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The Social Construction of Organizational Change Paradoxes

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Abstract Paradox has become a common label for the organizational complexity, ambiguity and equivocality accentuated by change. Yet, as a label, paradox is socially constructed – the product of actors’ daily discourses. Applying a social constructivist lens and insights from systems theories, we explore the nature and dynamics of paradox related to changing organizations. Building from related studies, we propose a framework that details recurring paradoxes, their communicative sources, and their paradoxical interplay. Our action research study of the Lego Company offers an integrative example. We conclude with a critique of “resolution,” noting responses to paradox that may energize change.

Introduction

In management literature and organization studies, there is a rising awareness of complexity, equivocality, ambiguity and paradox (e.g., Farson, 1996; Handy, 1994; Koot, Sabelis and Ybema 1996; O’Connor, 1995). Such terms are particularly prevalent in studies of changing organizations, where paradox is a prominent theme (Lewis, 2000). Van de Ven and Poole (1988) present organizational change as inherently paradoxical. “In the acts of organizing, distinctions are drawn that are oppositional in tendency: differentiation and integration, collectivity and individuality, stability and change, uniformity and complexity, morphostasis, the maintenance of structure, and morphogenesis, creation of new structure” (p.83).

Paradox has been described broadly as the simultaneous presence of seemingly mutually exclusive elements – demands, emotions, perspectives, ideas (Quinn and Cameron, 1988). Paradox, however, has many faces. As a cognitive phenomenon, paradox emanates

from joint action or reflection. According to Handy (1994), at best, paradoxes are teasers of the brain, challenging formal logic and decision making. At worst, they are sources of organizational paralysis, an emotional, even debilitating tug-of-war fueled by actors' struggles to make sense of underlying tensions (Smith and Berg, 1987).

We share the view of theorists who depict paradox as cognitively and socially constructed. According to Apker (2003), organizational members enact opposing tendencies in daily discourses as they seek to make sense of change at individual, organizational and systemic levels. Putnam (1986), for example, identifies varied communicative patterns as sources of paradox. Likewise, German systems theorist Niklas Luhmann stresses the mental state aroused by paradox: "No system can accept that its' operations are blocked by a tautology or a paradox" (1988, p.21). Luhmann accentuates the challenges of managing paradox, namely that social systems faced with seeming contradictions often are unable to cope, adapt or progress. Argyris (1988) elaborates one such pattern. He describes how actors spark vicious cycles by avoiding tensions and disguising the fact that they are doing so, rendering the sense of paradox undiscussible.

This paper explores paradoxes and their construction in changing organizations. Applying insights from social constructivism and systems theories, we begin by asking why organizational change settings are ripe for paradox. We then propose a framework that details three paradoxes, their communicative sources, and their paradoxical interplay. Paradoxes of performing, belonging and organizing accentuate Putnam's (1986) depiction of mixed messages, recursive cycles and system contradictions. We explicate this framework by leveraging related studies, using our action research study of the Lego Company as an integrative example. We conclude by critiquing the concept of "resolution," exploring how managers might cope and even thrive with paradoxes of organizational change.

Organizational change and paradox

A paradox perspective is particularly relevant in changing organizations as the complexity, ambiguity and equivocality aroused by change intensifies experiences of paradox (Lewis, 2000). Exploring such experiences, research examines how paradox may challenge and enable understandings of organizational change (e.g., Bartunek, 1988; Dauphinais, 1996; Ford and Backoff, 1988; Van de Ven and Poole 1988, Luhmann, 1998, Weick, 1996). For example, change processes foster complexity as the number and variety of organizational demands, roles and tasks multiplies. Actors must deal with many issues – e.g. changes in the financial resources of a department may be intertwined with changes in production routines, encouraging reflections about recruitment and managerial styles, etc. Loosely coupled, yet interdependent issues revealed by change in one area may encourage actors to consider changes in other areas (Leavitt, 1965). As complexity rises so does the likelihood that actors will face seemingly conflicting, yet simultaneous—and hence paradoxical—issues.

Similar conditions accentuate ambiguity. Hatch and Ehrlich note: “When environments are complex and changing, conditions are ripe for the experience of contradiction, incongruity, and incoherence and the recognition of paradox and ambiguity within organizations” (1993, pp. 505-506). Indeed the combination of ambiguity and complexity exacerbates challenges of paradox. For instance, while complexity denotes a growing number of related—and potentially conflicting—demands, ambiguity renders the relations between demands uncertain and misunderstood (Warglien and Masuch, 1996).

Equivocality is a communicative feature intensified by change. Whereas a situation may be perceived as ambiguous and complex (i.e. replete with numerous demands of uncertain meaning), messages, discourse and information may be equivocal (i.e., open to multiple interpretations). According to Putnam, “The nature of the input influences the amount of equivocality engendered in the receiver. The receiver then must activate processes to manage the equivocality and to select the interpretations that are most appropriate in a

given context” (1982, p.117). The multiplicity and uncertainty of demands during organizational change raise actors’ awareness of equivocal messages.

Paradigm lens: social constructivism

Social constructivism, with its roots in sociology, serves as our paradigm lens. Social behavioralist George Herbert Mead (1934) proposes that we construct our own identities through interaction with others. From this stance, nothing is in the individual that hasn’t first been part of an interaction. Likewise, according to Campbell (2000), the meaning of a statement does not reside in the intention of the author or message sender, but rather in the way readers construct meaning from within their personal – temporal and cultural – context.

Social constructivist research seeks not to reflect reality, but to understand the way realities are construed from the voices of many actors holding different perspectives (Campbell, 2000). Whereas functionalist inquiry typically revolves around variations of the question “what is effective management?”, social constructivists simply ask “what is management?” In this light, the social constructivist aim is not to improve praxis according to a predetermined goal, but rather to alter our understanding of how managers define situations, and act in accordance to their own definitions (Darmer, 2000, p.348).

Within the focus of this paper, researchers seek to explore what paradoxes are and how they are constructed through communicative actions, rather than judge the immediate impact of paradox on organizational effectiveness. Paradox is seen as a part of a meaning system that actors use to give sense to their social world and to make it possible to interact in specific contexts (Teunissen, 1996, p.23). A paradox appears, as actors recognize that elements of their thoughts, actions and emotions are contradictory, yet simultaneously true. Paradox, in this sense, is the result of oppositional logics being brought into recognizable proximity through communicative action. According to Farson (1996), cases where two, mutually exclusive statements are true render actors indecisive, confused and anxious.

Luhmann (1988) further stresses that although social systems create paradox as a way of mentally framing reality, such frames, in turn, may challenge the social system.

Integrating these views, we propose that paradox is constructed when elements of our thoughts, actions and emotions that seemed logical when considered in isolation, are juxtaposed as being mutually exclusive yet simultaneously true. The result is often an experience of absurdity and/or paralysis. Actors become stuck in an either/or frame that promotes a viscous cycle. Lewis explains that “most actors accentuate contradictions by interpreting data (e.g., their own and others’ feelings, organizational practices, environmental cues) through simple, bipolar concepts, constructing logical, internally consistent sets of abstractions that separate opposites. Such frames of reference or schemes enable actors to make sense of complex realities, but they are biasing and, once entrenched, become highly resistant to change (Bartunek, 1988)” (2000, pp. 761-762). Indeed, Smith and Berg (1987) note that when actors attempt to make sense of a paradoxical experience, their responses frequently have the unintended consequence of escalating the contradictory forces.

Researchers propose that paradoxes have a paradoxical effect on social systems. While paradox may be a source of stuckness and paralysis, such experiences also may fuel change and movement in a system. Smith and Berg (1987) theorize that *living within* the paradox enables movement. A paradox perspective may help actors view organizations as complex, dynamic systems in which change is inherent. Similarly, Ford and Backoff (1989) suggest that paradox produces tensions that may inspire paradoxical thinking, fostering creativity and more revolutionary change. Davis, Maranville and Obloj (1997) explain that the awareness of paradoxical contradictions may motivate dramatic reframing, as actors question their initial frame of reference in search for alternative perspectives and possibilities.

Paradoxes of organizational change

We now seek to unpack paradoxes of organizational change. Building from existing

studies, we propose three categories of paradox that may extend understandings of how organizational change complicates work demands, relations and systems. More specifically, our framework, show in Table 1, maps paradoxes of performing, belonging and organizing to Putnam's (1986) communicative patterns of paradox – mixed messages, recursive cycles and systemic contradictions, respectively. Identifying links between paradoxes and communication suggests discursive processes through which actors seek to make sense of change, but that often foster anxiety and paralysis. As Apker explains, “By examining how organizational members enact opposing tendencies in daily discourses, we can better understand the meanings ascribed to change” (2003, p. 221). Leveraging diverse studies, we illustrate each paradox. An action research study of the Lego Company (Anonymous, 2002) serves as an integrating example, enabling discussion of the interplay of the three paradoxes.

----Insert Table 1 about here----

Paradoxes of performing

In a changing organization, roles fluctuate with changes in structure and expectations, disrupting actors' self-conceptions. What are the standards for performance in the emerging organization? How might actors conceive of themselves if previous demands are in question? Managers, for instance, may feel strained as they seek to retain their authority and promote employee involvement. How can they be in charge and let others make decisions?

Boundaries or punctuation offer a way to simplify complex issues and create distinctions (Bateson, 1972). Yet as actors attempt to construct some boundary by defining their primary role, the new definition may accentuate the need to meet other, seemingly contradictory demands. For example, Warglien and Masuch (1996) describe the difficulty of interpreting performance demands in changing organizations. From their perspective, the attribution of “success” denotes an intricate and subjective process, rendered particularly challenging when systems and meanings are in flux. For example, does managerial success

imply productivity or creativity, efficiency or quality, control or empowerment? Such co-existing interpretations accentuate paradox, challenging managerial sensemaking.

Existing studies illustrate varied tensions that may underlie paradoxes of performing. Apker (2002), for instance, explores paradoxes surfaced by increasing role conflict for nurses. The implementation of managed health care challenged the nurses' identities as care givers, focused on care quality and access, with increasing emphasis on cost control. In reviewing their own previous studies, Huxham and Beech (2003) examine contrary management prescriptions and their tensions. They note that managers, particularly in times of change, are challenged to apply competing best practices, such as calls to increase employee accountability *and* autonomy, or prescriptions to build trust by initiating joint action as quickly as possible *and* by first developing shared goals and understandings.

In the Lego study, managers grappled with the transition to self-managing teams. The very notion of managing self-managed teams was experienced as paradoxical. During one intervention session, a manager exemplified the struggle by describing his conflicting role demands. He stated, "Maybe, if I want the members of my production team to cooperate better, I should talk to them individually. But then, that will not foster a higher degree of self-management. Is their conflict my concern or is it theirs?" Through reflective discourse, the manager was confronted with the managerial task that he left out when trying to create boundaries around his role of being responsible for conflict. Later in the conversation, he continued the struggle: "They should be responsible for solving their own conflicts. But will they do it? And what if they don't? I am still responsible for the effectiveness in this team. So I cannot just let it run on its own." This interaction depicts the manager's frustration in coping with the paradoxical demand: lead and recede into the background. In this and other interactions, the Lego managers attempted to use our intervention sessions to clearly define their new roles. Yet by applying a traditional linear and logical approach to problem solving,

the managers could not come to a resolution, instead confronting complexity and ambiguity.

Communicative pattern of paradoxes of performing - mixed messages

Why do issues of performance become so complex and ambiguous to actors during organizational change? Examined from a systemic perspective, communication patterns appear a primary source of contradictions and uncertainty. Putnam (1986) proposes that the role conflicts fueled by organizational change stem from interpersonal communication, especially between superiors and subordinates. Related paradoxes arise through mixed messages given at different levels of communication. For instance, the manager who tells his employees that he trusts them to run the department while he is away, but constantly calls, is sending contradictory signals. Verbally he claims, "I trust you" while his actions suggest distrust. As Putnam explains, the manager might be unaware of his mixed messages, but his subordinates nonetheless must consider both messages. The full impact, however, depends on the response. If subordinates choose to accept the contradiction, the unclear communication may be confirmed and thereby established as part of the ongoing relationship.

Studies of performing paradoxes illustrate this pattern. Apker, for instance, notes that "nurses continuously confirm or modify their role requirements through communicative sensemaking with others" (2002, p. 213). As the nurses grappled with change, they often blamed top management for mixed message about their roles. Huxham and Beech (2003) similarly stress how managers leading change efforts become frustrated by mixed messages posed by competing best practices presented by management or some bodiless expert. They claim that such messages may be "read" differently by different actors, feeding the social construction of multiple, parallel realities. Results may be extreme doubt by managers who feel incapable of choosing between competing prescriptions or a nihilistic attitude that their efforts will not matter as even best practices are unlikely to improve performance.

In the Lego study, such communicative patterns were exemplified by the manager

who opened a meeting with his production team by saying. “We need to talk about the conflict that is accumulating in this team. It prevents the team from working effectively. So at this meeting I need you to speak up in an honest, orderly and civilized manner.” The manager did not recognize his mixed messages. At one level he displayed goodwill, calling for an honest discussion about how people felt. Yet he also communicated that only orderly and civilized expressions were allowed. The manager requested assistance in an intervention session, explaining that he did not understand why team members reacted to his message with silence. Our response was the question: “What if their honest expressions are not civilized?”

During our session, the manager recognized that he was communicating in contradictory terms. He was saying “Let’s get the conflict out in the open” and “Let’s not open the conflict”. In a subsequent meeting with his production team, the manager tried again, this time saying: “We need to talk about this conflict. Let’s hear your experience so we can work through it. We really need to reach a point where we can have a civilized and orderly working relation after this. And unless we talk about what is bothering you, we cannot create a better teamwork. So how do you experience the problem?”

The manager in this example was stuck, not knowing how to punctuate reality in one way or another, when both harmony and conflict were desirable (Watzlavick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967). In other words, he did not know how to perform in relation to the situation, and the performing paradox was formulated: In order to control, allow for the uncontrollable.

As mixed messages challenge actors’ sensemaking capabilities, a key question becomes: “What is the message?” Examining message ambiguity, Weick (1969) proposes an information-processing model in contexts marked by change. He claims that organizational members select parts of messages that best fit their existing cognitive frames. A central premise of Weick’s theory is that: “Most ‘objects’ in organizations consist of communications, meanings, images, myths, and interpretations, all of which offer

considerable latitude for definition and self-validation” (1969, p.157). Thus, an important part of all organizing activity consists of the members collectively making sense of ambiguous, equivocal and mixed messages to create sufficient certainty for action.

Such challenges to sensemaking also impact self-conceptions. As Weick explains: “Sensemaking processes derive from...the need within individuals to have a sense of identity – that is, a general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one’s self conceptions” (1995, p. 22). From this view, these illustrative studies suggest that mixed messages of performance affect self-conceptions. In other words the question “What is the message?” also implies “Who am I?” “What is my role?” and “What is expected of me?”

In sum, paradoxes of performing concern organizational actors and their sense of self; a sense of self created through an understanding of their roles and performance expectations. Recognition of mixed messages—e.g., seemingly conflicting imperatives for empowerment and control, for motivation and productivity—surface such paradoxes. In turn, responses may vary. According to Putnam, actors often react to the absurdity of mixed messages by choosing to comply with only one side of the message. This choice temporarily reduces ambiguity, providing sufficient clarity for action. Yet such a response also signifies disobedience; as the actor neglects one performance imperative for the other. The reviewed studies also suggest alternative responses, such as rising antagonism with top management (Apker, 2002), feelings of doubt or nihilism (Huxham and Beech, 2003), and a sense of confusion and paralysis (Anonymous, 2002).

Paradoxes of belonging

In times of change, actors often grapple with shifting social constellations. In the social experience of belonging to an organization and its varied subgroups, paradoxes of belonging emerge as tensions between self and other (Lewis, 2000). In their treatise, Smith and Berg (1987) explicate their view that groups are inherently paradoxical, examining the

impact of such factors as identity, involvement and group boundaries.

Changing social relations may challenge actors' sense of identity. From a social constructivist perspective, it is only possible to form individual identity through social relations. At the same time, however, group identity is formed as its members contribute their individual identities (Smith and Berg, 1987). Tensions arise as actors struggle to realize the benefits of group membership, while expressing their personal, and possibly deviant, views. For instance, Apker (2002) notes how managed health care altered relations within the hospital by accentuating teamwork (between nurses and doctors, social workers, case managers, insurance professionals, etc.). The nurses felt both empowered and subjugated by their tightening relations with other professionals. They felt empowered by the respect that team membership offered. Yet nurses also felt incapable of expressing their rising concerns over the teams' collaborative objectives for fear of harming the team and their membership.

Tensions that underlie belonging paradox also may revolve around involvement as actors grapple with how much of themselves to invest in the group. Smith and Berg (1987) explain that a group thrives as its members become immersed in group dynamics, but remain capable of extricating themselves from the group to remain critical of group processes and outcomes. In the Lego study, managers stressed tensions between wanting to establish close contact with their subordinates, while retaining an appropriate distance. For example, one manager was concerned about conducting an emotion-laden meeting. He worried about how to remain close enough to accept members' feelings and to know when adjustments were needed, but distant enough to reflect on the process. Such issues illustrate Smith and Berg's claim: "To develop the level of detachment necessary for self-reflection demands a kind of involvement that makes detachment appear impossible. Detachment through involvement *and* involvement through detachment are the essence of this paradox" (1987, p. 99).

Another source of tensions in groups may stem from the construction of group

boundaries (Smith and Berg, 1987). One cannot talk about a group unless it is defined by boundaries, i.e. who is inside and not inside the group. Boundaries, however, may foster a sense of anxiety and potential conflict. In his study of changes at a Dutch amusement park, Ybema (1996) explores growing social distinctions between established craftsmen and new professionals. Discourses accentuated group boundaries by depicting each group as the other's opposite. Such discourses created a sense of unity and harmony within each group, while accentuating division and conflict between groups. Likewise, Westenholtz (1993) notes how group boundaries formed around opposing frames of reference. Set in a producer's cooperative, as employees became owners of the firm, distinctions arose between frames that emphasized focus on solidarity vs. market, internal vs. external, unambiguity vs. ambiguity. While each group held firm to their boundaries, reaffirming their frames and providing a sense of security, these distinctions lead to a decade long deadlock in wage discussions.

Communicative pattern of paradoxes of belonging – recursive cycles

In the case of paradoxes of performing, mixed messages both reflect and intensify actors' sense of uncertainty. Similarly tensions that permeate social life in organizations surface through actors' communications. Yet the emotions underlying paradoxes of belonging may fuel more complicated patterns as human desires to maintain relationships may inhibit actors from confronting contradictions, placing them in paralyzing recursive cycles (Putnam, 1986). In other words, the very interactions that enable effective and empowering relations are the same interactions that may tear relations apart (Smith and Berg, 1987).

Argyris (1988) stresses the link between mixed messages and recursive cycles by explaining how actors may allow mixed messages to persist to avoid the perception of distrust. In time, such behavior may allow mixed messages to become a consistent and undiscussable feature of social interactions. As Argyris explains: "Most paradoxes that I have observed occur because individuals designed and produced inconsistent meanings and

disguised the fact that they were doing so ” (1988, p. 255).

Gregory Bateson’s (1972) theory of double bind extends understandings of recursive cycles. A double bind occurs when two or more actors with an emotional relation construct a paralyzing recursive cycle. At the crux of these cycles lies attempts to avoid negative results embedded in a tertiary negative injunction: “Do not do X or I will punish you” *and* “if you do not do X I will punish you.” The emotional connection between actors, however, renders it too “dangerous” for the recipient actor to recognize, let alone confront, the contradiction. Bateson offers an example of a mother who communicates love and rejection to her son, but love is only communicated to maintain her self-image as a loving mother. If the son admits to this pattern, the result would be an unbearable sense of loss – he would be without a caring mother. Hence escape is impossible and the pattern continues. A well-developed double bind needs only a few ingredients: a strong emotional relationship, paradoxical demands, and an inability/inhibition to assume a metaperspective and thereby examine the pattern.

While Bateson’s theory was originally used within the clinical field, Argyris (1988) stresses the potential for similar patterns in organizations. For instance, team members may avoid recognizing mixed messages (e.g., team meetings as settings that encourage and constrain individual expression) and inhibit others from confronting their avoidance by attempting to communicate clearly about unclear emotions (e.g., stressing appreciation for the “openness” of team meetings). Similarly, Smith and Berg (1987) note how group members may withhold their energies, wishes, and secrets, until they feel confident in the group. Yet withholding inhibits the development of trust that would facilitate expression. Actors move slowly into a group, feeling simultaneously motivated and restrained by ambivalence.

Existing research depicts varied recursive cycles. For example, Apker (2002) describes the nurses in her study as caught between accepting the positive outcomes of more collaborative managed care (i.e., professional respect) and resisting the problems created by

its efficiency mandates (i.e., challenges to quality care giving). The result, in Apker's view, is a double-bind that fuels the use of collaboration as concertive control. Ybema (1996) notes how antagonistic discourses enacted group distinctions and a sense of group solidarity in his studied amusement park. While discourses accentuated a dichotomy between professional managers and senior craftsmen, however, observations suggested otherwise. "Managers adopted some of the parochial ideas and practices and were aware of the impact of traditional values, as seniors did see the necessity of professional management" (1996, p. 50). Rather than admit such intersections and enable new, collaborative opportunities, antagonism persisted as actors sought to bolster their group security. The result was an intensifying power struggle. Likewise, Westenholtz (1993) notes a double-bind fueled by defensiveness. As employees in one group defended their frame of reference to bolster their group identity, such efforts pushed their opponents to defend their own frame in a reinforcing cycle.

In the Lego case, managers struggled to express themselves in their management team. During initial, individual interviews, each manager noted that they had difficulty trusting the group enough to start revealing their challenges. The result was paralysis as they were reluctant to start using the team to work on managerial issues. Indeed, in initial meetings with the team, members were painfully silent. Finally one member said: "In my department I am struggling with the issues of ... I'm sure that I am not the only one having these problems." This tentative last sentence may reflect his hope of finding safety in the group by evoking a sense of acceptance by other members. He was trying to participate in order to discover whether participating was a good idea.

In sum, recursive cycles strip actors of choice, primarily because of an inability or emotionally determined reluctance to confront the very context that created the cycle. Applying a systemic view, paradoxes of belonging are characterized by recursive cycles for two reasons. First, it is difficult to examine the premises of one's own communication

patterns. Often people are unaware of the metacommunicative messages that set the frame for their daily interactions. Paradoxical messages may develop and escalate because the metacommunicative level is not taken into account. The difficulty, according to Putnam, is that these “feelings of helplessness, in turn, may cause both parties to blame each other or to withdraw from further interaction” (1986, p. 160). Second, emotions inhibit both parties from confronting the tension because there is a high risk that it will threaten the relationship. Thus, the emotional bind is double in the sense that neither party is willing to jeopardize existing relations, rendering a discussion of the paradox undiscussable (Argyris, 1988).

Paradoxes of organizing

Studies suggest that the very process of organizing is paradoxical. As Ford and Backoff (1988) explain, organizing entails the drawing of distinctions that create tensions. Given their multiple constituents, organizations denote social spaces continuously pulled in opposing directions (Bouchikhi, 1998). Change fosters paradox by juxtaposing divergent perspectives, while contrasting the old and the new. As such, organizing paradoxes denote “an ongoing process of equilibrating opposing forces that encourage commitment, trust and creativity, while maintaining efficiency, discipline and order” (Lewis, 2000, p. 765).

Viewed in light of the sensemaking process, the prevailing organization shapes the behaviors that seek to change it. Weick’s (1979) notion of enactment details how stability and change may be created through cognitive processes, while structures and policies reflect and restrict the organizing process. Stability and change become paradoxical, as structure guides change, while forming the basis for the reproduction of structure (Poole and Van de Ven, 1988). Similarly, Weick and Westley (1996) describe the learning organization as an oxymoron. Organizing seeks to enhance stability and order, while learning entails change and uncertainty. According to Van de Ven and Poole (1988), such tensions can be traced back to Greek philosophers, who disputed whether the world should be considered in terms

of stable structures (Democritus) or as a process in continuous flux (Heraclitus).

Research illustrates paradoxes of organizing in practice. For example, Ybemba (1996) explores how organizational change may surface and polarize organizational subcultures. In his study, conflicts between the formal discourses of change and the sub-texts of disparate groups accentuated tensions of consensus and dissensus. He describes the friendly banter in meetings and formal documentation as promoting frontstage harmony, while more intimate conversations and unit meetings intensify backstage conflict. Similarly, O'Connor (1995) depicts change efforts aimed at increasing employee participation as highlighting conflicting practices of empowerment and control. In particular, the rhetoric of participation may contradict engrained organizational practices such as limited access to information and hierarchical authority for decision making.

At Lego, paradoxes of organizing surfaced as mid-level managers grappled with the need for order and flexibility at the organizational level. For example, in an intervention session with a management team, participants stressed the need for both common and diverse goals. To explain their frustrations, they used their team meetings as illustration, calling for their supervisor to set a common and clear team agenda, while demanding that he address their different opportunities and needs in relation to that agenda. During our ensuing discussion, the managers explored challenges their supervisor would face in assessing what might be perceived as “common” to the group and how to gauge each manager’s diverse objectives. Through social reflection, managers determined that in their turbulent, complex setting the search for commonality and diversity must be an ongoing, collaborative process.

Communicative pattern of paradoxes of organizing – system contradictions

Literature suggests that paradoxes of organizing surface through particularly ingrained communicative patterns. Putnam (1986) explains that system contradictions develop overtime as consistent patterns of mixed messages and recursive cycles become

woven into the fabric of organizations. “Contradictions and paradox cycles extend beyond the superior-subordinate relationship into the goals, reward systems, resource demands, and division of labor of an organization” (1986, p. 163). In other words, paradoxical communications influence organizational interactions to the extent that patterns become independent of the actors involved.

As Bateson (1972) notes, a double bind is a pattern and not a single occurrence in an actor’s experiential realm. Hence, one could expect that a double binding relationship might eventually become part of a broader communication system. According to Hennestad (1990, p.273) “People communicating from the position of being trapped by double binds can not be expected to be clear in their message sending to others; on the contrary, they can be expected to say one thing, but act otherwise, say different things in different situations about the same things. Thereby they could accelerate the degree of ambiguity and double bindedness in the organization. This implies that double binds as an organizational cultural feature in organizations could develop along the lines of some self-reinforcing cycles.”

Weick (1979) explains enactment as the collective cognitive process whereby organizational members construct the very organization in which they are a member. Actors engaged in organizational life are, therefore, engaged in an ongoing, collective sensemaking of their own activities. Eventually the conversation between organizational members reflects a transformation from “we” to a more abstract level. Putnam (1986) shares this views, stressing that through collective sensemaking, actors form scripts and shared meanings that eventually become embedded within the organizational culture to the point at which actors cannot account for their origin. Systems contradictions may be accentuated in times of change. As Hennestad (1990) explains, executives may envision a new direction beyond the existing organizational frame. Indeed, as boundary-spanners, executives may be particularly aware of such contradictions given their position, metaphorically, of having one foot inside

and one outside the organization. Yet while they might try to break the old frame and establish a new one, executives can hardly free themselves completely of the prevailing organizational paradigm. Consequently they may do or say one thing in one situation, and then the contrary in another. Or, they could appear to be doing so, due to the historically rooted expectations of organizational members. Furthermore, structures and systems, at least for some time, reflect the past. Actors are, for example, rewarded and punished according to the norms and values of the “old” frame and not according to the new, proclaimed direction. Meanwhile, actors may experience conflicting messages, thus reflecting system contradictions at the crux of organizational change. For these reasons, as McKinley and Scherer (2000) note, change may foster cognitive order for executives, but intense disorder for others, particularly the mid-level managers challenged to make sense of and implement change imperatives.

Ybemba’s (1996) study illustrates such systemic patterns. He notes that paradoxical discourses may be ingrained in organization structure and culture as unit grouping and socialization practices enable, even reinforce, group distinctions, while overarching elements of a new organizational mission and goals seek to foster coordination. In her study of change, O’Connor (1995) details how actors who questioned contradictions between new rhetoric of participation and persistent norms of control were quickly labeled as resistant to change. Such labeling signified “insiders” and “outsiders” in the change initiative. Hence, what was framed as an effort for greater inclusion, accentuated a sense of exclusion.

Similar communicative patterns surfaced in Lego during discussions of the organizational change initiative. From our perspective, the managers’ frustration with the initiative had grown over a six month period of intervention sessions. Such rising tensions seemed surprising given that executive communications during that same period had increased, particularly in the form of information meetings. When we presented this

observation to the managers, it sparked a provocative debate over whether their growing sense of uncertainty was due to ineffective executive communications or whether it was inherent in the change itself. As Putnam (1986) notes, change may spark a clash between prevailing objectives and their constraining effects. In such settings, paradox arises as actors attempt to solve problems fostered by the constraints of an existing objective by adding a new objective – which in turn offers new constraints in an ever expanding web. Hence, supposed solutions create new challenges. In the Lego case, goals of employee empowerment and self-managed teams clashed with the continuing and ingrained emphasis on productivity.

Interplay of organizational change paradoxes

We have described paradoxes of performing, belonging and organizing as distinct. Yet as social constructions themselves, such categories denote artificial distinctions. Indeed, Putnam (1986) suggests a link from mixed messages at an interpersonal level toward system contradictions at the organizational level. Paradoxes fueled by mixed messages may become a stable pattern in the organization and foster recursive cycles. Eventually such communicative patterns become so embedded in the habits of organizational communication that they become independent of actors, appearing as contradictions of the system itself.

Putnam, however, accounts for a progression from one level of paradoxical communication to another as a linear, causal relationship. In contrast, our experiences at Lego suggest that the three paradoxes of organizational change influence each other reciprocally through the interplay of their communicative patterns. For example, system may lead actors to eventually communicate mixed messages or create double binds. In this sense, the ambiguity and uncertainty accentuated by paradoxes of organizing may foster paradoxical communications at lower, more interpersonal levels. For example, paradoxes of organizing at Lego, such as structure-action tensions, surfaced in executive calls for the managers to plan their time and be flexible. Likewise, the conflicting recommendation that managers be

visionary and keep their feet on the ground reflects systemic tensions of stability-change. Assuming such reciprocal relations, paradoxical interplay appears dynamic and intricate.

----Insert Figure 1 about here----

Critique of paradox resolution

We have explicated paradoxes of organizational change by applying a social constructivist lens. Yet if paradox is a cognitive construction that is brought into play through social interaction, and if the result is a potentially paralyzing experience, then what possibilities do actors have of working their way through paradox toward a more workable certainty?

While traditional approaches to management may call for actors to resolve paradox, researchers increasingly stress the potential for paradox to foster creativity, energy and change (e.g., Stohl and Cheney, 2001; Westenholtz, 1993). In this mindset, Lewis (2000) reviews three modes of working through paradox: reframing, confronting and accepting. Working through does not imply eliminating or resolving paradox, but constructing a more empowering understanding. We now expand upon each of the three modes in turn.

Reframing paradox

Several writers from more philosophic traditions (e.g., Handy, 1994; Rescher, 2001; Sainsbury 1996) depict paradox as a matter of fun or teasers of the brain. Yet paradoxes also may engender debilitating paralysis. Rapoport explains that whenever we discover a problem that cannot be solved within the conceptual framework that supposedly should apply, we experience shock. Stuckness and indecisiveness is the result. In such instances, actors may need to actively reflect upon – and be able to transcend – the shock of paradox to escape paralysis.

Transcending paradox denotes a reframing of tensions. Organizational actors apply second-order thinking, or what Westenholtz (1993) refers to as paradoxical thinking, creating a frame of reference that sheds new light and understandings on well-known problems.

According to Bartunek, such reframing denotes a constructive cognitive process that involves: 1) realizing that the present understanding is no longer adequate, 2) experimenting and taking in of new information and new perspectives, and 3) generating an expanded frame that accommodates conflicting perspectives (1988, p.157). In other words, transcendence entails a dramatic, second-order change in the meaning attributed to a situation as paradoxical tensions become viewed as complementary and interwoven (Lewis, 2000).

Van de Ven and Poole offer three approaches to reframing: spatial separation (i.e., leveraging varied physical or hierarchical spaces, e.g., one horn applies to executives, the other to employees), temporal separation (i.e., leveraging time, such as “Do A first and then do B, or do A in order to achieve B”) or synthesis (i.e., a dialectical development, where a new problem is introduced that integrates opposing tensions) (1989, p.556). Others elaborate these approaches. Luhmann (1995, p.32), for example, claims that paradoxes render a state of confusion and indecisiveness, and that only by introducing the notion of time, i.e. chronologically separating elements of the paradox into logical fragments, are we given the possibility to act. Similarly, the role of time in helping reframe conflicting managerial demands increasingly appears in prescriptive organizational literature. For instance, Dauphinais (1996) gives advice to managers who want to manage uncertainties of change. He separates paradoxical demands by posing one side as the means and the other as the desired end. His five paradoxical prescriptions for successful firms depict this reframing:

Positive change requires significant stability.

To build an enterprise, focus on the individual.

Focus directly on culture, indirectly.

True empowerment requires forceful leadership.

In order to build you must tear down. (Dauphines, 1996, p.21).

The field of psychotherapy has long viewed psychology as a potentially paradoxical

process. Clients may become stuck in cycles that require a similar form of reframing. Sigmund Freud explains that a client might consult a therapist in hopes of changing his/her present psychological condition (Smith & Berg, 1987). Yet the client may be deeply invested in the status quo. This defense mechanism stems from the client's desire to hold on to old, well-known solutions to problems until better ones become evident, even practiced. The cycle becomes paralyzing as the client seeks change, but preserves the status quo.

Various psychologists base their work on paradoxical processes that enable reframing. Otto Rank (1936), for one, points to the interconnectedness between life and death anxiety. He stressed how a client who is afraid of dying often will isolate herself from others and from life. Eventually she will discover that this attempt at a solution leads her to lose her life and bring her closer to death, intensifying the anxiety as the response becomes the problem. Likewise, Carl Jung (1958) uses the metaphor of yin and yang to illustrate holism and equilibrium, stressing oppositional forces within the human psyche. Such therapists focus their work on the re-integration of denied, repressed or projected elements that had been cut-off from psyche, thereby preventing actors from leading a full and rich human life.

Lewis (2000) builds from these early psychology works, stressing the human tendency to oversimplify reality when faced with rising complexity. While simplification may serve as a defense mechanism against confusion and uncertainty, it does not eliminate the pressure to deal with a complex world. The solution of either/or thinking becomes paradoxical: The more one tries not to deal with the complexity, ambiguity and equivocality in order to maintain simplicity, the more organizational life appears chaotic and alienating.

Confronting paradox

One way of addressing paradoxes is by confronting the emotional components that have been repressed, denied or projected elsewhere. Such emotions may lead actors to sustain recursive cycles. According to Argyris (1988) and many others (e.g., Miller, 1983; Smith and Berg

1987; Vince and Broussine, 1996), there is a need for top-managers, who have the courage to confront these paradoxes, to break the vicious cycles by making them discussable elements of daily organizational life. Paradoxes of belonging, in particular, are characterized by emotions that may bar open discussion, blocking actors' from working through paradox. In this case, Argyris notes that the detached perspective of an outside facilitator may become vital.

Smith and Berg (1987) note that staying with the paradox, in terms of confronting emotional tensions, makes it possible to discover a link between opposing forces and "opens up the framework that gives meaning to the apparent contradictions in the experience" (cited by Vince & Broussine, 1996, p.4). Breaking out of recursive cycles may be initiated via meta-reflections on how messages are communicated between organizational actors. Yet confrontation also may involve identifying patterns of relatedness and paradoxical emotions to challenge the ways in which actors think about themselves and others.

The first step in the confrontation process is therefore to address one's own defense mechanisms. Vince and Broussine explain that, "Defenses can be seen as various ways in which the contradictions of paradox, and the emotional discomfort that such contradictions imply, are suppressed, denied or projected, often unconsciously" (1996, p.5). Given such defenses, analysis of defensive patterns in relationships may need to be shared with an outsider—someone who is not caught up in the defensive routines, but is able to engage in a trustful and empathic relationship with the actors involved.

Many theorists stress the difficulty of addressing emotional experiences of paradox (Bateson, 1972; Smith and Berg, 1987; Vince and Broussine 1996; Watzlavick et al., 1967). Simply stated, confrontation means discussions of the undiscussable, to use Argyris' (1988) terms. Opening communications require discussing relationships from a metalevel, asking: What are the communication patterns in the organization? What are the effects of communicating that way? What emotions have organizational actors invested in these

relationships? What is taboo between us? Etc.

Vince and Broussine (1996) explore how different workshops and drawing sessions might help actors illustrate or begin to verbalize what has hitherto been non-verbal conflicts and tensions in management teams. Similarly, Argyris offers on how to approach and eventually confront recursive cycles and thereby influence organizational communication patterns (1988). Working through paradox requires reclaiming emotions to explore contradictions and complexity. As Lewis and Dehler note: “Such explorations require immersion within the extremes – moving toward the anxiety rather than struggling against it – to transcend a one-dimensional view of organizations, others and self toward a dynamic, multidimensional, and paralogical gaze” (2000, p.712).

Accepting paradox

Paradoxes related to change and thus to the organizing process as a whole, become paralyzing if actors project them elsewhere, particularly onto top-management. Executives, in turn, may attempt to separate paradoxical tensions into clear, one-dimensional messages to help managers at a lower organizational level make sense of the change. Yet the result may be a vicious cycle, as the managers eventually note that executives are contradicting themselves with distinct and disparate, yet contradictory messages. Organizational efforts to maintain stability and create change, therefore, proliferate experiences of paradox.

Working through such pervasive paradoxes seems to require greater acceptance. Normally, accepting the conditions of something suggests that nothing can be done about it. But in this context, acceptance signifies a new understanding of inconsistencies and ambiguity as natural working conditions. This awareness reduces tendencies to blame, encouraging actors to find means of living within tensions. Managers, for instance, then may envision the need to contribute to ongoing developments within the dynamic constraints of the organization.

Van de Ven and Poole (1989) propose acceptance as one of four modes of working through paradox. Yet as they explain, “This response does not mean that the paradox is ignored” (p.566). Rather acceptance enables a degree of comfort with inconsistencies of the organizing process. Such recognition may foster more inclusive sensemaking at all levels of the organization. Because punctuating one horn of a paradox may activate the positive potential of the opposite, organizational reality as reflected in managerial demands and performing expectations and task definition must be constantly negotiated. In other words, accepting the inherent paradoxes of organizing taps the positive potential for tensions to trigger more continuous and collective reflection and adjustment.

Conclusion: Paradoxes are paradoxical

Juxtaposing the framework of organizational change paradoxes and the three modes of working through paradox suggests potential linkages. Paradoxes of performing, for example, are related to actors’ self-understanding and may need reframing as cognitive conflict (e.g., over roles, expectations and demands) may call for cognitive responses. Likewise, emotional tensions that pervade paradoxes of belonging may benefit from confrontation as an emotional approach to working through. In psychotherapy exposure to what is threatening has long been known as a logical solution to the working through process, thereby playing out alternative emotions. Likewise, the understanding of paradox as a natural feature of intricate and dynamic systems suggests that paradoxes of organizing may benefit from acceptance.

Yet, even as we note possible one-to-one links between specific paradoxes and working through modes, we are faced with the awareness that paradoxes are slippery by formulations, likely to elude such simplistic conclusions. What creates a paradox to one person may suggest straight logic to another. Therefore, when examining paradox, researchers must deal with a subject of study that may be fun – and exhausting – work! As such, researchers and/or as interventionists might benefit from lowering their expectations

regarding how much movement they can expect in the study of such intricate and messy matters as paradox. Recognizing that most organizational phenomena that we make the subject of study are brought out through our own social interactions, we may find process and product are two sides of the same coin. Exploring paradoxes often creates circles of reflection, mainly because a paradox doesn't solve problems, but rather opens possibilities and sparks circles of even greater complexity. Yet a paradox framework entails staying with that complexity to explore its dynamics and possible implications.

How might actors engaged in organizational life find flow in their daily activities through paradox? Managers, in particular, are challenged to act, to impose some kind of order on surrounding complexity, and to decide what is best for themselves and their organization. Although this paper has suggested some modes of working through paradox, that very notion remains necessarily ambiguous. In other words, the solution of working through paradox is somewhat paradoxical, as it leads us to the following conclusions:

***Paradox is a mental construction and
can therefore be mentally dissolved***

And

***Paradox is inherent in all social life and
can therefore not be dissolved***

- just lived!

In his book, *Finding Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) offers a paradoxical solution to paradox by drawing upon the Buddhist advice:

Act always as if the future of the universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference...It is this serious playfulness, this combination of concern and humility, that makes it possible to be both engaged and carefree at the same time. (1997, p.133)

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Table 1: Paradoxes of Organizational Change

Paradox	Communicative Pattern
<p>Performing: <i>As roles fluctuate with changing structure and expectations, contradictory demands disrupt self-conception</i> Apker (2003): control costs and enhance care quality and access Huxham & Beech (2003): contrary management prescriptions (e.g., increasing employee accountability and autonomy) Lego: managers' role conflicts over their responsibilities for managing self-managed work teams (e.g., direction or autonomy)</p>	<p>Mixed Messages: <i>Communicated expectations are experienced as conflicting, ambiguous and equivocal demands</i> Apker (2003): rising frustration with/distrust of management Huxham & Beech (2003): doubt (inability to choose) or nihilism (futility of choice) Lego: managers unaware of their own mixed messages (e.g., call for both conflict and harmony to examine group challenges)</p>
<p>Belonging: <i>Shifting social constellations foster tensions between self and other, as actors seek to identify themselves in relation to the organization and its varied and fluctuating groups</i> Apker (2003): collaboration as empowering and subjugating Ybema (1996): group boundaries enable unity and division Westenholz (1993): contrary frames of reference Lego: managerial tensions between being involved with and detached from with their subordinate teams</p>	<p>Double Bind: <i>Desire to maintain relationships inhibit confrontation, as the interactions that may enable effective and empowering relations, may also tear relations apart</i> Apker (2003): collaboration as concertive control Ybema (1996): antagonistic discourses accentuate distinctions Westenholz (1993): defending frame increasing others' defences Lego: managers stuck between building team trust through personal disclosure and needing trust for disclosure</p>
<p>Organizing: <i>The organizing process and its varied participants enact distinctions that create and accentuate tensions</i> Ybema (1996): change accentuates organizational consensus and subculture dissensus O'Connor (1995): efforts aimed at increasing participation highlight conflicting practices of empowerment and control Lego: tensions between order (e.g., clear and common team goals) and flexibility (e.g., managers' diverse goals)</p>	<p>Systemic Contradictions: <i>mixed messages and recursive cycles become embedded, existing independent of the actors involved</i> Ybema (1996): unit groupings and socialization reinforce group distinctions, as organization mission and goals seek coordination O'Connor (1995): labelling "insiders" and "outsiders" in change initiative exposed exclusivity of inclusive, participatory efforts Lego: new goals of empowerment and self-managed teams clashed with existing and ingrained emphasis on productivity</p>

Figure 1. Interplay of Organizational Change Paradoxes

