
ORGANIZATIONAL MINDFULNESS AND RESPONSIVENESS: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this paper was to examine the relationship between organizational mindfulness and responsiveness. The paper is designed as a conceptual paper. Its focus was on conceptualizing and identifying the relationship between organizational mindfulness and responsiveness. The paper therefore draws on the arguments and theories presented by previous studies as it affirms that organizational mindfulness is critical to the development of responsive capabilities – conceptual and instrumental responsiveness. In conclusion it was stated that the collective sense of awareness and consciousness applied in the daily functions and activities of the organization go a long way in ensuring that the organization is able to effectively respond and address the changing and growing expectations of its environment. It was thereafter recommended that organizations should on a consistent basis, assess their dispositions and the applicability of their systems and technologies within their various contexts. The applicability of such features determines their effectiveness and also impacts on their responsiveness.*

Keywords: Organizational mindfulness, responsiveness, conceptual, instrumental, threats, opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and turbulent environment, organizations are expected to deal simultaneously with the "present as well as the future", and they are also expected to be capable of combining routine behaviour with improvisation (Winter, 2003). As such the capability to respond effectively advances the organizations chances of survival, within its current environment as well as its estimated placement in the future. Hence, organizational responsiveness can be described as comprising of the strategic as well as operational features. In this paper organizational responsiveness is considered as an organization's ability to fathom its complex relationship with the outside world. This entails a sensing process which consists of three distinct stages: noticing, interpreting, and acting (Schilling, 2000). Huber (2004) argued that organizational responsiveness depends on the cumulative sensing effort of all organizational members. This is also premised on what Sanchez and Collins (2001) described as modular organizing. The modular organizing is defined as the combination of autonomous organizational units into customized constellations (Sanchez, 2003; Schilling, 2000; Worren, Moore, & Cardona, 2002). Sanchez and Collins (2001) explain that the key merit of modularization is to increase organizational flexibility without jeopardizing performance.

Currently, organizations are faced with emerging and growing pressures from the environment and are being compelled to improve their ability of continuously adapting to new competitive

scenarios. Among others, the most common pressures cited in literature have been demographic changes, competition and the emerging dynamics of global business practices, which has contributed to the emergence of a more global economy (Daft & Lewin, 1993) which continue active in the competitive landscape and nowadays are pushing the firms to develop new forms of organizing (Graetz & Smith, 2009). Organizational responsiveness will depend not only on being efficient in their organisational routines but also on being innovative at the same time (Graetz & Smith, 2009).

Literature on organisational responsiveness began over six decades ago and has been linked to several organisational capacities (agility, versatility, adaptability, fit, as well flexibility.). A significant number of studies reveals how companies can attain and sustain competitive advantages, create capabilities to control and influence their environment and manage chaos and adversity through their emphasis on responsive systems and processes. Recently, organisational responsiveness has received growing attention from both researchers and managers as a key imperative for the survival and competitiveness of organizations in turbulent and unpredictable environments (Dreyer & Gronhaug, 2004) and it is becoming the new hallmark of organisational excellence (Volberda et al. 2007).

According to Hatum and Pettigrew (2006), managers face major difficulty in accomplishing organisational change without losing stability because of their apparent lack of suitable models explaining the relationship between organizational responsive capabilities, environmental turbulence and the firm's performance (Suarez, Cusumano & Fine, 2003) along the enterprise lifecycle (Dreyer & Gronhaug, 2004; Verdú-Jover, Lloréns-Montes & García-Morales, 2006). Different approaches have emerged and empirically show the dimensionality of organisational responsiveness (Hatum & Pettigrew, 2006), its interaction with firm size (Kraatz & Zajac, 2001), the context specificity of responsiveness capabilities as well as organisational design (Volberda, 1998; Verdú-Jover, Lloréns-Montes and Garcia-Morales, 2005; Martínez-Sánchez, et al. 2009). The evident disparity between the mix of the identified organizational factors (Size, design, structure etc.) and their suitability for particular environment, specifies the need for mindfulness as a collective condition within the organization.

While the attempt to understand organizational response to threats and opportunities have drawn on different bodies of research that lead to conflicting conclusions. For example, studies that follow threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al. 1981) suggest that threat interpretation increase organizational inertia by narrowing alternatives and focusing response on previous learned routines (Dutton & Jackson 1987; Staw et al. 1981), while that of the opportunity perception make salient the potential gains rather than the risks involved (March & Shapira 1987) thus leading to actions that might otherwise be perceived as too risky (Thomas et al. 1993). Nonetheless, studies which have examined the role of organizational mindfulness as a predictor of responsiveness appear to be scarce and hardly addressed even within contemporary literature. This study offers a departure from previous studies as it discusses the theories linking both constructs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation – The Institutional Theory

The institutional theory is considered as adequate in addressing the relationship between organizational mindfulness and responsiveness in this study. Institutional theory provides a framework regarding how organizations respond to institutional and contextual pressures within their environment (Zucker 1987). Firms respond to a combination of both internal and external organizational pressures in a way that the theory argues to be towards a tendency of convergence of business practices across different organizations. The premise underlying the institutional theory is homogeneity or what can be described as consistency in behaviour. In the convergence phenomenon, Grewal and Dharwadkar (2002) claimed the importance of creating and maintaining legitimacy among organizational stakeholders.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) claim that organizations are driven to adopt and apply the practices and procedures derived from prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized within their own operational contexts. Independently of the immediate efficacy of acquired practices and procedures, organizations will attempt to increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects through a collective mindfulness of the existing practices and norms. Meyer and Rowan (1977) define institutional rules as classifications built in to society as reciprocated forms or interpretations and they acknowledge that such rules may be simply taken for granted or may be supported by public opinion or the force of law. In addition, Meyer and Rowan (1977) assert that institutionalization involves the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule like status in social thought and action.

Organizational Mindfulness

Organizational mindfulness is expressed by organizations that operate successfully in highly complex and time sensitive environments (Weick& Sutcliffe 2006). This view builds on the assumption that any new situation contains novel elements and that taking anything for granted in a routine-like way is a risky endeavour (Weick et al., 1998). Mindful organizations are often effective in their goal attainment and effectiveness, given their capacity for both in anticipating, and in containing, the unexpected. One way to anticipate the unexpected is preoccupation with failure, which implies attention to the small and large failures that may appear in an organization. An increased attentiveness of possible failures ensures an ongoing sense of potential vulnerabilities in the technology, gaps in existing procedures, and sloppiness in systems or functions of the organization (Weick& Sutcliffe 2006), which in themselves may help prevent failures from happening.

Mindfulness is not about single individuals “being mindful,” or engaging in meditative practices. Rather it is about patterns of organizing that result in a quality of organizational attention that increases the likelihood that people will notice unique details of situations and act upon them (Weick& Sutcliffe, 2006). Mindfulness functions by counteracting the tendency to simplify events into familiar categories and by strengthening the capability to anomalise events (Weick& Sutcliffe, 2006). In effect, mindfulness both increases requisite variety and enhances its usefulness.

The law of requisite variety asserts that the variety of a system such as an organization, team, or individual must be as great as the variety of the environment that it is trying to regulate (Sutcliffe, 2000). It is often assumed that random variety is “requisite,” but, in fact, the type of variety that is brought to bear is critical (Dimov, Shepherd, & Sutcliffe, 2007). The variety sought by more mindful organizations is that which provides insight into their particular environments and ongoing activities. In addition, although requisite variety represents critical building blocks of adaptability, the capabilities to use that variety are context dependent. Consequently, mindful organizing is the means by which organizations can create and draw on requisite variety, and in this way, it undergirds capabilities for adaptability

Organizations with access to a variety of expertise and perspectives are likely to monitor the environment more broadly and thus are more likely to notice cues signalling the need for adaptation (Sutcliffe, 2000). This occurs in two ways. First, different perspectives on the environment are likely to uncover different cues. For example, an expert in marketing is more likely to notice that customer preferences are changing, whereas an operations expert may notice that manufacturing requirements are likely to slow down future production. Second, different people are likely to frame the organizational situation from their own worldview, providing insight into potential problems or opportunities that others may not notice.

Requisite variety not only create a broader coverage of monitoring, it also is likely to result in earlier discovery of the need for adaptation. The first cues that adaptation is necessary are often very small, visible only to certain parts of the system. For example, the loss of a small customer may be insignificant to the organization overall, but to someone who knows that that customer represents the new target market for the organization, such a loss is a cue that the new value proposition is not working. Recognizing this cue early can mean the difference between a small shift in strategy early versus an enormous recovery effort later (Dimov *et al.*, 2007).

Organizational Responsiveness

Organizational responsiveness can be described as a firm’s propensity to act based on market information generated (Hult *et al.* 2005). Taking the view of market information process, Kohli and Jaworski(1990) correspond organizational responsiveness to information utilization within the organization, which is composed of two sets of activities – response design (the use of market intelligence to develop plans) and response implementation (the use of market intelligence to execute such plans) (Kohli & Jaworski 1990). Kohli and Jaworski(1990) also identified several concrete forms of organizational responsiveness including, selecting target markets, designing and offering products and services that cater to customers’ current and anticipated needs, and producing, distributing, and promoting the products in a way that elicits favourable end-customer response (Kohli & Jaworski 1990).

The view of information utilization differs from a cognitive approach, which has its foundation in a view that firms’ action is shaped by how managers notice and make sense of their environments and translate those perspectives into strategic choice (Thomas *et al.* 1993). The institutional theory offers a position which enhances the understanding of the interaction between organizations and their environment, and the tendency for achieving innovation. As pointed out by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) changing market needs call for the introduction of innovative products and services to match the evolving needs of the market and environment.

The introduction of new and modified services and products, however, is inherently risky because such may have a high tendency for failure.

Due to the high risk involved with innovation and resources required for responsiveness, an organization does not respond to every market change detected, instead, the organizational responsiveness is facilitated by the mental models regarding how decisions should be carried out. Managerial cognition and actions thus link a firm's actions to a changing environment by influencing what is noticed, how this information is interpreted, and why certain choices are made (Kaplan 2008). According to this view, organizational responsiveness involves two sequential stages –the market situation interpretation and actual responses (Chattopadhyay, Glick, & Huber, 2001; White et al., 2003). Specifically, this paper conceives organizational responsiveness a two-stage information utilization process comprised of the following: conceptual responsiveness and instrumental responsiveness.

Conceptual Responsiveness: Conceptual responsiveness refers to the process of producing general enlightenment or understanding from market information, and it can be considered as the managerial assumptions and mental models which shapes managers' orientation towards priorities, the manner in which they formulate problems, the range of solutions they convey, and the criteria of choice they apply (Moorman 1995). As pointed out by Cillo et al., (2010), during the conceptual responsiveness phase, market information is mainly used indirectly to challenge traditional assumptions and long-held representations of the market, in order, for example, to discuss a firm's existent strategy, to import ideas from other context, and to envision new approaches to the market. Thus, conceptual responsiveness relates to information processing process through which information is given meaning and decision maker's mental models of the market environment is shaped (Menon & Varadarajan 1992; Moorman 1995). This is as managers acting on a mental model of their environment has been widely recognized in both the management and marketing literature (Day & Nedungadi, 1994; Sinkula, 1994; Thomas et al., 1993). This stream of literature reveals that organizational action is evoked by the meaning attached to the market information (Chattopadhyay et al. 2001). This implies a form of sense-making (Thomas et al. 1993), or categorizing (Dutton & Jackson 1987; Jackson & Dutton 1988).

Following the position of previous studies, this paper focused on the categories of threat and opportunity as major features of the environment, which are also found to be the two most salient categories in managerial decision process (Chattopadhyay et al. 2001). Secondly, the institutional theory suggests that effective organizational action in response to environment changes often depends on the interpretation of the market information, thus an interpretation-action link (Thomas et al. 1993). This is as while conceptual responsiveness can be described as offering as the cognitive process, instrumental responsiveness is the behavioural process of responsiveness.

Instrumental Responsiveness: Instrumental responsiveness refers to direct application of market knowledge to match the evolving needs (Moorman, 1995). Instrumental responsiveness is the main focus in the market orientation literature, and it involves changes, which can range from small-scale forms such as changes in procedures, to larger-scale forms, such as product/service changes, and revision in strategy (Jaworski & Kohli, 1996). Note that by this view our conceptualization of responsiveness concurs with that of Moorman (1995) which

shows responsiveness is facilitated by providing information regarding how decisions should be carried out. The focus of responsiveness in this paper is different from that of Jaworski and Kohli (1993), which looks at whether and how quickly the firm responds to market information in the design and implementation of marketing strategies. In this paper, the focus is more on the adaptability of systems to existing threats and opportunities within the environment.

As Dutton & Jackson (1987) put it, threat involves a negative situation in which loss is likely and over which one has relatively little control (Dutton & Jackson 1987), and the label threat is associated with reduced-control, likely-loss and increased-anxiety and stress. We argue that the threat perception might lead to resource rigidity. First, as pointed out that the concept of threat is associated with reduced-control, likely-loss and increased-anxiety and stress (Staw et al. 1981). Managers who perceive threats will seek responsiveness which reduces the negative impact of threats on the organization. On one hand, with the purpose of increasing control, managers will focus on core business which they might be able to handle with confidence. On the other hand, managers are de-motivated to make investment outside familiar domains because the investment risk associates with unfamiliar domains amplifies the negative impact as well. Therefore, the firm facing threat interpretation tends to directed toward resuming business order and maintaining inertia (Dutton 1993; Hartman and Nelson 1996), which leads to resource rigidity.

Organizational Mindfulness and Responsiveness

Organizational mindfulness is argued to contribute to an organization's capability to make adaptations once the need is recognized. Groups that can generate diverse perspectives, ideas, knowledge, and skills may have access to a greater arsenal of responses when faced with the need to adapt (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). This occurs in several ways. First, when the organization is made up of individuals and groups with a variety of knowledge and experiential backgrounds, it has access to a larger pool of potential responses to any given situation (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Second, such organizations may be better equipped to create entirely new responses.

Research suggests that groups composed of individuals with diverse knowledge and expertise have access to a greater variety of cognitive elements which can then be combined and recombined into novel solutions (Amabile, 1983). Finally, organizational mindfulness may improve adaptability by encouraging divergent thinking during problem solving (West et al., 2006). It is generally held that divergent thinking increases the potential range of novel solutions (Nemeth et al., 2001). It seems evident, therefore, that organizational mindfulness increases capabilities to notice and respond to subtle cues that adaptation is necessary. Without supporting organizing structures and processes, however, organizations are unlikely to be able to generate or draw on them.

Mindful organizing is enabled by organizing structures that both develop and draw upon mindfulness as a means of maintaining adaptability (Weick et al., 1999). In particular, these are structures that allow organizations to (i) find and use expertise wisely, (ii) seek out and encourage alternative perspectives and frameworks, (c) focus on the potential for failure, and (iii) learn from mistakes. Recent empirical evidence suggests that to the extent that organizations or groups engage in mindfulness and in mindful organizing, they are more likely

to catch and prevent errors (Vogus& Sutcliffe, 2007). This study considers the same set of behaviours with respect to adaptability.

In addition to mindful organizing, the leadership of the organization plays a critical role in creating and maintaining a context for mindful organizing. When leaders seek out and use variety in their decision making, they create a mechanism for incorporating the benefits of that variety into organizational outcomes. By doing so, they also model the behaviours needed from organizational members to ensure that such variety continues to make its way into the system. For example, when a leader asks for feedback on a decision or seeks input from others, she is providing a channel for that information to make its way into the organizational response.

Mindfulness demands attention to the variability in organizations, although this may render certain standardization issues inflexible in different local contexts. Therefore, a mindful organization possesses situational awareness and is sensitive to its current operations (Weick et al. 1999). This implies creating a picture of the organization's overall situation and operational status, being aware of the relationships and dependencies that exist among the employees, the structure of the organization, and the management of the work performed. People who are sensitive to these situational facts see the interconnections in the organization and more easily comprehend the complexity that exists. The sensitivity is achieved through collective story building, knowledge of existing interconnections, diagnosis of limitations of planned procedures, and shared mental representations (Weick et al. 1999; Ciborra *et al.* 2000; Swanson & Ramiller 2004).

CONCLUSION

The theories addressed by this paper centred on the role of organizational mindfulness in the responsiveness of such organizations. The views expressed herein show support for and an affirmation of the need for organizational mindfulness in the functionality and operations of the organization as a way of enhancing its conceptual and instrumental responsiveness. As a result of the arguments presented, and the theoretical support offered the imperatives of organizational mindfulness, this paper affirms that there is a link between organizational mindfulness and responsiveness and as such concludes that the collective sense of awareness and consciousness applied in the daily functions and activities of the organization go a long way in ensuring that the organization is able to effectively respond and address the changing and growing expectations of its environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are stated as positions through which mindfulness practices can be improved upon as a way of driving the responsiveness of the organization.

- i. Organizations should on a consistent basis, assess their dispositions and the applicability of their systems and technologies within their various contexts. The applicability of such technologies determines their effectiveness and also impacts on their responsiveness
- ii. Organizational policies should be designed to offer the necessary learning support. Such policies should also focus on identifying and addressing the various loopholes in the functionality of the organization in line with enhancing its goals of effective responsiveness to environmental changes

- iii. Organizational structures and task arrangements should also emphasize on flexibility and adaptability. These are important in mindful organizing and planning and suggest a readiness for change or a more effective stance towards highly volatile and unpredictable business environments

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