Editorial

How individuals and organizations adapt to a complex world

Dear Reader.

In the current business environment that some have referred to as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), individuals and organizations must adapt quickly in order to survive. This special issue of Management Research contains two invited contributions along with commentaries that address the issue of adaptability. The first focal paper is by Angelo DeNisi and Caitlin Sockbeson where the authors tackle the process by which individuals seek out and respond to feedback. The second primary paper by Brooke Graham and Wayne Cascio addresses the topic of employer branding, whereby organizations manage the signals and messages they send to potential employees. Both papers highlight the need for further theoretical and empirical work to examine the mechanisms by which individuals (through feedback encounters) and organizations (by managing their employer brand) can adapt to our current business environment. We hope that this special issue can be the catalyst to spur this needed research.

In the first invited paper by DeNisi and Sockbeson, “Feedback sought vs feedback given: a tale of two literatures,” the authors draw a previously unexplored distinction between feedback that is sought versus unsolicited feedback given to an individual. The authors argue that these two processes generate different types of feedback content and are received (and acted upon) differently by the feedback recipient. This paper builds on their previous work which found that feedback does not always lead to increases in performance, as had been previously assumed. Instead, in about one-third of the time, feedback (positive or negative) leads to a decrease in performance. The current paper suggests that one possible mechanism for this effect may be the impetus for receiving the feedback (actively sought versus unsolicited).

In the first commentary on the DeNisi and Sockbeson paper, “Like ships passing in the night: towards a truly dyadic perspective on feedback dynamics,” the authors Anseel, Vossaert and Cornille agree for the need to integrate the feedback-seeking with the feedback-giving literature. However, they go even further and argue that future research should adopt a truly dyadic and dynamic approach when studying feedback processes. Such an approach would allow for the examination of the broad contextual factors surrounding feedback episodes.

In the second commentary, “Listening first feedback later,” Kluger and Lehmann argue that feedback-giving and feedback-seeking are better understood as parts of a greater continuum of conversations between a supervisor and a subordinate. Depending on whether the conversation is understood as one where the supervisor is telling, versus one where there is mutual listening, the subordinate will approach the information presented in the conversation differently. This conversation dynamic will then impact the subordinate’s motivation to learn and adapt their behavior based on the information being conveyed.

The final commentary, “Dual judgment processing in feedback: opening Pandora’s xox” by De Stobbeleir and Desmet, extends the arguments in the DeNisi and Sockbeson paper by presenting a dual-judgment model of the feedback process. Specifically, they argue that oftentimes the line between feedback-giving and feedback-seeking is blurred and, therefore, it is not as useful to use that distinction as the primary factor in studying the feedback process. Instead, the authors argue that it is more fruitful to begin with the cognitive judgment process that is inherent in feedback encounters. When viewed from this
perspective, factors such as evaluation salience and rater motivation are more fundamental in understanding the feedback process than whether the feedback encountered was initiated by, or thrust upon, a feedback recipient.

Taken together, the paper by DeNisi and Sockbeson, along with the three commentaries, present a more complex and complete picture of how individuals make sense of the feedback in their environment to adapt their behavior. What these papers make clear is that this process is fluid and dynamic and previous research and theorizing has failed to capture this complexity.

The second invited paper, “The employer-branding journey: its relationship with cross-cultural branding, brand reputation and brand repair” by Brooke Graham and Wayne Cascio examines how organizations adapt as they seek to develop a competitive advantage within the labor market. The authors discuss the concept of employer brand as a way by which organizations manage their identities and reputations in order to differentiate themselves in the eyes of potential employees. The current economic expansion, with its extremely low unemployment rate, makes it difficult for organizations to compete for talent. Therefore, managing their employer brand is a strategic way by which organizations can adapt to a tightening and competitive labor market. In addition to addressing some of the most critical aspects of employer branding, the authors also address the challenges involved in extending an organization’s employer brand across different cultures. In our ever-shrinking world aided by electronic communication and connected gadgets, as well as extended global supply chains, organizations need to be able to compete for talent beyond their home countries. Finally, the authors present novel ideas on how organizations can repair their brands when a negative event happens. With the ubiquity of social media and camera-enabled cellphones, negative events such as poor customer feedback, accidents or unethical behavior by an employee can travel the world in seconds. Thus, brand repair is a critical tool in the arsenal of any organization seeking to adapt in a VUCA world.

In her commentary on the Graham and Cascio paper entitled “People make the brand,” Backhaus expands on the concept of employer brand by discussing the ways by which brands are created through the behaviors and interactions of individuals within an organization. She argues that employees serve as brand ambassadors by positively promoting the organization during real or virtual encounters with other potential employees. Conversely, employees can quickly destroy a company’s brand by engaging in damaging or illegal behaviors that reflect poorly on their employer. Thus, organizations must ensure that all employees are aware of and aligned on their company’s employer brand in order to send a consistent message through their actions that reinforces this brand.

We are confident that you will find the papers and commentaries in this issue of Management Research to be relevant and thought-provoking in addressing the challenges faced by individuals and organizations as they seek to adapt to a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

Happy reading.

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