Internal and external interfaces of the executive suite

Van Doorn, Sebastiaan; Heyden, Mariano; Reimer, Marko; Buyl, Tine; Volberda, Henk

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Internal and external interfaces of the executive suite: Advancing research on the porous bounds of strategic leadership

ABSTRACT

Scholarship on strategic leadership has undergone considerable advancement in the 40 years since the introduction of upper echelon theory (UET). In this special issue we engage with the state-of-the-art in the field and categorize the manuscripts along a new typology of what constitutes the dominant coalition in the firm. From traditional models focusing on 'CEO-only' or 'TMT as a group' we discuss the current range of conceptualizations that exist of the dominant coalition and discuss benefits and drawbacks of each approach. In particular we observe a tendency of scholars to be more inclusive of specific actors, e.g. functional specialists of the TMT, and a natural broadening of the actors thought to be part of, or strongly supporting, the dominant coalition of the firm. This special issue offers guidelines on how to frame scholarship in the strategic leadership tradition going forward and presents an effort to strengthen coherence and clarity in the field.

1. Introduction

The question of *who* is responsible for the organization's success is one that fascinates business practitioners and academics alike. Almost four decades ago, Hambrick and Mason (1984) formulated the 'upper echelons theory' (UET), with the general premise that organizations are a reflection of their dominant coalition. Dominant coalition here refers to the individuals or groups who exercise choice on the organization's behalf (Child, 1972). Rooted in the Behavioral Theory of the Firm (Cyert & March, 1963), the dominant coalition has been internalized as a core concept in strategic leadership research (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Mithani & O'Brien, 2021; Samimi et al., 2020). The field of strategic leadership builds on the core assumption that by studying the members of the assumed dominant coalition (e.g., chief executive officer [CEO], top management team [TMT], and non-executive directors), we can infer the bounds of rationality from which organizational choices ensue (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Strategic leadership scholars have contributed richly by developing and testing theory on "the people who have overall responsibility for an organization – the characteristics of those people, what they do, and how they do it" (Hambrick, 1989: 6).

However, there has been limited emphasis on *who* precisely should be considered as (part of) the dominant coalition (Hegarty and Hoffman, 1987; Jones and Cannella, 2011). Cyert & March themselves offered little clarity on this issue, noting that: "We assume a set of coalition members, actual or potential. Whether these members are individuals or groups of individuals is unimportant. Some of the possible subsets drawn from this set are viable coalitions" (Cyert & March, 1963: 44–45). Yet, as Child (1972) argued early on, the "notion of dominant coalition is advantageous in the way it highlights the immediate sources of major structural variation in organizations, but *it is an abstraction and could be misleading if not used cautiously*" (Child, 1972: 13; italics added). Accordingly, accurately specifying and justifying who needs to be considered as part of the assumed dominant coalition in strategic leadership research is of utmost importance, as otherwise the theorized influence of key actors on organizational processes and outcomes may be diluted or overestimated.

In this theoretical discussion of different conceptualizations of the strategic leadership function, we seek to provide a preliminary conceptual background for situating the richness of interpretations of dominant coalitions in strategic leadership research. Traditionally, strategic leadership research has focused on either the CEO in isolation (e.g., Hambrick and Fukutomi, 1991) or the TMT as a

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non-hierarchical social entity (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) as representing the dominant coalition of the firm tasked with strategic choice. In the latter 'teamness' approach, the group of senior-most executives (the TMT) is seen as a collective decision-making unit (Boone and Hendriks, 2009; Hambrick, 1994; Simsek et al., 2005). However, in the almost four decades that have passed since the initial formulation of UET, the role of strategic leaders has become more dynamic and complex (Georgakakis et al., 2019). For instance, the elaboration of global supply chains, the adoption of more networked ways of pursuing innovation, and the emergence of digital business models has elevated demands for effective senior leadership. This has raised awareness that senior leaders generally call on different actors, both within and beyond the organization's boundaries, to assist in decisions pertaining to key organizational processes and outcomes (Alexiev et al. 2010, 2020; Van Doorn et al., 2017).

As a result, strategic leadership scholars have increasingly embraced the ecological complexities of how senior leaders ultimately influence the organizations they represent, through their interfaces with internal and external actors (Cao et al., 2010; Simsek et al., 2017). Within the TMT, scholars have discerned between different intra-TMT actors, such as CEOs and other TMT members (Buyl et al., 2011; Heyden et al., 2017; Ling et al., 2017). Moreover, in recent advances scholars have also included a richer set of potential actors who exert influence on organizational choices (Finkelstein et al., 2009). Influential actors such as middle managers (Heyden et al., 2018; Reimer et al., 2016a; Raes et al., 2011; Volberda, 2017), internal/external advisors (Alexiev et al., 2010; Arendt et al., 2005), and non-executive directors (Westphal, 1999), have been introduced through several auxiliary perspectives and shown to also play a role at times. As a result, the bounds of the TMT have become porous, with a multiplicity of internal and external actors involved in processes and outcomes traditionally attributed to the TMT (Simsek et al., 2017). Other research streams have signaled similar trends – i.e., that strategic leadership is not a solitary activity. For instance, corporate governance studies have adopted stakeholder theories to consider how strategic leaders align behaviors along influences from beyond firm boundaries (e.g., external advisors and institutional agents McDonald et al., 2008). In leadership studies, where traditional inquiries would consider the role of the CEO as guiding, concepts such as transformational (Bass and Avolio, 1993) and shared leadership (Agarwal et al., 2020; Mihalache et al., 2014) have shifted the focus toward a more inclusive model of leadership (Raes et al., 2007).

Although this 'expanding coalition', 'delegation rationale' or 'interfaces' perspective holds the exciting potential to inform a more comprehensive and ecologically valid theory of strategic leadership, it also runs the risk of fragmenting the field. The aim in this special issue is therefore to consolidate interest in conceptual and empirical research on this topic. In what follows in this theoretical discussion, we first distinguish between five generic models of dominant coalitions: the traditional (1) 'CEO in isolation' and (2) 'TMT as a group' models, and beyond these traditional models we distinguish three models based on the interfaces that occur with(in) the dominant coalition, i.e. (3) the 'CEO-TMT interface', (4) 'multi-factional', and (5) 'open bounds' model. For each of the models, we briefly highlight some notable underlying assumptions, strengths, and limitations. After that, we will focus on the three latter models, given the current special issue's focus on 'interfaces', and we will introduce each of the special issue's papers, categorizing them along these models. Together, all papers give an impression of the current state-of-the-art of strategic leadership research, with explicit attention for the interfaces senior leaders engage in to arrive at comprehensive strategic decisions and outcomes. This gives rise to a number of interesting opportunities to shape the future of strategic leadership research along notions of an expanding dominant coalition. Accordingly, we end our introduction to this special issue with an integration and overview of fruitful pathways for future research.

2. Models of dominant coalitions

A core objective of this special issue is to examine '*who*' has been theorized and modeled to be involved in strategic decision-making in the strategic leadership discipline, with special attention for the internal and external interfaces of senior leaders. This special issue was in part motivated by an opportunity to chart out different interpretations of *who* drives strategic leadership processes and outcomes commonly documented. As a preliminary step to contextualize this issue, in this theoretical discussion, we consider five generic models of dominant coalitions that we have identified in the larger strategic leadership research: CEO in isolation, TMT as a group, CEO-TMT interface, multi-factional, and open bounds. Below, we briefly discuss each model's key assumptions, strengths, and limitations.

CEO in Isolation, Model 1. Although the notion of "coalition" is not intuitively interpreted as a singular actor, many scholars still focus on the CEO, given his/her ultimately accountability for the taking and/or approving of strategic decisions (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). The CEO of an organization is the senior leader who has overall responsibility for the conduct and performance of the entire entity, not just a subunit (Hambrick and Quigley, 2014). With the exception of co-CEOs (Krause et al., 2015), interim CEOs (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010), and former CEOs on boards (Quigley and Hambrick, 2012), the CEO is typically the most identifiable decision-maker of a firm and assumed to be the key person 'in charge'. Strategic leadership scholars have estimated the 'CEO effect' ranging between 15% and 40% of performance outcomes (Quigley and Hambrick, 2015). A recent study also found that about 30% of total variance in corporate social responsibility, as one example of a strategic outcome, is explained by the CEO (Wernicke et al., 2021).

Although Hambrick and Mason's (1984) UET is explicitly articulated as a group-level theory, CEO interpretations of dominant coalitions are still pervasive (e.g., Hambrick and Fukutomi, 1991). The 'CEO in isolation' model assumes that looking at the most prominent strategic leader of an organization is sufficient for understanding strategic choice, as this actor's preferences and behaviors will be sufficiently dominant to overshadow individual contributions of other top managers (Jackson, 1992). Alternatively, it assumes that the CEO has a range of options exogenously generated and his/her dispositions toward a particular alternative can be inferred from looking at his/her characteristics or style (Bertrand and Schoar, 2003).

This first traditional model is parsimonious and allows for reliable data collection of a structurally comparable actor between firms. In particular, there are data advantages for engaging with the 'CEO in isolation' model, and it has been popular with studies focusing on large datasets in adjacent fields, such as finance (Beber and Fabbri, 2012; Bertrand and Schoar, 2003; Kaplan et al., 2012). The 'CEO in isolation' model can be important for particular questions, and has featured prominently in studies with an agency theory background, concerned with issues such as succession, compensation, and risk-taking (Nyberg et al., 2017). It is also increasingly gaining prominence in models concerned with personality traits of CEOs (Gerstner et al., 2013; Nadkarni and Herrmann, 2010; Resick et al., 2009).

Yet, a core limitation of this model is that it assumes that considering the CEO alone offers sufficient insight to gauge the senior leadership function and largely disregards the influence of other actors on the preferences and behaviors of the CEO. In particular, "the complexity of creating and carrying out the strategic decisions of an entire organization demands more skill and effort than a single leader can effectively provide" (Colbert et al., 2013: 351). Thus, if a CEO is rationally bounded, he or she is likely to rely on input from other actors, including other executives, if s/he is to make decisions that are to reach some minimal level of legitimacy (Arendt et al., 2005). Failing to include these insights might lead to an incomplete picture of how a CEO settles on a particular course of action. Thus, in this model, the CEO is assumed to represent the preferences of the dominant coalition and understanding the CEO is a parsimonious way of understanding the selection of a particular choice out of a hypothetical choice set – yet, it is not very informative for understanding the choice set definition and preceding alternative generation process.

TMT as a group, Model 2. The 'TMT as a group' model assumes that TMT members are collectively involved in a particular decision problem. It assumes that preference emerges out of the decision-making process and that the group collectively endorses a particular course of action. Scholars have used this approach to study strategic change (Boeker, 1997; Wiersema and Bantel, 1992; Sidhu et al., 2021), innovation strategy (Bantel and Jackson, 1989; Qian et al., 2013; West and Anderson, 1996), international strategy (Herrmann and Datta, 2005; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2011), and competitive strategy (Hambrick et al., 1998; Marcel et al., 2010). In this approach, group-level mechanisms have taken center stage, such as different types of conflict (Amason, 1996; Simons and Peterson, 2000), cognitive diversity (Kilduff et al., 2000; Narayan et al., 2021), and informational availability to inform decisions (Alexiev et al., 2010). The role of compositional heterogeneity is central in this model and underlies the presumed mechanisms at play; but mostly it is assumed that heterogeneity in compositional attributes of the group is desirable as, on average, more heterogeneous teams perform better on many desirable strategic choices. Non-findings using the group model are often explained in terms of disruptive conflict in the team or threshold effects (e.g., non-linear effects).

The main strength of this second traditional model, again, lies in its conceptual simplicity. However, that also induces a major limitation of this model: it assumes that all identified TMT members are actually involved in strategic decision-making with equal weighting (or power). Yet, there might be opportunity costs involved in mobilizing all members of top management to make each and every decision. For instance, TMT members may not necessarily be collocated geographically (Cannella et al., 2008) and although we can expect that members will generally be informed about ongoing issues, they may have limited added value in terms of expertise required for specific decisions being debated (Buyl et al., 2014).

One of the few explicit justifications for inclusion of all TMT members comes from Wiersema and Bantel (1992: 104): "We defined top management team members as including the very biggest level of management—the chairman, chief executive officer, president, and chief operating officer—as well as the next biggest tier. (…) By defining the top management team as the two biggest executive levels, regardless of the titles used, we achieved greater consistency across the sample of firms than have other studies in the measurement of the top management team." But even Wiersema and Bantel's reasoning implicitly assumes that all members, within the two layers, are relevant and involved in equal weighting. In addition, this model does not have a 'tie breaker' for decisions and consensus seems to be implied. As such, this model cannot, and perhaps is not intended, to explain why a TMT would focus on one particular decision problem (e.g., innovation versus internationalization) and ignores another, or how these dynamics matter in relation to multiple choice options.

CEO-TMT interface, Model 3. The CEO-TMT interface model appeases some of the limitations of the traditional 'CEO in isolation' and the 'TMT as a group' models, by jointly considering their coexisting effects (see Georgakakis and Buyl, 2020 for a recent comprehensive review). This model considers the TMT as a hierarchical decision-making body, where some TMT members – i.e., CEOs – have greater influence than others. The general assumption of this model is that CEOs influence and are influenced by, the TMT within which they are embedded. It focuses on the interfaces that occur between the CEO and the TMT as a whole (Georgakakis and Buyl, 2020), or the CEO and specific TMT members (e.g. Menz, 2012; Kunisch et al., 2020). This model has several sub-variations.

Judge-advisor model. The most basic variation of the CEO-TMT model is what Arendt et al. (2005) term the Judge-Advisor model. In this model, the CEO engages with the larger TMT interdependently to develop a range of solutions to particular problems, but the final choice (which is viewed as judgment task), is made by the CEO. It builds on the premise that TMTs are essentially hierarchical bodies in which the CEO has disproportionate influence on decision making (Olie et al., 2012: 87), and views the CEO as 'primus inter pares' (first among equals) (Nadolska and Barkema, 2014: 1489). This view can be useful for understanding choices where decisions are highly uncertain and complex, but where the choice is a judgment for which a particular decision-maker is held accountable. That is, the CEO is assumed to be the person accountable for the decision, whereas the other TMT members provide suggestions, interpretations, and recommendations.

One key limitation of this model is that it might be hard to empirically disentangle who is actually driving the effect, that is, although both the TMT and CEO are presumed to matter in different roles, whether the effect is primarily driven by group or the CEO depends on the specific context of the study. For instance, it could be assumed that the baseline relation is between the CEO and an outcome, with the TMT as a moderator, or alternatively the baseline could be that the TMT influences an outcomes (Buyl et al., 2011), with the CEO functioning as a moderator. Empirically, the modeling is the same in most quantitative studies, so this is fundamentally a theoretical and conceptual issue.

CEO delegation model. Another variation assumes a preference or judgment from the CEO who then gives mandates to other executives. The CEO delegation model builds on the premise that the CEO influences TMT behaviors and that these collective behaviors in turn are reflected in strategic choice. Buyl, Boone, and Hendriks (2014) for instance examined how CEOs delegate decisions to different problems to their top managers, whereas Simsek (2007) looked at how CEO tenure influenced TMT risk-taking propensity, and Peterson et al. (2003) looked at how the CEO's personality influenced TMT dynamics.

This model is particularly useful when looking into the processes of strategy formulation and implementation, but assumes that the TMT will act consistent with the preferences of the CEO and does not take into account that the CEO's preference or leadership style could be contested (Costanzo and Di Domenico, 2014). That is, it does not take into account the TMT's preferences or behaviors, but assumes TMT members' behaviors and attitudes to be malleable in relation to CEO preferences and choices. This of course, may not be the case, as the TMT may not be sensitive to particular CEO tendencies – in terms of either willingness or ability.

CEO complementarity model. The CEO complementarity model in turn assumes that it is not the absolute involvement of the CEO versus the TMT that matters, rather the extent to which they are complementary in the knowledge and skills they bring to address a particular decision problem. This model can be used to understand the depth versus breadth of insights represented in a TMT, from an informational perspective. This model is particularly useful for theorizing the efficiency (in terms of non-redundancies in distributed knowledge) of decision-making (Cao et al., 2010). For this model, it is theoretically relevant to understand the knowledge requirements to reach a particular (desirable) decision outcome. Thus, adopting this view requires a normative assumption as to which knowledge elements, distributed between the CEO and TMT, are required to reach a particular decision or state (e.g., being ambidextrous).

Several studies implicitly seem to adopt this lens, but differ in whether complementarity is considered a function of the differences in knowledge between CEO and TMT (Cao et al., 2010), or of the interaction between both (Fernández-Mesa et al., 2013), or whether CEO and the TMT knowledge coexist in parallel in the same empirical model (i.e., additive model) (Boeker, 1997; Jaw and Lin, 2009). However, this model does not specify how strategic choice is actually arrived at, besides assuming that if the TMT provides a good knowledge complement to the knowledge gaps of the CEO, or vice versa, better decision outcomes will be achieved. What exactly constitutes a 'good decision' is interpreted in relation to the assumptions of the properties of the dependent variable under study and thus the model may not be as appropriate for new phenomena that are still poorly understood. That is, this interpretation pre-assumes what knowledge is necessary to reach a good decision. However, having complementary knowledge in relation to one strategic choice problem does not mean that the complementary knowledge is useful for reaching quality solutions to another choice.

Multi-factional, Model 4. The 'multi-factional' model assumes that there are multiple sub-groups with distinguishable competing preferences and interests represented in the same decision-making body trying to achieve a collective objective. There are two key differences between this model and the CEO-TMT interface model. First, the sub-groups are not assumed to be singular individuals (e.g., the CEO), rather subgroups within groups. Second, whereas the CEO-TMT interface implicitly assumes cooperative behavior, the starting point of most multi-factional models are the tensions between the preferences and motives of the different subgroups. Thus, quasi-resolution of diverging preferences is a common theme in these models (Cyert & March, 1963). For this model, too, multiple variations have been described.

In-group/Out-Group model. This variation assumes that there are status differentials within groups and that these differences underlie the ability of different actors to influence strategic choice – with in-group members exerting most influence (Hutzschenreuter and Horstkotte, 2013). The in-group/outgroup approach assumes social categorization and relational mechanisms that define whose preferences will be most salient and carry the heaviest weighting in driving choice. Faultine theory can be very informative in this area and preference is primarily a social resolution of conflict, which is a key process that has to be theorized (Barkema and Shvyrkov, 2007; Lau and Murnighan, 2005; Ndofor et al., 2015). Faultlines can occur on a myriad of attributes (e.g., task-related, social category), and those that are most pertinent to the choice problem are usually considered (Bezrukova et al., 2008; Georgakakis and Buyl, 2020). One promising stream adopting this model is the family business literature, where 'familiness' has been argued to be an important determinant for being prominently involved in decision-making (Minichilli et al., 2010). Thus, this model assumes that members identify with different sub-groups and the influence over, and involvement in, strategic choice is in favor of members of the dominant sub-group (e.g., family members in family-controlled firms). This model might be insightful for understanding selection between competing alternatives, by understanding the interests and dispositions of different sub-groups.

However, faultlines in and of themselves need not be a problem – especially not for executives who can be expected to have experience with coping with diversity. Rather the extent to which they are activated in relation to a particular strategic choice determines whether disruptive conflict (or exclusion) ensues (Jehn and Bezrukova, 2010; Georgakakis and Buyl, 2020; Pearsall et al., 2008; Ren et al., 2014). In addition, faultlines are particularly challenging for newly formed teams, and the effect is expected to be diluted over time. This dilution may occur as teams learn to work across their differences and/or as they homogenize through attrition (Boone et al., 2004; Nielsen, 2009). Moreover, multiple cross-cutting faultlines could coexist, making it difficult to ascertain with which sub-groups individual members more strongly identify with. As such, the joint impact of different potential sub-groups would need to be taken into account.

Factional groups. Another variation closely related to the previous model, is the factional group model. Li and Hambrick (2005) coined the term factional groups to denote decision-making bodies in organizations that have distinguishable interests that have to be resolved to reach a common objective (e.g., joint ventures, alliances, M&As). The factional group might be considered a special case of the faultline model, but given the prominence of its domain of applicability (i.e., inter-organizational strategies), we discuss it as separate. This model might be particularly useful for understanding the preliminary stages of newly merged organizations and/or newly formed joint ventures and alliances, where top managers from the parent organizations come together to attempt to realize the benefits (e.g., synergies) of an inter-organizational strategy. This model assumes that the factions are not imbalanced in terms of their relative power, and thus their diverging interest must be reconciled somehow in pursuit of collective goals.

The limitation of this model is that it might not be generally applicable and perhaps only informative in the initial stages of dominant coalition formation from partners with identifiable points of divergence in preference (Georgakakis and Buyl, 2020). In addition, it does not specifically address how impasses would be resolved (should they arise), or in other words, how preferences are tilted in favor of one of the factions. Resolving disputes in this context will probably be associated with turnover, boycotts, or sabotage of the "losing" faction. Political processes and tactics might need to be specifically theorized, although they are notoriously difficult to measure and challenging to generalize (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974). Granted, it is not by definition that the interests are actually misaligned or that the subgroups will not cooperate, but in the beginning the subgroups and subgroup memberships are clear. One key challenge in factional groups is finding a leader that supersedes the factions (Hogg et al., 2012; Murase et al., 2014). This in turn means finding other dimensions of collective identification between factions. However, if other dimensions of collective identification along which the dominant coalition can be specified are present, then the value of defining factional groups a priori becomes somewhat redundant, or has to be taken into account in relative terms.

Inner circle-outer circle. A slightly more benign variation, is the inner circle-outer circle model which separates decision involvement between those with higher influence on the final choice, but acknowledges that the nature of decision processes is still cooperative and multiple members of the TMT are involved (Roberto, 2003). For instance, outer circle members (e.g., regional SVPs) may be tasked with scanning and filtering information from the environment and provide this filtered interpretation to the inner circle for deliberation and judgment (e.g., CEO, CFO, COO, executive directors). In that sense, the inner circle directs attention and search for information of the outer ring, and these filter and interpret insights that the inner circle then uses for judgments. Ironically, a key limitation of this model is that the inner circle might become dependent on the information of outer-circle members, whose members could tailor informational inputs provided to the inner circle in favor of their self-interest.

In addition, there is an implicit, or sometimes explicit, boundary to being member of the inner core, but this does not mean (as compared to the in-group/out-group model) that there is conflict or even social tensions, as the implicit hierarchies might be perceived as legitimate. However, over time outer circle members may want to seek to become inner circle members. This can be expected to happen by either expanding the inner circle or turnover. Expanding the inner circle can take place, for instance, in professional service firms when a senior vice president (SVP) is promoted to partner (Morris and Pinnington, 1998). Turnover in turn could result in succession contests and evidence suggests that these can be quite disruptive (Friedman and Olk, 1995; Naveen, 2006; Santora, 2004).

Open bounds, Model 5. The final category entails models of dominant coalitions with open bounds where actors who are not top managers in the focal organization are involved (temporarily) in the dominant coalition. Several variations can be observed, depending on *who* these actors are. For all variations, the main assumption is that actors outside of the broader TMT, either within or outside the focal organization, can have a non-trivial influence on strategic choice.

Board involvement. The most common non-TMT actors sometimes included as part of the dominant coalition are board members. In particular non-executive board members, who are not members of the organization or immediate-former members (e.g., retired executives), are often studied. Non-executive directors differ from executive directors, who can be expected to be inner-circle members of the TMT, as their everyday activities revolve around their executive tasks (Finkelstein, 1992). As firm outsiders, non-executives play a complex mix of collaborative and controlling tasks (Adams and Ferreira, 2007; Shen et al., 2022), as the board of directors is the highest monitoring authority in the firm and is entrusted to safeguard value-added utilization of discretionary resources for the firm's stakeholders (Hillman and Dalziel, 2003). In particular, whereas boards are traditionally expected to control and monitor executives, non-executive board members are increasingly held accountable for the actions of the firm (Kaplan and Harrison, 1993). Accordingly, they are progressively becoming active participants in strategy making by providing counsel, engaging critically in strategic analysis, and defining the scope of strategy discussions and managerial discretion (Hendry et al., 2010; Miller, 1991; Ruigrok et al., 2006; Tuggle et al., 2010).

Consistent with this, several studies have examined how CEO-board and TMT-board relationships relate to strategic choice (Chen, 2011; Kor, 2006; Kroll et al., 2017). This approach has been a mixed blessing, as one analytical challenge of this approach is a blurring boundary between non-executives and executives. In addition, board functioning is endogenous (Campbell et al., 2012; Shivdasani and Yermack, 2002), as CEO-Chairperson duality studies highlight the connection between executives and the board (Haynes and Hillman, 2010; Tuggle et al., 2010), where CEOs often interacts with the board to shape the scope of their desired discretion (Westphal, 1999; Westphal and Zajac, 1995; Zajac & Westphal, 1996). In addition, recent studies highlight how the board model adopted in a given institutional context may enable or constrain board members' ability to be involved in strategy making (Heyden et al., 2015 As such, including board members might be suitable in contexts adopting particular board models (e.g., one-tier models), whereas in others this approach might not be readily correct (e.g., two-tier models).

(External) advisers/consultants. Another way in which non-firm executives are involved as part of the dominant coalition is through advising roles. Several studies have started to consider the involvement of advisers in decision-making (Alexiev et al., 2010; Dahlander and Piezunka, 2014; Heyden et al., 2013; McDonald and Westphal, 2003; Strike and Rerup, 2015). These studies assume that members of the incumbent dominant coalition rely on advice from other actors to help in their assessment of current strategy and judgment of the future (Bergh and Gibbons, 2011; McDonald et al., 2008), who can be either from within or outside the organization (Alexiev et al., 2010, 2020). As such, reliance on advisers, often unobservable if not specifically the aim of a study, could be driving strategic choice regardless of the composition of the presumed dominant coalition inside the organization.

The notion of the 'most-trusted-adviser', a non-TMT member of the inner circle, is also gaining ground in this literature. This actor may have more influence over decisions than even other members of the inner-circle (Strike and Rerup, 2015). One implication of this view on dominant coalition is that the worldviews of actors not involved with the decision, or even the firm, become reflected in organizational processes and outcomes (Heyden et al., 2013). This is problematic, as decisions tend to be skewed in favor of the insights obtained from outsiders (Menon and Pfeffer, 2003). Thus, studying the characteristics of TMTs or CEOs who might be relying

Table 1
Overview of papers in the Special Issue.

Authors	Title	Method	Dominant Coalition Model/Interfaces	Main Findings
Simsek, Heavey & Fox	A managerial interfaces perspective on competitive action patterns	**Conceptual**	**CEO-TMT interface & Multi-factional & Open bounds** General overview of interfaces	The managerial interfaces perspective can be used to understand managers' role in shaping the firm's competitive action patterns. It explains how interfaces among managers, relevant stakeholders, and other strategic contributors enable and constrain core decision-makers' analysis of the competitive environment and the formulation and implementation of competitive actions.
Bartkus, Mannor & Campbell	Fast and rigorous: Configurational determinants of strategic decision-making balance	**Qualitative** Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis with a sample of 96 senior corporate leaders, 179 strategic decisions, and 298 team members	**CEO-TMT interface** Interface between CEO and TMT	Six specific leader-team configurations are identified that each facilitate decision processes characterized by strategic decision-making balance: rigorous intra-team debate, meaningful reconciliation of divergent ideas, and fast decision speed.
Kalogeraki & Georgakakis	Friend or foe? CEO gender, political ideology, and gender-pay disparities in executive compensation	**Quantitative** Panel sample of non-CEO executives (57,697 executive-year observations)	**CEO-TMT interface** Interface between CEO and individual other TMT members	Conservative-female CEOs compensate female (versus male) executives lower compared to all other CEO gender-ideology categories (i.e., female-liberal, male-liberal, and male-conservative).
Firk, Gehrke, Hanelt & Wolff	Top management team characteristics and digital innovation: Exploring digital knowledge and TMT interfaces	**Quantitative** Panel sample of 305 firms and 2413 firm-year observations	**CEO-TMT interface** Interface between the CEO and the CDO and between the CEO and other TMT members	On average, there is a positive relation between TMT digital knowledge and digital innovation, and this relation is stronger in case of an integrative CEO or the existence of a Chief Digital Officer. However, a strong hierarchical structure in the TMT weakens these moderating effects.
Huynh, Wilden & Gudergan	The interface of the top management team and the board: A dynamic capability perspective	**Conceptual**	**Multi-factional & Open bounds (board)** Interface within the TMT and between the TMT and the board	The board's monitoring and advice-giving condition the impact of the top management team on strategic change, depending on the faultlines between the TMT and the board in dynamic managerial capabilities.
Shen, Ponomareva & Uman	Can you catch two birds with one stone in CEO-board relationship? The impacts of nominating committee composition	**Conceptual**	**Open bounds (board)** The interface between the CEO, the board, and the nominating committee	Many public organizations create a nominating committee composed of independent directors, but this can lead to a decline in

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Authors	Title	Method	Dominant Coalition Model/Interfaces	Main Findings
	on board monitoring and resource provision			information sharing and trust, and, hence, in board resource provision. Boards can consider bringing non-CEO executives back onto nominating committes as inside directors to alleviate this negative impact.
Cummings, Eggers & Wang	Monitoring the monitor: Enabling strategic change when the former CEO stays on board	**Quantitative** 698 CEO succession events	**Open bounds (board)** Interface between new CEO and board (chair and members)	When the predecessor CEO was the board chair and the successor CEO was an outsider, boards with a higher proportion of outside directors experienced greater post-succession strategic change.
Srour, Shefer & Carmeli	Positive chairperson-CEO work relationships: Micro-relational foundations of organizational capabilities	**Qualitative** Interviews with pairs of chairpersons and CEOs in six firms	**Open bounds (board)** Interface between the CEO and chair of the board	The (positive) nature of the chairperson-CEO work relationships is conducive to building knowledge creation capabilities and cultivating collective resilience, through shaping a supportive organizational communication climate.
Weck, Veltrop, Oehmichen & Rink	Why and when female directors are less engaged in their board duties: An interface perspective	**Quantitative** Multi-source survey data (61 CEOs; 315 individual directors)	**Open bounds (board)** Interface between individual board members and CEO and peers	Female directors are ascribed lower status within the board, which results in lower task engagement. However, under female chairs, the director's gender loses importance as a status cue. Moreover, the presence of a CEO low on social dominance (i.e., a more participative CEO) mitigates the link between low status and low task engagement.
Rink, de Waal, Veltrop & Stoker	Managing C-suite conflict: The unique impact of internal and external governance interfaces on top management team reflexivity	**Quantitative** Multi-source survey data (56 organizations; 111 TMT members; 152 board members)	**Open bounds (board, external)** Interface between TMT and board, and between TMT and external supervisory authority	Cognitive TMT-board conflict is positively associated with affective TMT-board conflict, but this effect is moderated by board influx - i.e., high board membership influx mitigates the escalation of cognitive into affective conflict. Affective TMT-board conflict is negatively associated with TMT reflexivity, but this effect is attenuated by the degree of monitoring by an external supervisor.
Raes, De Jong, & Bruch	Setting the tone at the top: How the interface processes of organizational climate and non-TMT managers'	**Quantitative** Multi-source survey data (96 organizations; 305 TMT members; 10,964 employees)	**Open bounds (middle management, employees)** Interface between TMT, middle managers, and employees	TMT cohesion affects the collective turnover intentions among employees through the separate, but inter-related mechanisms of

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Authors	Title	Method	Dominant Coalition Model/Interfaces	Main Findings
	leadership transmit TMT cohesion to employees			corrosive organizational climate and non-TMT managers' transformational leadership.
Li	Preemptive or promotive: The differential impact of strategic leaders' political connections on firm long-term investment in China	**Quantitative** Panel sample of 1392 firms and 5771 firm-year observations	**Open bounds (external)** Interface between senior leader and political connections	A firm whose leader has ascribed connections tends to make fewer long-term investments, whereas leaders with achieved connections conduct more long-term investments. Both relationships become weaker when a firm outperforms other firms and reduces its reliance on government.

heavily on advice from external advisers is prone to a key omitted variable bias. Non-inclusion of advice could in fact be one factor accounting for non-findings and inconsistent results (Van Doorn et al., 2017).

2.1. Middle manager involvement

A last variation includes middle managers. A so-called "middle management" perspective is now beginning to emerge as a complement to the upper echelon perspective that dominated earlier research (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Wooldridge et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2010). Drawing on both the upper echelon and middle management perspectives, recent studies have sought to take the literature forward by way of multi-level research that recognizes that both the firm's most senior executives and its middle managers matter when it comes to strategic renewal. Middle managers have long been acknowledged as key actors in the effectuation of strategic choice (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Burgelman, 1983; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Guth and MacMillan, 1986), but their interacting roles with top managers have only been systematically theorized recently (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Heyden et al., 2018; Raes et al. 2007, 2011). Middle managers are often identified as those strategy practitioners below executive levels, but above supervisory level (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). They are entrusted for the vertical workflow within functions and groups, but not for the workflow of the organization as a whole (Huy, 2011; Mom et al., 2007; Reitzig and Maciejovsky, 2015).

Prior scholarship has typically portrayed the executives who constitute the TMT as change agents whose role is to give others within the organization a sense of what the firm is seeking to achieve. In contrast, middle managers have been viewed as sense-makers, charged with executing the plans formulated by the TMT (cf. Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Rouleau, 2005). However, recent scholarship has started to acknowledge that middle managers probably play a more sophisticated role (Huy, 2002; Raes et al., 2011; Glaser et al., 2015). Middle managers have been shown to influence the issues that are considered by top managers, as they have been shown to sell issues to the top (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Van Doorn et al., 2015) and champion initiatives (Burgelman, 1983; Day, 1994; Heyden et al., 2020), while also being enablers of blockers of top manager's ideas (Huy, 2002; Mantere, 2007). Given their importance, and their proximity to organizational capabilities, they are instrumental to ensure decisions embrace the true abilities and technical competence of the firm (Ou et al., 2014). However, middle managers also introduce biases to issues top managers consider, as they have been shown to filter initiatives from subordinates (Reitzig and Sorensen, 2013; Reimer et al., 2016b) as well as being reluctant to provide top managers with information they perceive as being inconsistent with the top manager's beliefs and preferences (Park et al., 2011). As such, this model increases the complexity by introducing middle manager agency, which is particularly problematic as top managers may only interact infrequently with middle managers (Raes et al., 2011). Further, it is conceivable that the potential for social categorization on the basis of demographic categories may lead to the emergence of fault-lines that demarcate TMT and middle management groupings (see Lau and Murnighan, 2005). Inasmuch as fault-lines can impede resource and information sharing (cf. Hambrick, 2007), what effect do such fault-lines have on collective TMT and middle management learning? There is a need for a more systematic theory or set of empirical findings regarding TMT–middle management dynamics that shape strategic decision-making and hence a firm's ability to survive and grow.

3. Overview of papers in the special issue

Our special issue builds on the aforementioned identification of models of dominant coalitions by identifying a common denominator between them – interfaces (Simsek et al., 2018). Interfaces allow scholars to appease some of the limitations discussed, while maximizing versatility for the problems at hand. By definition, taking this approach allows us to pick up scholarship seeking to go above and beyond the CEO in isolation model and the TMT as a group model. The papers considered here all share the ambition to advance more precise conceptualizations of the dominant coalition, albeit with different interpretations and contextual applications of how to deconstruct dominant coalition membership in relation to their research problem.

Table 1 gives an overview of all papers in this special issue, including the dominant coalition model(s) in which the paper can be categorized. Note that, as mentioned above, this special issue specifically focuses on the interfaces between the CEO/TMT and other actors. Because of this, only the latter three of the above-mentioned models are represented in these papers – i.e., the 'CEO-TMT interface', 'Multi-factional', and 'Open bounds' models. From the nine empirical studies in the special issue, seven use quantitative research designs. This is in line with the general over-representation of quantitative studies in the UET research field.

As can be seen in Table 1, several papers combine multiple models, which illustrates that these models are not mutually exclusive and often used in conjunction. This should not be surprising, as recognizing that there might be a hierarchical divide in the TMT (as suggested by the 'CEO-TMT interface' model) does not necessarily imply that one cannot also acknowledge that the board or external advisers might also matter (as proposed in the 'Open bounds' model). Put differently, many scholars explicitly account for the (simultaneous) presence of multiple interfaces between the CEO/TMT and other players. The first paper in this special issue, by Simsek et al. (2022) explicitly addresses this issue. Here authors develop a conceptual model and propositions about how firms' competitive action patterns can be better explained by studying the interfaces among on the one hand the CEO and core decision-making unit (which refers to the inner-circle, as discussed in the 'Multi-factional' model), and on the other hand key players, such as members of the TMT outside of the core decision-making unit (in line with the 'CEO-TMT interface' model) and internal and external stakeholders (consistent with the 'Open bounds' model).

Next, we find three papers in this special issue that take a 'CEO-TMT interface' approach. First, Bartkus et al. (2022) advance a model of the CEO-TMT interface where role theory helps to outline how CEOs and TMTs co-inform the strategic decision-making process from a social-interactionist, functionalist and structural perspective. Using a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis approach, they identify six configurations of CEO and team characteristics that each advance the quality and speed of strategic decision-making. Second, Kalogeraki and Georgakakis (2022) consider the role of CEOs' gender as well as their political ideology in alleviating the gender pay gap in the TMT. They find that the presence of a female CEO who is also conservative is associated with a higher pay gap between male and female TMT members. Finally, in their study of the effect of TMT digital knowledge on digital innovation, Firk et al. (2022) do not only consider the impact of the CEO, but also focus on the presence of a specific TMT member, i.e. the Chief Digital Officer (CDO), and find that both the CEO and the CDO can play an integrative role in sensemaking processes on the digital reality firms find themselves in. However, this effect wanes in case of a strong hierarchical structure in the TMT.

Only one paper in this special issue explicitly takes a 'Multi-factional' approach. In their conceptual paper on the role of interfaces in dynamic managerial capabilities (DMC), Huynh et al. (2022) explore the role of DMC faultlines within the TMT in the breadth and speed of strategic change. However, the authors do not stop here – in line with the 'Open bounds' model, they include the impact of the board, in terms of its monitoring and advice-giving activities as well as the DMC faultline that might arise between the TMT and the board.

Huynh and Gudergan (2022) is not the only paper in this special issue that accounts for the interface between the CEO/TMT and the board of directors; four other papers exclusively focus on this interface. Here we find that the open bounds model has been embraced by the majority of the authors in this special issue. First, Shen et al. (2022) develop a conceptual framework on the role of the board's nominating committee and its role in balancing the monitoring and resource provision role of boards. They argue that many public organizations may feel pressured to compose the nominating committee exclusively of independent (non-executive) directors, but this may jeopardize information sharing and trust between the CEO and the board. Second, Cummings et al. (2022) focus on CEO succession events, and the CEO/board interface in the subsequent period. They find that in case of an external successor CEO and a predecessor CEO staying on board as the chairperson, a higher proportion of outside directors in the board was associated with greater post-succession strategic change. Third, Srour et al. (2022) are also interested in the interface between the CEO and the chairperson. Adopting a micro-perspective, they assess the intimate relationships between CEO and board chair, and how these relationships can cultivate knowledge creation capabilities as well as collective resilience. Finally, Weck et al. (2022) address gender issues in strategic leadership. They find that due to low ascribed status within the board, female directors often experience reduced task engagement, however the presence of a participate (as opposed to a dominant) CEO alleviates this effect.

The final three papers in this special issue also take an 'Open bounds' approach. However, they do not focus (exclusively) on the interface between the CEO/TMT and the board, but (also) take other interfaces into account. Firk et al. (2022) address conflict that may arise between the 'TMT as a group' and the board. They argue that cognitive TMT-board conflict might escalate into affective conflict (especially if the board does not experience membership influx), and subsequently reduce TMT reflexivity. However, this effect is offset by the degree of monitoring by an external supervisor – putting the spotlight on the interface between the TMT and this external actor. Second, Raes et al. (2022) also account for the link between the TMT and external actors, but in this case the focus is on actors external to the TMT, but internal to the organization – middle management and lower-level employees. These authors find that cohesion at the top level resonates throughout the whole organization – it instigates transformational leadership in middle managers and reduces the presence of a corrosive organizational climate, and in this way weakens collective turnover intentions among employees. The final paper in this special issue, by Li (2022), turns the attention to yet another type of external interfaces: the senior leader's political connections. In this paper, it is found that leaders' ascribed (preemptive) connections negatively affect long-term investments, while their achieved (promotive) connections positively affect such investments. However, when firms outperform their peers and reduce their reliance on government, these relationships become weaker.

4. Integration and future research

Trends in conceptualizations. While literature on strategic leadership has offered several conceptualizations that offer differential foci and associated contributions to the field, this special issue charts a clear broadening of approaches with more attention for actors beyond the formal bounds of the executive suite, i.e. CEO and TMT. Clearly, with our call for work on executive interfaces, we have received a skewed sample of studies but the diversity in approaches as to how to capture meaningful interfaces beyond the formal bounds of the TMT provides rich context for furthering the field in years to come. While studies on CEOs or TMTs as standalone entities are certainly meaningful, we observe clear trends that even within these more concise studies, interface impacts are at minimum controlled for. E.g. in their study on CEO narcissism Buyl et al. (2019) control for a suite of TMT and board level variables (e.g., tenure diversity).

Within the broader literature, there exists a clear call for more sophisticated conceptualizations along with the expansion of insight on what constitutes the strategic leadership function of the firm. This may in part be influenced by the natural expansion of the TMT itself, i.e. TMT size doubled from mid 80s to mid 00s (see Guadalupe et al. 2013). Growth here derives from the introduction of additional functional specialists such as CMO, CIO, CSO, etc. and not from general managers. This in turn has lead to ad-hoc decision making teams depending on the domain of decision problems. In addition there has been overwhelming attention in the literature for the under-socialized character of strategic leadership studies in the traditional CEO or TMT focus (e.g. Arendt et al., 2005; Heyden et al., 2017) which is in line with more novel approaches to leadership in general around transformational and delegated forms of leadership that inhabits most modern organizations.

Clearly the dominant current approach revolves around CEO-TMT interface models, with increasing tendencies to include more distinct functional roles in this equation, be it within the team e.g. focusing on CFOs or CIO's or beyond the formal bounds of the executive suite. This special issue provides a compelling overview of work in this direction and provides food for thought regarding the position of UET in the broader strategy domain.

UET as a foundation. UET offers thorough theoretical footing in a research tradition that has now evolved beyond its initial intended domain. With the increased level of environmental uncertainty, the added complexity of technological advancement and globalization as well as the rise of digital, we observe how traditional ideas encapsulated in UET need to be re-evaluated, not in their validity but in their meaning and appropriateness of understanding contemporary leadership in organizations. When we consider traditional UET, the initial pool of environmental stimuli has arguably been broadened and includes more complex and potentially contradictory cues for future strategy formation. At the same time, we witness a broadening from a primarily cognitive perspective to one where values of senior managers become equally guiding in the processual character of the interaction of the strategic leadership function with its environment. This extends even the professional domain, see e.g. the emerging literature on CEO life events (e.g. O'Sullivan et al., 2021) where values formed in the early life phases of top managers find their way into the decision arena of major corporations. This coincides with a clear broadening of the firm outcomes that need to be balanced in contemporary society and that underline that profit orientations alone have become insufficient as firm objectives, see e.g. the focus on SDGs (Le Blanc, 2015).

It is then not surprising that strategic leadership scholarship has begun to distinguish entities beyond the CEO and TMT to give meaning to this more complex and inclusive decision arena through an extended field of vision and more profound interpretative qualities than would normally be present within a formally demarcated TMT. In line with the elaboration of functions within the TMT, the potential for meaningful connections beyond the formal team has taken a substantial leap forward, but one that needs careful consideration if the objective is to arrive at a coherent field of inquiry on strategic leadership in the 21st century.

With this special issue we offer some guidance in terms of which avenues provide fruitful direction in this challenge. First, we underline the broadening of functional roles within the TMT which, although offering potential for factionalism greatly improves the ability to interpret a broader set of cues and facilitates more efficient division of labor. Second, we highlight that the set of actors able to offer support, additional interpretation and/or aid implementation has expanded beyond the upper echelon of the organization and now specifically includes those at lower levels within the organization, e.g. middle managers, as well as extra-organizational actors, e.g. advisors and consultants. Finally, we emphasize that UET has not lost its ecologically valid role in steering how strategic leaders make decisions, but that we need to reinterpret some of its lessons to arrive at more accurate descriptions of how effective strategic decisions are formulated.

Future opportunities. With this special issue come several interesting aspects to consider moving forward. First, the UET tradition has been and still is primarily quantitative in nature, potentially concealing some opportunities for more deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms that tie senior leadership to organizational outcomes. This is particularly of interest given the rebalancing of cognition and values in the lens that is applied by top managers to recognize, interpret and action relevant cues from the organizational and environmental context. In our special issue, several interesting findings emerge from the qualitative study by Srour et al. (2022) and the QCA approach applied by Bartkus et al. (2022). For instance, understanding regarding configurations of characteristics of CEOs and TMTs in directing strategic choice gives broader insights in the underlying complementarity of managerial qualities, rather than pursuing the validation of a set hypothesis. Srour et al. (2022) in addition allow for an intimate gaze into the realities of relationships at the highest organizational level, emphasizing that it is not all information and cognition that determines how decisions emerge but that social processes are at the centre of strategy formation. More in-depth attention for the micro-foundations of strategy within the UET tradition is then a promising future research avenue.

Another promising direction when it comes to the literature on executive interfaces would reside in broadening understanding of the drivers of the 5 generic models of dominant coalition? Which Environmental, industry, firm, team, CEO characteristics may play a role in influencing CEOs and TMTs to liaise more actively with those outside the formal bounds of the dominant coalition. In addition where does agency and motivation lie in the seemingly broadening conceptualization of the dominant coalition? Is it the upper echelon that feels inundated and explores natural extension of their expertise? Are middle managers becoming more strategically involved due to the automation of their more routine tasks (e.g. Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994)? There are many possible explanations and understanding what drives the extension of the executive suite potentially allows us to better guide this process, e.g. if it complexity that drives extension, which functional roles are underrepresented currently and can it be dealt with through natural turnover or does the team needs more immediate and further reaching extension of insight.

Finally, it is interesting to consider that a broadened conceptualization of the dominant coalition and the actors that partake in strategic decision making has implications for the shared accountabilities when strategic decisions result in undesired outcomes. Surely, with more delegated forms of strategic leadership, questions will inevitably arise regarding accountability of those involved. Along notions of in-group/out-group and factionalism it becomes increasingly important for senior practitioners to understand and recognize how e.g. informational support originates, understand the relational nuances through which information is communicated and weigh carefully their value in the broader picture of firm strategy.

5. Conclusion

With this special issue we have compiled the state-of-the-art of scholarly inquiry on executive interfaces and have endeavoured to give additional direction to a research domain that has developed considerably over the 40 years it has been studied. Following Hambrick and Mason's (1984) seminal work, we have devoted much energy to understanding how the CEO, TMT, other members of the managerial echelon as well as outsiders might influence strategic-decision making in firms (Haleblian and Finkelstein, 2017; Kor, 2003; Zhang and Rajagopalan, 2009). With our systemic overview of generic models of dominant coalitions we have clearly shown that the papers in this special issue have further expanded the dominant coalition of decision-makers by further deepening and intensifying the delegation rationale and taking into account multiple inside and outside interfaces. Such a more comprehensive approach on interfaces of the executive suite will result in more valid theories and rich empirical findings on strategic leadership. We hope you enjoy reading the manuscripts in this special issue and that some of the clarifications in our theoretical discussion on models of dominant coalitions are helpful in guiding your future work.

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Sebastiaan van Doorn is a senior lecturer at The University of Western Australia. He obtained his Ph.D. at Rotterdam School of Management and has since held positions at Singapore Management University and Warwick Business School. His research interests include upper echelon theory, corporate entrepreneurship, digital innovation and CSR. His research has been published in Organisation Studies, Human Resource Management, Journal of Product and Innovation Management, Long Range Planning and the Journal of Business Ethics.

Mariano L.M. Heyden (PhD, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University) is Associate Professor of Strategy and International Business at the Department of Management of Monash Business School, Monash University. Previously, he was on the Faculty at the University of Newcastle. He studies decision-making across the organizational hierarchy, the role of external governance mechanisms, as well as processes of organizational adaptation with a focus on renewal, innovation and corporate entrepreneurship. His work is published in Organization studies, Human resource management, Journal of management, Journal of business ethics, Research Policy, Leadership quarterly and the journal of Applied psychology.

Marko Reimer (PhD, TU Berlin) is a Professor of Management Accounting and Control at WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management in Vallendar, Germany, and Director of the Institute of Management Accounting and Control (IMC). His research focuses on the influence of upper echelons on strategy formulation and implementation and the role of CFOs and controllers in designing and using management control systems.

Tine Buyl is an Associate Professor of Organization Studies at Tilburg University (the Netherlands). She received her Ph.D. in Business Economics from the University of Antwerp (Belgium). Her research focuses on Chief Executive Officers, as well as on the composition and dynamics of top management teams and their effects on organizational processes and outcomes. Her work has been published in international peer-reviewed journals such as Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Long Range Planning, Journal of Organizational Behavior, and Leadership Quarterly.

Henk W. Volberda is Professor of Strategy & Innovation at Amsterdam Business School of the University of Amsterdam. Moreover, he is Director of the Amsterdam Centre for Business Innovation. He has been a visiting scholar at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and City University's Bayes Business School in London. Volberda holds various executive and advisory positions such as member of the supervisory board of NXP Semiconductors Netherlands and Apollo Tyres Europe, expert member of the World Economic Forum and fellow of the European Academy of Management. His research on technological disruption, digital transformation, coevolution, new business models, strategic renewal, strategic flexibility, and management innovation has led to an extensive number of publications in peer-reviewed journals including the Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Management Science, Organization Science, and Strategic Management Journal. Moreover, he received numerous awards, including the Erasmus Research Award, the SAP Strategy Award, the EURAM best book award for Reinventing Business Models: How Firms Cope with Disruption, and the prestigious Igor Ansoff Strategic Management Award.

Sebastiaan Van Doorn*
University of Western Australia, Stirling Highway 35, 6009, Australia

Mariano L.M. Heyden
Monash University, 900 Dandenong Rd (N7.32), Caulfield East, VIC, 3145, Australia
E-mail address: pitosh.heyden@monash.edu.

Marko Reimer
WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management, D'Esterstrasse 13, D-56179, Vallendar, Germany
E-mail address: marko.reimer@whu.edu.

Tine Buyl
Tilburg University – Department of Organization Studies, Warandelaan 2, 5037AB, Tilburg, the Netherlands
E-mail address: t.p.l.buyl@tilburguniversity.edu.

Henk W. Volberda
Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam, PO Box 15953, 1001 NL, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
E-mail address: h.w.volberda@uva.nl.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Sebastiaan.vandoorn@uwa.edu.au (S. Van Doorn).