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Leveraging Paradoxical Tensions:

An Ethnographic Case Study of a Private Nonprofit U.S. Higher Education Institution

Patrick A. Bennett, Franklin University

Abstract

Private nonprofit higher education within the United States has experienced unprecedented disruption and discontinuous change over the last several decades. To make matters more difficult, institutions that make up this segment of higher education are not known for their flexibility and adaptability. Recent studies suggest that the benefits and attributes of unit-level ambidexterity help to provide balance between paradoxical tensions and that these coexisting pressures can create strategic agility for organizations. This ethnographic case study describes how the culture-sharing senior leadership team of a private nonprofit U.S. institution of higher education leverages tensions to create strategic agility. The results of this qualitative study yielded six major themes including (a) Fostering a culture that seeks and embraces innovation through paradoxical tensions, (b) Creating a mindset for innovation and growth, (c) Generating collaboration and partnership, (d) Forming teams mindfully and purposefully, (e) Managing tensions positively, and (f) Increasing institutional responsiveness through the creation of flexible capacities. Through the synthesis of the study’s results, along with current research in the area of paradoxical tensions and unit-level ambidexterity, a conceptual model has been proposed. The aim of the proposed conceptual model is to aid in the transferability of the results of this study to other like institutions for the purposes of creating greater strategic agility.

Terms

Ambidexterity: An organizational unit’s ability to exploit value from existing markets, competencies, and resources, while it simultaneously explores new markets, products, and opportunities (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

Discontinuous Change: External change that is sudden and non-incremental in nature (Birkinshaw, Zimmermann, & Raisch, 2016).

Leadership: “The process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 7).

Paradox Leadership Theory: How contradictory tensions create increased awareness of strategic opportunities by employees, increase the ability to adapt and seize such events by the organization, engender unification of organizational leadership, and create resource flexibility (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014).

Strategic Agility: “How an organization remains flexible to respond to complex, global, and dynamic environments” (Lewis, et al., 2014).

Research Question

The qualitative study was guided by the following research question: How do senior leaders of a private nonprofit U.S. higher education institution leverage paradoxical tensions to create strategic agility?

Purpose

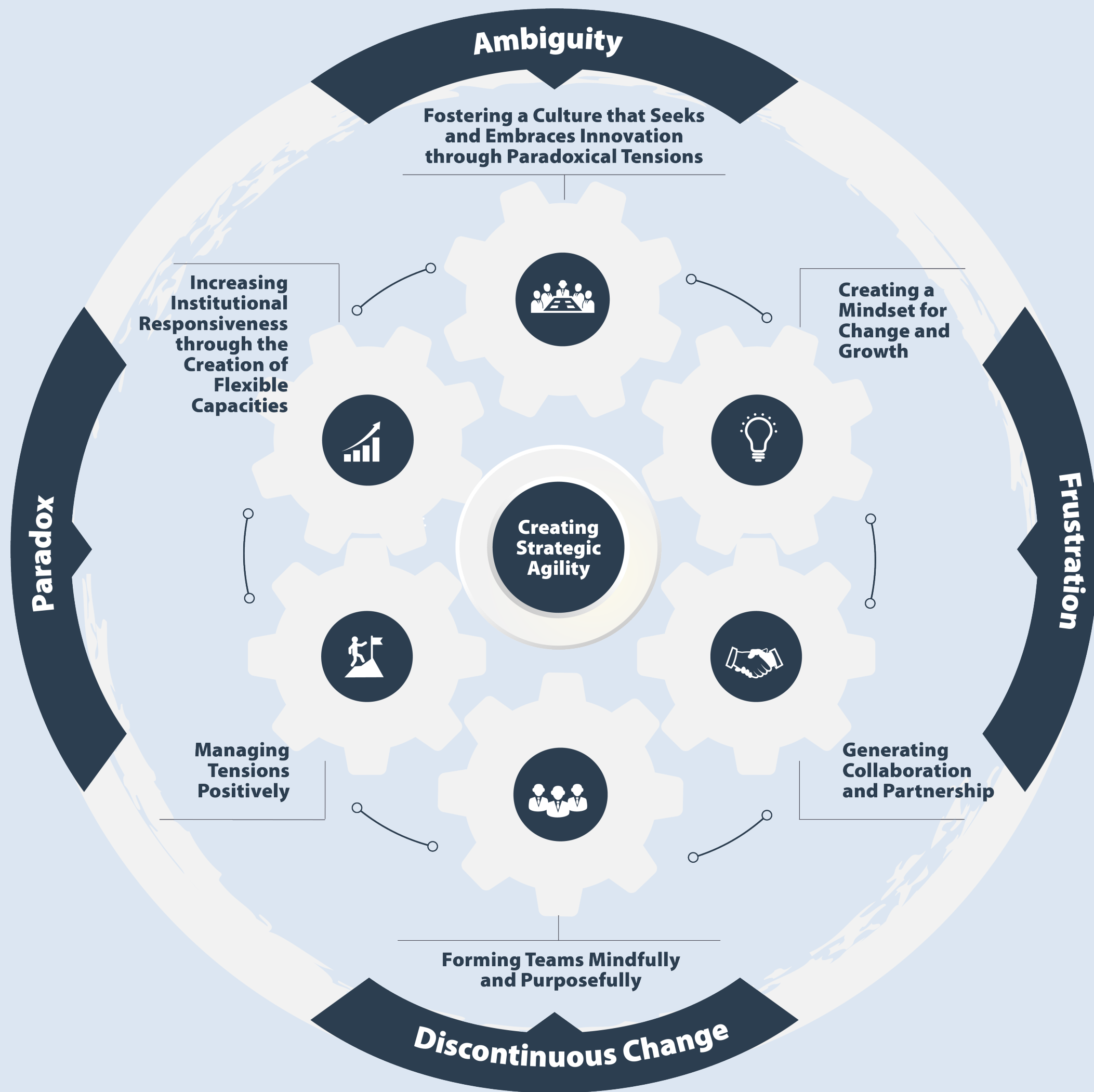
The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to formally document how senior leaders in a private nonprofit U.S. higher education institution leverage paradoxical tensions to create strategic agility.

Aim

The aim of this study was to formally document how senior leaders of a private nonprofit U.S. institution of higher education leverage paradoxical tensions to create strategic agility. Furthermore, the study sought to provide a framework that other institutions of higher education may use to increase strategic agility. By incorporating existing research on paradox with the data from the study, a set of practices emerged, were documented, and a model proposed for use by the existing and other like institutions.

Major Findings /Results

Model for Leveraging Paradoxical Tensions to Create Strategic Agility



Methods

Innovative blend of qualitative methods – Ethnography & Case Study

This study lent itself to qualitative methods that allow multiple types of data collection and analysis techniques to create a case description and case themes that aided in exploring this real-life system over time (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

In addition, the study sought to describe the essence of the intuition’s senior leadership culture-sharing group through the documentation of an individual case at a specific point in time (Creswell, 2013).

Discussion

This ethnographic case study describes how the culture-sharing senior leadership team of a private nonprofit U.S. institution of higher education leverages paradoxical tensions to create strategic agility. Analysis of the data surfaced six major themes and eight related subthemes. Through the synthesis of the study’s results, along with current research in the area of paradoxical tensions and unit-level ambidexterity, a conceptual model has been proposed. The aim of the proposed conceptual model is to aid in the transferability of the results of this study to other like institutions for the purposes of creating greater strategic agility.

- Paradoxical leadership approaches can aid in creating strategic agility within private nonprofit U.S. higher education institutions
- Increase attention on group dynamics and We leadership
- Culture and group dynamics have a relationship to leadership and approaches to managing and leveraging paradoxical tensions within nonprofit higher education

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