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## Building castles from sand: Unlocking CEO mythopoetical behaviour in Hewlett Packard from 1978 to 2005

Sotirios Paroutis<sup>a\*</sup>, Max Mckeown<sup>b</sup> and Simon Collinson<sup>c</sup>

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How do successive CEOs use myths in an organization over time? While studies start to provide us with understanding of the discourse employed by particular organizational actors, we lack studies about the discourse used by successive strategic actors over long periods of time and the precise mechanisms of such use. To address this gap we theorise the components of mythopoetical behaviour of CEOs and apply critical discourse analysis to unpack the discursive mechanisms used by three CEOs at Hewlett Packard over a 27-year period. We offer two contributions: first, we elaborate on the concept of mythopoetical behaviour (*mythopoesis*) and show how it forms part of the four discursive mechanisms of *authorization*, *moral evaluation*, *rationalization* and *mythopoesis* that allow incoming CEOs to construct and legitimise their identity as strategic actors. Second, we develop the notion of *mythopoetical distance* to provide a method to examine how myths developed by CEOs are compared to the institutionalised myths in their firms.

**Keywords:** CEO; discourse; critical discourse analysis; leadership; large firms; mythopoetical behaviour; strategy

The plaque outside the ramshackle two-family house at 367 Addison St. in Palo Alto, Calif., identifies the dusty one-car garage out back as the ‘birthplace of Silicon Valley.’ But the site, where Dave Packard and Bill Hewlett first set up shop, in 1938, is more than that. It’s the birthplace of a new approach to management, a West Coast alternative to the traditional, hierarchical corporation. (*Businessweek*, March 28, 2004)

### Introduction

How do successive CEOs use myths in their organization over time? To address this question we follow the broader linguistic turn in management studies.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, our study is located at the intersections of strategy, discourse and history in an effort to gain a greater understanding of the nature of CEO strategy discourse over time. We follow a discursive approach and apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a longitudinal case study of the internal and external communication by three CEOs in a large corporation, Hewlett Packard (HP), from 1978 to 2005, with a particular focus on the discourse utilised by CEO Fiorina (1999–2005), an outsider appointed in an attempt to transform HP.

A number of studies have shown that managers can employ discourse to legitimise their position or encourage change.<sup>2</sup> More recently, studies have focused on power,

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discourse and practice in particular contexts, such as the creative industries and accounting firms.<sup>3,4</sup> What is less clear is how, in more complicated settings, with long historical footprints, leaders synthesise the past and future discourses to create their own strategic discourse.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, we contribute to discourse studies by focusing on CEO discourse in a complex organizational setting. In what follows, we theorise about CEO discourse as featuring instances of mythopoetical activity and offer empirical insights from a multi-level analysis of discursive strategies used by three CEOs in HP. Our findings reveal the multi-faceted and intertextual nature of myths that CEOs utilise during their tenure.

### Theoretical components of CEO discourse

#### *CEO discourse: when leadership, language and strategy collide*

Leadership has the potential to shape the ways organizations strategise and the way strategy work is organised, even in complex organizational settings.<sup>6</sup> Within the leadership realm, the CEO is a key strategic actor,<sup>7</sup> working with the top management team and other collective organizational structures, comprising history and culture around strategic activity.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside leadership studies, a stream of research in organizational theory has focused on the discourse managers utilise to legitimise their position or encourage change.<sup>9</sup> Johnson, Scholes and Whittington propose that effective use of discourse can be a distinct advantage for an individual and note that it can help legitimise the CEO as a credible strategist 'making a difference' and dealing with the most important (i.e. strategic) areas of the business.<sup>10</sup> This attention to particular strategists and their discourse resonates with the recent attention to practice theory<sup>11</sup> and, within the strategy domain, the strategy-as-practice perspective.<sup>12</sup> For example, adopt a critical perspective to identify discourses that seem to systematically impede or promote participation in the strategy process.<sup>13</sup> Tsoukas argues that what is empirically interesting to explore is how the unit, between changes in language and changes in practices, works, as well as through 'what discursive strategies a new discourse is made to resonate with individuals'.<sup>14</sup> A discursive approach makes this mediating role researchable in that the subjects, concepts and objects of study are all accessible or observable via words.<sup>15</sup> As such, a discursive approach to the study of particular strategists, such as the CEO, the chief strategy officer or strategy teams,<sup>16</sup> can help reveal how their performances relate to strategy and institutional phenomena.<sup>17</sup> Further, if leadership is language, and attempted strategy is constituted through language, then strategy leadership can be tracked, studied and considered by examining the linguistic fragments, traces and patterns left in the empirical, often textual, record. Of course, text does not, and cannot, represent all that strategy is, as a large part of strategy work is about shaping and adapting to the future.<sup>18</sup> For one thing the record is incomplete, as is our ability to interpret what is available, and yet no data collection method can ever offer us a definitive, multi-dimensional account of what has happened, by whom and for what reason. We can, however, by making the assumption that leaders tend to communicate strategy, look with enthusiasm at the written record as representative of how the discourse of strategy develops over time, and at multiple levels. Leaders have very few direct levers open to them in accomplishing strategy through other people and so must explain some part of what is intended to subordinates, suppliers, customers and other stakeholders, and much of this explanation, for reasons of clarity, tradition and practicality, when faced with the demands of employee-leader ratios and dispersed geographical location, is committed to text in various publications, including employee magazines, memoranda, press releases and annual reports.

Another assumption, following the linguistic turn, is that organizations are constituted, in large part, by language and the social context in which language is used.<sup>19</sup> As such, efforts to accomplish strategy will involve the use of language by the CEO both to communicate strategic intention and to encourage certain patterns of individual and collective actions.<sup>20</sup> Notably, Vaara follows a CDA approach to call for more studies examining strategy discourse at different levels of analysis (at the meta, meso and micro levels) and the processes linking these levels.<sup>21</sup> We address his call and contribute to studies examining the discursive aspects of strategy by focusing on the multi-level construction of strategy discourse by CEOs. Additionally, our study is unique in taking a historical perspective and revealing the discourses used over the tenureships of three successive CEOs in a single firm, allowing for the examination of CEO discourse and its impact over a long period of time.

### *CEO mythopoetical behaviour: the inter-textual nature of CEO myths*

Myths can be perceived as ideology in narrative form;<sup>22</sup> in other words as particular types of narratives or stories that have moral/ideological foundations, for example when particular actors from the past are perceived as heroes (for instance when an organizational myth is about the founders of the firm who are perceived as heroes because they used innovative methods, for their era, to grow the firm). Van Leeuwen distinguishes between moral tales (in which actors are rewarded for doing what is considered good or for restoring order after facing difficulty and taking risks, with a happy ending for our heroes) and cautionary tales (which convey the negative consequences of being 'bad', for failing to conform or perform).<sup>23</sup> The ending of each tale, happy for good people and terrible for bad people, is part of its legitimating force, but the story itself, its characters, their behaviour and the context may subtly or brashly emphasise or support certain views of the world that, as a result, legitimise or delegitimise certain courses of action, behaviours, outcomes or even style. [Table 1](#) summarises pertinent aspects of the concepts of myth narrative/storytelling and rhetoric and helps us demonstrate the distinctive features of myths compared to other discursive phenomena. Importantly, we develop a set of researchable questions and gaps for each concept in relation to the strategic management literature. Our aim is to showcase the potential from the study of discourse for strategy scholars and strategy-as-practice in particular.<sup>24</sup>

In order to address our research question, we conceptualise CEO mythopoetical behaviour as the creation by the CEO of a story (myth-making) that has ideological dimensions and that she or he communicates to internal and external audiences. These audiences, in turn, produce discursive reactions to these myths that can take various forms, for instance counter-myths. This phenomenon over time for successive CEOs can be visually presented by [Figure 1](#). Related to the content of the myth, the CEO may seek to tell a narrative, or shape a moral tale, in which she or he is the hero or even one in a series of heroes who from time to time have to save the organization from the evil forces of, for instance, inertia and complacency, while other CEOs may be characterised as either villains or, more likely, as failed heroes who have attempted the quest but been variously put to the sword, turned to stone or burnt to a cinder, dependent on the particular variation of the moral or cautionary tale. Employees, at the level of text (surtext and subtext), and others in the context (society) may assess legitimacy of the proposed tale against its moral values, its arguments and whether the version of the tale fits with their memory and interpretation of events, of the actions, motives and character of the CEO, and of their interest in playing supporting parts that

Table 1. Definitions of discourse concepts and their application to strategic management studies.

Concept	Myth	Narrative/storytelling	Rhetoric	Metaphor
<b>Definition</b>	A particular form of narrative that has ideological dimensions. A traditional or legendary story concerning a hero or event.	The symbolic reconstructions of events into stories by storytellers.	The use of discourse as a way to persuade actors in specific situations.	A particular figure of speech in which a term is applied on something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest resemblance.
<b>Primary research question for strategy research</b>	How do strategists create and employ myths during the strategy-making process?	What are the forms of narrative employed by strategists and how are these used in action?	How do strategists employ rhetorical practices to influence organizations and institutions?	How do strategists employ familiar and recurring metaphors to create persuasive appeal across time and sub-cultures?
<b>Primary research method</b>	critical discourse analysis (CDA)	Narrative (and ante-narrative) analysis	Rhetorical analysis	Metaphorical analysis
<b>Related readings</b>	Hirschheim and Newman (1991); Jarnagin and Slocum (2007); Thompson (2004)	Boje (1993, 2001), Barry and Elmes (1997); Brown and Rhodes (2005); Denning (2006); Gabriel (2000); Philips (1993); Whittle and Mueller (2012); Vaara (2002)	Alvesson (1993); Brown et al. (2012); Silince and Suddaby (2008)	Cornelissen (2004, 2005); Lakoff and Johnson (1980); Manning (1979); Morgan (1980); Tsoukas (1991)
<b>Further research questions and gaps</b>	How do strategists construct myths? What is the effect of strategy-related myths and counter-myths on the strategy process?	What are the features of enduring strategy narratives? How do strategists employ narratives to influence the emergence of institutions?	How do rhetorical practices by strategists differ from those of other professions? What are the features of rhetorical practices employed by strategists across different geographies?	How do particular strategy metaphors develop over time and why? How do strategy metaphors differ in their use according to the particular setting (strategy workshop, away day, strategy presentation)?

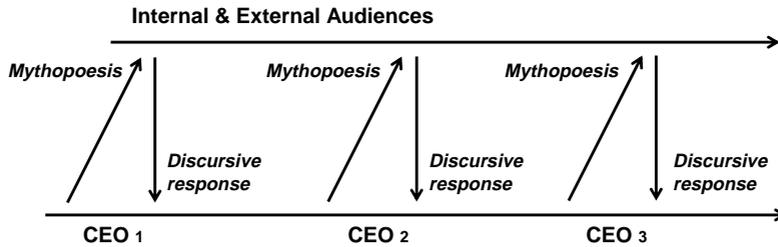


Figure 1. Conceptual framework about the mythopoetical behaviour of successive CEOs.

lead to a desirable happy ending. The extent to which this tale, story or narrative is animating, engages effort, is orientating and gives direction, and the extent to which the heroic story can be influenced and made the accepted version determines the success of the CEO, since the outcome is, essentially, one that is based on sharing 'meaning' rather than an objective measure. Studies in information technology and marketing have relied upon the concept of myths to explain organizational phenomena and consumer behaviours.<sup>25,26</sup> Closer to the topic of this paper, leadership studies have focused on the notion of mythopoetical leadership. For instance, Jarnagin and Slocum,<sup>27</sup> based on the work of cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell,<sup>28</sup> explain that 'myths are analogies used to explain the unexplainable. That is, myths help people make sense of chaos'<sup>29</sup> and develop the notion of mythopoetic leadership as 'a framework for developing robust corporate cultures based on myths'.<sup>30</sup> More recently, O'Gorman and Gillespie have used a hermeneutic approach to study the use of myths by hospitality leaders.<sup>31</sup> Yet, what remains unclear is a more nuanced and theoretically profound understanding of myth-making by CEOs over longer period of times. Such historical perspectives in the study of myths and mythopoetical behaviour also addresses recent calls for more work in these areas.<sup>32</sup>

In order to unpack the ways CEO mythopoetical behaviour occurs over time across its multiple dimensions of discourse, we use CDA by Fairclough.<sup>33</sup> This approach allows us to examine three distinctive levels of discourse: first, the analytical level of context, which examines the relationship between CEO discourse and external discourse of strategy; second, the analytical level of discourse, at which the CEO discourse of strategic renewal is examined, including the way that CEOs seek to legitimate their discourse;<sup>34</sup> and third, the analytical level of text, the way that people other than the authors respond to the CEO discourse,<sup>35</sup> including acceptance, counter narratives and ironic acquisition of CEO narratives. Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes propose that these three levels of CDA be applied to strategy literature and illustrate this application with empirical data collected for another research project.<sup>36</sup> They identify research approaches at the three levels of analysis to specific, existing parts of the strategy literature that are particularly interested in the effects of language at macro, meso and micro levels. This approach also echoes Vaara, who argues that 'a multifaceted interdiscursive approach [...] can help to go beyond simplistic views on strategy as unified discourse and pave the way for new research efforts'.<sup>37</sup>

For all its strengths in examining strategy, CDA has yet to offer convincing answers when it comes to explaining the mechanisms through which discourse transforms social reality.<sup>38</sup> The discourse analysis literature may occasionally examine the language of organizational change, however it does not offer many explanations of how it works; it

does not propose precise generative mechanisms by which a discursive strategy, for example, leads to individual or organizational action. If words are actions, how do words lead to actions in others? This is a pertinent issue for an incoming CEO as she or he deals with multiple discourses, most notably the strategy discourse supported by the outgoing CEO. These multiple discourses that successive CEOs in a single organization have to deal with are the focus of our paper. In applying CDA, we also follow the recommendation by Pye and Pettigrew, who concluded that ‘working across or between levels, that is, in the dynamic complement of relationships between individuals and group, organization, and societal levels is a more appropriate focus and would rest attention on meaning in relationships, shifting with time and context’.<sup>39</sup> As Vaara stresses, ‘there frequently are alternative and competing strategy discourses the interplay of which is one of the most important issues to advance analysis of strategy discourse’.<sup>40</sup> Our study addresses this call by providing a detailed analysis of the generative mechanisms employed by successive CEOs in their attempt to discursively transform the social reality of their organization. Overall, we are guided in our investigation by the question: How do successive CEOs use discourse, and particularly myths, in a large organization over time?

### Research design

Our study is based on analysis of longitudinal data from a single in-depth case examination of Hewlett Packard (HP) and three CEOs (Young, Platt and Fiorina) from 1978 to 2005. The third CEO, Carly Fiorina, is an outsider hired during a period of financial crisis for the firm.

### Research context

We selected HP because it is a large, established firm, with a long, well-documented history and famous, influential founders, which allowed us to collect case data and examine CEO discourse over a long time period and across levels. We can justify a single-case approach because our intention is to develop theory, not to test it.<sup>41</sup> HP was also offered an unusual level of research access necessary to enable the rich, multi-level data-gathering process described below.<sup>42</sup>

HP is a large technology product and services organization. It was founded in 1939, has headquarters in Palo Alto, California, and in 2006 became the world’s largest technology vendor by sales, with US\$91.7 billion.<sup>43</sup> In 2008, it was the largest worldwide seller of personal computers and the sixth largest software company in the world.<sup>44</sup> In 1999, under intense media and shareholder scrutiny owing to poor financial results, it departed from tradition and appointed its first outsider CEO, Carly Fiorina, who stayed in post until she was forced out by the Board in 2005 owing to differences about how to implement strategy. The institutional myth in the HP case relates to the ‘HP Way’ myth of the two founders, Dave Packard and Bill Hewlett, who based the culture of the firm in five principles that were novel for their era and are seen by many as having contributed to the creation and growth of Silicon Valley. These principles are: we have trust and respect for individuals; we focus on a high level of achievement and contribution; we conduct our business with uncompromising integrity; we achieve our common objectives through teamwork; and we encourage flexibility and innovation.<sup>45</sup> Overall, our aim is to theoretically elaborate the components of CEO discourse and examine the role of mythopoetical behaviour in such discourse over time and its relation to the HP Way myth.

### *Data collected*

Our dataset is based on texts produced by, and about, HP. In detail, we collected: (1) 118 internal employee publications (the 'Measure' magazine series) from 1978 to 2001; (2) multiple practitioner, academic and journalist accounts of the corporation in book, paper and article form; (3) key management texts referring to HP; (4) four interviews with the editors of HP internal publications and (5) discussion board comments from stakeholders, employees and ex-employees about HP, its leadership and attempts at strategic change. This database allowed us to analyse CEO-generated stories at multiple levels and over time.

### *Data analysis*

We employed CDA to analyse our dataset. We followed the recommendations by Phillips et al. to examine how strategy, as an organizational logic, is socially constructed.<sup>46</sup> CDA offers such potential, as it is capable of analysis at three interconnected levels: social context, discourse and text. First, at the analytical level of context, we examined the relationship between CEO discourse and the external grand discourse of strategy; second, at the analytical level of discourse, we examined the way that CEOs seek to legitimate their discourse;<sup>47</sup> and third, at the analytical level of text, we explored how actors other than the CEO responded to CEO discourse, including acceptance, counter narratives, and ironic acquisition of CEO narratives.<sup>48</sup> These levels were examined over time using external and internal documents produced by, or on behalf of, of the three HP CEOs (Young, Platt and Fiorina).

*First analytical level (grand discourse).* This level considers how CEO discourse was intertextually produced, with textual fragments available in the external context<sup>49</sup> that provide a 'regime of truth'<sup>50</sup> that is imported from the expressive sphere of culture to establish intersubjective meaning that can lend weight to CEO discourse and even marginalise other discourse.<sup>51</sup> Following Boje, our aim was to reveal the implicit macro story, or context, of the CEO discourse utilised by the three successive HP CEOs.<sup>52</sup>

*Second analytical level (CEO discourse).* This level considers how CEOs at HP discursively construct legitimation to gain attention and followers for their objectives by examining our empirical evidence. Our approach is informed by Van Leeuwen, who describes the way in which social actors recontextualise 'social practices into discourse about social practices to answer the spoken or unspoken questions, "Why should we do this?" or "why should we do this in this way?"'.<sup>53</sup> He provides a framework for analysing how the answers to such questions, which employees, customers and shareholders are likely to ask, particularly, as noted, when they are asked to make changes in their thinking or their actions by a CEO. He then introduces four categories of legitimation as a means of critically analysing the construction of legitimation in discourse: *authorisation*, whereby discourse is legitimated by reference to the authority of tradition, custom or law and/or those social actors from whom institutional authority is accepted by virtue of their role; *moral evaluation*, where social actors seek legitimation through reference (often oblique) to value systems; *rationalization*, by which legitimation is sought by reference to the goals of social action in the context of socially accepted cognitive validity; and finally *mythopoesis*, by which legitimation is conveyed through narratives, or stories, in which legitimate actions are rewarded while illegitimate actions are punished.<sup>54</sup> Building upon this idea, it can be argued that the CEO may seek to tell a narrative, or shape a moral tale, in which s/he is the hero or even one in a series of heroes who from time to time have to save the organization from the evil forces of, for instance, inertia and complacency. We employ these four categories to analyse the discourses employed by the three HP CEOs.

*Third analytical level (text).* The challenge facing the researcher operating at Fairclough's analytical level of text is to identify the local narratives that are developed in response to the truth effects of discourse.<sup>55</sup> These include authoritative responses that accept or defend CEO discourse, including the legitimacy of the leader and the proposed corporate identity, as well as any plan put forward to accomplish change. They also include dissenting responses that may offer counter narratives, that resist the CEO discourse or ironic narratives, that modify CEO discourse and authoritative narratives, using rhetorical strategies such as irony, humour or cynicism. We chose to zoom in our analysis at this level on the CEO who has been associated with a period of radical change and is an outsider (Fiorina). That way we are able to provide a focused and in-depth analysis of the various counter-discourses by analysing a variety of both internal and external texts. [Table 2](#) summarises our key questions, data and analytical levels. In the following section, we use these levels to present our findings.

### **Grand discourse**

In what follows we examine how CEOs construct the discourse of strategic renewal from external texts, and discourse in intertextual themes that move between global social and local contexts. We reveal the grand discourses argued for by three HP CEOs, in order of tenure: Young, Platt and Fiorina.

#### *The discourse of quality (1980–1992)*

During his 15 years of tenure, CEO Young utilises the discourse of quality, for instance in the HP internal magazine *Measure* (1980, February), when he spells out 'issues of the '80s' with 'challenges, to be dealt with during the next decade', including 'the need to focus on cost and quality as competitive elements'; with another article, in the same issue, noting that the 'month end rush' was causing 'quality problems' that 'newer customers are less able to deal with defects and less tolerant of problems' and that 'a significant contribution to customer satisfaction and HP profitability' can be made 'by eliminating problems at the design stage'. The term 'Total Quality Control' (TQC) occurs regularly within *Measure* articles in 1984, May/June, in 1984, July/August, and 1985, March/April.

In the 1987 *Measure* (1987, May/June), a four-page feature about increased competition stated that 'customers expect the best of both worlds - quality and price advantages - in our products and services. And internally, our combat preparations have turned up many new and better ways to compete, to become a total-quality organization' and then offers a series of examples, including one in which 'unhappy customers in 1985' led to a trio of managers listening to 'the philosophy and methodology of Total Quality Control (TQC)', so that by 1986, as narrated in the 1987 *Measure* (1987, September/October), the 'Japanese Quality Conference' invited them to 'make a formal presentation' as a 'first for any non-Japanese company'; all of which suggests continuing acceptance by employees of the discourse of quality and the importance to the CEO of showing employee acceptance and products that actually lead the 'pack in innovation and quality' to internal and external audiences, including journalists. CEO Young reasserts this discourse of quality in his letter to employees in the 1987 *Measure* (1987, November/December) by assigning one of his strategic issues to 'make continuous process improvements using TQC methods as an integral part of every HP activity' because it's one of the most important companywide skills [...] acquired since we started working on quality in 1980' since it gives a 'way of improving our operations

Table 2. Questions, data collected and levels of analysis.

Related questions	Level of analysis (Fairclough, 2005)	Application to strategy (Phillips et al. 2008)	Analytical method	Data sources
How do CEOs re-use external strategic discourse?	Level of social context (MACRO)	<i>Meaning</i> : Discourses exist outside the organization but can be invoked to support the production of bodies of knowledge and systems of 'truth' inside the organization.	Identification and analysis of grand discourse outside the organization that is re-used inside the organization as part of CEO strategic discourse. (Boje 2001)	<i>Internal magazines</i> n = 118 (1978–2001) <i>Biography</i> Tough Choices (2007)
How do CEOs use language to construct legitimization?	Level of discourse (MESO)	<i>Truth and its effects</i> : Drawing on external discourses, internal discourses of strategic change can be developed.	Identification and analysis of CEO language that constructs legitimization through: (1) Authorisation, (2) Moral evaluation, (3) Rationalisation (4) Mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen 2008)	<i>Internal magazines</i> n = 118 (1978–2001) <i>Annual reports</i> n = 25 (1980–2005)
How do organizational members respond to CEO strategic discourse?	Level of text (MICRO)	<i>Text/Talk</i> : Response to 'truth' effects of discourse. <i>Authoritative narratives</i> : reproduced by members of the organization (acceptance)	Identification and analysis of textual responses to CEO discourse that is accepting, ironical or counter-narrative (Fairclough 2005)	<i>Web-sites and discussion boards</i> messages.finance.yahoo.com glassdoor.com <i>Interviews</i> Internal magazine editors n = 4
How is CEO language produced, disseminated and consumed intertextually?		<i>Ironical narratives</i> : rhetorical strategies, e.g. irony and cynicism, to modify or challenge authoritative narratives (resistance). <i>Counter-narratives</i> : overtly challenge authoritative narratives (a product of overt resistance).	Identification and analysis of intertextual production, dissemination and consumption of CEO language and narrative (Fairclough 2005; Boje, 2001)	<i>Newspaper and magazine articles</i> news.google.com Wall Street Journal articles n = 250 <i>Biography</i> Tough Choices (2007)

and increasing productivity at a faster rate than our competitors'. By 1992, CEO Young acknowledges that there have been problems when he reports in the 1992 Measure (1992, May/June) that the quality movement at HP has survived its midlife crisis in what is probably his most passionate defence of quality, and his part in it, and an admission that problems *have* existed that is possible only after they have, according to him, been solved:

Consider the enthusiasm of youth. Upon entering adulthood, people begin to feel their own potential. Nothing's impossible. No mountain is too steep to climb. Then, one moves towards maturity. This is a stage marked by lots of hard work, when people have little time to review their direction or progress. Sometime along the way, people's lives reach a plateau. They pause for breath, survey the scenery and think about what path to take next. Some even wonder if the mountain's too steep to climb [...] It's an apt description of what HP's quality movement has recently experienced.

### *The discourse of reengineering (1992–1999)*

In the 1993 internal newsletter Think (page 11), there is a segue provided between the old discourse of quality and the new discourse of reengineering, described as 'a popular movement in quality circles'. It is not until the first letter to employees from Young's successor, CEO Platt, in the 1993 Measure (1993, Jan/Feb) that the term is explained when he outlines, over both pages, the two company Hoshin goals for 1993. Platt brings Hoshin to the foreground as a tentative candidate for his discourse of strategic renewal, whereas previously employees have heard the term, he suggests there have been misconceptions and that he would like to clear up any confusion people have about what exactly Hoshins are:

Hoshin is a systematic planning process that allows an organization to plan and execute strategic organizational breakthroughs. Indeed, the Japanese word "Hoshin" literally means "breakthrough." It is a component of the total quality management system. First used in Japan in 1965, it has become one of the most widely recognised and used elements of the total quality management system.

In the 1999 Measure (1999, May/June), CEO Platt announced that the Measure magazine will no longer be printed, but assures the reader that the HP Way isn't dead; it profiles Lucent Technologies as an example of innovation, the company from which CEO Fiorina will be recruited, and dedicates a long feature to e-services about how a seemingly impossible vision nearly 20 years ago at HP is transforming the Web into a huge virtual computer that attempts to position HP as the inventor of e-services years before it was used as a term. It also makes the big announcement that HP will split into two companies; that the heads of the four business groups will act as autonomous presidents and CEOs, and that CEO Platt will after retire having overseen the changes. It also included and an article about the reaction to the changes following communication with employees via coffee talks, email, and the internal Web.

### *The discourse of reinvention (1999–2005)*

Even before the new outsider CEO, Fiorina, was appointed, she introduced the phrase 'preservation and reinvention' during her first informal meeting with the complete HP board in July 1999.<sup>56</sup> In her account, she felt the need to speak about her objectives and, unrehearsed, used the term as a way of reassuring the board about the need for change and continuity:

I talked about the opportunity the split of the company represented: an opportunity to inject new energy and speed into HP. And I talked about the HP Way. I said the most important thing I could do was strike the right balance between preservation and reinvention. It was the first time I'd used those words. I said the word preservation because the legacy of the company was a powerful symbol and motivator. I chose the term reinvention because invention was a core virtue of Bill and Dave's, and I needed to find a word for change that captured their pioneering spirit. The phrase seemed to resonate with the Board, and I would use it over and over again.<sup>57</sup>

In her first letter to employees, published in *Measure* in October 1999, she confirmed her belief in HP as 'one of the world's greatest companies [, something to be preserved along with] growth of one of the world's great brands [...] and the HP Way which would act as a compass [that would] guide [the company] unerringly into the 21st century'. She also immediately emphasises the need to reinvent the company since there are several areas in which she knows they can achieve and contribute more, including a (new) vision that must be compelling and inspire the company to even greater growth with a focus that is strong and deep that allows the company to play to win and leverage the brand with much clearer messages to make this great company an even better one. She includes her twin themes of preservation and reinvention, but there is a significantly greater emphasis throughout on the need for and nature of reinvention, yet without, at this stage, clearly defining reinvention as a corporation objective.

### **CEO discourse**

This section considers how HP CEOs discursively construct legitimation to gain attention and followers for their objectives by examining our empirical evidence.

### ***Authorisation***

CEO Young is able to state simply that he foresaw few surprises in the future calling upon his personal authority, or at least his personal formal authority, and his assumption that employees shared a common view, in which the CEO had the ability to see into the future and the organization had the ability to work on those issues ahead of time [1] (The numbers in brackets correspond to the numbered quotes in [Table 3](#)). He often refers back to the authority of tradition, such as when he argues that the open door management policy is 'a fundamental tenet of the HP Way' that has been 'practiced since the inception of the company', and then turns to legitimation by moral evaluation by stating that this traditional practice is central to the 'HP attitude of trust and understanding' [2]. His successor, CEO Platt, tends refer less to his own personal authority but instead depends on the authority of others, such as when he justifies his view of Y2K readiness by saying 'that's not just my opinion' but the opinion of independent consultants [3]. In complete contrast, outsider CEO Fiorina often, and particularly at the start of her tenure, attempts to legitimate her strategic discourse with personal authority, such as when she states that 'to me, the rules are the HP Way' [4], suggesting a strong preference for personal authority but a lack of total confidence in whether others will accept her assertion. On occasions she will attempt to blend this with authorisation via presumed conformity, such as when she states that 'we all own' the reinvention of HP [5], and attempts to strengthen her own authority, such as when she states that her opinion is based on being an HP 'customer for the past 10 years', which qualifies her to say from experience that the company has an enormous opportunity to preserve what's best and reinvent the rest [6]. Her decision to first change the title, then remove the editor, and then discontinue the internal magazine are

Table 3. CEO discursive construction of legitimization at HP (1978–2005).

CEO	Authorisation	Moral evaluation	Rationalisation	Mythopoesis
<b>Young (1978–1992)</b>	[1] In his report to HP managers on “issues of the ‘80s,” President John Young foresaw “few surprises.” The issues will not be esoteric ones, but areas that we can all work on today – and are already working on in most cases. ( <i>Measure</i> 1980, February)	[7] As we enter the 80’s we do so with strength and with the expectation that our future opportunities are at least as good and probably better than any time in the past. ( <i>Measure</i> 1979, December)	[12] To put it in perspective, if we were working at the same level of effectiveness today as in the 1960’s we would require an additional 60,000 people! ( <i>Measure</i> 1979, December)	[16] Employees then, as well as now, expressed the identical feelings and concerns about the special relationships we now call the “HP Way”. ( <i>Measure</i> 1980, Jul/Aug)
	[2] Open Door is a fundamental tenet of the HP Way. It’s been practiced since the inception of the company, and is central to the HP attitude of trust and understanding that must exist between managers and employees at all levels. ( <i>Measure</i> 1980, Sep/Oct)	[8] In fact, the returns were very favorable to HP. Less than 2 percent of US companies studied in the past two decades are in a class with HP. ( <i>Measure</i> 1981, Mar/Apr)	[13] Sometimes the word “wandering” is replaced by “walking” which is literally the way many HP managers put MBWA into practice. Such walking may seem random but it should be regular, creating a feeling of openness and providing informal opportunities for everyone to hear and be heard. [...] I can think of no greater responsibility for an HP manager. ( <i>Measure</i> 1980, Nov/Dec)	[17] Individual performance relative to the performance of other people doing the same or similar jobs is the key measure. ( <i>Measure</i> 1980, Nov/Dec)
				[18] HP offers no “career paths” for people to follow – no master plan that says where and when to make a change. Nor do we view promotion as a routine advancement. What the company does offer is opportunity. ( <i>Measure</i> 1981, Jul/Aug)

(continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

CEO	Authorisation	Moral evaluation	Rationalisation	Mythopoesis
<b>Platt (1992–1999)</b>	[3] That's not just my opinion. Management consultants from the High-Tech Consortium – a group of some 80 companies sharing methods and information about Y2K readiness – recently audited HP. (Measure 1999, Jul/Aug)	[9] Instead of time off work for holidays, we may need to put customer priorities ahead of our personal priorities. Employees are saying that they understand what needs to be done and they'll do it. (Measure 1999, Jul/Aug)	[14] You could spend years debating if HP's realignment could be accomplished in a better way. Our company leadership certainly debated the choices for a long time. We feel confident that we made the right decision, and that time – and business results – will prove us correct. (Measure 1999, May/June)	[19] You may remember that there was a rash of commercial airplane crashes [...] After extensive investigations; the Civil Aeronautics Board was shocked to learn the reason [...] the cockpit crew began working on the problem and no one remembered to fly the airplane. (Measure 1999, May/June)
<b>Fiorina (1999–2005)</b>	[4] To me, the rules are the HP Way. (Measure 2000, Jan/Feb) [5] The reinvention of HP doesn't belong to any individual or team – we all own it. (Measure 2000, Jan/Feb)	[10] The HP Way is our compass. It has pointed this company in the right direction for 60 years and it will guide us unerringly into the 21st century. (Measure 1999, Sep/Oct)	[15] Our vision must be compelling so that it unites HP in the minds of our people and our customers, and inspires us to even greater growth. (Measure 1999, Sep/Oct)	[20] The reinvention of HP, I'm convinced, is a story that will be told and retold for years to come. It's a compelling story: A venerable firm, founded by radicals, returns to its roots and reinvents itself. (Measure 2000, Jan/Feb)
	[6] As a Hewlett-Packard customer for the past 10 years, I've had a chance to see HP at its best – and worst. So when I say that HP has an enormous opportunity to preserve what's best and reinvent the rest, I'm speaking from experience. (Measure 1999, Nov/Dec)	[11] Exciting, but also challenging because now we've entered what's called in chess "the middle game." The middle game is where strategy is essential and every tactic, every move counts [...] Diversity and collaboration must be celebrated and leveraged – it is critical to our playing the middle game. (Invent 2001, Jan/Feb)	What else is new? The new CEO of Hewlett-Packard, of course. Get the lowdown on Carly Fiorina – everything from her personal messages to employees to an ongoing record of external media coverage – on HP. (Measure 1999, Sep/Oct)	[21] Don't forget that at HP, we've reinvented ourselves over and over (Measure 1999, Nov/Dec)
				[22] The only way our revitalization of HP can be successful is if you commit your creativity and energy to making it happen. (Measure 1999, Nov/Dec)

suggestive of a discomfort with having to legitimate her authority to an internal audience in a genre so reminiscent of her predecessors.

### ***Moral evaluation***

CEO Young seeks to legitimate his strategic discourse by, for example, suggesting that ‘future opportunities are [...] probably better than any time in the past’ [7], with the use of the evaluative adjective ‘better’ shielding the strategic actions from debate and argument, and a description of how only ‘two percent of US companies’ are in a ‘class with HP’ [8], with use of the word ‘class’ suggesting that HP is superior in ways that legitimates the strategic actions and discourse of the CEO as natural, so that employees should not take any concerns they have with the strategic plans as evidence that there is anything wrong. When CEO Platt described additional work by employees in abstract ways that imbued them with a moral quality, such as when he explains that ‘we may need to put *customer* priorities ahead of our personal priorities’ [9] during holidays, thus suggesting a certain moral choice instead of emphasising the unpaid interruption of family time. CEO Fiorina calls upon moral evaluation when, for example, she uses analogy to claim that the ‘HP Way is our compass’, defining its nature in a way that suggests the actions taken at HP, including the strategic actions of the CEO, will ‘unerringly’ lead the company in the right direction [10], and also when she links the abstract qualities of the ‘middle game’ in chess and its need for strategy with the need for her strategic discourse [11].

### ***Rationalisation***

CEO Young uses instrumental rationalisation when he presents his proposed strategic changes as part of a long line of improvements, seeking to put in perspective past changes by saying that that working at the same level of effectiveness as the 1960s would require an additional 60,000 employees [12]. Thus, what has happened is because CEOs have decided to act on the world and succeeded, and, similarly, managers are described as deliberately walking about to create a feeling of openness and explain that this activity is a great responsibility for HP managers, who need to listen to the unfailing advice or discourse of the CEO [13]. This is in contrast to CEO Platt, who describes employees spending years debating whether the strategic choices of the organization could be accomplished in a better way, suggesting at first that this is open to debate but then nesting this in an attempt at prediction, in which ‘we feel confident that we made the right decision’ and that future ‘business results’ will prove him right [14], such that the employees accept it as legitimate.

CEO Fiorina uses goal-oriented instrumental rationalisation to legitimise the need for her strategic vision to be ‘compelling’, including whatever she then defines as compelling by using the term ‘so that’ to link it with the goal of uniting HP, seen as a morally attractive outcome that is intentionally pursued and that will, in turn, inspire ‘greater growth’ or require greater effort, such that, taken together, they comprise an activity sequence in which ‘greater growth’ is the main strategic purpose for the corporation, while ‘uniting HP’ may be seen as the main purpose for the HP community [15]. She also appears to use the words of the editor of the internal magazine to offer a theoretical explanation for her style of strategic leadership when she is described as the answer to ‘what else is new?’, such that the message and medium are both ‘new’, leading to an expectation that making lots of changes is the natural state of affairs for Fiorina, who is just being truthful to her feelings; any other expectation would be going against the way it is and the way she is, which needs to be accepted.

### *Mythopoesis*

In response to employee concerns about the HP Way, CEO Young tells a moral tale about how employees in the past expressed identical feelings about the special relationships that are now called the HP Way, with the implication that good employees worry about it because it is important and that their good leader will, as in the past, continue to protect the HP Way [16]. He also offers two brief moral tales to show how HP offers no career paths for people to follow and no master plan for promotion but does offer opportunity [18], such that individual performance leads to advancement [17], which, if accepted, would ignore the possibility of poor management or prejudice leading to lack of advancement for individuals or, by extension, the organization.

CEO Platt, attempting to keep the organization focused as he makes significant, or strategic, changes, tells the cautionary tale of ‘a rash of commercial airline crashes’ that were caused because ‘no one remembered to fly the airplane’ when dealing with other problems [19], and further emphasises that this was only discovered after ‘extensive investigations’, suggesting that this kind of complacency or distraction, perhaps in questioning strategic direction or worrying about strategic outcomes, would not be obvious and might even look like positive and productive concern and so requires additional scrutiny on the part of individuals.

CEO Fiorina uses an anticipatory moral tale with founders as heroes who created something magical which has been lost, and her as hero who will return to its roots to reinvent the organization with any good employee who joins her reinvention army [20]; reminding employees that ‘we’ve reinvented ourselves over and over’, suggesting that this is part of a natural teleological process that responds to dissatisfaction with the renewal of social construction and purposeful enactment by individuals who ‘commit their creativity and energy’ to make it happen, such that if anything goes wrong it would be because individuals were not committed rather than as a result of failings in the strategy or structure communicated via CEO discourse. [Table 3](#) summarises the discourses used by the three HP CEOs.

This analysis has been a detailed examination of the discursive strategies utilised by the three HP CEOs in their efforts to legitimise particular strategic initiatives and, in so doing, their grand strategic directions at particular points over three decades. Our findings showcase the central role myths play in shaping the CEO discourse. In the next section we focus on the third level of text that forms responses to the CEO discourse and their myths over time.

### **Responses to CEO discourse: the case of an outsider CEO**

This section will examine authoritative, counter, and ironic discursive response to the legitimacy of the new outsider CEO (Fiorina) and her proposed transformation of corporate identity by analysing local texts produced by organizational members and other stakeholders, contained within internal and external documents, including employee newsletters and web sites.

#### *Talking back to Fiorina: authoritative, counter and ironic responses to CEO discourse*

The first issue of *Measure*, after Fiorina is appointed, (1999, Sep/Oct) contains text produced in support of the strategic change, such as the editor who comments, in an editorial praising the former CEO, that ‘it looks like’ HP has found an able replacement in Carly Fiorina[1] (The numbers in brackets correspond to the numbered quotes in [Table 4](#)),

Table 4. Authoritative, counter and ironical responses to CEO Fiorina.

Authoritative	Counter	Ironical
[1] It looks like HP has found an able replacement in Carly Fiorina. She's bright, warm, focused, and a big believer in employee communications. ( <i>Measure</i> 1999 Sep/Oct)	[2] HP will become another DEC unless they take the following steps: 1. Spinoff Carly Fiorina 2. Spinoff Ann Livermore 3. Spinoff 50% of managers 4. Spinoff 20,000 employees 5. Spinoff e-service 6. Spinoff new profit sharing formula and go back to old formula. ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 27-Oct-99)	[3] Re: Rules of the garage These "rules" are so poorly written, and so ill-thought out, I bet Carly wrote them herself. If I were her professor, I'd give her a D-. But then again, Medieval History is her specialty, isn't it? Now repeat after me: "INVENT, INVENT, INVENT". Ok, where's my 70 million bucks I just earned? ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 30-Jun-01)
[4] We can always find a way to share our time and skills with people who really need a helping hand. Bear in mind this rule of the garage, "Believe you can change the world." ( <i>Measure</i> 2001 May/June)	[7] Re: Clarkes departure big loss to new HP – Note ... Carly's Way is NOT THE HP WAY ... make no mistake ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 25-Nov-03)	[9] Carly Failurina, I say that its time for you to stop crying about it, accept it, and move on. I know its painful to admit that you were a low performer. And I know that you're in deep denial. However, the decision was made and you were cut.
[5] No matter who you speak to, speed, motion and personal magnetism are the qualities that keep popping up when people describe the first woman to head a Dow 30 company. ( <i>Measure</i> 1999 Sep/Oct)	[8] Her time in Corvallis was nothing like the visits of Dave and Bill, both of whom I saw on several occasions as they visited my divisions. [...] There was no mingling with the ordinary troops, no wandering around the site meeting people in their own work areas and conversing with them quietly and off the record. This aloofness has characterised her entire tenure at HP, and it has been her downfall. ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 16-Dec-01)	Fear not, tho, because its not the end of the world. HP is but one company for you to run into the ground. There are others. Like Lucent; whooops, you already did that one. ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 30-Nov-01)
[6] So I say change your "I'm entitled to a job at HP" mentality, brush off your resume, get off these boards, and GET A JOB AND A LIFE!!! ( <i>Yahoo Board</i> , 30-Nov-01)		

(continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Authoritative	Counter	Ironic
<p>[10] Barely two months into her job [...] Carly has quickened the pace. The pulse rate for this 60-year-old company is beating just a little bit faster since the 44-year-old leader arrived [...]. The demands on Carly's time were incredible and yet, she seemed to keep a step ahead of everyone. (<i>Measure</i> 1999 Sep/Oct)</p>	<p>[11] It really "lights my rocket" when managers override HP policies that frontline personnel must adhere to by providing special treatment to customers that are persistent enough to contact them. I feel this makes the customer-support person look bad in the eyes of the customer. [...] Were the policies and procedures that caused this customer to lose confidence in HP changed? Shouldn't we look at what caused the dissatisfaction in the first place, fix that and then trumpet the fix as a success story? (<i>Measure</i> 2000 Jan/Feb)</p>	
<p>[12] Hiring Carly gives HP "a sort of speed injection" Industry analyst for Goldman Sachs (<i>Measure</i> 1999 Sep/Oct)</p>	<p>[14] Re: Carly Fiorina interview with Forbes – HP management saying that a majority of pre-merger HP employees favoured the merger, basing these statements on a bogus "employee pulse" taken without anonymity from a group of hand-selected employees who had just heard Carly give a talk about the benefits of the merger. (<i>Yahoo Board</i>, 06-Aug-03)</p>	<p>[15] Hmm... Remember these HP Carlyisms? "Shining souls", "eservices", "Just watch", "apps on tap", "Rules of the Garage", "Leadership is a performance", "we may have to do something extraordinary" ... (<i>Yahoo Board</i>, 08-Mar-03)</p>
<p>[16] I enjoyed re-reading the article about Lucent (May-June, 1999), especially after our new CEO was named. Thanks for having the insight to feature an article about Lucent! (Wendy Fong, <i>Measure</i> 1999 Sep/Oct)</p>	<p>[17] Re: A new beginning. It still looks like Lucent II – the Sequel, to me Carly-Sue. Lies, lies, and more lies – right up to when she pops the golden parachute. (<i>Yahoo Board</i>, 21-Nov-02)</p>	<p>[18] Give Carly some credit -hpq – So, IBM has been lucky enough not to have an egotistical leader like Carly. What idiot, other than the creator of the Lucent coffee ring, would think that HWP + CPQ = &gt; HPQ was as innovative a marketing message as adding "invent" to the HP logo. (<i>Yahoo Board</i>, 18-Aug-05)</p>

with the term 'it looks like' a signal that the editor retains some independence of expression and feels the need to position his text with the rest of HP rather than the incoming outsider CEO. However, on an online message board in the same month, a member overtly challenges the legitimacy of Fiorina and her approach with his argument that HP will become another DEC, a failed competitor, if they do not get rid of Carly Fiorina, 50% of managers, 20,000 employees and the new profit sharing formula. Fiorina's rules of the garage were central to her discursive attempts to transform corporate identity and received particular attention from those supporting, countering and appropriating the text of strategic renewal; for example, just a few issues later, an employee is able to apply the affirmative, self-help sentiment of the 'garage' text to his own situation [4], a way of supporting, and to some extent internalising, the corporate discourse of strategic renewal [5]. Elsewhere, the rule of the garage was subject to resistance, as with the thread on Yahoo's message board with a humorous reference to her undergraduate major, intended to undermine the credibility of the rules and an attempt at belittling the role of the CEO [3], demonstrating the way in which the words and concepts that underpin the Fiorina discourse of strategic renewal can be accepted and assimilated, taken as life-changing wisdom, rejected directly or mocked in a way that removes their rhetorical power to transform corporate identity or legitimate the CEO, as in comments calling on readers to remember what are termed as 'these HP Carlyisms' [15].

One counter narrative is offered [7] in which a clear distinction is made between the superior Hewlett and Packard version of the HP Way and the inferior Fiorina version, to the point that the new version is something totally different. Another story [8] described how Fiorina's approach characterised her entire tenure at HP and how it was her downfall, and one member made it clear that the rules of the garage are Carly's version of the HP way, adding hypocrisy and inconsistency to a list of cynical responses to Fiorina's discourse, in marked contrast to the language used by Dick Hackborn [13]. Resistance is of varying levels of intensity and focus, mirroring the lack of sympathy expressed by Fiorina supporters [6, 9].

Overall, Fiorina's attempts to legitimate her formal authority, discourse of strategic renewal, the transformation of corporate identity and the creation of the myth of the 'new HP' depend on acceptance by others, internally and externally. To some extent, the level of acceptance or engagement with Fiorina's discourse will alter the level of effort, from employees and partners, in making her proposed strategies successful, either by implementing them as proposed or by modifying them to make them successful and then crediting the success to the proposed strategic renewal. The CEO will be viewed as successful and in control if the dominant narrative, as told and repeated outside of her direct control, is one in which the CEO is the hero rather than villain or tragic figure, part of a romance, rather than a quixotic quest, ill-fated adventure or comedy. Next we discuss further the implications of our findings.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to studies examining the discursive aspects of strategy<sup>58</sup> and, specifically, recent efforts to understand the way discourse is used by particular strategists<sup>59</sup> by providing a detailed analysis of the discourse employed by three successive CEOs in Hewlett Packard over a 27-year period. Our results provide two key insights. First, they help us conceptualise mythopoetical behaviour as one of the four discursive mechanisms that incoming CEOs utilise to construct and legitimise their identity as strategic actors. Second, we develop the notion of *mythopoetical distance* to

provide a way to examine how distinctive myths developed by CEOs are compared to the institutionalised myths in their firms. Below we expand on each of our principal contributions.

Related to our first area of contribution, our findings highlight the mechanisms by which particular forms of CEO discourse shape the conduct and outcome of strategic conversations.<sup>60</sup> All three HP CEOs deliberately utilised discursive strategies, discursively sought legitimation<sup>61</sup> and attempted to assert new identities for individuals and the organization in an effort to bring about new behaviours and new outcomes during their tenure. More specifically, our findings at HP demonstrate that CEOs commit to discourses of authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis early in their tenure to shape the direction of their firm's strategic conversation. Such discourses tend to include at the clarification of the new strategy concepts adopted (for instance in the case of CEO Platt the notions of quality/excellence and reengineering) and a detailed explanation of the future strategy in relation to the predecessor CEO discourse (for example for CEO Fiorina the discourse of reinvention in relation to HP Way). Overall, CEO discourse was found to be intertextually linked with external texts, in an effort to further strengthen the persuasive nature of internal texts. These relationships, as Boje points out, may be located in texts produced in the past, present and future as discourses are recycled, resituated and re-contextualised either deliberately or simply the result of a subconscious echo on behalf of the authors.<sup>62</sup> Actors, employees at every level, try on the future utterances for size as an emphatic experiment using discursive templates, their own and those offered to them, to contextualise and weave them into their own discourse, transforming them into something new.<sup>63</sup> It is only discursively that the freezing of a continually shifting, hugely complex pattern of human behaviour is possible, and so it is only discursively that the destabilisation (or unfreezing) of meaning and any associated change in doing or thinking is possible. In a similar vein, a CEO must freeze the past and describe the future in ways that are sufficiently credible, engaging and durable in order to become part of the discourse of actors while remaining recognisably associated with the original text and positively associated with the CEO as author. If the depiction of the past or the 'vision' of the future lacks credibility, becomes fragmented beyond recognition, reflects poorly on the author, portrays the author negatively or reduces the author's personal authority, then it may not have served the CEO's purpose. Accordingly, we suggest that the discursive strategies of the CEO alter the social reality of the organization<sup>64</sup> to the extent that they act upon the desires, beliefs, and opportunities of individual actors leading to individual actions and words that contribute to changes or continuity of social and discursive reality; what Gergen, Gergen and Barrett refer to as *generative dialogue*.<sup>65</sup> This assertion is supported by the evidence from HP: the CEOs all deliberately set out arguments, utilised discursive strategies, discursively sought legitimation and attempted to assert new identities for individuals and the organization. During their tenure CEOs are asked to deal with a variety of meanings anchored and defined within the wider social system of the organization. We suggest that the discursive strategies of the CEO alter the social reality of the organization<sup>66</sup> to the extent that they act upon the desires, beliefs and opportunities of organizational actors. Effectively, CEO discourse often addresses counter or alternative discourses at the macro and micro levels.

Examining more closely the mythopoetical behaviour by HP CEOs, we argue that the myths told by CEOs will be shaped by their identities<sup>67</sup> and their view of what needs to be said, done and believed; but at the same time they shape their own identities as strategists<sup>68</sup> who can have a legitimate and credible voice inside the firm. Thus, the myths they use will influence how they are perceived, how people (particularly employees) react to them and

their requests. Such language is malleable and flexible to the extent possible by the demands placed upon it, by historic discourse, by interpretive schema, events and evolving interpretations, and yet, as Doolin points out, CEO discourse must meet minimum conditions for novelty and credibility if it is to engage discretionary efforts and support.<sup>69</sup> In most firms, incoming CEOs will base the creation of their myths on institutional myths that have withstood the test of time. In other words, these iconic and well recognised myths provide the incoming CEO with the discursive elements to construct their own myths. Accordingly, we can argue that the resulting new CEO myth can have varied levels of relatedness to the established, institutional myth: it can be closer or further apart from the institutional myth. This leads us to propose the notion of *mythopoetical distance* to mean how distinctive the CEO myth is from the prevailing institutional myth and the myths of previous CEOs. If the new CEO myth is very distinctive from the institutional myth and the myths of previous CEOs (in both content terms and connotations for particular actors, for instance the founders and the employees), then we argue that mythopoetical distance is higher. If the CEO myth is not that distinctive from the institutional myth and the myths of previous CEOs, the mythopoetical distance is low.

Table 5 provides details of the myths and *mythopoetical distance* for the three HP CEOs we studied. In this table, we articulate the impact to various actors from the mythopoetical behaviour adopted by each CEO and also examine the *mythopoetical distance* compared to the institutional myth: the HP Way story. Visually, this analysis can be applied to our initial conceptual framework (Figure 1), which leads to the development of Figure 2, which has two new components compared to Figure 1: the institutional myth (HP Way) and the level of mythopoetical distance. Two key insights are generated from this analysis. First, each CEO anchors their myth to the central institutional myth of HP Way. This demonstrates that the plausibility of the HP Way myth in the firm's culture motivates each incoming CEO to relate their individual myth to this central myth. Second, the mythopoetical behaviour and resulting distance from the institutional myth is also related with the particular strategic direction attempted by the incoming CEO. More specifically, when a radical transformation is attempted, like in the case of CEO Fiorina, there are greater chances that the particular myths that the CEO will use to support her or his position might result in counter-narratives (or even counter-myths) produced by the various audiences which were often impacted negatively by the transformation. This demonstrates the need to understand mythopoetical behaviour in context rather than as an isolated phenomenon. Accordingly, utilising our concept of *mythopoetical distance*, we suggest that when CEOs create myths that are distinctive from institutional myths (higher mythological distance), there are higher chances that counter-myths to the CEO myth will emerge.

Our study contributes to efforts that show how the strategy-as-practice agenda can be furthered using discourse analysis.<sup>70</sup> In their critical reflection of strategy-as-practice, Carter, Clegg and Kornberger argued that work in this perspective can help uncover the performative language games that are deployed in the creation of strategy.<sup>71</sup> A deeper examination of these language games can help us reveal the mechanisms employed by CEOs in making and executing strategy<sup>72</sup> and the resistance to these mechanisms.<sup>73</sup> Our study employs CDA to show that mythopoetical discourse forms part of the performative aspects of CEO practice.<sup>74</sup> As such, our findings suggest that it is not CEO discourse and particular myths in isolation that alter the power and language games taking place inside organizations. Instead, it is the way CEO myths are related to institutional myths that sparks particular counter-myths, which in turn help us reveal how discursive resistance to CEO discourse emerges.<sup>75</sup>

Table 5. CEO myths and mythopoetical distance in Hewlett Packard (1978–2005).

CEO	Young (1978–1992)	Platt (1992–1999)	Fiorina (1999–2005)
<b>Macro discourse</b>	The discourse of quality	The discourse of reengineering	The discourse of reinvention
<b>Key aspects of the myths created by the CEO</b>	The founders created the HP Way, which needs to be preserved by employees. The CEO will continue to protect the HP Way.	The founders created the HP Way, which employees need to recall. The CEO will remind the organization of the HP Way and guard against complacency or distraction. Employees are expected to embed the HP Way in their daily practice.	The founders are heroes who created something magical which has been lost. The CEO will be the new hero who will reinvent the firm. Employees will join the CEO's reinvention army.
<b>Primary audience</b>	Internal audience	Internal audience	Internal audience
<b>Aims of mythopoetical behaviour in relation to the HP Way myth</b>	To elaborate and extend the HP Way myth.	To motivate employees based on the HP Way myth.	To reinterpret what the HP Way myth means for the firm in the new conditions it faces.
<b>Mythopoetical distance from HP Way</b>	Low	Low	High
<b>Presence of counter-narratives</b>	Low	Low	High

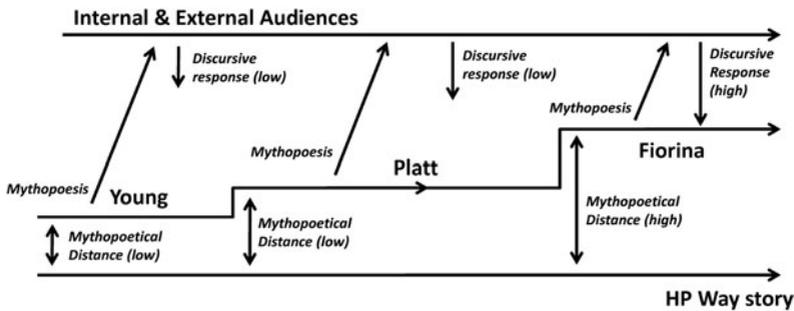


Figure 2. Mythopoetical distance for three successive CEOs at Hewlett Packard.

As strategy-as-practice starts to uncover the role of strategy discourse, its power<sup>76</sup> and institutional effects,<sup>77</sup> we have ahead of us the exciting prospect of extending discourse analysis even further to gain deeper conceptual and empirical understandings of strategy in practice. As highlighted in Table 1, a number of approaches can assist strategy scholars to develop further the linguistic turn: narrative/storytelling,<sup>78</sup> rhetoric<sup>79</sup> and CDA.<sup>80</sup> Such approaches have the potential to reveal, for instance, how interests and interest groups are constructed through discourse<sup>81</sup> or how the power effects of discourses are intensified through particular discursive and material practices<sup>82</sup> and, ultimately, help us appreciate more clearly how issues of power are dealt with in practice.<sup>83</sup>

For future studies, the concept of CEO mythopoetical behaviour provides a number of opportunities to address questions such as: What constitutes a successful (or failing) CEO mythopoetical behaviour in particular institutional settings? How is the same myth utilised by different CEOs across different industries and geographies? Are there major differences in CEO myth use between slow moving and more dynamic industries? Do certain CEO myths lead to the adoption of particular strategy tools?<sup>84</sup> A number of questions can also be addressed when we focus on the concept of *mythopoetical distance*, for example: How do CEOs use myths during their career and particularly in turnaround situations? Are there differences in mythopoetical distance between CEOs who are perceived to be successful and unsuccessful ones? What kind of organizational settings and designs are more receptive to CEOs that exhibit high mythopoetical distance? Even more challenging questions could focus on the intended or unintended (for example, when the CEO is not aware of the institutional myth) nature of mythopoetical distance. For business school faculty, our work demonstrates the importance of introducing discourse in strategy modules.<sup>85</sup> For practitioners, our study shows that attention needs to be paid to the way CEO-generated myths are managed, who is involved in creating them, what kinds of texts can be used to construct them and ultimately how CEOs utilise these myths during their tenure and career.

## Notes

1. Alvesson and Karreman, 'Varieties of Discourse'; Barry and Elms, 'Strategy Retold'.
2. Hardy et al., 'Discourse as a Strategic Resource'; Heracleous and Barrett, 'Organisational Change as Discourse'; Sillince and Mueller, 'Switching Strategic Perspective'; Suddaby and Greenwood, 'Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimacy'.
3. Brown et al., 'Invisible Walls'.
4. Kornberger et al., 'Changing Gender Domination'.
5. Mueller et al., 'Politics and Strategy Practice'.

6. Colville and Murphy, 'Leadership as the Enabler'; Jarzabkowski and Fenton, 'Strategizing and Organizing'.
7. Finkelstein and Hambrick, *Strategic Leadership*; Hambrick and Mason, 'Upper Echelons'; Pettigrew, 'On Studying Managerial Elites'.
8. Weick and Roberts, 'Collective Mind in Organisations'.
9. Hardy et al., 'Discourse'; Heracleous and Barrett, 'Organisational Change as Discourse'; Suddaby and Greenwood, 'Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimacy'.
10. Johnson et al., *Exploring Corporate Strategy*, 43.
11. Feldman and Orlikowski, 'Theorizing Practice'.
12. Jarzabkowski and Spee, 'Strategy-as-Practice'; Vaara and Whittington, 'Strategy-as-Practice'.
13. Mantere and Vaara, 'On the Problem'.
14. Tsoukas, 'Why Language Matters', 99.
15. Brown and Thompson, 'A Narrative Approach'; Clegg et al., *Power and Organisations*, 290; Fairclough, 'Discourse across Disciplines'; Heracleous, *Discourse, Interpretation, Organisation*, 108.
16. Angwin et al., 'Connecting up Strategy'; Paroutis and Pettigrew, 'Strategizing'.
17. Brown et al., 'The Rhetoric'; Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
18. Mckeown, *The Strategy Book*, 4; McKeown, *Adaptability*, 1.
19. Brown and Rhodes, 'Narrative, Organisations and Research'.
20. Vaara, 'On the Discursive Construction'; Vaara et al., 'Pulp and Paper Fiction'.
21. Vaara, 'Taking the Linguistic Turn'.
22. Lincoln, 'An Early Moment'.
23. Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 117.
24. Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
25. Kaarst-Brown and Robey, 'More on Myth'.
26. Thompson, 'Marketplace Mythology and Discourses'.
27. Jarnagin and Slocum, 'Creating Corporate Culture'.
28. Campbell, *The Hero*, 10; Campbell and Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, 5.
29. Jarnagin and Slocum, 'Creating Corporate Culture', 290.
30. Ibid., 291.
31. O'Gorman and Gillespie, 'The Mythological Power'.
32. Kahl et al., 'The Integration of History and Strategy Research'.
33. Fairclough, 'Discourse across Disciplines'; Fairclough, 'Discourse Analysis'.
34. Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 20.
35. Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 'Critical Discourse Analysis'.
36. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA'.
37. Vaara 'Taking the Linguistic Turn', 29.
38. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA'.
39. Pye and Pettigrew, 'Studying Board Context', 28.
40. Vaara, 'Taking the Linguistic Turn Seriously', 31.
41. Eisenhardt and Graebner, 'Theory Building from Cases'.
42. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 127.
43. Hewlett-Packard, *Annual Report*, 1.
44. Softwaretop100, 'Softwaretop100 update'.
45. Hewlett-Packard Alumni, 'The HP Way'.
46. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA'.
47. Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 117; Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse*, 5.
48. Fairclough, 'Discourse Analysis in Organisation'.
49. Boje, *Narrative Methods*, 39.
50. Thornborrow and Brown, 'Being Regimented'.
51. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA'.
52. Boje, *Narrative Methods*, 41.
53. Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 105.
54. Ibid., 118.
55. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA'.
56. Fiorina, *Tough Choices*, 165.
57. Ibid., 166.

58. Hardy et al., 'Discourse'; Heracleous and Barrett, 'Organisational Change as Discourse'; Suddaby and Greenwood, 'Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimacy', Vaara, 'On the Discursive Construction'.
59. Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'; Whittle and Mueller, 'Bankers in the Dock'; Whittle et al., 'Storytelling and Character'.
60. Ford and Ford, 'The Role of Conversations'.
61. Halsall, 'The Discourse'.
62. Boje, *Narrative Methods*, 26.
63. Tsoukas, 'Why Language Matters'.
64. Weick, *The Social Psychology*, 164.
65. Gergen et al., 'Dialogue', 44.
66. Weick, *The Social Psychology*, 168.
67. Beech and Johnson, 'Discourses of Disrupted Identities'; Boje, *Narrative Methods*; Brown, 'A Narrative Approach'; Coupland and Brown, 'Identities in Action'; Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organisations*.
68. Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
69. Doolin, 'Narratives of Change'.
70. Hardy and Thomas, 'Strategy, Discourse and Practice'; Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
71. Carter et al., 'Strategy as Practice?'.
72. Mckeown, *The Constitution*, 1.
73. Vaara, 'Taking the Linguistic Turn'.
74. Cabantous and Gond, 'Rational Decision Making'; Kornberger and Clegg, 'Strategy as Performative Practice'; Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
75. Balogun et al., 'Selling, Resistance and Reconciliation'; Vaara, 'Taking the Linguistic Turn'.
76. Hardy and Thomas, 'Strategy, Discourse and Practice'.
77. Paroutis and Heracleous, 'Discourse Revisited'.
78. Phillips, 'Telling Organisational Tales'; Whittle and Mueller, 'Bankers in the Dock'; Vaara, 'On the Discursive Construction'.
79. Brown et al., 'The Rhetoric'; Brown and Thompson, 'A Narrative Approach'.
80. Phillips et al., 'Applying CDA', Vaara, 'Taking the Linguistic Turn'.
81. Whittle et al., 'Dialogue and Distributed Agency'.
82. Hardy and Thomas, 'Strategy, Discourse and Practice'.
83. Carter et al., 'Strategy as Practice?'; Carter et al., 'Re-Framing Strategy'.
84. Wright, Paroutis and Blettner, 'How Useful'.
85. Paroutis, Heracleous and Angwin, *Practicing Strategy*, 121.

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