

## MOVES THAT MATTER: ISSUE SELLING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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**In this study, we examined 82 accounts of "issue selling" to better understand managers' implicit theories for successfully shaping change from below by directing the attention of top management. The study reveals the importance of various issue-selling moves, including packaging, involvement, and timing. Managerial accounts uncover three kinds of contextual knowledge that are critical to the execution of issue-selling moves. The study shows managers actively shaping the issue-selling microprocesses that contribute to organizational change.**

Scholars often portray change as a discrete event—a system is unfrozen, moved, and refrozen (Lewin, 1951). But in reality, organizations are a cacophony of complementary and competing change attempts, with managers at all levels joining the fray and pushing for issues of particular importance to themselves. Indeed, it may be most accurate to portray an organization as a pluralistic marketplace of ideas in which issues are "sold" via the persuasive efforts of managers and "bought" by top managers who set the firm's strategic direction. Effective management in this second portrayal of change is of critical importance to the increasing number of firms that must compete in high-velocity environments through a process of continuous change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). Effective management begins with an understanding of a key component process, issue selling.

Issue selling is the process by which individuals affect others' attention to and understanding of the

events, developments, and trends that have implications for organizational performance (Ansoff, 1980; Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Because no issue is inherently important or strategic, individuals' claims about what matters (that is, their issue selling) determine, in part, which change initiatives get activated (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Floyd & Wooldrige, 1996). Issue selling shapes an organization's investment of time and attention and thereby shapes, in part, the actions and changes that ensue. Issue sellers are "players" (Ocasio, 1997) who use a repertoire of moves to sell issues and affect top-level decision makers' attention. By moves, we mean the behaviors that constitute an interaction (Goffman, 1981; Pentland, 1992). In this study, we gained insight into managers' implicit theories of issue selling—their sense of what works and doesn't work in this process—by asking them to describe issue-selling episodes. From a qualitative, systematic examination of these descriptions, we extracted lessons about the elements thought to be important to successful issue selling. Before turning to our study, we first show how a focus on issue selling can provide unique insights into more general change processes. This study also addresses a gap that we identify in the current literature on issue selling. Finally, we clarify the assumptions upon which we based our data gathering and analysis.

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### ISSUE SELLING AS A CHANGE PROCESS

Issue selling is an early part of a more general change process. Issue selling affects the allocation

of management attention, a limited and scarce resource in organizations (March & Shapira, 1982; Pfeffer, 1992; Simon, 1947). As depicted in attention-based views of the firm (March & Olsen, 1976; Ocasio, 1997), patterns of attention allocation inside a firm partially explain patterns of organizational change. What is important is how attention allocation activates some decisions and not others (Dutton, 1997; Kingdon, 1990; Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Posada, & Saint-Macary, 1995; Ocasio, 1997; Weiss, 1989). An issue-selling perspective directs attention to the often-unnoticed acts of change agents, below or outside organizations' top management groups, who invite consideration of some issues and not others. This perspective frames people outside the top management team as potentially potent initiators of change (e.g., Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Nonaka, 1994; Stumpf & Mullen, 1992). It helps to rewrite change as a more emergent and pluralistic process than it is typically assumed to be in more traditional "upper echelons" perspectives (e.g., Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick, 1989; Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

Furthermore, an issue-selling perspective allows recognition of the inherent intersection of micro and macro forces in determining change patterns in organizations. It highlights the social-psychological underpinnings of change processes by supporting theorizing about individuals' motivation to undertake efforts to shape the attention of others but implies that such activities are always contextually situated (Collins, 1981; Ocasio, 1997). Issue sellers act in efficacious and self-motivated ways to make change happen (Scully & Creed, 1998), but within a structured context composed of rules, routines, values, and norms that constrain what they do. We propose that, over time, they develop implicit theories, constituting theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1982), based on knowledge about the context. Their theories inform how they attempt to gain attention for their issues and make change happen.

### Past Research on Issue Selling

Our in-depth study of issue-selling moves also contributes to the more specific research on issue selling. First, the study grounds a conceptual model of issue selling proposed by Dutton and Ashford (1993) with accounts of actual issue-selling episodes as they occurred in an organizational setting. To date, the empirical work on issue selling has been limited to two types. First, there are studies of the factors that contribute to issue sellers' decisions to sell an issue. For example, Dutton, Ashford, Wierba, O'Neill, and Hayes (1997) examined the contextual cues issue sellers used in as-

sessing whether or not to undertake issue selling. Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, and Dutton (1998) assessed the social-psychological processes through which context affects an issue seller's willingness to sell issues. Other studies have examined the claims individuals make about the needs of particular identity groups (Creed & Scully, 2000; Harquail, 1996; Meyerson & Scully, 1995) as a type of organizational issue. These latter studies started to uncover the role of context in shaping how claims are made about what issues are important. However, the focus of these studies has been on claims narrowly related to identity issues; the issues in the current study are much broader in range.

The second type of empirical effort establishes a relationship between middle managers' involvement in processes such as issue selling and organizational performance (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996; Westley, 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). However, little empirical evidence exists about the kinds of moves that compose the actual issue-selling process. Researchers have studied the antecedents and processes used by innovation champions (Howell & Higgins, 1990), by whistle-blowers (Miceli & Near, 1992), and by change initiators (Kanter, 1983; Morrison & Phelps, 1999) who engage in related forms of discretionary action, but understanding of the way that people accomplish this process remains incomplete.

On the basis of theory but no data, Dutton and Ashford (1993) used impression management and upward influence research from psychology and social problem theory from sociology to build an initial framework for thinking about issue selling and issue-selling moves. They identified moves from four general categories. The first category includes packaging moves, such as the content framing of an issue (for example, implying responsibility), presentation of the issue (for example, in emotional or novel terms), the type of appeal used (for example, one- or two-sided), and the bundling of the issue with other issues to enhance the chances of gaining attention. The second, third, and fourth categories of moves—which they group under the label "process" but we separate here—include involvement moves, choice-of-channel moves, and formality moves. Our goals for the present study were to see if these two types of moves showed up in actual managers' descriptions of the process and to allow the data to suggest new categories and add nuance or complexity to the prior descriptions.

### Assumptions

We assumed that managers' accounts of the moves they made in successful and unsuccessful

issue-selling episodes could yield a better understanding of the process of issue selling. Moves create new situations from existing situations by accomplishing desired ends (Pentland, 1992). Goffman (1981) proposed the move as a unit of analysis in interactions. Although the relationship between managerial accounts of their issue-selling moves and their *actual* selling process is imperfect and fraught with the usual biases of recall (Golden, 1992; Schwenk, 1985), we treat these accounts as imperfect representations of managers' implicit theories evoked to explain unsuccessful and successful selling moves. They are a trace of managers' "sense making" about what works and does not work for selling issues in their organizational setting (Weick, 1995).

Our reliance on managers' stories as useful data fits with research on how people understand (store and remember) their own experience and with the recent wave of interest in narrative analyses of organizational phenomena (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; O'Connor, 1997, 1999; Weick & Browning, 1986). In the words of Bruner, narratives are a "natural vehicle for folk psychology. [They deal] with the stuff of human action and human intentionality" (1990: 52). Stories provide a "wedge into the expertise" of issue sellers (Klein, 1998: 193).

Our second assumption was that the moves described by issue sellers help to explain a piece of the "knowledgeable behavior of people that accounts for all organizational activity" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000: 131). Moves are actions that are informed by and expressive of practical knowledge (Pentland, 1992). In this case, the knowledge is about how to have influence and make change happen in organizational contexts. Such knowledge may be a form of practical intelligence that managers acquire with experience (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). It may also be a form of social expertise that is acquired and revised through interactions with others (Fligstein, 1997). The current study applies insights from practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Lave, 1988) and practice theory's emphasis on situated knowledge to better explain the practical accomplishment of directing attention to issues in organizations.

Although we began with the assumption that issue-selling moves are a form of intelligent individual action, we did not originally intend to focus on the knowledge that informed moves as a key theme. However, interviewees' accounts provided substantial evidence about the knowledge needed and used for issue-selling moves. Given this evidence, we analyzed our data to better understand the knowledge that enabled specific moves.

## METHODS

### Organizational Setting

The setting for this data collection was a large (411 beds, 2,683 employees), not-for-profit regional hospital located in a rural northeastern town and connected to a prestigious educational institution. The hospital, which we labeled "Northeast Hospital" for this study, is one of three entities (along with an outpatient clinic and a medical school) composing a medical center that is a regional provider of medical services to a large geographical area in the Northeast. We focused on issue selling within the hospital entity but note that the hospital's connections with the clinic and medical school were an important contextual feature.

It is helpful to understand the nature of the hospital as a context for issue selling. Northeast Hospital was the dominant hospital (and the only tertiary-care facility) in the region. Throughout much of its existence, Northeast Hospital had enjoyed near-monopoly status, and its strategy was conservative, risk-averse, and internally rather than externally (that is, customer) focused. At the time of this study, however, Northeast Hospital's decision makers confronted many of the same competitive pressures that challenge most hospitals today, including a need to lower costs, focus on quality, and accommodate third-party payers (Shortell, Morrison, & Friedman, 1990). These challenges translated into a heightened interest in, and pressure for, innovation within the hospital. Also, in its recent history (within the six months prior to the study), the hospital had experienced a severe budget crunch that mobilized forces at the senior management level to respond to a downturn in volume and revenue losses. Managers often referred to this budget crunch and to the construction of a new facility to which the entire center would relocate the following year.

### Sample and Procedures

The hospital structure had three managerial levels. The top management team consisted of five individuals: the president, and the senior vice presidents of planning and marketing, operations, finance, and nursing. The next level in the hierarchy consisted of 15 vice presidents, each reporting to one of the four functional senior vice presidents. At the third level, 62 department directors each reported to one of the 15 vice presidents. The sample in this study consisted of all the vice presidents available during the time of the study (13 out of 15) and a randomly selected subsample of the department directors (29 out of 62). This final sample of 42 middle-level managers was distributed over the

four major functional areas in the hospital—nursing ( $n = 12$ ), finance ( $n = 3$ ), operations ( $n = 23$ ), and planning and marketing ( $n = 1$ )—and included others who reported directly to the president ( $n = 3$ ). The sample distribution over functional areas mirrored the relative sizes of the four departments in the hospital. Members of the sample held an average of 8.4 years of tenure within the hospital and had an average tenure of 4.8 years in their current positions. Fifty-two percent of them were men.

The vice president of operations, our main contact person, sent a memo to all vice presidents and department directors explaining the study and the hospital's decision to participate in it. The memo informed employees about the random process for selecting interviewees and told them that they might be contacted for an interview. We then contacted the random sample of employees to arrange interviews. The interview protocol had several sections. First, we described the goals and nature of the project and asked interviewees to provide general information about their backgrounds (for example, education, tenure in hospital), their current positions in the organization (for example, title, number of "direct reports"), and their extent of direct and indirect contact with the top management group. Next we asked them to think about particular incidents in which they had tried to direct the attention of the top management to a particular issue. They were asked to define an issue very broadly—as any event, development, or trend that could affect the hospital's performance; this definition of a strategic issue is from Ansoff (1980).

We then asked the interviewees to describe, in an open-ended fashion, a successful attempt on their parts to bring an issue to the attention of top management. We asked them to describe the major milestones in the process and how they interpreted them. Our goal was to capture, as completely as possible, a retrospective account of the process as it unfolded over time and the elements that seemed most important in the interviewees' understanding of the story. Then this protocol was repeated when we asked respondents to describe an unsuccessful attempt to sell an issue to top management. Thus, our data collection methods were open-ended in the sense that the interviewees could emphasize some aspects of issue selling over others and raise any aspects they thought made a difference. The protocol was directive, too; while an interviewee described a process, we probed specifically about who was involved in the process, how they were involved, what seemed to work well, and what things the seller could have done differently. The final portion of the interview asked the managers to

describe the hospital (what made it unique and distinctive), the top management group, and the types of broad issues considered important and unimportant in the hospital.

The unit of analysis for our results was an issue episode. Our data consisted of a total of 82 issue episodes generated by 42 interviewees. Forty interviewees described both successful and unsuccessful issue-selling episodes, and 2 people chose to talk only about a successful episode.

### Coding

The goal of the coding scheme was to capture the major moves that interviewees mentioned in their descriptions of successful and unsuccessful issue-selling episodes. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), we developed the coding scheme inductively, adding new codes as the interviewees mentioned new types of moves in the different interviews. In this sense, our final set of codes was comprehensive—it included a complete list of categories that served as retrieval and organizing devices (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 57) relating to a particular concept, theme, or idea that interviewees mentioned in their issue-selling accounts. The coding process involved three steps.

First, two of the authors began with a "start list" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of codes based on the major descriptive categories of behaviors that Dutton and Ashford (1993) used to describe the process of issue selling: packaging moves, involvement moves, type-of-channel moves, and formality moves. We did not code the characteristics of the top management team or issue seller characteristics (which were part of the Dutton and Ashford model), as they did not capture the process involved in issue selling.

Second, the same two coders independently read the transcripts of five interviews in order to develop an exhaustive list of the codes that emerged from these interviews. The two coders then created a more complete start list of codes that captured the major categories of moves and subcategories that these respondents used in their issue-selling descriptions. The research team created a brief descriptive label for each category and subcategory that allowed the coders to assess whether the move was mentioned in each issue-selling episode. For example, within the general category of issue packaging, a subcategory emerged that was labeled "use the logic of the business plan in presentation." An episode was coded as suggesting this subcategory when interviewees mentioned that the issue was framed in a way that used a business plan logic and/or process. Each successful and unsuccessful

issue for each interviewee was coded as a separate episode.

Interviewees who described their selling efforts in ways consistent with a subcategory in an episode were given a code of 1 for that subcategory, and interviewees who did not mention that subcategory in their episode received a 0. In this tally, we included both explicit and implicit mentions. In an explicit mention, the interviewee used the words of the subcategory title or definition, and in an implicit mention, the interviewee's comment captured the essence of the subcategory without using the exact words.

Third, we only included a category in our findings if it was mentioned in at least eight (10%) of our sample of episodes. This procedure led to subcategories. The Appendix presents the final list of categories and their definitions. This list includes five broad categories that describe issue selling (for example, packaging, involvement, formality, preparation, and timing) as well as various subcategories that describe each theme at a finer level of detail. The total category set captures most of the content of the interviewees' accounts of their successful and unsuccessful issue-selling episodes. Each coder completed the full coding task. Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for determining agreement, we had 60 percent of the coded material check-coded by another coder, obtaining approximately 85 percent agreement. Where disagreements occurred, the coders discussed their options until they reached agreement.

### Analyses

We performed two analyses on the coded interview data and then did a third analysis of the contextual knowledge that enabled the moves. The first involved a simple count, for each category, of the number of interviewees who mentioned moves in that category (either explicitly or implicitly). We used this count to gauge the salience of moves in issue sellers' overall thinking. If a particular person mentioned a move more than once in an episode, we still counted it as a single mention. We considered counting the absolute number of mentions, but such a count might have reflected individual differences in verbal style and overweighted the importance that particular issue sellers placed on the different moves. This conservative counting rule meant that the total number of mentions serves as a rough indicator of the relative salience of the various categories of issue-selling moves in people's implicit theories of issue selling.

The second analysis compared counts of mentions of moves in both successful ( $n = 42$ ) and

unsuccessful ( $n = 40$ ) selling episodes. To do this, we counted separately the number of times an interviewee said he or she either did use or did not use each move during both successful and unsuccessful issue-selling episodes. Each time interviewees stated that they did not use a move, we also coded whether or not they mentioned that, in retrospect, they wished they had used the move. Phrases that indicated such regret included: "I wish I could have done," "I tried to do it but I couldn't," and "I could have done a better job if I had." We interpreted these types of statements as indications that an interviewee believed the move would have made the selling effort more successful. We then compared the extent to which moves were discussed as used or not used by managers in order to gain further insights into their relative importance in their theories of successful and unsuccessful issue selling.

We also undertook a third analysis we did not anticipate when the study began. In coding the data, we noted that interviewees frequently referred to various kinds of knowledge about features of the organizational setting (which we call "contextual knowledge") that encouraged, enabled, or hampered them in executing a move. Our third analysis involved a additional pass through all of the episode data to document the kinds of knowledge about Northeast Hospital the sellers described as informing their capacity to execute issue-selling moves. We examined the moves themselves to see what knowledge about the context they indicated or implied was necessary. We also noted what features of the context were identified as pathways or roadblocks to success. By "pathways" to success, we mean aspects of an issue-selling context that an interviewee indicated were helpful and thus gave the issue a greater likelihood for success. By "roadblocks," we mean aspects of a context that a respondent indicated were troublesome, a hindrance, or likely to have caused the failure of the issue-selling attempt. Although pathways and roadblocks made the context more or less favorable for selling an issue, knowledgeable navigation of these contextual factors facilitated an issue seller's efforts, independent of prior conditions. From this reassessment of interviewees' descriptions of moves, pathways, and roadblocks, we were able to derive three types of contextual knowledge that were considered by issue sellers as they selected moves.

### The Issues

The issues that managers chose were varied. Some were highly specific, tangible solutions to a perceived problem (for example, the need for an

in-house mini-laundry). Others were more nebulous issues judged as worthy of organizational attention but perhaps lacking immediate or imagined solutions (for example, the need for some nursing departments to update old-style practices). More than half of the issues had a financial element (potential cost savings, revenue enhancements, or capital outlays), such as the controversial billing for the cost of drawing blood samples or the request for an increase in the dialysis budget. The issues also frequently addressed administrative, logistic, or technical functions at the hospital, including record-keeping systems, scheduling processes, and technological aids. For example, one long-time employee sold the administrative and logistical issue that the hospital units should consolidate their registration system. Many initiatives were patient- or employee-related, involving the treatment, education, or organization of these constituencies, including issues around scheduling, safety, convenience, and information exchange. For example, one issue that impacted both employees and patients was the proposal for a method of enhancing patient and staff safety when a patient became violent. Few of the issues were mentioned by more than one manager. Although some of the issues we heard described must have competed for attention simultaneously, no sense of competition concretely emerged from the issue descriptions or selling accounts—interviewees did not mention the other issues being sold at the same time they were selling their own issues.

#### PATTERNS IN ACCOUNTS OF ISSUE SELLING

Below, we discuss the patterns in interviewees' descriptions of issue selling in two sections. First, we present the categories of moves mentioned in the issue-selling stories and compare them to those described in Dutton and Ashford's (1993) original description of issue-selling actions. The three general categories of moves are packaging, involvement, and process-related moves; within each category, we discuss related types of moves. Then we compare accounts of perceived successes and failures in issue selling to discern what managers believed worked or did not work. We view differences between the mentions of moves made in successful and unsuccessful selling as imperfect traces of what actually works and does not work in this setting. Thus, these accounts are both theories of effective and ineffective practices in this setting at the same time that they are retrospective attributions about successful and unsuccessful actions. Second, we develop and elaborate a three-category framework of contextual knowledge that became

apparent as we analyzed the moves. We elaborated this framework by revisiting our data to identify the different kinds of contextual knowledge implied in the accounts of successful and unsuccessful issue selling. Both parts develop a theory of knowledge-in-use in issue selling and, correspondingly, in making change happen from below.

Interviewees raised many of the original process moves proposed by Dutton and Ashford (1993) (packaging, involvement, channel type, and formality); several new process elements also appeared in the accounts. In addition, the issue episodes reveal elaborate sensibilities about various packaging and involvement choices that were not anticipated in the earlier issue-selling framework. We use these new process moves and a deeper exploration of the "old" process moves to develop a knowledge-based account of how managers think about issue-selling processes in organizations.

#### Packaging Moves

On the basis of Dutton and Ashford's (1993) theoretical work, we divided the packaging moves into two groups: *presentation moves*, which were aspects of how an issue seller went about actively promoting an issue, and *bundling moves*, which were sellers' attempts to connect the issue to other issues or goals. Table 1 gives the frequencies of our packaging categories and subcategories.

**Presentation.** We labeled the most frequently mentioned presentation tactic "using the logic of a business plan." Interviewees emphasized the importance of using lots of numbers and charts, conveying a logical and coherent structure, and emphasizing bottom-line impacts. Sometimes sellers described concentrating on financial aspects (for example, "running the numbers"), and at other times they focused on business perspectives more closely aligned with strategy, operations, or marketing. This move is consistent with Dutton and Ashford's (1993) assertion that supporting facts and evidence will be important in the claim for an issue's legitimacy. One issue seller, who was trying to make the case for more critical care space in the intensive care unit (ICU), illustrated her use of the logic of a business plan:

So, it involved a lot of work with physicians, a lot of work with our data people, looking at trends and volumes, and our current volumes and all that . . . So it involved the development of a full business plan from a financial standpoint, a marketing standpoint, and a demographic assessment standpoint.

More than 75 percent of the interviewees mentioned the use of a business plan logic for present-

**TABLE 1**  
**Packaging: Presentation and Bundling**

Category and Subcategory	Total Mentions by Respondent <sup>a</sup>	Mentions by Episode <sup>b</sup>						
		Total	Successful			Unsuccessful		
			Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use	Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use
<b>Presentation</b>								
Use logic of business plan	32	39	27	0	0	9	1	2
Make continuous proposals <sup>c</sup>	23	27	10	0	7	8	1	1
Package issue as incremental <sup>c</sup>	10	12	8	0	0	1	2	1
<b>Bundling</b>								
Tie issue to valued goals—Profitability <sup>c</sup>	21	31	18	0	0	2	6	5
Tie issue to valued goals—Market share/organizational image <sup>c</sup>	17	23	15	0	0	2	3	3
Tie issue to concerns of key constituents <sup>c</sup>	23	30	15	0	0	13	2	0
Tie issue to other issues <sup>c</sup>	22	27	17	0	0	8	1	1

<sup>a</sup> Mentions are combined for each interviewee's successful and unsuccessful issues ( $n = 42$  individuals). If an interviewee mentioned a move more than once, it was counted as a single mention.

<sup>b</sup> Mentions are separated by successful and unsuccessful episodes ( $n = 82$  episodes) and tallied according to the framing of the mention. If an interviewee did not explicitly or implicitly mention a move as something he or she either used, did not use, or wished he or she had used, then it was not mentioned at all.

<sup>c</sup> Not proposed by Dutton and Ashford (1993).

ing an issue. This finding is consistent with influence research data showing that rationality is very pervasive in upward influence attempts (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1983). A seller's actions may also create legitimacy by couching an issue in a form that is consistent with the language of the organization (Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990). Comparing the pattern of mentions strengthens this interpretation, as this move was described in many more successful episodes than unsuccessful episodes.

The second most frequently mentioned presentation tactic was continuous proposal making. More than half of the interviewees mentioned this feature, which involved raising issues many times over a period of time. The goal in many cases appeared to be preparing the target to better "hear" a full proposal. For example, an issue seller described his efforts to sell the issue of improving community service to a senior vice president in the hospital: "When you tell him about a concept, you sort of acclimate him to the situation and you repeatedly tell him about it for several months so he knows it is coming, and he knows what is happening. And then you hit him with the big package." Although continuous proposal making was frequently mentioned by sellers, there is no meaningful pattern in the distribution of mentions across successful and unsuccessful episodes. Thus, we conclude that this move is a part of managers' the-

ories of how to promote an issue at Northeast Hospital, but their opinions about its contributions to successful issue selling remained mixed. It may be that the reliance on continuous proposal making is mostly a function of the nature of managerial work (fragmented and discontinuous, with only short periods available for any activity) (Mintzberg, 1997). As a result, sellers may rarely have the chance to present issues all at once, so they bring them forward over time in bits and pieces.

Presenting an issue as if it were an incremental change was mentioned by 24 percent of the interviewees. Although this tactic seems similar to continuous proposal making, it refers to the *size* of the change implied by an issue, not to the multiple (possibly small) presentations used to prepare the target to hear the complete issue. That is, an incremental issue may be presented all at once, whereas continuous proposal making serves to make a radical or incremental issue more familiar through repeated presentations. In their explanations for why incremental presentations worked (or did not), issue sellers noted that making an issue seem incremental made it more palatable for issue targets. Such statements support Weick's (1984) idea that "chunking" a social problem into a series of small wins may induce greater acceptance than trying to attack the full-scale problem. The pattern is also consistent with Frohman's (1997) studies of per-

sonal initiators of change who tended to use incremental as opposed to revolutionary action patterns. An issue seller illustrated this logic in his account of a failed effort: "I lumped a lot of different things together, and I might have tried to do smaller pieces." In the successful episodes in our data, each time this move was mentioned, the interviewee had used it; but most of the mentions (three of four) in the unsuccessful episodes were of not using it. Thus, sellers' sense making about this move suggests agreement that this kind of presentation tactic is one that they believe works.

**Issue bundling.** The accounts revealed four ways that issue sellers talked about connecting, or bundling, an issue with other ideas that had currency in the organization. In their accounts, the bundling moves were much more varied and prominent than Dutton and Ashford (1993) proposed. Sellers described tying their issues to the organizational goal of profitability, to market-related issues, to the concerns of key constituents, or to other issues. Each of these bundling moves was mentioned by more than 40 percent of the interviewees. In addition, interviewees only talked about using bundling in the successful episodes, whereas they talked about both using and not using bundling in the unsuccessful stories.

The most clear-cut case of a theory of "what works" in bundling is in the case of tying an issue to valued goals like profitability. For this issue-selling move, there were mentions of its use in 18 successful accounts, whereas only 2 accounts of unsuccessful episodes contained mentions of using it. Six interviewees describing unsuccessful attempts said they would have used it in retrospect. The move of tying an issue to the valued goals of market share and a positive organizational image (more externally focused goals) followed a comparable pattern. Thus, sellers tended to believe that connecting an issue to valued goals is associated with effective issue selling.

One informant illustrated the success of issue bundling in her attempt to sell the need for more critical care facilities at Northeast Hospital. In this quote, she clearly ties the issue to the valued organizational goal of enhancing patient care and improving revenues:

Well, there were several overriding concerns. One . . . was patient care. The issue with patient care was that we're not able to provide all the services we needed to provide to all of our patients because we didn't have the space . . . So, the first "couch" was probably patient care. The second "couch" was economy, I mean the finance of turning away patients is pretty . . . it struck quite a chord shall we say.

Less clear from the bundling data is the utility of the moves aimed at tying an issue to concerns of key constituents and tying an issue to other issues. Although both of these issue-selling moves were mentioned by more than half of the interviewees, they were used in both successful and unsuccessful issue-selling episodes. Interviewees mentioned tying their issues to concerns of key constituents almost as often when describing successful as unsuccessful accounts. Similarly, sellers mentioned tying an issue to other issues in accounts of both successful and unsuccessful issue selling, but twice as many mentions were in successful episode descriptions. Thus, we conclude that these two bundling moves are part of managers' implicit theories of how to sell issues at Northeast Hospital, but their association with success is mixed. The pattern of bundling findings suggests that, in contrast to Dutton and Ashford's (1993) observations, it is the linking of one's issue to already agreed-upon goals rather than to other issues currently up for consideration that people believe is associated with issue-selling success.

### Involvement Moves

Issue sellers in organizations face choices of whom to involve in their issue-selling efforts. Innovation research (Dean, 1987; Kanter, 1983), strategy process research (Burgelman & Sayles, 1986; Lyles & Reger, 1993; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990), coalition-building studies (Dutton & Webster, 1988; Murnighan, 1978), and participation research (Wagner, 1994) all suggest that involving others during upward influence attempts can positively affect the scope and the impact of one's efforts. By involving others, sellers often intend to make an issue more visible to yet other organization members, to "grow" a larger and potentially more powerful coalition, to build commitment to the issue and its resolution, and to ensure that attention and action are devoted to the issue. Our interviewees clearly supported Dutton and Ashford's (1993) contention that whether to involve others or to "go solo" is an important selling consideration. The 1993 article is also quite explicit about the nature of others' involvement, specifically, its formality and the range of other people who can be involved. Although Dutton and Ashford never mentioned these involvement dimensions, the data suggest that these are key aspects of the issue-selling moves in this context.

Sellers talked about the *targets* of involvement and the *nature* of involvement (its formality and breadth). Table 2 gives the frequencies of our involvement categories and subcategories. Sellers also discussed the timing of involvement, which



**TABLE 2**  
**Involvement: Targets and Nature**

Category and Subcategory	Total Mentions by Respondent <sup>a</sup>	Mentions by Episode <sup>b</sup>						
		Total	Successful			Unsuccessful		
			Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use	Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use
Targets of involvement								
Involve others at upper level <sup>c</sup>	27	38	21	0	0	3	11	3
Involve others at same level <sup>c</sup>	26	28	18	1	0	4	4	1
Involve others outside organization <sup>c</sup>	21	25	12	0	1	10	1	1
Involve others at lower level <sup>c</sup>	7	10	7	0	0	2	1	0
Keep boss informed <sup>c</sup>	7	8	7	0	0	1	0	0
Nature of involvement								
Involve people formally <sup>c</sup>	13	14	7	0	1	6	0	0
Wide range of involvement <sup>c</sup>	12	13	8	0	0	3	1	1

<sup>a</sup> Mentions are combined for each interviewee's successful and unsuccessful issues ( $n = 42$  individuals). If an interviewee mentioned a move more than once, it was counted as a single mention.

<sup>b</sup> Mentions are separated by successful and unsuccessful episodes ( $n = 82$  episodes) and tallied according to the framing of the mention. If an interviewee did not explicitly or implicitly mention a move as something he or she either used, did not use, or wished he or she had used, then it was not mentioned at all.

<sup>c</sup> Not proposed by Dutton and Ashford (1993).

we discuss later in the section on timing characteristics of the issue-selling process.

**Targets of involvement.** Knowledge of effective issue selling included a sense of whom to involve, not just when involvement should take place. Issue sellers talked about customizing issue-selling efforts to include the full range of issue stakeholders or any solution that was to be attached to the issue. As expected, the most frequently mentioned move was "involving others at an upper level." When interviewees talked about such others, they were referring to any person at a higher organizational level whom they involved in the issue-selling process. For example, one interviewee said: "What I've done is involved the entire upper-level management team in defending the position, and so I've brought the troops forth." Another commented, describing a failure episode: "I think that if we had had more confronting meetings early on with higher-level management, that would have been beneficial." These examples highlight the importance that sellers placed on involving others at a higher level. This tactic was mentioned by more than 60 percent of the respondents. Since issue selling, by definition, requires making one's case for the significance of an issue to those higher in an organization's hierarchy than one is oneself, this finding confirms these managers' belief in the utility of the move.

More interesting is that close to half of the issue sellers (48%) mentioned involving those at their

own level or others from somewhere else in the organization as part of what accounted for a selling success or failure. Interviewees talked about involving departments and individuals. Not surprisingly, involving others took effort. As one interviewee told us:

Probably the in-depth working with three other departments—computer services, personnel, and ourselves. . . . There was an awful lot of coordination there that took place. . . . And the only reason we were successful is because of the cooperation we were getting between the three departments.

Sellers talked much more often about involving others at their own levels when they were describing what they did in successful as opposed to unsuccessful selling episodes. In addition, several people wished they had used this tactic in the failed selling attempts. Thus, the theory-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1982) for effective selling seemed to include this involvement tactic as an accepted necessity.

Half the sellers described involving people from outside of the boundaries of the organization. However, there were nearly as many mentions of involving outsiders in successful selling episodes as there were in unsuccessful selling episodes. In one illustration, an issue seller involved an outside person in order to lend credibility: "We also, as a prelude to all of this, engaged an outside consultant, a third-party person, to just give us an opinion about the

MRI field—to try to take it out of the context that this is what the chairman of the department wanted or the clinician wanted.”

In some issue-selling episodes, sellers mentioned their efforts to involve individuals who were lower than they were in the hierarchy. Sellers described using this tactic three times as often in successful selling stories than in unsuccessful ones. In most cases, sellers were referring to people who would be affected by action taken if the issue were successfully sold. One seller explained his failed issue-selling attempt: “I guess I thought probably where we messed up is not selling it to the employees first, assuming that this was something that they were going to like. And we did involve some of them in discussions, but not enough. That’s probably where a major mistake was made.”

Finally, most of the accounts that referred specifically to involving the issue seller’s boss were about successful episodes. Several times, involvement of the boss was described as an intermediate step in building the case for an issue. This move resembles what Kanter (1983) called “clearing the investment” with your immediate boss, as a type of prelude to building a coalition. By advocating the issue to a supervisor, sellers pursued an incremental, cascading approach to selling an issue upward.

**Nature of involvement.** Sellers differentiated between formal and informal types of involvement. When they talked about formal involvement, they discussed it as the legitimate and sanctioned means for selling an issue at Northeast Hospital. For example, one seller told us about the committees and task forces that were used as legitimate forums for creating involvement and interest in issues. He explained, “We did it through committees. We have a couple of committees that deal with operational issues within our nursing department and elsewhere.” Using formal means of involvement was mentioned with equal frequency in describing success and failure.

Also, the talk of involvement included distinctions about the range or breadth of individuals who were involved in a selling episode. Unlike our other subcategories, which concern who was involved in an issue-selling episode, this subcategory reflects sellers’ mentions of the overall scope of the involvement of others in the issue-selling process. For example, one issue seller described her involvement tactics as including the creation of a task force with diverse membership: “The chairman of the task force was the vice president for maternal and child health nursing, and we had representatives from finance, from the medical staff, and from nursing—the intensive care nursery.” Sellers mentioned using broad involvement more often in de-

scribing successful as opposed to unsuccessful episodes.

In sum, Dutton and Ashford (1993) emphasized the payoffs and costs of involving others, but our data focused on whom to involve and how to involve them. Involvement moves indicate sensibilities about how to create allies to foster issue-selling success. Effective involvement tactics depend on knowing the context (for example, knowing if it is normative to involve others formally in a given context) and having the right social connections and knowledge of whom to involve and when to involve them.

### Process Moves

In this category, Dutton and Ashford (1993) anticipated only moves that reflected the *formality* of the process. Interviewees’ accounts revealed two additional new groupings: *preparation* and *timing*. Table 3 gives the frequencies of our process categories and subcategories.

**Formality.** Issue sellers were thoughtful and deliberate in their choices about how to proceed with issue selling. One-quarter of the interviewees mentioned making choices about the level of formality of the process. Sometimes the formality of the process was credited as a positive force in an effective selling attempt. Not being formal enough was sometimes viewed as contributing to a process failure. For example, this seller described the reasons for a successful attempt: “We followed the protocols for packaging an issue. In this case, the packaging was in the form of the program summary protocol. So we followed the outline and filled in the text. So we answered the questions that [were] required of us to be answered.” Likewise, written communication was a formal process mechanism. The pattern is unclear in its implications for successful selling.

**Preparation.** “Doing one’s homework” was the colloquial term for a range of activities through which sellers learned about an issue, any attached solutions, and the context of the issue before and during the issue-selling process. These forms of preparation fit nicely with Kanter’s account of the buying-in process used by change advocates. This action served as a type of “check that was designed to screen out chancy or unneeded ideas” (Kanter, 1983: 157). For some sellers, preparation involved collecting information through meetings with people inside and outside the organization. For example, one issue seller described his extensive information gathering:

I went and met with every single department director and vice president, etc., individually when I

TABLE 3  
Process: Formality, Preparation, and Timing

Category and Subcategory	Total Mentions by Respondent <sup>a</sup>	Total	Mentions by Episode <sup>b</sup>						
			Successful			Unsuccessful			
			Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use	Did Use	Wish Had Used	Did Not Use	
Formality									
Use of formal process	10	13	5	0	2	0	1	5	
Use of written communication <sup>c</sup>	10	14	8	0	0	5	1	0	
Preparation <sup>c</sup>	17	19	10	0	1	8	0	0	
Timing									
Persistence in selling activities	12	13	7	0	0	3	2	1	
Opportune timing	16	18	6	1	0	1	10	0	
Early involvement	12	14	6	2	2	1	3	0	

<sup>a</sup> Mentions are combined for each interviewee's successful and unsuccessful issues ( $n = 42$  individuals). If an interviewee mentioned a move more than once, it was counted as a single mention.

<sup>b</sup> Mentions are separated by successful and unsuccessful episodes ( $n = 82$  episodes) and tallied according to the framing of the mention. If an interviewee did not explicitly or implicitly mention a move as something he or she either used, did not use, or wished he or she had used, then it was not mentioned at all.

<sup>c</sup> Not proposed by Dutton and Ashford (1993).

arrived here for the first three months. And built a background of information on the issues that were troubling the key administrators within the organization, and communications was one of them that continued to come up. . . . So the background was there.

Sometimes sellers felt that preparation had enabled them to capitalize on momentum that could build from unexpected places or unanticipated circumstances. One seller described this advantage as follows: "It takes a good deal of time to get things through the system, so that by my doing a lot of preparation and in setting things up, when I need things to happen, I've pretty much got people buying into the issue that I'm trying to sell. . . . I can go and get people to act quickly on it." However, this move was mentioned almost equally in successful and unsuccessful episodes, suggesting that preparation is relevant but may not be a sufficient condition for success.

**Timing.** Timing was represented in the form of persistence, opportunism, and involving others at the right time. Given that issue-selling processes can take a long time, sellers thought it was important to be persistent. Most often, respondents characterized persistence as a necessary and positive factor contributing to success in issue selling. It was a move mentioned twice as often in successful as in unsuccessful episodes. Frohman (1997) describes change initiators as using persistence to signal a bias for action. One issue seller described the role of persistence thus:

Well, we never let up. And every time we had someone who was on the floor, we showed the problem, and we also engaged the staff so that staff was continually promoting the idea within the institution. . . . We kept pushing the timeliness of it, and as other institutions undertook this endeavor, we were promoting the idea internally by sending people publications, etc., surrounding the issue.

Also, sellers' narratives exhibited an astute sense of when it was appropriate and effective to move forward with an issue and when it might be better to hold back. Although a number of the successful accounts used opportune timing, many of the unsuccessful accounts indicated that the sellers wished they had used this move. Often the sense of timing capitalized on the salience of an issue. As one seller indicated: "This is the national trend in managing nursing staff. To try to be as flexible as you can to give the . . . biggest benefit package you can as a recruitment tool. We've got a national nursing shortage, and so it . . . went along with the trend."

The selling accounts were replete with a sense that the timing of selling an issue had some controllable and some uncontrollable elements. In successful selling accounts, respondents often conveyed a sense that they knew when to sell an issue on the basis of their assessment of the level of support that existed for the issue, the pressure for action on it, and the availability of convincing facts. For sellers, it was often a delicate balancing

act of having the forces lined up in the right way to enable the execution of a successful sell.

The final timing question was when to get others involved in the process of issue selling. Sellers' accounts implied that early involvement contributed to the efficiency of the issue-selling attempts. As one interviewee explained: "Involving them early allowed us to get past that hurdle, and also saved me the time of doing it [the issue selling], which was an effective use of staff resources." Sellers generally believe that the early involvement of others allowed a richer set of cues or signals about possible resistance. Six accounts of successful issue selling contain mentions of early involvement. In a handful of episodes, however, the sellers indicated retrospectively that they should have used this tactic. Thus, although timing of involvement is not a common move, sellers that mentioned it seemed to indicate that they thought it was useful.

### Contextual Knowledge and Issue Selling

The data analyses reveal that three kinds of contextual knowledge are relevant to making issue-selling moves happen. In Table 4 we present these kinds of knowledge in the form of a set of questions, the answers to which would give the issue seller needed information.

First, issue-selling moves seemed to rely on *relational knowledge*, or sellers' understanding of the individuals and the social relationships that were important to their issues. Relational knowledge is

knowledge that "actors have of each other, of each other's intentions, stakes, private goals and territories" (Baumard, 1999: 22). Knowledge about these matters helped a seller anticipate and address resistance, find and enlist expertise, and learn and work the power structure. Thus, relational knowledge helped sellers navigate the political aspects of a context. It also helped them to talk about an issue in a way that captured a person's interest. We see the value of relational knowledge in this seller's account of how she customized the sale of an issue to different groups:

It depended on who I was talking to. If I was talking to [the chief operating officer], I talked about why we should do it physically. If I was talking to the physicians, I talked about how it would improve their ability to care for their patients. If I was talking to the nursing staff, I talked about how it would improve their work. I didn't talk about finances because I knew they didn't want to hear it.

Several moves implied the importance of relational knowledge. For example, all of the involvement moves required relational knowledge, both a sense of whom to involve and a sense of how to motivate their involvement. Sellers who hope to tie their issues to the concerns of key constituents must have relational knowledge to know which constituents are key and the nature of their targets' concerns. Even such seemingly unrelated moves as opportune timing and use of written communication can require relational knowledge. For exam-

TABLE 4  
Contextual Knowledge Important to Issue Selling

Type of Knowledge	Questions
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who will be affected by the issue?</li> <li>Who has experience with the issue?</li> <li>Who cares about the issue?</li> <li>What groups can help with advocating for the issue?</li> <li>What groups might object to this issue?</li> <li>Does this issue threaten anyone or any group?</li> <li>Who has decision authority relevant to the issue?</li> <li>Who has power to promote or to hinder this issue?</li> <li>When will people be ready to hear about this issue?</li> </ul>
Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What kinds of data do people use? In particular, what kinds of data do important people use?</li> <li>How are data normally presented?</li> <li>How are arguments made against an issue?</li> <li>What kinds of protocols are followed?</li> <li>What kinds of meetings or social gatherings are considered legitimate decision forums?</li> <li>How much time does it usually take to sell an issue?</li> <li>Have similar issues been sold (or failed) before?</li> </ul>
Strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the organization's goals?</li> <li>How does the organization plan to achieve these goals?</li> <li>What are the critical strategic issues for top management?</li> <li>What is our broader competitive context?</li> </ul>

ple, part of what makes the timing opportune is knowledge about when the time is right for the targeted individuals. Similarly, the decision to use written rather than spoken communication relies on the relational knowledge of the target person and how he or she likes to receive communication. Smart sellers will use their relational knowledge to guide their moves.

Issue-selling moves also seemed to rely on *normative knowledge*, or sellers' understanding of the accepted or appropriate behavior patterns in a particular organizational setting. As Floyd and Wooldridge stated, "Informal norms are highly idiosyncratic to an organization, but knowing them may be critical to smoothing the way for strategic initiatives" (2000: 201). Ocasio (1997) similarly endorsed the importance of normative knowledge. In Northeast Hospital, the normative knowledge considered as relevant to issue selling involved awareness of data presentation, protocols, forums, and past history. We get a sense of how normative knowledge helps an issue seller in this account:

I really have proposed very little that was not accepted, but it's always inter-institutional, inter-departmental, and I get other department directors to buy in before I propose it or I don't propose it. . . . I believe in doing your homework before. . . . It helps when you know the background of the institution well. I think it helps to make decisions of what to pursue and what not. Because, I mean, there are many things that have been tried before, and I might even remember why they died, so that helps me in proposing it again.

Another example of the relevance of normative knowledge concerns the use of formal or informal channels, which relies on knowledge of organizational norms (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Respondents described their presentations to operating committees and boards of trustees, the formation of ad hoc project teams, and their compliance to procedural hierarchies as all fitting into the standards of acceptable process at Northeast Hospital. Not using moves that fell within these standards was viewed as potentially jeopardizing one's case. To make these moves appropriately, however, requires knowledge of the normative context. Indeed, deciding just which moves to make requires normative knowledge. Decisions about when to persist, when is an advantageous time, and when to involve selected others all depend on the norms of the situation. The more sellers know about those norms, the better able they are to choose moves and execute them well for that specific setting.

Finally, our issue sellers' accounts implied that their moves relied on *strategic knowledge*, or an

understanding of the organization's goals, plans, and priorities. Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) argued that knowledge in this domain, which includes a sense of the competitive scene or broader institutional context in which an organization is embedded, is an important antecedent to strategic renewal. With such knowledge at Northeast Hospital, for example, an issue seller finally sold an issue that had been evident but ignored for many years by invoking external pressures for improved health care in order to mobilize people to get behind the issue. As she describes it:

I think I was benefited because I came in at the right time. If I had tried to sell the concept two years ago, it would not have flown. There's no doubt in my mind. But everybody is ripe for change now. . . . Because they see the changes in health care, and they realize we can't keep doing the status quo—for job security or whatever reason—so they're really much more open for ideas.

Sellers need strategic knowledge in order to engage in most of the bundling moves (for example, tying issues to valued goals) and to present the issues effectively in the logic of the business plan. Although this can be done generically with little strategic knowledge, such knowledge will allow sellers to tailor their presentation to the logic of their specific organization and its business plan. Taking advantage of opportune timing can also depend on strategic knowledge, since what makes a time advantageous so often depends on the strategic choices and pressures faced by an organization at that time.

Our data suggest that Westley's (1990) admonition to keep managers actively involved in conversations about the strategies of their firms may be particularly important in organizations that view issue selling as critical to the firms' adaptive process (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). Being aware of the strategic context may facilitate managers' access to the themes and language necessary for effectively bundling the issues with the current goals of an organization. This knowledge allows sellers to enhance the perceived importance of an issue by connecting it to goals already deemed important by top management. Strategic knowledge can also help managers time their moves opportunistically to optimize success. Sellers can use pressure points and windows of attention to build a case for an issue and to take advantage of the right moments (Scully & Creed, 1998).

## DISCUSSION

This study provides a picture of the behind-the-scenes moves that in part compose change pro-

cesses in organizations. It is consistent with efforts to understand how agents "animate change processes [while] remaining in the shadows" (Scully & Creed, 1998: 24). By analyzing patterns of moves made in successful and unsuccessful issue selling, we deepen understanding of issue-selling processes in particular and organizational change processes more generally.

### A Revised View of Issue Selling

The picture of issue selling that emerges from these descriptive accounts of success and failure suggests some support for the moves identified by Dutton and Ashford (1993) and uncovers additional categories of choices that sellers make implicitly or explicitly when promoting an issue. In general, the process looks much more political and contextually embedded than it was portrayed as being in the original account. Three data patterns suggest revisions to their model of how issue selling might work in organizations.

First, Dutton and Ashford (1993) suggested that sellers would be more successful to the extent that they sold their issues as strategically important, that the managements of their organizations were capable of responding, and that there were payoffs for the organizations. Our sellers clearly carried these three dimensions in their implicit theories too. The sellers' desire to convey strategic importance is evidenced through their tendency to tie issues to important goals. Sellers' concern for management's response capability was evidenced by their tendency to break up the issues into bits and present them incrementally. Concern for showing payoffs to organizations was indicated through the tendency to use the logic of the business plan in making claims about issues. These findings support Ocasio's (1997) contention that decision makers attend to issues with greater organizational legitimacy, value, and relevance. The issue sellers in this study appeared to pitch their issues in line with these allocation tendencies.

Second, although there was evidence, as Dutton and Ashford (1993) proposed, that sellers thought about the importance of presentation and bundling moves, packaging moves were not as simple as their original speculations. Rather, a seller's sense that the issue process must conform to the logic of a business plan involved a more complex selling recipe than simply providing compelling facts. Following the logic of a business plan also implied knowledge of how to present these facts (for example, in what order and in what form). It was an issue-selling move that advantaged sellers who had both normative and strategic knowledge about the

organizational context. However, these patterns of packaging moves—using a business logic, continuously pushing an issue, packaging an issue as incremental as opposed to radical, and tying an issue to valued goals—also imply a conservative bias in the issue-selling processes in this organization. Sellers may be less likely to raise an issue for which a business logic is not yet established or that cannot be broken into small commitments. As a result, one might expect that without explicit intervention by top managers, few radical changes would bubble up from managers below. Our guess is that this conservative bias, created in part by the conformity to a constrained presentation recipe, is typical of many bureaucratic organizational settings.

Third, Dutton and Ashford (1993) also mentioned moves that did not show up in our data. For example, they stated that sellers would be more successful to the extent that they used emotional and novel terms, told their stories succinctly, used two-sided arguments, and framed them so that top management felt a heightened sense of responsibility for actions. Our interviewees rarely mentioned these framing moves. It may be that the most salient features of their implicit theories of issue selling are those that can show the payoff of an issue, and more subtle moves are less critical. It may also be that in this culture, the more forceful move of implying top management's responsibility was seen as inappropriate.

Three broader patterns are also noteworthy. First, sellers' impression management concerns were much less salient in these data than implied by Dutton and Ashford (1993). That study implied, for example, that involving others was shaped by impression management concerns (for example, if you involve others, you'll get less credit). Contrary to the earlier prediction, sellers at Northeast Hospital characterized involving others mainly as a means to increase the chances of getting an issue on the table. Here, as in the discussion of other moves, preservation of a positive self-image was less central than making moves that fit the political and organizational context. We suspect that impression management does play a role in the issue-selling process, but it may be that our interviewees thought that admitting to having these concerns to the interviewer would be bad impression management! Such concerns have been shown to be important in past qualitative (Dutton et al., 1997) and quantitative (Ashford et al., 1998) research on the initiation of issue selling. Alternatively, it may be that impression-management concerns affect choices to sell or not sell an issue but have less of an impact on the selling process itself.

Second, issue selling as revealed by this study is

much more of a political and commitment-building process than Dutton and Ashford originally conceived it to be. Such a view supports Kanter's (1983) original account of change masters in organizations and Floyd and Wooldridge's (2000) more recent description of middle management's role in the strategic renewal process. The process is also deeply contextual in the sense of requiring issue sellers to have in-depth knowledge of "how the system works" in order to effectively make change happen. For example, the selling stories uncover the knowledge required to execute the involvement moves needed to build support for an issue. Although Dutton and Ashford (1993) speculated that the key issue-selling choices around involvement were whether one went solo or not, from this study, we see that involvement moves offer choices about whom to involve, at what level, at what time, and in what manner. In addition, the importance of issue bundling implies astute issue sellers have a good sense of the kinds of concerns and targets of attention that already have currency in their organization. This knowledge requires political acumen and a willingness to act on it. The overall picture suggests that achieving change through issue selling is closely tied to how effectively sellers orchestrate getting the right people involved at the right time and in the right way. Such effectiveness is a form of practical intelligence that has utility for these bottom-up change efforts but also relies on a combination of relational, normative, and strategic knowledge.

Third, issue-selling processes are in part shaped by a seller's sense of the timing of such efforts. The category of timing-related moves was unanticipated by Dutton and Ashford (1993) as an important aspect of issue selling, yet these sellers clearly activated change efforts through the timing of discretionary moves. Sellers can, with varying degrees of success, read the contextual signs indicating readiness to commit to, act upon, or consider an issue. Their efforts to establish the relevance of an issue suggest that temporal sorting processes exemplified by the "garbage can model" may actually be formed by individuals' attention-allocation efforts (March, 1994). Bundling an issue is an example of the way that issue sellers instrumentally shape choice opportunities in an otherwise disorderly system. What we observed in this setting was very similar to Kingdon's (1990) characterization of effective docket setters in Congress as good "surfers," people waiting patiently and sensing when the conditions are right to "ride the wave" that will get an issue on the agenda.

Individuals' efforts to create change are temporally embedded (Dacin, Ventresca, & Beal, 1999). Our findings are consistent with the idea that there

are event-triggered windows of opportunity for making change happen (Gersick, 1994; Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994). Astute issue sellers scan their environment for nonroutine events via which they can effectively mobilize attention for issues. Preparation and persistence ready the seller and the target before such an opportunity. These findings are supported by research that shows that the timing of key adaptive behaviors distinguishes high performers from low performers (Waller, 1999). Our research also suggests that the timing of change efforts may have as much to do with middle managers as it does with top executives, who are typically seen as the sole instigators of organizational reorientation (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Thus, sellers' efforts can be critical at special moments by affecting the onset of change efforts (Scully & Creed, 1998).

Future research would be well served if there were greater attention to how sellers (or other people taking discretionary action in organizations) learn to make their moves or sense that the timing for action (or inaction) is right. These sensibilities were articulated in this study, but how such awareness is created remains a mystery. For example, studies could investigate how organization members acquire sensibilities about appropriate timing or about their organization's political environment and how these forms of practical intelligence affect discretionary processes. Consideration of these questions may reveal how issue sellers entrain to internal and external rhythms (Ancona & Chong, 1996), such as legal and regulatory deadlines, media events, and other patterned regularities. Also, researchers involved in such future efforts could consider how irregularly timed aspects of an internal organizational context (such as other issues, limited resources, and "shocks to the system") and the external environment affect sellers' thinking and success in timing their issue-selling moves. It is also important to determine if these moves are combined in different ways to form systematic patterns of timing moves that coincide with the outcomes of selling behavior.

### **The Importance of Knowledge for Navigating the Organization Context**

Three types of process knowledge underlie managers' implicit theories about issue selling: relational, normative, and strategic. These types of embodied and embedded (Blackler, 1995) knowledge about "the way things work around here" help to explain why certain moves during issue selling may have been viewed as more or less successful. Relevant issue-selling knowledge involves knowledge about how to proceed, how to involve others,

and so forth (Ryle, 1949) that is tied to knowledge about an organization's relational, normative, and strategic contexts.

Knowledge about the "how" of issue selling requires both skill in interpretation and a "feel for the game" being played inside an organization. It forces sellers to recognize that they have little control over many larger aspects of the organization but much control over small but important things. For example, issue sellers do have control over whom they involve, the timing of their moves, and their own persistence. Through these types of moves, they indirectly control the process by being ready to act with others when the time is right. One interviewee conveyed this insight in this way:

As long as you are patient enough, and you have a good idea, and something is important, it will happen. You just have to be patient. If I'd stayed in that position, I wouldn't have given up on it. I just would have let it rest for about six months and then would have started stirring it again.

Two practical implications flow from this knowledge-based perspective. First, individuals who have deeper and broader knowledge about a relational, normative, and strategic context will be better equipped to execute a variety of issue-selling moves. They can use it to tailor issue-selling efforts to what best fits a particular organizational setting. Although our particular data collection methodology did not allow us to view the sellers over time, we would expect that star sellers would emerge—managers with a track record of issue-selling success. That success, we suspect, would be based upon their contextual knowledge and the interpersonal skills necessary to navigate the context effectively.

Second, top management can facilitate these types of navigation and orchestration efforts by enhancing managers' opportunities to acquire and update their relational, normative, and strategic knowledge. Socialization programs, attempts to involve managers at all levels in strategic conversations (Westley, 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990), and cultural audits are just some of the ways that managers acquire and sense these critical pieces of contextual knowledge. By failing to make sure that people are equipped with the knowledge to achieve effective selling from below, organizations rob themselves of this vital source of internal change initiatives.

### **Implications for Organizational Change Processes**

Our study of issue selling at Northeast Hospital is a study of the initial stage of change—that of focus-

ing attention on an issue. It contributes to the change literature in organizations in several ways.

First, consistent with research showing the dominance of incremental over radical organizational change (e.g., Tushman & Romanelli, 1985), the moves evidenced in Northeast Hospital suggest a conservative change pattern. The repertoire of issue-selling moves found here suggests that, in cases of issue selling occurring in typical, large bureaucratic organizations and without intervention by top management, Burgelman's (1983, 1991) portrayal of most change efforts as fitting with rather than challenging the scope of an organization's strategy may be appropriate. Even more novel issues, such as cross-training support services staff and computerizing the operating room, were characterized as being sold successfully because they were toned down and made to appear to be more incremental changes through packaging and involvement tactics. This portrait of middle managers is consistent with Jackall's (1988) observation that middle managers can be a conservative group who avoid nonconformity in order to get ahead.

Second, issue selling is consistent with Weick and Quinn's (1999) characterization of change as continuous rather than episodic. Continuous change tends to be "ongoing, evolving, and cumulative" (Weick & Quinn, 1999: 375). Those authors argued that with continuous change, translation processes are key, where ideas (or, in our case, issues) get matched to purposes and localities (Czarniawska & Jeorges, 1996). Issue selling may be an important means of translation in continuous change efforts: sellers actively try to present and time initiatives and to involve others in ways that fit the context and do not violate existing norms and practices. The imperfections in this translation process, and the amount of time and specificity of circumstances needed to make it work, mean that these efforts go on all the time. As Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) proposed in their "garbage can model," when change happens, it is often because of a fortuitous convergence of issues, solutions, and opportunities, an event an issue seller can only indirectly control but that smart sellers deliberately try to control. Future research might profitably concern how the issue-selling efforts of multiple managers can intersect and collide to promote or impede change.

Third, the dominant portrait of change agents has centered on the heroic efforts of those at the tops of organizations or those called in to make change from the outside (consultants). An issue-selling view is part of a growing trend (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Morrison & Phelps, 1999) toward recognizing the less visibly heroic, behind-the-scenes



work and efforts of those below the top management group. In fact, issue sellers are mindful and proactive orchestrators of change (Kanter, 1983) who, with intent, try to bring streams of issues, solutions, and opportunities together in ways that focus attention and invite action on issues. Issue sellers' actions are evidence of the entrepreneurial resources that individuals use to affect the activation and direction of change efforts (Mosakowski, 1998). Issue sellers exercise discretion in how they construct an issue (Pitt, MacAuley, Dowds, & Sims, 1997), as well as in how they mobilize involvement and attentional investment in it. This portrait calls for an expansion of the change agent skills researchers and others consider relevant and describes a new target for skill-building efforts: the middle manager. Indeed, making change from below requires specific types of practical knowledge and skill. We agree with Ford and Ford (1995) that change takes place in conversations, and our research suggests that future work should focus on the broad set of skills and competencies needed for this kind of behind-the-scenes work.

Finally, our study suggests a complementary set of moves that top managers might make to promote issue selling and change in their organizations. The best top managers will not only be mindful about the cultures they create, the enabling structures they put into place, and the resources they allocate, but will also be mindful about how these factors contribute to patterns of change that occur over time. This fundamental shift leaves to top managers the important job of constructing the context by shaping the norms and structures that promote the behavior they want. One example might be the establishment of what Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) termed "semistuctures" that fix some aspects of context (for example, responsibilities, project priorities) but give great freedom on other aspects. The freedom allows organizations to capitalize on the creativity and change potential of middle managers, whereas the partial fixing allows for coordination. Thus, both organizations and individuals can develop repertoires of skill-based actions that influence what changes can happen as well as how those changes happen in organizations (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 1998).

### Limits of the Study

This kind of study has several limitations. First, our data come from a single organizational context that has been historically isolated from extensive competitive pressures. All of the managers whom we interviewed described Northeast Hospital as a fairly bureaucratic and formal context, and the

issue-selling accounts obviously reflect these contextual features. Thus, our claims about how managers think about issue-selling moves, and the theoretical implications derived from this empirical pattern, are most easily generalized to similar organizational settings. Future research should include a greater variety of organizational contexts to better explain how issue-selling knowledge is acquired and how it works.

Second, our data consist of retrospective accounts. One problem with such accounts is the accuracy of the recall of events and processes. We also have no way to determine whether it was the way sellers actually executed moves that affected failure or success. Here, as in previous studies (e.g., Dutton et al., 1997), managers had no trouble remembering or describing their issue selling (suggesting that they are reflective about this behavior), but we cannot assess the accuracy of their accounts. Another problem may be the reconstruction of events with positive (successful) rather than negative (unsuccessful) outcomes, owing to self-serving attribution biases and other factors (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). In these data, it is difficult to distinguish talk about real moves from normative talk about failed and successful moves. We tried to minimize this difficulty by being cautious in interpreting findings when self-aggrandizement was a plausible alternative explanation. However, this limit remains and will need to be addressed in future work on issue selling.

Third, our interview guide asked sellers to reflect on issue-selling episodes involving strategic or important issues for their organization. Patterns of moves could be very different for issues thought to be less strategic. Given our focus, our emphasis on strategic issues makes sense, but it may limit the generalizability of our results.

### CONCLUSION

From a narrow perspective, this research contributes to understanding the processes through which a manager's initiatives can shape top management's attention. More broadly, our research begins to unravel and make sense of the microprocesses that compose strategic change (e.g., Floyd & Wooldrige, 1996; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1994; Noda & Bower, 1996; Westley, 1990). In this way, our study works at the interface between organizational behavior and corporate strategy.

In a pluralistic organizational world, managers coexist with different and competing interests and perspectives. Through the issue-selling process, managers push their ideas forward to effect change. Our issue-selling accounts reveal the importance of

relational, normative, and strategic contextual knowledge in this process. This situated, pragmatic knowledge enables situated, competent action (Blackler, 1995; Lave, 1993; Star, 1992). Successful sellers drawing on this knowledge employ a variety of moves to achieve their issue-selling objectives, including characterizing their appeal as a rational, incremental step, tied to important organizational goals and priorities. They involve a wide range of others, early in the process, with a special focus on involving those at their level or above. They keep their bosses informed, and they persist in their selling efforts while taking advantage of timing to decide when to sell and when to hold back. In short, managers have nuanced theories about how to act successfully in their contexts. This study suggests that it is important to understand how managers read and navigate their strategic and structural contexts in order to benefit themselves and their organizations. Indeed, we propose that senior management's context design mandate (e.g., Burgelman, 1994; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1994; Noda & Bower, 1996) can only be accomplished if it is based on an understanding of the thought patterns of those who are trying to "work" the context. Theirs are the moves that matter: moves that will serve as internal engines for change and innovation. Given their importance, these moves are worth cultivating through explicit senior management attention and intervention to creating a context that effectively mobilizes this bottom-up change process.

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## APPENDIX

### Category Definitions Used in Issue-Selling Episodes

#### 1. Packaging

**Use logic of business plan:** The degree to which the issue seller packaged the issue in a way that is similar to a business plan. The issue seller might have concentrated on financial aspects ("running the numbers"), marketing, strategy, operations, or a combination of business perspectives.

**Make continuous proposals:** The issue seller either made a single proposal/plan or presented continuous proposals in succession.

**Package issue as incremental:** The issue was packaged by the issue seller using a step-by-step process to sell the issue. This incremental packaging involved presenting different aspects of the issue one piece at a time until the complete story was told.

**Tie issue to valued goals—Profitability:** The issue was linked to monetary consequences or profitability.

**Tie issue to valued goals—Market share/organizational image:** The issue was linked to market forces or to the image the organization wanted to project.

**Tie issue to concerns of key constituents:** The issue was linked to the customers of the organization—the patients.

**Tie issue to other issues:** The issue was linked to other issues that already had been sold as well as to other issues that were currently in various stages of being sold.

#### 2. Involvement

**Involve others at higher level:** The level of the involvement (from weak to strong) of others at levels above the issue seller.

**Involve others at same level:** The level of involvement (from weak to strong) of others at the same level as the issue seller.

**Involve others outside organization:** The level of involvement of parties outside the hospital, including organizations or people who would affect the success of the issue-selling process and those who would be impacted by the issue-selling process if it were successful. These parties included the community, the state, insurance companies, and the health care industry as a whole.

**Involve others at lower level:** The level of involvement (from weak to strong) of others at levels below the issue seller.

**Keep boss informed:** The issue seller determined the extent to which he or she involved his or her boss in the issue-selling process by means of keeping the boss informed of what was going on during the selling process.

**Involve people formally:** This defined whether the issue-selling process and/or issue seller were endorsed or sanctioned by the institution by means of a task force or official endorsement.

**Wide range of involvement:** The issue seller saw involvement as broad, with the administration as well as physicians involved.

#### 3. Process

**Use of formal process:** The degree to which formal organizational processes were followed and observed during the selling process.

**Use of written communication:** The amounts of memos, letters, proposals, and other written forms of communication that were used in the selling process.

**Preparation:** The amount of research and investigating (or homework) that an issue seller did before and during the selling process.

**Persistence in selling activities:** The extent to which the issue seller used constant pressure to sell the issue.

**Opportunistic timing:** The availability of an opportunity to start the selling process.

**Early involvement (timing of involvement):** The issue seller identified the point (for example, early in the process) at which she or he or others became involved in the issue-selling process. Typically, early involvement referred to being involved at the beginning of the issue-selling process.

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