Title
How Can We Create Collaborative Design Knowledge in Politicized Contexts?

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HOW CAN WE CREATE COLLABORATIVE DESIGN KNOWLEDGE IN POLITICIZED CONTEXTS?

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Abstract: This commentary notes that the authors of the Special Issue propose that organization design knowledge will be more actionable if it is created in collaboration with the organization's members. I draw attention to a risk in the co-creation of design knowledge: increasing the politicization of the already politically fraught process of organizational design. The reasons why collaborative design-knowledge creation may increase politicking are discussed, and ideas for managing it are suggested.

Keywords: Organization design, organizational politics, ambiguity, actionable knowledge, collaboration

How do we make organization design knowledge actionable? The articles in this Special Issue address that challenge by emphasizing that those seeking to take action on organizational design and redesign need to discover and generate more accurate information in collaboration with the focal organization's members. John Austin says that ideas and knowledge become actionable through a collaborative translation process that fits them to the local context. Eric Engler, Stephen Jones, and Andrew Van de Ven emphasize the need for collaboration in design decisions in the extraordinarily complex challenges facing healthcare organizations. They describe Ascension Health as just one example of the myriad markets, stakeholder demands, and uncertainties facing large organizations today. Traditional assumptions about technological and market uncertainty are difficult to apply when organizations use many technologies, operate in many distinct markets, and have to cope with disruptive changes that no one fully understands. In the face of such complexity, many organizations feel like all they can do is act, gather feedback and adjust, and hope that the adjustments will happen quickly enough for the organization to survive.

However, I am not sure that a lack of situation-specific knowledge is the most important challenge currently facing those who seek to redesign and change their organizations. Rather, I want to suggest that an even bigger challenge is the political barriers that must be overcome in order to achieve effective organizational change and adaptation. If I am correct, then this critical challenge to actionable design knowledge is made more difficult to overcome when design experts are advised to privilege local, contextualized information over their own expert design knowledge.

Alan Meyer provides an excellent summary of the shift in scholarly attention to organization design from the abstract early normative theories to the present concern with developing highly specific knowledge about a particular organization's circumstances. Certainly, organization design scholars began by developing abstract general theories. Recall that Fayol's (1916) principles of management made no provision for task or industrial context, and even the contingency theories pioneered by Woodward (1965) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) contained difficult-to-measure contingencies such as technology and environmental uncertainty. As Meyer notes, "My assessment is that design-oriented organizational scholars

are in the process of shifting from one integrated set of assumptions to another somewhat more amorphous set of assumptions." The field of organization design seems to be shifting from a normative, rational model of action to one that is focused on creating situation-specific knowledge through feedback from experience.

I have no doubt that these authors are correct in their claims that collaboration will generate more useful information that can make design knowledge more actionable for a particular organization's situation and resources. My concern is that I am not sure the most important barrier to making design knowledge actionable is a lack of knowledge about what is appropriate for a particular organization's circumstances. Rather, I believe the biggest challenge in creating effective designs is that some organization members will lose and some will gain from any proposed organizational change. In other words, the process of organization design and redesign is contentious and politicized (Pfeffer, 1981). Organizational politicking increases ambiguity, and ambiguity provides more space for participants to pursue their preferred outcomes. If design experts suggest that participants' own views are necessary to build actionable knowledge this creates more ambiguity, and it may increase politicking relative to the search for good designs. The creation of knowledge in collaboration with organization members increases the potential of turf warriors to distort and even block design initiatives. Rational normative models of organizational design may not be more accurate, but they may well be more useful in helping organizations adapt their designs to changing environmental conditions.

While knowledge created in collaboration with organization members will be more fine-grained and localized, the collaborative process itself gives organization members the opportunity to pursue their own self-interests. That organizational changes are contentious and politicized has long been known. Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) famous "garbage can model" of change proposed that astute managers will seize the opportunity to argue that their own preferred organizational structure is an exemplar of what the organization design seeks to accomplish. Reorganizations are the perfect issue for various organization members to lobby for their preferred solutions. Different designs empower different people, and we can expect that organization members will use all of the persuasive powers, threats, bargains, facts, and figures they can muster to influence the design of their organizations.

If we assume that design changes are politicized, contentious events, then local managers cannot be assumed to be impartial, disinterested bearers of design information. Their careers and jobs may be at stake in a redesign process, and it is unrealistic to expect them to behave objectively when working collaboratively on new or alternative designs. When design-oriented organizational scholars shift from an integrated set of assumptions to more amorphous ones they expect to modify in collaboration with local managers, this alters the political environment in which actual design work is performed. If design knowledge is to be co-created, and local managers are told they will be full partners in the co-creation process, design experts have ceded their expert power (Mintzberg, 1983). If organizations cannot fully benefit from more than one hundred years of accumulated design knowledge, will they be able to adapt to today's complex, dynamic environments?

I am not proposing that organization design experts with their evidence-based knowledge should dictate design solutions to others. Nor am I suggesting that organization members should not participate in the process of knowledge interpretation and application. I simply wish to point out that organizational politics is part of the process of collaboration. I suspect there already is a lot of knowledge about how to manage politicking during design development and implementation, and that sharing this knowledge would be useful to those seeking to make design knowledge more actionable. For example, local collaborators could address political issues in an open forum, and all participants could have a chance to listen to those who would argue for an alternative. Relevant, specific stories and examples about managing politicking during design interventions would be invaluable. Even better would be systematic research on how to manage collaborative organizational design when the participants have conflicting goals.

My commentary is intended to call greater attention to the political context in which real organizations are designed. Effective change can occur if all parties recognize that organization members have a real stake in the outcome and may have conflicting goals. To

produce actionable design knowledge, we need a better understanding of how to collaborate in politicized environments.

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