

Chapter 18

Organizational Routines: Developing a Duality Model to Explain the Effects of Strategic Change Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an integrated duality model to understand how changes in core processes caused by strategic interventions are related with views on human conduct, organizational routines and embedded organizations, particularly in today's society that is characterized by fluidity and continuous change. This model is developed from a Deweyian perspective on human conduct including the interplay between habits, cognition and emotion. Using this duality model, the current chapter discusses why top-down strategic plans and initiatives will result in resistance amongst organizational members. Finally, it discusses directions for further theoretical development and empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

Every day, many managers and employees in thousands of organizations all around the world are busy developing and executing new strategic change interventions. Under the pressure of austerity measures, severe competition or new product introductions, organizations are faced with the challenge of having to re-invent their core processes and doing this rapidly. Such work processes lie at the heart of every organization; without them, there is no justification for an organization's existence. After all, essential and distinct products and services are manufactured and delivered through these processes in which management and employees are engaged during most of their working days. With respect to expected changes to organizational work processes, strategic interventions can be very explicit.

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In the field of organization studies, organization change is a fascinating subject and a primary topic of interest for scholars as well as practitioners. This fascination has resulted in vast numbers of change-related studies, theories and practices. Some studies have focused on the substance of change from different perspectives; others have investigated the forces or conditions of organizational change. Practitioners have directed their attention to actions taken by change agents and to their instruments, mostly in planned and top-down management interventions. What is central in most of these models is human conduct in situations where the status quo appears to be problematic. In change literature, attempts to change salient routines that result in active or passive behavior such as sabotage, recalcitrance or unwillingness are often labeled as resistance.

Interventions directed at alterations of work processes can also interfere with established meso level structures, including norms and standards, and lead to tensions within organizations. Example manifestations of these meso level structures are profession and sector-specific associations. Their influence affects organizations through the creation and distribution of knowledge, through political lobbying and through the development of norms and standards that in turn will affect attitude and behavior. In time, these influences form less tangible, taken-for-granted assumptions used by managers and employees during their daily activities within organizations. These extramural associations can also provide organizational members with a sense of belonging. We therefore expect that some interventions directed at micro level work processes will evoke resistance, because members will struggle to retain previous work routines even if these are no longer in line with the new organizational strategy.

An interesting perspective on the further understanding of work processes in change processes is the concept of organization routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Since its initial formulation, this concept has developed into various strands from which a duality model is developed here. The duality model considers routines on the basis of two views: 1) micro practices that are guided by 2) meso level aspects. Here, micro practices refer to habitual human conduct in organizational life or routine performance; the meso level concerns organizational artifacts and beliefs, values and symbols that guide routine performances. Because of their palpable nature, artifacts are considered changeable through formal strategic interventions, given the availability of sufficient resources and commitment on various organizational levels. Changing artifacts are therefore considered non-problematic in relation with resistance. On the other hand, processes creating, changing and maintaining intangible aspects (beliefs, values, symbols) are considered to be problematic in this context, because these create resistance amongst organizational members.

This chapter will examine the concept of resistance with the use of the concept of organizational routines. The remainder of this chapter is as follows. First, we will outline the organizational context through the concept of the liquid organization, with which we will argue that organizations are areas of continuous change. Second, we will develop a duality model of routines using a diversity of perspectives, including organizational routines, habits and tacit knowledge. Finally, we will end this chapter by formulating conclusions and research implications.

HYPER-TURBULENCE AND CONTINUOUS CHANGE

In a state of liquid modernity, as depicted by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, long-term planning is replaced by short-term activities. Bauman also points to other consequences of liquid modernity. Struc-

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