Broadening management bandwidth through organizational mindfulness

Organizations face increasing availability of information at all managerial levels. This induces challenges to efficiently and effectively use this information during scanning and sensemaking phases of strategy formation processes. This conceptual paper proposes how the emerging research on organizational mindfulness can broaden management bandwidth during organizational scanning and sensemaking. Organizational mindfulness broadens the strategy formation funnel at two stages.

First, during scanning, organizational mindfulness focuses attention on weak cues, increases an organization's field of vision, enhances sustained attention capabilities, and induces a shift from conceptual to perceptual noticing. Secondly, during sensemaking, organizational mindfulness stimulates direct experience, reduces bias caused by cognitive maps and alerts organizations derailing in active inertia through unlearning.

These effects are primarily accomplished through mindful organizing processes of preoccupation with failure, sensitivity to operations and reluctance to simplify interpretations. Mintzberg describes managing in the 21st century as " one damn thing after another" (Mintzberg, 2009, p. 19), i. e. managers facing continual interruptions caused by information overload. Organizations are challenged not to be overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of information availability and to direct their attention to those events relevant for survival and development.

These challenges occur while attaining information both from within the organization and the external environment; while interpreting information to construct meaning; and while acting and making decisions – a process

referred to as strategy formation (Narayanan, Zane & Kemmerer, 2011). However, an emerging stream of literature on organizational mindfulness demonstrates that organizations can consciously direct their attention and create meaning in dynamic, complex, interdependent and hypercompetitive environments, leading to higher performance.

This paper theorizes on the contribution of organizational mindfulness on an organization's capacity to efficiently and effectively attain and retain information in an environment that is characterized by increasing levels of information-overload. I approach these organizational cognition processes from a strategy formation perspective, depicted as a management bandwidth funnel consisting of the processes of attaining (scanning) and retaining (interpreting) information.

I focus on scanning and sensemaking, and exclude decision making, given (1) the high interdependency between scanning and sensemaking, and (2) the antecedent nature of scanning and sensemaking as compared to decision making, as highlighted by Fiol and O'Connor (2003), arguing that mindfulness broadens scanning and sensemaking processes, impacting subsequently the organization's decision making process.

This paper contributes to the emerging literature of organizational mindfulness by (1) building a link with the strategy formation and organizational cognition literatures, (2) integrating processes of mindful organizing with organizational scanning and sensemaking, and (3) developing propositions to further research the application of organizational mindfulness in organization theory. The objective is to develop an

organizational mindfulness perspective on challenges posed by information overload during strategy formation.

This is important for at least three reasons: (1) allocating attention mindfully to capture meaningful information is an increasing scarce resource for organizations (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003); (2) in organizational contexts, the role that mindfulness could play regarding performance-related processes and outcomes remains largely untapped (Dane, 2010); and (3) research on sensemaking in organizations was largely limited to contexts characterized by crisis situations and extreme circumstances (Maitlis, 2005), which not necessarily represent sensemaking processes in a more diverse set of organizations.

Our multilevel approach is framed within the paradoxical nature of organizing, and adheres to a perspective whereby individual thinking is highly interrelated with organizational thinking (Gioia & Sims, 1986). Determinants of both scanning and sensemaking in organizational cognition are typically multilevel: forces at industrial, organizational, team and individual level of analysis are highly intertwined in shaping how organizations and managers perceive, shape and make sense of reality (e. g. Shrivastava & Schneider, 1984; Sutcliffe & Huber, 1998; Walsh, 1995).

In this paper I view organizations as interpretive attention systems, assuming that (1) within a socially constructed reality (Astley, 1985; Berger & Luckmann, 1964; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985), organizations enact their environments through interpretation systems, (2) bounded attention systems guide managerial cognition and behavior (March & Simon, 1958), and (3)

cognition and actions of managers is distributed among the interplay of individual and organizational context (Ocasio, 1997).

Sensemaking is a complex, interactive, retrospective and ambiguity-reducing process viewing organizations as open systems, having cognitive memories and information channeling processes. (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1979; Weick, 1995; Weick & Daft, 1983). Organizations thus perceive through filtered processing and simplifications (Lant, 2002) and enact their organizational environment (Weick, 1979).

This interpretive perspective implies that organizations and their environments are interdependent and act upon each other (Porac & Rosa, 1996; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1979), whereby the essential question becomes how cognitive processes influence both the perception and construction of information in order to accurately formulate strategies. This paper is structured as follows: I first introduce the construct of mindfulness organizational level of analysis and describe five processes of mindful organizing.

Subsequently I describe and analyze the strategy formation processes of scanning and sensemaking from a social cognitive perspective. I highlight challenges that organizations face to efficiently and effectively execute these processes in an environment that is characterized by information-overload. In a next phase I develop propositions as to how mindfulness at the organizational level of analysis can help overcome the challenges caused by overloaded cognitive processes during scanning and sensemaking.

In order to theorize on the impact of organizational mindfulness on the strategy formation process in organizations, constructs need first to be clarified and defined (Suddaby, 2010). This paragraph introduces the construct of organizational mindfulness. Brown and Ryan (2003, p. 822) define mindfulness as " the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present, (…) an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality". Simply stated, mindfulness is a quality of consciousness, which encompasses both awareness and attention (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007).

Mindfulness decouples perception from cognition and " introduces a ' space' between one's perception and response" (Bishop et al. , 2004, p. 232), inhibiting habitual or conceptual responsivity. From a cognitive perspective, Langer defines mindfulness as a process of drawing novel distinctions (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000), inducing "(1) a greater sensitivity to one's environment, (2) more openness to new information, (3) the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and (4) enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000 as quoted in Weick & Putnam, 2006, p. 80).

Mindfulness and organizing The topic of mindfulness in organization studies is particularly relevant given that an undisciplined mind, resulting from habituation, mindlessness, laxity and scattered attention, proves to be unreliable (Weick & Putnam, 2006). Mindfulness reduces tendencies towards managerial and organizational inertia. Mintzberg (1973; 2009) identifies generalizing – among other characteristics – as the core act of organizing,

which involves simplifying and expectations leading to ' pre-interpretation of the universe', hence mindlessness.

Being mindful, to the contrary, promotes discrimination of subtle cues in the environment which interrupt routines and induces the potential of concept-free mindfulness, focusing mental processes on the moment of pure awareness in het here and now. Thus far, the literature on mindfulness has been focusing strongly on two major streams: (1) individual level mindfulness in psychological or medical contexts, and (2) individual level mindfulness in organizational context. A third and developing stream of research deals with organizational level or collective mindfulness, the topic of next section.

Principles of organizational mindfulness Mindful organizing focuses on enhanced distinction making through awareness and attention, preventing a shift from perception to conception that threatens rich awareness of discriminatory detail (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Collective mindfulness builds on the assumption that any event contains novel elements (Weick et al. , 1999) and taking anything for granted in a routine-like way is a risky mindset. Based on research on High Reliability Organizations (HROs), Karl Weick has developed the organizational level of analysis construct of collective mindfulness (Weick, Sutcliffe &

Obstfeld, 1999). Analyzing a series of crisis situations and disasters in different settings Weick, 1993; Weick, 2010; Weick & Roberts, 1983), Weick and associates have identified a series of at least five processes for mindful organizing that " provide the cognitive infrastructure that enables

simultaneous adaptive learning and reliable performance" (Weick et al. , 1999, p. 81). These processes apply in both complex and ambiguous environments, beyond HRO context (Maitlis, 2005; Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Rerup, 2005; Rerup, 2009; Vogus, 2011; Vogus & Welbourne, 2003).

Important to highlight is that mindfulness at the organizational level of analysis is depicted as an organizational capability, not as the application of individual mindfulness efforts within an organizational context (Barton & Sutcliffe, 2008). The first process of mindful organizing (Vogus, 2011; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick et al. , 1999), preoccupation with failure, increases the sheer number of data points for organizational learning by treating all failures as learning opportunities, analyzing all ' near failures' and acknowledging potential hazardous effects arising from the liability of success.

Preoccupation with failure translates to paying attention to weak cues (Rerup, 2009) and anticipating symptoms of potential malfunctioning. Secondly, reluctance to simplify interpretations, counters the tendency of organizations and their members to simplify their interpretation of observed phenomena through conceptual schemas and expectations, and directs attention to potential anomalies and undesired consequences, often induced through skeptical redundancy (Weick et al. , 1999).

Thirdly, sensitivity to operations highlights the deep understanding of system interdependency and complexity, placing a premium on detection, differentiation and watchfulness (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Sensitivity to operations fosters situational awareness, a collective mind that includes the

collective knowledge or an integrated big picture of relevant operations. Fourth, commitment to resilience, refers to the ability to absorb strain and preserve functioning during a moment of adversity, to recover and bounce back, and to learn and grow (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Resiliency elaborates response capabilities and encourages conceptual slack. Finally, underspecification of structures, encompasses the ability to alter traditional decision making processes based on organizational structures when unexpected problems arise, and gaining flexibility to migrate decisions to the most knowledgeable individual (or team) in the organization. Underspecification of structures allows for temporary instances of organized anarchy in the direction of a garbage can structure (Cohen, March & Olson, 1972).