Organizational Reliability and Resilience

The Duality Dilemma

Frank C. Braun (UvA)

BENAIS Ideas Bazaar

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the duality requirements of stability and change for organizational reliability and resilience. Through both qualitative and quantitative inquiry this research explores and evaluates the dynamic and competing nature of these organizational duality perspectives. Assuring high organizational reliability is a challenge today in an increasingly complex and dynamic world. Environmental forces continue to change beyond the bounds of expectation causing uncertainty to grow. An organization must develop mechanisms to manage uncertainty (the unexpected) in order to continually provide reliable goods and services for market (Weick 2001). To be reliable means an organization must be dependable, consistent, and stable all the while competing in a global market that is dynamic and uncertain. Therefore an organization must also be able to change, through flexible, innovative, and adaptive organizational processes and mechanisms in order to remain a valuable competitor. This implies that organizations must develop mechanisms that ensure stability and consistency while also enabling adaptability and resilience, which may imply competing objectives.   Adaptability implies that an organization can effectively change as the environment requires, be it an evolving phenomena or unexpected event. Over the past two decades organizations have focused primarily on productivity and efficiency (the exploitation of resources) through designing and developing standardized processes that are quality oriented, routine, consistent, and resistant to variation. However, change itself requires variation in these same processes that were designed to be stable and consistent. Farjoun (2010) refers to this dilemma as the need for duality in organizational mechanisms and processes that support and promote both stability and change.

In order to achieve sustainable organizational high reliability, do stability and change mechanisms coexist, are they concurrent or is there some sort of oscillation between them, or are they mutually exclusive? For example does the focus or fixation on stability such as developing standards for the exploitation of given resources limit the organization's adaptive capacity for innovation and resilience when change is required? Does the focus on change and innovation risk stability and reliability in organizational processes? Farjoun (2010) conjectured that stability and change both can be outcomes, objectives, and performances, as well as underlying mechanisms – processes, practices, and forms. Earlier Giddens (1984) proposed a "duality of structure" in which agents and their actions come into existence only within a structured environment. So what is or are the structural design(s) and dimension(s) that support organizational process outcomes that are stable and consistent while also leveraging the capacity to change and adapt to environmental factors assuring high organizational reliability and resilience? Developing a better understanding of this stability

and change duality dilemma and how it contributes to both organizational reliability and resilience is needed and is the focus of this research. To explore the duality phenomena, this study incorporates aspects of Weick's five high reliability organizational processes along with routine-based and mindfulness-based reliability proposed by Butler and Gray (2006) as frameworks to sample and evaluate organizations in several industry sectors including healthcare and financial services.