On the emergence and management of paradoxical tensions: The case of architectural firms

Medhanie Gaim

Department of Business Administration, Umeå School of Business and Economics, Umeå University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Paradoxical tensions are pervasive and unavoidable in the everyday practice of creativity-based contexts, such as architectural firms. Whilst the existing literature has extensively explored both coping strategies and multiple ways of approaching paradoxical tensions, we still have a limited understanding of how individuals engage with paradoxical tensions and how organizations support their members' efforts to sustain such tensions. Accordingly, my purpose here is to explore paradoxical tensions in the context of architectural firms and explain how firms and their members make sense of these tensions. I use a multiple case study to investigate empirically the salient paradoxical tensions central to architectural firms and to develop an understanding of what makes them salient. I explain how triggers evoke latent tensions and make them salient and also outline salient paradoxical tensions prevalent within this context. In exploring how architectural firms and their members make sense of these tensions, I outline and explain the importance of a paradoxical mindset, a paradoxical practice, and supporting organizational arrangements. I conclude by discussing the interplay among mindsets, practices, and arrangements as an organizing platform—a conceptual framework that future studies could explore further.

1. Introduction

"Don't mute the trumpet to hear the sax; make rich music." (Friedman, 2008).

In contemporary organizations, Friedman's jazz quartet metaphor captures the central challenge of engaging tensions in organizations. Tensions are pervasive and have been studied through the lens of different research areas (see Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013), such as innovation (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008), leadership (Smith & Tushman, 2005), and governance (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). There also have been numerous studies examining tensions in different settings, such as social enterprises (Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013), cultural industries (DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007) and finance (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). Tensions are not only pervasive; organization members acutely experience them (Cunha, Clegg, & Cunha, 2002), which generates various responses—some virtuous and others vicious (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). A well-established challenge that is critical for scholars in management and organization studies is to understand how organizations can

effectively manage tensions that are paradoxical (Kauppila, 2010; Smith & Tushman, 2005, p. 534).

Increased interest in this topic has led to the emergence of a rich body of literature on tensions, both conceptual and empirical (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Yet, we have still not fully answered the question of how to engage with tensions that are paradoxical (Jules & Good, 2014), and we know little about how such tensions are managed, and sustained in a creativity-based context, such as architectural firms (DeFillippi et al., 2007; Lampel, Lant, & Shamsie, 2000). Creativity-based contexts have the dual objectives of achieving both novelty and usefulness as well as both symbolic and commercial objectives (Blau, 1987; Larson, 1993; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). This makes them rife with tensions, which surface when practitioners attempt to realize an aesthetic experience—such as a work of art—while meeting the functional demands of clients and users. Such tensions cascade down into engaging expressions of artistic value and market constraints at the project level, whilst also into creative sparks and discipline at the individual level (Lampel et al., 2000). Despite their paradoxical nature, however, actors experiencing such tensions rarely perceive them as interrelated. Their seemingly oppositional nature predominates and their responses typically imply a choice of selecting or leaning towards one in preference to the other. By way

E-mail address: medhanie.gaim@umu.se.

of an example, DeFillippi et al. (2007) claim that the symbolic dimension outweighs other dimensions. This inclination towards one, however, leads to a Daedalian risk. Blau (1987) used Daedalian risk to explain the either/or approach where a sharp swing to one of the demands would either "melt the wax or soak the feathers." Favoring one at the expense of the other, therefore, spurs negative and even vicious cycles (Lewis, 2000), which means that the tension has not been analyzed in terms of paradoxes. Even when organization members do engage with and manage tensions as paradoxes, Smith (2014) claims that sustaining this state proves to be challenging and frustrating.

When dealing with tensions that are paradoxical, the existing literature focuses on collective approaches at the organizational level, placing less emphasis on individual organization members (Schad et al., 2016). Works that have explored tensions at the individual level have mainly focused on leaders and managers (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Tushman, 2005; Smith, 2014). Hence, irrespective of the importance of engaging with tensions that are paradoxical at the individual level, analyses fall short in terms of explaining how this is done. Moreover, the scholarship on this topic has yet to explore how individuals in creativity-based contexts sustain tensions that are paradoxical.

Through analysis of empirical materials, I detail three salient paradoxical tensions at the organizational, project, and individual levels, along with four triggers that turned latent tensions into salient ones. To make sense of salient paradoxical tensions, I present an individual "paradoxical mindset," which has both emotional and cognitive dimensions, as well as paradoxical practices that explicate individual behavior. These emotional and cognitive dimensions are intertwined, whereby one cannot exist without the other. I also discuss organizational arrangements that support individuals' paradoxical mindset and practices that enable them, not only to make sense of and manage paradoxical tensions, but also sustain them. I explain the interplay between the individuals' paradoxical mindset and practices and the organizational arrangement from the perspective of an organizing platform. Adopted from the field of computing (see, for example, Ciborra, 1996), platform represents an environment where a software is executed. The platform gives a formative context or a framework for action and interaction. According to Thomas, Autio, and Gann (2014) a platform refers to a structure in social life that stores an organization's resources, constraints, and capabilities and on which a system that solves a specific problem can be developed. In this papers case, this organizing platform constitutes an institutionalized background condition in the form of organizational arrangements giving direction to individuals' emotional and cognitive dimensions, which lead to the enactment of behaviors that allow individuals to make sense of and manage paradoxical tensions.

2. Tensions and paradoxes in a creativity-based context

Firms in a creativity-based context, such as architectural firms, have peculiar characteristics when it comes to workflows, sources of status, work styles, modes of thinking, and dominant logics (Martin, 2004, p. 9). Architects' training emphasizes innovation and problem solving, and the creative process is a driving factor for many architects to pursue this profession. They tend to be motivated more by the pursuit of acclaim for their creative work than they are by the pursuit of business success (Winch & Schneider, 1993, p. 927). Also—as in most cultural economies—in architecture, symbolism and aesthetics are at the very core of value creation (DeFillippi et al., 2007).

The work of firms in a creativity-based context can be assumed to be somewhat divergent, impulsive, and messy (DeFillippi et al., 2007, p. 511). Their work is also seen as spontaneous and irrational and hence, hard to control (DeFillippi et al., 2007). This makes work in such a setting challenging to manage. Not only is it difficult to anticipate and control workflows and cash flows, for the process also involves managing creative professionals who are culturally resistant to being managed (Lampel et al., 2000; Winch & Schneider, 1993). Organization members find the idea of formal planning and adhering to a fixed strategy impractical and perhaps even downright offensive to their professional ethos. Hence, the ethos of the profession and the esteem of their professional peers strongly influence architects' practice (Winch & Schneider, 1993, p. 934). This is puzzling, however, because in such settings, professionals spend their working lives developing concepts and then detailing plans so that all aspects of the whole fit together (Winch & Schneider, 1993, p. 934). This evokes tensions between order and chaos, organization and disorganization, stability and change (Cooper, 1986; Farjoun, 2010). Relatedly, firms in such settings face tensions due to their dual objectives of the sanctification of art linked to the individual's professional ethos and the commercialization of creativity. This also means that architectural firms must manage to fulfill both the creative needs of their staff and the pragmatic design needs of their clients (Winch & Schneider, 1993, pp. 933–934). A tension arises as firms must, on the one hand, propose a unique experience (a focus on art) and on the other hand, meet financial targets (a focus on commerce), which can also be translated as the tension of accommodating relentless creation and economic viability. When these tensions cascade down to the individual level, they pit the individual's professional ethos against organizational logics (DeFillippi et al., 2007; Lampel et al., 2000). To the individual, this means engaging with artistry (being part of a bohemian milieu) and pragmatism (satisfying deadlines, budgets, and client desires) making them "practical artists" (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Winch & Schneider, 1993).

Thus, in the above cases tension signifies the relationships between competing demands, forces or logics, which are reflected when organization members engage emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally in satisfying these. The paradoxical nature of the tension stems from an awareness of "opposing and interwoven elements" (Lewis, 2000, p. 397), meaning that whilst these elements are contradictory, they are also interrelated. Tension, if it is paradoxical, is always active; attending to one of the demands exacerbates the need for the other (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). At this point, it is worthwhile distinguishing tension from paradoxes. Tension refers to the push-pull force that tears individuals between two competing demands (see Engeström & Sannino, 2011; Lewis, 2000). The mere existence of competing demands in the organization implies that there is a latent tension, which might surface at one point in time. When, due to triggers, tensions surface, they become salient. Paradox, as one kind of salient tension (hence also called paradoxical tension), refers to contradictory yet interrelated demands that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox is, therefore, one conceptualization of tension. Tension can also be conceptualized as dualities, dilemmas, and dialectics. For a detailed discussion, see Smith and Lewis (2011) and Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016).

As the concepts of Daedalian risk and the jazz quartet metaphor in the introduction illustrate, managing paradoxical tensions should be based on a virtuous cycle that accentuates acceptance rather than defensiveness (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 392). The response to tension should be built on acceptance and resolution, where organizational tensions can be considered both as a call for and a source of creativity (Beech, Burns, De Caestecker, MacIntosh, & MacLean, 2004; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011) and should correspondingly be nurtured and managed. In contrast, responses that suppress the tension—through which the organization satisfies one