The Role of Task and Process Conflict in Strategizing

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The implementation of strategic initiatives is central to organizational success (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003). Recent studies show that implementation does not simply operationalize and execute strategy, but also results in subtle adjustments or explicit reformulations of strategy content (Sminia & de Rond, 2012; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Strategy implementation is thus central to effective strategizing. Yet, strategy implementation is complex, partially because it is critically affected by human dynamics like resistance (Courpasson et al, 2013), politics (Whittle et al, 2013) and tension (Jarzabkowski et al, 2013). Rather than indicators of failure, such dynamics are an integral part of how organizations negotiate multiple goals (Denis et al, 2001, 2007; Johnson et al, 2003) and can improve the quality of strategy (Normann, 1977; Pettigrew, 1977). It is thus important to understand the human dynamics underlying strategy implementation.

While strategy scholars have studied the role of dynamics such as resistance, politics, and tensions during strategy implementation, little focus has been put on conflict. This is surprising as (i) conflict is specifically about incompatibility of goals, processes and relationships (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003), which are central to strategy implementation; (ii) conflict significantly impacts organizational outcomes such as performance (De Wit *et al.*, 2012) and helps develop organizational capability (Danneels, 2008; Hinthorne, 1996); (iii) all organizations are affected by conflict to some degree (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008); and (iv) conflict often precedes resistance, politics and tensions (Courpasson et al, 2013; Jarzabkowski et al, 2013; Whittle et al, 2013). Hence, conflict is a critical dynamic for strategist to understand.

The few studies explicitly investigating conflict in the strategy process tend to focus on formulation by studying strategic decisions (e.g. Amason, 1996; Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1999; Eisenhardt et al, 1997). Such studies show that conflict leads to increased scrutiny of information and, consequently, better decisions (Eisenhardt, 1999; Kellermanns et al, 2008; Mooney et al, 2007). There has been little attention to conflict during strategy implementation (exceptions: Floyd & Lane, 2000; Regnér, 2003). Conflict is likely to impact implementation but do not know how. That is our focus.

Employing a strategizing perspective, we theorize the role of human dynamics in strategy implementation, focusing on conflict. We then investigate these ideas in a detailed longitudinal study of implementing a strategy in real-time, highlighting the importance of task and process conflict. Our study shows that the interaction of task and process conflict, and the responses this interaction evokes, enables strategy to emerge as actors implement it. Both conflict types enable actors to

identify strategy problems, but the recursive relationship between them is critical in iteratively shaping the emergence of strategy content and process. Managers iterate back and forth between strategy process and strategy content issues as they experience and respond to process *and* task conflict. This iteration is critical, as actors cannot define all strategy content and process in advance and must follow an incremental, process-based feedback loop, identifying and resolving problems as these emerge during implementation. We contribute to understanding of how strategy content emerges during implementation. Specifically, we show that conflict is revelatory of the emergent process of strategy implementation and thus integral to how managers strategize in practice.

A Strategizing Perspective

This paper adopts a strategizing perspective, which implies a focus on "the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life *and* which relate to strategic outcomes" (Johnson et al, 2003: 3). In line with the turn toward practice in organization studies (Orlikowski, 1992, 2000; Schatzki et al, 2001), this requires shifting focus away from strategy as a static input or output toward strategy as a dynamic set of activities enacted by individuals (Jarzabkowski, 2005). *Strategizing* has important implications for how we view and study strategy (Johnson et al, 2003; Jarzabkowski et al, 2007). First, it emphasises micro-activities, i.e. what people in organizations *do* when they do strategy, thereby giving critical importance to everyday human dynamics like information-sharing, coordination and conflict (McGrath & Argote, 2001). These are seen as central to strategizing due to their link to strategic outcomes like firm direction and survival (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007).

Second, *strategizing* encourages a broader definition of strategists by demonstrating that middle managers are central in shaping strategy (e.g. Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Mantere, 2005; Regnér, 2003; Rouleau, 2005). This suggests that strategy, once formulated, is not stable, shifting attention from strategy formulation toward implementation. Since the seminal work of Mintzberg (1978; & Waters, 1985) and Pettigrew (1985; 1987), we know that strategy content emerges through implementation and, hence, is inimically entwined with the processes that produced it. Strategy making is thus an emergent process (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Tsoukas, 2010; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and working out strategy content is messy, incremental and continuous (Bartunek, Balogun & Do, 2011). Thus, we are called to study the social mechanisms that explain the relationship between strategy process and content (Sminia & de Rond, 2012); we propose conflict as one such mechanism.

Conflict is likely to be central to strategizing because strategy is complex and ambiguous (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2007; Sillince et al, 2012), creating the potential for disagreement over

what the strategy is and how it should be implemented. Indeed, conflict is a common occurrence in strategy processes (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al, 1997) due to the plurality of strategic roles and activities (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007; Westley, 1990). We thus need to understand conflict in strategy implementation.

Strategy Implementation: Tensions, Politics & Resistance

While strategy implementation studies often only address conflict indirectly, they commonly study related topics like resistance, politics and tensions. Focusing on the human dynamics that underpin strategizing, such work may assist our understanding of the role of social dynamics like conflict in strategy implementation. Indeed, resistance, politics and tension often precede conflict. For instance, resisting a dominant direction may result from conflict over a task or process (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Similarly, political behaviour often occurs in response to conflict: "The political decision process can be understood in part as the resolution of conflicting demands" (Pettigrew, 1977: 82; also Baldridge, 1971; March, 1962; Pfeffer, 1981). Equally, tensions may the result of contradictions being made salient through confrontation (Jarzabkowski et al, 2013). These studies highlight the importance of human dynamics for strategy outcomes.

The resistance to change literature illuminates the role of social dynamics in strategy implementation. Resistance generally refers to an action (Brower & Abolafia, 1995) that is not aligned with the dominant direction or status quo. Resistance is inherent to organizations (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995) and can produce both positive and negative outcomes (Courpasson et al, 2012). While much literature still views resistance as "an adversarial and antagonistic process" that may waylay strategy (Courpasson et al, 2012: 801), resistance can also positively influence management decisions and so generate constructive change (Courpasson & Dany, 2009; Courpasson, Dany & Clegg, 2012; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). This has resulted in theorizing about positive (Piderit, 2000) and productive resistance (Courpasson & Dany, 2009). This suggests that 'resisters' may introduce new ideas (cf. Ford et al, 2008; Piderit, 2000), thereby positively altering decisions of strategy-makers and, so, the path of strategy (Regnér, 2003).

Micro-politics of strategy further illuminate social dynamics of strategizing (cf. Pettigrew, 1977). Politics are "the observable, but often covert, actions by which executives enhance their power to influence decisions" (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988: 737). Strategic decision-making is a political process; which issues are attended to and which action adopted depends on how power is mobilized (Pettigrew, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974). Political activity is common in organizations (Rosen et al, 2013; Whittle et al, 2013) but can be counterproductive by focusing activities on internal power dynamics rather than external market issues, leading to in-fighting and potentially

delaying strategic decisions and actions. Conversely, politics can be productive; for instance, ensuring there is appropriate questioning of strategic decisions and actions to secure the best organizational outcome (Johnson, 1992; Whittle et al, 2013).

Work on organizational tensions casts light on the social dynamics inherent in strategizing. 'Tension' bridges the literature on dialectics, paradox and contradiction, emphasizing organizations' need to balance multiple contradictory pressures (Crossan & Hurst, 2006; Lewis, 2000). Contradictions present in organizational life include cooperation vs. competition, rigidity vs. flexibility, and short-term vs. long-term goals (Das & Teng, 2000). Tensions can be negative, leading to *either/or* trade-offs and suboptimal strategizing via suppression of one pole (Lewis, 2000). Yet tension can also be positive when organizational actors are able to transcend and work across different forces in a *both/and* fashion (Lewis, 2000). Positive outcomes of tensions are often achieved via improvisation, which is the "creative and spontaneous process of trying to achieve an objective in a new way" (Vera & Crossan, 2005: 205; also Crossan & Hurst, 2006). To fully appreciate strategy implementation, it is thus important to understand such dynamics.

Existing Work on Social Dynamics of Strategizing

The bodies of work reviewed above highlight the importance of social dynamics during strategizing and help understand the potential implications of conflict on strategizing. They outline the importance of studying human micro-dynamics in understanding how destructive and generative potential is created. Thus, we expect some similarity between how conflict and these other dynamics function in strategy implementation.

Yet, there are also likely to be important differences as conflict is distinct from resistance, politics and tensions. Unlike resistance, conflict neither assumes divergence from a dominant direction, nor a change context; conflict may arise between equally powerful and legitimate interests during relative stability. Further, conflict may occur without politics, as it is not necessarily based in power and influence but rather focuses on tasks, processes and relationships (Befahr et al., 2011). Conflict also implies disagreement, not contradiction; while disagreement suggests active salience of differences between groups, tensions may lie dormant. Conflict is thus more common and impactful.

However, despite the relative importance of conflict in strategy processes, work on strategizing and conflict has evolved independently with few exceptions (e.g. Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al, 1997; Kellermanns, 2008; Mooney et al, 2007). Consequently, strategy has overlooked a vast array of empirical and theoretical resources. Our paper addresses this oversight.

The Role of Conflict in Strategy Implementation

Conflict refers to incompatibility, discrepancy or disagreement between individuals or groups in relation to goals, processes and relationships (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). It often arises as people from different divisions and specialisms advance a joint task (Pruitt, 2008). While acknowledging conflict as important, the strategy literature often only studies it indirectly, creating a void of systematic strategy research on conflict. The modest work that has been conducted indicates that conflict may play an important role in strategy implementation.

Research suggests that conflict may arise from different interpretations of strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Westley, 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989). Interpretations may generate disagreement as people come together to achieve goals (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Westley, 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989), and produce ambiguity about action, increase opportunistic behaviour, lower the quality of information shared, reduce trust, hinder change, and lead individuals to work cross-purpose (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Conflict may also have beneficial effects by uncovering disparity in perceptions, interpretations, and practices (Floyd & Lane, 2000), heightening information scrutiny (Ford *et al.*, 2008), and aligning decisions with organizational interest (Ford *et al.*, 2008). For instance, Régner (2003) shows that conflict can mobilize managers into taking action.

While these strategy studies indicate the significance of conflict in strategy implementation, they cannot explain how effects are generated. Mixed results highlight the need to further understand the role of conflict during strategy implementation through a more fine-grained approach. We turn to conflict studies for theoretical and empirical tools.

Conflict as a Lens to Unpack Strategy Implementation

Despite little direct attention from strategy scholars, conflict studies have a long history within management (Crozier, 1964; Pondy, 1967; Walton, 1967). The dominant focus has been on group conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; March & Simon, 1958), as organizations consist of groups with different aims and methods that are interdependent and share macro-goals (Walton, 1967). These competing values provide fertile ground for conflict (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). How conflict is enacted and dealt with is critical for organizational success (Pruitt, 2008). While conflict was traditionally seen as something to be eradicated (Crozier, 1964; Pondy, 1967), new conceptualizations position conflict as a natural part of human interaction (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Martin & Bergman, 1996; Pruitt, 2008). Conflict can have positive and negative effects depending on its nature (cf. De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Two types of conflict – task and process conflict – are particularly

relevant to strategy implementation, as they centre on task-related issues[1]. Both types can evoke positive and negative effects (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix & Trochim, 2008).

Task conflict is disagreement about the content and outcomes of a task; i.e. *what* the task is (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Shaw *et al.*, 2011). This conflict arises from discrepancy between task-based values, needs or interests. Examples include discrepant views about goals or key performance indicators. Task conflict can lead to poorer information processing (Carnevale & Probst, 1998) and reduce group effectiveness, creativity and decision-making (De Dreu, 2006). However, it may also improve task criticality (Amason, Thompson, Hochwater & Harrison, 1995; Nemeth, 1995), innovation (De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu & West, 2001), task commitment and member satisfaction (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson & Trochim, 2011). This potential for benefit means task conflict is labelled the most constructive form of conflict (De Wit *et al.*, 2011). Task conflict is interesting to strategists, as it speaks to core strategy issues: The content and outcomes of tasks. Conflict around strategy content is thus likely to arise during strategy implementation (Regnér, 2003).

Process conflict is disagreement about task logistics like delegation and role assignment; i.e. *how* the task should be accomplished (Jehn, 1997; Shaw *et al.*, 2011). Examples comprise disagreement about who should lead a project or what constitute key milestones. Detrimental effects are commonly reported (de Wit *et al.*, 2012), especially if process conflict is high (Jehn, 1997). Such conflict may hamper group functioning (Greer, Jehn & Mannix, 2008) and viability (Thatcher, Jehn & Zamutto, 2003; Vodosek, 2007), distract from task accomplishment (Jehn, 1995), and reduce productivity (Jehn *et al.*, 1999). Yet, low levels can have positive impacts like clarified roles, agreed resource use, and suitable plans and timelines (e.g., Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Process conflict is relevant to strategy, involving issues like deadline agreement (Goncalo, Pollman & Maslach, 2010), role/task allocation (Karn, 2008), and time management (Karn, 2008; Kurtzberg & Mueller, 2005), which underpin the coordinating and scheduling work of strategy implementation. As implementation is often characterized by resource issues and contested assignment of responsibilities (e.g. Floyd & Lane, 2000; Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009), process conflict is likely.

This suggests that it matters *which conflict* takes place. Longitudinal studies of conflict (Greer *et al.*, 2008) propose that it also matters *when conflict* occurs (Goncalo *et al.*, 2010; Greer *et*

[1] We exclude relationship and status conflict from our analysis. We exclude relationship conflict because (1) it is difficult to identify in observational data, as organizational norms often prohibit the expression of relationship conflict (Behfar et al., 2008), (2) there are few qualitative studies that offer detailed guidance on how to reliably identify and code relationship conflict, and (3) preliminary coding of our data provided little evidence of such conflict. We exclude status conflict (cf. Bendersky and Hays, 2012) as (1) it was only recently identified and there is insufficient research to justify including it and (2) we did not identify the presence of status conflict in early coding.

al., 2008). Early work suggests high performing teams experience low but increasing levels of process conflict and moderate task conflict at midpoint (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Comparison with lower performers confirms that conflict fluctuates over time, though the pattern is different; these groups experience higher process conflict at the start and end of projects and high task conflict at the end (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). These studies indicate the need to trace conflict patterns if we are to better understand the role of conflict. In strategy implementation, we thus need to consider which conflict type occurs when.

Additionally, conflict types can interact, with one type morphing into or stimulating another (cf. Jehn, 1997). For instance, process conflict may lead to task conflict as disagreement about task execution interferes with task accomplishment (Greer *et al.*, 2008) or deters from critical discussions and implementation (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). Similarly, task conflict may lead to process conflict, as discrepant views about goals produces disagreement about how to pursue the goals (Greer *et al.*, 2008). Given the ambiguity of strategic goals (Sillince *et al.*, 2012), we would expect a dynamic process of interaction between conflict types to shape the messy and emergent processes of strategy implementation as actors work out strategy (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Yet, despite various calls (cf. Martin & Bergmann, 1996), we still know little about the dynamics of conflict, particularly how conflict types interact (Greer *et al.*, 2008). This is the focus of our paper in which we ask: *What is the role of task and process conflict during strategy implementation, and what impact do they have upon the implementation process?*

Method

Case and Data

Consistent with our exploratory approach, we use a longitudinal, real-time case study (Yin, 1994). We observed Telco, an infrastructure firm that just agreed a new strategy with its regulator. As Telco owned the industry distribution network and could give unfair monopolistic benefits to its Retail division, Telco agreed to separate the network into an independent business division. The strategy required this division, Distribution, to ensure *all* industry players had equal access to the Telco-owned network. Distribution could thus not favour Telco divisions, neither sharing commercial information nor allowing influence over decision-making. The strategy also required Telco to separate products offered through its integrated value chain to tight deadlines.

This salient case of strategy implementation profoundly altered the business environment; the new strategy changed the industry and its dynamics by transforming the relationship between Telco and its competitors (Marcus & Geffen, 1998). It also changed the company's integrated business model, challenging market-facing divisions with a differentiated industry position around high

customer service. Telco's ability to respond to the new configuration determined its future success (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). There was conflict over strategy implementation as divisions remained and worked together in the same corporate structure, but had different goals. While Distribution was an independent industry supplier treating all customers equally, other divisions pursued market goals of service differentiation. Tension over strategic objectives is a common source of conflict (Marcus & Geffen, 1998; Pondy, 1967; Shaffer & Hillman, 2000).

To observe strategy implementation, we conducted an 18-month study of Telco from inception of the regulatory strategy, tracing the separation of one Telco product, Beep, in real-time. Beep was important because the Retail market was based on Beep; if Beep failed, the Retail market failed. Beep was also complicated to separate as there was no blueprint to follow. Importance, complexity and novelty are associated with conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1997). To access naturally-occurring data and preserve temporality, our core data comes from non-participant observation of implementation meetings (see Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). These meetings were used to manage the implementation process and were scheduled regularly –weekly or bi-monthly – and attended by set attendees, largely middle-managers. We observed 130 meetings in total, of which 70 were central meetings and 60 were divisional meetings. Functional managers attended divisional meetings, while divisional leads attended central meetings. Meetings were typically two hours long, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. We took extensive notes to complement recordings.

Avoiding bias from a single source and broaden contextual understanding (Yin, 1994), we also gathered 125 interviews, audio recorded and transcribed, informal on-site interaction, and copious documents. Interviewees were people central to the implementation process, and generally the same individuals participating in implementation meetings. However, we also sampled for some more senior and junior managers to ensure we understood the broader context and impact. Documents related specifically to Beep and included PowerPoint slides, reports, and e-mails. Analysis was iterative; the full process is summarized in Table 1 and a complementary fuller description can be accessed in a weblink to Appendix A[2].

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Findings

In qualitative research there is always a trade-off between showing the rich data upon which findings are based and the constraints of an academic manuscript (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007;

[2] We moved the detailed description of analysis into Table 1 and will provide the full method as an electronic Appendix A in order to comply with journal guidelines and on advice of the managing editor. A copy of Appendix A is available in the letter to reviewers.

Golden-Biddle & Locke 2006). This trade-off is particularly pertinent in presenting incidences of conflict in strategy implementation, where situated activities must be analysed to expose underlying dynamics. We thus present findings around stages of strategy implementation, using representative vignettes of the interaction between process and task conflict. Vignettes progressively illustrate how recognizing and working through conflict helped define and implement strategy. In illustrating this dynamic we show that, conflict was necessary but not sufficient to advance the implementation process. Rather, the interaction between conflict types and actors' ability to appropriately recognize and respond to both types, enabled implementation.

Beep had two strategic goals: Producing an equitable and functioning product by Month 10 (BHAG), and ensuring its full consumer uptake by Month 16 (CTC). Managers described these goals as follows: 'BHAG puts pressure on us; if we don't meet the date, we'll make a payment to other industry players…$5 million per month. But more than that it's about loss of credibility…The legal commitment is the CTC in Month 16. All of our customers will be using Beep then, so we better make sure it works!' (Retail manager[3]).

Meeting these strategic goals was critical for Telco but there was no guide for what constituted an equitable and functioning product. Consistent with the emergent nature of strategy, actors had to work out this content through implementation (Sminia & de Rond, 2012). Task and process conflict arose as disagreements about *how* to implement the strategy highlighted disagreement about *what* constituted the strategy, which in turn produced further conflicts about *how* to do this. Task and process conflict thus interacted in important ways. For instance, process conflict could arise from task conflict, as problems with defining strategy content made it difficult to develop an implementation process. Yet, managers would not have recognized this and responded appropriately without experiencing task *and* process conflict. In our description, we thus focus on how the interaction between task and process conflict shaped definition of strategy content and coordination of strategy process. For each phase, we explain the task and process conflict dimensions, provide a vignette of their interaction in defining and implementing the goals, and explain the implications of conflict for strategy.

Phase 1 (M1-4): Ambiguous strategy

Process and task conflict were mutually reinforced the ambiguous nature of the strategy. Process conflict and subsequent decisions about how to approach building project plans, setting

[3] While we gave primacy to meeting data in our analysis, we draw upon all of our field data to present the findings. We thus use a combination of verbatim quotes from meeting observations and interviews to illustrate dynamics. In-so-doing, please note that we draw on observational data unless we append the word *interview*.

timelines, and assigning roles, uncovered task conflict due to a vague understanding of task elements. While managers knew they needed to produce an equitable and functioning product and transfer all customers to that product, they did not know what *equitable* or *functioning* meant or how they could achieve it: 'When we signed up to this, the reality was that it was best guess' (Telco manager, interview). The strategy was thus ambiguous, producing not only task conflict but also fuelling process conflict as actors did not know how to interact, who to involve, and what to do to implement strategy; 'Our communication wasn't good. The tendency when you're embattled is to run away and hide in a corner.' (Distribution manager, interview).

Interaction between conflict types. Divisional managers realised they needed to agree a project plan. As they debated their discrepant views about how to address this process issue, they recognized the underlying task issue surrounding functionality. Retail managers argued the process should be organized around a common project document detailing required Beep functionality: 'The first thing to do is to get the document that's got the information that you need, as opposed to trying to solve the issues that might then exist. So a group of people should go and build that document' (Retail manager). Distribution managers favoured industry discussion about what functionality was needed; 'I wasn't aware that was an objective. My view was that this was a collaborative forum in which we collaborate with industry to come up with a specification' (Distribution manager). This process conflict and debate around whether industry discussion or project document should come first spurred further recognition of task conflict: 'That goes to show what we don't know' (Retail manager); 'It raises a lot of issues. Some of them are product requirement issues, some of them are technical issues, some of them are performance issues. I hear that – But I think there's potential danger that we get bogged down in the detail.' (Distribution manager). Actions proposed and taken to implement the strategy thus uncovered more disagreements, not just about process but also task issues, i.e. task conflict about definition of product and performance requirements. With no clear way forward, the Retail manager returned to his earlier point: 'The number one aim has to be to get a deliverable, a document. Any issue like "this is not fast enough" or "that functionality is not right" has to be put to one side. You'd then use the document to solve those issues' (Retail manager). While what constituted a functioning product remained unclear, there was effort to progress the task by resolving the process disagreement about how to proceed with implementation. So, process conflict highlighted a specific process issue that was problematic and on which a decision needed to be made. Deciding on the issue facilitated implementation progress. By helping managers identify a problem, and taking steps to resolve it, process conflict facilitated the implementation. This focus was on process conflict, and subsequent actions to address strategy process issues.

Strategy implications. The task remained ambiguous with no agreed definition of *equitable* or *functioning*. Yet managers could progress implementation by developing mechanisms to surmount process conflict, creating *joint programs* and *rules of engagement* between divisions. These mechanisms subdued conflict and enabled actors to progress planning. However, managers did not deal with the basis of the task conflict; the ambiguous strategy. Without agreeing what *equitable* and *functioning* meant (strategy content), it was impossible to work out how to achieve this (strategy process). The result was sustained ambiguity and superficial implementation progress: 'There are two things we need to work out: "what we are going to deliver" and "the impact on our plan of delivering that"…there is going to be a knock-on effect.' (Distribution manager). Process issue responses were a temporary solution and task issues responses were delayed; the stage was set for further conflict.

Phase 2 (M4-6): Progressing strategy process by ignoring ambiguity over content

Managers advanced implementation by purposefully ignoring ambiguity over strategy content. Process conflict arose over how to time deliverables, uncovering task conflict about what was needed for a functioning and equitable product. This process conflict helped actors recognise the need for better interdivisional collaboration. Coordination mechanisms were introduced to surmount process conflict but strategy content remained vague, with few product elements defined. The underlying problem was thus not addressed while actors over-attended to process conflict.

Interaction between conflict types. Attempts to hone delivery plans generated more task and process conflict. The product spec was central as it outlined the development plan and detailed the functionality available by BHAG. Managers' reactions to the spec indicated continued task conflict about what features to include, stimulating process conflict about how to embed additional features in the existing delivery schedule. Yet, content issues remained: 'The spec is still not agreed. The version that Distribution sent us was very different to the version we were working to. And some of the changes we expected weren't there; only about 50% of the changes were. We're still working significantly at risk.' (Retail manager). This highlighted a content gap around what spec could be deemed *functioning* (task conflict) and a process gap around how they approached the task (process conflict). 'There are 77 technical issues and 11 key customer issues that we're trying to work through with Distribution. Their CEO made a commitment that the 11 customer issues would be resolved by Friday. That's impossible because they're doing feasibility work to see how the issues can be fixed. And they obviously can't agree to do it until they know how they're going to do it.' (Retail manager). The way *functioning* was defined exacerbated process conflict: Trying to deliver more functionality threw up new process issues, such as running trials, which constrained efforts to agree strategy content. Thus, strategy process in some ways had to precede strategy content and became the

dominant focus: 'The spec was released early so we could thrash out some of these issues and start working together' (Distribution manager). However, Retail managers felt that they just needed to get on with making the spec work; 'With all due respect, it was supposed to be published in Month 3!' (Retail manager). Process conflict created by delays in producing and releasing the spec details was thus not a separate issue, but rather compounded the task conflict over what features would be offered. Process and task conflict were intertwined as managers tried to implement the strategic task without clarity about the strategy. However, managers' focus on process, driven by process conflict, obscured this relationship and meant they did not address issues of content.

Strategy implications. Managers sought progress by developing mechanisms that enabled them to request and prioritize functionality. This offered an *equitable* strategy process tool to communicate product needs between divisions, allowing actors to surmount process conflict and advance implementation: 'It's easy; we just ask for it' (Retail manager). Process conflict thus initially drove the implementation by enabling managers to identify and address specific process problems, which uncovered the need to further define content. Strategy content was iteratively defined as actors responded to process conflict issues, paying little attention to task conflict. There was only marginal progress in determining strategy content, with *equitable* refined to mean appropriate access and functionality for all industry players. This did not eliminate the origin of task conflict, as ambiguity remained about what *functioning* meant, constraining implementation of the strategy process.

Phase 3 (M6-10): Defining strategy content through crisis

Process conflict became increasingly specific, centring on the inability to progress implementation due to task conflict about the features underpinning equitability and functionality. As attempts to coordinate the strategy process failed to produce real progress due to underlying strategy content issues, both conflict types surged. Process conflict over progress failure led to sharp task conflict, as actors realized they could not advance strategy process without defining strategy content: 'We've hit a wall. We can't progress the delivery until we figure out what we are going to do!' (Retail manager). As actors tried to use new implementation processes, they realized these did not overcome core definitional differences. Significantly, product design was deemed insufficient to meet market demands; Beep was failing to *function*: 'This doesn't allow us to fulfil our current customer contracts. That's not what I would call a market-ready product' (Retail manager). As managers tried to work out what features were sufficient to make Beep *function*, they recognized they could not deliver by BHAG, further exacerbating task conflict. Implementation was in crisis over ambiguous strategy content: 'This project is a shambles' (Retail manager). Project managers

called on senior managers to develop a common understanding of the strategy; 'We are currently awaiting a steer from the Group CEO' (Telco manager).

Interaction between conflict types. As the origin of task conflict became clearer and the need to address it urgent, actors tried to work toward content-based solutions. This uncovered further conflict: 'I see a total mismatch in how we approach this task. Some people are just trying to meet the deadline regardless of quality. That's not good enough. We actually need a product that works!' (Retail manager); 'You can't expect a perfect product on day one. That's not how product delivery works...BHAG means having a working product and we are on track to deliver that. It might not be as elegant a solution as you would like, but it will work' (Distribution manager). Task conflict continued about the functionality that had to be delivered. While some managers insisted *functioning* solely meant the product was available and being supplied, others demanded a high functionality: 'That's totally unacceptable. That's not what I call fit-for-purpose. The customer experience and operational procedures in Retail depend on the ability to offer functionality. That's not happening but it is something we absolutely have to do. Otherwise we can't progress. We may be able to turn Beep on at BHAG, but we'd have a catastrophe on our hands!' (Retail manager). By explaining that the implementation process had not enabled them to work out Beep's functionality, Retail emphasized they had a content *and* process crisis, in which 'no current plan indicates that we can make BHAG!' (Retail manager). Unable to progress the task, the implementation broke down. Senior managers intervened and helped overcome task conflict by defining the strategy. They clarified that a *functioning* product had to satisfy consumer demand by 'meeting or exceeding' quality levels of comparable products; this meant more features. The BHAG deadline was forsaken to facilitate this: 'The exec has decided that the current product is insufficient to be used by BHAG and has made it clear what we need to deliver in order for the product to go live' (Telco manager); 'If we tried to meet BHAG, the result would be a bad customer experience, possibly a service crisis and meltdown. The CEO agreed to a delay but made it *very* clear that he regards this as a failure.' (Retail manager).

Strategy implications. Strong focus on how to manage the implementation (strategy process), driven by high levels of process conflict, had waylaid the task by preventing managers from defining the core task (strategy content). Managers had deferred response to task issues, initially ignoring task conflict, in favour of process-based responses. They thus became stuck in a cycle of experiencing and responding to process conflict. When actors recognized the need to address content issues and tried to respond, it was too late: There was no feasible plan to get to BHAG and Telco had to pay a cumulative fine until it delivered on BHAG. This breakdown disrupted the process, forcing managers to confront the underlying problem; they had not resolved task conflict about what the

strategy was. Senior managers were called in to help define strategy content, prioritizing clarity about functionality. The outcome was a clear definition of strategy content; senior managers defined what was meant by *functioning* and gave achieving this primacy over the deadline. Task conflict subsided, enabling managers to advance the implementation; 'The exec worked with us to agree a solution. If that hadn't happened, we would really have struggled. That was breaking through the barrier...but it meant we didn't actually start implementing the solution until the beginning of Month 10' (Retail manager, interview). Hence, the breakdown occasioned by failing to recognize the task-based origin of much conflict ultimately forced a breakthrough in defining the strategy content, which had been ambiguous throughout the implementation. This breakdown and breakthrough, while costly for Telco, allowed them to understand the strategy content and progress its implementation.

Phase 4 (M10-13): Making the defined strategy work

Defining strategy content led to more specific process conflict about how to deliver content. Telco was paying a hefty monthly fine for failing BHAG and needed to deliver. Defining the strategy reduced ambiguity and prevented much task conflict, but process conflict increased as actors worked out how to achieve the agreed strategy. This spurred *very specific* task conflict about minor delivery elements: With strategy content better defined, actors could coordinate the strategy process.

Interaction between conflict types. Working out how to design and include new features within tight timescales, surfaced process conflict over how to best progress. This uncovered minor task conflict about the detail of specific functionality, including the ability to satisfy transfer requirements. As each detail was better understood, it was integrated into the process, creating opportunity for further process conflict: 'It's getting back to the age-old debate; it's not just about what we've agreed, but also how we've agreed to do it' (Distribution manager). For example, as managers tried to deliver a functional product, they realized it was intertwined with testing. They needed the process of testing to achieve the outcome of *functionality*, jeopardising the final CTC goal: 'We are very concerned about the lack of stability in the testing platform. That's going to knock our transfer plan back...these problems are going to affect other areas.' (Retail manager). Thus, efforts to implement defined product features uncovered additional process conflict; e.g. delivery mode changes were needed: 'It is an entire change of systems and that means teething problems... not only systems but process and product changes. We mitigate as much as we can but obviously you're always going to get something that upsets the applecart' (Distribution manager). Process conflict about how best to proceed remained: 'Any changes will have a big impact. Why are we still making changes this late in the game?' (Retail manager); 'I really don't know what the best way forward is!' (Distribution manager); 'Our program is deteriorating and loss of testing time is a constraint. The

imperative is to start using Beep ASAP but we're running out of time' (Retail manager). Implementation was a process of working out *how* to deliver the strategy, involving iteration between process and content, often via conflict, to achieve sufficient clarity to progress.

Strategy implications. While the strategy content was now clear, actors still faced major work in deciding how to implement the strategy (strategy process). As they developed and released product features, process issues like how to use ICT systems to deliver new features emerged. Actions to address these issues spurred some task conflict, drawing attention to the need to refine nuances of strategy content, e.g. agreeing specific characteristics of product features. This iteration between strategy process and content, enabled increasing strategy implementation. Process tools like delivery groups, project dashboards, and early-testing helped to surmount process conflict and advance implementation. Actors delivered the features necessary for a *functioning* product and satisfied BHAG requirements. While late and not perfect, it was successful: 'Given the situation, it was a pretty good delivery...even when we met BHAG, there was still functionality missing, but there was no major service crisis.' (Telco manager, interview).

Phase 5 (M13-18): Achieving strategy implementation

In this phase, conflict was much decreased, focusing on *very specific* issues. With a clear definition of strategy content and a viable strategy process emerging, managers focused on minor refinements while working toward CTC: 'Once we get the customers transferred, we can move Beep into business-as-usual.' (Telco manager).

Interaction between conflict types. As actors moved toward CTC and started transfers, they uncovered process disagreement about how and when to progress: 'I don't think we can start mass transfer on Thursday because we won't even have tested the transfer feature!' (Retail manager). Actions to address process conflict around transfer targets led to task conflict; different transfer plans had different milestones and functionality. For instance, managers disagreed about deadlines for specific transfer features: 'If you ask why we can't do it sooner, the main rub is the capability to develop this alongside the product. We hope this will go live for testing in M14; then it better meet expectations!' (Retail manager). Working through these issues, managers noted other disagreements, like task conflict around the definition of transfer and what completion meant: 'CTC literally means "customer transfer complete". That means we have to transfer *all* customers by the deadline' (Distribution manager); 'All customers that can be transferred. Obviously there'll be some customers that we won't be able to transfer.' (Retail manager). They also disagreed about numbers: 'The number of residual customers is rapidly rising and now far exceeds what we predicted...we need to get this back on track' (Distribution manager); 'We need to contextualize this...the number looks big,

but it's actually less than 5% of our total volume. You have got to remember that we've transferred millions of customers; so a few thousand customers are insignificant' (Retail manager). Customer transfers not only raised process conflict about how to transfer customers but also task conflict about what constituted success: 'There has been disagreement about what is necessary to do mass transfer... the core issue seem to be how soon we can move to volume' (Retail manager). These issues were intertwined; decisions about task content had implications for task process and vice versa. Conflict drove identification of the issues and decisions that became focal points. Thus, conflict, where properly identified and responded to, had generative effects on the emergent strategy process.

Strategy implications. Moving toward meeting the final goal, managers focused on strategy process by coordinating activity to meet CTC: 'Yesterday we declared customer transfer complete.' (Telco manager). The only minor refinement to strategy content was the definition of *full product uptake*. It was defined to include the entire customer base, apart from few unique cases that became stuck during the transfer process and required additional time to be moved. At CTC, Telco had implemented a major shift in the product base of the retail market, in the process emerging a clear definition of the strategy and the way to achieve it.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

These implementation phases, during which increasingly clear definitions of strategy content and process emerged, are summarized in Table 3. Task and process conflict were central to strategy implementation. While conflict itself was not generative, it directed managers' attention to critical issues requiring resolution. Managers' ability to understand and address content and process issues appropriately, including acknowledging the relationship between these, enabled managers to incrementally work out what the strategy was and how to implement it. Specifically, managers experienced process conflict as they developed mechanisms to advance strategic goals. Efforts to respond to this process conflict highlighted disagreement over what the goals were and generated micro task-conflicts. Task and process conflict were thus iterative and recursive (see Figure 2). Findings also suggest that task conflict in Phase 3 generated a breakthrough in defining strategy content. This impasse was critical in raising awareness that strategy content was still ambiguous and constituted a barrier to implementation. Actors could not make real progress on task or process until they agreed quite specific strategy elements. Responding to task conflict was necessary for strategy content to be sufficiently defined for managers to focus on specific implementation actions. Yet, this was also not without conflict. As actors focused on strategy process, they exposed disagreement about how to advance specific tasks, resulting in more process conflict. Telco implemented the intended strategy in a messy and emergent way that required it to continuously revise its

understandings of the strategy and how to execute it. Our case shows that iteration between strategy content and process is a necessary part of implementation; it offers an important feedback loop that ensures implementation is aligned with the emerging strategy content. Conflict is critical in highlighting problematic issues that need to be addressed. Yet, addressing these issues is not straightforward, as strategy process and content, like process and task conflict, are entwined in practice, difficult to entangle, and hard to address. This helps to explain why strategy implementation is so complicated and can often lead to unintended consequences (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), inertia (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Johnson, 1988) and even failure (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003).

Discussion

This paper examines the role of task and process conflict in strategy implementation. Our findings identify a recursive micro-process of interaction between task and process conflict within which strategy emerges and is implemented. Thus, we conceptualize the interaction between task and process conflict as an explanatory mechanism for how strategy content emerges within, shapes, and is shaped by implementation. While not claiming that conflict is generative, we explain that conflict can have generative effects when managers correctly recognize and respond to it; this requires acknowledging the link between task and process conflict, and iteratively working through the issues it exposes. This informs our theorizing, summarized in two conceptual models below.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 demonstrates the recursive association between task and process conflict central to our study. Managers' experience of and response to one type of conflict necessarily impacts their experience of and response to the other. This interaction shapes both strategy content and strategy process in an incremental, emergent way. As indicated by the arrows in the model, conflict iteratively shapes strategy by directing managerial focus and enabling recursive switching between ill-defined elements of strategy process and content. Thus, task conflict occurs when some element of the strategy content is ambiguous, prompting actors to define micro-elements of the strategy. Process conflict occurs when actors experience disagreement about how to make the strategy work, stimulating coordination activities.

Responding to task conflict over different understandings about quite specific strategy elements, managers generate an increasingly shared definition of strategy. This is emergent as many elements of strategy content are unclear and cannot be anticipated in advance; they are defined as they arise from interaction between task and process conflict. Simultaneously, as actors try to make the strategy work, they find which actors and activities need to be coordinated to implement their current understanding of the strategy. Again, this is emergent; process conflict arises as actors realise

they do not have a sufficiently common strategy definition to identify processes necessary for achieving it. Process conflict thus shows which elements of strategy content remain too ambiguous to implement, generating task conflict that further stimulates definition of the strategy content. As our conceptual model shows, strategy is implemented via association of strategy process and content. The micro-process of experiencing and responding to numerous small task and process conflicts underpins the process of strategy implementation illustrated in Figure 3.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Actors go through recursive cycles of task and process conflict as they implement an ambiguous and emergent strategy (Figure 3). In our study, initial progress in Phases 1 and 2 improved coordination of the strategy process without defining strategy content (see dotted arrow from process to task conflict). This overemphasis on strategy process, driven by an unbalanced focus on process conflict (shown with bold, underlined text), proved unsustainable as strategy content was too ambiguous to enable further implementation. Actors thus reached a crisis point in Phase 3 (indicated by broken arrows); the strategy process could not move forward as actors did not have an agreed definition of strategy content. Rather, the previously neglected task conflict dominated (indicated by bold, underlined text), requiring actors to focus on and deal with strategy content ambiguity. This breakdown indicates that recognition of and willingness to respond to task conflict as soon as it arises is critical. Otherwise, actors become 'stuck' in a cycle of responding only to process conflict by addressing process-based problems, essentially ignoring the need for fundamental redefinition of the strategy content highlighted by task conflict. Thus, while task conflict can have a generative effect in prompting actors to address ambiguity and work through specific strategy elements highlighted by conflict, it can constrain and even lead to breakdown in strategy implementation when its interaction with process conflict is ignored. Hence, the recursive relationship between conflict types and strategy process and content is critical. Without sufficiently common definitions of the strategy, implementation cannot progress, as actors do not know what to implement. Actors need to respond to both process and task conflict to advance implementation. As we show, even when actors arrive at some common understanding of strategy content, implementation still raises further conflict as experiencing and responding to process conflict highlights ongoing elements of strategy content needing clarification. Interaction between strategy process and content during strategy implementation is spurred by actors' experience of and responses to task and process conflict. Only when recognizing this, managers can balance task and process conflict sufficiently to progress implementation (indicated by regular font and solid arrows). It is thus critical for managers to understand the recursive association between task and process conflict in

strategy implementation: If managed appropriately, conflict enables actors to iterate between strategy process and content, working out what the strategy is and how to make it work in practice.

Contributions

Our conceptual model of the role of conflict in strategy implementation contributes to the strategizing literature. First, we demonstrate *how* middle managers actively define strategy by identifying and defining specific elements of strategy content through responses to task and process conflict. As most strategies are ambiguous (Sillince et al, 2012), these micro-details of how an intended strategy is worked out through implementation are critical in the emergence of common understandings of strategy. While middle managers may not 'formulate' strategy, they fill strategy content with meaning and action by defining its micro-elements. This provides deeper understanding of how strategy emerges and is realized through fluctuating human dynamics.

Further, our focus on the *interaction* between task and process conflict, and the responses managers formulate to address conflict, extends knowledge of the generative mechanisms through which middle managers provide impetus to the strategy process. Studies of emerging strategies focus on generative mechanisms such as championing, forcing (Burgelman, 1983a), experimenting, and adjusting (Régner 2003). While Régner notes that conflict is important in this process, because it enables middle managers to sharpen arguments and mobilize energy, he views conflict as a process outcome. By contrast, studying conflict during implementation of intended strategy, we show that conflict critically underpins the identification of specific elements of strategy content and process by directing managerial attention. Rather than simply being an outcome, if managed appropriately, conflict can have generative effects in underpinning mechanisms others have found. For example, we might better understand championing and forcing (Burgelman, 1983a) as activities fuelled by task conflict, and experimenting and adjusting (Regnér, 2003) as activities fuelled by process conflict, or arising from a combination of task and process conflict. Further studies adopting our granular approach might show different conflict types underpinning different strategic responses. A micro-view of conflict may also help us better understand resistance (Courpasson et al, 2013), politics (Whittle et al, 2013) and tensions (Jarzabkowski et al, 2013).

Our process model may also explain different paths of strategizing. For example, where strategy failure has been attributed to different political interests (e.g. Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003; Sillince & Mueller, 2007) that waylay implementation of the strategy (e.g. Guth & Macmillan, 1986), future research might examine whether the strategy process has become stuck in a cycle of inadequately defined strategy content. If so, task conflict will be prevalent and needs response. However, if task conflict is not adequately diagnosed, actors may engage in process conflict and

become frustrated trying to implement the strategy whilst ignoring definitional problems. Our case showed this dynamic temporarily in Phase 3, potentially explaining tendencies toward strategic drift (e.g. Johnson, 1988), in which actors focus on existing processes, so neglecting alignment between these processes and strategy content. An appreciation of the iterative association between task and process conflict is critical in highlighting where actors lack a common strategy definition, helping a definition to emerge, and working out ways to implement that definition. In short, process and task conflict in combination indicate that something is not working in implementation and that this cannot be resolved by simply improving process or content issues, but that both need to be addressed simultaneously. It is important for firms to understand conflict type, what this indicates, and that this might be recursively entwined with and indicative of another form of conflict.

While our main contributions are to the strategy literature, our findings also elaborate the conflict literature. First, our process model illuminates the recursive relationship between task conflict and process conflict. Our study underscores the close correlation between task and process conflict reported in the literature. A recent meta-analysis aggregating correlations across studies suggests that the association ranges between .44 and .90. (De Wit *et al.*, 2012). While some authors argue this may be due to overlap in definition and measurement (cf. Befahr *et al.*, 2011), our findings support an alternative explanation: Task and process conflict underpin one another (see also Greer *et al*., 2008). We show that, rather than one type of conflict simply morphing into or stimulating another type (cf. Jehn, 1997), the relationship between task and process conflict evolves in a series of recursive loops, with conflict types continuously informing one another. We propose that this is because defining task content and process is an incremental process, which actors have to work through iteratively. We show the different responses that managers make to the conflict they face. Our findings thus offer a more fluid and dynamic conceptualisation of conflict and emphasize the need for dynamic research methods that go beyond cross-sectional studies to advance understanding (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) and generate insight into the relationships between conflict types.

Second, while many studies see process conflict as predominantly negative (De Wit *et al.*, 2012), our study of strategy implementation, focusing on middle managers, suggests process conflict may also play an important role in implementing tasks. Process conflict directs managerial attention to process-based issues, enabling actors to advance implementation in the absence of a clear definition of content. This is a common strategy problem, as content is worked out as it is implemented in practice. While middle managers may be more prone to process conflict as their tasks inherently involve logistics and their roles provide authority over implementation activities, our results show that this does not exempt them from task conflict, which must be addressed for effective

implementation. We thus show how task conflict, via its link with process conflict, is one of the ways that middle managers influence tasks and their definition, even if this is not their original remit (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). For conflict to have this generative effect, managers need to understand the incremental nature of the strategy process and respond to conflict as an indicator that something in either the task or process is problematic, rather than pushing harder on an existing process, or insisting on a particular definition of the task, without understanding ramifications for the other. Future research should study this relationship between task and process conflict and examine how to minimize its negative consequences whilst harnessing its generative effects in implementation.

This paper responds to calls for strategy research to furnish new insight into the micro-processes underpinning strategizing by refocusing on implementation (Tsoukas, 2010; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and the association between strategy process and content (Sminia & de Rond, 2012). We illuminate the human dynamics that underlie strategizing, pointing to task and process conflict as critical mechanisms enabling actors to complete implementation. Our findings are generated from a single case in which managers, because of regulation, were required to implement the strategy or face overt penalties. This is thus a bounded context and we do not claim empirical generalizability. However, as firms in other contexts also face decline or financial consequences from failure to implement strategy (e.g. Johnson, 1988; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003), our results have wider theoretical application. Further, we studied changes typical for regulated firms in OECD countries (Baldwin & Cave, 1999; Kay & Vickers, 1988; Young, 2001). Our findings are thus relevant in other regulated firms. We expect our models to provide grounds for future research on how the dynamic interaction between conflict types shapes strategy implementation and strategizing.

Table 1. Iterative Stages of Data Analysis

Stage	Analytical Activities	Output
1. Develop thick descriptions to generate initial insights	1. Generate thick descriptions of Telco case 2. Share descriptions with informants to improve trustworthiness	• 1 thick description identifying two key strategic goals: i. Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG): equitable and functioning product by Month 10 ii. Customer Transfer Complete (CTC): full uptake of equitable and functioning product by Month 16
2. Code observational data to identify conflict	1. Define conflict as incompatibility, discrepancy or disagreement between individuals or groups in relation to goals, processes and relationships (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) 2. Develop rigorous coding scheme for task and process conflict using existing survey measures and qualitative assessments of conflict (cf. Table 2) to develop synonym-lists (Jehn, 1995), behavioural cues (Jehn, 1997; Pondy, 1967) like changes in inflection (broken or high pitch speech), emotive word usage (using mean, crass or emotion-invoking words), volume (raised voices or yelling), and physical gestures (like banging a fist on the table) 3. Prepare data for coding by treating each specific incident of conflict as a datum; incidents ranged from three sentences to two paragraphs (cf. Armstrong et al, 1997) 4. Code data using this coding scheme 5. Confirm coding scheme and data classification (Clark et al, 2010; Dutton et al, 2001; Guler, 2006; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) i. Examining how participants referred to specific incidents or experiences of conflict in our interview data ii. Using multiple coders to verify accuracy: code 10% of the data to check consistency (71% agreement), discuss areas of ambiguity and discrepancy to reach full agreement & clarify coding scheme, code a second random sample of 10% of data (91% agreement), discuss areas of ambiguity and disagreement to reach full agreement. iii. Training graduate student to code each datum and flag up any queries; 5% of data recoded through this process	• Identify conflict in meeting data i. 115 conflict incidents relating to Beep • Conflict data coded to task and process conflict ii. 19 task conflicts iii. 96 process conflicts • Verified coded data
3. Map conflict patterns over time to identify conflict dynamics	1. Conduct monthly frequency counts of task and process conflict 2. Graphically display conflict patterns (cf. Figure 1) as early indicator of variability (see Jehn, 1995, 1997) 3. Identify interpretive trends in variability (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Langley, 1999)	• Conflict patterns: Task and process conflict followed almost identical patterns of waxing and waning over time • Rich narrative of patterns, focusing on the relationship between task and process conflict
4. Examine evolution of strategic task to seek evidence of how task & process conflict impact the implementation of Beep	1. Revisit conflict data to see how conflict unfolded and how strategy implementation progressed to identify relationship between the two: responding to task conflict helped actors identify ambiguities & problems in strategy content (= refine what the strategy task is); responding to process conflict helped actors identify ambiguities & problems in strategy process (= refine how they might best accomplish the strategy task)	• Five stages of implementation: (1) ambiguous strategy, (2) progressing strategy process by ignoring content ambiguity, (3) defining strategy content via crisis, (4) making the defined strategy work, and (5) achieving implementation. • Model of the relationship between conflict and strategy implementation

Table 2. Conflict Coding Scheme

Type	Sources	Definition	Subtypes	Examples
Task Conflict	Amason & Sapienza (1997); Amason & Schweiger (1994); Amason (1996); Behfar *et al* (2008, 2011); Behfar *et al* (2011); Bendersky & Hays (2012); Cronin & Weingart (2007); De Dreu & Beersma (2005); De Wit *et al* (2012); Greer & Jehn (2007); Greer *et al* (2008); Jehn & Bendersky (2003); Jehn & Mannix (2001); Jehn (1994, 1995, 1997); Jehn *et al* (1999, 2008); Pelled (1996); Pelled *et al* (1999); Priem *et al* (1995); Rahim (2002); Shaw *et al* (2011); Weingart (1992)	Task-oriented disagreement about task content and outcomes, i.e. *what* the task is	**Task content:** Disagreement over the task definition, nature of the task, or what the task is **Task outcomes:** Disagreement over task outputs and deliveries, ends of task accomplishment, relevant, or what we need to achieve	- Disagreement on the goal of a project - Different key performance indicators - Disagreement about key outputs - Divergent benchmarks
Process Conflict	Behfar *et al* (2008, 2011); Bendersky & Hays (2012); De Wit *et al* (2012); Greer & Jehn (2007); Greer *et al* (2008); Jehn & Bendersky (2003); Jehn & Mannix (2001); Jehn (1997); Jehn *et al* (1999, 2008); Shaw *et al* (2011); Weingart (1992)	Task-oriented disagreement about the task process, i.e. *how* the task should be approached	**Responsibility**: Disagreement over assignment of tasks and responsibilities **Procedures**: Disagreement over tools or techniques for task accomplishment **Scheduling & time management**: Disagreement over planning of tasks and timelines, as well as ability to meet these **Contribution:** Disagreements over workload, effort, commitment and engagement	- Differences re who should do what (roles & boundaries) - Disagreement about how to assign or delegate tasks - Divergence on how to engage/interact/share information - Withholding information necessary for the group tasks - Absence of mutual assistance and cooperation - Disagreement about scheduling/timing of project - Disagreement about scheduling/timing of key tasks - Divergent opinion about best action, policy or procedure - Serving own interests at the expense of others - Disagreement about allocation of resource - Inequity of workload, effort, commitment - Inability to deliver on agreed deadlines

Table 3. Summary of the Relationship between Conflict and Strategy

Phase	Conflict	Representative illustrations of conflict micro-process	Implications for Implementing Strategy
Phase 1: Strategy is Ambiguous	General Task Conflict (Med) Conflict about the meaning of the two key task elements, equitable and functionality, such as disagreement about what aspects of functionality constitutes key deliverables. General Process Conflict (High) Conflict about how to approach the task, such as who should be involved and how to align project plans.	Task conflict about how much focus should be placed on functionality requested by Retail: ''There's a big gap. Retail want a lot more than we are prepared to deliver. Some of their demands are quite inequitable' (Distribution manager); 'We're in a unique position. We're only one with a historic relationship with Distribution and we're a scale operator… that means 'industry standard' is not good enough for us!' (Retail manager). Process conflict about how to assign responsibility, and design and align project plans: 'They had a planning meeting and didn't invite us. What kind of planning session is that?' (Retail manager); 'It wouldn't be fair to engage with you in that way. Whether you like it or not, we can only share information that we're also ready to share with industry.' (Distribution manager).	Attempts to coordinate implementation spark process conflict, which reveals that the strategy is ambiguous: They cannot specify processes because do not know what constitutes an equitable or functioning product. Outcome: Some progress on strategy process through development of coordinating mechanisms, but no progress on strategy content.
Phase 2: Progressing strategy process by ignoring ambiguity over content	General Task Conflict (Low) Conflict about the two key task elements: equitable and functionality. Included debate about what constituted key deliveries and disagreement about the meaning and weighting of task elements. Specific Process Conflict (Med) Conflict about how to approach specific task elements, such as when to deliver certain elements in order to attain acceptable functionality by the deadline.	Task conflict about whether to focus on equity or function. While *equity* meant designing a product that could meet minimum industry standards, *functionality* was about maximizing service: 'Some of the features aren't going to be there by BHAG. That's the nature of a fair process' (Distribution manager); 'The problem with the proposal is the customer experience. We need to agree the quality criteria for a *functioning* product' (Retail manager). Process conflict about how to engage equitably, how much information could be shared, and details of the delivery schedule: 'If we are actually going to use the functionality, we need it by Month 6 so we have time to test it.' (Retail manager); 'We can't give it to you then. We have a lot of other functionality to include before BHAG and cramming anything else in would jeopardize our existing commitments.' (Distribution manager).	Further implementation efforts lead to more focused process conflict as actors try to coordinate actors and activities, despite ambiguity about what the strategy is. Specifically, as people disagree about how to approach strategy implementation, they expose a lack of common understanding about the strategic requirements for functionality. Outcome: Some progress on strategy process through development of further coordination mechanisms, but only marginal progress on strategy content, with a few product features agreed.

Phase 3: Defining strategy content through crisis	Specific Task Conflict (Med) Conflict about specifics of the two task elements, equitable and functionality, reach a crisis point; there is no agreement about the core features of Beep or about the meaning and weighting of different elements and their deliverables. Specific Process Conflict (Low) Conflict about how to approach the task when they have no agreement over what it is, leads to a cessation of process, which also generates conflict over lack of progress.	Task conflict about what constituted *functionality*, particularly as current product features leave Telco unable to satisfy customer contracts: 'One month until the deadline and we still don't have consensus with Distribution on what the BHAG acceptance criteria should be!' (Retail manager); 'How the hell are we going to get this project done if we can't even agree on what we're doing?' (Distribution manager). Process conflict about the failure to progress, as different definitions of the task obstruct design of processes for attaining it: 'Sometimes whole paragraphs are removed from reports. We'll see what the scope of that job was but don't get to see the finding or the detailed work. I have to absolutely emphasize that we need to see what the scope and the methodology is. Otherwise, we can't fit it into our Beep delivery plans' (Retail manager).	Implementation ceases as actors cannot coordinate a strategy on which they have no common understanding. Task conflict surges as actors realize that the lack of agreement has jeopardized the BHAG goal. The ensuing crisis focuses them on defining what functionality means. Outcome: No progress on strategy process is possible without agreement on strategy content. With senior management involvement, strategy content is defined quite specifically as a set of core product features that must be incorporated.
Phase 4: Making the defined strategy work	Specific Task Conflict (Low) Conflict about specifics of the two task elements, equitable and functionality, is decreasing and focuses on specific characteristics of core features and their deliverables. Specific Process Conflict (Med) Conflict about how to approach newly defined task elements arises as actors must work out how and when to deliver specified core features.	Task conflict about the specific detail of agreed product features and how much these features had to deliver: 'There are specific issues around Beep functionality that we need agreement on. Like the fault functionality; that needs to be improved. It's not enough to say there is a fault. We need to see why it's there.' (Retail manager). Process conflict about *how* to produce the needed functionality; this included debate on timelines and ways to collaborate: 'It's about input from Distribution. We're quite disappointed in terms of progress. It's not just about finding a better time plan to wrap around it. We're actually getting back to making a plan for the plan!' (Retail manager).	Great clarity over the strategy content eliminates much task conflict, but exacerbates process conflict as focus shifts to implementation and how to make strategy work. Specifically, actors have different views on how to coordinate activity, which in turn, leads to the identification and resolution of a few remaining ambiguities about the strategy. Outcome: Progress on strategy process moves rapidly due to agreement on strategy content and the need to redress the missed BHAG. In the process, there are some minor refinements of strategy content.
Phase 5: Achieving strategy implementation	Specific Task Conflict (Low) Conflict about specifics of the two task elements, equitable and functionality is minimal and focused on specific definitions of the deliverables. Specific Process Conflict (Low) Conflict about how to approach defined task elements persists as actors work out the remaining aspects of implementation.	Task conflict about the specific functionality needed to enable customer transfer by CTC and what features were required to facilitate mass transfer: 'We need that feature for transfer' (Retail manager) **–** 'I don't see how *that* is a transfer capability feature' (Distribution manager). Process conflict about how and when to meet CTC. This included how and when to increase volume; when transfer tools were needed; and how to share plans and information: 'The volume coming through is much lower than expected. We need to speed up if we are going to meet CTC.' (Distribution manager); 'A lot of customers we transfer end up stuck. Things are going wrong, so we need to inspect what is going on there. That means turning the volume back down' (Retail manager).	As implementation nears completion focus is on the specific remaining elements of coordination necessary to meet the CTC goal. Conflict is generally reduced and, when it does occur, is very specific and focuses on key operational detail. Outcome: Progress on strategy process, as they meet key milestones and, finally, the CTC deadline. During this final process, minor aspects of the strategy content, such as specific product features, are refined.

Figure 1. Pattern of task and process conflict over time

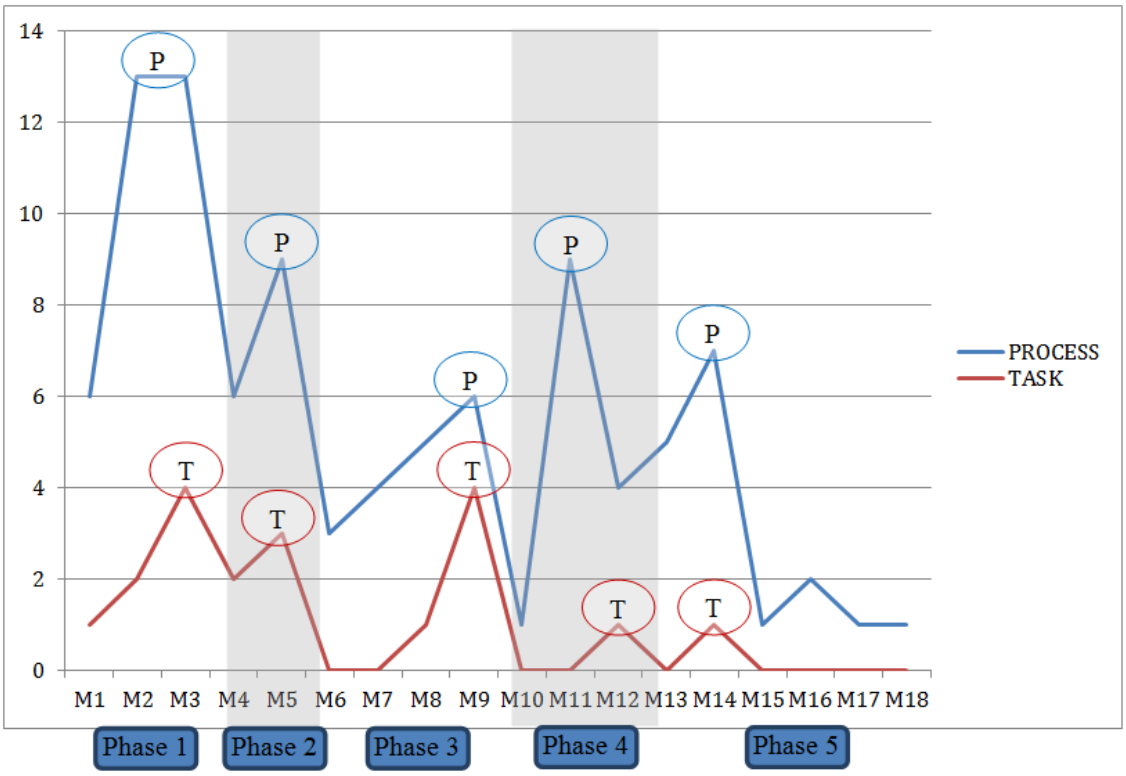


Figure 2. Process model of conflict underpinning strategy implementation

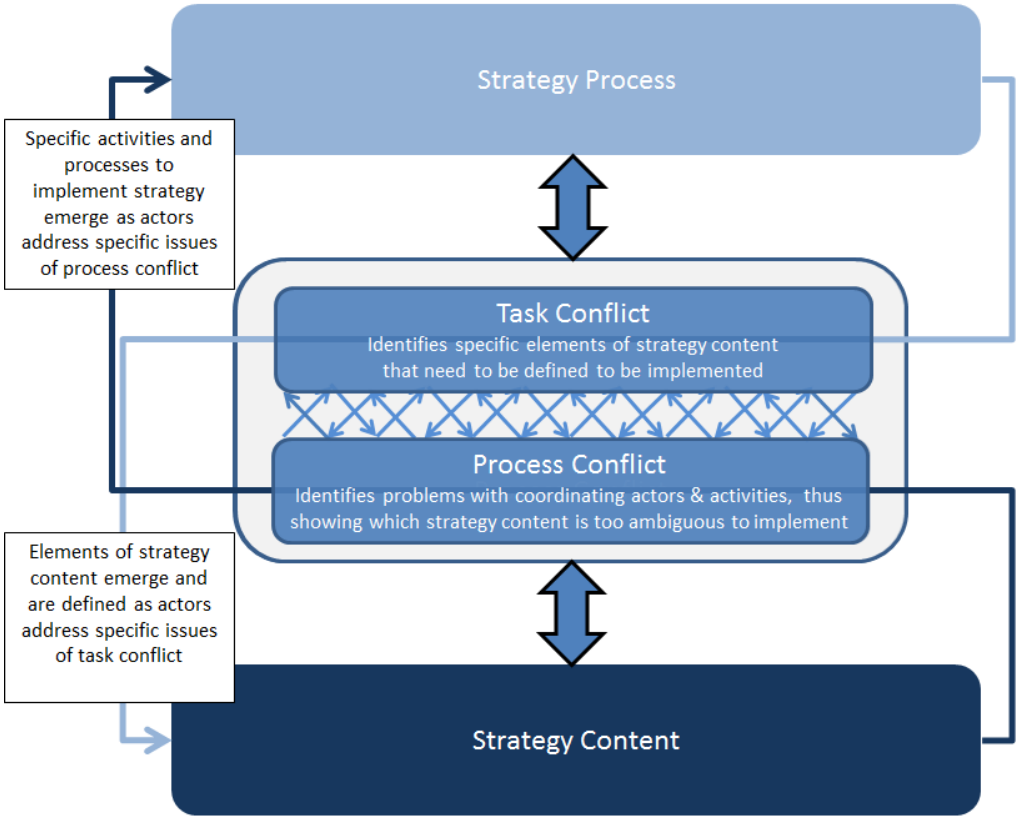
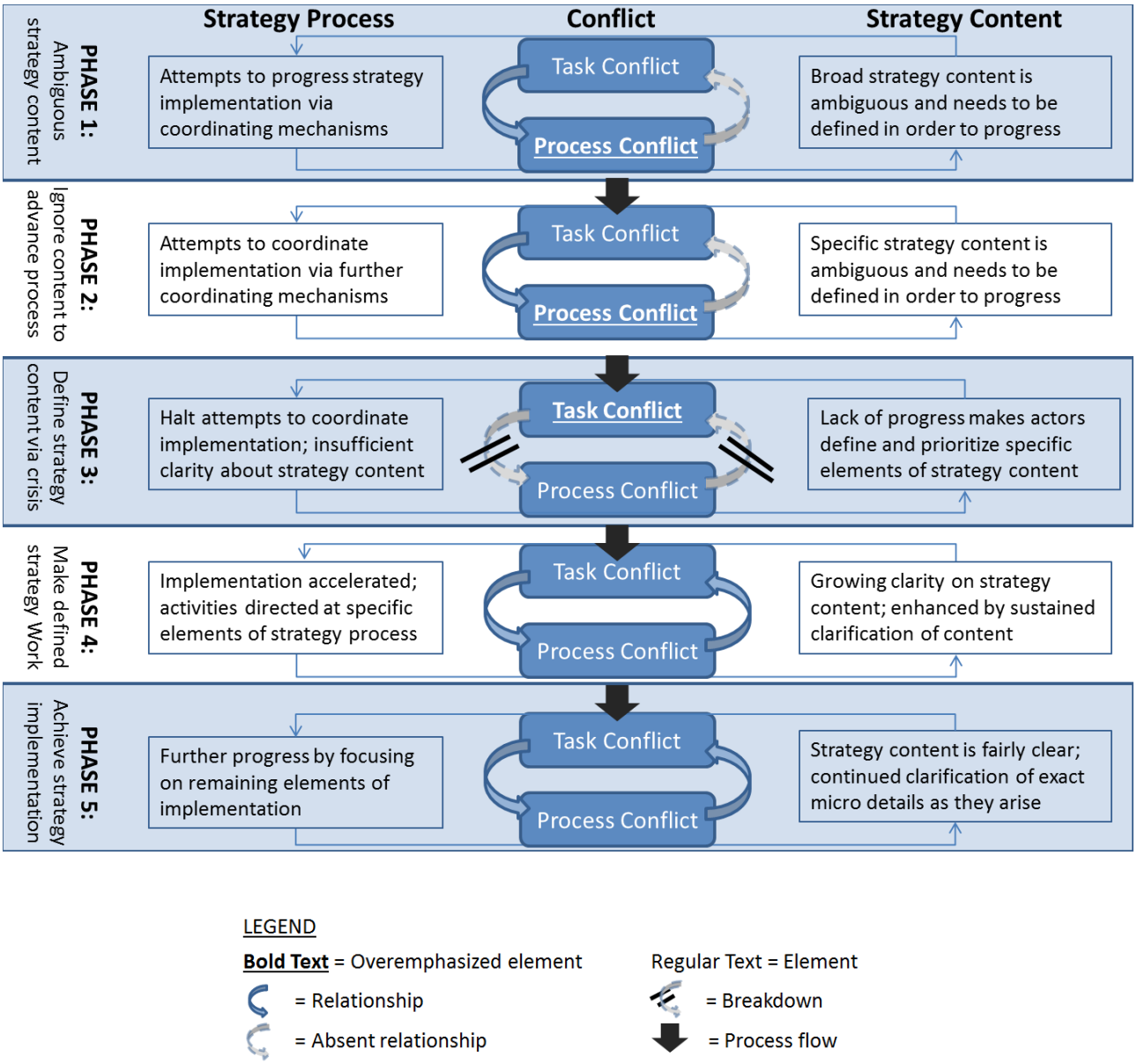


Figure 3. Cumulative process model of conflict underpinning strategy implementation



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