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Line Managers and HRM: A Relational Approach to Paradox

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Abstract

The scholarly literature on line manager involvement in HRM increasingly acknowledges competing demands that pervade this work. This chapter introduces *a relational* approach to paradox that postulates that the way line managers translate competing demands is highly relevant for, and impacts on, other HRM actors' experiences of tensions and abilities to handle them. We draw on suggestions from paradox literature that active engagement with competing demands can promote learning and focus on the role of training and supportive practices in organizations that enable the development of paradox mindsets and practical ways to handle tensions. By taking a relational approach to paradox, we model how individual responses to competing demands enable or hinder beneficial learning dynamics and promote virtuous cycles.

Keywords: line manager, paradox, relational approach, competing demands, organizational learning, human resource management

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1. Introduction

Line managers involvement in human resource management (HRM) activities is by now an established field in the HRM literature (for recent overviews see Kehoe & Han, 2020; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021). While early research asked whether or not responsibility for HRM activities could be devolved from HR specialists to line managers, HRM scholars today widely agree that managing employees is a genuine task of all managers in work organizations. Many contributions on line managers' HRM involvement explicitly recognize competing demands, focusing on tensions (e.g., Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010) and stress (e.g., Evans, 2017; Gilbert, De Winne & Sels, 2011). While this literature offers valuable insights into the experience of competing demands, theoretical perspectives (e.g., role theory) overlook individual responses when faced with tensions, the dynamics these responses trigger, and HRM outcomes including the impact on organizational viability (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

One way that research on line manager HRM involvement can develop in terms of drawing connections between responses to competing demands on the one hand, and organizational outcomes on the other, is through theory borrowing, i.e. the transfer of theoretical concepts and perspectives from related disciplines. In this chapter, we engage in theory borrowing by mobilizing insights from paradox research (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith, Lewis, Jarzabkowski, & Langley, 2017) to provide an analytical perspective on line managers' responses to competing demands and their implications for organizational outcomes. Paradox research has emerged in organization and management studies over the last twenty years and points to enduring competing demands in organizational settings. This perspective proposes that recognition of and active engagement with competing demands fosters beneficial learning dynamics in organizations.

Using a relational approach to paradox, this chapter discusses how line managers co-produce learning dynamics through both their responses to competing demands *and* their relationships with other HRM actors, i.e. other line managers, HR specialists and employees. As we will show, organizational learning dynamics depend on the nature of the relationship, specifically how much the response from one HRM actor affects the other actor's response to paradox. To ground our arguments, we first outline key tenets of the paradox perspective. We then use these concepts to develop a framework for studying responses to paradox and learning dynamics.

Finally, we identify levers for line managers' active engagement with competing demands and discuss how training and supportive practices may contribute to this engagement.

2. Key tenets of the paradox perspective

The paradox perspective has its origins in debates on organizational viability, which commends a focus on the ongoing nature of tensions and a dynamic view of coping with and responding to them. Paradox research is a rapidly growing field in management studies (Schad, Lewis, & Smith, 2019). In the field of HRM and employment relations, the relevance of such research is increasingly recognized (Keegan, Brandl, & Aust, 2019). Recently, we proposed a paradox framework on HRM tensions (Aust, Brandl, Keegan, & Lensges, 2017: 419ff.). Here, we summarize the key elements of this framework: the nature of tensions (paradox), responses and unfolding dynamics, and then present applications in the HRM field.

Paradox

A widely agreed definition of paradox refers to competing demands that are contradictory and interrelated, exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 382). This definition highlights that contradictory demands are “tied in a web of mutual interactions and cannot be disentangled” (Smith et al., 2017: 1).

In their authoritative literature review, Smith and Lewis (2011) suggest that competing demands can be *latent* or *salient*. In the latter case, *tensions* come to surface and are experienced as conflict regarding how competing demands can be handled. Smith and Lewis (2011) propose three conditions under which competing demands are likely to become salient: plurality, change and scarcity. *Plurality* “derives from diversification of types of employees/groups in the workplace with different interests, preferences, terms and conditions of employment, formal employment relationships, etc.” (Aust et al., 2017: 420). *Change* “is endemic to HRM systems and is related to dynamism in institutional/legal arrangements regarding employees' rights and employers' responsibilities; product market competition; introduction of new organizational strategies for competing; new models for the HRM function; new technologies and how these order and shape employment relationships and possibilities for employees to interact with the HRM function, etc.” (Aust et al., 2017: 421). And *scarcity* “is linked with contextual or internal developments including loose/tight product and labour markets; increasing/decreasing firm

financial resources; fluctuations in labour supply/demand; changing societal norms regarding training and development of school-leavers; etc.” (Aust et al., 2017: 421).

In the field of HRM, studies have documented that change and plurality foster salience. For example, Kozica and Brandl (2015) show that tensions between decisiveness and doubt for first-line managers become salient after HRM policies have changed. Brandl and Bullinger (2017) show how competing demands became salient when senior managers explain their evaluation of HRM policies in front of a heterogeneous audience.

Responses to paradox

When competing demands become salient, actors are prompted to respond to tensions. In paradox research, responses can be clustered as *proactive* and *defensive* in nature (for an overview, see Keegan et al., 2019). Proactive responses refer to ways of managing that are based on accepting paradoxical tensions and taking contradictory demands into account. By contrast, *defensive* responses involve behavior that ignores the paradoxical nature of competing demands and, treats them (mistakenly) as alternatives. A central claim of the paradox perspective is that management should use proactive responses, which pay attention to multiple demands simultaneously (‘both/and’) and navigate the tensions between them (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Contingency approaches, in comparison, advise managers to choose between competing demands (‘either/or’) and develop one-sided solutions based on priorities.

Dynamics

The paradox perspective assumes that responses to paradox create dynamics that are constitutive for organizational viability. Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart (2016: 81) define these dynamics as “iterative spirals or self-reinforcing sequences of events that grow out of the ways that actors process contradictions”. Smith and Lewis (2011) distinguish *vicious* and *virtuous* cycles based on how actors frame and respond to tensions. Vicious cycles lower organizational viability and result from defensive responses. They “undermine individual self-efficacy and well-being, as well as deteriorate organizational capabilities” (Berti & Simpson, 2021: 253). In contrast, virtuous cycles enable viability and are based on both/and management approaches. Organizational viability is characterized by actors engaging with tensions actively and working through them in constructive and self-reinforcing ways premised on accepting both/and elements (Smith & Lewis, 2011). With its emphasis on adaptation of organizations for organizational survival, the paradox perspective postulates that those who wish to retain an

organization's 'basic features' need to focus on organizational learning and change, rather than on developing solutions to complexity (as for instance a configurational perspective would suggest).

In the search for understanding about how dynamics unfold and how vicious cycles can be enabled, recent paradox literature has proposed a *relational* approach to managing paradox where the nature of dynamics depends on how managers *translate* paradox to other actors whom they supervise (Nielsen & Hansen, 2020; Pradies et al., 2021). Recognizing that cooperation with other HRM actors is crucial for line managers, this chapter develops this relational approach for modeling how translations of paradoxes to others influences outcomes of learning and organizational viability.

3. HRM involvement of line managers

We briefly discuss what we mean by line manager involvement in HRM before analyzing how relationships with other HRM actors shape virtuous cycles. Following Boxall and Purcell, we define HRM as “the process through which management builds the workforce and tries to create the human performances that the organization needs” (Boxall & Purcell, 2016: 28). This process has been characterized as entailing the design of HRM policies, transformation of these policies into daily practices, and perceptions of HRM practices by employees (Wright & Nishii, 2013). Line managers are involved in this process through cooperation with other HRM actors when implementing HRM practices and by influencing employees' perceptions of which behaviors are expected and valued by the organization (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, Kees & Looise, 2013; Townsend, Wilkinson, Allan, & Bamber, 2012)..

Based on this conceptualization, we view line managers as key players in the 'HR Triad' (Jackson, Schuler, & Werner, 2009), which includes HR professionals and target employees. In line with the HR triad, we assume that line managers cooperate with several other HRM actors and thus probably encounter a range of competing demands in these relationships. While much of the literature on line managers' HRM involvement refers to the hierarchical level or positions of individuals, we draw attention to their interdependencies with other HRM actors.

Following Nielsen & Hansen (2020), we distinguish dependencies of participants within a relationship and use the terms paradox 'navigators' and 'co-navigators' to discuss how

managers translate paradox. We adopt the following terminology in the rest of the discussion. First, we use *navigator* for those actors in a HRM related relationship who translate paradox and the term *co-navigator* for actors whom they supervise. The navigators' views constitute the fundament for virtuous cycles, as their framing of competing demands affects co-navigators' experiences of paradox and development of responses. We go beyond categorizing HRM actors as first-line manager, senior manager or HR professionals as commonly done in HRM literature, since these labels focus on structural positions and say little about the influence actors have in translating paradox and influencing dynamics. A relational approach is also helpful for highlighting the different dependencies in which specific HRM actors engage as they cooperate with others, in some interactions acting as navigators, in others as co-navigators. For example, how a first-line manager translates competing demands can be expected to matter for how employees experience tensions, but the scope of this first-line managers for translating tensions may be influenced by another supervising manager. In the next section, we draw on the concepts of the paradox approach to develop an analytical perspective for examining how the translation of competing demands affects receiving HRM actors' experiences of tensions and dynamics.

4. Responses to paradox: constellations and outcomes

A relational paradox approach assumes that “individual actors’ paradox response strategies influence and are influenced by other actors’ coping space and available coping strategy repertoire” (Nielsen & Hansen, 2020: 3). This implies that for understanding the dynamics from paradox, we need to analyze how managers respond to paradox *jointly* with an analysis of targeted employees’ responses. Here, we employ the relational approach to propose four possible constellations of paradox responses and resulting dynamics for individual HRM actors and/or their relationships (Table 1). We suggest that the specific dynamics depend on whether navigator, co-navigator or both respond proactively or defensively to paradox. Furthermore, we propose that collective dynamics are conditional on the responses from *all* HRM actors involved in the relationship. In constellations where only one HRM actor (navigator or co-navigator) responds proactively and the other defensively, this may lead to vicious cycles for the HRM actor with the proactive response.

<i>Defensive response</i>	(1) vicious dynamics for relationship (“collective downward spiral”) <i>(e.g., McCracken et al, 2017)</i>	(2) vicious dynamics for co-navigator <i>(e.g., Ali & Brandl 2018; Tracy, 2004)</i>
<i>Proactive response</i>	(3) vicious dynamics for navigator <i>(e.g., Brandl, Schneider & Dreher, 2020)</i>	(4) virtuous dynamics for relationship (“collective learning”) <i>(e.g., Francis & Keegan, 2020; Fu et al. 2020)</i>
<i>Paradox navigator</i> <i>Paradox co-navigator</i>	<i>Defensive response</i>	<i>Proactive response</i>

Table 1. Paradox response constellations in dyadic relationships

The framework presumes that relationships between navigators and co-navigators can be either loosely or tightly coupled (Orton & Weick, 1990) and that the degree of coupling affects whether learning dynamics occur for the relationship or for the individual actors only.

When their relationship with others is *tightly* coupled, line managers responses not only produce effects for their *own* range of activities, but also for how other actors in the HR triad co-produce tensions. For example, first-line managers’ responses to paradox and their coping strategies can empower or disempower targeted employees’ proactive responses. In this case, HRM actors’ influence on each other’s response is high and may be more likely to spur dynamics in their relationship (e.g., collective learning, collective downward spiral).

We identify two constellations as relevant here. In constellation 1, defensive responses from navigators lower chances for proactive responses from co-navigators. In the context of the employment relationship, the interpretation of situations by line managers in upper hierarchical levels defines the (legitimate) activities and responses for other HRM actors or at least sets boundaries for such interpretations. Response options to tensions are fewer for those who are addressed by and subject to HRM policies than for those transforming such policies into practice. This implies that defensive responses from line managers lowers chances for proactive responses from employees. McCracken et al. (2017) illustrate constellation 1 with the maladaptation phase in relationship between line managers and HR business partners.

In constellation 4, proactive responses from line managers increase chances for proactive responses from other HRM actors. Classic workplace admonitions to ‘do more with less’, for example, can force workers into uncomfortable situations where excessive workloads and absurd workplace performance pressures are justified by paradoxical framing of demands without resources to support to achieve them. For example, Francis and Keegan (2020) identified supportive dialogue with line managers, premised on acceptance of the existence of such tensions, as fundamental to learning and creative responses and without which double-binds were felt to be persistent and debilitating. A study by Fu and colleagues (2020: 205) emphasises processes of line manager interactions with employees as valuable resources for navigating paradoxes of treating people consistently and differentially: “the nature of daily interactions with direct reports, individually and in combination, providing opportunities for allocating feedback, development, interpersonal problem solving, and so forth across team members. It manifests in decisions regarding how to apply HRM practices both consistently across diverse subordinates and in response to specific individual circumstances, including differential contributions”.

In contrast, when the relationship is *loosely* coupled, involved HRM actors may handle and experience paradox in different ways. Their possibilities to influence each other’s responses are low so that outcomes are more likely experienced by the individual HRM actors than affecting the collective relationship. The latter assumes that HRM actors have a degree of autonomy that may sometimes lead them to implement and use HRM policies selectively when managers encounter complex situations with contradictory demands. According to Jackson, Schuler and Jiang (2014: 4) line managers interpret HRM policies “as they strive to *respond* to specific and rapidly changing situations” (our emphasis). Similarly, employees as knowledgeable individuals are able to interpret and react to line managers’ directives and improvisations in different ways (Trullen, Bos-Nehles, & Valverde, 2020).

In constellation 2, co-navigators deal proactively with tensions despite defensive responses from navigators. For instance, employees may reflect about paradoxical aspects in managing employees, while line managers ignore these aspects, prioritizing some demands over others. In their empirical study, Ali and Brandl (2018) observe how employees recognized line managers violated meritocratic performance standards in hiring processes for hiring candidates with a favorable political background, and how they problematized this behavior in private conversation, but nevertheless confirmed the selection decisions based on these performance standards. Since they felt discouraged from articulating their concerns in the workplace,

recognizing these tensions was associated with difficult emotions and discomfort. Tracy (2004) shows that a climate of silence can lead to withdrawal from involvement.

Finally, constellation 3 depicts situations where navigators deal proactively with HRM tensions while co-navigators remain defensive, which may spur vicious cycles for navigators. For example, Brandl, Dreher, and Schneider (2019) report that HR managers can experience fundamental doubts about the influence of HRM policies on organizational performance and wish to paint a more realistic approach about HRM, but are unable to challenge the aspirational demands aimed towards HRM from other HRM actors. Since competing demands typically affect the manager's identity and challenges their sense of coherence, it is extremely difficult for individuals to navigate tensions, especially when opportunities for making sense with others about these tensions are lacking.

The framework presented in Table 1 highlights outcomes related to the nature of dyadic relationships between two or more HRM actors. While relationships constitute important elements for examining paradox, the analytical focus of a relational paradox approach is not limited to addressing dynamics in interactions. Considerable writing in paradox literature takes the position that paradox is nested in work organizations and coevolving with the responses of organizational actors (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000). Responses to competing demands in one interaction have implications for responses in subsequent interactions in the same relation and for interactions of other HRM actors.

In the HRM domain, research by Keegan, Bitterling, Sylva and Hoeksema (2018) investigates how tensions arise from the distribution of HRM responsibilities over different actors and according to different organizing structures. Any attempts to resolve such tensions by enacting particular structures (e.g. Ulrich style three-legged stools) often sow the seeds of future tensions (e.g. between complexity/simplicity) and the very solutions trigger dynamically co-evolving tensions/responses over time. Given this conceptual foundation, each relationship needs to be recognized as an element of a process in which several HRM actors cooperate in defining performance outcomes for the organization, transforming HRM policies into daily practices and seeking to shape others' perceptions of HRM.

In the next section, we review the conditions that encourage active engagement with competing demands, with a focus on immediate factors as well as enabling conditions.

5. Conditions for virtuous cycles

When competing demands are contradictory and interrelated, exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 382), line managers' both/and responses are preferable over choices which prioritize one demand over others. Whether paradox spurs virtuous or vicious cycles, and how vicious cycles may be mitigated, is influenced by several factors. This section outlines key levers for fostering active engagement with tensions that have received attention in previous paradox research. We group these levers into two broad areas: (1) paradox mindsets that are enabled by training and education and (2) practical accomplishments that are enabled by supportive organizational practices (Figure 1).

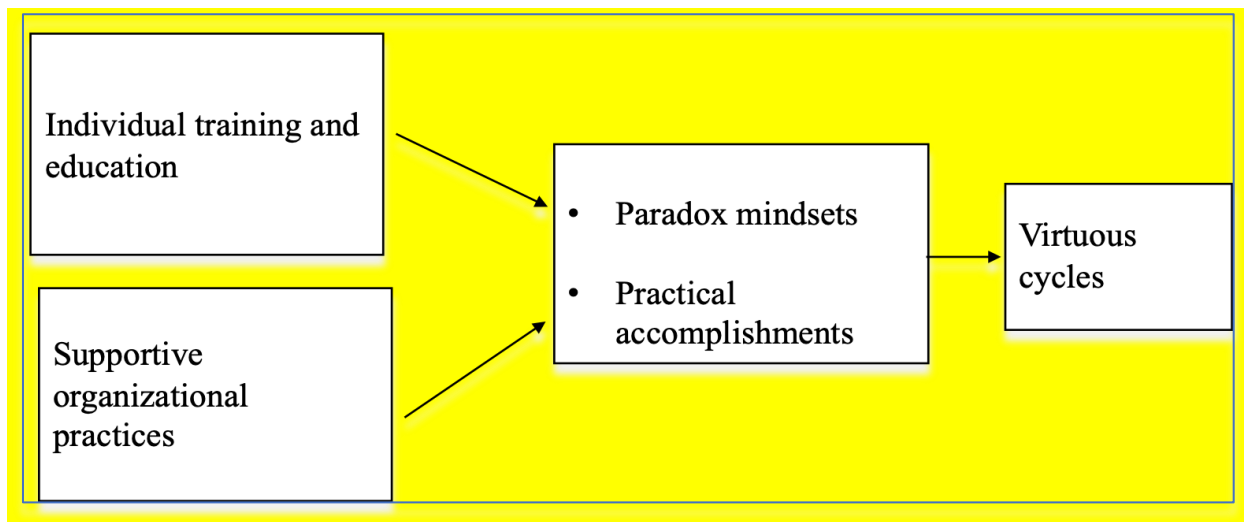


Figure 1. Conditions for virtuous cycles

Paradox mindsets

One factor which paradox scholars pay attention to is the line manager's conceptual approach to tensions, in other words, his/her paradox mindset. A paradox mindset refers to embracing competing demands through being open to solutions, accepting ambiguity, employing creativity, and using opposites to confront conflict and engage in continuous learning. Paradox mindset can be defined as "a tendency to value, accept and feel comfortable with tensions" (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018) or to make sense of paradox.

Based on prior paradox research we assume here that having a paradox mindset *or not* influences the outcome of whether individuals emotionally suffer when tensions arise or whether they are able to respond to tensions creatively and thrive at work. Acceptance and sensemaking of multiple, contradictory perspectives and requirements have been identified as

important skills for leaders (including line managers) to support their followers (Pradies, Delanghe & Lewis, 2021). Several studies on leadership have shown the importance of acceptance and cognitive aspects of dealing with paradoxical tensions such as sensemaking (Keller, 2015), holistic thinking, integrative complexity (Zhang et al., 2015), reflexivity (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) and critical thinking (Mink et al., 1989) (based on Pradies, Delanghe & Lewis, 2021). To translate acceptance into concrete action, extant research also highlights the importance of actors dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity in ways that provide guidance to others. The capacity to convey the meaning of ambiguous cues, and therefore to engage in sensegiving to followers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) even in the midst of uncertainty, is important in dealing with paradoxical tensions. Research has identified skills including confidence, defined as “inner strength to take risks, to act on uncertainty and ambiguity rather than become anxious and defensive” (Smith & Lewis, 2012: 229), communication and conflict management skills (Smith & Lewis, 2012) and finally team management skills (Pradies et al., 2021).

Paradox mindsets go beyond cognition and behavior and refer also to the emotional aspects of coping with paradox. Researchers highlight the importance of a combination of both “cognitive and behavioral complexity *and* emotional equanimity” (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 389, emphasis added). Keegan and colleagues (2019) have argued that HRM tensions will never go away and that accepting them as a normal part of organizational life can lead to an emotional relief for those confronted with such tensions on a regular basis. Research on turbulent change processes by Sanchez-Burks and Huy (2009) underpins the importance of emotion management during paradoxical and ambiguous situations. The authors offer the concept of “emotional aperture” to convey the need for change leaders to scan and detect varying collective emotional responses to the turbulence of change. They “show how emotional aperture can help leaders recognize and deal with diverse collective emotions that arise during strategic renewal and other emotionally turbulent processes” (Sanchez-Burks & Huy, 2009: 22). The value of nurturing a paradoxical mindset, and modelling the same, has also been demonstrated. A study by Liu, Xu and Zhang (2020) shows that employees with a paradox mindset are more innovative and thrive at work, and the study also shows that the leaders’ (line managers’) paradox mindsets have a positive influence employees’ innovative work behavior.

Practical accomplishments

Paradox research suggests that dealing with paradoxes is an eminently practical accomplishment (Smets, Cowan, Athanasopoulou, Moos, & Morris, 2019). This requires attention to how HRM actors handle paradoxical tensions during interactions and not only to cognitive operations.

Schneider, Bullinger and Brandl (2021) identify three practices frontline managers use to create resources for handling paradoxical tensions in everyday work with customers: situational reframing, organizational preframing and institutional deframing. In situational *reframing*, frontline managers restore customer orientation after unpleasant experiences; this means to both, make the situation look as if the customer is king, and stick to predefined (formal) procedures. In organizational *preframing*, they anticipate tensions and provisionally alter organizational procedures and meaning to maintain customer orientation (e.g., they create a new price category for services to meet customer requests and generate revenues, when existing price categories appear inadequate to customers). Finally, in institutional *deframing*, frontline managers “draw on powerful institutionalized beliefs to de-emphasize customer orientation to justify the existing and potentially conflicting organizational procedures.” (Schneider et al., 2021: 1292).

While the research focused empirically on manager – customer relations, the concepts developed in this study can be used as analytical tools for examining how HRM actors translate HRM policies and practices to others. The findings by Schneider et al. (2021) imply that in principle, all line managers can use proactive responses for navigating paradoxical demands, since actors are able to activate local resources or create resources during interactions. These insights are especially useful for examining how managers who possess relatively few resources practically accomplish managing paradoxes proactively.

While some scholarship associates active engagement with competing demands with individual traits (e.g., Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), most paradox literature assumes that individuals’ readiness for managing paradox proactively can be developed and is contextually enabled or hindered (e.g., Liu et al., 2020). Education/training and organizational support are enabling factors frequently addressed in scholarly debates. We now review how they may influence line managers’ paradoxical thinking and their practical accomplishments in proactively handling paradox.

Education and training

Lüscher and Lewis (2008) suggest that organizational actors can be trained to approach tensions as both/and paradoxes. They can be enabled to accept and accommodate the absurdity of paradoxes in the form of mixed messages and contradictions (Putnam, 1986) in order to be able to work through them. Fu et al. (2020) also show that line managers can be made aware of how their interactions with employees can enable open and accepting approaches to paradoxes (e.g. consistent versus differential treatment) providing that paradoxes are framed appropriately and interactions are managed thoughtfully to engage (and not deny) the paradox.

There is growing literature regarding training and guidance specifically for line managers to avoid vicious cycles and enable proactive responses to tensions (e.g., Lewis & Dehler, 2000; Link & Müller, 2015). Lewis and Dehler (2000) describe elements of a pedagogical strategy for management education which encourages students to explore contradictions and complexity. The authors view paradox training in terms of three principles (1) constructing complexity from simplicity, (2) discovering inner paradoxes (critical self-reflection) and (3) learning to ‘read’ complexity (i.e., recognize value and limitations of isolated perceptions). While these strategy elements are discussed for raising the awareness of paradox with students, the questions that these trainings address (e.g., “how can students become comfortable with tensions? How can they find rationality in the seemingly absurd?”) are also potentially relevant for line manager training in the workplace. Lewis and Dehler (2000) present a number of practical exercises that serve to develop the capacity for paradoxical thinking, building on action research and methods for advancing complexity thinking.

Supportive organizational practices

Paradox literature points to the importance of paying attention to the ‘organizational context’ and whether it enables, or constrains, switching from vicious to virtuous cycles. The organizational context provides cues for interpretation of events that over time become shared and come to shape ‘taken-for-granted social prescriptions’ (Battilana & Dorado, 2010: 1419, in Berti & Simpson, 2021: 8). This ‘interpretative context’ (Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis, & Courtois, 2020) can both strengthen, and undermine, whether “recipients” of paradoxical messages feel empowered to voice concerns, seek support and question the nature of the tensions they confront (Francis and Keegan, 2020). HRM actors’ responses to paradoxical tensions may be affected and constrained by power constellations in organizational settings (Aust et al., 2017: 414) due to power imbalances (Putnam, 1986; Putnam et al., 2016) who underline the importance of power. Recent paradox research (Berti & Simpson, 2021) has more specifically

examined paradoxes in managerial (authority) relationships and vicious cycles associated with the lack of agency on the part of (less powerful) employees. Berti and Simpson (2021) assert that “power relations can also influence mindsets” (p. 254). “Actors lacking agency are unable to harness the generative potential of organizational tensions due to their incapability towards choosing a legitimate response” (Berti & Simpson, 2021: 255). However, the cultivation of supportive conversational practices in organizations can enable line managers and employees to work through tensions, as Francis and Keegan (2020) found in their research: “those targeted by paradoxical (engagement) strategies need explicit workplace *resources* including supportive conversational practices to cope with and work through tensions”. Resources, including those embedded in the organization’s interpretative context, are an important aspect of context and enable actors to approach tensions proactively. However, “to enact proactive responses, individuals require not only appropriate interpretive contexts (Knight & Paroutis 2017), but also need resources empowering their ability to choose (e.g., decisional autonomy, psychological safety, material assets, and cognitive capabilities)” (Berti & Simpson, 2021: 256). Such resources can also be highly practical and material in nature, including ensuring employees have the right equipment to combine competing priorities efficiently (Francis and Keegan, 2020), scheduling time for meetings and conferences (including travel budget), and permission to compensate employees with additional days off (Kozica & Brandl, 2015).

6. Conclusions and suggestions for future research

The goal of this chapter was to introduce an analytical perspective on line managers’ responses to competing demands and their implications for organizational outcomes. We use concepts from paradox research (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith, Lewis, Jarzabkowski, & Langley, 2017) to show that HRM actors can respond to competing demands in different ways and organizational learning dynamics depend on the nature of the relationship, specifically how much the response from one HRM actor affects the other actor’s response to paradox. While HRM actors inevitably engage with competing demands, active engagement with tensions arising from these is required from all participants in the relationship in order to foster organizational learning and viability, and to avoid vicious cycles of defensive and emotionally damaging reactions.

Paradox literature provides a rich insights on the conditions that support line managers’ and other HRM actors’ active engagement with competing demands. Conditions were reviewed in

terms of both factors immediately involved in interactions (mindset, accomplishment) as well as enabling conditions (supportive organizational practices, education and training). The message emerging is that line managers' readiness for managing paradox proactively can be developed rather than being seen as a relatively immutable personal trait. This implies that HRM scholars need to examine how activities and structures foster a paradox mindset among line managers (e.g. through training or coaching activities) in order to increase the cognitive flexibility and emotional resilience of individuals and to support them to thrive at work. Irrespective of whether the development of paradox readiness occurs as a hands-on seminar for experienced practitioners or is part of management education in universities, a pedagogical strategy for addressing challenges in line manager HRM involvement (effectively) needs to recognize two requirements. *First*, it is necessary to start from the idea that making competing demands in managing employees salient to employees can be useful and productive for organizational dynamics. Since much contemporary line management education builds on a unitarist HRM paradigm, where conflict tends to be negatively connotated and competing demands are suggested to require as either/or choices, realizing this idea requires HRM scholars (and practitioners) a shift to a pluralist paradigm. *Second*, the content of education needs to include basic paradoxes inherent in the employment relationship in the context of contemporary society. In this context, it may be worthwhile for HRM scholars to reconsider that (future) line managers may be better served for solving problems in work organizations by a realistic portrayal of HRM, not an idealized one.

For HRM scholars interested in analytical perspectives on line manager research, the relational paradox approach offers a valuable perspective on the role of line managers in influencing organizational learning and viability through responses to paradox and translating these to other HRM actors. Beyond perspectives that focus on role tensions and stress in the context of HRM involvement, the framework that we introduce in this chapter suggests how organizational outcomes can be linked to patterns of interactions and relationships and is open for further developments/enrichments from a relational view of HRM (e.g., Soltis et al., 2018).

Finally, adopting paradox as a theoretical perspective implies a change in framing of desirable HRM outcomes. If competing demands persist and organizations require virtuous cycles for viability, single targets like performance or well-being cannot be viewed as targets for managing, rather as temporary and disputable possible outcomes. Line manager work may be better analysed for its contribution to facilitating organizational learning by working through tensions between competing and simultaneous priorities. Favereau (1989) argued that salaries

de facto reflect not only competencies or hierarchy levels but also employers' expectations of a manager's contributions to organizational learning. Using a paradox mindset for practically handling competing demands is the answer that a relational paradox approach commends for meeting these expectations.

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