



In search of a creative space: A conceptual framework of synthesizing paradoxical tensions



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ABSTRACT

We examine paradoxes in organizations and the organizations' ability to deal with the resulting paradoxical tensions. Paradoxes constitute contradictory yet interrelated organizational demands that exist simultaneously, with the resulting tensions persisting over time. Irrespective of the prevailing evidence that engaging paradoxes leads to peak performance in the short-term, which reinforces long-term success, the question of how this might be done remains perplexing. Thus, based on pragmatic philosophy, this paper aims to increase our understanding of what constitutes a paradox and suggests a conceptual framework from which organizations and their members can frame and cope with tensions that result from paradoxes. Specifically, we conceptually map a way to achieve a synthesis of paradoxical tensions that is informed by design thinking. This synthesis is said to occur when competing demands are simultaneously fulfilled to their full potential. In this paper, design thinking – as a management concept – is used to refer to the interplay between perspective, structure, process, and mindset. It provides an alternative framing of how organizations approach paradoxes and deal with the resulting tensions.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary organizations, competing demands are inevitable and ubiquitous features (Lewis, 2000; Sanchez-Runde & Pettigrew, 2003) that exist beyond management's control (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002). Such competing demands require simultaneous attention and are often viewed in contrasting terms. They include, for example, the needs for certainty and flexibility (Thompson, 1967), for stability and change (Mintzberg, 1987), for exploitation and exploration (March, 1991), and for efficiency and flexibility (Adler, Goldoftas, & Levine, 1999). These simultaneously occurring needs have been conceptualized and approached in terms of dilemmas, trade-offs, dialectics, dualities or paradoxes (Achtenhagen & Melin, 2003; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Westenholtz, 1993). However, this list is by no means absolute. For a deeper conceptual depiction, some authors turn to metaphors, mythologies, and ancient philosophy. For instance, Rothenberg (1979) and Sjöstrand (1994) used the Roman god Janus to emphasize the capacity needed to deal with competing forces at work. Morgan (1986) used the Taoist philosophy from ancient China represented by the symbol of Yin and Yang as a way to describe flows of

complementary yet opposite energies. And finally, Barry and Rerup (2006) used the Scylla and Charybdis from the Odyssey to symbolize the navigation between polarities such as rigidity and chaos.

Given today's global and dynamic environment, competing demands in organizations are intensifying (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith, 2014) and are becoming pervasive in contemporary innovation (van Dijk, Berends, Jelinek, Romme, & Weggeman, 2011). Managing the tension resulting from competing demands is becoming necessary for effective innovation to occur (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Norman, Palich, Livingstone, & Carini, 2004; Tse, 2013; Garud, Gehman, & Kumaraswamy, 2011). However, when organizations are faced with these competing demands, they often tend to choose one or the other, compromise between them, or attempt to reconcile them. This happens for many reasons—for example, organizational members' need to produce consistent and reliable outcomes (Martin, 2007a,b), or being compelled by their cognitive limits to seek certainty (Tse, 2013), or attempting to simplify a complex reality (Bartunek, 1988). It is also related to human beings' general tendency to see the world in black and white terms, which is a false dichotomy. In this case, Dewey, one of the leading proponents of pragmatism, stated that mankind, in general, thinks in terms of extreme opposites. We tend to formulate our beliefs in terms of “either–or”, between which alternatives we recognize no intermediate possibilities (1938a:17). Similarly, Cooper (1986) claimed that we are given to thinking in

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binary terms, privileging one alternative over the other. Such thinking, when it relates to management practices, is rooted in formal logic (Ford & Ford, 1994), which defines entities based on “what they are” and “what they are not” (Norman et al., 2004). Thus, this formal logic lacks the ability to integrate contradictions and engage competing demands (Norman et al., 2004; Tse, 2013). When the need for logic and internal consistency overrules contradictions, one value is implicitly chosen over the other (Van de Ven, 1983). Order is assumed over change, ends over means, individuals over collectivity, or vice versa (Cameron & Quinn, 1988, p. 7). Dewey claims that any outcome that leads to an excess or deficiency of either demand, or an isolation of one from the other, is undesirable and characterizes such a state as an unaesthetic vice (Pappas, 2008, p. 78).

In organization studies, the risk of an unaesthetic vice occurs when competing demands are treated as dilemmas, for example. In that case, to manage the resulting tension, one demand is prioritized at the expense of the other. Similarly, treating competing demands as a trade-off leads to compromise and reconciliation (Eisenhardt, 2000). In both cases, the inclination towards one of the needs exacerbates the need for the other (Clegg et al., 2002; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003) and the tension is therefore suppressed. Lewis (2000) believed that these typical approaches to analyzing and managing competing demands are inadequate.

In this paper, we start with the notion that the way competing demands are conceptualized affects the way they are approached and dealt with (Norman et al., 2004; Smith & Lewis, 2011). That is to say, how competing demands are framed (for example, as dilemmas or paradoxes) prescribes the response that could lead to either vicious (choosing the one over the other, compromising) or virtuous (engaging both, synthesizing) cycles. Although we are not claiming that competing demands should be framed as paradoxes at all times, we stress that framing competing demands as paradoxes prevents organizations from picking one demand over the other or inclining towards one. Rather, framing competing demands as paradoxes helps organizations recognize that these demands can and should coexist (Clegg et al., 2002; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Tse, 2013), leading to creative alternatives that engage both (Smith, 2014; Eisenhardt, 2000). Accordingly, we construe competing demands as paradoxes defined as contradictory yet interrelated organizational elements that exist simultaneously, the resulting tensions of which persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

If one is to wear the paradox hat, organizing will inherently juxtapose the contradictory yet interrelated elements (Lewis, 2000). In this regard, several studies have shown that organizations that pursue competing demands simultaneously (i.e., as paradoxes) are more successful in a dynamic environment (Tushman, Smith, Wood, Westerman, & O'Reilly, 2010; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Tse, 2013; Lewis & Smith, 2014). For instance, Smith & Lewis (2011) showed how doing so leads, in their words, to top performance in the short run and reinforces long-term success. Accordingly, to understand, describe, and manage the resulting paradoxical tension, theoreticians and practitioners are shifting from a tunnel-vision, non-synthesized “either-or” thinking that emphasizes only one element of the tension towards a more synthesized approach based on both-and, best-of-both, neither-nor thinking that engages both demands (Smith, 2014; Stroh & Miller, 1994). In line with this, organizations are increasingly adopting paradoxical frames (Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011), paradoxical lenses (Smith & Lewis, 2011), paradoxical logic (Norman et al., 2004), and integrative thinking (Martin, 2007a,b), which makes synthesis possible.

Synthesis, according to Poole and Van de Ven (1989), seeks a view that engages paradoxical tensions. Clegg et al. (2002) see synthesis as a symmetrical relationship that occurs when both

demands are simultaneously fulfilled to their full potential. However, how to bring a paradoxical situation into awareness and manage the resulting tension remains in question (Jules & Good, 2014). And, this calls for a wider perspective and a mindset that works with the intricacies of paradoxes and paradoxical tensions.

In response to a wider perspective and a readiness to engage competing demands, in addition to dissecting what constitutes paradoxes, this paper aims to elaborate how design thinking, as a management concept (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Çetinkaya, 2013), can help organizations and their members deal with paradoxical tensions. Utilizing the elements of design thinking can help us, we suppose, deal with the paradoxical tensions of, for example, exploration and exploitation (Martin, 2009; Dunne & Martin, 2006), especially when there is pressure to engage both. Design thinking in general, though, has been criticized for being loose, elusive and confusing in its conceptualization, leading to various interpretations (Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013). Moreover, as practitioner-led (such as Tim Brown of IDEO and David Kelly of IDEO and Stanford's d.School), a comprehensive theoretical framework is still missing. There is also a lack of scholarly works to balance the overstated praise bestowed upon it by the practitioners (Carlgren, 2013). Nevertheless, we consider that design thinking's integrative approach and the mindset it instills makes it relevant to organization studies, particularly to the challenge of engaging paradoxes. Accordingly, we present a deeper understanding of synthesis using design thinking rooted in pragmatic philosophy. Accordingly, this paper operationalizes design thinking as the interplay between perspective, process, structure and mindset rooted in the fallibilists' epistemology of pragmatism, and central features in pragmatic philosophy such as pluralism, abduction, and unaesthetic vice. By doing so, the paper conceptually maps a way to achieve a synthesis of paradoxical tensions informed by design thinking. To make our operationalization of design thinking clear and its connection to pragmatic philosophy visible, we used two real-world illustrations. We used the short-lived spaghetti organizational form that was implemented by Oticon in the early 1990s to show the risk of an unaesthetic vice arising in the structural features of design thinking. In addition, we used Bob Young and his successful transformation of Red Hat in the mid-1990s to illustrate the integrative perspective based on pluralism, an open mindset based on evolutionary ontology and the fallibilist epistemology of pragmatic philosophy. In addition, we used Red Hat's illustration to explain an abductive logic to characterize the process aspect of design thinking. This responds to the often-mentioned shortcoming in design thinking that it lacks theoretical foundation.

This paper is structured as follows: in the next section, we discuss different conceptualizations of competing demands and explain why paradoxes matter. This is followed by the responses to organizational tensions. In this section, we place synthesis in a context in which it stands in comparison with other “non-synthesized” responses. We then introduce pragmatic philosophy and present the core notions of this philosophy that are useful in this paper's context. Using pragmatic philosophy as a background, we then describe our version of design thinking and its building blocks, which make a synthesis of paradoxical tensions possible. We conclude the paper by outlining the theoretical and practical implications of our framework.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Competing demands

Competing demands have been conceptualized in different ways. At times, these multiple concepts have led to ambiguities.

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