Why Are Some Better Than Others? Differences in Manager's Capacity to Lead Business Continuity and Change Simultaneously

Samila Wijesinghe, *Reading University*

Ambidexterity (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004), which can basically be defined as exploitation of existing competencies and exploration of new possibilities (March, 1991) simultaneously, has already gained ground as a research stream in relation to organisational development and change. Here, it is the role of senior leadership which is repeatedly highlighted in the literature as vital for the pursuit and achievement of a simultaneous 'both/and response' to the contradictory requirements of ambidexterity (e.g. Carmeli and Halevi, 2009; Nemanich and Vera, 2009). Arguably, the role of many individual middle managers (IMMs) in knowledge-intensive, fast-paced, and dynamic environments where change occurs frequently puts them in a context that demands they act as 'ambidextrous leaders' (Rosing et al., 2011) who explore new ways of working to deal with new change whilst continue business as usual (i.e. exploitation) in their unit(s). However, the concurrent pursuit of any duality is known to be cognitively and behaviourally challenging because of the apparent contradiction between the two elements inherently creates tensions that can polarise individuals (Lewis, 2000). However, how IMMs, who are squeezed in between the strategic change initiatives from the top and operational demands of the bottom, handle the duality as agents for continuity and change remain almost unexplored.

Building on this, a recent development related to organisational contradictions suggests that for people to fully apprehend contradictions and experience "institutional arrangements as provisional and potentially changeable upon encountering the contradictions are more problematic than typically acknowledged" (Voronov and Yorks, 2015, p.563). This is because over time and as a result of experience, individuals develop different cognitive and emotional dispositions that may help or hinder them in identifying, tolerating and working with conflicting demands like ambidexterity. Drawing on insights from constructive-developmental theory (Keegan, 1982, 1994), the authors theorise differences in people's capacity to apprehend contradictions resulting three qualitatively distinct mindset stages in adults who show different degrees of cognitive and affective apprehensions to contradictions such as ambidexterity. People respond differently to contradictory demands at each stage. Therefore, it can be argued that IMMs in different mindset stages may exhibit different

capacities to handle the dual demands of continuity and change. Following table shows some of the key differences between mindsets.

Mindset Stage	Core Features
Socialized	Dependent on 'valued others' for a sense of self
	Values can be easily changed by the values and needs of valued others
	Intimidated by conflicts and strains to valued relations
	Dominant operating mode: automatic and intuitive; avoiding conscious deliberation; mainly concrete
Self-Authoring	Feel self as autonomous
	Distinguish the values between the self and others
	Accept conflict as opportunities to improve performance
	Dominant operating mode: conscious deliberation; minimizing the role of intuition and emotion in decision making; abstract
Self-Transforming	Take self as negotiated and provisional
	See others as dialogical partners to build a shared reality
	Welcome conflicts as opportunities to self-learn Dominant operating mode: both conscious reflection and embracing of intuition and emotion; concrete and abstract

__The apprehension of Contradictions by Different Knower's__ (Compiled from Drago Severson, 2004, 2009; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009)

By using Voronov and Yorks' (2015) mindset classification, the aim of this purely qualitative study was to explore and reach a deep understanding on an as yet almost unexplored question; in what ways does the capacity to apprehend the contradictory demands affect IMMs leadership in their role as agents for continuity and change?

Methodology

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviewing and twenty statements tests (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954). A particular thematic approach explained by Ritchie et al. (2014) is being used in the data analysis. Informants included three cohorts (senior academics, middle management level professionals with doctoral level education, and middle managers who had enrolled in an executive MBA programme) of purposefully selected

practitioners who deal with contradictory demands of continuity and change in their workplaces.

Findings

Bringing new insights to the leadership development, the current findings show that only the IMMs in self-transforming mindset which is the highest and the rarest stage of mindset development are more likely to be purely ambidextrous leaders who have the capacity to effectively oscillate between changing demands of continuity and change. They show a more systemic (i.e. big picture) understanding of the phenomenon and possess a high level of 'both/and thinking' capacity. Findings reveal that self-authoring IMMs may also be able to deal with contradictory demands successfully with some exceptions. Nevertheless, there is a clear gap in the level of capacity between the two. It is found that IMMs who are in the socialised mindset is generally non-ambidextrous. These findings lead to the conclusion that not every IMM have the capacity to handle the contradictory demands of business continuity and change at the same time raising some implications in the areas such as leadership development, training and coaching, change management, recruitment, etc.

Next Steps…

A theoretical level paper related to this research was presented in the Developing Leadership Capacity Conference, Bristol, 2018. Therefore, it is expected to present a much more developed empirical paper including all the major findings this time. Data analysis will be completed by the end of October 2018.

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