

MAINTAINING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AS A SERIES OF BALANCING ACTS

How can leaders create ongoing change in their organization in ways that both reinforce its foundational principles and continually adapt its practices? Many organizations need to do this, but what it involves and how it unfolds in practice and theory are inadequately understood.

The primary theoretical approach to this quandary, paradoxes of stability and change (Farjoun, 2010), gives conceptual guidance, but does not flesh out ways that leaders may deal with ongoing tensions between stability and change over time. Neither does Archer's (1995) critical realist approach, which asserts that engagement with particular structural conditions likely will result in either elaboration or reproduction of them. Archer's elegant treatment of reflexivity, however, does suggest an approach to understanding how leaders make sense of the tensions they are encountering.

We conducted an exploration of The Forum, a center for collaborative research and practitioner development created in 2000 and continuing today. Using interview, observational, and archival data collected over the entire time period of the Forum, we studied the multiple tensions related to stability and change that have arisen over time in response to particular internal and external events, such as leadership succession and the 2008 recession, as well as leader initiatives such as intentional collection of feedback on an ongoing basis. We also studied leaders' reflections and responses to these events, and how their responses affected both stability and change.

In particular, we explore in depth how the leaders reflected on and responded to a) the 2008 recession and its impacts and b) their recognition based on internal feedback that newer Forum members were not learning older knowledge that had been developed there. Their reflection comprised a kind of double loop learning (cf. Argyris & Schön, 1974). It was not only a direct reaction to the events but an attempt to understand their underlying meanings. The leaders' responses to the events included both a change in governance and membership and the development of action learning sets. We will suggest how these responses both conserved basic principles and aided The Forum's ongoing adaptation in creative ways.

On the basis of our findings, we suggest the types of external and internal tensions between stability and change that are likely to arise in organizational settings, the role that leaders' reflection will have in their responses to the tensions, and how their reflections may (or may not) lead to actions that foster both stability and change over time, not just one or the other. Our findings flesh out empirically what conceptual explorations of tensions of stability and change have introduced and what they have left out.

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