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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the issue of organizational anxiety as well as reactions and possible solutions. Building on the general solutions we explore how Information Systems can be used to manage organizational anxiety.

Keywords: Organizational anxiety, Computer supported communication

Introduction

While organizational anxiety is a natural function of change, it may upset strategy or divert resources. The literature on organizational anxiety suggests that actions taken to mitigate organizational anxiety often have the opposite result of exacerbating and protracting it. Why such unintended consequences? For the same reason most remedial initiatives fall short of expectations: they focus too much on symptoms, not enough on causes, and end up adding layers to the problem. This paper proposes a model to help identify means by which information systems can be utilized to process organizational anxiety in appropriate ways.

Literature Review

Our review of the literature found that little has been done in relation to organizational anxiety and even less has been done on the role that information systems can play in organizational anxiety. The literature defines organizational anxiety as an organization member's emotional and physiological response to organizational activities (Baruch & Lambert 2007, Voyer 1997). These activities include three levels: 1) tasks people do, 2) personal histories, and 3) primitive survival. In addressing the literature we identified four parts of organizational anxiety: outcomes, causes, reactions, and solutions.

Causes

Organizations experiencing change are especially susceptible to increased organizational anxiety due to uncertainties about new work patterns and surfacing issues previously kept out of awareness by psychological contracts people had with one another and with the organization (Hirschhorn et al 1993). Organizational anxiety can result from inappropriate, unarticulated or conflicting goals, time pressure, poor leadership, and mixed messages (Melymuka 2003). Baruch and Lambert (2007) cite organizational change as a time when organizations are particularly susceptible to the influence of uncertainties and stress which can cause anxiety.

Reactions

Manageable levels of anxiety are normal and often stimulate an adaptive stress response. If the response to a perceived threat is disproportionate or prolonged, normal processes break down leading to adverse impacts on individuals and the organization (Baruch et al 2007). As managers, groups, and individuals deal with organizational anxiety they attempt to address it in different ways. Several methods (strategies) have been proposed as to how managers and groups deal with organizational anxiety (defenses against organizational anxiety, avoiding tactics, containment of anxiety).

Manic behaviors at both individual and group levels can act as defense mechanisms. Behaviors such as splitting, introjection, and projection (Klein 1975, Hirschhorn 1988/Diamond 1993) occur when managers split "good" and "bad" aspect of their existence, self-elevates (introjecting good into self), lowers participants (projecting bad onto others), and punishes them (blame, extra work, etc.) These are just a more complex occurrence of the classic blaming, scapegoating, and cutoff defense behaviors (Miller 2003). In addition to blaming, groups and individuals in organizations can exhibit the flight response where they pretend no problem exists (Bion 1959).

Grouping behaviors also act as defense and avoidance mechanisms. Dependency occurs when a group ceases constructive problem solving and waits for a "messiah" (Bion 1959). Pairing behavior is when two "good" group actors combine to undermine the "bad" leader (Bion 1959). Akin to pairing is triangling where a diad under high stress seeks to stabilize by incorporating a third person to combine with one of the original diad and force their views on the other member (Miller 2003). Togetherness pressure, another group behavior, is where an external threat breeds internal group patriotism. Where togetherness pressures are strong, group cohesiveness may become the de facto mission of the organization, often to the detriment of the stated mission (Miller 2003).

Work behaviors can also defend against anxiety.   One behavior, at the individual level is pursing and distancing, where individuals seek contact or withdraw out of the "normal" range. Another behavior is over-functioning and under-functioning, where doing more than one's fair share or being unassertive yields feelings of strength or control (Miller 203).   Another individual level behavior reaction to organizational anxiety is increased internal competition, which may lead to less shared understanding and decreased organizational resources. Organizational level work behavior responses to anxiety include a management short-term focus on metrics where an overload of financial or other organization metric targets are set in response to setbacks, which may have detrimental impacts in the long-run (Voyer 1997). Another organizational level response is the forced moving of the locus of the organizational anxiety container by management without shared understanding, which often results in further anxiety (James & Clark 2002).

Outcomes of Organizational Anxiety

The outcomes of uncontained organizational anxiety are decreased productivity, decreased creativity, decreased morale, increased attrition, personality conflict, turf wars, and faulty decision making. James and Clark (2002) found that if anxiety is not recognized and managed, dysfunctional employee behavior continues. They postulate that the containment of organizational anxiety is part of the psychological contract between employee and organization. Stokes (1994) suggested that projecting blame and frustrations on a distant (and thus safe) group is facilitated by hierarchical (bureaucratic) structures and cultures. Voyer et al (1997) found that many defense mechanisms against organizational anxiety tend systematically to increase it. Baruch et al (2007) warn against the detrimental influence of uncontained organizational anxiety on organizational trust.

Based on the initial review of the literature, the following model is proposed. This model addresses the causes of organizational anxiety and how they progress to produce negative outcomes.

Causes
▶ Uncertainties
▶ Surfacing Issues
▶ Inappropriate/ Unarticulated Conflicting Goals
▶ Perception of Failure
▶ Layoffs
▶ Only Game in Town

Organizational Anxiety

Reactions
▶ Manic Behaviors
▶ Projecting
▶ Dependency
▶ Over/Underfunctioning
▶ Cohesion Pressure
▶ Pairing/Triangling
▶ Pursuing/Distancing
▶ Repression
▶ Internal Competition

Outcomes
▶ Decreased Productivity
▶ Decreased Creativity
▶ Decreased Morale
▶ Increased Attrition
▶ Personality Conflict
▶ Turf Wars
▶ Faulty Decision Making

Figure 1: Basic Model Based on Initial Literature Review

Possible Solutions (Containment Methods)

The literature also suggests solutions for containing, or controlling, organizational anxiety. These include:

- Voyer et al (1997) suggest reducing negative behavior by focusing on positive causal loops (Accountability/empowerment, Ability to succeed, Pressure to learn and perform) and increasing the use of feedback loops (inquiry skills) to promote understanding, learning, and questioning.

- James and Clark (2002) focused on the effect of moving the locus of the anxiety container. A key issue is employee internalization of the move. Success requires training, coaching, rewarding.

- Millers' (2003) solutions focus on management style and intervention. Managers must deal with their own anxiety and not pass it on (overfunctioning, scapegoating, triangling, pursuing).

Addressing the Issues through Information Systems

Forrester (1961) offers three ways in which systems can be altered. These are: strengthening good causal loops, weakening bad causal loops, and changing the structure of the system by deleting or adding feedback loops. In correcting and reinforcing the loops Voyer et al. (1997) suggested that creating a safe environment whereby employees can communicate: a shared vision, clearly defined goals, questions and understandings.

Information systems have the ability to address these loops and if addressed properly IS can control the reactions and outcomes of organizational anxiety. Based on this idea, the following model is proposed.
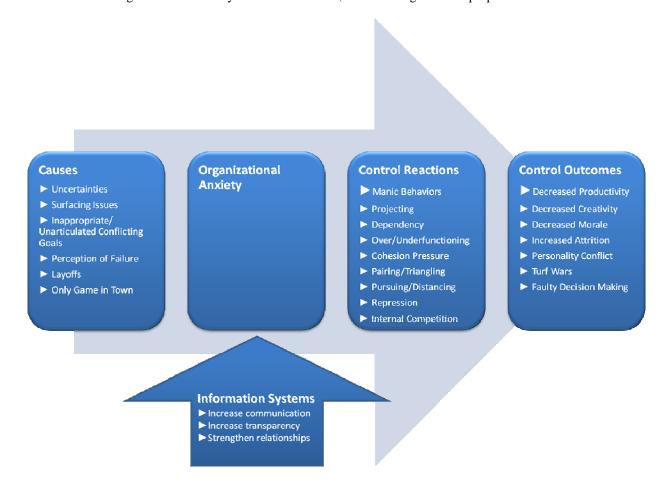

Figure 2: Proposed Model with Information Systems Impacts

We propose that the primary way in which IS can help contain organizational anxiety is through improved communication and enhancing organizational transparency. Current technologies such as knowledge management systems, blogs, wikis, portals, discussion forums, listserves, and even e-mail have the ability to increase communication as well as transparency, which strengthens relationships. As a point of reference we briefly exam three of these: blogs, wikis, and portals.

Blogs

Blogs, short for weblogs, primarily enhance communication on one direction. From a organizational point of view they can be used in a similar manner as press releases. However they have also been used to control communication between an organization and its stakeholders. Because they are inexpensive to create and easy to use, they are an efficient means of communication (Geerts & Kim 2005).

Wikis

Wikis are primarily designed for online collaboration. Wikipedia is often used as an example of how many people can contribute to something of value to many. In an organizational setting wikis have the ability to provide equal

access to information as well as a means for collaborating on ideas, policies, and projects. While enhancing collaboration, wikis open communication and can enhance transparency.

Portals

Portals often provide one stop access to organizational knowledge and communication. Access can be controlled allowing some users to contribute and others to simply view. Utilized in an organizational context they have been shown to increase and improve communication (Weiss 2005, Eudes 2005). Portals are still evolving and continue to develop new ways to enhance communication.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual paper, the propositions in the paper need to be tested and further refined. More research is needed to develop and enhance our understanding of both organizational anxiety and the ways in which Information Systems can be used to manage it. Blogs, wikis, and portals were used as examples, but additional research should build on this anecdotal evidence to provide in-depth case studies as well as quantitative studies that address these issues.

In recognizing the need for future research we are convinced that IS can significantly increase organizational communication as well as transparency which have the ability to strengthen relationships and mitigate organizational anxiety.

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