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More alignment, better results

Literature review

Mirror Mirror collaborates with the Technical University of Delft and the Rotterdam School of Management in the Netherlands. This helps us establish what knowledge exists in the areas of context profiling and team alignment for the benefits of organizational effectiveness. It also allows us to continually enhance the Mirror Mirror processes.

During an initial desktop study, the starting point was to investigate how context impacts effectiveness. The study also expanded to include the areas of shared context, complexity, and performance. Areas that were touched upon in addition to that were strategic option and decision analysis, and fuzzy cognitive mapping.

Context and effectiveness

During the initial review, the domain of contingency theory was of particular interest due to its underlying premise that leadership necessarily needs to be adaptive to circumstances:

> *"Leadership depends on the situation. Few social scientists would dispute the validity of this statement. […] The most recent of these, contingency theories, is argued to be most consistent with existing evidence and most relevant to professional practice."*[1]

However, it became clear quite early on that all approaches within the field of contingency theory necessarily take a reductionist approach to establishing causal relationships between leadership effectiveness and individual elements of context (such as Leader-member relations, Task structure, Position power in **Fiedler's** model, or follower ability and willingness in **Hersey and Blanchard's** situational leadership model), as opposed to trying to characterize the context as a whole. These approaches therefore only had limited value to this work.

It also became clear that this reductionist approach left the models open to criticism and proved difficult to validate. Where validation was available for the effectiveness of the leadership style, in a given situation, it was difficult to attribute it to single parameters of managers. So rather than taking the individual leader as starting point, complexity theory attempts to look at the context first.

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1 Vroom,V.H. & Jago, A.G. (2007): The Role of the Situation in Leadership; American Psychologist

Once managers are free to recognize that their personality and preferences make them suited to certain environments and less suited for others, it is a matter of helping them understand what sort of system they operate in. Complexity theory attempts to do this by helping managers develop sense-making skills for the degree of complexity they find themselves in.

A far more complete view of context is attempted within complexity theory, such as in the Cynefin Framework developed by **Dave Snowden and Mary Boone**[2]:

Truly adept leaders know not only how to identify the context they're working in but also how to change their behavior to match.

Although their framework also assumes that managers or leaders are capable of changing their leadership styles or modes in accordance to the situation, it acknowledges that most leaders are capable of leading effectively in only one or two (of the four identified) domains, due to the fact that most business schools and organizations equip leaders to operate in ordered (as opposed to complex or chaotic) domains.

More importantly they emphasize that the context itself shifts constantly and that many leaders struggle to adjust their style (through complacency or lack of contextual awareness) when this happens. Particularly problematic is the drop-off from the plateau of the "simple" domain down the cliff into the "chaotic" domain. In order to be able to adapt their own behavior in the first place, effective leaders must master the skill of making sense of his/her context:
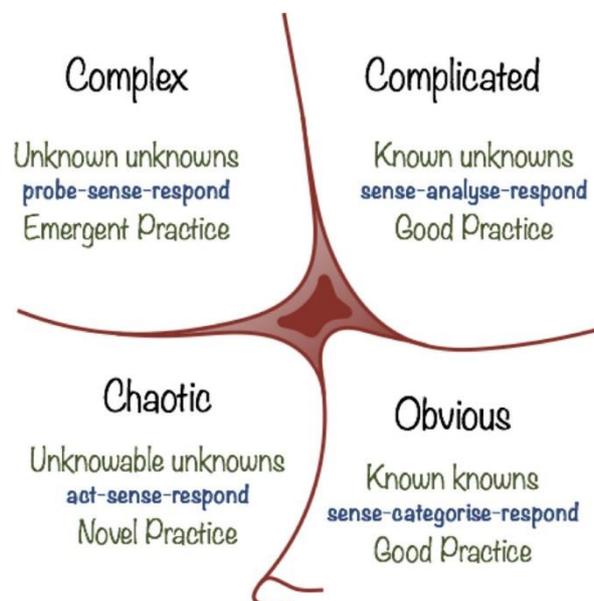

Complex
Unknown unknowns
probe-sense-respond
Emergent Practice

Complicated
Known unknowns
sense-analyse-respond
Good Practice

Chaotic
Unknowable unknowns
act-sense-respond
Novel Practice

Obvious
Known knowns
sense-categorise-respond
Good Practice

Figure 1 – from David J. Snowden & Mary E. Boone (2007): Leader's Framework for Decision Making; HBR Magazine Article Nov 2007 Edition

2 Snowden, D.J. & Boone, M.E. (2007): Leader's Framework for Decision Making; HBR Magazine Article Nov 2007 Edition

A further review of existing literature, in work conducted in cooperation with the Technical University of Delft, found 'social alignment' as a term used to describe how one or more people can share a current reality based on a common understanding.

'Shared reality' is based on Social Constructionism, which derives mainly from Berger and Luckmann's The Social Construction of Reality (1971) and is defined by Crotty [3] as

> *"the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context".*

According to Social Constructionism, meanings are constructed rather than discovered, and people may construct meanings in different ways depending on their 'social relativity', as all human knowledge is developed and transmitted in social situations, in specific socio-historical contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1971; Crotty, 1998)

Since meanings are constructed and are not absolute, it is fair to say that Social Constructionism is relativist; it is not focused on 'the way things are' but 'the sense people make of them', and it is not concerned with the validity of meanings, but the ways meanings are generated in socio-historical contexts, by people, from culture, through language.

We traced back work on shared meaning to 1999, in the work of Stout, Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Milanovich[4] who recognized barriers that teams face in sharing meaning and the impact of that on performance:

> *"Specific failures in communication and coordination behaviours as well as deficient cooperation (i.e., motivation or desire to work as a team) derail the process of building a shared understanding of the situation between team members, which leads to poor performance and errors."*

In 2000, Barron[5] asserted that sharing meaning in a work context was a challenge in itself:

> *"Working teams in organizations are faced with challenges of establishing common frames of reference, resolving discrepancies in understanding, negotiating issues of individual and collective action, and coming to a joint understanding."*

Behaviours to overcome these challenges were identified in research from 2004 by Tjosvold et al[6].:.

3 Crotty, Michael (2003) The Foundations of Social Research : Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif. :Sage Publications

4 Stout, Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Milanovich (1999). Planning, Shared Mental Models, and Coordinated Performance: An Empirical Link Is Established., HUMAN FACTORS, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 61–71

5 Achieving Coordination in Collaborative Problem-Solving Groups, Brigid Barron, Journal of the Learning Sciences Vol. 9, Iss. 4, 2000.

6 van den Bossche, P., Gijselaers, W., Segers, M., Woltjer, G., & Kirschner, P. (2011). Team learning: Building shared mental models. Instructional Science, 39(3), 283–301

"An open-minded discussion of diverse views is a critical social process by which a more complete awareness and appreciation of the complexity of the problem at hand is developed, incorporating diverse ideas Through this negotiation by argument and clarification, the team works towards a convergence of meaning in order to reach shared mental models."

Shared mental models gained more attention when Salas and Fiore[7] linked shared cognition in teams to performance in 2004 explaining that:

"Shared cognition is a critical driver of team performance, especially in shared mental models, team situation awareness, and understanding communication as a fundamental component of how information is processed at the team level."

Furthermore, emphasising the value of social alignment, Box & Platts[8] (2004) concur that

"Problems caused by misalignment include confusion; waste of time, money and opportunity; diminished productivity; de-motivation of individuals and teams; internal conflicts; power struggles; and ultimately project failure... as well as resulting in time and energy spent: doubting, conspiring, guessing or gossiping - when that same energy could be deployed in moving an organization forward."

They add that if individuals are aligned with each other and the organization's goals,

"their fullest potential can be deployed. Alignment allows the maximum energy and effectiveness to flow into achieving the desired outcomes."

Then, the work of Bossche et al.[9] in 2011 established a deeper relevance between shared mental models and team outcomes:

"Effective teams are able to build a shared conception of the problem at hand (Dillenbourg et al. 1996; Roschelle 1992). These results add to similar findings that indicate that shared mental models are related to important team outcomes (e.g., Mathieu et al. 2000, 2005)."

In the mainstream business literature, Richard Nisbett, Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan brought popular attention to the need for alignment between people in his book, 'Mindware' (2015):

"Our understanding of the world is always a matter of inference and interpretation. Our judgements about people and situations, even our perceptions of the physical world, rely on stored knowledge and hidden mental processes and are never a direct readout of reality."

7 Salas, Cooke & Roose (2008). On Teams, Teamwork and Performance, Discoveries and Developments HUMAN FACTORS, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 540–547

8 Box, S., & Platts, K. (2005). Business process management: establishing and maintaining project alignment. Business Process Management Journal, 11(4), 370–387

9 van den Bossche, P., Gijselaers, W., Segers, M., Woltjer, G., & Kirschner, P. (2011). Team learning: Building shared mental models. Instructional Science, 39(3), 283–301

The term Social Alignment gained traction more recently in the academic vocabulary as being the basis of shared meaning notably in the work of Gallotti et al[10]. in 2017:

> *"When people reciprocally exchange information about each other's thinking, and the meanings they are ascribing to things, processes of alignment tend to unfold over time, creating a social interaction and shared understandings – the base foundations of social alignment."*

Organizational Alignment - an emerging field

Alignment can be described as 'when all forces move in the same direction to minimize energy loss and maximize outcomes.' In an organizational setting, this means people can work from a shared reality about purpose, goals, behaviours, and mental models to achieve the best results.

Traditionally, the word 'alignment' within organizations is associated with the activity of mapping individual goals and activities to the organizational strategy, as part of Business process management (BPM) activities. This is being referred to more commonly as 'strategic alignment'.

Research in the social sciences now shows us that people carry different interpretations, biases and assumptions. These are often invisible and can build up to create a fog of confusion that affects decisions and actions large and small, undermining engagement and performance.

The alignment of people with each other, a 'social alignment', can be seen as a precursor of Shared Mental Models, being when people share a whole understanding of their context (a shared current reality), for the purposes of advancing their shared goals.

In the process of this review, the following three components of social alignment became apparent:

1. **Social participation** – how people interact, include and connect each other's perspectives and ideas
2. **Shared cognition**– how people understand the shared context together, including the purpose of the team and the organization
3. **Relevance to the individual** - the purpose of the individual and how that relates to the work of the team.

In this light, leaders wanting to focus on performance improvement need to allow the people to align to the strategy (strategic alignment) as well as between each other (social alignment). When team members are aligned to the strategic frame as well as within their shared context, they are more adaptive and effective.

A variety of interventions to improve social participation through increased understanding of self and others, such as the psychometric tool Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) are widely used. Other approaches to help people share an understanding of their common context alongside, are less available.

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10 Gallotti, M., Fairhurst, M. T., & Frith, C. D. (2017). Alignment in social interactions. Consciousness and cognition, Elsevier. Volume 48, February 2017, Pages 253-261

Typically, organizations attempt the use of organizational communications practices to create clarity and alignment.

i2i Practical Communications is a company that recognizes that in an increasingly complex and fast-changing world, significant unclarity and misalignment between people in the workplace is caused by varying interpretations, misunderstandings, assumptions, personal biases, social and environmental influences, and diversity in thinking, which traditional communication methods and leadership engagement practices do not address. It was designed and developed to minimize the cost of misalignment, and to improve clarity, positivity and effectiveness at the team level.

Behaviours and effectiveness

Further studies of the literature on collaborative learning, and the social and cognitive factors that drive teamwork has led to these findings:

Teams (bringing together people with different experiences and values) are more effective than are individuals. However, effective collaboration is not merely a case of putting people with relevant knowledge together[11].

Team members face the challenge of integrating their different perspectives and developing shared cognition (a shared understanding) of the problem at hand. This is driven by interpersonal and socio-cognitive processes and practices (behaviours). The behaviours needed to construct a better shared understanding are expressed within four states / areas:

1. **psychological safety** – a shared belief that the interpersonal risk taking will not carry negative consequences
2. **team cohesion** – shared commitment to achieve shared goals
3. **group potency** – the collective belief of team members that the group can be effective (confidence)
4. **interdependence** – a) task related: reliability of interconnections between tasks; b) outcome related – team members' personal benefits and costs depend on goal achievement.

The effect of these behaviours combined manifest in **Team Learning Behaviours**. These allow for example, constructive conflict to occur whereby divergent views can be either negotiated to common ground or become more readily accepted.

These socio-cognitive conditions and behaviours do not occur in a vacuum but are influenced by the social context in which they take place, in terms of willingness to engage in the joint effort to build and maintain mutually shared cognition.

Therefore, by understanding the perspectives of others and the assumptions behind them, team members are more able to modify the way they see things towards more compatibility.

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11 Van den Bossche, Segers, Kirschner – 2006

Mirror Mirror – an alignment process to improve team effectiveness

Using a perspective comparison process, Mirror Mirror allows people in teams to identify their common ground and differences. Each participants' perspective represents their interpretation of the context the team is operating in. These interpretations in turn are informed by the underlying governing assumptions each of us holds, which are often untested or unconsciously held.

Assumptions (and their reappraisal) stand at the beginning of the organizational learning cycle, as shown in **Chris Argyris'** Double-Loop Learning Model, below.
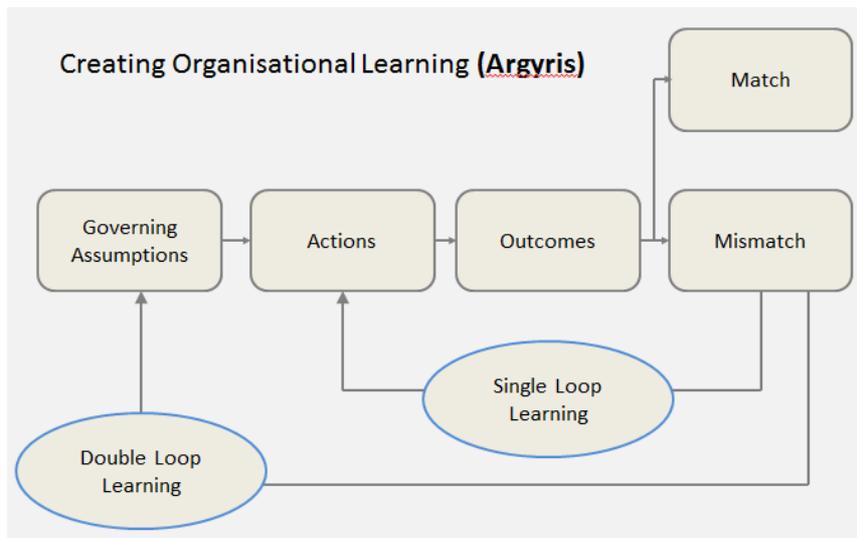

Figure 2 - adapted from Chris Argyris[12]

In conclusion, social alignment is a term used to describe how two or more people can develop a shared understanding of their common context, which in connection with strategic alignment, is a powerful means of improving team effectiveness.

Based on this research, Mirror Mirror is a process that identifies, measures, and addresses organizational misalignment. It therefore sits squarely in this space as an accelerator of team effectiveness.

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12 Argyris, Chris (May 1991): Teaching smart people how to learn-; Harvard Business Review. 69 (3): 99–109