



VTT

Organisational tensions as a source of renewal

Means for organizations to explore and exploit tensions



29/01/2020 VTT – beyond the obvious

Tensions as a source of renewal

Means for organizations to explore and exploit tensions



This slide set is a result of the project, in which VTT studied organizational tensions. The project was funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund, VTT and two participating organisations in 2017-2019. The slide set handles following questions:



What are organizational tensions?



How to identify and categorize organizational tensions?



How to improve ways for dealing with tensions in an organization?

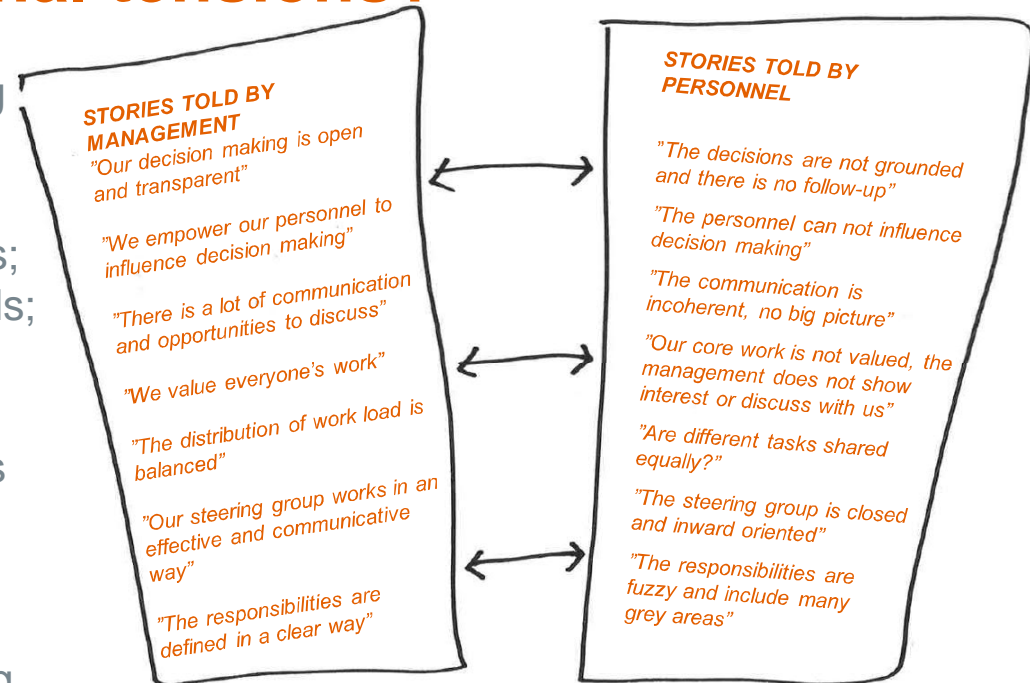


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What are organizational tensions?

What are organizational tensions?

- Manifold contradictions are colouring the everyday life in organizations
- Tensions are seen as errors, disturbances and managerial failures; personal conflicts between individuals; the "*irrational dimension of an organization*"
- Defensive attitudes towards tensions often leads to situations where discussing them openly is avoided
- Defensiveness has its roots in the logic of mass production, considering organizations as "*machines*"



An example of an organization where the stories told by personnel and management are contra dictionary or contain tensions



What to do?

- Conclusions on organizational conflicts may be based on oversimplified reasoning. Then the management may start solving them with rapid top down actions in order to be effective and consistent
- This may yield some short time relief. However, it may strengthen the tension in the long run, if the background causes are neither understood nor discussed openly
- Further, defensive strategies do not provide means for understanding persistent tensions and dealing with them in a more sustainable way.

"The personnel hasn't understood what the change is about"
"The personnel's viewpoint is too restricted"
"The personnel is not committed to the change and to the organization"
"Part of the employees have personal difficulties in adjusting to the situation and their responsibilities"

"We shall share more information"
"We shall provide more professional guidance"
"We shall take the issue up in the next personnel day"
"We shall provide more opportunities for participating"



How to describe tensions in a more fruitful way?

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- Tensions are mismatches or contradictions between different circumstances and operational models, emerging from the dynamics and the abundance of alternative choices
- In a complex environment, tensions are **a natural feature and even a necessary phenomena** in organizations. As such, they are neither good nor bad.
- Tensions **arise constantly** due to various contradictions, both inside an organization and in its relations with the outer environment
- Tensions have **”two faces”**: They do cause both organizational and individual challenges and problems. On the other hand, they are important indicators and energizers in organizations.
- Tensions indicate where to pay attention. They help in creating new solutions and ways to act in the best case.

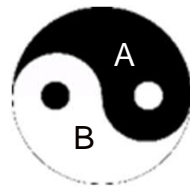


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How to identify and categorize tensions?

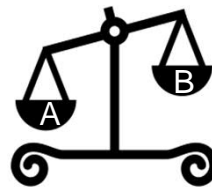
How can organizational tensions be identified and categorized?

In various organizational theories, tensions have been considered as paradoxes, dilemmas where one has to choose between two contradictory alternatives, as well as dialectic problems where a consensus is sought



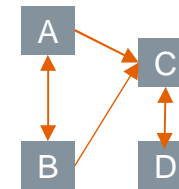
Paradox

Tensions reflecting persistent contradictions between interdependent elements.



Dilemma

Tensions that can be dealt as **two mutually exclusive alternatives**. Dilemmas are solved by assessing pros and cons related to both alternatives. Then the best solution is chosen. Tensions are perceived as conflicting interests.



Dialectic problem

Tensions, where combining contradictory alternatives A and B yields to a new solution C. C is a synthesis and eventually a new alternative D, contradictory to it, may emerge

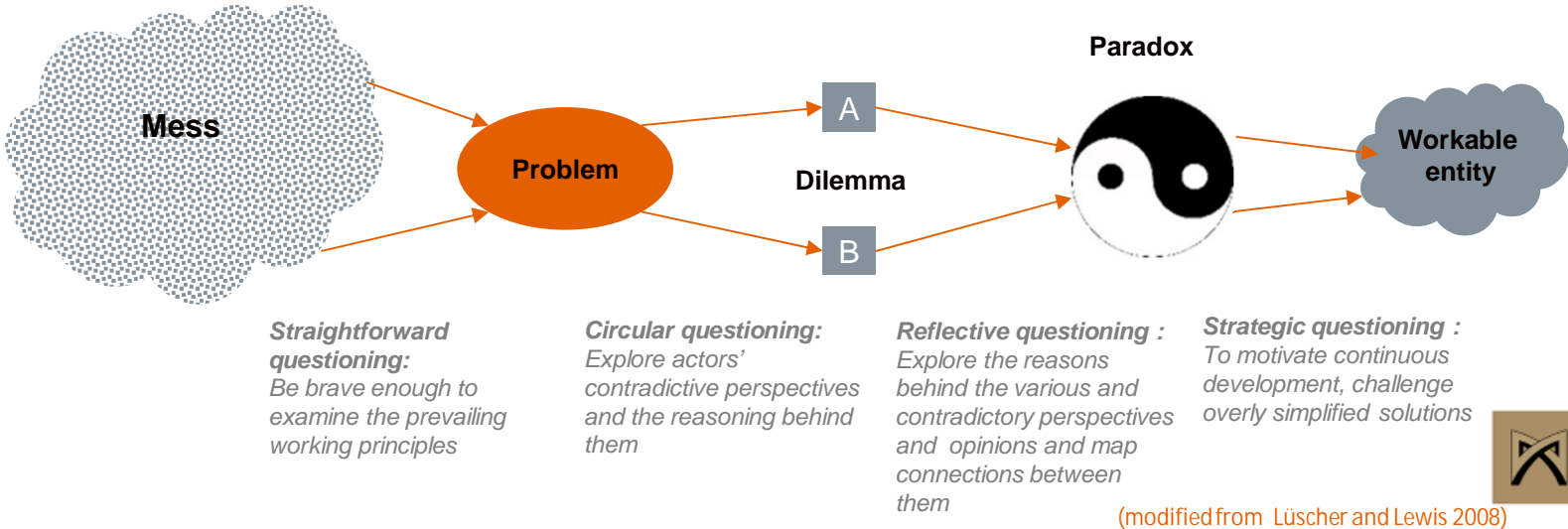
(modified from Smith & Lewis 2011)



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Identifying tensions

In practice, it may be helpful to make sense of organisational tensions for instance using the categorization shown below, considering them as a problem, dilemma and a paradox. Our perception affects the ways how tensions can be dealt with. The picture shows examples on how different types of questions can be used to work with a tension as a problem, dilemma and a paradox in order to define workable goals.



Persistent tensions in organizations

- Persistent tensions in organizations are called paradoxes. Paradox can be used as a "lens" or a tool for understanding persistent tensions.
- Persistent organizational tensions can be categorized as those related to learning, organizing, identity and performing
- These persistent tensions must be dealt with consistently. Their effects vary at different organizational levels and on different actors. Any one-and-only solution to them does not exist .



(modified from Smith & Lewis 2011)



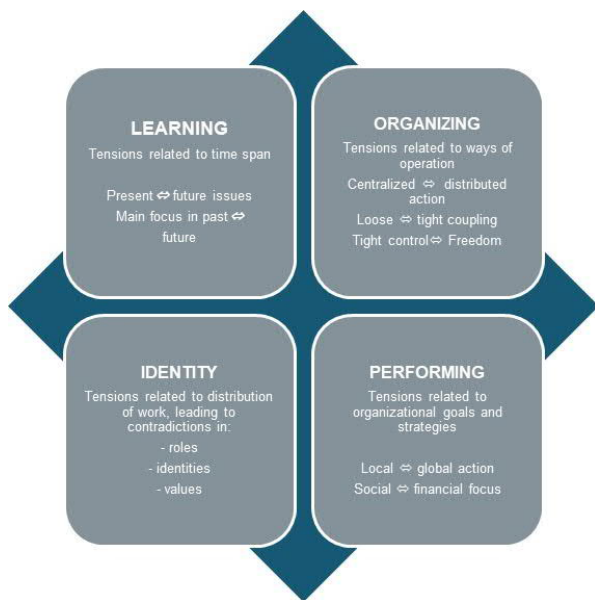
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Case study A: Tensions in a public organization

- The object of the study was municipal library service where several changes had been made to optimize and improve the services
- The goal was to improve communality and coherence in the working community
- Based on interviews of key persons, the core tension proved to exist between constant improving efficiency and simultaneous the expansion of the activities. This had an extensive effect on the personnel.
- Contradictory stories (narratives) were told by the management and the personnel
- In a co-creation process with the steering group rather simple means were utilized to mitigate the core tension and make the actions more transparent (e.g. use of an annual clock for recurrent activities was introduced)



Example 1 on dealing with tensions



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Perceptions on goals and priorities

*Clear direction
The aim is to realize everything defined in the strategy*



*Unclear and fluctuating
The goal is to define the focus by oneself*

Perceptions on the functionality of the organization

The way of working is communicative, working collectively in teams



The way of working is function and resource oriented

Perceptions on development

Emphasis on forerunner status, adopting new technology and innovativeness - > willingness to develop



*Recession, backwardness, fears
-> obligation to develop*

Perceptions on change management

Dictatory corporate management, scarce resources and uncertain future, own job jeopardized



Adjustment and emphasis on innovativeness and learning

Perceptions on personal features

*Applicability of personnel is based on personal features
The management does not want to communicate*



*Applicability of personnel emphasizes co-operation and community
The management acts openly*

Perceptions on work and its meaning

*We achieve results and succeed
Customers value our work*



*We are inadequate
Customers' expectations are contradictory and impossible to fulfill*



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Case study B: Tensions in a safety critical organization

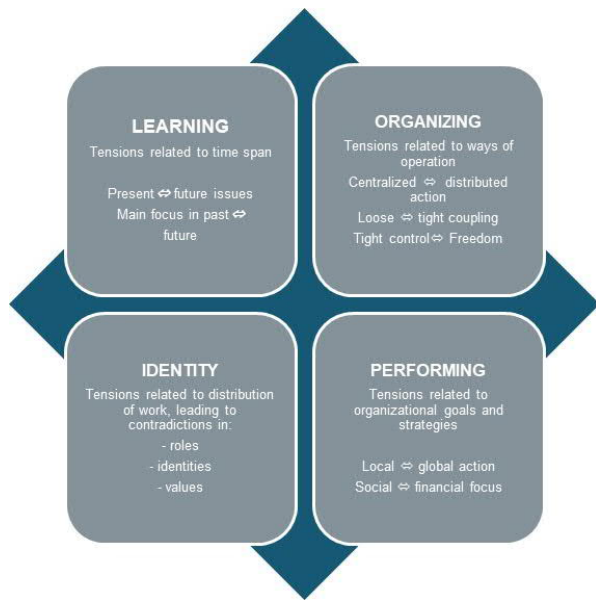


- The object of the study was the development of the safety information data management in a globally acting process industry enterprise
- Two different organizations were responsible for the system, and they could not agree on who's responsibility was to feed certain data in the system. When unsolved, this seemingly rather simple issue caused continuous complications in the everyday work
- We found rather manifold deeper tensions behind this issue, connected as well to the relations between the organizations and professional identities as to some contradictory features of the IT system
- The study helped the organization to assess the "simple" IT problem using paradox lenses, as a wider socio-technical question, and to make sense of its background causes



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Example 2 on dealing with tensions



Perceptions on the nature of the problem and its solution: straightforward or complex

Tightly focused, simply a matter of making a decision ↔ *Complex, widely affecting, a difficult matter of negotiations*

Perceptions on the relationship of the two organisations

Close, dependent, common interests, either easy to agree of to client to decide by themselves ↔ *Different interests, optimal solution for both organisations can't be found, option to refuse exists*

Perceptions on the nature of the task in question

Important routine task, suitable as a part of expert work ↔ *Simple, frustrating, waste of expert's time*

A job for a hired person ↔ *A routine task which is not suitable as a main task*

A routine task for a temporary work force ↔ *Requires good knowledge, extensive familiarization and commitment*

Perceptions on IT solutions and information systems

Makes work easier and more effective ↔ *Slows down work and makes it more difficult*

Optimal tool for each specific task ↔ *Tools should compatible with each other*

The reliability and usability should be as good as possible ↔ *Tools have good and poor features – users will adapt*

If it is good, it is good for all ↔ *Each user may have different needs*

Perceptions on change

The system should be replace by better just now ↔ *Introducing a new system would cause costs, trouble, and risks. The current system is serviceable if fixed*

Investment ↔ *Improvement of own practices*

Long term profitability. ↔ *Immediate profitability*

Promise for better raise hope ↔ *Waiting for better frustrates*

How to improve ways for dealing with tensions in an organization ?

Living in tensions and resilience

- There is no one-and-only right way for resolving tensions. Instead, organizations should develop a variety of working methods and assess their applicability in different situations. This ability for adaptive action can also be called organizational resilience.
- The next slide shows an example of a sparring process, where the middle management of an organization was supported in transition to self-organizing teams (Lüscher and Lewis 2008).
- Tensions related to the change were explored actively and examined using several lenses: problems to be solved, dilemmas and paradoxes. These helped in drafting workable goals.
- The sparring process helped the managers in perceiving tensions and accepting their paradoxical nature. On this basis they learned to seek “both-and” solutions to persistent tensions, besides “either-or” solutions.



An example of exploring an organizational change through different lenses

	Problem: Cleaning a mess	Dilemma: Either/ or choice	Paradox: Conceptualizing interconnections	Workable goal
Questions related to Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can I build a strong team with such different members? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should I EITHER set common goals for the team OR stress member differences? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BOTH, promote unity AND value and emphasise diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In order to create a consistent team. treat team members according to everyone's needs and preconditions
Questions related to performing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can I delegate tasks that I could solve best by myself If my team becomes self-managing, what will be my role? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should I EITHER direct my employees OR let them gain the experience? Should I EITHER manage OR let my employees manage? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BOTH, lead the way AND recede into background BOTH top-down AND bottom-up management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share your experience with employees to help them learn to solve problems by themselves Create optimal conditions for teams so they are able to become self-managing
Questions related to organizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can I establish self-managed teams when my employees are not motivated to change? How can I build a successful team midst of this mess? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should I EITHER force team building OR respect my employees' wishes? Should I EITHER build the teams now OR wait that the situation becomes clearer? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change is BOTH expected to have meaning for people AND meaning is created through changed action Promote BOTH a change AND a stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster motivation for the new teams throughout the ongoing process of team building Build flexible, supportive teams capable of operating in turbulence

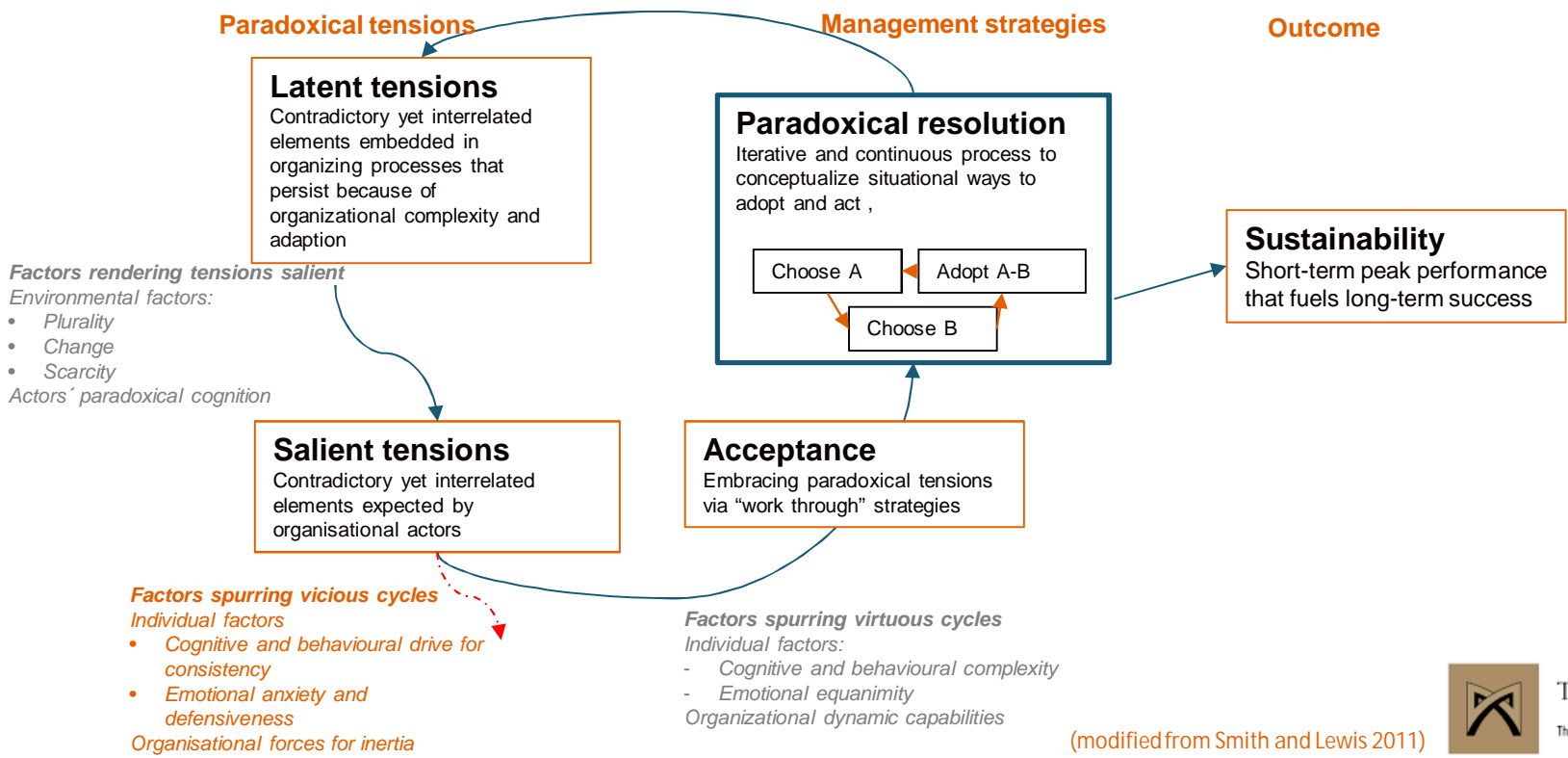


Active processing of persistent tensions

- Ignoring persistent tensions easily leads to a vicious circle. In the worst case, this strengthens contradictions and enforces the negative effects of tensions.
- The following slide describes active processing of paradoxical tensions in an organization by taking latent tensions in a collective discussion and decision making.
- Accepting paradoxes as a normal part of organizational life helps dealing with them. Further, it enables to identify and choose multiple situational options to proceed.
- It is also good to notice that being restricted to linear logic (unambiguous) reasoning, or actions emphasizing only one side of a tension, can lead to enforce tensions and contradictions.



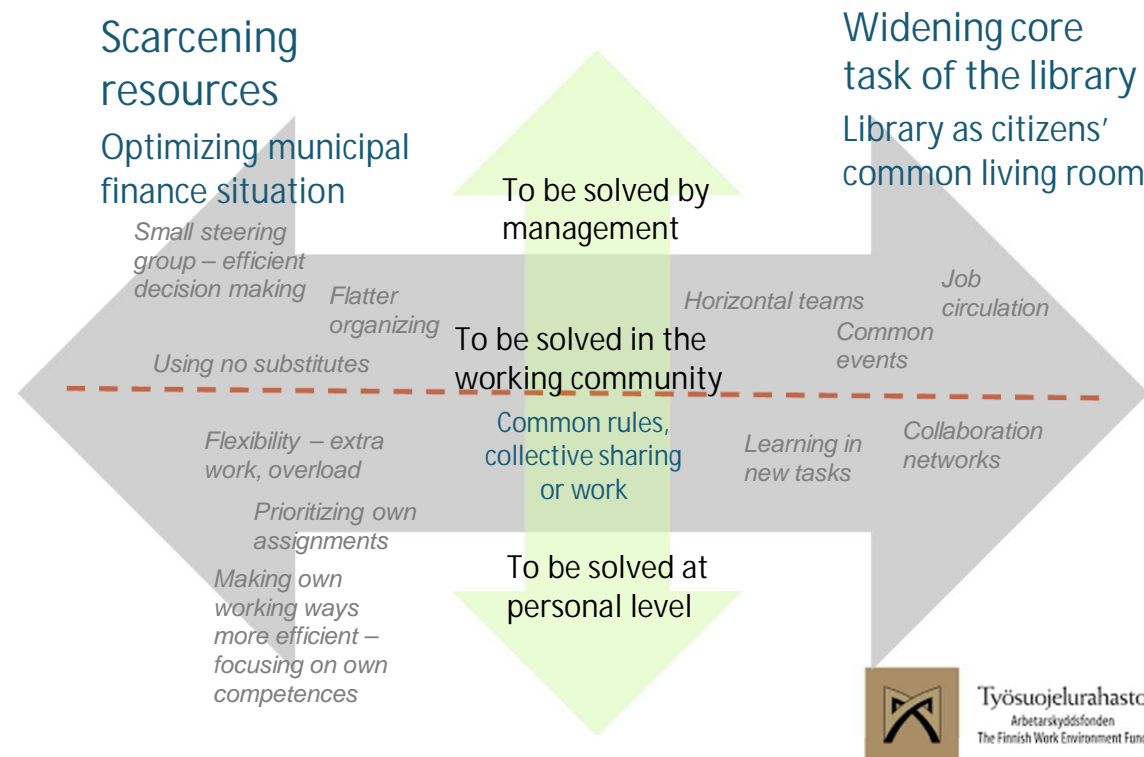
Active processing of paradoxes



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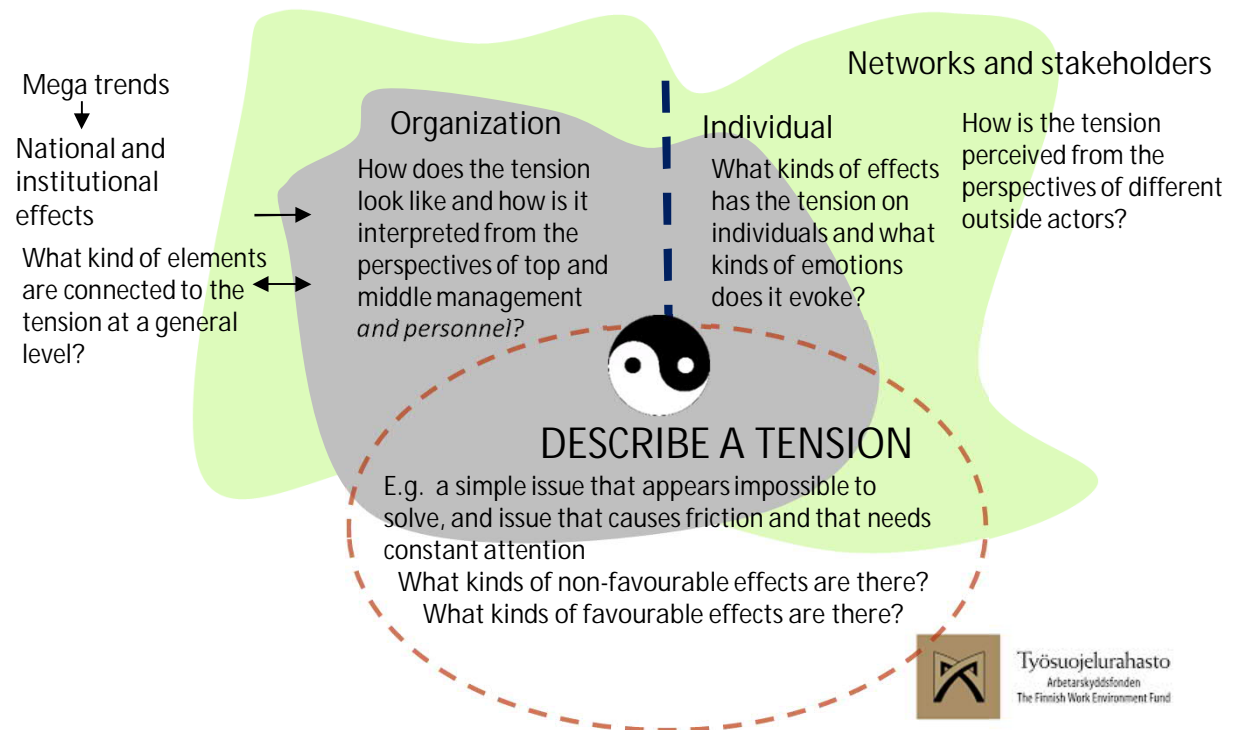
An example of acting on tensions

- In today's library services there exists a persistent tension between decreasing resources and widening core task
- This causes several interconnected tensions in the everyday work
- The organization used various methods at different levels for solving tensions and moving forward



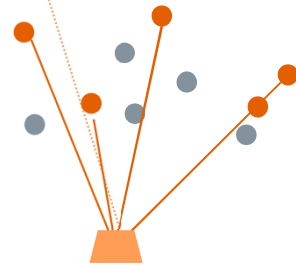
Framework for analyzing tensions

- A tension may look like a conflict between two individuals but it may reflect various phenomena at different levels
- Versatile and cross-level examination of tensions provides a basis for developing more workable ways to act

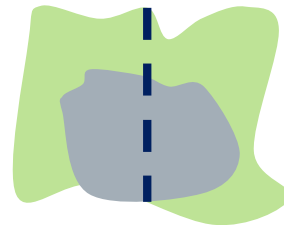


What did we learn?

1. It is difficult to predict the effects of solutions, if a problems or tensions are dealt one by one, for example, "an inadequate commitment" as a single problem



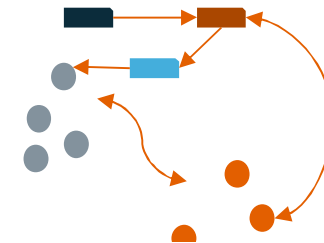
2. Treating tensions as "bundles" widens understanding on how different elements interact and what kinds of surprising effects and opportunities may emerge; e.g. centralized management vs. self-organizing



3. Exploring tensions from various perspectives helps understanding their wider backgrounds and effects

- individual perspective (employee)
- organization as a whole vs. units vs. teams
- Institutional vs. national vs. global

4. Tensions can be fruitfully dealt with via communication. Organizations can be helped to identify and interpret tensions; to find solutions and to change prevailing organizational narratives and, as a result, to change actions



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Summary of living in tensions



Be curious – give space for different opinions!



Analyze from several perspectives – observe interconnections!



Create collective solutions – try out!



Adopt different development methods as a continuous iterative process!

A living and well-functioning organization will never be finished – it is in a constant state of change!



References

- Link to final report: (only in Finnish)
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