LILA Theme for 2015-2016

MANAGING COMPLEXITY - HOW ORGANIZATIONS NAVIGATE STRATEGIC PARADOXES

Today's work environments are complex, and conditions of ambiguity, uncertainty, conflicting goals, contradictory messages, and competing perspectives can create barriers to effective performance. We are asked to take a long-term view and yet make short-term decisions that increase profits. We are asked to learn new things and yet perform at highest levels. We need to innovate but also operate in predictable ways. We oscillate between centralized and decentralized operational structures. We tightly organize work for control but want people to show initiative and self-organize. We encourage collective identity and yet reward individual achievements.

Such conditions give rise to *paradoxes*, contradictory yet interrelated ways of thinking and acting (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Paradox can be a double-edged sword—capable of providing meaning and energy, and also fostering paralysis and deep frustration when people try to avoid or resolve them prematurely. Research suggests that adopting paradoxical practices (actions and mindsets that favor "yes and" rather than "either/or" approaches) is associated with increased performance and creativity. Paradoxical practices are also critical in enabling innovation when a task is complex or when there are limited resources. Paradoxical thinking and action expand the way we come to understand cross-cultural and global issues.

This theme will explore how paradoxical practices enhance the ability to recognize interrelated aspects of competing elements, as well as how to address the relationships between those elements in a way that brings about a balanced way forward. The theme will tackle questions such as: *What are key paradoxes in today's organizational life? How can we make sense of these paradoxes? How do leaders embody paradoxical thinking and action? How do organizations develop these practices in their employees? How might organizations be designed more purposefully to attend simultaneously to competing demands?* We will approach our inquiry into paradox through three distinct topics.

The Paradoxical Leader: Paradoxes of Vision and Leadership (October 21-22, 2015)

Paradoxes can be opportunities when leaders recognize them and find ways to manage them with insight. Generally speaking, there are at least two ways leaders do this. *Smart trade-offs* are when leaders figure out the smart balance for the context rather than going to one or another extreme, or letting things fall out haphazardly. *Smart synergies* happen when leaders find ways in which conflicting visions of action aren't perfectly conflicting—ways through which we can get *more* than just a trade-off. This topic will examine particular paradoxes related to vision and leadership, such as: *How do leaders ask for individual excellence AND collaboration? How do leaders motivate consistency and predictability AND innovation and change? How do leaders put multiple stakeholders (employees, customers, shareholders, community members, etc.) "first"?* This session will focus on ways to address paradoxes that help leaders make sense of competing demands and unclear roles in order enable action. We will examine typical "fault lines" that lead to contradictions both at the individual and organizational level and understand how get "unstuck" with paradoxical thinking and action.

The Paradoxical Organization: Paradoxes of Culture and Structure (February 10-11, 2016)

This session will identify the design elements of organizations that effectively navigate strategic paradoxes. It will aim to understand how organizations create cultures and structures that enable paradoxical practices to thrive. We will look at how such organizations can provide a positive experience for those who work there by helping them deal with the competing agendas that exist in organizations. We'll home in on particular paradoxes of culture and structure such as: *How do organizations create structures of centralized monitoring and control AND flexible, local decision-making? How do organizations create shared cultural identities AND allow for unique and diverse identities?* This topic will aim to illustrate the conditions necessary for individuals and groups to learn from one another and to engage in processes that aim to generatively work with tensions.

Learning Through Paradox: Paradoxes of Learning and Performing (April 13-14, 2016)

This session will focus on paradoxes of thinking and action related to learning and performing. At individual, group, and organizational levels, there is increasing pressure to develop new skills, experiment, make mistakes, and learn. However, there is also pressure to continue to execute with existing knowledge, maintain efficiency, and perform the highest levels. This topic will explore how organizations create developmental and performance mindsets and actions in the face of this paradox. It will explore formidable forces that shape this paradox, such as time, scale, and technology. It will examine the latest research on how organizations allocate resources to deal with the urgency of action while supporting longer-term reflection and learning. It will gather insights into how leaders strike the balance between investing in formal *AND* informal learning as well as top-down *AND* bottom-up approaches to spreading knowledge throughout an organization. The goal will be to understanding the conditions that enable paradoxical thinking and action to thrive as organizations attempt to balance a need to learn while performing.

10th Annual LILA Summit (June 7-8, 2016)

As we come together as a broader LILA community, we will invite new voices into the conversation and review what we have learned during the yearlong exploration of *Managing complexity: How organizations navigate strategic paradoxes.* We will identify what we can do to better deal with the paradoxes that we experience in our working life, and how to promote paradoxical practices of thinking and action in our organizations.