

Extended book review and author interview: the rise of the ambidextrous organization: the secret revolution happening right under your nose

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The ambidextrous organization is not a new concept to readers of *The Learning Organization* journal. Volume 26, issue 4, guest edited by Nhien Nguyen and Alf Steinar Saetre, provides readers a special issue on the topic. Turn to the further readings section for more details on the articles within that issue. Jacob Brix's article in that special issue, "Ambidexterity and organizational learning: revisiting and reconnecting the literatures," offers an integrated view of the two ambidextrous streams that he describes as previously coexisting and evolving in parallel. Brix's article offers a foundation to Eric Zabiegalski's book, *The Rise of the Ambidextrous Organization: The Secret Revolution Happening Right Under Your Nose*. Both Brix's article and Zabiegalski's book explain the context dependency of ambidexterity and learning. Both Brix and Zabiegalski emphasize the varying levels of ambidexterity across organizations, and both explain that certain situations may require more exploitation while others more exploration. The two opposing sides of the ambidexterity discussion. The balance between both is rarely 50:50. The balance shifts across the organization and with the external environment. Ambidextrous organizational and individual capacity, just as learning at the organization and individual levels, facilitates organizational success. Not only do both ambidexterity and learning facilitate maneuvering with change, Zabiegalski goes as far as saying, every ambidextrous organization is a learning organization, and every learning organization is ambidextrous. The two are interdependent.

For this book review, Zabiegalski has agreed to provide an interview format in explaining his key points. His responses offer readers depth beyond what is covered in the book. But, as he emphasizes, the book contains much more breadth than the interview can offer.

The book begins with an explanation of the countering exploration-to-exploitation forces. The paradox whereby, "organizational exploitation drives out exploration [...] as organizations exploit the marketplace by doing what they do best for profit and market share, they consequently stop exploring and looking for new ideas" (p. 1). From this foundation, Zabiegalski introduces his solutions.

Zabiegalski divides his argument into three logical progressive sections. First, he discusses the ambidextrous organization touching on concepts such as culture, learning and structure. This section sets the theoretical groundwork. Then, he addresses complexity and ever-changing environmental influences upon the organization. Here, his focus changes to complexity science, emergence, chaos, structure and governance. The final section addresses



the ambidextrous mindset. In this section, his focus is upon shifting from exploitative to explorative mindsets and concentrating in either comfortably, depending upon the situation. The book smoothly flows across the three sections and sequentially leads the reader from theory in Section 1 to the environmental change and learning in Section 2 to the balance of two forces in Section 3.

Let us begin our interview questions for Dr. Zabiegalski from the book cover.

Question: What is the background to the title? Why do you say, “The Secret Revolution Happening Right Under Your Nose”?

Interestingly, the term “organizational ambidexterity” goes back to the 1970’s and was coined by Robert Duncan to describe one type of ambidexterity (there are 3 more or less, I suggested a 4th triggered by COVID last year, temporal ambidexterity). Duncan spoke of “switching rules” in which companies would periodically shift from exploitation to exploration at different times of the year. James March also gets a lot of credit for ambidexterity because he introduced learning to the concept in the 90’s, but Duncan is the father. The background of the title of the book is inspired by my early research on the subject and the personal discovery that many companies had intuitively discovered and practice ambidexterity organically, that’s the “secret revolution” subtitle reference. Often these companies aren’t even aware that: 1. they are ambidextrous and have categorically risen to the ranks of complex learning organizations, and 2. they aren’t sharing their secret sauce that is working so well for them, considering it proprietary competitive information. Another discovery for me was that I originally thought being ambidextrous was the “rare” thing when it’s the sustainment of ambidexterity that’s the tricky part (Zabiegalski, interview).

Now I understand your title. Successful companies are already ambidextrous as it is part of the success. The trick is retaining or sustaining ambidexterity to remain successful.

In Section 1, you begin with the definition of ambidextrous organization culture. As you describe, attitude and mind-set are the critical cultural descriptors. Then, leadership layers on in a way to support the culture.

Question: Why start with culture and leadership?

Because they are the foundation of every organization. Edgar Schein, who coined the term organizational culture in the 1970’s, says that perhaps the single most important thing a CEO does for their company is set the culture. I will add that if they don’t, they’re going to get a culture anyway and they may not like, or even worse, understand what they have. *Horror vacui*, nature abhors a vacuum and in the case of social and organizational spaces they will *always* be filled with cultural phenomena and behavior. It is of the utmost importance then for leaders to know the *who* and *what* regarding their culture as it affects everything the organization does. Leadership, and leaders can be thought of as the caretakers and shepherds of culture. They may not espouse this outwardly (perhaps they should), but it should definitely be priority one. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric once famously said that he had two important questions to ask when considering retaining employees. The first was do they get the culture and the second was whether they produced results. If the answer was yes to both then it was a no-brainer, they were a perfect fit, if the answer was no to both the answer was also obvious, they needed to go. But here’s the surprising thing, if the answer was yes to the first and no to the second, if they got the culture but didn’t produce results Welch said retain them. He recommended putting them with a mentor or coach in order to get up to speed with their competency. If on the other hand they were a hot shot at work performance, producing and bringing in revenue but didn’t get the culture Welch didn’t retain them. Welch got it and many of the world’s top leaders get it too, culture is king. To use a sports metaphor if you don’t consider culture, you’re playing a short game. Don’t get me wrong, you could still be successful, but it will be short term, you probably won’t sustain your success (Zabiegalski, interview).

Now I understand more about the early portion and lead-in with culture and leadership. You then conclude Section 1 with learning and structure, which then must flow from culture and leadership. At this point in the book you introduce your cultural and structural dynamic model and the ambidextrous ecosystem.

Question: How do you link ambidexterity and learning?

The two are intrinsically linked, especially through the explorative side of ambidexterity. Organizational researcher James March introduced learning into the concept of organizational ambidexterity in 1991, that's when the concept really took off. To me, an ambidextrous organization is code for a learning organization, the two are synonymous. Under the big umbrella of "organizational learning" is the "learning organization", and these two terms are not the same. A learning organization is a dynamic organization learning in real time and rapidly rolling that learning into new and different action. Organizational learning is more static, structured, and formal, its *evolutionary vs revolutionary*, slow moving and familiar vs punctuated and unfamiliar. Also, from a semantics perspective the term "organizational learning" is cognitively problematic. So much so I fear that the two words cancel one other out leaving most organizations either paralyzed and not knowing what to do or doing the very least, here's what I mean. Words are important, it's the way your brain sees the world, creates images and acts. When considering these definitions, the word "organization" denotes a parsing down of things to a few selected items grouped in specific ways, it's a closing of the aperture, a convergence. By contrast, "learning" suggests a bigger picture consideration of all things, it's a divergence, a widening, the two terms are antithetical, incongruent, and disparate opposites, and cause a stalemate in our minds that we subsequently ignore because we can't reconcile them, or we do what's comfortable instead (Zabiegalski, interview).

Can you provide more details into your cultural and structural dynamic model? How do structure, learning and ambidexterity inter-relate?

The inter relationship is powerful and everything in life happens on a field of play. Think of it as the places where we physically interact, within your organizational space and out there in the environment. To build this model I borrowed from some heavy hitters and concepts. Field theory, structuration, and habitus from Kurt Lewin, Anthony Giddens, and Pierre Bourdieu. I also incorporated Edgar Schein's culture model. The model illustrates how organizations and individuals change one another over time and reflects the complexity and significance of how acting out known scripts, adding in our own behavior, and experiencing and discovering emergent discoveries change the course of reality in variant and unexpected ways. Studying and discussing created models such as this give us a feeling for the gravity and weight of our behavior as actors and an appreciation of both simplicity and complexity (Zabiegalski, interview).

Your ambidextrous ecosystem model illustrates the context-dependency of ambidexterity and the fluidity of exploration and exploitation. Can you offer an overview of the model and the theoretical foundations?

Certainly. Like the structure and learning model I borrowed from those who have come before. In this case primarily Max Boisot and his great book *Collisions and Collaborations* in which he studies the social learning cycles inside the operations of the CERN Geneva Large Hadron Collider and ATLAS collector, an endeavor that employs 3000 scientists, 174 research institutes, 400 companies and suppliers and 38 countries, a huge organizational undertaking. The model is broken down into three areas, *culture, learning, and social learning cycles* and is meant to illustrate an ambidextrous ecosystem where these interact in *exploitive and explorative* behavior for known work, creativity, and innovation. My contribution here is the emergent estuary at the bottom of the model meant to signify the place in organizations where new ideas can "bubble up" out of the organization from anywhere and anyone, and the "creative repository" in the upper left corner where ideas and

pieces of ideas and captured and recorded for periodic review. Organizations continually discard and dismiss great ideas because they're not *plug-and-play* ready in their conception or execution, the environments not quite right, or they're only fractions of ideas waiting for their other half to come along and make them whole, this wastes resources and opportunities, and hurts culture. Bottom line, companies that pay attention to their explorative social learning cycles with processes in place to capture and record them along with the performance side of their organizations do better and go farther (Zabiegalski, interview).

This takes the reader to an interesting point – the importance of the explorative side.

Section 2 expands to the environmental impacts to the organization and need to counter change with ambidexterity. Can you provide a summary of environmental change on the organization and specifically how it relates to learning and ambidexterity?

Every action elicits a reaction, sometimes it's only a cognitive reaction without any immediate physical compliment. A change in thought, conscious or subconscious is still an action albeit subtle and maybe even imperceptible, it's important to keep this in mind. The environment is changing us as we observe, experience, and move through it, it's like the double slit experiment in physics, is light a wave or particles? Call ambidexterity a philosophy, a world view, a tactic, or a strategy, none of those descriptors would be wrong. The important thing ambidexterity does for us is that it cognitively gives us a pivotal stance that is not only flexible and modular but also one which is biologically natural and universally (I mean from a physics and Universe perspective), intuitive. This is important because learning organizations need to be thought of as large living organisms, biological systems breathing in and out with negative entropy and changing and evolving with a continually changing environment, an ambidextrous mindset allows you to have that frame of mind. 40+ years of research on this subject says that "*exploitation drives out exploration.*" An ambidextrous mindset keeps exploration alive and viable and when technological advances like digital cameras (Kodak company), home computers (Xerox), or glass containers (the Ball company) emerge, we can naturally adjust and change our behavior. Or, if natural global disrupters like COVID-19 suddenly appear, we can meet them with success and renewed vitality (Zabiegalski, interview).

You mention in the book, "in the ambidextrous organization, specific behaviors allow the tensions of the competing schemata to coexist and regulate in a self-balancing and continually changing dance" (p. 48). Can you explain how this occurs in practice?

Sure. Like the action/reaction phenomena we just talked about, there's a balance. I use the metaphor of surfing a wave and the conscious and unconscious effort required to maintain that balance within the dynamic environment of the wave. As I mention in the book some systems are complex while others are adaptive but not all systems are "complex adaptive systems", these are learning organizations and simultaneously think tactically and strategically at the same time, short term, and long term. In life, and in organization, there is chaos internal and external that we are faced with. How we interpret, create, mitigate, prevent, and navigate that chaos makes all the difference (Zabiegalski, interview).

Section 3 transitions the reader to the individual and how to balance the paradox. You state the lofty goal for yourself and the reader as, "by the end of this book you (reader) will think ambidextrously, shift easily from exploitative to explorative mindsets, dwell in either place with concentration and comfort, and be in better command of your inner mind. . ." (p. 54). What are a few critical steps to take in reaching the goal? Can you provide examples across organizational levels?

Certainly. To reach this goal requires rewiring and retraining your brain until those neural pathways begin to stick and you're taking a new path in conscious and unconscious thought. I like to say everyone has a cognitive hemispheric home room they default to, either left or right

brain. It's in this place we like to park, dwell, idle, or run to when feeling threatened or insecure. The critical steps to take to develop this resiliency is to relax and quell anxiety, learn to find comfort in discomfort, suspend judgement, and delay action until a decision, and action, must be made. You will begin to understand why behavior modifications like these pay dividends after you begin to do, and reflect, upon them (Zabiegalski, interview).

Your final chapter offers the reader some advice. Can you link the advice to learning and across the multiple levels of the learning organization?

As the Greek philosopher Plato said, "know thyself", that's the ultimate battle. The advice I offer the reader is designed to promote and encourage learning for themselves and their organizations, but it really speaks to self-management, self-leadership, and emotional intelligence. From time to time we will always surprise ourselves in terms of our innermost feelings, biases, and prejudices. From an evolutionary standpoint the human body is set up that way in order for us to navigate our world and the mind will "fill-in" blank spaces in our perception, look for helpful familiar short-cuts, and favor and dismiss things both pleasant and unpleasant. While we may never see perfectly clear in this hall of mirrors, it is possible to understand yourself to a degree that puts your best self forward. The better you know yourself the better product you present for others and yourself. The advice I link forward to learning and organizations is to keep the aperture open and only narrow and converge when necessary (Zabiegalski, interview).

Throughout the book you describe how ambidexterity is required for learning organizations and how learning organizations are ambidextrous. Can you offer a few concluding thoughts on the linkage of ambidexterity and learning organizations?

The linkage is synonymous, we are talking about the same thing. Recently I watched an interview with Michael Tushman. He along with Charles O'Reilly have been prolific writers on the subject of organizational ambidexterity. In the interview, Tushman said that the subject of organizational ambidexterity has become diffused, even omnipotent, and therefore has become impotent, and nothing, *if something is everything*. Tushman argues, *it is nothing*, I couldn't disagree more. What Tushman was revealing, I suspect, was his own personal preference for the exploitive side of the enterprise. Something which perhaps has been bound, scoped, defined, and is ready to be relegated to the archives of history. But, he was not describing the concept of organizational ambidexterity. This has not been played out. I interpret Tushman's explanation as instead the recognition of, and perhaps the lack of in his case, the marking of a concept about transition. While "exploitation", the objective, convergent, known side of organizational ambidexterity may be sufficiently defined at present, exploration is infinite, there is still much work to be done to refine and maintain the best balance (Zabiegalski, interview).

Your linkage back to Tushman and O'Reilly is fitting for our readers. The previously mentioned special issue, *Organizational Ambidexterity: two modes of learning*, provides readers a book review of O'Reilly and Tushman's recent 2016 book *Lead and disrupt: How to Solve the Innovator's Dilemma* (Morais-Storz, 2019). This review summarizes the authors over two decades of collaborating on ambidexterity concepts and supports your comments about the differences between exploiting and exploring.

Thank you to Dr. Zabiegalski for providing depth into some of the concepts central to his book. His explanation of concepts linked to his book provides theoretical background that he expands upon for the reader. He offers readers a compelling model and applicable actions to help understand ambidexterity, link with learning and apply. He ultimately explains how to balance exploration and exploitation for the betterment of the organization and individual.

Further reading: The Learning Organization, Vol. 26 No. 4

- Brix, J. (2019), "Ambidexterity and organizational learning: Revisiting and reconnecting the literatures", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 337-351.
- Cunha, M.P., Bednarek, R. and Smith, W. (2019), "Integrative ambidexterity: One paradoxical mode of learning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 425-437.
- Kakkar, S. (2019), "The goblet and two faces: Understanding transcendence and paradox from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 412-424.
- Kerry, M.J. and DeSimmon, J.A. (2019), "Learning organization ambidexterity: a joint-variance synthesis of exploration-exploitation modes on performance", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 352-380.
- Morais-Storz, M. (2019), "Book review: Lead and disrupt: How to solve the innovator's dilemma (2016) by Charles A. O'Reilly III and Michael L. Tushman", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 442-444.
- Reese, S. (2019), "The practitioner's approach to ambidexterity and organizational learning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 438-441.
- Seidle, R.J. (2019), "Sequences of learning types for organizational ambidexterity", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 381-296.
- Souza, C. and Takahashi, A. (2019), "Dynamic capabilities, organizational learning and ambidexterity in a higher education institution", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 397-411.