Deconstructing organisational paradoxes in construction

Workshop session as part of CIB W55/W65 Symposium 2011 in Amsterdam
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Context

Paradoxes are part and parcel of organisational life (Smith and Berg, 1987), and these manifest in a variety of ways (see Chan and Cooper, forthcoming). For instance, tensions arise between the desire to take a longer-term view and the demands of satisfying short-term goals when shaping a strategic response to organisational change. Furthermore, in the globalised world we operate in today, there is the conflict between thinking in global terms whilst maintaining a sense of localism. The need to engage with community stakeholders has also meant that there are ambiguities of control emerging from the need to balance top-down authority with bottom-up participation, and a need to reconcile individual perspectives with collective consensus. Managers and workers in contemporary organisations are often presented with these contradictions as they make sense of everyday dealings at the workplace. As a result, organisational actors frequently have to exercise trade-offs as they tackle emergent change in society. Unsurprisingly, much attention has been centred on how tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes are being resolved in an organisational context. Poole and van de Ven (1989) and Beech *et al.* (2004), for example, suggested four tactics in which opposing views can be harnessed, including engagement, elimination, avoidance and transcendence. Clegg *et al.* (2002) noted the importance of improvisation tactics to address organisational paradoxes when putting plans into action. Smith and Tushman (2005) called for the need to explore and exploit binaries at the extreme ends when tackling paradoxes.

The systematic study of organisational paradoxes has however been given scant attention in the field of construction management research. Price and Newson (2003), for instance, articulated the nature of paradoxes in the context of strategic management in the construction industry. Yet, construction organisations and workplaces are fertile grounds for exploring how tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes surface and how these contradictions are addressed at an operational level. Apart from some of the paradoxes mentioned above, there is the added dimension of inter-organisational relations that are critical given the temporary, project-based nature of construction work. Questions are raised as to how stakeholders in construction resolve frictions caused by the aspirations of integration across construction supply chains and the need to maintain organisational identity within firms. There is also the paradox of coopetition, where actors across supply chains engage in cooperative competition. Therefore, this workshop proposal seeks to bring together paper contributions from researchers that will facilitate the deconstruction of organisational paradoxes in construction.

Critical aspects that could be discussed at this workshop are as follows:

- Organisational paradoxes are often explained in binary terms for practical, expedient reasons, but how do we conceptualise the middle-ground? How do researchers and practitioners explore, and deploy efforts to deal with, organisational paradoxes in the field?
- In deconstructing organisational paradoxes, there is the tendency for researchers to set boundaries on, and simplify messy realities into, discrete categories. What happens when multiple paradoxes clash with one another? How do researchers

trace the changing nature of organisational paradoxes, and how practitioners deal with these, over time and across the space between organisations?
- What is the purpose of studying organisational paradoxes in construction? And how can research methods be developed to better deconstruct organisational paradoxes in construction?

Expected outcomes
The workshop will form a special thematic track at the CIB W55/W65 symposium in Delft in 2011, coordinated by the Task Group TG78 on "Informality and emergence in construction", and in collaboration with Task Group TG76 on "Recognising innovation." The purpose is to advance the community's understanding of organisational paradoxes in construction by encouraging meaningful collaborative relationships to be forged through the intense discussions developed at the workshop. Depending on the quality and quantity of papers received, there could be opportunities for a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal and/or a best paper award.

Timescales
If you intend to submit a paper to this workshop, you can do so via the conference website (see http://www.misbe2011.nl). Please bear in mind the key dates, including:

1 October 2010   Deadline for abstract submission

1 December 2010   Notification of acceptance of abstracts

1 February 2011   Deadline for full paper submission

1 March 2011   Notification of acceptance of full papers

15 April 2011   Deadline for final paper submission

Please refer to the conference website http://www.MISBE2011.nl for more information. Check out http://informalandemergent.ning.com for more information as well.

References

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