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# Mapping strategic consensus within and between teams

By **Murat Tarakci**

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**Organisational scholars** have been aware for some time that achieving a high degree of shared understanding about the strategy within the enterprise is extremely valuable. However, until now, managers have had few good tools for monitoring shifts in opinion at a granular level – and without that, most executives have had to simply reiterate the same messages again and again.

The visual tool that we have developed with four colleagues from Erasmus University Rotterdam and one from Tilburg University, which is described in detail in a recent issue of the *Strategic Management Journal*, should make it easier for managers to focus their messages more selectively.

Our approach, which we call Strategic Consensus Mapping (SCM), provides a comprehensive analysis of strategic consensus within and between groups and displays them in intuitive and easy-to-understand visualisations.

SCM relies on data that quantifies how members of work groups, teams, business units, organisations, or industries assess their strategic priorities – for example, by ranking a number of strategic objectives presented in a survey. To set up an SCM plot, we display on a vector graph the degree to which each group involved in the survey is internally aligned and then the degree to which the groups are aligned with each other. We believe executives will find SCM valuable for its ability to conduct

more fine-tuned and extended analyses of strategic consensus within and between groups than they have been able to manage before now.

In particular, we believe that understanding the degree to which several units share a common opinion concerning a particular issue, and whether the opinion is shared at all echelons of the unit or is only held by the people at the top, should make it much easier to form a smart outreach strategy to allay concerns or resolve outstanding issues.

We tested this system at a large Western European service industry firm, using data about 72 top and middle managers' understanding of the relative importance of the company's strategic goals. The group included members of the top management team (TMT) and managers in nine functional departments.

When we presented these findings to the TMT, we could see that our illustrations made it easier for the managers to understand the results of the data they had collected earlier. The TMT



members were especially surprised to see the low level of consensus within their own team regarding strategic priorities. Consequently, the TMT decided to arrange a semi-structured half-day meeting to build their shared understanding of the firm's strategic priorities.

## Useful tool

As this case suggests, SCM will be a helpful tool for making sure that the company actually follows its own plans. Executives invest significant resources trying to set their organisation on a particular strategic course, but they seldom invest in seeing whether the intervention actually achieved the desired change in people's hearts and minds. SCM will enable them to evaluate whether a particular strategic intervention has been effective, and identify places where the organisation still lacks consensus. It can also be a good way for managers to take the organisation's pulse and monitor shifting perceptions.

Our visualisation technique provides a clear and intuitive means of



“Our visualisation technique provides *a clear and intuitive means of determining the strategic alignment of teams.*”

determining the strategic alignment of teams. Managers will be able to use the information gathered from SCM to communicate more clearly to their employees, making it possible for them to target those issues where they are in need of greater consensus. Being able to zero in on the pain points should make managers' communications more productive and cost-effective.

At the same time, we think SCM will also be a useful research tool for our scholarly colleagues, enabling them to make much more fine-grained and extended analyses of the multifaceted and multileveled nature of strategic consensus than ever before. Using SCM, researchers in strategic consensus and in the subfields of managerial and organisational cognition would finally have a common framework for research and discussions. ■

**This article draws its inspiration from the paper *Strategic consensus mapping: a new method for testing and visualizing strategic consensus within and between teams*, written by Murat Tarakci (Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam), Nufer Yasin Ates (Tilburg University), Jeanine P. Porck, Daan Van Knippenberg, Patrick J.F. Groenen, (Erasmus Research Institute of Management) and Marco De Haas (S-ray Diagnostics). The paper was recently published in the *Strategic Management Journal* 35: 1053-1069 (2014). <http://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2151>**

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