Isomorphism and Barriers to Organizational Change

Patricia Katopol

Introduction

Simon, the library director at a medium-sized college in a small town, admitted to being envious every time he saw an article about a similar college library, headed by Milly Jones. Milly had a library commons, Simon had a basement room with computers. Milly had treasure hunts in the library that attracted half of the student body, whereas Simon could barely get students to attend the mandatory orientation session. Milly had student groups falling over themselves to use the library for community service projects; Simon had never met with any of the student or community organizations. And to top it off, Milly had instituted a book festival that grew from a small affair on campus into a weekend-long tourist attraction for the area. Simon liked to think he had an attention-getting 'book of the month' display.

For some reason, Simon's library just never hit the mark when compared to similar libraries. . Well, he was going to change that. Simon gathered the stack of articles about Jones' library and marched down to the conference room for the staff meeting. Together they would review what Jones had been able to do at her library and repeat it in theirs. What could go wrong?

It is appealing to think that we can stand outside of a successful organization, repeat what we see, and create a successful organization of our own. However, it almost never works because we only think we know what is going on. The reality is that unless we are inside it, we cannot know an organization's truth.'

In *Groupthink: Group Dynamics and the Decision-Making Process*,[1] I introduced normative isomorphism – the idea that people with similar educational and professional backgrounds, and with behavior framed by the standardizing practices of professional associations – tend to think the same way about problems, decision-making, and problem-solving. In this article, I want to cover isomorphism more broadly and how knowing about it can frame the way we view organizational change – or the lack of it.

Isomorphism

Organizations often have processes and structures that are similar to each other within a field. For example, hospitals tend to look like hospitals, libraries in Pittsburgh tend to look like libraries in Cleveland, and the government education agency in one state tends to look like education agencies in other stations. While organizations of the same type, such as libraries, may be superficially similar, because each operates with different staff and in different environments, logic dictates that they should vary in their form as they try to resolve the organizational uncertainties that are theirs alone. Competition should also result in more varied organizational forms, as organizations try to differentiate themselves in the market. However, this is not the case and organizations tend to look like each other due to the pressures of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism.[2] (DiMaggio & Powell , 1991)

Before discussing isomorphism, however, it may be worthwhile to review some background information about organizations and their purpose. If we define an organization as a collection of people joined together, in shifting alliances, as they work toward shared or

individual goals, it makes sense that people would try to act for the good of the organization, since acting that way should result in obtaining the organizational goals. People will also act for their own good, whether at the departmental or individual level, such as getting a budget increase for the department or negotiating a promotion for themselves. However, despite what they may want to do, people in organizations often can't do what they want to do because they are constrained by a need to do something else. Often these needs are not realized at the conscious level.

Another thought - we know what an organization is, but not *why* it is. People organize in order to reduce uncertainty – uncertainty about the environment, uncertainty about the impact of environmental changes on the organization, and uncertainty about how they can respond to these changes.[3] (Weick, 1995) To reduce uncertainty, people can search for information, such as by using databases or talking to other people, or, they can behave in patterns that other people expect, understand, and accept. Behaving in accepted ways, even when you don't realize you are doing it, reduces uncertainty. They also decrease the likelihood that risks will be taken and create a preference for the organization to 'follow the leader' so that it reduces the risk of failure. Rather than individualize their actions as they seek to reduce uncertainty in their environment, organizations tend to look alike due in part to the pressures of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism,[2] (DiMaggio & Powell , 1991) discussed below.

Coercive Isomorphism

Organizations with interconnected relationships exert pressures on each other. For example, a nonprofit that differs in structure from other nonprofits in their mission space may suffer when seeking funding. Granting agencies want to fund organizations that look like the other organizations they fund. They want to see similar structures and hierarchies, staffing, and expertise. Any new organization that prides itself on how different it is from other organizations with similar goals will soon learn that in order to be seen as legitimate (for example, to obtain government grants, to attract skilled professionals to its workforce, etc.), it must begin to look like the other organizations. Note that the mission of the nonprofit may well be unique, but it had darned well look like other nonprofits.

Mimetic Isomorphism

Simon is going to run into problems trying to replicate Jones' library from afar. Modeling based on established or successful organizations in the field can reduce some of the uncertainties mentioned previously – that is why organizations use the 'best practices' created by other organizations. By modeling the success of others, the imitating organization hopes to obtain success for itself. In the case of a new organization, modeling can be a conscious decision in an attempt to obtain legitimacy for itself by looking like other organizations in the space. Modeling may also be an unconscious choice as an organization models itself on other organizations without realizing it. This may happen through the influx of new employees who bring their knowledge of successful organizational forms with them.

Simon thinks he can look at the public face of the other library and figure out what is going on in order to imitate it, but this rarely works. The imitating organization does not have the organizational history, resources, personnel, budget, skill sets, or processes that worked for the successful organization, so imitation attempts may be less than successful.

Let's say that Jones has a business-like, but pleasant, personality. People enjoy working for her, finding her fair and open to suggestions from her staff. Jones has also been at her school for over ten years. She is active on campus committees and has held several

offices in the state and national associations. The administration knew her capabilities and strengths. When she asked for a bigger budget to offer services comparable to those offered at schools to which their prospective students applied, the administration didn't have to think twice about approving the funds, not only for facilities but for an increase in salaries so that Jones could attract the best experienced librarians as well as some enthusiastic recent grads with new ideas. On the other hand, Simon enjoyed his library fiefdom and didn't like to interact with the other administrators around campus unless forced. He let his staff do their own thing, not micromanaging, but not leading, either. He admired people who held association positions, but didn't feel he had to do it; he was pretty sure that none of that mattered for his administrators. Simon could try to replicate Jones' library, but without the resources, personnel, and administrative support that Jones had, it would be almost impossible to do what Jones had done just by looking at her results from an outside perspective.

Normative isomorphism

The growth and influence of professions and professionalization also make organizations similar and discourages change. Professions circumscribe the actions of their members by determining educational criteria such as entrance exams; continuing education credits; or the need to research, write, and present at conferences in order to keep one's professional status. Others, such as lawyers, doctors, and accountants have codes of ethics to which members must adhere or face sanctions. In addition to ethical standards that produce a sameness of action, education tends to make professionals act similarly – especially if highly sought after employees tend to come from the same schools. This doesn't mean that they have to all come from Harvard or Michigan; they could also come from a well-regarded program at any university. The highly rated LIS programs, for example, are situated in a variety of universities, each with its own missions, demographics, and specialties, but turning out similarly educated information professionals who are likely to approach problems in a similar fashion. Personnel go from one organization to another, bringing their past experiences, their assumptions of how things are done, and what looks right and what doesn't. This subtly (or not so subtly) forces the new organization to behave in ways similar to the staffers' previous organizations. "Such mechanisms create a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organizations and possess a similarity of orientation and disposition that may override variations in tradition and control that might otherwise shape organizational behavior."[5]

Inertia

Finally, there is an additional force that makes change difficult. As organizational processes become hardened, it is difficult to act outside of them or make changes. Once a best way or best practice is found, the organization will continue to use it until forced not to do so, even if the practice has lost its utility. This develops into inertia, which can be so strong that organizations "tend to reflect the conditions of their founding, even decades later."[6] Founders will impose their strong views about the nature of the world and the role of the organization on others, who will generally hold them until "they become unworkable or the group fails and breaks up."[7] When I lived in Ann Arbor, I shopped at the Meijer food chain. The store provided booklets on the company history, focusing on the founder, Hendrik Meijer, and his son, Frederick. More than just a corporate history, the booklets contained page after page of sayings from the two men on how to treat the customer, how to treat the employee, patriotism, and the work ethic. Their strong imprint on the organization

was as evident to me as a shopper in the 1990's as it must have been to early shoppers and employees. When organizations are finally able to change, it is more likely due to political or religious ideology, rather than a rational basis for making change. 'Founder' influence doesn't have to mean the original founder of the organization. It can also be a strong person whose influence continues long after they have left the department or organization. Who among us has not been on a job where we were told, 'this is how Mary did this' and were expected to do things the same way? Or, we have suggested a new process or service and were told that the organization hasn't done it that way before and wasn't about to start now, thank you very much. In my opinion, few things are as crushing to the morale of new employees as being told to keep their ideas to themselves. Meanwhile, management wonders why change is so difficult.

Conclusion

Simon is not Milly. He doesn't have the management style, network, or administrative support that she has. However, Simon and his staff know their university and their library. Only they know what they can do and what would be difficult to accomplish. They would be better off thinking about the positives and strengths of their own organizations than trying to replicate Milly's. To the extent that they want to take 'best practices' from any library, they should do so only after tweaking them to fit their particular environment. And though it may seem counterintuitive in terms of change, having librarians with similar professional backgrounds and training may be a good thing, as they are more likely to be on the same page about changes and on how to institute them.

Isomorphism can help us understand why change in organizations is difficult and takes so much effort. Change is difficult because so many forces are arrayed against it. Organizations seek to copy what they only partially understand, similarly educated staff struggle to think outside of how they were trained, and organizations that do not look like other organizations in the field may have trouble attracting funding or quality staff. Add inertia to all of this and it is a wonder that substantive change is ever made. When faced with staff and organizations that are resistant to change, managers must be willing to examine what can be done to get staff to move past the very strong forces that make them do what they do (and they will not do). Finally, as difficult as it is to say, even when a manager wants to introduce change and innovation in the organization, it might not happen if the forces arrayed against them are very robust.

Notes

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3. Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
4. DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell , W. *The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields.*
5. Ibid, p. 71.
6. Ingram, P., & Clay, K. (2000). The Choice-within-Constraints New Institutionalism and Implications for Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* (26): 525-546, 540.
7. Schein, E. (1992). Organizational Culture and Leadership. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 213.

Patricia F. Katopol (pkatopol@uiowa.edu) is IRB Education & Compliance Specialist with the Human Subjects Office in the Harden Library for Health Science at the University of Iowa

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