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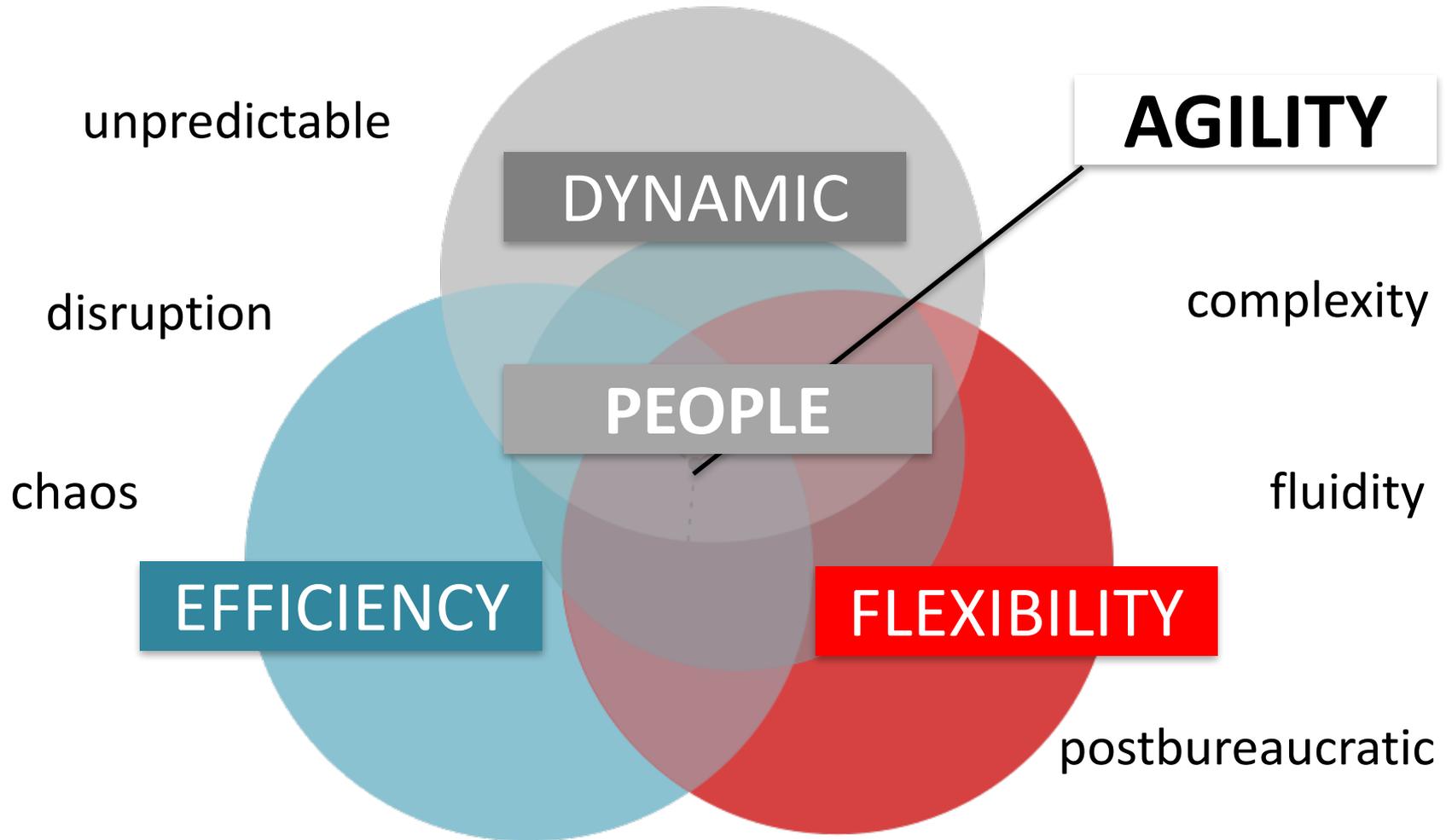
A World in Crisis:
The Role of
Public Relations

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Agility in strategic communication research:
**Historical roots, conceptual specification, and
implications for theory and practice**

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PR/SC in a VUCA world



Agility in PR/SC research

Practice

- Agility is omnipresent buzzword
- Companies strive to become *agile* by redesigning structures, emphasizing flat hierarchies, self-management, and empowerment
- Comms departments have a dual role in supporting org. agility and enhancing their own agility



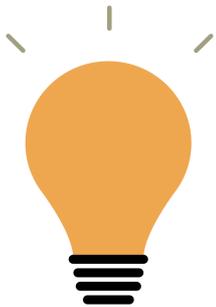
Scholarship

- PR/SC research has not yet adopted the topic of agility
- van Ruler (2015): scrum method as an agile planning method
- Multitude of related approaches: contingency, responsiveness, adaptability

Our approach

Goals of this research:

- ① Explore the roots and core facets of the concept of agility in management and organization research
- ② Link the concept of agility with relevant theoretical perspectives in PR/SC scholarship



Method: Interdisciplinary literature review of management and organization research and PR/SC scholarship

Assumption: New label – old idea?

(e.g. Sherehiy et al., 2007; Klein, 2017)

Agility in organization and management research

- Historical roots: early references by contingency theorists in the 1920s/1960s (e.g. Beer, 1959, 1972; Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Weick, 1995)
- Upswing: in the 1990s after the publication of the ‘Lehigh Report’ and adaptation by consultants (Nagel, 1992)
- Disciplines: org theory, production mgmt, general mgmt, IT/IS, business processes, logistics, leadership, marketing
- Status quo: plethora of definitions, concepts, models/frameworks (e.g. Zhang & Sharifi, 2000; Vázquez-Bustelo et al., 2007; Sherehiy et al., 2007; Wendler, 2013; Tseng & Lin, 2011)

Conceptual Specification

Levels of conceptualization: environmental agility, **agile organization**, agile departments, agile processes (development & manufacturing), agile projects, workforce agility, agile leadership, agile tools & practices, etc.

Agility is the overall **capability** of an organization to respond to and **take advantage** of the **changes** initiated by the drivers in the external environment.

It includes the ability to

- a) **identify changes** and to **respond quickly**, efficiently and effectively, employing the right **personnel based on competence**, not hierarchical status;
- b) implement **flexible structures** and processes suited to the **immediate tasks** at hand and to **intelligently employ** the right **resources in the shortest possible time**.

Three waves of agility related research in PR/SC



Systems Theory/cybernetics



Contingency/complexity



Postmodernism

Linking agility concepts to PR/SC

1. Concepts from systems theory and cybernetics (e.g. Hazleton, 1992; Gregory, 2000; Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006)

- PR as a organizational subsystem that observes and monitors the external environment and helps the org. to adapt
- ‘Variety can destroy variety’
- Links to agility: complexity, adaptivity, self-organization, open systems

2. Contingency, chaos and complexity theories; ecological perspectives (e.g. Long & Hazelton, 1987; Everett, 2011; Gilpin & Murphy 2006; Murphy, 2015; Lauzen & Dozier, Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007)

- PR as a mechanism through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their (contingent, complex, chaotic) environment
- Only complexity can deal with complexity
- Links to agility: ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty, improvisation, emergence, organizations as CAS

Linking agility concepts to PR/SC

3. Postmodernism (e.g. Brown, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2002, Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Toth, 2002; Edwards, 2011; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015)

- Alternatives to modern/managerialist/functional approaches
- “There is no one best way of doing.”
- Beyond structure and ‘grand strategies’
- Links to agility: reflexivity, irrationality, ambiguity, plurality, power resistance, contextualization

Conclusions for Research

- Why has there been a downturn of research on this domain after early the 2000s?
- Further explorations of the agility concept in relation to former concepts and approaches
- Critical inquiries (pseudo-agility, dysfunctional agility, agility as a fashion, etc.)
- Empirical research into the realities of agility with regard to corporate communications

BUT: Beware of the ‚reinventing the wheel effect‘

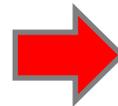
Implications for practice

Communication departments will either be *drivers of agility* or be *driven by* these changes

Dual challenge

Enhancing departmental agility

- Adopt structures and processes
- Implement different management & leadership concepts
- Engage in agile practices (scrum, Kanban, design thinking etc.); employ tools supporting agility (social collaboration)



Supporting organizational agility

- Communicate agility
- Facilitate agile structures, processes and practices
- Initiate cultural change
- Engage and prepare people to work in agile environment
- Provide the tools

Thank you!

Questions and Comments



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