innovation (Kent & Theunissen, 2016). Dialogue enables middle managers to interpret strategic issues and align organizational actions with strategic direction, contributing to strategic change and innovation (Ayuso et al., 2006; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). While dialogue plays a crucial role in cultivating shared understanding, the concept of cognitive consensus provides a deeper understanding of the alignment of beliefs and perceptions among stakeholders.

2.6. COGNITIVE CONSENSUS IN BRIEF

Cognitive consensus refers to the level of agreement or shared understanding between stakeholders about a particular cognitive task or decision-making process. It involves aligning individuals' mental models, beliefs, and knowledge to reach a shared understanding or agreement (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Cognitive consensus is an essential aspect of group decision-making and can influence the quality and effectiveness of decision-making (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001).

Cognitive consensus is essential in strategic management and organizational decision-making, involving shared beliefs, common understanding, and aligned mental models among stakeholders (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001; Shepherd et al., 2020). It includes shared assumptions, frames of reference, and belief structures (Hedberg & Jönsson, 1978; J. P. Walsh, 1988), contributing to group trust and cohesion, thus enhancing decision-making quality (Shepherd et al., 2020).

Cognitive consensus-building is influenced by cognitive diversity, communication quality, and shared mental models (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). While cognitive diversity, involving different knowledge and perspectives, can enrich or hinder consensus-building (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001), effective communication is crucial for building shared understanding (Heidmann et al., 2008; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Mo-

ammed & Ringseis, 2001). Similarly, shared mental models facilitate and align collective thinking (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001).

In strategic management, cognitive consensus is linked to improved organizational performance through better communication, coordination, and collaboration (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008). It is also associated with mental models and frames, shaping information perception and interpretation (McDermott & Boyer, 1999; Muafi & Kusumawati, 2020; Ross et al., 1977). Achieving it involves aligning these cognitive structures, often through communication and dialogue (Desmidt & George, 2016; Sievers et al., 2020).

The benefits of cognitive consensus include improved decision-making, strategic alignment, collaboration, and coordination (Mansour & Obembe, 2018; Porck et al., 2020; Priem, 1990; West & Schwenk, 1996). However, its achievement can be complex, requiring dialogue and negotiation in the face of conflicts (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997b). Cognitive consensus is a multifaceted construct crucial for aligning beliefs and understanding, significantly impacting strategy formulation.

2.7. SYNTHESIS AND IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCH GAPS

Digital strategizing in organizations is affected by the interaction between strategic discontinuities, strategic dissonance, and cognitive consensus, caused by digital transformation.

Digital transformation, driven by technological advancements, is a source of strategic discontinuities. Organizations may encounter changes that challenge their established strategic direction (Norling, 2024b) as they integrate digital technologies and strategies. If these shifts are not addressed promptly and effectively, they can result in strategic dissonance, a divergence between an organization's intended and realized strategies. This misalignment can be due to external environmental changes and internal organizational dynamics. In this

context, consensing becomes a critical process for organizations to navigate the challenges posed by strategic discontinuities, as it facilitates the realignment of strategic intent and shared understanding among stakeholders.

Amid these challenges, the significance of cognitive consensus becomes evident. I argue that a shared understanding across the organization is an antecedent to coherent digital strategizing. Cognitive consensus helps organizations address the complexities of transformation and reduce the potential for strategic dissonance. In other words, a shared understanding enables the alignment of realized strategy with strategic intent. For instance, when an organization's members have a shared understanding of the strategic objectives and the rationale behind them, they are more likely to make decisions and take actions that align with the intended strategy, thus reducing the likelihood of strategic dissonance.

Existing research has emphasized the outcomes of consensus over process, focusing on shared agreement and commitment and their effect on performance (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022; González-Benito et al., 2012; Homburg et al., 1999; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011). However, a shared understanding is considered an inherent pre-condition in the consensus as an outcome literature and thus not elaborated upon. Therefore, I argue that shared understanding is a critical factor that requires more attention and investigation in academic research. Furthermore, within the consensus process literature, shared understanding is black-boxed. Therefore, I argue that to understand it, we must unpack and comprehend cognitive consensus-building. The conceptual framework of consensing proposed in this thesis aims to address these gaps by unpacking the process of cognitive consensus-building and providing a more nuanced understanding of how shared understanding emerges and influences strategy formulation. This insight provides the foundation for my proposed conceptual framework of consensing

2.8. CONSENSING IN BRIEF

Consensing is an iterative and reflexive process that facilitates the formation of shared understanding, shaping collective commitment and actions. Importantly, consensing is not a direct consolidation of pre-existing individual perspectives nor a negotiation between stakeholders. Instead, it is an emergent process where shared understanding co-evolves, shaped by the constant interplay of inputs, dialogue, and reflection.

Two primary mechanisms drive consensing: *sensing* and *synthesizing*. *Sensing* represents the capacity to perceive, interpret, and share signals from their internal and external environment. It forms the input side of consensing, feeding the system with a *requisite variety* (Seidl & Werle, 2017) of diverse, nuanced perspectives and information. *Synthesizing*, conversely, represents the collective reflective processing and integration of these inputs into a coherent, shared understanding. Consensing is further augmented with the *adjacent possible* concept (Kauffman, 1996), which symbolizes the range of immediate, feasible actions stakeholders can commit to, given its current state and context. As such, it encapsulates the potential futures accessible to stakeholders and provides a flexible horizon for action that evolves with consensing.

Balancing is crucial in this context. Balancing divergent and convergent thinking, individual and collective perspectives, and emergent and deliberate strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), guided by diagnostic and generative dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005), ensures the dynamism and responsiveness of consensing. In addition, the consensing process is cyclical and iterative, punctuated by instances of choice leading to consensing outcomes and actions embodying the shared understanding. These *inflection points* (Burgelman & Grove, 1996) represent significant moments in the consensing process where there is a significant change in understanding. This could be due to new information, experiences, or insights that challenge existing beliefs and require a re-evaluation of the cognitive framework. Such inflection points can be transformative, leading to new

ways of understanding or approaching problems from the adjacent possible, propelling the organization into its next state. Finally, digital platforms facilitate organizational consensing, with their unparalleled ability to operate on a large scale with speed (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), enabling consensing in a previously impossible way.

2.9. DIALOGUES AND CONSENSUS: ESTABLISHING STRATEGIZING SUCCESS

It is essential to have dialogue when strategizing because it helps to achieve a shared understanding. This shared understanding, in turn, is crucial because it creates the foundation for well-informed decisions and facilitates subsequent actions. Suppose you do not take the time to establish a shared understanding upfront. In that case, you will probably spend more time and effort later trying to communicate, defend, and explain decisions. This can be inefficient and time-consuming. Therefore, building a shared understanding from the start is better, to avoid misunderstandings and delays later.

Achieving a shared understanding through dialogue is not merely about communication but cultivating a cognitive consensus. Cognitive consensus becomes the basis upon which decisions and actions are made. The importance of shared understanding cannot be overstated. It allows for a smoother transition from planning to implementation, reducing the need for excessive clarification and defense of decisions post hoc. When a strategy is formulated upon a shared understanding, it resonates more effectively throughout the organization, aligning actions and reducing friction in implementation.

However, the absence of purposeful dialogue in strategizing leads to a different scenario marked by a *consensus deficit*. Such a deficit occurs when decisions are made without adequate dialogue with stakeholders, leading to a lack of shared understanding. This deficit can manifest in various forms, such as resistance to change, confusion over strategic direction, and inefficiencies in execution. Over time, a pattern of decision-making that

consistently results in a consensus deficit can erode organizational trust and effectiveness. In this context, the concept of *consensus debt* becomes particularly prominent. Consensus debt is the cumulative impact of repeated decisions made with insufficient consensus. It is a debt that accrues not financially but in terms of organizational cohesion and effectiveness. The following fictional case summarizes how this could be played out in practice.

2.10. A TALE OF STRATEGIC MISSTEPS WITH DIRE CONSEQUENCES (FICTIONAL)²

A Swedish municipal government implemented a new digital platform as part of its digital transformation efforts. The top management decided, without involving the middle managers and employees, the primary users of the new platform. The lack of dialogue led to the selection of a platform that was not useful for the existing workforce. Consequently, the implementation faced significant resistance. The employees were disappointed with the functionality and reluctant to adopt the new system. Decision-makers spent extensive time and resources training and defending their choice, leading to delays and frustration. The lack of initial consensing resulted in a severe consensus deficit, which hampered the digital transformation.

2.11. HOW DIALOGUE AND CONSENSING COULD HAVE HELPED

The outcome could have been significantly different had the municipal government engaged in a thorough dialogue and consensing before the decision. By involving middle managers and employees in the discussion about the new platform, the management could have gained valuable in-

² The fictional case is based on my experience as a practitioner. The fictive story illustrates how dialogue, consensing, and consensus debt play out in practice. See 4.16 about the rationale for using fictional stories.

sights into the users' needs and preferences. This participative approach would have fostered a shared understanding and collective cognitive framework regarding the objectives and functionalities of the platform. Such an inclusive decision-making process would have likely led to selecting a more suitable platform, ensuring smoother implementation, higher user acceptance, and reduced need for post-decision explanations and defense. By paying the price of cultivating a shared understanding in advance, the organization could have avoided the consensus deficit and the associated organizational strain.

In conclusion, cognitive consensus-building precedes, or should precede, consensus-building as agreement or commitment. The outcome of cognitive consensus-building should preferably result in a consensus surplus. If the dialogue and inclusion preceding a decision are lacking, the chance is that a consensus deficit will occur. Although this may occasionally be in order, repeatedly making decisions that result in a consensus deficit will adversely affect the organization.

2.12. SUMMARY OF STRATEGIZING IN FLUX

This chapter has explored the interconnected concepts of digital transformation, strategic discontinuities, strategic dissonance, dialogue, and cognitive consensus, emphasizing their significance in strategizing amidst digital disruption. It has underscored the need for a framework that integrates these elements to support organizations in navigating the complexities of digital transformation and achieving strategic alignment. Figure 1 illustrates how discontinuities create strategic dissonance due to the widening misalignment between intended and realized strategy. Thus, discontinuities challenge the foundational beliefs underpinning the current strategy and necessitate a re-evaluation of the strategic assumptions. This re-evaluation is done through consensing and involves using the organizational infrastructure (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1999) of dialogue, fostering a shared understanding, embodied in the digital transformation strategy. The next chapter delves deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of consensing.

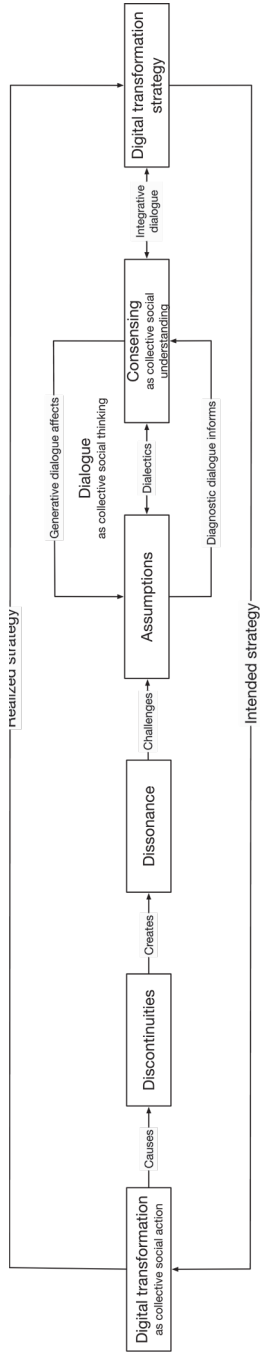


Figure 1. How discontinuities affect strategy formulation

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF CONSENSING

“Do not seek to bring things to pass in accordance with your wishes, but wish for them as they are, and you will find them.”

EPICETUS

As organizations undergo digital transformation, they face new opportunities and challenges, prompting a reevaluation of their strategies. A critical aspect of this transformation involves ensuring that strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989) aligns with actions. One potential solution to achieving alignment is establishing a shared understanding, achieved by collective social thinking (Isaacs, 1999) using the organizational infrastructure (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1999) of dialogue.

However, digital transformation has its challenges. Organizations face potential pitfalls such as strategic dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996), role conflicts (Gemino & Reich, 2023), and inertia (Kelly & Amburgey, 1991), emphasizing the need for continuous learning and adaptability (Levinthal & March, 1993). Balancing exploration and exploitation becomes essential (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, 2024b), as does recognizing and navigating these paradoxes' inherent tensions. Despite these challenges, ambiguity emerges as a barrier and enabler, facilitating consensus and enabling diverse stakeholders to come to a shared understanding of the strategy.

Furthermore, the role of dialogue in organizational dynamics and strategy-making appears as a mechanism for sensing (Gómez & Ballard, 2013; Rouleau, 2005; Weick, 2020), innovation, and facilitating shared under-

standing. As organizations navigate the details of their digital transformations, the importance of dialogue and consensing becomes even more pronounced. This synthesis of insights from strategy, the significance of consensus, and the use of dialogue provides a foundation for understanding the role of consensing in digital strategizing.

3.1. INTEGRATION OF THREE RESEARCH STREAMS

This thesis integrates the literature on consensus, dialogue, and strategy to bridge a gap in understanding the consensing approach to strategizing. Each stream offers distinct insights that, when combined, provide a comprehensive view of consensing. The consensus literature explains how organizations reach agreements, which is fundamental for strategizing. Dialogue literature details communication processes that facilitate or impede shared meaning. Finally, the literature on strategy contextualizes these elements within broader organizational objectives. Combining these streams makes a multifaceted analysis possible, which is essential for understanding strategy formulation dynamics. To gain a deeper understanding of existing knowledge, exploring the intersection of various fields is necessary rather than depending solely on one field (Tarafdar & Davison, 2018). The complex and multifaceted nature of digital transformation necessitates effective dialogue among stakeholders to navigate challenges, address assumptions, and formulate strategies that align with the organization's goals and capabilities.

3.2. DIALOGUE

Dialogue plays a crucial role in various aspects of organizational and social interactions. It is a form of communication that involves the exchange of ideas, opinions, and information between stakeholders. In this chapter, I explore the concept of dialogue and its significance in different contexts.

In previous research, dialogue has been characterized as "the flow of meaning" (Bell, 1996, p. 20). According to Schein (1993, p. 42), dialogue is "at the root of all effective group action." Stieger et al. (2012) suggest internal crowdsourcing to democratize the strategy dialogue to involve and integrate stakeholders' knowledge to create a shared understanding. Pye (1995) boils down managing into dialogue and doing. Essentially, they all view dialogue as central to action and change. Here, dialogue is considered the organizational infrastructure (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1999) on which organizations build shared understanding. In essence, without dialogue, organizations would not exist. However, despite dialogue being an organization's lifeblood, attention to creating the potential for dialogue (Kent & Lane, 2021) is lacking.

If dialogue is the infrastructure for shared understanding, it suggests that strategy is a social interaction process based on the organizational collective's assumptions and shared understanding (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). This perspective aligns with strategic sensemaking, which emphasizes the social construction of strategy through ongoing interactions and sensemaking activities (Rouleau, 2005). It recognizes that strategy emerges through the collective efforts and interactions of stakeholders within an organization. Furthermore, the idea of strategy as a social interaction is also supported by the concept of open strategy, which emphasizes the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in developing the strategy (Hautz et al., 2017). Open strategy encourages transparency, inclusivity, and collaboration, recognizing that diverse perspectives and inputs can improve strategy.

In this research, dialogue is primarily used as a verb and uses the dictionary definition; "take part in a conversation or discussion to resolve a problem" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2010). This definition aligns well with the notion that the purpose of strategy is to solve challenges (Rumelt, 2022b) and with Rumelt's view (2022, p. 4); "a properly configured strategy is a mixture of policy and action designed to surmount a high-stakes challenge." Rittel & Webber (1973) arguments for the use of dialogue in

strategic planning when dealing with wicked problems and consequently dialogue in strategizing should be viewed as; "...an argumentative process in the course of which an image of the problem and of the solution emerges gradually among the participants, as a product of incessant judgment, subjected to critical argument." (1973, p. 162). This leads to strategy-making as conversations that link intent with learning and the outside environment with internal capabilities (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996).

According to Liedtka and Rosenblum (1996), strategy-making is a conversation. This aligns with Bourgoin et al.'s (2018) argument that strategy happens through conversation and Jacobs and Heracleous's (2005) view of reflective dialogue as an enabler of strategic innovation. Previous research has shown that strategy conversations take place through strategy documents (O'Nolan, 2018; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), in workshops (Pregmark & Berggren, 2021; Schwarz, 2009), meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Paulsson, 2022), committees (Hoon, 2007), enterprise social networks (Plotnikova, 2020), through storytelling (Adamson et al., 2006; Spear & Roper, 2016; Wheeldon, 2014) and in roadmapping (Phaal & Palmer, 2010).

3.3. THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN ORGANIZATIONS AND STRATEGY

Dialogue generally refers to an interactive and reciprocal communication process in which stakeholders exchange ideas, opinions, and information (Kent & Lane, 2021; Lane, 2020). In practice, dialogue is essential in organizations, facilitating the discussion of progress, sharing ideas, and making decisions (Meske et al., 2020). For example, workshops provide a platform for stakeholders to express their concerns, ask questions, and engage in dialogue about the change process. Thus, dialogue helps address resistance, build understanding, and gain buy-in from stakeholders (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Rouleau, 2005). Dialogue with stakeholders such as citizens, patients, and organizational members, is vital for organizations

to understand their needs, expectations, and concerns (Ayuso et al., 2006; Guibert & Roloff, 2017). Organizations can gather feedback, address issues, and build relationships with stakeholders through dialogue. Additionally, dialogue is integral to decision-making processes within organizations and allows the exploration of different perspectives, considering diverse viewpoints, and evaluating potential risks and benefits (Garbuio et al., 2015).

Dialogue and traditional communication differ fundamentally in their objectives and processes. Although classic communication models often involves one-way transmission of information from a sender to a receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 2015), dialogue is a two-way, interactive process focused on mutual understanding and co-creation of meaning (Kent & Lane, 2021). Dialogue emphasizes active listening, open exchange of ideas, and equal participation, fostering a collaborative environment (Sievers et al., 2020). On the contrary, traditional communication may be hierarchical and directive, conveying information rather than facilitating mutual understanding (Phaal & Palmer, 2010). Thus, dialogue serves as a more inclusive and transformative mode of interaction, particularly valuable in strategy-making and organizational learning (Tsoukas, 2009).

Dialogue is inherently regenerative (Kent & Theunissen, 2016), implying that some form of destruction is essential for the emergence of new insights. Kent and Theunissen (2016) suggest that established assumptions are challenged through dialogue, alternative avenues for understanding are unveiled, and opportunities for novel interpretations and cognitive changes become possible. However, this process requires self-disclosure, which exposes individuals to the potential disintegration of certain existing assumptions and understandings. Dialogue serves as a catalyst for transformation, succinctly summarized as “dialogue begins with destruction but ends in rebirth” (Kent & Theunissen, 2016, p. 4050).

Dialogue is fundamental in cultivating a shared understanding and is essential for strategizing and sensemaking (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Bal-

gun, 2011). Drawing on data from two research projects on middle managers and their change practice, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) explain how middle managers engage in strategic sensemaking through dialogue to interpret and make sense of strategic issues and changes in the external environment. Through dialogue, middle managers can collectively construct a shared understanding of the organization's strategic direction and align their actions accordingly (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Dialogue also contributes to strategic change and innovation by generating new ideas and perspectives (Ayuso et al., 2006). By engaging in dialogue, stakeholders can challenge existing assumptions, explore alternatives, and foster creativity (Ayuso et al., 2006). In other words, through dialogue, organizations can engage with different perspectives and assumptions to think generatively together to formulate and solve problems (Schein, 1993).

Dialogue plays an important role in strategy by facilitating various aspects of strategy-making. It enables organizations to gather new ideas and perspectives from stakeholders, fostering sustainable innovation (Ayuso et al., 2006). Resistance to change can be addressed through dialogue (Ford et al., 2002), as it provides a platform for open and honest conversations that help stakeholders understand and navigate the complexities of change. Dialogue also helps bridge formal barriers in digital work environments, enabling effective communication and collaboration across organizational hierarchies (Meske et al., 2020). Through strategic sensemaking and discursive competence, middle managers engage in dialogue to construct a shared understanding of the organization's strategic direction (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Andersen (2015) argues that interactive strategy-making, which involves ongoing dialogue and learning from decentralized responses, can enhance the quality and effectiveness of strategic decision-making. Dialogue facilitates the integration of different points of view, leading to more informed and robust strategic choices. Integrating different perspectives highlights the importance of involving relevant stakeholders in strategy work to foster dialogue and achieve shared understanding (Laine & Vaara, 2015). In-

cluding a diverse set of participants allows for the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives, thus infusing a requisite variety (Seidl & Werle, 2017) and creating the potential for dialogue (Kent & Lane, 2021). Dialogue as a strategic process has several implications for organizations. It fosters stakeholder collaboration and cooperation, developing shared goals and objectives (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005). In a case study of a strategic initiative in the city of Gothenburg, Brorström (2017) argues that dialogue enables the alignment of stakeholder and organizational interests, thus enhancing the effectiveness of strategy execution.

Dialogue is fundamental in strategy formulation, particularly in cultivating a shared understanding among stakeholders. This shared understanding creates conditions for strategy formation, cultivated through continuous dialogue (Henfridsson & Lind, 2014; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). Dialogue is particularly relevant in digital transformation and technology-driven strategies (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), with Adner et al. (2019) arguing that digital strategy requires a qualitative change in thinking and decision-making, emphasizing the need for dialogue to navigate the complexities and uncertainties associated with digital transformation. Dialogue enables organizations to explore innovative approaches, address challenges, and leverage the potential of digital technologies (Adner et al., 2019).

In conclusion, dialogue emerges as a critical infrastructure in strategy formulation, enabling organizations to cultivate shared understanding, address challenges, and develop innovative solutions. As organizations navigate the complexities of digital transformation, the role of dialogue becomes increasingly vital. By fostering open communication, collaboration, and consensus-building, dialogue lays the foundation for effective strategy formulation in the face of disruptive change. The next chapter delves into the concept of consensus, exploring its interplay with dialogue in the strategic context.

3.4. CONSENSUS

Consensus can be defined as a general agreement or shared understanding among stakeholders about a particular course of action or decision. It involves reaching a collective decision through open communication, negotiation, and compromise, considering diverse perspectives and opinions (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Consensus-building ensures that decisions are made collectively rather than by a single individual or a group of stakeholders (Innes & Booher, 1999). This research focuses on consensus as a shared understanding between stakeholders.

In the context of strategy formulation, consensus plays a crucial role. Strategy formulation involves the development of a plan or approach to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Mintzberg, 1977). Consensus-building ensures that strategy formulation considers diverse perspectives and expertise (Amrollahi & Rowlands, 2017; Denis et al., 2011; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). By involving multiple stakeholders and encouraging open dialogue, consensus-building helps to integrate different viewpoints and reach a shared understanding of the strategic issues (S. L. Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

It is important to note that consensus does not necessarily mean unanimous agreement. Consensus can be reached through negotiation, compromise, and finding common ground, even if there are some differences of opinion (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). The goal is to achieve a general agreement or shared understanding that allows for collective action and implementation of strategies (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Recognizing that consensus involves layered dimensions beyond mere agreement, we must delve into its multifaceted nature to appreciate its full impact on the strategic process and organizational dynamics.

3.4.1. CONSENSUS IS MULTIFACETED

A comprehensive understanding of consensus requires a multifaceted view of consensus (Markoczy, 2001; Tarakci et al., 2014). According to Markoczy (2001), the concept of consensus can be broken down into four facets: *locus*, *scope*, *degree*, and *content*. *Locus* refers to which stakeholders participate in the consensus, while *scope* refers to how many participate. *Degree* refers to how strongly the consensus is held, and *content* refers to the actual beliefs of the consensus. These facets are essential to consider when studying consensus formation in organizations. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the process and stakeholders in consensus-building during strategic shifts, as pointed out by Markóczy (2001). Kellermanns et al. (2005) further argue that the consensus definition should align with the study's context and theoretical foundation. Previous research indicates that an elevated level of consensus within a group can improve communication, coordination, and performance while fostering synergies (Tarakci et al., 2014). On the contrary, an excessive level of consensus may impede change and innovation (Tarakci et al., 2014). Achieving intergroup consensus requires disbanding silo mentality and cultivating mutual understanding among interdependent teams (Porck et al., 2020).

Several factors contribute to the formation of consensus within organizations. *Strategic alignment*, which refers to the congruence between strategic goals and actions, has been identified as a critical antecedent of consensus (Walter et al., 2013). In a survey study across 63 university departments, Walter et al. (2013) showed that consensus and alignment positively influence organizational performance. However, their interaction reveals that when strategic alignment is high, consensus among decision-makers has little impact on performance. In contrast, a greater consensus can significantly enhance performance when strategic alignment is low. Walter et al. (2013) suggest that the benefits of coordination and cooperation from consensus are more critical when the organization's strategic priorities are not well-aligned with the environment, indicating that strategic alignment can offset the negative influence of low consensus. Under certain con-

ditions, a well-aligned strategy can neutralize the performance effects of consensus. Therefore, while consensus and alignment are important, their relative impact on performance can vary depending on the level of strategic alignment. (Walter et al., 2013).

Paradoxically, consensus has been found to positively and negatively affect organizational performance (Kellermanns et al., 2011). On the positive side, a high degree of consensus among stakeholders leads to better coordination, cooperation, and commitment, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness (Rapert et al., 1996). Consensus also contributes to innovation performance (Camelo et al., 2010). When there is agreement on strategic goals and actions, it provides a clear direction for innovation efforts and facilitates the implementation of innovative ideas. Despite the potential benefits, consensus can also have negative effects on organizational performance (Kellermanns et al., 2011). In complex environments, having less agreement can facilitate greater innovation, flexibility, and creativity (González-Benito et al., 2012). Research by Knight et al. (1999) suggests that a diverse range of perspectives, while challenging for reaching consensus, can positively impact environmental scanning and broaden the range of strategic options available. Abonyi's notion of filtering (1983) is an approach aimed at developing alternatives beneficial for all stakeholders and useful for identifying conflicts that could hinder the implementation of policies, programs, or projects. This approach is not a standalone decision-making process but a consensing tool that uses dialogue to understand diverse stakeholder perspectives, thus delineating the parameters for consensus. Filtering is a useful tool for consensing and developing strategies through dialogue.

Several studies have substantiated the role of isomorphism in shaping consensus within organizations. Bryson et al. (2010) discuss the role of isomorphic pressures in organizational conformity. These pressures encourage organizations to align with existing norms, practices, and expectations, leading them to adopt similar strategies, structures, and processes. This phenomenon can notably affect consensus-building within organizations (Bryson et al., 2010). Similarly, Desmidt & George (2015) explore the

connection between internal communication and between-group consensus, suggesting that effective communication practices, influenced by isomorphism, can enhance consensus-building. Adding to this, Bragaw and Misangyi (2022) delve into the different types of consensus and their effects on strategic climate, highlighting the role of isomorphism in cultivating consensus through developing psychological bonds. González-Benito et al. (2010) also contribute to this discourse by focusing on consensus-building on strategic issues, emphasizing that shared beliefs and values, influenced by isomorphism, are central to reaching consensus. Collectively, these studies affirm the significant role of isomorphism in influencing consensus within an organization.

Although consensus is generally considered beneficial, it has challenges and limitations. Achieving consensus can be complex and time-consuming, especially in large organizations with diverse stakeholders (González-Benito et al., 2012). Different perspectives, interests, and power dynamics can hinder consensus formation. Moreover, striving for consensus can give rise to *groupthink* (Janis, 1971; Whyte, 1989), a situation in which the collective prioritizes harmony over critical evaluation and individual judgment. This inclination toward conformity can stifle divergent opinions and alternative perspectives within the group, compromising decision quality and stifling innovation opportunities (McDermott & Boyer, 1999). Whyte's (1989) assertion that *groupthink* is an insufficient explanation for failures of group decision-making is noteworthy. Although group thinking focuses on seeking agreement, it disregards other factors, such as group polarization. The decision frame that the group initially adopts has a more significant impact on the decision outcome. Therefore, groupthink cannot be considered the only cause of decision-making failures. Kelman et al. (2017) conducted a study to understand effective decision-making in government organizations by analyzing decision-making approaches and advisor utilization of US federal subcabinet executives. The study found that outstanding executives were more decisive than their counterparts. They were willing to make crucial decisions even with limited information, suggesting that they preferred to take action rather than being stuck

in *paralysis by analysis* (Langley, 1995). This indicates that the danger of striving for consensus is *paralysis by analysis* rather than groupthink. While the pursuit of consensus presents challenges, including the risk of decision-making paralysis, it is crucial to dissect its dual nature as both a collaborative process and a consequential outcome that shapes organizational decision-making and strategy implementation.

3.4.2. CONSENSUS AS PROCESS AND OUTCOME

Consensus can be understood as both a process and an outcome. As a process, it refers to the collaborative effort to reach a shared agreement or understanding on a particular issue or decision. This involves active communication, negotiation, and the integration of diverse perspectives (Jolly et al., 2021; Susskind et al., 1999). Techniques like *Delphi* and *World Café* can facilitate this process (Jolly et al., 2021). The academic discourse on consensus as a process is extensive, covering its role in decision-making (Dean & Sharfman, 1993), the importance of stakeholder participation (Laine & Vaara, 2015), common direction (Foss & Lindenberg, 2013), and extends to the public sector, emphasizing the role of effective strategy communication in achieving consensus (Obembe et al., 2021).

As an outcome, consensus signifies a collective decision or understanding supported by a majority or all participants (Haug, 2015). It implies that a common understanding or agreement has been reached (Mirzaei et al., 2016). Achieving consensus as an outcome has several benefits, including promoting ownership and commitment (E. F. Thomas et al., 2018), improving decision quality (Dror et al., 2018), and fostering trust and cooperation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). However, it may involve compromise and can sometimes be partial (Gero, 1985). Consensus is influenced by factors like procedural rationality (Dean & Sharfman, 1993) and stakeholder participation (Laine & Vaara, 2015). Achieving consensus as an outcome has implications for decision quality, implementation effectiveness, and organizational commitment (Luger et al., 2018). In the pub-

lic sector, it is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of strategies and policies (Obembe et al., 2021). Beyond these tangible advantages, consensus also manifests as cognitive consensus, a vital aspect of organizational coherence and the efficacy of decision-making processes.

3.4.3. COGNITIVE CONSENSUS

Cognitive consensus refers to stakeholders' shared beliefs and common understanding (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001) regarding strategic issues (Shepherd et al., 2020). Cognitive consensus is a multifaceted construct crucial in strategizing and organizational decision-making. It is fundamentally characterized by shared beliefs, common understanding, and alignment of mental models among stakeholders (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001; Shepherd et al., 2020). This alignment extends to shared assumptions (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001), frames of reference (Hedberg & Jönsson, 1978), and belief structures (J. P. Walsh, 1988). The high level of agreement regarding goals, values, and strategic direction is not merely a theoretical construct, but has practical implications, fostering stakeholder trust and cohesion (Shepherd et al., 2020). This, in turn, enhances the quality of decision-making processes and outcomes (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Fiol (1994) offers a valuable insight into the nature of cognitive consensus-building. She argues that “shared understanding can derive from a common view of the scope of relevant issues, even in the face of differing views of issue content” (p. 416). This suggests that achieving cognitive consensus does not necessarily require complete agreement on every aspect of an issue. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of establishing a shared understanding of the boundaries and relevance of the issues under consideration. By agreeing on the scope of the problem, stakeholders can engage in constructive dialogue and work towards a common understanding, even if they hold different views on the specific details. This aligns with Mohammed and Ringseis (2001) view that differences of opinion can exist in cognitive consensus.

Cognitive consensus-building is influenced by various factors, including cognitive diversity, communication, and shared mental models (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Cognitive diversity, which encompasses differences in knowledge, expertise, and perspectives between stakeholders, can facilitate and hinder the building of cognitive consensus. It can enrich decision-making by introducing a broader range of ideas, leading to more innovative solutions (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). However, it can also be a source of conflict, making consensus more challenging to achieve (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Communication is another critical factor for developing cognitive consensus (Heidmann et al., 2008; Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Open and transparent communication allows for exchanging ideas and clarifying misunderstandings, thereby building a shared understanding of the task or decision at hand (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). In strategic management, cognitive consensus is mainly instrumental. A high cognitive consensus among top management teams facilitates effective communication, coordination, and collaboration, improving organizational performance (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008).

To facilitate effective collaborations, communication, dialogue, and information sharing are essential processes (Desmidt & George, 2016; Sievers et al., 2020). Shared mental models, the internal representations of knowledge and beliefs, also play a crucial role in developing cognitive consensus (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Cognitive consensus is closely related to mental models and frames, which are cognitive structures that shape how individuals perceive and interpret information (McDermott & Boyer, 1999; Muafi & Kusumawati, 2020; Ross et al., 1977). Achieving cognitive consensus involves aligning these cognitive structures, leading to a common understanding or perspective (McDermott & Boyer, 1999; Muafi & Kusumawati, 2020), facilitated through various processes such as communication, dialogue, and information sharing (Desmidt & George, 2016; Sievers et al., 2020). When stakeholders have similar mental models, aligning their thinking and reaching a shared understanding becomes easier. However, if there are significant differences in mental models, developing cognitive consensus may take more time and effort (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001).

Although mental models are a broader concept than cognitive frames, in this thesis, they are used synonymously for the sake of argument. When it comes to changing mental models, consensing is similar to a framing contest (Kaplan, 2008). Although both framing contests and consensing share a cognitive-based view on strategy, they differ significantly. While consensing emphasizes dialogue, Kaplan (2008) emphasizes contest, which implies and distinctively views cognitive frames as a political game where one frame is winning. In contrast, consensing views mental models as co-created and regenerative (Kent & Lane, 2021). A fundamental similarity is that both framing contest and consensing defer action until there is a shared view. One could argue that consensing, as a framing practice, is about *framing consensus*.

The benefits of cognitive consensus are numerous and have been associated with improved decision-making, increased strategic alignment, and enhanced organizational performance (Priem, 1990; West & Schwenk, 1996). Furthermore, it facilitates effective collaboration and coordination (Mansour & Obembe, 2018; Porck et al., 2020). However, achieving cognitive consensus is not always straightforward and may require constructive dialogue and negotiation, especially when conflicts or disagreements arise (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997b). While cognitive consensus yields significant strategic benefits and collaboration, there's a subtle shift to presumed consensus, a state where stakeholders assume alignment without the rigors of dialogue or explicit agreement, potentially overlooking the nuances of true consensus-building.

3.4.4. PRESUMED CONSENSUS

Presumed consensus refers to a situation where stakeholders consider having a shared agreement or understanding, even without explicit communication or formal decision-making processes. It is defined here as *an assumed shared agreement or understanding*. It is a form of consensus based on assumptions of shared understanding rather than explicit agreement or consensus-building activities.

Presumed consensus can arise in various contexts, including organizational decision-making, strategic planning, and digital transformation initiatives. In organizational decision-making, presumed consensus may occur when stakeholders make decisions based on assumptions or shared beliefs without explicitly discussing or confirming their agreement (Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). This can be particularly common in situations with high trust and pre-existing shared understanding among stakeholders (Pregmark & Berggren, 2021).

In strategic planning, presumed consensus may occur when strategic decisions are made based on assumptions or implicit agreement among top management or critical stakeholders (Smith & Tushman, 2005). This can happen when there is a shared understanding of the organization's goals, values, and strategic direction, which allows decision-makers to make decisions without extensive deliberation or explicit consensus-building activities (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Presumed consensus is also relevant in the context of digital transformation initiatives. Digital transformation involves the integration of digital technologies into various aspects of an organization's operations, processes, and strategies (Bresciani et al., 2021). Without explicit communication or formal decision-making processes, presumed consensus can arise among stakeholders involved in digital transformation. This can happen when there is a shared understanding of the need for digital transformation and the desired outcomes, which guide decision-making and action (Fernandez-Vidal et al., 2022).

It is important to note that presumed consensus is only sometimes a desirable or effective approach to decision-making or strategic planning. Presumed consensus can be a significant cause for the *Abilene paradox* (Harvey, 1974), which occurs when stakeholders collectively agree on a course of action that none of them desire. This happens when stakeholders fail to voice their true preferences or concerns, leading to a presumed consensus that goes against the desires of individual stakeholders. Therefore, organi-

zations should be aware of the positive and negative implications of presumed consensus, considering when to utilize inclusive processes involving diverse stakeholders and perspectives (Weißmüller et al., 2023). However, the reliance on presumed consensus must be navigated carefully to avoid falling into the trap of the false consensus effect, where the perception of agreement may be more about individual projection than collective alignment.

3.4.5. FALSE CONSENSUS

False consensus is a well-documented cognitive bias, expressed as “the tendency to overestimate the extent to which one’s opinions are also shared by others” (Pope, 2013, p. 540). This bias was initially brought to scholarly attention by Ross, Greene, and House in 1977 and has since been corroborated through numerous studies across a variety of disciplines, including psychology, organizational behavior, and planning theory (Innes & Booher, 2015; Marks & Miller, 1987; Pope, 2013; Yousif et al., 2019).

In strategizing, false consensus can manifest itself in several ways. For example, a decision-maker may assume that stakeholders widely support their proposed strategy or initiative without fully exploring or considering opposing viewpoints or alternatives. Additionally, organizations can overestimate the extent to which the strategic intent is shared by stakeholders, leading to a lack of participation or commitment from those with different perspectives. This lack of shared understanding and commitment among organizational members regarding strategic priorities is what Bragaw and Misangyi (2022) refer to as a misalignment in the strategic climate, which can undermine strategy implementation.

Schein has emphasized the detrimental impact of false consensus on effective communication and collaboration within organizational settings (Schein, 1993). Schein's insights are particularly valuable because they

highlight the organizational implications of this bias, which can manifest as misunderstandings and conflicts, thereby affecting the overall productivity and effectiveness of teams and organizations.

The false consensus effect operates through a combination of cognitive and motivational processes. On the cognitive side, individuals engage in selective attention and memory, focusing on information confirming their beliefs while ignoring conflicting data (Krueger & Zeiger, 1993). On the motivational side, there is often a desire to protect and enhance one's ego, which can further reinforce this bias (Krueger & Zeiger, 1993).

Social factors also play a role in the false consensus effect. For instance, social categorization processes can influence individuals to project their beliefs onto those they consider similar, skewing their perception of consensus (Krueger & Zeiger, 1993). This projection often makes individuals consider their choices and judgments more common and appropriate while viewing alternative viewpoints as uncommon or even deviant (Marks & Miller, 1987).

In the realm of planning theory, false consensus can be particularly problematic. Planners may assume that their values and perspectives represent the broader community, which can lead to flawed decision-making processes (Innes & Booher, 2015). This is a point of contention in communicative planning theory, which emphasizes dialogue and inclusion. Still, it has been criticized for potentially leading to false consensus by ignoring power dynamics and the influence of different stakeholders (Innes & Booher, 2015).

In organizational contexts, especially among top management teams, false consensus can be a significant obstacle to effective decision-making and can even limit a firm's ability to seize market opportunities (Haapanen et al., 2020). Bias can be exacerbated by various factors, such as the repetition of information, which can lend undue credibility to a particular claim (Yousif et al., 2019). The clarity and transparency of information sources can also influence the degree to which false consensus takes hold (McDermott & Boyer, 1999; Yousif et al., 2019).

To mitigate the effects of false consensus, Schein (1993) advocates for the promotion of open and inclusive dialogue within organizations, as well as the active consideration of diverse perspectives. This aligns with Innes and Booher's (2015) recommendation for planners to engage in pragmatic interaction, considering the specific context and the diversity of perspectives to avoid false consensus. Similarly, providing transparent information about the dependence or independence of information sources can help individuals distinguish between true and false consensus (Yousif et al., 2019). Therefore, organizations can actively encourage dialogue between stakeholders based on divergent thinking and constructive dissent to avoid false consensus. Furthermore, organizations can reduce the risk of false consensus and increase the likelihood of making well-informed decisions by creating a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2004) where individuals feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and challenging strategic assumptions (Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). Additionally, organizations can open their strategy formulation process using open strategizing (Hautz et al., 2017) and prioritize transparency and inclusion, ensuring that many views are represented and considered.

3.4.6. CONSENSUS IN STRATEGY

Consensus is essential in strategic decision-making and management for any organization. Consensus is critical when stakeholders with different perspectives or interests are involved. Understanding the fundamental role of consensus in bringing together varied perspectives and interests sets the stage for exploring the practical applications and benefits it offers in various contexts.

In the context of strategic decision-making, consensus can lead to better decision quality and implementation effectiveness (Shrivastava & Grant, 1985), suggesting that organizations can benefit from adopting empirically derived models of strategic decision-making processes that emphasize

the importance of consensus-building and information sharing (Shrivastava & Grant, 1985). Consensus-building can also enhance organizational commitment to strategy and facilitate the *alignment* of stakeholder and organizational goals (Nketia, 2016).

Furthermore, consensus-building is relevant in the public sector, where decision-making processes often involve multiple stakeholders with diverse interests and perspectives. Llewellyn and Tappin (2003) highlight the challenges of consensus-building in the public sector and the need for effective strategies to manage conflicting interests and achieve consensus. They argue that consensus-building can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of public sector strategies and policies.

Consensus ensures that stakeholders are aligned and share an understanding of the organization's goals, objectives, and strategies (Innes & Booher, 1999a; Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Organizations have various stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and the community. Consensus-building can be used to engage and involve stakeholders in decision-making, ensuring that their perspectives and interests are considered (Savage et al., 1991). By seeking consensus, organizations can build stronger relationships with stakeholders, improve their reputation, and gain support for strategic initiatives (Kerkhof, 2006). One way consensus is achieved among stakeholders is when developing strategic plans. Strategic plans outline an organization's long-term goals and objectives and provide a roadmap for achieving them. Consensus among stakeholders, such as top management, board members, and department heads, is essential in formulating these plans. By involving multiple perspectives and reaching a shared understanding, consensus helps to ensure that the strategic plan reflects the collective intent and priorities of the organization (Priem et al., 1995).

Consensus is also essential in implementing strategic initiatives. Once a strategy is developed, it must be effectively executed to achieve the desired outcomes. Consensus among stakeholders involved in the implementation

process is key for successful execution. When there is consensus, stakeholders are more likely to align and commit to strategic initiatives, which can improve their motivation and performance (Weller et al., 2020). Consensus also helps minimize resistance to change and increase the likelihood of successful implementation (Aslam et al., 2016). Strategy formulation involves complex and uncertain decisions where multiple alternatives and perspectives must be considered.

Finally, consensus is also relevant in managing organizational culture, the shared beliefs, norms, and values that guide organizational behavior (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016; Schein, 1988). Consensus-building based on dialogue can be used to shape and reinforce desired cultural norms and values (Schein, 1993). By involving stakeholders in decision-making and fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, consensus-building can help create a culture of collaboration, trust, and mutual respect (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016).

Consensus-building methods such as *structured conflict* (Priem et al., 1995), *deliberative dialogue* (Kerkhof, 2006; Macfadyen et al., 2005), and *consensus mapping* (Tarakci et al., 2014) can help facilitate decision-making by ensuring that diverse viewpoints are heard and considered (Priem et al., 1995). These methods help to promote open communication, active participation, and the exchange of ideas and information among stakeholders, leading to better understanding and alignment of perspectives. These methods can be used to reach a consensus, enabling organizations to make informed strategic decisions based on a shared understanding supported by a broader range of stakeholders (Priem & Price, 1991). The commonality between these methods is the use of dialogue based on open communication, active participation, and the exchange of ideas and information among stakeholders, which leads to a shared understanding and alignment of perspectives. While the adoption of consensus-building methods is geared towards forging a unified strategic direction, the research on strategic consensus presents a nuanced picture, reflecting a spectrum of impacts on firm performance and highlighting the intricate balance between consensus and effective strategy implementation.

3.4.7. STRATEGIC CONSENSUS

In strategic management, strategic consensus corresponds to the agreement level amongst decision-makers concerning the implementation and content of an organization's strategy. However, findings regarding the value of strategic consensus have varied, with some studies suggesting a positive correlation with firm performance and others not finding a significant relationship (Kellermanns et al., 2005). This lack of consistency can be attributed to theoretical and methodological reasons, including the absence of a clear definition of strategic consensus and the diverse measures used to quantify the concept. This inconsistency is evident in several studies that examine aspects of strategic consensus, such as its antecedents, impact on firm performance, and strategic decision-making groups (Almansour & Obembe, 2021; Desmidt & George, 2016; Desmidt & Meyfrootd, 2021; Dooley et al., 2000; Vilone et al., 2012). Furthermore, while consensus-building can be time-consuming, it can enhance performance, particularly in strategy formulation for challenging issues (Dess & Origer, 1987). Therefore, despite inconsistencies in the literature, strategic consensus remains a central concept in strategic management research.

It is important to note that the connection between strategic consensus and other concepts, such as *strategic alignment*, is crucial. *Strategic alignment* refers to the extent to which decision-makers prioritize strategic initiatives corresponding to the external environmental demands faced by the organization (Walter et al., 2013). Various studies have shown that misalignments can undermine strategic consensus and disrupt strategy formulation and implementation, reducing value realization from digital transformations (Ateş et al., 2020; Correani et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding strategic alignment is critical to achieving strategic consensus and effective strategy implementation (Dess & Priem, 1995).

Bragaw and Misangyi (2022) propose that redefining strategic consensus as the outcome of strategic decisions can provide clarity and depth to the concept. Bragaw and Misangyi (2022) also introduce the notion of strategic climate, which refers to the shared understanding of strategic goals and

priorities among stakeholders (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022). This shared understanding and commitment are integral to strategic consensus and to achieving organizational objectives. Research has revealed that low-performing organizations lack consistent shared perceptions of strategy (Bowman & Ambrosini, 1997).

In her seminal work, Innes emphasized that consensus-building is a process where inclusive, collaborative dialogue is fundamental in creating shared understanding (Innes, 1996). According to Innes, consensus-building can be considered a social learning process involving stakeholders coming together to solve problems collectively. The intent is to create policies and plans that can be implemented effectively and enjoy widespread support. Her work pointed out that successful consensus-building fosters shared understanding and mutual trust among participants, vital for effective collaboration and implementation. In particular, Innes demonstrated that consensus building is not just about achieving an agreement but fostering an environment enabling shared learning and understanding among diverse stakeholders (Innes, 1996). This aligns with the concept of strategic climate proposed by Bragaw & Misangyi (2022), as well as Kent and Laine (2021), who suggest that organizations can create dialogic potential but not force dialogue to occur. Additionally, this is consistent with Siciliano (2016), who emphasizes that organizations need to create structures for dialogue-based interaction between individuals to enable shared learning and understanding. Thus, dialogue is crucial for consensus and strategic decision-making in organizations, bridging the gap between theory and practice (Innes & Booher, 1999a).

The notion of dialogue further enriches the understanding of consensus. Dialogue has been proven to be instrumental in formulating and implementing strategy, particularly when addressing complex problems, which are often termed wicked problems (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Pye, 1995; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Rumelt, 2022a; Stieger et al., 2012). Strategy documents embody the intended strategy and act as symbols and signals (Feldman & March, 1981). The strategy document can facilitate stra-

tegic dialogue and distinguish important signals from unimportant noise within and outside the organization (Romme & Barrett, 2010). Norling et al. (2024) reveal that a strategy document can be used as a social object for facilitating strategic dialogue and building consensus. Thus, despite being critiqued, strategy documents can play a pivotal role in strategic dialogue and consensing.

In essence, achieving consensus requires creating an inclusive environment that fosters dialogue, allowing stakeholders to understand their interests beyond their positions. The consensus-building process is critical to accomplishing desired goals and navigating complex projects or policies successfully. Additionally, this consensus-building process encourages stakeholders from diverse perspectives to engage in open discussions, which could lead to shared understanding or agreement. This aspect is particularly critical in the digital space, characterized by rapid developments. In other words, consensus-building offers a practical approach to addressing strategic problems involving stakeholders through dialogue (Dess & Origer, 1987; Innes, 1996; Markoczy, 2001).

3.5. STRATEGY

Strategy as a topic has a long tradition, historically, as a part of military education and theory. Since its introduction in business management about 60 years ago (Kay et al., 2006), strategy has become a widely researched topic. Strategy is often confusing for practitioners due to its many interpretations stemming from its military origins and extensive scholarly publishing history. Among many things, strategy is what organizations do and intend to do. Organizations can also have a strategy, which is sometimes documented and manifested in strategy documents and plans. Furthermore, strategy is something organizations want, their aspirations. In other words, strategy is an organization's aspirations, actions, and documentation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, strategy was viewed as centrally done by a few select experts with the skill and time to plan; this view is known as *strategic planning* (Mintzberg, 1994). Strategic management followed this in the 1980s and 1990s (Kay et al., 2006), where management, especially top-level management, and their actions and views were the focus of strategy research. In 1996, Whittington published his seminal work on *strategy-as-practice* (Whittington, 1996) and started a new field within strategy research. Open strategy followed in the 2010s (Whittington et al., 2011).

3.5.1. STRATEGIZING AND DIGITAL STRATEGIZING: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Jarzabkowski et al. define strategizing as “... comprises those actions, interactions, and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (2007, p. 8). Strategizing, especially in information systems research, is linked to exploitative and exploratory activities (Marabelli & Galliers, 2016). During digital transformation, digital technology and resources influence the content of strategy through new opportunities, capabilities, and challenges (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), as well as the process of strategy-making, where digital tools alter the role of the strategist (Volberda et al., 2021). Digital affects practice, practitioners, and praxis. This change is reflected in the definition of digital strategizing by Morton et al. (2022, p. 2): “A domain focused on the interplay between digital technologies and people at different levels of organisations in processes that form, transmit, implement, host, and support strategy” that explicitly frames digital strategizing as being a domain of practice, not a theory or construct. Strategizing is the doing of strategy, and digital strategizing is a domain.

3.5.2. STRATEGY AS CRAFT

Strategy as craft (Mintzberg, 1987) shares similarities with *phronesis*, which refers to practical wisdom acquired through experience (Koutsikouri et al., 2023). Phronesis is the ability to deliberate and make prudent decisions in specific, real-world situations (Küpers & Statler, 2008). This practical wisdom is essential for strategists navigating the complexities and uncertainties of the organizational environment. Nonaka and Toyama (2007) suggest phronesis is crucial in strategic management as it involves distributed practical wisdom within an organization, enabling members to collectively pursue the common good through a blend of subjective vision, environmental interpretation, and the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity. The strategy-as-practice perspective, which focuses on the practices, praxis, and practitioners involved in strategizing (Whittington, 2006), can be enriched by incorporating phronesis as a key element. Practitioners with phronesis can draw upon their experience and judgment to make sound strategic decisions and adapt to changing circumstances.

In this research, I view strategy as a verb; thus, the focus is on strategy as action, that is, strategizing and specifically strategizing within digital transformation. Consequently, this research is situated in the domain of digital strategizing. This line of thinking, strategy as action, originates from Mintzberg (1978), who defined strategy as “a pattern in a stream of decisions” (1978, p. 935); Eisenhardt’s (1999) view of strategy as strategic decision-making, and finally, Jarzabkowski et al. (2021), who defined strategy as patterns of actions. However, first and foremost, I align with Kornberger and Vaara (2021), who view strategy as engagement, functioning as a bridge between policy and tactics. A policy is the “... overarching ‘intellectual architecture’ that gives purpose and meaning to action... It is the North Star that guides strategic decision-making: unimplementable, yet invaluable for orientation and guidance” (2021, p. 2).

Moreover, tactics are the art of employing available capabilities and resources to accomplish an end. Furthermore, Kornberger and Vaara (2021) view tactics as distributed collective action. This collective view is in line

with open strategy (Tavakoli et al., 2017), which means the collective and collaborative involvement of the whole organization in the strategy work instead of a select few managers and strategists. Tana et al. (2022) refer to digital transformation as collective social action, which they define as “purposive cooperation among and between social actors (e.g., individuals or groups) who, united through shared values and norms, pursue a joint objective” (2022, p. 4).

Consequently, digital strategizing is a collective effort, where strategy is a process of social interaction. Furthermore, a collective view of strategy implies that the intended strategy, what is planned, and the realized strategy, what is done, need equal attention.

3.5.3. INTENDED AND REALIZED STRATEGY

Intended and *realized strategy* are central concepts in strategic management, initially conceptualized by Mintzberg (1978). *Intended strategy* is the planned course of action formulated by top management based on a comprehensive analysis of the organization's internal and external environment (Mintzberg, 1978; Whittington et al., 2017). In practice, it is a roadmap, a plan, for decision-making and resource allocation. In contrast, *realized strategy* is the strategy that is implemented, emerging from all the actions and decisions within the organization (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Mintzberg, 1978). The relationship between these two types of strategy is complex and dynamic, influenced by various internal and external factors (Eisenhardt et al., 1997b; Whittington et al., 2017). External factors can create a gap between the intended and realized strategy, requiring adjustments to new opportunities or threats (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Internal factors such as organizational culture, individual decision-making, and power dynamics can also impact the realization of the intended strategy (Eisenhardt et al., 1997b; Sievers et al., 2020).

There are different perspectives on the *alignment* between intended and realized strategy. Some argue they are closely aligned due to effective strategic planning (Mintzberg, 1978), while others emphasize the need for flexibility and adaptation to respond to changing circumstances (Eisenhardt & Brown, 1998). The concept of *emergent strategy*, which evolves through learning and adaptation, has gained prominence (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), and recent years have seen an increased focus on flexibility and agility in strategy formulation, especially in dynamic and uncertain environments (Eisenhardt et al., 2010). Collaborative approaches that involve stakeholder participation have been explored to bridge the gap between the intended and realized strategy, focusing on consensus-building and shared understanding (Innes & Booher, 2003, 2016).

In conclusion, intended and realized strategies are interrelated yet distinct concepts influenced by many factors. While the intended strategy outlines the planned course of action, the realized strategy is the actual outcome of the implementation. Both internal organizational dynamics and external environmental factors shape the dynamic relationship between the intended and realized strategy. And consensing can reconcile the two.

3.5.4. STRATEGY DEFINITION

Rumelt (2011b, p. 6) defines strategy as; “a coherent set of analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that respond to a high-stakes challenge”. Although a good definition, it lacks focus on value-creation, which is highly relevant for innovation (i.e., exploration). In line with the previous discussion on strategy in this research, e.g., strategizing as the doing of strategy, I adhere to a practice-oriented definition of digital transformation strategy, “a concrete approach to digital technology-driven changes in public organizations that align intent and capabilities to achieve objectives and create public value.” (Norling, 2024b, p. 4). The definition builds on Bryson and George (2020), adding a technology dimension as proposed

by Matt et al. (2016) and linking strategy to the capabilities needed to achieve objectives (Schoemaker, 1992). The definition also acknowledges intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), establishing what an organization aspires to achieve, and the purpose of public sector organizations to generate public value (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019).

3.5.5. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY

In a study of 25 incumbent organizations and their digital transformation journeys by Sebastian et al. (2017), their primary recommendation was to define a digital strategy for a successful digital transformation. Thus, organizations need to develop strategies that answer the essential questions of strategy. Where are we going? How will we get there? (Eisenhardt, 1999; Eisenhardt & Brown, 1998).

Digital transformation strategies should be dynamic, constantly iterating between learning and doing (Chanas et al., 2019). In a study of the successful digital transformation of three German media companies, Matt et al. (2016) describe creating a strategy as a primary concern. The strategy should contain four dimensions: 1) the use of technologies, 2) changes in value creation, 3) structural changes, and 4) financial aspects. This complements the strategy definition used in this study by adding the technology dimension. Thus, for a successful digital transformation, formulating a strategy is essential (Chanas et al., 2019). In addition, Kane et al. (2015) argue that strategy drives digital transformation.

In a study of digital transformation strategies in Swedish municipalities, the direction of the strategy (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022) was identified by utilizing ambidexterity theory (March, 1991; Peng, 2019), where the digital transformation strategies were analyzed and categorized on type of activity; exploitation (e.g., efficiency) or exploration (e.g., innovation) and what stakeholders, external or internal, were in focus. A subsequent study in Swedish regions confirmed the results (Norling, 2024b). Studying

strategy documents provides insights into the direction of digital transformation and the organization's intended public value creation. As value creation is central to innovation (Scupola & Mergel, 2022), understanding the strategic direction helps clarify the values a strategy aims to generate (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, 2024b). This value discussion is crucial, as the purposes and values of private and public organizations differ significantly (Alford & Greve, 2017), which becomes evident when examining the concept of public value (Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

A recent study on the coproduction of digital transformation of public sector organizations in Denmark (Scupola & Mergel, 2022) identifies four types of public value: 1) economic value, the output of public administration, 2) administrative value, a procedural perspective, 3) societal and democratic value, and 4) citizen value. As the driver for digital transformation is value creation (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, 2024b; Scupola & Mergel, 2022), it is essential to distinguish between different value types. It can affect the actions, capabilities, and goals the organizations should pursue. Understanding public value in digital transformation sets the stage for defining an organization's strategic intent, which harnesses these values to inform and direct long-term objectives and operational actions.

3.5.6. STRATEGIC INTENT

Strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989) is about engaging stakeholders working together with a clear vision, setting targets, and prioritizing open communication to ensure success in the public sector (Joyce, 2015). It is a statement that communicates the organization's aspirations, values, and desired outcomes (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). Strategic intent provides the organization with a clear focus and direction, aligning its activities and resources towards a common purpose (Seidl & Werle, 2017) in other words, "strategic intent is integrative" (Mantere & Sillince, 2007, p. 415).

Strategic intent is crucial to organizational success, providing a clear focus and direction for decision-making and resource allocation (Modell, 2012). Additionally, strategic intent helps organizations anticipate and respond to changes in the external environment, identify opportunities, and overcome challenges (Kazakova & Geiger, 2016). It provides a framework for making decisions and allocating resources effectively (Lusiani & Langley, 2019). In digital transformation, strategic intent involves setting clear goals and objectives to leverage digital technologies and capabilities (Vial, 2019). It requires organizations to align their digital strategies with their main ones and continuously adapt and evolve in response to technological advances and environmental dynamics (Vial, 2019).

Effective strategic intent requires a deep understanding of the organization's internal capabilities and external environment. It involves a thorough analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the organization (Amrollahi & Rowlands, 2017). This information identifies strategic priorities, sets performance targets, and develops action plans (Mithas & Rust, 2016). Strategic intent also involves engaging stakeholders and fostering a shared sense of purpose and commitment (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010).

Strategic intent is closely intertwined with strategic assumptions. Strategic intent provides an organization's overarching direction and purpose, while strategic assumptions inform the development and implementation of strategies (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010). When formulating a strategic intent, organizations need to consider the assumptions they make about the future state of the industry, market trends, and technological advancements, which influence their framing (Kaplan, 2008). Strategic assumptions play a crucial role in implementing strategic intent, as organizations need to continuously monitor and reassess their assumptions to ensure that their strategies remain relevant and effective (Mason, 1969).

To achieve strategic intent successfully, organizations need to develop the necessary capabilities and resources (Kaplan & Jarzabkowski, 2006)

because the “goal of strategic intent is to fold the future back into the present” (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, p. 66). This may involve investing in technology infrastructure, developing digital skills and competencies, and cultivating a digital culture of innovation and agility (Bitzer et al., 2021; Hartl & Hess, 2017; Wilson & Mergel, 2022). Dialectics can drive the transformation process by making the implicit strategic assumptions explicit (Mason, 1969; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). Dialogue can facilitate challenging assumptions and perspectives to achieve consensus; “Strategic intent enables the switching of perspective and thus creates coherence by acting as a guide for discussion about strategy” (Mantere & Sillince, 2007, p. 417).

3.5.7. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The *strategic context* in the public sector refers to the external factors and conditions that influence the formulation and implementation of strategies in government organizations (Bryson et al., 2010; Pettigrew, 1992). It encompasses the political, economic, social, technological, and legal environment in which public sector organizations operate (Poister et al., 2010). Understanding the strategic context is crucial for public sector organizations to formulate effective strategies that align with the external environment and address the needs and expectations of stakeholders (Alford & Greve, 2017; Johnsen, 2015). As noted by Bryson et al. (2010), the strategic context of public organizations is often characterized by a high degree of complexity, ambiguity, and change, which makes strategic management both challenging and essential. Factors influencing the strategic context:

- *The political environment*, including government policies, regulations, and priorities, significantly influences the strategic context. Public sector organizations must align their strategies with the political agenda and respond to changes in government priorities (Shepherd et al., 2020).

- *The social and economic context*, including demographic trends, societal values, and economic conditions, can shape the strategic choices of public sector organizations (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008).
- *The organizational challenges and goals* further shape the strategic context. Public sector organizations may be mandated to provide public services, promote social welfare, or achieve specific policy objectives, which can influence their strategic direction and priorities (Hodgkinson & Hughes, 2014).

To effectively navigate the complex strategic context, public sector organizations employ various strategic management approaches and tools. These approaches help organizations assess their environment, formulate strategies, and make informed decisions. Strategic management approaches and tools:

- *Strategic planning* involves setting goals, formulating strategies, and allocating resources to achieve desired outcomes (Andersen & Torp, 2019).
- *Strategic decision-making processes*, such as scenario planning and workshops, can help public sector organizations assess options and make informed choices (Elbanna, 2006; Schwarz, 2009).
- *Collaborative approaches*, such as open strategic planning, can be used to engage external stakeholders and ensure a more inclusive and participatory strategy development process (Amrollahi & Rowlands, 2017).

Digital transformation has brought new opportunities and challenges to public sector organizations. Understanding information systems strategy and leveraging digital capabilities have become essential for effective governance and service delivery (Teubner & Stockhinger, 2020). Public sector organizations must adapt their strategies to harness the potential of digital technologies and address emerging issues such as cybersecurity and data privacy (Müller & Kunisch, 2017).

In conclusion, the strategic context in the public sector is shaped by a complex interplay of external factors, including the political environment, socio-economic conditions, organizational goals and challenges, and the increasing role of digital technologies. Public sector organizations must employ various strategic management approaches and tools to effectively navigate this context and formulate strategies that align with the external environment and stakeholder expectations.

3.5.8. STRATEGIC CLIMATE

Strategic climate refers to the overall environment and conditions within an organization that influence the development and implementation of strategic initiatives (Lusiani & Langley, 2019). It encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors of stakeholders, as well as the organizational structures, processes, and systems that shape strategic thinking and action. Bragaw and Misangyi (2022) offer a more specific definition, describing strategic climate as “the shared understanding among organizational members of the strategic goals and priorities of the organization.” (2022, p. 671). This definition highlights the importance of cognitive consensus (i.e., shared understanding) and strategic intent (i.e., strategic goals and priorities) in shaping the strategic climate. Key characteristics of strategic climate:

- *Shared perceptions* emphasize the importance of mutual understanding and consensus among stakeholders regarding the organization's strategic goals and priorities (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022; Lusiani & Langley, 2019).
- *Agreement and awareness* refer to the shared understanding and commitment to the organization's strategic intent, which involves clearly articulating the organization's purpose and direction (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2017; Heshmati & Cszasz, 2023).
- *Enactment* involves translating strategic priorities into concrete actions and behaviors, ensuring alignment between stated goals and actual practices (Lusiani & Langley, 2019).

- *Alignment* between symbol and substance refers to the consistency between an organization's stated strategic priorities and stakeholders' actions and behaviors, which strengthens the strategic climate and promotes harmony (Lusiani & Langley, 2019).

The strategic climate influences stakeholder behavior, guiding their actions and decisions in line with the organization's strategic goals and priorities (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022). Organizational internal capabilities and resources also play a role in shaping the strategic climate of the public sector. Public sector organizations must understand and assess their strengths, weaknesses, and core competencies to develop strategies that leverage their unique capabilities (Desmidt & George, 2016; Doeleman et al., 2021; Sandoval-Almazán et al., 2017). The availability of financial resources, human capital, and technological infrastructure also influences the strategic climate (Elbanna, 2006).

In conclusion, strategic climate plays a crucial role in shaping organizational behavior and decision-making in the public sector. By fostering shared perceptions, agreement, and alignment among stakeholders, strategic climate ensures that an organization's strategic goals and priorities are effectively pursued and realized.

3.5.9. THE RELATION BETWEEN STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC CLIMATE

As noted above, strategic climate and strategic context are closely related concepts. In this thesis, a distinction is made between internal and external context, where the strategic climate is *internal* to an organization (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022; Lusiani & Langley, 2019), and strategic context (Pettingrew, 1977) refers to the *external* factors and conditions that shape an organization's strategic decisions and actions. The relationship between the two can be understood as follows: The strategic climate within an organization is influenced by the strategic context in which it operates. The external factors and conditions of the strategic context shape the strategic

priorities, goals, and actions of the organization. In turn, the strategic climate within the organization, including its culture, leadership practices, and decision-making processes, influences how the organization responds to and navigates the strategic context (Miller, 1986).

For example, an organization operating in a highly competitive and rapidly changing industry may need to foster a strategic climate that promotes agility, innovation, and adaptability. This climate would enable the organization to respond effectively to the dynamic strategic context and make timely strategic decisions. In contrast, an organization operating in a stable and regulated industry may focus on a strategic climate emphasizing efficiency, consistency, and compliance with industry standards (Grieser et al., 2023).

3.5.10. STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS

Strategic assumptions are beliefs or statements accepted as true without empirical evidence, serving as the bedrock for an organization's strategic planning and decision-making (Mitroff et al., 1979; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). These assumptions shape the perception of an organization of its strategic climate and context, objectives, and strategies to achieve them. However, these assumptions can also enable and constrain the organization's adaptability and responsiveness.

Strategic assumptions serve multiple enabling functions within organizations. They guide decision-making by providing a framework for navigating complex and uncertain environments and aligning actions with strategic goals (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). They foster strategic coherence by establishing a shared understanding and common language among stakeholders, facilitating effective communication and collaboration (Lusiani & Langley, 2019). Additionally, they stimulate innovation and adaptation by encouraging a culture of learning and continuous improvement (Sirén & Kohtamäki, 2016). These assumptions also enhance strategic agility, al-

lowing organizations to swiftly adapt to market changes and seize new opportunities (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010). In the context of digital transformation, they drive effective technology leverage by guiding investments and developing digital capabilities (Vial, 2019).

While instrumental in guiding organizational strategy, strategic assumptions also constrain aspects that impede effective decision-making and adaptability. Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, can narrow perspectives and limit adaptability (Feduzi et al., 2022). Deeply ingrained assumptions can create resistance to change and inhibit the adoption of new strategies or technologies (Amrollahi & Rowlands, 2017). They can also lead to organizational inertia and path dependence, constraining the ability to seize new opportunities. Unreviewed assumptions risk causing strategic drift and misalignment with a changing environment, and an overreliance on past success can foster complacency and inhibit innovation (Alford & Greve, 2017). Lastly, a lack of diverse perspectives can stifle creativity and overlook valuable insights (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential for organizations to regularly reassess their strategic assumptions to mitigate these constraints while leveraging their enabling aspects.

3.5.11. STATUS QUO BIAS IN STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS

Status quo bias is a cognitive bias that can significantly influence strategic assumptions and decision-making in organizations. It refers to the tendency to prefer maintaining the current state of affairs, even when change may lead to better outcomes (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). In the context of digital transformation, status quo bias can manifest as resistance to change, adherence to traditional business models, and reluctance to adopt new technologies or practices (Vial, 2019). This bias can be particularly prevalent in public sector organizations, as demonstrated by the analysis of digital transformation strategies in Swedish local governments (Norling, 2024a).

Status quo bias can be attributed to various factors, such as loss aversion, where the potential losses from change are perceived as more significant than the potential gains (Kahneman et al., 1991), and the endowment effect, where individuals and organizations place a higher value on what they currently possess (Thaler, 1980). Additionally, uncertainty avoidance and the perceived costs of change can contribute to the maintenance of the status quo (Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009). Norling (2024a) found that the influence of bureaucratic culture in Swedish local governments often leads to a cautious approach toward digital innovation, prioritizing incremental improvements and maintaining existing processes. This aligns with the findings of Oschinsky et al. (Oschinsky et al., 2021), who emphasized the role of status quo bias in restraining public-sector employees from embracing change in the digital age.

Status quo bias often interacts with other cognitive biases, such as *confirmation bias*, to further influence strategic assumptions and decision-making. Confirmation bias, which refers to the tendency to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998), can reinforce the effects of status quo bias. When individuals and organizations are already prone to maintaining the current state of affairs, confirmation bias can lead them to selectively attend to information that supports the status quo, while discounting evidence that challenges it. This interplay between status quo bias and confirmation bias can create a powerful cognitive barrier to change and adaptation, particularly in the context of digital transformation, where the pace of change and the need for innovation are high (Vial, 2019).

In digital transformation, status quo bias can hinder organizations from effectively responding to disruptive technologies and changing market conditions. It can lead to strategic inertia, where organizations struggle to adapt their strategies and business models to the demands of the digital age (Vial, 2019). As Norling (2024a) pointed out, the digital transformation strategies of Swedish local governments often failed to challenge implicit assumptions or reimagine the role of digital technology in organizational and societal contexts, reflecting the impact of status quo bias on strategic direction.

Overcoming status quo bias requires organizations to actively challenge their strategic assumptions, foster a culture of experimentation and learning, and embrace the potential benefits of change (Warner & Wäger, 2019). Norling (2024a) emphasized the need for a more integrated and action-oriented approach to digital transformation that aligns technology adoption with organizational culture and agile practices, moving beyond traditional infrastructure investments to leverage digital innovation for creating public value. Addressing status quo bias is crucial for public sector employees to embrace change and facilitate digital transformation (Oschinsky et al., 2021).

3.5.12. STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS FRAME STRATEGY

Strategic assumptions provide a framework for strategic decision-making and planning. They help organizations navigate complex and uncertain environments, identify opportunities and threats, and align actions with strategic goals (Seidl & Werle, 2017). Formulating strategic assumptions involves gathering and analyzing relevant information, engaging in consensusing, and incorporating the expertise and perspectives of various stakeholders. This requires thoroughly understanding internal capabilities and external factors impacting organizational performance (Modell, 2012).

To uncover the underlying assumptions, they must be made explicit. Mitroff and Emshoff (1979) proposed a method where *dialectic inquiry* is used to make strategic assumptions explicit by engaging in critical examination and debate, i.e., dialogue. This approach involves identifying and challenging underlying assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives, and reconciling conflicting points of view. By actively engaging in dialectic inquiry, organizations can uncover hidden assumptions, mitigate biases, and make more informed and robust strategic decisions.

3.5.13. STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

In digital transformation, strategic assumptions about digital, guide organizational efforts to leverage technology. These assumptions help identify the potential benefits and risks of digital technologies, determine the necessary investments, and define desired outcomes (Ko et al., 2022; Vial, 2019). In digital transformation, strategic assumptions diverge significantly from traditional settings, necessitating a distinct approach to strategizing. This divergence is driven by several distinctive factors for the digital transformation. First, the focus shifts toward technology, emphasizing its potential impact on the organization, unlike traditional assumptions that may prioritize market dynamics and internal capabilities (Vial, 2019). Second, the volatile and rapidly evolving nature of digital transformation demands assumptions that can adapt to rapid changes in technology, markets, and customer behavior (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). Third, the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity associated with emerging technologies require a different set of assumptions that can navigate these complexities (Seidl & Werle, 2017). Fourth, agility and adaptability are emphasized (Tallon et al., 2019, 2022), contrasting with traditional models that may emphasize stability and long-term planning (Modell, 2012). Fifth, customer-centricity becomes paramount, facilitated by digital technologies that enable personalized experiences (Kazakova & Geiger, 2016). Finally, a culture of continuous learning and experimentation is essential compared to traditional settings that may be more risk-averse and stability-focused (Duerr et al., 2018). These differences underscore the unique challenges and opportunities in digital transformation, highlighting the need for organizations to adapt their strategic assumptions accordingly.

Digital transformation introduces opportunities and challenges, necessitating a rethinking of traditional strategic paradigms. Central to this thesis is the concept of shared understanding. As strategy has evolved, so have its interpretations, leading to many definitions and applications. This diversity, while enriching, can also be a source of confusion. Shared understanding becomes paramount to ensure that strategic intent aligns with action,

especially in the face of digital transformation. In this context, strategy is about engagement, dialogue, and collective social action (Tana et al., 2022).

3.6. SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF CONSENSING

This chapter delves into the theoretical foundations and antecedents of consensus-building within digital transformation, emphasizing the critical role of dialogue in achieving shared understanding and strategic alignment. It integrates insights from consensus, dialogue, and strategy literature to explore the consensing approach to strategizing, highlighting the importance of continuous dialogue and stakeholder engagement. The chapter offers a comprehensive view of the concepts that underpin consensing, summarized in Table 1.

Concept	Definition	Reference
Cognitive consensus	“similarity among group members regarding how key issues are defined and conceptualized.”	Mohammed and Ringseis (2001, p. 409)
Cognitive consensus-building	“the process of aligning and cultivating a shared understanding amongst stakeholders.”	This thesis p. 28
Consensing	“A dynamic and iterative process that establishes shared understanding through the interplay of individual inputs and collective dialogue.”	This thesis p. 96

Consensus	“the degree to which individual mental models of strategy overlap. The term strategic consensus represents shared cognitions among team members.”	Knight et al. (1999, p. 445)
	“the extent to which managers from a strategic business unit share similar perceptions of strategic priorities.”	Bowman and Ambrosini (1997, p. 244)
Consensus-building	“a cooperative process in which stakeholders work towards reconciling differences through constructive dialogue to develop a mutually acceptable agreement or shared understanding in the best interest of the whole.”	Defined here. Bsaed on Susskind et al (1996) and Innes and Booher (2004)
Consensus-making	“the tendency of participants to engage in the creation of common meanings and shared understanding for what the coordinating effort is to accomplish, how the purpose is to be accomplished, and the language used to accomplish these.”	Williams and Karahanna (2013, p. 952)
Diagnostic dialogue	“The identification of conflicts and gaps in shared understanding, providing critical input for sensing, and highlighting consensus discrepancies.”	This thesis p. 150
Dialogue	“take part in a conversation or discussion to resolve a problem”	New Oxford American Dictionary (2010)
Dialogue inertia	the tendency of organizational dialogue to persist in a state of motion or stagnation, following established communication patterns without progressing toward strategic actions or decisions.”	This thesis p. 209

Digital transformation strategy	“a concrete approach to digital technology-driven changes in public organizations that align intent and capabilities to achieve objectives and create public value.”	Norling (2024, p.4)
Digital strategizing	“A domain focused on the interplay between digital technologies and people at different levels of organizations in processes that form, transmit, implement, host, and support strategy”	Morton (2022, p.2)
False consensus	“the tendency to overestimate the extent to which one’s opinions are also shared by others”	Pope, (2013, p. 540)
Generative dialogue	“The exploration of diverse viewpoints and co-creation of ideas, enriching the sensing aspect of consensing.”	This thesis p. 150
Integrative dialogue	“The facilitation of differences, transforming varied perspectives into a unified shared understanding.”	This thesis p. 150
Presumed consensus	“an assumed shared agreement or understanding”	This thesis p. 70
Stakeholders	“individuals, groups, and other organizations who have an interest in an organization’s actions and the ability to influence it”	Savage et al. (1991, p. 61).
Strategic consensus	“Strategic consensus occurs when all the deciding social actors—typically, but not limited to, the TMT—accept the strategic decision.”	Bragaw and Misangyi (2022, p. 671)
	“the shared understanding of strategic priorities among managers at the top, middle, or operating levels of the organization.”	Kellermanns et al., (2005,p. 721)

Strategic climate	“the shared understanding among organizational members of the strategic goals and priorities of the organization”	Bragaw and Misangyi (2022, p. 671)
Strategic intent	“a proactive mode in strategizing, a symbol of the organization’s will about the future, which energizes all organizational levels for a collective purpose... a rhetorical device for creating coherence between intents possessed by multiple intra-organizational actors.”	Mantere and Sillince (2007, p.407)

Table 1. Definitions of concepts underpinning consensing

CHAPTER 4

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ETHICS, PARADIGM, AND METHODS

“What stands in the way becomes the way.”

MARCUS AURELIUS

4.1. ASSUMPTIONS

I make the following assumptions about the world: First, the world is an open system that is interconnected and constantly influenced by external factors. Second, everything is contextual and contingent on the circumstances, entities involved, and their actions and inactions. Third, new mechanisms emerge as systems and entities evolve. Fourth, as humans, we are all fallible and biased, whether we know it or not. Finally, we are all *creatures of our habits*. I consider research as normative. I want my research to create new knowledge, thereby improving the current situation and order of things while having an impact.

4.2. RESEARCH MOTIVATION AND INTRODUCTION TO MY ETHICS FRAMEWORK

I am pursuing my Ph.D. because I want to make a difference. I want my research to impact the digital transformation of the public sector, ultimately contributing to saving the welfare state. The notion of science as solidarity (Rorty, 1990) resonates with me. In addition, I want to make theoretical contributions. Thus, ethical considerations play a critical role in shaping my research and ensuring a responsible digital transformation of the Swedish public sector while simultaneously making theoretical con-

tributions. This chapter provides an overview of the ethical frameworks underpinning my work, integrating insights from moral philosophy, regulatory compliance, pragmatic everyday practice, and the interplay between ethics and method and vice versa. By exploring these interconnected perspectives, I want to establish a robust ethical foundation for my research, influenced by the ongoing discourse on responsible research in information systems (Herwix et al., 2022; Stahl, 2012). In his proposed framework, Stahl (2012) introduces four interconnected levels of normativity, moral intuition, and explicit morality to ethical theory and metaethical reflection. I have structured this chapter loosely on Stahl's framework. As a strategy researcher, I was also inspired by the work of Singer (2010) on integrating strategy and ethics through pragmatism.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows: First, I turn to explicit morality (Stahl, 2012), a deontological view on ethics, i.e., the formal rules and regulations that govern research conduct in my field, focusing on the principles of ALLEA (All European Academies) guidelines (ALLEA, 2017) and the AIS (Association for Information Systems) Code of Research Conduct (AIS, 2014). They outline practices for ensuring ethical research and addressing crucial issues such as data protection, informed consent, and research integrity. By adhering to these guidelines embedded in the presented data management plan, I ensure that my research is based on good practices of ethical conduct.

I then continue, drawing upon stoicism, by examining the principles of ethics and virtue that Stahl (2012) calls moral intuition. As a philosophical school, stoicism emphasizes rationality, self-control, and cultivating the virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom (Sharpe, 2013). Thus, stoicism provides a valuable framework for understanding the importance of ethical conduct in my research activities. By aligning my work with these time-tested principles, I strive to promote a culture of integrity, responsibility, and moral excellence in my scholarship, like a true stoic.

Subsequently, I delve into ethical theory (Stahl, 2012) and the practical implications of ethics in my everyday research practices and outcomes, i.e.,

a consequentialist view on ethics, by adopting a pragmatic approach and emphasizing the importance of habits, context, and adaptability. In this section, I discuss how ethical considerations inform my decision-making processes and judgments, recognizing that each research project presents unique challenges and opportunities. By integrating the principles of pragmatism into my ethical framework, I seek to foster flexible and responsive habits for research grounded in my core values and sensitivity to the research context.

Additionally, I briefly explore reflection and meta-ethics (Stahl, 2012) through the lens of ethics as a method and method as ethics (Markham, 2006), highlighting the inherent connection between the ethical considerations of my research and the methodological choices I make. This perspective recognizes that the methodological principles of critical realism that I employ in my research reflect my ethical stance and shape the ethical implications of my work. By carefully considering the relationship between ethics and method as practice, I design a more holistic and integrated ethical approach deeply embedded in every aspect of my research process.

I consider my ethical principles and norms to be a fuzzy mix of virtue ethics (stoicism), utilitarianism (pragmatism), and deontology (codes of conduct) based on the foundational ideas of minimizing harm, informed consent, and protecting privacy and confidentiality (Zimmer, 2018).

So far, the principles and norms have guided me in solving a critical ethical dilemma. I first intended to do a case study-based research project utilizing ethnographic methods to study the organization where I am employed. Instead, I shifted to doing population-based studies on found data. I used anonymous surveys and semi-structured interviews with public servants in their professional roles to complement the publicly found data. The change in research design was primarily due to the need to be more objective than when I intended to study my organization. My gut feeling told me I was biased and that I needed to find another way to explore the phe-

nomena. This change was also motivated by the need for a more rigorous research design with a higher degree of generalizability.

4.3. ETHICAL GUIDELINES AND CODES OF CONDUCT

My research adheres to *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (ALLEA, 2017), as stated by the University of Gothenburg. Summarized as follows (ALLEA, 2017, p. 4):

- Reliability in ensuring the quality of research reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis and the use of resources.
- Honesty in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full and unbiased way.
- Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment.
- Accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organisation, for training, supervision and mentoring, and for its wider impacts.

Furthermore, I also follow the AIS Code of Research Conduct (AIS, 2014) as a researcher, summarized as follows: general ethical principles, professional responsibilities, professional leadership responsibilities, and compliance with the code. The main principles, as I view them, are listed below:

- Prioritize the public interest and avoid harm
- Act with integrity
- Strive for professional excellence
- Promote fairness and equality

- Comply with laws and regulations
- Maintain confidentiality
- Avoid conflicts of interest

4.4. DATA MANAGEMENT

This research does not collect sensitive personal data. It is primarily based on anonymous survey data and publicly available records, complemented by interviews with public servants in their official roles. Nevertheless, informed consent is essential, and all participants in the ongoing studies have been informed of the purpose of the research, that participation is voluntary, that the collected data is published in anonymized form, how to contact the researcher, and that only the research group has access to the collected data. Finally, participants are informed that data is securely stored. Moreover, even though they do not contain personal data, the data can still be sensitive in the case of interviews and surveys. Therefore, a data management plan is devised as follows.

4.4.1. DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN

The following data management plan outlines the strategies for handling both found and made data (Jensen, 2012) during the research project. *Found* data refers to already created data, such as publicly available documents, open datasets, published literature, or pre-existing survey results. The researcher creates *made* data as part of the research project. In this case, survey responses and interview data, i.e., audio files and transcripts. This data is stored on the Microsoft 365 platform, as instructed by the University of Gothenburg. This is deemed sufficient for ensuring secure and efficient data management, as the research data contains no sensitive personal data.

4.4.2. FOUND DATA

For found data, in this case, mostly publicly made records and published research, I identified relevant data sources, such as public databases, research articles, and reports. Ensured I had the necessary permissions or licenses to access and use the data. I have also documented the source and any relevant metadata for each dataset.

4.4.3. MADE DATA

I designed my data collection methods, such as surveys and interviews, in line with the research aim and ethical considerations, obtaining informed consent from interviewees for their participation when collecting the survey data, although the respondents were anonymous. In addition, I have ensured data quality through proper validation, calibration, and data-cleaning techniques.

4.5. DATA STORAGE AND ORGANIZATION

All data is securely stored on the Microsoft 365 platform, utilizing features such as version control and access permissions to maintain data integrity and prevent unauthorized access. In addition, the data is organized consistently and logically, using clear file naming conventions and folder structures while maintaining comprehensive metadata records to facilitate data discovery, understanding, and reuse.

4.5.1. DATA ACCESS AND SHARING

I will also provide access to non-sensitive data, as appropriate, to collaborators, supervisors, or other stakeholders while respecting any relevant confidentiality agreements or intellectual property rights and adhering to the FAIR Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Re-usable)

for data management. Thus, opting for sharing anonymized or aggregated *made data* through open data repositories or as supplementary material to publications, ensuring compliance with the requirements of funding agencies or journals.

4.5.2. DATA PRESERVATION AND ARCHIVING

I preserve data in long-term storage on the Microsoft 365 platform, ensuring regular backups and data integrity monitoring. I retain data for a minimum period of 10 years as specified by the University of Gothenburg and securely archive or dispose of it after this period.

4.5.3. ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have ensured compliance with relevant ethical guidelines and legal frameworks, such as data protection regulations and informed consent procedures, by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. This was done by anonymizing any made data that may be shared or published.

By following this data management plan, the research project will ensure the secure, organized, and responsible handling of both found and made data, contributing to the overall quality and integrity of the research process.

4.6. FUNDING

As a researcher, I am fully funded, e.g., salaried, by Region Västra Götaland (VGR), one of the organizations studied. The dual character of being an externally employed doctoral student and researching your organization poses some potential ethical dilemmas. First, I hold a consciously and unconsciously biased view of my employer. This dilemma must be

resolved by consciously considering biases when analyzing data, even on a population level. But, foremost, when analyzing primary and secondary data from VGR.

4.7. PARADIGM

For this research, I take a convergent mixed methods research approach starting from a critical realist view like many scholars have done before me in the information systems research field (Fischer & Baskerville, 2022; Henfridsson & Bygstad, 2013; Lauterbach et al., 2020; Øvrelid & Bygstad, 2019). And recently, specifically for digital transformation research (Haskamp et al., 2021). With a sociology and international relations background, I feel the need to put forth my paradigm and rationale for conducting this research. The next chapter explains why the critical realist view, pragmatism, and stoic virtue ethics are essential for this research and me as a researcher.

4.7.1. PARADIGM-PERSON-RESEARCHER-FIT AND ETHICS

I consider myself a neo-generalist (Mikkelsen & Martin, 2016) and practitioner, and I was born with an insatiable curiosity. At work, I have always been wondering why events unfold as they do. Simply put, why is change so unpredictable? Finding a working theoretical paradigm is a journey into the known unknown; it is becoming comfortable with the Socratic paradox, “I know that I know nothing”³. Privately, I follow stoicism, a practical-oriented philosophy with strong virtues-based ethics. Stoicism fits me as a person, as it is very much about resolving life’s dilemmas.

³ The phrase is not recorded to have been said by Socrates. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_that_I_know_nothing

4.7.2. STOIC VIRTUE ETHICS

I will now delve into the principles of ethics and virtue that underpin stoicism. The philosophy of stoicism, with its focus on reason, self-discipline, and the cultivation of individual excellence, presents a valuable framework for comprehending the significance of ethical behavior in my research pursuits. According to Sharpe (2013), the stoic tradition highlights the four cardinal virtues of *courage*, *justice*, *temperance*, and *wisdom*, which serve as a comprehensive ethical guide for making decisions and conducting oneself. Wisdom here is Aristotle's and Socrates' notion of *phronesis* as both the faculty of judgment and the practical wisdom it issues over time.

By examining these core virtues, I have gained valuable insights into how I can approach my research with greater ethical awareness and responsibility. *Courage*, for instance, encourages me to confront challenges and uncertainties in my research with determination and perseverance. *Justice* motivates me to uphold the values of impartiality and integrity in all aspects of my work, guaranteeing that I accord every stakeholder equal and respectful treatment. *Temperance* assists me in practicing self-restraint and moderation, especially when I may be confronted with ethical dilemmas or feel tempted to take shortcuts to attain desired outcomes. *Wisdom*, the last cardinal virtue, emphasizes the importance of continually seeking knowledge, refining my understanding, and applying critical thinking to all aspects of my research.

In aligning my work with these time-tested stoic principles, I endeavor to create a habit of integrity, responsibility, and moral excellence within my scholarship. Furthermore, by integrating the teachings of stoicism into my research practices, I strive to maintain the highest ethical standards. Building on the moral foundation established through stoicism, I now examine the pragmatic approach to ethics, which complements and extends the stoic framework by emphasizing the importance of context, adaptability, habits, and practical application in real-world research scenarios.

4.7.3. UTILITARIAN ETHICS BASED ON PRAGMATISM

Creswell and Creswell (2018) summarize pragmatism as a philosophy that focuses on the consequences of actions, is centered around solving problems, accepts multiple perspectives, and is practice-oriented. In this thesis, my research ethics are guided by pragmatism, which is grounded in stoic principles and provides a practical framework for addressing ethical dilemmas in the research process.

My research ethics are guided by pragmatism, which maintains that ethical judgments should be informed by the outcomes of our actions and underscores the importance of reflecting on our habits (LaFollette, 2000). Therefore, I recognize the significance of considering immediate and long-term societal impacts in my research. To accomplish this, I adopt a problem-centered approach that concentrates on relevant and pressing issues, contributing to advancing theoretical knowledge and practical solutions. Furthermore, I recognize the diversity of perspectives and experiences through the pluralistic nature of pragmatism, which acknowledges the complexity of ethical issues. Furthermore, I recognize the diversity of perspectives and experiences through the pluralistic nature of pragmatism, which acknowledges the complexity of ethical issues. This is exemplified in Ethical Pragmatism (EP(ph)), which is characterized by its reliance on *phronesis*, which represents the pragmatic tradition's commitment to ethical conduct tailored to specific contexts (Ess, 2020). I strive to incorporate this pluralism by considering multiple viewpoints, engaging with a multitude of stakeholders, and being open to alternative solutions. This inclusive approach enriches my ethical decision-making process and fosters greater sensitivity to the complexities of the issues I explore.

As a real-world practice-oriented philosophy, pragmatism emphasizes the importance of grounding ethical considerations in the actual experiences and challenges of conducting research. This pragmatic focus demands that I continuously reflect upon and refine my research habits, ensuring that they align with the ethical principles that guide my work. By cultivating conscientiousness, critical reflection, and adaptability habits, I can more

effectively navigate the myriad ethical dilemmas and decisions that arise throughout the research process. As new dilemmas occur and decisions must be made, it can be likened to crossing the river by feeling with your feet. Learning, feeling, and reflecting in the moment while moving.

In summary, pragmatism serves as a valuable framework for this thesis's research ethics, complementing the stoic virtues by providing a practical and context-sensitive approach to ethical decision-making. By embracing pragmatism and its focus on consequences, problem-centeredness, pluralism, and real-world practice, I strengthen the ethical foundation of my research and foster a more responsive and responsible approach to the challenges and opportunities emerging from it.

Having established the importance of stoicism and pragmatism as a guiding framework for this thesis's research ethics, I will now explore the concept of critical realism. This approach builds upon the pragmatic approach and further enriches my ethical and methodological understanding by offering additional perspectives and, more specifically, methodological principles for navigating the complexities of my research.

4.7.4. CRITICAL REALISM BRIDGING METHOD AND ETHICS

Critical realism becomes a feasible choice for me as it builds on pragmatism. I first chose critical realism for the methodological principles as described by Wynn & Williams (2012), see Figure 2. Second, it is well suited for mixed-method research. Furthermore, the iterative process of using the principles is familiar since it is like the Plan-Do-Study-Act process that is the backbone of quality management and organizational development in the Swedish public sector. Furthermore, the critical realism methodological principles align with work-life experience from agile practices, where iterative work is the norm. Finally, it also enables making reoccurring ethical judgments, each representing critical junctures (Markham, 2006). These are all crucial factors. The research group I belong to implicitly has used

pragmatic research within the research consortium Digital Government. Thus, the philosophical paradigm of critical realism fits both the research and the researcher (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014).

4.7.5. CRITICAL REALISM AS METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND PARADIGM

Building on the pragmatic paradigm, critical realism (CR) is becoming recognized in social sciences and information systems research (S. A. Carlsson, 2011; Smith, 2006; Tsang, 2014; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Critical realism is a viable alternative as “CR-based research methodologies offer researchers new opportunities to investigate complex organizational phenomena in a holistic manner” (Wynn & Williams, 2012, p. 787). For critical realism, explaining the mechanisms that create an event is at the forefront rather than predicting or understanding (Wynn & Williams, 2012). Furthermore, applying critical realism gives the research a way to identify entities, causal powers, relations, and dependencies and thus discover and explain organizations’ institutional mechanisms (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018)

Have you ever been in a meeting and wondered, ‘What happened in there?’. That experience was caused by mechanisms and structures in the real world, resulting in an event in the empirical world you experienced. It was observable. Nevertheless, you could not understand or explain it, nor the mechanisms and structures behind the event. Simply put, you cannot see a mechanism but experience the events it creates. Thus, theory cannot be experienced, but it can be explained by exploring the observed data if it is, at least, an intermittently occurring phenomenon.

4.8. MECHANISM-BASED THEORIZING

Mechanism-based theorizing, centered on uncovering the underlying causal mechanisms that produce social phenomena, and is used in strategic management and information systems (Blom & Morén, 2011; Mingers et

al., 2013; Volkoff & Strong, 2013; Wynn & Williams, 2012). A cornerstone in this approach is Pawson and Tilley's (1997) Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configuration, which delineates how social interventions work by examining the context, identifying the mechanisms, and analyzing the outcomes (Blom & Morén, 2011). The CMO framework has facilitated nuanced understandings in various fields, including organizational change and strategic planning, by offering detailed insights into strategic phenomena and aiding in the development of effective strategies (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013; Sirén & Kohtamäki, 2016).

Despite its merits, the approach can potentially foster reductionist models by concentrating too narrowly on specific mechanisms, hence overlooking the multifaceted nature of organizational phenomena (Weber, 2006). It necessitates a balanced application, harmonizing with broader theoretical frameworks to avoid the abandonment of grand theorizing. In the realm of information systems, it has been instrumental in addressing theory-practice gaps and exploring coordination mechanisms in innovation, showcasing its utility in understanding technology adoption and implementation dynamics (Smith, 2006). Mechanism-based theorizing is useful in information systems and strategic management.

4.9. MECHANISM-BASED THEORIZING AND CRITICAL REALISM

Mechanism-based theorizing and critical realism share a focus on uncovering the underlying causal mechanisms that generate social phenomena, emphasizing the role of context in understanding these processes (Blom & Morén, 2011). Critical realism, providing the philosophical grounding, insists on the existence of deep, often unobservable mechanisms driving social events and structures, encouraging a deeper exploration beyond observable patterns. Mechanism-based theorizing, aligning well with critical realism's ontological assumptions, concentrates on identifying and elucidating the generative mechanisms or causal pathways that explain specific outcomes or behaviors in social systems (Bygstad et al., 2016). By adopt-

ing this approach within a critical realist framework, researchers can offer nuanced, context-specific explanations, enhancing the understanding of how societal structures and human agency interact to produce outcomes.

To justify the use of both process and mechanism in relation to consensing, I draw upon the works of Langley (1999), Pettigrew (1992), and Van de Ven and Poole (1995). These studies demonstrate how combining process and mechanism perspectives can yield valuable insights and contribute to theory development. Langley (1999) discusses how researchers can develop process theories by combining a focus on the overall sequence of events with an examination of the specific mechanisms that drive change and stability. This perspective aligns with my exploration of sensing and synthesizing as key mechanisms within the broader consensing process. Similarly, Pettigrew (1992) argues for a process perspective on strategy that takes into account both the overall patterns of strategy formation and the specific mechanisms that shape strategic choices and actions. This view supports my approach of considering consensing as a process while also investigating the underlying mechanisms that enable it. Finally, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) propose a typology of process theories that combine different motor mechanisms to explain organizational change processes, providing a foundation for understanding the interplay of various mechanisms within the consensing process.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, I position consensing as a process theory that encompasses specific mechanisms driving the development of shared understanding and strategic alignment in the context of digital transformation. This theoretical framework, grounded in critical realism and mechanism-based theorizing, informs my methodological approach and guides my empirical investigation of consensing in practice. The inclusion of both process and mechanism perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how consensing unfolds and influences strategy formulation in organizations.

4.10. CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

Throughout my research, I observed how my initial hunches and intuition, i.e., ‘direct knowing’ (Kump, 2022), transformed and developed into a robust, theoretical framework. Furthermore, I noticed how my professional background in using intuiting practices (C. Walsh et al., 2023) and organizational expertise aided and enriched this process. In this reflection, the ambition is to track the evolution of these hunches and emphasize the interdependent relationship between my professional experience and the research process. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the profound depth and richness that this approach has brought to my research.

4.11. THE INITIAL HUNCH

My research journey embarked with an abductive approach grounded in preliminary observations of strategizing derived from the Swedish public sector, specifically the Rhizomatic paper (Magnusson et al., 2022, p. 6417) the quote: “Each minute behind the desk is a minute lost. We must be out there meeting people. We should have dialogue, we should have conversations, and we should build from there” resonated with my professional experience of the importance of dialogue, humble inquiry (Schein, 2013) and active listening (Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021; Jonsdottir & Fridriksdottir, 2020). This initial hunch, further informed by a rich body of literature on strategy, dialogue, and consensus, laid the foundation for the theoretical framework that would undergo several transformations in the subsequent phases.

4.11.1. TRANSITION TO THE RETRODUCTIVE PHASE

As I delved deeper into strategy and ambidexterity (Lindroth et al., 2022; Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, 2024b), a critical juncture was reached where the focus shifted towards understanding the role of balanc-

ing in strategic dialogue (Bourgoin et al., 2018). This transition marked the initiation of a retroductive phase, a methodology deeply rooted in critical realism. This approach worked backward from outcomes, i.e., consensus as an outcome, to identify the underlying mechanisms and structures that generated the observed phenomena, fostering a dynamic and iterative research process characterized by continuous refinement of theories through a recursive engagement with empirical data and theoretical insights.

4.11.2. THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE AND CONSENSUS-BUILDING

While researching and writing the “Iron Cage” paper (Norling, 2024b), I made a deeper exploration into dialogue and consensus-building, where the abductive/retroductive approach carved out a space for nurturing and developing initial hunches through a thorough engagement with a wide array of literature. This phase was marked by a critical juncture where I serendipitously stumbled upon a LinkedIn post that mentioned consensus debt (Thornton, 2023), prompting a pivot towards thinking about consensus as a dynamic process, contrasting sharply with the dominant perspective of *consensus as an outcome* in the strategic consensus literature (Kellermanns et al., 2011).

4.11.3. LEVERAGING EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

Drawing upon two decades of practical experience in the Swedish public sector, I reflected upon my deep-seated understanding of the empirical realities within, thus enhancing the depth of my research. This synergy facilitated a deep dive into the intricate processes and structures that underpin consensus-building, necessitating a detailed exploration of the mechanisms through which consensing cultivates shared understanding and strategic alignment. This phase represented a pivotal moment where practical knowledge met theoretical insights, giving rise to a more nuanced understanding of the consensing process and its outcomes.

4.11.4. REFINEMENT THROUGH FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION

In the chapters discussing the mechanisms and outcomes of consensing, the retroductive approach became central in unraveling the consensing process and mechanisms. This stage was characterized by rigorous testing of hunches through drawing diagrams, illustrations, reports, and draft papers, enriched by feedback from diverse stakeholders, including practitioners, peers, students, supervisors, and other researchers. The feedback garnered through seminars and workshops facilitated a critical juncture in the research, steering it towards a path of continuous refinement through deep reflection and critical engagement with the empirical realities of the Swedish public sector.

As I stand at the culmination of my Ph.D. journey, it is evident that several critical junctures have marked the research process, each steering the direction toward a deeper understanding of consensing. These pivotal moments, arising from theoretical engagements and practical insights, have enriched the research and opened avenues for future exploration.

4.12. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE HERMENEUTIC WAY

Pursuing my doctoral research, I have employed a hermeneutic literature review approach, a methodological decision that has shaped the depth and breadth of my understanding of the field. This approach aligns closely with the nature of my research, exploring digital transformation strategies in the Swedish public sector. A topic that benefits from a nuanced and context-rich exploration of the literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Central to this approach was the principle of reading until saturation (Combs et al., 2010), in other words, reading until the moment when one notices that “I’ve seen this (or something very similar to it) before.” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 84). In other words, a feeling of *déjà vu*. This iterative process involved engaging with the literature until no additional themes or fundamental insights emerged, ensuring a comprehensive array of literature was covered.

Unlike traditional literature reviews that often dive into each article, my approach focused on broader thematic concepts (Webster & Watson, 2002). I was especially interested in how the concepts are interlinked. This method allowed me to understand overarching themes and trends across various studies, providing a macroscopic view of the subject matter (Cole & Avison, 2007; Klein & Myers, 1999).

I engaged in a research method that involved a cyclical process of seeking, acquiring, scrutinizing, and interpreting academic works, using the hermeneutic circle method for analysis and interpretation (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This process entailed a series of repetitive steps: (1) initial examination, (2) organizing and categorizing, (3) critical evaluation, (4) formulating arguments, (5) identifying research issues or queries, and (6) continual searching (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), recognizing my preexisting knowledge and experiences as foundational to the review process (Myers, 1995).

A notable aspect of my literature review is the predominance of sources in public administration and strategic management. This choice was deliberate; following Webster and Watson (2002), I read outside of the Information Systems (IS) discipline, thus aligning my literature review with the interdisciplinary nature of IS research (Webster & Watson, 2002). Public administration and strategic management literature offer insight into the strategic, organizational, and social aspects pivotal to understanding the complexities of public sector digital transformation (Kurnia et al., 2019; Mintzberg, 1994; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).

In conclusion, using a hermeneutic review of the literature in my doctoral research was necessary to understand consensing. It has allowed for a nuanced, contextually rich, and interdisciplinary exploration of literature, laying a robust foundation for my research into the role of dialogue and consensus in digital strategizing.

4.13. OBJECT OF ANALYSIS

The object of analysis is the process of strategy formulation. More specifically, the concept of consensing and its role in achieving cognitive consensus. It examines how strategies are formulated using dialogue, focusing on cognitive consensus-building and the role of the strategy document and stakeholders in the process, including the influence of organizational culture.

4.14. LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONSENSING

This thesis contributes a middle-range conceptual framework (Hassan & Lowry, 2015) focused on consensing, or the building of cognitive consensus (See Figure 10), in formulating digital transformation strategies within the Swedish public sector. This research adopts a multilevel framework, see Table 2, incorporating micro-, meso-, and macro-level analysis to provide a comprehensive theoretical lens.

Level of Analysis	Focus	Data Collection Methods
Micro	Individual actors and stakeholders within organizations	Qualitative interviews, targeted surveys
Meso	Entire organizations	Organizational case studies
Macro	Sectors within the public sector, e.g., municipalities and regions	Population studies, large-scale surveys, sector-wide content analyses
Inter-level	Interactions and mechanisms across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels	Multi-level modeling techniques (for future empirical studies)

Table 2. Levels of analysis

The conceptual framework considers individual actors and stakeholders within organizations at the micro level. It delves into how these actors

engage in consensing, thereby contributing to the formulation of digital strategies. At this level, qualitative interviews and targeted surveys were used to capture the nuances of stakeholder interactions.

The meso level within the framework examines organizations, seeking to understand how consensing takes place within broader organizational settings during the formulation of digital transformation strategies. Organizational case studies are the primary method for gathering data at this level, providing a more in-depth understanding of the organizational aspects of consensing.

At the macro level, the framework extends to sectors within the Swedish public sector, such as municipalities and regions. This level uncovers how consensing occurs sector-wide during the strategy formulation. Population studies have been conducted at this level, including large-scale surveys and sector-wide analyses.

The conceptual framework identifies and articulates how consensing mechanisms manifest and interact. Future empirical studies could employ multilevel modeling techniques to explore interlevel dynamics and validate the framework. The multilevel conceptual framework of consensing sets the stage for future empirical research to explore, validate, and refine the framework across multiple levels of analysis.

4.15. RESEARCH DESIGN

The Swedish public sector is primarily studied through population studies, complemented by case studies. In addition, the thesis kappa utilizes mechanism-based theorizing. The research is action-research-based, meaning that the critical researcher is actively undertaking engaged research, succinctly described by Ackroyd and Karlsson (2014, p. 17): “realists attempt to influence social practices on the basis of theoretical generalizations concerning structures and mechanisms they know about or propose are operating in the places of research.” Ackroyd and Karlsson (2014, p. 17) go on to explain how realist acts in engaged studies:

“... realists tend not to write prescriptions for change, nor do they propose recipes for producing good social outcomes. Too much is unknown and contingent on this. Instead, they provide practitioners with knowledge of structures, their mechanisms, and tendencies that practitioners can apply to their specific contexts.”

In aggregation for this thesis, I used a *convergent mixed methods research approach*, collecting and analyzing data simultaneously through qualitative and quantitative methods. Arguing that a diversified data set will provide a fuller explanation of the research problem. The data collection resulted in several sets of data: documents, interviews, and surveys presented in Table 3.

Included papers	Data collection method	Number
Rhizomatic Strategizing in Digital Transformation: A Clinical Field Study	Documents	140
	Interviews	60
	Emails, phone calls, and seminars	25
Digital Decoupling: A Population Study of Digital Transformation Strategies in Swedish Municipalities.	Documents	282
Strategic Responses to the COVID Pandemic: Empirical Evidence of Shifts in Digital Transformation Strategy.	Survey	9135
Strategic Dialogue in the Public Sector: An Exploratory Survey Study	Survey	59
Digital Transformation or Digital Standstill? Status Quo Bias in Swedish Public Sector Strategies	Document	20
Cognitive Consensus in Digital Transformation Strategy Formulation	Interviews	20

Other publications		
Balancing the Digital Portfolio: Empirical evidence of an ambidextrous bias in digital government	Documents	167
	Interviews	52
The Iron Cage of Internal Efficiency: A Content Analysis of Digital Transformation Strategy Direction in Swedish Regions	Documents	20
Hinder för Digitalisering i Västra Götalandsregionen: Ett styrningsperspektiv	Interviews	45
Regionernas digitaliseringsstrategier: riktning och konsekvenser	Documents	20

Table 3. Overview of data collection methods

The rationale behind using multiple and diverse datasets for the research is twofold. First, a diversified data set provides a fuller explanation of the research problem, and second, triangulating data of the research findings. Creswell (2018) characterizes convergent mixed methods as using predetermined and emerging methods and open- and closed-ended questions, drawing on all possibilities using multiple forms of data. The analysis is both statistical and textual, with interpretation happening across databases. As the research progresses, data is integrated at different stages of inquiry to inform the research direction. Thus, data and inquiry will create an integrated feedback loop based on the methodological principles, creating iterations as illustrated in Figure 2.

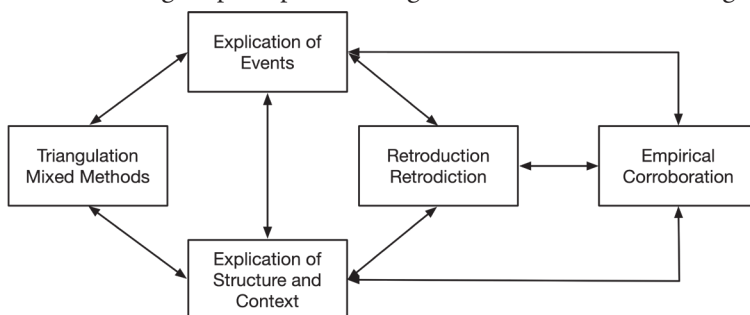


Figure 2. Relationship among the methodological principles. Adapted from Wynn & Williams (2012)

4.16. THE USE OF FICTIONAL TALES AS VIGNETTES

In addition to the various research methods and philosophical underpinnings discussed in this chapter, I also employ the use of fictional tales as a means to illustrate and explain complex theoretical concepts. These fictional tales serve as vignettes, which are brief, evocative stories or sketches that capture the essence of a particular concept, situation, or experience (Klotz et al., 2022).

The use of fictional stories and vignettes has gained traction in management and organizational research as a way to communicate ideas, stimulate reflection, and bridge the gap between theory and practice (Czarniawska, 1999; Phillips, 1995). By crafting fictional tales that embody the key elements of a theoretical concept, I aim to make the concept more accessible and relatable to readers, inviting them to engage with the ideas on a more imaginative and emotional level. These fictional tales draw upon my professional experiences, observations, and insights gained throughout my research journey, as well as my imagination and creativity. They are designed to illuminate the nuances and complexities of the phenomena under investigation while also engaging the reader's interest and empathy. By weaving together elements of narrative, description, and analysis, these vignettes offer a rich and multi-faceted perspective on the research topic (Gabriel, 2000; Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

Including fictional tales as vignettes aligns with my philosophical commitments to stoicism, pragmatism, and critical realism. These traditions emphasize the importance of practical wisdom, context sensitivity, and the integration of theory and practice. By using fictional tales to convey theoretical concepts, I aim to embody these values and make my research more accessible and impactful to a wider audience (Rorty, 1989; Singer, 2010).

It is crucial to differentiate these fictional tales from empirical evidence. They are not meant to replace data-driven findings or analyses but rather to complement them by providing vivid, context-rich illustrations of the theoretical concepts. To reinforce this distinction, the fictional tales will be clearly labeled as such in their headings/titles, e.g., “A slow cooking consensus: An inspirational tale (fictional)” or “The Lindentown loop: A tale of breaking the cycle (fictional).”

While these fictional tales can be a powerful tool for engaging readers and facilitating understanding, it is essential to acknowledge their limitations and potential criticisms. They are not meant to be comprehensive representations of the phenomena but rather illustrative vignettes that highlight specific aspects of the theoretical concepts.

4.17. PAPER RESEARCH METHODS OVERVIEW

The included papers include two case studies, four studies based on a population research strategy based on made data in the form of interviews and anonymous surveys, and *found data* in the form of publicly available documents. Depending on the context, a choice is made between qualitative or quantitative, data-driven methods, or a mix of both.

The primary qualitative made data is *semi-structured interviews* representing all regions, and *found data* consists of documents from the Swedish regions. The primary and secondary data are analyzed using Atlas.ti to find conceptual patterns.

In addition to the qualitative methods described above, *quantitative made data* from the DiMiOS survey panel was used, and additional quantitative made data was collected through the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Strategic Dialogue survey. The survey data complements the primary qualitative data from interviews and observations. For analysis, I primarily use document analysis, which, as a method, involves skimming, reading, and interpreting the collected data (Bowen, 2009). This iterative process combines elements of thematic analysis (Alhojailan, 2012) and content analysis (R. P. Weber, 1990). Both are used in this research.

4.18. FUTURE ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The current legislation on privacy (GDPR), the Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, and the Ethical Review Act can lead to ethical dilemmas, depending on how they are interpreted. Using digital tools can create unforeseen

dilemmas between the confidentiality of the interviewees and informants and the letter of the law. I especially find the avoidance of harm challenging to assess, primarily related to the public interest, as the effects of my research can have second, and third-order effects that are hard to foresee. Moreover, to what extent am I responsible if practitioners and organizations interpret my research unintendedly, leading to adverse outcomes?

4.19. SUMMARY OF ETHICS, PARADIGM, AND METHOD

This chapter has explained my integrated approach to ethics, weaving together regulatory guidelines, insights from stoicism, pragmatism, and the interplay between ethics and method. By combining these diverse perspectives, I have explored and explained the ethical framework that guides my research efforts, ensuring that I contribute responsibly and meaningfully to advancing the knowledge in my field of research. Ethics are based on my habits as a researcher; as such, I need to be reflective of my behaviors and choices, with the ethos of striving to do good and mirroring the fact that, as a person, I contain multitudes, i.e., father, husband, colleague, researcher, public servant, etc. Ethics are founded on practical action and wisdom, i.e., *phronesis*, one of the stoic virtues. To be ethical, you must practice ethics, forming ethical habits through continuous judgments (franzke et al., 2020).

4.20. DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

I used ChatGPT Plus and Assistant by scite.ai to ideate around consensus, consensus debt, and dialogue inertia. Scite.ai was used to find relevant references. I have used both ChatGPT Plus and Claude 3 as an editorial assistant to analyze and criticize the coherence, logical flow and readability of this thesis. Finally, I used Grammarly GO, Writefull and Paperpal to improve the thesis's writing. After using these tools, I reviewed and edited the content as needed. I take full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXT OF THE SWEDISH PUBLIC SECTOR

“We should always be asking ourselves: ‘Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?’”

EPICLETUS

The Swedish public sector operates within a specific governance and cultural context rooted in a long tradition of Swedish government and Weberian bureaucratic values. This chapter briefly explores its foundational principles, the influence of New Public Management, and the challenges and opportunities presented by rapid technological advancements. The objective is to provide a basic understanding of the strategic imperatives and challenges facing Swedish public organizations in digital transformation.

5.1. PUBLIC SECTOR AT LARGE

The public sector is, by and large, defined by the value tradition of Weberian bureaucracy (Olsen, 2005), based on meritocracy, rule-based organization of work, and the principle of offering equal and fair service to all (Gay, 2000). Instituting and following organizational routines is a founding principle, described as ‘doing things right’. It is associated with efficiency, maintaining the status quo, and preserving things as they are. Janssen and van der Voort (2016, p. 3) eloquently describe the characteristics of bureaucracies: “By design, bureaucracies are inherently slow in reacting due to the well-defined and strictly applied rules, policies, and organizational hierarchies. The latter is necessary for ensuring account-

ability and the fair treatment of constituents”. However, doing things right can be slow and inefficient. Introducing New Public Management (NPM) as the new managerial paradigm, a new value tradition, answered the call for a more efficient public sector (Hood, 1991). NPM, with its influence from the private sector and its focus on cost and control, tilted the direction even more toward efficiency while still ‘doing things right’ (SOU, 2019, p. 43). NPM’s principles form the rules that nowadays are taken for granted and guide the public sector; these embedded principles, practices, and behaviors form structures, also known as organizational deep structures (Bowles, 1990; Silva & Hirschheim, 2007).

Unfortunately, organizational risk aversion (Torugsa & Arundel, 2017) and deep structures in the public sector have created barriers to digitally driven change and innovation through organizational inertia caused by routine rigidity (Gilbert, 2005; Zhen et al., 2021). According to Rose et al. (2015), e-government initiatives are affected by the different value traditions of Weberian bureaucracy and NPM, as they are not harmonized.

5.2. EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Today, there is a growing sense of urgency for change due to demographic and economic constraints. The welfare state is also challenged by an ever-increasing pace of change and the interdependent complexity of global-scale threats. External forces, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the change in demographic composition in Sweden with a growing proportion of elderly, result in a shrinking tax base (SKR, 2020). For the public sector to manage these challenges, there is a need for change and innovation (OECD, 2015), partially enabled by digital transformation. Digital technology is a fundamental cornerstone of contemporary organizations and modern society. The Swedish government’s ambition is: “to be the best in the world in using the possibilities of digitalization” (Skr., 2017, p. 5).

As the external pressure to change increases and digital technology becomes ubiquitous through consumerization, it forces public organizations to accelerate their digital transformation (Gregory et al., 2018). To succeed in digital transformation, bureaucratic public sector organizations must focus more on 'doing good things', utilizing the resources they have at their disposal. They must focus on continuous strategic renewal, breaking path dependency by transforming capabilities and strategic intent (Schmitt et al., 2018). Public sector organizations need to discover transformation methods. In other words, achieving digital transformation in the public sector can be complex. Although technological transformations can improve efficiency and policy integration, introducing technology is often associated with conflicts and negative feedback (Giulio & Vecchi, 2023).

The context of digital innovations in the public sector requires careful consideration to ensure successful implementation (Giulio & Vecchi, 2023). When a shared understanding of the foundations of a strategy is lacking, the implementation of the strategy will fail or, rather, fade out and wither. Stakeholders can interpret the strategy differently without a shared understanding, resulting in misalignment, confusion, and conflicting actions. This can impede coordination, collaboration, and the allocation of resources necessary for effective implementation (N. Brown & Brown, 2019). Navigating from the potential pitfalls of misalignment and confusion in strategy implementation, the next section focuses on the philosophical underpinnings that differentiate the public and private sectors.

5.3. CO-CREATION VERSUS WINNING: DIVERGENT PHILOSOPHIES IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

In a study of the digital transformation of public administration in Denmark, Scupola and Mergel (2022) emphasized the coproduction of public value, suggesting that the public sector is philosophically different from the private sector in its focus on winning. The assertion that the private

sector prioritizes winning while the public sector is centered on co-creation is substantiated by research. Torfing et al. (2016) delineate transforming the public sector into a sphere conducive to co-creation, accentuating the necessity of involving citizens and various stakeholders in the collaborative endeavor of public value creation, thereby steering away from a sole focus on winning. This perspective is echoed by Crosby et al. (2016), who advocate for collaborative innovation in the public sector, urging organizations to foster partnerships with diverse stakeholders to address intricate societal issues, further endorsing the co-creation orientation of the public sector. Collaboration extends to governance and strategic intent.

“Public value creation must be seen in a collaborative governance perspective. Organizations cannot optimize strategic intent on their own, as some of the NPM literature seemed to assume, but they must increasingly work with other stakeholders and citizens in wider democratic processes to achieve forward momentum.” (Alford & Greve, 2017, p. 13).

Additionally, Sanina et al. (2021) scrutinize the socioeconomic ramifications of digital government transformation, positing that it facilitates enhanced service delivery and fosters citizen participation, elements that resonate with the co-creation paradigm.

Siciliano (2016) underscores the role of organizational learning in the public sector, suggesting that leveraging networks and external expertise can be beneficial, thereby implying a collaborative and co-creative approach over a competitive stance. In synthesis, the argument is that while the private sector is driven by competition and profitability, denoting a ‘winning’ approach, the public sector is distinctly characterized by its commitment to collaboration, citizen engagement, and value creation, epitomizing a co-creative ethos. Having established the co-creative ethos prevalent in the public sector, the next chapter explores the implications of this approach on the pace and complexity of strategizing within this domain.

5.4. THE INHERENT SLOWNESS OF PUBLIC SECTOR STRATEGIZING

Strategizing in the public sector is inherently more complex and thus requires a more meticulous and concerted effort than its private sector counterpart. Central to this argument is the insight provided by Lindgren et al. (2021), who articulate that “governmental organizations need to put more effort into handling and absorbing conflicting ideals, ideas, and strategies than aligning strategies from a business-oriented perspective.” (2021, p. 42). This perspective naturally leads to a slower pace of strategizing in the public sector, a phenomenon corroborated by several studies and researchers. Alford & Greve (2017) delineated bureaucratic processes, political considerations, and stakeholder involvement as significant factors that decelerate strategizing in the public sector. This is echoed by Ely and Jacob (2012), who emphasize time constraints and pressures arising from the imperative for transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to public demands.

Adding to this discourse, Bryson et al. (2010), in their review of public strategic management research, pinpoint the complex and dynamic environment of the public sector as a ground for slower decision-making processes and strategy implementations. Similarly, Höglund and Svärdesten (2018) highlight the diversity of stakeholders and interests as elements that further slow down strategizing. Strategy alignment can also contribute to the added complexity. A study of digital strategies for municipalities in Germany (Niehaves et al., 2019) shows that municipalities can align their strategy with higher-level digital strategies, other parties' digital strategies, and their strategies and concepts. In contrast, private organizations must align their plans with their overall corporate business strategy or strategic plan.

Johnsen (2015) contributes to this discussion by identifying policy ambiguity, the need for transparency, scrutiny from vigilant publics, time constraints, and unstable coalitions as factors necessitating a structured ap-

proach to planning in the public sector. The same study also notes a higher degree of constraint from external forces reported by public managers in the strategy development process than those in the private sector. Despite a general trend leaning toward less formal planning in contemporary strategic management theory, Johnsen (2015) observes a persistent preference for detailed strategic planning in the public sector, characterized by a rich, layered approach that integrates various theoretical perspectives.

In conclusion, existing research underscores the slower pace of strategizing in the public sector due to its complex nature and many other factors, including bureaucratic processes, political considerations, and stakeholder involvement. The central takeaway, emphasized by Lindgren et al. (2021), is the imperative for governmental organizations to invest more effort in navigating conflicting ideals and strategies, a task far removed from business-oriented strategic alignment yet fundamental in laying the groundwork for successful strategy formulation and realization in the public sector. This emphasis on navigating conflicting ideals and strategies aligns well with consensus-building, illustrating the necessity of a consensing approach in the complex landscape of public sector strategizing. Building upon this understanding of public sector strategizing, we now focus on the Swedish context to further delineate how these dynamics play out in a setting characterized by a deep-rooted emphasis on consensus and distinct governance structures.

5.5. SWEDISH PUBLIC SECTOR

The Swedish public sector operates within a distinct governance structure that includes various levels of government and the Swedish organizational culture. This chapter outlines the sector's fundamental principles and doctrines, including the governing laws and the cultural emphasis on consensus in management. Understanding these elements sheds light on the sector's strategic challenges and opportunities.

The doctrine of the Swedish public sector follows a principle of power division between the national, regional, and local levels of government, as well as the European level, after Sweden joined the EU (Government Offices, 2015b). The Riksdag, or Swedish parliament, has legislative powers and works with the government, which proposes new laws and implements decisions made by the Riksdag. The government is supported by the Government Offices, which include ministries and about 400 central government agencies (Government Offices, 2015a). Each ministry is responsible for several government agencies, which must apply the laws and carry out activities the Riksdag and government decide on. The Government decides on the conditions for each agency's operations through annual appropriations directives and ordinances. However, the government cannot intervene in an agency's decisions regarding the application of the law or the due exercise of its authority. This prohibition of ministerial rule means that collective government decision-making and the ban on instructing agencies on individual matters are expressions of this principle (Government Offices, 2015a). There are a few notable laws that need to be mentioned.

The principle of public access to information is a fundamental aspect of Sweden's form of government, rooted in the Freedom of the Press Act. The principle of public access to information ensures transparency in public sector activities, allowing the public and media to access official documents, granting officials the right to share information, and ensuring public attendance at trials and decision-making assemblies. (Government Offices, 2020, p. 7). Official documents are accessible to the public, but there are restrictions. Not all documents held by a public authority are considered official, and some information in official documents is classified as secret (Government Offices, 2020, p. 8).

The Employment (Co-Determination in the Workplace) Act (1976:580) is a law in Sweden that became effective in 1976. This act governs the interaction between employers and employees concerning the right to information, collective agreement, and mediation of labor disputes. It is a significant law that encourages collaboration and shared decision-making between employers and employees within the workplace (Government Offices, 2021).

5.5.1. SWEDISH ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

When organizations experience fast technological advancements, there may be conflicting expectations for top-level, middle-level, and operating managers (Ouchi, 1980), creating strategic role conflicts in the individual and the organization. In addition, the Swedish public sector mixes market control, bureaucratic control, and clan control (Ouchi, 1980), which further aggravates the situation. In other words, cognitive dissonance can be caused by role conflicts inherent in the control system itself. Although the inherent control system can lead to cognitive dissonance and role conflicts, it is essential to understand this within the broader context of the Swedish management culture and its unique emphasis on consensus.

The Swedish management style is characterized by a strong emphasis on consensus (Gustavsson, 1995), which is characterized by equality, qualitative assessment of performance, consensus orientation, conflict avoidance, teamwork, 'soft' management, and implicit control (Salminen-Karlsson, 2013). It is described as a culture where employees take care of each other's well-being and resist managerial pressures by conforming to this cultural norm (Salminen-Karlsson, 2013; Styhre et al., 2006). Consensus culture is a defining theme of Swedish management (Gustavsson, 1995). A distinct feature of Swedish culture is the cultural expectation of *lagom* (moderation), which can be seen as a form of consensus culture. This cultural view based on *lagom* is also legitimized by Swedish working life regulations and care policies. Wieland (2015) suggests that the Swedish national context, with its culture of moderation and the corresponding governmental regulations and strong unions, helps people resist managerial control.

The Jante Law is a cultural code in Nordic countries that values modesty and collective well-being over individual success. It advises against self-promotion, emphasizing equality and social harmony (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2018; Scott, 2022). In Sweden, this norm aligns with '*lagom*', meaning moderation, influencing management, and societal attitudes, including a propensity for self-criticism (Gustavsson, 1995). The Jante law further accentuates consensus as integral to Swedish culture with its focus on collective well-being and social harmony.

5.5.2. SWEDISH ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Organizational culture interacts with digital transformation, and the literature indicates that agile and cultural transformation are identified as essential components for successful digital transformation initiatives (Bitzer et al., 2021). Warner and Wäger (2019) and Bitzer et al. (2021) emphasize the necessity of agility as a mechanism for strategic renewal in digital transformation, as agility significantly influences an organization's collaborative approach and culture. Ajigini and Chinamasa (2023) support this by illustrating that organizational culture is a key predictor of the success of digital transformation initiatives. However, organizational culture remains underexplored (Grover et al., 2022).

Tangi et al. (2021) observe that cultural transformation often lags behind the technical aspects of digital transformation in Italian public administration, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between technological and organizational culture for effective digital transformation. Additionally, (Pedersen, 2018) suggests a balance between transformation and the development of capabilities to enable it, while Weritz et al. (2020) further emphasize the importance of dynamic capabilities and digital culture. Furthermore, Warner and Wäger (2019) and Serpa et al. (2022) discuss how digital transformation reshapes organizational resilience and culture, influencing exploitative and exploratory innovation. Collectively, these studies underscore the critical impact of organizational culture on digital transformation, indicating that organizational culture not only predicts the success of such initiatives but also fundamentally shapes the process.

Wilson and Mergel (2020) highlight the significant relationship between organizational culture and strategy in the success of digital transformation. Schein's (1988) model of organizational culture, encompassing artifacts, values, and assumptions, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics. The framework underscores the need to align organizational culture with strategic intent and a change toward a digital

organizational culture (Duerr et al., 2018; Hartl, 2019; Knecht & Hund, 2022). A conceptual framework based on Schein (1988) was developed for this thesis, see Figure 3.

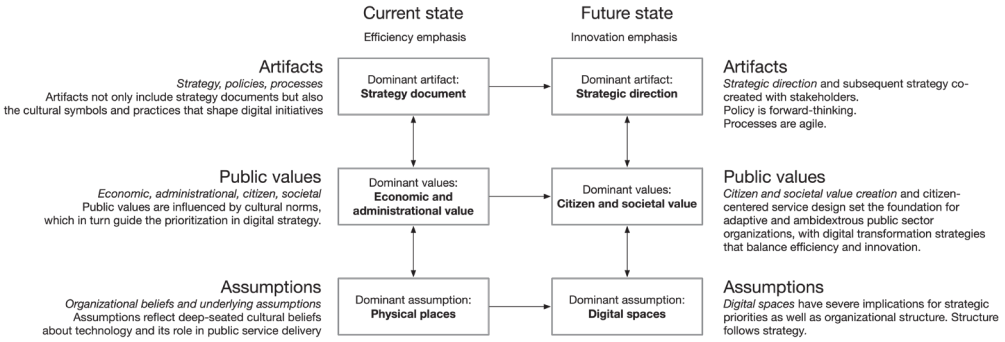


Figure 3. Public sector digital culture framework based on Schein (1988)

A study (Norling, 2024a) finds that the content of the regional digital transformation strategies reflects the existing culture, prioritizing efficiency, which can hinder the adoption of digital technology and maintain the status quo. As Nutt and Backoff (1987, p. 44) expressed, “Without some concept of the organization’s intentions, all change becomes contentious, and the organization’s strategy tends to stay rooted in past practices and conventional wisdom.” This suggests that future strategies should clearly articulate the strategic intent and the explicit assumptions.

The observed status quo bias in the strategy documents reflects a deeper phenomenon rooted in bureaucratic culture. Status quo bias, a cognitive bias that disproportionately favors current conditions and resists change (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), can significantly impede digital transformation efforts (Vial, 2019). This bias manifests in the analyzed strategy documents, as the influence of bureaucratic culture in Swedish local gov-

ernments often leads to a cautious approach toward digital innovation, prioritizing incremental improvements and maintaining existing processes (Norling, 2024a). The prevalence of status quo bias underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to addressing cultural barriers in digital transformation initiatives. As Norling (2024a) suggests, future strategy documents should clearly articulate strategic intent based on explicit assumptions to shape the cultural narrative around digital transformation. This involves challenging the status quo and embracing a more integrated, action-oriented approach that aligns technology adoption with organizational culture and agile practices. Overcoming status quo bias is crucial for public sector employees to embrace change and facilitate digital transformation (Oschinsky et al., 2021).

To assist in cultural transformation, the Strategic Direction and Culture Mapping (SCDM) framework was introduced, illustrated in Figure 4, effectively integrating the concept of strategic direction, that is, strategic intent, with the Competing Values Framework. This integration provides a model for public sector organizations to balance operational and strategic demands during digital transformation. SDCM is grounded in the understanding that an organization's strategic intent is intertwined with its culture. This approach enables organizations to visualize their strategies with the competing values of internal and external focus, flexibility, and stability, enabling a future alignment between culture and strategy (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022).

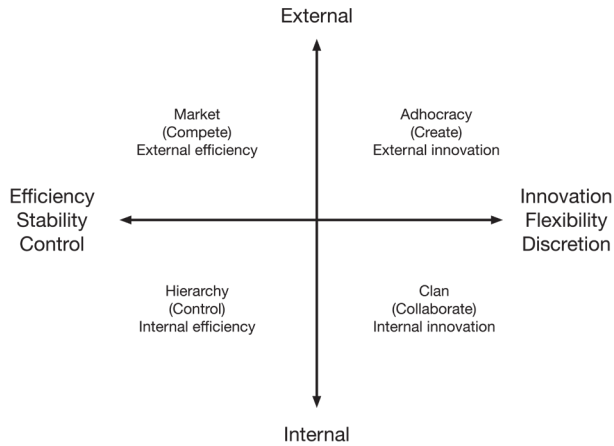


Figure 4. Strategic Direction and Culture Mapping based on Cameron and Quinn (2011) and Norling et al. (2022)

In summary, organizational culture affects strategic direction and content in digital transformation strategizing. The chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding and aligning organizational culture with digital transformation strategies to achieve successful outcomes and cultivate a digital organizational culture.

5.6. STRATEGIZING WITH THE CULTURE

In conclusion, the digital transformation in the Swedish public sector is multifaceted. The insights provided in this chapter shed light on the strategic challenges and opportunities present, offering an understanding of the governance and cultural context within the Swedish public sector. It underscores the importance of formulating a strategy through shared understanding.

To get a complete picture of the problems and challenges facing organizations, any current strategy formulation should include diverse perspectives and the inclusion of all stakeholders in the organization. Here, I take a normative position, declaring that in the spirit of Swedish public sector culture and doctrine based on transparency through public access to information, strategy formulation should be equally transparent and inclusive, in line with open strategy (Hautz et al., 2017). The solution is evident based on the tradition and culture of the Swedish public sector. Digital transformation initiatives should work with the existing organizational culture and tradition.

CHAPTER 6

MECHANISMS OF CONSENSING AND DIALOGUE

“We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say.”

DIOGENES LAËRTIUS, VII. 23.

This chapter explains the notion of consensing. It discusses how consensing acts as a dynamic, iterative process that transcends mere aggregation of perspectives. The chapter unpacks the primary mechanisms, sensing and synthesizing, highlighting dialogue's role in shaping shared understanding and strategic intent. It proposes a nuanced approach to balancing divergent and convergent thinking and the temporal aspects of decision-making, emphasizing the importance of managing these elements to foster effective strategy formulation. But first, a bit of history on the notion of consensing.

6.1. HISTORY OF CONSENSING

Consensing is derived from the noun *consensus*, which refers to a general agreement or shared understanding among a group of people. The word *consensus* originates from the Latin term *consensus*, meaning agreement or accord, which is the past participle of *consentire*, translating to ‘feel together’ (Etymonline, 2024). *Consensing*, as a verb, denotes the process of building a shared understanding. It involves active stakeholder participation and communication to arrive at a shared understanding. This thesis defines consensing as *a dynamic and iterative process that establishes shared understanding through the interplay of individual inputs and collective dialogue*. The academic use of the term *consensing* can be traced back to the work of Abonyi (1978) and Postner (1976).

Abonyi (1978) introduced consensing as a method for structuring the consensus-building process in project assessment and large-scale program planning. He described it as an approach to mediate between conflicting interests and perceptions among interdependent parties. Abonyi emphasized that consensing adopts a positive/descriptive approach involving an interactive process rather than seeking an 'optimal' decision based on pre-specified criteria (Abonyi, 1978). According to Abonyi (1978) the role of consensing is "to create conditions that (a) allow convergence to an unanimous consensus or (b) make representative preferences 'sufficiently similar', or (c) set the stage for an effective pooling of diverse preferences" (1978, p. 2).

To navigate the diverse and sometimes conflicting perceptions and interests of social groups involved in or affected by a program, Abonyi introduced the concept of *filtering* as a specific consensing method (Abonyi, 1983). Filtering provides a formal procedure for identifying areas of agreement among diverse interests on specific project designs through a structured dialogue framework between planners and designers. Abonyi's work highlights the importance of consensing to navigate and mediate conflicting interests and perceptions between stakeholders, laying the foundation for its application in various domains.

Postner (1976) in his report 'Consensing Methods and Problems: A Non-technical Introduction'⁴, explored the concept of consensing in the context of network forms of economic consensing (Postner, 1976, as cited in Postner, 1997). He highlighted the challenges that networks, often characterized by informal, consensual, and reputational relationships, pose for traditional statistical methods based on market or hierarchical forms of economic organization. Postner's work emphasizes the 'art' of consensing, which refers to reaching an agreement or making decisions within these network structures that do not easily conform to standard rules of business

⁴ Unfortunately, I have not been able to access this report directly. It was not to be found in the archives of the Economic Council of Canada. If someone reading this has access to the report, please let me know!

accounting or statistical reporting (Postner, 1997). In a later blog post, Postner (2014) further elaborated on the concept of consensing, discussing its relevance to economic research and consensus-building. He noted that consensing could have several possible meanings and that the nature of dialogue in this process could be either constructive or counterconstructive. Postner emphasized distinguishing situations where consensing may or may not be relevant.

In the context of group decision-making, the concept of *systemic consensing* was developed by Erich Visotschnig and Siegfried Schrotta starting in the 2000s (Wikipedia, 2024). This method prioritizes minimizing participant resistance in decisions by having participants score proposals based on their level of opposition. The proposal with the lowest overall resistance score is then selected (Wikipedia, 2024). Maiwald (2018), in his book ‘Smart Decision-making: Systemic Consensing for Managers’, describes consensing as “an artificial word, a verb derived from consensus” (section: Concept and basic principles) and notes that while reaching a unanimous opinion through communication and persuasion may be impossible, systemic consensing offers a way to achieve the greatest possible approximation.

Abonyi's (1978) definition of the *consensing problem* is particularly relevant to the context of digital transformation strategy formulation. He describes the consensing problem as existing in any context where there are: “(1) partly conflicting perceptions, and/or (2) partly conflicting interests, (3) mutual interdependence, and (4) some dispersment of information and control (i.e., power)” (1978, p. 2). These characteristics are often present in the digital transformation process, where various stakeholders with different perspectives, goals, and levels of influence must navigate the complexities of the digital landscape. By applying the concept of consensing to the digital domain, this thesis addresses the challenges of building shared understanding and alignment among diverse stakeholders in the face of digital disruption.

Drawing upon these early academic works, this thesis extends the concept of consensing to the domain of digital transformation strategy formulation. The proposed mechanisms of consensing, namely sensing and synthesizing, build upon the fundamental ideas of shared understanding central to the term's origins.

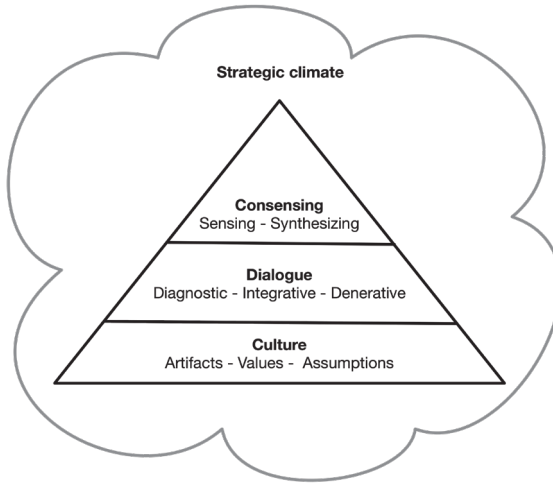


Figure 5. *The concepts and their relationship*

Figure 5 shows how consensing, dialogue, culture, and strategic climate are related. At the top, *consensing* is the culmination of *sensing* and *synthesizing*, the process of building shared understanding. Dialogue serves as a medium through which consensing occurs, with *diagnostic*, *integrative*, and *generative* representing types of dialogue. At the base, *culture* is the basis of the model, consisting of *artifacts*, *values*, and *assumptions* that influence dialogue and consensing. The outer strategic climate layer encompasses and influences these interactions, signifying the broader context within which consensing occurs. This model suggests that effective digital strategizing requires a supportive culture and climate that promotes dialogue, thus facilitating cognitive consensus-building.

6.2. FOUNDATION: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

As described in the Context chapter, organizational culture influences and plays a foundational role in shaping the content of strategy documents in the Swedish public sector. The bureaucratic and consensus-oriented culture, influenced by Weberian bureaucracy and the principles of NPM, sets the foundation for strategy formulation.

6.3. CONTEXT: STRATEGIC CLIMATE

Organizations do not chart their course in isolation. Instead, they exist within a climate of shared perceptions and attitudes toward the organization's strategic goals and direction. The *strategic climate*, a term borrowed from Bragaw and Misangyi (2022), is influenced by numerous previous decisions, experiences, understandings, and aspirations. It is integral to consensing.

Two intertwined elements comprise the strategic climate: extant shared understanding and strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). The present, existing, shared understanding embodies the collective knowledge, beliefs, and norms prevalent within the organization. This understanding, informed by historical experiences, forms the patterns within which consensing occurs, shaping how stakeholders perceive, interpret, and respond to their environment.

Simultaneously, strategic intent signifies the future-oriented aspirations and objectives that the organization strives to achieve (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). It indicates the direction or strategic climatic 'conditions' the organization wants to navigate, thus setting the agenda for the issues that require consensing. Strategic intent plays a pivotal role in dialogue, shaping the discourse, defining the borders of the adjacent possible, and guiding the actions that emerge from consensing.

Collectively, the existing shared understanding and strategic intent create the strategic climate of an organization. They set the current conditions and boundaries within which consensing unfolds. Each consensing process commences with an interpretation and negotiation of this strategic climate as stakeholders engage in dialogue to align their existing understandings and intentions with the organizational collective.

However, the strategic climate is not static; it evolves and adapts through consensing. As organizational stakeholders participate in dialogue, exploring the adjacent possible and taking actions, they are simultaneously reshaping the strategic climate, the shared understanding, and strategic intent, considering new insights, experiences, and outcomes. Thus, the strategic climate reflects the cumulative outcomes of past consensing processes, creating a recursive loop that intertwines the past, present, and future of the organization's strategy.

In sum, the strategic climate serves both as the starting conditions and the evolving patterns of consensing. It presents the conditions within which consensing transpires while also being reshaped by consensing itself. Simply put, the strategic climate interacts with consensing.

6.4. MECHANISMS OF CONSENSING

As previously shown (see Consensus chapter), organizational strategy formulation benefits from a shared understanding. Extending the notion of consensing by Abonyi (1978) and Postner (1976), consensing is grounded in the intersection of cognitive consensus (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001) and dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), consensing provides a comprehensive and flexible framework for understanding the emergence of shared understanding and its influence on collective social thinking, understanding, and action.

Consening is an iterative and reflexive process that facilitates forming a shared collective understanding while simultaneously being shaped by and shaping collective thinking and action. Importantly, consensing is not a

direct consolidation of pre-existing individual perspectives. Instead, it is an emergent process where shared understanding co-evolves, shaped by the constant interplay of individual inputs and collective thinking through dialogue and reflection.

Consensing mechanisms	Definition
Consensing	A dynamic and iterative process that establishes shared understanding through the interplay of individual inputs and collective dialogue.
Sensing	The act of perceiving, interpreting, filtering, and communicating various environmental signals.
Synthesizing	The collective integration of sensed inputs into a coherent and unified perspective.

Table 4. Definitions of the consensing mechanisms

Two primary mechanisms underpin consensing: *sensing* and *synthesizing*. *Sensing* represents the capacity to perceive, interpret, filter (Abonyi, 1983), and share signals from the internal and external environment. It forms the input side of consensing, feeding the system with diverse, nuanced perspectives and information. *Synthesizing*, conversely, represents the collective reflective processing and integration of these inputs into a coherent, shared understanding. A simplified model of consensing is illustrated in Figure 6.

Consensing is enriched by incorporating the concept of the *adjacent possible* (Kauffman, 1996). This refers to the range of practical and achievable options available to an organization based on its current state, context, and capabilities. This aligns with Mintzberg et al. (1998) “what can come into being” (p. 282), resonating with Mintzberg’s (1978) emphasis on emergent strategy. The adjacent possible encourages the organization to strive for attainable yet ambitious objectives, achievable through focused effort. In other words, strategic objectives can be achieved with dedication and hard work.

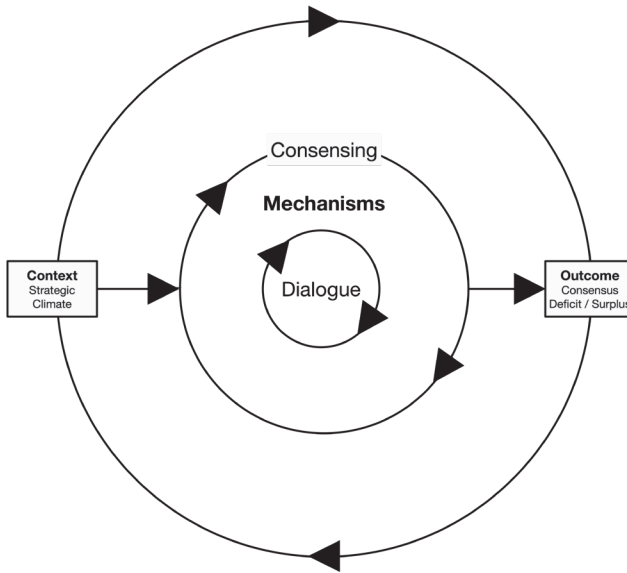


Figure 6. Simplified consensing process

Balancing is crucial in this context. Consensing balances divergent and convergent thinking, individual and collective perspectives, and the intended and realized strategy. This balancing mechanism, guided by dialogue, ensures the dynamism and responsiveness of consensing.

Finally, consensing is cyclical and iterative, punctuated by *inflection points* (Burgelman & Grove, 1996), leading to consensing outcomes embodying the shared understanding. These inflection points represent significant moments in consensing where the stakeholders commit to a choice from the adjacent possible, propelling the strategy formulation to its next state. A typical inflection point would be a sudden external environmental change, like a pandemic, or internal events, like a significant reorganization or layoffs. It can also be related to technological changes; Burgelman and Grove (1996) refer to an inflection point as “the replacement of an existing technological regime by a new one” (1996, p. 10). In the case of public sector organizations, it could also be a new political direction after an election.

To illustrate how these mechanisms could play out in practice, imagine a strategy workshop where participants discuss the organization's digital transformation strategy. Through sensing, participants might share their perspectives on organizational and citizen needs, technological trends, and external and internal pressures while actively listening to each other's views. Then, through synthesizing, they would start integrating these diverse inputs, discussing how they relate and what they imply for the organization's strategy. Gradually, a shared understanding of the key priorities and direction for digital transformation could emerge.

The example of Region Nordhaven (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024) illustrates how the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms can unfold in practice. During their digital transformation strategy formulation process, participants engaged in sensing by sharing their diverse perspectives and actively listening to each other. Then, through synthesizing, they started integrating these inputs, discussing their interrelations and implications for the strategy. Over multiple iterations, this process gradually led to a shared understanding of the key priorities and direction for digital transformation.

6.5. MECHANISMS OF DIALOGUE

As previously noted (see 3.2), dialogue is integral to consensing, providing a dynamic and responsive medium for the coevolution of shared understandings and strategic intent. Dialogue is an essential communicative practice that shapes the organization's identity, strategic action, and collective commitment.

Thus, dialogue enables open, inclusive, and reflective (Garbuio et al., 2015) communication among organizational stakeholders in consensing. This dialogue is not simply about sharing information or reaching an understanding; it is about *thinking together* (Isaacs, 1999). In other words, dialogue is *collective social thinking*. Dialogue fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas, perspectives, and insights that inform the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms of consensing.

Lane's (2020) concept of the dialogic ladder offers a valuable perspective on the different levels of dialogue that can occur within the consensing process. The ladder progresses from simple two-way communication to true or authentic dialogue, characterized by high levels of mutuality, proximity, empathy, risk, and commitment. In the context of consensing, the higher rungs of the ladder, particularly interactions based on the five principles of dialogue and true or authentic dialogue, are most relevant. These forms of dialogue involve a deeper level of engagement and a positive orientation towards communication and other participants, which are essential for the effective functioning of the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms. By striving for true or authentic dialogue, organizations can foster a more meaningful exchange of ideas, leading to a richer shared understanding and more effective strategy formulation.

Dialogue is an essential communicative practice that shapes the organization's identity, strategic action, and collective commitment. Building on the work of Jacobs and Heracleous (2005) with their notion of *diagnostic* and *generative* dialogue and adding an integrative dialogue, three intertwined mechanisms underpin dialogue, *generative*, *diagnostic*, and *integrative*, each with distinct contributions to consensing.

6.5.1. DIALOGUE MECHANISMS AND RELATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The dialogue mechanisms in the consensing framework resonate with the conversations identified by Ford and Ford (1995) in their study of organizational change. They propose four types of conversations: (1) initiative conversations that start change, (2) conversations for understanding that generate awareness and understanding, (3) conversations for performance that generate action, and (4) conversations for closure that provide completion. In the context of consensing, generative dialogue aligns with initiative conversations, as it stimulates the exploration of new ideas and possibilities. Diagnostic dialogue parallels conversations for understand-

ing, as it helps to surface existing perceptions and identify gaps in shared understanding. Integrative dialogue encompasses both conversations for performance and closure, as it facilitates the negotiation of differences, the construction of shared meaning, and the translation of understanding into strategic action.

The dialogue mechanisms in the consensing framework also align with the types of dialogues identified by Bourgoin et al. (2018) in their study of strategy-making. They propose three types of dialogues: (1) political dialogue that builds coalitions and legitimacy, (2) strategic dialogue that engages resources and capabilities, and (3) tactical dialogue that focuses on implementation and execution. In the context of consensing, generative dialogue serves a similar function to political dialogue, as it helps to surface and align diverse stakeholder interests and perspectives. Diagnostic dialogue parallels strategic dialogue, which involves assessing the organization's current position and identifying strategic issues and opportunities. Integrative dialogue aligns with tactical dialogue, focusing on translating shared understanding into concrete strategic actions and initiatives.

By aligning the dialogue mechanisms in the consensing framework with the work of Ford and Ford (1995) and Bourgoin et al. (2018), we can gain a more nuanced understanding of their nature and functions. This theoretical integration highlights the role of different types of conversations and dialogues in shaping the consensing process. It underscores the importance of moving beyond information sharing to higher levels of meaning-making and co-creation to build cognitive consensus.

6.5.2. DIAGNOSTIC, GENERATIVE, AND INTEGRATIVE DIALOGUE

The generative dialogue mechanism stimulates the exploration of diverse viewpoints and the co-creation of new ideas, indirectly feeding into the synthesizing aspect of consensing via integrative dialogue. As discussed by

Norling, Crusoe et al. (2024), strategic dialogue in the Swedish public sector involves various forms (e.g., meetings, workshops, digital platforms), forums (e.g., formal and informal settings), and actors (e.g., top management, managers, specialists). These diverse dialogue configurations enable organizations to gather a wide range of perspectives and insights, enriching the sensing process. Encouraging generative dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005) fosters a rich input of perspectives and possibilities, enabling the collective to probe the complexity of strategic issues and the breadth of the adjacent possible.

The diagnostic dialogue mechanism helps identify conflicts, gaps, and inconsistencies in shared understanding, providing critical input for the sensing aspect of consensing. The diagnostic dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005) allows for the collective assessment of shared understanding, facilitating the recognition and negotiation of differences and helping to articulate areas of consensus deficit or surplus.

The integrative dialogue mechanism, in turn, facilitates the negotiation of differences and the construction of shared understanding. As observed in the example of Region Nordhagen (2024) dialogue enables the negotiation of differences and the construction of shared meaning. Through iterative workshops and discussions, stakeholders engage in consensing, gradually aligning their perspectives and building a shared understanding of the strategic direction. This mechanism underscores the transformational aspect of dialogue, as differing perspectives are not merely juxtaposed but synthesized into a new, shared understanding. In other words, integrative dialogue transcends the diagnostic and generative dialogue mechanism and feeds into the synthesizing mechanism of consensing. This is similar to Kent and Theunissen's (2016) notion of dialogue as inherently regenerative. In this way, integrative dialogue directly contributes to the emergence of cognitive consensus and the resolution of consensus debt.

Dialogue mechanisms	Definition
Generative	The exploration of diverse viewpoints and co-creation of ideas, enriching the sensing aspect of consensing.
Diagnostic	The identification of conflicts and gaps in shared understanding, providing critical input for sensing, and highlighting consensus discrepancies.
Integrative	The facilitation of differences, transforming varied perspectives into a unified shared understanding.

Table 5. Definitions of the dialogue mechanisms

Diagnostic dialogue, which helps identify conflicts, gaps, and inconsistencies in shared understanding, is crucial in surfacing and addressing problems or deviations from the intended strategy. By engaging in diagnostic dialogue, organizations can identify issues that hinder the realization of their strategic objectives and take corrective actions. On the other hand, generative dialogue stimulates the exploration of diverse viewpoints and the co-creation of new ideas, thereby facilitating the identification and pursuit of new opportunities. Generative dialogue enables organizations to tap into the collective creativity of their stakeholders and uncover potential avenues for innovation.

The interplay between diagnostic and generative dialogue facilitates a balanced approach to strategizing, ensuring that organizations address current challenges and proactively seek new possibilities. This balance is essential for maintaining strategic alignment while fostering adaptability and resilience in the face of change. By engaging in diagnostic and generative dialogue, organizations can comprehensively understand their strategic landscape and make informed decisions that contribute to long-term success.

To recapitulate, dialogue is central to consensing and actively shapes its dynamics and outcomes; it serves as a constitutive process that co-creates the organization's strategic direction and shared collective understanding,

reinforcing the adaptive exploration of the adjacent possible and aligning the intended and realized aspects of strategy. In other words, dialogue is *collective social thinking*.

6.6. THE MECHANISMS ILLUSTRATED

The illustration depicts the *consensing* mechanisms and their relationships. *Consensing* involves two key processes: *sensing* and *synthesizing*. *Sensing* involves *diagnostic dialogue* that helps to understand the present situation or problems. On the other hand, *synthesizing* involves *generative dialogue* that helps to create new solutions or strategies. Integrative *dialogue* acts as a bridge between *sensing* and *synthesizing*, facilitating a comprehensive understanding and innovative solutions. This model emphasizes that the process of *consensing* in strategic formulation requires a flow between understanding the current state (*diagnostic*), integrating diverse insights (*integrative*), and creating new strategic directions (*generative*).

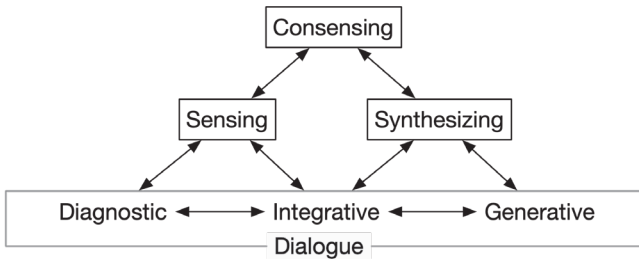


Figure 7. The mechanisms and their relationships

6.7. THE STRATEGIC DIALOGUE MODEL: ACTORS, FORMS, AND FORUMS

Strategizing within the public sector requires a nuanced understanding of dialogue. To facilitate this understanding, Norling, Crusoe et al. (2024) introduced the strategic dialogue model, a conceptual model comprising

three critical dimensions: *actors*, *forms*, and *forums*. The model serves as an analytical lens and has practical applications. It can guide organizations in ensuring the effectiveness of dialogue. The interplay between forms, forums, and actors is dynamic, with each dimension continually influencing and being influenced by the others. This reciprocal relationship is central to understanding and facilitating effective dialogue in strategizing.

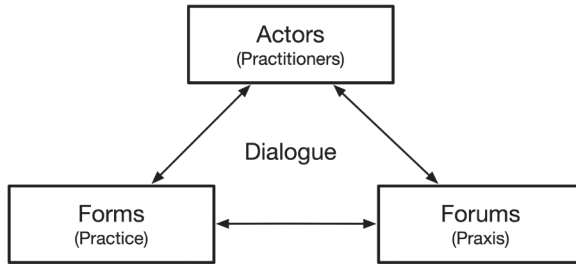


Figure 8. *The strategic dialogue model (Norling, Crusoe et al., 2024)*

Actors are the stakeholders engaged in dialogues, defining the ‘who’. Stakeholders bring different perspectives and stakes, enrich the dialogue with their multitude of views, and introduce complexity. The power dynamics and expertise among stakeholders, from top management to external consultants, are critical for balanced and informed decision-making because they affect the formulation of strategies.

Forms represent the various mediums and modes of communication employed in dialogues, defining the ‘how’. Forms encompass traditional written records, providing clarity and longevity, real-time dialogues facilitating instant feedback, and digital platforms allowing synchronous and asynchronous dialogue across time and space. The choice of form is instrumental in shaping the dialogue’s transparency, clarity, and effectiveness, with implications for the outcome of the dialogue.

Forums are physical or virtual spaces that embody the ‘where’ of dialogues. In other words, forums are contextual spaces that influence dialogue form and stakeholder engagement, from boardrooms that lend formal structure

to casual settings that may encourage transparency and trust to digital platforms that ensure inclusion for dispersed stakeholders.

6.8. CONSENSING AS A BALANCING MECHANISM

Understanding consensing involves appreciating its role as a balancing mechanism between sensing and synthesizing. This balance is not merely a binary state but a fluid, dynamic continuum of interactions that fluctuates according to the situational context, thus making it crucial for effective strategizing. The consensing mechanism of sensing and synthesizing relies on the dialogue for collective thinking, thereby enabling the consensing mechanisms to co-create meaning, a collective understanding, i.e., shared understanding. In other words, *dialogue is thinking together* (Isaacs, 1999), and *consensing is understanding together*.

The sensing mechanism of consensing reflects the collective effort of the organization to perceive and understand the complexities of its strategic context and climate, whether it is internal dynamics or external influences. It is an exploratory phase, invoking dialogue to create the conditions for shared understanding and insights about the current situation and potential, helping the organization identify the adjacent possible.

In contrast, *the synthesizing mechanism* of consensing embodies the collective effort to weave the sensed signals into a shared understanding, resulting in actionable insights to inform strategy formulation. Synthesizing signifies a movement from shared understanding to shared action, essentially shaping the adjacent possible into a course of action the organization can commit to. Consensing is an adaptive balancing mechanism that continually oscillates between sensing and synthesizing. It ensures that an organization neither gets lost in the infiniteness of the sensed possibilities nor rushes into actions without sufficient shared understanding.

Moreover, this balancing act is not a one-time event but a cyclical process that repeats itself considering new insights or changed circumstances. Such dynamic fluidity equips the organization with the agility and resilience to adapt to complex, uncertain contexts and take strategic actions that resonate with their shared understanding and intent by framing consensing as a balancing mechanism using sensing and synthesizing, thereby illuminating its role in shaping the trajectory of strategy formulation in organizations.

6.9. THE CENTRALITY OF COGNITIVE CONFLICT IN CONSENSING

Innes' work on consensus-building (Innes, 1996, 2004; Innes & Booher, 1999a) provides critical insights into the role of conflict within consensus-building. From her perspective, conflict is not an obstruction but an essential part of the consensus-building journey. Through navigating conflict, shared understanding emerges, and consensus is built. Within consensing, cognitive conflict plays a similar role. As integral to dialogue, cognitive conflict allows for exploring and negotiating diverse perspectives and insights, feeding into the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms of consensing. It exposes gaps in shared understanding, surfaces underlying disagreements and assumptions, and invites collective exploration and negotiation of the adjacent possible (Kauffman, 1996).

Contrary to everyday experiences from meetings where consensus is often misunderstood as everyone having the same opinion, true consensus, as put forth by Innes, is about reaching shared understanding through the navigation of cognitive conflict. It is the product of a constructive process where differences are surfaced, understood, and integrated into a shared perspective that everyone can support. This happened in Region Nordhøven (2024), where the organization actively encouraged diverse perspectives and constructive disagreement during the strategy formulation, leading to a more robust strategy.

As previously shown (see Consensus chapter), organizational strategy formulation benefits from a shared understanding. Building shared understanding, i.e., consensing, is a new construct encapsulating the dynamic process. Grounded in the intersection of cognitive consensus (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001) building and dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), consensing provides a comprehensive and flexible framework for understanding the emergence of shared understanding and its influence on collective social thinking, understanding, and action.

Innes' work aligns with scholars such as Amason (1996) and Liedtka (2000), who emphasize the importance of cognitive conflict in decision-making. Cognitive conflict, which refers to task-oriented disagreements, can enhance decision quality by fostering the exchange of diverse perspectives and preventing premature convergence (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). This constructive conflict resonates with dialectical inquiry (Mason, 1969; Schweiger et al., 1989), which encourages exploring opposing views to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues.

Within the consensing framework, cognitive conflict plays a similar role. As an integral part of dialogue, it allows for exploring and negotiating diverse perspectives and insights, feeding into the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms. It surfaces gaps in shared understanding, exposes underlying assumptions, and invites a collective exploration of the adjacent possible (Kauffman, 1996).

6.10. CONSENSING AND THE ADJACENT POSSIBLE

To effectively navigate the complexities of the environment (Collis, 2019), a mechanism capable of comprehending intricate nuances and revealing latent opportunities is necessary. This is where the concept of consensing becomes pivotal, as it aids in traversing the delicate interplay between present realities and the myriad of possibilities, commonly known as the *adjacent possible* (Kauffman, 1996). In the organizational realm, the ad-

adjacent possible represents the range of viable options and opportunities available to an organization that is challenging to discern and implement. It encapsulates the realm of 'next steps' that could be feasible given current knowledge, resources, and capabilities. Essentially, it is a vision of the 'potential future' close enough to be achievable yet far enough to require effort and innovation.

Consensing, with its dual mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, engages with the adjacent possible in a balancing act. First, by sensing, the stakeholders collectively map the contours of the adjacent possible, capturing the nuanced understanding of their strategic climate and potential opportunities. Subsequently, synthesizing processes this sensory information, integrating diverse insights to construct a shared understanding and outline the most viable paths forward.

This dialogue-driven, iterative interplay between sensing and synthesizing, anchored by the concept of the adjacent possible, enables the creation of a meaningful shared understanding. Moreover, it fosters the collective capacity to detect the most promising directions, thereby taking strategic actions that are firmly grounded in the shared understanding but agile enough to adapt to emerging possibilities. Therefore, in engaging with the adjacent possible, consensing serves as a dynamic compass, helping organizations navigate the complexity of strategy formulation by balancing reflective sensing with proactive synthesizing.

6.11. BALANCING AND INTEGRATING INTENDED AND REALIZED STRATEGY

The dynamic and multifaceted nature of contemporary strategic environments necessitates an approach that balances and integrates realized and intended strategy. This dynamic integration relates to Burgelman and Grove's (1996) concept of strategic dissonance, which arises from the misalignment between an organization's strategic intent and its actual

initiatives. Consensing, with its mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, provides a valuable means to achieve balance and, thus, reduce strategic dissonance. Realized strategy emerges from the actions and decisions within the organization. On the other hand, intended strategy is preconceived, intended, and pursued consciously, often in response to specific objectives or challenges. In a complex and rapidly evolving world, organizations must be adept at managing these two facets of strategy, maintaining a dynamic balance between the realized and the intended. Consensing facilitates this balance.

The sensing mechanism engages in dialogue to identify patterns, trends, and environmental shifts, contributing to strategy formulation. Sensing allows organizations to understand and interpret their context, making sense of complex information, filtering (Abonyi, 1983) signals from noise, and leading to insights that shape emergent strategic direction. *The synthesizing mechanism* transforms these insights into an actionable and shared understanding. The organization forms its intended strategy by synthesizing and deciding on specific actions and initiatives aligned with the collective insights gathered through sensing. Synthesizing balances the emergent insights from sensing with the need for purposeful action, forming a planned strategic response to the identified opportunities and challenges.

The balancing act between diagnostic and generative dialogue is particularly relevant for integrating intended and realized strategies. *Diagnostic dialogue* helps identify discrepancies between the intended strategy and the actual implementation, allowing organizations to course-correct and align their actions with their strategic objectives. *Generative dialogue* enables organizations to identify emergent strategies and opportunities that may not have been part of the original plan but hold potential for value creation. By balancing these two forms of dialogue, organizations can ensure a dynamic alignment between their intended and realized strategies, remaining responsive to challenges and opportunities in their environment.

The balancing role of diagnostic and generative dialogue in strategizing finds support in the literature. Jacobs and Heracleous (2005) discuss how different forms of reflective dialogue contribute to identifying problems and opportunities, enabling strategic innovation. Similarly, Liedtka and Rosenblum (1996) argue that shaping conversations, akin to diagnostic and generative dialogue, helps organizations balance the need to address current challenges while exploring new possibilities. Furthermore, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) illustrate how middle managers engage in different forms of discourse, resembling diagnostic and generative dialogue, to make sense of strategic issues and drive change.

6.12. CONSENSING AND TEMPORALITY: BALANCING SPEED AND DEPTH

Temporal dimensions play a central role in consensing, interweaving with the rhythm and pace of strategizing, informed by Eisenhardt's (1989) conceptualization, and shaping the co-evolution of shared understanding and strategic intent in organizations.

In consensing, decision timing and rhythm refer to the optimal moment and pace when shared understanding reaches a point that allows purposive cooperation between stakeholders, i.e., collective social action (Tana et al., 2022). This is influenced by many factors, including the nature of the decision (incremental vs. fundamental) (Etzioni, 1967, 1986), the degree of consensing outcomes, and the organization's context. However, there is no absolute 'right' moment to reach a consensus, as the optimal timing will always depend on the specific context and dynamics of consensing.

On the one hand, decision speed has been historically favored, particularly in fast-paced industries where organizations need to adapt quickly to changes (Eisenhardt, 1989b), which is positively associated with decision quality (Shepherd et al., 2021). This speed can give organizations advantages, such as responding quickly to crises. On the other hand, slow-

er decision-making allows for more thorough sensing and synthesizing, which can result in more widespread shared understanding, thus affecting strategy execution.

The consensing rhythm refers to the pace at which consensing unfolds, influenced by the complexity and urgency of the action, the diversity of inputs, and the degree of conflict and alignment among participants. It is not a uniform beat but can oscillate between fast and slow rhythms, similar to music, with a dynamic interplay between different tempos. The consensing rhythms oscillation between fast and slow is similar to Andersen's (2015) notion of interactive strategy-making, with its mechanisms of slow forward-looking centralized reasoning and fast decentralized actions. Dialogue is the basis for consensing and interactive strategy-making that "collect current experiences from fast operational responses and ties them to the slow forward-looking strategic thinking process through open and interactive discussions." (Andersen, 2015, p. 79). The intersection between the adjacent possible and temporality adds another layer of complexity to consensing. As shared understanding evolves and expands, new possibilities emerge, cultivating a dynamic landscape of strategic options. Therefore, the rhythm of sensing and synthesizing influences the pace at which the organization navigates it is adjacent possible.

6.13. CONSENSING AND TEMPORALITY: COMPLEXITIES AND TENSIONS

The balancing act between the speed of decision-making and consensing is delicate and lies at the core of many organizational challenges. Speed and consensing can often seem to be at odds with each other. The tension between these two concepts brings to light several complexities.

- *Time pressure and quality of strategy.* Rapid decision-making can be critical in many situations, especially in volatile and uncertain environments. Organizations often face time pressure and risk losing opportunities if decisions are not made swiftly. However, a

speedy strategy formulation can risk being shallow or poorly considered, especially if it bypasses consensing. Consensing allows for a thorough exploration and understanding of the problem, enabling improved strategy quality.

- *Inclusivity vs. efficiency.* Consensing is an inclusive process that values diverse perspectives in building a shared understanding. It can lead to higher commitment, better implementation, and greater acceptance. However, this process is often time-consuming. A fast process might prioritize efficiency over inclusivity, leading to less effective implementation if individuals do not feel their perspectives were considered.
- *The complexity of the problem.* The balance between speed and consensing also depends on the complexity of the problem. Simple problems with clear choices might not require extensive consensing and can be solved rapidly. However, complex problems, such as those involving high stakes and uncertainty, can benefit from the thorough exploration and integration of diverse perspectives that consensing allows.
- *Temporal trade-offs.* Investing time in consensing upfront may slow down strategy formulation but could speed up implementation, as the strategy has broad support, and everyone understands the reasoning behind it. Conversely, formulating a strategy quickly may speed things up in the short term. Still, it may slow down implementation, as more time is needed post-formulation to explain the strategy and get buy-in and commitment.

The tension between speed and consensing presents a paradox that organizations must manage. It requires a nuanced understanding of the decision context and the ability to flexibly adapt the decision-making process to match the situation's needs. It is about finding the right balance and cultivating a dynamic capability to shift along this spectrum as needed.

6.14. SUMMARY OF CONSENSING

The chapter discusses the concept of *consensing*, which explains the dynamics of building shared understanding for collective action in organizational strategy formulation. Consensing is an iterative and reflexive process based on cognitive consensus and dialogue, aiming to surpass the mere consolidation of individual perspectives.

The chapter explores the two primary mechanisms of consensing: *sensing*, which involves perceiving, filtering, and interpreting signals, and *synthesizing*, which integrates these inputs into a shared understanding. Consensing is an emergent process shaped by individual inputs, dialogue, and collective reflection. The concept of the adjacent possible is introduced, symbolizing the range of immediate and feasible strategic possibilities for an organization and providing a flexible horizon for strategy formulation.

The role of *dialogue* is emphasized, cultivating a dynamic exchange of ideas through its generative, diagnostic, and integrative mechanisms. The importance of cognitive conflict is highlighted, providing a platform for different ideas to be considered and integrated, facilitating critical thinking, and enhancing strategy quality.

Balancing is essential in consensing and facilitating equilibrium between divergent and convergent thinking, individual and collective perspectives, and realized and intended strategy. The strategic climate, comprising existing shared understanding and strategic intent, sets the conditions within which consensing unfolds and evolves.

This chapter focused on finding a balance between sensing and synthesizing in consensing. This balance ensures a smooth and dynamic continuum of interactions. Consensing is a compass that helps organizations navigate complexity, enabling *alignment* between realized and intended strategy.

The chapter explored the temporal dimensions of consensing, highlighting the importance of balancing speed with thoroughness. It discussed the tension between decision-making speed and consensing, along with the trade-offs and complexities involved, such as time pressure, inclusivity versus efficiency, complexity of the problem, and temporal trade-offs. The next chapter will explore the outcomes of consensing.

CHAPTER 7

OUTCOMES OF CONSENSING

*“Reputation is not an empty thing. But it proceeds from reality
and not from what men think.”*

MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS, BOOK VI, 30

Consensing, the process of building shared understanding and commitment through dialogue, is crucial for successful digital transformation strategy formulation and implementation. However, achieving optimal consensus is a delicate balance, and organizations must navigate the challenges of *consensus deficit*, *surplus*, and *debt*.

A *consensus deficit* occurs when a lack of shared understanding hinders progress, while a *consensus surplus* arises when an overemphasis on dialogue stifles action. *Consensus debt*, on the other hand, happens when organizations proceed with strategies based on superficial consensus, leading to misalignment and resistance later on.

In the high-stakes context of digital transformation, understanding and managing consensing outcomes is critical for success. This chapter explores the nuances of *consensus deficit*, *surplus*, and *debt*, presenting a framework and strategies for achieving optimal consensus. Through two fictive tales set in the public sector illustrate the challenges and opportunities of navigating the consensing process in digital transformation initiatives.

7.1. THE CONSENSUS COMPASS: A TALE OF NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL DEPTHS (FICTIONAL)

In Sjöberga, Saga's leadership in developing a citizen engagement app was characterized by her commitment to inclusivity and diversity. She initiated the project by hosting a series of conversational rounds, encouraging the cross-pollination of ideas among team members who rotated between tables to discuss various challenge aspects. As the project progressed, Saga utilized visual mapping to align varying perspectives into a unified strategy, recognizing both consensus and discord.

Encountering hesitation from some groups, Saga prompted constructive challenges to prevailing thoughts, invigorating the dialogue. Conversely, to manage the plethora of ideas, she introduced structured criteria to streamline proposal prioritization. Saga vigilantly balanced the scales of consensus, continually adapting her approach to marry open-ended exploration with decisive action. This resulted in a robust app design that encapsulated the team's varied insights while ensuring strategic coherence. Ultimately, her team's work significantly bolstered the municipality's capacity for inclusive strategizing and consensing.

7.2. THE CONSENSUS WHIRLPOOL: A TALE OF DIGITAL STAGNATION (FICTIONAL)

In Gammelvikén, Axel's team developed an interdepartmental collaboration platform without engaging stakeholders upfront or incorporating diverse perspectives, which led to a lack of shared understanding. Despite Axel hosting open meetings, their structured nature discouraged the constructive conflict and exploration of dissenting views, leading to a false consensus. As the misalignment within the team grew, Axel attempted to correct course with interactive workshops that fostered a positive atmosphere but failed to rectify the fundamental misunderstanding.

The platform's launch was met with low adoption and commitment from key groups, a clear sign of the team's built-up consensus debt from the flawed strategy process. Realizing the extent of their oversight, Axel's team shifted their approach to embrace inclusive strategizing and consensing in decision-making routines. They began by mapping the stakeholder landscape and visually capturing diverse viewpoints during strategy discussions, which improved subsequent initiatives. However, this cultural shift was unable to fully counteract the enduring impact of the initial consensus challenges that marked the collaboration platform's rollout. This experience highlighted the critical importance of proactive, inclusive consensing from the beginning to build a genuine shared understanding and commitment.

7.3. THE KEY LESSONS OF THE TALES

These cautionary tales vividly illustrate both the potential pitfalls of neglecting inclusive consensing practices and the substantial benefits of proactively nurturing shared understanding through robust dialogue. While fictitious, they reflect real-world challenges organizations often face when formulating strategies, especially in the context of complex digital transformations. The lessons distilled from Saga's and Axel's experiences provide a compelling rationale for closely examining and optimizing consensing outcomes, which this chapter will explore in depth.

The two tales demonstrate the potential benefits of effective consensing practices and the pitfalls of neglecting inclusive strategizing during digital transformation initiatives. By analyzing these stories through the lens of the consensing guidelines, we can extract valuable lessons.

7.3.1. THE TALE OF NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL DEPTHS (FICTIONAL)

Saga exemplified the guidelines by assessing existing processes, engaging diverse stakeholders, fostering open dialogue, employing specific techniques, monitoring consensus outcomes, and adapting iteratively. Key Lessons:

- Engage diverse stakeholders, citizens, staff, officials, and partners, like Saga did, to ensure multiple perspectives.
- Create psychologically safe dialogue using techniques like world café conversational rounds that allow free exchange of ideas.
- Use methods like dialogue mapping to visually synthesize diverse viewpoints and identify areas of alignment and conflict.
- Introduce techniques like devil's advocacy to challenge assumptions when consensus deficits emerge and structured decision criteria during surplus situations.
- Continuously monitor consensus states using metrics like surplus, deficit, and debt. Iterate by adjusting facilitation approaches accordingly.

The implications are to leverage a varied toolkit of inclusive dialogue methods, synthesize perspectives, consciously maintain consensus balance through dynamic facilitation, and foster a mindset of continuous consensus monitoring and adaptation.

7.3.2. THE TALE OF THE CONSENSUS WHIRLPOOL (FICTIONAL)

In contrast, Axel neglected key guidelines, leading to accumulated consensus debt that undermined his initiative. Key Lessons:

- Conduct initial assessments and engage diverse stakeholders to build shared understanding from the start, which Axel failed to do.

- Structured dialogues that discourage exploration and conflict, like Axel's meetings, breed false consensus and suppressed dissent.
- Disconnected remedies like Axel's positive workshops cannot fully resolve underlying consensus deficits from flawed formulation processes.
- Manifest consensus debt, as experienced by Axel - lack of strategic alignment, resistance, compromised the implementation.
- Systematically integrate techniques like stakeholder mapping, dialogue mapping, and consensus monitoring to escape entrenched consensus whirlpools.

The implications are to assess consensing readiness upfront thoroughly, proactively engage diverse voices, create open yet structured dialogue spaces using techniques like appreciative inquiry, vigilantly monitor consensus states, and systematically apply methods to build shared understanding and commitment.

By internalizing these tangible lessons, organizations can effectively implement the principles and techniques for enhancing consensing in strategy formulation. The tales vividly illustrate the transformative impact of inclusive strategizing when done right, and the risks of neglecting consensing best practices.

7.4. CONSENSUS DEFICIT, SURPLUS, AND DEBT

Consening leads to a spectrum of possible outcomes, which I have classified into *consensus deficit*, *surplus*, and *debt*. Adding further depth to this spectrum are the concepts of *consensus optima* and *consensus threshold*, two critical reference points that help assess and steer consensing.

A *consensus deficit* emerges when the urgency for action surpasses the development of shared understanding. This scenario typically arises when strategy formulation is expedited or when the phase of dialogue and de-

liberation is insufficient. In such circumstances, actions may not entirely reflect the shared understanding, triggering potential inconsistencies or misconceptions within the organization.

Contrastingly, a *consensus surplus* is a situation where shared understanding exceeds taking collective action. This discrepancy may result in stagnation or inertia (Kelly & Amburgey, 1991), where the organization becomes trapped in a cycle of dialogue and reflection, seldom transitioning to action. The agility and responsiveness of the organization may be negatively impacted by the disparity between its capacity to act and the rate at which a shared understanding is developed and disseminated.

The concept of *consensus debt* encapsulates the temporal aspect of consensing. It refers to instances where an organization acts based on a presumed consensus. Although this approach facilitates prompt decision-making, it also accumulates a debt that must be repaid later through dialogue and reflection or, as often is the case, through massive communication initiatives. The reason for this is the need to evolve a shared understanding for those who lack understanding due to not being involved in the dialogue or not being informed about the strategy until it was time to implement it. The outcomes are illustrated in Figure 9.

7.5. DIFFERENT FORMS OF DEBT IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Consensus debt draws inspiration from the general idea of debt, specifically technical debt (Kruchten et al., 2012). It refers to the potential costs that an organization may incur in the future due to previous software development practices that were expedient but not optimal. This concept has been extended to technology and digital debt, reflecting the broader impact of past IT decisions on an organization's current and future strategic options. The different forms of debt in digital transformation are briefly described below.

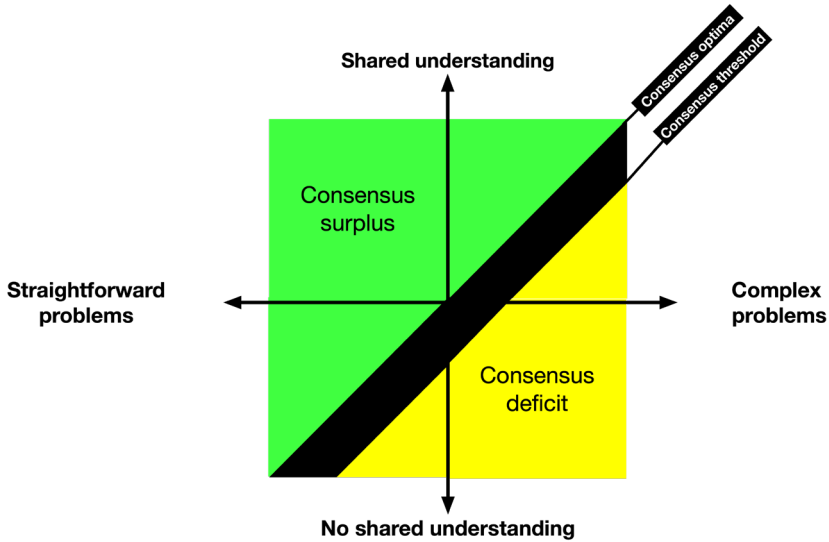


Figure 9. Consensus outcomes: deficit, surplus, optima and threshold

Technical debt was introduced by Cunningham (1993) to describe the adverse effects of poor coding practices in software development. He compared technical debt to financial debt, since it accumulates interest and must eventually be repaid through refactoring, which is rewriting the code. Put another way, technical debt refers to the costs incurred when a software project takes shortcuts in its development, such as not thoroughly testing or documenting code, which can lead to increased maintenance and support costs in the future (Rios et al., 2018).

Technology debt is a term similar to technical debt, but is more focused on technology, such as investing too much in outdated technology that risks becoming obsolete. It refers to the accumulated obligations resulting from past IT decisions (Magnusson & Bygstad, 2014).

Digital debt is the accumulation of technical and informational obligations that arise from maintaining and developing an organization's digital platform and infrastructure (Rolland et al., 2018). Due to outdated or inadequate digital infrastructure, digital debt limits an organization's strategic and behavioral options.

All types of debt, whether *technical*, *technological*, or *digital*, can cause inertia and path dependencies. The general idea behind all these forms of debt is that previous decisions create a ‘debt’ that the organization must manage, similar to financial debt. These debts carry an ‘interest cost’, manifested as a decrease in the flexibility of future options. Each decision can increase or decrease this debt, influencing the organization's ability to adapt and evolve its digital infrastructure and services. Debt can make it difficult for an organization to maintain and improve its digital services, potentially hindering its ability to take advantage of new digital options.

The broader debt concept is essential to understand when managing digital platforms in relation to an organization's work processes and infrastructure. These various forms of debt can affect an organization's ability to modernize and innovate since they involve trade-offs between immediate operational needs and long-term strategic renewal. Managing these debts (Magnusson & Bygstad, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2020; Rolland et al., 2018) is crucial for organizations to remain relevant and adaptive in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

7.6. CONSENSUS DEBT

Just as technical, technology, and digital debts signify the long-term consequences of past software and digital infrastructure decisions, *consensus debt* encapsulates the deferred organizational cost of avoiding necessary consensus-building activities. It represents the accumulation of unresolved issues, bypassed discussions, and unaddressed disagreements within an organization. When strategic decisions are made without achieving a broad and informed agreement, it may expedite action in the short term but at the expense of long-term alignment and commitment. Like other forms of debt, consensus debt creates a burden that, if not managed, reduces organizational agility and the ability to execute cohesive and effective strategies. The notion of consensus debt underscores the importance of consensing based on deliberative dialogues and the careful management of trade-offs

between the immediacy of decision-making and the foundational need for stakeholder alignment using shared understanding to ensure successful strategy execution.

Consensus debt captures the temporal dimension of consensing. It encapsulates the occasions when organizations act based on a *false* (Pope, 2013) or *presumed consensus*, where shared assumptions are not explicitly articulated (See Consensus Chapter for a thorough explanation). While an imagined consensus, that is, false or presumed consensus, allows rapid strategy formulation, it can also accumulate a ‘debt’ that needs to be ‘repaid’, since shared understanding was not confirmed to exist. This situation requires resolving and replacing the imagined, implicit shared understanding with an explicit shared understanding. Consensus debt can manifest itself in several ways. For example, stakeholders may begin to pursue individual agendas rather than working toward shared goals, or decision-making may become slower and more difficult due to disagreements and lack of alignment. Furthermore, stakeholders may disengage from the organization's strategic intent, resulting in a lack of commitment to the strategy and its non-implementation.

A consensus deficit, for example, could occur in a scenario where a public sector organization's top management decides to implement a new citizen engagement platform without sufficient dialogue with frontline staff. As a result, there might be a lack of shared understanding about the platform's purpose and functionalities, potentially leading to resistance and suboptimal usage.

Conversely, a hypothetical example of consensus surplus could be a municipality's smart city initiative where extensive dialogue has led to strong alignment on the vision but a reluctance to commit to specific actions. In such a case, the surplus of consensus without action could lead to stagnation and frustration. The Nordhaven example (Norling et al., 2024) highlights the potential challenges of reaching a consensus. Despite recognizing consensus as crucial for inclusive decision-making and robust

implementation, Nordhaven had to navigate the ambiguities inherent in strategy formulation. This involved carefully managing the dialogue to align diverse viewpoints and avoid a consensus deficit, where insufficient shared understanding could lead to resistance or misinterpretation. In the context of strategizing, consensus debt can arise when an organization's stakeholders lose shared understanding and commitment to its strategic intent. This can occur for various reasons, such as external or internal environmental changes or stakeholder conflicts. When consensus debt accrues, the organization may experience increased costs for decision-making and strategy implementation.

The *consensus optima* represents the most desirable consensing outcome. At this point, there is just enough consensus, a *minimum viable consensus*, to direct meaningful collective action, but not so much that it impedes adaptability or innovation. Achieving this optimal state ensures that the strategy formulation is reflective, inclusive, and aligned with the organization's shared understanding and intent.

On the contrary, the *consensus threshold* is the minimum viable consensus needed for collective action. Below this threshold, organizations face the risk of a *consensus deficit*, where shared understanding needs to be improved to support the strategy. Above the threshold, especially if it overshoots the *consensus optima*, there is a risk of entering a consensus surplus where dialogue overwhelms action.

Balancing these consensing outcomes and understanding their implications form the crux of effective strategy formulation. It highlights the necessity of an adaptive equilibrium between sensing and synthesizing and intended and realized strategy. By conceptualizing and monitoring these critical consensing states, organizations can better navigate the nuanced terrain of consensing, ensuring that their strategy formulation is inclusive.

7.7. CONSENSUS SURPLUS AND DEFICIT: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING THE IMBALANCES IN CONSENSING

The exploration of consensing inevitably leads us to confront the twin challenges of consensus surplus and deficit. These imbalances manifest themselves as excessive understanding or a persistent lack thereof, distorting the strategy formulation process. This section delves into practices for identifying and mitigating these imbalances.

7.7.1. CONSENSUS SURPLUS: RECOGNIZING AND REDUCING OVEREMPHASIS ON CONSENSUS

A consensus surplus, characterized by excessive consensus, often obscures the complexity of dialogues and actions. Here is how to identify a consensus surplus:

- *Groupthink dynamics.* Signs of surplus may emerge when a conformity dynamic takes hold, marked by a premature consensus, discouragement, or dismissal of dissenting voices, and a lack of robust exploration of diverse viewpoints (Janis, 1971, Norling, Lindroth et al., 2024).
- *Uniformity of opinions.* A surplus might be at play if the organization rapidly formulates a strategy without substantial discussion or when dialogues revolve around repetitious opinions without introducing fresh perspectives (Sunstein, 2002).
- *Expedited strategy formulation.* Rapid strategy formulation, lacking comprehensive exploration and discussion of alternative points of view, might signal a consensus surplus, leading to potential oversights and underexplored opportunities (Eisenhardt, 1989b; Norling 2024).

7.7.2. MITIGATING A CONSENSUS SURPLUS

Creating an environment that encourages diverse opinions and constructive dissent through cognitive conflict is vital to mitigate the risks associated with too much consensus in strategy formulation. This section outlines ways to do that, including actively facilitating dialogue where various perspectives are valued, employing techniques to stimulate debate, decelerating the decision-making process to allow time for thorough exploration, and engaging in continuous reflection on the process and the outcome. These practices target a *minimum viable consensus* or *consensus optima*, ensuring sufficient agreement for commitment and implementation while upholding the value of diverse thought and avoiding groupthink (Janis, 1971).

- *Promote diverse opinions.* Actively foster dialogue potential (Kent & Lane, 2021), creating an environment where diverse perspectives are invited and valued, even if they challenge the prevailing consensus.
- *Engage in constructive dissent.* Employ techniques such as the *devil's advocate* (Schwenk, 1984; Schwenk & Cosier, 1993), *dialectical inquiry* (Priem et al., 1995; Schweiger & Finger, 1984), *assumptive analysis* (Mitroff et al., 1979), or *strategic decision analysis* (H. Thomas, 1984) to introduce counterpoints to the prevailing consensus, stimulating debate and facilitating a more comprehensive exploration of options.
- *Encourage deliberate pacing.* Accelerate decision-making while ensuring adequate dialogue, exploration, and reflection time (Eisenhardt, 1989b). A slow strategy formulation can potentially contribute to a consensus surplus. On the contrary, an expedient strategy formulation may lead to a consensus debt.
- *Prioritize continuous reflection.* Engage in reflective practice, using dialogue on both the process and the outcome, allowing the recognition and rectification of consensus surplus situations.

Striving for a *minimum viable consensus* or *consensus optima* ensures sufficient agreement for robust commitment and implementation while upholding the value of diverse thought and circumventing groupthink.

7.8. CONSENSUS DEFICIT: DETECTING AND ADDRESSING LACK OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING

In contrast, a consensus deficit arises when a persistent lack of shared understanding obstructs the progress and efficacy of strategy formulation. Here is how to detect and alleviate a consensus deficit.

- *Engagement shortfall.* Low participation or engagement from stakeholders during dialogue might signal a consensus deficit, reflecting a sentiment of inadequately considered views (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Norling, Crusoe et al, 2024).
- *Unresolved disagreements.* The persistence of disagreements post-discussion and negotiation indicates an apparent consensus deficit. These disagreements may be rooted in the content of the decision (substantive) or in the decision-making process (procedure) (Priem et al., 1995).
- *Post-decision dissent.* A consensus deficit may become apparent if stakeholders express dissatisfaction or resist the implementation of the decision, suggesting that an inadequate consensus was reached (Dooley et al., 2000).

For instance, a public sector organization aiming to implement a new digital citizen engagement platform may face a consensus deficit if top management decides on the platform's features without sufficient dialogue with frontline staff and end-users. This lack of shared understanding could lead to resistance during implementation or a suboptimal platform that fails to meet stakeholder needs effectively

7.8.1. MITIGATING A CONSENSUS DEFICIT

In organizational decision-making, reaching a balanced consensus outcome is a nuanced process. The challenge often lies in managing consensus to avoid a deficit and in ensuring that the formulation of the strategy is inclusive and aligned with the strategic intent. This section outlines practical strategies to navigate these dynamics. Organizations can improve the quality of their consensing by cultivating open dialogue, practicing active listening, re-evaluating strategy when necessary, and facilitating learning from consensus deficits. These practices can create a more effective and inclusive strategy formulation process, helping organizations address and mitigate potentially negative consensing outcomes.

- *Open dialogue.* Encourage an open and inclusive dialogue culture, ensuring that all views are expressed and considered, thus facilitating inclusion and reducing the consensus deficit (Isaacs, 1999; Norling, Lindroth et al, 2024).
- *Practice active listening.* Prioritize active listening during dialogue, promoting understanding of others' words, perspectives, and emotions, facilitating, unearthing, and proactively addressing latent disagreements (Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021)
- *Re-evaluate and refine strategy.* Consider revisiting the formulated strategy if a consensus deficit is detected. This may involve re-initiating dialogue, exploring alternative options, or refining the strategy based on newly emerged information or perspectives (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).
- *Facilitate learning.* Utilize instances of consensus deficit as opportunities for organizational learning. Identifying the root causes of the deficit and extracting lessons from these experiences can enhance future dialogues and strategy formulation (Argyris, 1976; Norling 2024a).

Incorporating these strategies into your dialogue and strategy formulation can help identify and mitigate consensus deficits, facilitating a more ef-

fective, inclusive, coherent and aligned strategy. Therefore, organizations can improve the quality and efficacy of consensing by understanding and addressing the surplus and deficit of consensus.

7.9. SUMMARY OF CONSENSING OUTCOMES

The chapter delves into the outcomes of consensing. It introduces the concepts of consensus deficit, surplus, and debt, along with the critical reference points of consensus optima and consensus threshold.

A consensus deficit occurs when the urgency for action outpaces shared understanding, leading to potential inconsistencies within the organization. Conversely, a consensus surplus arises when shared understanding overwhelms action, resulting in stagnation or inertia. A consensus deficit can accumulate into a consensing debt that must be reconciled through dialogue and reflection.

The chapter emphasizes the importance of achieving consensus optima, the most desirable state with enough consensus for action but not so much that it hinders adaptability. It also defines the consensus threshold, the minimum viable consensus needed for action, and explores the risks of falling below or exceeding this threshold.

The latter part of the chapter tackles the challenges of consensus surplus and deficit, offering practical strategies to identify and mitigate these imbalances. For surplus, it suggests promoting diverse opinions, engaging in constructive dissent, encouraging deliberate pacing, and prioritizing continuous reflection. For deficit, it recommends cultivating open dialogue, practicing active listening, re-evaluating decisions, and facilitating learning. Organizations can navigate consensing by monitoring these critical outcomes and implementing the outlined strategies.

CHAPTER 8

APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSENSING FRAMEWORK

“The first rule is to keep an untroubled spirit. The second is to look things in the face and know them for what they are.”

MARCUS AURELIUS

The consensing framework consists of several integral parts, see Figure 10. The framework is derived from the findings of the research papers included in this thesis, which explore digital transformation strategies in the Swedish public sector. The *sensing* and *synthesizing* mechanisms, central to the framework, emerged from analyzing these strategies (Norling, 2024a, 2024b; Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2022; Norling, Magnusson, et al., 2022) and creating them (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024). The sensing phase involves diagnostic dialogue within the organization, asking ‘what is’ and serving as the starting point for exploring the adjacent possible, asking ‘what is viable?’ and ‘what could be?’ This dialogue can be characterized as diagnostic (what is?) and generative (what could be?), leading to an integrative understanding of strategic context and climate. The second stage is the *synthesizing* phase. The diverse understandings derived from the dialogue are transformed into a shared understanding. This phase is critical, as it connects the sensed possibilities through a shared understanding with strategic actions, acting as a bridge between ‘what could be’ and ‘what is viable’.

The sensing phase involves diagnostic and generative dialogue that facilitates the exploration of the adjacent possible. Strategic dialogue in the Swedish public sector involves various forms (e.g., meetings, workshops, digital platforms), forums (e.g., formal and informal settings), and ac-

tors (e.g., top management, managers, specialists) (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024). These diverse dialogue configurations enable organizations to gather a wide range of perspectives and insights, enriching the sensing process. Diagnostic dialogue helps to surface the current state and challenges, while generative dialogue encourages the co-creation of new ideas and opportunities.

The synthesizing phase involves integrative dialogue that transforms diverse understandings into a shared understanding. As observed in Region Nordhaven (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024), dialogue enables the negotiation of differences and the construction of shared meaning. Through iterative workshops and discussions, stakeholders engage in a process of consensing, gradually aligning their perspectives and building a common understanding of the strategic direction. Integrative dialogue plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between individual viewpoints and a collective shared understanding.

This iterative process alternates between these phases until a shared understanding is reached. The studies in this thesis, such as the regions (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024) and the municipality using rhizomatic strategizing (Magnusson et al., 2022), exemplify this iterative nature of consensing. In Region Nordhaven, the evolving strategy document acted as a social object that enabled strategic dialogue, embodying the interplay of sensing and synthesizing. Similarly, in the municipality, ongoing dialogue allowed stakeholders to collaboratively explore and integrate solution designs, allowing the digital transformation strategy to emerge organically.

The outcome of this process can either be a *consensus surplus* or a *consensus deficit*. A surplus occurs when collective commitment and understanding exceed the requirements for action. In contrast, a deficit arises when there is insufficient commitment or understanding to realize the strategy thoroughly.

Region Nordhaven's approach (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024) exemplifies several elements of the consensing framework in action. The evolving strategy document acted as a *social object* that enabled *strategic dialogue*,

embodying the iterative interplay of sensing and synthesizing. The selective control of access to the draft reflects the balance between transparency and strategic focus. And the translation of the strategy into a capability map and action plans shows how consensing outcomes guide future action. Building on these conceptual foundations and real-world examples, two tales vividly illustrate the process of consensing and lack thereof.

8.1. A SLOW COOKING CONSENSUS: AN INSPIRATIONAL TALE (FICTIONAL)

In a large and diverse organization, an experienced manager recognized the need for a new digital transformation initiative. Understanding the importance of inclusion, she brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, each contributing with their unique perspectives. This meant that the group initially did not agree, but through regular dialogues, the group found common ground. The manager acted more like a facilitator than a traditional leader, ensuring that clear communication channels were established and used. As the team began to coalesce their perspectives and ideas, the manager introduced the strategic intent of the initiative and gently brought it into discussions to align with the organization's long-term ambitions. She encouraged flexibility and adaptability, allowing the shared understanding to evolve based on stakeholder feedback, and sprinkled a culture of trust and mutual respect to create a safe space for dialogue. Data and facts were methodically incorporated into the decision-making process, which grounded the discussions in reality. The manager also encouraged all stakeholders to question assumptions, fostering an environment for critical thinking and innovation. Aware of the importance of patience in achieving a deep and nuanced consensus, the manager let the process simmer slowly. Over time, the various ingredients coalesced and formed a cohesive and robust digital transformation strategy. The strategy was presented at a general meeting, along with feasible plans and commitments. The organization embraced the well-designed strategy, which led to a successful digital transformation, celebrated for the shared understanding and strategic direction.

8.2. RUSHED CONSENSUS: A CAUTIONARY TALE (FICTIONAL)

In a contrasting scenario, an overly confident executive, convinced of his own expertise, decided to lead a digital transformation initiative without broadening his perspective. He quickly assembled a small, like-minded group without considering the diversity of perspectives needed for a broad and deep understanding of the challenge. The communication channels were poorly designed, leading to recurring misunderstandings and lost opportunities for alignment. The manager dictated the strategic intent, leaving little room for the group to contribute or align the initiative with the long-term organizational goal. Flexibility and adaptability were lacking, and the manager rigidly stuck to his original plan despite feedback suggesting adjustments. Trust and mutual respect were thus lacking, as the manager's attitude stifled all initiatives for open dialogue and consensus. Data and facts were selectively used to support the manager's biases rather than inform a balanced decision-making process. Questioning assumptions was discouraged, stifling innovation and critical thinking. In his haste to implement the initiative, the manager failed to recognize the value of patience in building a deep and nuanced consensus. The result was a cognitive consensus that was half-cooked and lacked the depth of flavor that comes from a slow and careful blending of different perspectives and ideas. When the strategy was presented to the organization, it was met with resistance and skepticism. The initiative was stumbling, hampered by its lack of inclusivity, strategic misalignment, and lack of a genuine, shared understanding.

8.3. SEVEN KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE TWO TALES

The inspirational and cautionary tales highlight several critical lessons for fostering effective consensing during strategic initiatives:

- Engage a diverse range of stakeholders and perspectives early on.
- Foster open dialogue through clear communication channels.
- Allow the strategy to evolve and align with the organization's intent through ongoing discussions.
- Build a culture of trust, respect, and psychological safety for genuine consensus.
- Ground discussions in data/facts and encourage questioning of assumptions.
- Exercise patience - achieving nuanced shared understanding takes time.
- Blend diverse inputs gradually into a cohesive, widely embraced strategy.

While adhering to these key learnings can help organizations navigate the consensing process, it's equally important to recognize potential boundary conditions and constraints that may influence the feasibility and optimal approach.

8.4. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS OF THE CONSENSING FRAMEWORK

It is important to clearly define the consensing framework's boundary conditions so that researchers and practitioners can understand its applicability and limitations.

The framework works at the strategic organizational level, emphasizing consensing in the context of strategy formulation. The framework sheds light on how organizations collectively formulate strategies and adjust to changing operational and wider environmental circumstances. However, its applicability and effectiveness may vary depending on certain contextual factors.

Consensing is likely most relevant and effective when dealing with wicked problems in strategy formulation. As Rittel and Webber (1973) argue, wicked problems are complex, ill-defined issues with no clear-cut solution. They suggest that such problems require a dialogic approach, where understanding and solutions emerge through critical discussion among stakeholders. This aligns well with the consensing framework, which emphasizes dialogue as a key mechanism for navigating complex strategic issues and building shared understanding.

Additionally, the framework is probably more applicable in consensus-oriented cultures, such as Sweden, where there is a strong norm and expectation for inclusive decision-making. As discussed in the context chapter, the Swedish management style strongly emphasizes consensus (Salminen-Karlsson, 2013). consensing may be less suitable in highly hierarchical or

autocratic organizational cultures or in situations where speed of decision-making is prioritized over inclusiveness. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions provide a potential framework for understanding how cultural factors influence the suitability of consensing principles.

Moreover, I privilege dialogue as the principal mode of communication in consensing. Dialogue is a form of communication that involves open, inclusive, and critical discourse directed at sharing and synthesizing diverse perspectives into strategic actions. This signals my intention to explore the interplay between realized and intended strategy through dialogue. The effectiveness of consensing also depends on the organization's capacity for open dialogue, including factors such as psychological safety, trust, and communication skills (Edmondson, 1999). Consensing may be hindered without a conducive, candid, and constructive dialogue environment.

However, while dialogue is the focus, the conceptual framework does not negate the importance or impact of other forms of communication, formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional, in the organizational context. Instead, it explicitly zooms into dialogue as a key mechanism for consensing, navigating the adjacent possible, and balancing consensus outcomes.

Simply put, the consensing framework provides a focused perspective on strategy formulation in organizations. It highlights the importance of dialogue in reaching a shared understanding. However, it is important to note that the framework does not account for all aspects of organizational communication outside the strategic sphere. This level of specificity offers a comprehensive understanding of strategy formulation but limits the framework's applicability.

8.5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Now, let's turn to implications for practitioners that arise from understanding the concept and dynamics of consensing in strategy formulation. This chapter outlines critical organizational capabilities and practices that leaders must cultivate in order to harness the full potential of inclusive consensus-building. Specific implications are presented, including the need to embrace cognitive conflict as a driver of innovation, continuously monitor and maintain balanced consensus states, align strategic intents with the organizational climate and culture, manage the temporal dimensions of consensing, and facilitate high-quality stakeholder dialogue. Real-world examples illustrate how organizations can operationalize these principles to formulate robust digital transformation strategies that unite stakeholders behind a shared vision. Collectively, these implications provide advice for improving strategy processes through more participatory, psychologically safe consensing practices tailored to today's complex environments.

8.5.1. EMBRACING COGNITIVE CONFLICT

Given that cognitive conflict is vital in consensing, organizations should strive to cultivate an environment that encourages the expression of diverse views and ideas (Amason, 1996; Edmondson, 1999). This would involve nurturing a culture that views conflict as a catalyst for innovation and learning rather than a disruption (Jehn, 1995). This could mean using techniques like devil's advocacy, dialectical inquiry (Schweiger et al., 1989), or role-playing during strategy discussions to promote cognitive conflict (Innes & Booher, 1999b).

Organizations can draw upon Edmondson's (1999) work on psychological safety and learning behavior in teams to create a psychologically safe environment for constructive disagreement. Edmondson suggests that leaders can foster psychological safety by demonstrating openness and fallibility, inviting participation, and responding positively to feedback and

questions. By modeling these behaviors and establishing clear norms for respectful dialogue, organizations can create a climate that supports cognitive conflict and enables the productive exploration of diverse perspectives.

A compelling example of successfully embracing cognitive conflict in strategy formulation can be found in the Region Nordhaven example (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024). Region Nordhaven actively encouraged diverse perspectives and constructive disagreement among stakeholders during their digital transformation strategy formulation process. They were able to surface and integrate a wide range of viewpoints, leading to a more robust and innovative strategic plan. This story illustrates how organizations can effectively harness cognitive conflict to enhance the quality of their strategy formulation efforts.

8.5.2. MAINTAINING BALANCE IN CONSENSUS OUTCOMES

Understanding the possible outcomes of consensing, namely consensus surplus, deficit, and debt, can enable organizations to improve their strategizing. Managers should be attentive to signs of consensus surplus and deficit and take measures to address them. This could involve slowing down the strategy formulation process to allow for deeper discussion or increasing the pace when strategy formulation is unnecessarily delayed by an attempt to reach a perfect consensus.

However, maintaining balance in consensus outcomes is not without its challenges. Managers may face resistance from stakeholders uncomfortable with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the consensing process (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Some may prefer the familiarity of traditional, linear approaches to strategy formulation, while others may struggle with the cognitive and emotional demands of engaging in constructive conflict (Amason, 1996). To overcome these barriers, managers must actively work to create a culture of trust, psychological safety, and open communication (Edmondson, 1999). They should also provide training and support to

help stakeholders develop the skills and mindsets necessary for effective participation in the consensing process, fostering double-loop learning and reflective practice (Argyris, 1977).

8.5.3. ALIGNING STRATEGIC INTENT WITH ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

The concept of strategic climate underscores the need for strategic intent to be clearly communicated and aligned with the organization's broader objectives. In practice, this involves ensuring that communication channels are open, transparent, and used effectively to communicate strategic intent at all levels of the organization. Furthermore, organizational leaders should create a strategic climate conducive to consensing by cultivating trust and open dialogue among stakeholders.

Successful implementation of consensing principles can be observed in real-world cases. For instance, Region Nordhaven's digital transformation strategy formulation process, (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024), exemplifies the consensing framework in action. The region actively encouraged diverse stakeholder participation, fostering open dialogue and cognitive conflict through iterative workshops and discussions. This approach allowed for comprehensive sensing of different perspectives and gradually synthesizing a shared understanding, aligning strategic intent with the organizational climate.

Another illustrative example can be found in the rhizomatic strategizing approach adopted by the municipality studied (Magnusson et al., 2022). Through ongoing dialogue, stakeholders collaboratively explored and integrated solution designs, allowing the digital transformation strategy to emerge organically. This case highlights the importance of balancing control and flexibility in consensing, leveraging slack resources to nurture shared understanding while remaining adaptive to emergent insights and opportunities.

8.5.4. MANAGING TEMPORALITY IN STRATEGIZING

Balancing the need for speed with thoroughness in strategizing is a critical challenge. Understanding the relationship between consensing and temporality can help managers to manage this tension effectively. This could involve varying the speed according to complexity and urgency, ensuring sufficient time to explore complex problems by deliberate consensing. In contrast, more straightforward problems are handled more rapidly, without elaborate consensing.

8.5.5. HARNESSING THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue is central to consensing. By utilizing different form of dialogue (Norling, Crusoe at al, 2024), organizations can harness the collective intelligence of their stakeholders, leading to more comprehensive and effective strategic actions. This could involve implementing formal processes for strategy dialogue, training in effective communication and dialogue skills, and valuing contributions from a diverse range of stakeholders within the organization.

8.5.6. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The insights gained from exploring the mechanisms and outcomes of consensing are intended to guide organizations in formulating and implementing digital transformation strategies. By providing actionable advice and best practices, this thesis aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice and support organizations in overcoming the challenges of digital transformation. As Hanisch (2024) notes, prescriptive theorizing can serve as a catalyst for addressing real-world problems and driving positive change in organizations and society. Understanding and effectively applying consensing can enhance the quality of strategy formulation, leading to more robust and broadly supported strategic actions. These implications are followed by practical guidelines for organizations seeking to improve their strategy formulation and, ultimately, their performance.

8.6. GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING CONSENSING IN STRATEGY FORMULATION

To help organizations effectively apply the principles of consensing in their strategy formulation processes, I propose a five-step guideline:

1. *Assess current practices*: Conduct an audit of existing strategy formulation practices, identifying areas where consensing principles can be integrated.
2. *Engage stakeholders*: Identify and engage a diverse range of stakeholders, ensuring that multiple perspectives are represented in the consensing process (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024).
3. *Foster dialogue*: Create a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999) and use the appropriate form of dialogue (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024). Leverage specific techniques to facilitate constructive conflict and diverse participation, such as:
 - *World café* (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005): This approach involves hosting a series of conversational rounds, where participants move between tables to explore different aspects of a strategic issue, fostering cross-pollination of ideas and inclusive dialogue.
 - *Dialogue mapping* (Conklin, 2006): This technique uses visual representations to capture and organize diverse perspectives during strategic discussions, promoting shared understanding and surfacing cognitive conflicts.
 - *Devil's advocacy* (Schwenk, 1984): Assign individuals to critically challenge prevailing assumptions or proposed strategies, stimulating cognitive conflict and preventing group-think tendencies.
 - *Appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000): This approach focuses on identifying and building upon existing organizational strengths and successes, fostering a positive and constructive dialogue environment.

- *Systemic consensing* (Maiwald, 2018): a decision-making process that seeks the option with the least collective resistance among all stakeholders in a given group
4. *Monitor consensus outcomes*: Regularly assess consensus outcomes, measuring consensus surplus, deficit, and debt (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024) to identify imbalances and guide corrective actions.
 5. *Iterate and adapt*: Embrace an iterative approach to strategy formulation, continuously learning from experience and adapting practices as needed to ensure ongoing effectiveness (Argyris, 1977).

Organizations should seamlessly integrate consensing practices into existing organizational processes and governance structures to ensure their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. This integration can occur at various levels.

- *Strategic planning cycles*: Incorporate consensing principles into the organization's strategic planning process, aligning the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms with the different phases of strategy formulation, review, and implementation. For example, sensing mechanisms can be leveraged during environmental scanning to gather diverse perspectives from internal and external stakeholders (Bryson, 2017). During the strategy development phase, synthesizing mechanisms like cross-functional workshops should be employed to build shared understanding and align strategic intent (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009).
- *Decision-making routines*: Embed consensing principles into the organization's decision-making routines, particularly for high-stakes strategic decisions. This could involve mandating inclusive dialogue sessions, leveraging techniques like Dialogue Mapping (Conklin, 2006) to surface cognitive conflicts, and monitoring consensus outcomes to guide decision approval or refinement processes (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997a).

- *Performance management systems*: Integrate consensing practices into performance management systems by incorporating metrics or indicators that measure the effectiveness of dialogue, the degree of shared understanding, and the alignment between strategic intent and realized actions (Walter et al., 2013). This reinforces the importance of consensing and incentivizes its consistent application across the organization.

Organizations can institutionalize these practices by systematically integrating consensing into existing organizational processes and governance structures, fostering a culture of inclusive strategizing and shared understanding. This integration also ensures that consensing is not treated as a one-time initiative but becomes a sustained approach to strategizing (Beer & Nohria, 2000).

The study by Norling, Crusoe et al. (2024) underscores the importance of inclusive strategizing by engaging diverse actors, including top management, managers, and specialists, in strategic dialogue; organizations can empirically bolster the advocated dialogue techniques and the significance of actor diversity in consensing. The study advocates leveraging varied forms of dialogue, such as meetings, workshops, and digital platforms, and employing multiple forums, both formal and informal, to facilitate a comprehensive strategic dialogue.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that applying consensing principles in strategy formulation is not a one-time event but an ongoing learning and adaptation process. As organizations navigate the complexities and uncertainties of digital transformation, they must remain open to new insights, perspectives, and approaches (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024). This requires a commitment to continuous learning at the individual and organizational levels (Argyris, 1977).

Managers should encourage experimentation, reflection, and feedback-seeking behaviors among stakeholders, fostering a culture of learning and growth (Edmondson, 1999). They should also regularly assess the effec-

tiveness of their consensing practices through stakeholder engagement, decision quality, and strategic alignment to identify areas for improvement (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024).

By embracing a mindset of continuous learning and adaptation, organizations can ensure that their strategy formulation processes remain relevant, effective, and responsive to the ever-changing demands of the digital age. This, in turn, will enable them to build the resilience and agility needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and uncertain world (Vial, 2019).

By following these guidelines, organizations can systematically integrate the principles of consensing into their strategy formulation processes, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of their strategic decision-making.

8.7. LEVERAGING DIGITAL TOOLS

Digital tools can play a crucial role in supporting the application of consensing principles in strategy formulation. Digital platforms such as enterprise social networks (ESNs) can facilitate open and inclusive dialogue among stakeholders, enabling the sharing of diverse perspectives and ideas (Plotnikova, 2020). ESNs can also help to break down hierarchical barriers and foster a more collaborative and participatory approach to strategy-making (Meske et al., 2020). According to Norling, Crusoe et al. (2024), the use of digital tools for strategic dialogue in the Swedish public sector is surprisingly absent. This suggests there is potential for significant improvement in consensing and dialogue by integrating these technologies to enhance transparency, democratize participation, and more effectively harness collective intelligence in the public sector.

Data analytics and visualization tools can support the monitoring and managing of consensus outcomes, providing real-time insights into the levels of consensus debt (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024). These tools can help managers identify imbalances and take corrective actions promptly, ensuring the strategy formulation process remains on track.

8.8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The exploration and development of *consensing* as an iterative, dialogue-based process within the domain of digital strategizing carry significant theoretical implications.

8.8.1. RECONCEPTUALIZING CONSENSUS

The conceptual framework of consensing advances the understanding of consensus in strategy formulation by conceptualizing it as a dynamic, continuous process rather than a static end state. *Consensing* expands the consensus concept beyond the mere agreement, considering it as the ongoing creation of shared understanding through dialogue. This adds a temporal and processual perspective to consensus in the strategy literature. The processual perspective of consensing contributes to the ongoing debate in the strategy literature on the nature of consensus. Kellermanns et al. (2005) highlight the lack of consistency in defining and measuring consensus, calling for a more nuanced understanding of its dimensions and effects. The consensing framework advanced in this thesis bridges the gap between the content and process perspectives by conceptualizing consensus as a dynamic, emergent property of dialogue and interaction. It shifts the focus from the degree of agreement to the quality of shared understanding, offering a more holistic view of how consensus unfolds in practice.

8.8.2. INTEGRATING COGNITIVE CONFLICT

The integration of cognitive conflict into the consensing framework offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of conflict in consensus-building. This perspective challenges the traditional view of conflict as detrimental to consensus, as often portrayed in the groupthink literature (Janis, 1971). Instead, it aligns with the notion of constructive conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), which posits that task-related disagreements can enhance decision quality by fostering the exchange of diverse perspectives and preventing premature convergence.

The consensing framework builds upon the work of Amason (1996), who distinguishes between cognitive and affective conflict in strategic decision-making. Cognitive conflict refers to task-oriented differences in judgment, while affective conflict involves personal and emotional clashes. Amason argues that cognitive conflict can improve decision quality by stimulating critical thinking and preventing groupthink, while affective conflict undermines team performance. The consensing framework extends this line of reasoning by demonstrating how cognitive conflict can be harnessed through dialogic practices to build a more robust and inclusive consensus.

Moreover, the integration of cognitive conflict into the consensing framework resonates with the concept of dialectical inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Mason, 1969; Schweiger et al., 1989). Dialectical inquiry is a process of exploring opposing views and assumptions to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. By encouraging the confrontation of divergent perspectives, dialectical inquiry can lead to more creative and effective solutions. The consensing framework operationalizes this idea by showing how generative and integrative dialogue mechanisms can facilitate productive engagement with cognitive conflict, leading to a richer shared understanding.

8.8.3. ENRICHING STRATEGY PROCESS RESEARCH

Consensing enriches strategy process research by unveiling the dynamics between shared understanding, strategic intent, and strategy formulation. My work emphasizes the importance of the iterative nature of these relationships and the recursive influence they exert on each other. The consensing framework advances our understanding of the micro-processes involved in strategy formulation. Pettigrew (1992) emphasizes the importance of studying strategy as a contextualized process, considering the interplay of content, context, and process over time. Van de Ven (1992) argues for a more dynamic and eclectic approach to strategy process research, integrating multiple perspectives and levels of analysis. The consensing framework heeds these calls by examining

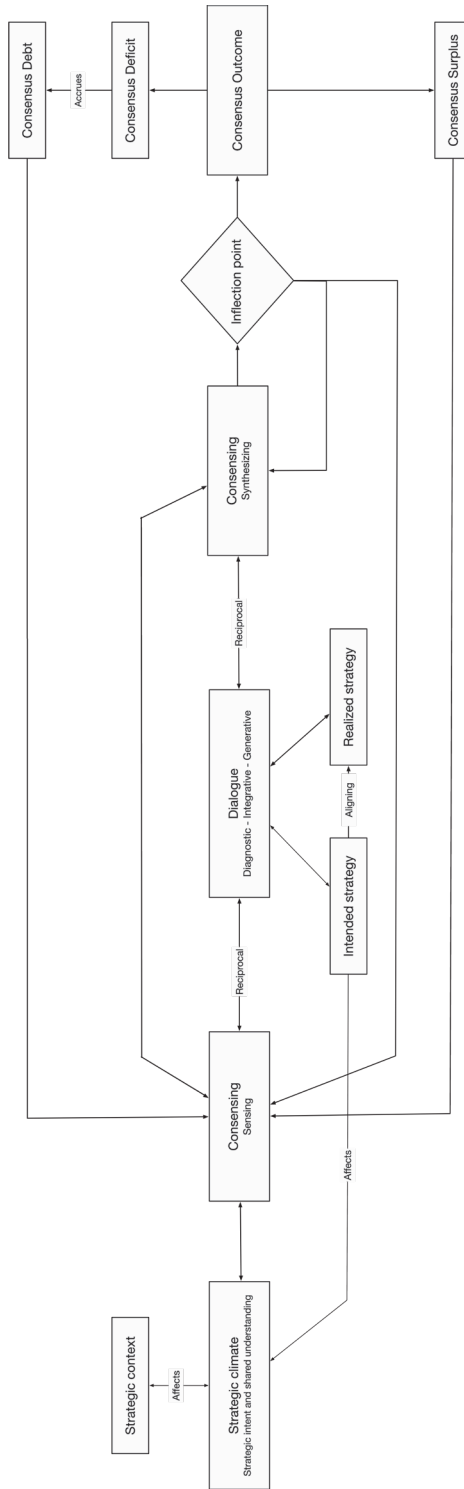


Figure 10. Conceptual consensing framework

the interplay of dialogue, shared understanding, and strategic action across individual, group, and organizational levels. It offers a granular view of how strategic consensus emerges through the iterative cycles of sensing and synthesizing, contributing to the growing body of process-oriented studies in strategic management (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

8.8.4. BRIDGING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGIZING

The consensing framework contributes to bridging the gap between organizational communication and strategizing. Traditionally, these two domains have been studied separately, with communication research focusing on the processes and practices of interaction (Putnam, 1982; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), while strategy research has emphasized the content and outcomes of strategic decisions (Whittington, 2006). However, recent studies have begun to explore the intersections between communication and strategy, highlighting the constitutive role of communication in shaping strategic realities (Cooren et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007).

The consensing framework advances this line of inquiry by explicating how specific communicative practices, such as generative, diagnostic, and integrative dialogue, enable the formation of shared understanding and strategic consensus. It draws upon the concept of the communicative constitution of organizations (Cooren et al., 2011, 2015), which posits that organizations are continuously created, sustained, and transformed through communication. By demonstrating how dialogue mechanisms shape the emergence of strategic consensus, the consensing framework provides a concrete illustration of how communicative processes constitute strategic outcomes.

Moreover, the consensing framework contributes to the growing literature on the role of communication in strategy-as-practice (SAP) (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). SAP research examines strategy as something that organizations do rather than something they have, emphasizing the micro-level practices and interactions that produce strategic outcomes. The consens-

ing framework enriches this perspective by showing how specific dialogic practices, enacted by multiple actors across various forums and forms, collectively shape the direction and content of strategy. It thus responds to calls for a more communication-centric understanding of strategy-making (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

8.8.5. HIGHLIGHTING THE ROLE OF TEMPORALITY

The consensing framework underscores the critical role of temporality in strategy formulation by exploring the tension between speed and thoroughness in decision-making. This contribution aligns with the growing recognition of the temporal dimensions of strategy-making (2013; Kunisch et al., 2017). Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) argue that strategy work involves the interplay of multiple temporal orientations, as actors make sense of the past, present, and future to construct strategic accounts. The consensing framework extends this perspective by demonstrating how the pace and rhythm of dialogue shape the temporal dynamics of strategy formulation.

Moreover, the consensing framework's emphasis on balancing speed and thoroughness resonates with the notion of strategic agility (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Y. Weber & Tarba, 2014). Strategic agility refers to an organization's ability to make timely and effective decisions in the face of rapid change and uncertainty. The consensing framework contributes to this literature by highlighting the role of consensing mechanisms, such as sensing and synthesizing, in enabling organizations to strike a balance between fast and slow strategizing. It shows how the iterative and adaptive nature of consensing can help organizations maintain strategic responsiveness while ensuring the quality and robustness of their decisions.

Furthermore, the consensing framework's attention to temporality speaks to the broader debate on the nature of strategic change (Kunisch et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2001). Some scholars argue for the importance of

revolutionary change, emphasizing the need for rapid and radical transformation (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). Others advocate for evolutionary change, emphasizing incremental and continuous adaptation (S. L. Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). The consensing framework offers a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that effective strategy formulation requires a dynamic interplay between fast and slow processes punctuated by moments of choice and inflection points. It thus contributes to a more temporally sensitive understanding of strategic change

8.8.6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF STRATEGIC CLIMATE

The consensing framework offers insights into the role of strategic climate, as conceptualized by Bragaw and Misangyi (2022), in shaping strategy dialogue and shared understanding. It elucidates how the existing level of shared understanding and strategic intent, which constitute strategic climate, influence the consensing process and outcomes. Moreover, it demonstrates the recursive relationship between strategic climate and consensing, where consensing outcomes can reinforce or challenge the existing strategic climate perceptions. The framework thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between individual, collective perceptions, and strategic climate in shaping strategic outcomes.

8.8.7. SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The consensing framework provides a way to understand how consensus dynamically evolves in practice. This contributes a new analytical tool to the literature on strategy formulation, opening avenues for further research. The notion of *consensing* provides several important contributions to the literature on consensus, strategy, and organizational communication. It also points to new directions for future research and offers a rich theoretical landscape for further exploration (see chapter 12.12).

8.9. SUMMARY OF THE CONSENSING FRAMEWORK

The chapter illustrates the consensing framework, laying the ground for understanding the emergence of shared understanding and its influence on collective action in organizational strategy formulation. It emphasizes the dynamic, iterative nature of consensing, the importance of balancing various elements, and the critical role of dialogue and cognitive conflict, with significant implications for practice and theory in digital strategizing.

CHAPTER 9

THE DARK SIDE OF CONSENSING

“If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid with regard to external things. Don't wish to be thought to know anything, and even if you appear to be somebody important to others, distrust yourself.”

EPICETUS, XIII

This chapter serves as a critical counterpoint to the predominantly positive framing of consensing throughout the thesis. While the previous chapters have highlighted the potential benefits and mechanisms of consensing, such as fostering shared understanding, aligning strategic intent, and enabling collective action, it is equally important to acknowledge and explore the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of consensus-building processes. This exploration of the *dark side* of organizational phenomena draws upon a growing body of literature that examines the negative, unintended, or paradoxical aspects of organizational life (Linstead et al., 2014). As Linstead et al. (2014) argue, the *dark side* of organizations encompasses a range of dysfunctional, irrational, and ethically questionable behaviors and processes that often coexist with the more positive and functional aspects of organizational reality. By engaging with the dark side of consensing, including phenomena such as *groupthink* (Janis, 1971), *false consensus* (Pope, 2013), and introducing the notion of dialogue inertia, this chapter aims to provide a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the consensing framework and to situate it within the broader context of organizational decision-making and strategy formulation.

The pursuit of consensing, while valuable, can lead to groupthink (Janis, 1971), where the desire for harmony overshadows critical evaluation and

individual judgment. Groupthink can stifle innovation and lead to suboptimal decision-making. Groupthink is where the collective prioritizes harmony over critical evaluation and individual judgment, potentially stifling divergent opinions and innovation opportunities. Like groupthink, the echo chamber effect occurs when a group becomes insulated from external opinions or dissenting views, leading to a narrow, self-reinforcing perspective. It can result in flawed consensus-building, as the group's thinking becomes homogenized, and critical analysis or alternative viewpoints are not adequately considered.

The false consensus effect is a cognitive bias in which individuals overestimate the extent to which their beliefs are shared by others, which can lead to misunderstandings and ineffective collaboration, impacting strategy formulation and implementation (Pope, 2013; Ross et al., 1977). A type of false consensus is consensus compliance. It emerges when members agree to a perceived group consensus, even when they disagree privately. It is often driven by a desire to avoid conflict or hierarchical pressures. This type of false consensus can lead to suboptimal decisions as it overlooks valuable dissenting opinions and insights.

The *consensus illusion*, or *Abilene paradox* (Harvey, 1974), is an issue that arises when a group believes it has reached an agreement but, in reality, members have different understandings or interpretations. This illusion of consensus can result from inadequate discussion, a rush to agreement, or avoidance of delving into details. It leads to future conflicts when these hidden disparities surface. There is also a risk of presumed consensus, which can lead to decisions based on assumptions rather than explicit agreement, risking misaligned strategies and actions.

Consensus overemphasis, combined with the effects of isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), can stifle individual creativity and the emergence of homogenized thinking, thus diminishing the potential for innovative ideas in strategic processes. This phenomenon can be further exacerbated by coercion and compliance, where consensus is often artificially

constructed under hierarchical pressures, leading to superficial agreement. This can stem from dominant voices, where the views of a few, particularly those in authority or more outspoken, disproportionately influence decision-making. This dynamic suppresses diverse opinions, resulting in a consensus that reflects the dominant perspectives rather than a true collective agreement, thereby undermining the richness and effectiveness of strategic decisions.

In the context of consensing, dark side phenomena extend to strategy phenomena, like *strategic dissonance* (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). It arises when consensus-building leads to a disconnect between agreed-upon strategies and actual organizational actions. This is often compounded by strategic inertia and a reluctance to embrace necessary changes, hindering effective adaptation in digital environments.

Strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) becomes a tactical flaw during consensus processes, where vague language is intentionally used to obscure disagreements or push specific agendas, resulting in misleading agreements prone to future conflicts (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Denis et al., 2011). Additionally, strategic myopia can occur, characterized by a narrow focus on achieving consensus at the expense of recognizing broader strategic opportunities or threats, potentially undermining long-term organizational goals (Lorsch, 1986).

9.1. PRACTITIONERS BEWARE!

In pursuing consensus within digital transformation strategy-making, several challenges emerge for practitioners. Practitioners must be wary of delayed decision-making, as the quest for consensus can impede the agility of strategy formulation (Denis et al., 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989b; Judge & Miller, 1991). A practical approach to consensus must address conflict avoidance, ensuring that differing viewpoints are recognized and actively integrated into strategic dialogue (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

In dialogue, a core component of consensing, the emphasis should be on depth and breadth to avoid misalignments (Galbraith, 1974; Isaacs, 1999). Practitioners must distinguish between genuine agreement and understanding and surface-level consensus, ensuring that strategies are agreed upon, thoroughly understood, and embraced (Markoczy, 2001; Priem et al., 1995). These considerations are crucial for leaders and teams involved in digital transformation strategies to ensure comprehensive, inclusive, and effective decision-making.

To mitigate the impact of dark side phenomena, practitioners can employ several strategies, such as: (1) fostering a culture of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) to encourage open and constructive dialogue; (2) implementing structured decision-making processes, like devil's advocacy or dialectical inquiry (Mitroff et al., 1979; Schweiger et al., 1989), to challenge assumptions and integrate diverse perspectives; and (3) regularly monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of consensus-building processes to identify and address potential dysfunctions (Amason, 1996).

9.2. DIALOGUE INERTIA

The upcoming chapter addresses dialogue inertia in organizational strategy, identifying it as a phenomenon that hinders strategy formulation and extends to decision-making. Dialogue inertia occurs when conversations cycle without advancing strategizing or decision-making. This inertia can be unconscious, stemming from resistance to change, and conscious, resulting from intentional sabotage. Dialogue inertia can lead to unproductive outcomes, which impact the effectiveness of strategizing. The insights offered will set the stage for a deeper understanding of the dark sides of consensing in the following chapter. Dialogue inertia can be seen as a specific manifestation of organizational inertia within the context of strategic dialogue, contributing to the overall resistance to change and adaptation in organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Huff et al., 1992).

Dialogue inertia is defined as *the tendency of organizational dialogue to persist in a state of motion or stagnation, following established communication patterns without progressing toward strategic actions or decisions*. It represents the systemic resistance to change manifested in strategic dialogue through endless, looping discussions aimed at preserving the status quo (Argyris, 1990). Dialogue inertia serves to maintain the status quo by allowing conversations to cycle repeatedly over the same topics without leading to actual changes or new decisions. Just as status quo bias leads to a preference for upholding the current state over change (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), dialogue inertia reflects an inertial force within organizational discourse that obstructs progress toward different strategic directions. This inertia can be understood as a manifestation of organizational inertia more broadly, which refers to the tendency of organizations to maintain the status quo and resist change (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Strategic inertia, a related concept, describes the persistence of existing strategies and the difficulty in altering them, even in the face of environmental changes (Huff et al., 1992).

9.3. THE LINDENTOWN LOOP: A TALE OF BREAKING THE CYCLE (FICTIONAL)

In the municipality of Lindentown, the initiative to create a new digital reporting system for public facilities appeared to be a promising project. The strategy team, composed of various department heads, met monthly to discuss and plan implementation. Initially, the meetings were productive, with clear objectives. However, as months passed, the focus shifted from implementation to discussing potential system features and hypothetical scenarios and revisiting decisions already made. The dialogue became a loop of what-ifs and revisited topics that often revolved around minor issues, i.e. bikeshedding, thus avoiding the most significant problems. Each meeting ended without any concrete actions, plans, or decisions. This cycle continued, and the project stalled and eventually fizzled out.

This fictional tale is an example of emergent dialogue inertia where active discussions led to no outcomes, leaving public works employees waiting for a system that was always ‘under consideration.’

9.4. TYPES OF DIALOGUE INERTIA

Dialogue inertia can be deliberate or emergent. Either way, dialogue inertia poses a significant obstacle to progress, whether it arises unintentionally from passive adherence to the status quo or deliberately from acts of sabotage. This *deliberate dialogue inertia* can be used as a strategic tool to hinder advances or maintain power structures (Hendry & Seidl, 2003). This shows the darker side of organizational politics, where dialogue is weaponized to serve certain interests at the expense of collective objectives. This aspect of dialogue highlights the intricate interplay between human agency and systemic structures that shape strategic outcomes (Jarzabkowski, 2008).

Paralysis by analysis (Langley, 1995), on the other hand, is a state where decision-making is stalling due to overanalyzing or overthinking a situation. It involves an excessive search for more information and options, preventing the decision-making process from progressing. While both prevent progress, dialogue inertia is about unproductive discussion, whereas analysis paralysis is the inability to make decisions due to excessive deliberation.

In addition, dialogue inertia is related to groupthink (Janis, 1971), decisional conflict (Priem & Price, 1991), and cognitive lock-in (Maurer & Ebers, 2006) because all these concepts involve hindered decision-making in a group context. Groupthink stifles dissent, leading to unchallenged, potentially flawed decisions (Janis, 1971), whereas dialogue inertia involves endless discussions without reaching a decision. Decisional conflict relates to uncertainty in choices, causing delays akin to stagnation of dialogue inertia (Priem & Price, 1991). Cognitive lock-in, in which groups are fixated on a specific approach (Maurer & Ebers, 2006), can

contribute to dialogue inertia by limiting the scope of discussions and preventing new, actionable ideas from emerging. These concepts—dialogue inertia, groupthink, decisional conflict, and cognitive lock-in—interact in complex ways, often reinforcing each other and creating a vicious cycle that leads to organizational inefficiency (Argyris, 1990). For instance, groupthink can contribute to dialogue inertia by fostering an environment where dissent is discouraged, and discussions become echo chambers that fail to generate new ideas or challenge existing assumptions (Janis, 1971). This lack of critical evaluation can lead to cognitive lock-in, as the group becomes committed to a particular course of action without considering alternatives (Maurer & Ebers, 2006). Simultaneously, decisional conflict can arise from the uncertainty generated by the lack of diverse perspectives and the pressure to conform to the group's prevailing opinion (Priem & Price, 1991). This conflict further perpetuates dialogue inertia as the group becomes mired in indecision and fails to move forward with a clear strategy.

As these dynamics play out over time, they create a self-reinforcing pattern of ineffective communication, flawed decision-making, and resistance to change (Argyris, 1976; Masuch, 1985). This pattern can be understood through the lens of single-loop learning, a concept introduced by Argyris, describing how individuals and organizations often respond to challenges by maintaining their existing beliefs and practices rather than questioning and modifying their underlying assumptions. Consequently, this self-reinforcing pattern ultimately undermines organizational performance (Argyris, 1990; Michael Beer & Eisenstat, 2000). The interaction of these concepts highlights the importance of fostering open, diverse, and constructive dialogue (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 1993) to break free from the trap of organizational inertia and promote adaptability in the face of changing circumstances (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

9.5. DIALOGUE INERTIA IN PRACTICE

Dialogue inertia is a common phenomenon in which discussions become repetitive, leading to no real progress or decisions. This issue arises when there is a lot of talk but no concrete action towards achieving the objectives. It outlines the unproductive nature of ongoing conversations that do not yield results and mainly concerns the dynamics of discussions within meetings.

Dialogue inertia often manifests itself in meetings where everyone talks in circles, but progress or decisions are lacking. It is when discussions continue without apparent results, causing frustration and a lack of progress on the goals you are trying to achieve. This phenomenon often spans a series of meetings, bouncing back and forth between different hierarchical levels without any progress or outcome. It is a common trap where the conversation feels busy but does not move things forward.

Dialogue inertia and analysis paralysis are interrelated and can co-occur within organizational decision-making processes. Analysis paralysis refers to a state where decision-making stalls due to overanalyzing or overthinking a situation, involving an excessive search for more information and options that prevent the decision-making process from progressing. Dialogue inertia may lead to or arise from analysis paralysis when endless discussions are centered around overanalyzing data or options. Both phenomena create stagnation in progress but come from different origins: one from circular dialogue that does not produce results and the other from an overabundance of analysis that hinders a decision. In practice, addressing one can often help alleviate the other, as both require a shift toward decisive action and clear outcome-oriented communication.

9.6. SUMMARY OF THE DARK SIDE OF CONSENSING

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the dark side of consensing, shedding light on various phenomena that can undermine the effectiveness of consensing in organizational strategy formulation. The dark side phenom-

ena discussed, such as groupthink, false consensus, the Abilene paradox, and strategic ambiguity, can be understood as distortions or dysfunctions of the core mechanisms and outcomes of consensing.

Groupthink, for instance, can be seen as a dysfunction of the synthesizing mechanism, where the pressure for conformity and cohesion overrides the critical evaluation and integration of diverse perspectives (Janis, 1971). Similarly, false consensus can be understood as a distortion of the sensing mechanism, where individuals project their own beliefs and preferences onto others, leading to a misaligned understanding of the strategic context (Ross et al., 1977). The Abilene paradox and strategic ambiguity, on the other hand, can be seen as dysfunctions of the consensing outcomes, where apparent agreement masks underlying differences or conflicts, leading to a false sense of consensus or a lack of clear direction (Eisenberg, 1984; Harvey, 1974).

By understanding these dark side phenomena as distortions or dysfunctions of the consensing framework, practitioners can be better equipped to identify and address these challenges in practice. Recognizing the potential pitfalls and actively fostering open, diverse, and constructive dialogue is essential for harnessing the benefits of consensing while mitigating its dark side.

In today's fast-paced business landscape, making strategic decisions can be a daunting task. It's crucial for organizations to have a comprehensive understanding of the pros and cons of consensing. By being aware of the possible drawbacks and taking preemptive measures to mitigate them, companies can create a more robust and successful approach to consensus-building. This will ultimately result in better long-term strategic outcomes.

CHAPTER 10

PROPOSITIONS

“The written word is the philosopher's garden.”

SENECA, LETTERS TO LUCILIUS, LETTER 61

This chapter introduces propositions based on the consensing framework developed in this thesis. These propositions synthesize key concepts, mechanisms, and dynamics discussed in earlier chapters. They provide a starting point for testable hypotheses to enhance our understanding of consensus-building in strategy formulation.

Grounded in the theoretical underpinnings spanning dialogue, consensus, and strategy literature (Chapter 3), as well as the mechanisms of consensing and dialogue (Chapter 6), these propositions capture the intricate interplay between shared understanding, strategic intent, and strategy formulation outcomes. They build upon the insights into consensus outcomes, such as consensus surplus, deficit, and debt (Chapter 7), and the temporal dimensions of consensing (Chapter 8), emphasizing the importance of balancing speed and depth in strategy formulation.

From a theoretical perspective, the propositions contribute to the ongoing discourse on consensus-building in strategy formulation by conceptualizing consensus as a dynamic, iterative process (Proposition 1). They challenge traditional views by integrating cognitive conflict as a catalyst for shared understanding (Proposition 3), aligning with the work of Amason (1996) and Jehn (1995). Additionally, the propositions enrich strategy process research (Proposition 2) by unveiling the dynamics between intended and realized strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) and bridge the gap between organizational communication and strategy formulation (Proposition 5) by explicating the role of dialogue mechanisms (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005). Moreover, Proposition 8

highlights the significance of balancing strategy formulation speed and depth, contributing to the understanding of temporal dynamics in consensing and their impact on consensus outcomes.

Practically, the propositions offer organizations a framework for enhancing the effectiveness of their strategy formulation processes through consensing. By empirically validating the relationships proposed, such as the impact of diverse inputs on shared understanding (Proposition 1), the role of strategic climate (Proposition 6), and the moderating effects of temporal dynamics (Proposition 7), organizations can develop strategies to leverage consensing principles, foster inclusive decision-making, and achieve better alignment between strategic intent and realized actions.

The chapter proposes a multi-method approach to validate these propositions empirically, spanning qualitative techniques like longitudinal case studies and ethnographic observations, quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments, and computational modeling techniques. This triangulation of methods aligns with contemporary calls for mixed-methods research (Molina-Azorin et al., 2017) and engaged scholarship (Ven, 2007), enabling a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted nature and practical implications of consensing.

PROPOSITION 1: A GREATER DIVERSITY OF INPUTS IS POSITIVELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE DEPTH OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND THE BREADTH OF EXPLORED ADJACENT POSSIBILITIES.

This proposition builds upon the theoretical concepts of requisite variety (Seidl & Werle, 2017) and cognitive diversity (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Requisite variety suggests that organizations need to incorporate a diverse range of perspectives and inputs to navigate complex environments effectively. Cognitive diversity, which encompasses differences in knowledge, expertise, and perspectives among stakeholders, can facilitate and

hinder the development of shared understanding (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Organizations can enrich their shared understanding by integrating diverse inputs during consensing, thus exploring a broader range of adjacent possibilities.

To further validate this proposition, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative case studies with quantitative surveys, could be employed. Case studies could provide rich insights into how organizations incorporate diverse inputs during consensing. At the same time, surveys could quantitatively measure the depth of shared understanding and the breadth of adjacent possibilities explored. This approach aligns with the mixed-methods guidelines proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) for conducting robust organizational research.

PROPOSITION 2: CONSENSING DEMONSTRATES A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SENSING AND SYNTHESIZING MECHANISMS, BALANCING INTENDED AND REALIZED STRATEGY.

The balanced interplay between sensing and synthesizing aligns with the notion of reconciling intended and realized strategies, as Mintzberg and Waters (1985) proposed in their seminal work on deliberate and emergent strategies. Burgelman and Grove's (1996) concept of strategic dissonance, which arises from the misalignment between an organization's strategic intent and its actual initiatives, further underscores the importance of integrating intended and realized strategies through consensing.

To empirically validate this proposition, longitudinal case studies across different organizational contexts could be employed. By conducting in-depth observations and interviews over an extended period, researchers could gain insights into how the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms unfold and interact during the consensing process. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989a) and Yin (2018) for building and testing theory through longitudinal case study research.

PROPOSITION 3: COGNITIVE CONFLICT WITHIN CONSENSING IS POSITIVELY ASSOCIATED WITH ENHANCED SHARED UNDERSTANDING.

Cognitive conflict within consensing processes, characterized by task-related disagreements, is posited to facilitate enhanced shared understanding. This positive correlation is supported by the theory of constructive conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), which posits that effectively managed disagreements can improve decision quality through diverse perspectives and critical examination of issues. Such conflict echoes the principles of dialectical inquiry (Mason, 1969; Schweiger et al., 1989), advocating for the engagement with opposing views to reach a more comprehensive grasp of complex problems. Moreover, cognitive conflict can be a catalyst for innovation (Eisenhardt et al., 1997a, 1997b), with respectful debate prompting scrutiny of assumptions, questioning of norms, and the pursuit of novel solutions, ultimately fostering a culture of creativity (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996).

To understand this relationship fully, research must capture the nuanced dynamics of real-world consensing. Future studies could blend experimental methods recommended by Shadish et al. (2002) and Aguinis and Bradley (2014) with qualitative analyses that consider the complexities and contextual variables influencing cognitive conflict. This mixed-methods approach could offer a more balanced and comprehensive view, recognizing both the benefits and potential downsides of cognitive conflict, such as the risk of paralysis by analysis or conflict escalation, and suggesting practical measures for managing cognitive conflict to ensure constructive outcomes.

PROPOSITION 4: THE LEVEL OF INITIAL COGNITIVE CONSENSUS IN CONSENSING IS POSITIVELY CORRELATED WITH THE SPEED OF STRATEGY FORMULATION.

The proposed positive correlation between initial cognitive consensus and strategy formulation speed aligns with research on strategic decision-making speed. Eisenhardt's (1989b) seminal work on high-velocity environments suggests that a shared understanding among decision-makers can facilitate faster strategic decisions by reducing the need for extensive deliberation and negotiation.

Additionally, this proposition resonates with the literature on strategic consensus and firm performance. Studies by Shepherd et al. (2021) and Judge and Miller (1991) have demonstrated that higher levels of consensus can positively impact decision speed and quality, particularly in dynamic environments.

To empirically test this proposition, quantitative approaches could be employed, such as a large-scale survey study across multiple organizations. Researchers could measure the level of initial cognitive consensus among strategic decision-makers (Kellermanns et al., 2005) and correlate it with objective measures of strategy formulation speed, such as the duration of strategic planning cycles or time taken to make specific strategic decisions. This approach aligns with the recommendations of MacKenzie et al. (2011) for developing and validating measurement scales in organizational research.

PROPOSITION 5: DIALOGUE POSITIVELY AFFECTS THE DYNAMICS OF CONSENSING.

The positive impact of dialogue on consensing resonates with the literature on organizational communication and strategy-as-practice. Kent and Lane (2021) emphasize the importance of dialogue in shaping shared meaning and facilitating collective action within organizations. Additionally, the work of Jacobs and Heracleous (2005) on diagnostic and generative dialogue highlights how these communicative practices can stimulate critical thinking, challenge assumptions, and foster strategic innovation, aligning with the dynamics of consensing.

To empirically validate this proposition, research could employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative observations with quantitative surveys. Qualitative observations could provide insights into how different dialogue mechanisms unfold and influence consensing dynamics within organizational settings. Simultaneously, surveys could quantitatively measure the perceived effectiveness of dialogue and its impact on consensus outcomes. This approach aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) recommendations for conducting robust mixed-methods research in organizational studies.

PROPOSITION 6: BOUNDARY CONDITIONS MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSENSING AND ITS OUTCOMES.

This proposition aligns with the notion of contingency factors and boundary conditions in strategy research. Bourgeois (1980) and Ginsberg and Venkatraman (1985) have emphasized the importance of considering contextual factors that can influence the effectiveness of strategic processes and decisions. Additionally, the idea of boundary conditions resonates with the concept of situational strengths and constraints proposed by Drazin and Van de Ven (1985), which suggests that the impact of organizational processes can vary depending on the specific situational context.

To empirically test this proposition, a combination of comparative case studies and survey-based methods could be employed. Qualitative case studies across diverse organizational contexts could provide insights into the specific boundary conditions that shape consensing dynamics and outcomes. Concurrently, survey-based research could quantitatively measure the moderating effects of identified boundary conditions on the relationship between consensing and its outcomes, such as consensus surplus or deficit. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989a) for theory-building through case study research and MacKenzie et al. (2011) for construct measurement and validation in organizational research.

PROPOSITION 7: TEMPORAL DYNAMICS MODERATES CONSENSING OUTCOMES.

This proposition resonates with the growing recognition of the temporal dimensions of strategy-making in the literature. Researchers such as Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) and Kunisch et al. (2017) have highlighted the importance of understanding the interplay between multiple temporal orientations (past, present, and future) in shaping strategic outcomes. Additionally, the proposed moderating effect of temporal dynamics aligns with the literature on strategic agility (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Y. Weber & Tarba, 2014), which emphasizes the ability of organizations to make timely and effective decisions in response to rapidly changing environments.

To empirically validate this proposition, a combination of longitudinal case studies and computational modeling techniques could be employed. Longitudinal case studies could provide rich insights into how temporal dynamics unfold and influence consensing processes and outcomes over an extended period. Concurrently, computational modeling and simulation approaches could be utilized to systematically explore the moderating effects of temporal dynamics on consensing outcomes. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Davis et al. (2007) and Burton and Obel (2011) for using computational models to study complex organizational phenomena.

PROPOSITION 8: BALANCING STRATEGY FORMULATION SPEED AND DEPTH MODERATES CONSENSING OUTCOMES.

This proposition aligns with the literature on strategic decision-making speed and quality. Eisenhardt (1989b) and Judge and Miller (1991) have explored the trade-offs between decision speed and comprehensiveness, suggesting that striking the right balance is crucial for achieving favorable outcomes. Additionally, this proposition resonates with the concept of 'speed traps' discussed by Perlow et al. (2002), highlighting the potential pitfalls of prioritizing speed over careful deliberation and analysis in strategic decision-making processes.

To empirically validate this proposition, a combination of experimental vignette methodology and survey-based studies could be employed. Experimental vignette studies could manipulate the conditions of strategy formulation speed and depth, exposing participants to different scenarios and measuring the impact on perceived consensus outcomes. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Aguinis and Bradley (2014) for designing and implementing experimental vignette methodology studies. Concurrently, surveys could be conducted across organizations to quantitatively measure the moderating effects of speed and depth on consensus outcomes, such as consensus surplus or deficit. This approach would align with the construct measurement and validation guidelines proposed by MacKenzie et al. (2011).

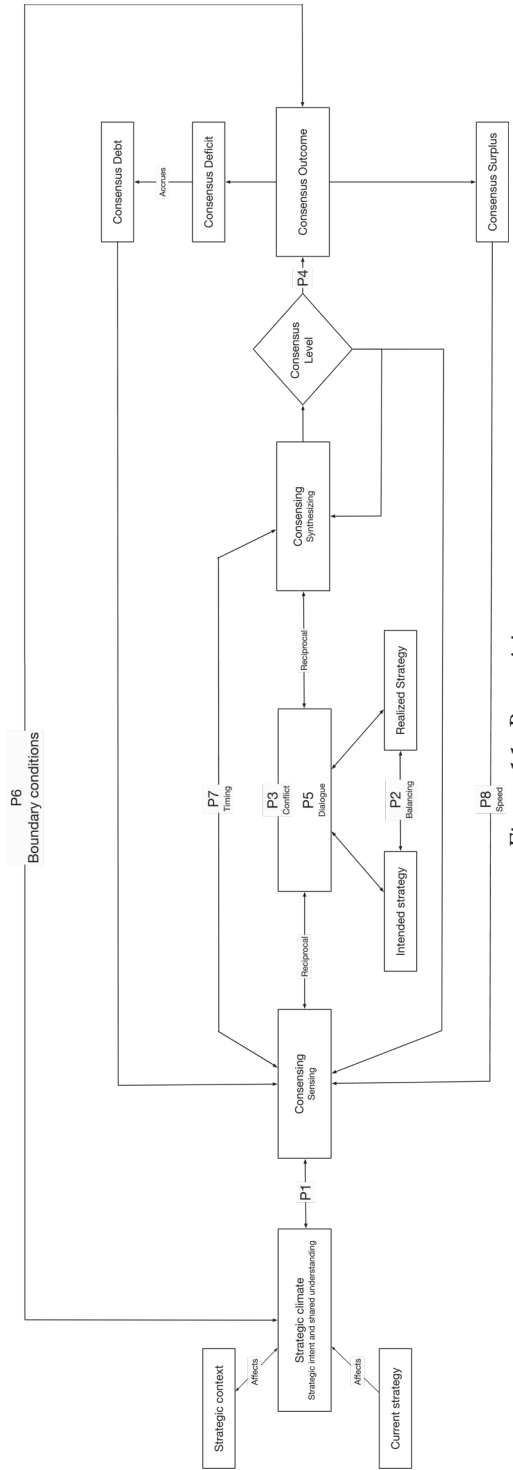


Figure 11. Propositions

10.1. SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSITIONS

The propositions presented in this chapter offer a comprehensive foundation for empirically validating and refining the consensing framework (See Figure 11). Each proposition captures a key relationship or dynamic within the framework, collectively advancing our understanding of how consensing unfolds and influences strategy formulation outcomes.

By grounding these propositions in established theoretical perspectives from strategy, organization, and communication literature and suggesting methodological approaches rooted in robust research practices, this chapter provides a roadmap for future empirical investigations.

Potential methods span qualitative techniques like longitudinal case studies and ethnographic observations, quantitative approaches such as surveys and experiments, and computational modeling techniques. This multi-method approach aligns with contemporary calls for triangulation and mixed-methods research (Molina-Azorin et al., 2017), enabling a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted nature of consensing.

As empirical evidence accumulates through exploring these propositions, the consensing framework can be iteratively refined and extended, enhancing its theoretical contributions and practical implications. This iterative cycle of theory-building and empirical validation aligns with established principles of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2017), clinical (Schein, 2008), and pragmatic research (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Ultimately, empirically grounded insights from these propositions can enrich our understanding of strategy formulation processes, consensus-building dynamics, and the role of dialogue in shaping strategic outcomes. This knowledge can guide organizations in leveraging consensing principles to enhance their strategic decision-making quality, alignment, and effectiveness, particularly in digital transformation.

CHAPTER 11

THE PAPERS IN BRIEF

“Write to impress yourself, not others.”
EPICETUS, DISCOURSES, BOOK III, 24

This series of papers offers a comprehensive examination of digital transformation strategies in the Swedish public sector, shedding light on the strategizing processes of organizations. They explore key themes such as articulating strategic intent, cultivating a shared understanding among stakeholders, and the pivotal role that strategic documentation plays in navigating from present realities to future goals. Furthermore, these studies illuminate the tangible dimensions of digital transformation, addressing the obstacles organizations encounter and proposing forward-looking strategies. Through a detailed investigation that spans various facets of digital strategizing, including strategic dialogue, consensus-building, and the impact of organizational culture, this collection underscores the critical importance of communication and collective alignment in successfully implementing digital initiatives.

The first paper on “Rhizomatic Strategizing” (Magnusson et al., 2022) introduces a non-linear approach to strategy formulation, underscoring the necessity for adaptive governance that balances control and flexibility, cultivating a natural emergence of strategy through dialogue and shared understanding. The exploration continues with a paper on “Digital Decoupling” that scrutinizes the digital transformation trajectory in Swedish municipalities, urging strategic objectives aligned with political governance to avert potential issues in digital government. The subsequent study on the “Strategic Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Norling, Magnusson, et al., 2022) delineates the shifts in digital transformation strategy

during the crisis, highlighting the imperative of adaptability and sustained dialogue. “Strategic Dialogue in the Public Sector” (Norling, Crusoe, et al., 2024) delves into the intricacies of strategic communication, emphasizing the critical role of dialogic interactions in shaping and implementing digital strategies within the public sector. Following this, “Digital Transformation or Digital Standstill?” (Norling, 2024a) scrutinizes the pervasive influence of bureaucratic inertia on digital initiatives, highlighting the tension between traditional organizational cultures and the imperatives of digital innovation. The series culminates with “Cognitive Consensus in Digital Transformation Strategy Formulation” (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024), which examines the process of consensus-building in strategy development, introducing the concept of *consensus debt* as a critical factor in the alignment and execution of digital transformation strategies.

Collectively, these papers construct a comprehensive narrative on the multifaceted dimensions of digital strategizing in the public sector, weaving together themes of dialogue, consensus, and organizational culture.

Paper number	1	2	3
Paper title	Rhizomatic Strategizing in Digital Transformation: A Clinical Field Study	Digital Decoupling: A Population Study of Digital Transformation Strategies in Swedish Municipalities	Strategic Responses to the COVID Pandemic: Empirical Evidence of Shifts in Digital Transformation Strategy
Author(s)	Johan Magnusson, Jwan Khisro, Tomas Lindroth, Andreas Nilsson, Kristian Norling	Kristian Norling, Tomas Lindroth, Johan Magnusson	Kristian Norling, Johan Magnusson, Tomas Lindroth, Jacob Torell
Outlet	Proceedings of the 55th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences	DG.O 2022: The 23rd Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research	AMCIS 2022 Proceedings
Theoretical concepts	Digital transformation, Strategy-as-practice, Rhizomatic strategizing	Digital transformation, Strategizing, Ambidexterity	Digital transformation, Strategizing
Research question	How does a digital transformation strategy-as-practice emerge over time?	What is the direction of digital transformation strategies in municipalities?	Which digital transformation strategies have public sector organizations enacted during the pandemic?

Table 6. Overview papers 1-3

Paper number	4	5	6
Paper title	Strategic Dialogue in the Public Sector: An Exploratory Survey Study	Digital Transformation or Digital Standstill? Status quo bias in Swedish public sector strategies	Cognitive Consensus in Digital Transformation Strategy Formulation
Author(s)	Kristian Norling, Jonathan Crusoe, Nataliya Berbyuk-Lindström	Kristian Norling	Kristian Norling, Tomas Lindroth, Nataliya Berbyuk-Lindström
Outlet	Submitted	Submitted	Unfinished manuscript
Theoretical concepts	Strategic dialogue, Digital strategizing, Digital transformation	Digital transformation, Strategy content, Status quo bias, Organizational culture	Cognitive consensus, Consensus debt, Consensing, Digital transformation strategy, Strategic dialogue
Research question	How does the public sector enact strategic dialogue in the context of digital strategizing?	How does bureaucratic culture impact the content of digital transformation strategies within public sector organizations?	How is consensus enacted in digital transformation strategy formulation?

Table 7. Overview papers 4-6

PAPER 1: RHIZOMATIC STRATEGIZING IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

This paper explores the emergence of a digital transformation strategy-as-practice within a large Swedish municipality engaged in digital transformation since 2017. Grounded in the theoretical concept of the rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which emphasizes non-linear and emergent processes, the study investigates the evolution of the municipality's strategy in the absence of a formalized plan. The research also draws on the strategy-as-practice perspective, focusing on the enactment of strategies through continuous re-configuration and interactions rather than formal documentation.

The paper discusses the pivotal roles of dialogue, consensus, and alignment in driving digital transformation within a municipal setting. It underscores dialogue as a foundational element for the digital transformation team, particularly in accelerating their activities and broadening organizational engagement in the transformative journey. The emphasis is placed on the necessity of conversations as means not only for effective communication but also for fostering trust and mutual understanding. Additionally, the article infers the significance of consensus and alignment through the team's strategic initiatives, such as crafting a unified internal perspective on digitalization, aimed primarily at business development rather than societal impacts. This approach suggests a concerted effort to cultivate a collective agreement on the essence and objectives of digitalization within the organization.

The study employs a clinical field study methodology, involving iterative engagement with the municipality through weekly check-ins and thematic analysis of the collected data. The researchers actively influenced the digital transformation process, with findings communicated through reports that also impacted other public sector organizations.

The findings reveal that the municipality's digital transformation strategy emerged through a series of de- and reterritorializations, incorporating new concepts over time without relying on a formal strategy document. Key traits of this emergent strategy included a focus on reducing complexity, empowerment, anti-formalism, and the importance of trust and experimentation.

The originality of this paper lies in its application of the rhizomatic perspective to digital transformation strategizing, highlighting the value of non-linear and emergent processes. The study contributes to the understanding of digital transformation strategies by suggesting that organizations should foster an environment of trust and slack to allow strategies to emerge organically, rather than relying on formal design and execution. The research also proposes integrating operations and digital transformation teams to successfully navigate digital transformation.

The paper's limitations include its focus on a single case study within the Swedish public sector, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to further explore the rhizomatic perspective and its application to strategy development in various organizational contexts.

The practical implications of the study suggest that organizations engaged in digital transformation should embrace a more flexible and adaptive approach to strategizing, allowing strategies to emerge through continuous reconfiguration and experimentation. By fostering a supportive environment and integrating digital transformation efforts with ongoing operations, organizations can successfully navigate the complexities of digital transformation.

PAPER 2: DIGITAL DECOUPLING

This paper investigates the direction of digital transformation strategies in Swedish municipalities, responding to calls for more empirical studies on digital transformation in the public sector and new approaches to studying corporate strategies. The primary research question explores the dominant direction of these strategies, categorizing them based on their focus (external or internal) and activity type (efficiency or innovation).

The study builds upon previous research in eGovernment, Information Systems, and organizational ambidexterity theory. It employs a theoretical framework that classifies digital transformation strategies along two dimensions: focus and activity. This framework enables a nuanced understanding of the strategic orientation of municipalities in their digital transformation efforts.

The research methodology involves a population study of 290 Swedish municipalities, analyzing their top steering documents (goals and resourcing plans for 2021) through content analysis. Each municipality's digital transformation direction is categorized according to the established framework. Additionally, a descriptive contingency analysis is conducted to examine the influence of demographic factors on the direction of digital transformation strategies.

The findings reveal that Swedish municipalities predominantly focus their digital transformation strategies on internal value and efficiency activities rather than expanding the scope of value offerings to citizens. The study also identifies that goals and resource allocation related to digitalization are more frequently expressed in major cities, municipalities with financial surpluses, and those with right-wing political majorities. Notably, the paper introduces the concept of digital decoupling, highlighting the potential risks associated with separating digital initiatives from the municipality's operations and political governance, which may compromise the democratic foundation and equal access to digital welfare services.

The originality of this paper lies in its categorization of digital transformation strategies, which can inspire future studies, and its methodological approach to studying strategy-as-practice within the public sector. The identification of digital decoupling as an empirical phenomenon contributes to the understanding of digital transformation challenges in the public sector, warranting further research.

The study's limitations include its focus on Swedish municipalities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research could explore digital transformation strategies and the occurrence of digital decoupling in different countries and levels of government.

The paper has significant implications for practice, emphasizing the need for organizations to recouple digital transformation with political governance and be aware of the agnostic nature of digital transformation strategies. It also highlights the necessity for policy action to address the increasing inequality in access to digital welfare services resulting from the current direction of digital transformation strategies.

PAPER 3: STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE COVID PANDEMIC

This paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital transformation strategies within public sector organizations, addressing the research question: “Which digital transformation strategies have public sector organizations enacted during the pandemic?” The study contributes to the existing literature on digital transformation, digital transformation strategy, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on organizations, shedding light on the emergent nature of digital transformation strategies and the interplay between organizational and technological capabilities.

The research methodology leverages data from a national study on digital maturity initiated in 2017, involving over 300 organizations and more than 15,000 respondents. The data, assessed through a scientifically developed framework for digital maturity, provides insights into the evolution of organizational and technological capabilities during the pandemic.

The findings reveal two distinct digital transformation strategies enacted by public sector organizations during the pandemic. The first strategy, identified as “Strategy 2020,” focused on responding to the immediate, acute changes brought about by the pandemic, with an increased emphasis on technological capabilities (digital heritage) to accommodate the need for digital services. In contrast, “Strategy 2021” shifted towards prioritizing organizational capabilities over digital heritage, recognizing the prolonged nature of the pandemic and the need for more fundamental changes in operations and business development.

The originality of this paper lies in its extension of micro, case-based studies of digital transformation to a national, macro-level analysis, offering both empirical and methodological contributions. The study underscores the importance of examining the interplay between organizational and technological capabilities in the context of digital transformation strategies.

The paper’s limitations include the specific focus on public sector organizations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may limit the gen-

eralizability of the findings to other sectors or crisis situations. Future research could explore the longer-term implications of the identified strategic shifts and investigate the applicability of the findings to other organizational contexts.

The study has significant implications for both research and practice. For researchers, it highlights the value of macro-level analyses in understanding digital transformation strategies and the potential for further investigations into the dynamic interplay between organizational and technological capabilities. For practitioners, the findings offer insights that can inform the development and adaptation of digital transformation strategies in response to crises. Policymakers can also leverage the data to support data-driven decision-making and policy formulation, emphasizing the importance of grounding policies in a comprehensive understanding of the context.

PAPER 4: STRATEGIC DIALOGUE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

This paper investigates the enactment of strategic dialogue in the Swedish public sector's digital strategizing, focusing on the forms, forums, and actors involved. Theoretical insights from strategic management and organizational change literature inform the conceptual framework, highlighting dialogue's pivotal role in strategy formulation and implementation. Strategic dialogue, distinguished from general communication by its purposeful nature in shaping and implementing strategies, is central to aligning objectives and integrating deliberate and emergent strategies.

The paper discusses how strategic dialogue fosters shared understanding among stakeholders, facilitating the alignment of digital transformation objectives. By engaging various organizational actors in meaningful conversations, strategic dialogue aids in bridging the gap between intended strategies and emergent practices, ensuring a cohesive approach to digital transformation.

An exploratory survey methodology was employed, targeting managers and specialists involved in strategic dialogue related to digital transformation within the Swedish public sector. The paper examines the utilization of different forms and forums for dialogue in digital strategizing and the involvement of various actors, revealing the nuanced use of strategic dialogue in the public sector.

The findings indicate that strategic dialogue in the public sector is predominantly driven by top management and specialists, occurring mainly in formal meetings and workshops. This bureaucratic form of dialogue suggests a reliable yet rigid and closed strategizing process, potentially hindering the agility required for effective digital transformation.

The originality of this paper lies in its exploration of strategic dialogue within the context of digital strategizing in the public sector, providing insights into the complex interplay of dialogue forms, forums, and actors. It contributes to the literature by highlighting the nuanced role of dialogue in strategizing, particularly in the public sector.

The paper's limitations include its focus on the Swedish public sector, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore strategic dialogue in different national contexts and employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

Practical implications suggest that the public sector could benefit from adopting more inclusive and dynamic dialogue processes to improve the effectiveness of digital strategizing. Emphasizing the importance of fostering an open, collaborative dialogue environment can facilitate more agile and responsive strategizing practices.

PAPER 5: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OR DIGITAL STANDSTILL?

This paper delves into the impact of bureaucratic culture on the formulation and content of digital transformation strategies in Swedish local governments, focusing on understanding how such a culture influences strategic documents. It is anchored in the theoretical intersection of digital transformation, organizational culture, and strategic management. It explores the ramifications of entrenched bureaucratic norms and the propensity to uphold existing processes, which can significantly hinder transformative digital initiatives.

The paper sheds light on the role of strategic dialogue in navigating the complexities of digital transformation within a bureaucratic context. It emphasizes the necessity for continuous and inclusive conversations among stakeholders to foster alignment and collaborative decision-making. Moreover, it highlights the importance of shared understanding in achieving successful digital transformation, underscoring the need for a common conceptualization of digital objectives, processes, and expected outcomes across all levels of the organization.

Employing qualitative content analysis, the methodology involved a detailed examination of strategy documents from local governments. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the influence of bureaucratic culture on strategic content, drawing insights from themes such as agility, technology adoption, and organizational change. The analysis was driven by a concept-driven coding method, enabling a nuanced understanding of the strategic implications of bureaucratic culture on digital innovation efforts.

The findings reveal a pronounced status quo bias inherent in bureaucratic culture, significantly shaping the strategic approach to digital innovation, often limiting initiatives to incremental changes rather than transformative digital opportunities. This bias is reflected in the strategic documents, which, while recognizing critical elements of digital transformation strategies, frequently lack detailed action plans and concrete activities for implementation.

The originality of this paper lies in its elucidation of the nuanced role of bureaucratic culture in shaping digital transformation strategies within the public sector. By providing a unique insight into the Swedish context, it contributes valuable perspectives to the broader discourse on digital transformation and organizational culture.

The paper underscores the need for a more profound understanding of how organizational culture affects digital transformation, pointing to future research avenues, especially in exploring mechanisms to balance bureaucratic stability with digital agility.

Practically, the paper advocates for a culturally aware approach to digital transformation, recommending that policymakers and public sector managers incorporate cultural considerations to foster a more conducive environment for digital innovation within bureaucratic settings.

PAPER 6: COGNITIVE CONSENSUS IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY FORMULATION

This paper delves into the enactment of consensus in formulating digital transformation strategies within Swedish local governments, emphasizing the centrality of cognitive consensus for effective strategizing. Cognitive consensus is defined as the alignment of stakeholders' understanding regarding strategic intent, objectives, capabilities, and public value, highlighting its pivotal role in harmonizing organizational direction, and fostering coherent digital transformation efforts.

The paper foregrounds the process of *consensing*, a mechanism that nurtures shared understanding through dialogue among stakeholders. Consensing ensures that diverse perspectives are integrated by facilitating open and inclusive conversations, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to effective strategy formulation. This dialogic approach aligns stakeholders' perceptions and actively involves them in the strategizing process, enhancing commitment and alignment with the organizational vision.

The concept of *consensus debt* is introduced to capture the costs associated with gaps in shared understanding and alignment, drawing a parallel with *technical debt* in software development. The paper posits that inadequate cognitive consensus can have long-term detrimental effects on strategy formulation and implementation, underscoring the importance of mitigating consensus debt through effective consensing practices.

Employing qualitative research methods, the paper investigates the development of cognitive consensus in Swedish local governments, focusing on the role of consensing in strategy formulation. Through in-depth interviews and content analysis of strategic documents, the research elucidates the dynamics of strategic dialogue and shared understanding, offering insights into the practical enactment of consensus in the public sector.

The findings highlight the critical importance of consensing in mitigating consensus debt, showcasing the detrimental impacts of inadequate cognitive consensus on strategy formulation and execution. The paper contributes to the discourse on digital strategizing by elucidating the mechanisms of cognitive consensus building and the implications of consensus debt, providing valuable insights for enhancing public sector strategy-making processes.

The paper's focus on the Swedish public sector may limit the generalizability of its findings. Future research could extend the investigation to different national contexts and incorporate a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to broaden the applicability of the findings.

Practically, the paper suggests the need for more inclusive and dynamic dialogue processes in the public sector to improve the effectiveness of digital strategizing. Emphasizing open, collaborative dialogue can foster a more agile and responsive approach to strategy formulation, enhancing organizational adaptability and innovation in the face of digital transformation challenges.

11.1. SUMMARY OF ALL THE PAPERS

This collection of papers investigates digital transformation strategies within the Swedish public sector, spanning strategic direction, strategy content, dialogue, strategy formulation and cognitive consensus, and the impact of organizational culture. The research spans various theoretical frameworks, including rhizomatic strategizing, digital decoupling, and consensus-building, to analyze how public sector organizations navigate digital transformation challenges.

Dialogue is central to these studies, positioned as a mechanism for fostering collaboration and strategic alignment. The papers illustrate how purposeful communication among stakeholders facilitates the development and implementation of digital transformation strategies, emphasizing the role of dialogue in adapting to changing circumstances and integrating diverse perspectives.

Shared understanding is highlighted as crucial for successful digital transformation. The research underscores the need for aligning stakeholders' perceptions regarding strategic goals and digital initiatives, suggesting that a collective grasp of strategic objectives is fundamental to effective strategy execution.

The methodologies employed across the papers vary, including clinical field studies, population surveys, and qualitative content analyses. This diversity allows for a comprehensive examination of digital transformation from both macro and micro perspectives, contributing to a nuanced understanding of strategic processes in the public sector.

The findings shed light on the complexities of strategizing in a digital context, revealing how adaptive governance, strategic alignment, and stakeholder engagement are key to overcoming bureaucratic challenges. The research introduces concepts such as consensus debt and highlights the importance of balancing control and flexibility in strategy formulation.

The papers contribute to digital transformation literature by providing empirical insights into the strategic practices of Swedish public sector organizations.

They underscore the significance of dialogue and shared understanding in achieving strategic coherence and effectiveness.

Research limitations primarily pertain to the studies focus on the Swedish public sector, which may limit the applicability of findings to other contexts. The papers suggest avenues for future research, including exploring these themes in different organizational and cultural settings.

Practically, the research advocates for inclusive, dialogue-driven approaches to strategy formulation in the public sector. It emphasizes the need for environments that support open communication and consensus to enhance digital strategizing and organizational agility.

CHAPTER 12

DISCUSSION

“Know, first, who you are, and then adorn yourself accordingly.”

EPICETUS

The ancient wisdom in the quote above emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and understanding others, which are crucial elements in cognitive consensus-building. In the context of digital transformation strategy formulation, understanding stakeholders' diverse perspectives and cognitive dynamics is essential for strategizing.

This thesis has explored the critical role of consensing, a process of cognitive consensus-building through the mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, in aligning strategic intent and shared understanding among stakeholders during digital transformation strategy formulation in the Swedish public sector. It has argued that consensing, enabled by the organizational infrastructure of dialogue, leads to outcomes such as consensus surplus, deficit, or debt. The discussion chapter will now delve deeper into the implications of these findings, examining how they contribute to our understanding of effective digital transformation strategizing and the practical recommendations that emerge from this research.

12.1. RESEARCH QUESTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Research Question: How does cognitive consensus-building unfold in digital transformation strategy formulation?

To answer this central question, it is imperative to delve into the nuanced process of cognitive consensus-building or, rather, consensing. This process is crucial to public sector strategizing and involves individual and collective cognitive dynamics.

12.2. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONSENSUS

At the outset, consensus might be misconceived as a simple compromise lacking depth and substance. However, a more profound exploration, informed by dialectics and dialogue, unveils the essential role of cognitive conflict in forging cognitive consensus, a perspective significantly highlighted in the works of Innes (1995, 1996). This challenges the prevailing notions about consensus in organizations, positioning conflict not as a deterrent but as a central element in achieving shared understanding.

This thesis presents a new perspective on strategy formulation through a cognitive consensus-building process, i.e., consensing, contributing to the digital strategizing literature. It conceptualizes the consensus surplus and deficit, which can lead to consensus debt, enhancing the understanding of consensus as an outcome. These novel concepts provide a more nuanced understanding of consensus outcomes, enabling researchers and practitioners to assess the effectiveness of the consensing process and its impact on strategy formulation. By identifying and addressing consensus surpluses or deficits, organizations can better align their strategic goals with the shared understanding among stakeholders, ultimately leading to more successful strategy implementation.

12.3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mechanism-based theorizing significantly aided the process of understanding consensus-building. This approach, rooted in abductive and retroductive research techniques, allowed a nuanced exploration of the mechanisms underlying consensus-building. By adopting a critical realist perspective, the research evolved through a recursive process of engaging with empirical data and theoretical insights, gradually building on initial hunches. Drawing on two decades of practical experience in the Swedish public sector, this iterative approach yielded a deep understanding of consensus-building, contributing to a detailed framework for strategy formulation in the public sector.

Mechanism-based theorizing involved iteratively moving between empirical data and theoretical insights to identify the underlying mechanisms of the consensing process. Abductive reasoning was employed to generate plausible explanations for the observed phenomena, while retroductive techniques were used to identify the necessary conditions for the consensing mechanisms to operate. Adopting a critical realist stance has fundamentally shaped my research. This perspective has enabled me to delve deeper into objective realities and subjective social interpretations that are focal in strategy formulation, highlighting the significant role of cognitive consensus-building in mediating this intricate interplay. For example, it influenced the incorporation of cognitive conflict, as underscored in Innes' work (2004), and its central role in consensing, thereby challenging prevailing misconceptions about organizational consensus as a bland compromise. This approach has encouraged a thorough and multilayered exploration of the complex dynamics at play, promoting a critical and in-depth engagement with existing research rather than just a surface-level analysis.

The conceptual framework of consensing presented in this thesis is grounded in Abonyi's (1978) and Postner's (1976) early work on consensing. By extending the notion of consensing to the context of digital transformation strategy formulation, this research highlights the relevance of consensing in navigating the partly conflicting perceptions, interests, interdependence, and dispersement of information and control that characterize the digital age. The mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, along with the three dialogue mechanisms, provide a means for organizations to address these challenges and the alignment of shared understanding among stakeholders.

This conceptual exploration sets the stage for confronting the practical challenges in strategic management, particularly the alignment between an organization's intended strategies and the strategies that are actually realized. It underscores the necessity of bridging the gap between theoretical consensus-building and actionable strategic outcomes.

12.4. ALIGNMENT

As outlined in the previous sections, the consensing framework plays a crucial role in facilitating the alignment of intended and realized strategies in digital transformation. As we move forward, it becomes evident that the key to effective strategizing is aligning intended strategies with realized ones. Achieving this alignment requires a thorough examination of the gaps that exist within organizational processes. These gaps can take various forms, such as discrepancies between what is said and what is done or divergence between perceptions and subsequent actions. Identifying and addressing these gaps is crucial to meeting strategic objectives.

12.5. CHALLENGES OF RESPONDING TO UNFAMILIAR PROBLEMS

Organizations often struggle with a recurring issue in which there is a gap between what they say and what they do. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between what they believe and what they do. Organizations tend to respond with familiar solutions even when faced with new and unfamiliar challenges. This tendency is reinforced by organizational path dependency (Sydow & Schreyögg, 2015), logical incrementalism (Quinn, 1980), and established assumptions (Mason, 1969; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979). This recurring pattern of applying familiar solutions to unfamiliar problems creates a significant gap between the intended and realized strategies. Consensing can help organizations overcome these challenges by fostering a shared understanding among stakeholders and enabling them to explore new solutions collectively. By engaging in open dialogue and challenging established assumptions, organizations can develop more adaptive and effective strategies aligning their goals with the realized outcomes.

Furthermore, a gradual misalignment between an organization's strategy and its environment leads to a strategic drift, causing a drift of digital transformation (F. Carlsson et al., 2023). This emphasizes the importance of addressing the differences between the intended and realized strategies

and developing organizational responses that are flexible and consistent with the strategic intent. It also underscores the need to constantly question established assumptions, another situation where consensing can be helpful.

Dealing with the problem of responding in familiar ways to unfamiliar problems requires challenging the established norms of the existing culture. One way to achieve this is by introducing diverse perspectives, such as continuously employing devil's advocacy. On the other hand, when faced with unfamiliar and complex situations, it becomes crucial to narrow down the available options. Organizations are compelled to select and scrutinize a single path from many possibilities, often resorting to preliminary studies, drafting reports, or dismissing the issue as irrelevant. Occasionally, problems may escalate, only to be met with similar responses or relegated down the hierarchical ladder for further examination, typically culminating in preliminary studies or reports. This cycle illustrates the need for consensing as one possible way to bypass the traditional strategy hierarchy, which can lead to more decisive and unified outcomes.

12.6. DISCREPANCY BETWEEN DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

Another common issue that highlights the need for consensing is the discrepancy between decisions made in meetings and the subsequent actions taken by individuals. Despite reaching unanimous decisions at meetings, subsequent actions often betray a reluctance to deviate from established routines, with individuals reverting to their usual practices. Although there are exceptions, they are generally perceived as novice errors. Experienced managers, adept at navigating political landscapes, typically adopt a cautious approach, awaiting others to initiate action.

It is crucial to re-assess the traditional interpretation of consensus and strategizing. Instead, organizations should adopt a more flexible approach

considering the interplay between conflict and cooperation. This requires critically examining current practices and a willingness to explore new avenues guided by collaboration and decisive action.

The central theme of this thesis has been consensing as a mechanism that contributes to strategy formulation by building cognitive consensus, i.e., shared understanding. I have argued that consensing, an iterative process involving sensing and synthesizing, promotes shared understanding within organizations, leading to consensus outcomes with a significant impact on strategy formulation. This comprehensive perspective on consensing illuminates the dynamics involved in dialogue and the formation of consensing outcomes.

As highlighted, consensing is crucial in balancing intended and realized strategies. The sensing aspect of consensing is vital to unveiling and making the realized strategy explicit, while synthesizing facilitates alignment of realized and intended strategy. It also allows for exploring the *adjacent possible*, what is viable for the organization given its current capabilities and strategic intent.

12.7. COMPARISON WITH RELATED CONCEPTS

To fully grasp the distinctive nature of consensing, it is essential to compare and contrast it with related concepts in the literature. As discussed in the previous section, the alignment of intended and realized strategies highlights the importance of understanding the nuanced process of consensing in digital transformation. To further clarify the distinctive nature of consensing, the following section compares and contrasts it with related concepts such as sensemaking, consensus-building, and strategic consensus. To deepen our understanding of consensing, it is necessary to differentiate it from related concepts such as sensemaking, the dynamic capability of sensing, consensus-building, and strategic consensus. Let us briefly discuss these differences.

12.7.1. DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES

Although the dynamic capabilities perspective initially seemed a promising lens to study consensing, upon further discussion, it appears that the external focus and the emphasis on strategic renewal in dynamic capabilities do not significantly contribute to understanding consensing. As I have framed it, consensing involves a broader scope of interactions, adding an internal perspective, and is not restricted to strategic renewal alone. Adding an internal perspective is similar to how the 5S organizational agility framework (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018) divides dynamic capabilities into sensing, searching, seizing, shifting, and shaping. The inward-looking capabilities are; “Searching: The ability to create new opportunities within the organization... Shifting: The ability to effectively implement new strategy, business model and capabilities.” (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018, p. 337). However, I used the notion of sensing and the 5S framework as an inspiration for consensing.

12.7.2. CONSENSUS-BUILDING

Consening emphasizes building a cognitive consensus, although related to consensus-building (Innes, 1995, 1996). A shared understanding, rather than just reaching an agreement, i.e., consensus as an outcome. While consensus-building focuses on negotiation and compromise to reach common ground, consensing nurtures the generative potential of dialogue (Kent & Lane, 2021) that values diverse inputs. Consensing engages deeply in exploring practical and achievable options for the organization. It fosters a dynamic and responsive process that is more nuanced than the more linear and agreement-focused consensus-building. What is similar is the focus on the process itself, perhaps the most critical outcome of consensus-building and consensing.

12.7.3. SENSEMAKING

Consensing, with its roots in Innes' work on consensus-building (Innes, 1995, 1996), diverges from sensemaking in several key respects, even as it shares some commonalities. As originally conceptualized by Weick (Weick, 1993), sensemaking is rooted in individual cognition and involves interpreting ambiguous situations based on personal experiences. However, more recent research has recognized the social and intersubjective aspects of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Consensing extends the sensemaking process to a collective level, fostering shared understanding through dialogue. It is an iterative and reflexive process that integrates individual accounts into a shared understanding, which is central to strategy formulation, especially in organizational cultures based on a consensus culture.

Moreover, while sensemaking often focuses on the retrospective interpretation of past events (Weick, 1995), consensing is more future-oriented, leveraging dialogue to co-create new shared understandings to guide future strategic action. The consensing approach is forward-looking, facilitating the coevolution of shared understanding and strategic intent to build a collectively constructed outcome that guides collective action and strategic decisions. In this sense, consensing could be seen as a particular form of collective strategic sensemaking (Rouleau, 2005) that is especially relevant in consensus-oriented organizational cultures. However, its distinctive focus on dialogue, collective processes, and future-oriented co-creation of meaning sets it apart as a specific type of collective strategic sensemaking. For instance, consider a hypothetical situation where a municipality faces public criticism over a delayed infrastructure project. They might engage in sensemaking to interpret what had gone wrong. In contrast, consensing could play a key role as they proactively formulate a strategy for better project governance going forward. The Nordhaven case (Norling, 2024) also illustrates how consensing differs from related constructs like sensemaking. While sensemaking was likely involved as participants interpreted the evolving strategic context, consensing played a key role as they proac-

tively formulated a shared strategy for digital transformation. The focus was on co-creating a future-oriented understanding, not just interpreting past events.

12.7.4. STRATEGIC CONSENSUS

Contrary to strategic consensus (Bragaw & Misangyi, 2022; Meyfroodt, 2020), consensing is not merely about achieving alignment or agreement on strategic decisions but is a process-oriented approach that values dialogue, reflection, and building a shared understanding. It recognizes what diverse perspectives can bring to strategy formulation, thus co-creating a shared understanding through an iterative and reflexive process that shapes collective thinking and action. This approach engages deeply with strategic context and climate, incorporating concepts like the adjacent possible to navigate the interplay between present realities and potential futures, offering a dynamic and reflexive approach to building shared understanding compared to the outcome-focused perspective of strategic consensus.

This section has differentiated consensing from dynamic capabilities, consensus-building, sensemaking, and strategic consensus, highlighting its unique focus on fostering shared understanding through iterative, future-oriented, and dialogue-driven processes.

12.8. CONSENSUS OUTCOMES

Having distinguished consensing from related concepts, it is crucial to shift our focus to the outcomes of the consensing process. The following section explores the notions of consensus surplus, deficit, and debt, which serve as vital indicators of the effectiveness of consensing in digital transformation strategy formulation. When shifting the focus from the process-oriented nature of consensing, it is essential to recapitulate the outcomes as indicators of consensing effectiveness. The effectiveness of the consensing process can be assessed by examining its outcomes, namely consensus surplus, deficit, and debt.

12.8.1. CONSENSUS SURPLUS AND DEFICIT

The consensus outcomes, *consensus surplus* or *deficit*, are vital indicators of the effectiveness of consensing. A consensus surplus indicates a strong alignment between individual interpretations and organizational strategy, facilitating commitment to strategy and action. On the contrary, a consensus deficit may signify dissonance, potentially leading to inertia or resistance, adversely affecting strategy implementation. However, both surplus and deficit are not static states but the outcomes of a dynamic process. This points to the potential for the management of consensus through dialogue, either by mitigating a deficit by fostering shared understanding or calibrating a surplus by encouraging diverse perspectives.

12.8.2. CONSENSUS DEBT

The discussion on consensing also introduces the notion of *consensus debt*. Drawing parallels with technical debt from software development, consensus debt signifies an incomplete dialogue and an underdeveloped shared understanding, leading to delayed or suboptimal strategic actions. It opens new avenues for researching how organizations can identify, measure, and manage consensus debt.

The exploration of consensus outcomes underscores the dynamic nature of consensing and the potential for organizations to actively manage and shape these outcomes through dialogue and iterative processes. Consensus outcomes, including consensus surplus, deficit, and debt, underscore the importance of effectively managing the consensing process to ensure successful strategy formulation and implementation. Building upon these insights, the following section examines the practical implications of the consensing framework, focusing on fostering a culture of consensing and managing consensus outcomes in organizational contexts.

12.9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although mostly theoretical, this discussion has practical implications as well. For example, organizations could improve their strategic decision-making and implementation by fostering a culture that encourages open, integrative dialogue, promotes consensing, and effectively manages consensus outcomes. Therefore, understanding and applying consensing could significantly enhance the efficacy of strategy formulation.

12.9.1. FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CONSENSING

To effectively implement consensing in Swedish public sector organizations, aligning the process with the existing organizational culture is crucial. As discussed in the thesis, the Swedish management style is characterized by a strong emphasis on consensus, equality, teamwork, and conflict avoidance (Gustavsson, 1995; Salminen-Karlsson, 2013). This cultural context provides a solid foundation for fostering a culture of consensing in digital transformation strategy formulation.

To cultivate a culture of consensing, organizations should:

- *Encourage open dialogue and diverse perspectives:* Promote an environment where all stakeholders feel comfortable sharing their views and ideas. This aligns with the Swedish cultural expectation of lagom (moderation) and the Jante Law, which values collective well-being and social harmony (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2018; Scott, 2022).
- *Emphasize collaboration and teamwork:* Leverage the existing Swedish management culture that values teamwork and 'soft' management (Salminen-Karlsson, 2013) to facilitate consensing. Encourage cross-functional collaboration and break down silos to foster shared understanding.

- *Ensure transparency and inclusivity:* In line with the principle of public access to information in Sweden (Government Offices, 2020), make the consensing process transparent and inclusive. Involve a broad range of stakeholders, including employees at various levels, to ensure diverse perspectives are considered.
- *Training and support:* Offer training and support to help employees develop the skills necessary for effective consensing (see chapter 8.6). This will enable them to navigate the complexities of building shared understanding in digital transformation strategy formulation.

By fostering a culture of consensing that aligns with the existing Swedish organizational culture, public sector organizations can more effectively navigate the challenges of digital transformation and develop strategies that have broad support and buy-in from stakeholders. This approach leverages the strengths of the Swedish management style while introducing a structured process for building shared understanding and alignment around digital transformation goals.

12.9.2. MANAGING CONSENSUS OUTCOMES

Effectively managing consensus outcomes is crucial for successfully implementing digital transformation strategies in Swedish public sector organizations. As discussed in the thesis, the outcomes of the consensing process can be either a consensus surplus or a consensus deficit, with the potential for consensus debt (Norling, Lindroth, et al., 2024). To manage consensus outcomes, organizations should:

- *Monitor consensus surplus and deficit:* Regularly assess the level of collective commitment and understanding in relation to the requirements for action. This can be done through surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions with stakeholders involved in the strategy formulation.

- *Address consensus deficit:* If a consensus deficit is identified, take steps to bridge the gap between the current level of shared understanding and the level required for effective strategy implementation. This may involve additional dialogue sessions, clarifying strategic intent, or providing more resources to support the consensing process.
- *Calibrate consensus surplus:* In cases where collective commitment and understanding exceed the requirements for action, consider whether the surplus can be leveraged to support other strategic initiatives or if it needs to be moderated to maintain focus on the current strategy.
- *Manage consensus debt:* Be proactive in identifying and addressing instances of consensus debt, where incomplete dialogue or underdeveloped shared understanding may lead to suboptimal strategic actions. This can be done by regularly reviewing the progress of the consensing process and ensuring that all stakeholders have had sufficient opportunities to contribute and develop a shared understanding.
- *Embed consensus monitoring in governance structures:* Integrate the monitoring and management of consensus outcomes into the organization's existing governance structures and processes. This may involve incorporating consensus metrics into performance management systems or establishing dedicated roles or committees responsible for overseeing the consensing process.

By actively monitoring and managing consensus outcomes, Swedish public sector organizations can ensure that the shared understanding developed through the consensing process translates into effective strategic action. This proactive approach can help prevent the accumulation of consensus debt and facilitate the successful implementation of digital transformation strategies.

The practical implications of the consensing framework, including fostering a culture of consensing and managing consensus outcomes, underscore

the potential for organizations to enhance their strategic decision-making and implementation processes. Building upon these practical insights, the next section highlights this thesis's contributions to the literature on digital strategizing.

12.10. CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis offers several significant contributions to digital strategizing. First, it reintroduces the notion of consensing, addressing the gaps in the existing literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of consensus-building in organizations. Consensing emphasizes the iterative and reflexive nature of reaching shared meaning between stakeholders, highlighting the coevolution of shared understanding through input, dialogue, and collective reflection. By reintroducing consensing, the proposal expands the theoretical toolkit for studying strategizing. Second, integrating theoretical perspectives of consensing improves the understanding of digital strategizing. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights, consensing offers a comprehensive and flexible framework for interpreting the emergence of shared understanding and its influence on collective action. Third, consensing aligns with the challenges of digital transformation, positioning it as a wicked problem and emphasizing the need for collaboration and collective social action. It recognizes that traditional approaches to strategizing may need to be revised to address the complexities and uncertainties of digital transformation. By highlighting the role of consensing as an adaptive mechanism, it offers a potential solution to strategizing in the digital age.

12.11. LIMITATIONS

However, like all research, this thesis has limitations, which open avenues for future research. First, while I present a theoretical model of consensing with some empirical support, more empirical research is required to

validate and refine this model. Furthermore, longitudinal case studies in various organizational contexts would be beneficial for observing and analyzing consensing in action and its effects on strategy formulation.

Second, my study operates primarily at the strategic organizational level, focusing on strategic dialogue to balance planned and realized strategy. It would be worth examining how consensing works at other levels, such as the operational level, that is, the tactical level.

Third, I have outlined boundary conditions for consensing. However, a more detailed exploration of these conditions and how they influence consensing would provide more comprehensive insights.

Finally, cognitive conflict has been considered central to consensing. Future research could investigate this aspect more thoroughly, examining how cognitive conflict is managed within the consensing process and how it contributes to the consensus outcome.

Given these considerations, my thesis sets the groundwork for a promising line of inquiry. By exploring consensing and its implications, I hope to contribute to a richer understanding of the complexities of strategy formulation in organizations.

12.12. FUTURE RESEARCH

The propositions presented in the previous chapter provide a robust foundation for future empirical investigations into the consensing framework and its implications for strategy formulation. Building upon these propositions, this chapter outlines a comprehensive research agenda that can advance our understanding of consensing dynamics, antecedents, and outcomes in digital transformation.

12.12.1. ANTECEDENTS OF CONSENSING

Propositions 1 and 3 focus on the antecedents of consensing, specifically the role of diverse inputs and cognitive conflict in shaping the depth and breadth of shared understanding. To investigate these relationships, future research could employ a combination of qualitative case studies and quantitative surveys. In-depth case studies of organizations undergoing digital transformation could provide rich insights into how incorporating diverse perspectives and managing cognitive conflict influence the consensing process. Researchers could conduct interviews with key stakeholders, observe strategy formulation meetings, and analyze relevant documents to capture the nuances of these dynamics.

Complementing the case studies, large-scale surveys could be administered to a broader sample of organizations to quantitatively assess the impact of input diversity and cognitive conflict on consensing outcomes. Hypotheses could be developed to test the proposed positive relationships between diversity, conflict, and shared understanding using established measures of cognitive diversity (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001), task conflict (Jehn, 1995), and consensus (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Structural equation modeling techniques could be employed to analyze the survey data and identify the strength and significance of the hypothesized relationships.

The findings from these studies could contribute to the literature on strategic decision-making, team diversity, and conflict management while also informing managerial practices related to stakeholder engagement and facilitation of constructive dialogue in strategy formulation.

12.12.2. CONSENSING MECHANISMS AND OUTCOMES

Propositions 2, 4, and 5 focus on the mechanisms and outcomes of consensing, examining the interplay between sensing and synthesizing, the impact of initial cognitive consensus on strategy formulation speed, and the role of dialogue in shaping consensing dynamics. A combination of

longitudinal case studies, experimental designs, and computational modeling could be employed to investigate these relationships. Longitudinal case studies could provide a rich, processual understanding of how sensing and synthesizing mechanisms unfold over time and influence the integration of intended and realized strategies. Researchers could conduct periodic interviews with decision-makers, observe strategy formulation and implementation activities, and collect real-time data on strategic actions and outcomes. Within- and cross-case analyses could be performed to identify patterns and insights into the dynamic interplay of consensing mechanisms.

Experimental studies could be designed to test the causal impact of initial cognitive consensus on strategy formulation speed. Researchers could manipulate the level of initial agreement among participants in a simulated strategy formulation task and measure the time taken to reach a decision. Various scenarios and decision contexts could be explored to assess the generalizability of the findings.

Computational modeling techniques, such as agent-based modeling (Davis et al., 2007), could simulate the impact of different dialogue mechanisms on consensing dynamics. By modeling the interactions among agents with diverse preferences and information, researchers could systematically explore how various dialogue configurations influence the emergence of shared understanding and consensus. The findings from these simulations could inform the design of more effective dialogue interventions in real-world strategy formulation processes.

The insights from these studies could contribute to the literature on strategy process research, organizational communication, and group decision-making while providing actionable recommendations for managers seeking to optimize consensing dynamics and outcomes in their organizations.

12.12.3. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND TEMPORAL DYNAMICS

Propositions 6 and 7 focus on the boundary conditions and temporal dynamics that shape the effectiveness of consensing. A combination of comparative case studies, survey-based research, and temporal analysis techniques could be employed to investigate these factors. Comparative case studies could be conducted across organizations operating in different industries, cultures, and strategic contexts to identify the boundary conditions that influence consensing dynamics and outcomes. Researchers could collect data through interviews, observations, and archival sources to develop a nuanced understanding of how factors such as environmental uncertainty, organizational structure, and decision-making norms shape the consensing process.

Survey-based research could be used to quantitatively assess the moderating effects of identified boundary conditions on the relationship between consensing and its outcomes. Scales could be developed or adapted to measure the relevant constructs and hierarchical linear modeling techniques could be employed to analyze the cross-level interactions between organizational and individual factors.

To capture the temporal dynamics of consensing, researchers could employ time-series analysis techniques, such as event history analysis (Allison, 2014) or latent growth curve modeling (Duncan & Duncan, 2004). These methods could be used to examine how consensing processes and outcomes evolve over time, identifying critical inflection points, feedback loops, and path dependencies. Researchers could collect longitudinal data through repeated surveys, diary studies, or real-time tracking of strategic actions to enable these temporal analyses.

The findings from these studies could contribute to the literature on contingency theory, temporal perspectives in strategy research, and the micro-foundations of strategic decision-making. The insights could also help managers adapt their consensing approaches to different contexts and optimize the timing and pacing of their strategy formulation processes.

12.12.4. BALANCING STRATEGY FORMULATION SPEED AND DEPTH

Proposition 8 focuses on the moderating effect of balancing strategy formulation speed and depth on consensing outcomes. To investigate this relationship, a combination of experimental vignette methodology and survey-based studies could be employed.

Experimental vignette studies could manipulate the conditions of strategy formulation speed and depth, exposing participants to different scenarios and measuring the impact on perceived consensus outcomes. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Aguinis and Bradley (2014) for designing and implementing experimental vignette methodology studies.

Simultaneously, surveys could be conducted across organizations to quantitatively measure the moderating effects of speed and depth on consensus outcomes, such as consensus surplus or deficit. This approach would align with the construct measurement and validation guidelines proposed by MacKenzie et al. (2011).

The findings from these studies could contribute to the literature on strategic decision-making, highlighting the importance of balancing the need for swift action with the benefits of thorough deliberation in the consensing process. The insights could also inform managerial practices, guiding leaders in optimizing the pace and depth of their strategy formulation efforts to achieve desired consensus outcomes.

12.12.5. INTEGRATION AND EXTENSION

While the proposed research agenda outlines distinct streams of investigation, there is significant potential for integration and cross-fertilization across the propositions. Future research could explore the interrelationships between the antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes, and boundary

conditions of consensing, developing a more holistic understanding of the framework. For example, researchers could examine how the impact of diverse inputs on consensing outcomes is moderated by the nature of the strategic context or the effectiveness of dialogue interventions. Similarly, the influence of initial cognitive consensus on strategy formulation speed could be studied in conjunction with the sensing and synthesizing mechanisms, examining how these factors jointly shape the integration of intended and realized strategies.

Future research could also extend the consensing framework by exploring additional antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes that may be relevant to digital transformation. For instance, researchers could investigate the role of digital technologies and platforms in enabling or constraining consensing dynamics or examine the impact of consensing on organizational agility, innovation performance, or stakeholder buy-in.

Furthermore, several key questions emerge from the propositions and the overall consensing framework that warrant further investigation:

- *How can the consensing process be adapted to different organizational contexts and cultures?* Future research could explore the cultural and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of consensing approaches, such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, or industry dynamics. Comparative case studies or cross-cultural surveys could shed light on the boundary conditions and adaptations necessary for successful consensing in diverse settings.
- *What are the key factors that influence the effectiveness of consensing in digital transformation strategy formulation?* Researchers could examine the specific characteristics of digital transformation initiatives that enable or hinder effective consensing, such as the complexity of the technology, the scope of the transformation, or the level of stakeholder involvement. Qualitative studies or factorial experiments could help identify the critical success factors and develop contingency models for consensing effectiveness.

- *How can organizations measure and monitor consensus outcomes, such as consensus surplus or deficit, and what are the implications for strategy implementation?* Future research could focus on developing and validating measurement scales for consensus outcomes, as well as exploring the relationship between these outcomes and various indicators of strategy implementation success, such as goal attainment, resource allocation, or stakeholder commitment. Longitudinal surveys or action research projects could provide insights into the dynamics and consequences of consensus outcomes over time.
- *What are the long-term effects of consensing on organizational performance and adaptability in the face of digital transformation?* Researchers could investigate the impact of consensing approaches on an organization's ability to navigate and thrive in rapidly changing digital environments. Studies could examine the relationship between consensing practices and various measures of organizational performance, such as financial metrics, market share, or innovation outcomes, as well as indicators of adaptability, such as strategic flexibility, learning orientation, or resilience. Longitudinal designs or event studies could help capture the long-term effects and temporal dynamics of consensing in digital transformation.

By incorporating these questions into the future research agenda, scholars can further advance our understanding of the consensing framework and its application. The insights generated through these lines of inquiry can provide valuable guidance for organizations seeking to optimize their consensing practices and navigate the challenges of digital disruption effectively.

12.12.6. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To advance the consensing research agenda, rigorous and diverse methodological approaches must be employed. While the proposed studies outline specific methodological suggestions, future research could benefit from a broader range of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs.

Quantitative studies could leverage advanced statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, multilevel modeling, or social network analysis, to capture the complex relationships and interdependencies inherent in the consensing framework.

Qualitative studies could employ innovative data collection methods, such as video ethnography, narrative analysis, or participatory action research, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences and sensemaking processes of individuals involved in consensing.

Mixed-methods designs that integrate quantitative and qualitative data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of consensing dynamics. They would allow researchers to triangulate findings, explore divergent perspectives, and develop contextualized theories. Combining surveys, interviews, observations, and archival data could help researchers capture the multifaceted nature of consensing and enhance the validity and generalizability of their findings.

In addition to these methodological considerations, future research could prioritize engaged scholarship and collaborative research approaches. Partnering with organizations undergoing digital transformation, involving practitioners in the research process, and co-creating knowledge with stakeholders could ensure the relevance and impact of the research findings. Engaged scholarship approaches, such as clinical inquiry (Schein, 2008) or design science research (Hevner et al., 2004), could help bridge the gap between theory and practice and contribute to developing evidence-based management practices.

12.12.7. SUMMARY OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The future research agenda outlined in this chapter provides a roadmap for advancing the study of consensing. Researchers can refine and extend the conceptual framework presented in this thesis by empirically investigating the propositions related to the antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes, and boundary conditions of consensing. The proposed studies, spanning a range of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives, offer opportunities for contribution to multiple streams of literature, including strategic management, organizational behavior, and communication research. The findings from these studies can inform the development of evidence-based practices for fostering effective consensing dynamics in organizations undergoing digital transformation.

Moreover, by embracing engaged scholarship and collaborative research approaches, future research on consensing can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring the relevance and impact of the findings for managers and organizations. The insights generated through this research agenda can empower leaders to navigate the complexities of digital transformation, foster shared understanding among stakeholders, and drive successful strategic outcomes. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the need for effective consensing approaches will only grow.

By advancing the research agenda outlined in this chapter, scholars and practitioners can collaborate to build a robust and actionable knowledge base on consensing, ultimately contributing to organizations' success and resilience in the face of digital disruption.

CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSION

*“He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he
has not, but rejoices for those which he has.”*

EPICETUS

This thesis has presented a multifaceted examination of digital transformation strategy within the Swedish public sector, weaving together insights from the literature on strategic management, organizational communication, and digital transformation to develop a novel framework for understanding and facilitating the formation of cognitive consensus in strategy formulation. It argues that consensing, a process of cognitive consensus-building through the mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, plays a critical role in aligning strategic intent and shared understanding among stakeholders during digital transformation strategy formulation. This consensing process is enabled by the organizational infrastructure of dialogue, which encompasses generative, diagnostic, and integrative dialogue types that facilitate the development of shared understanding.

The thesis has explored the conceptualization of consensus as a dynamic and iterative process that challenges traditional views of consensus as a static outcome. By integrating the role of cognitive conflict, dialogue mechanisms, and consensus outcomes (surplus, deficit, debt), the consensing framework advances our understanding of how shared understanding emerges and evolves in digital strategizing. The research findings underscore how the mechanisms of sensing and synthesizing, facilitated by generative, diagnostic, and integrative dialogue, contribute to the development of a shared cognitive foundation for strategic action. The novel

concepts of consensus surplus, deficit, and debt introduced in this study provide a nuanced understanding of the outcomes of the consensing process and their implications for strategy implementation.

The insights gained from this research contribute to various streams of literature, enriching strategy formulation theories, organizational communication, and digital transformation. The consensing framework highlights the importance of fostering a culture of open dialogue, managing consensus outcomes, and leveraging digital tools to support effective strategy formulation processes. These findings offer practical guidance for organizations navigating the complexities of digital transformation and seeking to align their strategic actions with their unique contexts and goals.

Although this thesis has focused on the strategic organizational level within the Swedish public sector, the consensing framework holds potential for broader application and impact. Future research can explore the dynamics of consensing at different organizational levels, investigate boundary conditions, and conduct longitudinal case studies to further validate and refine the framework. The propositions developed in this thesis provide a roadmap for empirical work on consensing and its impact on strategy formulation, inviting scholars to build upon and extend the insights gained from this research.

As organizations grapple with the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation, the need for effective strategies that foster shared understanding and align strategic actions becomes increasingly critical. The consensing framework introduced in this thesis offers a timely and relevant contribution to this effort, providing a foundation for research and practice to support the success and resilience of organizations in the digital age.

In conclusion, this thesis affirms the central argument that consensing plays a vital role in aligning strategic intent and shared understanding in digital transformation strategy formulation. By shedding light on the cognitive dynamics of consensus-building and offering a novel conceptual framework, this research contributes to the evolving discourse on digital strategizing and provides actionable insights for organizations striving to navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation. The journey ahead requires ongoing research, reflection, and adaptation as we collectively strive to understand and harness the transformative potential of digital technologies while remaining grounded in the fundamental human processes of communication, collaboration, and consensus-building.

EPILOGUE

*“Tell me the reality is better than the dream, but I found out the
hard way, nothing is what it seems!”*

SLIPKNOT, DUALITY.

Three years later, this journey reached its destination after reading over 1300 publications, written 10, creating more than 100 framework sketches, and going on numerous reflective walks with the dog. It has been a privilege to spend so much time thinking. I end this thesis with a favorite quote by Marcus Aurelius:

“The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.”

Finis.

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