

# STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION AND NARRATIVES FOR NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY

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How can the strategic direction for an organization’s overall development be supported and communicated if planning, and even strategies, are no longer sufficient options? The answer lies in narratives and strategic improvisation. In this article, new and old ideas about communication and management are integrated into a framework rooted in the humanities and fine arts. The result is a new conceptual mindset for corporate communication which argues that jazz music, narrative theory, and improvisational theatre have more to offer to the development of organizations than traditional managerial models.

## CONNECTING NEW AND OLD IDEAS

A premise in this article is that the traditional division between society and business has become obsolete while the growing dependencies between all institutions, actors, and stakeholders are creating increased complexity, paradoxes, ambiguity, and the constant need to adapt. In what sociologist Anthony Giddens (2002) once called a “runaway world”, corporate communication is no longer just a function but a core management process. But if corporate communication is to create real value and provide meaningful support, and perhaps even drive an organization’s mission, a new mindset is essential. Drawing insights from a forthcoming book –

co-authored by two academics and two communication leaders – we explore the question of what is required to successfully lead and develop an organization.

Over the decades, the answers to this question have evolved both in content and form. From the almost religious conviction in the early nineties regarding the salvational effect of management by objectives to today’s situation where certainty has waned and the belief in a one-size-fits-all model has faded. Regardless of the organization, most managers today testify that their environment has become increasingly challenging to interpret and predict,

and experience that they act in an environment that has become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. A pattern emerges: the prevalence of uncertainty about a higher purpose, internal conflicts, and objectives that often become counterproductive. By connecting new and old ideas about communication and management we argue that a new framework rooted in the humanities and arts is needed. By combining ideas and knowledge from several fields – some old and wise, others new and creative, this approach will encourage innovative thinking and challenge established managerial concepts, such as the notion of the economic man, organizations as containers, and society as a stable system. Two models illustrating the conceptual ideas are introduced – the *Strategic Improvisation Model* and the *Matrix of Fundamental Management Principles* – both designed to be used by communication practitioners.

## STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION: THE CORNERSTONES AND THE CREATION OF A MODEL

We live in an era of increased complexity, but what does this mean and how can corporate communication be a force for organizations to deal with these challenges? In our forthcoming book we argue that sensemaking communication defines contemporary societies and organizations in a world where narrative understanding and the ability to engage in strategic improvisation are crucial. Narratives keep societies together, but can also polarize them. And this particular feature of narratives raises important leadership questions.

- What stories are being told about us and our business? Who is telling them and why?
- The question is: Should we take the lead in shaping and guiding the narrative about us?

Most leaders now recognize that the traditional division between society and business has become obsolete. The dependencies between all institutions, actors, and stakeholders create a constant demand for adaption. On a systemic level, some refer to this as living in VUCA world – one characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

The consequences of this complexity highlight the need for organizations to take a new, communicative approach to organization, leadership, and management. A starting point is the recognition that new ways of creating value are constantly emerging and have been doing so for centuries. Indeed, the history of mankind has been defined by a continuous process of innovation and improvement, promoting the ability to create both financial value and welfare. One of the most significant shifts in this process was industrialization.

A second ongoing transformation is the development of knowledge work and specialist services, which comprise an expanding proportion of the global economy. Management scholars Scherer, Palazzo, and Seidl (2013) conclude that this increased societal complexity must be met with increased corporate complexity. This means that contemporary organizations need to develop and implement diverse strategies to navigate in this interconnected, multi-actor arena.

## THE VUCA WORLD

VUCA – an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – originated in the US Army in the late 1980s and was first introduced by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985) as a new strategic leadership approach to navigate the multilateral global security context following the bilateral dynamics of the Cold War. Over time, VUCA expanded beyond the military and became a framework in general strategy scholarship to address the major corporate challenges of the 21st century.

- On a general level, VUCA refers to our contemporary information and communication environment characterized by overwhelming floods of data and offers ideas of how to use and respond to this situation. This concept is comparable to what social scientists refer to as late modernity or hypermodernity.
- From an overall perspective, VUCA represents a shift towards a less predictable society, where time horizons are shorter. The managerial tool par excellence – the plan with a capital “P” – has therefore become less relevant in a VUCA world.

## THE COLLABORATION STRATEGY TO EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY

What about the relationship and interface between social change and organizations? According to our understanding, we need to fly high to grasp the massive transformation that is taking place in contemporary organizations and businesses. We believe that one way of understanding what has happened and what is happening is to use a dichotomy between dominance and collaboration:

- **Dominance strategy:** Using established methods and tools to keep control and dominate. This leads to an increased focus on long-term planning, dividing organizations into functions, documenting, measuring, focusing on information (rather than communication), and evaluating results, as well as creating new administrative tasks and systems for control. Following this approach, different models are applied to assess results at the level of individuals, employees, managers, and entire organizations.
- **Collaboration strategy:** Aligning organizations with the perceived uncertainty and paradoxes while taking strategic initiatives. It is in this strategy that our idea of strategic improvisation takes its starting point. Instead of counteracting the world around us, we embrace it and try to create innovation through new ways of collaboration, organizing, and managing. Instead of focusing on documentation, long-term planning through detailed goals, and centralization, the emphasis shifts to learning from mistakes, decentralization and committed employees who drive development here and now. The idea is not to spend more resources than necessary on the organization's administrative superstructure, but to focus more on actions which directly engage citizens, customers, and other stakeholders.

A consequence of the collaboration strategy thinking is that it enables organizations to act more quickly when something happens – not through randomness, but because there's a good balance between:

- Clear structure (everyone knows what needs to be done and why); and
- Freedom for coworkers to act freely within the existing framework.

## NARRATIVE AND COGNITIVE APPROACH AS CORNERSTONES

Taking one's starting point in collaboration strategy thinking also means placing narrative as a cornerstone in the steering of organizations. From our perspective, the ability to create or use strategic narratives is crucial for contemporary organizations. The concept of narrative is as old as humankind itself and is rooted in the fundamental process of human meaning-making:

- Narratives are aligned with storytelling as a practice, yet the concept of narrative is often used without any deep reflection on what it means.
- Most definitions view narrative from a structuralist approach, as a story of events and experiences, true or false, with an internal structure called a plot. Following this logic, one of the most wellknown narratologists, Vladimir Propp (1968), analyzed fairytales and proposed that all narratives build on 31 different narrative functions connected to seven alternative character types.
- More recent research has challenged these ideas and highlighted that we live in a world where long, complete, and fixed-structure narratives are challenged by communication happening in everyday conversations and social media interactions, which often lack links to established narratives and plots (Dayter, 2015). Digital narratives tend to be incomplete, fragmented, and do not follow a linear logic at all.

In our conceptual model, narratives are fundamental for contemporary management and are one of the main contributions corporate communication can bring to organizations. While the managerial approach to narratives mentioned above is not new, it is experiencing a renaissance, often renamed as “strategic narratives”. This concept is especially connected to public diplomacy, statecraft, international conflicts, and war. In a world of increasing spread and impact of propaganda and disinformation, the importance of strategic narratives is growing. Ekman and Nilsson (2023) describe, for example, how Ukraine and its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have used strategic narratives in a very efficient way to create resistance towards Russia's aggression.

The idea of a strategic narrative that persuades an opinion or group is fascinating, but overly simplistic since it describes communication as a one-way, linear process:

- Narratives in our VUCA world – in societies as well as in organizations – rarely flow top-down or from the center to a periphery. Instead, narratives are continuously in flux and co-produced by diverse actors in a multi-vocal arena.
- Strategic narratives launched by management in an organization may be embraced by coworkers and stakeholders as well as opposed and rejected.
- If the strategic narratives mirror values and images that are grounded in and outside the organization, the opposition tends to be minor but there's rarely unanimous support from all parties.

The participatory nature of contemporary digital platforms has disrupted the traditional one-way model of mass communication and has the potential to lead to increased openness, participation, and dialogue – or even “multi-logue” due to the inherent openness.

The impact of narratives can also be linked to the so-called cognitive turn in management science that began during the 1960s, with the scholar Karl Weick (1969) making a particularly important contribution to this field. We argue that there is a need to revisit early ideas on the cognitive aspects and processes in leadership and organizations. Understanding organizations through this lens is essential for contemporary management. According to this thinking, organizations are the outcome of socially organized processes rather than designed and implemented solutions. Embracing this approach means putting communication (as sensemaking) at the very top of the management system and positioning corporate communication as a core process.

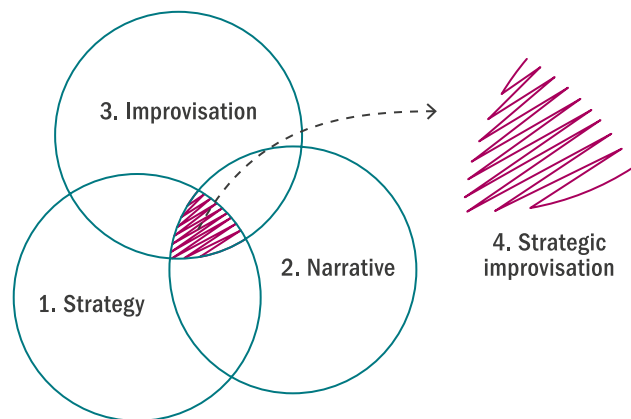
## THE STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION MODEL

The narrative and cognitive approach to organizations leads us to a new and communication-based way of understanding and doing management. We have conceptualized this approach into the *Strategic Improvisation Model*. The aim of strategic improvisation is to enable us to navigate the tension between order and chaos, perform the balancing act between complexity and the ever-changing nature

of everything, and establish a clear direction. Ultimately, strategic improvisation fulfils the basic needs for stability, security, and shared values. It occurs when three essential components are combined:

- A clear strategy (the framework or composition);
- A professional interpretation and articulation of purpose (the narrative); and
- Situational adaptation based on given opportunities and conditions (improvisation).

### The Strategic Improvisation Model



Source: Falkheimer et al., 2025

Strategic improvisation should not be interpreted as a linear process but one where the different parts continuously influence and enhance each other. It involves adapting a narrative to the situation within a defined framework. Strategic improvisation is the intersection of two seemingly contradictory logics. However, in practice, these concepts are not at odds; instead, they are prerequisites for one another. The idea of strategic improvisation has its origin in both the creative and fine arts, crisis management (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide 2022), and management and strategy (e.g., Moss Kanter 2002; Marren 2008; Tyrstrup 2006). Still, the main contributor to the field of improvisation and management is Frank J. Barrett (e.g., 2012) who highlights the importance of embracing jazz improvisation in organizations. His connection to this thinking is not so surprising given that, alongside his academic research, he is a skilled jazz musician.

## EMBRACING JAZZ IMPROVISATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

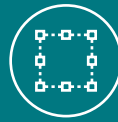
In music, the composition is the piece of music to be performed as planned – the choice of key, time signature, dynamics, length, instruments, and more. This is also known as the score. In an organization, this corresponds to the documents that will guide the direction and structure of the business. Narrative is similar to the musician's interpretation of the composer's intention and composition. The musician considers the choice of tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and much more, asking: What does the composer want to convey with the composition?



Improvisation, for a musician, means reusing older material, combining it with new elements, and thereby configuring it in a new way for a certain audience and environment. Improvisation therefore has to do with flexibility, creativity, and innovation.



The process is not completely random: There is a thought, plan, and rhythm to rest upon. A clear direction guides which impulses are acted upon and the opportunities that are exploited. Similarly, improvisation extends beyond the world of music: A party leader must connect to the party's ideological values, a company leader to the business plan, a director general to the authority's directives, and the municipal official to the politicians' decisions.



Improvisation requires boundaries to be meaningful. In music, this delineation involves choosing specific musical material and forms; in theater it involves crafting a story, casting roles, and planning events. An overabundance of ideas or rapid transitions between ideas can make the overall picture incoherent and dull. In strategic improvisation, the framework and narrative provide these necessary boundaries, but also allow for the freedom to move within them. These necessary boundaries, but also allow for the freedom to move within them.

## MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION

So how can we apply the concepts of narratives and strategic improvisation in practical corporate communication management and leadership? To make the ideas applicable we've developed three fundamental management principles (see model) and exemplified what we mean with these:

- A well-planned framework (strategy);
- A responsive ability to act (improvisation); and
- An ability to create genuine meaning using powerful images and stories (narrative).

The three principles concretize the application of strategic improvisation, where one principle is about re-creating preparedness for uncertainty and constant change, and the other two principles are about creating direction, context, and shared meaning.

## Fundamental management principles

	STRATEGY	IMPROVISATION	NARRATIVE
<b>PRINCIPLE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› A well-planned foundational structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Responsive action capability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Powerful images and stories</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Focus on value creation, predictable and robust</li> <li>› Room for innovation, development, and flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Rigged for constant change</li> <li>› Iterative processes and learning loops</li> <li>› Room for maneuver</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Co-production with employees and other stakeholders</li> </ul>
<b>APPROACHES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Connects the short and long term</li> <li>› Provides predictability</li> <li>› Reminds of the vision and what creates value</li> <li>› Equips the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Makes functional and intuitive decisions instead of optimal ones</li> <li>› Sees failure as natural and necessary</li> <li>› Cultivates a culture of trust and takes responsibility for mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Explains, repeats and reminds</li> <li>› Talks the walk</li> <li>› Walks the talk</li> <li>› Is present and accessible</li> </ul>

Falkheimer et al., 2025

## OUTLOOK

Although many publications address sensemaking, communication, value creation, and leadership, these concepts remain largely confined to academic circles. We hope to contribute to a further developed practice based on an explicit recognition of sensemaking and communication, narratives, and improvisation.

Typically, firms have traditionally engaged communication specialists to produce and disseminate information and develop channels, as well as to manage crises. However,

in a changing societal landscape, organizations must act more anticipatory. And to do this for a simple reason – to establish their narratives about who they are and how they are contributing to societal transformation. Given this shift, we argue that communication strategists and agencies will increasingly serve as main advisors to organizations at the executive and board levels. Management consultants, though, will focus more on conducting feasibility studies for proposed strategies and the narratives that support them.

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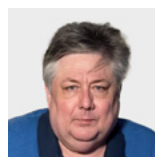
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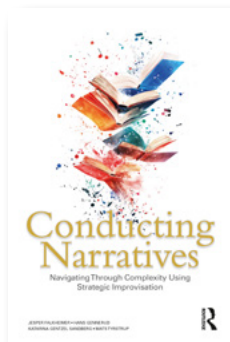


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## MORE INFORMATION

An extended discussion of this topic can be found in the forthcoming book *Conducting narratives* by the authors (Falkheimer et al., 2025).



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