Organizations and Unusual Routines

Everyone working in and with organizations will, from time to time, experience frustrations and problems when trying to accomplish tasks that are a required part of their role. This is an unusual routine – a recurrent interaction pattern in which someone encounters a problem when trying to accomplish normal activities by following standard organizational procedures and then becomes enmeshed in wasteful and even harmful subroutines while trying to resolve the initial problem. They are unusual because they are not intended or beneficial, and because they are generally pervasive but individually infrequent. They are routines because they become systematic as well as embedded in ordinary functions. Using a wide range of case studies and interdisciplinary research, this book provides researchers and practitioners with a new vocabulary for identifying, understanding, and dealing with this pervasive organizational phenomenon, in order to improve worker and customer satisfaction as well as organizational performance.

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A Systems Analysis of Dysfunctional Feedback Processes

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Preface

When something goes wrong
I'm the first to admit it
I'm the first to admit it
And the last one to know.
When something goes right
It's likely to lose me
It's apt to confuse me
It's such an unusual sight.

  (Paul Simon, *Something So Right*, © 1973)

This book identifies, describes, and analyzes the pervasive and frustrating experiences people have with dysfunctional feedback in organizational and societal contexts, by showing that they are symptoms and consequences of unusual routines. An unusual routine is a recurrent interaction pattern in which someone encounters a problem in trying to accomplish normal activities by following procedures, then becomes enmeshed in wasteful and even harmful subroutines while trying to resolve the initial problem, creating and reinforcing unintended and (typically) undesirable outcomes, to some set of people, subsystems, organization, or society, either within or across system levels (or both). Often, the feedback loops about this initial unusual routine are either non-existent, dysfunctional, or deviation-reinforcing, creating a second-level, or meta-, routine. The term "unusual routines" is intentionally oxymoronic. The processes and consequences, when known, would be considered unusual, unacceptable, or negative by one or more stakeholders. Although the phenomenon is pervasive, any particular instance may be infrequent and difficult to identify. Nonetheless, the process and consequences are systematic, to the point where they become routinized and embedded in other routines. The subtitle emphasizes that the book takes a social systems analysis

perspective, although technical aspects of information and communication systems also play a role throughout the book.

Chapter 1 begins the book by reviewing the inspiration for this work, Benjamin Singer's concepts of crazy systems and Kafka circuits, and introducing an initial, more general, model of unusual routines. The following chapters provide a wide range of empirical case analyses, from implementation of information and communication technology systems (Chapter 2), and unsatisfying customer service interactions (Chapter 3), to a detailed analysis of the implementation of a university networking system (Chapters 5 and 6). Each of these attempts to advance an interdisciplinary model of unusual routines. The foundations for an interdisciplinary model of unusual routines, based in systems theory, sensemaking theory, diffusion of innovation theory, socio-technical systems theory, and, especially, organizational routines theory appear in Chapter 4.

Interestingly, while many theoretical and pragmatic approaches to problems such as unusual routines recommend increased feedback, Chapter 7 shows, through a broad review of literature, that the process of feedback itself is often quite problematic, and even implicated in the generation and reinforcement of unusual routines. Feedback is treated from both a communication and an organizational perspective as a complex and often dysfunctional process, involving activities such as ignoring available information, seeking versus receiving, discourse and language, multiple layers of content and relation, reflexive loops and undesirable repetitive patterns, skilled incompetence and competence contradictions, reporting errors, feedback timing, tensions between behavior and learning, organizational memory, the unreasonableness of rational systems, vicious circles, and defensive routines.

Chapter 8 is specifically intended to show how this common and pervasive experience is related to, and a generalized example of, many other issues, such as tragedy of the commons, social traps and social dilemmas, personal heuristics, cognitive dissonance, errors in logic, predictable surprises and worst-case scenarios, organizational complexity, unanticipated consequences, organizational paradoxes, organizational deviance and employee mistreatment, technology complexity, system manipulation, normal accidents, automated systems and system error, system drift and workarounds, among others. Chapter 9 reviews a variety of recommendations, derived from the

research and theories underlying the prior chapters, about ways to help avoid, mitigate, resolve, or at least identify, unusual routines. Chapter 10 integrates the main arguments and insights from each chapter, providing a tentative comprehensive model of, and initial suggestions for analyzing, unusual routines. The reference section provides an extremely broad and diverse set of sources for these chapters. Both the table of contents and the index provide multiple access points into the materials.

The first intended contribution of this book is an identification and articulation of a set of core concepts, terms, and recommendations about unusual routines, leading to an integrated model of unusual routines, that will help researchers, practitioners, designers, customers, and clients identify, analyze, and possibly mitigate this pervasive but sometimes invisible phenomenon. The second intended contribution is an implicit critique of the idealizing of functional approaches to systems and routines, and of sensemaking theory, as social, communicative processes that necessarily counter organizational dysfunctions and necessarily create social benefits for all concerned. The third intended contribution is an emphasis on the experiences, perceptions, and implications of users, consumers, clients, employees, supervisors, and administrators, rather than, as is usual in information systems or organizational behavior books, executives, strategists, and industries, or, as are often the focus of psychology or user interface books, specific individuals.

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