

# Dialogue for strategy implementation: how framing processes enable the evolution of new opportunities

Paola Bellis, Silvia Magnanini and Roberto Verganti

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *Taking the dialogic organizational development perspective, this study aims to investigate the framing processes when engaging in dialogue for strategy implementation and how these enable the evolution of implementation opportunities.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Through a qualitative exploratory study conducted in a large multinational, the authors analyse the dialogue and interactions among 25 dyads when identifying opportunities to contribute to strategy implementation. The data analysis relies on a process-coding approach and linkography, a valuable protocol analysis for identifying recursive interaction schemas in conversations.*

**Findings** – *The authors identify four main framing processes – shaping, unveiling, scattering and shifting – and provide a framework of how these processes affect individuals' mental models through increasing the tangibility of opportunities or elevating them to new value hierarchies.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the strategy implementation and organizational development literature, providing a micro-perspective of how dialogue allows early knowledge structures to emerge and shape the development of opportunities for strategy implementation.*

**Practical implications** – *From a managerial perspective, the authors offer insights to trigger action and change in individuals to contribute to strategy when moving from formulation to implementation.*

**Originality/value** – *Rather than focusing on the structural control view of strategy implementation and the role of the top management team, this study considers strategy implementation as a practice and what it takes for organizational actors who do not take part in strategy formulation to enact and shape opportunities for strategy implementation through constructive dialogue.*

**Keywords** *Dialogue, Strategy implementation, Dyads, Framing process, Linkography*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

Developing and implementing a new strategy is crucial for organizations (Greer *et al.*, 2017; Eling and Herstatt, 2017). It involves understanding environmental changes and opportunities, defining a new direction (Siguaw *et al.*, 2006), and fostering future-oriented business concepts for improved performance (Greer *et al.*, 2017). While scholars have focused on strategy formulation and the role of top management, they recognize how strategy implementation is more challenging and deserves further attention (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 2005; Hitt *et al.*, 2017).

Novel strategies not only innovate products or services but also transform the organization's structure, competencies, processes or culture, having a destabilizing effect (de Brentani and Reid, 2012; Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). Effective strategy implementation requires new and valuable ideas and understanding new norms, values and attributions (Tawse and Tabesh, 2021; Fronda and Moriceau, 2008; O'Connor and McDermott, 2004; Mortensen and Haas, 2018).

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It involves framing new knowledge for innovative solutions and actions (Siguaw *et al.*, 2006; Koch, 2011; An *et al.*, 2014).

Consistent with this perspective, recent research on strategy implementation has shifted from perceiving it as merely creating plans, structures, systems and incentives (structural control view) to understanding how organizations interpret and put those plans into practical action (strategy-as-practice view) (Weiser *et al.*, 2020; Alcadipani *et al.*, 2018; Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Bertels *et al.*, 2016; Jarzabkowski, 2004).

The structural control view of strategy implementation, which is predominantly top-down, involves the top management team (TMT) crafting conversations to mitigate resistance from organizational actors who may oppose change (Blackman *et al.*, 2022; Dutton *et al.*, 2001).

On the other hand, the strategy-as-practice view focuses on how strategies are continuously enacted and adapted during implementation (Weiser *et al.*, 2020). This shift aligns with theories of organizational development that aim to help managers cope with the complexities of our rapidly changing world, such as dialogic organizational development (Bushe and Marshak, 2014; Marshak and Grant, 2008) and sensegiving and sensemaking (Weick *et al.*, 2005).

Strategy-as-practice research suggests that strategies are implemented through the discursive, interpretative and emotional practices of responsible actors (Balogun *et al.*, 2014). In simpler terms, strategy implementation happens through dialogue (Weiser *et al.*, 2020), which serves as a tool for framing and enacting opportunities for strategy implementation (Bourgoin *et al.*, 2018).

Management studies on dialogues highlight their role in driving transformation processes, where conversations enable people to frame their reality through knowledge enactment and transfer (e.g. Ford and Ford, 1995). Dialogues go beyond expressing thoughts and preferences; they create a collaborative space for ideas to flourish and be tested (Arnett, 2016). By fostering mutual understanding and creative abrasion, dialogues facilitate the framing of new knowledge and meanings (De Luca Picione and Valsiner, 2017; Ahn and Hong, 2019). Through framing processes, dialogues prompt individuals to critically examine and reassess their mental models and knowledge structures, leading to new worldviews, opportunity identification and subsequent actions (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005).

In strategy management, the study of framing processes examines how strategic actors, like the TMT, use dialogue to shape courses of action and social identities to mobilize others (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014) in a way that aligns with the old structural control view of strategy implementation. Still, there is a limited understanding of how individuals not involved in strategy formulation engage, comprehend and identify alternative opportunities and actions that impact the effectiveness of strategy implementation (Tawse and Tabesh, 2021; Greer *et al.*, 2017; Dimov, 2021). In other words, from a strategy-as-practice perspective, little is known about how strategies are continuously enacted and framed during implementation. Several authors have called for more detailed and systematic examinations of how employees at all levels engage in strategic dialogue and of how their reasoning in context builds on, extends or challenges the formulated strategy (Riis *et al.*, 2006; Roobeek *et al.*, 1998; Cornelissen and Werner, 2014).

In this study, we explore these gaps through exploring dialogic dynamics in the context of opportunity identification for strategy implementation. Specifically, taking the dialogic organizational development perspective, we investigate the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do people frame new opportunities for strategy implementation through dialogue?
- RQ2. How do the framing processes enacted enable the evolution of the opportunities identified?

We adopt a micro-level perspective as instances of social interactions delimited in time and effort to study the actual conversations of pairs of individuals when developing and refining new strategy implementation ideas and opportunities. After mapping the causal links among the assertions, we examine the dialogue dynamics and how organizational actors understand and propose alternative relationships and actions that may affect the strategy (Ford and Ford, 1995).

Specifically, we observed the interactions of 25 pairs in creating novel opportunities and concrete actions to be designed and embraced for the implementation of a new strategy. All the pairs involved were from the same organization embarking on a radically new strategy, not just improving an existing one, thus a setting where the dynamics of interest are expected to be more evident.

Through this journey, they had the opportunity to experience time-bounded moments of collaboration in pairs to benefit from feedback and confrontation with someone on the same journey. We recorded all interactions for a total of 500 min and analysed the dialogue through linkography (Goldschmidt, 2014), a protocol analysis method gaining recognition in the design field to clarify how individuals think and interact during collaboration. Through this analysis, we identified four main framing processes or interaction schemas – shaping, scattering, unveiling and shifting – that characterise opportunity disclosure. We observed how these framing processes enabled individuals to elaborate opportunities and ideas in four main directions: shaping and shifting, which seem to lead to more concrete and actionable opportunities; unveiling, which elevates the identification of opportunities to a more abstract level, enabling the emergence of novel value hierarchies; and finally, scattering, which allows detailing the opportunity features.

Our research contributes to the strategy-as-practice view of strategy implementation by providing a micro-perspective of how strategy implementation opportunities are framed through dialogue. The study provides insights about how strategies are continuously enacted and framed in the implementation process (Weiser *et al.*, 2020).

Besides, the study contributes to the literature about dialogue and framing in the strategic management field, going beyond the role of framing for purposeful communication efforts of TMT to frame others' understanding of the strategy and providing insights about how organizational actors frame opportunities for strategy implementation, considering the mutual and reciprocal influence organizational actors have among them when enacting a new strategy through dialogue (e.g. Riis *et al.*, 2006).

From a managerial perspective, our study provides insights on how people observe and embrace novel strategies, as well as a framework of how ideas emerge and are shaped through dialogue.

## Literature background

Novel strategies aim to spark a new direction, requiring changes to existing technologies and/or market infrastructures, values and norms depicting a new organizational setting (Correani *et al.*, 2020). From a people perspective, new strategies often have a disruptive effect and cause the loss of meaning (Fronza and Moriceau, 2008). Thus, engaging individuals in new strategy implementation is crucial for the success of the initiative (Greer *et al.*, 2017; Logemann *et al.*, 2019). We next review the literature on strategy formulation/implementation and people's involvement therein to explore how dialogue helps individuals understand, embrace and contribute to strategy implementation.

### *New strategy implementation and the effect on people in organizations*

New strategies are future-oriented and capture the strategic beliefs and understandings that define what the firm is and how the activities are assembled to ensure their

effectiveness (Tawse and Tabesh, 2021). New strategy development aims at transformational and revolutionary change (del Val and Fuentes, 2003) not only for the business but also for the organization, changing the values, norms (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1996; Nadler and Tushman, 1990) and the way people work and interact (Correani *et al.*, 2020).

A new strategy represents “the way of thinking and leading that drives the firm over the long run, keeping it innovative” (Siguaw *et al.*, 2006, p. 562). A new strategy involves clarity of thought and purpose, generally articulated through a vision statement and clear objectives, encouraging innovation projects and facilitating proactive positioning (Cooper *et al.*, 1989).

The strategy development literature tends to privilege the formulation over the implementation stage (Hitt *et al.*, 2017; Greer *et al.*, 2017; Mistry *et al.*, 2022). Research in the strategy and innovation field helps managers identify and formulate new approaches to remain competitive (e.g. Kim and Mauborgne, 2005; Verganti, 2009).

Besides, strategy implementation research is traditionally more focused on creating plans, structures and systems aimed at transmitting and disseminating the formulated strategy in a top-down fashion (Friesl *et al.*, 2021). Such structural control view of strategy implementation emphasizes the role of the TMT or innovation managers in influencing a new strategy (Mistry *et al.*, 2022; Cannella *et al.*, 2008; Marcel *et al.*, 2011), overlooking the crucial role of other organizational actors and the involvement of employees in implementing a new strategy (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). The literature also highlights that organizational actors pose the greatest challenge to strategy implementation (Magnanini *et al.*, 2021). Individuals resisting change (i.e. not supporting or understanding it) have been extensively studied in the management field (Blackman *et al.*, 2022; Bartunek *et al.*, 2006), and most studies focus on how to manage such resistance through persuading and aligning people towards the desired direction (Huy *et al.*, 2014; Guth and Macmillan, 1986).

A novel strategy is often perceived as generating chaos, the loss of meaning for individuals who have lived in one corporate world and are asked to adopt the practices, norms and behaviours of a new one (Fronza and Moriceau, 2008). A new strategy requires a shift in individuals' mental models of their industry, strategy and organization so that they can see things in new ways, unconstrained by history (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005). This implies that for successful strategy implementation, employees need to be aligned and, above all, understand, embody and engage with it.

Coherently with this view, recent studies started to shift from strategy implementation as plan definition and control to strategy implementation as an adaptive process about how organizations make sense of and enact strategies in practice (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2018; Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Bertels *et al.*, 2016; Jarzabkowski, 2004). Precisely, strategy-as-practice research holds that strategies are enacted within the discursive, interpretative and emotional practices of the actors who implement them (see Balogun *et al.*, 2014). Noble (1999, p. 119) paved the way for such an adaptive view of strategy implementation by defining strategy implementation as “the communication, interpretation, adoption and enactment of strategic plans”. More recently, scholars seem to agree that strategy enactment and further implementation happen through dialogue among the organizational actors engaged (Weiser *et al.*, 2020; Bourgoin *et al.*, 2018; Jarzabkowski, 2005).

Somehow, strategy implementation involves creating a new reality that does not currently exist. Unlike other change domains, there are no specific competencies for strategy implementation, making the sharing of emergent knowledge structures among organizational actors crucial. Strategy studies are rooted in knowledge-based theory, emphasizing the development and deployment of knowledge to nurture the firm's strategic orientation (King and Zeithaml, 2003; Snyman and Kruger, 2004).

Nevertheless, several authors have called for more detailed and systematic examinations of how employees at all levels engage in strategic dialogue and of how their reasoning in context builds on, extends or challenges the formulated strategy (Riis *et al.*, 2006; Roobeek *et al.*, 1998). Somehow, little is known about the dynamics that characterize the dialogic process through which people enact a new strategy, understand it and identify opportunities and actions to contribute directly to its implementation.

In the upcoming section, we review the literature about dialogue and framing, explaining how they facilitate transformational events such as strategy implementation, and then we introduce our research questions.

### *The transformational role of dialogues and framing processes*

Verbal communication is not simply about transferring information but contributes to creating meaning and knowledge (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). While the instrumental approach views language and dialogue as enabling relevant managerial outcomes (Liedtka and Rosenblum, 1996; Sackmann, 1989), the interpretive approach emphasizes that language as symbolic action contributes to the development of shared meanings, knowledge and actions (Dong *et al.*, 2013; Ford and Ford, 1995; Evered, 1983). Dialogue facilitates knowledge creation and learning (all parties benefit), differing from directive and prescriptive communication (telling others what to do) and debate (arguing who is right and who is wrong) (Greer *et al.*, 2017; Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Mariano and Awazu, 2021). Somehow, the goal of dialogue is not merely to express and transmit one's thoughts and preferences but to collaborate in establishing a shared space where ideas can grow and be tested against each other (Arnett, 2016; Evered, 1983). Through dialogue, people externalize their knowledge and understanding and receive immediate feedback that validates, enriches or destroys what has been said, contributing to framing and understanding the new reality.

Ford and Ford (1995) argue that dialogue drives any organizational transformation, where conversations allow people to frame the reality in which they live. Following this approach, Bushe and Marshak (2014) propose dialogic organizational development in opposition to the more traditional diagnostic form.

Diagnostic organizational development is rooted in the change theories developed by Lewin (1947) and Lippitt *et al.* (1958), where change is conceptualized as a planned process of "unfreezing" the current status, creating "movement" towards a new status and "freezing" it. Thus, the core activity is detecting and diagnosing where to intervene.

Differently, dialogic organizational development focuses on emergent, relational and inclusive processes, viewing organizations as sensemaking systems where the social reality emerges from the dialogic processes and interactions among organizational actors (Marshak *et al.*, 2015). Communication is viewed as constructive, and change as interpretive, discursive, emergent and ongoing (Bushe and Marshak, 2014; Marshak and Grant, 2008).

Constructive dialogue involves conversations for understanding (Ford and Ford, 1995), making claims, giving evidence, examining hypotheses, exploring beliefs and feelings and maintaining contentions. These conversations allow individuals to clarify their assumptions, intentions and expectations by shaping their mental models. Mental models are emergent constructs that arise from individuals' cognition (Dong *et al.*, 2013), constituting an organized understanding of the world that influences human behaviours (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Albeit simplified representations of the world, mental models are rooted in what one knows or thinks is true (Ma *et al.*, 2003; Mohammed and Dumville, 2001), thus shaping the interpretations, knowledge and actions (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005).

When engaging in constructive dialogue, individuals' mental models are enacted, and new concepts emerge from their clashing and fusing (Dougherty and Takacs, 2004), leading to the creation of a novel shared mental model that may result in new interpretations and actions (Dong *et al.*, 2013). The enactment of a mental model, the creation of a new one, and its translation into action occur within dialogue, recognized as a framing process (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Dong *et al.*, 2013). Framing processes are defined as how people interact and use language and other symbols to create meaning (Blumer, 1971; Goffman, 1974); they involve how individuals use language or other symbolic gestures in context either to reinforce existing interpretive frames or to call new frames into being (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Framing processes distinguish humans from machines (Verganti *et al.*, 2020; Bianchi and Verganti, 2021), as humans subjectively frame the reality they perceive (Cukier *et al.*, 2021; Goffman, 1974), interpreting it by creating a mental representation (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Engaging in framing through dialogue enables creating new lenses to make sense of the situation in a new way. The exchange of utterances through dialogue allows individuals to shift the focus to alternative aspects that were not part of the initial problem scope but creatively brought in through dialogue (Dorst, 2015). The newly designed mental model suggests the opportunities to pursue and the subsequent action to take, as well as clarifying the desired outcome.

Studies on constructive dialogue (Ford and Ford, 1995) and the rhetorical construction of understanding (Stumpf and McDonnell, 2002) explain that a conversation that leads to framing is based on premises that might be accurate (related to facts or truths) or preferable (related to values and value hierarchies). Premises are used as guidelines to make choices and propose ideas. From these premises, individuals engage in framing processes through dialogue by creating links between statements that might be associated or dissociated. Associations link an already accepted concept or idea to a concept that the arguer wishes to be accepted. They can be based on the structure of reality, trying to exploit reality as it is constructed or establish a new reality by drawing a new link to new claims (Stumpf and McDonnell, 2002). Dissociations are introduced to overcome incompatibilities among the emerging frames, implying a creative change and a pivot in how people perceive reality. Association and dissociation work in tandem, creating a new reality and knowledge that concur in framing the new mental model.

### *Research gaps and goals: how framing processes support strategy implementation through dialogue*

Recently, strategy scholars have begun to recognize the importance of the framing processes in moving from strategy formulation to implementation (Friesl *et al.*, 2021; Tawse *et al.*, 2019). Strategy formulation is the process of creating a plan or an approach to achieve a goal (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005). Framing processes in strategy implementation are the emergent processes through which this plan begins to be translated into opportunities for future action, requiring communication, knowledge transfer, knowledge creation and learning (Friesl *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Zeithaml, 2003). So far, studies about framing for strategy management focus on how, through language and symbolic gestures, strategic actors frame courses of actions and social identities to mobilize others to follow suit (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Therefore, they are still aligned with the structural control view of strategy implementation (Weiser *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, whether literature about strategy implementation and literature about dialogue and framing seem to connect, both present interesting gaps to be further explored. On the one hand, in strategy implementation literature, there is an open call to explore how the dialogue between diverse organizational actors facilitates strategy enactment and implementation (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005; Love *et al.*, 2002). Little is known about the dynamics that characterize the dialogic process through which people enact a new strategy, understand it and identify opportunities and actions to contribute directly to its implementation. On the other hand,

literature about dialogues and framing still reifies what are essentially the dynamic and socially situated processes of meaning construction individuals engage in when dealing with strategy implementation (e.g. Kaplan, 2008; Oliver and Johnston, 2000), focusing exclusively on how TMT can frame compelling and persuading discourses to gain acceptance and support for the new strategy (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Sonenshein, 2006, 2010).

Therefore, the present study explores how the framing processes are shaped through dialogue during strategy implementation and what they enable by addressing the following research questions: How do people frame new opportunities for strategy implementation through dialogue? How do the framing processes enacted enable the evolution of the opportunities identified?

Through analysing dyadic conversations, we describe the framing processes that emerge when individuals engage in constructive dialogue aimed at identifying strategy implementation opportunities. Therefore, we study how reality construction occurs through dialogue, investigating the steps taken from a dialogic perspective.

## Methodology

### *Research setting*

From a methodological perspective, we deemed the qualitative exploratory approach to be the most appropriate for our study. We rely on an ethnographic-phenomenological method (vom Lehn, 2019) to capture from multiple observations the dialogic micro-interactions among individuals when embracing a strategic direction.

We conducted our study from September 2021 to March 2022 at Layla (name changed for anonymity), an organization part of IDeaLs – Innovation and Design as Leadership, a research platform founded by the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano that, with partner organizations, is investigating how to engage and transform people in the articulation of new strategies.

As industry leader, Layla set the ambitious strategy in 2021 to commit to all the environmental, social and governance (ESG) dimensions in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The TMT needed to engage and mobilize people towards sustainability by actively translating the ESGs into their daily work and proposing actionable opportunities to promote their impact. This challenge was part of the major strategic change the company was undergoing at the time to maintain its leadership position: rethinking its business model, processes and activities from a product company to a service and sustainable company. In this sense, the company promoted the shift to sustainability to disseminate a new mindset internally and guide the design of new services and business models according to the circular design principles, including regeneration, modularity and durability. However, while the TMT formulated the strategic input for change, the involvement of the entire organization was needed to drive the implementation. As such, this setting is well suited to investigate the dynamics underlying our research questions. Besides, the company was embarking on a radically new strategy, not just improving an existing one; thus, it provided a setting where the dynamics of interest are expected to be more evident.

Layla's sustainability community team selected 22 individuals to participate in a three-month strategy implementation process based on storymaking, an approach explicitly conceived by the research platform to engage individuals in writing and implementing their personal stories of transformation towards the given strategy. Layla's TMT framed the challenge around the key question: "How can I embed sustainability in my daily work to achieve an integrated impact?". The storymaking process was structured in three sets of workshops over three months conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams, using Miro as a digital platform

to support the activities. While the workplace is where individuals effectively embrace the strategy and take real actions (e.g. developing new ideas, collaborating and interacting with colleagues), the storymaking workshops were designed as a space to individually or collectively reflect on the ongoing transformation. In the workshops, participants were asked to identify the enablers and obstacles faced in the transformation with the support of canvases, summarising their reasoning in a written narrative. This task was crucial to helping them enact and externalize their mental models, their understanding of the strategy and its impact on their daily lives. A key task was proposing what [Dimov \(2021\)](#) defines as “opportunity”, an intentional space for action to be enacted through the fulfilment of concrete actions in line with the new strategy. Opportunities arise from the individual's intentional stance in the organization through a combination of propositional content (venture concept) and theory of change, such as a roadmap to transform aspiration into concrete action ([Dimov, 2021](#)). For instance, opportunities might entail proposing new initiatives, collaborating with and involving other stakeholders or nurturing personal learning. From one storymaking workshop to another, individuals had to realise the opportunity and move from pure intention to action.

The collaborative work consisted of time-bounded pair sessions where individuals could share their stories and opportunities with a colleague and benefit from the confrontation and feedback of someone on the same journey. These sessions lasted about 20 min. Individuals were randomly paired and mixed in every session to ensure cross-pollination and variety, allowing everyone to talk to a different person each time. Their task was straightforward: one person shared their understanding of the given strategy and the proposed opportunity for its implementation; the other was invited to actively listen and provide “enhancement”. Enhancement could entail making claims, providing evidence of hidden cues, examining unclear hypotheses, exploring beliefs and feelings or providing feedback to support the other's story. From a methodological perspective, the pair sessions allowed observing the dialogic interplay among individuals exchanging their feelings, actions and perceptions in deploying the strategy. From a theoretical perspective, they provided a collaborative space where the framing processes occurred and new concepts emerged from the clashing and fusing of mental models ([Dougherty and Takacs, 2004](#)). On the one hand, they elicited the obstacles, learnings or achievements in carrying out the actionable opportunities towards the given strategy. On the other hand, they triggered the other's reflection by providing insights, comments or suggestions to make the proposed opportunities more effective. While two researchers facilitated the overall process, the pair sessions were autonomously managed by the two individuals, who collaborated in a private digital breakout room without interruption.

### *Data collection*

The primary data for the study were collected from the verbatim transcripts of the 25 pair sessions, supported by audio recordings comprising around 500 min of recordings transcribed for a total of 250 pages. Additional evidence was collected in the form of the actual content created by participants, such as the text describing the opportunities proposed, their monthly story and the enhancement canvas.

The initiative was presented to participants as part of the company's overall transformation. Participants were aware that some activities were part of a research project; all the recordings were made exclusively upon their permission, and all data were analysed anonymously.

The secondary data sources comprised company material (e.g. text of the challenge), recordings of the overall sessions, and other canvases completed by participants.

We used the former data for the analysis and the latter to deepen our understanding of the context. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of the data collected.

**Table 1** Data sources

<i>Data types</i>	<i>Use in the analysis</i>
<i>Primary data</i>	
25 pair sessions; 500 min recording (250 pages of transcripts)	The transcripts of the 25 pair session were analysed through linkography and a process-coding approach to identify recurring patterns of interactions among individuals, clustering the 32 observations related to each pattern.
Enhancement canvas 48 items	Enhancement cards were used to corroborate and clarify the dialogic interplay during the pair sessions
Opportunities canvas 48 items	Opportunity cards and individual stories were used to corroborate and clarify the dialogic interplay before and after the pair sessions
Individual story 48 items (100 pages)	
<i>Secondary data</i>	
Workshop observation 12 workshops; 80 h	The workshop observations were helpful to gather additional insights about the participants' experience.
Other storymaking canvas (e.g. obstacle, companion, mentor); 720 items	Additional cards were used to corroborate their transformation stories
Company material; 20 pages	Additional material allowed gaining a deeper understanding of the strategic challenge posed by the TMT to participants
Source: Authors' own creation	

### Data analysis

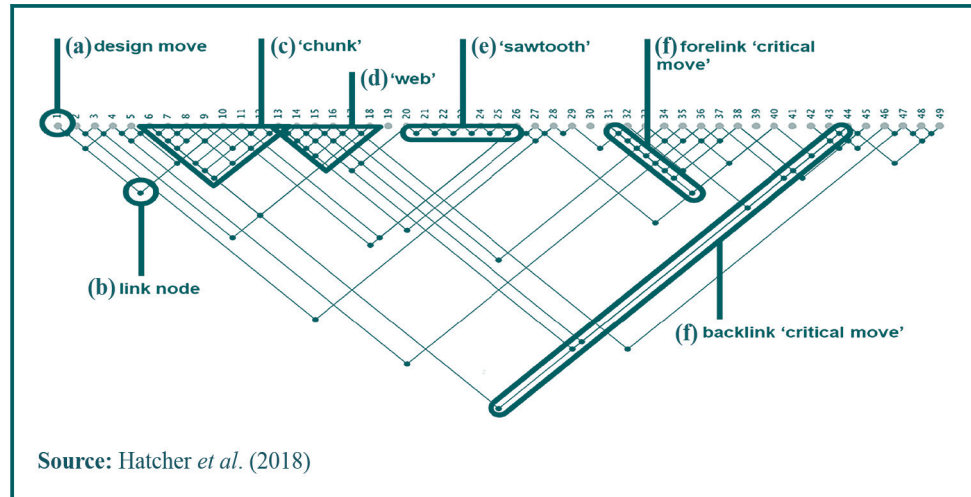
We deemed an inductive qualitative approach using protocol analysis (Goldschmidt, 1990) and process coding an appropriate way to identify the patterns underlying the dialogic mechanisms among individuals during the pair sessions.

In particular, we used linkography (Goldschmidt, 1990) as a valuable protocol-analysis method to visualize and analyse how individuals interacted during conversations (Hatcher *et al.*, 2018). Grounded in a process perspective, linkography differs from other qualitative methods in that it explicitly incorporates temporal progression and reveals how knowledge unfolds through dialogic interactions among individuals (Goldschmidt, 1990).

In particular, the temporal dimension of linkography in analysing conversations (Hatcher *et al.*, 2018) relates well to investigating phenomena according to the dialogic theory of organizational development (Bushe and Marshak, 2014). Building on the view of change as an interpretative and discursive process (Bushe and Marshak, 2014), linkography places the dynamic nature of dialogue at the centre of the analysis, helping the researcher gain a deeper understanding of how individuals frame and make sense of reality over time through detecting patterns in conversations. In addition, given the dynamic nature of the framing processes (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005), the sequence and path dependencies of verbal micro-interactions are crucial to understanding how issues emerge during a conversation between individuals.

As a method, linkography codes and visualizes the links between the “moves” [see (a) in Figure 1] expressed during a conversation concerning one or more topics. Conceived as “a step, an act or an operation in the process that changes the situation” (Goldschmidt, 2014, p. 145), moves are pieces of conversation first identified in the data and numbered sequentially along the horizontal axis. Then, through analysing whether each move is linked to any other move (Hatcher *et al.*, 2018), nodes (b) are established to denote the link between two moves. This process allows for producing visual maps of the geometrically discernible structural patterns and evaluating the links among the individuals' utterances, ultimately visualizing the divergent and convergent dynamics (Hatcher *et al.*, 2018). According to their configuration, patterns are described as chunk, web and sawtooth (Goldschmidt, 1990). Chunk (c) and web (d) describe clusters of nodes of different sizes, indicating a high level of connectivity among a particular range of moves, a combination of thoughts, and a focus on specific topics.

**Figure 1** Sample linkograph illustrating common features and terminology



Our linkograph followed the guidelines of [Goldschmidt \(2014\)](#) and [Hatcher \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#) using the LiNKODER software.

The analysis proceeded in two main steps. First, two authors agreed on the guidelines that would ensure consistency throughout. After agreeing on what should be considered a design move (hence defining the appropriate level of granularity), the moves were categorized to indicate what actions contributed to the emergence of patterns throughout the dialogic interplay. The two authors and two external researchers tested two different coding schemes to ensure reliability. The first, based on the reflective practice scheme of [Dong \*et al.\* \(2013\)](#), was considered too high level to depict the specific moves, hence inappropriate. Instead, the feedback coding scheme of [Harrison and Rouse \(2015\)](#) perfectly reflected the interplay between two individuals (e.g. creative worker and feedback provider) throughout the framing process. We named the individual sharing reflections about the transformation and identifying the opportunity to implement the strategy as “creator”, and the individual offering suggestions or insights to help realize the opportunity in coherence with the strategy as enhancement “provider”. [Table 2](#) shows the design moves in the linkography.

Each move was numbered sequentially and coded according to type, adding evidence from the contributing individual. To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding, based on the established guidelines, two authors independently coded all 25 sessions for a total of 4,000 utterances. The other author and two external researchers then reviewed the coding and resolved discrepancies by discussing and recoding the data as necessary. An excerpt of a linkography transcript is shown in [Table 3](#).

The linkographs for each pair session served as the basis for the second stage of the analysis. First, we identified a series of focal events in which the interrelation of nodes reflects the formulation of the enhancement provider’s feedback to the creator. In particular, we identified the visual patterns in the linkographs during the dyadic conversations. In this regard, [Kan and Gero \(2008\)](#) specify four typologies of visual patterns depicting the effectiveness of dialogue, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

Using an inductive approach, we traced the sequences of activities (patterns) of the individuals in the pair in correspondence with every focal event. Patterns were aggregated into higher-order categories, representing the emerging dialogic mechanisms allowing individuals to reframe their interpretation of the strategy and enhance their identified opportunities for implementation, thus the framing processes ([Dong \*et al.\*, 2013](#)).

**Table 2** Categorization of design moves adapted from Harrison and Rouse (2015)

<i>Interactive role</i>	<i>Move action</i>	<i>Move code</i>	<i>Interaction move description</i>
Creator (the individual sharing reflections about the transformation and the identified opportunity)	Backgrounding	BACK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Opening the black box of the process</li> <li>■ Explaining the rationale behind choices</li> <li>■ Broadening the perspective on prior options</li> </ul>
	Forecasting	FOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Acknowledging limitations of previous actions</li> <li>■ Illustrating future plans of development</li> </ul>
	Opening	OPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Illustrating issues that have not been explored yet</li> </ul>
Enhancement provider (the individual enhancing through critique and suggestions the creator's identified opportunity)	Personalizing	PER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Expressing love/hate, interest/confusion or curiosity toward previous moves</li> </ul>
	Puzzling	PUZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Asking questions to deepen understanding</li> <li>■ Using metaphors/analogies to increase comprehension</li> </ul>
	Prescribing	PRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide indications on what and how to change</li> <li>■ Identify content changes</li> <li>■ Using "should", "need" terms</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own creation adapted from Harrison and Rouse (2015)

**Table 3** Example transcript with coded links

<i>No.</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Move code</i>	<i>Links</i>
1	MA: So, I have some hurdles with my boss, because every time I need his approval to validate some of my activities	BACK	
2	MA: I want to ask my colleague for help to accelerate work in that direction	FOR	1
3	EG: I totally agree with you, sometimes it is challenging to act quickly	PER	1 2
4	EG: Have you tried to 'just do it'?	PUZ	1 2 3
5	EG: You need to balance risk	PRE	4
6	EG: But this could help you show him your proactivity	PRE	1 4 5

Source: Authors' own creation





As for the former analysis step, even this second stage of analysis was performed by two authors who worked independently and then checked and compared the analysis. The other author reviewed the analysis and helped in solving any discrepancies.

The construction of patterns through qualitative inquiry took into account several criteria:

- correspondence, the activities in the coding scheme should occur in relation to a focal event;
- sequence, the activities should occur in a specific order;
- similarity, the activities should occur in a similar order; and
- frequency, the activities should often occur within or across all ethnographic observations.

For each dynamic, we analysed the content of the opportunities articulated during each framing process in relation to Dimov (2021). Here, we identified the premises (Stumpf and McDonnell, 2002) participants used to introduce their opportunities and the stage of advancement. Some

**Figure 2** Reframing processes in the four visual pattern categories

Visual patterns (Kan and Gero, 2008)	Description
<p><b>Typology 1</b></p> 	Moves are totally unrelated, indicating no connection among topics. Very low opportunity for the articulation of such topics in the conversation
<p><b>Typology 2</b></p> 	All moves are interconnected, showing a totally integrated process with no diversification, hinting at a premature crystallization or fixation around some topics. Low opportunity for the development of identified topics
<p><b>Typology 3</b></p> 	Moves are related only to the subsequent one, indicating the process is progressing but not developing, few opportunities for the development of a single topic
<p><b>Typology 4</b></p> 	Moves are interrelated but not totally connected. The openness of the linkograph indicates that there are good opportunities for the development of a selection of topics

**Source:** Kan and Gero (2008)

participants were more focused on stating their motivations, dwelling on the values and strategic goals that led them to identify the opportunities in their personal environment. We call this category aspirational opportunities due to their still highly abstract, value-driven nature that led to identifying the venture concept (Dimov, 2021) but still fluctuating in the implementation process. Others identified a more tangible opportunity connected to a well-defined theory of change (Dimov, 2021), an implementation roadmap characterized by a clear set of tasks, initiatives or punctual information, thus categorized as enacted opportunities.

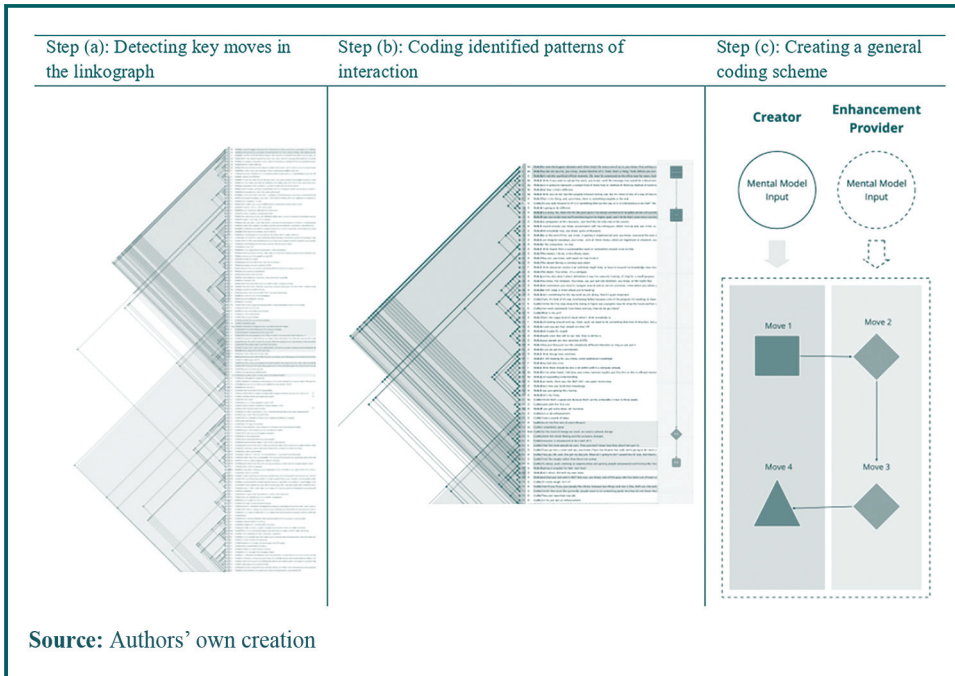
Using these criteria over multiple iterations, we identified different clusters of observations for four main pattern typologies: *shaping*, *scattering*, *shifting* and *unveiling*. Each pattern consists of a series of dialogic interactions between the creator and provider, from which the reframing process emerges.

Figure 3 illustrates the main methodological steps. First, key moves were detected in the linkograph to identify different interaction schemes during the pair conversations (a). We then extrapolated these to conceptually visualize the framing process (b). The analysis focused on the enhancement moment without considering the creator's follow up after receiving the enhancement. We used the subsequent scheme as a general canvas to map the different framing processes (c): the creator enacts his/her mental model to the provider who elaborates the creator's understanding of the transformation.

## Results

Using the linkograph as a canvas shows that the areas in which the backlinks are more recursive coincide with the moments when the provider offered the creator an enhancement. Interestingly, most of the dynamics fall under the fourth typology of visual patterns (Kan and Gero, 2008), where several moves are interconnected but not completely integrated. This is coherent with the concept of constructive dialogue (Jacobs and

**Figure 3** Conceptual visualization of coding the dyadic reframing process



Heracleous, 2005), where different perspectives start connecting and the conversation is still open for development.

The coding of the linkographs led to identifying the four main framing processes shown in Figure 4 and discussed next.

### *The framing processes to enhance strategy implementation opportunities*

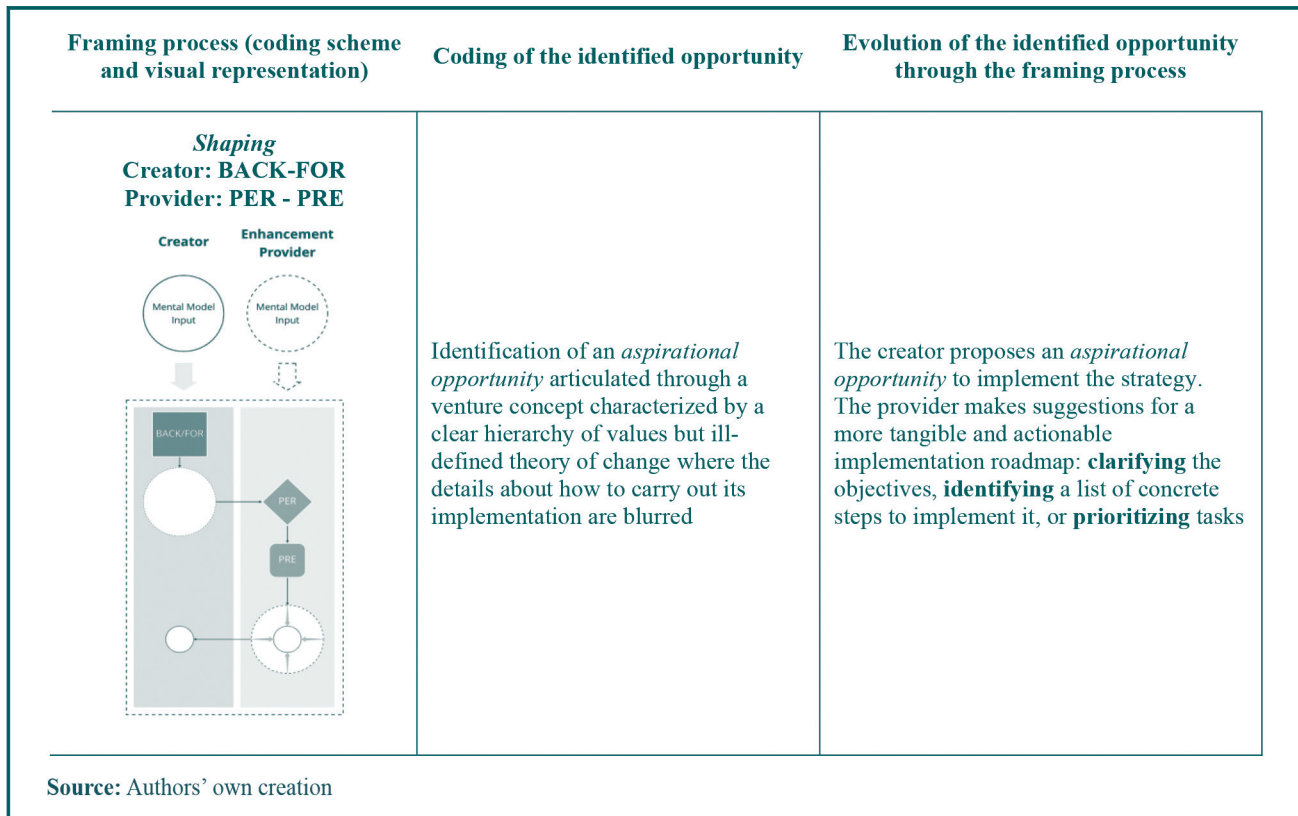
*Shaping* The shaping process occurs when the provider helps the creator transform the identified opportunity for strategy implementation. The pattern underlying this interaction has a specific sequence of moves enacted by both parties (Figure 5).

**Figure 4** Framing processes: descriptive overview

Visual pattern	Reframe process	Framing process and opportunity evolution	No. obs for each type of framing process/total obs
<p><b>Typology 4</b></p>	Shaping	Making a proposed <i>aspirational opportunity</i> more actionable and concrete ( <i>enacted opportunity</i> )	14 observations / 32 observations
	Scattering	Detailing the features of a proposed <i>enacted opportunity</i> by questioning its characteristics	5 observations / 32 observations
	Shifting	Providing a different point of view to overcome the hurdles faced during the implementation of an <i>enacted opportunity</i> and refine it	7 observations / 32 observations
	Unveiling	Elevating an identified <i>enacted opportunity</i> at an abstract level to highlight its connections with the overarching strategy	6 observations / 32 observations

**Source:** Authors' own creation

**Figure 5** The shaping pattern



Typically, the creator identifies the opportunity they intend to pursue in the long run to contribute to the strategy implementation process (BACK). However, while the presentation of the opportunity extensively articulates the aspirations and goals that make the proposal coherent with the overarching strategy, the implementation roadmap emerges less clearly. Therefore, the vague boundaries of the creator's proposal (FOR) convey quite aspirational connotations of the opportunity. In this case, the provider proceeds mainly through association (Dorst, 2015) and supports the creator by providing boundaries to the proposal (PER), becoming almost prescriptive in pointing out a list of concrete steps for implementation.

The framing process enacted by the provider progressively shapes the creator's opportunity into a more manageable and tangible (PRE) contribution by proposing actions, prioritising specific tasks or clarifying the objectives. This seems to help the creator embody a broader understanding of the strategy and translate it into concrete actions to implement the venture concept and enact the proposal.

Many of the creators elicited the benefits of the feedback they received, identifying it as a "North Star", a set of anchor points to cling to during strategy implementation. At the same time, framing concrete steps for action was helpful to clarifying the objectives and understanding how the aspirations of the venture concept could be implemented in real life, ultimately reducing uncertainty in the short term. The proactive attitude of the provider triggered this dynamic in the conversation thanks to suggesting specific solutions for a clear implementation roadmap. Some examples:

Pair 1 (Workshop 1): C illustrates his intentions to spread a shared sustainability culture in his team and overcome internal resistance. P suggests that the challenge lies in making this goal

tangible and personal for everyone, inviting C to hold a meeting to engage others in formulating their sustainability perspective;

Pair 2 (Workshop 1): C mentions that he wants to gain more knowledge on sustainability to increase his confidence in the topic. P urges him to define a short-term goal to embody this knowledge in something physical (e.g. a sustainability guide);

Pair 3 (Workshop 1): C illustrates her desire to gain knowledge about her personal transformation. P suggests she focuses on knowledge concerning the sustainability topic to make her attempt more manageable;

Pair 5 (Workshop 1): C proposes creating a sustainability team. P recommends focusing on first building credibility with colleagues she wants to engage with;

Pair 6 (Workshop 1): C wants to think about how to make her journey impactful, and P suggests she sets milestones as she will go through continuous change and needs fixed points to guide her;

Pair 7 (Workshop 1): P tells C that she needs to make her opportunity more tangible as it is too abstract;

Pair 8 (Workshop 2): P suggests three concrete points to engage a new collaborator in C's sustainability team: subdivide the objectives, plan them and be proud of the results; and

Pair 9 (Workshop 3): P tells C to be more specific in her idea of gaining as much knowledge as possible in her new working environment. She urges her to link knowledge acquisition to concrete objectives, such as organizing an initiative or new partnerships

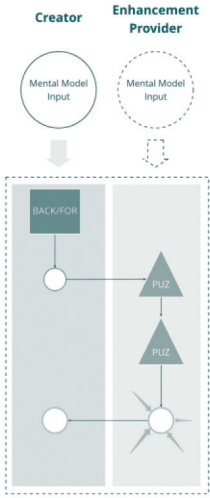
The examples provided show how the enhancement given by the “provider” includes very concrete and actionable contents, supporting the creator’s opportunity development. Engaging in such a framing process has implications both for strategy implementation and organizational development. On the one hand, the provider helps the creator make his opportunity more concrete and actionable, making the related strategy easier to implement (e.g. setting milestones in Pair 6 or embodying knowledge in physical and tangible output in Pair 2). On the other hand, by following the provider’s suggestion, the creator collects a set of concrete actions to be taken within the organization, fostering organizational development and change coherently with the current strategy (e.g. holding meetings to engage others in the journey in Pair 1). Through shaping, the actors engaged stay within the proposed strategy but make sense of how to make it less abstract through concrete actions.

*Scattering* The scattering mechanism is triggered when the provider wants the creator to elaborate the identified opportunity. Across the majority of observations, the identified opportunities emerged as *enacted*, namely, tangible actions or initiatives that the creator has started to put into practice. Creators, in fact, spent a significant amount of time explaining the activities, tasks and results related to their venture concept to update the provider on the latest advancements. Once the creator disclosed the details concerning the proposal (BACK) and the tasks they committed to translating into concrete actions (FOR), the provider stepped into the endeavour (Figure 6).

Through scattering, the provider starts asking precise rapid-fire questions (PUZ) (e.g. What is the input? What outcome do you expect in practice? Who do you plan to involve?) investigating the different facets of the identified opportunity without proactively enacting them.

Whereas the *shaping* process is characterized by the provider’s proactive approach, *scattering* entails a neutral and divergent approach where the questions act as a platform on which the creator’s answers are grafted, providing further explanations not previously shared. In particular, providers invited creators to further articulate their opportunity with more specific information and to more clearly define the boundaries of the proposed

**Figure 6** The scattering pattern

Framing process (coding scheme and visual representation)	Coding of the identified opportunity	Evolution of the identified opportunity through the framing process
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Scattering</b>  <b>Creator: BACK-FOR</b>  <b>Provider: PUZ-PUZ-PUZ</b></p> 	<p>Identification of an <i>enacted opportunity</i> characterized by concrete and objective facts (e.g. initiatives, projects, tasks) not only to identify a specific venture concept, but also a clear roadmap to put into action and contribute to strategy implementation</p>	<p>The provider explores the proposed <i>enacted opportunity</i> through a series of alternative questions, opening up multiple areas of reflection around the same opportunity</p>

**Source:** Authors' own creation

venture concept. The questions helped creators clarify the objectives, resources and activities to deploy the initiatives but also to look at the future and reflect on the expected value and outcomes.

Some examples:

Pair 10 (Workshop 1): C explains the preliminary insights his team gathered in introducing a series of webinars about sustainability for some categories of products. P asks how the sessions are organized, how they relate to a long-term plan and the expected results;

Pair 11 (Workshop 1): C proposes assessing the resources of his business function to implement sustainability. P asks for clarification about the process phases, the people involved and the outcomes;

Pair 12 (Workshop 2): P asks C what kind of outcome (e.g. information sharing, co-creation) she expects from the collaborative sessions she is organizing in her project area. He then asks what input she expects from her directors; and

Pair 13 (Workshop 2): P asks C to clarify what kind of value he expects to generate through the creation of an incubator to accelerate internal sustainability initiatives and how to assess the impact

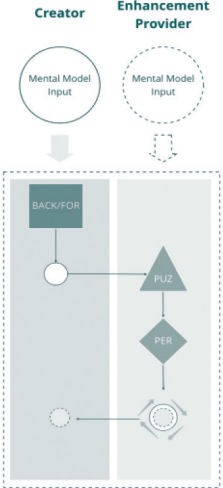
As emerged from the examples presented, when scattering happens, the provider helps to clarify the creator's opportunity for strategy implementation, solving unclear nexus and leading to an opportunity that is more robust and coherent with the organizational environment (e.g. P asks for organizational details in Pair 11 and coherence with a long-term plan in Pair 10) and the strategy itself.

*Shifting* In the shifting process, the provider contributes to the creator's identified opportunity in the spirit of feasibility and tangibility. The shifting dynamic emerges when the creator describes the obstacles and resistance faced in implementing the opportunity while articulating the strategy.

The creator introduces the *enacted opportunity*, focusing on the actions to foster its implementation but also the hurdles (BACK), such as internal stakeholder resistance or unexpected events. In response, the provider interferes in the flow of reasoning (PUZ) with one or more questions to address the creator's problems, offering a novel perspective (Figure 7).

Whether with a rhetorical question or a point of advice (PRE), the provider triggers the creator to view the opportunity from a different perspective. The inferences could act as a warning bell or a nudge, throwing an unexpected light on the narrative the creator introduced. The *shifting* mechanism relies on dissociation in an attempt to change how the creator perceives reality. For this reason, the *shifting* dynamic induces the creator to make a lateral mental shift to pivot their reasoning towards alternative ways of solving the challenges. In some cases, the solution was directly embedded in the provider's feedback; in others, the inference acted as a trigger, leading the creator to question their original assumptions and find alternative solutions to an existing problem.

**Figure 7** The shifting pattern

Framing process (coding scheme and visual representation)	Coding of the identified opportunity	Evolution of the identified opportunity through the framing process
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Shifting</i></b>  <b>Creator: BACK-FOR</b>  <b>Provider: PUZ/PRE</b>  <b>Creator: FOR</b></p> 	<p>Identification of an <i>enacted opportunity</i> related to the application of venture concepts in the realm of reality, namely based on facts and truths (e.g. initiatives, projects, tasks enacted). The presentation focuses on the relationship between the envisioned concept and theory of change, showing the difficulties and resistance faced in deploying the opportunity throughout the implementation roadmap</p>	<p>The creator illustrates the <i>enacted opportunity</i> and the hurdles faced in implementing it. The provider suggests an unexpected point of view to overcome obstacles, find new solutions to problems, and pivot the enacted opportunity into a refined version</p>

**Source:** Authors' own creation

Some examples:

Pair 14 (Workshop 1): C introduces his customer care role and idea of managing customer questions or claims about products. However, he's not finding the time to tackle the commitment. P intervenes in the conversation, helping C orient his efforts towards sustainability and make the task more manageable;

Pair 15 (Workshop 2): C complains that he's too slow in managing a community of sustainability ambassadors because he needs continuous approval for every task. P encourages C to "just do it", be proactive without increasing the need for coordination;

Pair 16 (Workshop 2): C explains that due to the complexity of her job (e.g. too many different decision-makers), she could not carry out her idea of engaging colleagues. P provokes her by asking if this is a priority for them. C understands that she could share her idea with other stakeholders to make it a priority and speed up the process;

Pair 17 (Workshop 1): C wants to reorganize the open space where she works by organizing a waste island. P suggests it is a matter of engaging people in shaping a sustainable working environment rather than reorganizing space; and

Pair 18 (Workshop 1): C attempted to engage his team in defining the green requirements for the product development process. P suggests first obtaining his manager's support to certify what he's doing in the team and speed up engagement

As the examples report, the shifting framing process enables the creator to better focus and align over the direction set by the new strategy. By inducing the creator to make a lateral mental shift, the provider helps the creator to recentre the reasoning (e.g. re-orienting reasoning over sustainability in Pair 17) or provide a complementary perspective more valuable to foster organizational development and strategy implementation (e.g. shifting the focus on people engagement and mindset rather than space management in Pair17).

*Unveiling* The unveiling reframing process takes place when the provider elaborates an *enacted opportunity* proposed by the creator (BACK-FOR) by connecting it to higher levels of reflection. While the creator introduces the concrete steps to implement a venture concept through a theory of change (BACK), the provider elaborates on one specific feature of the identified opportunity (PER) to give the proposal new meaning. By shining a new light on the creator's story, the provider identifies seemingly insignificant cues and amplifies their value (PER) (Figure 8).

This dynamic requires the provider's ability to connect with the creator's story, extrapolating seemingly insignificant stimuli from the discourse and returning them as key insights.

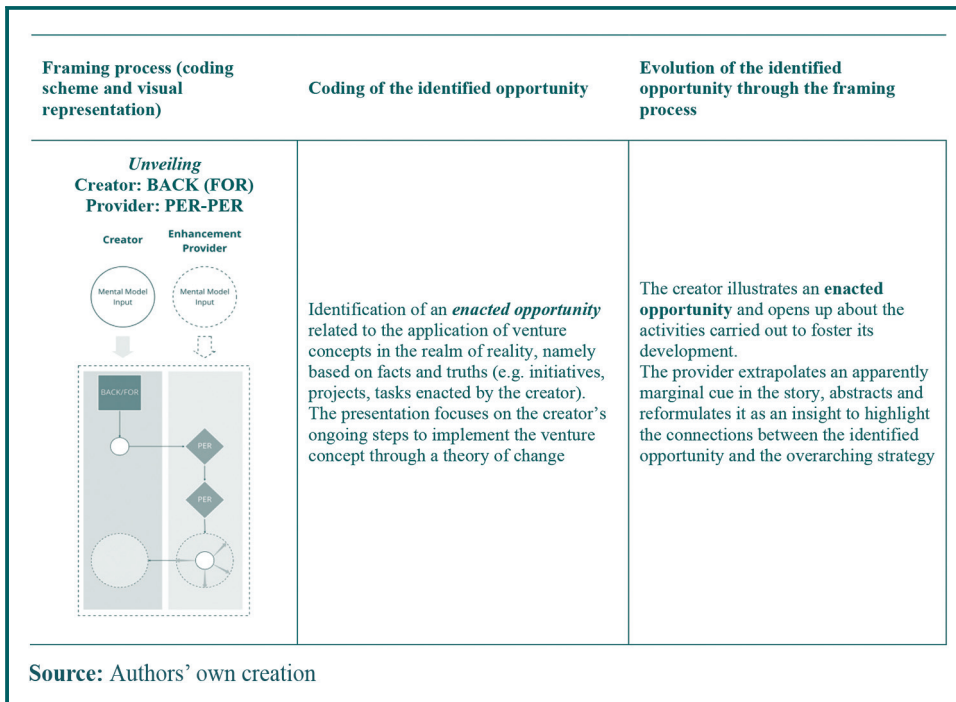
While the *shaping* dynamic fosters association (Dorst, 2015) through a sort of vertical movement by translating abstract intentions for innovative ideas into more tangible actions, *unveiling* works in the opposite direction. Here, the provider generates unexpected links between the creator's opportunity and new value hierarchies (Dorst, 2015). This abstraction enables the creator to test the alignment of the identified opportunity with the strategy or its underlying values.

The *unveiling* dynamic extrapolates an insight from a detail already embedded in the creator's *enacted opportunity* and sheds light on its value without prescriptive traits. On the contrary, it gives new impetus to what the creator proposes by contextualizing the opportunity in the overarching strategic direction. Some examples:

Pair 10 (Workshop 1): C wants to redesign the lifecycle of products to reduce waste. In her presentation, she explains that she is from Africa. P builds on this cue by suggesting that her different cultural background can contribute to product development from a sustainability perspective;

Pair 11 (Workshop 1): C says that she's too emotionally involved in acting as a catalyst for sustainability in her team. P highlights how this can be a positive trait as an ambassador;

**Figure 8** The unveiling pattern



Pair 12 (Workshop 2): C calls the idea of disseminating sustainability in her team a small contribution. P builds on the concept and amplifies it, telling C she has nothing to 'feel small' about because it requires humility to bring about such a cultural transformation in a team; and

Pair 13 (Workshop 1): C illustrates her attempt to review the product portfolio with the team in light of the sustainability principles. P notes that this can be a way to change the company mindset.

Somehow, during Unveiling, the provider enacts alternative perspectives that might extend the formulated strategy (e.g. suggesting that the cultural background of the creator can contribute from a sustainability perspective in Pair 10) or discern from the creator discourse some hidden traits and opportunities that can improve the effectiveness of strategy implementation (e.g. underlining the importance to be emotionally involved to be a strategy ambassador in Pair 11) and the development of the organization (e.g. recognizing humility traits in the creator's words that might support the cultural transformation in the team in Pair 12).

### Results summary and main implications for strategy implementation

Overall, the different framing processes represent different ways in which strategy-as-practice happens (Weiser *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, they show how creators enact the same strategy in different ways and how alternative pathways exist through which dialogue catalyses individuals' intention towards strategy implementation.

Through *shaping*, providers help creators sharpen their *aspirational opportunities* into more tangible outcomes, specific actions and tasks or the priorities to address. This is perceived as beneficial, as it boosts the development of the identified opportunity through a series of small concrete steps that render the strategy implementation roadmap more manageable. However, the challenge is to ensure a clear and coherent link between the *aspirational opportunity* and its concrete enactment. For this reason, the provider also acts as a

validator of the link between the creator's opportunity and the formulated strategy during the discussion.

Instead, the *scattering* process triggers a different mechanism beneficial for strategy implementation. While the *shaping* process clarifies the steps in the implementation roadmap, the *scattering* dynamic further articulates the opportunity and characteristics of the venture concept and a theory of change to implement the strategy. This dynamic allows the creator to enrich the scope of the envisioned opportunity by extending the reasoning from the present timeframe to the future development of the proposed initiative and its implications. Besides, it helps to align the envisioned opportunity with the specific organizational context (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014).

*Shifting* also helps creators advance the enactment of their identified opportunity. While *shaping* helps reframe an opportunity from an abstract to a concrete level, shifting is perceived as a crucial dynamic to address the hurdles emerging during strategy implementation. In shifting the creator's perspective, the provider offers suggestions and insights to reframe the identified opportunity and refine its development, aligning it with the direction set by the formulated strategy.

Finally, the *unveiling* process is perceived as a constructive mechanism to validate the venture concept. The providers' comments help creators identify their aspirational hallmark when the identified opportunity evolves. Aspirational hallmarks enable to expand the understanding of the formulated strategy and potentially impact its effectiveness (Riis et al., 2006).

## Discussion

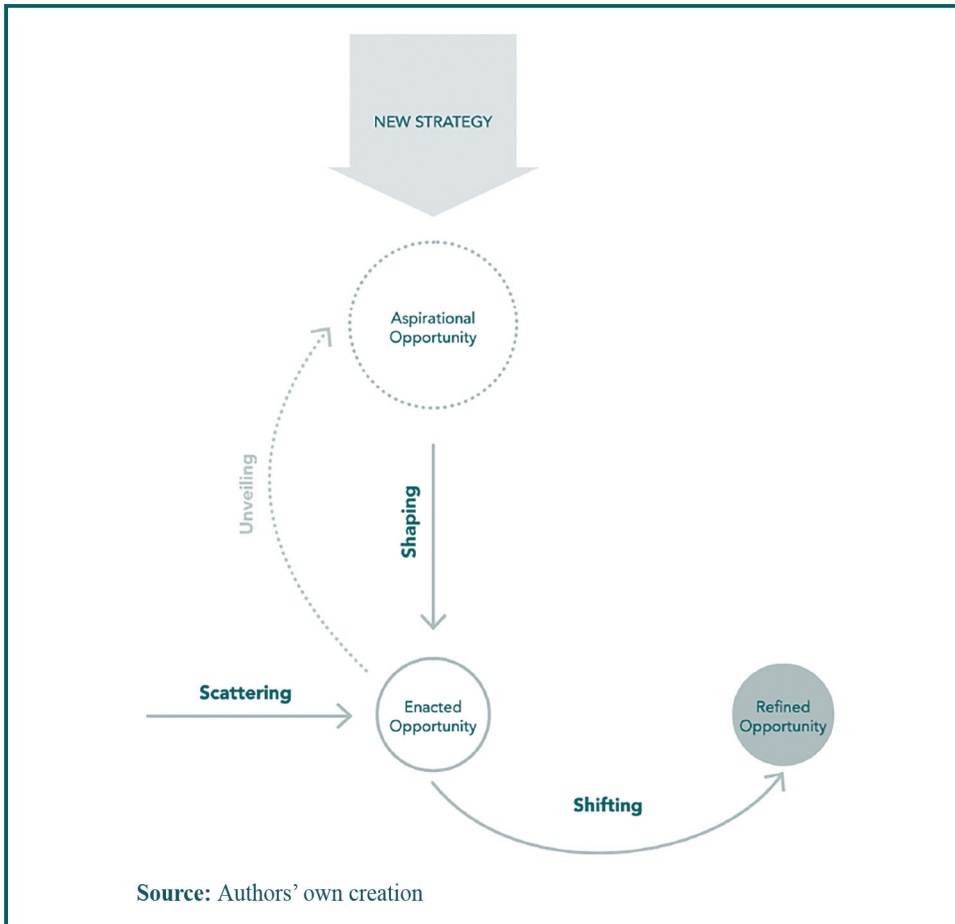
This study explores how people frame new opportunities for strategy implementation through dialogue and how the framing processes enacted enable identifying and developing opportunities. The focus on dyadic interactions allowed us to depict the emergent nature of the phenomenon (Kim and Zeithaml, 2003) and how conversations act as catalysts of change and organizational development (Bushe and Marshak, 214; Marshak and Grant, 2008). By moving closer to the action at a micro level and by studying the ongoing and interpretive processes of framing and meaning construction among actors, we observe how strategy-as-practice happens through dialogue (Weiser et al., 2020).

In analysing the dyadic conversations, we identified four main framing processes that not only shape the mental models when implementing a new strategy (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005), but also allow enacting the opportunities that nurture strategy implementation (Dimov, 2021; Dong et al., 2013) through shaping, scattering, shifting, and unveiling. We observed that the different framing processes are linked to the type of opportunity identified by the creator (aspirational or enacted) and determine its transformation into a more well-defined or aspirational opportunity. Figure 9 shows how the framing processes enable the evolution of the creator's opportunities for strategy implementation.

Through shaping, the provider attempts to make the creator's opportunity clearer and more actionable. Shaping occurs as the creator introduces the opportunity with premises based mainly on the values and value hierarchies (Stumpf and McDonnell, 2002), thus an *aspirational opportunity*. In this case, the provider proceeds mainly through association (Dorst, 2015). Our findings show that this helps the creator embody a broader understanding of the strategy enacted and translate it into concrete action towards a better-defined *enacted opportunity*. Through shaping, individuals receive an already half-framed enhancement that incorporates the premises and incrementally refines the opportunity.

While shaping advances the opportunity from aspirational to enacted, unveiling works in the opposite direction. Through unveiling, the provider abstracts something marginal from the creator's words to reconnect it as a critical insight to a higher level of reflection. When this framing process occurs, the creator's opportunity moves from an enacted to an aspirational

**Figure 9** How framing process lead to action for strategy implementation



state. In a theoretical perspective, through association, the provider forges unexpected links, forcing the creator to reconsider the values and value hierarchies (Dorst, 2015). This abstraction allows the creator to verify the proposal's alignment with the newly formulated strategy, potentially extending it (e.g. Riis *et al.*, 2006).

While shaping and unveiling enable the evolution of opportunities from aspirational to enacted, scattering and shifting enable opportunity evolution by remaining at an enacted level.

The shifting process allows elaborating opportunities in the spirit of feasibility and tangibility. The provider acts by posing a question or prescriptive phrase that makes the creator reconsider the opportunity from a new perspective. In other words, through dissociation, the provider attempts to change how the creator perceives reality. This unexpected reflective action seems to be a powerful way to help the creator shift towards a revised enacted state by pointing out new ways to tackle the obstacles, sharpen action, and find solutions to problems that may arise in implementing the opportunity. Shifting shocks the creator's mental model, usually framed as unexpected suggestions or different perspectives to address the opportunity problems.

Through scattering, the provider asks a series of questions, investigating different facets of the enacted opportunity without proactively elaborating these. Therefore, when scattering emerges, the creator's idea evolves, allowing the individual to look at it from a different point of view.

These framing processes show how strategy implementation opportunities evolve and transform through dialogue (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2009). Opportunities emerge as the representation of an individual's mental models or their own representation and emergent knowledge structure for the implementation of a novel strategy (Dong *et al.*, 2013). Newly emerged opportunities are just a preliminary elaboration of the individual's knowledge about the novel strategy. The framing processes we investigate are all forms of constructive dialogue (Ford and Ford, 1995), where new knowledge emerges from the clashing and fusing of individuals' mental models (Dong *et al.*, 2013; Dougherty and Takacs, 2004). Kozlowski and Klein (2000) explain that emergent phenomena ensue from a bottom-up process and are formed through dynamic interactions among individuals. Therefore, the framing processes represent the mechanisms that enable observing how emergent knowledge is enacted in the context of strategy implementation (Kim and Zeithaml, 2003).

Interestingly, we found that through the framing processes, the emergent knowledge leads not only to incremental improvements and the refinement of the preliminary knowledge structure but also changes the nature of the opportunity, thus leading to an enacted opportunity or elevating it to an aspirational one.

In other words, we show how the framing processes enacted through dialogue enable a continuous interplay between the conceptualizing and enacting the formulated strategy, directly impacting the implementation process (Weiser *et al.*, 2020). Somehow, when engaging in strategy implementation, the path to developing innovative concepts for products and services is not as straightforward as expected (Friesl *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, the emergent mechanisms, triggered by the specific framing process, may enable translating aspirational opportunities into enacted ones. On the other hand, they may lead to reconsidering aspects of the opportunity by raising it to a more aspirational level (Beckman and Barry, 2007).

Despite the complexity and uncertainty, this mechanism allows seeing new opportunities and building a comprehensive view of the overall situation. We found how discursive and interpretative practices enable a deeper understanding of the formulated strategy and, at the same time, better align opportunities with the organizational context of reference for more effective implementation.

Besides, the framing processes presented show how opportunities are continuously re-framed. As such, awareness of how emergent knowledge, ideas and opportunities evolve is crucial, as the framing processes determine what will be part of the new organizational world and what will be left behind.

These considerations have implications for strategy and organizational development research.

While strategy formulation is the process of creating a plan or an approach to achieve a goal (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005), strategy implementation is traditionally conceived as the processes through which this plan starts to translate into opportunities for future action (Kim and Zeithaml, 2003).

Traditionally, studies about strategy implementation suggest top-down and persuasive methods and tools to overcome organizational resistance to change, align, and engage people in the new strategic direction, coherently with the structural control view of strategy implementation (Blackman *et al.*, 2022; Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). Coherently, traditional diagnostic approaches to organizational development see transformation as a shift from one status to another that is already designed (e.g. Lewin, 1947).

Our research provides a complementary perspective, following the strategy-as-practice view for strategy implementation (Weiser *et al.*, 2020). We show that implementing a new strategy is not a matter of acceptance and alignment but of understanding and embodying. Our findings contribute to the literature by expanding the conversation that looks at strategy

implementation as a learning and knowledge creation process (Beckman and Barry, 2007), where the path to implementation is non-linear. Friesl *et al.* (2021) recognize the non-linearity of the strategy implementation process and call for more research in this direction. Bourgoin *et al.* (2018) and Weiser *et al.* (2020) underline how the discursive and interactive nature of strategy implementation remain still black-boxed.

By focusing on the framing processes, we also advance conversation by showing how non-linearity manifests in practice, adding elements to consider when looking at the evolutionary process that leads to strategy implementation. The framework presented in Figure 9 shows how each framing process is related to an individual's opportunity processing stage concerning the new strategy. Therefore, employees navigate the emergence of different ways of understanding strategy implementation (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989; Boswell and Boudreau, 2001), and the framing process then determines its evolution. These findings have implications for both literature and practice.

### *Contribution to the literature*

The present study contributes to the literature in at least three ways. First, our study adds to strategy implementation research. In doing this, differently from the more traditional structural control view of strategy implementation, which is predominantly top-down (Blackman *et al.*, 2022; Dutton *et al.*, 2001), we adopted the strategy-as-practice view, which focuses on how strategies are continuously enacted and adapted through discursive and interpretative interactions during implementation (Weiser *et al.*, 2020).

By leveraging dialogic organizational development theories (Bushe and Marshak, 2014) and by adopting a micro-level and discursive research design (Chreim, 2006), we provide insights about how horizontal interactions between people contribute to horizontal and vertical feedback loops and adaptations in strategies and strategy implementation plans (Weiser *et al.*, 2020).

Scholars recognize that strategy implementation is enabled by the framing processes that emerge through dialogue (Friesl *et al.*, 2021), a change domain where competencies and knowledge are not available but framed through dialogue and interactions among the organizational actors engaged in strategy implementation (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005; Love *et al.*, 2002). By studying the framing processes that actors engage in during the strategy implementation dialogue, we show that these processes may have different shapes, making strategy implementation anything but linear. Despite that strategy formulation is defined as the process of creating a plan to achieve specific goals (e.g. Kim and Mauborgne, 2005), we show that the subsequent implementation does not result in merely deploying the plan but in a process of interpreting, framing and understanding that leads to continue strategy enactment and refinement. By adopting a micro level research design, we found how these mechanisms do not depend only on the premises (i.e. aspirational or enacted opportunities) but also on the feedback received.

Second, our study contributes to the dialogic organizational development literature. Although much has been theorized about dialogic organizational development (e.g. Bushe and Marshak, 2014; Marshak and Grant, 2008) and the framing processes (e.g. Dong *et al.*, 2013; Pham *et al.*, 2023), we contribute to the literature about strategic framing (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014), which suggests that framing research concerning strategy reifies what are essentially dynamic and socially situated processes of meaning construction in terms of packaged outputs and relatively stable meaning systems (e.g. Kaplan, 2008). In a way, research about strategic framing focused on strategies to support TMT in framing persuading discourse to foster organizational onboarding towards a given strategy.

We opened the black box of the dialogic framing process during strategy implementation, showing that the interactive dynamics that emerge through dialogue can embed different mechanisms while facilitating the emergence of new concepts and knowledge (Dougherty

and Takacs, 2004). This allowed us to identify within framing processes those key elements that can facilitate the embodiment and enactment of a new strategy, but also those elements that can create resistance by helping managers to have a “grammar” of elements on which to act. The elements that favour strategy enactment are: moving from the abstract to the concrete (shaping), finding a connection between the values of the identified opportunity and the strategy (unveiling), circumventing implementation obstacles through new perspectives (shifting), and better detailing the identified opportunity versus the strategy and organizational reality (scattering). Conversely, the possible elements to manage are: remaining too abstract in interpretation, stopping at implementation obstacles, and developing opportunities not aligned with corporate values.

Our third contribution concerns the use of linkography (Goldsmith, 2014), supporting the adoption of a process perspective of knowledge development during strategy implementation. Rather than looking at knowledge as the output of a linear process, linkography is crucial to investigating the emergence of knowledge as a dynamic phenomenon (Dougherty and Takacs, 2004), capturing the value generated thanks to the micro-interactions among individuals. Linkography allows us to contribute to an open call from literature about dialogues and framing processes for a greater focus on knowledge co-construction (Davidson, 2006; Polletta, 2009; Steinberg, 1999). By moving closer to the action at a micro-level, linkography enabled us to study the ongoing and interpretive processes of framing and meaning construction across actors and time.

Finally, we contribute to the knowledge management literature by looking at strategy implementation as a learning and knowledge development activity. We continue the conversation in this realm in terms of how learning and feedback are critical not only for strategy formulation but also implementation (Greer *et al.*, 2017), since a firm’s strategy is refined over time with knowledge gained during its implementation (Magnanini *et al.*, 2021).

### *Practical implications*

Our study also provides contributions and insights for practitioners on how individuals embrace a new strategy, the chaos it causes, and concrete actions for its implementation.

The general contribution we concretely make to managers is that we make evident dynamics that they might not otherwise know exist and identify reading patterns within a nonlinear and unpredictable process.

Precisely, we show that the different dialogic dynamics allow the strategy implementation opportunities to evolve according to their initial framing. As such, instead of narrowing down actionable and concrete opportunities, managers should encourage people to explore, co-create, and learn through dialogue. Rather than nudging the interpretation of change as a linear process where people move from strategy to implementation, managers should create the space to support employees in iteratively reflecting on both aspects. Accepting such a dynamic environment implies that managers adopt a strategy-as-practice view, which might turn traditional strategy implementation threads into opportunities to be embraced. For example, organizational resistance to change has been traditionally seen as negative and obstructive (e.g. Guth and Macmillan, 1986). Embracing the strategy-as-practice view implies looking at resistance as potentially valuable feedback and a valuable driver for progressive adaptation (Ford *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, we suggest managers adopt the adaptive view of strategy implementation and, on the one hand, try to avoid focusing on resistance management through prescriptive actions while, on the other, focusing on how to integrate best and co-align different socially constructed perspectives into a cohesive pattern of action.

In such a dynamic environment, it becomes crucial for managers to detect the nature of the identified opportunities enacted by employees during strategy implementation.

Opportunities can help trigger alternative reframing dynamics according to specific trajectories. Table 4 presents the signals that allow recognising the opportunity identified through dialogue and suggests alternative reframing processes to facilitate strategy implementation at different levels.

Our study also has practical implications for workshop activities related to strategy implementation initiatives. For instance, our findings suggest that rather than using prescriptive templates, managers or facilitators could use more flexible tools, such as card sets, to question or provoke the frames people adopt during strategy implementation. In particular, before guiding them towards convergence, individuals should be encouraged to explore and gather knowledge in their own way.

We also suggest the power of dialogue as a co-creation and learning tool. In this sense, dialogue may work either with actors on the same path or with actors not directly engaged in the activity. Through dialogue with others on the same path, individuals can explore and move between the aspirational and enacted levels, which they are unlikely to do if left to reflect on their own. Through dialogue with other employees (which can be conducted through an interview), people can gather insights and learn about how others see where the company stands and how they wish it could evolve. This activity would foster collective sensemaking of change, facilitating further development for strategy implementation.

Important to highlight is the role of those in charge of enacting strategy development (in our study, the creators) and those willing to enhance the transformation (in our study, the enhancement provider). Gifting others with different points of view can boost their intention to refine their goals and enact strategy implementation.

As each strategy implementation differs, we offer these insights as tools to help managers orchestrate the complexity and unpredictability of interactions characterizing a strategic transformation (Bushe and Marshak, 2014). Indeed, we highlight the role of dialogue in nurturing knowledge for strategy implementation to help employees effectively enact new ideas to foster transformation.

Strategic innovation is not just about formulating a strategy and asking people to move accordingly; it is a process that requires time, immersion and reflection, where it is not so much the idea that emerges that is important as the evolution that dialogue accomplishes, since each movement can lead to defining different actions.

**Table 4** Practical insights to detect opportunities and trigger alternatives framing processes

<i>Identified opportunity</i>	<i>Signals to detect identified opportunity</i>	<i>Suggested reframing processes</i>
"Aspirational opportunity"	Individuals tend to talk about hierarchies of values connected to the strategy, aspirational objectives, and a sense of direction, lacking concreteness and implementation.	<i>Shaping</i> : make the opportunity more concrete, define a set of actions for roadmap implementation
"Enacted opportunity"	Individuals tend to talk about ongoing initiatives' objectives, activities, resources and tasks	<i>Scattering</i> : make the opportunity clearer, investigating its current state and future developments <i>Unveiling</i> : connect/verify the connection of the enacted opportunity to the overarching strategy, highlighting its values and aspirational objectives
"Enacted opportunity"	Individuals tend to talk about the obstacles and resources they face during the implementation of an enacted opportunity	<i>Shifting</i> : provide an alternative perspective to overcome the issues faced during the implementation, offer solutions to solve problems encountered

Source: Authors' own creation

## Conclusion

As with all studies, ours is not free of limitations that also provide future research avenues. From a methodological point of view, relying on a single case study was considered the most appropriate choice since it represents a base for exploring how the contours of a frame, or rather a set of framings, are actually constructed and negotiated in context by actors while exchanging words (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). However, we recognize that our results are limited to a single case study, hence limiting their generalizability.

Besides, although observed in a controlled environment, the dyadic dialogues we observed took place intimately and privately in a workshop, which may have influenced the dynamics. Future research in a field environment or quantitative studies (e.g. surveys) could expand and confirm our findings in a broader sample. In addition, we focus on the creator-provider exchange and not the creator's follow up after receiving the enhancement. Future studies could go beyond the dialogic exchange we analyse to determine whether the enhancement received leads to further refining the creator's idea.

In addition, we show that different framing processes enable individuals to create a novel mental model that may result in new interpretations and actions. Besides, we provide evidence about how the different framing processes enacted determines different evolution of the opportunity identified. However, we acknowledge that there is no causal relationship between the emerging mental models and the enacted opportunities. Also, we acknowledge that the framing processes we identified might be specific to the context we observed. Studies in different contexts should be performed to confirm the patterns that emerged in our study or even expand them. Moreover, there are some limitations in detecting the specific interplay among individuals due to the complex nature of the collaborative endeavour. However, future studies could explore how these processes can be nurtured and facilitated by shedding light on how each individual proportionally contributes to the conversation and how their inferences can consequently shape action in the long run. As the four framing processes (shaping, shifting, scattering, and unveiling) occurred with different frequencies in our study, future studies could investigate the factors that lead to one dynamic or another (e.g. company culture, strategic direction or an individual's characteristics). Finally, we provide a framework that maps the different dynamics but not their effectiveness for strategy implementation. Future research could explore this aspect to guide organizational actors in embracing and implementing a new strategic direction.

To conclude, the implementation of a new strategy is a dynamic and evolutionary process. As such, individuals' mental models continuously evolve as they gather cues from the environment, generating new knowledge about the transformation. Therefore, we hope our study helps develop awareness of the different framing processes people pass through and the resulting outcomes.

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## Further reading

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