

# **A Conceptualization of Organizing, Organization and Managerial Work Processes, That Recovers the ‘Provisional Bonds’ of Actor-Network Theory, and Rehabilitates the ‘Commitments’ of Computer Supported Cooperative Work**

**Dr Peter Lenney**  
**Professor Geoff Easton**  
Lancaster University Management School  
UK

## **Introduction**

“To breed an animal with the right to make promises – is this not the paradoxical problem nature has set itself with regard to man? And is it not mans true problem..... [As] a naturally forgetful animal” [Nietzsche 1956]

March comments that: “Administrative life seems to be filled with ...seemingly pointless and endless commitments” [March 1984 p20]. He is both right and wrong. Commitments, or commissions as we term them, are indeed endless in administrative life, but are far from pointless - commissions being the seemingly simple pledges, sometimes large sometimes small, that, through many and varied mechanisms, are made, crafted, solicited, conducted and fulfilled by members of an organization; they are the objective-laden seeds of action. Commissions represent the links of the ‘means-ends’ chain, the building blocks of the lateral organization of Burns [1954] and Blau [1955] that really makes organizations tick, and what fills the more recent ‘white space’ of Rummier & Brache’s [1988] organization charts, and even more crucially their business process flowcharts. These objective/action-laden entities are the vital mutable extra-somatic enabling complement of the immutable mobiles of Latour [1987].

In her conversation analytic study of managerial work Boden concludes: “actors create and re-create their organizations .....Their talk ...is the centre of their coordination”[1994 p205]. ‘Coordination is the centre of their talk’ may have been a somewhat better conclusion. It is our contention that at the centre of their talk, and at the centre of their myriad formal and informal somatic and extra-somatic interactions, are the fundamental processes that enable a state of collective endeavour to be achieved and maintained; those of the shaping and sustaining of commissions. We argue that commissions represent the central object of the work of organizing, and that the characteristics of commissions explain much of the findings of the stream of investigations into what has become known as ‘the nature of managerial work’ [reviewed by Hales 1986, 1999 & 2001a/b]. The developed perspective peeling the ‘ontic onion’ [Tsoukas 1994] to ‘expose’ the processual coherence of the myriad, seemingly unrelated, and seemingly frenetic activities of phone calls, coffee machine conversations, memo writing, presentation making and formal meetings. We also contend that viewing organizations and organizing behaviour through this lens opens up new and highly practical empirical avenues in process organization studies, and the possibility of “a new coupling between theory and data” [Langley 1999].

The developed conceptualisation emerged from an abductive reflection on two sequential field engagements [Lenney 2006, 2009]. The first field study comprised an 18-month auto-ethnography of the lead author during his engagement as an interim director. This auto-ethnography was complemented by a 24-month action research driven ethnographic engagement of the lead author alongside several senior managers within a large multi-national company. Any quotes deployed are drawn directly from the empirical material [in italics]. Given the lengthy and broad ranging managerial background of the lead author the field study should quite possibly be viewed as a reflective subjective-personal- introspection [Holbrook 2006] stimulated by field engagements; an attempt to respond to

Bergson’s entreaties for us to dive back into the flux, turn our faces to the sensation, and get to know it [all again!] from within’ [1946]. Though a strong process view [Chia & Langley 2004] characterised the standpoint from which we viewed the empirical material, it was a strong process view coloured by the Whitehead’s perspectives [1925, 1929]. In contrast to Bergson, who advocated an uncompromising pursuit of better process thinking, Whitehead advocated an acceptance of an entitative perception of process as a central and crucial ingredient in our making sense of a processual world. Our ontology might be one of process [Rescher 1996], but we found our epistemology unavoidably and necessarily suffused with one particular entity as we sought to make sense the flowing organizational worlds experienced and observed – that of commissions.

## **Theoretical Antecedents**

The developed conceptualisation of commissions builds on Cooren's conception of 'discursive objects' [1997, Taylor et al 1996], and exploits and develops the perspectives on collaborative work of Flores & Winograd [1980, 1988] and the distributed artificial intelligence literature [Castelfranchi 1995 & 200, Singh 1999], to recover the explanatory potential of the sadly disregarded 'provisional bonds' of Actor Network Theory [Strum & Latour 1984].

From the very centre of the distributed artificial intelligence literature Aube and Sentini conclude: "Within complex species that pursue multiple goals, and who absolutely require as such the cooperation of other agents, commissions [commitments] might well become (be seen as) the most important of all resources! Hence in a social species like ours, evolutionary forces would have favoured and selected out precisely those organisms that have become equipped with powerful mechanisms to insure control over commissions [commitments]" [1996 p15]. It is significant that this quotation has direct resonance in the zoo-anthropological origins of the domain of social theory termed Actor- Network Theory [e.g. Latour 2005, Callon 1986, Law 1992]. Strum & Latour's study of baboons [1984, 1987] led Latour to the following conclusion: "society is what is held together not what holds us together. Social scientists have mistaken the effect for the cause, the passive for the active, what is glued for the glue" [1986 p276]. From Latour's perspective the 'glue' that binds a collective is a heterogeneous array of what he termed 'extra-somatic' resources [1986 p264]. These extra-somatic resources represent ways of linking people that possess some degree of temporal persistence beyond the site of their inception/formation, including the material and inscriptive, and most centrally to our conceptions, "the provisional bonds made by the actors" [Latour 1986 p264]. The Actor- Network studies that sprung from this origin have convincingly demonstrated the crucial role of material artefacts, whether textually inscribed or not, in stabilising, as Czarniawska [2008 p3] puts it, the "otherwise fragile relationships among humans". She continues "Apes [and here she means non-human primates] are distinctly social animals, but relationships end when they part or, finally, with their death. Relationships between people leave traces on paper and on stone and can last for centuries". With the latter point one can hardly disagree; but the implication that relationships end when humans part, other than in that that is 'materialised', is problematic in many dimensions, not least in the disregard of the 'provisional bonds' category of Strum and Latour's extra-somatic resources that are so vital to human collective endeavour. It is a disregard that would appear to be endemic within A-N.T.; one potentially driven by an insistence to ascribe

symmetry of agency between human and non-human actants - an insistence that we, and others, believe profoundly impoverishes the approach [Cooren & Fairhurst 2009; Hernes 2009]. Commissions are, from our perspective, a profoundly fundamental extra-somatic resource, and one through which most, if not all, purposefully deployed 'organizing actants' arise and operate.

The pursuit of CSCW & DAI system software is founded on the speech act theory of Austin [1962] and Searle [1969, 1976, 1979] and their conception of 'commissives' and 'directives'. 'Commissives' are those speech-acts that 'commit' a speaker to some future course of action. 'Directives' are their complement - those speech-acts that solicit 'commissives'. Winograd & Flores, and thence the ensuing field of systems research, label the 'output' of this process a 'commitment'. In their terms commissive speech acts yield commitments. In our terms the commissioning process, speech mediated or not, yields, or at least has the potential to yield, commissions. Surprisingly, despite the conversation-analytic turn taken in the studies of managerial work undertaken by scholars such as Boden [1994], Ford & Ford [1995] and Samra-Fredricks [2000], these fine-grained analyses of conversational conduct would appear to have disregarded the 'ontic level' of speech acts [Tsoukas 1994]. In the managerial work literature only Shotter [1993 p149], Sayles [1964 p27], Watson [2001 p223, 2002 p85], Carroll & Gillen [1987 p44] and Brunsson's studies of local government [1982 p32-33] make any mention of commissions, though they use the term commitments, and it is fleeting.

It would appear that the only authors to have given commissions any attention within the mainstream management literature are Sull, Spinosa and Houldner (Sull, 2003; Sull and Spinosa, 2005; Sull, and Houldner, 2005; Sull and Spinosa, 2007). They use the term commitments and this practice will again be adopted in discussing their work. There are, however, crucial differences between commissions and the commitments of Sull et al. Sull and Spinosa have written a series of papers on cross-functional working and strategy implementation incorporating consulting and management training tools (Sull and Spinosa, 2005). Their purpose is almost entirely normative. Their aim is to persuade managers that there are ways in which what they also call promises can more readily be made and more thoroughly kept. However the road from the positive to the normative is not an easy one. To make this leap they have largely concentrated on major commitments. "Actorial commitments take many forms, from capital investments to hiring decisions to public statements....." (Sull, 2003). This definition of commitments seems to be relatively strategic in nature, that is to say a commitment has to have a major impact on the organization. They argue that "...each commitment exerts both immediate and enduring influence on a company" (Sull et al., 2003). However we would argue that this is only the case for their conception of commitments.

Commissions are crucially also not necessarily, nor most usually, underpinned by any of the fundamental characteristics ascribed to commitments by Sull & Spinosa [2005, 2007] in their re-iteration of Salancik [1977] and Weick's [1995] conceptions: those of individual choice, explicitness, irreversibility and public awareness.

Our theory of commissions is positive and meant to cover all levels of organizational commissions and commissioning – from the mundane to the magnificent. Sull et al's conception is prescriptive and because of that is confined to high level strategic commissions. The conceptions do not compete but rather complement each other – Sull et al's commitments can be seen a most particular form of commission.

It is in the field now labelled 'The Communicative Constitution of Organization' [Putnam & Nicotera 2009] that one finds organization theory that speaks most substantively to the developed conception of commissions. Given the speech act origin of the perspective it may possibly not surprise that such penetration of the organization studies literature has taken place from the direction of communication theory [Cooren 1997 & 2000]. Cooren exploits the semio-narrative speech act theory of Greimas [1987]; a theory that analyses speech acts from the perspective of the 'objects' that they can be seen as putting into circulation among agents. These objects, such as an order, an apology, a request, advice, a question, encouragement, an assurance etc. – Cooren terms 'discursive objects'. He sees these 'texts', as he often re-labels them, circulating among agents acting like 'machines' to speak on behalf of an agent "in the different narrative schemas that that constitute the temporal structure of any organizational form" [Cooren 2000 p 7]. The discursive objects of Greimas include four of modal action-precursory character- 'a wanting to do', 'a knowing how to do', 'a being able to do', and 'a having to do'. In Cooren's analysis this latter category encompasses discursive objects such as pledges, promises, undertakings, commitments and, in our terms, commissions. In a cogent critique of actor-network theory Cooren [1997, 2000] contends that it is the inter-agent transfer of, and constant referral to such discursive objects, as well as the deployment of physical objects, that explains how agents coordinate their activities. He concludes that it is the 'restance' [Derrida ], the extra-somatic 'staying power', of these discursive objects that enables organizations to endure. We agree with his critique and conclusion. CCO is a burgeoning field that has pursued, and is still pursuing, an integrated communicative theory of organizing and organization [Taylor & Van Every 2000, Putnam & Nicotera 2009], but the explanatory possibilities of the 'entitative' character of Cooren's original discursive object perspective has been somewhat left behind, and what we see as its powerful high utility explanatory potential remains largely un-exploited some 14 years on; in the CCO literature and beyond.

As has been noted commissions [commitments], as entities, have only received any substantial attention from researchers and system developers in the fields of computer supported co-operative work and most particularly in the development of multi- agent/distributed artificial intelligence systems. [e.g. Flores & Kremer 2002, Flores & Ludlow 1980, Winograd & Flores 1986, Flores et al 1988, Medina-Mora et al 1992, Denning & Medina-Mora 1995, Kibble 2006, Jennings 1993, Castelfranchi 1998, Singh].

However, the researchers in these fields have used a somewhat unsophisticated notion of commissions, their nature, and of the processes of their solicitation, acceptance and fulfilment (McCarthy, 1994 p80; Suchman, 1987, 1994). As Flores and his associates admitted, their 'language action perspective' approaches would succeed only "...in organizations in which users are relatively confident about their own position, and the power they have within it...(where) there is clarity about what is expected of people and what authority they have....where everyone is working for the good of all..[and]...parties recognize that honest dealings with each other will be the best for their shared benefit" (Flores et al, 1988, p.168). Clearly these conditions are rarely met in practice. The simplification and systematization of commissions and commissioning has not provided an easy hunting ground for groupware programmers or business process consultants. Nor is it proving an easy hunting ground for the massed armies of the D.A.I. research community (Castelfranchi 1995, 2000, 2001; Singh 1999) where, in their pursuit of the 'collaborating computer', they have, and are still, deeply reflecting on how humans go about collaborating (Read 2004). ); and it is to this latter domain's treatment of commitments that we owe the most theoretical debt.

We have chosen to deploy the somewhat different terminology of commissions rather than commitments for several reasons. Firstly the systems development driven conception of commitments has really only had room for the simplest conception of commissions, their characteristics & properties, and, most particularly, an extremely thin and inappropriately techno-rational treatment of their solicitation, acceptance and fulfilment [McCarthy 1994 p80; Suchman 1987, 1994,]. The treatments that have become embedded in this stream of research do not do justice to commissions as 'entities', or to the sophistication and subtlety of the 'commissioning' process. Flores and his co-workers themselves comment that 'language action perspective' based approaches will succeed only: "...in organizations in which users are relatively confident about their own position, and the power they have within it...[where] there is clarity about what is expected of people and what authority they have....where everyone is working for the good of all..[and]...parties recognize that honest dealings with each other will be the best for their shared benefit." [Flores et al 1988 p168]. We contend these conditions are seldom met in practice! Secondly, as previously mentioned, commissions are not necessarily, nor most usually, underpinned by any of the fundamental characteristics ascribed to the commitments of the work of Salancik [1977] and Weick [1995]; nor as re-iterated

and deployed by Sull & Spinosa [2003] in somewhat different form - those of individual choice, explicitness, irreversibility and public awareness. Commissions also bear no conceptual comparison to the commitments of Weick as they are not behaviours that become “an undeniable and unchangeable aspect of the person’s world” [1993 p11] and they are not actions, nor necessarily even the sort of pledge, which binds [Staw 1981]; in these latter senses commissions are definitively not of the same ilk as commitments.

Commissions, these organizationally crucial ‘provisional bonds’, have been left behind by A-NT, under exploited by CCO, and mistreated in the pursuit of Computer Supported Cooperative Work systems (CSCW) and Distributed Artificial Intelligence (DAI) systems [Winograd 1987-88; O’Hare & Jennings 1996]. In the conceptualisation of commissions outlined below we attempt to begin the rehabilitation of the ‘commitments’ of computer supported cooperative work & distributed artificial intelligence, the recovery of the ‘provisional bonds’ of Latour and, building on the CCO foundations laid by Cooren [1997], begin the recovery of what we believe to be some important lost ground.

The paper unpacks these objective-laden inter-subjective entities, these [products of] inter-actions, to reveal their constitution, properties and character. It is an unpacking that, as it ‘reveals’ the character and properties of commissions, sheds illumination on the complex processes of their constitution – their shaping and sustaining.

### **Commissions**

A commission is an undertaking through which someone agrees/accedes to endeavour to do, or refrain from doing, ‘something’; they are the deceptively simple ‘promises-to- endeavour’, sometimes large sometimes small, that are solicited, captured, accepted, conduced and fulfilled in collective endeavour. Commissions are ephemeral entities that rest in the ‘space between’ actors, and for the proximal-relational thinker, it is in this ‘space between actors’ where the real action is [Cooper & Law 1995 p245, Bradbury & Bergmann 2000].

### **Commissions, Intentions & Expectations**

Intentions could be said to have the form of intra-subjective commissions: ‘I’ll attend that meeting; I’m going to support that investment in advertising; I am not going to tell the MD that just yet; I’ll let her do it on her own this time; it’s rubbish to my mind but I’m going to keep quiet; it’s not perfect but it’s good enough; I’m going to call [the FD] and tell him these numbers just don’t make sense’. This would, however, be a potentially misleading perspective. Commissions are fundamentally inter-subjective; intentions are fundamentally intra-subjective. Intentions and expectations are the potential intra- subjective consequence of commissions. Commissions may generate expectations, intentions cannot. Commissions may generate intentions; but may not. Expectations represent the vital assumptions with regard to ones collaborators intentions, and hence their contemporaneous and projected actions, that underpin collective endeavour. In Luhman’s terms, expectations, in their provision of an anticipatory structure, generate the founding condition for connective action [1995], but unlike commissions, they rest, as Hernes puts it, firmly “in the psychic not the social realm” [2008].

Intentions and expectations may be two sides of the same intra-subjective coin, but commissions are the inter-subjective metal from which the coin is cast.

### **Inter-subjectivity & Authenticity**

No purported macro-actor [Callon & Latour 1981, Callon & Law 1982, Czarniawska & Hernes 2005], be it an organization, department, function or government can accept or capture a commission. Commissions are fundamentally inter-subjective; they have a ‘who to whom’ character. Actors may make what might be termed joint commissions, where those individuals involved in making a commission to a third party cannot unilaterally rescind it [Royackers & Dignum 1999]. However, this ‘jointness’ is itself simply a manifestation of other implicit, if not explicit, commissions between the commissioning parties.

Authority can be seen as the capability of an individual to take up commissions on behalf of, or conduce commissions within, a certain set of individuals. An individual with a particular hierarchical position having within their ‘power’ the capability of accepting on behalf of others, and potentially fulfilling through these others, arrays of commissions beyond only personal ones. However, there is only ever the potentiality of a macro-actor in the acceptance of such a commission, as commissions are only ever inter-subjective. In essence the actor of authority, the putative spokesperson of the incipient macro-actor, is taking up a commission of a certain kind, one to engage in the capture of commissions from others. As Latour comments: “Power is the illusion people get when they are obeyed...[they] discover what their power is really made of when they start to lose it. They realise, but too late, that it was ‘made’ of the wills of others” [1986 p 268]

So, only individuals can have intentions & expectations, and only individuals can capture and accept commissions, even though they may do so on -behalf of a seemingly manifest macro-actor. However, as we all know from often bitter experience, an individual’s intentions may not necessarily be congruent or consistent with their manifest commissions. ‘Authenticity’ is hence a much sought characteristic of accepted commissions; though of course,

even if the commission is authentic, if it has been made on behalf of an incipient macro-actor, it remains intrinsically tenuous and fragile.

### **Dimensions & Forms of Commissions**

What, Who, When and How represent the four central dimensions in which commissions are specified. All commissions must have at least the first two of these dimensions. The 'what' refers to the 'content' of a commission e.g. 'we'll take the retailers logo off the 'available-at' tag that's been put on the 'Zest' Adshel poster' and the 'how', its mode of fulfilment e.g. 'I'll talk to the customer tonight and the agency first thing tomorrow'.

Nine forms of commission content / 'what' predominate. Commissions to:

1. Execute a physical act e.g. 'You have to ensure you are at the exec meeting'
2. Execute a cognitive act e.g. 'OK, I'll think about that manufacturing option'
3. Prioritise / sequence e.g. 'Tony, we'll kill this key account problem off first eh?'
4. Focus attention e.g. 'you will need to watch the Chinese financials carefully'
5. Exhibit certain behaviour  
e.g. 'not quite the way I see it, but I'll support you at the board'
6. Allocate resources; for example:
  - a. Financial e.g. 'Zeb OK!!..I'll authorise the spend'
  - b. Physical e.g. 'Let them use that stock – we'll take the hit'
  - c. Man-hours e.g. 'I'll put Sandi on it full time'
7. Endeavour to achieve a projected outcome  
e.g. 'We'll do whatever it takes to get the factory finished on time'
8. Engage in the processes of commissioning, i.e. endeavour to shape and/or sustain commissions  
e.g. 'don't worry, I'll get the German team to use the group system'

In essence all commissions are of forms 6 & 7, as they are all potential resource deployments of some kind in the pursuit of a particular outcome. Commissions give actors access to what might be termed second-order resources in the pursuit of their goals [Aube & Sentini 1995]. In effect all commissions have the form of goal commissions, but with differing extents and degrees of specification in the 'how' dimension. The objective always embedded within a commission represents, one might say, its 'spirit'.

The 'when' dimension in a sense demands no further elaboration; except to stress that it is a fundamental characteristic of commissions that their capture and acceptance are temporally, and most often spatially, dislocated from their potential fulfilment or dissolution. They hold the promise, to use Bratman's phrase, of 'future directed intentions'; they are not 'present directed intentions' [Bratman 1984]. Their crafting and fulfilment are rarely synchronous and hence they must possess temporal persistence of some degree [cf. Law 1994]. At this point it must be stressed that all commissions are commissions to strive to take action of a certain form to achieve a particular goal. There is never certainty of fulfilment. Commissions might be said to sit on a multi-dimensional spectrum of fulfilment probability. The question: 'to what degree, in what dimensions, is this commission likely to be fulfilled' is one that implicitly, if not explicitly, suffused the observed managerial deliberations; not least in those concerned with so-termed organizational change/development programmes.

At first sight the 'who' dimension appears simple. But the essential temporal dislocation of capture and fulfilment ensures it has a problematic nature. The frequency and rapidity of structural and personnel change in the studied organisations, and those personally experienced, made it highly problematic, with carefully crafted, and often critical commissions dissolving, no matter how carefully 'materially inscribed', when individuals "moved on, or out": "When I [European Marketing Director] was in H.Q. the rumour was that [the Global Chief Marketing Officer] was going to resign... came back.... having convinced people in H.Q. that it was the right thing to do... everyone convinced about that ...then the C.M.O. resigned, and his number two! So people here started to get nervous... now in a position don't know if I've got the money or not... global had committed to some money.. nobody more senior than me will make any decision now 'cause they're all so nervous".

This piece of empirical material powerfully exemplifies the intrinsic inter-subjective, individual-to-individual character of commissions; no matter if the individual putatively acts on behalf of a macro-actor. Since Weber the theory of formal organizations has, in its abstractions, mostly deleted the individual, thus ensuring that the theory cannot easily speak to the brute facts of the concrete lived experience of our studied managers. Roles and functions cannot capture, accept or fulfil commissions – only individuals can.

### **Commission Viability, Looseness, Mutation & Strength**

The acceptance of a commission may be fully authentic, but an agent's beliefs at the moment of acceptance may be based on inappropriate assumptions. Commissions may therefore be accepted on the basis of false premises, particularly with regard to their conflict with other commissions; possibly even within the commission portfolio of

the same actor. Most particularly commissions may be made on a provisional basis, particularly where the deployment of scarce resources is involved. Commissions are therefore more or less viable at the point of their inception.

Most commissions are also underdetermined. As Ford & Ford put it: “People regularly make requests and promises, set deadlines, show evidence of completion...but seldom set clear conditions of satisfaction, insist on accountability for fulfilling these conditions, or communicate straightforwardly to renegotiate the performance agreement” [1995 p550]. As a result commissions almost inevitably suffer from what might be termed ‘looseness’; a characteristic exemplified in the following dialogue.

Joe: You know we’ve missed it!?

Katie: But we knew about that..How the hell!?

Joe: Yeah, we knew about it, but we didn’t get to know when they were placing the actual order, which is what I was waiting for...’cause there were loads of amendments and changes to make..didn’t you know that?

Katie: No I didn’t but...

Joe: Well it was almost a total re-design we had to do..but anyway I’d spoken to the purchasing and commercial guys about it back then..told them I needed to know when the order was getting placed OK...so I could put up the amended customer orders against it before....then wham!.. saw Chris last Thursday..said hey thought you’d let me know when the order had been put up..told me it had been done..and that it had been bought!!

Katie: So we can’t.....?

Joe: No! But I didn’t think what we were doing was right anyway!

Katie: What!???

Looseness is an intrinsic property of commissions, as it is rare that their constituent components(s) can be comprehensively or rigorously specified in all their dimensions, because, as Isenberg comments: “..like the proverbial manual for riding a bicycle, an action plan can never be entirely spelled out, because there is always another level of operational specificity” [Isenberg 1986 p259]. As a result, determining the meaning of ‘commission descriptions’, in specific situations, is an important component of the commission fulfilling conduct of organizational actors.

Very often commissions also ‘pass through many hands’ on route to their fulfilment. These ‘tokens’, as the ANT theorists may term them are, “in many hands [and] everyone shapes it according to their different projects...[and] faithful transmission...becomes a single unusual case among many, more likely, others” [Latour 1986 p268]. Commissions therefore, given their inherent looseness, frequently mutate to some degree on route to their fulfilment.

Additionally, even when fully authentic in their acceptance, commissions are accepted with differing degrees of commitment to their fulfilment : “..I’m just fed up of people agreeing, then doing exactly the opposite...I’m gonna get some kind of electrocution system.....”. There can be differing degrees of commitment to a commission, and in this sense commissions could be said to possess differing ‘strength’. When the strength of a commission is low it is more vulnerable to mutation.

### **Commission Durability**

As the following typical quotes well illustrate, commissions often lack durability; they are labile:

“ ..We actually put our bid in for [T]...and got it over [Competitor A]...now in a state where we’ve got it, but I’m sat here thinking should we have it...’cause not sure people support it now”

“Activity was due to start middle of July, that’s what we’d told [X],... but then there was feedback from the factory...there was problems..Wouldn’t hit... ‘til end July...all the media had been booked so...”

“..The budget we set out with, for the [D].., they’re saying they now can’t work to that budget”

The accidental, or deliberately malicious, lack of fulfilment of commissions does, of course, contribute to the vulnerability of collective endeavour. However, most of the commission lability with which organizational actors contend derives from the ‘changes of mind’, ‘changes in people’, ‘changes of situation’, ‘unexpected outcomes’ and the unintended consequences of the turbulent milieu in which they are embedded. Clearly the greater the temporal dislocation of commission inception and fulfilment, or commission duration, the more vulnerable a commission will be.

### **The Inter-connectedness of Commissions**

Commissions rarely exist in isolation. Most often they are embedded in a network of interdependent commissions where they are linked in differing dimensions, and to different degrees, to other commissions, and through those first order connections to many more commissions in a commission network. Networks of commissions are pervaded by interdependency in all their dimensions.

This interdependency is most clearly empirically manifest in the ubiquitous action/project plans of the organizational lives observed. These so-evidenced networks of commissions are very often extensive, and complex, with many of their constituent commissions very tightly coupled, not least in the temporal dimension: “global went off their timeline again...everything kinda feeds off [X]’n what global are doing..y’know..if you’re not clear on that then that will knock back on everything else that you do...how do we get right and ready all the relevant materials to do a compelling account presentation for the sell-in that’s due if we haven’t got... well everything....there’s a real knock-on effect”

Given the previously elaborated properties of commissions, commission networks are clearly a precarious and fragile achievement. Even when their constituent commissions are durable, strong and their scope & degree of specification is comprehensive and tight, the overall scope & degree of specification of ‘networks of commissions’ is most often somewhat ‘loose’. This is a result, one might say, of the commission network equivalent of ‘engineering-tolerance stack-up’: “..there’s been a load of confusion [Jim]..it’s not turned out the way we envisaged..basically now it’s too late to fix anyway, we’ve got to use what’s approved not what [F] wants now..they should be here on Friday, if we get them back you will be able to use them...but [Simon] isn’t in ‘til Friday now so can’t...don’t know when [C] coming back on it now anyway so can’t hang it together now, [Paul] may know...but the [Xs] are due in on the fifteenth!”. The tightly coupled character commission networks, and the properties of their constituent commissions, ensure commission networks are highly precarious – they afford no ease or assurance in any dimension.

It is our contention that it is in the direction of commission networks that social network researchers and others should turn their attention in pursuit of the ‘good network theory organization’ for which Salancik [1995] published a ‘WANTED’ poster.

### **Commission & Commission Network Robustness**

Commissions, given their predominant forms, their prevalent ‘looseness’, mutation, differing strength, and lack of durability are, as a result, inherently precarious. This inherent precariousness would, at first sight, appear to be a wholly negative attribute of commissions. This is an unsurprising perspective given the fundamental place of fulfilled commissions in the achievement of a collective objectives. However, the inherent unreliability that derives from these characteristics is clearly the flip-side of the prized attributes of flexibility and responsiveness. The ‘price’ of the flexibility and responsiveness that the turbulence of the commercial milieu may demand is the inherent unreliability of the crafted commissions. Unreliability is an intrinsic property of commissions; but it is the flip-side, and the necessary consequence of a most crucial property - ‘responsive modulatability’.

Latour contends [1987 p227] that large scale attempts at ordering depend for their success on the deployment of immutable mobiles. In stark contrast we contend that, although such success may well require immutable mobiles of one form or another, such sustainable distancing is far more crucially dependent upon the ‘mutable mobiles’ that we term commissions [cf. Law 1994 p102], and most particularly those resilient- responsive commissions we characterize as robust. Given the turbulence, indeterminacy and complexity of the organizational and business milieu, it is in the ‘spirit’ of their accepted commissions, not in their detail, that one needs ones collaborators to act. These mutable mobiles, these robust, most ‘reliable’ of commissions, are those where the spirit of their embedded objective is at the centre of their capture/acceptance, and where their specification is detailed enough to enable coordination but soft enough to enable their responsive, often improvisational, modulation in the face of inevitable exigencies and unintended consequences. The most resilient and least precarious commission networks are those crafted from such robust commissions, and it is to this craft that we now turn.

### **Commissioning**

The developed model of commissioning is based on the metaphor of a temporal rope, with the strands and threads of the rope representing processes in which the subject actors were engaged [c.f. Marples 1967, p287]; with the length of the rope representing time [Figure 1]. Each of the processes becoming ‘visible’ when the subject managers engage in them, just as the strands and threads of a rope become visible as they surface repeatedly over its length. The cross-section of this metaphorical rope is presented graphically in Figure 2. Although there is no simple temporal sequential relationship between the ‘shaping’ and ‘sustaining’ strands, commissions have obviously to be shaped before they can be sustained. However it is clear that the shaping of commissions can be interpreted as simply the extreme form of commission modulation. There is no ‘beginning’; the ‘shaping’ strand merely has a ‘goal seeking’ character, whereas the ‘sustaining’ strand a ‘goal directed’ one [Sharifi 1988] - see Figure 3.

In the space available, and given the necessary focus on the commission entity itself, it is not possible to discuss fully all of the components of the developed model of commissioning – our focus is therefore on what are seen as the aspects of the model most sensitive to the properties of the commission entity itself, and where there are the most significant theoretical caveats.

### **Sustaining Commissions**

“The value of brute persistence may be vastly more important than the scarcity of references to it in the management literature would suggest” [Peters 1978 p 12].

Commissions are constantly being, both formally and informally, monitored and their meanings maintained and continually elaborated in all their dimensions:

“...lots, ‘n lots, ‘n lots of calls...a whole day of calls..talking to people, getting things done, making sure things were happening, chasing and chasing things

“,. ..constant interaction to keep things on track...constantly I am saying ‘ what has happened with this and what has happened with that, and where are we up to, ‘n what needs to happen now...”

The studied organizational actors spent the vast majority of their time in the sustaining of commissions. As Sayles puts it: “.the actions of each manager affect all the other groups around him, and they must make adjustments before he can shift his own efforts. As one or more groups make what are, for him, less than optimal moves, our manager must make compensating moves. These, in their turn, affect still other groups and so our peripatetic manager must go around the circuit again securing new agreements, commissions [commitments], and assurances from those he had committed to something else only shortly before ....” [Sayles 1964 p26-27]. They expended huge energy in their “keeping things on track”, as they put it, despite a plethora of disturbing contingencies, unintended consequences and a veritable hail of exigencies. Commissions, given their elaborated properties have little momentum; they require a constant input of energy. The intrinsic fragility of commissions and the precariousness of the commission networks crafted therefrom necessitates this perpetual pursuit, with there being, of course, no panopticon [Foucault 1977, Bentham 1995(1785)] from which to conduce commissions. Networks of commissions represent the fragile substance of Strauss et al’s ‘negotiated order’. When this negotiated order is effective, it is effective, not because the ‘negotiated’ commissions are reliable [c.f Sull 2003, Sull & Spinoza 2005], but because they are constantly sustained.

Procedures/routines are utilised to enhance the durability of the commission networks that undergird any repetitive collective action. However, as Mangham points out, even the sustaining of procedures is “. not [an] automatic occurrence but rather must be worked out and sustained by the repeated acts of participants” [1979 p74]. This maintenance, even of the supposedly institutionalised networks of commissions that constitute so-called ‘business processes’, is a perpetual activity; which at times does not necessarily receive what might be seen as the requisite level of attention:“...sometimes there are very dangerous assumptions about what is or is not being progressed” .

Commissions are both the progenitors and descendants of procedures [Singh 1999]. Procedures/routines are methodological prototypes. They represent latent networks of commissions, the fulfilment of which has been found from experience to have had a requisite effect/achieve a particular objective; most usually captured in some form of inscribed actant. The initiation of an established procedure, most usually a commission fulfilment itself, triggering a cascade of commissions that may, or may not, be picked up. The ostensive not always being faithfully represented in the performative [Feldman 2000, Feldman & Pentland 2003]. The latent constituent commissions of a procedure/routine are most often specified in all their dimensions other than one – ‘the who’. Procedures represent scripts, where commissionees are defined in terms of roles/positions, but where specific actors are not identified [Barley 1986 p83]; in this way procedures carry what Weick terms generic subjectivity [1995 p72]. This anonymity, this deletion of identity from their constituent commissions, is fundamental to the stable ostensive ambition of routines [Feldman 2000, Feldman & Pentland 2003]. But, as previously highlighted, roles and functions cannot accept or fulfil commissions, only actors can. The re-insertion of identity into the constituent commissions of routines on their triggering drives their performative character, as the emanating commissions are picked up, interpreted and their fulfilment considered by the individuals actually involved. Substantially repetitive work was however very sparse in the contexts of our subject managers and the procedures when developed were more like dance routines than military marches, well rehearsed, but with substantial scope for improvisation [Feldman 2000]. The commissions that emanate from triggered procedures/routines, just as all other commissions, depend for the achievement of their embedded objective, on their appropriate interpretation at the time of acceptance/fulfilment. Hence one needs ones collaborators to act ‘in the spirit’ of the emanating network of commissions. The most resilient of procedures/routines will therefore be those crafted from robust commissions ‘inscribed’ in technologies of the requisite plasticity to allow the responsive modulation of the routine/procedure in the face of inevitable exigency.



It is strikingly clear that very often the achieved result of commission fulfilment differs substantially from that that was envisaged on its capture. As Boden rightly concludes: “What ‘looks good’ or practical or desirable at T1 often looks different a few days or weeks later, in the light of intervening information and events.” [Boden 1994 p191]; and as Clegg et al comment: “Most managerial policies spawn a set of unintended consequences...” [2002 p491]. The continual monitoring and maintenance of commissions is therefore accompanied by their modulation in the face of exigencies, discrepancies and unintended consequences:

“...we originally said we were gonna put their [retailer’s] logo on the advertising..but we became less keen because as it ended up it was part of a bigger brand campaign and we had to back-track a little bit...we counterbalanced it with a real positive..we’ve sited the ‘six-sheets’ [posters] outside their sites..”

“..what I’ll try to do then is on the basis of this, I’ll try to bail us out of the second lot of product..if I can..this is another one where we’d probably have ordered just 200 but when everyone gets in a room and gets excited it goes to 1500..and everyone was right up for it at the time..then now all of a sudden!...”

Modulations which can at times, given the lability of even the most substantial commissions, comprise the re-crafting of an entire network of commissions: “[Thursday].. managed to get the MD to say yes, to sign off two and half million pounds, got the FD to say yes, got the Euro-Marketing Director to say yes. so we all said yes. went to London.. said to the agency book the TV ‘n let’s be really clear on the outdoor, went off and started to book things.. by the Monday we then had to find a £1 million saving...”

As Hernes (2009 p27) observes Whitehead [(1929) 1978] suggests that we are far better off treating as living things the entities that we craft, and with which we thence contend. Our subject managers would seem to concur. The entities that they craft, commissions, as the vital objective-laden seeds of action that they represent, require a constant input of energy and careful nurturing if they are to survive and thence germinate into appropriate and timely action.

### **Cultivating & Maintaining Relationships**

This second strand of conduct incorporates the cultivating of the personal relationships that underpin the effective shaping and sustaining of commissions [Kaplan 1984]; a thread of conduct that Kotter [1982] termed ‘networking’. Compliance with norms, authority, procedures and the seeking of continuance may be heavily represented in individual rationales for the acceptance and fulfilling of commissions, but the influence of affective factors is at times very strong: “ I’m only doing this for you y’know; if it was anybody else I’d...”. This strand of conduct represents the proactive accrual of social capital [Adler & Kwon 2002] through many and varied mechanisms. Possibly most effectively, through the fulfillment of commissions to others; particularly those commissions where the degree of discretion is high and compulsion low. One could say that commissions represent the currency of coordination, and of social capital, and that, authentic, robust and fulfilled commissions represent the interest payments on the social capital accrued.

### **Shaping Commissions**

“Much of the literature on decision-making....depends on cognitive models of individuals, whereas what seem to be needed are interactional models of people ‘thinking out loud together’.” [Boden 1994 p 84-5]

Organizational actors certainly do a lot of thinking out loud together when shaping commissions. The developed model provides a response to Boden and elaborates upon a form of conduct not dissimilar from what Strauss termed ‘articulation work’ [1985, 1988], and what may be seen through the lens of A-N.T. as interest aligning enrolment processes [Callon & Law 1982, Latour 1986].

It is at this point that the apparent absence from the model of ‘decision-making’ as a process in which managers are engaged should be explained. In the terms of the model decision is a way-mark not a process. Decision-making labels the transition from the shaping to the sustaining of commissions; the point when commissions are captured/accepted. In Whitehead’s terms decision is a fundamental event – a point in time-space when entities emerge [Hernes 2009 p55]; the entities that emerge in the decision event being commissions. If decision is seen as the event when commissions emerge the commissions model can be seen as fundamentally compatible with Luhmann’s perspective that ‘an organization that ceases to make decisions ceases to be an organization’; no decision, no commissions, hence no commission network, and therefore no organization. If there is no acceptance of commissions – ‘no picking up’ - the way-mark we term decision is not passed and the entire shaping endeavour is mere utterance [Whitehead (1929), 1978, Hernes 2009 p80]. Or as one of our subjects put it: “N.A.T.O. – no action, talk only”. However, as this manager was well aware, and as has been discussed, commission acceptance, and the passing of the way-mark termed decision does not necessarily mean that the emerging commissions will be fulfilled; their acceptance may not have been authentic, and even if authentic, the commissions may well not be robust. A decision event simply represents the beginning of the often arduous and always relentless process of their sustaining.

The shaping strand of conduct comprises strands and several threads of conduct. The Reporting/Informing and Sensing/Information Seeking threads require little further explanation.

However it should be noted that the single most intense activity exhibited by the subject actors, within these complementary threads of conduct, was the monitoring of, and reporting on, states of commission/commission network fulfillment in all their dimensions. Given the often extensive-complex character and precariousness of commission networks this is unsurprising.

The ‘mindfulness generating’ thread of conduct requires some minor elaboration. The following extract exemplifies this particular thread of conduct.

“This is not to worry any one... but I want you guys to know where the business is... you can see from this that it is not in a fully healthy shape ...our operating profit is now..... we are worse than we were last year at this point...product development costs are up selling costs are up and marketing costs are up...we’ve got a higher fixed cost base now and sales are not growing as predicted ....you need to think very carefully about how and where we spend money and we've got to get the sales line going again..... we don't want to get into a negative spiral of sales going down pushing down promotional expense in response and sales then going down again.... we have to have a way of controlling cost to focus cash on supporting sales”

The subject involved is, of course, sharing information in this endeavour, but that is not his central purpose. He is attempting to make his team ‘mindful’ of certain aspects of the commercial situation, in order that they modulate their own shaping and sustaining of commissions in response. His purpose is to exert a form of premise control as Perrow terms it [1986 p130], and influence the frames of reference [Goleman 1985, Goffman 1974] that his subordinates employ in their shaping and sustaining of commissions. A process that was often facilitated by the crafting and promulgation of explicit, if not always detailed, rules, policies, credos and vision/mission statements etc. Just as their brethren - procedures, these represent purposeful distal constructs deployed to influence the proximal.

The four constituent threads of the envisioning strand of conduct – ideating, option crafting, projecting, and the accepting & capture of commissions, are simple labels for forms of conduct that are easily discerned. Little further elaboration is intended, in the current paper. However, the remaining thread of conduct in the commission crafting strand, that labelled sensemaking, requires some attention. As elaborated below most aspects of the Weick et al’s conception of sensemaking. [Weick 1969, 1979, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obsfeld 2005, Gioia 1986, Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Gioia & Thomas 1996] make it the ideal label for this crucial thread of commissioning conduct. However we hold a serious discomfort with the seeming distortion of one of the concept’s core attributes. The meaning of the term sensemaking has been stretched in many directions by many scholars, but possibly most problematically into the future. With prospective sensemaking [Donnellon et al 1986 p49; Gioia et al 1994 p378] and future perfect thinking [Gioia et al 2002] in particular, attempts have been made to broaden the sensemaking concept to encapsulate the pervasive ‘what nextness’ [Boden 1994 p193] of the managerial deliberations that we encountered in the empirical material. Based on the extant literature a case could be argued for labelling the entire envisioning strand of conduct ‘sensemaking’. However these theoretical elaborations, though possibly linguistically and philosophically sound, struggle to adequately capture the speculative ideational character of the option crafting and projecting threads of conduct. Like Emirbayer and Mische we argue that attention must shift away from the ‘retrospectivity’ of sensemaking to better illuminate how organizational actors “give shape and direction to future possibilities” [1998 p984] and highlight the central imaginative-projective dimension of organizational agency. As Bruner comments: “[The second universal of human reflexivity] is our dazzling capacity to envision alternatives, to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving. So while it may be the case that in some sense we are ‘creatures of history’, in another sense we are autonomous agents as well” [1990 p109]. The sensemaking process, as initially conceptualised by Weick, was explicitly and intrinsically retrospective [1969, 1979 1995] and as Gioia et al themselves emphasise, sensemaking is ‘past-focused’ [2002 p 622]; we leave it so. The enactive aspect of the sensemaking concept [Weick 1979 p147; 1969 p63] is one of the two characteristics that render sensemaking the appropriate label for this thread of the commissioning process - “Actors create and constitute the environment to which they react; the environment is put there by the actors in the organization and no-one else.” [Weick 1969 p28]. Weick’s conception of sensemaking [1995] explicitly accepts that what actors sense, investigate, interrogate and interpret, i.e. what they make sense of, is determined by what they pay attention to, their ‘appreciative system’ [Vickers 1965, Pye 1995 p454], and that the determination of foci-of-attention is not a simple techno-rational process. Sensemaking, as Lyles & Mitroff [1980 p113] point out, is, at its very base a resource constrained socio-political process. “...management realities are not created internally in the manager’s mind, nor externally by the organization and its structure, but constructed dialogically between managers and others in everyday conversations” [Cunliffe 2001 p354]. It is this intrinsically social nature of sensemaking that forms the second key part of its attraction as a thread label. The subject actors deliberately crafted the degree of concordance as to ‘what is’, and ‘why what is, is’, that they perceived as necessary for the crafting of commissions.

There was a lot of ‘talking things through’. This ‘thinking out loud together’ [Boden 1994] suffused the everyday commissioning conversations of the subject actors; it comprised an intense, at times fraught, collision of ideas, insights, perspectives, judgements, information, presumptions, expectations and explanations.

Through these deliberations they melded the multi-subjective into the inter-subjective [c.f. Wiley 1988]; socially constructing the ‘alterity’ [Thayer 1988 p254] on which they would found their crafting and capture of commissions/commission networks. The central outputs of the commission crafting strand of conduct are of course the ‘who, what, how and when’ of individual commissions and commission networks; most often materially evidenced in the ubiquitous action arising notes, project plans, programs, budgets and strategy documents. However, the essence of its output was seen to be concordance as to the ‘why’ – a crucial component of which was the ‘alterity’, the ‘sensemake’, on which the putative action was to be based.

As has been noted given the intrinsic precariousness of commission networks, the prevalent ‘invisibility’ of commission fulfilment (due to its usual spatial and intrinsic temporal dislocation), the very often weak and unreliable feedback loops that pertain, the acceptance of potentially conflicting commissions, and the aforesaid shaky epistemic foundations of the emergent ‘strategies’, the subject actors required their collaborators to act in the ‘spirit’ of their commissions. In their pursuit of a less arduous sustaining challenge and more resilient and responsive commission networks, our subjects continually sought what we have described as robust commissions. Given their tightly coupled character all commission networks are intrinsically precarious and require relentless attention, but those networks built of robust commissions are more resilient and responsive. The deliberative-concordancing character of the commission crafting process was fundamental to the pursuit and capture of such commissions.

The resilient-responsive character of commission networks constructed from robust commissions could be argued to represent the fundamental micro-foundations of the adaptive loose coupling of organizations (Weick 1976, March & Olson 1975, March 1981), and the intrinsically deliberative-concordancing character of their commissioning the key to the ‘interlocking of behaviours’ (Weick 1979) that underpins such responsiveness.

## **A Concluding Reflection**

Commissions represent a major and essential component of Latour’s heterogeneous organizational glue, but they have been largely ignored within A-N.T. and organization studies. Thankfully they have been kept alive, though somewhat mistreated during their captivity, within the D.A.I. literature. We contend that the developed entitative conception of commissions is an abstraction that usefully recovers the provisional bonds of Actor-Network Theory, and rehabilitates the systems driven conception of commitments. We believe commissions provide a powerful entitative lens through which to view organizing and organizations, and that commissions represent a highly researchable object of analysis in empirical studies of organizational process.

The commissions approach outlined represents a fundamentally relational perspective that sees organizations as complex “networks of active connections” [Cooper 2005]. It is one that collapses the differentiation-integration, mechanistic-organic, formal-informal organization and macro-micro dichotomies through the deployment of a conceptual entity that reveals both structure and process to be “cut from the same cloth” [Bakken & Hernes 2006 p1608]; or possibly more metaphorically accurately - as being woven, in the main, from the same fibres. The conceptual entity of commissions shines a penetrating light on the recursive shaping of one by the other, and as a result reveals a potentially crucial underlying mechanism of organizational autopoiesis [Bakken & Hernes 2003]. By throwing an entity laden light on the recursive-structural relationship of process and structure [Giddens 1984] we believe the developed perspective contributes to bridging the conceptual gap between, what some would term, the behavioural reductionism of Weick - that fails to account for the residual ‘structural’ effects of action, and a Parsons inspired structuralism - that does not account for how, and from what, structure emerges [Bakken & Hernes 2003 Chapter 4]. It is also a conceptualisation that, through the objective-laden character of the commission entity, brings purposeful projective agency back to the centre stage of analysis (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). As a result we believe the commission/commissioning concept outlined succeeds in responding to the ambitions of the rapidly emerging field of process organization studies to develop theory that is proximal and fine grained enough to illuminate the concrete experience of action, whilst still retaining the conceptual capacity for dealing with the distal itself [Cooper & Law 1995] - what might be termed the more stable contexts for action – roles, functions etc. [Hernes 2008].

Latour rightly contends that provisional bonds are fast-decaying and that much effort is expended in the attempted shifting of these so-termed social ties to other supposedly more durable artefactualised/quasi-artefactualised links [2005 p66]. However, we contend that this is a strong argument for focussing even more on the elucidation of their character, and on the processes of their shaping and sustaining. Particularly as one can argue that artefacts, though part of actor-networks, only come to be a part through the facilitative-distanciation roles they play in the commissioning processes of human organizational actors [Hernes 2008 p65]; roles they only continue to play if they themselves are constantly sustained [Law 1994 p102].

Commissions are indeed labile, and, whether robust or not, require a relentless attention to their sustaining in order to ensure their survival, and appropriate fulfilment.

They are meta-stable and so, though they hold much potential energy, with their intrinsic objective-laden character, they require a constant input of kinetic energy to achieve and maintain the necessary organizational persistence and viability. Their shaping and sustaining constitutes the essence of managerial work, and their sustaining represents its most demanding component.

The commissioning model addresses the lacuna in the managerial work literature highlighted by Colin Hales, in answering his question - 'why do managers do what they do' [1999], i.e. conduct themselves in the way they do. The developed model responds to Hales' question at the 'ontic' level at which it is asked; at the 'actual level', as the critical realists may term it, attempting to reveal the 'deeper processes'/'mechanisms' of managerial work [Sayer 1992]. In Hales' terms the shaping and sustaining of commissions represent the behaviours that link manifest conduct to performance outcomes. The rope of conduct model elaborated may represent at least the beginnings of the much-sought explanatory account of the nature of managerial work. It is an account that appropriately conveys the processual dynamics of managerial work and one that eschews the highly static explanatory concepts of the managerial work literature. All of the preceding being concepts that are clearly explainable through, and simply encompassed by, the developed model.

The entity founded experience-near [Geertz 1979 p226] abstraction of commissions easily feeds back into concrete experience [Bakken & Hernes 2006 p1609], and hence enables an easy bridge to be made between the theorising of organizational behaviour, social psychology, the managerial work literature and the 'competencies of conduct' that are the focus of the managerial skills arena. Though university management/business schools may not be the place for extensive socio-political skill development, the commissions/commissioning model provides an easily communicable conceptual framework that can be used to draw together and cohere, in an enlightening and demonstrably practical way, the insights of the organizational behaviour & politics, organizational sociology and social psychology disciplines, with the insights of the managerial work literature. As one of our colleagues commented, 'teaching students about management in a lecture theatre is like trying to teach swimming in a damp room'. We believe that the thoughtful pedagogical deployment of the developed model could, however, make the classroom just a little more humid. It is a belief we are currently testing out with our MBA class.

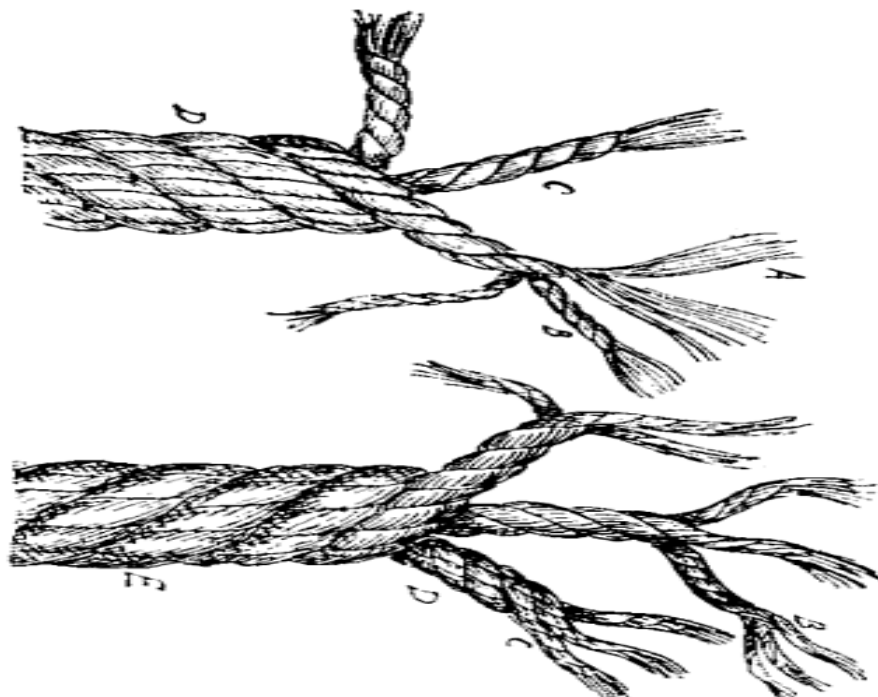


Figure 1

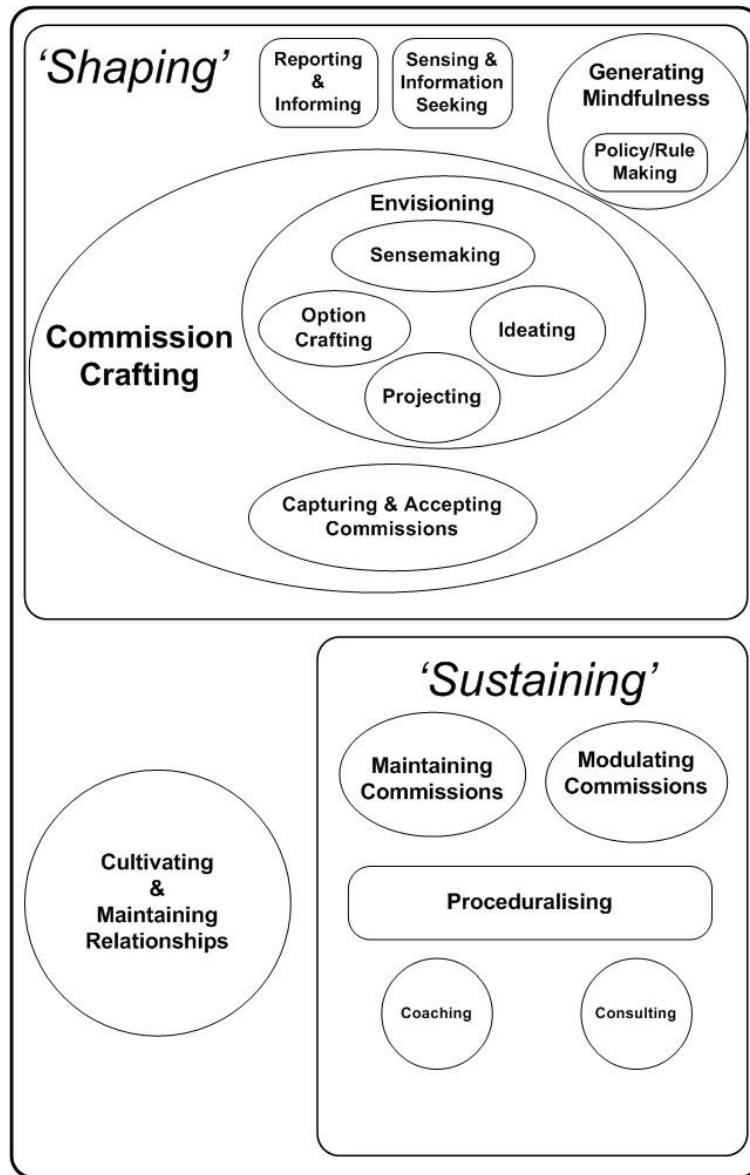


Figure 2

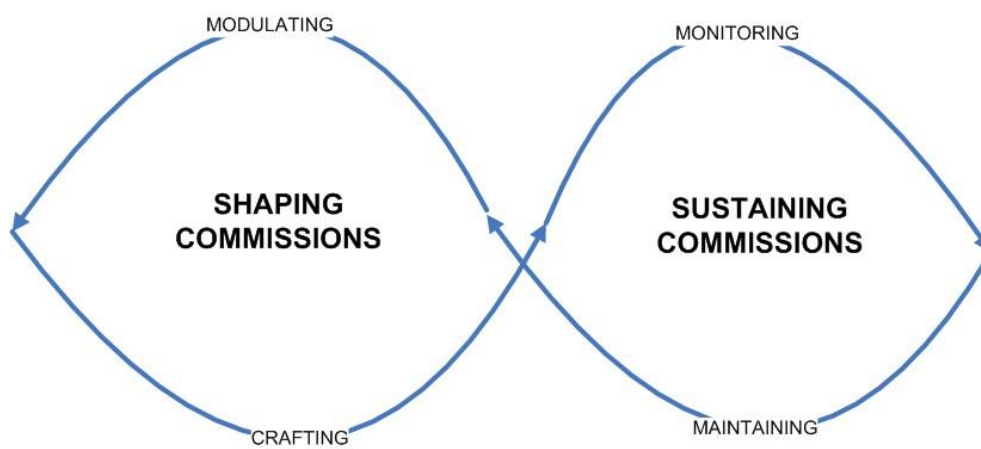


Figure 3

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