

SYMBOLIC INNOVATIONS

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**Lessons from health services
and higher education organizations**

J. David Johnson



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*Symbolic innovations:
Lessons from health services and higher education organizations*

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DEDICATION

*To those who try to do the right thing,
often in the face of substantial obstacles.*

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PREFACE

I have served in a number of management roles over the course of my work life – noncommissioned officer in charge of a supply and services division of a hospital, warehouse supervisor, department chair, and dean of an academic college. Naively in the latter roles I have often assumed that what was important was to do a very good job of fulfilling the basic missions of my units (e.g., teaching, research). However, I have often discovered that what was truly valued was not the cake, but the icing. Colleges and departments are often rewarded for doing the trendy and flashy, as the recent fashionable efforts related to Massively Open Online Courses demonstrate all too clearly. Innovations signal many things symbolically to external stakeholders: you are on the cutting edge; you are the future; you are worthy of investment; you can respond to competitive pressures; you are attuned to a larger world; and so on. So, ultimately, it is not the work you do, but what your efforts stand for symbolically that is critical.

As a Dean at the University of Kentucky I was involved to various degrees in three of the case studies we focus on here. Since my college had a strategic emphasis on health communication and informatics I attempted, with little success because of medical exceptionalism and bureaucratic turf wars, to secure our involvement in the electronic medical records and health information exchange efforts of our Commonwealth. In this book I update an earlier book chapter that focused on profiling the likelihood of adoption of electronic medical records before Obamacare (Johnson, 2009).

Since our college was responsible for 10 per cent of the undergraduates at UK and one of two colleges that offered required courses in the undergraduate studies curriculum I was often appointed to task forces that focused on undergraduate retention (e.g., Wharton group, First Year Task Force). During this time period our college generated a substantial ‘profit’ from grants and undergraduate enrollment, but because of an antiquated budgeting system benefited little from the fruits of our labor. This led me to be a member

of the 'Gang of Four' who served as champions of responsibility centered management. Finally, I taught graduate seminars in innovation that often used the work of various Provosts as contemporary examples of symbolic innovation at work.

I have also had the good fortune to be an active researcher who focused on innovation processes in several organizations. Most notably I have followed a number of innovations in a large state government agency and in a unique virtual organization, the Cancer Information Services Research Consortium. In my book *Innovation and Knowledge Management: The Cancer Information Service Research Consortium* I detail the efforts to create an innovation factory in the Cancer Information Service. In a latter chapter I condense some of the findings of this research program to highlight its lessons for symbolic innovation. This research and my concomitant adventures in academic administration have suggested that a broader view is necessary to truly understand innovations and their uses.

Here we will explore symbolic innovations comprehensively. Studying them provides a more thorough view of innovation processes and the underlying factors that motivate, generate them. Looking at innovations as symbols in some ways is like dark matter in physics in that it explains what is happening on the surface that would be inexplicable if one only focused on the bright side, the overtly acceptable motivations for being innovative (e.g., improved work performance, progress). In many ways they are the missing piece of the puzzle.

This book is intended for two primary audiences. First, it could be used by practitioners and policy makers whose everyday work is often focused on innovation. Second, the book is intended for a scholarly audience in that it provides an alternative viewpoint on innovation and could be used as a supplement for many of the courses that focus on innovation processes.

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I would like to thank the members of the various organizations in which I have conducted innovation research and beg the forgiveness of those who have often served as pawns in the larger games of innovations in the organizations in which I worked as a middle manager. John Thelin, the prominent historian of higher education, provided me with some early guidance on innovation in universities. Jeff Huber reviewed an earlier draft of the case study that focused on responsibility centered management. Jim Andrews provided me with some background information on recent developments in electronic medical records.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Organizations can substitute symbols for action. This is often the case for symbolic participation in innovations not because they are necessarily needed or desirable, but because they demonstrate to external stakeholders that you are riding the wave of current trends. This is particularly true of information technology and the current fascination of universities with distance learning programs (J. D. Johnson, 2013, pp. 136).

Organizations are often rewarded for doing the trendy and flashy, as the recent fashionable university efforts related to Massively Open Online Course's demonstrate all too clearly. Innovations demonstrate many things symbolically to external stakeholders: you are on the cutting edge, you are the future, you are worthy of investment, you can respond to competitive pressures, you are attuned to a larger world, and so on. Ultimately, unfortunately, it is often not the work you do, but what your efforts stand for symbolically that is critical to evaluations of work performance.

Here we will explore symbolic innovations comprehensively. Examining them provides a more thorough view of innovation and the underlying factors that motivate, generate them. Looking at innovations as symbols in some ways is like a focus on dark matter in physics: it explains what is happening on the surface that would be inexplicable if one only focused on the bright side, the overtly acceptable motivations for being innovative (e.g., improved work performance, progress). Studying symbolic organizations provides a more holistic view of why organizations pursue innovations: in many ways they are the missing piece of the puzzle.

IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATIONS

“You will either fail or succeed. If you succeed, you will not be much better off than if you hadn’t done anything, but, if you fail, you lose, you are out” (a manager describing innovation in the plastic industry quoted in Dougherty & Hardy, 1996, pp. 1143).

Innovation, by contrast, has always been, and often still is, regarded as something so uncertain that the best a company can do is put sufficient resources into it and then hope for the best (Boer & During, 2001, pp. 85).

The importance of innovation is reflected in the literally thousands of articles and books written on the topic. Ultimately the success of most organizations depends on their capacity to innovate, to turn new ideas into competitive advantage. However, it has also become increasingly clear that innovation is a perilous enterprise both for organizations and the individuals within them. Schumpeter (1943) long ago trumpeted the importance of creative destruction for capitalist economies and more recently Clayton Christensen (1997) has detailed the impact of disruptive innovations on companies. While customers often want to do business with innovative companies, they do not want to bear the risks innovations often entail (Samson, 2010). We also increasingly realize that early adoption can be risky and, at the very least, it is sometimes cheaper to wait to adopt innovations. Innovation is an inherently risky enterprise with difficulty in forecasting end-results and a tendency for organizations that have been successful at it to ossify, not realizing that they are living off the fruits of past efforts that inevitably took a long time to produce returns (Drucker, 1954).

Kanter (1988b) discussed the subjective nature of perceptions of innovation outcomes by exploring the phenomenon of pro-innovation bias (E. M. Rogers, 1983). She made the point that most research about organizational innovation is characterized by an implicit assumption that innovation is a good thing. According to Van de Ven, “... innovation is often viewed as a good thing because the new idea must be useful—profitable, constructive, or solve a problem. New ideas that are not perceived as useful are not normally called innovations: they are usually called mistakes” (1986, pp. 592). There are also real organizational costs to innovations: wasting resources on inappropriate technology, constant uncertainty resulting from perpetual change, lowered

morale from unsuccessful adoption efforts, to name but a few. Resources devoted to symbolic innovations are often diverted away from the core goals of an organization (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

One of the most interesting problems for innovators is their high failure rate, with estimates that would be truly discouraging for most rational individuals. Even if successful, innovation can often take decades to mature to become commercial and/or financial successes (Kanter, 1988b). Sometimes whole careers, professions, and even organizations are wiped away by technological change. In spite of cultures that supposedly encouraged innovation even in the face of failure, investigators in the Minnesota Innovation Research Program found no example of someone who was an internal corporate entrepreneur that had a failure being given the opportunity to manage another innovation (Angle & Van de Ven, 2000; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkatraman, 1999).

So why do people persist in this folly? One obvious answer is that they have no other choice, that one must constantly adapt to ever accelerating change in the world around us. But there is also another answer, individual innovations are not the point, we are focusing on the figure rather than the ground that surrounds it. Innovations often serve larger, or at the very least different, purposes for their advocates. Western culture values progress, especially through the application of technology, and most of the innovation literature shares this pro-innovation bias (Abrahamson, 1991b; E. M. Rogers, 1995). People's lives are often intertwined with ideas and there are numerous social interests attached to them so we often innovate as a means to other ends, not as an end in and of itself.

WHAT KINDS/TYPES?

Innovation can involve many things: (1) a product or service; (2) a production process; (3) organizational structure; (4) people; and (5) policy (Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbek, 1973). Most of us focus on the first of these types of innovation, particularly new products. Generally people have categorized innovations by their inherent properties or by their functional purposes, but seldom have they been categorized by how they serve larger purposes or are means to ends rather than ends in and of themselves. The latter innovations often have longer lasting impacts on organization, at times turning them into innovation factories, as we will detail in Chapter 3, who exist to produce new

products and/or services. In the case studies we will focus on later we will highlight a range of different purposes for innovations ranging from appeasing external stakeholders to padding one's resume with acronyms you have brought to fruition.

Before we embark on our study of innovations as symbols some critical distinctions must be made. There are at the least three different processes at work when most people think of innovation: creativity, the transfer (diffusion, dissemination) of ideas, and implementation (J. D. Johnson, 2005). Creativity refers to the capacity to produce new ideas, with the additional implication in organizations that they must be of value in some way (Agrell & Gustafson, 1996). We can also distinguish between creative processes and creative results, with innovations usually reflecting the latter, with the move to process also resulting in a focus on social, sense making factors implicit in modern approaches to creativity (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999). Invention implies a creative process that suggests bringing something new into being, although some question whether this is really possible, if there is really anything new under the sun (R. S. Burt, 2004, 2005). For management creativity may be less of a critical issue than insuring good ideas, regardless of their novelty, are successfully implemented. Innovation, on the other hand, implies bringing something perceived as new into use in a differing context (E. M. Rogers, 1995). This perspective, then, highlights the process of transfer and ultimately the implementation of innovations in their new contexts.

Formally generated innovations are ones originating in upper management, using the traditional authority structure as the primary impetus underlying adoption. This is a unique feature of innovation within organizations, an entity of higher status and authority can decide to adopt an innovation that another segment of the organization must implement. This facilitates the process of decoupling institutional myths of the organization's environment from the actual practices of an organization (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In organizations the former unit has been termed the adoption unit and the process as a whole has been called authority innovation decision (E. M. Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Often people left to implement innovations chosen by others will ask the question of what is in it for them? The answer to this question may result in actions ranging from resistance to ironic appropriation to enthusiastic support and raises the questions of why should we go along?

WHY INNOVATE?

Innovations are not only adopted, implemented, and confirmed through social relations among people; they are also created, understood, and defined socially (J. W. Dearing, Meyer, & Kazmierczak, 1994, p. 17).

In effect, people are more motivated to *look* good than to *be* good (Angle & Van de Ven, 2000, pp. 688, italics in original).

The rhetoric – and reality – is that in haute cuisine restaurants like La Pomme de Terre, as in art worlds generally, expectations demand innovations (Fine, 1996, pp. 104).

Decisions about innovations are made partly on the basis of desirable status or image; the innovation is a means to achieve status or image (J. W. Dearing & Kreuter, 2010, pp. s102).

Dearing and Kreuter go on to suggest that the norms of an individual's reference group (e.g., profession, community of practice) are critical to adoption and can outweigh carefully reasoned judgments of an innovation's efficacy. In fact, the functionality of an innovation is only one criteria that might lead to adoption and, often, not the most important one. Certainly some innovations can result in improved work performance and enhanced skills/capabilities, but often, as in the case of technological innovations, at the cost of considerable training and experimentation. A focus on symbolic innovations draws us to the more intangible benefits of innovations in terms of: prestige, status, and one's own career advancement. Recognition from one's peers and from one's organization has been found to be much more motivating than financial incentives in encouraging innovative behaviors (Angle, 2000).

There is an increasing tendency to suggest that individuals and groups are not only shaped by context, the classic approach of contingency and situational perspectives, but can in turn shape contexts (Giddens, 1991; Gresov & Stephens, 1993), if only by how they activate and interpret them (Baker & Pettigrew, 1999). Innovations can be game changers, making the world around you a place where you are more comfortable and have a better

mix of skills. Perhaps the most interesting and demanding case of individual interest in changing the world around you is through understanding contextualism, shaping your surrounding context so that it better fits your own set of capabilities. So, Mike Pacanowsky came into the heavily quantitative world of Michigan State University's communication program with a background in creative writing and English. After receiving his M.A. at MSU, he left for Stanford for his Ph.D. Within five years he was instrumental in changing the emphasis in organizational communication from the quantitatively oriented climate and network analysis approaches (Jablin, 1980) to a focus on culture (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell Trujillo, 1982; L. L. Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983).

Because innovation is a social process often one's standing and reputation are more important drivers of innovation than other factors. Frequently organizational members are silent when they have ideas because of real or imagined social pressures. Socially connected members of heterogeneous groups may be more likely to self-censor their contributions than are socially isolated members, with surprisingly low proportions of good ideas followed through by managers who have them (R. S. Burt, 2004, 2005). Processes of self-censorship, especially when one does not hold strong views, are often coupled with false consensus effects, the projection on to others of similar perspectives to one's own, that further impede convergence to commonly held underlying attitudes (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). An interesting twist to these arguments is that a prominent person may be even more compelled to adopt normative innovations because they want to remain prominent (R. S. Burt, 1980). Because of the pressures to uniformity resulting from these processes, often peripheral members of organizational networks have the most creative (or at the very least different) perspectives (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), especially when this is coupled with ties outside of a social system (Perry-Smith, 2006).

The classic scenario for facilitating the adoption of innovations painted in the literature is: (1) identify the opinion leaders of a system; (2) expose them to sources of information they value; (3) increase the prestige value of the innovation; and (4) reduce risks associated with adoption (Becker, 1970) often through decoupling it from actual implementation (Bromley & Powell, 2012). It has been argued that motivations of adopters change at different stages of the innovation process with early adopters more concerned with efficiency and technical gains and later adopters more concerned with social gains and seeking legitimacy (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009). While the innovation

literature has traditionally emphasized efficiency gains (J. W. Dearing, 2008), engaging in innovative behaviors not only depends on their impact on performance, but also on how it contributes to an employee's image in the workplace (Yuan & Woodman, 2010).

The degree to which an innovation is seen as reducing external threats influences the speed of its adoption (Bradley et al., 2004). Often in 'adoption by mandate' situations (e.g., instituting new safety regulations from a government agency), organizations emphasize and inform employers of change required by law, while taking few concrete steps to meaningfully implement them (E. Hoffman & Roman, 1984) a classic example of the decoupling detailed in institutional theory (Wijen, 2014).

Individuals often adopt innovations in the hope it will put others at competitive disadvantages, something Ron Burt has articulated in his broader conception of the motivations individuals have for bridging structural holes (R. S. Burt, 2004). This entails an individual will adopt an innovation when a structurally similar alter does so even if they are not in direct communication contact. In fact, true competitors may have a vested interest in blocking the flow of information related to an innovation to maintain their competitive advantages, something seldom mentioned in the more normatively minded diffusion literature.

Perceived risk of losing one's status plays a critical role in innovations. Reducing uncertainty is central to processes of innovation within organizations (Fidler & Johnson, 1984). Compensation schemes that tolerate early failures while rewarding long-term success are more likely to encourage innovation (Samson, 2010). Uncertainty is a function of the number of alternatives (complexity), the risks associated with them, and the extent to which an individual can be sure of the alternatives (J. D. Johnson, 1990). Overcoming perceptions of risk is crucial to inducing the level of involvement needed for successful innovation (Bennis, 1965), since cooperative norms are often essential to the implementation of innovations (Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

At times the results of innovations are not easily visible, have a delayed impact, or only become apparent when there is failure of some sort. Users must in these circumstances often base their judgments on whether to adopt an innovation on trust, particularly in institutions (Sapp & Korsching, 2004), or by invoking an underlying value systems for which appeals to symbols are particularly important.

The reduction of uncertainty inherent in communication can decrease resistance to innovations, but usually decision units also must exert some

degree of power and influence to facilitate implementation. The various types of power used to overcome resistance to innovations are crucial in determining the success of innovative processes generally, since acceptance can be hindered through both passive and active resistance (Zaltman et al., 1973). While incentives may be helpful in increasing the relative advantage of particular innovations, their impact is seldom long-lasting and may lead to quick deadoption when they are removed (E. M. Rogers, 1983). Often in the case of symbolic innovations power and influence do not need to be overtly manipulated. So, in the case of referent power, people will adopt innovations because those they wish to emulate those of higher status. Often innovations are adopted simply because they provide legitimacy within a particular organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In summary, there are a range of motivations for innovation beyond classic concerns for improving productivity and efficiency. To name a few: to remain competitive (A. D. Meyer & Goes, 1988); to prevent malpractice liability suits (A. D. Meyer & Goes, 1988); to meet public expectations of what is an appropriate standard of care (Brenner & Logan, 1980; J. D. Johnson, 2005); to be strategic (A. D. Meyer & Goes, 1988); to attract the most talented people (Samson, 2010); and to assert cultural control, hegemony.

SYMBOLS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Gathering information and making decisions are signals and symbols of competence (March, 1994, pp. 226).

The ability to use symbols enables human beings to imagine, to select, to create, and to define the situations to which they respond (Gusfield, 1989, pp. 8).

Managers manipulate symbols every day of their organizational lives in the routine of managing. They may not, however, understand the potential such symbols have for handling the complexity of strategic change (G. Johnson, 1990, pp. 195).

A strong version of the relationship between human action and symbolism is that all human behavior stands for something or another while a weaker version, more in line with our arguments here, suggests that any

action not immediately explainable as rational response could be said to stand for or symbolize something else (Jarvie, 1976). In some ways there has been an overemphasis on facts and rationality in decision making related to innovations in part because of the personal predispositions of scientists and researchers; so we confuse “*rational* decision making with the reality of politically and institutionally constrained *sensible* decision making (Lomas, 2009, pp. xiii, italics in original).”

Organizations have been viewed traditionally as symbol manipulating enterprises with more recent movements in organizational communication towards emphasizing the importance of discourse in constituting organizational cultures. The organizational symbolism approach to organizational culture defines organizations as patterns of symbolic discourse that are maintained through symbolic modes, particularly those embedded in linguistic systems. The symbolic frame focuses on narrative, especially stories, to signal responsibility and negotiate meanings (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Although more recently some have suggested it may be time to restore the balance between the material world of the organization and the symbolic one (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009).

While Schon and Rein (1994) recognize that reliable communication may at times deepen disputes when parties truly understand the disparity of their positions, it is still a critical condition for further inquiry that may be the only hope of adjustments and the convergence of factors needed for successful innovation implementation. Too often managers do not listen to ‘back talk,’ assuming that individuals are willfully denying their arguments (they just don’t understand), nor the value of a cutting edge innovation. Thus, a failure to engage each other in dialogue may ultimately be a denial of the pluralistic world of the contemporary organization which is often splintered into different functional groupings and ‘occupational communities’ (J. D. Johnson, 1993).

As Burke has argued humans are symbol using animals coining the term logology to describe the relationship between language and meaning, words about words (Gusfield, 1989). Instrumental meanings refer to the manifest, explicit understandings conventionally understood, while symbolic ones exist in a context and connote understandings unique to that situation. To Burke symbolic action referred to the multiple levels of meaning associated with human activities which then became the frameworks for action and dialectic referred to in the transformation of meanings involved in change (Gusfield, 1989). Fundamentally Burke saw rhetoric as rooted in language and the use of symbols to achieve cooperative action (Shapiro & Schall, 1990).

Change is often assumed to be an ideational process implicating awareness, attitudes and beliefs. As a result, social influence is critical to understanding the underlying dynamics and mechanisms of change (McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003). The western pro innovation bias has frequently been linked to larger cultural values of progress (E. M. Rogers, 2003). Often developing societies feel compelled to adopt innovations because this represents symbolically their adherence to a larger cultural hegemony. The manipulation of the symbolic elements of an innovation is often fundamental to assessments of compatibility which may be the most important attribute of any innovation for its adoption, diffusion, and implementation.

Innovations are often not as tangible, concrete as we would like them to be. Symbolic actions are most effective under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Administrative innovations are inherently symbolic since by and large they involve verbiage and are subject to intense, politically charged negotiations (Van de Ven, Angle, & Poole, 2000). It is difficult to assess the quality of non-profit services, making agencies responsiveness to stakeholders even more important as an indicator of success (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001).

Defining Symbolic

Every symbol stands for something other than itself, and it also evokes an attitude, a set of impressions, or a pattern of events associated through time, through space, through logic, or through imagination with the symbol (Edelman, 1964, pp. 6).

A symbol is, thus, any thing, event or phenomenon to which meaning is attributed by members in their attempt to comprehend the social fabric within which they are enmeshed, and which therefore expresses the character of the organization, stimulates an emotional response and conditions action (A. D. Brown, 1994, pp. 862–863).

To the degree that innovations convey meanings that differ from their ostensible purpose, the innovations have a *symbolic aspect*. The meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the fact, object, or behavior, but is derived from the understanding by a group as to what the fact, object, or behavior represents (Everhart & Doyle, pp. 68, italics in original).

Everhart and Doyle go on to distinguish between ceremonial innovations where the symbolism is more important than their manifestly intended behaviors and non-ceremonial ones that have consonance between meaning systems and manifest behaviors. The essential idea underlying symbols is that they stand for something else which is consistent with most scholarly definitions (Byron & Laurence, 2015); with "... the relation between them normally being from the concrete to the abstract, particular to general" (Firth, 1973, pp. 15). They become a concrete indication of more abstract values often with some end in view so that symbols often have some instrumental value (Firth, 1973). For symbolic innovations the focus is not on the innovation *qua* innovation, but what the innovation entails.

Classic dictionary definitions of symbol also point to some important characteristics of symbolic innovations. "1. Something that stands for, represents, or suggests, another thing ... From the Greek *symbolon* token, pledge, sign by which one infers a thing." (Merriam-Webster, 2004). "Something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, esp. a material object used to represent something invisible" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1976). For our purposes perhaps the Greek root of the word is the most important. Studying symbols allows us to draw inferences about other phenomenon, perhaps ones of greater permanence and importance. So, in its simplest expression, a symbolic innovation then is one that stands for something else. "A symbol ... conveys socially constructed meanings beyond its intrinsic content or obvious function use ..." (Zott & Huy, 2007, pp. 72). So, one adopts a technological innovation to demonstrate that one is 'with it'; that it has other advantages adds to its worth, but the primary benefit is the symbolic one, an increase in one's standing in a social system. Innovations, then, become one of many potential ways of signaling to others who you are, what you stand for, what values you adhere to, and there is often an emotional charge inherent in their application (Firth, 1973).

Other Uses of Symbolic Innovations

Political forms thus come to symbolize what large masses of men need to believe about the state to reassure themselves (Edelman, 1964, pp. 2).

Our use of symbolic innovations here is somewhat unique. Others have attached a different connotation to the term. Symbolic innovations may be

the very essence of creative industries (e.g., the arts, music) (Mile & Green, 2008). In rural sociology symbolic adoption of innovations has often been used to refer to what more classically has been described as a predisposition to be favorable to adoption or an intent to adopt (Sapp & Korsching, 2004). So, in principle, assuming other qualities of the innovations itself are appropriate, somebody might be inclined to adopt an innovation and therefore mentally have symbolically adopted innovation in their cognitive structures. The symbolic adoption occurs when somebody has reached the end process of the evaluation of an innovation that results from conversations with opinion leaders that develop a favorable attitude towards it and thus an inclination to adopt, other things being equal.

Marketers and advertisers have been especially interested in symbolic innovations and their linkages to consumer behavior (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Pandya & Venkatesh, 1992). “*People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean*” (Levy, 1959, pp. 118, italics in original). “Symbolic innovations are products, services, attributes, or ideas that have new social meaning” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2009, pp. 419). Symbols are appropriate when they reinforce what a consumer thinks about themselves and how they might be distinguished from others (Levy, 1959). People buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean (Hirschman, 1986; Tomaseti, Sicilia, & Ruiz, 2013). Clothing especially signals to others membership in a particular social grouping (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2009). One of the more interesting findings in this literature is that the functional features of a product and its symbolic aspects (e.g., platform shoes), especially for referent groups, do not necessarily interact (Tomaseti et al., 2013).

Physical factors often have symbolic value for organizations and those who interact within them (Steele, 1973). Increasingly organizations are using corporate architecture to define themselves to the public (and to their own members). So, McDonald franchises have a unique architecture that can easily be identified by potential customers. Perhaps even more importantly for organizational members is that their placement in physical space and their surroundings send important information to others about their standing in the corporation. Classically, higher status members may have corner offices, with more windows, more square footage, and appropriate design features. Entrepreneurs who pay attention to the symbolic meanings of their office décor are more successful than those who don’t (Zott & Huy, 2007). Symbolic representations of self (e.g., family pictures, diplomas) are often used to personalize office spaces (Byron & Laurence, 2015).

Related Terms

Symbolic innovations are also closely linked to some other key organizational terms.

Identification, Commitment. Symbols are powerful when they make it possible for people to identify with each other (Duncan, 1962). Identification and commitment have been argued to be accomplished via socially constructed symbolic processes that are especially important during times of disruptive organizational changes (Larkey & Morrill, 1995). It has been argued that an individual need for affiliation and identification will impact the level of anxiety they feel towards an organizational change (V. D. Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994). Identification itself is often determined by the manipulation of symbols and one's adherence to them in strong organizational cultures. In many circumstances an individual advocating or supporting an innovation is more about expressing fealty, than necessarily supporting the innovation itself for its own inherent worth.

Status. "The status motivations for adopting innovations have been understudied in past diffusion research" (E. M. Rogers, 1995, pp. 214). Often coalitions of organizations develop standards that they impose on other organizations (e.g., ISO, accreditation) who wish to join them (Wejnert, 2002). In the presence of uncertain environments and ambiguous goals organizations are more likely to model themselves after organizations that are perceived to be successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In adopting public policy states will sometimes use another state's reputation for innovativeness as a signal they do not have to engage in deeper research or thinking about the long-term consequences of adoption. High salience, low complexity policies are more likely to be widely adopted (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009). Since the advantages and prospects of an innovation are often unclear, social pressures can result in over adoption which often means that inappropriate innovations are taken up because they are status conferring (E. M. Rogers, 1983).

Symbols also come to represent ones standing in the social order (Firth, 1973). For individuals normative innovations will be quickly adopted when others who are structurally equivalent have already done so (R. S. Burt, 1980). People may resist change because of misunderstandings and fears of poor outcomes (Dent & Goldberg, 1999); both of these issues can be dealt with by close observation and emulation of successful peers in a near institutional framework. Those of low status in an organization may push forward innovations that are destatusing that diminish the standing of others while

increasing their own. So, adoption of new medical technologies can transfer status from older practitioners to newer ones (Burkhardt & Brass, 1990).

Image. Most people care more about their self-esteem and image than they care about products, divorcing the two is often critical to the process of selling new products, there is an almost an infinite array of innovations that could satisfy the former concerns (Cohen & March, 1986). For example, a classic marketing problem came early in the introduction of highly processed foods. Cake mixes that were totally self-contained didn't sell as well as those which required consumers to crack an egg. The latter mixes gave the consumer the feel that they were still 'cooking' and thereby fulfilling the cultural ideal of a caring mother.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This chapter and the next one that specifies levels of innovation processes provide the foundation which we will apply to much more detailed explorations of case studies that focus on one or another aspect of symbolic innovations. In this chapter we focused on defining symbolic innovations and the general role of innovations in organizations. The next chapter turns to the issue of levels which is particularly important for innovation processes. There we argue that three levels are essential to understanding innovations: framing, the internal environment of the organization, and the attributes of the innovation itself.

The next four chapters focus on innovations in higher educational and health care settings. These organizations are in highly fragmented fields that are moderately centralized (e.g., medicare, accrediting bodies) where stakeholders are more likely to impose conflicting institutional demands (Pache & Santos, 2010). They are also relatively opaque fields where observers have difficulty establishing causal relationships between policies and outcomes, have difficulty identifying the nature of prevailing practices, and measuring results (Wijen, 2014).

Cohen and March (1986) referred to universities as organized anarchies, health care organizations are somewhat similar, characterized by problematic goals, unclear technologies, and fluid participation of different professions. In these symbolic frames goals and information are often unclear or ambiguous, cause-effect relationships are poorly understood, and there is cultural diversity (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Organizations have increasingly realized that it is not one innovation that matters, but rather setting up the structure in which multiple innovations can be generated over time. The first case study details the development of one such innovation factory in the public sector: the Cancer Information Services Research Consortium. The next case study chapter focuses on a sweeping organizational change that bundles many separate innovations, responsibility centered management, and its torturous history at the University of Kentucky, contrasting it with its implementation at Ohio State University. The following case study, also focusing on the University of Kentucky as an exemplar of higher education institutions, focuses on the critical issue of student retention which is in some ways a nationwide scandal. Only a very small proportion of undergraduates who start out seeking a four-year degree actually complete one. The press of individual motivations of administrators focuses our attention on short-term solutions to what are often long-term structural problems, as this case study details. The final case study focuses on one aspect of the sweeping national changes involved in what is popularly known as Obamacare. It is commonplace for organizations to turn to technology as the solution to almost any problem. Here we focus on electronic health records and their role in the dramatic changes affecting our health care system.

The final chapter summarizes the book by raising some longer-term issues. What is success? What are the ethical concerns raised by symbolic innovation? How do they relate to the individual interests of the various parties involved in innovation processes? Finally, we contrast the traditional view of innovations focusing on real change with the more holistic view that an understanding of symbolic innovations suggests.

CHAPTER 2

LEVELS

To maintain ceremonial conformity, organizations that reflect institutional rules tend to buffer their formal structures from uncertainties of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pp. 341).

The acknowledgement that some organizational symbols dramatically reflect historical events and sustain myths perpetuated by environmental actors should not obscure other symbols that are robust mechanisms generating commitment to future courses of action (A. D. Meyer, 1984, pp. 16).

I have previously suggested that successful implementation of innovations depends on positive weightings of three distinct factors: framing, innovation environment, and innovation attributes (J. D. Johnson, 2000, 2001, 2005). Framing refers to the couching of an innovation in terms of the political and strategic imperatives of the organization often with explicit references to larger cultural values. The innovation environment refers to the internal tactical environment (for example the presence of enabling information technologies) which rests on such processes as teamwork and organizational climate. Innovation attributes refers to the characteristics of the innovation *qua* innovation such as complexity. Not only must an innovation meet certain criteria in terms of its qualities, but it also must be acceptable, both in a social equity and moral sense, in the larger social milieu that a user finds themselves in (Sapp & Korsching, 2004). How these levels interact is the major driver of innovation success. Neither framing, environment, nor attributes are sufficient by themselves to ensure unequivocal success, although they may lead to partial ones.

Each level has been the focus of an ever expanding literature, but partially because of their differing epistemological and methodological approaches,

the interactions between them are seldom specifically addressed, although it offers considerable promise for more holistic view of innovation processes (Drazin et al., 1999; Fiol, 1996; Kanter, 1988a; Klein & Sorra, 1996; Klein, Tosi, & Cannella, 1999). Different levels assign different meaning and causal functions to innovations (A. D. Meyer & Goes, 1988).

Not only are these factors at different levels of abstraction (Rousseau, 1985), they are also related to different hierarchical management levels, with attendant differential access to power. Framing is often a tactic used by top-level managers; although others can evoke it too in their persuasive appeals and issue selling to top management (Dutton, Ashford, O'neill, & Lawrence, 2001) and external stakeholders. The internal innovation environment is normally the province of middle managers, while innovation attributes are primarily an operational concern of those actually charged with implementation. This creates substantial problems for internal dialogue within an organization since key groups are using a different vocabulary, sets of assumptions (Drazin et al., 1999; J. D. Johnson, 2000), as well as different concerns related to outcomes.

A fundamental problem associated with the different factors, then, is that each entails considerably different ways of viewing, interpreting, and discussing innovations. As the parties involved in the innovation become associated with the different factors, their possibilities of engaging in a dialogue on the same ground diminish. If one of the three factors predominates, without addressing issues inherent in the other two, then major distortions may occur in the innovation process. For example, workers have a tendency to view innovations in terms of their operational attributes; valuing their impacts on their routine work and resulting enhancements in their effectiveness and sense of self-actualization. On the other hand, upper management may value an innovation for its ability to directly address the needs of major, external stakeholders. They seek innovations that provide an image of a cutting edge and prestigious organization.

Management's most important role in these perspectives is as a stimulus or cue to action. They must define the most important issues that an organization needs to face. The classic diffusion of innovation paradigm assumes the purpose of innovation is adoption of a more effective practice that will improve institutional efficiency (J. W. Dearing & Kreuter, 2010), the efficient choice perspective, but often the primary purpose of participating in innovation is symbolic – a demonstration that you are forward looking and modern, willing to jump on whatever bandwagon may be rolling by

(Abrahamson, 1991a; Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993). This results in the paradox of widespread adoption, but less effective implementation associated with symbolic appropriation processes.

FRAMING

We see policy positions as resting on underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation, which we call 'frames.' ... the frames that shape policy positions and underlie controversy are usually tacit, which means they are exempt from conscious attention and reasoning (Schon & Rein, 1994, p. 23).

Innovation, in order to find support among the organizational elites, must be perceived as essentially conservative. That is, the innovation must be presented in such a way, cloaked in appropriate symbolism, that it appears to fit into the predictability of the elite mind-sets (Kelley, 1976, pp. 68).

Some organizations generally desire change, whereas others may desire the appearance of change without any change at all (Sternberg, 1995, pp. 231).

The concept of frames is most commonly used to indicate a way of viewing the world and interpreting it, acting as a sense-making device that establishes the parameters of a problem (J. D. Johnson, 1997b). Frames have traditionally received some attention in organizational communication theory and this concept has a long history in the social sciences, more generally (J. D. Johnson, 1997a, 1997b). Since innovation is inherently uncertain, how it is framed is often critical (Kanter, 1988b). Frames perform many critical functions for interactants: they are shared conversational resources, they provide a common emotional tone, they insure quicker responses, and they also provide a basis for temporal stability by insuring more continuous responses. In short, frames are a basis for coordinated action in collectivities, since cooperation requires a 'reading' of the other's actions and intentions (J. D. Johnson, 1997a, 1997b). This is especially important given the essentially social nature of many innovation processes.

Framing and Power

An organization should also be less likely to adopt value-subverting innovations when it is relatively independent from external resource pressures (Kraatz, Ventresca, & Deng, 2010, pp. 1528).

It turns out that the imposition of a concept by fiat can easily result in a workplace that looks ‘creative’ but works terribly (Saval, 2014, pp. 296).

Kraatz et al., in their study of enrollment management programs (EM) at private liberal arts colleges, observed that they were often stalking horses for the adoption of a more business oriented set of values and often resisted as such by traditional academics. Interestingly middle status colleges and those with more competitors were more likely to adopt EM, while those with “... powerful internal value guardians, experienced leadership, and significant autonomy from its resource environment” (pp. 1540) were less so.

Innovation orchestrators manipulate information, control resources, set agenda, acquire power bases, and frame decision premises to promote the political capital that they have invested in a given innovation (Frost & Egri, 1991). Often, for symbolic innovations, the focus is on how innovations are framed in terms of the expectations of key external stakeholders (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Satisfying these external stakeholders is critical to the flow of resources in large public sector organizations, where new investments often depend on the matching of the institutions efforts with new political initiatives.

Often environmental ‘jolts’ associated with organizational stakeholders are necessary to stimulate innovations (A. A. Marcus & Weber, 1989) and they can also result in forced selection of innovations by regulatory agencies and others who have the power to impose their will on organizations (Abrahamson, 1991a). But, as the world has become more complex, so has, perhaps inevitably, the internal environments of organizations. So organizations find themselves with stakeholders who have different visions of the organization and, perhaps relatedly, organizational members who mirror these divergent outside interests. Organizations can have a range of responses to these stakeholders: acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation. At times the conflicting demands, especially related to the ultimate goals of the organization, of stakeholders and insiders can result in organizational paralysis and even dismemberment (Pache & Santos, 2010).

In institutional frameworks rules can take on a mythic quality and adherence to them becomes a means of gaining legitimacy, stability, and resources. These myths and rules are embedded in socially constructed institutional realities that become the lens through which organizations interpret innovations that might be adopted for particular purposes. Those organizations who become isomorphic with the myths of their institutional environment, however, must often ‘decouple’ their structures, especially those focused on coordination and control related to technical production and exchange, to maintain legitimacy (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Interestingly, when paired with impression management processes that transferred a focus from means to ends, organizations whose members participate in illegitimate activities, who can decouple these activities from their legitimate structures, may end up with better relationships with stakeholders (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992).

Not only can managers utilize information about stakeholders’ perceptions of innovation to facilitate the adoption and implementation of innovations in the interest of meeting specific strategic objectives; the ways in which managers respond to stakeholders’ attitudes towards innovation may influence the organization’s ability to generate future innovations. Entrepreneurs who were the most skilled in impression management involving symbolic actions were more successful in acquiring resources for their ventures (Zott & Huy, 2007).

A unique feature of innovation within organizations is that an entity of higher status and authority can decide to adopt an innovation that another segment of the organization must implement (E. M. Rogers, 2003) which has important implications for decoupling. At a formal level, management can effect innovation by setting goals and priorities (Daft, 1978) and a cultural emphasis on the diffusion of innovations helps (E. Hoffman & Roman, 1984). The innovation process is often characterized by various parties contending to be the choice of elite decision makers (Kelley, 1976). Since innovation often involves competition and allocation of scarce resources it is inevitably controversial (Kanter, 1988b).

Appealing to larger principles, attaching an innovation to an unassailable value, like patient welfare (Kanter, 1988b) is one way culture plays a significant role in innovation processes. All cultures develop rules that shape innovation processes. Strong cultures can improve organizational effectiveness by clearly delineating roles, relationships, and contexts within which individuals can innovate. An example of how culture limits organizational choices is often found in innovation processes related to new technologies

(Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Fulk & Boyd, 1991). Organizations often adopt information technologies not for their technical capabilities, but for their symbolic value, to demonstrate they are on the cutting edge to environmental stakeholders (Nass & Mason, 1990); however, a dominant professional ideology is likely to impede innovation (Mohr, 1969), as we will see when we examine electronic health records.

Framing and Communication

To the extent that innovation does occur through borrowing, both the rate of innovation and the *type of innovation* ... will be functions of exposure – thus of the communication structure of the organization (March & Simon, 1958, pp. 210, italics in original).

The structural equivalence model of diffusion emphasizes symbolic communication between competitors rather than direct communication among contacts (G. F. Davis, 1991, pp. 594).

Pervasive in communication, grounded in the very use of language, symbolization is part of the living stuff of social relationships (Firth, 1973, pp. 15).

... the current 'elastic consensus' among the organizational communication community: *Communication entails the dynamic, interactive negotiation of meaning through symbol use* (Ashcraft et al., 2009, pp. 6, italics in original).

I argue that that the diffusion of a practice depends on the discursive justifications used to rationalize it (S. E. Green, Jr., 2004, pp. 653).

The ability to understand the differing underlying assumptions of the three levels is somewhat akin to the classic communication concept of rhetorical sensitivity (Hart & Burks, 1972; Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980). Organizations and subcultures have been found to foster certain communication predispositions towards rhetorical sensitivity in their

members (Hart et al., 1980). Rhetorical sensitivity is an instrumental concept, stressing that effective persuaders must be able to communicate within the framework of others to achieve their goals. Seeming inconsistency in approach to particular audiences, may be perfectly consistent with the accomplishment of the persuader's ultimate goals. The rhetor must have the conceptual flexibility necessary to manage complex interactions. The, perhaps optimistic, assumption being that a rhetorically sensitive approach best promises to achieve human understanding and to effect social cohesion. Organizations can be studied as rhetorical cultures since both are guided by the use of symbols to achieve cooperation (Shapiro & Schall, 1990).

Most importantly, a lack of recognition of the underlying assumptions for dialogue of the differing parties leads to a lack of recognition that 'facts' and arguments rest on our tacit assumptions and may have little significance or value for those operating in different perspectives. Without an awareness of these differing levels, it is not possible to resolve policy disputes. Social designing relies on recognizing problems, feedback, reinvention, and recognizing the intentions underlying the goals of the other party, all of which require at least a minimal level of interaction. In the end there must be a convergence of meaning about what is to be done (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986), even if there are different interpretations of the reasons for doing it. This, of course, may not be a problem to powerful actors who can ignore others and impose solutions. To insure adoption agencies should focus upon information dissemination, control of the media, and, most importantly for this section, managing the language of risk used to describe the innovation itself (Sapp & Korsching, 2004).

More generally it is been argued that from a sociological viewpoint that "... human communication in society is an attempt to create symbols whose use is believed to uphold social order" (Duncan, 1962, pp. xxiv). Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) have suggested that managerial effectiveness rests on the management of meaning that is largely accomplished through framing. They concentrate on framing 'skills' including context sensitivity, tools (for example metaphor, stories, and spin), avoiding mixed messages, framing preparation, and establishing credibility. Similarly, Bolman and Deal (1991) also see frames as tools for leaders: "The truly effective manager and leader will need multiple tools, the skills to use each of them, and the wisdom to match frames to situations" (pp. 12).

Narrative

It has been argued that innovation could be better understood from a process approach with narrative explanations that appeal to multiple motors of change (one of which could be symbolic) (Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, & Holmes, 2000). The narrative approach to communication (Fisher, 1987; Sharf & Vanderford, 2003; T. L. Thompson, 2003), itself a metaphor, suggests that compelling stories often are the essential communication tool. So "... stories are important organizational symbols that help legitimate new firms" (Zott & Huy, 2007, pp. 71). By understanding stories, and metaphors, we come to grips with the generative mechanisms that drive human action in particular contexts and provide explanations for why things happened in certain ways (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). Some have argued that they provide greater clarity than analytic argument and are very powerful forces in organizational change since they can take on a life of their own (G. Johnson, 1990).

Slogans

Slogans, verbal statements referring to a desired end and the relationship between the end and the activities designed to bring it about were extensively analyzed by Everhart and Doyle (1980) to describe the symbolic aspects of a multi-year educational innovation. For more extensive changes a rather loosely related chain composed of similar slogans may exist in a slogan system. In their study they examined how slogans were used to operationalize the goal of comprehensive change centered on the slogan 'providing an appropriate environment for learning for each student' (pp. 70). They traced more specific slogans in three main areas, community, organizational relationships, and instruction, focusing on how they changed in response to internal and external influences. So, a district wide charette as a vehicle for 'converting community desires into real programs' morphed into 'each principle knows his own community best' (pp. 75). Slogans were sometimes abandoned, but more often new ones were invented and often designed to forestall anticipated criticism of the ongoing organizational change and to reconcile rhetoric with reality.

In a risk averse organization, it might be better to frame innovations in terms of potential gains or the real risks of not changing (Fairhurst & Saar, 1996). According to Frost and Egri, "innovation is, at its core, a political and