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Note on Organizational Resilience: Harnessing Potential in the Face of Adversity

From the daily threat of intensifying competition to rare events such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and information technology network failures, leaders of today's global organizations operate in immensely complex environments with numerous threats. Even with the best of intentions, managers often have little time and energy to plan for adversity; and even when they do enact sophisticated risk management strategies, they are often unable to predict the challenges that may arise. In light of this, they need to shift from implementing contingency plans to building organizations that are flexible, learn, grow, and come back stronger when faced with adversity. Organizations that have harnessed this capacity to bounce back can be termed "resilient."

Resilience, while often used to describe individuals who have overcome hardship, has increasingly been used to refer to organizations as well. This note is on the emerging concept of organizational resilience. It outlines the two leading views of organizations, the history of resilience, enabling factors to build resilient organizations, and the benefits of harnessing resilience.

Perspectives on Organizations

There are many lenses through which to view organizations. In 1961, organizational theorists Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker made a critical distinction between *mechanistic* views of organizations and *organic* views of organizations.¹ These have been two of the most widely adopted perspectives on organizations, as they provide complementary views on how organizations operate – including perspectives on power, control, structure, and change.

The Mechanistic View

The view of organizations as machines, which emphasizes the bureaucratization and routinization of work, has driven much of the theory of organizations since the industrial revolution. Using a mechanistic lens, organizations are described with metaphors such as machines, assembly lines, and computer processors. This perspective often is used to characterize manufacturing and industrial organizations, in particular factory assembly lines and fast-food restaurants, in which employees do repetitive, small, and limited tasks.



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