Managing Tensions in Virtual Work Arrangements

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Introduction

Modern work settings such as virtual work arrangements – which are geographically distributed and in which workers rely heavily on information and communication technologies (ICTs) – allow for work to be conducted in new ways, but they also give rise to new types of work pressures that differ from those faced by workers in traditional organizations. This chapter will consider tensions arising from global, geographically distributed, and technologically mediated work arrangements and the ways in which these tensions are communicatively managed by organizational members. When people hear the word “tension”, they typically think of something negative, like stress or interpersonal conflict. While the modern workplace is often fraught with work pressures and stress due to information overload from email and other sources (e.g., Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011), we will be discussing a different sort of tensions. The tensions that will be discussed here can both alleviate and add to work pressures involving virtual work arrangements and increased use of new communication technologies. In this chapter, we will consider tensions as normal features of organizing that can be productive for organizations, depending how they are managed. We do so by highlighting several virtual work contexts in which tensions are likely to arise: global team collaboration, telework policies, and technology use in distributed work. Drawing on examples from my own and other related research, this chapter will illustrate the ways in which dialectical tensions arise and are discursively managed through communication
practices in ways that are productive for virtual workers. This has important implications for anyone who works in or manages a virtual organization.

**Dialectical Tensions in the Workplace**

The notion of dialectical tensions originates with Bakhtin’s work on dialogism (1981). In Bakhtin’s theory, “dialogue is the concept that brings coherence to the whole” (Baxter, 2004, p. 2). Bakhtin regarded social life as an open dialogue that was indeterminate and multivocal, comprised of multiple voices, rather than fixed and totalizing (Baxter, 2004). His notion was of dialogue as a constitutive process in which relationships are constituted in communication practices, in the interaction of self and other. This process is one of dialectical flux – it is dynamic, emergent, and messy.

Relating and dialogue is as much about differences as similarities, positioned as a dialectical or contradictory interplay between centripetal forces of unity and centrifugal forces of difference (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin’s work differs from other theorists such as Marx and Hegel, whose notion of dialectics is more linear and deterministic, in which a contradiction between thesis and antithesis is subsequently neatly resolved through synthesis. Another key difference is that while Marxist-Hegelian dialectics characterize social life on a more macro level, Bakhtin’s work is situated at more of an interpersonal level, as forces pulling individuals in opposing directions. As such, his theory highlights the individual agency involved in the actions and choices of individuals – and their multiple voices – as they act and respond to pressures in the environment around them to accomplish complex goals.

Communication scholars of relationships have adapted Bakhtin’s theory to explain the tug of war individuals routinely face in their interpersonal relationships.
through relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For instance, relational partners often swing back and forth between poles of autonomy and connectedness, as they want to feel connected to their partner without losing themselves or their independence in the process. At times the relationship may become strained when one partner desires more connectedness while the other partner desires more autonomy; at other times the emphasis on one pole or the other may change over time or in different situations as the relationship evolves. Nevertheless, the necessity to attend to both opposing poles creates tensions in the relationship that require management through communication. And finding a way to attend to both needs without contradiction helps maintain a healthy balance in the relationship, although it never reaches equilibrium but is always in flux.

Organizational members also face tensions in the workplace that pull them in different directions. They may find their own needs or goals at odds with those of the organization, or of other co-workers, or even be pulled apart by competing goals of their own (e.g., being a committed worker versus being a committed spouse or parent). Sometimes these competing goals and interests are both important and necessary to attend to, requiring creative solutions to do seemingly opposite things. To address this ‘dilemmatic’ nature of organizing (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004) in which organizations are seen as conflicted sites of activity rather than sites of stability and determinacy, scholars have applied dialectical theory to examine organizational tensions (e.g., Putnam, 1986; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). A tension is defined as an opposition between two conflicting poles, which can be goals or interests of an individual or group, or set of “unified opposites” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Rather than being a simple either-or
choice, however, it involves pressures to attend to seemingly contradictory needs. Tensions are regarded as normal, ubiquitous features of organizing (Pepper & Larson, 2006; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004) rather than anomalies or problems to be resolved or minimized. The existence of tensions is not inherently productive or destructive, but depends how such tensions are discursively managed (Tracy, 2004). While simple contradictions (involving an either-or choice between two competing alternatives) and pragmatic paradoxes (that demand impossible choices between mutually exclusive options, as in the saying “be spontaneous”) have been found to produce negative responses as they paralyze action and limit possibilities for response, dialectical tensions have been found to be productive as they allow for the merging of opposites through ‘both-and’ options (Putnam & Boys, 2006).

Communication plays an important role in the management of organizational contradictions. The range of responses has been categorized into several types: selection (selecting one pole and ignoring the other), separation (vacillating back and forth between the two poles), integration (attending to both poles through a ‘forced merger’ or neutralization, which does not allow for either to be fully realized), transcendence (creatively transforming dualities through reframing or synthesis so that the opposition no longer exists), and connection (treating tensions as mutually reinforcing in order to attend to both poles) (Seo et al., 2004). In this chapter we are particularly interested in the productive functions of tensions in terms of the ways in which they enable rather than constraining behavior and the ways they provide balance by enabling the accomplishment of multiple goals.
A dialectical approach also situates ambiguity as a central feature of organizing (Eisenberg, 1984; Weick, 1979), in contrast to traditional assumptions of communication and organizations that privilege openness, clarity, and consensus and regard communication as a process of uncertainty reduction. It acknowledges that organizational members are strategic, symbolic actors (Eisenberg, 2007) who often engage in “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984) in which they deliberately engage in ambiguous communication to foster multiple meanings of messages or communicative events – such as organizational mission and vision statements – in order to accomplish particular goals or appeal to a variety of stakeholders with diverse values. While clear and open communication is often taken for granted as the ideal and most effective form, this “ideology of openness” has been critiqued on the grounds that open communication is not always desirable, and in fact, can be risky as too much disclosure may surface differences and jeopardize relationships, as well as damaging organizational reputation or employee morale (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Covert or ambiguous communication often plays a strategic role in organizations by allowing for political behavior or face-saving that is not just self-interested but concerned with preserving good relationships and face of others.

This perspective is also grounded in a constitutive view of virtual organizing (and other organizing processes) as constituted through communication (Gibbs, Nekrassova, Grushina, & Abdul Wahab, 2008) that recognizes that such processes are not fixed or determinate but are continually recreated and reproduced in interaction among organizational members. This chapter addresses research questions such as what dialectical tensions emerge in virtual work settings? How do virtual workers manage and negotiate these tensions? How do responses to these dialectics constrain or enable
processes of organizing? To illustrate how a tensional view may apply in the modern workplace and work to manage a variety of work pressures, this chapter will address these questions in the context of several types of virtual work environments.

**Tensions in Virtual Work Settings**

Due to the rise of global competition and pressure to compete in a global workplace, along with the convergence of new communication technologies that enable interaction across time and space, new non-standard work arrangements such as global teams, telework, and temporary or part-time work are on the rise (Ballard & Gossett, 2007). The infusion of new communication technologies in the workplace means that co-workers are no longer confined to a single physical space such as an office building to conduct their work. Rather, they may work from home or conduct work across geographically dispersed sites, within the same country or internationally. This poses challenges such as scheduling real-time meetings when members are located in different time zones and may not be working during the same time intervals and sharing knowledge across geographical or cultural contexts (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Virtual work settings require more complexity in management and coordination, and are full of tensions. We will now discuss three different virtual work contexts to provide examples of the sorts of tensions that arise and how they may be communicatively managed.

**Global Team Collaboration**

Tensions play a critical role in global organizing. Prior research has found that global teams more loosely coupled (Gibbs, 2006) and global collaboration is characterized by ambiguity and contradiction rather than by clarity and consensus (Gibbs, 2009b). Global teams face more complexity in many ways (Gluesing & Gibson, 2004)
because they are embedded in multiple geographical, temporal, organizational, and cultural contexts. Global organizations may even face differences in organizational culture from region to region, creating tensions between standardization and differentiation in corporate culture (Gibbs, 2009a). Differences in cultural norms, values, structure and policies are likely to lead to conflicting goals, priorities, and processes among global team members that create irresolvable tensions. It may be impossible to create standardized policies regarding salary, bonuses, and other benefits because team members come from units with different structures. For instance, global software teams involved in offshore outsourcing face tensions in evaluating performance of temporary contractors whose project managers may not be subject to the same metrics or procedures for performance appraisals as their permanent managers in other country locations, resulting in their career development being in limbo during their assignments while meanwhile, other employees are promoted back home (Gibbs, 2006). Further, it can be difficult to determine what is fair in terms of bonuses or financial rewards due to different pay structures in different country locations (Gibbs, 2009b; Gibbs & Boyraz, in press).

In an ethnographic study of a global software team in a high-tech organization, Gibbs (2009b) identified several irresolvable tensions arising in global team interaction: autonomy versus connectedness, inclusion versus exclusion, and empowerment versus disempowerment. Global team managers faced a tension between maintaining autonomy in their work while preserving team connectedness caused in part by the unclear dual reporting structure and amorphous team processes. While they worked to preserve unpredictability and detachment in their relationships with foreign assignees, these assignees often pushed for predictability and involvement. Customers faced a dilemma in
negotiating work relationships with assignees who were temporary employees in their teams in terms of including or excluding them. While there were benefits to integrating them into the team and giving them more responsibility, there were also costs to investing too much time and resources into them, since they were eventually going to leave. Finally, tensions arose around perceptions of the foreign assignees as empowered or disempowered, due to pressures to treat them equitably compared to, on one hand, their colleagues back in their home center and, on the other hand, their temporary teammates. The uncertainty and lack of career path they faced while on assignment led to perceptions of marginalization, which clashed with the managers’ perceptions of their assignments as a privilege since it offered career growth and additional benefits. Team members responded to these tensions through several discursive responses, some of which (transcendence) enabled creative attendance to both poles and were thus more productive than others (selection and withdrawal), which constrained team members’ actions. Managers were more likely to draw on productive strategies that enabled them to transcend oppositions and embrace ambiguity, while lower-level assignees were less able to cope with tensions and more constrained by them.

As the above findings indicate, dialectical tensions may be productive in global teams by allowing for irresolvable differences to co-exist. Preserving ambiguity in organizing processes rather than pushing for clarity and uncertainty reduction can be beneficial in allowing for “unified diversity” in which diverse perspectives and interpretations co-exist while members believe they are all in agreement (Eisenberg, 1984). Taking a dialectical view may also present a useful way of managing cultural differences in global or multicultural teams. Gibbs (2009a) proposed a dialectical
framework employing the metaphor of ‘culture as kaleidoscope’ to better conceptualize the complexity of culture in global teams, in which cultural differences may cohere around national, organizational, functional, or other faultlines. Regarding culture as kaleidoscope is a more fluid, dynamic view that regards culture as multi-faceted and constituted through communication. This goes against more traditional ‘corporate culture’ views of culture as unified, strong, integrated, and subject to managerial control (e.g., Schein, 1992). This view reframes cultural differences as dynamic cultural tensions, rather than static polar oppositions. As Gibbs writes, “By reframing cultural differences as dynamic tensions, rather than static oppositions, as they are often regarded in the literature (e.g., Hofstede, 2001, 2005), these differences can be managed more productively and generate creative new solutions rather than leading to conflict and deadlock. Rather than suggesting that cultural differences be minimized or homogenized, this view proposes that they may generate productive intercultural collaboration when different views are in healthy tension with one another” (Gibbs, 2009a, p. 2). This framework is helpful in explaining tensions in national culture, regional differences in organizational culture, and tensions among various micro-organizational identities (e.g., home software center versus temporary project team) that bifurcate employee allegiances in global work arrangements.

**Telework Policies**

Another form of virtual work that has found to be characterized by tensions is telework. Participatory and democratic work structures and practices more broadly have been characterized as fraught with paradoxes and contradictions as they purport to give workers more freedom and voice but often become co-opted as forms of managerial
control (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Similarly with telework, there is often a disconnect between the utopian discourse that emphasizes its personal benefits such as increased flexibility and work-life balance as well as organizational benefits such as cost savings, greater productivity, and environmental impacts and the realities of telework experiences that do not achieve these benefits. For instance, Hylmo and Buzzanell’s (2002) qualitative study of telecommuters reveals that telework is a paradoxical process as teleworkers routinely worked longer hours than in-house employees while being marginalized for their lack of physical presence; in this and other ways, the very systems designed to provide greater autonomy limited their freedom and flexibility.

Even formal policies and guidelines surrounding virtual work, such as telework policies, have been found to be more ambiguous and less clear-cut than might be expected. A qualitative content analysis of a set of 35 U.S. state government’s formal telework policies revealed that they revealed regular contradictions that provided challenges to virtual workers and their employing organizations (Gibbs, Scott, Kim, & Lee, 2010). This study found two key tensions: autonomy versus control and flexibility versus rigidity. The first tension between employee autonomy and employer control was manifested in the framing of telework as a management option rather than an employee choice, the extent to which teleworkers were monitored by the agency versus self-managed, and slippage in whether agencies or individual teleworkers were responsible for provision of equipment and data and physical safety. The tension between flexibility and rigidity was evident through standardized versus ad hoc eligibility criteria and stated guidelines for teleworkers, clear versus ambiguous statement of rules, and the degree to which work and family commitments were explicitly separated versus allowed to blend.
While some policies were quite vague about rules and requirements for teleworkers, other policies attempted to regulate teleworkers’ home and personal lives (by specifying required levels of home maintenance, explicitly prohibiting non-work activities or visitors, and setting requirements for how often to check email) in ways that were more restrictive and controlling than typical traditional work arrangements. Although explicit contradictions between telework benefits and realities may be problematic, most of the policies were found to employ ambiguity productively to allow for individual and organizational interests to co-exist.

**Technology Use**

Virtual workers typically rely heavily on new communication technologies such as email, instant messaging, videoconferencing, smart phones, and social media applications to communicate and collaborate. The use of such technologies has also been associated with work pressures such as increased communication load (or overload) and stress (Barley et al., 2011). Jian (2007) adopts a tensional perspective to explain organizational resistance to ICT implementation, finding that adoption of a new software system brought a variety of organizational tensions into play, which contributed to competing interpretations of the technology, and the reactions to these tensions and interpretations in turn produced resistance behaviors.

Other research on multiple media use among managers and subordinates regards media use as “a contested site of struggle in which conflicting role-based goals play out” (Erhardt & Gibbs, 2012, p. 10). Drawing on rich qualitative data from 91 semi-structured interviews and observations with six project teams in Sweden and the U.S., the authors found that managers and employees engaged in impression management tactics that were
often in dialectical tension with one another as managers and subordinates pursued individual role-related goals while attempting to maintain cooperative working relationships with one another, and that each group drew on different technological affordances to accomplish these often conflicting goals. This work portrays impression management as a dialectical process in which actions by managers often provoked counter actions by subordinates and vice versa, as the actions of each were recursively shaped by one another in dialectical tension. Further, the actor-audience relationship was constantly shifting as was the stage on which impression management tactics took place, which took the form of a variety of media, including face-to-face.

Specifically, Erhardt and Gibbs (2012) identified four sets of inter-related tactics: strategic non-response versus social pressure, single vs. multi-communicating, demonstrating competence to employees versus the manager, and knowledge control versus knowledge access. For instance, managers would often strategically ignore or selectively respond to email (by not responding in a timely fashion or avoiding difficult questions) so as to protect their time and face while attending to the needs of their subordinates. This strategic non-response was met by efforts to exert pressure on them to respond to requests by subordinates through mobilizing multiple media and multiple co-workers to indirectly reinforce the message without being perceived as pushy. At other times, the situation was reversed and subordinates were motivated to protect their time and attend to individual tasks (often in an attempt to maintain work-life balance) while managers pushed them to engage in collaborative work. In the single vs. multicommunicating set of tactics, employees would leverage the invisibility of cues provided by unobtrusive devices such as smart phones and laptops to
‘multicommunicate’ (Stephens, 2012) or attend to multiple communicative activities during meetings by muting the phone while calling in from a child’s soccer game or reading and drafting emails and text messages while appearing present in the conversation. Managers responded by exerting subtle indirect tactics to secure employees’ full engagement and focus in face-to-face meetings.

In the third set of tactics related to demonstrating competence, a tug-of-war over media use was evident as managers preferred the non-traceability and nonverbal cues in face-to-face communication to demonstrate competence to their employees by exerting control over the task at hand and guarding against unanticipated, documented responses that could undermine their credibility. By contrast, subordinates preferred editable and persistent ICTs such as email to strategically demonstrate competence and make themselves more visible to their managers. Other research has also found that ICTs can be used to strategically alter perceptions of expertise; Leonardi and Treem (2012) found that distributed workers often used knowledge-sharing technologies strategically to enhance perceived rather than actual expertise.

Finally, the last set of tactics revealed a tension in sharing versus controlling knowledge. Although both managers and subordinates were motivated to maintain good relationships and save face of themselves and others, this led to managers attempting to restrict the flow of sensitive or confidential information, while subordinates attempted to increase access to it. These counter tactics were productive in enabling both parties to meet conflicting needs while maintaining face with one another. Although managers and subordinates were driven by conflicting goals that created tensions between them, their
communicative management of these tensions ultimately served to keep team interaction in balance by allowing for the accomplishment of both groups’ goals.

In another recent study, Gibbs, Rozaidi and Eisenberg (in press) found that the use of social media by engineers in a distributed high-technology organization was characterized by tensions created by unique affordances that led to strategic use of social media to communicatively manage these tensions. While emerging research on social media use is often characterized by an “ideology of openness” that assumes that social media will increase open communication and knowledge sharing in organizations (and that this is always desirable), Gibbs et al. find that the unique affordances of social media such as visibility, association, persistence, and editability (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) lead to a dialectic of openness versus closedness as distributed workers use social media to both increase and limit knowledge sharing, requiring strategic communication practices designed to preserve both openness and ambiguity. They identified three tensions: visibility vs. invisibility, engagement vs. disengagement, and sharing vs. control.

First, employees relied heavily on Skype chat as a collaborative group-based instant messaging tool to enable remote co-workers to be more available or visible to one another, but also to become more invisible in order to avoid being disturbed. For example, one strategy was for East Coast engineers to “go invisible” on Skype at the end of their work day when they would typically get barraged by questions from the West Coast (where it was still afternoon) in order to limit their availability to others and work undisturbed while still being able to respond to urgent requests at their discretion. This use of ambiguity to maintain good impressions and relationships was also evident in research finding that organizational members engaged in strategic behavior that exploited
ambiguities afforded by media use, such as using shared calendars to indicate availability but not necessarily attendance of meetings and avoiding use of the ‘return receipt’ feature in email in order to retain ambiguity regarding whether the email was read and being ignored or just had not been read yet (Birnholtz, Dixon, & Hancock, 2012).

Second, managers and other engineers would limit their engagement in the many Skype chat windows they used as news feeds or media streams (Ellison & boyd, 2013) to manage the tension between engagement vs. disengagement. Their use of Skype groups allowed them to easily traverse information by scrolling through status updates to see what required their attention. While this provided more immediacy and interactivity than email, attending to the constant updates popping up in open chat windows could be quite time-consuming and disruptive to work. To combat this tension, managers and other employees found ways to simultaneously engage yet disengage, such as quickly scanning conversation threads to monitor project status but limiting their engagement only to issues that required their attention, akin to the “trigger-based engaging” affordance in which notifications provided by social media tools allow participants to monitor discussions and participate only when relevant (Kane, Azad, Majchrzak, & Faraj, 2011). This use of technologies to disengage was also illustrated by Leonardi, Treem, and Jackson (2010), who found that teleworkers engaged in strategic use of technologies to increase (rather than decrease) perceptions of distance in order to counteract the expectation that they would be constantly connected.

Finally, employees faced pressures to both share and control knowledge through social media. While most were quite open to sharing information with their colleagues as needed, they tended to limit what was shared by restricting permission settings to
particular audiences or ‘selective sharing’ of expertise, out of concern for job security as well as confidentiality of data. These findings also illustrate the productive role of dialectical tensions in enabling organizational members to attend to multiple goals.

**Conclusion: Navigating Communicative Tensions in the Modern Workplace**

As this chapter has shown, tensions play a critical role in virtual work contexts in enabling workers to attend to multiple, conflicting goals. The research discussed above highlights the role of tensions between standardization and flexibility and between autonomy and connectedness in virtual work arrangements such as global teams and telework, as well as in management of time, attention, and information load in technology-mediated work settings. These findings highlight the fact that virtual workers (as well as organizational members more broadly) often struggle with workplace pressures / tensions due to the need to manage multiple, sometimes conflicting goals. There may be tensions between various role-based members (e.g., managers versus subordinates) as well as tensions among individual goals (e.g., autonomy versus connectedness). Communication practices play a significant role in managing tensions, as members make strategic choices about how to respond to them. While tensions may be productive or detrimental, this chapter has focused particularly on the productive role of tensions in enabling organizing processes, as they hold together “necessary incompatibles” (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004) and maintain flexibility and balance among opposing goals that does not force a resolution of oppositions. These findings also call attention to the ways in which ambiguity plays a positive role in organizing processes, by allowing for conflicting goals and interests to co-exist and maintaining positive impressions and relationships.
Virtual work contexts are a key feature of the modern workplace. Understanding their tensional nature and the communicative responses to such tensions has practical implications for managers and other organizational members who face work pressures such as information overload, stress and burnout, the struggle to maintain work-life balance, and pressures for constant connectivity through smartphones and other mobile technologies (e.g., Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2005), and can help them cope with such pressures. While it may be impossible to resolve or eliminate such tensions, employees do engage in strategic behavior to respond to such tensions in a way that enables them to meet complex and competing needs and maintain balance among them. As work arrangements become more distributed and new technologies such as social media become more prevalent in organizations, it will become more important to learn to manage these tensions in productive ways.
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