FROM ADAPTING PRACTICES TO INHABITING IDEAS: HOW MANAGERS RESTRUCTURE WORK ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Organizations that adopt new practices employ managers to make decisions about how to materialize these practices. I examine how these managers move between the meanings and resources found in extra-local and local realms. I find that managers’ practices shift over time from adapting BPR practices to inhabiting BPR as an idea. Managers’ approaches are shaped by each organization’s history of efforts to introduce extra-local ideas. Rather than adapting BPR practices, managers draw on change tools, techniques, and methods that have worked in the organization and integrate BPR work into ongoing interactions, activities, and language in the local context.

Keywords: Managerial work; inhabited institutions; managerial fads; research paper
INTRODUCTION

Between macro patterns of diffusion and micro processes of organizational change lies a no-man’s land. Occupied by managers responsible for materializing new management ideas in their organization, this territory has struck few as worth claiming. This is not where institutional entrepreneurs (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004), institutional workers (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011), and consultants (Heusinkveld, Benders, & Hillebrand, 2013) conduct their sexy, high-profile business. This no-man’s land, located at the macro–micro interface that connects organizations to their environment, is where managers decide how to introduce novelty in their organization, making sure the rubber hits the road. The managerial work of adoption requires being a part of and moving between macro and micro realms to transform universal prescriptions into activities that can be implemented in a particular organization. This work has been given short shrift in organizational theory.

Macro studies of diffusion conceptualize managers as carriers via their membership in associations (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2014) or movement across organizations (Kraatz & Moore, 2002), but they cannot examine managerial agency at the interface of organizations and their environment. Close studies of organizational change detail how extra-local prescriptions — institutions, management fashions, regulations — are negotiated and the degree of coupling achieved (e.g., Hallett, 2010; Kellogg, 2009; Sandholtz, 2012). Although managers play a role in these analyses, they often move to the background as the change process and consequences come to the fore. In studies where managers remain in the foreground, they are either observed prior to adoption — selling issues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993) and championing (Howell & Higgins, 1990) — or during adoption — implementing (e.g., Currie, 1999), sensemaking (e.g., Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), and managing emotions (Huy, 2002). We rarely consider managers’ experiences at the macro–micro interface as they make decisions about how to introduce extra-local pressures into an organization.

Studies at the macro–micro interface tend to focus instead on how practices are adapted (Ansari, Reinecke, & Spaan, 2014) or how practices are translated (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) with time and across geographies. Adapting refers to choices managers make about how to modify practices, in their fidelity and extensiveness, to the technical, cultural, and political demands of the organization (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010). Managers who use an adaptation approach drop certain practices or implement some practices less intensively in order to increase fit with the local
context. Translation refers to the “drift, invention, mediation, creation of a
new link that did not exist before” (Latour, 1993, p. 6) that occurs as ideas
are transformed into objects and actions in a particular context. This
requires that managers assess how they will make a given intention or end
manifest in a specific situation.

Because studies of processes of adaptation and translation focus on how
practices change across time and space, they provide fleeting insight into the
managerial work going on in the no-man’s land and are insufficient to under-
stand how managers mediate — through their associations, interpretations,
and experiences — the ways in which institutions, management fashions,
and regulations are expressed and made incarnate in organizations. This
paper builds on a “peopled” (vs. a practice) focus of what happens at the
macro—micro interface (Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). A
“peopled” or “inhabited” perspective goes beyond recognizing extra-local
pressures as malleable to local circumstances, to examine how interaction in
specific contexts alters what is made manifest and “suffuses institutions with
local force and significance” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 213). This per-
spective has proved useful for analyzing change processes (e.g., Hallett,
2010). I use it here to examine the work of managers at the macro—micro
interface. Although managers do not determine how extra-local pressures
will materialize in the organization, they exert significant influence via their
choices and plans. Their interactions in extra-local and local contexts affect
how they understand and enact novelty in organizations. Managerial work
between the environment and the organization influences both what is
brought into the organization and how it is received and implemented. If we
follow managerial experience and work over space and time, we are likely
to evoke a more dynamic perspective of the macro—micro interface that
stems from experience — failures, setbacks, and wins — working across
these realms.

This paper examines managers’ choices at the interface of the organiza-
tion and its environment. I examine the accounts of 25 managers who have
introduced business process redesign (BPR) across two or more organiza-
tions. These managers, who are employed to rationalize their organization’s
structure and work processes and who are active members of the extra-
local BPR community, reflect on how their approach to working in this
no-man’s land changed through interactions in the BPR community and
within their organizations. In their early experiences, they tend to concep-
tualize BPR as a practice — a bundle of tools, techniques, and
language — that they adapt to the environment more or less successfully. As their experience in both local and extra-local settings accumulates, they
begin to conceptualize BPR as an idea that can be inhabited — practice, discussed, materialized — in many ways. Managers notice that because organizations have been responsive to numerous extra-local pressures, they are littered with extra-local tools, techniques, and practices that have been tried with more or less success, and that employees are familiar with and often skeptical about new ideas. Rather than adapting BPR practices, managers draw on change tools, techniques, and methods that have worked in the organization and blend BPR work into ongoing interactions, activities, and language in the local context (e.g., Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Managers buffer their organization from associations with the extra-local BPR community and introduce BPR by borrowing from established change practices in the organization (TQM, Six Sigma, and lean), integrating the work of restructuring with these practices. At the same time that managers create distance between the extra-local BPR symbols and practices, and the local introduction of BPR, they actively participate in the extra-local BPR community. Overall, managers learn how to mediate flows between the extra-local and local and repurpose prior flows (practices, tools, and language) between these realms. They do this in order to build a process-based organization.

These findings offer three contributions. First, they show how managers, through experience, develop an inhabited approach to introducing extra-local pressures. They come to understand that management fashions (BPR in this case) are at their core particular ideas about rationalization and that allowing variation in activities, interactions, and meaning-making processes means that the idea is more likely to be inhabited (although differently) across contexts. This has implications for our understanding of micro processes of organizational change and macro patterns of diffusion. Managers working at this interface are engaging in activities that integrate and blur activities — practice adoption and change management — that researchers think about separately. Further, managers’ choices and plans affect whether researchers observe instances of organizational change as extra-local adoption initiatives or as local, idiosyncratic change initiatives. This suggests that scholars in both domains need to think more seriously about how activities at the macro–micro interface are affecting our observations. On the ground, an inhabited-ideas approach may look like effective change-management practices (Kotter, 1995), but this interpretation would miss the importance of the extra-local idea, managerial commitments, and employees’ experience with prior management practices. As managers creatively implement management fashions in ways that make them less tractable to outsiders (Nelson, Earle, Howard-Grenville, Haack, & Young, 2014), our current definition and observations of diffusion become less reliable.
Second, the findings suggest the importance of observing how managerial interactions in macro and micro realms influence managers’ choices. Beyond observing managers as change agents in particular organizations, we need to understand their relationship to extra-local communities. Membership in these communities influences the meanings that managers attach to their work, thereby affecting how they do this work. The relationships they develop in the extra-local community become a source of support and knowledge. I find that managers’ relationship with the extra-local community changes over time. Early on, interaction in the community provides information and resources, but with time the relationship becomes a source of inspiration and a space of belonging, sustaining managers’ commitment to their work. While these observations are important for understanding managerial work between organizations and environments, they also suggest that studies of diffusion might benefit from paying more attention to the health and vibrancy of the spaces and communities committed to particular institutions or fads than they pay to the adopting organizations.

Third, the findings suggest that studies of practice adaptation, translation, and organizational change need to pay more attention to the rich history of change in each organization. As change managers restructure work or make other changes in the organization, the resistance they face need not be treated as a general human response (Lewin, 1989). Resistance may instead be a response to the constant flow of new extra-local ideas about how to best organize, increase efficiency, and engender accountability and commitment in local contexts. Employees’ experiences with these practices and ideas will influence how they experience the new-new thing. While this has been observed by those who contextualize organizational change (e.g., Carberry & King, 2012; Hallett, 2010; Zbaracki, 1998), it has not been taken into account in studying resistance to planned change. Understanding that resistance may be related to particular practices, and to the organization’s change history, should inform how managers go about restructuring work and organizations.

ADAPTING, TRANSLATING, AND INHABITING

Because we lack well-developed accounts of managers’ experiences and decisions at the nexus of organizations and their environments, “managers are, consciously or unconsciously, easily portrayed as naïve and unreflective followers” (Benders & van Veen, 2001, p. 34). The concepts of adaptation and translation elevate managers to more than followers or carriers
of extra-local pressures. While acknowledging the role of managers in adaptation and translation, the primary focus of the adaptation and translation literatures is the changing nature of the practice as they move across time and space. The managerial work and experiences involved in managing the macro–micro interface receives less attention. The people involved in changing the practices — their experiences, interpretations, and decisions — are not at the center of the literatures on practice adaptation and translation.

For example, the adaptation literature focuses on how practices are modified — in kind (fidelity) or in degree (extensiveness) — to address misfit between the practice and the organization’s technical, cultural, and political features (Ansari et al., 2010). In the case of TQM, practices including “customer surveys and focus groups; flow charts, pareto analyses, and statistical process control; team building methods such as role clarification and group feedback” (Ansari et al., 2010, p. 73) can be adapted in terms of their content or be partially implemented, depending on the context. This strategic choice perspective (Child, 1972) focuses on how practices can be changed during the adoption process, influencing diffusion across organizations (Scarborough, Robertson, & Swan, 2015). Managerial acts of adapting practices are credited with both varying practices as they diffuse (Ansari et al., 2010) and facilitating their diffusion through variation (Ansari et al., 2014). Although managerial work is given credit for practice change and diffusion, the details of that work and the experiences of managers who do that work remain relatively opaque.

Translation studies also focus on tracing how practices are modified across settings and the implications for diffusion dynamics. The translation concept emerged from the Scandinavian literature tracing institutional reform in the public sector (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Through the synthesis of findings across numerous case studies, particularly of the adoption of New Public Management, scholars noted how this management prescription circulated and changed as it moved across time and space (Rose & Miller, 1992). By embedding organizations in an institutional environment, this perspective depicts them as drawing on ideas from this environment and specific materializations demonstrated by particular activities, techniques, and terminology (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). What circulates is not a canned practice or fundamental idea “but rather accounts and materializations of a certain idea or practice” (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 225).

Ideas about translation, like adaptation, focus primarily on the dynamics of “things” as they circulate and on related field-level processes,
with the associated managerial work and challenges moving to the background. However, the translation literature stimulates two important observations of the work that happens at the interface of organizations and their environments. First, a distinction is made between ideas and practices. Management fashions, institutions, and regulations can be thought of as having an underlying logic, intention, or objective. For example, TQM is based on three ideas: “customer focus, continuous improvement, and team work” (Ansari et al., 2010, p. 73). Related to these ideas are a set of practices: techniques, language, methods (noted above) intended to enact these ideas. This analytic distinction reminds us to reflect on what managers are working with at the interface. Are they focused on practices? Or, do they see themselves as working with ideas that they must then turn into practices? Does this focus change over time? Second, this literature conceptualizes translation—the movement between ideas and practices—as interpretative work that occurs based on meaning in a given context, and as having the potential to transform ideas and practices as well as those who are doing the translation work (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). This suggests that managerial work at this interface need not be viewed through a strategic-fit lens but, like most work activities, involves processes of meaning making, identification, and commitment (Cohen, 2013).

Both observations are extended by scholars who conceptualize extra-local pressures as inhabited or peopled in a particular time and space (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Those who take an inhabited approach describe how managers materialize these pressures and the local meanings that develop through ongoing interaction around the practices. For example, Principal Kox (Hallett, 2010), mandated to increase accountability in the Costen Elementary School, was considered by members of the school board to be a champion of their efforts. As a fellow at Principal Leadership Training in Education Practices, she was part of a cohort of school leaders who learned different ways of aligning teachers’ activities with the logic of accountability. Within Costen Elementary, she chose specific practices—surveillance, student management, and grading and lesson plan justification—to make each teacher accountable. Across several studies (Binder, 2007; Gouldner, 1954; Zbaracki, 1998; Zilber, 2002), we see that the detailed changes organizations enacted in response to extra-local pressures depend partly on the responsible actors’ extra-local commitments and beliefs and their decisions about how to enact them.

Beyond the interpretations and choices managers make, the inhabited-institutions perspective demonstrates that employee resistance is not a lack of readiness (Kotter, 1995) or a failure to unfreeze (Lewin, 1989).
Employees are generally knowledgeable about popular management programs such as TQM or the accountability movement in schools. They hear about them through the media and their social circles. Both Hallett (2010) and Zbaracki (1998) document that employees may be skeptical or cynical about the introduction of a particular practice based on their knowledge of prior adoptions, spectacular failures reported in the press, public debate over the value of the practice, or widely circulating humor about the practice. Unlike studies of resistance that locate employees’ fear of change and loss of faith in organizational leaders and methods in concern for self or group in the local context (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997), a more contextualized approach may show resistance to be a response to the history and social context surrounding a change initiative. Local resistance cannot be isolated from extra-local pressures.

Although the inhabited-institutions approach grounds and extends in important ways ideas of adaptation and translation through rich ethnographic studies of organizational change processes, this approach does not fully illuminate managers’ experiences and decisions at the macro–micro interface. Principal Kox’s actions, for example, can be analyzed as poor leadership (Hallett, 2010, p. 69) if we do not contextualize her work across organizations and over time as experience and history builds for manager and for employees. Understanding Kox’s commitment to and understanding of the accountability movement in education as well as her experiences across schools can provide insight into how managers work across these realms to materialize extra-local pressures in organizations. How do they balance their participation in the extra-local community with their organizational responsibilities? How do they consider the change histories of each organization? How do they materialize extra-local pressures in a local context? This paper makes inroads to addressing these questions by examining the experiences of managers who, like Principal Kox, are responsible for restructuring work in their organization. Rather than analyze how restructuring occurs in one organization, I analyze managers’ accounts of working at the macro–micro interface across time and organizations to identify patterns in the interaction at this interface and dynamics over time.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

I use BPR as a context for examining managerial work across the macro–micro interface. BPR is an example of management fashion that – like TQM, Six Sigma, Lean, or balanced scorecard – swept
corporate America in the 1990s. Large organizations coupled the adoption of information technology with the restructuring of work in attempts to create significant efficiencies. This often corresponded with mass layoffs (Head, 2003). As part of their reengineering efforts P&G terminated 13,000 of 106,000 workers, AT&T laid off 40,000 people, and GTE cut 17,000 jobs (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). While the stock market rewarded organizations that restructured and slashed jobs (Osterman, 1999), reengineering efforts raised many eyebrows. Michael Hammer, the reengineering guru, became known as the man “whose ideas launched tens of thousands of pink slips” (White, 1996). Further, reengineering became known as a very expensive, time-consuming failure. A 1994 survey of 99 organizations that completed reengineering projects found that 67% of these produced mediocre, marginal, or failed results (CSC Index, 1994). Reengineering became a euphemism for failed change and mass layoffs, and a subject of ridicule in the press including the newly syndicated cartoon “Dilbert” (Case, 1999; Conti & Warner, 1994; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996; Pruijt, 1998).

I choose BPR as a context because, despite this difficult early history, BPR work continues and is supported by an established extra-local community. Whereas critics focus on overblown rhetoric, the “obliterating” methods, and the reports of resulting organizational carnage, the goal or objective of reengineering is rarely criticized. Reengineering is a radical prescription for changing how work is organized. The aim is to transform vertical, functionally organized structures into horizontal, process-based structures. Proponents argue that functional boundaries are detrimental to quality, innovation, and efficiency because they interfere with the flow of information and knowledge, prioritize functional goals over organizational goals, and create an overspecialized and sequential division of labor. Whereas Taylor (1914) looked to break everything down and optimize every little thing, reengineering seeks to reintegrate all of these fragmented tasks, grouped and divided by function, to optimize a sequence of tasks, weaving them together, indifferent to functional boundaries, to reverse the industrial revolution. Reengineering the organization requires that managers take work seriously, as the fundamental, bottom-up means through which the organization is constituted. In contrast to the more glamorous work of designing high-level strategies presented to executives, managers design and implement a new operational model.

By the late 1990s, “reengineering” receded from the management lexicon to be replaced by the more mundane Business Process Redesign (BPR). Despite being labeled a fad, reengineering in the form of rebranded BPR
persists. A community of consultants and trainers, largely organized around the late Michael Hammer and the sales of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, continue to do the political, technical, and cultural institutional work necessary to sustain interest in BPR (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Accenture and IBM both have significant global BPR practices. SAP and Oracle, both ERP products, promote the business process logic. In addition to this material continuance of BPR, the cultural work continued to be done by Michael Hammer, the father and promoter of reengineering, until his death in 2008. Between 1999 and 2004, over 15,000 people attended his seminars. There are hundreds of BPR manuals and books available, and *Reengineering the Corporation* (Hammer & Champy, 1993), with sales of over 2 million, is a classic.

### Data

The findings presented below emerged inductively from career interviews with 25 individuals who held high-level change-management roles at Fortune 500 companies or federal agencies in the United States. Because my original goal was to understand the career implications of working on BPR projects, I sought participants who had experience introducing and leading at least two BPR initiatives. A single experience might indicate an assignment to a project. Two or more experiences are more likely to indicate a choice to be associated with BPR. Some of the managers I interviewed worked on the first generation of projects in the late 1990s. They became invested in this approach and built careers leading BPR projects across a number of organizations (Huising, 2016). While this prevents me from examining counterfactuals, it allows me to focus on managerial experiences at the interface of the BPR communities and organizations.

As part of these open-ended interviews, I asked managers to describe their current experiences and strategies for introducing and implementing BPR and to contrast them with prior experiences and strategies. As managers explained changes, I asked them to provide examples that illustrated these changes. The interviews, which lasted from 40 to 110 minutes, were taped and transcribed. In addition to conducting interviews, I observed and conversed informally with 12 of these managers as they participated in the BPR community. I attended training sessions and seminars in which they were participants and presenters. In these venues, I was able to observe them interacting during social periods such as meals, coffee breaks, and
happy hour receptions. I also observed three of these managers for 2–5 days as they worked in their change roles in organizations.

Initial contact with 13 of the managers was facilitated by Michael Hammer. The remaining project managers were reached through a snowball sampling approach. The managers in my sample worked across a variety of industries. They came from a wide range of backgrounds (e.g., finance, engineering, marketing, and human resources), and most had a master’s degree related to their functional background. They had between 4 and 16 years experience introducing reengineering in at least two organizations. On average, they had worked on four projects (for a total of 100 projects), and across their projects they reported a mix of failures and successes. This persistence despite failure, while an artifact of my sampling, has been identified in large-N studies (Deichmann & van den Ende, 2013). Failure to materialize an idea encourages managers to persist. Table 1 summarizes managers’ demographics and project experiences.

Analysis

The findings of this paper emerged from an inductive and iterative analysis of transcripts and field notes. I did not have a preconceived notion about managers’ strategies, or of whether or how their strategies might change over time. I also did not know if there would be patterns in managers’ accounts of their strategies or if they would be rather idiosyncratic. I began the analysis by reading and rereading the data and by coding managers’ accounts and my field notes line by line (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to coding I wrote, for each manager, a short memo that described how they introduced change. During this analysis and writing process, it became clear that managers changed their approach to introducing BPR over time.

To understand what changed and whether there were discernable patterns across the managers, I returned to my coding. I listed the codes that applied to early approaches and those that applied to more recent ones. Across the codes, I created conceptual categories of like codes (Charmaz, 2006). So, for example, codes like large-scale, extensive, elaborate, enterprise-wide, which describe early approaches, were bundled together into the concept of large-scale change. After following this process for all codes, I compared and contrasted the concepts that describe earlier and later approaches. I wrote memos to elaborate the conceptual categories. The memos were based on the coded text related to the conceptual categories. In doing this, I began to see how some aspects of their approach continued
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while others were discontinued. I also identified emerging approaches. I worked to theorize the group of concepts that were discontinued, coming to recognize a symbolic-buffering and technical-blending approach. I also theorized the group of concepts that continued and emerged, coming to recognize the goals were continued and the pragmatic nature of emerging approaches. I focused on understanding what characterized early approaches and what characterized later approaches. Only after completing this analysis and identifying the specific changes in approaches over time did I begin to theorize the movement from adapting practices to inhabiting ideas.

FINDINGS

Overall, managers’ approaches to introducing BPR into organizations change significantly. In early experiences managers draw heavily on the symbolic and technical resources offered by BPR gurus and consultants as they redesign their organization according to a process logic. Despite poor results, or perhaps because of them (Deichmann & van den Ende, 2013), managers continue to participate in the extra-local community and to lead BPR initiatives in other organizations. As they gain experience moving between these realms, they shift to focusing on implementing the idea of BPR — a process-based means of organizing work, information, and authority — and away from BPR language, social associations, and prescribed techniques. They buffer the organization from any language or interactions that would identify the change initiative with the extra-local BPR community. They take into account employees’ knowledge of and experience with other extra-local prescriptions such as TQM, Six Sigma, and Lean. In materializing BPR, they blend the goals of BPR with familiar tools and techniques that employees find useful. Through their participation in the extra-local community, managers become committed to implementing the idea of BPR, but their interest in enacting particular techniques, activities, models, and terminology fades. This diminished interest emerges as they focus on how the idea can be inhabited in each organization, taking into account the history of employees’ experiences with failed and successful introductions of extra-local ideas. These changes are summarized in Table 2.

Early Experiences: Adapting the Prototype

In their first attempt to bring BPR into an organization, managers describe being enamored with BPR and externally focused as they made decisions
Table 2. From Adapting Practices to Inhabiting Ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended outcome</th>
<th>Adapting the Prototype</th>
<th>Inhabiting the Idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transform functionally designed organizations into a process-based design.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unchanged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work, information, and authority reorganized horizontally to integrate all actions related to the production of a good or service.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership and association</td>
<td>Became a member and created relationships with the extra-local BPR community: attended meetings, joined consortia, and participated in bench visits.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-local community a source of knowledge and practices.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and symbols</td>
<td>Draw on BPR discourse learned through practitioner manuals, training seminars, and interaction with other practitioners (e.g., process master job titles, process BPR, mentions of Hammer, reference to books and articles).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices and techniques</td>
<td>Draw on prescribed methodologies to design and implement the project. Projects are organization-wide, require a large supporting infrastructure, and draw on process tools and techniques only.</td>
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</table>

about how to introduce BPR. For example, after returning from a BPR education session, a manager explained, he “felt it [introducing BPR] was just the right thing to do.” The experiences of a young, up-and-coming Director of Finance at a consumer products company highlight common initial practices across managers. The Director, appointed by the CEO to investigate BPR as a potential solution to lagging organizational performance, knew almost nothing about BPR. He began reading up on the idea
and talking with consultants, and then decided to attend several of Michael Hammer’s training sessions. There he got to know other managers working with BPR. Within 6 weeks he was convinced that BPR, as his CEO suggested, was something the organization should pursue. He returned to his organization, ambitious to “do it right,” and have a “real BPR project” in terms of scale, method, and outcome. He hired a retired executive to coach him through the process and joined a consortium of managers who met twice annually to discuss their work.

Much of what happened over the next 18 months resembled, with adaptation, best-practice prescriptions for BPR in terms of change process, methods, and tools. Working with a core team of eight handpicked employees, the Director spent the first 7 months laying the foundation for the project, following the prescribed methodology found in readings, seminars, and visits to other organizations doing this work (e.g., Petrozzo & Stepper, 1994). The team developed a communications process and BPR training courses, and held BPR brown-bag question-and-answer forums. Throughout, they borrowed techniques and exercises from BPR consultants and texts. For example, they completed the “Staple yourself to the order” exercise intended to teach employees what it is like to be one of their customers. Gathering frank feedback from customers, they created a narrative of how miserable their current organizational structure and work practices made the customer. They found, for example, that if a customer wanted to change their address they would be passed through eight to nine people before this simple transaction was complete. They also followed Michael Hammer’s suggestion to compile a short videotape of what customers experienced when they received their product (the major point of complaint across customers).

The work plan they laid out was significant. It involved a complete redesign of the organization. The traditional bureaucracy would be reorganized into five core business processes over 5 years. The project team, consisting of 35 employees who worked full-time on the project, resembled a new department. Members of the team spent months developing process maps of the as-is processes for the five core processes. They redesigned each process and proposed an implementation plan. Together, they identified $150 million in savings.

They were living the vast majority of BPR prescriptions in an exemplary manner. However, when the CEO resigned suddenly, the project was put on hold. The new CEO canceled the project. Although nothing had been implemented, the experience had a profound effect on the Director. He was tightly integrated into the BPR community, and known for his work on
this project. The team’s governance structure, team processes, and walls were prototypes: “Boeing came in and benchmarked us … They brought in their teams from St Louis and California. Their CIO came in and we had a great Q & A; but with all that said and all the great work that was done, we went for a home run … instead of going for small wins.” He was also frustrated that he and his team had been unable to change much in the organization, in part because they had focused so much on the external community and prescriptions. “We were zealous, almost …. We were criticized for that.” Members of the organization also criticized the lack of progress.

This Director’s vignette reflects three features common to the early implementation experiences of the managers I studied. First, managers immersed themselves in the extra-local community to learn about BPR. This lively community welcomed them and offered significant prescriptive advice about how to implement it. Second, they adopted the language and prototypical or best-practices prescriptions from the extra-local community. Their inexperience with BPR combined with their intensive interaction with the community facilitated this heavy dependence on extra-local resources. Third, although their early implementation experiences did not lead to change, the managers remained committed to implementing BPR and went on to work on other BPR implementations. Despite falling short of his expectations, the Director found work in an organizational change role at a competitor, where he was hired to implement BPR.

Later Experiences: Inhabiting the Idea

As managers moved on to other BPR projects, they changed their approach to introducing BPR. Below I present managers’ accounts of how their approach changed. While they reported remaining committed to the fundamental ideas of BPR and the goal of creating process-based organizational designs, they changed three aspects of their approach described above and outlined in Table 2. First, managers reported creating balance between their membership in the extra-local BPR community and their local organization. In early experiences they identified strongly with the extra-local community. Later, they rebalanced their identification across these two realms. Second, managers reported buffering their organization from extra-local language and symbols. Third, managers reported that they began to use internal tools and techniques to implement BPR, blending the extra-local idea with local practices. Overall, managers shifted from
From Adapting Practices to Inhabiting Ideas

adapting practices from the extra-local environment to implementing the fundamental idea of BPR by buffering the organization from the extra-local and blending their approach with the tools and techniques used in the organization. Managers attribute buffering and blending approaches to employees’ knowledge of and histories with management fads, including BPR. Managers use these approaches to increase their chances of materializing the idea of BPR in the organization, although not its identity or practices.

Balancing Extra-Local and Local Membership

The managers were committed to implementing BPR across the organizations that employed them. Most described a normative or ideological rationale, like this manager who was working on his fifth implementation:

Man, that whole philosophy I’ve taken hook, line, and sinker. But I believe in it. It’s not just because you know I’m a zealot; I guess I am. But you know I really look at it and say “I want to be able to provide an environment for every person in my organization where they can be everything they can be and be challenged and be part of something great.”

That managers may have had other reasons, career or monetary, or multiple reasons for continuing to implement BPR does not negate their observed local commitment to implementing BPR and extra-local commitment to participating in the BPR community. They participated in BPR seminars, practice consortia, and bench visits, settings in which they could interact with others interested in BPR. A manager described it as his “little world,” where

I stay in touch with the Hammer conferences and there are multiple websites on process that I pay attention to or at least occasionally look at. There’s an organization called APQC (American Product Quality Consortium); they do a lot of process framework and business process management … I made some trips earlier this year with APQC to some companies and heard their presentations on the implementation of process models and frameworks and so on.

I observed that managers used these external communities to learn about the latest practices from consultants and authors, and to share their experiences and create relationships with other practitioners, generating a sense of collective purpose (Melucci, 1989). Most often experiences were shared and connections made by swapping stories. For example, a lively conversation began over lunch when a manager mentioned that they were having
difficulty securing senior manager buy-in. The manager across the table agreed that this was a difficult part of each project: “Our senior managers weren’t visited by a bright light. We persuaded, sold, and educated our leaders until they were on board.” He went on to describe, with humor and some bravado, how each individual was convinced. For example, in a meeting with a senior manager, the team members laid out the current production costs for specific products compared with projected production costs using a process-based approach. This story of rational persuasion was summed up thus: “We told him, ‘You might not like change, but we can assure you that you will like irrelevance less’.” The managers around the table laughed.

In these stories managers emphasized, like Orr’s (1996, p. 126) photocopier technicians, “the perversity of the world,” a functionally organized world, which they were attempting to improve. In another example, a manager explained that his team was redesigning internal purchasing and sourcing processes. They had studied how current purchases were made and calculated the costs of that method: they found that it took five people to buy a stapler, or about $90 of salary for a $5 stapler. The other managers listening shook their heads. They had made similar, discouraging, findings in their organization. Stories, like the two described above, allowed managers to recognize that they faced similar problems and to share their experiences trying to address them.

In addition to relating the struggles associated with introducing BPR into the organization, these stories relayed evidence of a community engaged in these struggles (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Telling a story that is understood and appreciated by another practitioner indicates that the storyteller is a member of a community (Orr, 1996). Through these interactions, managers learned that their efforts were neither solitary nor particularistic but were part of a broader, legitimate collective effort. A manager explained:

[Knowing] that other people were out there doing this stuff helped me calm my lack of self-confidence. When you meet someone else who is doing it … you feel better that (a) somebody else is going through this, and (b) that there are some things that they’re doing right and there’s some things that they knew not to do.

In trading what one manager called “war stories,” managers encouraged one another. A manager summed this up:

It’s not the technical part of process engineering to me — and this is another thing I wouldn’t have believed when we started — but the technical part is just not that hard. It
is the change part. You just need somebody there to give you some guard rails and some moral support and encouragement. To me, that made all the difference.

Beyond pointing out needing and receiving moral support and encouragement, this manager reveals that his perspective shifted over time, from getting the techniques right to focusing on how to make the change stick in a particular setting. Managers continue to attend seminars, participate in communities of practice, and keep up on what is happening in companies from distant industries, because they value learning about one another’s experiences with BPR and find themselves reinvigorated through discussion. The seminars are an example of one space where they can openly and freely identify their work with BPR.

Back inside the organization, a manager pointed to the BPR seminar binders, best sellers, textbooks, video tapes, and case studies placed discreetly in the corner of her office, and explained that she uses these resources “for inspiration but not for perspiration.” These resources, artifacts of participation in the BPR community, are inspirational. They offer slogans, narratives, tactics, and tools. This manager argues that they should not be drawn on directly or publicly to do the work of creating a process-based organization. Although she is a well-known participant in the extra-local community, members of her organization do not recognize her affiliation with the extra-local community or the change initiative she is managing – its language and techniques – as BPR.

Another manager who has been working on BPR initiatives across organizations since 1991 explained that “I’m married to process ... process as a way of thinking” but that no one in the organization would know that he is a “process person.” Despite their deep commitment to rebuilding organizations according to a process logic, within their organization managers are careful to avoid any identification with BPR. A manager explained that he does not advertise his deep training and experience with BPR: “I’m a Process Master. I’m not putting ‘Process Master’ on my resume.” In a similar vein, many managers said they avoid referring to BPR in their job titles.

Managers began concealing their participation in the extra-local community when they observed that it interfered with their work of introducing process-based structure. A manager in a consumer goods company recalled experiencing difficulty in early efforts because of his open association with BPR:

I was personally ridiculed a bit, coming in the door, talking about the power of process and sometimes in a kidding way, sometimes maybe by people who just thought I was a crackpot and nuts. There was this real misconception that there was a difference
Managers’ narratives reveal how employees’ past experiences with and general knowledge of different management practices – BPR, Six Sigma, TQM, and Lean – both constrained and enabled how they introduced and materialized BPR in the organization. First, because employees did not have positive associations with the concepts of reengineering or BPR, managers removed language and associations that would connect the change effort with reengineering and BPR. They buffered employees from the symbolic association with BPR. Second, because employees had used other management techniques, tools, and methods previously, managers repurposed these wherever possible. For example, information from a series of kaizen sessions was compiled by a manager to develop a process map. Managers blended or integrated the materialization of BPR with existing activities both to take advantage of employees’ comfort with accepted tools and techniques and to move away from prescribed BPR practices that they believed were not feasible given the history of change in the organization. I present managers’ narratives of buffering and blending below.

**Buffering the Local from Extra-Local Language and Symbols**

In framing and communicating initiatives in the organization, managers did not use the language and labels of BPR. A manager working on his third change initiative identified language as an important issue:

> The idea is wonderful. Absolutely can’t argue with it … I’m not comparing BPR to a cult but there’s a zealotry there in some people. It makes sense to them. [Interviewer: Well, it makes sense to you too but you haven’t become zealous about it.] No, it makes entire and complete sense to me. You just have to communicate it in a way that others can accept.

He learned how the language used to introduce, frame, and communicate a BPR project affected how others perceive and respond to it. By modifying or removing BPR vocabulary from organizational communications and interactions, managers increase the acceptance of BPR goals and outcomes in two ways.

First, this buffering avoids association with the illegitimacy and taint of BPR. A manager with a decade of experience explained:

> There are some folks who are sick of process … they don’t want to hear about process, process, process. So we have attacked it from a terminology level instead of a
conceptual level. We’re getting the same point across; we are just not using the processespecific vernacular … it’s been a struggle with the terminology. We can be talking about the same thing, philosophically or conceptually, but using terms so that people aren’t fighting one another.

Instead of talking about redesign processes, some organizations talk about integrating work or coordinating delivery. Another manager explains an approach he calls “guerilla process work”:

Well, we’re doing it but not calling it that. Because people can’t accept it — and that’s a huge issue with process work … calling it something that the culture that you’re working in can accept. The most success I ever had doing process was calling it something different that was acceptable to the culture and doing what they taught me in all those classes in Boston … We called it “the square model” … Yeah, it’s process work, absolutely process work … but forget process redesign; this is about how you deal with people, right? You’ve got to find what terms and communications style work for them and then get in their space and manage the situation, right? It’s the same everywhere …

Because employees are cynical about and repelled by BPR, this managers explains that they offer them the “square model” and then implement process.

Second, buffering prevents conflict with local language and concepts that employees inhabit in their daily activities. A manager explained, “I prefer to get to the problem and past the labels.” In order to avoid large discontinuities, managers downplay language and symbols associated with BPR or combine them with existing terminology to describe and work around BPR. They draw on existing resources and frameworks in the organization. For example, a manager drew on a submission the organization had made to the Baldridge Awards (a national quality award in the United States): “It was pretty wretched, but … people were used to talking about it. It was verbiage and a model that people were familiar with.” She used the familiar language, recycling work done by the former quality department, to introduce the idea of organizing work by process into her organization.

A manager with 13 years of BPR experience identified an attachment to the theory of BPR, including its methods and language, as getting in the way of making change:

I think in many cases people get enamored with the theory. The theory makes sense to them and they can’t mentally adapt to the needs of the real world. So no matter how much I like this theory, if I can’t make it work in the real world to deliver results, it doesn’t really matter. I can make the mental compromises that say, “you know what, we’re not going to go right to the final destination perfectly” … my desire to keep
learning and adapting the theory to the real world is probably what makes me different than many of the folks who are focused on concepts like process and are pushing process.

Despite his commitment to achieving a process-based organizational design, his day-to-day goal is to make BPR as a general concept work in a specific situation. Although he uses the term “adaptation” to describe his approach to making the idea work, his specific proposal is to stop using the language or terminology of process.

One exception to the practice of buffering emerged from managers’ narratives. The extra-local realm is sometimes drawn on to inspire executive managers and senior managers who are selectively asked to attend an introductory seminar. A manager explains that such seminars create legitimacy for their initiative because executives can see that there is someone here from IBM and someone is here from Shell and there are people from all kinds of big-name companies with lots of recognition... you know, I am not totally beyond manipulation. I was able to get a couple of our top leaders to go to a seminar because I knew some of the senior people of our number-two customer were going to be at the seminar. If you are in the same room for two days you will probably get an opportunity to talk.

In particular, the seminars are highly effective in “getting people excited about it and understanding it.” Managers cordoned-off their relationships and interactions within the BPR community from their colleagues, except in specific situations where they felt that exposure to this realm would serve their goal of implementing a new organizational structure. Beyond this, their presentation of themselves and their work in the organization was disconnected from this world of community and inspiration.

**Blending Extra-Local Ideas with Local Practices**

Across the various detailed, yet nearly indistinguishable, prescriptions for introducing BPR is the fundamental practice of clean sheet design. BPR involves the radical redesign of the organization (Hammer & Champy, 1993) and therefore must be an enterprise-wide effort (Kettinger & Teng, 2000). Efforts that do not attempt significant redesign on an organizational scale, including TQM, lean management, and Six Sigma, are dismissed as incremental, small-scale improvements made within a dysfunctional system that requires overhaul. BPR means obliterating the existing system that is the cause of major inefficiencies (Hammer, 1990), “tearing up the old
blueprints and completely redesign[ing] the organization” (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996, p. 25), and starting with “a blank sheet of paper” (Hammer & Champy, 1993, p. 131). Even though much of the aggressive language and ideas associated with the rise of reengineering were cast off during its reconstitution as BPR, this bold scale remains central to the idea of BPR (Kettinger & Teng, 2000). When managers were asked to distinguish BPR from other ideas such as Six Sigma, TQM, or lean production, their responses were similar to this manager’s: “It’s the ‘radicalness’ of [BPR] that sets it apart. We are not working for incremental improvements. We are starting with completely new ideas about how to organize work.”

“Clean sheet design” was a shared way of talking about radically reorganizing the structure of work.

Managers come to reject the notion that the practice of clean sheet design is required to rebuild an organization according to a process logic. Although complete restructuring of the organization into horizontal work process is their eventual goal, they reject the radical technique of clean sheet design for two reasons. First, a history of failed management ideas means there is less slack and patience in organizations for large-scale plans that may or may not produce results; ideas need to be proved. Second, there is a detritus of past change techniques, tools, and plans to be found in every organization. Managers thus decide to mobilize change practices that employees are comfortable with in order to make progress on a smaller scale.

Almost all managers explained that they learned to introduce the process logic through a pilot project or experiment. A manager explains:

We did not declare a transformation. We decided to let the work show the way. [So as we worked] we collected evidence that showed we needed to change the structure to support the process as opposed to declaring that the structure need to change because we were moving down a process path. That actually made it easier for our company, doing it this way.

Through this small project, the manager brought an example of the change results to the CEO. This approach overcomes what a manager labeled the “Catch-22 of organizational change”: new ideas may not be approved unless they can be shown to work — to generate results — but it is not possible to generate results unless the idea receives approval. An experiment or pilot can be used not only to sell a project but also to sustain the broader effort over time.

A manager, in reflecting on one of his early experiences, realized that such an experiment is necessary to introduce and sustain a change project:
I think there is one enormous mistake we made and that was listening to the outside advice and going for the home run, and that home run involved waiting six, eight, nine months .... It's that we decided not to go for small wins. We were afraid of the effort breaking down into incrementalism.

Experiments, pilots, or what the managers called “small wins” create a fast, small version of the larger idea. They are proof of concept; however, they are also heterodox because of their scale. Such experiments are not cross-functional redesigns and do not reflect the scale or strategic nature of a “true” BPR project. A “true” BPR project is a tall, idealist order. A manager, a BPR careerist, explained: “Dr. Hammer assumes that your redesign is a strategic priority” and by association a large-scale endeavor. An experiment, it is feared, can lead to an incremental project that focuses on part of a work process rather than the entire process. A manager who has been working on BPR projects for the past 10 years has learned not to take the advice too literally:

You understand why he’s [Hammer’s] presenting it; he’s presenting it as an alternative view and the answer is somewhere in between, depending on where your company is at and what your projects are. But people can get frustrated .... and you can totally see where there are opportunities for us to implement parts of that.

It is a guide for action or outline for possibilities, but not the answer. Over time, managers learned to interpret ideas like “enterprise-wide transformation” as a desired end state but probably not a starting point. In a world without constraints, the change would be radical and named a strategic priority; however, managers modified this inspired vision, breaking it into smaller pieces, increments.

Each manager was introducing BPR in an organization littered with change tools and techniques from past change efforts. Instead of introducing new methods, they drew on those that employees had tolerance for in order to move the organization towards a process logic. The manager who drew on the organization’s submission to the Baldridge Award explains how she recycled that proposal for her own purpose: “Of course in that application and in that winning submission is a process management model. Now it’s not very good, but it was a good starting point. So that’s basically what we used.” In addition, she took the recommended operating model that a consulting house created for the company and created a model from two existing artifacts that were known to managers: “What I did was — rather than using a blank slate, which is sometimes difficult to manage people through — what I did was took things that were familiar to them and used that as a launch point.”
A manager who began working on BPR projects at Texas Instruments in the early 1990s explained the “toolbox approach” she came to use after working on several projects:

We finally learned that the best way to position these [all change methods] was to just talk about toolboxes. That there were a lot of different tools, capabilities, and methods – quality tools, process approaches. The more robust your toolbox was, the better positioned you were to use the appropriate tools for the appropriate problem.

This allowed the effort to avoid contention with TQM ideas and approaches that were used in the organization. Because Six Sigma and lean tools had been used in different organizational units, the manager explained, “we’re fitting them all together and trying to build a toolkit” that employees in both units can use. Another manager decided not to introduce the idea of process mapping to a group of employees who were very proficient working with the kaizen method. Instead, the kaizen discussions were used to build a process map out of sight of the employees.

Prior efforts to bring in extra-local ideas had changed the contour of the organization and presented specific challenges that managers tried to anticipate. Managers’ decisions about how to materialize the idea of BPR were shaped by the history of changes in each organization. In considering how to materialize the idea of BPR, managers were not adapting practices to fit or thinking through general resistance and good change-management processes, they were recognizing that the organization and its employees were not ignorant of or inexperienced with management practices and fads.

DISCUSSION

While actors at the institutional or extra-local level create ideas, practices, and resources for on-the-ground activity, the local manifestation and significance of management practices emerge through the work and interactions of people within the organization. Managers responsible for introducing the extra-local to the local move between these two realms to make decisions about how to introduce and enact novelty in organizations. Their choices are likely to diverge from extra-local prescriptions. From a cross-organization or organizational perspective, managerial work appears to involve strategic choices about how to adapt practices to the organization’s technological, political, and cultural characteristics. However, when we shift from a practice to a peopled perspective, managers are observed to move between the meanings and resources found in the extra-local and
local realms. Across these contexts, they make choices about what to materialize, and how. These choices are influenced by interactions in each realm, and by the meanings and possibilities that are generated.

I find that with experience in each realm, managers learn to work at this interface in a way that allows them to be sufficiently adequate participants in both realms and achieve progress towards a goal they value. Managers identify their commitment to the underlying idea or goal of BPR — organizing work according to a process logic — as distinct from the related practices, language, and associations. They also come to see that their organization is cluttered with extra-local tools, language, and methods, and that employees respond negatively to additional ideas and language. They mediate, in particular ways, how extra-local language, associations, and practices enter the organization. They buffer employees from more language and from association with another management fad. They also forgo bringing in new practices and techniques. Instead, they repurpose existing, successful practices and techniques in order to restructure work. At the same time, they actively participate in the BPR community, drawing support and inspiration from interaction in this realm.

This peopled perspective of the interface of organizations and their environments does not fit well with the academic division of labor. The managers in my study are neither carriers in the diffusion process nor implementers in the organizational change process. Studying their work makes these domains of academic research less distinct and more complicated. Managers may be carrying and diffusing management fashions in a way that diffusion studies cannot recognize, leading to underestimations of the adoption and persistence of so-called fashions. This corroborates recent work by Nelson et al. (2014) that finds that labels and language are not an accurate measure of diffusion and that we need to observe practitioners (like these managers) and their communities to measure adoption and diffusion more realistically. Likewise, managers are addressing resistance in a manner that the organizational change literature does not recognize. They are not managing resistance to change in a general sense, but they are managing resistance rooted in management-fashion fatigue and cynicism. Employees are familiar with a range of practices because these have been cycling through the workplace for decades. They have their own analyses and opinions of these fads, supplemented by what they read in the media.

As we study resistance to change we must contextualize it to understand the nature of employees’ resistance.

An alternative interpretation of my findings is that managers are “just learning” how to manage change projects over time. According to this
interpretation, managers learn, through trial and error, how to successfully materialize the restructuring of work according to a process logic. Negative feedback, resistance, and failure lead managers to reflect on and adjust their approach. This characterization of my findings, situating them in the organizational change literature, misses the role of the extra-local in influencing managers’ meanings, commitments, and associations. It also ignores the prior role of many extra-local pressures in each organization and employees’ experiences with them. This paper identifies the role of the extra-local in both the trial (what and how managers materialize) and the error (what is the source of problem and resistance). So, while managers do learn from their experiences introducing BPR across organizations, the learning occurs at the interface of the extra-local and the local. There is clearly more to be learned about what happens at this interface. This paper is just a start.

Boundary Conditions and Future Research

This study reveals and theorizes a phenomenon — managerial work between organizations and their environments — that has received limited prior attention. However, there are two boundary conditions that suggest opportunities for future research. First, this study considers BPR, a management practice with volumes of prescriptions and a relatively well-developed discourse. It has rich symbolic and technical aspects that can be buffered and blended. This is not the case with all management fads or external pressures. Further, because BPR is, at its foundation, an organizational design prescription, it can be implemented with different accompanying language and techniques. This may be more difficult for more technically specialized management practices such as Six Sigma or balanced scorecard practices. In such cases, it may be more difficult for managers to blend multiple tools. It may be that symbolic buffering is sufficient in such cases. A cross-practice research design would allow us to better understand the relationships between types of practices and managerial choices and strategies.

Second, this study, like many, relies on managers’ self-reports of success and failure. Although I triangulated these data with other available data, I do not have data that would allow me to consistently explore how others in the organizations understood and interpreted these buffering and blending strategies or whether there is agreement on their success or failure. Studying these strategies via ethnographic methods in one or two
organizations would generate further insight into managers’ choices and strategies in situ.

Finally, this study illuminates the associations that managers develop and maintain with the extra-local communities and other practitioners. These relationships are central to managers’ work, as they are a source of knowledge, support, and communion. Although the contributions of these relationships change as managers gain experience, participation in these communities remains important. This insight suggests that we need to learn more about these spaces and associations and how they influence managers’ interpretations and choices. Studies of these communities would shed more light on managerial activities at the macro–micro interface and the reciprocal influence that managers channel between these realms.

CONCLUSION

It is not unexpected that management fashions, institutions, and regulations are reformulated within and across organizations. However, researchers have primarily focused on changes in the practices—on their adaptation and translation. What is missing is an examination of the people who make decisions and strategies about how to materialize practices in organizations. This paper brings managerial participation and commitments in these realms to the fore, examining how interaction and meaning across these realms shape their decisions about how to introduce BPR into organizations.

NOTE

1. Bench visits did not involve any formalized data collection and analysis, as done in benchmarking, but as the name suggests were visits to organizations that had implemented or were implementing a process-based structure. In these contexts managers had the chance to interact with and continue to learn from peers who also had experience with BPR redesign projects.

REFERENCES


Dear Author,

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