

# **The Process of Legitimising: How practitioners gain legitimacy for sustainability within their organisation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The process of legitimising an organisational strategy to internal organisational actors has received scant attention. Empirical evidence from 51 Heads of Sustainability explores how they legitimise sustainability within their organisation. Investigation of the conform, select, manipulate legitimising strategies reveals a more fundamental dichotomy in legitimising choices: legitimising through stasis or legitimising through change. The former is depicted through a cycle of stasis, while the latter is depicted as the spiral of change, contributing to new environments and ‘promulgating a new social reality’ for the organisation. Implications of the cycle of stasis include supporting ‘business-as-usual’ and potentially limiting the definition of sustainability. Evidence of the spiral of stasis indicates the importance of the process of legitimising in both strategy implementation and organisational change.

## INTRODUCTION

If legitimacy is a resource at least as important as capital, personnel, and customer goodwill (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002) it stands to reason that the acquisition of this resource deserves significant attention in the management literature. However, while considerable attention has been paid to the constituent elements of legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975) and its forms of expression (Suchman, 1995), much less effort has gone into understanding the *process* of gaining legitimacy (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This has created an empirical and theoretical vacuum, with the process of legitimising<sup>1</sup> progressing little since Suchman's (1995) seminal but static and one-dimensional framework which simply presented three legitimising strategies: conform, select, and manipulate. As such, no legitimising framework exists which incorporates the dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted nature of the legitimising process. Moreover, this has limited the ability of the legitimising construct to fulfil its rightful potential to be included in studies of strategy implementation and organisational change. This article has three broad aims. First, it aims to reconceptualise the legitimising framework (Suchman, 1995) using empirical evidence and incorporating related theory to develop a dynamic model of legitimising. In doing so it will uncover a clear dichotomy between legitimising achieved through stasis and legitimising achieved through change. Second, it aims to overlay such a framework with key influences, facilitators, and obstacles that individuals report when determining their legitimising choices, and following the legitimising strategy. Both of these aims will contribute to the theoretical development of the legitimising process. Finally, and most ambitiously, this paper aims to demonstrate the central role legitimising choices hold in advancing or impeding strategy implementation and organisational change. This contention is empirically and theoretically supported, and moves the process of legitimising from a concept in the wings of management literature - of interest

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<sup>1</sup> The process of gaining legitimacy is sometimes referred to as 'legitimation'. However, this term is also used in the literature to reference the outcome of legitimacy. As such, to avoid confusion, this paper will use the term 'legitimising' to reference the *process* of gaining legitimacy.

perhaps only to those analysing individuals and their actions - to centre stage, demanding attention from scholars studying the process of strategy implementation and organisational change.

In studying the process of legitimising, it is necessary to choose a context which allows facets of the concept to emerge. This research focuses on the internal organisational environment and studies the process of an individual legitimising an emerging organisational strategy: in this case a sustainability strategy. While there is no accepted definition of corporate sustainability, it is widely recognised as the link between business and society (Banerjee, 2003). Sustainability strategy usually involves business taking responsibility for negative impacts as well as effecting positive impacts. While this vague definition is criticised by many sustainability scholars (Fergus and Rowney, 2005), it provides a useful opportunity in the study of legitimising by offering a multi-dimensional construct which may be legitimised in a number of ways.

## **THEORY**

### **Legitimacy**

The construct of legitimacy can be found in a number of different fields including psychology, politics, and management. Legitimacy is a generalized perception that an entity is desirable, proper, or appropriate (Suchman, 1995), thereby providing a ‘reservoir of support’ (Tost, 2011): entities that lack legitimacy are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational or unnecessary (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Legitimacy exists at the level of the individual, a specific organisational strategy, or the organisational generally.

Legitimacy theory is divided into two distinct groups: institutional and strategic. Those in the institutional tradition (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) (Meyer & Scott, 1983) (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991) adopt a detached stance and emphasize the ways in which sector-wide dynamics generate cultural pressures that transcend purposive control (Suchman, 1995): entities ‘receive’ legitimacy by conforming to system-wide norms, beliefs, and rules (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) (Scott, 1995). Because legitimacy operates at the subconscious or preconscious level there is little chance organizations will be reflectively aware of it or use deliberate strategies to manipulate it (Suchman, 1995) (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). This approach has been criticized as it underplays both how different institutional forces may pressurize organizations to prioritize different values (Sonpar, et al., 2010), and the presence of institutional contradictions requiring negotiation and settlement (Reay & Hinings, 2009). Conversely, those in the strategic tradition (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990) (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975) (Pfeffer, 1981) (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) adopt a managerial perspective and emphasize the ways in which organizations instrumentally and actively manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to garner societal support (Suchman, 1995) (Sonpar, et al., 2010). While some authors call for caution in the focus on individuals and their ability to ‘create legitimacy’ (Nielson & Rao, 1987, p. 524), others call

for a focus on the instrumental and intentional actions for mobilizing approval (Drori & Honig, 2013).

The majority of extant theory and empirical research of legitimacy takes place at the organisational-level with issues of internal legitimising of organisational strategy largely ignored (O'Dwyer, et al., 2011) [for exceptions see (Castello & Lozano, 2011) (Tost, 2011)]. Drori and Honig (2013, p. 347) recently defined the outcome of internal legitimacy as “the acceptance or normative validation of an organizational strategy through the consensus of its participants”, and so the *process* of internal legitimising can be understood as the actions taken and arguments advanced by individuals to achieve such internal legitimacy and “acquire the participation, enthusiasm and commitment from others that is necessary for managing their activities effectively” (Flynn & Du, 2012, p. 213). No empirical research to date has explicitly “examined the processes through which internal legitimacy originates, develops and is maintained” (Drori & Honig, 2013, p. 347). It should be noted that while this research focuses empirically on the internal legitimising process and the literature supports such a focus (Ruef and Scott, 1998), the resultant framework has generalizability to other contexts.

Suchman's (1995) seminal legitimising framework includes three legitimising strategies which are summarised in Table 1. Most of the limited literature that incorporates these legitimising strategies considers them in isolation, implying – although not explicitly stating - that they are mutually exclusive. Two exceptions exist: Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) acknowledged that legitimising strategies can be used “in any combination, concurrently or sequentially as fits the situation” (p. 427) and Aies and Weiss (2012) described them as “distinct, but not necessary (sic) mutually exclusive” (p. 1081). However, these authors fail to provide empirical justification for these assertions, conceptual explication of how the dynamic interplay of these strategies may play out, or potential implications of such

complexity. An exception to this is the empirical work by Williams Middleton (2013) in the entrepreneurial field which finds both conforming and selecting strategies are more prevalent in the early incubation of a new business. Additional work is required (Castello and Lozano, 2011) to enrich knowledge of the different legitimising strategies and to develop a framework which is fit-for-purpose and incorporates the dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted nature of the legitimising process.

Conformance	aiming for conformity with the organisation's existing demands and expectations
Selection	some level of conformity but allows the individual to select among the multiple environments which exist internally
Manipulation	making changes in the internal environment to achieve consistency between the strategy and the internal environment

TABLE 1: Legitimising Strategies

### **Sustainability**

Corporate Sustainability is often described as encompassing environmental, social and economic aspects - usually termed the triple bottom line - which, when addressed together, produce a balanced organisation (Elkington, 1997). However, critical scholars argue that “the term has become a cliché ... applied to almost anything remotely related to the business processes, the society in which those processes operate, and the environment in which both processes and society are embedded” (Fergus & Rowney, 2005, p. 19). Moreover, it is increasingly accepted that trade-offs form an integral part of achieving such balance and that all three aspects can rarely be simultaneously maximised (Hahn, et al., 2010). This is in part due to the challenge of translating from the societal-level concept of sustainable development (UNWCED, 1987) to the organizational-level concept of corporate sustainability (Banerjee,

2003; Gladwin et al., 1995; Bansal, 2005) which represents a cross-over from a macro global-level development concept based on normative principles, to a micro organizational-level business concept (Aras & Crowther, 2008; Hahn & Figge, 2011). As such, it has been suggested that business does not pursue an equal balance of social, environmental, and economic aspects: that there exists a systematic *a priori* predominance of economic outcomes over environmental and social aspects (Hahn & Figge, 2011). That is, profit maximisation remains a dominant logic driving organisations (Friedman, 1962). It is likely that the reality for most individuals is that they face a complex and nuanced context of competing factors and expectations.

Given this context, sustainability practitioners face an important challenge in gaining legitimacy for their strategy from other organisational actors. While some papers have considered the link between legitimacy and sustainability, these have either focused on contribution of sustainability to external organisational legitimacy (Claasen & Roloff, 2012), or on evaluations of the legitimacy of sustainability by internal actors (Thomas & Lamm, 2012) (Pava & Krausz, 1997), rather than the process of gaining that legitimacy. This latter area is a mirror of the research outlined in this paper. For example, Thomas and Lamm (2012) argue that efforts to develop effective strategies in support of sustainability – that is to legitimise it – would benefit from an understanding of the attitudes that contribute to the legitimacy of sustainability. We concur. However, equally important is an understanding of the legitimising strategies which are currently being used in support of sustainability.

## **METHOD**

Our study design was guided by our focus on developing a process framework that explains the legitimising process with a comprehensive overlay of influences, facilitators, and obstacles. However, rather than working towards developing a truly ‘novel’ framework, we

were provided with a 'starting point' in Suchman's (1995) useful although underdeveloped framework. As such, we pursued an abductive research perspective, which allows scholars to broaden existing knowledge as well as introduce new ideas (Habermas, 1978) (Meyer & Lunnay, 2012). Abductive research provides the flexibility usually associated with inductive research by ensuring the individual's perspectives predominate and the results are grounded in the data, but has the added benefit of including theoretical frameworks within the analysis process while also considering unintended artefacts of empirical data which can remain opaque with a deductive approach (Meyer & Lunnay, 2012).

### **Data Collection**

Our qualitative data collection incorporated semi-structured interviews to ensure there was direct discussion of relevant topics and to achieve equivalent data across the sample (Eisenhardt, 1989). This allowed us to "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1) which is in keeping with an abductive research strategy. Similar methodologies can be found in other legitimacy research (Castello & Lozano, 2011) (Claasen & Roloff, 2012) (O'Dwyer, et al., 2011) (Sonpar, et al., 2010). In keeping with the abductive research design, the approach to data collection was largely inductive. Interviews involved conversations with semi-structured but non-directive questions, rather than directed questions derived from theory (Harris, 2000). The interview schedule was designed to explore and unravel the issues and the thinking of the interviewees themselves in as non-directive a way as possible (Harris, 2000) (Yin, 2009), and provide a depth and complexity of data. This was an appropriate data collection design for investigation of constructs such as both legitimacy and sustainability which are multidimensional and are difficult to measure in their full-complexity (Claasen & Roloff, 2012).



## **Selection of Respondents**

The selection of respondents was purposeful, with a theoretical sampling approach used to ensure that respondents were chosen based on their appropriateness to address the theoretical concepts under investigation and to meet our research aims (Davidsson, 2008) (Fletcher & Harris, 2012). As such, there were no restrictions on geography, industry, or company size. Each respondent was well suited for the study because they held a position akin to Head of Sustainability and were charged with legitimising sustainability within the organisation. Potential respondents were identified through the researcher's personal network, LinkedIn connections and LinkedIn searches of relevant job titles. A total of 122 potential respondents were emailed requesting participation in a study of corporate sustainability. They were informed that the interview would be anonymous and non-attributable. In total, 50 interviews were conducted with 51 individuals (one interview included two participants). Average interview length was approximately 50 minutes with the shortest interview lasting 20 minutes and the longest 75 minutes. All but two interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the interviews where permission to record was not granted, extensive notes were taken. Respondents were labelled 1-51 to preserve personal and firm anonymity. See the appendix for a summary of respondents including industry and location.

## **Analysis Procedures**

Transcribed interviews (and notes from non-recorded interviews) were imported into Nvivo, then coded and analysed using a modified version of content analysis. Content analysis is a methodology that facilitates the reduction of large volumes of textual data into 'much fewer content categories' (Weber, 1990, p. 12). A major advantage of content analysis is that the use of structured techniques to analyse data facilitates reliable coding (Sonpar, et al., 2010). The coding and analysis occurred in two stages. The first stage focused on the manifest content or "those elements that are physically present" (Berg, 2004, p. 269). Each transcript

was read and all major themes identified inductively and coded. Here, we were less concerned with identifying specific legitimising strategies, and more concerned with capturing the essence of the perspectives provided by respondents. We then recoded each transcript to ensure the consistency of coding. Codes were then revised, clarified and condensed to develop key themes from the data. The second stage of analysis focused on the latent content of the data, where we were concerned with capturing the ‘deep structure’ or implicit categories of meaning (Berg, 2004). The entire data set was re-coded blind to the original coding. Legitimising codes were used for the three strategies (conformance, selection, manipulation), and other codes added inductively for example for legitimising actions, influences, facilitators, obstacles, and reasons. We then re-coded each transcript to ensure consistency of the legitimising codes. At this point, a number of data points were coded for the first time, or coded to additional categories, making this re-coding a valuable process and contributing to the rigour of the coding. All legitimising codes were then revised, clarified, and condensed to final ‘legitimising’ codes. This analysis strategy is summarised in Table 2.

<b>Stage One</b>	<b>Manifest Data (inductively coded): KEY THEMES</b>
	a. Code each transcript, inductively ascribe codes
	a. Re-code each transcript to ensure consistency of coding
	a. Review codes: Revise, clarify and condense into key themes
<b>Stage Two</b>	<b>Latent Data (using theoretical framing): LEGITIMISING CODES</b>
	a. Code each transcript (blind to inductive codes ascribed above) using ‘Legitimising’ umbrella code and ‘conformance’, ‘selection’, and ‘manipulation’ codes, while inductively ascribe other relevant codes
	a. Re-code each transcript to ensure consistency of coding
	a. Review codes, revise clarify and condense into key ‘legitimising’ codes

**Table 2: Analysis Process**

## **FINDINGS**

The findings are structured as follows. First, each legitimising strategy is presented individually with evidence from the data. Then, influences are explored in sub categories of the context, the internal stakeholders, and the individual. Finally, these results are drawn together to explore the relationship between the strategies and the impact of these influences. An extended theoretical framework is presented.

### **Conformance**

Conformance was the most commonly coded legitimising strategy with all interviewees referencing some element of conformance to existing expectations of economic returns when legitimising sustainability internally. This is unsurprising as managers seeking legitimacy find it easiest to simply position themselves within the existing regime (Suchman, 1995), and “no manager can completely step outside of the belief system that renders the organization plausible to himself or herself, as well as to others” (Suchman, 1995, p. 585). However, it is still important to explore this finding for a number of reasons. While individuals may adopt a conformance strategy, this does not necessarily mean that legitimising will be successful. That is, even where individuals attempt to legitimise sustainability by conforming to the existing environment, it does not automatically mean that sustainability will gain legitimacy or will be adopted. While this study does not purport to answer questions on the success per se of legitimising strategies resulting in legitimacy (an alternative methodology is proposed in the conclusion to address such questions), understanding how a conformance strategy is used to legitimise sustainability forms a foundation for such future research. Interrogating this strategy is also important for understanding interrelationships with other legitimising strategies and in constructing a comprehensive framework, which positions legitimising in the broader strategy implementation and change management literatures.

Evidence of conformance was widespread. This was most obvious where individuals were conforming to existing environments dominated by expectations of economic returns. Interviewees stated that ‘money is king’ (7)<sup>2</sup>, ‘we wouldn’t do anything unless there was a business case to it ... I’ve only pushed stuff that had a core economic benefit’ (12), and ‘given that we’re a high volume, low margin business, the money talks’ (13). One interviewee identified this as his primary challenge:

*“I think the number one challenge is that how do we turn either the positive that someone can gain out of our using our products OR minimising the negative, how do we turn that into euros?” (8)*

There is strong evidence in the data that economic returns are prioritised by business, and so these influence how individuals legitimise sustainability. A number of interviewees highlight the importance of economic returns arguing that they ensure ongoing support for and resourcing of sustainability: the survivability of sustainability in the organisation is reliant on demonstrating a business case, especially in difficult economic times:

*“If it’s just for the sake of doing sustainability, once the business gets under pressure the first thing that happens is it’s going to get cuts” (24).*

One of the key drivers for conformance related the necessity to adhere to ownership expectations. An interviewee from a partnership firm stated ‘the main partner objective is finance: how do you make the most money’ (13), one from a publicly listed company explained that ‘the shareholders are by and large ... driving profits’ (12), while one from a franchise structure observed that ‘because as you approach the end of a franchise ... shareholders ... start to basically batten down the hatches and not really invest towards the end of the franchise’ (7).

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, bracketed numbers are used to indicate the anonymised respondent number.

Two nuances were found in the data relating to this concept of conformance. The first related to the primary focus of the individual – either on the economic returns themselves, or on sustainability in its own right – while continuing to acknowledge the requirements for economic returns and therefore remaining ‘true’ to the definition of conformance. The second related to the interpretation of ‘economic returns’. While these nuances have been included in the ‘conformance’ findings, there is also an argument that they represent ‘micro-manipulations’. Such a contention will be returned to later in this section.

Focus on Economic Returns versus Sustainability:

While there was widespread evidence of conformance with economic returns, there were two subtle but important differences as to how this was approached. One perspective focuses on economic returns *in spite of* overall sustainability considerations, while the other focuses on sustainability *provided* it can meet economic returns. Sustainability acts as a tool for economic returns in the former, and an important issue in its own right in the latter. Note that both acknowledge the necessity of economic returns, but they differ in their focus. The subtlety of this distinction can be observed in the following quote:

*“The challenge a sustainability professional has is ... to make sure that it’s not about stripping cost out for cost sake, it is about applying the sustainability lens to become more sustainable and save costs, and you’ve got to be very clear about it. It’s sustainability, it’s not a cost saving exercise. And if you can do that, the two generally come together though: you can have both.” (26)*

These perspectives are summarised in Table 3 with evidence from the data.

<b>Focus: Economic Returns</b>		<b>Focus: Sustainability</b>
<b>Sustainability as a tool</b>		<b>Sustainability important in own right</b>
Find the best economic return – see if sustainability can improve it		Find a sustainable solution – see if it can make an economic return

<p>“We have financial objectives that we need to reach and we use sustainability and other things to ensure that we get there, so I think it is an instrument that we can use to our advantage, as and when it is seen to be sensible, and you can turn it up and turn it down.” (42)</p>	<p>“So it’s about growing the business, but growing it in the right way. So it’s about being sustainable, reducing the impacts of your products and business, but still growing as a business and having profit.” (17)</p>
<p>“if we can improve our planning hit rate or reduce the number of planning applications that go through legal review, that’s a substantial business benefit ... So there’s a strong business case for being better at planning and using sustainability for that.” (12)</p>	<p>“when I’m trying to push an environmental agenda, it’s very much, where does it make sense for the business as well, cos there’s still plenty of opportunity available that has both business benefit and environment outcomes.” (34)</p>

**Table 3: Sustainability Focus**

Interpretation of ‘Economic Returns’:

The data also uncovered two different interpretations regarding economic returns. Given the importance of economic returns to the conformance strategy, these are worth exploring. One approach focused on short term quantifiable returns, the other on longer-term potentially unquantifiable returns. The former includes a narrow focus on short-term profits, meeting quantified IRR requirements, or demonstrating a quantifiable business gain such as short term, quantifiable risk management or reputation gains. The latter sees economic returns more broadly as a contribution to longer term market positioning or business strength, as well as factors that are less quantifiable such as engagement. In particular, issues of complexity and trade-offs between economic, social, and environmental factors were raised in this latter perspective, as well as broader issues of long term risk, and investment in innovation. Measurement and monetising requirements were identified as one of the biggest challenges for those adopting a longer term or less quantifiable perspective, and still attempting to legitimise through conformance:

*“it’s unnecessarily challenging when some of the value which [sustainability] creates is intangible, if you’re looking for a hard number, it’s a bit difficult to get to” (14);*

These perspectives are summarised in Table 4 with evidence from the data.

<b>Economic returns as short term, quantifiable</b>	<b>Economic returns as long term, potentially unquantifiable</b>
Economic returns = profit, IRR, direct quantifiable business gain	Economic returns = long term market position, business strength
“businesses are set up to make money and they’re told to by the city and the shareholders and shareholders and investors are by and large not driving companies towards more sustainable practices, they’re driving profits and if you do something that counters profits and your competitors don’t, you lose shareholder value, your share price goes down.” (12)	“It’s an investment in many cases, just like R&D is. The best thing you could do for today’s shareholders is quit spending \$2 billion on R&D and give it to those shareholders. But we’re not going to be in business very long. So we’ve as a company made a decision that there’s a certain amount of money we’re going to invest that is going to go towards creating the next generation of products so that we are a successful company in the future. So it’s the same way in sustainability, it’s a set of investments that we’re going to make, some of them won’t return sooner than others, you know energy efficiency tends to return pretty quickly, some other things maybe return a little bit longer, but again they’re investments so that we will be a successful company into the future” (19)
“it’s come back to cost, so any project must be able to hit the bottom line, which I’ve always believed in anyway, it has to save money on the bottom line.” (33)	“If you only look at value in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, then it doesn’t make sense. If you look at value in a much wider context ... Economically it’s not worth doing, but it actually delivers you engagement, that you wouldn’t get otherwise” (15)

**Table 4: Economic Returns Interpretation**

However, there was also the sense from one interviewee that although one may accept a longer-term perspective on returns, at some point this must still be measured, proven, and communicated:

*“it’s not about actually selling sustainability, it’s about showing that you’ve kept your promises. Because the promises at this stage and the business case is probably made 5-10 years ago, if not longer, so show me now what you’ve done, show me that you’ve actually changed employee engagement, show me that you’ve developed customer relationships, that you have contributed to some meaningful business outcomes.”* (32)

The importance of conformance as a legitimising strategy is clear in the data. This suggests that it may be functioning as a foundational strategy for all legitimising. That is, while selection and manipulation may build on a foundation of conformance, they do not replace it. It should be noted, however, that even where conformance requirements are met in one respect, a sustainability project may not be funded because of other contextual factors. One individual’s £5 million renewables project was not funded despite conforming to the rates of returns required by the company ‘because the Chief Technology Officer said network quality is our aim over the next three years ... [and he required] the CEO to give me [a] mandate [to pursue sustainability instead]’ (23). This suggests to a more complex interplay between strategies than simple reliance on conformance.

### **Selection**

The examination of a selection legitimising strategy is particularly interesting given the internal focus of this study. Selection strategies are evident where “rather than simply conforming to the demands of a specific setting, managers ... attempt to locate a more amicable venue, in which otherwise dubious activities appear unusually desirable, proper, or appropriate” (Suchman, 1995, p. 589). That is, it acknowledges that multiple environments exist within an organisation, not just the dominant environment, which may provide amicable venues to legitimise ‘non-conformance’ aspects of sustainability. While conformance was referenced by a larger proportion of interviewees, there were more references in total to



selection. This suggests that, where a practitioner uses selection, they select a number of different ‘amicable venues’ in which to legitimise sustainability. The data reveals that these venues include groups, individual decision-makers, projects, programmes, and policies, which are summarised in Table 4.

‘Amicable Venue’	Definition
Group	Groups within an organisation may have a tacit or explicit predilection for sustainability. There was evidence of geographic locations and functional teams such product designers, R&D, or operations teams.
Decision-maker	Selecting an individual decision-maker, including a CEO or another executive with whom to legitimise sustainability was also evident. This may happen in anticipation of selecting a department of project led by that person.
Project	Specific projects, often termed pilot projects were common venues for a selection strategy providing opportunities for sustainability innovation.
Programme	Similar to the selection of a project is the selection of a widespread programme such as a sustainable agriculture programme or a sustainable transport programme. While these may include external elements, for example in the supply chain, it is their role as part of internal legitimising that is relevant in this study.
Policy	Individuals selected a policy in which to initially legitimise sustainability such as capital investment payback or recruitment policies. This may overlap with manipulation legitimising strategy depending on the existing context and the scale and scope of the policy’s impact.

**Table 4: Selection ‘amicable venues’**

Use of multiple selection strategies was evident from a number of interviewees. For example, one identified that the team in Europe were more open to sustainability than other locations and instituted an engagement programme legitimising sustainability by looking at “new service models, really progressive stuff around product take back schemes, new business models around service provision ...” (27). In addition she identified an individual decision-maker the Chief Technology Officer, who “over the course of a couple of years I warmed up, I could see the opportunity, so I warmed him up got him involved ... [and] he began to see the potential as well ... he was a person who’d like [Company] to be doing more on sustainability and he can see the skill set that it needs” (27). This demonstrates individuals

integrating multiple selection strategies as part of a more sophisticated and complex legitimising process. Selection may also be opportunistic where plans change as unexpected opportunities arise for legitimising sustainability: “the best laid plans often don’t get up, and I’m actually very opportunistic in how I bring things to fruition” (32). That is, where ‘amicable venues’ suddenly arise, for example a customer makes a specific request, this interviewee is ready to respond to that opportunity.

### **Manipulation**

Suchman (1995) argues that most entities gain legitimacy primarily through conformance and selection. However, for some these strategies will not suffice and “in this case, managers must go beyond simply selecting among existing cultural beliefs: they must actively promulgate *new* explanations of social reality” (Suchman, 1995, p. 591). However, analysis of manipulation is complicated by the fact that there appear to be a number of overlaps between selection and manipulation: while they can be separated analytically – the former involves selecting an already existing ‘amicable venue’ in which to promote sustainability and the latter involves manipulating or changing the environment to make it conducive to sustainability – empirically it is more opaque. That said there is some evidence of manipulation strategies through what are largely widespread change management programmes.

Data showing actions across a wide range of departments within the organisation is evidence of manipulation as it demonstrates the broad scope of change management activities:

*“So what I did from a corporate objective is bring across all of our senior executive and get them across the whole sustainability agenda, and then to go back into each of their areas, whether it be risk and governance, whether it be HR and employee well-being, or supply chain procurement ... to make sure that those things were maintained or at least understood” (36)*

It is the scale of this endeavour which categorises it a manipulation strategy, with the individual attempting to change the mindset of the entire senior executive to ‘promulgate a new social reality’ (Suchman, 1995). One interviewee talks about establishing a global sustainability council including representatives from the 12 core businesses and geographic locations as well as a ‘representative from corporate communications, public policy, legal, environmental compliance that participate’ (4). Evidence of manipulation as a legitimising strategy can be seen in recruitment strategies, employee engagement and training programmes, and networking activities that individuals design and implement to disseminate sustainability widely. Proactive recruitment strategies ensure that ‘if people have the wrong attitude, including ... not taking [sustainability] seriously, they don’t get a job in the first place, or if they get a job and they don’t live our values then they usually leave quite quickly’ (18). Employee engagement and training programmes are another example of manipulation as can be seen in these quotes:

*“everybody in the organisation understands what sustainability is, [allowing] intelligent conversations at every level ... 80% of our 55,000 staff have been through sustainability e-learning” (16)*

*“employees learn about sustainability ... through an e-learning game” (11)*

Interestingly, both of these individuals show no other signs of manipulation, and only limited signs of selection. As such, it may be that these strategies represent the first forays into manipulation by individuals attempting to legitimise sustainability with non-conformance strategies.

The evidence demonstrates the existence of the three legitimising strategies. This section now turns to the influences on these strategies which emerged in the data, before discussion the relationship between the strategies.

## **Influences**

Three broad classes of influences were found in the data. These have been categorised as internal stakeholders, the context, and the individual.

### **Internal Stakeholders**

#### Leadership:

The role of leadership was most evident in relation to selection and manipulation strategies of legitimising. Interestingly, leadership, and the CEO in particular, were more often identified as facilitators for legitimising sustainability elsewhere in the organisation, rather than an audience for legitimising per se. The data suggests that individuals are often given the space to pursue non-conformance aspects of sustainability, including both selection and manipulation legitimising by leadership either directly or indirectly. There is evidence of leadership providing the drive towards sustainability in the first place: ‘the owners themselves have a desire to not do harm to the environment, to do what is right, to be sustainable minded’ (28), and ‘[the CEO has] a strong track record in identifying and then committing to sustainability’ (38). They may provide the formal legitimacy for sustainability which the individual can leverage:

*“I don’t have any problems with getting approval, because we have our chief operating officer’s buy-in from the start [because I] made sure that she was involved in the committee from the outset” (37).*

Leadership interventions facilitated selection and/or manipulation by creating more ‘amicable’ venues for selection, or by creating an environment more conducive to change management and so facilitating manipulation. These include:

- Approving goals and targets: “we set a goal of 25% energy reduction across our facilities” (9);

- Creating reward structures: “making sure to a certain extent [sustainability is] within ... either individual performance metrics ... or business performance metrics” (14);
- Allowing a culture of experimentation: “there’s an adage we use which is about successful failure. So it’s about giving people the opportunity to fail and to come up with the ideas” (17).

The importance of leadership to manipulation strategies in particular should not be underestimated. All but one of the individuals who identified using manipulation as a legitimising strategy had the support, and often the pre-emptive drive, from leadership. This suggests an important link between manipulation and the support of proactive leadership. One interviewee stated that the organisation had:

*“a new CEO, he’s set a really ambitious agenda, and he’s really revitalised the culture within [Company]” (48)*

There may also be an important link here between leadership and their resourcing allocations, given the importance of resourcing to achieve scale in successful change management:

*“we’ve got so much work to do, that actually whether or not we are able to undertake that scale of work is still kind of the question” (48)*

*“there’s 12-13 of us in the sustainability group, and we’ve got advocates and practitioners so we’ve got about 500-600 people involved, but still that’s out of 100,000. We need 10,000 to be really effective” (15)*

Further evidence of the importance of leadership in driving amicable environments for selection can be found in one interviewee’s experience of leadership change:

*“2 years ago the Managing Director ... left, and somebody who was the finance director previously became the managing director ... the whole executive’s team attitude seemed to change” (7)*

Employees:

By definition, finding amicable venues in which to legitimise sustainability through a selection strategy means finding employees conducive to sustainability. References to conducive employees were common: '[employees want to] work for an organisation that reflects their values' (39), and 'I've found very few people who genuinely want to destroy the environment' (34). It is no surprise that a number of interviewees referenced the importance of this, and also described the importance of successfully legitimising sustainability to these groups by making it relevant and practical to their daily role.

*"the average guy who works in a factory, he doesn't want to destroy the environment or be unfair to his colleagues or harm them ... what I try to articulate is the message about ... very simple, practical things at an operational level ... To try and break it down in a much more practical basis." (33)*

That said where selection (focused on employees who are already conducive to sustainability) moves to manipulation (focused on changing employees to become conducive to sustainability), there was evidence of employees exhibiting resistance to change. This proved an important obstacle to a manipulation strategy. An interviewee from an infrastructure company stated that:

*"you're dealing with a piece of kit which has been around for 200 years and which has to be very very reliable, and they've found a way of making it work, and it's very difficult to persuade any change" (1)*

This is linked to change management literature and the associated challenges:

*"I mean the hurdle is always that you're asking an entrenched opinion to be changed ... there's huge change management, so I guess the fundamental challenge is that the burden of proof is almost always on us, so we have to ...*

*undo the ... conventional, the burden never is on those who just say well it's always been done like this" (2)*

*'there's a culture that has been ingrained for a long time it can be very difficult to introduce new ideas and new concepts to that' (29)*

#### Middle Management:

Middle management emerged from the data in a 'gate-keeping' role in relation to legitimising sustainability, and practitioners appear to spend a lot of time focused on them. This is true of conformance, selection, and manipulation strategies. Practitioners must legitimise sustainability to middle management in order for it to get traction within the organisation. This is because they often control the departments where sustainability-driven programmes take place. The data suggests that many middle managers are hesitant as regards sustainability. However, this appears to be attributable to the fact that they are overwhelmed already in their 'day job'. Given their existing responsibilities and tasks, they have limited capacity to incorporate another issue into their role. This sentiment can be found throughout the interview data. This quote from a construction company where the sustainability team focus on social and community aspects illustrates this problem well:

*"You know they're [middle management] managing anything from 5 to 10 different kinds of construction projects [from] £3-4 million to a £25 million - £30 million job. So just managing those projects alone in ensuring that they deliver on time and on budget is a huge job. They're then given health and safety to manage, which is another huge job. They're then given customer to manage which is another challenge. They're then asked to manage all the environmental aspects of the job. They're then asked to manage the quality aspects, they're then asked to manage a supply chain which is in decline and going into liquidation by the day. And they're asked to manage all the material specs. They're now asked*

*to manage because of procurement reasons, design, because clients are moving more to a design and build type contract ... and then we pop along and ask them to manage all their community agenda.” (44)*

This obstacle was identified by others with one interviewee arguing that sustainability is never ‘going to be their number one main priority’ (15), and others referencing the:

*“competition for management attention is always an issue because there’s so many other more immediate, more quantifiable, issues that have more attention focused on them” (31)*

*“I work with people who do other things the rest of the day so my main challenge is having ... people prioritise it, find time to work on sustainability with me” (11)*

Given this constrained time and attention, and given that these individuals often have P&L responsibilities, the evidence suggests that the way to ‘get on the radar’ of these middle management gatekeepers, is to demonstrate how sustainability will help them to achieve their financial targets which often are the primary factor in their reward structure. That is, using conformance strategies to legitimise sustainability. For example, many tout cost and efficiency reasons for pursuing sustainability and use this to get the attention of middle management:

*“if I’m talking about cost savings, cost reductions, what that means in equivalent sales, then I seem to get some cut through” (13)*

## **The Context**

External Environment:

While this study focused on internal legitimising, the external environment was found to strongly influence internal legitimising strategies. There was evidence of this for conformance factors, this was much more common in both selection and manipulation



strategies. Factors from the external environment were sometimes described as ‘mega-trends’ and included climate change, urbanisation, demographic change, increasing population, globalisation, resource scarcity, and political instability. These either directly changed how people viewed sustainability, or influenced intermediary factors. Wider knowledge and acceptance of sustainability impacted legitimising strategies and appear to have made legitimising sustainability easier within the organisation. One interviewee referenced hearing sustainability in ‘everything from the Harvard Business Review, to hearing murmurings within mainstream finance and accountancy magazines ...’ (13). This was augmented by external recognition, through awards, indices, or press coverage, which were leveraged to legitimise sustainability internally. Intermediary factors such as government both facilitated legitimising sustainability through requirements for sustainability within government tenders, and created obstacles through legislation. NGO attention was an initial driver of sustainability for a number of businesses and is an on-going factor used to legitimise sustainability. External stakeholder expectations were leveraged to legitimise sustainability for example where it became part of the license to operate offered by local communities. Value chain factors were referenced both upstream and downstream with a focus on limited resources and reliance on suppliers, as well as global consumption trends and consumer access to complementary resources for consumption (i.e. water for washing).

The data suggests that changes in the external environment over time have proved fundamental to driving, shaping and enabling legitimising strategy. This has impacted the type of sustainability issues receiving attention, and even the ‘type’ of people who take on this role of legitimising sustainability, as seen in the quotes below.

*“I think it’s changing at this very moment in time, around what’s important, and if I look back 10 years ago environment was really high on the radar, community was really low ... I’d say that’s now switched” (44)*

*“I think that I’m part of a second wave of sustainability people, I think there’s been a first wave, they’ve been at it for 20 maybe 30 years and they’ve come at it from very much an environmental point of view and a lot of these guys are getting really tired and burnt out, and now there’s kind of this second wave of people saying, wait, maybe we can take this through, and then I’m assuming, in 10 years there will be a third wave, so you know I just think as we come to the, we’ve picked all the low hanging fruit, you know we’ve put windows and meters and boilers and all that stuff have kind of been optimised and it just becomes now what do you do next and to that’s what’s pushing us in many cases” (2)*

*‘I think it’s become easier now ... because people are talking about sustainability now, whereas in 1994 they weren’t’ (17).*

This is the first evidence of a temporal aspect of sustainability and the dynamic nature of the construct.

Historical/Cultural factors:

There was some evidence to suggest that individuals pursuing a manipulation strategy were able to leverage an underlying affinity with sustainability often derived from the organisations founder, history or culture. One interviewee quotes the company’s founder from 100 years ago saying “I won’t sell the future for momentary profit” (6). There were also some links to country-of-origin culture [actual countries omitted below to preserve anonymity]:

*“Whilst there is the pressure around revenue and profit, it is equally balanced with contribution to society within [country]. So it is not traded-off which is really quite unique” (40)*

*“There’s a very strong [country] culture I would say and then in [country] maybe due to the quality of the landscape and so on there has always been concern for environment” (5)*

## **The Individual**

### Practitioner Traits:

Turning to the individual, three significant traits were uncovered in the data which are commonly relied upon when legitimising sustainability within the organisations. These relate either to the individual or to their role. Individuals identified being empowered, being business-astute, and being persistent as important in the legitimising process.

Many interviewees emphasised the importance of being empowered, which provided them with a sense of identity and confidence. However, most significantly, it seemed to act as a signalling mechanism to their audience – in particular middle management – as to the importance the organisation placed on the issue of sustainability, for example when they had the ‘direct authority of the CEO’ (20).

*“I have the same clout as my colleagues do ... and with all of our investment decisions if I don’t sign off then they don’t go through the system” (2)*

One interviewee identified lack of empowerment as an obstacle calling for ‘a position that reports either directly to an executive, or an executive position itself’ (13).

The importance of being business-astute was recognised as giving individuals traction and credibility. It also enabled them to understand what would appeal to their colleagues and what was ‘just going to sound plain nuts’ (16). However, it was also noted that in addition to

have ‘smart business people who can articulate economics’ (2) having an interest in social and environmental issues was useful. That said, a number of interviewees sought to distinguish themselves from ‘deep green’ aspects of sustainability, implying these would have negative impacts on legitimising sustainability, instead remaining focused on business aspects.

*“You get a lot more traction from a business perspective by coming at this from as a business person. And so there’s a degree of credibility having come... out of one of our sales units and delivery units. To be able to say, look I’m not coming at this from a deep green ecological perspective, I’m coming at this from a business perspective.” (49)*

One interviewee identified the combination of being both empowered and business astute as important:

*“you have to really empower the position and not simply make it a sub function somewhere in corporate affairs [and] the position has to be staffed with people who ... are fundamentally business people” (2).*

There appeared to be a sense of fear regarding *not* being seen as being business-astute, especially as related to the fear of not conforming with the existing environment which required economic returns. One interviewee advocates the avoidance of the word ‘sustainability’ entirely, for fear it invokes questions about the ability of his strategies to conform to economic returns:

*“we try to not actually have these conversations under the theme of a sustainability objective, because in our view all our initiatives should be business objectives driven, and of course they can create an impact from a sustainability perspective” (24)*

He is not alone in his avoidance of certain terms for fear of their ‘non-profit’ connotations. Another interviewee questioned his predecessor’s use of the term ‘industrial ecology’ arguing that it ‘isn’t the right approach to talk to our senior business leaders... [because] ... it’s too woolly’ (15), while another stated that ‘it’s actually up to the sustainability people to change their language to make sure it connects with the business’ (40).

The third trait that was evident among legitimising individuals was persistence. This was important given the dynamics of the organisation, the power of the status quo, the competition for attention for different issues, and the difficulty of any change management type endeavours where you have to ‘repeat, repeat, repeat the message all of the time for it just to start to sink in’ (26). A number reported frustration when ‘you think you’ve got it sorted, and that person leaves, and you have to go and convince someone else’ (15), as well as the personal toll: ‘it requires a significant amount of [persistence and energy] from a personal point of view to continue to push this forward’ (40).

The importance of persistence was linked not just to legitimising sustainability in different ways, but to the entire survivability of sustainability within the organisation:

*“if my whole department disappeared ... the company would probably shift back to a lot of business as usual, so you do need that constant pressure” (2)*

There appeared to be strong links between persistence and the gate-keeper role of middle management. However, there was evidence of this in relation to Board-level cognisance also:

*“We just kept going on at [the Board] ... there is always a paper going in to them, there is always discussion about what are you doing about it, we’re ... constantly banging on and on about it” (7)*

### Practitioner Actions:

The three specific actions taken by legitimising individuals emerged from the data. Individuals commonly engaged in networking, framing, and differentiating. The data showed individuals forming and maintaining internal networks and alliances, both formal and informal. In a formal sense this included sustainability councils, steering groups, or networks, often functioning across global and/or departmental boundaries. Some interviewees strategically influenced membership of these groups to make them most effective. One interviewee describes the importance of networking strategically in his pursuit of legitimacy by:

*“being a bit cunning on my side, rather than try and convince the world, I take out the two decision makers and say - what do you think?” (51)*

In an informal sense there was evidence of practitioners developing alliances ‘over the course of a couple of years’, for example with Chief Technology Officers, Head of HR, or Head of Procurement. In this way networking happened over a long time frame and was pursued strategically. There was a sense that ‘getting people on side, so that kind of negotiation, influencing, trying to win people round effectively’ (14) was a key focus of the role, and a key factor when legitimising sustainability for a number of interviewees. One interviewee saw such networking as central to her role of legitimising sustainability:

*“we spend a lot of time out working and networking with people ... I spend times in the different regions. You know go to Asia, go to Europe, go to Latin America, to ... bring the messages to the people - we get a lot of new employees there” (19)*

The second action relates to individual’s strategic framing of sustainability, providing a mechanism by which it is understood and disseminated. This provided boundaries for what was and what wasn’t included in sustainability. It was an important function because of the ongoing confusion, complexity, and controversy around what ‘sustainability’ actually means.

Framing was achieved by directly and functionally demonstrating how existing operations, initiatives, or programmes are part of sustainability, or by using ‘stories to really embed it in their thinking’ (11). The importance of getting this framing right is clear given the extent one interviewee has gone to, to try to develop a useful framework:

*“we have battled for a year now to bring it [their sustainability proposition] to life in a way which is understandable, and kind of meaningful. I’ve spent a lot of time with creative agencies, so to consider like a branded platform, you know like M&S Plan A, or like Unilever Sustainable Living Plan...” (35)*

Simply tagging a project a ‘pilot sustainability project’ provided one interviewee with a mechanism to legitimise sustainability because it was formally framed as such and so suddenly gave people ‘a different mindset, a different type of thinking’ (38). While a number of responses about framing related to economic aspects, interestingly some of the most ‘progressive’ sustainability companies used frameworks which were formal and widely-publicised and comprised non-economic elements of sustainability.

*“A three legged stool is a very stable thing. Even when the length of each of the legs isn’t the same. But if one leg gets too short it falls over. So for us, that’s how we describe the triple bottom line. A three legged stool but the lengths of the legs are dynamic over time, they’re dynamic by market, they’re dynamic by project. So you can have two projects running side by side in the same place and the length of the three legs will be different. In some the economic leg will be shorter or longer and in others the social leg will be shorter or longer, or the environmental leg. So it’s a dynamic. It’s a dynamic across projects and it’s a dynamic over time. If one leg gets too short in any of those situations the system falls over.” (18)*

The third action taken by practitioners related to differentiating and personalising legitimising strategies for different internal audiences. Almost half of the interviewees spoke of altering what sustainability looked like depending on the person or department they were addressing. References included generally choosing different language or focus, or specifically personalising messages to ‘the individual business or the individual site’ (19), or even to an (often influential) individual to make them ‘feel like they are achieving their personal and professional ambitions’ (48). As such, there was evidence that differentiation and personalisation were used proactively, strategically and intentionally when legitimising sustainability. While again the economic focus was raised in this result with references to groups who ‘just want to know the P&L impact’ interestingly broader issues were introduced when differentiating and personalising messages.

*“I think it’s actually different for different people. Sometimes people are just really driven by a really positive story about how many people they’re going to save ... some people just want to know well does this fit with strategy, does this deliver savings, does this deliver business benefits.” (14)*

There was a sense that one of the strengths of sustainability, from the perspective of legitimising it internally, was its inherent flexibility. There is often criticism leveled at sustainability for being unclear and encompassing everything. However from the perspective of legitimising sustainability its broad nature allowed practitioners to appeal to different internal motivations.

*“I think there’s you know a little bit of everything for, depending on what kind of peoples’ focus and what turns them on.” (9)*

This sense of appealing to different motivations when legitimising sustainability was defined by one interviewee as the heart of what it means to be a sustainability leader:



*“if you’re in a senior level in sustainability in industry ... you’re a bit of a chameleon, you know you don’t change what you believe for other people, but you need to understand what motivates other people to be able to actually understand how you need to work with them to motivate them.” (50)*

### **Legitimising Framework**

Developing the legitimising framework from the data involves consideration not just of each legitimising strategy and the influences on strategy choices, but also of the relationships between the strategies. A significant finding from the data is the evidence of individual’s using more than one legitimising strategy. Of the 51 interviewees, only 3 referenced just one strategy (all three focussed only on conformance). Where two strategies were referenced, the most common combination was conformance as a foundation with selection used additionally – often with multiple different selection strategies. However, nine interviewees demonstrated the use of all three strategies. Results presented to date have provided some explanations for the use of multiple strategies. Given the evidence of conformance as a foundational strategy, an individual pursuing a selection, or even a manipulation strategy would still be using conformance, and so multiple strategies are used. Moreover, evidence suggesting that individual’s differentiate and personalise strategies depending on their audience again leads to multiple legitimising strategies in use. However, one further observation can be made from the data. While this research was cross-sectional in nature and longitudinal results can only be inferred from interviewees’ recollections, there was some evidence to suggest a potential cyclical relationship between the strategies. Certainly, at a minimum, there is a temporal aspect to the legitimising process with interviewees stating that ‘we’re still at the start of the journey and to think where we were six years ago, to where we are now, it’s huge, so there is light at the end of the tunnel’ (41), and ‘it’s early days still, the system is very

much stacked against this longer term comprehensive view' (2). However, this temporal aspect may be extrapolated further to a potential cyclical relationship. While conformance appears to form the foundational legitimising strategy, once this is achieved individuals may have an opportunity to strategically select environments internally in which to introduce non-conformance aspects of sustainability. This strategy selection may happen in one instance, or may happen continually with different types of environments such as a product, a programme, a project, a geographical location. Individuals may then move to manipulation perhaps when there is a 'ground swell and enthusiasm' (39) within the environments which have been selected:

*"I'm not sure if you've seen the video about the shirt-less dancing guy and it's about leadership. Well I think I was the lone crazy shirtless dancing guy, and now I've got a whole host of other people who are dancing to the same beat. And it makes it a lot easier for other people to join in, they don't feel like it's just one crazy person talking about these things. It's more like everybody's talking about it so they might as well get on board" (43)*

Further support for this contention is found in the following quote:

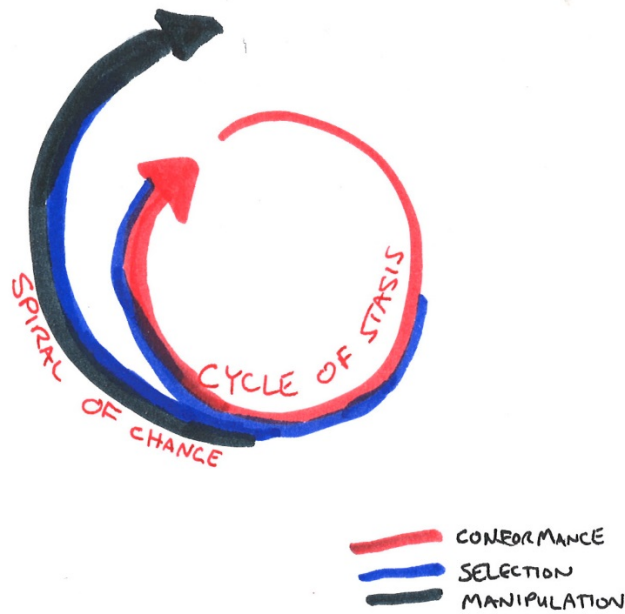
*"you've probably heard it time and time again from people leading sustainability: this is a really messy sort of process and every day is different and it's about leading change and as soon as you get it where you were going you're [thinking] ... where am I going next, how am I going to bring the company to the next place and to the next place..." (9)*

Drawing together these strands provides the foundation for an extension of existing legitimising theory to a new theoretical framework. This framework depicts two approaches to legitimising which have formed an undercurrent of the data presented in this paper, but have not yet been explicitly stated. Legitimising may be approached through stasis or

through change. Where legitimising is approached through stasis, individuals rely on a conformance legitimising strategy, perhaps with the addition of some limited selection but only that which does not lead to change. In our framework this is termed the ‘cycle of stasis’. Some may suggest that a cycle of stasis is a contradiction in terms, however it demonstrates the temporal nature of legitimising as with any activity which must be reconsidered and re-implemented over time. The term ‘stasis’ refers to the fact that the individual’s legitimising strategy does not attempt to change the organisational members or the wider organisational environment.

However, where elements of manipulation are added to legitimising strategies, or when selection strategies become so influential and widespread they can be considered ‘manipulation by stealth’, individuals are approaching legitimising through change. That is, the individual is attempting to change the organisational members or the wider organisational environment. This is termed the spiral of change. Two components to this framework are important. First, it is cumulative whereby the addition of later legitimising strategies does not replace earlier ones, but rather forms complex, multi-layered, and dynamic interactions of multiple strategies. This is important in extending Suchman’s one-dimensional framework, as it demonstrates the interplay of legitimising strategies and that they build on each other. Secondly, where manipulation is successful *and change* occurs, the theoretical framing spirals, because a new environment is created. As such, the pathway is reset and so does not lead back to *the same* environment, but to a new one through promulgation of ‘a new social reality’.

The dichotomous nature of this framework can be best understood visually in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Cycle of Stasis and Spiral of Change**

[Note to readers: draft diagram will be replaced by clearer and more professional diagram]

Overlaying the cycle of stasis and spiral of change as approaches to legitimising are the three categories of influence: the context, internal stakeholders, and the individual. The interplay of these influences acts to facilitate or to create obstacles for the different legitimising strategies. In particular, they create the environment for selection strategies, and the impetus for the movement to manipulation strategies.

Given the significance of the spiral of change as an approach to legitimising, two mini-case studies from the data are presented below. These cases depict individuals who have departed from the cycle of stasis and entered the spiral of change as their approach to legitimising.

Interviewee 36 - General Manager, Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability: This practitioner from a property development company identifies the point in the cycle when he was recruited into his role three years ago. While the company has displayed

conformance legitimising for some time, he was appointed after some initial selection had taken place to legitimise sustainability, and he was charged with moving to a wider manipulation strategy: “One of the things I had to do when I got into the role about three years ago was embed a lot of the sustainability practices ... at that stage it was very much an individual or a couple of individuals were out flying the flag and it was acknowledged [that] ... on an ad hoc basis and on an individual basis there were some great things being done. So what I did from a corporate objective is bring across all of our senior executive and get them across the whole sustainability agenda, and then to go back into each of their areas, whether it be risk and governance, whether it be HR and employee well-being, or supply chain procurement ... So we’ve now embedded most of that into the organisation.” Interestingly, this interviewee points to this as an exit point, as his role is being split so that “while I still maintain overall responsibility for sustainability across the group, individual groups have now got their own sustainability champions, so it’s been disseminated and decentralised.” He points out that “there’s a lot of sustainability professionals who’ve had their roles changed, or they’re no longer required within the organisation, because they’ve done such a good job of actually embedding it”. He also states that “we still need a co-ordinator, somebody to actually be the champion, make sure that, while it’s been embedded, a lot of the practices are not lost and nothing falls through the cracks”.

It is interesting to consider this individual’s final observation. Given the importance of individual persistence in legitimising, and the obstacle of competition for attention especially in middle management, there may be warning bells associated with removing the individual responsibilities for legitimising. This raises potential theoretical implications of organisations, who have not actually embedded sustainability, moving from the spiral of change *back* to the cycle of stasis.

Interviewee 17 - Sustainability Manager: This practitioner from a carpet company, identifies the beginning of legitimising sustainability 20 years ago when the CEO set the company on a “road to sustainability” because “from his own personal point of view, it was about doing better [as a company], by doing good”. However, the CEO’s first challenge was addressing questions such as: “Is this a viable model? Are [we], bearing in mind that we’re a B2B, relatively small sphere of influence, are [we] the right company to go down this route and kind of start this revolution? ... What’s the return on investment of sustainability? ... What’s the cost? What’s it going to cost us?” Because of this “it very much started with a reduction in waste from a business point of view, and I think the running total from waste, sort of avoidance costs, is around about \$440 million, since we started. So there is a business case for what we do”. However, the payback policy has been loosened “Because of what we’ve proven, sort of over a period of time” allowing longer term investments. This is an indication of a selection strategy emerging over a longer time period, due in part to ongoing legitimising. However, the foundation is still some element of conformance, which has allowed selection and manipulation: “it works because we’ve saved this money, we’ve made more because we can produce more carpet, and that sort of started it. And then from that kind of waste and cost reduction, through doing things more efficient and better, it then escalates it to OK what other areas can we look into, how do we look at innovation, how do we look at RnD”. The balanced nature of their approach to sustainability is evident in his assertion that “it’s about growing the business, but growing it in the right way. So it’s about being sustainable, reducing the impacts of your products and business, but still growing as a business and having profit”. While this study has not independently judged the success of legitimising leading to legitimacy, the following quote demonstrates how manipulation strategies identified by

this individual, may have changed the perspective of the entire company: that is, may have successfully legitimised sustainability. On discussing the recent death of the Chairman and CEO who had initiated the sustainability agenda, the interviewee quotes the new CEO who was asked if the company would “forget the sustainability stuff, go back to the work you were doing”. The CEO replied “we’ve done it for so long now that to go back to what we were doing, it probably wouldn’t be as successful as we are ... we’d probably lose 85% of our people”.

What is interesting about this case, is that the temporal description by the interviewee of a legitimising cycle, actually includes different people over time. That is, this case does not describe one person’s legitimising strategies as the majority of the data here has reported, but the legitimising choices across the organisation starting with leadership, aiming to legitimise sustainability. This lends weight to the generalisations of the framework beyond the individual as the unit of analysis.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this article we have provided evidence of internal legitimising as pursued by individuals, leading to an extended legitimising framework to reflect the dichotomous approach to legitimising, and the interplay and overlap of legitimising strategies.

### **Legitimising Through Stasis**

In the cycle of stasis, legitimising individuals immerse themselves and their strategy in the existing environment. Individuals feel they have more solid ground in ensuring the survival of sustainability within the organisation, in securing middle management attention and action, and in staying true to and leveraging their identity as a business-astute individual by conforming to the existing environment. As an initial step, conformance provides the individual with the ability to become an ‘insider’ (Aies and Weiss, 2012) thereby boosting the chances of subsequently introducing new ideas or perspectives. Newcomers must ‘fit in’

and respect the current environment before they can legitimately initiate change (Markowitz et al, 2012). However, the evidence suggests this pathway to legitimising *remains* in the conformance mode: their strategy choice supports business-as-usual and so is a cycle of stasis. There are important implications of this cycle of stasis, both for the individual and for sustainability itself.

Drawing on entrepreneurial literature De Clerq and Voronov (2009) argue that entrepreneurs must delicately balance their roles as conformists and innovators. In constructing a legitimate identity for their enterprises, entrepreneurs strive for ‘optimal distinctiveness’ (Brewer, 1991; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001): to balance the need for strategic distinctiveness against that of normative appropriateness (Glynn and Abzug, 1998). This links to the issue of identity which emerged subtly throughout the results as a potentially important factor influencing the focus on conformance strategy. Evidence could be seen in the focus on the individual being business-astute, on avoiding ‘wooly’ or ‘deep green’ ideas, and on the steadfast and widespread - sometimes bordering on emotional - explication of the importance of the business case. The data suggested a fear of being seen as ‘anti-business’. From the entrepreneurship literature, it has been suggested that such commitment to ‘conforming’ strategies “may also diminish identity construction toward the role of ‘entrepreneur’” (Williams Middleton, 2013: 20). However, by allowing entrepreneurs to legitimise beyond conformance, this may “contribute to construction of an entrepreneurial identity, which can then be applied to new processes of entrepreneurial emergence” (Williams Middleton, 2013: 22). Extrapolating to the current context, conforming strategies may diminish the individual’s identity towards ‘sustainability’. However, by allowing individuals to move beyond conformance, sustainability may become or remain part of their identity. While the data did not explicitly explore such specific psychological constructs, drawing on identity and other psychological literature would provide interesting further insights.



There are important implications for such a cycle of stasis for sustainability also. Where conformance to economic returns is chosen, sustainability could be described as part of, but subordinate to economic returns. It can be assumed that individuals are identifying and developing *only* the aspects of sustainability that provide economic returns, and that aspects which do not, are not pursued, linking to the argument of economic predominance (Hahn and Figge, 2011). This is likely to include some of the ‘broader’ aspects of sustainability prominent in the ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ aspects of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). Over time, these may be ‘lost’ from the definition of sustainability. It is important to remember that legitimising processes both delegitimate as well as legitimate: they create pressures for social change, yet they also create stability (Zelditch, 2001). It appears that a cycle of stasis may contribute to the stability of the status quo, and the promulgation of business-as-usual. The potential impact on sustainability as a concept is identified by one interviewee:

*‘At the end of the day we’re run on short term profits and short termism is probably the single biggest barrier to the long term value of sustainability being seen’ (32)*

There is some evidence of this in the sustainability literature, for example in the distinction between weak and strong forms of sustainability. Weak forms exist when profit maximisation remains the dominant imperative for business decisions, while strong forms require businesses to operate individually and collectively in such a manner that the planet’s carrying capacity is not exceeded: “profit-making would no longer be a company’s primary objective, though it would remain a necessary constraint, essential to its ability to sustain operations and attract capital investment” (Thomas and Lamm, 2012: 194). The authors argue that an emphasis on weak forms can actually undermine progress toward achieving true long-term sustainability. However, “structural constraints will continue to prevent companies,

particularly those legally obligated to report their quarterly financial performance to shareholders, from foregoing near-term profits in order to invest in organizational or technological innovations that offer less tangible benefits or generate positive externalities” (Thomas and Lamm, 2012: 194).

It should also be noted that the concept of ‘conformance’ has been difficult to pin down in the data. This is because small re-interpretations of the existing environment may occur which are difficult to identify. While it is largely accepted that conformance to the existing requirements of economic returns was evident in the data, the results also indicated two nuances exist with this ‘focus on economic returns’ reflecting subtle diverging perspectives. These related to the focus on economic returns versus the focus on sustainability (while ensuring economic returns), as well as short-term, quantifiable versus longer-term potentially unquantifiable economic returns. While this paper has considered these as nuances of conformance, it may be that these small but subtle actions hold manipulation attributes. These may be considered as micro-manipulation. Weber et al (2008: 562 in O’Neil and Ucbasaran, 2011: 683) point out individuals with reform agendas often “eschew tactics designed to catch wide attention and provoke confrontation with the mainstream”. The extended legitimising framework presented in this paper, thus may benefit from more in depth analysis of these processes in particular.

### **Legitimising Through Change**

In the spiral of change, the empirical evidence suggests that incremental extensions of selection become, at some point, a tipping point to manipulation. This may occur when the entire organisation becomes the focus of the individual, rather than a specific department or product, or when the individual selects the ‘amicable venue’ but then proceeds to change it further to fit the sustainability aims. In this sense, selection may become a ‘test run’ for wider or more significant manipulation. Moreover, combining a number of different

selection strategies may be seen as ‘manipulation by stealth’. Analytically, the tipping point between selection and manipulation, whether considered from the perspective of scope within the organisation or scale of impact, is opaque. That is, it is difficult to tease out empirically evidence to support such differences and then provide analytical clarity to distinguish them. Nevertheless, they do suggest the role of selection, and in particular the role of a number of different selection strategies, as a contributory factor towards, or indeed a determining factor for, choosing a manipulation strategy. The role of leadership must be considered as central to individuals having such legitimising strategies available to them that precipitate change. While middle management were referenced in their role as a gate keeper for action and implementation of sustainability, leadership may be considered gate keepers of thoughts and approaches. Leadership have the control over the conditions that make some ideas safe to discuss and others unsafe (Neilson and Rao, 1987). Their actions and attitudes may affect “what is said, how open people are in discussing the viability of competing frames of reference, and how particular frames of reference are applied to specific issues” (Neilson and Rao, 1987: 529).

### **Theoretical Implications**

There are implications of these results for both the legitimacy and sustainability literatures, as well as for the areas of strategy implementation and change management.

For legitimacy, these results provide a welcome focus on the process of legitimising which has received scant attention since Suchman (1995) proposed his conceptual framework. By interrogating all three legitimising strategies individually it provides much needed empirical evidence and theoretical development for each contributing to more rigorous and directed future research. However, the most significant contribution comes from evidence of the interplay between the strategies indicating the complex and dynamic nature of legitimising, and theorising the potentially cyclical and spiralling nature of such a relationship.

The results uncovered a number of factors influencing legitimising strategies, categorised as the context, internal stakeholders, and the individual. These included the external environment, individual traits and actions, leadership, and historical or cultural factors. What is interesting about these influences is that some can be categorised within strategic notions of legitimacy which adopt a managerial perspective, while others bear hallmarks of an institutional approach to legitimacy. This suggests an interesting interplay between strategic and institutional legitimacy. While individuals may undertake intentional actions in line with the strategic tradition, these are linked to aspects of the institutional environment. Indeed, manipulation has been described as “the purposeful and opportunistic attempt to co-opt, influence, or control institutional pressures and evaluations” (Oliver, 1991, p. 157). That is, actions taken by individuals for the purpose of legitimising can alter the values and norms of the organization and, in turn, society (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). This observation is an example of bringing the individual back into the purview of institutional analysis, which has long been called for by scholars. Moreover, it supports the emerging concept of institutional work which sees social actors as neither bystanders to a larger social dynamic nor ‘heroic’ institutional entrepreneurs who engage in an insurmountable uphill battle for change. Rather, studies on institutional work investigate the ways in which “social actors carry out actions, practices and processes that alternately and interchangeably create, maintain, transform or disrupt organizations” (Drori and Honig, 2013: 367). That is, it uncovers the dynamics between institutions and social actors. There is some limited empirical support for these findings in the CSR and sustainability literature. Some authors found that CSR laggards appear drawn to the positivistic, while CSR leaders, although still embracing the positivistic, are starting to employ dialectic rhetoric with “a shift from the economic, utility-driven view of CSR into a political, communications-driven concept of organizational responsibility.” (Castello and Lozano, 2011:12).

For the sustainability literature, this research makes two contributions. First, it rings a warning bell for the more comprehensive construct of sustainability: if only conformance to economic returns is highlighted, there is the potential wider ‘balance’ aspects of sustainability may be lost. Interestingly, this may place the choice of legitimising strategy as central to the success or otherwise of durable social change. It should therefore provide individuals with a reflection point on what they are hoping to achieve within their role, and whether their chosen legitimising strategy is able to contribute to that. However, on a more optimistic note, it suggests that sustainability practitioners are using different legitimising strategies at different times and for different audiences, in order to legitimise sustainability. Of course, whether this process is successful requires an extended research design including measures of legitimising as a process matched to legitimacy as an outcome.

### **Limitations**

Limitations in this study exist in its cross-sectional approach. Given indications in the data of the dynamic nature and interplay of legitimising strategies, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to better explore this phenomenon. This is associated with a further limitation, common for all interview-based research: the reliance on retrospective accounts (Glick, et al., 1990), where interviewees may neglect important project events, or add their own judgement or interpretation into the narratives, in an attempt at post-rationalization (Flynn & Du, 2012). This may be particularly apt given the single perspective of the research from the view of the one individual. An in-depth longitudinal case study may address these concerns by study one legitimising context in greater detail from multiple participants over time.

### **Areas for future research**

An alternative future research strategy may address this through a ‘matched-sample’ approach: matching the individual undertaking the legitimising process, with the decision-

makers or employees to whom they are trying to legitimise the strategy. This would also allow research questions regarding not only the process of legitimising, but also the outcome of legitimacy. This represents an important future research agenda for this area. Further study is also recommended into the individual who is undertaking the legitimising process. While this research has explored and uncovered relevant traits and actions, questions regarding issues of identity arose but were not explored in full. Questions may also be raised by stepping back from the legitimising strategies per se, and considering the sensemaking process individuals undergo leading up to legitimising choices. Do they bracket and label organisational actions retrospectively when making sense of them (Weick et al, 2005)? In what way does this process, which may take place subconsciously, impact the subsequent legitimising choices? What factors influence such a sensemaking process? Such questions deserve further attention.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the cycle of stasis and the spiral of change are identified as two approaches to legitimising an internal organisational strategy. It addresses the turn to the individual and provides a welcome update of the theoretical construct of legitimising as a process. Moreover, it gives the legitimising process and choices a central role in successful strategy implementation and change management.

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