# Strategic narratives articulated by CEOs of construction, engineering and infrastructure organisations

**Abstract**

In this study the ways in which chief executive officers (CEOs) of UK-based large construction, engineering and infrastructure corporations socially construct and contest strategic narratives are explored. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews have been conducted and analysed to understand the nature and the role of strategic narratives articulated by CEOs. The common narratives were about organizational and industry-level identities; thinking prospectively and also reflecting back on past history. Of particular note are struggles and paradoxes evident in the strategic narratives mobilized. This research contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of 'linguistic and narrative turn' in the existing literature. It has broader implications in this emergent research domain.

*Keywords:* Chief executive officers, identities, linguistic and narrative turn, leadership, narratives

## 1. Introduction

Prediction is always hard, but crucial for developing organizational strategies (Chen et al., 2015; Fitza, 2013). One of the great challenges for organizations in the current economy is to project the future under the uncertainties posed by dynamic work environments, emerging new technologies and regulatory changes (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2011). Creating organizational strategies is often seen as future-oriented activity (Brown and Thompson, 2013). Strategy can be defined as a type of activity that is connected with particular practices, such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and their associated discourses (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Implementation of a strategy is formed through the

most prominent and influential future-oriented narratives articulated by those in senior positions in organizations (Fenton and Langley, 2011).

Chief executive officer (CEO) is the singular organizational position that is primary responsible for making key organizational decisions, implementing strategies and policies. CEOs often know they must break with the status quo, but there are only few signposts indicating the way forward. Their formal role and duties is to lead companies by setting the vision for the future and implementing decisions into actions (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). CEOs of large construction, engineering and infrastructure organizations operate in the context of major programs and portfolios - innovative and uncertain adventures involving complex problems solving (Morris, 2013; Winch, 2010). In this context, the implementation of strategies and actions cannot be easily predicted due to the variety of elements interacting with each other and unfolding changes emergent in complex environment (Havermans et al., 2015). As Winch (2010: 1995) stresses the importance of future-perfect thinking: "From the chaos of all possible future states the imaginative act of future-perfect thinking pulls one, or a narrow range of possible states". Thinking prospectively is hence necessary when leaders develop and implement program and corporate strategies (Morris, 2015). It is through strategic narratives that leaders promote organizational vision and create organizational culture (Enninga and van der Lugt, 2016). Leaders are often described as decision makers – 'reflexive' actors situating activities in the context of past actions, current organizational context and future aspirations (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006).

A core assumption in much of the strategic management literature is that more accurate forecasts of future activities and capabilities will lead to strategic success (cf. Denning, 2008; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2014). However, the view on a strategy from the perspective of making scenarios of future trends and directions created by leaders has limitations. The

process of strategizing is the process of developing the plan and strategy implementation is about putting that plan to use. It is expected narratives and leadership playing key roles in implementing strategies. The ways leaders socially construct and contest strategic narratives need careful attention. There are many theoretical controversies and contradictions in understanding strategic narratives. There remains little empirical work exploring the narratives articulated by leaders and their relation to identity work. This study explores the ways leaders mobilize strategic narratives evident in forming organizational and industrial identities drawing upon qualitative interview-based research with CEOs of UK-based large engineering, construction and infrastructure corporations.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on a 'linguistic and narrative turn' in recent emergent organization studies and the management of projects, programs and portfolios literatures. This is followed by a discussion on understanding of narratives in the literature. Of particular interest is the role of strategic narratives in forming organization and industry-level identities. The qualitative methodology is then discussed, justifying the narrative inquiry and interview-based method. The analytical procedure is explained in the paper, presenting a plethora of strategic, future-oriented narratives articulated by CEOs. The following section discusses the empirical findings in relation to the reviewed literature. The conclusion summarizes the key theoretical contributions, and addresses the practical implications.

## 2. 'Linguistic and narrative turn' in the literature

It is commonly recognized that strategic management research seemed to have lost sight of the human being (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). In order to understand human agency in the construction and enactment of strategies, it is seen as necessary to re-focus research towards the interactions and actions of strategists. This shift is located within the broader 'narrative

turn' in the social sciences, which has arisen in response to a greater focus on people and socially constructed concepts (Whittington, 2003). Actors are not acting in isolation from regulations and socially defined models of acting that arise from the social institutions to which they belong. But the emphasis has shifted over time towards the ways strategy and organization emerge from managerial talk and actions (cf. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Tsoukas (1996) argues that knowledge such as 'industry recipes' are embedded in conversations and social interactions. It is through talk these forms of knowledge, the strategic and performative vision of one organization are made sense of and become realized. Material entities such as written reports and brochures are always talked about and in this way strategists make them meaningful for their present purposes. Studies of the language and narratives by leaders are important for understanding how they develop strategic direction and project a sense of the future. Wilson and Jarzabkowksi (2004) further reinforce that much of the social infrastructure (e,g. tools, technologies and discourses) through which micro-actions are constructed has institutionalized macro-properties that enable its transmission within and between contexts.

There is an increasing interest in the constructive role of language and narratives in the context of projects, programs and portfolios (Henderson, 2004; Laufer et al., 2008). Enninga and van der Lugt (2016), Havermans et al. (2015) and McKenna and Metcalfe (2013) have recognized 'lingustic and narrative turn' in the existing literature exploring narratives mobilized by program leaders. Recent research has focused on lived experiences of practitioners, emphasizing the importance of language they use (Cicmil et al., 2006; Cooke-Davies et al., 2007). Due to formal leadership roles, project and program managers are in powerful positions to introduce new vocabulary, new narratives that shape future vision and strategies. A strategic understanding of narratives mobilized by strategists, their nature and role, opens opportunities for shaping emergent industrial trends and progress. Exploring

narratives of leaders can hence shed light into the ways in which they shape organizational and industry-level identities. Insights into the narratives of leaders can be of potential practical and theoretical relevance in better understanding of the nature and the role of language use in leadership terms.

## 3. Understanding of strategic narratives

Prior research suggests that strategic narratives about organizational phenomena are the ways of constituting an overall sense of purpose and direction (Fenton and Langley, 2011; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Bartel and Garud (2009) argue that it is through strategic and provisional narratives leaders shape future vision and influence how others make sense of situations. Leadership narratives are frequently recognized as strategic tools to convince people to change and follow the common goals (Denning, 2006, 2008). Narration is seen as performance – by a 'self' who persuades and moves the audience through language and actions. Strategic narratives expressed by leaders can be oral and written both being an integral part of organizing (Brown et al., 2008; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011).

Narratives are told from the point of view of the narrator or another individual or group. It is through language and narratives that business leaders claim to the legitimacy they need for authority and power (Maclean et al., 2011). Narratives become authoritative through consistent, and often repeated, messages to overcome resistance in organizations. Boje (2001) argues that narratives possess a plot together with a greater degree of coherence. Narratives are seen as speech-acts that bring into existence a social reality that did not exist before (Brown and Thompson, 2013). Narratives are further seen as attempts to ascribe activities and events with a meaningful order (Abolafia, 2010; Brown and Humphreys; 2003). Because narratives represent attempts to impose order, they are frequently seen as an integral means of organizing (Currie and Brown, 2003; Brown et al., 2008); they seek to bring plausibility and

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coherence to disparate shared experiences (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011). Organizations are often seen as discursive spaces that offer strategists opportunity for writing and talking.

Program leaders use narratives as an important means in shaping projects and programs in which they engage. The ways business leaders articulate narratives impact current and future organizational and industrial directions (Boddy and Paton, 2004; Havermans et al., 2015). Enninga and van der Lugt (2016) acknowledge that narratives can be structured and presented as a plot. A narrative presents actors dealing with a series of events and circumstances that have an underlying pattern. McKenna and Metcalfe (2013) further argue that project and program managers interpose different linguistic concepts and use them to shape future actions. Examples of these concepts include innovation, agility and internationalization. The multiplicity of the linguistic concepts can be represented as a network. Project conceptualization is seen as a process of selecting the right concepts to provide coherent means.

Metcalfe and Sastrowardoyo (2013) further recognize stakeholders' narratives as important sources and that provide robust, transparent, creative and fair management of complex projects and developing strategies. Sage et al. (2014) explore the ways in which narratives about project successes and failures are mobilized to legitimize managerial identities and actions. Hartmann and Dorée (2015) reinforce that narratives help to grasp complexity and alternative views of practice in a reflective manner, they remain ex-post representations of practice that may miss part of this practice through which learning occurs. These scholars provide a necessary background for understanding how various narratives may be told, offering different lenses through which to reassemble and interpret the events that happened. The reflective and co-constructive nature of narratives helps organizational

actors to share common views and solve complex problems. Re-constructing narratives of the past shape current practices and future strategies visions.

**4. The use of narratives in constructing organizational and industry-level identities**

The theoretical position adopted in this paper is that identities at all levels (industry, organizational and individual) are social constructions (Gioia et al., 2000). It is important to recognize that industry level identity is shaped by written narratives mobilized in government reforms, structures, regulations and can be long-term processes. Industry level identity construction may be explored on much more longer-term than organizational identities. Industry and organizational identities are inevitably formed through strategic narratives mobilized by those in senior strategic positions. Alvesson and Robertson (2015) address identity issues in relation to senior employees in the UK investment banking sector. Their study demonstrates that senior employees are far less sensitive to identity issues than existing research suggests. It hence important to consider boundary conditions and exceptions. The advice given by these authors to subject assumptions and concepts like identity to scrutiny and critical reflection.

Research has examined how actors have interpreted the past to forge organizational identities (Hansen, 2007; Mordhorst, 2014), set strategic directions (Suddaby et al., 2010; Schulz and Hernes, 2013). Gioia et al. (2000, p. 64) argue that organizational identity is commonly understood as an 'organization's members' collective understanding of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, and that distinguish the organisation from other organizations. Organizational identity is attributed from expressed values subject to multiple interpretations by organizational members. Bourne and Jenkins (2013) clarify that top management espouse organizational values through verbal and written statements and formal documents. Organizational values typically refer to the small number

of values that are coherent and consistent. Changes in values do occur over time, but typically incrementally. Anteby and Molnar (2012) show how forgetting in a firm's rhetorical history helps sustain organizational identity and collective memory over time. They argue that identities are part of ongoing historical constructions and collective memories. They argue that organizational identities can be viewed as socially constructed, collective memory can be seen as historically constructed. It is commonly recognized that strategic narratives play an important role in (re)constructing individual and organizational identities (Brown and Thompson, 2013). Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) increasingly emphasize that organizational identity is continually constituted in narrative texts and may be reflexively woven by organizational members. Whilst organizational identity narratives tend to be consistent, they can be modified over time (e.g. strategies are revised; company reports are re-written). These scholars call for further research to establish the implications of a narrative approach for issues centred on organizational and industry-level identities.

## 5. Methodology

Narrative inquiry refers to a subset of qualitative research designs in which narratives are understood as linguistic composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed plot (Polkinghorne, 1995). A plot is seen as a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual and organizational events and experiences can be displayed. The interview situation is viewed as a social interaction between the interviewee and interviewer (cf. Quasthoff, 2013). It is recognised that the interview talk may reflect impression management - intention to be perceived as a certain type of leader in the eyes of others, i.e. a researcher in the interview situation. A different researcher would likely elicit a different set of narratives.

The interviewees were hence purposefully selected on the basis of their formal leadership roles in implementing strategies and extensive experiences working on major construction, engineering and infrastructure programs (more than ten years on average). Twenty-two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with CEOs of large UK-based infrastructure, construction and engineering corporations between February and May 2015. Twenty of the interviewees were male and two were female. Table 1 presents general background information about CEOs interviewed and organizations they lead. The sample represents highly publicized corporations appearing in the social media, hence, the more specific details are kept confidential and anonymous. In order to ensure anonymity, CEOs in this paper are given pseudonyms.

Table 1 CEOs interviewed background information

| Pseudonyms | Background | Number of years of experience | Nature of the organization | Number of employees in the company |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adam | Physics | 30 | Construction management organization | 500 |
| Mary | Business and management | 33 | Multinational construction and engineering corporation | 15000 |
| Gary | Engineering Production and Management | 44 | Public-private company responsible for the maintenance, renewal and upgrade of the infrastructure | 3500 |
| Thomas | Operations and project management; chartered civil engineering | 36 | Public company with responsibility for managing the core road network | 3500 |
| Marshall | Civil engineering | 35 | Rail infrastructure corporation | 10000 |
| Nick | Law, Chartered engineering | 25 | Multinational construction and development company | 57000 |
| George | Civil engineering | 25 | Water infrastructure corporation | 500 |
| Samuel | Aerospace and engineering | 27 | Rail infrastructure corporation | 800 |
| William | Quantity Surveying | 30 | Cost and project management consultancy | 2500 |
| Stephen | Quantity Surveying | 49 | Consultancy, maintenance and construction | 4350 |
| Robert | Architecture, Chartered surveying | 26 | Building, maintenance and asset management | 2000 |
| Alexander | Planning management | 13.5 | International consultancy and construction company | 2900 |

| Trevor | Business and management | 25 | Contractor offering dry lining, ceilings and specialist internal fit- out to main contractors, owner clients and architects | 1000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Matt | Organizational business | 11 | Infrastructure group providing innovative and efficient infrastructure | 50000 |
| Chris | Civil engineering | 25 | Consultancy, maintenance and construction | 4500 |
| Ben | Chartered building | 33 | Consultancy, maintenance and construction | 8000 |
| Harry | Infrastructure | 17 | Global engineering company that provides consulting, design, construction, and operations services | 26000 |
| Katherine | Law | 11 | Construction management organization | 500 |
| Andrew | Chartered engineering | 30 | Construction management consultancy | 10000 |
| Peter | Civil engineering | 23 | Regional building and civil engineering contractor | 350 |
| Louis | Architecture | 27 | Providing architecture, planning and management services to the infrastructure sector | 150 |
| John | Surveying and Chartered Building | 44 | Construction management consultancy | 1000 |

The interview questions were open in nature oriented towards strategic intent, which are likely to elicit narratives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). Examples of interview questions include: 'Could you please tell me about your professional background and role in the organization?', 'What is your vision of the future development of the organization and the industry as a whole?' 'To what extent looking backward and looking forward is important in shaping strategic directions?'. The last two questions sought to elicit strategic narratives about future vision, connecting with - and making sense of - past and present experiences. They were specifically designed to explore the relationships between narratives and organizational and industry-level identities. Interviews were one-to-one conducted by the author and ranged from 45-90 minutes in length with an average interview lasting an hour. The interviews were typically held in practitioners' offices. The interviews were tape-recorded and then fully transcribed by the author.

Following a narrative inquiry, the interviewees' strategic narratives are seen as socially constructed and contested. Narrative socially constructed by executive directors is a unit of analysis of the resent study. The analytical process involved coding the interviews for narratives by identifying natural linguistic expressions, texts and words used by the interviewees. The sequence and consequence of such diverse texts emerge in plotted narratives: events are organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for particular audience (Riessman, 2008). The analytical process commenced with a detailed reading of the transcripts several times over with a focus on strategic narratives. This involved examination of the extent to which CEOs' narratives reflect organizational and industry-level identities. Of particular interest was to explore whether or not strategic narratives reflect the CEOs' self-identities. Plotted narratives are considered as outcomes of dominant structures, political actions, script-following, performance, organizational and industry identity works (Alvesson, 2003). The analysis required better understanding of the context within which interviewees operated. This involves reading industrial and organisational reports, strategies and published brochures. This leads to recognition of the socially constructed and contested nature of narratives. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved a continuous moving back and forward between the entire dataset (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). The common and consistent narratives across all interviews were identified. Of particular interest was the ways narratives connect the past, present and future. Narratives were organized as representational strategies, with quotations providing illustrations presented in Table 2.

## 6. Findings

Table 2 Identified common narratives with illustrative quotations

| Identified narratives | Illustrative quotations |
|---|---|
| 1 Strategic narratives of organizational identities | "Values are crucial. One of our values is innovation. If you say to people our values are collaboration and innovation. It is value-based, but it is subjective." (Adam) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | "Vision is very important, but I place more importance on values of the organization, but it is supported by appropriate behaviours. In leadership terms, being able to express the values of the organization, what behaviours are the ones you aspire to achieve are important." (Gary)<br><br>"How do we make it almost in DNA in our company? We are thinking about it. We are thinking about having champions around governance staff, around decision-making." (Harry) |
| 2 Strategic narratives of industry-level identity | "Because we are talking about a long journey, and in a slow journey it is really important how far we have gone. We are a better industry than we were. We can prove it" (Adam)<br><br>"There will be many challenges in the future. But what I am trying to do is to create different psychology for this industry to move faster." (Marshall)<br><br>"It is focused on cost and not value, and it is a very short term. There are some structural problems with the industry that do not help the natural adoption of change as a constant. We have got to find a way of changing that." (George)<br><br>"As you might image, having led businesses for 25 years I have got a bit of experience of what works, what does not work" (Nick)<br><br>"There are big markets, economic issues for construction. Because it is low margin business, it is a project-based business. For all kind of reasons it is difficult to transfer learning from project to project. Construction people tend to reinvent from project to project. There is a lack of continuity. Cycling of construction is discontinuous because it is project-based. On the other hand, construction provides a very kind of positive environment for innovation. Projects are unique, there are unique problems to solve that goes on quite regularly in construction." (William)<br><br>"It is a fantastic sector to work in, but I think it is a very strange sector because things that are happening in the construction sector would not happen in other businesses. I think it has to do so much to learn." (Robert)<br><br>"I would be disappointed if we did not have a culture of collaboration. That is what I resonate to. That is what I connect to. It is difficult in our climate because price tends to be the top criteria." (Alexander) |
| 3 Strategic future-oriented narratives | "Our strategy has got a headline that we want to be an engineering enterprise by human capital. People in engineering is what we think makes us different" (Mary)<br><br>"I think about looking forward: how do we organize all that experience, all that creative thinking in a context of the firm and get the best of everybody to deliver." (Andrew)<br><br>"I think you are creating a look forward. I like the idea of creating futures." (Louis)<br><br>"Looking forward is very important. It is very easy to keep looking back. I think it is important in leadership terms to create a vision of where you are going." (Gary)<br><br>"I would say forward is more important because I enjoy change. I do not want to go backwards, I want to go forward. I always believe do something better tomorrow than you do today." (Nick) |
| 4 Reflecting on the past and (re)constructing narratives for the future | "Retrospectively, as you are learning from your experiences, capture it, share it, and use it. Lots of businesses are not good at sharing experiences and best practice." (Mary)<br><br>"It is difficult to disconnect past and future. You can definitely learn from the past. When it comes to innovation to get a speed of change faster, we need to de-couple from the past. There is quite a lot that is holding us back." (Nick)<br><br>"We get to construction industry – the era of power of access and information. It is going to be a phenomenal break through in these areas. These are very technical. But to enable that we really got to capture what we have done." (Stephen)<br><br>"You have to sell because that is what we did compare to anyone else. We have to tell the story and sell it, and convince someone that you can do things." (Harry) |
| 5 Narratives struggles and paradoxes | "I have got enough experience around this business. I get a sense of how long it takes to do something. I get a sense when someone comes to me with a project |

| | financial forecast" (Thomas) |
| | "So the only way of passing experience and knowledge is storytelling. And only some people are good at storytelling, not everyone is." (Mary) |
| | "I think there is a place for cataloguing experiences. People can go and read it. My experience is that people do not go and read that staff. Increasingly, the way we are going to do it in our business is to create that very connected, organic workforce, a sustainable workforce where Jim knows Paul works in that job. Sue knows Susan." (Harry) |
| | "Why it is appeared to be unusual in the construction industry to see younger people in senior positions? I always thought that was wrong" (George) |
| | "There are huge opportunities at the moment: there is technology; there are regulations; here is money. In my book all the ingredients that are amazing are there. You just have got to find to tap into and make it work." (Peter) |

*Narratives 1: Strategic narratives of industry-level identity*

This strategic narrative is about forming organizational identities. All interviewees talked about setting a strategic vision for their corporations, creating values and organizational culture. The formal role of leadership is emphasized strongly in this type of narrative. The purpose of these strategic narratives is to influence all organizational members to follow their vision. Values are seen crucial by all interviewees. The common values embedded in construction, engineering and infrastructure firms were repeated by most interviewees: health and safety, collaboration, integration, innovation. Some labels used were different in different organisations referring to the same meaning (for example inspiration as a value was meaning innovation). Generally, this plotted narrative is common among all interviewees. There some slight differences in ways some interviewees placed more importance on values of organisations than vision. Many interviewees viewed creation organizational values and culture as long-term strategies. But all talked about the role of creating organizational culture. Of further note some struggles evident in forming organizational identities:

> "How do we make it almost in DNA in our company? We are thinking about
>
> it. We are thinking about having champions around governance staff, around
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> decision-making." (Harry)

Interviewees often asked themselves questions through the interview situation. They were continually thinking about how to solve problems and improve performance.

*Narratives 2: Strategic narratives of organizational identities*

CEO's narratives of future challenges in industry are key means of strategic positioning. Their goal is to articulate narratives that spark actions, share knowledge, transmit values, foster collaboration and lead people into the future:

> "There will be many challenges in the future. But I think to put in place an innovation programme, there will be different priorities. I do recognise that for those industries that only survive by coming up with new ideas, it is critical to innovate. Fast manufacturing processes, the mobile industry are hugely competitive. You will only survive if you do things differently. For our own industry we do not often create the crisis. We often have to innovate to survive. But what I am trying to do is to create different psychology for this industry to move faster. Now leadership. What is it about that makes people to stay in the programme [Name], or apply for a job with us or stay longer than otherwise they would? When I arrive here the vision was to deliver on time, on cost and in partnership - and that was fine. That what we do for the day job. But it seemed to me the ambition was quite big enough that we are responding for the legacy to move forward the industry. So, we put together our value book." (Marshall)

Of particular note is that the delivery of programs in time, budget and in partnership is seen as essential day job, whilst creating values is seen as a higher level priority and ambition to develop the infrastructure sector. When faced with particular problems and solutions to these

problems, leaders emphasized the role of exposing of full capability and experience of a firm. Different perspectives on innovative capability are articulated by interviewees.

Creating values and culture are often seen as long-term strategies for organizational and industrial development. This narrative highlights the importance of changes at different levels (educational, firms, sectors, international). The emphasis is placed on the structural problems in the industry, seeking to find a solution:

> "I think culturally we do have problems in the industry. It is not sufficient to say let's just put it to safety. Now this comes back to the problem of 'of course it is more expensive'. As long as a profit margins in construction in this country are as low as they are very difficult to persuade someone to spend more with the prospect but no guarantee of making it better. I think the start to get to the problem which is a profit margins in the construction industry in this country are different and they are lower than the big Spanish, French, German contractors would expect to see. It is a little bit simplistic, but I do think if you do something as cheap as you can, and again it is focused on cost and not value, and it is a very short term. There are some structural problems with the industry that do not help the natural adoption of change as a constant. We have got to find a way of changing that. It has to start at the educational level" (George)

The reference is giver to the International comparison of the construction sector, and the importance of long-term strategic development.

*Narrative 3: Strategic future-oriented narratives*

The third narrative is about a need to learn from the past in order to do better in the future. It is about accepting that mistakes happen in organisations are by no means subject to quick solutions. The CEOs are aspired to a high level of professional ethics and compromises:

> "Forward is the most important thing because you can influence and change that. But if you do not recognise what has happened and learn from experiences looking forward would be as valuable. So, always make sense your experiences constructively. Do the good things again and the bad things make sure you avoid that, and we all not perfect at that. Retrospectively, as you are learning from your experiences, capture it, share it, use it. Lots of businesses are not good at sharing experiences and best practice. There is not generosity for people to make the same mistakes. The more you get some consistency." (Mary)

This narrative is thoughtful with an implied element of moral or wisdom with a sense of reflection on personal experiences. Sharing experiences and best practices across project, programs and portfolios are seen importance for businesses.

*Narrative 4: Reflecting on the past and (re)constructing narratives for the future*

The forth narrative refers to the importance of reflection on the past programs, and thinking about the present situations and future strategic directions. Retrospective examples of successful projects assist program leaders to recognize achievements (e.g. creating values, generating new jobs) at present time and to project future vision. This narrative demonstrates an inherent connection between the past, present and future. It is critical in nature, as program leaders imagine various questions that people may ask and construct possible answers to these questions:

"If I stand in front of 300 people and say 'I want us to be innovative, creative company', one of the questions would be: 'Why?' I will say 'I want us to be more systematic. I want us to be more explicit. I want us to see as a commercial differentiator with our clients, it makes it easier to retain our people, because I want to have an environment of fun and creativity'. It means I can hire smartest people who want to work for me because they know they are going to use their brains in a quite creative way. I need to be able to answer questions. That is a bit more like forward looking. Why can we use the past is to say 'When we did it here, when we did it there, we applied there… Look what has happened? We took on London Olympics, we were creative, innovative, commercially, organizationally, technically; look at the careers we generated; look at a value we created for our client; look at a value we created for our company'. I think we can use examples of the past. We did it probably at a time with different drivers. If you stand back now what we did in Olympics, we were innovative in all sorts of different levels" (Harry)

It is noted that this narrative involves an element of imagination ('if I') and critical reflection ('need to be able to answer questions'). A vocabulary commonly used by program leaders contains discursive terms such as 'innovation', 'value' and 'collaboration'. Through language and narratives, program leaders claim to create an 'organizational culture'. The metaphors and cultural keywords selected by CEOs offer insight to corporation's policies on matters of governance, accountability, planning, performance and strategic thinking.

*Narrative 5: Struggles and paradoxes in narratives*

The fifth narratives retains to struggles and paradoxes evident in narratives. It is noted that leaders seek to answer the question of how learning can be captured and transferred across

generations of leaders and over time. As program leaders have extensive experience in managing programs (on average ten years), their wisdom comes with experience. Based on extensive experience, program leaders articulate very engaging and thoughtful narratives:

> "How do you take learning from previous projects and present it in such a way that people want it? Or does it just become a dusty paper on someone's book shelf? Maybe a digital innovation in someone's hub? How does it become a demonstration of how you can deliver value or even become more valued if you apply it somewhere else? I do not know the answer. One is to move people to the next big project. So, to equip them with. The most efficient is to move people forward. Maybe you can take 60-70% of your learning with you. If you write things down you can probably get 10%. If you put things on digital website maybe it is another 10-15%. There is no one medium I think that is yet proven to be the best way. Creating curiosity in your next organisation, when the first thing you do is go and ask what other people do. There is a push how you presented and there is a pull how you want to receive it. Olympics, Terminal 5 we have a Learning Legacy. I am trying to create a hub for UK infrastructure where you have a really good chance to actually create value. To me, Shell UK the big Dutch Oil company if you deep into a day to day base of innovation. It is information plus I think experience that creates value and you have wisdom. Wisdom is not something that you write down, wisdom come with experience."
> (Marshall)

This type of narrative is self-critical, as leaders continuously ask themselves questions and think critically about possible solutions to occurring challenges. The answers to the challenging questions are unknown and subject to continuous debate. Different business

leaders evidently made different assumptions. The language and vocabularies used by CEOs are important means for formulating policies, strategies, commitment and attitudes. The public discourses constructed by top management are subjected to careful assessment for developing and communicating strategies. Leadership must anticipate and act based on expected realities and future vision. The differences between managerial levels in spotting organizational changes over time were highlighted as follows:

> "The job of the leader is to spot the change sooner than anyone else. I did a bit of research few years ago. We did a very simple analysis. That was over time. In this scale you may see a sense of urgency, a sense of fear. We looked at the big change, disruptive markets. We plotted senior managers realized it was a crisis very quickly. We then took senior management who did not get what as a matter at first. They were slower to pick up and it took longer to come down. By the time we got to general workforce people in a factory started to realize when the re-structuring started. The sense of crisis was much less the scale of what the crisis was. It was much slower. By the time these people realized, these people forgotten about that." (Thomas)

It is noted that the above narrative emphasizes a sense of urgency, a sense of fear and a sense of crisis associated with disruptive changes. Many leaders tend to enjoy changes, seeing looking forward as more important than looking backward. They believe in 'doing better tomorrow than you do today' (Mary). Monitoring trends and understanding what is working and what is not working are seen important for developing program and corporate strategies.

**7. Discussion and conclusion**

The present study offers insights into the ways CEOs articulate strategic narratives. It is demonstrated that strategic narratives are rhetorical representations of leadership; a way of forming organizational and industry-level identities; and scripts with intent of an impromptu speech. This observation is in keeping with those authors who argue that narratives are the means for promoting strategic directions (Denning, 2006, 2008; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2011); shaping future vision and influencing people to change and follow common goals (cf. Bartel and Garud, 2009; Denning, 2006, 2008). The persuasive and convincing nature of the narratives was evident in the references to the formal CEOs leadership roles. The analysis has identified narratives as representations of pre-existing scripts with emphasis being placed on the importance of organizational performance and industrial development. Discursive terms such as 'value', 'innovation', 'collaboration' and 'culture' were heavily embedded into the strategic narratives. The narratives are directed at more generic audiences with clear purpose and strategic vision.

There is an increasing recognition of the constructive role of language and strategic narratives in the existing organization and strategic management literature (Fenton and Langley, 2011; Garud et al., 2014; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Thinking prospectively is considered as important for planning and developing program and portfolio strategies (Morris, 2015; Winch, 2010). A strategic understanding of language and narratives opens opportunities for shaping emergent industrial trends and progress of programs and portfolios. This paper contributes to the 'lingustic and 'narrative turn' recognized in the organization studies (cf. Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2003; Wilson and Jarzabkowksi, 2004) and management of projects, programs and portfolios literature (cf. Enninga and van der Lugt, 2016; Havermans et al., 2015; McKenna and Metcalfe, 2013) both theoretically and empirically.

The first narrative demonstrates a tendency of leaders in socially constructing organizational identities. The emphasis was placed on organizational values and setting vision for future directions. The formal role of leadership plays a significant role in these narratives. As argued by Anteby and Molnar (2012), Brown and Thompson (2013) and Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) organizational identities are socially constructed through oral and written narratives reflexively woven by organizational members. This study clarifies that strategic narratives articulated by CEOs play an important role in constructing organizational identities. This common narrative leads to the second narrative of the ways leaders articulated their narratives about industry-level identity as a long-term construction. This common narrative is about perception of the infrastructure, construction and engineering industries, challenges faced and future vision. Whilst the industry is often perceived as conservative and slow in changing institutionalized practices, there were some encouraging narratives about future progress. The study conducted by Alvesson and Robertson (2015) addresses identity issues in relation to senior employees in the UK investment banking sector. Their study demonstrates that senior employees are far less sensitive to identity issues than existing research suggests. The present study addresses identity issues in relation to CEOs on the UK infrastructure, construction and engineering sectors. Strategic narratives mobilized by CEOs were about organizational and industry-level identities.

The third common narrative articulated by interviewees is about future thinking as important in leadership terms. Strategic narratives mobilized by CEOs are inherently future-oriented and are important for industrial and international relationships. This is not surprising findings as leaders need to think prospectively far beyond their followers (Wilson and Jarzabkowksi, 2004). The forth narrative highlights the importance of reflecting on the past history in order to develop future strategic vision. Examples of the past successful projects help program leaders to recognize achievements and develop strategies. This narrative

demonstrates critical reflection between past, present and future. The study supports the literature that considers leaders as 'reflexive' decision-makers situating their activities in the context of past actions, current organizational context and future aspirations (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). This common narrative emphasizes the importance of capturing lessons learnt and transferring learning to improve performance. Leaders articulate their narratives as a way of capturing and transferring learning across generations of leaders and through time. Whilst strategic narratives are towards coherent and consistent, on the long-term they can be updated and modified as the literature suggested (cf. Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). The strategic language and narratives mobilized by CEOs shape organizational and industry-level policies and strategies (cf. Boddy and Paton, 2004; Havermans et al., 2015). Finally, the last narrative demonstrates identity paradoxes and struggles. The CEOs interviewed questioned themselves about transferring lessons learned across the generations of leaders and through time. They also highlighted the challenges they face in their duties and responsibilities including a sense of urgency, a sense of fear and a sense of crisis associated with disruptive changes. This observation contributes to the literature on identity work and struggles (cf. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

**Practical implications**

Strategic narratives have an impact on future industrial developments. They tend to become formalized in the form of the grey literature. Examples include company brochures, websites, annual reports and business plans. The grey literature can also extend beyond individual companies to that which addresses the need for change on the industry level. Implementing strategies is one of the most crucial undertakings of organizations. Successful implementation of strategies can re-invent businesses and industries as a whole. Successful strategies

articulated through narratives can enhance the reputation, and have an impact on relationships within and between corporations.

**Future work**

Further research may examine other related processes of narration. A process of projecting the future through strategic narratives merits further attention. Observing public appearances of the CEOs is an alternative method to interviews that could provide additional insights into narration. Public appearances are often used to influence internal and external stakeholders of plans of the organizations. It is expected narratives to play a strong role here.

Further work may explore individual identities of leader in relations to personalized stories they tell about themselves and others. The link between individual, organizational and industry-level identities is another suggested research direction. The role of politicized nature of work environment and power relationships should be addressed to inform our understanding of organizational leadership. This would enrich our knowledge of the complex and dynamic nature of strategizing.

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