

# Paradox As the New Normal

Essays on framing, managing and sustaining organizational tensions

**Medhanie Gaim**

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal B, Samhällsvetarhuset, tisdagen 21 februari 2017, kl. 13:15. Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på engelska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor, Stewart Clegg,  
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.



**Umeå School of Business and Economics**  
Umeå University  
Umeå 2017

**Organization**

Umeå University  
Umeå School of Business and Economics

**Document type**

Doctoral thesis

**Date of publication**

31 January 2017

**Author**

Medhanie Gaim

**Title**

Paradox As the New Normal: Essays on framing, managing and sustaining organizational tensions

**Abstract**

Metaphorically, the idiom “you cannot have your cake and eat it too” describes fundamental tensions at the heart of today’s organizations. Engaging tensions may seem implausible or even impossible. However, there exists evidence, given the increasingly complex environment, that both are vital to organizational success. To succeed, therefore, requires that organizations be able to manage, embrace, and transcend tensions. Consequently, the overall purpose of this thesis is to advance our understanding of tensions in general, and in creativity-based contexts in particular.

The purpose is achieved through five self-contained yet complementary papers. The conceptual parts, which resulted in three papers, include a literature review on tensions, from which inspirations and ideas from different disciplines have been drawn in order to add value to the literature specifically addressing tensions. In parallel with this conceptual work, I explore tensions (a paradox, to be specific) in a specific context (architecture), an effort that results in two papers. Consequently, in the conceptual work, I focus on what “could be,” while in the empirical work I focus on “what is.”

The findings highlight that first, theorizing about tensions calls for conceptual clarity. This was accomplished by identifying and then assembling core features that scholars use to conceptualize tensions. In doing so, the thesis contributes to the ways in which tensions are “represented” by reducing confusion and by making the assumptions behind tensions clear. Second, the thesis establishes that dealing with tensions productively requires a shift from thinking (and doing) based on a contingency approach towards contemporary approaches. Given the nature of the empirical context and the challenges therein, a true shift of this order necessitates framing tensions as paradoxes. In the same vein, the thesis indicates the need to rethink the central question; currently, that question is predominantly “how can we accommodate both A and B?” Given the nature of the empirical context, the question can be shifted to “why not C?” Doing so breaks away from focusing on the existing competing options and turns the focus towards something new. Moreover, dealing with tensions through this lens prevents neutralizing them and settling for a bland halfway point between one extreme and the other. Third, the thesis challenges the taken-for-granted assumption in the literature that dealing with tensions as paradoxes necessitates temporal compromise, separation, or resolution. In the thesis, I argue that dealing with paradoxes is possible without separating. This is so because simultaneously engaging paradoxes allows organizations to tap their energy and opens up new possibilities. In this case, the thesis contributes to the literature by empirically studying architectural firms. This empirical study shows that dealing with paradoxes requires an intricate interplay between what I call paradoxical mindsets and practices—which comprise organization members’ emotions, cognition, and behaviors—and organizational conditions that embed such mindsets and practices into the organization’s system. Fourth, the thesis makes a point that not all tensions require an action move. Accordingly, the thesis establishes that dealing with paradoxes may not necessarily entail action moves but rather a space to engage in dialogue so as to connect opposites, move outside of them, and situate them in a new relationship. In doing so, the presence of tension is appreciated and complementarity is sought. That is, the challenge is to be able to embrace paradoxes and not to resolve them.

The thesis concludes that although it is challenging to tap the power of paradoxes, it is not impossible. This thesis shows that this goal can be accomplished by accepting that paradoxes are normal, and then seeking to transcend them. In so doing, organizations can unleash the “slices of genius” in their members.

**Keywords**

Competing demands, organizational tensions, paradox, paradox theory, architectural firms

**Language**

English

**ISBN**

978-91-7601-663-3

**ISSN**

0346-8291

**Number of pages**

80 + 5 papers