

Strategic Consensus in Top Management Teams: The Role of Status Hierarchy, Firm Performance, and a Culture of Dissent

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Status hierarchies influence all human interactions, including strategic consensus in top management teams. In this conceptual paper, we articulate why strategic consensus in top management teams is likely to be more a reflection of compliance of low-status top managers with high-status top managers' judgments than a genuine team's agreement on the firm's strategic priorities. We theorize how a firm's performance can restrain and drive change in status hierarchies, thus impacting the persistence and dissolution of strategic consensus. We also articulate how a culture of dissent can minimize the impact of status hierarchies on strategic consensus. Our model has some implications for examining diversity in top management teams. Scholars have long emphasized the importance of diversity in top management teams, arguing that managers with different backgrounds and viewpoints make firms better equipped to face competitive challenges. However, status hierarchies remind us that if top managers' ideas and contributions are weighed by their status, organizations might not easily realize the potential benefits of having a diverse top management team.

Keywords: strategic consensus, status hierarchies, top management teams, dissent, performance feedback, behavioral theory of the firm, multilevel theory

INTRODUCTION

Strategic consensus has long been regarded as an important step toward firm success (Drucker, 1954). Strategic consensus is achieved when group members share opinions and judgments about a firm's strategy (Kellermanns et al., 2005) and thought to enhance a firm's coordination (Priem, 1990), increase the likelihood of successful implementation of the firm's strategy (Dooley, Fryxell, Judge 2000), boost team sales performance (Ahearne, Mackenzie, Podsakoff, Mathieu, Lam, 2010) and positively affect profitability (Kellermanns, Floyd, Lechner, Shaw, 2011; González-Benito, Aguinis, Boyd, Suarez-González, 2012; Walter, Kellermanns, Floyd, Veiga, Matherne, 2013).

Given its importance, several studies have examined the antecedents of strategic consensus (e.g., Kellermanns et al., 2005). However, little is known about the conditions it persists and changes (Markoczy, 2001; Walter et al., 2013). Drawing on two long-standing social psychological theories – expectation states theory (Berger and Conner, 1974) and status legitimation theory (Ridgeway and Berger, 1986), this study conceptualizes strategic consensus as a product of group processes within top management teams. In such

processes, status hierarchies play a key role, as high-status team members are more likely to have opportunities to give inputs (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980). In contrast, low-status team members are more likely to defer to those members (Ridgeway, Johnson, Diekema 1994).

As the highest-ranking leader in a corporation, a CEO is likely to influence consensus-building (e.g., Wodak et al., 2011). However, given that status hierarchies emerge in the course of interactions among group members (Berger and Conner, 1974), status hierarchies may not necessarily reflect an organization's formal hierarchical structure. For example, a top manager who has an extensive social network and brings strategic information to the organization may have higher status than the company's CFO. Also, a top manager with technical expertise essential for developing new products may have more say in the decision processes than other top managers. An emblematic example of an influential executive who has never held a CEO title was Apple's former VP of design, the British-born designer Jonathan Ive. Knighted by Princess Anne for his services to design and enterprise (BBC, 2012), Sir Ive was Apple's human interface maestro (MacUser, 2014). He was reported to listen and not force his views, but his influence at Apple was unprecedented (Isaacson, 2011).

This conceptual paper articulates how status hierarchies in top management teams influence strategic consensus and how status legitimization processes contribute to the persistence and dissolution of strategic consensus. The model first explores how strategic consensus results from social influence processes in top management teams. Next, we draw on the behavioral theory of the firm (Cyert and March 1963; Greve, 2003) to articulate the role of firm performance in the persistence and dissolution of strategic consensus within top management teams. To counter the tendency of strategic consensus being merely a reflection of compliance of low-status top managers with high-status top managers' judgments, we articulate how a culture of dissent can help minimize the impact of status hierarchies on top management teams.

Our model responds to a call to research on the effect of status processes in teams (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011) and the investigation of the micro-macro divide in management research (Aguinis et al., 2011). Furthermore, the model sheds light on the culture of deferral to management (Stern and Westphal, 2010) and brings a different perspective to diversity in top management teams. Scholars have long emphasized the importance of diversity in TMTs, arguing that top managers with different backgrounds and viewpoints make firms better equipped to face competitive challenges (e.g., Carson et al., 2004; Gray et al., 2022; Hambrick et al., 1996; Weiss et al. 2015). However, given that status processes assign different weights to top managers' ideas and contributions, the benefits of having a diverse top management team might not be easily realized.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Strategic Consensus: Definition and Antecedents

Strategic consensus has several definitions, mainly because varying aspects of this concept have been examined. A few examples of such definitions are – “the agreement of all parties to a decision” (Dess and Orger 1987, p. 313); “the level of agreement on goals and means of competing” (Dess and Priem 1995, p. 402); “the level of agreement on the emphasis placed on a specific type of strategy” (Homburg et al., 1999, p. 340); “the level of agreement about the comprehensiveness of the decision-making process” (Iaquinto and Friedrickson, 1997), and a “shared understanding of strategic priorities” (Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner, Floyd, 2005, p. 721). Some researchers also define strategic consensus as the overlap among individual team members' mental models (Knight et al., 1999; Ensley and Pearce, 2001; Tarakci et al., 2014).

Most studies assume that the top management team members have agreed on the decision outcome, not considering the possibility that the managers might have only consented to it (Bragaw and Misangyi 2019). The latter opens the door to the idea that the content of strategic decisions is “an outcome of transactions of power and influence” (Narayanan and Fahey, 1982, p. 27). Bragaw and Misangyi (2019) broadly classify the former as natural strategic consensus and the latter as negotiated strategic consensus. In the present study, we focus on negotiated strategic consensus, conceptualizing it as an emergent team-level construct arising from status processes. A phenomenon is emergent when “it originates in the cognition, affect,

behaviors, or other characteristics of individuals, is amplified by their interaction and manifests as a higher-level collective phenomenon” (Kozlowski and Klein, 2000, p. 55).

Although strategic consensus is achieved through interactions among individuals, only a few studies in the top management team literature have examined social group processes as antecedents of strategic consensus. Early studies such as Smith et al. (1994) argued that social group processes could explain the unexplained variance left by traditional demographic variables (tenure, background, age). Knight et al. (1999) analyzed whether social behaviors such as agreement-seeking and interpersonal conflict are mediators of the demographics–strategic consensus relationship and found that social group processes provide information on strategic consensus beyond what demographic measures alone can explain. Chattopadhyay and colleagues (1999), while examining whether social influence processes shape individual belief structures, found that top managers’ belief structures are determined in part by the beliefs of other top members of the upper echelon team. Examining the social dynamics of TMTs in family and nonfamily new ventures, Ensley and Pearson (2005) found that the social system of the family creates a synergy in the TMTs in family ventures that nonfamily ventures do not have. And recently, although not examining its antecedents, Bragaw and Misangyi (2019) suggest that negotiated strategic consensus arises from social processes in TMTs (Detert et al., 2013; Song, 2009).

The next sections present a multilevel conceptual model of strategic consensus in which status hierarchies, firm performance, and a culture of dissent play a key role. First, we distinguish status from a related term, power, and next, we define status hierarchies and describe its impact on behaviors in teams.

Social Hierarchies and Distinction Between Status and Power

Status and power are important concepts because they are the basis of social hierarchies (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). Social hierarchies are defined as “an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals with respect to a valued social dimension” (p. 354). As Overbeck et al. (2005) noted, the definition of social hierarchy contains the words “*implicit*” and “*explicit*” to highlight that people may not be aware of such hierarchies.

Because status and power are the basis of social hierarchies and share some common outcomes such as influence (Li et al., 2016), much empirical research invariably uses these constructs interchangeably (Blader and Chen, 2012). However, status and power are theoretically distinct. Status is defined as “the amount of respect, influence, and prominence people enjoy in the eyes of others (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 117). In contrast, power refers to one’s control over valued resources (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). Although there is extant research on power in top management teams (e.g., Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella, 2009), our model focuses on status because status is an outcome of social interaction, whereas power is a property of the individual.

Status Hierarchies: Definition and Impact

Status hierarchies arise from interactions within any group of individuals engaged in a task (Berger and Conner, 1974) and may or may not be derived from a formal hierarchy. These orders dictate who is assigned high or low status within the group. They are based upon performance expectations that an individual holds of himself and others within the group (Berger et al., 1972).

Performance expectations are “generalized belief[s] that an actor holds about the capacity of himself or others to contribute to task completion” (Berger and Conner 1974, p. 87). The context in which individuals operate defines what dimensions are salient in status conferral processes (Li et al., 2016). Considered members of an elite, top managers operate in a highly competitive environment where status characteristics such as public recognition, elite educational backgrounds, previous employment, and board appointments are relevant (D’Aveni, 1990). As D’Aveni noted, “going to the proper schools, having impressive prior work experience and associating with the right people indicate higher status, aggregated prestige and skill” (1990, p. 124). Individual performance, personality, and attractiveness are also factored in (Anderson et al., 2001). Each member of the top management team combines information from these status characteristics to form expectations of each other’s competence (Berger and Conner, 1974). Such processes occur outside of people’s conscious awareness, making them more difficult to be challenged or changed.

Status hierarchies profoundly impact behavior in teams (Tarakci et al., 2016). In group discussions, high-status group members often talk more (even when they are not experts) and are spoken to more often than low-status group members, thus exerting greater influence on outcomes (Ridgeway, 1984). Over time, those given more opportunities to give inputs become more influential, further increasing their worthiness and respect in their group. These structural aspects of social interaction play a role in all groups, but in high-status teams, in particular, they are likely to be even more relevant (Ridgeway and Walker 1995). In the next subsection, we articulate how the TMT status hierarchy influences the content of strategic consensus.

The Role of TMT Status Hierarchy on Strategic Consensus

Although all top managers occupy a position at the highest-level team of the organization, they are not equal (D'Aveni, 1990). Some members outrank and outclass the others (Harrison and Klein, 2007). As a result, high-status group members exert influence, and submissive behaviors are more often displayed by low-status individuals (Carli 1991).

In top management teams, this compliance is not necessarily the result of dominating behaviors by high-status individuals. Rather, it is a *voluntary* act since low-status individuals seek to improve their positions within the status hierarchy by expressing the same opinions as high-status individuals or by actually forming coalitions with high-status individuals (Stern and Westphal, 2010). For instance, low-status managers conform to high-status top managers' opinions in an attempt to secure board appointments with other firms (Stern and Westphal, 2010). Similarly, top managers who work with celebrity CEOs are likely to attain CEO status through internal and external promotions (Graffin, Wade, Porac, and McNamee, 2008).

Therefore, the influence of high-status top managers is rarely seized or won through direct intimidation but established through cooperation with low-status individuals because the latter will enjoy future benefits (Ridgeway, 1987). Taken together, these findings suggest that high-status top managers are likely to influence the expressed opinions of low-status top managers, thus determining the content of the strategic consensus achieved. Instead of representing a genuine agreement on a firm's strategic priorities, the strategic consensus is consented – the outcome of the compliance of low-status individuals with high-status individuals. Thus,

Proposition 1: *The content of strategic consensus reflects the strategic priorities and opinions of high-status top managers.*

The Role of Firm Performance on Strategic Consensus

Although the beliefs and opinions of high-status top managers may drive what ultimately becomes the consensus within the team, some contextual conditions may impact this process. We focus on firm performance as a highly impactful contextual condition on strategic consensus, as firm performance is a primary driver of organizational change and continuity (Milliken and Lant, 1991; Audia and Greve, 2006, Vidal and Mitchell, 2015).

The behavioral theory of the firm (Cyert and March, 1963) suggests that managers routinely compare performance outcomes with their aspiration level, which represents their expectations about the level of performance that their company should achieve. When performance is at or above the managers' aspiration level, that is to say, within an acceptable range, managers maintain the same course of action. Indeed, research on competitive dynamics suggests that good past performance induces firms to carry competitive repertoires characterized as having high levels of inertia (Miller and Chen, 1994), meaning that success reinforces past strategic decisions and continuity. Conversely, when performance is below the aspiration level, managers may initiate problemistic search, which is “search that is stimulated by a problem ...” and be compelled to think outside the box. Accordingly, the behavioral perspective predicts strategic change when firm performance is below aspiration level (Greve and Gaba, 2020).

The following subsections articulate how these performance feedback mechanisms impact the legitimation and delegitimation of status hierarchies, thus contributing to the persistence and dissolution of strategic consensus within top management teams.

Firm Performance Above Aspiration Level and the Persistence of Strategic Consensus

The status legitimation theory (Berger et al. 1998; Ridgeway and Berger 1986) assumes that status hierarchies become legitimate as performance evaluations are consistent with performance expectations. In the context of strategic decision making, performance evaluations are consistent with performance expectations when firms perform at or above managers' aspiration level for the firm. Aspiration level is "a reference point that identifies the boundary between perceived success and failure" (Baum et al. 2005, p. 538). Since high standing is based on external performance evaluation (Ridgeway and Walker, 1995), performance above aspiration level is an external validation that the current strategy is working. Hence, such external validation increases the respect and deference the high-status top managers enjoy from others.

With legitimation, high-status individuals are shown more deference and support by others in the group than lower-status individuals (Berger and Webster, 2006). For example, low-status individuals in teams with a legitimate status hierarchy change their opinions to agree with high-status individuals (Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994). Moreover, high-status individuals are seen as having the right to control more of the group's time and attention than the lower status members (Eisenhardt and Borgeois, 1988). In fact, high-status individuals' ideas, proposals, and decisions are considered more valued, more effective, and more successful group contributions than those from lower-status members (Berger and Webster, 2006). A collective drive toward consensus is clear under conditions of high performance pressure (Gardner, 2012) as top managers understand that when their firm performs well, the entire top management team benefits from it (Graffin et al., 2008). For this reason, top managers are more likely to display opinion conformity when their company is performing above aspiration level (Park, Westphal, and Stern, 2011). Indeed, firm performance above aspiration levels leads to greater commitment to the status quo (Cyert and March 1963, Kahneman and Tversky 1979). In contrast, top managers who do not agree with the strategic priorities that have consensus within the team may refrain from expressing deviant opinions in fear of sanctions (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). Thus,

Proposition 2: *Under conditions of firm performance above aspiration level, the content of strategic consensus remains unaltered in that it reflects the strategic priorities and opinions of high-status top managers.*

Firm Performance Below Aspiration Level and the Dissolution of Consensus

Status hierarchies tend to be stable, and even when their normative prescriptions are at odds with some observed inconsistent outcomes, they continue to exist (Berger et al., 1998). However, under conditions of financial adversity, legitimated orders are likely to be undermined as performance evaluations, and performance expectations become incongruent (Ridgeway 1987). When managers receive information suggesting that the firm is not performing well, there are grounds for some level of concern about the appropriateness of the current strategy. Once silent, dissenting top managers are now more likely to voice their concerns and less likely to display deferential behaviors or comply with high-level top managers' opinions. The cost of supporting the influence of high-status individuals becomes high (Ridgeway 1987). Accordingly, there is strong empirical evidence that top managers are less likely to display opinion conformity and ingratiation behavior under conditions of low performance (e.g., Park et al., 2011). This reflects status conflicts erupting in the TMT, disputes over top managers' relative status in the TMT status hierarchy (Bendersky and Hays, 2012). As Bitektine and Haack (2015, p. 58) put it, "critical legitimacy judgments openly contradict the status quo and, thus, create a sense of illegitimacy of the institutionalized order." Therefore, the expression of dissent signals the "emergence of contradictions" (Tost, 2011), which lays the ground for the delegitimation of the current status hierarchy, and as a result, the dissolution of the once-held strategic consensus. Thus,

Proposition 3: *Under conditions of firm performance below aspiration level, strategic consensus dissolves in that its content no longer reflects the high-status top managers' priorities and opinions.*

The Role of a Culture of Dissent on Strategic Consensus

So far, we have proposed conditions and processes that are *sufficient* enough to be causative factors in the emergence, persistence, and dissolution of strategic consensus. Nevertheless, we recognize that these conditions are neither *unique* nor *necessary*. Legitimized status hierarchies impact strategic consensus, but other legitimized processes in organizations can counter this impact. We focus on the expression of dissent as part of a company's culture. When dissent is fostered in an organization, individuals are more likely to voice their concerns (Kassing, 2008). These organizations welcome dissent and don't retaliate against individuals who bring different perspectives to the table (Hastings and Payne, 2013). In fact, dissent is highly encouraged as a source of firm renewal (Tarakci et al., 2018). New ideas brought in by dissents may turn into profits for the organization, further legitimizing the expression of dissent.

A culture of dissent takes time to be legitimized, and leadership plays a key role (Jabarzadeh et al., 2019). As Banks (2008, p. viii) argues, "if [leaders] don't do something about contrarian visions, contested power, and diverse understandings, they aren't leading or in a leadership situation. They're merely occupying a position." Hence, CEOs must actively foster a culture of dissent in which top managers can freely exchange ideas (Bryant, 2011). Such a culture is likely to minimize the tendency of low-status top managers to comply with high-status top managers. As a result, strategic consensus is more likely to reflect a genuine team's agreement on the firm's priorities. Nevertheless, encouraging a culture of dissent is a tall order for leaders, as leaders are generally averse to constructive criticism (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007) and a culture of deferral to management is common in top management teams (Stern and Westphal, 2010). Thus,

Proposition 4: *A culture of dissent minimizes the impact of the status processes on the content strategic consensus.*

DISCUSSION

This study brings a different perspective to the study of TMTs as it draws on social psychological theories to offer a model of strategic consensus emergence, persistence, and dissolution. In our conceptualization, we articulate how strategic consensus within TMTs may be acquiesced – more a reflection of low-status top managers' compliance with high-status top managers' judgments than a genuine agreement on the firm's strategic direction. This compliance is not necessarily the result of dominating behaviors by high-status top managers because top managers in low-status positions benefit from their ingratiating behavior toward high-status top managers (Stern and Westphal, 2010).

The TMT status hierarchy remains legitimated as long as the performance expectations are met (Ridgeway and Berger, 1986). However, the status quo is destabilized under financial adversity since the decisions supported by the current status hierarchy no longer yield the expected financial results. Consequently, high-status managers' ability to influence low-status managers becomes impaired. The latter no longer feels obligated to comply with the former, thus creating an opportunity to dissolve the once-held strategic consensus.

In proposing this theory, this study suggests conditions and processes that are *sufficient* enough to be causative factors in the emergence, persistence, and dissolution of strategic consensus. Nevertheless, these conditions are neither *unique* nor *necessary*. For example, several successful, high-performing firms are characterized by dissent among top team members (Bryant, 2011). A culture of dissent may have been legitimized over time in those firms. One of these processes might be those new ideas brought in by dissents consistently turning into profits or new opportunities for the organization. Our conceptual theory suggests that strategic consensus as a function of the TMT status hierarchy tends to be the norm when a culture of dissent is not in place.

Our model responds to a call of research on the effect of status processes in teams (Bunderson and Reagans 2011). As Bunderson and Reagans (2011, p.182) put it, "theories of organization have tended to adopt a rational system model that emphasizes cooperative interactions between and among actors who are undifferentiated concerning power and status." Researchers must consider that a culture of deferral to

management (Stern and Westphal, 2010) is common in organizations and that status differences in organizations are real and might have unintended effects. We learned from the Great Recession in 2007-2009 that when dissenters do not voice their concerns and decisions made at the apex of organizations go uncontested, bad things can happen (Chan, 2011). By articulating how status hierarchies impact strategic consensus within TMTs, the present study highlights the importance of examining status processes and their effects on team outcomes.

The current study also addresses the current micro-macro divide in management research. As Aguinis et al. (2011, p. 397) noted, “practitioners who face day-to-day management challenges are interested in solving problems from *all* levels of analysis ... However, research produced by management scholars addresses only the organizational *or* individual level.” In responding to this call, the current study combines the micro-level and the macro-level. We articulate how an organizational factor, firm performance, impacts a team-level process – the legitimation and delegitimation of the TMT’s status hierarchies and the resulting strategic consensus.

Our conceptual model also has implications for diversity research. By articulating that TMT’s status hierarchy can influence group interactions within top management teams (e.g., who gets to talk more and whose idea is considered first), we argue that top managers’ opinions are likely to be weighed by the status they have in their teams. For this reason, this study challenges the common assumption that the *existence* of diversity within top management teams means the *expression* of diverse viewpoints at the apex of organizations. Researchers are urged to consider the collective social processes occurring within top management teams, as such processes may interfere with a lively, honest discussion of viewpoints.

Last but not least, this study has practical recommendations for managers to overcome the liability that status inequalities present to organizations. For instance, when made aware of the impact of the status hierarchies on strategic consensus, CEOs interested in genuine opinions will be mindful of those processes and ensure that low-status top managers are given opportunities to voice their concerns. Moreover, by understanding that a culture of dissent attenuates the impact of status processes, CEOs will likely take action to nurture and foster a culture of dissent in their organizations.

CONCLUSION

Top management teams are the elite of every organization and, as such, are the ultimate stage for battles for status and influence. Our conceptual model attempts to unveil the status dynamics surrounding top management teams and explain why strategic consensus is likely to be *negotiated* rather than natural. We also articulate why firm performance can act as a double sword, serving as (a) a reinforcement of current structures when above aspiration level and (b) a catalyst for change in the status hierarchies when below aspiration level. This occurs because performance feedback can legitimize and delegitimize status hierarchies. “Fighting fire with fire,” we argue that a solution might reside in other legitimized structures in organizations. When legitimized in the organization, a culture of dissent may help attenuate the effect of status processes on strategic consensus.

Nevertheless, we recognize that fostering a culture of dissent is a tall order for leaders. It requires leaders to be mindful of the influence of high-status top managers in strategic decisions. They would also have to depart from a culture of deferral to management, commonly present in organizations. Our conceptual model opens several avenues of research. We hope to inspire researchers to explore the structural aspects of social interaction and their impact on strategic decision-making.

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