

## READING THE WIND: HOW MIDDLE MANAGERS ASSESS THE CONTEXT FOR SELLING ISSUES TO TOP MANAGERS

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*Issue selling is an important mechanism for creating change initiatives in organizations. This paper presents two studies that examine what middle managers think about as they decide whether or not to sell strategic issues to top management. In Study 1 middle managers identify themes that indicate a favorable or unfavorable context for issue selling. Top management's willingness to listen and a supportive culture were the most often named contributors to context favorability, while fear of negative consequences, downsizing conditions and uncertainty were thought to signal that a context was unfavorable for issue selling. Study 2 identifies factors that middle managers associate with image risk in the context of issue selling. Violating norms for issue selling, selling in a politically vulnerable way and having a distant relationship with top management were regarded as major contributors to a middle manager's level of image risk. Both studies enrich our understanding of the social psychological mechanisms that undergird the strategic change process. © 1997 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Top managers charged with strategy making for the firm confront a difficult challenge. While organizational environments are becoming increasingly complex, dynamic and interdependent (Kanter, 1983; Jelinek and Schoonhoven, 1990), the information-processing capacity of the top management group remains stable and is inadequate for detecting, interpreting and handling these environmental challenges (Walsh, 1995). It is often middle managers rather than the top managers who have their hands on the 'pulse of the organization' and are closer to customers and other stakeholders. These links often give them knowledge of what strategic is-

sues require attention. Thus, middle managers play a pivotal role in detecting new ideas and in mobilizing resources around these new ideas (Kanter, 1982). They also use upward influence processes to champion issues and communicate information (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994) about potentially important strategic issues for possible inclusion on an organization's strategic agenda (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). By proposing and defining issues for top managers, middle managers provide important contributions to a firm's strategic direction, and thereby influence organizational effectiveness.

One important way that middle managers affect strategic adaptation is by choosing when, where, and how to bring issues to top management's attention. This paper focuses on how these managers read the context to assess its favorability

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Key words: issue selling; middle managers; image risk; dynamic capability

for raising strategic issues. Burgelman (1991) argued that managers' spontaneous initiatives are part of what he labels the autonomous strategic process. Dutton and Ashford (1993) labeled these processes 'issue-selling' behaviors and defined them as the set of behaviors that middle managers use to direct top management's attention to and understanding of issues. While these papers describe the importance of this process to an organization, they do not address how middle managers decide to initiate this important discretionary action.

From an organizational perspective, issue selling is a critical process in the early stages of decision making (i.e., in issue identification, Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Theoret, 1976). The issue-selling process shapes the direction and rate of strategic adaptation at the firm level by affecting the content of an organization's strategic agenda (Dutton and Duncan, 1987). If one thinks about strategy making in terms of an intraorganizational ecology, issue selling is one means of creating the variation that contributes to organizational learning and survival (Burgelman, 1991; Miner, 1994).

The issue-selling process is especially important for organizations that are faced with nontraditional forms of competition from other organizations, such as those in a 'hypercompetitive' environment (D'Aveni, 1994) or a high-velocity environment (Eisenhardt, 1989). Moving quickly is essential in a high-velocity environment where there is pressure for both a rapid and high-quality decision process. Studies suggest that firms in high-velocity environments can benefit from a fast decision-making process. In one study exploring how executive teams make fast decisions, Eisenhardt (1989) concluded that fast decision making allows top management to keep pace with change. Fast strategic decision making has also been linked to strong and effective firm performance (Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988).

Perhaps paradoxically, Eisenhardt's (1989) study suggested that one reason that fast decision making is so successful is because fast decision makers use more information than do slow decision makers. Simultaneous consideration of multiple alternatives is critical in helping decision makers overcome anxiety and gain the confidence necessary to make decisions quickly (Eisenhardt, 1989). Considering simultaneous alternatives also reduces the escalation of commitment to any one

option (Staw, 1981). Thus, decision makers who pursue multiple options are less likely to become psychologically trapped, since they have a lower stake in any one alternative and can quickly shift between options if they receive negative information on any alternative.

Middle managers can play a critical role in the fast strategic decision-making process by calling attention to strategic issues, thereby providing the decision maker with much-needed information. For example, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) argued that through the effects of issue selling (as an upward influence behavior) middle managers stimulate an organization's strategic thinking. They also argued that middle manager's upward-influence behaviors contribute positively to an organization's competitive position. Their argument suggests that upward-influence processes like issue selling contribute directly to an organization's strategic performance. Thus, organizations could potentially improve performance by encouraging middle managers to engage in the issue-selling process if top managers understood what motivates middle managers to engage in or avoid issue selling.

Westley's (1990) arguments about the importance of middle managers' inclusion in the strategic process provide a different but complementary rationale for why issue selling is important in dynamic and hypercompetitive environments. In addition to being a means for better information processing and strategic thinking, through issue selling, middle managers achieve a sense of inclusion and involvement in the strategic process. In support of Westley's argument, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) found a positive relationship between middle managers' involvement in strategic processes and organizational performance. Their arguments suggest that organizations will be better off with higher levels of middle-manager inclusion in the strategic process.

Building on Dutton and Ashford's (1993) framework for describing the issue-selling process, we sought to examine inductively the psychological factors that underlie middle managers' decisions to engage in selling issues to top management. Our research used psychological literatures of impression management and upward influence to inform our investigation of the middle managers' decisions to initiate issue selling. Because issue selling is an interpersonal process involving individuals of different status

levels, there are important potential reputational gains or losses to be made in the process of issue selling. As Dutton and Ashford (1993) argued, there are symbolic and instrumental linkages between issue-selling behaviors and individual outcomes. While the impression-management and upward-influence literatures originated in psychology, several researchers have discussed their application to behavior in an organizational context (e.g., Baron, 1986; Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1982; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1986; Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson, 1980; Schilit and Locke, 1982), and have examined the impression-management activities of organizational spokespersons responsible for enhancing and protecting an organization's image (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Elsbach, 1994) or for setting an organization's incentive plans (Westphal and Zajac, 1994) and CEO compensation schemes (Zajac and Westphal, 1995). Our goal is to enrich the depiction of strategic processes at the organizational level with ideas from the impression-management and upward-influence literatures by examining middle managers' perceptions of the context as a contributor to their willingness to participate actively in creating or changing a firm's strategic agenda through the process of issue selling.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND UPWARD INFLUENCE**

Impression management describes a social psychological process by which people attempt to create and maintain desired perceptions of themselves in the eyes of others (Schneider, 1981; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). Impression-management ideas are built on the assumption that people tend to control, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, information about themselves that will affect others' perceptions of them (Schlenker and Weigold, 1992). People's desire to portray a positive self-image exists in both their personal and professional roles, in hopes that impression-management efforts will result in the attainment of some desired goal, such as finding a spouse, high-status friends, or a job promotion (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

In an organizational setting, the impression-

management literature suggests that middle managers will be purposive and active in managing impressions. As an activity that can influence middle managers' standing in an organization, they will consider the decision to initiate issue selling as an act with general impression-management implications. At the same time, these managers' efforts are disciplined by the social context in which they find themselves. This context affects the availability and appropriateness of various issue-selling tactics. If the right tactics are not available that create the 'right impression' (e.g., that the manager is competent, in control, etc.), then individuals may not even initiate issue selling. Impression-management researchers have not considered how these concerns shut down or encourage individuals to initiate action in organizations. Rather, the more common approach is to consider how impression-management concerns prompt the use of tactics aimed at creating an impression (these approaches assume that a decision to initiate action has already occurred).

Upward influence is defined as attempts by subordinates to attain compliance and rewards from supervisors (Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988). The research on upward influence provides important insights into the process of issue selling. For example, studies of upward influence indicate that people adjust their influence tactics to the context and to the target of their influence attempt in order to be successful (Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Mowday, 1978; Schilit and Locke, 1982; Schilit and Paine, 1987). These findings suggest that middle managers should be sensitive to aspects of the organization context (e.g., is the company going through a downsizing effort?) as well as aspects of top management (e.g., is top management open to ideas?) in deciding whether to sell an issue. However, upward influence studies do not tell us what aspects of the context or the target are most important for initiating important upward-influence behaviors like issue selling.

Finally, in addition to considering the target and organizational context in deciding whether or not to sell issues, studies of persuasion process indicate the importance of source characteristics (in this case, issue-seller attributes) in deciding to engage in upward-influence attempts (McGuire, 1985). For example, people who perceive that they are credible in the eyes of others are more likely to initiate upward-influence tactics such as

issue selling than those who do not see themselves in this way. With greater credibility, middle managers may see issue selling as less risky to their organizational image in the eyes of top management (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). However, persuasion studies are silent about whether or not risk to one's image is important in management's decisions about initiating a persuasion attempt.

We believe issue selling is important in enhancing or diminishing an individual's image in the eyes of others. Middle managers exist in a marketplace for issues that all compete for top management's time and attention. Other researchers have argued that engagement in autonomous strategic behaviors by managers involves some risk (Burgelman, 1991). The ability to gain attention for an issue can yield career benefits for sellers and some immediate returns for a seller's unit. It is possible for middle managers to create a positive image in the minds of top management by directing top management's attention to critical issues or by conducting issue selling in ways that enhance top management's assessment of their credibility or competence. Alternatively, middle managers' positive public images could be unsettled or damaged if they bungle an issue-selling attempt try to draw management's attention to an issue that top management may deem inappropriate or negative. Thus, an issue well sold might yield the seller enhanced visibility and positive reputational status in the minds of top management, while a bungled selling attempt, or an attempt to sell a controversial issue, might yield a notoriety of a different sort. The potential for stigmatization from a failed issue-selling attempt heightens the risk of loss to a middle manager's image.

Given the importance of issue selling to successful strategic adaptation and given the personal stakes associated with engaging in this activity, middle managers most likely attempt to 'read' the organizational context to assess its favorability prior to issue selling. Just like the sailor who holds his or her finger in the air to read which way the wind is blowing, we believe successful issue sellers develop a sense about whether the organizational context is favorable or unfavorable for issue selling at a given time. This 'sense' impacts their issue selling by making them more or less likely to engage in this behavior. While impression-management and upward-influence

literatures help us to conceptualize what form middle managers' issue selling might take, they do not identify what aspects of the context are important for the decision to initiate issue selling in the first place nor how managers assess the importance of these aspects of the context. Given the potential importance of middle managers' issue-selling attempts for the organization, determining what factors middle managers take into account in reading the wind is critical. Some context factors may be inadvertently shutting down important input into the strategy process from the middle ranks of the organization. Therefore, Study 1 explores what middle managers in one firm believe makes the context favorable (is there a tail wind?) and what makes the context unfavorable (is there a head wind?) for issue selling. The results of this open-ended study provide a rich set of possibilities for future hypothesis testing. Study 2 focuses on one critical set of factors that govern middle managers' issue selling, those associated with a greater risk to their image. Once the context has been read for signals on whether or not to sail ahead, middle managers must assess the personal cost of issue selling before taking action.

Both studies use an exploratory approach to incrementally build our knowledge regarding the decision to initiate issue selling by middle managers. We are interested not in describing typical issue-selling behaviors, but rather in understanding the psychology involved in deciding whether or not to sell an issue in the first place. Thus we assess managers' perceptions of context favorability. Based on prior literature we argue that understanding the initiation decision and the psychology that underlies it is critical. If organizations do not understand the thinking that goes into people's decisions about whether or not to sell an issue, then they will be less able to create contexts that prompt issue selling from below.

Two conditions justify our use of a more open-ended, exploratory approach to this question. First, we wished to gain novel and fresh insights into a process (issue selling) about which we have some theory but no data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Second, given the nascent state of knowledge about issue selling in organizations, we wished to enrich our understanding of the phenomenon with descriptions from which we could derive concepts and questions for future study. As Van Maanen (1979) suggests, doing

description is the fundamental act of data collection in a qualitative study (such as our first study). These qualitative descriptions, combined with our inductive approach, should yield new insights into the process of issue selling.

Together, these two studies add value to strategy-process research in two important ways. First, we gain insight into a firm's strategic processes by exploring how managers assess the context for issue selling and how factors contribute to a sense of image risk. Our exploration builds on core assumptions of the impression-management and upward-influence literatures that are generally underutilized in strategy process research. We believe that these literatures help describe 'the motivational engine' that drives middle managers to perceive situations in certain ways. These motivations (e.g., to have influence and to create a positive image) are critical to understanding and predicting how middle managers will participate in building the organization's strategic agenda.

Second, while Dutton and Ashford (1993) developed a general portrait of the issue-selling process, they gave much more theoretical attention to *how* individuals sell an issue rather than the factors that influence individual's choices regarding whether or not to sell in the first place. Given the importance of middle managers' participation in the strategic agenda-building processes (Dutton, 1996), their perceptions of the context and how those perceptions feed into decisions regarding whether to sell an issue or not are of particular importance to the top management of firms. If top managers understand what perceptions and context factors impact the decision to sell issues, then they can take steps to promote this activity when they find it desirable in their organizations.

## STUDY 1

### Setting and analysis

The setting for the two studies was a regional telecommunications company in the Midwest, known as 'Telecom.' Although this firm has gone through many changes in recent years, throughout most of its history it has existed in a regulated industry. In recent years, the telecommunications industry has experienced fierce competition and rapid changes in technology, suggesting that this firm is in a hypercompetitive (D'Aveni, 1994) or

high-velocity (Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988; Eisenhardt, 1989) environment where information becomes inaccurate, unavailable, or obsolete quickly. At the time we did the study, Telecom was experiencing a year of record earnings, while at the same time the CEO announced a 7 percent cut in the size of the management staff.

The study sample consisted of 30 randomly selected middle-level managers from a population of 187. The mean age for the sample managers was 45 years and average company tenure was 20 years. The sample consisted of 21 males and 9 females who were, on average, 2.2 levels away from the company President. Interviews were conducted in person during the fall of 1992, averaging in length from 30 minutes to an hour. We asked informants three sets of questions. The first set of questions asked how they might actually try to sell a hypothetical issue at their company. A second set of questions, which remain the focus of this study, asked about issue selling in general at their company. Specifically, we asked informants to describe their perceptions of characteristics of the current organizational environment that were favorable to selling issues to top management, and characteristics that were unfavorable. Consistent with our study's goals, we did not ask how they went about selling an issue, but rather what factors would affect their decisions to sell an issue at all. The final set of questions asked informants about general characteristics of their organization's context.

We employed standard practices for qualitative data analysis, following the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1984), and Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1970). The inductive nature of the study demanded that we suspend *a priori* expectations of findings, and maintain the richness of the data while creating sense and order. We built inductive code categories by first reading all the interviews and generating an exhaustive list of all the perceived characteristics mentioned by the respondents that contributed to making the organizational context either favorable or unfavorable for issue selling. We then clustered these characteristics into themes. Characteristics were considered themes only if at least eight respondents mentioned them. Two coders analyzed each interview for the existence of these themes. We achieved good agreement of 92 percent between coders. When we did not agree or were uncertain about which theme an example fit, we consulted

(and debated) with one another until we reached agreement, following the example of other qualitative researchers (e.g., Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991).

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the themes associated with favorable and unfavorable contexts for issue selling and provides quotes that illustrate an instance of a code. Below, we describe the four most frequently mentioned themes in respondents' descriptions of context factors that are favorable and unfavorable for issue selling.

### *Context favorability*

We found that when middle managers assessed the favorability of the context for issue selling, two sets of themes were salient. A favorable context offers both psychological safety to the potential issue seller, as well as windows of opportunity.

The psychological safety of the context was created by characteristics of top management and the organizational culture. More than half of the informants (18) mentioned top management's willingness to listen as a key determinant of context favorability. At the time we conducted the study, a new company President had just come on board. On average, individuals believed that this top management change signaled that this group was both more willing to listen, and correspondingly, would encourage issue selling. One middle manager expressed this sentiment as follows:

I think that they, top management, are open, and I think that you have got a fairly good chance of presenting your case, and them listening to the situation.

Thirteen individuals mentioned that they considered the supportiveness of the organizational culture as relevant to the favorability of the context for issue selling. One informant explained that:

I think the culture in the company right now ... I don't think it's totalitarian the way it has been for a long time. I think people are more open to suggestions. I don't think people coming up and asking questions are viewed any more like 'Don't bother me.' I think people are listening.

When describing the cultural aspects that made

the context favorable, middle managers spoke broadly about the general level of supportiveness and openness that characterized the organization's culture.

In reading context favorability, middle managers described windows of opportunity that arose under conditions of organizational upheaval. Thus, the third most frequently mentioned theme (11 mentions) related to the level of competitive and economic pressures facing the firm. Surprisingly, informants mentioned that greater competitive and economic pressures, creating an urgent need for action taking, made the context more favorable for issue selling. One respondent explained it as follows:

I think most of the upper level managers for sure know, and most of the middle level managers probably know, that you have got to keep up with new things and new ideas. So there's a sense of urgency that if we don't, we'll all slip and fall back.

Greater economic and competitive pressures were associated with putting a higher premium on customer responsiveness. Illustrating the favorability for selling customer-related issues given such a context, this middle manager told us:

Well. I'll tell you the key factor: regardless of whether it's complex or minute or if it involves one person or ten thousand people, and that's the customer. I mean, the customer is paramount. It's number one. So any issues affecting customers, it's open to. Nobody will resent entering any discussion over an issue that impacts the customer.

The fourth most frequently mentioned theme involved the level of organizational change that was underway (10 mentions), indicating that even more general shifts in the organization could result in specific opportunities for issue selling. In the words of one informant:

I think that the fact that we're changing from a bureaucracy that was a cost-plus based bureaucracy to a competitive one (is favorable). We are having to rethink everything about the company and that means that all topics are open to discussion.

The middle managers in this sample expressed optimism and hope that recent changes would make the organization less bureaucratic and more

Table 1. Factors contributing to context favorability and unfavorability

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*N*<sup>a</sup>

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*Context favorability*

- (18) Top management's willingness to listen  
I think that they, top management, are open, and I think that you got a fairly good chance of presenting your case, and them listening to the situation.
- (13) Supportiveness of the culture  
I think the culture in the company right now ... I don't think it's totalitarian the way it has been for a long time. I think people are more open to suggestions. I don't think people coming up and asking questions are viewed any more like 'Don't bother me.' I think people are listening.
- (11) Competitive and economic pressures  
Well, I'll tell you the key factor: regardless of whether it's complex or minute or it involves one person or ten thousand people, and that's the customer. I mean, the customer is paramount. It's number one. So any issues affecting customers, it's open to. Nobody will resent entering any discussion over an issue that impacts the customer.
- (10) Change in the organization  
I think that the fact that we're changing from a bureaucracy that was a cost-plus based bureaucracy to a competitive one (is favorable). We are having to rethink everything about the company and that means that all topics are open to discussion.

*Context unfavorability*

- (10) Fear of negative consequences  
I know people are afraid to say anything these days and they're probably also afraid to bring up an idea for fear someone's going to say, 'that's a pretty dumb idea', you know?
- (9) Downsizing conditions  
We are probably going to actually, within the next few weeks, probably take some people off the payroll, involuntarily, through downsizing efforts. People at all levels are so wrapped up with this right now that, for a number of reasons considered with that, the selling of a new idea would be extremely difficult.
- (9) Uncertainty (about future in general, the organizational structure and players, consequences of major organizational change initiative called Star Leadership<sup>b</sup>)  
And still, it's not going to be smooth because there's a lot of uncertainty. So that's causing ... I mean I wouldn't raise issues right now. I'm in some task force at corporate headquarters. That's what I do is raise issues as we deal with some of the restructuring stuff. But I wouldn't bother people right now.
- (8) Conservativeness of the culture  
Right now the climate in the business is one of anxiety, concern, and fear of failure—all of the negative things I can think of. And that climate does not lend itself to people wanting to take risks. And I look at decision making and selling issues as taking a risk. That's a risk on the part of the person making the decision. And if the climate is as negative as I've described, it doesn't lend itself to selling issues.
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<sup>a</sup>Number of sample informants who mentioned this factor.<sup>b</sup>Disguised name of change effort to keep the study site confidential.

responsive, thereby encouraging issue-selling efforts.

### *Context unfavorability*

When judging whether the organizational context was unfavorable for issue selling, middle managers looked to social cues from the organization's culture and potential threats in the organization and its greater environment. The four top mentions were all identified by approximately one-third of Study 1's informants (8–10).

In assessing the context's unfavorability, these middle managers focused on the potential threat to their position in the organization. Middle managers most frequently mentioned a fear of negative consequences associated with selling an issue. The consequences mentioned ranged from a fear that one's personal image would be damaged to a direct fear of losing one's job. One respondent said:

I know people are afraid to say anything these days and they're probably also afraid to bring up an idea for fear someone's going to say, 'that's a pretty dumb idea,' you know?

In our view, it was surprising that the word 'fear' was used so often, suggesting that the act of issue selling was experienced as 'real' and consequential by middle managers in this organization.

The word fear was probably also on managers' minds because of recent company initiatives to downsize the professional staff of this traditional lifetime employment company. In fact, downsizing was the second most frequently mentioned contributor to a context's unfavorability for issue selling. One middle manager explained that:

We are probably going to actually, within the next few weeks, probably take some people off the payroll, involuntarily, through downsizing efforts. People at all levels are so wrapped up with this right now that, for a number of reasons considered with that, the selling of a new idea would be extremely difficult.

Some respondents talked about the downsizing as discouraging issue selling because it consumed middle managers' concern and attention. Others talked about the downsizing efforts as shutting down middle managers' willingness to take risks, as the consequences of such risk taking, while

unknown, were presumed to be negative for issue sellers.

This last example hints at the third most frequently mentioned theme that made the context unfavorable for issue selling—the level of uncertainty. Respondents mentioned uncertainty about the future in general, about what the future structure of the organization was likely to be, about the players, and about likely consequences of a new, large-scale organizational change initiative called 'Star Leadership' as making the context unfavorable, and causing them to hold back issue-selling initiatives. One informant told us:

And still, it's not going to be smooth because there's a lot of uncertainty. So that's causing ... I mean I wouldn't raise issues right now. I'm in some task force at corporate headquarters. That's what I do is raise issues as we deal with some of the restructuring stuff. But I wouldn't bother people right now.

Furthermore, middle managers looked to cues in the organization's culture to assess whether the context was unfavorable for issue selling. Respondents described the conservativeness of the culture as creating an unfavorable context. For example, one middle manager said:

Right now the climate in the business is one of anxiety, concern, and fear of failure—all of the negative things I can think of. And that climate does not lend itself to people wanting to take risks. And I look at decision making and selling issues as taking a risk. That's a risk on the part of the person making the decision. And if the climate is as negative as I've described, it doesn't lend itself to selling issues.

Picking up on social cues that heightened the sense of danger in risk taking, middle managers might assess the context as not being receptive to initiatives such as issue selling.

## **Discussion**

We began with the assumption that middle manager issue sellers assess the context when making decisions regarding whether or not to sell an issue. The ease with which our respondents answered questions about context favorability and unfavorability attests to the validity of our assumption. Surprisingly, however, none of our respondents mentioned trying to change the context itself, suggesting that they accepted the status



quo at some level. Although respondents did not try to alter the context, they did appear to be sensitive to context in their issue-selling decisions and quite able to describe its role in their decision-making processes.

Our findings suggest several patterns. In this organizational context, top management, the environment and the culture each were seen as both favorable and unfavorable contextual influences. First, consistent with literature from upward influence and impression management, potential issue sellers pay attention to characteristics of the target when assessing a context's favorability for issue selling. Top management, as the target, is featured prominently in descriptions of whether the context is favorable or not for issue selling and their perceived willingness to listen was the most frequently mentioned indicator of favorability.

Second, our data suggest that competitive and economic pressures faced by the organization turn up the heat in a positive way in the market for issue selling in an organization. Perhaps the existence of these pressures heightens the sense of possible loss from not acting, thus making middle managers more willing to take risks (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Alternatively, the existence of these pressures may serve to clarify organizational goals, as well as heighten a sense of urgency, factors that enhance middle managers' motivation to act (Dutton and Duncan, 1987). While these pressures favorably influenced middle managers' willingness to engage in issue selling, simultaneously they also shut down issue-selling attempts because of the associated uncertainty and negative consequences associated with this discretionary behavior.

Third, and similarly, middle managers saw organizational change as both favorable and unfavorable for issue selling. On the one hand, rather than seeing organizational change as shutting down issue-selling initiatives, middle managers saw it as enhancing issue awareness and facilitating top management's openness to hearing about these issues. Change in the context may relax or alter routinized patterns of action in ways that increase middle managers' expectations that issue selling could be successful. We know from subjective expected utility models of individual motivation (Locke, 1991) that individuals will exert more effort (in this case, exert effort to sell an issue) when they believe that their efforts

have a higher probability of success. For middle managers in this organization, changes resulting in a heightened focus on the customer and greater pressures to act were seen as positive contextual cues, heightening the probability of their success in the market for issues. On the other hand, while change did appear to open windows of opportunity for issue sellers, it also created uncertainty. In this context, where uncertainty ran rampant due to downsizing initiatives and deregulation, change also created fear and anxiety about issue selling. These emotions were present in middle managers' mentions of the potential personal and professional losses imagined from issue selling.

Finally, middle managers experienced the culture of their organization as simultaneously favorable and unfavorable. Middle managers viewed the culture as favorable for issue selling because of the supportiveness of the culture and the company's norms for openness to suggestions. At the same time, however, middle managers saw the company's culture as unfavorable for issue selling because of the company's conservativeness and its valuing of certainty over uncertainty. This pattern of factors simultaneously creating favorable and unfavorable conditions seems consistent with the information and political environments for many middle managers in organizational settings. While living in a rich information environment, middle managers exist in a context where competing forces simultaneously open up and close down action initiatives.

The findings suggest that the middle managers' read of the context is likely to be fluid and dynamic. Just like the sailor who is assessing when to set sail in a choppy sea, middle managers make ongoing appraisals of whether the context signals a 'go' or 'no go' for selling an issue. Study 1's results give us a sense of why such a read of the context is susceptible to revision: managers in this organization, at least, perceive environmental pressures, levels of change in the organization and uncertainty levels as some of the important cues indicating that it is safe or unsafe to raise issues. Middle managers' sensitivity to subtle social and normative clues as to the potential reaction to their issue selling belies a complex impression-management appraisal at work. A single fix on the context is likely to be a poor indicator of condition favorability and unfavorability. By implication, to be successful

in this context, issue sellers must learn more than which aspects of the situation to attend to. They also must learn when and how often to read the conditions to get a sense of when the winds are likely to change.

## STUDY 2

Study 1 suggests that a prominent factor making the context favorable or unfavorable is the potential threat posed to the middle managers' image and position. Consistent with impression-management tenets, managers who felt this threat to their image saw the context as unfavorable, and would, we believe, be less likely to attempt to sell issues. Study 2 is a systematic evaluation of factors that might contribute to this deterrent to issue selling—the level of perceived risk to one's image. As Dutton and Ashford (1993) noted: in addition to gaining attention for one's issue, a second major outcome of issue selling is the potential of this activity to enhance or harm one's image or reputation in the organization. This argument, based on an impression-management assumption that individuals (in this case, middle managers) are motivated to create and preserve a positive image in their eyes and in the eyes of others (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Steele, 1988), implies that managers can anticipate and act to protect their image by taking or not taking the initiative to sell an issue. Thus, perceived image risk ought to feature prominently in middle managers' decisions regarding whether or not to sell an issue. Study 1 supports this contention. What is less clear are the factors that create image risk for the issue seller. Therefore, consistent with psychologists who have studied the role of self-protection in decisions (Larrick, 1993), we are interested in what factors individuals believe pose the greatest risk to image loss in the context of issue selling. Again, in this study we are not interested in how managers sell issues, but rather in the perceptions that contribute to perceived image risk.

### Setting and analysis

Study 2 was based on an extended sample from the same group of middle managers at Telecom. We mailed a questionnaire to the full population of 187 middle-level managers working for Tele-

com, from whom we received 118 replies (63% response rate). The final sample contained 29 females and 86 males, who were an average of 2.4 levels away from the President, had an average age of 44 years, and an average tenure with Telecom of 20 years.

The survey contained a series of 30 questions designed to assess how various conditions and factors affected the amount of image risk that a manager associated with selling an issue to upper management at Telecom. We built the set of 30 items from several major sources. First, we developed items designed to capture major sets of factors that we thought would be important for image risk based on the issue-selling literature (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). These items are related to factors that would be important based on the upward-influence and impression-management literatures. Several clusters of items came from this step: items designed to measure the relationship between the seller and the target (e.g., seller has limited rapport with the target), items designed to capture selling-process characteristics that might be important for a seller's sense of image risk (e.g., issue is difficult to link to other issues), issue characteristics that tapped the consequences sellers associated with issue action (e.g., implies need for a new process or product), ownership of the issue and general issue characteristics (such as whether issue is ambiguous or not). These items represent a sampling of factors possibly important for a seller's sense of issue risk that come directly from Dutton and Ashford's (1993) model.

We also did initial interviews before we collected the questionnaire data. First, we interviewed five middle-level employees with varied backgrounds and managerial experience. In these interviews, we asked them to list factors that would affect whether or not they felt there was a risk to their image in selling an issue in their workplace. Second, we interviewed 10 individuals who were middle managers at Telecom (but not in our sample) about what factors would matter in their sense of image risk in raising a particular issue to top management (the issue focused on customer responsiveness). Based on these interviews, we added three clusters of items to our item pool: (1) items that described an issue seller's past selling attempts; (2) items that captured the level of evidence that a seller had to support an issue; and (3) the political viability of the

issue (e.g., whether the issue is politically charged or not). In both sets of pretest interviews informants indicated these might be important contributors to one's level of image risk. We list the original items and the domain of image risk contributors they were intended to capture in the footnote of Table 2.

For each item, survey respondents indicated on a 7-point scale the answer to questions with the following stem: 'In terms of potential image loss at Telecom, how risky would it be for you to try to sell an issue to upper management when ...' This item was followed by 30 items listing the various conditions suggested in the literature. The full set of items that managers rated are included

in the factor analysis results or in the footnotes of Table 2.

## Results

To distill and understand the factors associated with risk of image loss, we conducted a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation on all 30 items. We used a combination of eigenvalues greater than one and a scree test to determine the number of factors to retain. These tests indicated a four-factor solution. We retained items for each factor if they loaded greater than 0.65 on their primary factor and not greater than 0.35 on any secondary factor. Of the four retained

Table 2. Middle managers' perceptions of factors linked to risk of image loss: Items<sup>a</sup>, factor loadings<sup>b</sup>, and mean ratings

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
	Political Vulnerability	Distant Seller-Target Relationship	Norm Violation
Failed in previous selling attempts	<b>0.73</b>		
Issue implies criticism of upper management	<b>0.73</b>		
Issue implies change for the organization	<b>0.69</b>	0.31	
Sell issue alone	<b>0.68</b>		
Seller has no rapport with upper management	0.31	<b>0.82</b>	
Seller has limited exposure to upper management		<b>0.82</b>	
Seller is unknown to upper management		<b>0.81</b>	
Boss has previously turned issue down			<b>0.79</b>
Seller has no data to support the issue			<b>0.70</b>
Seller has no solution for the issue			<b>0.65</b>
Eigenvalue	13.8	2.1	1.3
Reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha)	0.85	0.93	0.75
Scale mean	5.4	4.9	6.1
(Standard deviation)	(1.2)	(1.4)	(1.9)

<sup>a</sup>Other items which did not load on these three factors but were part of the initial item pool: *From issue selling literature*: general issue characteristics (elicits strong emotional reactions, ambiguous issue, old issue); consequences of issue action (implies need for new product or service, implies little choice but to act or not, generates publicity inside the organization, generates publicity outside the organization, implies criticism of other departments, solution requires coordinated action with others, issue implies change for the organization); ownership of issue (no clear ownership of solution); selling process characteristics (difficult to link to other issues; selling directly or indirectly; go around the boss, unable to work behind the scenes, must sell directly to top management); publicness of selling process (sell in a public forum); *From pretest interviews*: political viability (fits management's agenda, is highly politically charged); issue seller's history (seller is early in career, seller is frequent seller, department has limited support for seller, seller failed in previous selling attempts, boss has previously turned issue down).

<sup>b</sup>Only items with factor loadings greater than 0.30 are presented.

factors only three were interpretable and included in the subsequent analyses. The one factor that we did not retain contained only two items and the collective meaning of these items was ambiguous.

Of the 30 original items, 13 loaded cleanly on a three-factor solution. We labeled the first factor Political Vulnerability. All four items on this factor referred to characteristics of the process of issue selling or characteristics of the issue that make the attempt riskier in terms of its potential to reduce someone's political viability in the organization. For example, if issue sellers have failed in previous selling attempts, they lack the political protection that comes from successful past selling attempts. If they sell the issue solo they are more politically vulnerable than if they propose an issue by using a coalition or group. The other items loading on this factor similarly place the issue seller in a precarious political situation. Selling an issue that implies a criticism or implies a need for change is likely to meet a 'kill the messenger' response, since both of these messages might be thought of as bad news by the target. This type of response is likely to raise concerns about one's political sensibilities, and raising these kinds of issues requires someone with greater political clout. Thus, we see these four attributes as part of a factor capturing a middle manager's potential political vulnerability in an issue-selling episode. A scale was created by summing these items, and the alpha for this scale was 0.85.

We labeled the second factor Distant Seller-Target Relationship. This factor's three items index the existence and the quality of the relationship between an issue seller and top management. Issue sellers' relationships to top management can vary in terms of their level of exposure, rapport and knowledge. Where exposure, rapport and knowledge are low, then the seller-target relationship is distant as opposed to close. The three qualities coherently capture the nature of the Seller-Target Relationship (Cronbach's alpha = 0.93).

We labeled the final factor Norm Violation. In 10 pretest interviews conducted at Telecom, a certain 'recipe' for issue selling in this organization was echoed by everyone with whom we spoke. The recipe was a simple one: (1) first try to push a particular issue with your boss; (2) back up appeals with data; and (3) it helps to

bundle the issue with a solution. The items loading on factor three all represent violations of this recipe (alpha = 0.75). These items constitute a normative or socially accepted procedure at Telecom; therefore, failure to follow this procedure is a violation of that norm.

Using paired *t*-tests, the three means for the image-loss scales are all significantly different from each other. First, Norm Violation was seen as creating the most risk of potential image loss to an issue seller ( $\chi = 6.1$ ). The Political Vulnerability factor was seen as the second most risky in terms of image loss ( $\chi = 5.4$ ). The Distant Seller-Target Relationship was viewed, on average, as the least important to image loss ( $\chi = 4.9$ ).

Demographic variables (e.g., age, education, gender, level, years in the organization, years in the position and race) had very little relationship to factors that contributed to risk of loss to image. Only age was significantly negatively correlated with two of the three factors (Political Vulnerability and Norm Violation) at  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed probability). Few conclusions can be adequately derived from these data other than to speculate that perhaps with greater age comes a greater sense of security (age and tenure at Telecom were significantly positively correlated at  $p < 0.01$ ) and investment in the organization, and hence a willingness to incur the costs of potential image loss for the gains of addressing pertinent issues.

## Discussion

The pattern of the item loadings and means suggests several insights for understanding how middle managers in this organization viewed the risks associated with issue selling. First, items comprising 'norm violation' were seen as the most important contributor to image risk in Telecom. While we cannot speak for all organizations from this one study, in at least this conservative culture, stepping outside of the bounds of normal procedure (by selling to a boss who has previously turned an issue down, having no data to support the issue, or selling an issue without a solution) was seen as potentially risky to an issue seller's image. Our pretest data suggest that each of these violate the socially accepted procedure for bringing issues to the attention of top management. It may be that there is a widespread recipe for middle managers' legitimate partici-

pation in the issue-selling process. While such recipes or routines may have arisen initially to facilitate and enable issue selling, they can later constrain the occurrence of issue selling as middle managers see risk in selling in ways other than the prescribed routine. Thus, as in Telecom, managers are unlikely to raise emerging issues for which there are few facts or solutions. To the extent that learning about such issues is important for the organization, then dominant recipes become a constraint to organizational learning. Future research can assess the prevalence of norms requiring full data, solutions, and the use of the chain of command.

The Political Vulnerability and Distant Seller–Target Relationship factors are suggestive of the type of conditions under which top management will hear from middle managers regarding important issues. Middle managers who have been unsuccessful sellers in previous issue-selling attempts and/or who lack organizational connections are likely to curtail their issue-selling efforts as these factors are associated with higher perceived image risk. Additionally, sellers who lack a relationship with (or exposure to) top management are similarly likely to hold back on their selling efforts. These results suggest that top management in this organization can influence the origin and extent of issues sold to them by creating occasional forums for selling untested or new ideas and by increasing their exposure to certain groups, thereby making subsequent selling by these individuals more likely.

Finally, two items loading on the Political Vulnerability factor (i.e., ‘Issue implies a criticism’ and ‘Issue implies change’) are suggestive of the types of issues that top management is less likely to hear about from those in the middle management ranks. If middle managers, as implied by this factor, take a ‘Tell them what they are doing is fine’ and ‘No change is needed’ attitude toward issue selling in order to reduce image risk, then much of the adaptive value of issue selling for the organization is lost. It is precisely by hearing that which they are doing wrong or that which requires major rethinking and change that top managers gain an advantage by opening up lines of communication with their middle managers. If middle managers are self-censoring around these issues to avoid potential image loss, then this advantage disappears. Top management may, once again, have to take proactive steps to

ensure that this information is shared. Thus, in general, the existence of image-risk concerns for middle managers implies the need for top management to manage the context in which the issue-selling process occurs more consciously and explicitly. This advice is consistent with recent calls for more explicit ‘context management’ by top-level managers interested in promoting distributed initiative within their organizations (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994).

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of these exploratory studies offer a rich portrait of how middle managers read the context before they initiate issue selling, and how they think about factors related to image risk. By examining this process, the studies help to reveal how selling issues creates what Burgelman calls the organization’s strategic context (Burgelman, 1991, 1994). At a general level, the pair of exploratory analyses offer several conclusions about how middle managers read the wind for issue selling. As we describe below, each of these conclusions suggests new research questions.

First, our findings in Study 1 are suggestive of a fairly general appraisal process that managers may use in judging whether the context favors or discourages issue selling. Respondents appeared to focus on broad aspects of the context (e.g., its supportiveness) in making these assessments. Their selling-initiation decisions appear to be based on general cognitive appraisals rather than more specific, effortful, cognitive appraisals of the context. This finding suggests that individuals may appraise organizational situations using broad categorizations of ‘favorable’ or ‘unfavorable’ in ways that are similar to how they appraise stress situations (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), interpret competitors (e.g., Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller, 1989) or understand strategic issues (e.g., Dutton and Jackson, 1987). Tempering this suggestion, however, is an awareness that we do not know if the coarse-grained assessments of context offered by our respondents were a function of our form of questioning. While we did not ask them to be broad or global in their responses, our general questions may have prompted general responses. If the coarse-grained assessment process suggested by this study is upheld in future research, then we can turn our

attention to the environmental features and managerial actions that are associated with a favorable, as opposed to unfavorable environmental read.

Our findings also indicate a second way in which respondents were more general in their thinking than we had expected based on previous research. For example, neither upward-influence nor impression-management perspectives would suggest that managers pay attention to conditions taking place outside the organization's boundaries (e.g., to customers, to competitors, to competitive conditions) in assessing context favorability for issue selling. Generally, proponents of context management (cf. Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994; Burgelman, 1983, 1994) have construed context as that which occurs within the organization. However, for middle managers in this study, the boundary between the firm's internal and external environment was not prominent in assessing context favorability. Rather, managers paid attention to changes taking place inside and outside the organization as clues to the advisability of issue selling. Future research should test ideas about the conditions that lead middle managers' read of the context to include or exclude consideration of events, developments or trends which are taking place outside the organization's formal boundaries.

A second conclusion from this study is that a manager's assessment of change in contextual conditions may be as important as the absolute level of those conditions in prompting issue selling. For example, we were surprised that recent increases in economic pressures and changing organizational conditions were interpreted as favorable conditions for issue selling. Indeed, three of the four themes related to context favorability noted a change in condition as an indicator of context favorability. For people, it may be easier to detect change in a condition than it is to assess the absolute conditions in an organization's internal or external environment. Prospect theory backs up this suggestion in its argument that 'the perceptual system is sensitive to changes in stimulus level rather than to absolute magnitudes' (Larrick, 1993: 442). Just like a seismograph which detects the earth's rumblings, managers who are alert to the winds of change in conditions may see more opportunities for issue selling.

This finding suggests that future research will need to assess not only how the existence of factors such as top management's willingness to

listen, the culture's supportiveness, and downsizing efforts, but also how changes in the levels of these conditions (in a positive or negative direction), add to or subtract from middle managers' initiation of issue-selling activity. In organizations founded in more turbulent environments than Telecom, or where hypercompetitive conditions have been present for a longer time period, middle managers may rely less on changing conditions as contextual cues.

A third observation is that middle managers are not autonomous agents operating with full maneuverability in selling issues. Rather, these middle managers are conscious of aligning themselves with the social context. We see managers constrained by recipes for issue selling that bestow them with legitimacy and symbolic value and by the networks of relationships within which they are (or are not) enmeshed.

First, our study suggests that managers are aware of norm conformity, evidenced by their sense that selling without a solution, data or the backing of the chain of command creates image risk. Selling in this way violated the prescribed recipe for selling in Telecom (as it may in many other organizations). Thus, where selling issues implies norm violation, middle managers are likely to hold back as opposed to undertake this discretionary activity.

There are many research questions that center around what creates particular issue-selling norms, the content of the norms, and how they enable or constrain forms of issue selling. Another important question related the presence of seemingly reasonable norms such as those that we found at Telecom to organizational adaptability and performance. It may be, for example, that adaptive organizations are those that create forums for discussions of issues not sanctioned by the intact hierarchy and for which little data or apparent solutions exist.

Second, the results from this study also suggest that the relational context of potential issue sellers affects the initiation of issue selling. Issue selling is a socially embedded activity (Granovetter, 1985). Middle managers initiate issue selling in the presence of other managers who are above, below or at the same level. Both the existence of and quality of relationships may affect middle managers' willingness to sell. Managers with relational connections may feel more able to get the ear of top management in order to air their

issues. In addition, middle managers who not only know top management but have rapport with them have an extra advantage. They not only feel able to get a hearing for their issue, but may also benefit from the target's initial favorable disposition that comes from having a relationship with a potential issue seller. Thus, the relational context has two effects. First, middle managers see the lack of relationship as a deterrent to selling and a contributor to image risk. Issues from connected managers will be heard more than from unconnected managers (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989; Kaplan, 1984). Second, managers react to the quality of their relationship with the target (e.g., the level of rapport). Given Study 1's findings, we can hypothesize that an important signal about rapport is a judgment that management is willing to listen.

In other organizational settings, research could be designed to test our ideas about how and when relationships with top management contribute to assessments of a context's favorability. In addition, research could examine the role played by relationships with peers or subordinates. For example, the relational network of middle managers may be particularly important when there is a great deal of uncertainty and fear runs rampant or when an issue seller is considering the selling of a contentious or 'hot' issue. Image risk in these cases may be a particular concern, closing down, as opposed to opening up issue selling. Under these types of conditions, the trust and sense of safety experienced in embedded ties (Uzzi, 1996) is an important balance to the fear that comes from a concern about image risk. Alternatively, relationships may simply be structural manifestations of patterns of access, resulting in a heightened sense of one's ability to sell an issue.

Future research should better articulate and investigate the theoretical mechanisms that explain issue-selling initiation. Three mechanisms seem particularly promising for future study. First, people sell issues more often when they feel able to sell them. They understand the goals, they know the traditional routines, they have connections, and they believe the target will listen. Second, people sell issues more often when they are motivated to do so. They have a sense of urgency about the need to communicate based on their perceptions of the importance of the issue or the state of the organization. Third,

people sell issues more often when they have a sense of psychological safety, particularly surrounding protecting, preserving or enhancing their image in the organization. They know that raising issues will not be seen as negative either because of the supportiveness of the context, because of the nature of the issue sold (e.g., it is not a criticism of top management), or because of the way that it is sold (e.g., with others and with supporting data). Factors that enhance selling ability, perceived urgency, and psychological safety should promote issue selling. Future research should begin with a focus on these factors.

We began this paper with an assertion that middle managers' discretionary issue-selling behaviors are important for strategic adaptation. By issue selling, middle managers can either hold back or bring forth information of strategic value to the firm. We proposed that middle managers' reading of the organizational context is a major determinant of whether or not and when they will engage in issue selling. The pattern of the results from these two exploratory studies at Telecom not only uncovers new research questions, it also affords practical implications for thinking about top management's role in creating and shaping the context in which the initiation of issue selling takes place.

### Limitations of the study

While our study did tap a significant proportion of the middle-level managers in this organization, it is a single organization study based on open-ended questions and new scales. While Telecom is typical of a large class of firms, this study bears replication in settings that vary on theoretically important dimensions. We would recommend that future studies pick sites that contrast large, centralized and bureaucratic organizations (such as Telecom) with small, decentralized and organic settings. Another relevant context contrast might be firm culture. Telecom is old and tradition-bound. An important contrast would be with a younger firm in which traditions are more emergent and fluid. Our hope is that the insights developed about the way managers read this context can be tested more systematically in other organization settings that differ on theoretically important contextual dimensions.

In conclusion, we believe that by understanding

the psychology of issue-selling behaviors, one moves a step closer to understanding the micro-dynamics that underlie the more general process of strategic adaptation. It also helps to articulate the process by which managers in these roles contribute to strategic performance (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996). Middle managers can be key players in setting a firm's strategic agenda. Through championing issues and engaging in autonomous initiatives, they influence the variation that is a key factor in an organization's learning and evolution (Burgelman, 1991; Miner, 1994). Managers make constant choices to enter or not enter the market for issues. Based on this exploratory study, we believe that middle managers have crude but coherent screens for reading the organizational context. Like sailors who had to navigate rough seas long before the age of advanced technical instruments, these managers read the winds before engaging in an action, issue selling, that requires their time, effort and political capital. Top managers interested in encouraging this activity need to understand the psychology of issue selling in order to intervene in the process and to enhance a firm's dynamic capability by having middle managers participate in this important strategy process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We appreciate the assistance of Scott Serich who assisted us in the data collection for this project.

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