

# **Gérer l’incertitude par l’ambiguïté.**

## **Ethnographie d’un changement organisationnel chez un distributeur de meuble international**

**Rieu Plichon, Caroline**

**ESCP Europe**

**caroline.rieu\_plichon2@edu.escpeurope.eu**

### **Résumé :**

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Représentant à la fois distance et proximité, maîtrise et authenticité, contrôle et confiance (Mintzberg, 2009, 1973; Rouleau, 2005; Huy 2001) afin d’“absorber les écarts” et établir de la cohérence, les middle managers semblent être bien placés pour incarner les paradoxes dans les organisations, dans la mesure où l’on attend d’eux qu’ils manifestent, à travers ces bipolarités, la capacité à faire face à des “éléments contradictoires mais interdépendants – éléments qui semblent logiques isolément mais absurdes et irrationnels quand ils apparaissent simultanément” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386).

L’objectif de cette recherche est d’observer comment, pour gérer l’incertitude et les injonctions paradoxales, les managers utilisent l’ambiguïté.

Parmi les manifestations des paradoxes en management, nous étudions, à travers cette recherche, l’ambiguïté des managers, en tant que pratique managériale.

Les principaux résultats de cette recherche sont au nombre de trois. Premièrement, elle montre la contagion et la personnification de l’ambiguïté. Deuxièmement, elle illustre le “bricolage” des managers avec un éventail d’ambiguïtés (temporelle, spatiale, hiérarchique, des attentes, des objectifs et des rôles). Troisièmement, elle met en lumière une négociation (enactment, expansion, réduction) d’ambiguïtés managériales.

La principale contribution théorique de cette recherche est, à travers la proposition d’une typologie d’ambiguïtés managériales, l’utilisation par ces middle managers de combinaisons de ces différentes ambiguïtés, comme coping strategy, voire comme coping practice.

La seconde contribution théorique de cette recherche est l’identification du management des ambiguïtés comme stratégie de sensegiving, dans un changement organisationnel. Au-delà de la réduction d’ambiguïté, le sensegiving peut produire une expansion de l’ambiguïté, soutenant et développant ainsi la conception du leadership selon Weick’s comme “légitimation du doute” (Weick, 1995).

Une contribution méthodologique est l’“ethnographie participante” voire la “participation ethnographisante” qui a été utilisée dans cette recherche.

Pour ce faire, nous observons, pendant une ethnographie de presque deux ans (d’octobre 2013 à juin 2015) chez un distributeur de meubles international, des managers d’équipes impactées par un changement organisationnel externalisant une partie du travail de ses membres.

**Mots clés :** incertitude, ambigüité, paradoxes, managers, sensegiving

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## **Managing uncertainty through ambiguity.**

### **An ethnography of an organizational change at a global furniture dealer**

#### **Abstract:**

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Representing at the same time distance and closeness, mastery and authenticity, control and confidence (Mintzberg, 2009, 1973; Rouleau, 2005 ; Huy, 2001) in order to “absorb the gaps” and to establish some consistency, the middle manager seems to be prone to embody paradox within organizations, in so far as he or she is expected to show, through these bipolarities, the ability to deal with “contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd an irrational when juxtaposed” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386).

The purpose of this research is to observe how, in order to put up with uncertainty and paradoxical injunctions, managers use ambiguity.

Amidst the manifestations of the paradoxes in management, we study, through this research, managers’ ambiguity, as a managerial practice.

The main results of this research are threefold. First, it sheds light on the contagion as well as the embodiment of ambiguity. Second, it illustrates the “juggle” or “bricolage” of managers with a set of ambiguities (temporal, spatial, hierarchical, in expectations, goal related and role related ambiguities). Third, it shows the negotiation (enactment, expansion, reduction) of managerial ambiguities.

The first main theoretical contribution of this research relies, through the proposition of a typology of managerial ambiguities, on the middle managers’ use of this combination of ambiguities as a coping strategy, or even as a coping practice.

The second main theoretical contribution of this research would be the attempt to consider ambiguities’ management as a sensegiving strategy, in an organizational change. Beyond the reduction of ambiguities, sensegiving could produce an expansion of ambiguities, supporting and broadening Weick’s conception of leadership as “legitimation of doubt” (Weick, 1995).

A methodological contribution would be the “participant ethnography” or “ethnographic participation” process that has been used in this research.

To do so, we observe, through an almost two year-long “participant ethnography” (from October 2013 until June 2015) at a global furniture dealer, managers whose teams are affected by an organizational change which externalizes part of the teams’ jobs.

**Key words:** uncertainty, ambiguity, paradoxes, managers, sensegiving

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## **Managing uncertainty through ambiguity.**

### **An ethnography of an organizational change at a global furniture dealer**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Representing at the same time distance and closeness, mastery and authenticity, control and confidence (Mintzberg, 2009, 1973; Rouleau, 2005 ; Huy, 2001) in order to “absorb the gaps” and to establish some consistency, the middle manager seems to be prone to embody paradox within organizations, in so far as he or she is expected to show, through these bipolarities, the ability to deal with “contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd an irrational when juxtaposed” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386).

The purpose of this research is to observe how, in order to put up with uncertainty and paradoxical injunctions, managers use ambiguity.

Amidst the manifestations of the paradoxes in management, we study, through this research, managers’ ambiguity, as a managerial practice.

During an almost two-year long ethnography, from October 2013 to end of June 2015, I am a participant observer in a multinational retail company and I am studying managers whose teams are impacted by an organizational change implying a modification in their professional role. Change management is not the research object, but constitutes an interesting context. This is because, acting as an accelerator, it makes phenomena more conspicuous. The actual object under study is how managers deal with uncertainty through ambiguity.

The first main theoretical contribution of this research relies, through the proposition of a typology of managerial ambiguities, on the middle managers' use of this combination of ambiguities as a coping strategy, or even as a coping practice.

The second main theoretical contribution of this research would be the attempt to consider ambiguities' management as a sensegiving strategy, in an organizational change. Beyond the reduction of ambiguities, sensegiving could produce an expansion of ambiguities, supporting and broadening Weick's conception of leadership as "legitimation of doubt" (Weick, 1995).

A methodological contribution would be the "participant ethnography" or "ethnographic participation" process that has been used in this research.

## **1. MANAGERS, PARADOXES AND AMBIGUITIES**

In a change context impacting their teams, how do middle managers deal with their subordinates' uncertainty and, in order to deal with this uncertainty, how do they use ambiguity? We will first try and position ambiguity within three literatures: the change management literature, the paradox literature, and the sensemaking literature as well as its "derived" literature: the sensegiving one, which seem to have ambiguity as a common ground, or as a bridge between these corpus.

For Nonaka (1994), change can not be completely mastered by companies' leaders. This observation opens the door to a necessary ambiguity which conveniently enable to « make it look like the change is mastered enough » and thus bounds resistance to change, but also allows some freedom for the stakeholders to drive and support the change. As a consequence, change seems to foster ambiguity.

According to March and Olsen (1976), ambiguity relates to « goals that are unclear, technologies that are imperfectly understood, histories that are difficult to interpret, and participant who wander in and out ». Ambiguity thus appears to be a cognitive construct and to embody duality, through a conflict of sense. The literature mentions different kinds of ambiguities, such as strategic, « by-design » (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) or temporal (related to different temporal sensemaking within a same organization, Wiebe E., 2012). For Ashforth et al., (2010: 2) « Ambivalence is the experience of simultaneously positive and negative orientations toward a person, goal, task, idea ». Ambivalence thus appears to be an emotional construct. Besides, these two notions, ambiguity and ambivalence, seem to have duality in

common: duality in meanings when it comes to ambiguity, and duality in feelings (toward a same object) when it comes to ambivalence.

If we define the idea of paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements - elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000: 760), then managerial ambiguity and ambivalence could be considered as manifestations of paradox in organizations. Two reasons appear behind this. The first one is related to the very position of the middle manager: representing at the same time distance and closeness, control and trust, in order to "absorb the gaps" and set some coherence, the middle manager seems to have the right position to embody the paradox within organizations. "Having to constantly deal with incompatible demands, middle managers should not only be considered as linking pins but as paradox agents" (Vas & Guilmot, 2015). The second reason is that "rather than being anxious and defensive about making hard choices, middle managers need to act on ambiguity to adopt an approach that combines and optimizes rather than split apart. From this perspective, we suggest that the role of ambiguity can be helpful in paradoxical situations as managers may rely on their agency to adapt their action to the way they interpret the duality encountered" (ibid.).

After having somehow related (managerial) ambiguity to the change literature and to the paradox literature, we will try and relate it to the sensemaking and sensegiving literature, as from a managerial viewpoint, sensegiving happens to be prevalent in a supervising activity.

Weick (1993:635) explains sensemaking as follows: "The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs". For Maitlis (2005: 21), the construction of meaning, or sensemaking, « allows people to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by creating rational accounts of the world that enable action. Sensemaking thus both precedes decision making and follows it: sensemaking provides the "clear questions and clear answers" (Weick, 1993: 636) that feed decision making, and decision making often simulates the surprises and confusion that create occasions for sensemaking ». Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991), through analysing the processes in the initial phase of a strategic change, draw a parallel between sensemaking, comprehension and cognition on one side, and sensegiving (the construction of meaning for others), influence and action, on the other side. They namely define sensegiving as "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (1991: 442). According to

Maitlis (2005: 22), “research highlights the importance of sensegiving as a fundamental leadership activity within organizational sensemaking”. Rouleau (2005) shows the key role of middle managers, as interpreters and sellers of a strategic change, to build and give sense, through their daily micropractices, and the importance of their tacit knowledge of the social and cultural context. Garreau & Mouricou (2012) also articulate sensemaking, sensegiving and the micropractices supporting both processes, in a real estate project. They analysed sensemaking as an anchorage process (for the strategy as well as for the organization), and sensegiving as a factory process (for the strategy and for the organization, too).

For Weick (1995: 261), “doubt is adaptability (...), certainty is insensitive to change, and doubt is one of the few means to restore that sensitivity”. In this research, we support this viewpoint, we would like to go beyond and show that “doubt” could be replaced with “ambiguity” in the previous sentence: ambiguity, as an alternative to doubt to maintain sensitivity to change context, doubt creating ambiguity, itself consolidating doubt.

How do middle managers deal with uncertainty? How do they try and make sense of an organizational change for their team, through ambiguity?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. FIELD RESEARCH**

In order to observe the complex phenomena, with blurred boundaries, the research is focusing on, ambiguity and sensegiving, under uncertainty, I used a qualitative research (Silverman, 2007) and a comprehensive approach. I more precisely chose an organizational ethnography, since “overall, ethnography focuses on interpretation, understanding and representation.” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 152). Organizational ethnography also allowed me to be at the same time in exploration (of phenomena) and explanation (of processes) (Eberle & Maeder, *in* Silverman, 2011).

In order to observe how middle managers deal with uncertainty, I have studied an organizational change impacting directly several teams, and indirectly their managers, as a participant observer in a change project, at the French subsidiary of a major furniture dealer, during almost two years, being present 50% of the time on the field (i.e. either two or three

days a week). Joining a project team for trying to answer the research question seemed to be relevant as “in a project organization, the project members experience a high level of ambiguity on what can and what is to be done in the present situation” (Garreau & Mouricou, 2012, our translation). Besides, “getting over uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity constitute pivotal project management matters” (Pich *et al.*, 2002, in Garreau & Mouricou, 2012).

I was thus officially part-time (50%) employed by the company, as the change and communication manager of the project ushering the change. I believe I could get this job for the following two major reasons: a long preliminary relationship with the company (I was already working for them for seven years, albeit in other functions) and my previous experience of project management and internal communication in a global context. We could then negotiate a win-win deal: I brought them the resource, competence and experience they needed, and they brought me in return fieldwork and money. However the company, albeit aware of my research (“about change and managers under uncertainty” was the most specific I ever been with them, being cautious not to mention neither ambiguity nor ambivalence), was hardly interested in it and kind of “tolerated” it. This situation entailed the disadvantage of having not much time left to work on the research as such, when on the fieldwork, but the benefit of no accountability toward the company, and no pressure on any direction for my research whatsoever.

For this change project, my job consisted in, reporting to the project manager, “leading and driving the change process throughout the lifecycle of the project” (that was the purpose of my job, written in my role description). My mission implied that I did so for the different stakeholders of the project, who were the French country management, the store managers, the store and the service office finance managers, the store and the service office accountants and last but not least, the labor unions. I thereby observed managers of the accountancy department (located at the service office and in the stores) experience the dematerialization of all invoices sent from all suppliers to the company. Contextwise, this change started being one of these subjects people talk about for ages in companies. The idea of invoices dematerialization was “in the air” in employees coffee conversations for maybe ten years. The two years before I joined the fieldwork, the change was getting prepared: travels and visits have been carried out in the possible European “Shared Service Center”, people have been met, meetings have taken place, questions have asked, some remained unanswered... When I

was offered to join the accountancy team as Change & Communication manager in the French subsidiary of this global retailer, the dematerialization had already taken place in the company's rather small countries, or known to be less complex to manage, and it showed results that were considered either "OKish" or "mixed", depending on the person from the country management to whom you talked to. Among the rather deceptive results were the lack of autonomy of the delocalized Service Center that needed to handle more exceptions than estimated and was unsure as how to proceed, and the lower than expected level of automation in the whole dematerialization process. The time when the project unfolded in France was also the period when similarly big and complex countries were "dealing" with or adapting the change implementation, and also negotiating its setup with the global project team, since it seemed politically and strategically complicated for the country management not to implement any parts of the change.

This change was expected first to impact the jobs of the managers' teams mostly, as the new process implies the externalization of part of their jobs, but then possibly their own jobs, too.

## **2.2. POSITION IN THE RESEARCH**

In order to enhance the internal validity of the research, a « detachment committee » has been built with three professors of my Ph.D. program's institution, to help me detach myself from my « natural environment », to enable me to turn my uncomfot related to my participant observer position into a reflexive analysis). The committee meets on a quarterly basis.

## **2.3. DATA COLLECTION**

From October 2013 until end of June 2015 (21 months), I have collected a diversified range of data, both primary and secondary data. These data are observation (with a fieldwork diary of about 150 pages), face to face interviews (27 formal semi-structured interviews, but there were also many informal interviews), strategic as well as mundane documents related to the change: meeting minutes (about 30), presentations of the change over the project duration (and their evolution) to the different stakeholders (about 50 presentations overall, mostly powerpoints, to country management, accountants, finance managers who are the accountants managers, and trade unions), the website of the project, the training material (over 100 pages) supporting the training sessions (each session lasts one day), initially designed for accountants and finance managers, and a lot of emails. A particularity here is that given my position in the

project, I have co-produced part of these data. I have collected the interviews as late as possible in the data collection process, in order to get the most "ripe" material before leaving the fieldwork.

In this research, 27 interviews have been carried out, overall, for an average length of about 45 minutes, each: 17 finance managers have been interviewed (4 managers from the service office accountancy department and 13 managers from the stores), either face-to-face when possible, otherwise over the phone, 5 accountants and 5 other managers (project manager, other project managers related to this change project, and top managers) have been face to face interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, following a guide of about 15 questions around their description of the project, their role in the project, who they are working with because of the project, the expectations they felt on themselves and the difficulties they possibly encountered, they own impressions of the project and if these ever evolved over the project, how they communicated the change to their team, how the team reacted and how they believed they did to manage uncertainty in this project.

In this ethnography, I have observed managers through two types of scenes: one type of scene was my daily interactions with them as colleagues in the same project, working in the same building, on a daily basis (during the time I was physically present in the company, i. e. 50% of the time). The other type of scene was my interactions with managers during dedicated one-day trainings I co-animated (with another person) just for them and their teams, as a part of my job. I have thus rather "closely" and continuously observed 5 managers in the first type of scene throughout the two-year project, while I have observed 12 other managers (and their teams) in the second type of scene during 12 X 1 day training.

My daily interactions with the managers at the company's Service Office enabled me to develop a rather deep and close contact with them and a comprehension "from within". The interactions with the managers during the trainings at different stores locations enabled me to get a more specific understanding and more external observation.

Both kinds of scenes seemed to be relevant and complementary to better answer the research question.

#### **2.4. DATA ANALYSIS**

In order to analyze these varied and numerous data, I started coding this material but I have not completed it yet. To do so in a more structured way, I am planning to get a Nvivo training

in the nearest future. In the meantime, I started coding manually (coding by themes). I then aggregated the themes, making up categories.

### **3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

#### **3.1. THE CONTAGION AND EMBODIMENT OF AMBIGUITY**

A first research finding is the contagion as well as the embodiment of ambiguity: the ambiguity around the organizational change “contaminates” the managers who seem to embody it.

As an example, the electronic invoicing to be implemented, which is an event and a situation with unclear tricky human implications, has influenced managers who became ambiguous too.

*"Can I say that to my team [about this change]? I am not quite sure. So I am waiting that things get said collegially" (John, finance manager)*

#### **3.2. THE “BRICOLAGE” WITH A SET OF MANAGERIAL AMBIGUITIES**

A second finding show that the 17 middle managers I am observing (5 on an almost daily basis + 12 at different events or episodes throughout the project) use and "enact" ambiguity, in order to help them « sell » to their teams the change and its would-be benefits. Their use of ambiguity seems to enable them to carry out a “mandatory task”, conveying an information that actually puzzles them. Indeed, it is part of the managers’ responsibilities to explain and promote the change to their teams, but at the same time, they are doubtful about this change because it might be rather impactful on their teams.

In order to deal with this paradox, the financial managers I am observing use and enact not only ambiguity, but a whole set of ambiguities (temporal, spatial, hierarchical/managerial, role-related, expectation-related, goal-related and terminological).

Here are examples of types of ambiguities the managers I am studying enact and negotiate (decrease, increase, create), based on my own experience of ambiguity, as a manager in the project.

A first type of ambiguity I have lived is a temporal ambiguity.

I have been “recruited” in the project in October 2013. In November 2013, when “project introduction meeting” took place, the project was scheduled to end in September 2014, and I thought “likewise, the sooner, the better”. The following month, my better understanding of the implications of the change made me try and influence the negotiations with the global team to postpone the project end until February 2015 to “give more time to the accountants that might change or lose their job”. What was negotiated was the first wave of project implementation. The strategy I supported was three implementation waves overall, in order both to experience better learnings (from a wave to another), but also to buy some more time, giving accountants more job opportunities. As of today, the project end date seemed to be stabilized as June 2015.

A second type of ambiguity I could observe is a spatial / geographical ambiguity.

A first surprising element is that my desk is nowhere close to my manager’s, it is not even at the same floor, but it is located instead by the desk of the person who recruited me in the project, the former CFO, who has changed job and moved to another country in the meantime. When I think about it, my desk is actually especially far from both my manager’s and the desks of the colleagues impacted by the change. I see in this situation a will and an unconscious strategy to keep the project confidential (at least when it was in its first phase), and discrete overall, as it deals with a sensitive matter. Now that the project has its confidential phase over, I could have asked to move my desk by the accountancy managers’ area or by my manager’s desk, which I haven’t done. Having my desk far away from some stakeholders of the project offers me the benefits of less control, and also probably the feeling that if the project is scattered through different areas and floors in the building (in my case), it might look less powerful or less dangerous.

A third type of ambiguity I could observe is a hierarchical or managerial ambiguity.

In the project I hierarchically and officially report to a person (accountant and financial services director), whereas I functionally and unofficially report to another one (project manager). The standard international recommendation is that my role of change and communication manager hierarchically depends on the project manager, but I happen to get

into the project before the project manager... I recently went through a little crisis with my project manager, about coercive versus participative management. I then used and developed the ambiguity that she was not my hierarchical manager, in order to avoid finding a quick solution to the crisis.

A fourth type of ambiguity I could observe is a role-related ambiguity.

Officially, on my job contract, I am a “project leader”, which contrasts with my role of “change and communication manager” in the project team: role duality seems to be my identity. Besides I am managing no one. I realize I use the either an identity or the other to get some legitimacy, depending on the context: when I mention my past experience as project manager and my former experience with work council unions meeting, I use the project leader identity, and when I need some communication legitimacy, I use the change and communication identity.

So in order to face uncertainty, managers (based on my auto-ethnography for the time being, but that will be developed with other managers’ stories) use ambiguity, and juggle with a set of ambiguities, such as temporal, spatial, hierarchical and role-related.

### **3.3. THE NEGOCIATION OF THE MANAGERIAL AMBIGUITY**

A third finding is that the 17 managers observed negotiate (increase or decrease, according to the managers) this ambiguity towards their teams.

If we get back to the example given to illustrate the temporal ambiguity, we can see that this was a situation where I experienced, negotiated and also increased (created more) temporal ambiguity.

Likewise, the here above illustration of spatial ambiguity showed that this “nowhere to be spatially rooted” situation, embedded in this example of desk, showed, after the surprise, the acceptance, the maintenance, and even the expansion of spatial ambiguity.

In the hierarchical ambiguity example, the situation uncovered a decrease in ambiguity. I made it clear that the project manager was actually not my hierarchical manager and use this clarified situation in order to confront her and deal with the conflict with less discomfort.

The example given for the role-related ambiguity resulted in an ambiguity increase.

Related to this third result is a similar one (managers negotiating ambiguity) but here with the specificity that it is somewhat in response to their own manager's ambiguity, in order to deal with it.

Sometimes, it results in even more unclear situations. It is then the ambiguity on the initial ambiguity, or a "square ambiguity".

*"I do not say a word of this to my team, because it is a tsunami if I ever tell a word too many. Or if I do not choose a proper word" (John, finance manager)*

Sometimes, for a different manager, the result is the opposite: a much clearer situation. The manager can on the contrary decrease the ambiguity he inherited.

*"I was not meant to tell them already at that moment, but I told them however, because I could not keep it for myself" (Irene, finance manager)*

#### **3.4. THE "DENIAL" OF THE MANAGERIAL AMBIGUITY**

A fourth result of this still on-going research seems to be a kind of ambiguity denial, from the observed managers.

They actually say certain things and behave differently (they say they are clear but I observed they behave with much less clarity), so there seems to be a gap between their discourse and their behavior.

*"I deal with human relations at work just as outside work: I am telling things the way they are. I try to adapt to people so I said things smoothly about the change" (Marta, finance manager)*

Here we can see a contradiction between the beginning ("I am crystal clear and frank") and the end (in order to adapt to my subordinate's mindset, I can not be too frank either) of Marta's sentence.

Besides managerial negotiated or created ambiguities, the preliminary results of my research also show that in order to be able to deal with the "thorns" of the project, such as a sensitive

social matter (the change should result in a partial decrease of the accountants number) and the fear of the work council unions reactions, managers experience ambivalence. If I study my own experience, a source of discomfort in the change, for me as a manager in the project, has been the legal meetings with the work council unions, and their necessary vote to enable the project to be implemented in all the business units/stores in France

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The preliminary results of this research unfold a set of different kinds of ambiguities that could be gathered into a typology of ambiguities: temporal ambiguity, spatial or temporal ambiguity, hierarchical or managerial, and role-related ambiguity. The temporal ambiguity refers to the moving deadlines of the project, the spatial or temporal ambiguity is illustrated by my desk located by my managers at a chosen place, both for official and unsaid but convenient reasons. The hierarchical or managerial ambiguity is exemplified by the different managers I reported to. The role-related ambiguity is embodied in my multiple identities in the project.

The temporal ambiguity illustrated in the negotiation between the French subsidiary and the headquarters of a delayed implementation (“we buy time”) of the electronic invoicing, and then, through different implementation waves (three, with two months in between) show a division of labor in time. The spatial ambiguity illustrated in the project implementation not in all stores simultaneously but by different “blocks” of stores show a division of labor in space. Unlike top managers who can use an ambiguity by design, or a strategic ambiguity (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), the finance middle managers we observe try and juggle with a set of ambiguities. As a result, the middle managers observed make up a “bricolage” of ambiguities (temporal, spatial, hierarchical, in expectations, goal related, role related), in order to put up with the uncertainty their accountants are facing on their professional becoming. This seems to illustrate a managerial coping strategy, or even a managerial coping practice. This result could qualify as a further argument in the “Strategy-As-Practice” field, considering managers daily micro-practices as a SàP thing.

Both the use and the creation of ambiguity, or of this set of ambiguities, would appear to be a managerial sensegiving strategy in organizational change: beyond ambiguity reduction,

sensegiving could produce ambiguity expansion, supporting and broadening Weick's view of leadership as "legitimation of doubt" (Weick, 1995).

## **5. LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH**

The fieldwork being freshly completed, the coding aspect needs to be further developed and consolidated. So do the preliminary results presented (among other things, the idea of ambiguity's management as a managerial sensegiving strategy). More testimonies and quotes from managers in the transcribed interviews remain to be added.

Besides, this research, being an ethnographic work, presents the limits of any ethnography: one single example through a highly subjective lens.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The first main theoretical contribution of this research would lie in the observation of a set of managerial ambiguities, via a typology (temporal, spatial, hierarchical, in expectations, goal related and role related ambiguities) as a coping strategy for middle managers. They actually do not have this top managers' "ultimate argument" but are exposed to a multiplicity of ambiguities they have to deal with, juggle with and eventually combine ("bricolage"), in order to put up with change and uncertainty, far away from the "luxury" of the strategic ambiguity used by the leaders.

The second main theoretical contribution of this research would be the attempt to relate ambiguity's management to sensegiving, positioning ambiguities' management (use and possible combination of a set of ambiguities by middle managers) as a sensegiving strategy. Beyond the reduction of ambiguities, sensegiving could produce an expansion of ambiguities, supporting and broadening Weick's conception of leadership as "legitimation of doubt" (Weick, 1995).

A methodological contribution would be the "participant ethnography" or "ethnographic participation" process that has been used in this research, and the care to compensate its possible limitations (see here above, "detachment committee").

The managerial implications of this research would be twofold. First, should the ability of managing ambiguity be recognized as necessary though difficult, as is the ability of managing

people, organizations, in order to improve themselves, might be more willing to set up processes to help managers deal with ambiguity, and favor the art of managing ambiguity as a core ability, when recruiting talents. As a result, managing ambiguity or ambiguities could be considered as a coping strategy. Second, the ability of reconciling the paradoxical frames/paradigms of clarity and ambiguity, if acknowledged as a managerial recurring challenge and valued as a managerial core competencies, would favor the sustainability of organizations by allowing the managers to combine adaptability and authenticity.

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