Tuesday 16th, 16.10 – 17.00

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Using Bowen Theory to Improve Organizational Change Outcomes

This presentation describes research designed to bring concepts from Bowen theory into mainstream organization development research and practice. It studies the implementation of a new accounting system at a leading international firm in the travel distribution industry. The study used concepts from Bowen theory to understand variations among work groups in the level of success implementing a new Performance Measurement and Evaluation System (PMES) at SygmaTech (fictitious name). As the new system was implemented, researchers Bertrand Masquefa and Martiño Rodríguez González observe organizational members' behavior using concepts from Bowen theory with Masquefa's social network data model as a framework.

Nine research and development divisions were undergoing change related to implementation of a new accounting system. The researchers predicted that the change would disrupt existing hierarchies, create uncertainty in the work groups, and generate anxiety. Variations in levels of differentiation, maturity, and leadership among the groups would influence the degree to which anxiety traveled through the work system through triangling. Higher levels of differentiation and less triangling in a division would facilitate a more successful implementation.

Findings upheld the researchers' predictions. The levels of differentiation within each group influenced the levels of anxiety and triangling that were observed and mapped using Masquefa's social network data model. A positive association was found between anxiety and triangling activity and two anxiety-related mechanisms, "bonding" and "splitting" were observed across the divisions. "Bonding" responses were associated with higher differentiation and facilitation of the PMES design while "splitting" responses were associated with lower differentiation and obstruction of progress. The study also distinguished between two splitting responses, indifference and resistance. Consistent with prior research, mediation strategies decreased resistance.

Organizational change literature, especially in accounting remains grounded in paradigms that focus on individuals and draw dichotomies between rational and irrational behaviors. The purpose of this research is to bring thinking about emotional process and an understanding of the interaction between thinking and feeling into the critical literature of organizational change.

The following recommendations based on findings from the study may be helpful to scholars and practitioners involved in organizational change projects:

1. Obtain support from high-functioning work groups.
2. Encourage collaboration.
3. Use tactics to reduce anxiety that enable individuals with lower levels of differentiation to function up.
4. Seek more mature, better differentiated organizational members, especially for leadership positions.
5. Use mediators for detriangling.
6. Track functioning using a tool such as Masquefa's social network data model.