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Dialectics of Collective Minding: Contrary Appropriations of Information Technology in a High-Risk Project

Jessica Luo Carlo, Kalle Lyytinen, and Richard J. Boland, Jr.

Abstract

In unpredictable and unforgiving environments, organizations need to act with care and reliability, often referred to as collective mindfulness. We present a theory-generating, interpretative field study of a highly complex and successful building project by architect Frank O. Gehry. We argue that what has been labeled collective mindfulness is only possible through a dialectic process of collective minding, in which organizational actors simultaneously exhibit elements of being mindful and mindless. Our analysis reveals that collective minding emerges from struggling with contradictions in the five elements of mindfulness. We argue that when actors struggle with these dialectic tensions, the same information technology capabilities are enacted as multiple, contradictory technologies-in-practice. Implications for the further study of collective minding and the appropriation of IT capabilities are discussed.

Keywords: Collective minding, collective mindfulness, high-reliability organizations (HROs), complex socio-technical systems, dialectics, IT affordances, IT capabilities, technology-in-practice