

Adaptive Capacity in Project Teams

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Organizational resilience has become critical in today's environment. According to Engelhardt and Simmons (2002),

The need for organizational flexibility to accommodate a changing world is well understood. Today's high-velocity and competitive markets apply added pressure to adapt rapidly and perform at high levels. Technology is opening up new ways to compete while making old ways obsolete. These trends are recognized in strategic management theories that focus on constant change and speed. (p. 113)

This paper presentation explores **interconnections between attachment and hierarchy theories as contributory factors in the development of adaptive capacity in project teams** and subsequent resilience in organizational systems.

Adaptive Capacity in Project Teams

Theoretical Foundations:

- Attachment Theory – Bowlby (1951, 1969, 1973, 1979, 1982, 1988); Ainsworth (1967, 1969, 1970, 1978); Main (1986, 1988, 1990, 1999) – “Secure Base”
- Hierarchy Theory – Piaget (1907); Ahl & Allen (1996); Bateson (1972); Hall (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983); Tainter (1988); Schumpeter (1942); Weick (1995, 2001, 2007)
- Complex Adaptive Group Development – Gunderson & Holling (2002); Tuckman & Jensen (1977); Edson (2011)

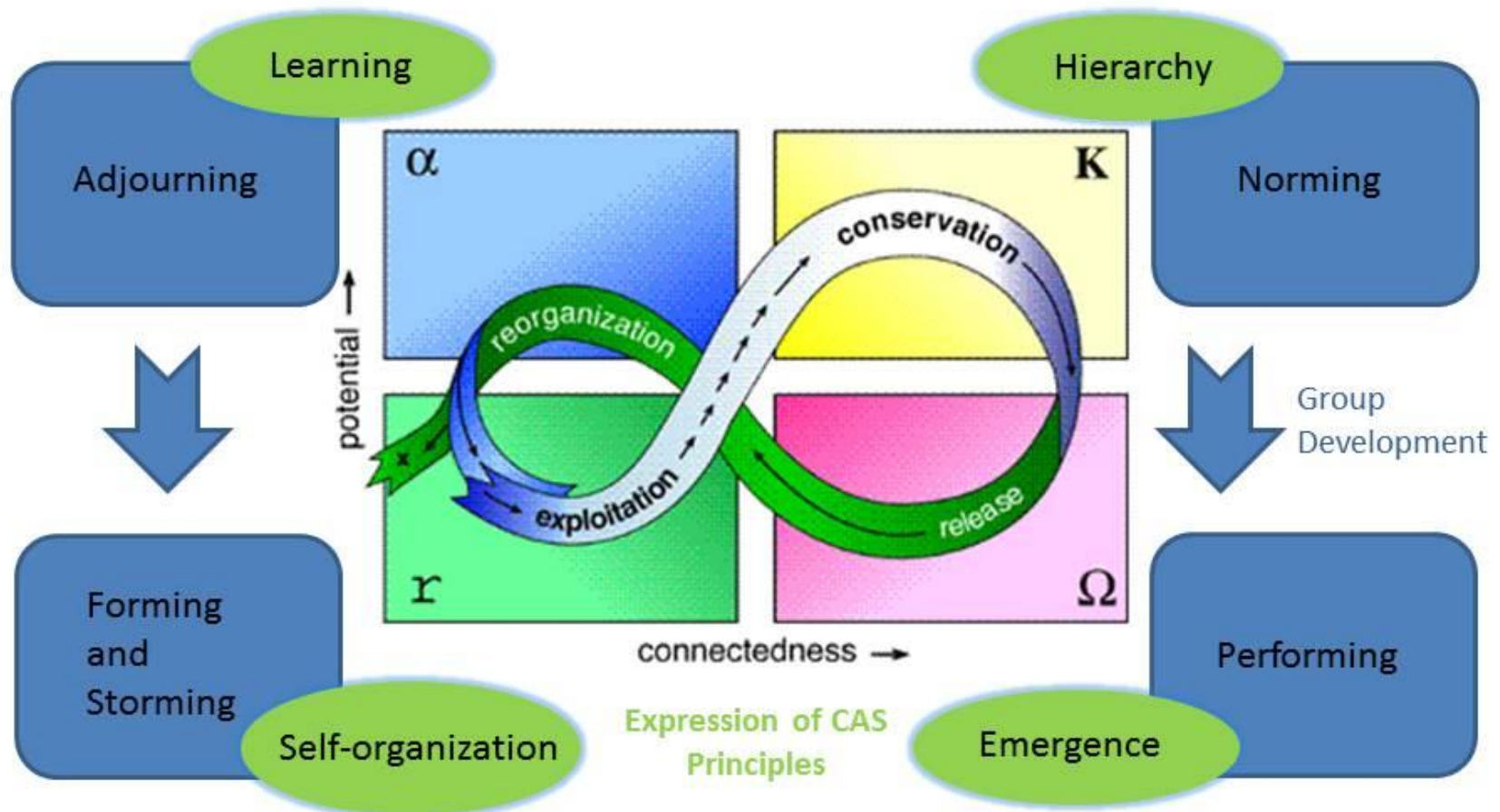
Adaptive Capacity in Project Teams

Research: A Systems Perspective of Resilience in a Project Team (Edson, 2011)

Research Questions:

1. Under adverse conditions, how do project teams become conscious of a need to change processes that no longer serve the team's objectives?
2. How do project teams take action to change?
3. Under these conditions, to what extent does the team undergo creative destruction?

Complex Adaptive Cycle in Project Teams



Note: Adapted from Gunderson & Holling (2002), *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*; Tuckman & Jensen (1977), *Stages of Small Group Development Revisited*; and Edson (2011), *A Systems Perspective of Resilience in a Project Team*.

Adaptive Capacity

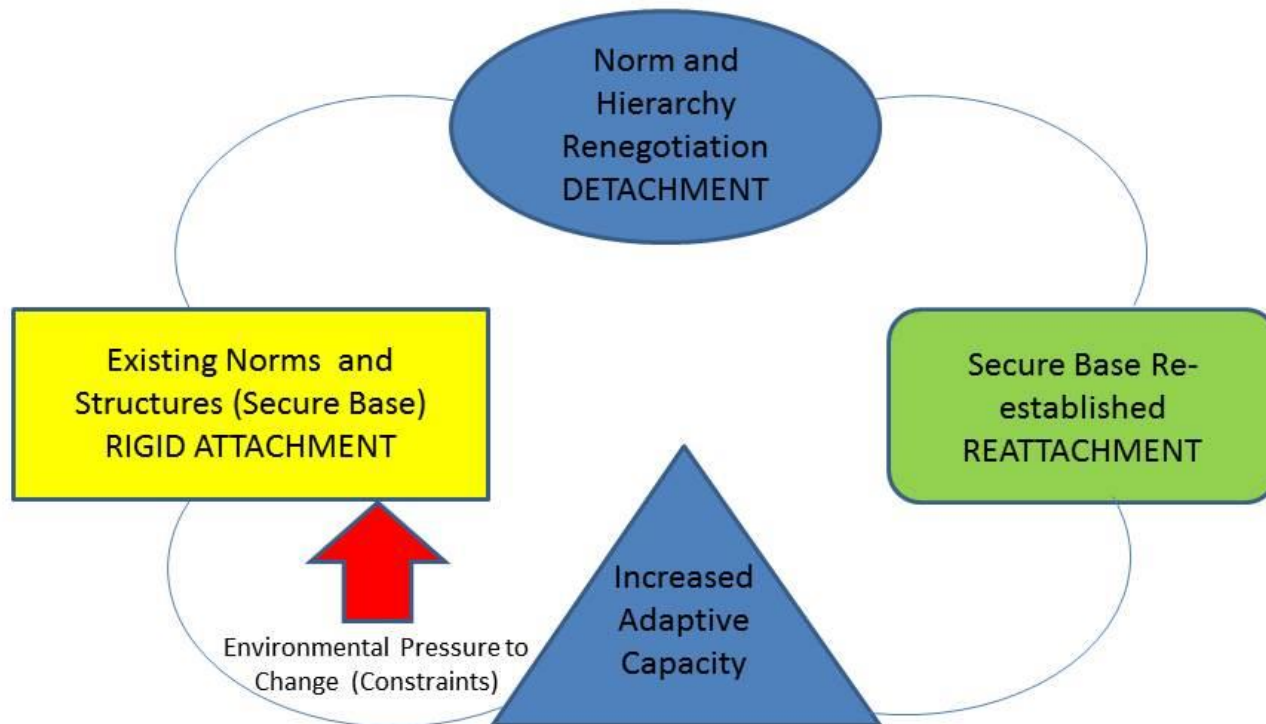
Relationship between Hierarchy and Attachment hinges on behavioral norms.

Implicit and explicit norms provide rules for behavior in groups. Storming calibrates and sets thresholds for acceptable behavior. Members understand that conduct within the behavioral threshold assures acceptance by the team or organization.

Explicit norms are institutionalized through hierarchical structures, usually documented, such as organization charts, policies, procedures, budgets, schedules, plans, time clocks/sheets, expense reports, etc. Conduct outside the threshold usually results in shunning, scapegoating, rejection, and removal.

The extent to which teams and organizations are attached (rigidly adhere) and are resistant to adapting norms impacts adaptive capacity.

Group Norm Renegotiation or Re-norming



Note: Based upon A Systems View of Resilience in a Project Team (Edson, 2011)

Adaptive Capacity

Individual attachment strategies (secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized) are carried into organizations impacting team performance (Harms, 2011). Increased awareness of individual attachment styles through assessment, selection, and intervention can help organizations build adaptive capacity by choosing team leaders and members for roles best suited to their attachment styles.

Adaptive Capacity - Implications

- Resilience – Spectrum of inflection points for change (e.g. Paradigm Shifts, Regimes Change, and Creative Destruction)
- Hierarchy strategies as building “secure base” to better manage uncertainty
- VUCA – vulnerability, uncertainty, change, and ambiguity (U.S. Army War College)
- Anti-fragility, backcasting, agile systems, scrum
- Applications – Knowledge Management (KM), Crisis Management, Disaster Recovery, High Reliability Organizations (HROs) and Teams (HRTs)

Project Team Cases

CUSD 2009 – Resilience under conditions of adversity

- Relationship between Group Development and Panarchy through CAS
- Hierarchy as sense-making, norming, artifacts of safety, security, reduction of risk
- Renegotiation of norms for adaptation and innovation
- Function maintained while norms and artifacts of hierarchy changed.
- Norms and artifacts perceived to reduce risk and uncertainty and increase commitment around shared meaning such as a common “vision.”

Standards Review Team – Internal Consultants as Enforcers of Performance (the Enemy)

- Hierarchy - building meaning and secure base through norming
- Role of trust in external relationships
- Role of trust in internal relationships
- Establishment of collective or team “secure base” – creation of “safe space” for team members to express concerns and frustrations without judgment

Recommended Reading

Ancona, D. & Bresman, H. (2007). *X-teams: How to build teams that lead, innovate, and succeed*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School

Lesson: Teams need to scan the external environment regularly for change influencing the goals and objectives of the team.

Harms, P. D. (2011). Adult attachment styles in the workplace. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21, 285-296.

Lesson: Attachment theory has been overlooked in favor of the Five Factor Model (FFM). It is time to revisit attachment styles in the workplace for complementarity to FFM and new insight.

Weick, K. E. & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2007). *Managing the unexpected: Resilient performance in an age of uncertainty*. New York: Wiley.

Lesson: Creating safe conditions for rapid feedback through reduction of hierarchical obstacles is critical for high reliability teams and resilient organizations.