

James Madison University

JMU Scholarly Commons

#LEADCC: Leading Change Conference

Proceedings of the 2nd Biannual Leading
Change Conference 2021 (Virtual)

How interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience: A case study on leadership through uncertainty.

Sombo Muzata Chunda

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/leadcc>

Recommended Citation

Muzata, S. (2021). How interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience: A case study on leadership through uncertainty.

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in #LEADCC: Leading Change Conference by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Name: Sombo Muzata Chunda, Virginia Commonwealth University

Title: How interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience: A case study on leadership through uncertainty.

Abstract

Interdisciplinarity involves integrating different themes and concepts from various disciplines to produce new perspectives by combining contents and methodologies and exploring relationships of those unique perspectives in real-world settings. Proponents argue that institutions that seek to enhance their performance, develop innovations, and continue to be relevant in a complex social order need to embrace interdisciplinarity. Consequently, many studies have been conducted to understand interdisciplinarity. The majority of studies focus on the components, barriers, and enhancers, advantages, and disadvantages of interdisciplinarity. Few studies explore how in practice, interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience through leadership. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper argues that the combination of knowledge from disciplines including strategic planning, project management, accounting, and marketing produces new insights that, when applied, lead to organizational resilience. The paper uses a case study method to demonstrate how the synthesis and integration of knowledge from different disciplines facilitated organizational resilience through uncertainty. The paper argues that interdisciplinarity is not an end in itself but rather a lens through which leadership can analyze complex problems and develop innovative solutions, thereby leading to organizational resilience. It is the leadership's practice of interdisciplinarity that facilitates organizational resilience.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, uncertainty, leadership, organizational resilience

Introduction

Interdisciplinarity involves integrating different themes and concepts from various disciplines to produce new perspectives by combining contents and methodologies and exploring relationships of those unique perspectives in real-world settings. Interdisciplinarity is popular in policy, practice, teaching, and research circles (Chettiparamb, 2007). There is no single definition of interdisciplinarity; however, in practice, there is a recognition of the complex nature of problems that need to be resolved through the application of various types of knowledge and technics. The complexity of real-world problems was aptly defined as 'wicked problems' by Rittel and Webber (1973), not in a disgraceful manner but rather as an expression of the illusory nature (Kreuter, 2004). This is the nature of problems that leaders seek to resolve and the application of interdisciplinarity offers clarity in both analysis and finding solutions.

Proponents of interdisciplinarity have various arguments, including a presumption of power and importance in creating newness (Graff, 2016). This assumption of novelty has led to massive investment in efforts that support interdisciplinarity. These efforts manifest as interdisciplinary programs in universities and earmarked research funding. University programs include many types of interdisciplinary studies degree programs such as (i) interdisciplinary studies, (ii) liberal arts, and (iii) integrative studies (Augsburg, 2016). Interdisciplinary research funding emphasizes integrating different disciplines with a promise of world-altering research (Graff, 2016).

There is a plethora of research on interdisciplinarity. Some studies have focused on what constitutes interdisciplinarity and others on advantages and disadvantages (Klein, 2014). Novel work includes that on methodological interdisciplinarity defined by Brunn et al. (2005), as concerned with improving the quality of results, typically by borrowing a method or concept

from another discipline to test a hypothesis, to answer a research question, or to help develop a theory.

Notwithstanding the abundance of research on interdisciplinarity, few consider the role of leadership. Specifically, how leadership's practice of interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience in uncertain times. I utilize a case study in leadership to demonstrate how interdisciplinarity facilitates organizational resilience. Krohn (2017) argued that real-world cases help to understand specific features of interdisciplinarity. Further, taking cases seriously implies a type of learning considerably different from received views of inductive or deductive methods (Krohn, 2017, p.41).

The main argument that this case study makes is that leadership's practice of interdisciplinarity creates new insights. When applied to problem analysis, the new insights result in an understanding of the complexity of the problem in a manner that would not be possible from a single discipline perspective. Also, those new insights enhance the solution.

A case study on leadership in uncertainty

Background of the organization

This case relates to Diakonia-Sweden, Zambia country office. Diakonia is a faith-based Swedish development organization that has been in existence for more than five decades. The organization started as a humanitarian organization in 1966, responding to drought in India, under the name of Swedish Free Church Aid. Diakonia works primarily in 3 ways:

1. with local partners to create long-term change.
2. in Sweden and internationally, focusing on popular education, mobilization, and advocacy.
3. on humanitarian emergency response in collaboration with its partner

organizations in the affected areas.

Diakonia operates in 25 countries and works with 400 local partner organizations. Zambia is one of the countries where Diakonia operates an office since 2003. The Zambia country office works in five thematic areas of human rights, democracy, gender equality, social and economic justice, and conflict and justice (Diakonia, 2021).

Uncertainty

The Diakonia -Sweden, Zambia country office underwent a period of uncertainty between 2011 and 2013. The factors that contributed to the uncertainty were (i) a change in back donor funding modality, and (ii) the global economy was still recovering from the 2007 to 2009 Great Recession. The Zambia country office found itself in talks with its prominent back donor, indicating no further funding. At the same time, projects supported by another cooperating partner were coming to a natural end. These realities led to downsizing on country office staff and commencement of country office closure procedures.

Responsive leadership

With the regional office's support in Nairobi, Kenya, and head office in Stockholm, Sweden, the Zambia country office embarked on a lengthy negotiation phase for a new funding contract with its back donor. The challenge before the leadership was to demonstrate innovation in its proposed program offering. To do this meant employing new strategies to guide (i) the articulation of the problems that the organization sought to resolve and (ii) the securing of funding to continue operations of the country office to facilitate continuation in program implementation. The leadership of the Zambia country office utilized interdisciplinarity to resolve the uncertainty that the organization was experiencing.

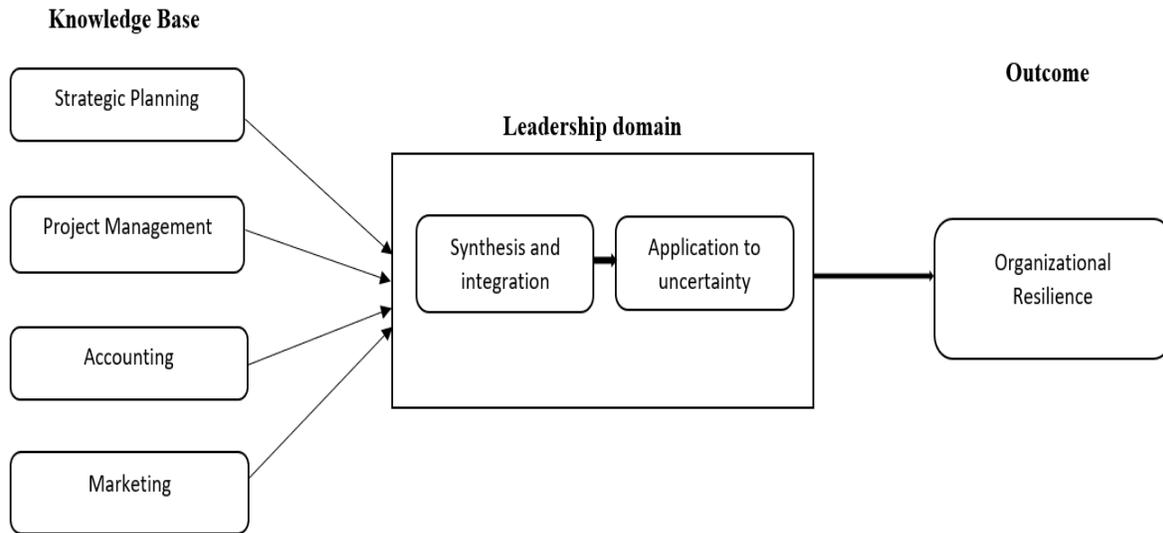
A model for interdisciplinarity

The Zambia country office's leadership drew on knowledge from various disciplines, including strategic planning, project management, accounting, and marketing. Drawing on strategic planning, the leadership undertook a strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats analysis (SWOT) to understand where it stood regarding the competition in the operating environment. Project management best practices were utilized too. Specifically, the leadership articulated the theory of change to demonstrate how outcomes would be achieved. The accounting information relating to the proposed program was presented seamlessly and incorporated all activities that were to be undertaken.

Further, this information considered potential changes to the economy and projections of the likely impact on the overall program if identified external events occurred. Recognizing that there was competition for the resources (identified through the SWOT), the leadership utilized marketing concepts to engage various stakeholders. The organization's target audience groups were identified, and specific messages were crafted and shared with these different publics. These specified disciplines provided the basis for creating new knowledge that assisted in identifying solutions to the problem of uncertainty and modeling the solution. The synthesis and integration of knowledge from these disciplines and the application thereof provided a comparative advantage and consequently resulted in organizational resilience (figure 1).

There is no specific order or discipline type that should be used to get the best insights into analyzing a problem, synthesizing and integration of knowledge, and formulation of outcomes. The choice of knowledge bases for each problem is determined by the issue being resolved, context, socio-economic, and political considerations.

Figure 1: A model for the application of interdisciplinarity



Discussion

The application of knowledge from the different disciplines to the Zambia country office's uncertainty led to the creation of new perspectives. The diverse knowledge base of the leadership played a key role in recalling the concepts from the various disciplines. However, it was the synthesis and integration of those unique perspectives that resulted in the organization obtaining a comparative advantage in its problem articulation and solution development process. Organizational resilience was achieved when a new funding contract in excess of \$2.7 million was successfully negotiated for phase one of the strengthened accountability programme. In this instance, organizational resilience is equated to raising funding for country office operations' resumption and averting an imminent closure.

Conclusion

Many studies focus on interdisciplinarity within the context of academic research. It is apparent from the literature that demonstrating the value and results of interdisciplinarity, presents a challenge that has at times led to equating interdisciplinarity to collaboration.

However, interdisciplinarity is not synonymous with collaboration (Klein, 2017).

Interdisciplinarity is the deliberate integration of different themes and concepts from various disciplines to produce new perspectives by combining contents and methodologies and exploring relationships of those unique perspectives in real world settings. Weingart (2000) argued that "interdisciplinarity is not the promise of ultimate unity, but innovation and surprise by way of recombining of different parts of knowledge, no matter which" (p. 41). The practice of interdisciplinarity requires knowledgeable leadership that can efficiently and effectively draw from different knowledge bases to create insights that benefit the organization and society as a whole.

References

- Augsburg, T. (2016). *Becoming interdisciplinary. An introduction to interdisciplinary studies.*
- Bruun, H., Hukkinen, J. I., Huutoniemi, K. I., & Thompson Klein, J. (2005). *Promoting interdisciplinary research: The case of the Academy of Finland.* Academy of Finland.
- Chettiparamb, A. (2007). *Interdisciplinarity: a literature review.* report, Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Group, University of Southampton.
- Diakonia. (2021). *Where we work: Africa, Zambia.*
- Graff, H. (2016). The “Problem” of Interdisciplinarity in Theory, Practice, and History. *Social Science History, 40*(4), 775-803. doi:10.2307/90017889
- Klein, J. T. (2017). Typologies of Interdisciplinarity. *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity,* 21-34.
- Klein, J.T. (2014). Communication and collaboration in interdisciplinary research. In O’Rourke, M., Crowley, S., Eigenbrode, S.D., & Wulfhorst, J.D. (2014), *Enhancing communication and collaboration in interdisciplinary research.*
- Kreuter, M.W., De Rosa, C., Howze, E.H., & Baldwin, G.T. (2004). *Understanding wicked problems: A key to advancing environmental health promotion*
- Krohn, W. (2017). Epistemic Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research. *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity,* 40.
- Rittel, H.W.J., & Webber, M.M. (1973). *Dilemmas in a general theory of planning.*
- Weingart, P. 2000. *Interdisciplinarity: The paradoxical discourse.* In Weingart, P and Stehr, N (eds.) *Practicing interdisciplinarity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 25–41.