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The social construction of organizational change paradoxes

Organizational
change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explain how paradox has become a common label for the organizational complexity, ambiguity and equivocality accentuated by change.

Design/methodology/approach – As a label, paradox is socially constructed – the product of actors' daily discourses. Applying a constructivist lens and insights from systems theories, the paper explores the nature and dynamics of paradox related to changing organizations. Building from related studies, the paper proposes a framework that details recurring paradoxes, their communicative sources, and their paradoxical interplay. This action research study of the Lego Company provides an integrative example.

Findings – Most organizational phenomena that one makes the subject of study are brought out through our own social interactions. Processes and product are two sides of the same coin. Exploring paradoxes often creates circles of reflection. An understanding of paradox does not solve problems, but rather opens new possibilities and sparks circles of even greater complexity.

Originality/value – The paper provides a critique of “resolution”, identifying responses to paradox that may energize change.

Keywords Organizational change, Role ambiguity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In management literature, there is a rising awareness of complexity, equivocality, ambiguity and paradox (Farson, 1996; Handy, 1994; Koot *et al.*, 1996; O'Connor, 1995). Such terms are particularly prevalent in studies of changing organizations, where paradox surfaces as a prominent theme (Lewis, 2000). Indeed, Van de Ven and Poole (1988, p. 83) pose organizational change as inherently paradoxical:

In the acts of organizing, distinctions are drawn that are oppositional in tendency: differentiation and integration, collectivity and individuality, stability and change, uniformity and complexity, morphostasis, the maintenance of structure, and morphogenesis, the creation of new structure.

Broadly defined, paradox denotes the simultaneous presence of seemingly mutually exclusive elements – demands, emotions, perspectives, ideas (Quinn and Cameron, 1988). According to Handy (1994), at best, paradoxes are brainteasers, challenging formal logic. At worst, they are sources of organizational paralysis, an anxiety-provoking tug-of-war fuelled by actors' struggles to make sense of underlying tensions (Smith and Berg, 1987). German systems theorist Luhmann (1998, p. 21) stresses the mental state aroused by paradox: “No system can accept that its' operations are blocked by a tautology or a paradox”. Luhmann accentuates



the challenges of managing paradox, as actors faced with seeming contradictions often are unable to cope, adapt or progress.

We share the view of theorists who depict paradox as socially constructed. This article explores paradoxes and their construction in changing organizations. Applying insights from social constructivism and systems theories, we begin by asking why organizational change settings are prone for paradox. We then propose a framework that details three paradoxes, their communicative sources, and their paradoxical interplay. Paradoxes of performing, belonging and organizing accentuate Putnam's (1986) depiction of mixed messages, recursive cycles and system contradictions. Leveraging related studies, we explicate this framework, using our action research study of the Lego Company as an integrative example. We conclude by critiquing the concept of "resolution," exploring how managers might cope and even thrive with paradoxes of organizational change.

Organizational change and paradox

We propose that paradox is constructed when elements of our thoughts, actions and emotions that seemed logical when considered in isolation, are juxtaposed, appearing mutually exclusive. The result is often an experience of absurdity or paralysis. Actors may become stuck in an either/or frame that promotes a vicious cycle. Lewis (2000, pp. 761-2) explains that:

... most actors accentuate contradictions by interpreting data (e.g. their own and others' feelings, organizational practices, environmental cues) through simple, bipolar concepts, constructing logical, internally consistent sets of abstractions that separate opposites. Such frames of reference or schemes enable actors to make sense of complex realities, but they are biasing and, once entrenched, become highly resistant to change (Bartunek, 1988).

Indeed, Smith and Berg (1987) note that when actors attempt to make sense of a paradoxical experience, their responses frequently have the unintended consequence of escalating the contradictory forces. For instance, "the very people who desire change often act in ways that reinforce the things they want altered" (1987, p. 8). Managers may call for new routines to enhance collaborative creativity, but cling to the comfort of extant rewards and systems that stress individual productivity and efficiency.

Building from existing studies, we propose three categories of paradox that may extend understandings of how organizational change complicates work demands, relations and systems. More specifically, our framework, show in Table I and Figure 1 maps paradoxes of performing, belonging and organizing to Putnam's (1986) communicative patterns of mixed messages, recursive cycles and systemic contradictions, respectively. Identifying links between paradoxes and communication suggests discursive processes through which actors seek to make sense of change, but that often foster anxiety and paralysis. As Apker (2003, p. 221) explains, "By examining how organizational members enact opposing tendencies in daily discourses, we can better understand the meanings ascribed to change". Leveraging diverse studies, we illustrate each paradox.

An action research study of the Lego Company (Lüscher, 2002) serves as an integrating example, enabling discussion of the interplay of the three paradoxes. This study spanned 1999-2002, when Lego implemented dramatic structural changes. Our focus was the sensemaking process of 45 middle managers in the production

Paradox	Communicative pattern
<p><i>Performing:</i> As roles fluctuate with changing structure and expectations, contradictory demands disrupt self-conception</p> <p>Apker (2003): control costs and enhance care quality and access</p> <p>Beech and Huxham (2003): contrary management prescriptions (e.g. increasing employee accountability and autonomy)</p> <p>Lego: managers' role conflicts over their responsibilities for managing self-managed work teams (e.g. direction or autonomy)</p> <p><i>Belonging:</i> Shifting social constellations foster tensions between self and other, as actors seek to identify themselves in relation to the organization and its varied and fluctuating groups</p> <p>Apker (2003): collaboration as empowering and subjugating</p> <p>Ybema (1996): group boundaries enable unity and division</p> <p>Westenholz (1993): contrary frames of reference</p> <p>Lego: managerial tensions between being involved with and detached from with their subordinate teams</p> <p><i>Organizing:</i> The organizing process and its varied participants enact distinctions that create and accentuate tensions</p> <p>Ybema (1996): change accentuates organizational consensus and subculture dissensus</p> <p>O'Connor (1995): efforts aimed at increasing participation highlight conflicting practices of empowerment and control</p> <p>Lego: tensions between order (e.g. clear and common team goals) and flexibility (e.g. managers' diverse goals)</p>	<p><i>Mixed messages:</i> Communicated expectations are experienced as conflicting, ambiguous and equivocal demands</p> <p>Apker (2003): rising frustration with/distrust of management</p> <p>Beech and Huxham (2003): doubt (inability to choose) or nihilism (futility of choice)</p> <p>Lego: managers unaware of their own mixed messages (e.g. call for both conflict and harmony to examine group challenges)</p> <p><i>Double bind:</i> Desire to maintain relationships inhibit confrontation, as the interactions that may enable effective and empowering relations, may also tear relations apart</p> <p>Apker (2003): collaboration as concertive control</p> <p>Ybema (1996): antagonistic discourses accentuate distinctions</p> <p>Westenholz (1993): defending frame increasing others' defences</p> <p>Lego: managers stuck between building team trust through personal disclosure and needing trust for disclosure</p> <p><i>Systemic contradictions:</i> mixed messages and recursive cycles become embedded, existing independent of the actors involved</p> <p>Ybema (1996): unit groupings and socialization reinforce group distinctions, as organization mission and goals seek coordination</p> <p>O'Connor (1995): labelling "insiders" and "outsiders" in change initiative exposed exclusivity of inclusive, participatory efforts</p> <p>Lego: new goals of empowerment and self-managed teams clashed with existing and ingrained emphasis on productivity</p>

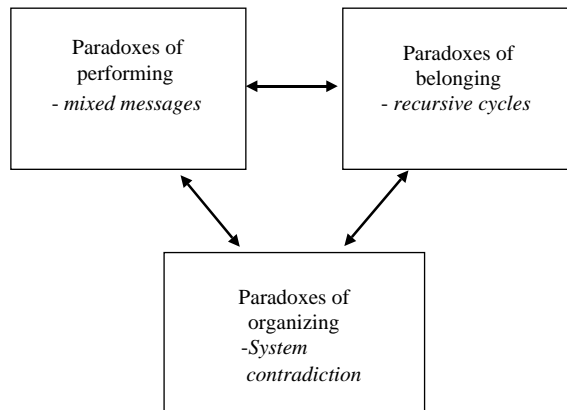
Table I.
Paradoxes of
organizational change

department – a group challenged by major management layoffs and the implementation of self-managed teams.

We chose an action research approach for several reasons. First, the collaborative nature of action research offers exceptional access to changing perceptions of complexity, ambiguity and equivocality (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). Building trust with participants, researchers may use intervention sessions to bypass defense mechanisms and explore normally undiscussable realms of daily life. Second, participants drive the research agenda, raising issues most pertinent to their work lives, evaluating research findings, and ensuring that results reflect understandings created through collaboration.

Our methods involved three interwoven and cyclical phases. Groundwork focused on building foundational understandings and relationships, which continued to evolve throughout the study. For example, interviews helped surface early patterns as coding highlighted repeated uses of such terms as tensions, tug-of-war, conflict and

Figure 1.



contradictions. Interventions sought to leverage our interactions to support managerial sensemaking. Working with the managers we agreed to target varied forms of questioning and thereby explore meaningful issues identified by the managers. In the induction phase, we conducted review sessions with a focus group of managers to formulate, evaluate and revise core concepts, categories and propositions. Iterating between interventions and review sessions enabled collaborative induction. For example, our collaborative sensemaking process, which we described as “working through paradox,” seemed to help alter managers’ either/or interpretations toward a paradox perspective that enabled managerial action.

Paradoxes of performing

What are the standards for performance in the emerging organization? How might actors conceive of themselves when previous demands are in question or in apparent conflict? Managers, for instance, may feel strained as they seek to retain their authority and promote employee involvement. How can they be in charge and let others make decisions?

Existing studies illustrate varied tensions that may underlie paradoxes of performing: role conflict for nurses (Apker, 2003), for example, as they try to provide care while managing costs. Beech and Huxham (2003) noted that managers, particularly in times of change, are challenged to apply competing best practices, such as calls to increase employee accountability and autonomy, or prescriptions to build trust by initiating joint action as quickly as possible and by first developing shared goals and understandings.

In the Lego study, managers grappled with defining effective management as they transitioned to self-managing teams. During one intervention session, a manager observed:

Maybe, if I want the members of my production team to cooperate better, I should talk with them individually. But that would undermine their self-management. Is their conflict my concern or is it theirs? . . . The team should be responsible for resolving their conflicts. But will they do it? And what if they don’t? I’m still responsible for the results of the team.

By applying traditional, either/or logic, the managers could not reach a clear resolution, but instead confronted complexity and ambiguity.

Communicative pattern: paradoxes of performing and mixed messages

Why do issues of performance become so tenuous to actors during organizational change? Examined from a systemic perspective, communication patterns appear a primary source of contradictions. Putnam (1986) proposes that role conflicts stem from interpersonal communication, especially between superiors and subordinates. Related paradoxes arise through mixed messages given at different levels of communication. For instance, the manager who tells her employees that she trusts them to run the department while she is away, but constantly calls to check on them, sends contradictory signals. Verbally she claims, "I trust you" while her actions imply distrust. The manager might be unaware of her mixed messages, but her subordinates must consider both messages. The full impact, however, depends on their response. If subordinates do not address the contradiction, it is confirmed and thereby established as part of the ongoing relationship and communications.

As the nurses in Apker's (2003) study grappled with change, they often blamed top management for mixed message about their roles. Beech and Huxham (2003) similarly stress how managers leading change efforts become frustrated by mixed messages posed by competing best practices presented by executives or some bodiless expert. Such messages may be read differently by different actors, feeding the social construction of multiple, parallel realities, leading to feelings of being incapable of choosing between competing prescriptions or a nihilistic attitude that their efforts will not matter as even best practices are unlikely to improve performance.

In the Lego study, contradictory communicative patterns were exemplified by a manager who opened a meeting with his production team by saying:

We need to talk about the conflict that is building in this team. It prevents the team from working effectively. So I need you to speak up in an honest and civil manner.

The team's response was silence. At one level, the manager called for an open and frank discussion. Yet he also communicated that only orderly, civilized expressions were allowed. What if their honest expressions were not civil?

During an intervention session, the manager recognized that he was communicating in contradictory terms: "Let's get the conflict out in the open" and "Let's not open the conflict". In a subsequent meeting with his production team, the manager tried again:

We need to talk about this conflict. Let's hear your experience so we can work through it. We really need to reach a point from which we then can have a civilized and orderly working relation. And unless we talk about what is bothering you, we cannot create better teamwork. So how do you experience the problem?

The manager in this example was stuck, not knowing how to punctuate reality, when both harmony and conflict were desirable (Watzlavick *et al.*, 1967). In other words, he did not know how to perform in relation to the situation, and a performing paradox was formulated: In order to control, allow for the uncontrollable.

In sum, paradoxes of performing concern organizational actors and their sense of self; a sense of self created through an understanding of their roles and performance expectations. Recognition of mixed messages – e.g. seemingly conflicting imperatives for empowerment and control, for motivation and productivity – may surface

performing paradoxes. According to Putnam (1986), actors often react to the absurdity of mixed messages by choosing to comply with only one side of the message. This choice temporarily reduces ambiguity, providing sufficient clarity for action. Yet such a response also signifies disobedience, as the actor neglects one performance imperative for the other. The reviewed studies also suggest alternative responses, such as rising antagonism with top management (Apker, 2003), feelings of doubt or nihilism (Beech and Huxham, 2003), and a sense of confusion and paralysis (Lüscher, 2002).

Paradoxes of belonging

Changing social relations may challenge an actor's sense of identity. From a social constructivist perspective, it is only possible to form individual identity through social relations. At the same time, however, group identity is formed as its members contribute their individual identities (Smith and Berg, 1987). Tensions arise as actors struggle to realize the benefits of group membership, while expressing their personal, and possibly deviant, views. Tensions that underlie belonging paradoxes also may revolve around involvement as actors grapple with how much of themselves to invest in the group. Smith and Berg (1987) explain that a group thrives as its members become immersed in group dynamics, but also remain capable of extricating themselves to remain critical of group processes and outcomes. In the Lego study, managers stressed tensions between wanting to establish close contact with their subordinates, while retaining an appropriate distance. For example, one manager was concerned with how to remain close enough to accept members' feelings and to know when adjustments were needed, but distant enough to reflect on the process, during an emotion-laden meeting. Such issues illustrate Smith and Berg's (1987, p. 99) claim:

To develop the level of detachment necessary for self-reflection demands a kind of involvement that makes detachment appear impossible. Detachment through involvement and involvement through detachment are the essence of this paradox.

One cannot talk about a group unless it is defined by boundaries, i.e. who is inside and not inside the group. In this sense, groups are defined by their inclusion and exclusion (Smith and Berg, 1987). Boundaries, however, may foster a sense of anxiety and potential conflict. In his study of changes at a Dutch amusement park, Ybema (1996) explores growing social distinctions between established craftsmen and new professionals. Discourses accentuated group boundaries by depicting each group as the other's opposite. Such discourses created a sense of unity and harmony within each group, while accentuating division and conflict between groups. Likewise, Westenholz (1993) notes how group boundaries formed around opposing frames of reference in a producer's cooperative. As employees became owners of the firm, distinctions arose between employees' frames that emphasized focus on solidarity vs market, internal vs external, unambiguity vs ambiguity. While each group held firm to their boundaries, reaffirming their frames and providing a sense of security, these distinctions lead to a decade long deadlock in wage discussions.

Communicative pattern: paradoxes of belonging and recursive cycles

Gregory Bateson's (1972) theory of double bind extends understandings of recursive cycles. A double bind occurs when two or more actors with an emotional relation construct a paralysing recursive cycle. At the crux of these cycles lies attempts to avoid

negative results embedded in a tertiary negative injunction: “Do not do X or I will punish you” and “if you do not do X I will punish you”. The emotional connection between actors, however, renders it too dangerous for the recipient actor to recognize, let alone confront, the contradiction. Hence, escape is impossible and the pattern continues. A well-developed double bind needs only a few ingredients: a strong emotional relationship, paradoxical demands, and an inability or inhibition to assume a meta-perspective and thereby examine the pattern.

While Bateson’s theory was predominantly applied within the clinical field, Argyris (1988) stresses the potential for similar patterns in organizations. For instance, team members may avoid recognizing mixed messages (e.g. team meetings as settings that encourage and constrain individual expression) and inhibit others from confronting their avoidance by attempting to communicate clearly about unclear emotions (e.g. stressing appreciation for the “openness” of team meetings). Similarly, Smith and Berg (1987) note how members may withhold their energies, until they feel confident in the group. Caught in this no-win bind, actors move slowly into a group, inhibiting the development of trust that facilitates expression.

Existing research depicts varied recursive cycles. For example, Apker (2003) describes the nurses in her study as caught between accepting the positive outcomes of more collaborative managed care (i.e. professional respect) and resisting the problems created by its efficiency mandates (i.e. challenges to quality care giving). The result, in Apker’s view, is a double-bind that fuels the use of collaboration as concertive control. Ybema (1996) notes how antagonistic discourses enacted group distinctions and a sense of group solidarity in his studied amusement park. While discourses accentuated a dichotomy between professional managers and senior craftsmen, however, observations suggested otherwise. “Managers adopted some of the parochial ideas and practices and were aware of the impact of traditional values, as seniors did see the necessity of professional management” (1996, p. 50). Rather than admit such intersections and enable new, collaborative opportunities, antagonism persisted as actors sought to bolster their group security. The result was an intensifying power struggle. Likewise, Westenholtz (1993) notes a reinforcing feedback loop fuelled by defensiveness. As employees in one group defended their frame of reference to bolster their group identity, such efforts pushed their opponents to defend their own frame in a reinforcing cycle.

In the Lego case, managers struggled to express themselves in their management team. During initial interviews, each manager noted that they had difficulty trusting the group enough to start revealing their challenges. The result was paralysis as they were reluctant to start using their team to work on managerial issues. Indeed, in initial meetings with the management team, members were painfully silent. Finally one member said: “In my department I am struggling with the issues of . . . I’m sure that I am not the only one having these problems”. This tentative last sentence may reflect his hope of finding safety in the group by evoking a sense of acceptance by other members. He was trying to participate in order to discover whether participating was a good idea.

In sum, recursive cycles inhibit actors’ choice, primarily because of inability or emotionally-determined reluctance to confront the very context that created the cycle. Applying a systemic view, paradoxes of belonging are characterized by recursive cycles for two reasons. First, it is difficult to examine the premises of one’s own

communication patterns. Often people are unaware of the meta-communicative messages that set the frame for their daily interactions. Second, emotions inhibit both parties from confronting the tension because there is a high risk that it will threaten the relationship. Thus, the emotional bind is double in the sense that neither party is willing to jeopardize existing relations, rendering a discussion of the paradox undiscussable (Argyris, 1988).

Paradoxes of organizing

Studies suggest that the very process of organizing is paradoxical. As Ford and Backoff (1988) explain, organizing entails the drawing of distinctions that create tensions. Given their multiple constituents, organizations denote social spaces continuously pulled in opposing directions (Bouchikhi, 1998). Research illustrates paradoxes of organizing in practice. For example, Ybema (1996) explores how organizational change may surface and polarize organizational subcultures. In his study, conflicts between the formal discourses of change and the sub-texts of disparate groups accentuated tensions of consensus and dissensus. He describes the friendly banter in meetings and formal documentation as promoting frontstage harmony, while more intimate conversations and unit meetings intensify backstage conflict. Similarly, O'Connor (1995) depicts change efforts aimed at increasing employee participation as highlighting conflicting practices of empowerment and control. In particular, the rhetoric of participation may contradict engrained organizational practices such as limited access to information and hierarchical authority for decision making.

At Lego, paradoxes of organizing surfaced as mid-level managers grappled with the need for structure and order, as well as flexibility and improvisation. For example, in an intervention session with a management team, participants stressed the need for both common and diverse goals. To explain their frustrations, they used their team meetings as illustration, calling for their supervisor to set a common and clear team agenda, while demanding that he address their different needs in relation to that agenda. During our ensuing discussion, the managers explored challenges their supervisor would face in assessing what might be perceived as "common" to the group and how to gauge each manager's distinct needs. Through social reflection, managers determined that in their turbulent, complex setting the search for commonality and diversity must be an ongoing, collaborative process.

Communicative pattern: paradoxes of organizing and system contradictions

As Bateson (1972) notes, a double bind is a pattern and not a single occurrence in an actor's experiential realm. Hence, one could expect that a double binding relationship might eventually become part of a broader communication system. According to Hennestad (1990, p. 273):

People communicating from the position of being trapped by double binds cannot be expected to be clear in their message sending to others; on the contrary, they can be expected to say one thing, but act otherwise, say different things in different situations about the same things. Thereby they could accelerate the degree of ambiguity and double bindedness in the organization. This implies that double binds as an organizational cultural feature in organizations could develop along the lines of some self-reinforcing cycles.

Ybema's (1996) study illustrates such systemic patterns. He notes that paradoxical discourses may be ingrained in organization structure and culture as unit grouping and socialization practices enable, even reinforce, group distinctions, while overarching elements of a new organizational mission seek to foster coordination. In her study of change, O'Connor (1995) details how actors who questioned contradictions between new rhetoric of participation and persistent norms of control were quickly labelled as resistant to change. Such labelling signified "insiders" and "outsiders" in the change initiative. Hence, what was framed as an effort for greater inclusion, accentuated a sense of exclusion.

Similar communicative patterns surfaced in Lego during discussions of the organizational change initiative. From our perspective, the managers' frustration with the initiative had grown over a six-month period of intervention sessions. Such rising tensions seemed surprising given that executive communications during that same period had increased, particularly in the form of information meetings. When we presented this observation to the managers, it sparked a provocative debate over whether their growing sense of uncertainty was due to ineffective executive communications or whether it was inherent in the change itself. As Putnam (1986) notes, change may spark a clash between prevailing objectives and their constraining effects. In such settings, paradox arises as actors attempt to solve problems fostered by the constraints of an existing objective by adding a new objective – which in turn offers new constraints in an ever expanding web. Hence, supposed solutions create new challenges. In the Lego case, goals of employee empowerment and self-managed teams clashed with the continuing and ingrained emphasis on productivity.

Conclusion: paradoxes are paradoxical

Juxtaposing the framework of organizational change paradoxes and the three modes of working through paradox suggests potential linkages. Paradoxes of performing, for example, are related to actors' self-understanding and may need reframing as cognitive conflict (e.g. over roles, expectations and demands) may call for cognitive responses. Likewise, emotional tensions that pervade paradoxes of belonging may benefit from confrontation as an emotional approach to working through. In psychotherapy, exposure to what is threatening has long been known as a logical solution to the working through process, thereby playing out alternative emotions. Likewise, the understanding of paradox as a natural feature of intricate and dynamic systems suggests that paradoxes of organizing may benefit from acceptance.

Yet, even as we note possible one-to-one links between specific paradoxes and working through modes, we are faced with the awareness that paradoxes are slippery; likely to elude such simplistic conclusions. What creates a paradox to one person may suggest straight logic to another. Therefore, when examining paradox, researchers must deal with a subject of study that may be fascinating – and exhausting – work! As such, researchers and/or interventionists might benefit from lowering their expectations regarding how much movement they can expect in the study of such intricate and messy matters as paradox. Recognizing that most organizational phenomena that we make the subject of study are brought out through our own social interactions, we may find process and product are two sides of the same coin. Exploring paradoxes often creates circles of reflection. An understanding of paradox does not solve problems, but rather opens new possibilities and sparks circles of even

greater complexity. A paradox framework entails staying with that complexity to explore its dynamics and possible implications.

How might actors engaged in organizational life find flow in their daily activities through paradox? Managers, in particular, are challenged to act, to impose some kind of order on surrounding complexity, and to decide what is best for themselves and their organization. Although this paper has suggested some modes of working through paradox, that very notion remains necessarily ambiguous. In other words, the solution of working through paradox is itself paradoxical, as it leads us to the following conclusions:

Paradox is a mental construction and therefore can be mentally dissolved And Paradox is inherent in all social life and therefore cannot be dissolved – just lived!

In his book, *Finding Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) elaborates this paradoxical solution to paradox by drawing upon the Buddhist advice:

Act always as if the future of the universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference ... It is this serious playfulness, this combination of concern and humility, that makes it possible to be both engaged and carefree at the same time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 133)

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