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Cognition-Based Strategy Model: A Cognitive Approach to Organizational Strategy Formulation and Implementation

Agung Feinnudin[1]✉, Puji Wahono[2]

[1,2]Universitas Negeri Jakarta

a.agung@mhs.unj.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores how cognitive factors influence strategy formulation and implementation within a public sector organization. Using a qualitative approach, comprising in-depth interviews, exploratory questionnaires, and documentation analysis, it was found that strategic decisions are not solely based on rational, data-driven analysis but are deeply shaped by cognitive frames, mental maps, and the subjective interpretations of leaders. Variations in strategic intent, perception of risks and opportunities, and resistance to change often stem from individual cognition rather than structural constraints. These findings highlight the important role of mental models and strategic intuition in shaping policy direction and suggest that aligning cognitive understandings across units is essential for coherent strategy execution. The study offers both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for improving strategic alignment through cognitive tools and organizational learning.

Keywords: Decision-Making, Leadership, Cognitive Frames, Cognitive Mapping, Public Sector, Organization.

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced and unpredictable business environment, organizations face mounting pressure to develop strategies that are flexible, adaptive, and responsive to change [1]. Traditional strategic models—rooted in rational analysis and linear planning—are increasingly seen as inadequate for managing the complexity and volatility of modern markets. In response, a cognitive approach to strategic management has gained traction. This approach focuses on how individuals and groups within organizations perceive, process, and respond to information when making strategic decisions.

Recent studies underscore the importance of incorporating cognitive perspectives into strategic decision-making. Kulinich et al. [1] emphasize that under conditions of uncertainty, understanding how managers mentally process information is vital for crafting adaptive and responsive strategies. It's not just about analyzing external conditions—it's also about how decision-makers internally interpret and give meaning to those conditions. These mental frameworks can significantly influence the direction and success of the strategies chosen.

Further evidence supports the view that strategy formulation grounded in cognitive awareness leads to better alignment with organizational realities. Hagoug [2] found that when strategies reflect how managers perceive and interpret the business landscape, decisions tend to be more accurate and relevant. This highlights the value of integrating analytical tools with cognitive insight.

The impact of managerial cognitive abilities on organizational performance is also well-documented. Adani and Achmadi [3] highlight that a deep understanding of the external environment, combined with cognitive adaptability, contributes to the development of more effective strategies. Zen et al. [4] add that when employees share a clear understanding of strategic goals and processes, their engagement increases and the implementation becomes more effective. Taken together, these insights point to the need for a more human-centered, cognitively informed approach to strategy. The purpose of this article is to explore how cognitive aspects influence strategic decision-making and why embracing this approach is essential for organizations operating in uncertain and dynamic environments.

Cognition, broadly defined as the mental activity involved in acquiring and processing information, has become an increasingly important focus in organizational research. Rather than treating cognition as a set of isolated functions, recent studies emphasize how cognitive processes—perception, attention, memory, and information processing—interact to shape how decision-makers interpret their environments and make strategic choices [5].

Perception, for instance, plays a pivotal role in how managers identify strategic threats and opportunities. It acts as a cognitive filter, determining how external signals are interpreted and whether they are viewed as risks, possibilities, or noise [6]. However, perception alone does not dictate strategic direction; attention determines which signals are noticed in the first place. Ocasio [7] argues that attention is not randomly

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allocated—it is guided by organizational structures, routines, and even power dynamics, which influence what information becomes strategically salient.

Memory adds a temporal dimension to cognition, enabling decision-makers to recall relevant past experiences and apply lessons learned to current challenges. Hitch et al. [8] emphasize that memory doesn't function merely as a static archive but plays an active role in shaping expectations and framing decisions. In volatile environments, this ability to access and recontextualize past experiences can be a critical asset—or a liability, if outdated assumptions go unchallenged. All these elements converge in the process of information integration. Jiang [9] highlights that strategic effectiveness depends on how well individuals can connect perceptual cues, focused attention, and stored knowledge into a coherent understanding of complex situations. This integrative processing enables managers to move beyond surface-level observations and craft nuanced responses tailored to rapidly changing environments.

Together, these cognitive processes form a dynamic system that underlies strategic thinking and action. Rather than viewing cognition as a background function, current research positions it as a central driver of how strategies are formulated, interpreted, and executed. This growing recognition underpins the cognitive turn in strategic management studies, where understanding how decisions are made is just as important as what decisions are made.

The classical rational approach to strategy has long dominated strategic management thinking. Rooted in economic theory, it assumes that decision-makers act rationally, operate with complete information, and follow logical, structured steps to identify optimal solutions. In this model, strategy is a linear process of analysis, planning, and execution, guided by clear goals and objective data. However, this assumption of perfect rationality often falls short in real-world organizational settings, where uncertainty, ambiguity, and incomplete information are the norm.

In contrast, the cognitive perspective on strategy acknowledges the complexity of human decision-making. Rather than assuming rational calculation, cognitive strategy emphasizes how individuals and groups *think*—how they perceive, interpret, remember, and respond to strategic problems [10]. This view highlights the importance of internal mental processes, including biases, heuristics, and personal experience, in shaping how managers make sense of dynamic environments and navigate strategic choices. Within the cognitive approach, three central concepts—cognitive frames, mental maps, and strategic intent—help explain how strategy is formed not only through formal analysis but through mental representation and interpretive processes.

Cognitive Frames. Cognitive frames refer to the mental templates individuals use to interpret information and assign meaning to events. These frames are shaped by personal experiences, organizational roles, and cultural backgrounds. While they can help decision-makers filter complexity and focus on what matters, they can also act as blinders, leading to rigid interpretations or resistance to change. Frames play a particularly crucial role during strategic inflection points, where the ability to reframe a situation can determine whether an organization adapts or fails.

Mental Maps. Mental maps are internal cognitive models that individuals use to represent the structure of the business environment, including key actors, relationships, and causal linkages [11]. These maps help strategists organize fragmented information and make informed predictions about possible outcomes. However, like cognitive frames, mental maps can be incomplete or distorted, especially in fast-changing contexts. Updating these maps is essential for effective sensemaking and decision-making.

Strategic Intent. Strategic intent refers to an organization's long-term purpose or vision that serves as a guiding compass for decision-making. It provides a sense of direction that goes beyond short-term plans and helps align individual cognition with collective goals [12]. Strategic intent also plays a motivational role by focusing attention, reinforcing commitment, and encouraging innovative responses in the face of uncertainty.

Cognitive Map. A cognitive map is a powerful visual tool that helps individuals or groups map out their thoughts, beliefs, and understanding of a specific problem or situation. Developed by Eden and Ackermann [13], this model allows organizations to visually represent the relationships between various concepts, making it easier to understand how different ideas are connected. By laying out these connections, cognitive maps reveal the assumptions, values, and perceptions that drive strategic decisions, providing insight into the mental models that influence decision-making. Additionally, cognitive maps help identify areas of conflict or consensus within an organization, facilitating a more nuanced approach to strategy development.

Dynamic Capabilities. The concept of dynamic capabilities was introduced by Teece [14] to explain how organizations adapt to rapid and often unpredictable changes in their environment. This framework suggests that competitive advantage does not solely rely on resources but also on the organization's ability to sense, seize, and transform its capabilities in response to shifting market conditions [15]. These three core activities—sensing (identifying emerging opportunities and threats), seizing (capitalizing on these opportunities), and transforming (reconfiguring resources to adapt to changes)—help organizations remain agile and responsive in a dynamic business landscape. In a cognitive context, dynamic capabilities emphasize the role of mental flexibility and adaptive thinking in organizational success.

Cognitive Leadership Model. The cognitive leadership model underscores the critical role of leaders in shaping the thinking and perceptions within an organization. Leaders are not just decision-makers; they also influence how their teams process and interpret information, which ultimately affects strategic outcomes. This model highlights the importance of a leader's ability to manage the organization's cognitive processes, guiding individuals through complexity and uncertainty [16]. By actively shaping the interpretation of information and aligning it with organizational goals, leaders help create a shared understanding that drives decision-making and strategic action across all levels of the organization.

A wealth of research has examined the role of cognition in organizational strategy, highlighting its critical function within a framework that links antecedents, structure, and processes of strategic cognition to organizational outcomes [17]. Studies have also delved into the impact of cognitive biases on strategic decisions, particularly how these biases interact with environmental changes and influence decision-making [18]. Moreover, understanding the mental processes and behavioral limitations of decision-makers has been shown to provide organizations with a competitive advantage by uncovering strategic opportunities that competitors might overlook [19]. These studies emphasize the growing importance of cognitive processes in shaping effective organizational strategies.

Research Gaps. Despite the robust body of literature on cognitive strategy, several research gaps remain that warrant further exploration. First, there is insufficient understanding of how individual cognitive processes intersect with broader organizational dynamics in the strategic decision-making process. Second, there is a notable need for the development of more integrative models that combine cognitive factors with other elements such as organizational culture, structure, and technology. Third, empirical studies testing the application and effectiveness of cognitive-based strategies across various industries and cultural contexts are still limited. Addressing these gaps will significantly deepen our understanding of how cognitive factors influence both strategy formulation and organizational performance. The research framework using the SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) model is as on Figure 1.

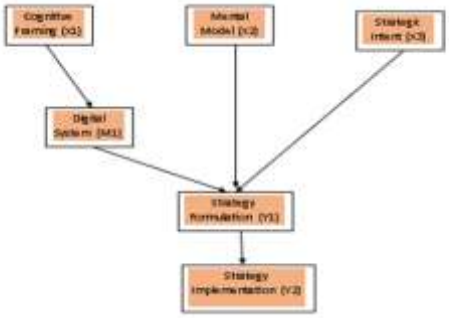

Figure 1. Research Framework

2. Research Method

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach supported by a single case study. This design aligns with the study's central aim: to investigate how cognitive processes shape the formulation and implementation of strategies within an organization. Exploratory qualitative research is particularly well-suited for examining complex and internal phenomena such as perception, interpretation, and meaning-making—elements that are essential to the strategic thinking of organizational actors [20].

The case study method is applied to facilitate a holistic and in-depth exploration of cognitive dynamics within an actual organizational setting. The case serves as the unit of analysis and provides a means of studying the phenomenon in its natural context. Case study research is valuable when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred, allowing for a richer understanding of interactions between cognition and organizational strategy [21]. Additionally, if sufficient data becomes available, a quantitative extension using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) may be employed to test the statistical relationships between relevant cognitive variables and strategic outcomes [22].

The research is conducted within a public sector organization—the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM)—which has implemented strategic approaches grounded in systems thinking and managerial innovation. This organization was chosen based on its participatory strategy formulation processes and the integration of digital information systems to support strategic decision-making. Participants are selected through purposive sampling and include individuals directly involved in strategic processes. These include heads of work units, sub-directors, planning team members (Pokja), procurement officials (PPK), and operational staff responsible for implementing strategic initiatives. The selection focuses on individuals with extensive experience and active involvement in the organization's strategic operations to ensure data relevance and depth [23].

Data collection follows a triangulation strategy comprising in-depth interviews, exploratory questionnaires, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key personnel to gain insights into their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of strategic decision-making. This method allows for flexible, in-depth exploration of how actors assess risks, understand environmental conditions, and articulate strategic goals [24].

Exploratory questionnaires are administered to complement the interviews and assess broader cognitive dimensions, including risk perception, strategic awareness, cognitive framing, and strategic intent. These instruments provide a snapshot of shared and divergent views within the organization. In addition, document analysis is carried out using

internal organizational records such as strategic plans, implementation reports, meeting minutes, and strategy maps. These documents help contextualize the data and verify cognitive patterns identified through other methods [25].

Data analysis employs both cognitive mapping and thematic analysis. Cognitive mapping is used to visualize participants' mental models of the organization's strategy and decision-making logic. Drawing from Eden and Ackermann's [13] approach, the maps reflect the relationships between strategic concepts and uncover dominant cognitive patterns and potential biases among decision-makers. Thematic analysis is conducted to organize the data into coherent themes. This involves a step-by-step process of open coding, categorizing key ideas, and interpreting thematic relationships across the dataset. The themes of interest include how individuals perceive risk, interpret the strategic environment, articulate long-term goals, and apply personal heuristics or mental shortcuts in their strategic reasoning [26].

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study, drawn from in-depth interviews, exploratory questionnaires, and internal documentation, reveal that the organization's strategic formulation process is not strictly governed by rational, analytical procedures. Instead, it is deeply shaped by the cognitive patterns of key decision-makers. Strategic choices often emerge not through systematic evaluation of all available data but via the lens of personal judgment, intuition, and prior experience. This became particularly evident during moments of policy shift, such as a significant change in national energy directives. In such instances, decisions were influenced less by empirical risk assessments and more by managerial impressions regarding the security of energy supply, institutional image, and anticipated public reaction. These choices were shaped by underlying mental models and strategic intuitions, demonstrating how cognitive processes function as shortcuts—or filters—that influence how issues are interpreted and acted upon.

Analysis of qualitative data uncovered the presence of diverse cognitive frames across leadership levels. Each leader interprets risk, opportunity, and organizational priorities through a unique mental lens shaped by their background, role, and professional orientation. For instance, some viewed the digital transformation initiative as a game-changing opportunity to streamline operations and improve service delivery. Others, however, perceived the same initiative as a threat, citing insufficient human resource capabilities and internal resistance. These contrasting perceptions led to fragmented execution of the digitalization strategy, with different departments advancing at varying speeds and levels of commitment.

The use of cognitive mapping techniques made these mental representations visible. It became clear that strategic actors rely on simplified internal "maps" to navigate complex institutional and policy landscapes. These mental maps organize how actors understand external pressures, organizational strengths, and potential pathways forward. While these tools help manage complexity, they also introduce a consistent pattern of bias—most notably, a strong anchoring on prior experiences and outcomes. As a result, strategic responses tend to be path-dependent, replicating past solutions rather than generating novel ones.

Another critical insight is the role of strategic intent in aligning day-to-day decisions with long-term institutional goals. In this organization, strategic intent typically reflects broader mandates such as national development priorities, energy sovereignty, or good governance. However, how these intentions translate into strategy varies significantly, depending on how leaders internally rank competing priorities. A recurring theme in the interviews was the prominence given to values like transparency and accountability in asset governance. Even when this emphasis conflicted with calls for operational efficiency or digital modernization, leaders continued to frame transparency as a top strategic concern. This cognitive prioritization heavily shaped both the direction of policy and the sequence of implementation.

In effect, strategic intent functions as more than a formal mission statement—it acts as a cognitive anchor that informs how leaders select, justify, and advocate for certain strategic initiatives. Yet, this anchoring also introduces rigidity; long-term goals remain stable, but the tactics employed to achieve them often lag behind evolving external conditions. Cognitive factors extend beyond formulation and continue to shape the strategy during its implementation. Leadership preferences, thinking styles, and unspoken assumptions were all found to leave a clear imprint on how strategic plans were rolled out. Several operational staff shared that specific initiatives reflected the convictions and leadership philosophy of upper management more than objective organizational needs. In these cases, the form of the strategy remained intact, but its spirit—its core rationale—was not clearly communicated or widely shared.

Resistance to change, commonly interpreted as a rejection of the strategy itself, was more accurately a reflection of cognitive dissonance: many employees lacked a shared understanding of why the strategy mattered or how it logically fit into the bigger picture. This cognitive disconnect hindered internal buy-in and contributed to gaps between planning and execution. Essentially, without collective meaning-making and aligned mental models, implementation efforts became fragmented, uneven, and, at times, symbolic rather than transformative.

The findings of this study reinforce existing scholarly insights into the cognitive dimension of strategy-making. Gavetti [27] argues that effective strategic leadership requires both *sensemaking*—the interpretation of complex, often ambiguous situations—and *foresight*—the ability to envision and

prepare for possible futures. The current study supports this view, showing that leaders at the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) rely heavily on cognitive framing and intuitive judgment when navigating policy shifts and institutional uncertainty.

Similarly, Teece's concept of *dynamic capabilities*—which consists of the abilities to sense, seize, and transform in response to environmental changes—was evident in how decision-makers prioritized strategic intent over efficiency [28]. Their ability to recognize opportunities (such as digitalization) and craft strategies that reflect institutional vision, even amid fragmented execution, echoes Teece's framework. However, this study adds nuance by showing that these capabilities are not just organizational but deeply embedded in individual cognition and leadership styles.

The results also align with Eden and Ackermann's work on *cognitive mapping* [13]. This tool, as shown in the study, was not merely a way to visualize decision paths but became instrumental in revealing how mental models shape strategy formulation and implementation. Leaders interpreted risks and opportunities through distinct mental maps—highlighting that strategy is often the outcome of negotiated meaning rather than unified logic.

Furthermore, the presence of resistance during implementation echoes Argyris and Schön's theory of *organizational learning*, particularly the tension between espoused strategies and actual behaviors [29]. The mismatch between strategic intent and shared cognition led to symbolic compliance and fragmented implementation—mirroring their concept of "single-loop" versus double-loop learning. The insights gained from this research carry several practical implications First, the idea that strategy cannot be separated from cognition demands a shift from purely data-driven models to approaches that also account for intuitive and interpretive processes. This supports the growing advocacy for *behavioral strategy* [30], which recognizes bounded rationality and subjective judgment as intrinsic to strategic decision-making.

Second, the findings suggest that strategic cognitive development should become a formal component of leadership development programs. Training designed to raise awareness of cognitive biases, expand mental frames, and improve sensemaking skills could enable more adaptive, reflexive leadership. Kahneman's work on *System 1 and System 2 thinking* reinforces the need to help leaders balance intuition with deliberation [31]. Third, the value of tools like *cognitive mapping*, *scenario planning*, and *strategic dialogue* becomes clear [32], [33]. These tools not only help surface hidden assumptions but also promote shared understanding across organizational units. This study highlights that fragmented cognition leads to fragmented strategy—thus, cognitive alignment should be treated as a strategic resource in itself. Finally, the research underlines the importance of cultivating a *learning organization* [34], where cognitive integration and continuous sensemaking are embedded in the strategic routine. This could help mitigate the disconnect between strategic formulation and actual implementation.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that strategy is not just shaped by formal analysis but also by how leaders perceive, interpret, and give meaning to complex realities. Decision-making is strongly influenced by mental models, past experiences, and subjective judgments, which guide both the direction and implementation of strategy. When cognitive frames differ across units, it affects how strategies are prioritized and executed, often leading to misalignment. The success of strategic efforts, therefore, depends not only on clear goals but also on how well shared understanding is built across the organization. Recognizing the cognitive side of strategy—intuition, bias, learning, and perception—offers a richer, more realistic view of how strategies take shape and evolve in practice.

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