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Why managers do what they do

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Abstract: This paper develops an alternative explanation for why managers do what they do when called to implement market plans, transform the organization, and forge new relationships with customers. It develops the explanation by organizing the discussions in the following way: It initially discusses the central tenets of symbolic interactionism, the method used to analyze the qualitative data that emerged from a study of marketing strategy implementation processes in 40 small and midsized industrial organizations. Then it traces a link between managers' symbolic interactions and their behaviors, and develops an alternative explanation for why they do what they do. It also discusses how the symbolic interactionist perspective provides alternative explanations for some of the enduring challenges of managing organizational change, i.e. why managers say and do different things, why their decisions and actions are often incongruent with their own best judgement, and why, despite professing awareness of innovative solutions to the problems, only some are able to implement their personal insights.

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Most scholars and managers would agree that an organization's ability to transform and adapt to a changing environment represents a source of competitive advantage. Not surprisingly, business literature is replete with descriptions of changes occurring in competitive organizations and with advice on how to solve problems related to managing change. If awareness of practical solutions, and information about what ought to be done was enough, most and not a select few organizations would consistently and effectively foster change and move purposefully forward. Largely missing from the literature's structural descriptions of what occurs and prescriptions for what presumably ought to occur are meaningful explanations for why some organizations and managers do what they do to sustain high levels of responsiveness to the environment. In other words, little in the literature speaks to managers searching for meaningful ways of thinking about why only some and not all organizations embrace change, shed old and adopt new ways of thinking and doing, and consistently foster vibrant, satisfying relationships with customers and other constituents in turbulent environments.

The central purpose of this article is to develop an alternative explanation for why managers do what they do when called to implement market plans, transform the organization, and forge new relationships with customers. We develop our explanation by organizing our discussions in the following way. We initially discuss the central tenets of symbolic interactionism, the method we used to analyze the qualitative data that emerged from our study of marketing strategy implementation processes in 40 small and midsized industrial organizations. Then we trace a link between managers' symbolic interactions and their behaviors, and develop an alternative explanation for why they do what they do. We also discuss how the symbolic interactionist perspective provides alternative explanations for some of the enduring challenges of managing organizational change, i.e. why managers say and do different things, why their decisions and actions are often incongruent with their own best judgement, and why, despite professing awareness of innovative solutions to the problems, only some are able to implement their personal insights.

Deriving the whys

One way to derive the whys of managerial behaviors is to examine the link between their thinking, insights, and behaviors from a symbolic interactionism perspective (Blumer, 1969; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionists rely on qualitative data, use depth-interviews and participant observations, and focus on experiences, thinking, and interpretations to understand people's behaviors. The interactionist's view of why managers do what they do, particularly when called to foster changes in the organization, is based on three interrelated premises. First, the interactionist believes that behaviors emerge from the meanings managers attribute to the constituents and contingencies in their social environment. By constituents we refer to team members, senior management and members of other functional groups, as well as customers, competitors, and market intermediaries; and by contingencies to the firm's market agenda, resources, current organization of activities, day-to-day events, competitor actions, technological environment and regulatory forces. The subjective interpretations and the resulting perceptual environment, as distinct from objective analysis of the physical environment, are viewed as central determinants of behavior. This view holds that managers do what is apparently meaningful or what makes sense to them in light of their current and expected situation.

Second, the interactionist views meanings as a social construct. The perceptual environment which defines in essence what is meaningful is viewed to result from social interactions and a symbolic, interpretative process. In other words, even though managers largely inherit their physical environment and the objective reality of the firm's constituents and contingencies, they actively construct their subjective reality via social interactions with others. Moreover, since the environment is crowded with others, the interpretations are influenced by the subjective choices managers make about whom to interact with and how, what those interactions mean, and what behavioral implications those meanings hold. The view that behaviors emerge from social construction of subjective reality via symbolic interactions with others offers an alternative way of thinking about why managers can exhibit bounded-rational and extra-rational behaviors; i.e. behavioral choices that make sense to the manager but appear irrational to others.

Third, sense-making is viewed as a dynamic process. The interactionist expects meanings to change over time and situations (Blumer, 1969). Similarly, the perceptual environment is viewed as a fluid construct. Changes are expected to occur when new information is assimilated, new constituents enter and others exit, new contingencies arise and some become more focal than others, and old ways of thinking are abandoned in favor of new. Hence, the interactionist views the continually changing perceptual environment as the context from which behaviors emerge. In providing a meaningful way of thinking about why managers do what they do, therefore, the interactionist calls attention to:

- the key constituents and contingencies in managers' perceptual environment;
- the nature of symbolic interactions between managers and their perceived environment and the process by which they make sense or construct their reality;
- the processes by which meanings and social realities change over time and situation, which in turn result in behavioral changes.

The field study

Our field study was conducted in two stages. First, we conducted a pilot and depth-interviewed ten managers responsible for marketing implementation from ten industrial organizations. We asked them to describe their marketing plans and strategies, their actions and interactions with others, and the process of deployment and the learning that emerged. Our purpose was to identify and develop research questions that were both under-studied and managerially relevant to guide the second stage of the study.

Based on a content analysis of the managerial responses, we developed a list of research questions and translated them into a protocol to guide depth-interviews in the second stage. Among the topics we asked managers, pre-qualified as the most knowledgeable about their business unit's marketing implementation processes, to discuss in the context of the most recently ended fiscal year and in relation to their most important product or product line, were:

- their experiences with marketing implementation;
- their market plans and processes, and key relationships and issues in the planner-implementor relationship;
- interactions with key constituents in their environment and the issues that emerged;
- key contingencies and the ways in which they responded;
- actions taken to implement market plans;
- intended and actual outcomes of the marketing implementation process.

Our depth interviews were highly formative in nature. Although the list of questions in our interview protocol helped initiate discussion and served as a guide, the probing questions and clarifications triggered by managers' responses strongly shaped the interviews. The tape-recorded interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were transcribed and content analyzed. We stopped data collection after the 40th completed interview largely because we found that new data were reinforcing existing themes without contributing much to the breadth of the findings (see Tables I and II for description of sample). Guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1984), Bogdan and Biklen (1982), and Patton (1980, 1990) were followed for the qualitative content analysis of roughly 1,200 pages of typed transcripts.

The process of data analysis was highly iterative. Briefly, we initially coded the transcripts to aid classification of data and comparison of responses. Then we identified and developed themes that explained managerial involvement in the implementation process. Supporting and contradicting evidence generated from the transcripts were integrated and reconciled with the emerging themes. The final set of findings were supported by actual managerial quotes, and withstood the scrutiny of a panel of experts with a variety of experiences in qualitative research, marketing, organizational behavior, and research methodology. Finally, an external, terminally qualified investigator with over 20 years of experience in qualitative data analysis was hired to develop an independent set of findings from our original data. The process by which the two sets of independently derived findings and their supporting evidence were compared and contrasted was also overseen by the panel of experts. We next discuss the findings that emerged when we examined our data from the symbolic interactionism perspective.

Why managers do what they do

The memos and notes we wrote while listening to and transcribing the taped interviews suggested that differences in managers' implementation directed behaviors were linked to the differences in the strategic thinking they reflected in their responses. As we analyzed interview transcripts, therefore, we tentatively positioned each manager along a rough continuum of strategic thinking, ranging from low to high. At the end of the iterative process during which each manager was repositioned in light of emerging data, four clear clusters of strategic thinkers emerged.

We included seven managers in the high strategic thinking cluster because they actively sought information from multiple sources, integrated many divergent points of view in their way of thinking, and identified several action alternatives before committing resources. High level strategic thinkers were distinctive because they evaluated likely outcomes of multiple scenarios in light of the expected response from internal (senior managers, their own team members, and members of other functional groups), and external constituents (leading customers, key dealers, distributors, and independent rep organizations). The extent to which key constituents would support each action alternative, and the impact of attempts to implement each alternative on the relationship with each constituent, factored strongly into their decision making. High levels of strategic thinking were also reflected by an acute awareness of the diverse orientations, interests, and priorities that existed within the organization, and by decisions and actions that consistently reflected this awareness. Strategic thinkers, more than any others in our sample, could articulate a clear vision of what they intended to accomplish in the market in ways that reflected an integrative understanding of their firm's technical and marketing prowess and customer needs.

Managers we included in the low strategic thinking cluster (n = 8) were similar in terms of:
- the disconnectedness with market constituents and the perceptual distances from customers;
- the inadequate grasp of the complex, multiple forces that shaped the context in which they were called to make decisions;
- the untested assumptions that often functioned as a basis for taking action;
- the resistance to new information that challenged current ways of thinking and doing;
- the inordinate involvement in knee-jerk, fire-fighting type reactions;
- the failure to articulate a clear vision of what they (and the firm) intended to accomplish beyond the near term; and
- the general lack of awareness about the breadth of orientations and concerns that existed within and outside the organization. We placed managers falling between these two extremes into two separate clusters, i.e., low to medium strategic thinking (n = 12), and medium to high strategic thinking (n = 13).

Once managers were grouped in the strategic thinking clusters, we were ready to examine the link between their thinking, symbolic interactions and implementation directed behaviors. Table III shows a brief summary of the findings that emerged from this process. For instance, we found that meaningful differences existed between managers and organizations from each cluster in terms of the customers they served, the types of constituents and contingencies that characterized their perceptual environments, the nature of decisions they made, and the actions they took.

Clusters of symbolic interactions

The nature of symbolic interactions of eight managers we placed in the low strategic thinking (n = 8) cluster were similar in several ways. They commonly viewed the production function as the chief constituent in their environment, and shared highlevels of concern for ensuring an even flowof customer orders to maximize machine utilization and minimize bottle-necks.The meaning assigned to marketing as an organizational function was selling production's output. The meaning emerged from social interactions with powerful production departments which exerted the strongest influence on the organization's market agenda and made most resource allocation decisions; and within a context of a stable, predictable external environment (i.e. a steady in-flow of local and regional customer inquiries/orders). Managers' responses to our questions betrayed an enduring belief that customers would seek them out because of their physical proximity and historic ties. Their firm's marketing actions appeared mostly inflexible and unresponsive to unusual customer needs. Most marketing actions were limited to addressing customer inquiries, preparing quotations, and administering incoming orders.

The thinking of managers in the second cluster (low to medium strategic thinking, n = 12) was dominated by engineering/R&D and production functions. The contingency offering the biggest source of anxiety was finding customers that could fit with the firm's technological capabilities. Considerable energies were spent prospecting and contacting potential buyers, engaging independent representatives, and appointing dealers/distributors. Marketing was defined as actions and mostly reactions related to finding customers and making a sale. The meaning emerged from managers' social interactions with R&D and production groups, and within the context of an established organizational tradition that emphasized technology over market/customer needs. Marketing activities were largely about scrambling for customers, and about firefights to address unforeseen outcomes of actions (or lack of actions). Managers held a distinctly skeptical view of market planning and forecasting, and were frequently overwhelmed by market developments. Considerable time and energies were spent solving problems as they arose. Describing marketing implementation as spur-of-the-moment actions, a manager noted:"

What else could implementation be without actions?... It wasn't a breeze. In fact, it was a lot of hours. It took that process I talked about earlier, where you take a step... See where the next one goes... Sometimes you have to take a step back... There was a lot of dead-end streets, ... I made a lot of phone calls, went nowhere..."

Descriptions of managers we placed in the third cluster (medium to high strategic thinking, n = 13) reflected greater concern for identifying and evaluating multiple marketing action alternatives. Marketing possessed a distinctive identity as an organizational function, and enjoyed an equitable status with R&D and production groups. Marketing decisions reflected considerable input from production and R&D groups, and appeared responsive to current and anticipated customer needs. Marketing was defined as a process of building and managing interfunctional interfaces. The meaning emerged from social interactions within a somewhat unique environmental context. First, every customer required modifications in the marketing plan, including changes in product features and re-negotiated prices, delivery schedules and installation, and service agreements. Each customer therefore required accommodations from R&D, production, sales, and other internal constituents. Second, all firms in this cluster (n = 13) were characterized by somewhat rigid interfunctional boundaries. Inflexibility, differences in mindsets, and entrenched micro-cultures of each department, and the fear of failing to respond to the non-standard needs of each customer strongly figured into managerial thinking. Marketing was about assessing customer needs, and about making promises to customers based on an integrative understanding of R&D's and production's concerns and orientation, and garnering support from internal and external constituents including sales, customer service, design engineering, production, R&D, senior management, dealers, and distributors via personally developed interpersonal relationships. Managing the marketing function, more than any other activity, was about cultivating personal relationships with key people within and outside the organization to accommodate unique customer needs.

The seven managers we placed in the fourth cluster (high strategic thinking) described marketing implementation as a process of holistic coordination. The meaning emerged from social interactions within a distinctive organizational and environmental context. Dedicated, technologically adept competitors, customers focused on total quality programs and searching for vendors on a global scale, and rapid advances in fundamental and applied technology strongly figured into managerial thinking. Their social interactions were about confronting challenges from a diverse set of constituents, often in the uncharted, uncertain terrain of new technologies, new customer needs, and new products. Diverging concerns from sales, production, design engineering and R&D, senior management along with leading customers shaped even the day-to-day marketing decisions. The organizational culture emphasized holistic, integrated thinking and compelled adoption of decisions that enjoyed organization wide ownership. A participating manager explained:"

Our departments here are engineering, manufacturing, quality, and marketing and technology. The fundamental idea was to merge the sales, marketing, and R&D people together, and to work closer to manufacturing. So the focus was on the customer and the application, so we can take extremely high technologies (sic) and try to get products to market."

Across all clusters, however, we found that regardless of formal intents, the general pattern of managerial actions was strongly shaped by the subjective, interpretative process by which they made sense of their environment, and defined the situation in which they were believed they were called to make decisions and actions. Owing largely to the subjective process of sense-making, in no instance did formal or informal intents and strategies completely, or over reasonably predict how the implementation process eventually unfolded in practice.

Explaining behavioral change

Although we traced the links between managerial thinking, symbolic interactions, and behaviors, it would be erroneous to infer that managers from any cluster were locked into a particular behavioral pattern over the long term. We found that behaviors remained static only to the extent perceptual representation of the environment, and the process of attributing meaning via social interactions, remained static. Describing the continual changes that occur in the perceptual environment, Blumer (1969, p. 5) notes:"

This process has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meaning in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action."

Aligned with Blumer's (1969) view, we found that behavioral change occurred to the extent subjective interpretations of events and the processes by which meanings were handled, resulted in new perceptual scenarios and implicated one set of behaviors over others. Hence, to view changes occurring in the market and objective environment, and wonder about why managers failed to respond in seemingly rational ways, was to overlook the subjective, interpretative process by which managers construct their reality, and overlook its strong impact on their decisions and actions.

Although much of the creativity and variety of managerial decisions and actions was linked to their subjective interpretation, it was clear from our study that the effectiveness of their actions was more directly linked to objective, physical environment that existed independent of managers. In other words, managers were effective to the extent that they engaged the real-world environmental constituents including customers, suppliers, and market intermediaries in intended ways, and responded to the objective reality of their needs, preferences, expectations and perceived choices - regardless of their subjective interpretations. Similarly, their responses showed that when their decisions and behavioral choices resulted from subjective interpretations that were far removed from the objective reality of the physical environment, they failed to effect meaningful changes within their organizations or engage environmental constituents in mutually profitable relationships over the long term. Hence, managing organizational change and remaining effective in the market place required managers to continually test the fidelity of their perceived reality with the objective reality of their environment. Without reality checks, managers' actions tended to lose their effectiveness, and seemingly insightful plans to transform the organization failed in practice. In this regard, we found that the more effective managers in our sample, i.e. the ones that reported high levels of success in accomplishing marketing objectives, relied inordinately on personally listening to key constituents for obtaining reality checks. In addition to helping them build strong interpersonal relationships with constituents, we found that the act of listening sent powerful cues about their intents, and functioned as a strong social-cohesive force. For instance, the listening not only assured constituents that their concerns were important and functioned as an immediate precursor to informed, mindful actions on a day-to-day basis, but it also helped identify key issues likely to confront the implementation process before they emerged in ways that compelled a knee-jerk, thoughtless response.

Much of the disparity between the real, physical environment and the one managers constructed from their social interactions with others existed because some did not look, and some looked but did not see. For instance, the vision of managers from the first cluster (extremely low strategic thinking, n = 7) was so clouded by the production function's demands for administering customer orders, they showed scant interest in looking at customers or their needs. Similarly, managers from the second cluster (low strategic thinking, n = 12) were so consumed by firefights, and so overwhelmed by day-to-day events that they had little energy to look, and often failed to assimilate market information in their ways of thinking. We found several commonalities in the cultures of organizations in which managers tended to look but not see. By culture, we refer to a set of fundamental assumptions and a collective perceptual representation of the world that people in organizations develop over time via intense symbolic interactions with key environmental constituents and contingencies. Important thinking and evidence is presented about strategic effectiveness and culture, and our study offers little in dispute (see Badovick and Beatty, 1987; Deshpande and Webster, 1989). We found, however, that even as cohesive cultures promised cohesive, well coordinated actions across the organization, owing mostly to the shared vision and commonalities in people's perceptual representation of their environment, they often became insular and regressive. Insular because they prevented the assimilation of new, objective market information, and regressive because cultural hubris restricted behavioral modifications (e.g. we have always done things effectively this way in the past). Reinforcing our data derived view, the literature is rich with examples of regressive, non-responsive organizational cultures that get in the way of adapting to environmental change, and of progressive cultures that assimilate new information and adapt to impending environmental changes (see Miller, 1994).

The gap between intents and outcomes

Following closely behind the questions about why managers did what they did were questions about why formal and informal intents to change the organization and develop new relationships with market constituents were rarely implemented strictly according to plan. We found that contributing strongly to the gap between intents and outcomes were notable gaps between: what managers intended to evoke from the constituents in their environment and what they actually evoked in practice; and what managers said and actually did.

The gap between intended and actual behavioral responses

The process of implementing market plans required all managers in our sample to generate an integrated response from the organization, elicit cooperation from market intermediaries, and generate commitment from customers. In other words, managers were effective largely to the extent they could manage, and more so sustain, behavioral changes in their own team members, key people across the organization, and key market intermediaries. Eliciting and coordinating activities of a diverse body of people represented the principal challenge of implementation. Problems arose when the constituents failed to respond in the ways intended by the manager, or worse yet, failed to respond at all. Why others did what they did, and why they failed to act according to the managers' intentions, were questions that commonly confronted even the more effective managers in our sample.

Constituents did what they did, and frequently responded to managerial intents and organizational plans in ways other than those intended, at least in part, because systematic differences existed between what managers believed they were doing (or what they espoused), and how others interpreted and responded to their decisions and actions. The content of plans and managers' explanations for what they were trying to accomplish were reflective of their rational, logical insights, drawn from their learning and experiences. However, their day-to-day actions were reflective of their subjective, symbolic interpretations. Problems arose when managers were themselves unaware that their subjective process of sense-making was not transparent to others, and that different people interpreted what they were actually doing in different ways. The unawareness of this unawareness greatly exacerbated the problem. Moreover, regardless of the managers' original intents, the behavioral responses of others were based not so much on objective analysis of managers' day-to-day actions, as on their own subjective, symbolic interpretations.

Hence, the subjective, interpretative context under which managers were called to foster organizational change held inordinate potential for creating misunderstandings and unintended responses from others. To ponder why effective management of organizational change frustrates all but the most astute manager, or wonder why misunderstandings occur even among well-intentioned people in organizations, therefore, is to erroneously assume that all interpretative processes are explicit and transparent to all the participants in the change. Moreover, to ponder why not only managers, but other participants in organizational change behave in inexplicable, seemingly irrational ways is to miss how the back and forth process of communication and subjective interpretations can serve to amplify the gap between what managers intend to evoke, and what they actually evoke from others.

The gap between saying and doing

A major contributor to the gap between intents and outcomes was the seemingly paradoxical distinctions between what managers said, and what they actually did on a day-to-day basis. Even though their general pattern of behavior, in aggregate, largely reflected their espoused theories of action, their day-to-day activities were often at odds with what they espoused. For instance, when asked about the ideal implementation scenario, most described one which included a logically connected series of events, largely reflecting their rational insights. In many ways, the ideal scenarios contained events uncontrollable by managers, including some responses from customers and competitors. These scenarios also contained, however, several action steps within their control that reflected their own learning and insights, including improvisations in plans (e.g. more aggressive pricing), or changes in actions (e.g. increased contact with new customers). Why managers appeared unable to act upon their own personal insights was a question that frequently emerged during our data analysis. Explaining this seeming contradiction, Taylor and Bogdan (1984, p. 10) note:"

People are constantly interpreting and defining things as they move through different situations. We can see why different people say and do different things. One reason is that people have had different experiences and have learned different social meanings... A second reason why people act differently (from what they espouse) is that they find themselves in different situations... the process of interpretation is a dynamic process. How a person interprets something will depend on the meanings available and how he or she sized up a situation."

Hence, symbolic interactions and the meanings managers developed from their social interactions with others mitigated the link between their objective, rational insights and their actions. Instead of consistently reflecting emerging insights, their day-to-day actions reflected meanings that emerged from social interactions with others, and the behavioral implications held by the selective perceptual representations. This view of managers' behaviors also offered one explanation for the chaotic nature of managing implementation, and for the heavy incidence of firefights. It also offered an alternative way of thinking about why informed and experienced managers exhibited uncharacteristic behaviors during firefights.

For instance, half the managers recounted firefights as their principal implementation directed activity. Moreover, all managers directed considerable energies to solving unforeseen problems after they emerged. The incidence of firefighting when compared to purposeful actions was high, the symbolic interactionist perspective suggested, because the subjective, interpretative context which shaped actions differed meaningfully from the objective reality of customers, competitors, and other environmental forces. Firefights consumed inordinate managerial focus and energies because the forces in the objective, physical market environment frequently overwhelmed their selective, socially constructed realities. When managers encountered events that were new or unfamiliar to their perceptual representations, much depended on how the new information was assimilated in their construct of reality and how they transformed their own way of thinking. The more effective managers were overwhelmed less frequently than others not only because of their frequent reality checks and rich, multi-dimensional perceptual environments, but also because of the rapidity with which they assimilated new, emerging market information. When the assimilation was relatively slow, however, managers exhibited knee-jerk, resource wasting responses. In other words, their own selective view of the world got in the way of a thoughtful, meaningful response. In retrospect, most described how their hasty reactions did not reflect their best judgements.

The emerging explanation for the gap between what managers said and did also helped explain, in a general way, why the unrelenting advice from the consulting industry, and the cascade of self-help books in the "how to" and the "ten action steps" genre have failed to create dramatic improvements in most organizations. For instance, most managers in our study recounted their awareness of the popular self-help books, and professed awareness and insights into popular management techniques. Their awareness and insights exerted negligible influence because their day-to-day actions were inextricably linked to their symbolic interactions and subjective interpretations of their day-to-day situation.

This finding raised another somewhat ironic question, i.e. why, if we are aware that symbolic interactions mitigate the relationship between rational insights and behavioral change, does this not emancipate firms from the tyranny of subjective, interpretative processes of its managers. Offering an explanation for this dilemma of modern organizations, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 21) notes about such emancipating awareness:"

(That kind of knowledge) is not cumulative. (First) It cannot be condensed into a formula; it cannot be memorized and then routinely applied. Like other complex forms of expertise, such as mature political judgement or a refined aesthetic sense, it must be earned through trial-and-error experience by each individual... Second, the knowledge of how to control consciousness must be reformulated every time the cultural context changes. The wisdom of the mystics, of the Sufi, or the great yogis, or of the Zen masters might have been excellent in their own time - and might still be the best, if we lived in those time and in those cultures. But when transplanted to contemporary California those systems lose quite a bit of their original power... Ritual form wins over substance... Control over consciousness cannot be institutionalized."

In sum, to managers concerned with managing the day-to-day realities of organizational change, the interactionist suggests: the process of interpreting and making sense of their environment mitigates the impact of rational insights, external advice and directives on day-to-day actions; this liberating knowledge about symbolic interactions is diffuse, non-cumulative, and difficult to transmit; and relatedly, when the process of symbolic interactions and sense-making is consciously managed, managers are more likely to exert a greater control over their own behaviors as well as the behaviors of others.

Implications for future research

Plans for organizational change are often based on rational thinking even though subjective interpretations shape the process by which intents are translated into actions. Our study suggests that a better understanding of the subjective, interpretative processes by which people define their behaviors can help managers foster and sustain organizational change. Moreover, we find a clear need for developing new ways of thinking about the processes by which social realities are constructed, reality checks are maintained, and new information is assimilated with existing perceptions of the environment. The result of this line of thinking may help alleviate the problems associated not only with managing change, but also with the high incidence of firefights and unplanned actions - problems that a breadth of real-life managers encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Currently, more is known about what managers do than why, largely because the former is easier to understand from a position of objective rationality. Our clearest finding is that rational insights seldom get translated into organization-wide action. While no firm actively chooses to fail, many do because of the failure to implement sound ideas that apparently exist within the organization. While our exploratory study generates one set of plausible explanations, it is important to develop alternative explanations that can help bridge the gap between intentions and results. We find that much of what occurs in organizations, more so why, is better understood when there is a greater appreciation of the subjective, interpretative processes that shape people's behaviors.

In a general way, academia's skepticism of subjective, interpretative methodologies has contributed to the lack of theoretical development in this area. Our study highlights that to focus exclusively on what managers do is to fail in understanding what occurs in its entirety, and to fail in generating actionable insights for managers interested in creating and sustaining organizational changes over the long term.

Implications for managers

Our study holds two important sets of implications for managers interested in implementing plans and producing results. The first relate to improving the effectiveness of their own behaviors, and the second to improving their influence on others who contribute to the implementation process.

First, for instance, our data show that social interactions with a diverse set of constituents is central to sound decisions, i.e., decisions that gain others' buy-in and commitment. For improving their own effectiveness, therefore, managers may find it useful to emphasize personal interactions with the diverse set of constituents that exist in their environment. In the absence of a rich, complex perceptual environment that results from such social interactions, we find that managers are often unprepared, overwhelmed by firefights, and consumed by knee-jerk responses.

Second, our data highlight the importance of reality checks that can continually test the correspondence between the perceptual environment managers construct via social interactions with others, and the real world of customers and competitors. Social contact, listening, and first hand interactions with customers, market intermediaries, and key people within the organization emerges as the most favored methods for obtaining such reality checks in our study. Moreover, since the physical reality of the organization and the market is continually subject to change, we find reality checks crucial even for managers who otherwise display unusually high levels of perceptiveness and the capacity to draw relevant meanings from their interactions with others. In other words, while our data suggest that keen perceptiveness is linked with effective, implementable decisions, it does not compensate for effective reality checks.

Third, our study highlights the importance of processing emerging information in ways that transform current ways of defining the environment and making decisions. For instance, we find that simple awareness of new information has little influence on behavior unless managers also use their emerging insights to transform their socially constructed view of the environment. Similarly, we find that when managers fail to integrate new information and their emerging rational insights with their interpretations, the gap between what they espouse and what they actually do in practice becomes greatly exacerbated.

Our data also hold implications for managers interested in improving their influence on others in their environment, and in generating concerted action from their own team members and other important constituencies in the organization. First, for instance, our study suggests that managing the behaviors of others is closely linked to managing their process of symbolic interactions and subjective interpretations. Hence, instead of favoring directives that spell out action steps and desired outcomes, managers may find it useful to actively engage others in social interactions and define scenarios in ways that implicate a certain set of actions over others. Second, managers may find it useful to note that their decisions and actions are often interpreted in ways that differ meaningfully from their intents. Ensuring that all constituents contributing to the implementation process clearly and accurately understand their intents on a day-to-day basis therefore poses a significant challenge.

Concluding comments

Our study sheds some light on why managing one's own actions and those of others, represents one of the more significant challenges of modern organizations. Since the process of translating intents into actions and producing concrete results continues to challenge most managers, it is time to pursue alternative explanations for why managers do what they do. Our study suggests that understanding how meaning is generated via symbolic interactions and influence people's behaviors can represent a sound initiating step toward answering this question.

Application questions

1 Is behavior determined by personality, expectation, reward, perceived need, or something else?

2 Why does it help to know why managers do what they do?

3 What in your experience has motivated your decision-making behavior at various times?

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Illustration

Caption: Table I; Types of manufacturing firms in the sample; Table II; Job titles of participating managers; Table III; A typology of marketing implementation behaviors

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