Significance of Dialectic Tensions in Transforming the Activity Systems of R&D Organizations across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Research and Development (R&D) Organizations in developing countries have sought to enhance their income generation capabilities by implementing best management practices collated from similar organizations in developed countries. Yet, the efforts of most were found to have been constrained. Using an organizational activity theory framework and a qualitative approach, based on interviews and workshops, an attempt is made to offer an understanding to this phenomenon. Historical analyses on the efforts of three R&D organizations in three countries are carried out from the perspectives of organizational climate and culture re-orientation in their activity systems. The outcome showed that the constraints are reflective of the organizations’ inability to identify and successfully manage new developments arising simultaneously in their activity systems during their best management practices implementation processes. Emergence of such new developments are a result of dialectic tension between the institutional and cultural elements in the management practices being implemented and those shaped by past history and engraved in the R&Ds organizational activity systems. By this understanding, effective strategies can be designed to facilitate the cross-cultural implementation of best management practices in R&D organizations.

Keywords: Practice implementation; Organizational activity; Transforming activity system; Activity contradictions; R&D organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Research and Development (R&D) Organizations in many developing countries are state owned agencies that provide technical and business extension services, testing facilities, problem solving services as well as research and development assistance to small and medium scale enterprises (SME). In this regard, the ability of R&Ds to serve SMEs effectively is an important determinant to the success of SMEs in meeting the competitive challenge of the marketplace. According to Mengu and Grier (1999), SMEs cannot attain their full potential without improvements in their ability to access, absorb, adapt, and exploit new technologies and business techniques. In this context, R&Ds are to play important roles in making this happen. However, they must provide services with the highest level of effectiveness and efficiency to best enhance SME capacity to innovate and ultimately to improve their competitiveness and sustainability. Mengu and Grier (1999) argue that the key impediment to successful R&D performance is often not technology but management. The situation has escalated in recent years as governments have, for a variety of reasons, reduced funding to the R&D organizations. Studies of R&Ds by Mengu and Grier (1999) in the European Union and elsewhere reveal a great deal of consensus regarding their underlying business principles and the practices used in their daily interaction with client enterprises. The practices identified by Mengu and Grier (1999) were categorized under ten management process areas (i.e. financial management, business development, organization management, project management, policy and programming, capacity building, personnel management, and networking). These practices were then recommended to most R&Ds for implementation and internalization through benchmarking. According to Mengu and Grier (1999), the tools developed targets R&Ds that provide technical and business extension services, testing facilities, problem-solving services and research and development assistance to industry, especially those in the SME sector. Yet, the efforts of most of these R&D organizations to implement and internalize these best management practices were constrained. This situation underscores the relative significance of the observation by House (2004) to the effect that the increasing connection among countries, and globalization of corporations, does not mean that cultural differences among them are disappearing or diminishing. House (2004) argues that on the contrary, as economic borders come down, cultural barriers could go up, thus presenting new challenges and opportunities in business.

A study by Sanda (2003) on the best management practices implementation efforts of ten R&D organizations in eight developing countries reveals the existence of some constraining factors to the R&Ds’ efforts. These factors include; (i) the prevailing socio-economic and legal frameworks, (ii) influence of consumer and market forces, (iii) pervading political atmosphere, (iv) the operating climate, (v) subsystem stability (i.e. operating system), (vi) communication interfaces within the R&D organization and between it and the surrounding environment, (vii) decision-making approach, and (viii) educational background (qualification) of employees. The observations by Sanda (2003) agreed with those made earlier by Negandhi (1977) from field studies of 92 industrial firms in five underdeveloped countries. Sanda (2003) observes that the extent to which the external environmental factors inhibit the implementation efforts of some R&D organizations depended on their abilities to identify and manage new developments that simultaneously arise within their activity systems. This raised the question as to whether constraints to the implementation of such best practices, (which are seen as successful management strategies used by companies in most developed countries) and their management across differing cultures (especially by companies in the developing countries) are the direct consequence of external environmental factors alone or whether the impact of the external factors are strongly influenced by other factors arising from an organization’s activity system (i.e. internal environmental factors). House (2004) notes that globalization opens many opportunities for business as it also creates major challenges. One of the most important challenges is acknowledging and appreciating cultural values, practices, and subtleties in different parts of the world. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine what constrained the efforts of some research organizations in developing countries to implement a best management practices model used successfully by similar organization in the developing countries in bid to enhance their income generation capabilities. The objective is to examine and provide understanding on the dialectic tensions that existed in the organizational activity systems of the R&D organizations and how such tensions impacted their 'best management practices implementation processes.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on practice implementations across cultures ‘has gained increased importance in the past two decades as a result of the growing need to learn from other management systems due to the intensification of international competition. Pudelko (2004) questions whether the term ‘cross-cultural management’ really covers the essence of the field or is in many cases misleading, inexact and therefore inappropriate. According to Pudelko, cross-cultural management research deals with all questions and problems concerning the management of productive social systems which result from differences in the cultural context and from the confrontation of persons and institutions with different cultural backgrounds. As Pudelko (2004) notes, it is to these that management problems resulting from the transfer of management theories, management techniques and managers belongs. In this respect, Shahnavaz (2002) indicated the necessity of considering other reasons. In this regard, therefore, Pudelko (2004) posits that there are in addition to the cultural variables, additional explanatory variables such as socio-political or economical contextual factors which can help in explaining the special traits of respective management systems different cultures. Pudelko (2004) argues that it is not usually management systems of different cultures that are compared with one another. For researchers to be able to find the reasons why differences exist in various management systems, they should not rely exclusively on culture as explanatory variable since there are other contingency factors which also play in important role in this context (Pudelko, 2004). Thus in the pursuit of trying to understand the influence of dialectic tensions in organizational activity systems relative to the implementation of management practices in organizations across cultures (i.e. in different countries), it makes sense to look at the influence of the different subsystems of an organization separately rather than proceeding only from the overall (cultural) system. The implication here is that, by looking at different organizational subsystems, the influence of dialectic tensions in each organization’s activity system could be understood. Therefore, in this study, instead of introducing culture as an explanatory variable for the entire organizational system, an organizational activity theoretical perspective is used. The theory has a strong explanatory power to provide an insightful understanding of the different subsystems of the organizations involved in this study.

Since organizational change is a difficult, time consuming, and expensive process, Shahnavaz (2002) notes that cultural factors, including the way people interact with each other in an organization and commit themselves to organizational goals, are complex matters that have significant bearing on the success of an organizational change. In this respect, Shahnavaz (2002) indicated the necessity of matching management methods and techniques to the local conditions. According to Shahnavaz (2002), societal and organizational culture-based differences should be considered when designing or introducing change in an organization. Thus an expansive transformation can be accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualised to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity (Engeström, 2001). In this respect, the distinction between individual goal-directed action and collective object-oriented activity is of central importance. Individual actions may be depicted focusing on their linear dimension or focusing on their socio-spatial dimension. Engeström (2001) explains that developmental transformations are seen as attempts to reorganize, or remediate, the activity system in order to resolve its pressing inner contradictions. While the primary contradiction between the use value and exchange value of the object does not go away, it evolves and takes the form of specific secondary contradictions as the activity system interacts with other activity systems. The emergence, aggravation and resolution of these secondary contradictions may be regarded as a developmental cycle in the life of the activity system (Engeström, 1987). Therefore, work activities undergo transformations which sometimes lead to expansive reorganization. What is commonly missing in such meetings is an awareness of the fact that the discourses do not only generate solutions for a particular issue, but also more general new patterns of activity (Engeström, 2004). Engeström (2004) argues that history is made in future-oriented situated actions and this poses the challenge of how to make the situated history-making visible and analyzable. In meeting these challenges a platform for assessing several variables (including the culturally-related ones) that are testable within the different elements of an organization’s organizational activity system, and which stands to contribute to the understanding of practices implementation and/or evaluation in organizations is required (Sanda, 2006). In this sense, since
the object of activity determines the horizon of possible goals and actions, then the emerging object of employees’ activity must be seen as standing to determine the horizon of possible goals and actions that could impact either positively or otherwise on the implementation of new work practices in organizations (Sanda, 2011). This is because the object and motive of a collective activity may typically be sought after by means of multiple alternative goals and actions, most of which will evolve from actors’ wildfire activities (Engeström, 2006), which are underscored by their emerging objects towards the realization of the collective activity (Sanda, 2011). Thus for studies of managerial discourse, this implies that ways of capturing how managers discursively create new forms of activity and organization (Engeström, 2004; Engeström, 2006; Sanda, 2011). In this study, the R&D organizations’ activity systems was by reflected by the framework shown in figure 1 below and its inner dynamic assessed using Engeström’s (2001) five principles of organizational activity.

![FIGURE 1: Framework for analyzing an organization’s activity system (Sanda, 2006)](image)

Engeström’s (2001) first principle of activity analysis postulates that a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems, is taken as the prime unit of analysis. Goal-directed individual and group actions, as well as automatic operations, are relatively independent but subordinate units of analysis, eventually understandable only when interpreted against the background of the entire activity systems. Activity systems realize and reproduce themselves by generating actions and operations. Engeström’s (2001) second principle relates to the multivoicedness of activity systems. It postulates that an activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests. The division of labor in an activity creates different positions for the participants, the participants carry their own diverse histories, and the activity system itself carries multiple layers and strands of history engraved in its artifacts, rules and conventions. The multivoicedness is multiplied in networks of interacting activity systems. It is a source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translation and negotiation. Engeström’s (2001) third principle relates to the historicity of activity. It postulates that activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time. Their problems and potentials can only be understood against their own history. History itself needs to be studied as local history of the activity and its objects, and as history of the theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped the activity. Thus, implementation of the management benchmark needs to be analyzed against the history of its local organization and against the more global history of the organizational concepts, procedures and tools employed and accumulated in the local activity. Engeström’s (2001)
fourth principle concerns the central role of contradictions as sources of change and development. It postulates that contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts. Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. This primary contradiction pervades all elements of our activity systems. Activities are open systems. When an activity system adopts a new element from the outside (for example, a new technology or a new object), it often leads to an aggravated secondary contradiction where some old element (for example, the rules or the division of labor) collides with the new one. Such contradictions generate disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity. Engeström’s (2001) fifth principle proclaims the possibility of expansive transformations in activity systems. It postulates that activity systems move through relatively long cycles of qualitative transformations. As the contradictions of an activity system are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The most essential characteristic of case studies, in the opinion of Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991), is that they strive towards a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action. They explain that cultural systems of action refer to sets of interrelated activities engaged in by actors in a social situation. This opinion of Feagin et al. is in conformity with the methodological position of Engeström (1987) who argues that doing expansive research does not mean dealing with activities “in general”, but with real activities realized by identifiable persons in identifiable locations. The implication here is that organizational activity systems realize and reproduce themselves through the generation of actions and operations in organizations. Therefore in carrying out expansive developmental research, it is important for the researcher firstly, to gain a preliminary phenomenological insight into the nature of the discourse and problems experienced by those involved in the activity before delineating the activity system under investigation (Engeström, 1987). What Engeström (1987) means by phenomenological insight is that in organizational activity theory-oriented studies, it is the task of the researcher to get a grasp of the need state and primary contradiction beneath the surface of the problems, doubts and uncertainties experienced among the participants of the activity. This may be accomplished through comprehensive reading of the internal and public discussion concerning the activity, through participant on-site observations, discussions with people involved in the activity or having expertise about it. By transposing these views of Engeström (1987) on the contextual frame of this study, the data source in each organization are the identifiable groups (agents) who are the staff members. Since these agents, as a collective entity, constitute the community, it is important to understand the character of such community in the respective cases. In order to provide an understanding of the community’s character, it became imperative that relative dimensions such as, autonomy, cohesion, trust, pressure, support, recognition, fairness, discourse, appropriation and social relations within each organization (or case) are assessed. The challenge here, therefore relates to how the researcher’s actions toward the assessment of these dimensions are triggered. A crucial triggering action in the expansive learning process is the conflictual questioning of the existing standard practice which can lead to deepening analyses (i.e. analysis of contradictions) and eventually to a sharper and more articulated questioning (Engeström, 1987). As Engeström (2000) noted, the actions of questioning and analysis are aimed at finding and defining problems and contradictions behind them. The term “contradiction”, as a source of tension in the organizational activity system, indicates a misfit between elements within an activity, and/or between different activities. These contradictions manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, breakdowns, and clashes. Therefore, the empirical approach for this study involved the collection of data on how activities were carried out by agents in each organization.

Data Collection

The mode of understanding implied by qualitative research involves alternative conceptions of social knowledge, meaning, reality, and truth in social science research. As such, there is a move away from obtaining knowledge primarily through external observation and experimental manipulation of human subjects toward an understanding by means of conversations with the human beings to be understood (Kvale, 1996). By implication, the basic subject matter is no longer objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted (Kvale, 1996). In this study therefore, the interview approach was used to collect data. This was because in the dialogue (i.e. interview conversation), the subjects (interviewees) do not only answer the questions prepared by the researcher (interviewer). They
Interviewees) also had the space to formulate their own conceptions of their lived world (Kvale, 1996; Sanda, 2010). The expectation here was that the sensitivity of the interview approach and its closeness to the interviewees’ “lived world” would lead to the evolution of knowledge that could be used to understand the relative outcome of the commercialization processes of the organization studied (Sanda, 2006). Thus the interview process created a platform based on which the interviewees answered not only the lead questions prepared for them, but also had the opportunity to formulate their own conceptions of issues in the organizations in which they worked during the interview conversation.

The study was carried out in three R&D organizations in Africa and the Caribbean. Before gaining access to the study participants, initial contact was firstly established with the Heads of each organization to know if the management was prepared to support the study by allowing unhindered access to employees from whom data could be sourced. The management, in turn, also sought a good understanding of the research purpose and the expected learning that their organizations could derive from the findings. A short research synopsis was sent to each organization to aide their understanding of the research purpose. Based on this, a commitment of support and cooperation was received from each organization allowing unhindered access to data collection. Purposive sampling characterized by a sense of snowballing (Patton, 1990) was used to select the study participants (i.e. data sources). This was based on the researchers criteria that persons each person viewed as source of data must “have-lived” the privatization process and thus have knowledgeable insights of the changes in the work environment. In this respect, twenty employees (i.e. interviewees) were selected in each organization. These employees were identified to have played variety of key roles in their organizations’ privatization process. As such, their individual implicit beliefs on actions during the process were sourced in the interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded and the average time for each interview session was one hour. Duration for data collection in each organization was 2 weeks.

Data Analysis

The interviews were viewed as conversations about the interviewees’ life-world, with the oral discourse transformed into texts to be interpreted hermeneutically (Kvale, 1996). Since the purpose of hermeneutical interpretation is to obtain a valid and common understanding of the meaning of a text, then hermeneutics is of double relevance to interview research. As Kvale (1996) explains, hermeneutics, firstly, elucidate the dialogue that produces the interview texts to be interpreted. Secondly, it clarifies the subsequent process of interpreting the interview texts that are produced, and which may again be conceived as a dialogue or a conversation with the text. In this respect therefore, the recorded interviews were transcribed and scripted (Kvale, 1996). The validity of the scripts generated for all the interviewees was established by crossing-checking with each interviewee. An interpretive description qualitative approach (Brazier, Cooke & Moravan, 2008; Thorne, Reimer & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Sanda, 2011) was then used to analyze the scripts generated from the interviews. Using this approach, the experiences of the interviewees during the transformation of activities in their respective organizations are described and interpreted, but without reconfiguring them into a more highly interpretive form, such as the theoretical framework that is created in a grounded theory approach. Instead, the findings were made to stay closer to the words of the interviewees. It described their experiences and at the same time captured the meaning they attributed to these experiences (Brazier et al., 2008; Sanda 2010).

RESULTS

The results are analyzed from the perspectives of the following three themes; (i) activity system of organization [A] during implementation process, (ii) activity system of organization [B] during implementation process, and (iii) activity system of organization [C] during implementation process.

Activity System of Organization [A] during Implementation Process

The organization’s transformation process emanated from the decision of the government to cut down on its yearly subvention to it, with the expectation that the organization should be able generate up to thirty percent of its annual budget. In order to meet this challenge, the organization found it necessary to implement best management practices within the framework of a broader commercialization program. The premise for the implementation is that such best management practices could enable the organization
to successfully commercialize its products and services, and hence be able to account for the subvention cut by the government. The results showed elements of constraints in the organization’s communication interfaces and decision-making process. The organization’s internal operating system was perceived as a huge bureaucratic entity which did not function in ways that could have assisted the organization in the realization of its objectives. There was also a tension in the institutional rules that emanated largely from the complex decision-making matrix binding the organization to a parent organization, and for which no major attempt is made to overhaul. This laid the foundation for un-cooperating attitudes of staff members, which situation was also reinforced by their individual histories and the organization’s history as a government non-profit making entity. This internal tension gave rise to a situation whereby the staff members judge organizational issues from the perspectives of their personal core values. The constraints in the institutional rule also contributed to the creation of tension among the organization’s community members with respect to the way labor is divided. This was aggravated by the inadequate provision of incentives to the staff members due to the organization’s continued reliance on inadequate government subsidies. There was a high degree of disparity between senior staff and their junior counterparts with respect to incentives for performance enhancement. The organizations human resource system was also found to be constrained. The information flow process and communication system was also found to be inefficient.

The commercialization appears to be for some few people and not for the entire staff members. There is a problem of communication within the system. It is just not effective. There is no trust in the working environment. There is also no commitment to the organization’s objectives by the staff. All these have arisen because there is nothing like a new organizational culture with which the staff could have themselves identified.

These observations indicated the presence of conflicts in the organization’s institutional rule and division of labor. It therefore signifies the existence of activity contradictions in the organizations institutional rules, community as well as the division of labor. The consequence of this tension-laden internal environment is that the organization’s staff members continued to work without identifying themselves with the new organizational culture, but rather allowed their old ways of doing things to predominate their perceptions. In this respect, there was an erosion of a unified organizational culture as a result of employees’ non-identification to the new process. This constrained the ability of the organization’s management to effectively organize and manage work as well as other related issues prescribed by the commercialization program. This situation resulted in the emergence of distrust within the organizational structure as well as the lack of commitment by the staff members towards the attainment of the organizational objectives. Thus the attempt to introduce changes by the organization using instruments obtained from external sources encountered varieties of constraints that caused instabilities in the organization’s sub-system. This instability was reflected by the absence of synergy among the various elements in the organization’s activity system. Specifically, the tension between the organization’s community and division of labor which emanated from the constraints in the institutional rules introduced an activity contradiction within the organization’s activity system. It can therefore be argued that as a result of the failure of the organization’s management to ensure the complete overhaul of the previous system prior to the commercialization program, its subsequent retention and translation resulted in the corporate image of the organization being defined within the context of its past existence. This is because, the organization was given up to two years to be able to generate the required thirty percent of its income, but it was able to generate only six percent of the target.

Activity System of Organization [B] during Implementation Process

The objective of the organization’s transformation process was to commercialize its products and services, and be fully self-income generating. The result showed that the quality of the organization’s internal environment was diffused as a result of most members of staff and the management seeing things in different perspectives. As such, the internal environment required to ensure an efficient introduction of new practices was affected by constraints in the organization’s human resources and information flow mechanisms. The consequence of this was the emergence of a fuzzy understanding of the organization’s emerging (i.e. new) corporate culture, which situation gave rise to individual interpretations and understanding of organizational values and norms. Most of the staff members held on to their own core values, as well as viewed issues from the perspectives of the organization’s past history.
There are some elements of informal rules within the organization. There are some that I try to ignore. There are some which affect the organizational process, for example, an organization going against its formal rules and producing inferior products. There is the need to revise those rules that ran contrary to the transformation process. With the current management structure, I am not sure if such situation could be easily identified for rectification. There are a lot of inconsistencies in the management structure and these have generated elements of distrust and disaffection within the system.

This observation depicted the presence of multivoicedness in the organization’s activity system due to the erosion of a unified organizational culture which was supposed to guide the commercialization process. This multivoicedness projected the organization’s activity system as a community entailing multiple points of views and cultures. Such differing interest created different positions for the staff members who carried their own diverse histories. Thus the multivoicedness in the organization’s activity systems served as sources of trouble with the organization’s management distrusted by some staff members. This distrust also impacted negatively on the organization’s division of labor. New and old staff members held differing visions of the organization with the old staff holding on to the organization’s historical past, and the new staff coming in with new organizational image envisioned by the management.

I currently see the new professionals coming on board as very selfish and arrogant. They most often look down on some of the old staff who are not degree holders, but have acquired enormous professional experience through years of work and have been able to rise through the ranks with time. This has resulted in a situation where almost everyone has to fight for recognition within the system, the consequence being a negative impact on the subsystem stability. Issues of loyalty are causing divisions within the ranks and file. Sense of professionalism is also giving way to self-glorification. There are traces of lack of knowledge among the young professional within the system now.

Such differences in perspectives introduced activity constraints in the division of labor with some staff relating to the organization’s new work culture while other did not. The consequence of this was that the organization’s drive toward full commercialization of its services and products remained a challenge with the implementation outcome falling below the organization’s expectations. The success range for the self-income generation is between sixty percent and sixty-five percent, as against the eighty percent expectation.

Activity System of Organization [C] during Implementation Process

The organization used the best management practices to re-orient its corporate culture in line with the operations of typical research and development institution. The results showed that the internal environment expected to ensure an efficient functioning of the best practices was negatively affected by constraints in the human resource and information flow mechanisms. This created a fuzzy understanding of the organization’s corporate culture among the staff members, and this resulted in individual interpretations of organizational values and norms within the system. This situation led to employee suspicion of management actions, which event constrained the functionality of the organization’s institutional rules and created a work environment that was devoid of trust, socialization and commitment.

I think the rules that are guiding our operations now are the old rules which have been adopted into the new system. They have never been changed. In fact, they are not consistent with the way we are supposed to function now. If we still continue to have confusion about the structure of the organization, then how can we really get a clear picture of the division of labor? I think the current management structure is not right. Actually, we do not have the foundation for building a research institution as it pertains in most countries. I see the human resource manager more as an advisor to the management and hence do not have the power to take decisions. This manager is not a member of the organization’s management.
Work organization was also constrained by frequent staff turnover, and so was the functionality of the organization’s institutional rules. Employees’ attitude was influenced by their individual as well as the organization’s history. This resulted in them judging organizational issue from the perspectives of their personal core values. The management also had to work with a board whose civil service orientation was maintained by the government which is the owner of the organization. This resulted in situations where the board numerosly disagreed on issues, and thus stalled the management’s efforts. Different sections in the organization built walls around themselves shaped by different perspectives of the organization’s vision. These perspective differences impacted negatively on the generation of common projects. This introduced activity contradiction in the organization’s division of labor. This contradiction was spread in the organization’s activity elements by constraints in the human resource and communication systems. The consequence of this was that the organization’s objective of transforming its operations to that of an effective research and development institution was not achieved.

DISCUSSION

The outcomes from the results analysis showed the prevalence of constraints in the organizational activity systems of the three R&D organizations. These observations indicate the interrelated linkages between the institutional rules, division of labor and the community’s climate and culture within the organization’s activity system (as outlined in figure 1) and whose functions are interdependent. The implication here is that once the function of one component of the activity system is constrained, it also goes on to constrain the functionalities of the other components of the system. This scenario indicates that the transfer of a practice model from an environment where it is implementable across cultures to a new environment does not necessarily imply that the model will also be implementable in its new environment. This observation shows that new practice does not come from external sources, but from those participating in the social process of using the new practice for problem-solving within that community. This social process is not necessarily that once the function of one component of the activity system is constrained, it also goes on to constrain the functionalities of the other components of the system. This scenario indicates that the transfer of a practice model from an environment where it is implementable across cultures to a new environment does not necessarily imply that the model will also be implementable in its new environment. This observation shows that new practice does not come from external sources, but from those participating in the social process of using the new practice for problem-solving within that community. This social process, as noted by Jarzabkowski (2003) to signify the routinized nature of practice explained by theories of social order, such as structuration (Giddens, 1984). Structuration examines the relationship between agents and socially-produced structures through recursively situated practices that form part of daily routines. In this respect, structures are the collective systems within which human actors carry out their daily activities (Jarzabkowski, 2003). For the R&D organizations, it could be argued that the structures built by the new practices being implemented constrained and disabled human action within the organizational activity systems. These findings affirm the view of that new practice does not come from external sources but from participating in the social process of problem solving within that community (Jarzabkowski, 2003). As Jarzabkowski argues, the routinized nature of practice may be explained by theories of social order such as structuration (Giddens, 1984), in which the interaction between agent and structure is recursive. Structuration examines the relationship between agents and socially-produced structures through recursively situated practices that form part of daily routines. In this respect, structures are the collective systems within which human actors carry out their daily activities, and which also tend to constrain and enable the actors’ actions. It can also be argued further that such structures are ascribed different meanings in different cultural environment and, this also dictates the degree of constrain that is imposed on human action, as have shown in this study. This agrees with Jarzabkowski’s (2003) view that structures are also created and re-created by actors who draw inspirations from their social structure and its underlying cultural implications in carrying out their activities. Therefore, it is this reciprocity between actors and structure that enabled the persistence of social order in the work environment, embedding it in the organizational culture that endure across time and space. As Jarzabkowski (2003) explains, structuration makes three main contributions to the routinized nature of practice. Firstly, practice is institutionalized in social structures that persist across time and space. Secondly, institutional social structures are incorporated in the daily practices that constitute action. Thirdly, structures persist through the tacit knowledge and practical consciousness of actors who choose familiar patterns because it provides them with “ontological security”. By taking these into account, it can argued that the process of implementing best management practices in an organizational system should be guided by clearly defined motives which are expected to translate into actions structured by conscious goals, since the key actors in the exercise also double up as learners of their new activities. As noted earlier on, the division of labor in the activity systems of all the three cases created different positions for the community members who also carry their own diverse histories. The implication here is that the requisite communal motive is not embedded in the objectives of their best management practices implementations. As Jarzabkowski (2003)
notes, the tension that existed in the organizations’ activity systems can be conceptualized as a generative process of continuity and displacement between old and new players. New participants learn from continuing members how to use the practices of the system, and in the process resocialising the continuing players and reinforcing the existing practices. However, due to their low socialization to the system, new members also question the practices, so creating the potential for their re-evaluation and adaptation (Hutchins, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991; March, 1991). This scenario can be seen as reflective of the dialectic tensions between the new organizational culture being introduced into the respective organizations activity systems and their community’s historical culture. As Jarzabkowski (2003) argues, new practice does not come from external sources but from participating in the social process of problem-solving within that community. In this regard, existing frameworks take on new meanings that are highly contextual and local practice may deviate from institutionally established practice. Yet, according to Jarzabkowski (2003) communities that have largely stable membership, with limited external networks, and few crises or problems are liable to engage in recursive practice while the converse situation promotes adaptive practice. This therefore calls for dimensions, such as, autonomy, cohesion, trust, pressure, support, recognition, fairness, discourse, appropriation and social relations within an organization to be assessed since all these stand to influence the quality of the mediational actions required to meet set goals. As such, one can associate with the views of Glendon (2001) by perceiving the organizational culture to embody varieties of dimensions assessable at three different levels (i.e. a relatively accessible level, intermediate level and deep level). In this respect, the most accessible level refers to observable behaviours and associated norms within an organization. The intermediate level includes attitudes and perceptions, which are not directly observable, but which may either be inferred from behaviours or assessed through questioning. At the deepest level are core values, whose depth, breadth, progression, strength, pervasiveness, direction and localization within an organization need to be assessed, in addition to those organizational climate measures relating to member attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions, which can help in accessing certain components of the dimensions of organizational culture.

As Engeström, Engeström and Kerosuo (2003) argue, situated actions are inherently tension-laden, unstable and open-ended, and that instead of just retrospectively asking why an action or an utterance occurred, one should also ask of what dynamics and possibilities of change and development are involved in a given action. Therefore, the analyses showed that the adoption of different positions by the actors constituting the communities for the three R&D organizations created problems of multivoicedness within their activity systems. The problem is compounded by the respective organizations’ own multiple layers and strands of history which are identified to have been engraved in their respective institutional rules and organizational norms. This multivoicedness, as explained by Engeström (2001) appears to have served as sources of trouble, with respect to the RTOs operations, during the best management practices implementation. These might have culminated into secondary contradictions (as outlined by Engeström in the fourth principle of activity theory) within the individual organizations’ activity systems, but for which the actions of translations and negotiation to address such dialect tensions are never realized by their respective managements. The variability in the constraints encountered by the three R&D organizations, in relation to their best management practices implementation and the quality of their activity systems are only understood against their own history. The adoption of a new instrument from the outside by some of the R&D organizations led to an aggravated secondary contradiction where some old elements within their activity systems dialectically collided with the new ones. In this respect, the (specifically, the institutional rules and division of labor) ability of the organizations to manage such new developments depend on the extent to which they are able to offset the dialectic tensions within their activity systems and which results in disturbances and conflicts within their communities. This point is relayed by the variability shown in the implementation outcomes of all the three cases studied, and which are dictated by the extent to which they were able to manage their resulting contradictions. It is therefore posited that in the study of practice implementation in organizations, the sub-units of analysis, in relation to the study framework (figure 1) must be identified within the various elements embedded in the different mediation media (i.e. instrument, institutional rules and division of labor) defining each of the respective relationship (i.e. subject-object, subject-community, and community-object) within the organization’s activity system. In this respect, the influence of the mediating artifacts defining the relationship between the subject and the object can be viewed as a key factor, and thus serve as the control mechanism for determining the strength, qualities, and extent of the mediational relationships between subject and
community, as well as between community and object. Additionally, the mediation artifact for the relationship between the subject and the object then becomes the transformation guide, mostly in the form of either “best management practices” or “strategic plans”. This mediational artifact, thus helps in defining the characters of the elements to be involved in the mediation action between the subject and the community as well as the elements constituting the mediation tools (i.e. division of labor) between the community (staff, management, board) and the object. In this context, the mediation artifact could be seen in the form of plans. This relationship can also be viewed as providing the context for multivoicedness in an organization’s activity system. Thus from the perspectives of management transformation in organizations, application of the embedded mediation elements in the institutional rules as a source of mediational action within the organization should be viewed to be influenced by the quality of the management processes, and its ability to ensure an effective organization of the community to meet the requirements of the mediation artifact relating the subject and the object (Sanda, 2006). On the other hand, the quality of the management organization processes should be seen to depend on such organizational factors, such as the structure, corporate culture, discourse (i.e. either authoritative or persuasive or combination of both), social interaction, commitment, competence, and the scale of trust, as well as the issues relating to structuration, among others. Similarly, it can be posited that the application of the mediation tool, between the community and the object should be seen to be influenced by the quality of the work organization processes, and its ability to interrelate with elements in the mediation medium between the community and the subject, in order to ensure the effectiveness of the mediational artifact. As such, the quality of the work organization should also be seen to be influenced by such factors as the human resource base (i.e. in terms of skills, tools, capability, and competence that are available to the community), appropriation, the form and medium of discourse, cooperation, collaboration, networking and trust, as well as the defined levels of recursiveness among the community (Sanda, 2006).

Wertsch (1998) points out that while the elements of agents and mediational means are always involved in mediated actions, one of these may take on special importance in particular cases. Furthermore, the transformations that a mediated action undergoes often involve changes in this mix rather than the introduction of a new element. Hence, in all such cases, understanding of such dialectical complexities requires the separation and comparison of elements. This is of relative importance, for as Engeström (2004) notes, various professionals conduct work meetings that are focused on problematic issues or cases, and which typically not only reflect on the particular issue or case, but also include consequential decision-making. This study has shown that the role of organizational as well as non-organizational influences in conditioning all such interpretive activity in the organizational arena can be understood by managers’ recognition of the importance of human interpretive activity to organizational activity (Sanda, 2011). By this, managers will need to analyze the total flow of their employees’ activities so that they can separate specific activities according to the criterion of motives that elicit them. The special feature of this analysis is that it serves to isolate an employee’s activities by disclosing its characteristic internal relations and their inherent tendencies to conceal occurring transformations as activity develops (Sanda, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The study has been able to draw a picture of the dialectical tensions within the internal operating environments of three different organizations, in relation to their individual implementations of similar best management practice. As it is observed in the various cases, existing frameworks took on new meanings that are highly contextual. This observation agrees with the assertion by Collins, Shukla and Redmiles (2002) that the dialectic tension which arises between elements of the activity system identify areas where systems no longer match the activities they model. Thus the functionality of the institutional rules and the effectivity of the division of labor are reflective of the community’s perceptions on the operating climates and culture. As such, they can be perceived as determinants of the level of activity contradictions in an organization’s activity system. Therefore, it is important to keep sight of them within the organizational activity system. In this context, it is established that best management practices can be successfully implemented and internalized by organizations if they are able to identify and effectively deal with dialectic tensions in their activity system which result from the interaction between their local history and changes introduced by the external environment.

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