

The practitioner's approach to ambidexterity and organizational learning

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Change is a continual element of the business environment. Leaders are often tasked with the discrete and paradoxical decision of exploring and learning new competencies or exploiting existing competencies as they drive business performance within the changing environment. The decisions for leaders habitually arise in the form of which of these finite buckets (learning to explore new or exploit existing) to place time, effort, and most importantly money. Converting the polarizing decision to a balanced or ambidextrous view is the theme of this issue of *The Learning Organization*. If you are leading an organization confronted with pressure to explore new arenas (customer, business models, etc.) and simultaneously exploit or optimize the benefits of the base, this special issue, "Organizational ambidexterity: Two modes of learning", offers ideas in how to overcome the conflicts and possibly explore and exploit simultaneously.

March (1991) enlightened us to this exploration versus exploitation paradox in organizational learning almost three decades ago. Since the introduction of exploration and exploitation as a paradoxical arrangement, Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) introduced the concept of ambidexterity, or the ability to deftly manage or balance the countering views almost simultaneously. In this issue of *The Learning Organization*, the authors present compelling methods for leaders to consider as they balance the countering pulls of exploring or finding and nurturing the next new technology versus exploiting or sustaining the existing technology. In general, there are three methodologies presented across the papers to move an organization toward ambidexterity. As the authors cite, the general methods fall into three groups of structural, sequential or contextual.

Before delving too deeply into the concepts, a good starting point in this issue is the book review because the book review itself provides a good practitioner overview of the concepts.

Morais-Storz (2019) in her review of *Lead and Disrupt: How to Solve the Innovator's Dilemma* (2016) presents O'Reilly and Tushman's view of the ambidexterity discussion. Within the review, Morais-Storz points to how O'Reilly and Tushman provide insight into 4 steps to answer "what it takes to become ambidextrous" (p. 174). Ideas for the practitioner are most lucid in the leadership practices that O'Reilly and Tushman propose in their definition of the consistently inconsistent leader. For more details on the overview of *Lead and Disrupt: How to Solve the Innovator's Dilemma* turn to Morais-Storz's book review.

Kakkar (2019) in *The goblet and two faces: understanding transcendence and paradox from the perspective of Advaita Vendanta*, approaches the ambidexterity topic from a contextual approach. As the author states, "the paper introduces the negative dialectic



method of adhyaropa-apavada (affirmation followed by recension) which can be used to encourage reflexive thinking in individuals” (p. 414). It is through what the author describes as a “two-step, negative dialectic process” that the opposing paradoxical views are brought into reflexive tension not through a synthesis of (both/and). Rather, the reflexive tension creates an opposing (neither/nor) discourse. The author posits that through the deeper appreciation of transcendence as an intuitive experience, the unity in the paradox becomes clear. The more provocative contribution espoused by the author is that the technique of adhyaropa-apavada allows leaders to move from the “construction of transcendence” to the “deconstruction paradox” through the use of a negative dialectic approach (p. 421). As stated, “the distinct advantage that the adhyaropa-apavada method presents is that it does not require an overarching discourse and provides individuals with the cognitive flexibility of developing their own ideas of paradox and transcendence” (p. 421). For practitioners, the application of Kakkar’s article is clear. Use a series of questions built from the negative dialectic side of discourse to help see through the paradoxical pulls. Build upon the neither/nor to deconstruct the paradox and build contextual ambidexterity.

Cunha *et al.* (2019) in *Integrative ambidexterity: One paradoxical mode of learning*, further the discussion on ambidexterity. The authors propose the fusion of exploration and exploitation into a single learning mode. Also viewing ambidexterity from a contextual stance, they point to the fact that models reinforcing integration across the modes of exploring and exploiting are limited as many prior studies focus on separation in time and/or space. To aid leaders in managing the dynamic balancing act, the authors suggest three supportive processes – novelty, agility and improvisation. The authors then define these three processes within a paradoxical situation themselves. For leaders considering a practical application, the authors provide examples within each of the three processes. For example, novelty in memory is the linkage of past to future. As the authors state, “too much memory will anchor organizations in the past; too much imagination will deprive the organization of its identity and strategic consistency” (p. 430). Returning to the exploration and exploitation concepts, it becomes clear that memory acts to entrench exploitative ideas and imagination promotes exploration. Therefore, the authors propose that organizations must offer employees space to merge the countering concepts. For practitioners, the questions to ask become more around how memory and novelty interact. Agility via focus is another pattern described by the authors. Agility is the capability to adjust, which is needed in the near term. Whereas focus is the strategic element that drives consistency in the business. The authors provide examples of how leaders should focus on flexibility within simple boundaries guided by focus. Finally, improvisation is described as the view that change can occur throughout the system as a foundational element, therefore building an integrative ambidexterity approach. The authors conclude by stating that they “hope that our insights around novelty, agility, and improvisation provide practitioners a pathway through and a way of thinking about this complexity” (p. 432).

Turning to the structure methods of managing ambidexterity, Seidle (2019) in *Sequences of learning types for organizational ambidexterity*, describes an empirical study comprised of 16 interviews within the biopharmaceutical sector. The study identifies the structures that firms can use to develop the interplay between external knowledge sourcing and internal development. Or as the author states, “our model of distinct learning sequences underpinning exploration versus exploitation identifies how firms might successfully utilize ambidextrous structures” (p. 440). Seidle focuses the study upon experiential and vicarious learning. Experiential originates from internal knowledge creating process, and vicarious learning initiates from external observations or learnings. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of learning as it flows across the experiential and/or vicarious learning types and through

the stages of the innovation process from initiation to development to implementation. The practical application is in how the flow occurs and how to promote structural improvement. The empirical study found the brokerage role acted to maintain the productive ongoing tension, and as the authors described, the “technological brokering could function instead as a linchpin between separate innovation phases in sequential ambidexterity” (p. 381). For the practitioner, engagement of technological brokering processes at appropriate time and place (experiential vs vicarious) can aid in alleviating the stress between exploration and exploitation.

Souza and Takahashi (2019) describe the interactions between dynamic capabilities, organizational learning and ambidexterity in their article *Dynamic capabilities, organizational learning and ambidexterity in a higher education institution*. The study uses a qualitative approach to collect in-depth interviews over a 15-year period in a university setting. The authors aim to more fully understand how dynamic capabilities, or the organizations ability to adapt to the environment, impacts organizational learning, and then, how organizational learning affects ambidexterity. As a result of the study leaders can better understand how to link the organization to the environment and counter the paradox. The study outcome is clarity into how these three separate concepts inter-relate into a process flow. Figure 1 in their paper best illustrates the process as information flows from the environment to the dynamic capabilities and then forward into organizational learning and finally resulting in ambidexterity in the balancing of exploration and exploitation. For practitioners, the study illuminates the importance of focusing on all three elements to handle the paradox.

Brix (2019) in *Ambidexterity and organizational learning: revisiting and reconnecting the literatures* expands the discussion beyond the organizational realm into that of the inter-organizational through a study that synthesizes the exploration and exploitation paradox with organizational learning. The author provides a concise review of a typology of organizational ambidexterity drawing upon the works of Simsek *et al.* (2009) and then overlays the context of different or inter-organizational views. The resulting Figure 2 illustrates how the advancement integrates. The author then introduces the terms interactive and integrative ambidexterity. Interactive is the learning process where valuable knowledge flows as absorptive capacity between employees across organizations and one organization learns. Integrative learning occurs when collaborative exploration and exploitation occurs between employees across the organizational boundary. As Brix’ study demonstrates, the discussion is expanded beyond a bias toward intra-organizational context. In addition, the study delves into the group/team level analysis through the lens of interactions across organizations. For practitioners, the paper provides insights into how the paradox occurs with business partners, which provides a valuable addition to the current discourse.

Kerry and DeSimone (2019) provide a less practitioner focused study in their article *Learning organizational ambidexterity: a joint-variance synthesis of exploration – exploitation modes of performance*. The authors’ intention is not directly to promote practical application. They propose that previous organizational ambidexterity studies conform to common statistical techniques and, through the utilization of such an approach, overlooked reciprocity. The authors propose joint-variance as the more appropriate estimator. The immediate practical applications of this study in industry may be extant. However, application may be more practical with future academic studies utilizing the joint-variance methodology.

For practitioners, the articles in this issue of *The Learning Organization* provide ideas and models around how to promote an ambidextrous view of the exploration and

exploitation paradox. As the environment continues to accelerate change, an organization can ill afford to be stuck too far on either side of the contradicting sides. Leaders must keep their team focused on both exploring the strategic blue sky while simultaneously active in the enhancement of the hear-and-now. The articles in this issue of *The Learning Organization* provide some methods to reach ambidexterity through structure, sequence and context. If the exploration and exploitation functions can be managed in parallel, the articles contain in this issue certain provide intriguing approaches for leaders to reach an ambidextrous organization.

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Further reading

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