

Original article

Consistency concept in different organizational structures: functional, process and hybrid

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INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Consistency problem in management has been present for some time now. However, organizational consistency usually deals with specific elements that are a given part of an organization, and that need to suit each other. In this article, consistency is seen from a different perspective – as a holistic problem that embraces every aspect of organizations. Moreover, even in the holistic approach, the problem of consistency profile is essential. In every organizational structure, consistency must be achieved, but differently. Thus, the question of what kind of consistency is possible or necessary in terms of a kind of organizational structure arises. The article tries to answer this question. In functional structures, managers have a kind of freedom when they decide on what the consistency platforms should be like. When the organization operates in process or hybrid structures, there is no freedom, and only process profile of consistency platforms should be chosen. The main subject of the article is to drive our attention to consistency as a whole. The article also provides the distinction of the consistency approach according to organizational structure. The outcome may have a great application value for managers.

KEYWORDS

consistency concept, organizational structure, process structure, hybrid organizations, formal structures



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Introduction

Contemporary organizations face many challenges in organizing their internal and external operations¹. The complexity of management areas nowadays is enormous. Therefore, the problem of choosing the frame of actions, and then coordinating all elements together seems to be a key to the successful existence and continuous development of any organization.

First thing that organizations need to decide on is the company structure [1]. The structures they may choose are various but they may be generally limited to three kinds: traditional

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(functional) structures, process structures and hybrid structures, connecting the two mentioned before. No matter what structure the company chooses, there is a problem of what steps it needs to implement next to make the organization consistent. There is usually a need to decide what management concepts are necessary and what management methods should fulfill the management system in the organization [1].

The problem is that although in each of the structures consistency means the same in its general assumptions, it will be built in a different way in details, because the organizations look from different perspectives on their operations and of their main body shape [2]. This article aims to provide a new viewpoint on the dilemmas mentioned above since managers may have different process structures as far as consistency is concerned. Such analysis may be useful for understanding consistency problem among managers and for enabling them to introduce consistency concept in a real life.

1. Corporate consistency in management theory

The topic of management consistency rarely appears in management theory, and when it is not analyzed profoundly. Moreover, neither operational studies have been carried out, nor models have been constructed so far. However, some authors deal with the issue, and a short overview will be presented below.

R. Coolidge approaches a consistency problem by pointing out that consistency is practicing what one preaches, which means that actions should be consistent with words [3]. This way, the author drives our attention to creating an appropriate corporate culture that is flexible enough to adapt to different periods in a company's life cycle.

Coolidge helps companies evaluate if they are consistent by listing some characteristics of consistent companies. These include:

- low employees turnover, high motivation and morale,
- high customer satisfaction, loyal customers,
- customers can accurately state the company's culture, and embrace it,
- rapid growth after a period of slow growth or decline,
- growth after a period of decline exceeds previous successes, indicates incorporation of learning and consistency.

According to E. Brackett, consistency relates to a company's brand and to be consistent means deciding on a specific name, logo, logotype, color, visual elements, and design system throughout the company [2]. Although necessary, this approach refers to consistency only in a narrow meaning, focusing on brand creation. S. Robshow-Bryan, who stresses the need for brand consistency [4], and A. Lynch, who gives examples of good (consistent) and bad brands [5], represent a similar approach.

A. Pulido, D. Stone, and J. Strevel analyze corporate consistency from customers' point of view [6]. They insist that in order to increase customer satisfaction, sales rate and revenues, companies should be consistent in implementing clear policies, rules, and supporting mechanisms to ensure uniformity during each interaction and positive customer experience – encompassed in a feeling of trust. In addition, companies should make sure that customers recognize the delivery of promises, which requires proactively shaping communications,

key messages, and themes that consistently highlight delivery. Moreover, in this approach, consistency relates to a given part of companies' activities, thus giving general clues about what companies should remember.

H. Cronqvist, A. Makhija, and S. Yonker represent different view on consistency as they associate consistency with human resource management and employment policy [7]. They point out that each CEO should be matched individually to the position in the company according to the accurate position description and to the requirements that the candidate matches or not. Only such detailed requirements allow for deciding a candidate is right or not for the position. What is essential, the authors advise using the behavioral consistency theory to adjust people to their functions.

De Roeck, El Akremi, and Swean analyze the consistency between CSR activities and employee identification with the organization [8]. Some authors focus on the consequences of inconsistencies between systems from the point of view of measuring and assessing behaviors and strategic goals [9]. Many researchers explore relations between selected variables within an enterprise or a group of enterprises using statistical or qualitative methods [10-12]. Other authors focus on internal and external harmonization, claiming that organizational problems may be caused by inconsistent and competing institutional logic, culture diversity, or dysfunctional organizational games [13].

As one can see from this short review, consistency is presented in management theory in a specific way – there are attempts to analyze consistency in certain areas of business operations. The most common area deals with marketing and the company-customer relationship. However, there has been no effort to analyze consistency from a general perspective, where the managers should plan and implement consistent actions throughout the whole company, in all aspects of its operations. Such an approach is a new way of analyzing consistency. Moreover, the consistency problem has never been analyzed from the perspective of various organizational structures. The new look at the consistency concept has been described shortly below.

2. Consistency concept in general

In general, the concept of consistency is about harmonization of different (all at the same time) areas of organization operations so that they form a consistent system – which is a new approach to the consistency problem in management. Only then may the organization work effectively and sufficiently using its different parts to enforce one another complementary. That is the main point of each consistency aspect: harmonizing parts of the organization for their complementary synergy effect [14]. This way, the company may build lasting competitive advantage as well as avoid various internal and external problems.

When the organization does not achieve consistency, the problems arise; and when there is no awareness of consistency need among managers, the diagnose of the problems may never be correct. The roots of the problems are then connected with the lack of consistency, but with no awareness of consistency the real reasons of problems will always be misunderstood.

Generally speaking, the consistency problem is quite easy to comprehend [15]. However, the problems start when more questions about the details are asked. The most obvious questions arise about how and where one should look for consistency and how to harmonize given

organizational areas. Besides, one of the critical problems concerns measuring consistency in order to optimize it daily. These are the questions that make consistency one of the significant and challenging problems of management nowadays. There have already been some answers (by the author of this article in other publications), but there is still a lot to be done in this area – first theoretically, and then practically.

Namely speaking, the idea of consistency may be brought to a more detailed picture by dividing it into consistency platforms and subsystems. Table 1 presents the idea.

Table 1. General approach for process organization consistency analysis

Consistency perspective 1	Consistency platform 1	Subsystem 1
		Subsystem n
	Consistency platform n	Subsystem 1
		Subsystem n
Consistency perspective 2	Consistency platform 1	Subsystem 1
		Subsystem n
	Consistency platform n	Subsystem 1
		Subsystem n

Source: Own study.

As we can see in Table 1, once the perspective of consistency has been identified, there is the need to search for consistency platforms and subsystems to operationalize the concept further. The point is that we take a look at all the possible perspectives of consistency at once. There is no fragment approach – it is a holistic view on consistency. The example for the perspective of process organization is presented below.

3. Consistency concept for organizations based on process approach

For the process approach, there are a few platforms of consistency. The first platform consists of management concepts and management methods. When the company decides to implement a particular management concept, it is usually necessary to implement other concepts to complementarily support the first one. For example, when we want to implement virtual structures, we also have to use the process concept and system approach. It is not possible to have virtual structures that work well without supporting them with mechanisms resulting from the other concepts, which in this meaning are complementary. Once implementing the concepts, managers need to think about the methods, which are complementary to the concepts. Many methods need to be used in organizations when they choose some management concepts. However, the problem is even more complex. Namely, management methods may be used differently. It means that each method may be shaped quite freely because it is possible to adjust the method to the specific of every organization. As one can see, the system of methods needs to be adjusted to the given management concepts, and then each method needs to be adjusted to another so that they form a consistent system

with concepts and with one another. The need for such creation is indisputable, but when we combine it with the lack of measures, it seems quite a significant challenge to achieving consistency in this aspect.

Another perspective of consistency is a perspective of corporate structure and management style. Companies may decide on different corporate structures nowadays. They may operate in a traditional way or a process way [16]. They may also go international in functional or virtual structures. Each choice they make will influence the management attitude towards the organization. When the company is a traditional structure, then the management system may be autocratic as well as democratic. However, in-process structure, there is no freedom of choice – the system needs to be democratic. Moreover, in this case, democracy should be peculiar using some specific management tools, such as navigation channels. As one can see in this case, on this platform, there is a specific kind of manager appropriate for a given organization, and there is no freedom left for managers to decide what kind of management they will choose.

The management issue brings us to the last platform, which is connected to the company's human resource nature. Each corporate structure needs a specific kind of workers on all the positions in an organization. It means that when one decides on a structure with a given management style, they need to adjust people to that structure to exist in the structure and work efficiently and effectively. Moreover, management concepts used in consistency platform one determine certain working conditions and mechanisms, which may be right for some workers and inappropriate for others. Getting into more details, implementing certain management methods also creates a specific working environment that some workers may not accept. As is visible, human resource characteristics must be strictly adjusted to all the other aspects of consistency. When we do not consider this issue, there will be a lot of organizational problems that deteriorate the organization's competitive position.

4. Consistency in functional structures

When one takes a closer look at consistency problems, they understand that this issue exists in every organization, no matter what kind of structures has been implemented. However, it seems that in some structures, there is a clear idea about how they should operate, and it is easier to find a path towards consistency. As for traditional structures, the problem is quite complicated. Traditional structures are universal – it means that there is a freedom of consistency choice as for management methods, management style, and human resource choice within them.

However, the above does not mean that there is no need for consistency in such structures. Such a need always exists. It means that it may have different faces in traditional structures [7]. For example, there may be a democracy and freedom of the workers' actions in traditional structures, but there may be autocracy with listening to orders and no freedom of action at all in other companies having such structures. In every case, the consistency needs to be achieved; however, it will look completely different in each situation.

Looking at the problem from this perspective, one may say that traditional structures are more flexible as regards choosing a consistency aspect – from pure democracy to strict autocracy. All the possibilities may be chosen, and if only the consistency exists – no problems resulting from the lack of it are expected to appear.

There is a question about what kind of companies should be formed nowadays – democratic or autocratic ones, and what methods and human resources are more relevant to the clients’ nature. These are essential questions, but they do not impact consistency matters in this meaning. However, one may broaden consistency meaning on the clients’ perspective and say that the company should be consistent also with the clients’ nature, market characteristics, and external environment. When we consider this, it becomes evident that not all consistency ideas available in traditional structures are right, and not all of them help to build competitive advantages.

Thus, summing up the above, we should say that traditional structures allow for more freedom in terms of consistency that managers search for within the company. However, when one puts that micro perspective on the client’s perspective, market, and the environment, the consistency in traditional structures is limited to a certain kind appropriate to the organization’s external conditions. Organizations must not limit their consistency views to the inside of the organization, primarily when they operate in traditional structures since it is easy to lose the direction shown by such vital factors, such as clients’ characteristics and needs.

5. Process structures consistency

When it comes to process structures, they are entirely different from traditional structures. In such structures, there are given management mechanisms that determine the consistency that should be implemented in the organization. In this meaning, it is easier for the managers to decide on consistency on different consistency platforms because the direction is only one – there is no freedom of choice. This lack of freedom can be noticed in management concepts, which are complementary to process structures. For example, when we implement process structures, we need to use the fractal concept, project management concept, the theory of the systems approach, and some more that complementarily fulfill the above. For such concepts, it is necessary to adjust given management methods, i.e., specific motivation system, participation, corporate culture, communication, and others. Moreover, analyzing the methods, it is indispensable to remember about seeking consistency within them; it means that methods need to form consistent system – they should be adjusted to one another as they can be differently configured as well.

Process structures also determine management style, which needs to be implemented [17]. This style results from management mechanisms necessary to execute in process structures. The mechanisms also, in a way, create consistency in a company – they are needful in such structures. The mechanisms of navigation channels, coaching and mentoring, internal producers, and internal client relations clearly show what direction management system should go and which management approach is not proper in such structures. Here one will take a somewhat democratic than autocratic style, which is quite apparent to consider the above.

Human resource nature in process structures is quite easy to define, and like in other consistency platforms, there is not much freedom – in terms of what kind of workers’ characteristics the company should look for. When managers understand the consistency viewpoint, they will be able to make a list of HR qualities they are searching for, and according to this list, they will match the organization’s people. If they do not harmonize organization in this matter, process structures will not work correctly or will not work at all. In the last case, the company will probably return to traditional structures, which happened quite often when

BPR started in the 90s (when the HR factor made it necessary to abandon process structures and to come back to traditional ones).

As one can see in process structures, consistency is as important as in traditional structures, but here the shape of consistency is precise, and there is not much freedom of consistency configuration. That is an advantage of process structures as they show the managers clearly what the directions that they should go with consistency activities are. The question is if managers know the rules of process management structures and if they are aware of the consistency concept.

6. Hybrid structures consistency

Hybrid structures should be considered a mixture of the traditional approach and the process structures that work together simultaneously. In such organizations, there are functional departments and processes go through them, so workers operate in both structures simultaneously. They often have two or even more managers responsible for different areas: functional manager, process owner, and often team leader if such teams are used in an organization [18].

When considering dilemmas presented in points 3 and 4, a question arises about consistency in hybrid organizations. As pointed out in point 3, traditional structures have a kind of freedom in terms of their consistency (it may go in different directions: from autocratic towards democracy). In process organizations, as pointed out in point 4, there is no choice for organizations, thereby they have to use specific management concepts, management methods, management style and HR profile in their operations. There is one best way for process organizations, and this makes the problem a bit easier to develop, understand, and solve. In this case, it is also more straightforward to implement solutions, as they seem to be standard in every process organization.

As for hybrid structures, there is a question about what philosophy to choose: the one from traditional structures or the one from process structures. As in process structures, managers do not have much choice, and the same situation will be in hybrid structures. In hybrid organizations, the managers need to follow the process philosophy of consistency, and in such a way, they need to harmonize their organizations.

The approach described above is profitable for organizations for many reasons. First of all, when there is a process structure, there must be a specific consistency achieved, since otherwise, the structures will not work correctly. It considers pure process structures and hybrid structures as well. In hybrid structures, there is also a formal structure, and here, the philosophy of consistency taken from process structures is also profitable and useful.

When process consistency in hybrid structures is implemented, the formal part of the organization with concepts, methods, management style, and HR profile characteristic for process structures is organized naturally. For organizations, it is a very profitable situation because formal structures work much better; they are much more efficient using consistency elements characteristic for process structures. Moreover, in such a situation, a kind of synergy is possible between formal structures and process ones operating within the same management concepts, methods, and others. In such conditions, it is possible to use the advantages of both structures, which are somehow linked by the same consistency philosophy (their nature is the only thing that differentiates them). From this perspective, hybrid structures may seem quite interesting for companies to choose, although they may generate more costs and

organizational effort than pure process structures [19]. Nonetheless, it is always interesting when the synergy effect appears as it lets the company create a new value, which may be a key to build a competitive advantage.

Conclusions

Consistency problem in organizations is an important one. Various researchers attempt to analyze consistency and provide managers with clues on how to create consistent aspects of their companies. The problem is that most authors focus on consistency only in a narrow aspect of organization operations, for example, CSR consistency, strategy consistency, brand consistency, HR consistency, and so forth. There is a need to focus on and analyze consistency from the holistic point of view – the consistency of the whole company becomes an essential and exciting issue. Moreover, the consistency may be looked at differently depending on the organizational structures that the organization implemented.

As far as the structures are concerned, the consistency concepts have to be realized in every organization regardless of implemented organizational structures. Traditional structures allow some freedom of choice when it comes to consistency profile in the company [20]. However, when one takes process structures and hybrid structures into account, there is only one possibility to create consistency, namely a process approach towards consistency. Table 2 shows the new pattern:

Table 2. Consistency in different organizational structures

No.	Organizational structure	Consistency profile
1	Traditional/Functional	Freedom of choice with regard to content and profile of consistency platforms
2	Process	Process profile of consistency platforms
3	Hybrid	Process profile of consistency platforms

Source: Own research.

As the information from Table 2 indicates, managers in different organizational structures should be aware of the consistency concept appropriate for the specific organization. As for process and hybrid structures, there is only one choice – a process profile of consistency. However, in traditional structures, managers may choose the profile of consistency as they wish. What must be pointed out, however, is the problem of consistency awareness. To decide on whatever kind of consistency, the managers need to know the concept and understand its nature first. Only then can they make further steps on choosing appropriate content for the consistency platforms. There is still a lot to be done in this area, and every further research and publications are necessary to make the consistency concept widespread and well understood for the improvement of organizational efficiency and the competitive advantage.

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Conflict of interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

The author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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Biographical note

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Koncepcja spójności w różnych strukturach organizacyjnych: funkcjonalnej, procesowej oraz hybrydowej

STRESZCZENIE

Problem spójności jest już obecny w zarządzaniu od jakiegoś czasu. Jednak, zwykle odnosi się on do specyficznych elementów wydzielonych w organizacjach, które muszą do siebie pasować. W niniejszym artykule spójność rozpatrywana jest z innej perspektywy – jako całościowy system, który obejmuje całą organizację. Ponadto, nawet w podejściu holistycznym pozostaje problem profilu spójności – w każdej organizacji należy dążyć do spójności, ale w inny sposób. W ten sposób pojawia się kwestia dopasowania spójności do struktur organizacyjnych. Ta kwestia analizowana jest w artykule. W strukturach funkcjonalnych menadżerowie mają względną swobodę w decydowaniu o spójności organizacyjnej oraz o platformach spójności. W strukturach

procesowych i hybrydowych takiej swobody nie ma. Głównym zadaniem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na problem spójności oraz na konieczność zmiany podejścia w zależności od rodzaju struktury organizacyjnej. Rozważania mają charakter zarówno teoretyczny jak i sporą wartość aplikacyjną.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE koncepcja spójności, struktura organizacyjna, struktura procesowa, organizacje hybrydowe, struktury formalne

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