





Exploring strategy message affordance as mediator to strategy translation for enhanced implementation



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Orientation: Strategy implementation remains a persistent challenge in strategic management, with many organisations failing to bridge the gap between formulation and execution.

Research purpose: This study introduces the concept of strategy message affordance and investigates its role in enabling effective strategy translation, which is posited as a precursor to enhanced implementation outcomes.

Motivation for the study: Given the ongoing implementation gap observed in organisations, there is a need to explore alternative explanatory mechanisms better understand and address implementation failures.

Research design, approach and method: Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted across two case organisations. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns relating to message interpretation, strategic alignment and implementation dynamics.

Main findings: The study finds that enhanced implementation is enabled when the strategy message is consistently and personally conveyed, supported by inclusive organisational culture, cohesion and open communication. Furthermore, a management team that engages directly, demonstrates contextual awareness and recognises employees as individuals fosters trust, leading to improved strategic alignment at lower levels.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations aiming to improve strategy execution should invest in deliberate, contextualised communication strategies and foster leadership behaviours that build interpersonal trust and collective understanding of the strategic agenda.

Contribution/value-add: This study advances the strategic management literature by conceptualising SMA and linking it to implementation success via the mediating role of strategy translation.

Keywords: strategy message affordance; strategy translation; strategy message; affordance theory; strategy implementation.

Introduction

Having a well-formulated strategy is one thing; implementing that strategy is an entirely different matter. There is substantial literature on strategy management and the challenges organisations face with implementation (Beer & Eisenstat 2000:4; Tawse, Patrick & Vera 2019:2; Van der Merwe & Nienaber 2015:11). While the extent of the problem is debated, with some suggesting that up to 70% of strategies fail during implementation (Miller 2001:360), it is clear that implementation failure poses an ongoing threat to organisations.

There are ongoing calls for more research on strategy implementation, as much of the existing literature focuses on formulation (Allio 2005:21; Amoo et al. 2019:448; Noble 1999b:131; Sull, Homkes & Sull 2015:4). Notably, no studies have been found that explored the concept of strategy message affordance (SMA) or its potential links to improved translation and implementation.

This article introduces SMA, a novel concept based on Affordance Theory initially proposed by Gibson (2014:56) in which the environment affords certain opportunities or actions to organisms, such as shelter or food, which can be perceived and acted upon (Gibson 2014:56). Similarly, the

strategy message might afford employees the means to translate and implement strategies. Using an affordance lens to examine strategy messages could offer valuable insights into enhancing implementation.

For clarity, this article defines 'strategy message' as the 'core narrative about a venture's strategy that is transferred to the implementers, leading to collective affordance of actions conducive to executing the strategy'.

The associated term 'strategy translation' is also clarified by referring to the sense-making and sense-giving processes during the transfer of strategy, which result in actionable decisions by implementers (Melebari 2016:77). Effective communication and mutual understanding are essential for the successful translation of strategies.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate whether the concept of a strategy message is related to enhanced strategy translation and implementation. The following research questions informed the study:

- What must the strategy message afford the implementers of strategy messages to ensure enhanced implementation?
- What are the elements and/or requirements (characteristics) of a strategy message that afford implementation?
- What affordances can be linked to enhanced sense reception to improve the rate of success of strategy implementation?
- What factors may create an environment in which the strategy message leads to enhanced translation?

Literature review

The aim of the literature review is to provide background on the key concepts of this study, namely: (1) strategy implementation; and (2) SMA, along with their respective constructs.

Strategy implementation

Effective strategy implementation is critical to an organisation's success, although it is often more challenging than strategy formulation (Andrews, Beynon & Genc 2017:19; Chirwa & Boikanyo 2022:1–3; Rani 2019:205; Tawse & Tabesh 2021). Despite the significant focus on strategy formulation in academic literature, implementation remains a complex and underexplored area (Alharthy, McLaughlin & Rashid 2016:2; Greer, Lusch & Hitt 2017:138; Okumus 2003:871; Safi & Mahmood 2022:1118). Even a well-formulated strategy can fail, if not implemented effectively, highlighting the need for a holistic approach that integrates formulation, message content, sense-making, processes and feedback mechanisms (Hrebiniak 2006:12; Tawse & Tabesh 2021).

For a considerable time, researchers have proposed various models and frameworks to address implementation challenges. For instance, Alexander (1985:96) emphasised the importance of message content, communication and employee buy-in,

while Li, Guohui and Eppler (2010:167) argued for the integration of implementation considerations during the formulation stage. Crittenden and Crittenden (2008:304) identified eight levers for successful implementation, focusing on structure and skills, while Higgins (2005:5) introduced the 8 S model based on McKinsey's 7 S framework. Despite these insights, the literature acknowledges that the failure to implement strategies effectively remains a significant problem.

The implementation problem is exacerbated by the complexity of tasks, involvement of multiple stakeholders and need for continuous adaptation (Holm, Kringelum & Anand 2025:1–2; Hrebiniak 2006:19). Previous studies have identified numerous obstacles, including the upper management's role, the clarity of the strategy message and the influence of middle management (Beer & Nohria 2000:133; Noble 1999a:23). Addressing these barriers is crucial for overcoming the multi-layered challenges of strategy implementation and ensuring organisational success (Decker et al. 2012:32).

Strategy message affordance

Strategy message affordance is proposed as an alternative concept or view to explore the implementation problem. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to highlight that the researchers consider SMA as the potential of a strategy message to enable employees to effectively translate and implement organisational strategies. It is envisaged that once investigated, SMA may offer valuable insight into what the strategy message concept affords people (employees) to implement organisational strategy. In the following two subsections, the concepts of affordances and strategy messages are explored.

What are affordances?

Affordance theory emphasises reciprocity between an organism (person or animal) and its environment, linking perception to action and meaning (Gibson 1988:4). Gibson argued that organisms perceive objects relative to their potential use, rather than as isolated elements (Gibson 2014:56). While this theory focuses on individual interactions with objects, it may be too simplistic for organisational settings, where team dynamics and group structures are prevalent (Volkoff & Strong 2017:235).

To apply affordance theory to strategy implementation in organisations, additional factors must be considered. These include the need to address outcomes that result from interactions with environmental objects, the limitations of the theory's individualistic perspective, and the presence of multiple actors and affordances in organisational contexts (Strong et al. 2014:66). In response, Strong et al. (2014:69) expanded the definition of affordances to include the potential for actions that lead to concrete outcomes arising from the interaction between artefacts and goal-oriented actors.

This extended definition is crucial for strategy implementation, as it involves multiple participants across various organisational levels (Allio 2005:17). The outcomes following perception and engagement with affordances are essential to the success of the implementation process, reflecting the dynamic and collective nature of organisational strategy (Treem & Leonardi 2013:146).

Strategy message

In this context, a strategy message refers to the 'core narrative about a venture's strategy that is transferred to the implementers and leads to collective affordance of actions conducive to executing the strategy' (Gibson 1988:4). While strategy literature often focuses on transforming organisational systems, the interpretation of the strategy message by recipients, encompassing sense-making, sense-giving and sense reception, tends to be overlooked (Mantere 2000:98). Thus, the researchers seek to incorporate these factors alongside message affordance considerations to enhance strategy implementation.

Elements of a strategy message: For a strategy message to be effective, it must be clearly communicated, understood and accepted, leading to implementation (Mantere 2000:20; Sterling 2003:33). The message must afford the impetus for action, involving the message source (sense maker and giver), message channel and recipient (sense receiver) (Kim 2015:285). Effective communication includes simple language, a detailed plan for resource allocation, clear goals, a call to action, human capital guidelines and feedback mechanisms (Amoo et al. 2019:449; Crittenden & Crittenden 2008:306; Hitt et al. 2017:8; Noble 1999a:24). These elements increase the likelihood of successful translation and implementation (Beer & Eisenstat 2000:35).

Strategy message affordance: Affordances involve environmental factors perceived to allow certain actions, whereas sense-making involves communicating a situation to set the stage for appropriate action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005:413). A strategy message should provide the recipient with confidence in the message's validity and implementability, as well as understanding, role identification and structure (resource allocation and reporting structures). These affordances are essential for an effective implementation.

Strategy message affordance and implementation: The concept of SMA and its impact on implementation have not been studied extensively. Investigating this concept could provide new insights into strategy implementation, addressing gaps that have challenged both academics and practitioners (Decker et al. 2012:29).

- **Message Perception:** Gibson's Affordance Theory focuses on perception, which is central to how organisms (or people) interact with objects in their environments (Gibson 2014). Perception, defined as ascribing meaning

to stimuli, requires active participation from individuals (Dunn & Goodnight 2019:21). This aligns with affordance theory, which emphasises reciprocity between the receiver and the environment during message interpretation (Marchiori & Bulgacov 2015:190).

- **Perception Versus Action:** A distinction must be made between perceiving and acting on a message. Affordances represent action possibilities, not actual actions or outcomes (Gibson 1988:6). Moving from possibilities to outcomes requires purposive actions, a process known as 'affordance actualisation' (Strong et al. 2014:70). This parallels strategy formulation and implementation, where the formulation does not guarantee implementation without successful translation and actualisation. Actualisation is influenced by social interactions within groups, managed by considering variations between individual, shared and collective affordances (Leonardi 2013:752). In an organisational setting, these variations are crucial because multiple players and groups are involved in the strategy implementation process.
- **Sense-making and Sense Reception:** Karl Weick's sensemaking perspective, strongly linked to organising, plays a crucial role in determining human behaviour, which is a key component in implementing strategic change (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015:11; Weick et al. 2005:409). Effective strategy implementation requires engaging employees at multiple levels in sense-making and sense-giving processes, which involves a feedback loop of mutual sense creation (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991:434; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander & Villi 2015:537). Lower-level employees engage in sense reception after receiving a message to implement it effectively (Letsholo 2021:21).
- **Message Barriers or Constraints That Oppose Affordances:** Several barriers can impede communication and message translation (Kheirandish, Abbaszadeh Avilagh & Nazemi 2017). Relevant barriers include value judgements on the message content, credibility of the message source (Beck & Keyton 2009:225), semantic problems and message filtering (Boshoff 1982:50). Additionally, affordances present both opportunities and constraints for action, depending on employees' perceptions and willingness to act (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan 2015:539). Individuals may perceive and act on strategy messages differently, influenced by their unique needs, circumstances and abilities.

This exploration of SMA, sense-making and barriers to message translation highlights the complex interplay of factors that contribute to successful strategy implementation in organisational settings.

Research methods and design

The methodology section addresses: (1) research design; (2) sampling strategy; (3) data collection methods; and (4) data analysis methods.

Research design

This study followed a qualitative research design in which the researchers were the 'principal instruments of data collection and analysis' (Merriam & Tisdell 2015:294). This allowed for 'the exploration of people's worlds and how they make sense of them' (Lim 2012:32). This subjectivity is important because the strategy implementation process varies from organisation to organisation and from person to person. Furthermore, the research design allowed the researchers to gain better insights from participants about phenomena that were not clearly understood (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway 2017:23). This was useful for this study, as it investigated a long-standing, complex strategy management problem (failed implementation) albeit from a unique perspective (Affordance Theory) and alongside a 'new' concept (SMA) for which little or no specific data exists.

Sampling

For this study, employees from two non-industry-specific organisations headquartered in the Gauteng Province of South Africa were selected through purposive sampling. Gauteng is considered to be South Africa's economic hub; hence, the researchers considered it to be appropriate. Since strategy implementation problems affect all types of organisations (Cândido & Santos 2019:39), the study was not limited to a specific industry. The organisations were chosen using criterion sampling, selecting organisations seeking insights into their implementation challenges (Polkinghorne 2005:141). Senior-level managers confirmed their interest, making criterion sampling ideal for this research, requiring specific, in-depth knowledge.

The participants were selected using both criteria and snowball sampling. Senior-level managers, chosen through criterion sampling, referred to additional participants – primarily lower- and middle-level employees. Middle management plays a crucial role in translating strategy messages and mediating between ground-level and executive management (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd 2008:1192). Lower-level employees are key to receiving and implementing strategy messages (Salih & Doll 2013:33), making their inclusion vital to the study's objectives.

In total, there were 12 participants from across the two organisations, representing senior-, middle- and lower-management levels. This distribution allowed for the inclusion of perspectives from all levels directly involved in strategy translation and implementation. Sample adequacy was guided by the principle of data saturation, which indicated that sufficient depth and diversity of insight had been obtained.

Data collection and analysis

In alignment with qualitative research practices, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because of their ability to engage with

participants' worldviews and personal experiences, as highlighted by King and Hugh-Jones (2018:121). Given the complexity and novelty of the research topic, this approach is the most appropriate for gathering rich, in-depth insights. The discussion guide used for the interviews was developed based on key research questions stemming from a comprehensive literature review. The guide was intentionally structured with open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses from participants, as recommended by Kallio et al. (2016:2960).

The data collected through these interviews were then subjected to thematic analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006:79, 2023:1) describe as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data, allowing for a rich and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences. Initially, an inductive coding process was applied to the interview transcripts, with relevant sections of data being labelled based on their connection to the research questions. In a subsequent round of coding, overlapping or similar codes were merged, and redundant codes were discarded. During the third round of analysis, four distinct themes emerged, each representing a central idea that tied together key observations from the data, following the approach outlined by Clarke and Braun (2018:108).

Data collection was conducted iteratively with ongoing analysis, and subsequent interviews were conducted. This iterative process helped ensure that the themes were refined and that new interviews added depth to the emerging patterns. Saturation was reached when no new themes or insights emerged from the data, and later interviews only reaffirmed the themes that were already identified. At this point, it was determined that the collected data were sufficient to comprehensively address the study's research questions, consistent with the principle of saturation in qualitative research (Naeem et al. 2024). By adhering to this systematic approach, the study captured detailed and meaningful data that supported a thorough exploration of the phenomenon under investigation.

Prior to the inception of the interviews, all participants completed a written informed consent form where background information was provided on the purpose of the study. Additionally, written consent to publish selective participant data (for improved contextualisation) was obtained from all participants – all efforts to anonymise participants were still taken.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Ethics Committee of the Department of Business Management (No. u04965907/2020).

Results

As previously indicated, four main themes were identified in the study, each with links to various research questions, as

TABLE 1: Framework of the themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Theme 1: Strategy message affordances for implementers	Theme 2: Elements and/or requirements of a strategy message that afford implementation	Theme 3: Affordances that are linked to enhanced sense reception	Theme 4: Factors leading to enhanced strategy translation
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding the strategy message ▪ Buy-in ▪ Roles ▪ Confidence in the strategy message ▪ Trust in management ▪ Accountability ▪ Structure ▪ Seeing the bigger picture ▪ Choice ▪ Resources ▪ Resistance ▪ Flexibility ▪ Attainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Strategy message elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personalisation ▪ Objectives ▪ Goals ▪ Message barriers ▪ Medium ▪ Review ➢ Strategy message requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consistency ▪ Inclusive strategy formulation ▪ Value match ▪ Rigidity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Communication affordances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective communication ▪ Open dialogue ▪ Direct communication ▪ Feedback ▪ Multiplatform communication ➢ Message elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clarity ▪ Simplicity ➢ Organisational environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cohesion ▪ Culture of inclusivity ▪ Context ▪ Biases ▪ Teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Human capital elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hands-on management ▪ Morale ▪ Human Resource Management ▪ Strengths and weaknesses ▪ Work environment ▪ Trust in colleagues ▪ Management support ▪ Transparency regarding problems ➢ Process elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paper trail ▪ Simple processes ▪ Planning ▪ Monitoring

shown in Table 1. These themes are related to the following: (1) SMAs for implementers; (2) elements and/or requirements of a strategy message that may afford implementation; (3) affordances that are linked to enhanced sense reception; and (4) factors leading to enhanced strategy translation. The themes and their related sub-themes were expanded and informed by quotations from the data in support of them.

Theme 1: Strategy message affordances for implementers

This theme relates to the affordances of the strategy message: concepts that have previously been defined as action-oriented implementers can be actualised to enhance implementation. It outlines the elements of the strategy message that have been identified as affordances (or not) for the implementers of the strategy message. Linkages are made to the literature, although they relate broadly to strategy implementation and not specifically to SMAs. This is because, as mentioned, no specific data for the SMA construct exist as far as can be determined.

All the participants indicated that the strategy message should collectively afford the implementers an improved understanding of the message to ensure affordance actualisation (Strong et al. 2014:70) for enhanced implementation.

‘So, you know, when we talk about strategy and we present strategy, we do allow people to ask questions because part of that translation to be successful is complete understanding and comprehension of what is meant.’ (P1, male, mid-level management)

‘Everyone should be able to understand it, the content and context of it.’ (P7, male, top-level management)

This notion of an improved understanding of the strategy message and its links to effective communication, which forms part of Theme 3 of this study, is supported in the literature (Sterling 2003:33). As mentioned previously, effective communication goes hand-in-hand with the translation process.

Additionally, all but one of the participants indicated that the strategy message should afford ‘buy-in’, which is referenced by phrases such as ‘strategy we’re loyal to’ (P2, female, lower-level management) and ‘build an alliance’ (P4, female, mid-level management).

‘If they don’t agree with it, you can’t push things down people’s throats. Rather sell it, let them buy into it, let them have some ownership. Then it’s not my strategy, it’s our strategy.’ (P7, male, top-level management)

Ensuring employees’ buy-in and commitment to the strategy is supported in the literature (Alexander 1985:96).

Furthermore, the majority of participants highlighted that the strategy message must clearly delineate roles in the implementation process. Indeed, implementers must understand their roles clearly to enable sense-making of what is required of them (Holm et al. 2025:1–2; Hrebiniak 2006:18).

‘Well [...] if the person implementing, their role in that implementation wasn’t clearly set out, that could make it all very difficult.’ (P3, male, top-level management)

Notably, some negative affordances were identified as potential deterrents for the implementers. Some participants noted that if not afforded, resistance may negatively impact the implementation process. This resistance could be linked to the message content, the message source (Beck & Keyton 2009:225), or a result of personal bias, which features in Theme 4. Additionally, accountability, while not a negative affordance, may have an adverse impact and should be absent in the strategy message. Indeed, a lack of accountability can severely hamper efforts to successfully implement strategies (Hrebiniak 2013:198).

Theme 2: Elements and/or requirements of a strategy message that afford implementation

Theme 2 comprises two sub-themes that split the affordances into either the elements or the requirements of the strategy message that affords implementation. As alluded to,

affordances are founded on the relationship between people (employees) and the features or aspects of the things (in this case, the strategy message) they encounter (Treem & Leonardi 2013:146). This implies that the same message may provide variable affordances to different people. This speaks to the importance of personalising, a unique element of the strategy message identified as the most important in terms of its affordances for implementation.

Strategy message elements

An expected confirmation of this study is the importance of personalising the strategy message to the receiver in the transference thereof to afford implementation. This implies an understanding of message receivers in terms of their linguistic ability (Boshoff 1982:50), professional context and overall capability.

'So, first things first, is to make sure whatever message you relay is in the right sort of language and context and wording that's appropriate to whoever needs to execute it and implement it.' (P1, male, mid-level management)

While the literature does speak to message personalising for marketing or advertising purposes (Strycharz et al. 2019:636), this does not specifically relate to internal communication.

Most participants also identified that the strategy message must contain clear goals and objectives to achieve those goals to afford implementation.

'I've had some really good management that give you clear end goals and a roadmap of how to get there.' (P3, male, top-level management)

Noble (1999a:24) also recognised this as an important element of the strategy message. Furthermore, in another element linked to personalisation of the strategy, participants said that the medium of communication (face-to-face, telephonic or digital) should be adapted to the receiver to improve the chances of successful translation.

Strategy message requirements

More than half of the participants considered consistency to be the most important requirement for a strategy message that affords implementation. This relates to the content of the message (Boshoff 1982:50) as well as to the source/s thereof (Beck & Keyton 2009:225).

'There's no sort of one strategy and a lot of the time the strategy comes from different people and different angles [...]' (P2, female, lower-level management)

The inclusive strategy formulation was highlighted as the next most important requirement of a strategy message that affords implementation. Including the implementers – and those responsible for overseeing the implementation – in the formulation process increases buy-in and the sense of responsibility for the success of the strategy (Sterling 2003:32).

'I take the team with me when it comes to, we begin together with formulations. I put out what I've analysed, ask for input and feedback, and then we'll formulate a strategy from there.' (P1, male, mid-level management)

Interestingly, a value match or alignment between strategy formulators and implementers in terms of the outcomes of the strategy message was identified.

'As soon as you get a message from top management and their point of view and your point of view is the same point of view for the future, that would make it much easier for us to go into the same direction.' (P8)

Value congruence was a distinctive element identified in this study. While it has been widely studied, it generally relates to employees' personal values and whether they fit within the organisation or its workgroups (Ostroff, Shin & Kinicki 2005:593). It has not necessarily been examined specifically from the perspective of the strategy message and how agreement between parties, regarding the outcomes thereof, could afford implementation. This element again highlights the importance of an inclusive strategy formulation to ensure alignment between all parties. It further relates to buy-in on one side of the coin and to potential resistance – the previously identified negative affordance of the strategy message for the implementers thereof.

Another requirement of the strategy message that participants said would not afford implementation was rigidity, or an inability or unwillingness to do things in new or different ways. The need for flexibility in strategy implementation is supported by the literature (Miller 1997:584).

Theme 3: Affordances that are linked to enhanced sense reception

This theme relates to the various affordances that could enhance sense reception, and thus, the translation of the strategy message. Sense reception, which has been touched upon previously, is part of the broader sense-making process or the continual process of making sense of and understanding information (Taylor & Robichaud 2004:397).

Communication affordances

This sub-theme relates to the affordances linked to communication, which the participants said could lead to enhanced sense reception. All participants identified effective communication, defined as regular communication sufficient to facilitate continuous understanding, as the cornerstone for enhanced sense reception.

'I think one of the key things ... is regular updates: regular communication about where we are, what are we doing, how are we doing it.' (P1, male, mid-level management)

Effective communication during the strategy management process is supported in the literature (Mantere 2000:20).

Most of the participants recognised the importance of an environment, which is also discussed later on, which

allows for open dialogue or the ability to question the strategy and offer suggestions for improvement. This also speaks to a culture of inclusivity, which is an identified sense reception affordance related to the organisational environment that will be elaborated upon. Indeed, open vertical communication and management willingness to learn from and involve employees are important (Beer & Eisenstat 2000:35).

'That's why there must be an environment and culture for courageous conversation ... The person that's implementing must be able to say, I've been given the opportunity to say I don't think this or that will work' (P7, male, top-level management)

Participants identified direct face-to-face communication as important, while many indicated that a feedback mechanism is necessary to afford enhanced sense reception. This has been alluded to previously (Hrebiniak 2006:19). Sending the message on more than one platform with a focus on tailoring the platform to the sense receiver was also emphasised. This again links back to the element of personalisation.

Message elements

Three elements that relate specifically to the strategy message itself were identified as potential affordances for enhanced sense reception. All participants stated that the content of the strategy message must be clear to improve their understanding. This is in accordance with the literature (Melebari 2016:194).

'And, for that strategy to be much clearer because I think that will translate better, it'll make their job easier, it'll make everyone beneath them sort of understand the process more [...]' (P2, female, lower-level management)

Some participants mentioned the need for a simple strategy message to afford enhanced sense reception. This is highlighted in the following quote:

'Simple messages [...] break tasks down into simple tasks with simple messaging.' (P3, male, top-level management)

The use of a simple language has been referenced previously (Shulman & Bullock 2019:2). Thus, it becomes clear that the method or the way in which the strategy is communicated is critical for its translation.

Organisational environment

This sub-theme relates to affordances of the organisational environment that are linked to enhanced sense reception. Most participants identified cohesiveness, or an organisational environment in which there is a collective push toward a common goal or goal, as optimal for enhanced sense reception.

'It must be a team effort all the time. I think that's what makes it easier is that the team relies on each other and we know that no matter the circumstance, the team is going to help.' (P5, female, lower-level management)

Teamwork, as part of the strategy implementation process, is supported in the literature (Li et al. 2010:171).

Some participants spoke about a culture of inclusivity and how they would assist with sense reception.

'[W]hen you create a sense of inclusiveness that we're all in this together, and we all need to make this change happen.' (P1, male, mid-level management)

Interestingly, some participants said it is important to understand the professional context of the message receiver to enhance sense reception. This implies that senior managers who pass the message down for translation and implementation should have their own understanding of the job requirements and responsibilities of their subordinates.

'Sometimes I think that our managers just go, "Do this," but they don't understand the thing that they're asking us to do.' (P5, female, lower-level management)

Again, this speaks to the element of personalisation, albeit in a different context. What emerged from the data is that employees want to be seen as individuals and not just as a face in the crowd in terms of their skill sets, wants and needs.

Theme 4: Factors leading to enhanced strategy translation

Theme 4 relates to broader factors that could lead to enhanced translation and, therefore, an improved understanding of the strategy message. It comprises two sub-themes: human capital and general process elements.

Human capital elements

This sub-theme describes people-related factors that can lead to enhanced strategy translation. The judged 'quality' of the people involved in the strategy implementation process may influence the effectiveness thereof (Li et al. 2010:169). As such, the majority of participants indicated that strategy translation was enhanced when the management was hands-on. This may also positively influence perceptions of management support, which has been identified as important.

'Yes, they roll up their sleeves and say, "Okay, how are we doing this?" They are very team-centric.' (P5, female, lower-level management)

Most participants highlighted overall organisational morale as important in increasing translation. This may also have a positive impact on the work environment and the level of trust in colleagues, two other elements outlined as leading to enhanced strategy translation.

'I think morale definitely contributes to how much you engage on the strategy. So you wouldn't go above and beyond your role, or as a team, if morale is not good within the office or in the environment and the team.' (P5, female, lower-level management)

Another element mentioned by participants is the proper treatment of staff and the impact this has on their output.

'So, he walked in here and he's brought everything together, he's just uplifted this whole department because of his good communication skills and the way he talks to people, the way he handles people.' (P12, female, mid-level management)

The need to treat staff (implementers) to increase morale and create a better work environment is supported in the literature (Beer & Nohria 2000:170).

Process elements

Process elements relate to the identified elements of the organisational process, which may enhance translation. Some participants identified having a paper trail as important in this regard.

'If it's not in writing and the message goes to more than one person you are going to get misunderstandings' (P12, female, mid-level management)

Participants also identified simple processes as a beneficial means of enhancing translation.

'And again, I think they need to be given the space to do their jobs instead of worrying about the bureaucracy, because that's what gets in the way.' (P2, female, lower-level management)

Planning in the process of transferring the strategy message was also highlighted, along with proper and consistent monitoring during the implementation process, to increase the chances of translation. This is supported by the literature (Holm et al. 2025:1–2; Hrebiniak 2006:19).

Discussion

This exploratory study investigated the concept of SMA and its potential link with improved strategy translation and implementation. Addressing the first research question – what a strategy message must afford to ensure enhanced implementation – revealed that the message should provide a broad understanding of the strategy, including its necessity and the benefits of its successful implementation. The message should also encourage buy-in through inclusion in decision-making, fostering responsibility and reducing resistance. Additionally, the strategy message must clearly define roles, enhance accountability, inspire confidence in the message's content and attainability, build trust in management, and offer flexibility in implementation.

For the second research question, the elements of a strategy message that afford implementation – a key finding – were the importance of personalising the message to the recipients, considering their sense-making abilities and potential barriers such as language or contextual factors. Clear goals and consistency in message content and sources were identified as being crucial. An inclusive strategy formulation process that fosters buy-in is also essential. A value match between strategy formulators and implementers was highlighted as critical for an improved sense reception. Rigidity in the strategy message was viewed as a negative affordance that could hinder implementation.

The third research question explored affordances linked to enhanced sense reception in order to improve strategy implementation. Three sub-themes emerged: communication, the message itself and the organisational environment.

Effective, regular communication and open dialogue were pivotal, fostering a culture of inclusivity and trust. Clarity and simplicity in messaging were identified as the essential affordances. Additionally, cohesion among staff and a culture of inclusivity in which employees feel connected to higher management are important. Understanding the professional context of message receivers is crucial for ensuring realistic expectations.

The final research question examined the factors that create an environment conducive to enhanced strategy translation. Human capital elements and organisational processes are key. A hands-on upper management team was seen as supportive and morale-boosting, improving trust among the staff. Treating employees well and maintaining a positive work environment are also crucial. In terms of processes, participants highlighted the importance of maintaining a paper trail and ensuring multiplatform communication along with simple processes, sufficient planning and robust monitoring structures.

Limitations and recommendations

This study has two main limitations. Firstly, it only sampled corporations that are headquartered in the Gauteng province of South Africa, which provides insight into local viewpoints on strategy translation and its affordances for implementation. Other organisations in different locations may have different operational methods and views, which could be beneficial to study in this regard. Therefore, a future research option could be to include more organisations to compare their viewpoints on strategy translation and its affordances for implementation.

Secondly and finally, the number of lower-level managers interviewed exceeded that of middle- and senior-level managers. Since much of the legwork for strategy translation and implementation is generally undertaken by lower-level employees, the number of participants in this segment should be increased in future studies to obtain a more holistic view of their experiences in this regard.

Conclusion

This section summarises the key insights derived from the study and outlines their managerial and theoretical implications.

This study proposed and highlighted the need for the strategy message to be personalised for the receiver thereof and transferred using a simple language to increase translation and afford implementation. It also outlined the need for a broad, organisation-wide understanding of strategy messages by nurturing a team-centric environment in which inclusive strategy formulation, a culture of inclusivity, and open communication and dialogue are present. This may require effective, consistent communication and a reciprocal process of sense-making, sense-giving and sense reception between employees at all levels of the organisation (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991:434). This is more easily achievable in cases

where the teams are small. In bigger organisations, senior management should ideally formulate the overall organisational strategy in conjunction with middle-level management. This message should contain broad details about the overall strategy but with individual roles and responsibilities. The middle-level managers, in conjunction with their teams, should then collectively tailor department-specific, simple strategy messages that feed into the overall strategy but contain more granular, personalised details for the implementers. This requires an understanding of the middle-level managers of their team members' strengths, weaknesses and professional contexts.

These individual departmental strategies should then be shared with senior management for their input and for incorporation into the broader overall organisational strategy, with personalised elements for each department. This strategy should then be widely communicated to the organisation with direct links between senior- and lower-level employees. As identified in this study, higher-level management should become hands-on and involved at the ground level to gain an understanding of implementers and their professional contexts. They should nurture a positive workplace environment, in which employees feel valued. This may increase morale, and thus afford the impetus to follow the direction of a trusted management team. The process outlined above may be more time-consuming than bulk, generic messaging and management practices, but may go a long way to enhance translation and afford implementation.

Ultimately, the researchers conclude that through the lens of affordance, the strategy message should not only allow but also enable and empower all employees (strategy implementers) to effectively translate and implement organisational strategies (even in the absence of supervision).

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CRedit authorship contribution

Muriel Serfontein-Jordaan: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Marius Pretorius: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Leanne Kunz: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualisation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft. Rebaona Letsholo: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources,

Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Muriel Serfontein-Jordaan, upon reasonable request.

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