

Achieving Shared Aims through Organizational Networks

Book Review

Angel Saz-Carranza, Uniting Diverse Organizations: Managing Goal-Oriented Advocacy Networks (New York: Routledge, 2012). 139 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780415899024; \$125.00 (eBook), ISBN: 9780203107799.

Uniting Diverse Organizations: Managing Goal-Oriented Advocacy Networks examines the conceptual and practical challenges of managing and leading organizational networks. It combines qualitative field research on four networks of advocacy organizations involved in immigration policy debates in the United States with a careful reading and application of the literature on managing organizations and organizational networks. The book makes three important contributions to the study of organizational networks:

1. It pinpoints unity and diversity as central concerns for leaders of organizational networks and develops the implications for network management.
2. It elaborates the emerging focus in network studies on managing “whole networks,” as distinct from studying network structure (e.g., ties and exchanges among members).
3. It grounds the challenges of managing the tensions between unity and diversity firmly in the literatures on organizational networks and classic organizational studies.

The first contribution is the book’s foremost accomplishment, and it has important implications for scholars and practitioners of network management. The core argument is that any network of organizations must foster unity among its members regarding the network’s goals, strategy, and implementation approach while also sustaining and exploiting diversity among its members in order to generate power and resources to support its work. Maintaining a balance between unity and diversity is crucial for “goal-directed action networks” such as the ones described in Angel Saz-Carranza’s book because they

are voluntary assemblages of separate organizations that thrive when they work toward the same goal by exploiting their differential strengths and assets. Just as organizations must simultaneously differentiate and integrate their staff’s roles (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967), Saz-Carranza finds that networks need to balance unity and diversity among their members. Without a sense of unity among its members, an action network lacks common purpose and strategic direction; a lack of diversity in its membership, by contrast, can limit its knowledge, access to power, representational legitimacy, and resources. Efforts by leaders to achieve unity, however, risk homogeneity at the expense of diversity, while too much stress on diversity risks division and excessive transaction costs among the network’s member organizations that can hinder progress toward goals.

After identifying these tensions through his field research, Saz-Carranza explores the conceptual and practical challenges that network leaders face in managing the contradictory demands that stem from the need to maintain both unity and diversity. Highlighting the challenges of balancing unity and diversity is a welcome corrective to the tendency in some network studies to celebrate the benefits of diversity or to assume that unity is unproblematic.

The immigration advocacy networks that Saz-Carranza studied balanced unity and diversity through a combination of different leadership activities, many of which are familiar from the literature on managing within networks. *Activation*—selecting and attracting organizational members—sustained unity and diversity by ensuring that members shared goals, common identities, and an appreciation of a diverse membership while differing in their size and complexity, priorities and constituencies, geographic locations, political tactics, and national cultures. *Framing* network policies helped leaders foster unity around the network’s organizational structure, as well as its norms, rules, and values. *Capacitating*—a new leadership activity that Saz-Carranza identifies (perhaps more familiar to some

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readers as “capacity building”)—helped networks build the capabilities of their member organizations through training and resource transfers. Capacitating sustained network unity by increasing the likelihood that members shared common ground rules, values, and meanings; it nurtured network diversity, meanwhile, by enabling constructive interactions and interdependence among members. *Facilitating* involved communicating with, mediating between, and assisting the networks’ member organizations. To balance unity and diversity, the networks in the study facilitated inclusive, participatory decision-making processes that enabled their members to acknowledge and—frequently—resolve differences about how best to pursue their shared goals.

The book presents this argument concisely—in scarcely more than 100 pages. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the conceptual and empirical foci of the study and describe the immigration advocacy networks that provide the empirical data. (An appendix presents more detail on the research design and methods.)

The most valuable parts of the book are chapter 3, “The Core of Goal-Directed Network Management: Uniting in Diversity,” which presents the central theoretic argument; the empirical elaboration of the argument in chapter 5, “Sustaining the Unity/Diversity Tension”; and the conclusion. In these chapters, Saz-Carranza brilliantly situates his fundamental thesis in the literatures on organizational networks and management (e.g., Agranoff and McGuire, Huxham and Vangen, and others on networks and classics in organizational theory by Simon, Thompson, and Lawrence and Lorsch, among others). With its overview of the tensions between unity and diversity, chapter 3 should be required reading in any course on organizational collaboration or networks. The conclusion also outlines applied lessons about managing the tensions between unity and diversity that practitioners should find useful.

These chapters epitomize the book’s signature blend of theoretical insights and empirical findings, differentiating it from most recent books on networks in public administration and management (e.g., Agranoff 2007; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; McGuire and Agranoff 2003). Rich with empirical findings and inductive concepts derived from data, those other books are nearly devoid of the inherited repertoire of organizational theory that undergirds the study of organizational networks. Saz-Carranza’s book should inspire network scholars to draw more explicitly on the public administration field’s broader conceptual heritage.

The contents of chapter 4 (“Building Network Power and Using It”) and, to a lesser extent, chapter 6 (“Managing Interaction and Decision-Making in

Diversity”) suffer in comparison to the rest of the book, though both chapters address important topics and include useful insights. Chapter 4 examines how networks build resources and power to accomplish their goals, and chapter 6 describes the facilitation of joint decision processes among a network’s member organizations. The treatment of power in both chapters is disappointing for two reasons.

First, the book offers no explicit analysis—or even much recognition—of the power conflicts related to race and partisan politics that are at the heart of many immigration debates. Readers unaware of the conflicts surrounding U.S. immigration policy might finish the book thinking that the success of goal-directed action networks is simply a product of internal network management rather than the intersection of the activities of united but diverse networks with those of political opponents. This neglect of external power relations and political conflict may result from the book’s focus on the challenges of network management and its inclusion in a Routledge series on business organizations and networks. I nevertheless suspect that Saz-Carranza has a wealth of research data up his sleeve that could fuel an informative article or two on the role of advocacy networks in the politics of U.S. immigration policy.

Second, the book treats only cursorily the challenges for network management that power imbalances and factional differences create. Chapter 6 acknowledges in several places that power imbalances and factions require careful facilitation of the interactions among network members, especially as they relate to network-wide decisions, but it does not report how the networks in the study addressed those challenges. While noting that the literature on network management recognizes the need to manage power imbalances, the chapter provides little conceptual or tactical elaboration of how effective network leaders do so. In a book whose central thesis is the importance of balancing unity and diversity among network members, fundamental sources of division in a network such as power imbalances and factions deserve more detailed attention.

Together, the strengths and shortcomings of this book highlight two frontiers in the study of network management and leadership: the virtues of infusing empirical analysis with a rich base of theoretic concepts and the need to investigate power relations and political conflict both within and between organizational networks. If network scholars pursue either of these frontiers with rigor and insight, the field will be much richer. If we pursue both—especially if each informs the other, as could be the case if studies of network behavior and management draw on theories of political coalitions—Saz-Carranza’s work will have pointed the way.

References

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