



The Interplay Between Organizational Theory, Metaphor, and Behaviour in Understanding Complex Organizational Phenomena: Navigating Digital Disruption, ESG, Hybrid Work, and Organizational Politics

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Abstract. *In an era defined by rapid technological shifts, sustainability imperatives, hybrid work models, and politicized internal environments, organizations must navigate complexity at multiple levels. This paper develops and applies an integrated conceptual framework that combines Institutional Theory, Contingency Theory, and the organizational behaviour lens of Psychological Safety, enriched by the metaphors of the organization as a political system and as an adaptive organism. Drawing from real-world cases across corporate, non-profit, and higher education sectors, the study examines how organizations respond to digital disruption, ESG pressures, hybrid work transitions, and organizational politics. Through this multidimensional lens, the paper reveals how legitimacy, adaptability, power dynamics, and psychological conditions shape the outcomes of change initiatives. The findings suggest that complex organizational phenomena cannot be understood through a singular perspective. Instead, theory, behaviour, and metaphor must be synthesized to account for both the formal and informal dimensions of organizational life. The study concludes by offering implications for leadership, design, and research, emphasizing the need for systems thinking, political literacy, and cultural sensitivity in navigating contemporary challenges.*

Keywords: Adaptive Systems, Digital Disruption, ESG, Hybrid Work, Legitimacy, Organizational Theory

1. Introduction

Organizations today are immersed in an environment of mounting complexity, marked by digital disruption, rising expectations for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) accountability, enduring shifts to hybrid work, and intensified internal politics. These challenges are not confined to corporate settings; they are equally disruptive in non-profit organizations and higher education institutions, which must now balance stakeholder diversity, resource constraints, and digital transitions with their core missions.

In the corporate world, Walmart's \$14 billion investment in automation and e-commerce highlights the urgency of digital transformation (McKinsey, 2023), but it also introduces issues of workforce displacement and technological dependency. Similarly,

Unilever's ESG commitments have sparked investor critique about the balance between purpose and profitability, emphasizing the political sensitivity surrounding corporate responsibility (Financial Times, 2022).

In the non-profit sector, organizations like Amnesty International face digital disruption in the form of algorithmic suppression of advocacy content on social media, while also grappling with internal governance debates regarding equity and inclusion (NGO Advisor, 2023). Their digital infrastructure and internal culture are under pressure to align with global activism in a transparent, agile manner. Meanwhile, hybrid work models in organizations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have raised concerns about collaboration loss and mission alignment across distributed teams (WWF Global, 2023).

In higher education, universities worldwide face a dual challenge: delivering digital learning while meeting ESG imperatives in teaching, operations, and research. Institutions such as the University of California system have pledged carbon neutrality and equity initiatives, but these efforts often clash with financial constraints, internal politics, and resistance from legacy faculty governance (Altbach et al., 2020). Additionally, hybrid education models introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic persist but not without cultural backlash from students and faculty preferring traditional academic engagement (Educause, 2022).

The increasing complexity of modern organizational phenomena has prompted a rich but fragmented body of research across organizational theory, behaviour, and metaphorical analysis. Existing studies have examined digital disruption through the lens of technological innovation and structural change (Yoo et al., 2012; Vial, 2019), while ESG and sustainability scholarship has largely drawn from institutional and stakeholder theories to understand legitimacy and performance trade-offs (Gond et al., 2012; Eccles & Klimenko, 2019). Separately, the rise of hybrid work has triggered debates in organizational behaviour, emphasizing trust, motivation, and autonomy (Waizenegger et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2022), while organizational politics has been approached primarily from power, conflict, and leadership angles (Vredenburg & Maurer, 1984; Buchanan & Badham, 2008). However, few studies offer a composite framework that bridges these diverse phenomena through an integrated analytical approach combining multiple organizational theories, behavioural constructs, and interpretive metaphors.

This study is motivated by the growing gap between the siloed academic approaches and the messy realities faced by real-world organizations. Organizations are no longer confronting isolated challenges they face overlapping pressures that demand a multi-dimensional response. Theoretical pluralism, when structured appropriately, can yield richer insights. Thus, this paper integrates Institutional Theory, Contingency Theory, and Psychological Safety with metaphors of the organization as a political system and living organism. These lenses are selected for their complementary ability to analyze structural adaptation, normative conformity, human dynamics, and symbolic meaning all crucial to understanding how organizations navigate disruption and transformation.

The objective of this study is twofold: 1) To develop a conceptual framework that synthesizes organizational theory, metaphor, and behavioural insight for analyzing complex organizational phenomena. and 2) To apply this framework to four interrelated issues digital disruption, ESG compliance, hybrid work models, and organizational politics using real-world cases from private, non-profit, and higher education sectors.

To make sense of such multifaceted dynamics, this paper applies a multi-lens approach integrating organizational theory, metaphor, and behaviour. From a theoretical standpoint, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) sheds light on

how legitimacy-seeking behavior influences ESG adoption and digital conformity across sectors. Contingency Theory (Donaldson, 2001; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) explains how organizations can structure themselves adaptively in response to environmental complexity whether it be students, donors, algorithms, or carbon targets.

At the behavioural level, Psychological Safety (Edmondson, 1999) is pivotal in understanding how trust and open dialogue facilitate innovation, especially in hybrid teams and politicized work cultures. Across all domains, organizational metaphors enhance interpretive power. The political system metaphor (Morgan, 2006) highlights how internal factions, power asymmetries, and symbolic decisions affect ESG rollouts, return-to-office policies, or institutional change. The organism metaphor frames organizations as adaptive systems whose survival depends on sensing and responding to external change (Burns & Stalker, 1961).

This paper argues that decoding today's organizational phenomena across sectors requires this synthesized lens. Section II presents the foundational theories, metaphors, and behaviour frameworks. Section III applies them to four real-world dynamics: digital disruption, ESG, hybrid work, and organizational politics. Section IV integrates and analyzes the cross-sectoral insights. The conclusion reflects on implications for leadership, design, and institutional resilience. In an age where ambiguity is the norm and legitimacy is constantly negotiated, organizations that embrace conceptual plurality and behavioural intelligence are best positioned to adapt and lead. This paper contributes to that effort.

2. Methods

To unpack the multidimensional challenges facing organizations - ranging from digital disruption to ESG pressures, hybrid work, and internal politics - this study draws on two foundational organizational theories, a key organizational behaviour construct, and two interpretive metaphors. Together, these frameworks provide a robust analytical structure to interpret how organizations respond, adapt, and evolve in highly complex environments. This research is a literature study. Data was taken from books, online, and offline articles. Triangulation was used to analyze the collected data.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1. Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory focuses on how organizations conform to socially constructed expectations, norms, and legitimacy standards within their environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). It is particularly useful in analyzing how phenomena such as ESG, sustainability reporting, and DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) become "taken-for-granted" organizational practices not necessarily due to performance logic, but because of normative, mimetic, or coercive pressures from regulators, peers, or civil society.

For example, ESG compliance is increasingly driven not only by internal ethics but also by institutional pressures from global investor coalitions (e.g., Climate Action 100+), accreditation agencies, and social media advocacy. Institutional theory explains how such pressures produce isomorphism, pushing organizations toward similar structures, policies, and values. Even digital transformation initiatives can be mimetically adopted to signal modernity, regardless of actual strategic alignment (Greenwood et al., 2011).

This theory is particularly salient in non-profit and academic settings, where legitimacy often supersedes profit as a guiding principle. In universities, for example, commitments to carbon neutrality or decolonizing the curriculum often reflect institutional logics tied to global ranking systems, donor expectations, and student activism (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013).

3.1.1 Contingency Theory

Contingency Theory, on the other hand, assumes that there is no universally best organizational structure. Instead, effectiveness arises from a fit between internal organizational design and external environmental complexity (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Donaldson, 2001). This theory emphasizes the dynamic tension between differentiation (specialized subunits) and integration (coordinated response).

In the context of hybrid work, contingency theory provides a powerful lens to evaluate how organizations restructure roles, communication protocols, and accountability systems. Some functions thrive in decentralized, asynchronous work (e.g., software engineering), while others require proximity, structure, or immediacy (e.g., student services or lab work). Thus, “hybrid” is not a single configuration but a contingent variable shaped by task interdependence, technology readiness, and organizational culture.

Contingency theory also helps diagnose why certain digital or ESG initiatives fail: not because the strategy is wrong, but because the structure, people, or leadership style are misaligned with environmental demands.

3.1.2. Organizational Behaviour: Psychological Safety

Psychological safety defined as a shared belief that one can express ideas, questions, or concerns without fear of punishment or humiliation is critical for team performance, innovation, and learning (Edmondson, 1999). In volatile contexts like digital transformation or political friction around ESG, psychological safety serves as a mediator between external turbulence and internal resilience.

In hybrid teams, where informal cues and in-person trust-building are diminished, the absence of psychological safety leads to silence, disengagement, or passive resistance (Newman et al., 2017). In political environments such as universities debating equity policies or NGOs addressing gender dynamics psychological safety determines whether dissent leads to constructive dialogue or reputational breakdown.

Moreover, psychological safety is culturally sensitive, varying by power distance, national culture, and historical marginalization. Organizations with inclusive cultures and transparent communication systems are more likely to foster environments conducive to trust and innovation (Frazier et al., 2017).

3.1.3. Organizational Metaphors: Political System and Organism

Organizational metaphors allow us to see and understand organizations beyond their formal structures (Morgan, 2006). Two metaphors are employed in this paper: Organization as Political System: This metaphor foregrounds power, interests, conflict, and coalition-building. It is especially useful for understanding resistance to change, ESG implementation battles, or leadership struggles in hybrid transitions. In political systems, agenda-setting, symbolic framing, and gatekeeping are central. For example, the use of climate language in mission statements might reflect symbolic alignment more than operational substance akin to “purpose-washing.” Organization as Organism: This

metaphor views organizations as living systems that adapt to their environments, much like biological entities. It underscores homeostasis, environmental sensitivity, and evolutionary change (Burns & Stalker, 1961). This is particularly useful when analyzing how organizations morph their structures or cultures in response to external shocks like pandemics or digital revolutions. The metaphor supports a systems-thinking approach, acknowledging the interconnectedness of people, structure, and environment. By integrating these metaphors with formal theory, the analysis in this paper attends not only to rational structures and behaviour, but also to symbolism, meaning, and subjective experience essential dimensions of complex organizational life.

3.2. *Application of the Framework to Key Phenomena*

This section applies the multi-lens framework composed of Institutional Theory, Contingency Theory, Psychological Safety, and the metaphors of organization as political system and organism to four intersecting organizational phenomena: digital disruption, ESG imperatives, hybrid work, and organizational politics. These cases span corporate, non-profit, and higher education sectors, illustrating how conceptual integration illuminates real-world organizational dynamics.

3.2.1. *Digital Disruption*

Digital disruption refers to the transformation of business models, operations, and value creation through emerging technologies such as AI, blockchain, and platform economies. Organizations like Walmart, Netflix, and Coursera have leveraged digital innovation to create competitive advantages. However, many others, including universities and non-profits, struggle to keep pace with the technological curve.

From an Institutional Theory perspective, digital transformation often represents a mimetic isomorphism organizations adopt digital tools to signal legitimacy rather than to drive true strategic transformation (Vial, 2019). Universities rushing to launch online programs during COVID-19 did so as a legitimacy imperative, but many failed to align these with instructional quality or learner-centered design (Altbach et al., 2020).

Contingency Theory helps explain why certain digital strategies fail: they lack alignment with internal capabilities, structural arrangements, or stakeholder expectations. For instance, digitally native nonprofits like charity: water succeed by aligning lean digital operations with donor engagement strategies, whereas legacy NGOs often face structural inertia that resists such transformations (Zahra & Nambisan, 2012).

At the behavioural level, digital disruption introduces ambiguity, role change, and fear conditions that undermine psychological safety. Employees often fear automation will render their roles obsolete. Without open dialogue and leadership support, this fear leads to resistance or disengagement (Newman et al., 2017). Using the organism metaphor, successful digital transformation is akin to evolutionary adaptation sensing environmental shifts, reallocating resources, and reconfiguring internal systems. The political system metaphor reveals how digital change can be shaped by power dynamics IT departments, top leadership, or consultants often dominate strategic narratives, sidelining end-user perspectives or frontline innovation.

3.2.2. *Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Pressures*

ESG is now central to stakeholder capitalism, particularly as global investors, regulators, and consumers demand transparency, sustainability, and ethical governance. However, its institutionalization remains contested and politicized. Institutional Theory

captures the normative and coercive pressures that drive ESG reporting and carbon neutrality pledges (Gond et al., 2012). For example, the University of California's commitment to carbon neutrality by 2025 stems from both student activism and global academic rankings, reflecting a bid for legitimacy in the higher education field (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013).

Contingency Theory emphasizes that ESG cannot be "plugged in." Organizational success depends on fit: ESG strategies must align with resource capacity, stakeholder profiles, and operating environments. A sustainability strategy that works in Norway may fail in India due to institutional and infrastructural mismatches. At the behavioural level, ESG initiatives are most successful when supported by psychologically safe environments that encourage ethical voice, internal dissent, and critical feedback. Organizations without these conditions risk purpose-washing, where superficial compliance undermines credibility (Sundheim, 2023).

The political metaphor is vital here: ESG initiatives are often sites of internal conflict between cost-focused departments and value-driven stakeholders. Power struggles between boards, sustainability offices, and operations managers dictate what gets prioritized. The organism metaphor reminds us that true sustainability requires long-term, systemic balance not episodic compliance.

3.2.3. *Hybrid Work Models*

Hybrid work combining remote and in-office work has become a dominant post-pandemic structure. Tech firms like Google and Apple have experimented with policies ranging from full flexibility to mandated office days, often with significant backlash.

Contingency Theory is central here: the optimal structure depends on task complexity, interdependence, and communication needs. A blanket policy seldom works. For instance, asynchronous roles in programming adapt well to remote models, while student advising roles in universities demand synchronous, in-person interaction.

Institutional Theory shows how hybrid work is rapidly becoming a new norm professional associations and media narratives now define flexibility as a cultural expectation. Organizations resisting this shift risk being seen as outdated, losing talent, or facing reputational harm. Psychological safety is arguably most fragile in hybrid contexts. Remote workers can feel excluded from informal decision-making and lack opportunities for spontaneous learning (Frazier et al., 2017). Inclusive leadership and transparent communication are essential to sustaining trust.

Metaphorically, the political lens helps explain internal resistance: office space managers, HR departments, and executives often push conflicting agendas under the guise of "culture." The organism metaphor suggests hybrid work is a natural adaptation to changing environmental conditions climate concerns, health risks, and global talent pools all drive the evolution of work structures.

3.2.4. *Organizational Politics*

All organizations engage in politics, but in times of uncertainty, political behavior becomes more pronounced especially in sectors where values and identities are deeply contested, such as higher education and non-profits. Institutional Theory reveals that organizational politics often surface during legitimacy crises: when leaders attempt symbolic reforms (e.g., DEI policies, ESG statements) that lack substantive follow-through, internal trust deteriorates.

Contingency Theory helps us understand that politics is more intense when role clarity, reward structures, or decision processes are ambiguous. Poorly structured hybrid environments or conflicting ESG metrics often produce role overlaps that foster political turf wars. In such contexts, psychological safety is critical. It enables employees to voice concerns, engage in dialogue, and participate in sensemaking even in politically charged climates (Edmondson, 1999; Detert & Burris, 2007). Without it, politics devolve into backchannel resistance, gossip, or withdrawal.

The political metaphor is explicitly applicable here. It helps analyze power relations, symbolic leadership, and decision-making rituals. Meanwhile, the organism metaphor reminds us that political activity while sometimes dysfunctional is also a sign of adaptive stress. It may be part of a broader learning process as the system recalibrates in response to external pressures. Across these four phenomena, the integrated framework provides a multi-dimensional lens to understand complexity, nuance, and contradiction. Institutional theory explains normative conformity, contingency theory assesses design-environment fit, psychological safety addresses human dynamics, and metaphors interpret underlying meaning systems. Together, they offer a richer, more actionable perspective on the evolving landscape of organizational life.

3.3. Cross-Phenomenon Synthesis and Integrated Analysis

The four organizational phenomena explored digital disruption, ESG, hybrid work, and organizational politics are often treated in isolation. However, when analyzed through an integrated framework, common patterns, tensions, and interdependencies emerge. This section synthesizes insights across the phenomena to surface deeper implications for organizational design, leadership, and institutional evolution.

3.3.1. Interdependent Complexity and Adaptive Pressure

Across all four cases, organizations face multi-causal pressures that are often simultaneous and conflicting. Digital transformation may increase efficiency but erode employee psychological safety. ESG initiatives may enhance legitimacy but spark internal resistance. Hybrid work can improve flexibility but challenge coordination and cultural cohesion. Organizational politics becomes the backdrop for how such changes are interpreted, supported, or undermined.

Here, the organism metaphor and Contingency Theory work in concert. Organizations are not static machines but adaptive systems that must constantly adjust internal structures to external demands. Those that treat disruptions as linear, one-off challenges often fail; those that cultivate feedback loops, cross-functional collaboration, and internal learning mechanisms thrive (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Donaldson, 2001).

3.3.2. Legitimacy, Symbolism, and Strategic Signaling

Digital initiatives, ESG policies, and flexible work practices are not just operational shifts they are also symbolic acts of legitimacy. Whether in a Fortune 500 company or a university, adopting ESG reporting standards or remote work policies signals alignment with societal norms. However, as Institutional Theory suggests, these symbolic actions can become decoupled from actual implementation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

This leads to a paradox: purpose-washing, techno-optimism, or flexibility rhetoric may earn short-term approval but backfire if stakeholders perceive a disconnect between words and action. The political metaphor clarifies how such legitimacy-seeking behaviour

can be hijacked by power holders using change initiatives as tools for control, resource capture, or reputation management (Morgan, 2006; Buchanan & Badham, 2008).

3.3.3. *The Central Role of Psychological Safety in Change Environments*

Perhaps the strongest cross-cutting theme is the centrality of psychological safety. In all four phenomena, psychological safety acts as a linchpin variable enabling or blocking change, learning, and adaptation. It explains why some teams embrace hybrid models while others disengage, why ESG efforts catalyze action in some organizations and spark resistance in others.

Organizations with high psychological safety can surface contradictions, test assumptions, and course-correct. Those without it suppress dissent, leading to performative compliance, cognitive overload, or silent sabotage (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). This supports the argument that human dynamics not just strategy or structure determine whether adaptation succeeds.

3.3.4. *Ambiguity as a Source of Both Conflict and Innovation*

A shared property of these phenomena is high ambiguity. Digital disruption, ESG, hybrid work, and organizational politics all involve fuzzy boundaries, contested meanings, and competing interests. This ambiguity creates space for creative innovation, but also for political maneuvering, confusion, and fear.

Metaphorically, ambiguity is the “fuel” of the political system: actors interpret events differently, frame agendas strategically, and build coalitions to advance narratives. From an organizational behaviour perspective, leaders must tolerate and manage ambiguity, rather than eliminate it supporting open inquiry while maintaining alignment and focus.

3.3.5. *Integrated Leadership Imperatives*

These insights generate leadership imperatives that cut across sectors: a) Sensemaking: Leaders must interpret complex signals, frame them compellingly, and align interpretations across constituencies. b) System design: Structures must be contingently aligned with specific goals e.g., ESG governance cannot be run like IT procurement. c) Symbolic integrity: Leaders must match what they say with what they do, lest legitimacy be lost. d) Safety scaffolding: Leaders should actively cultivate psychological safety, especially in hybrid and politically volatile settings. And e) Power awareness: Leaders need political intelligence knowing how decisions are shaped by influence networks and hidden interests.

Leadership in this context is neither purely rational nor charismatic; it is institutional, behavioural, and symbolic all at once.

3.3.6. *Sectoral Implications*

While these phenomena manifest across all sectors, their dynamics vary: a) In corporations, investor scrutiny and market logic drive faster but sometimes shallower adoption of digital and ESG reforms. b) In non-profits, mission alignment and stakeholder pluralism introduce unique governance challenges, requiring careful balancing of values and performance. And c) In higher education, shared governance, tenure systems, and public accountability introduce political complexity that often slows innovation but enriches institutional reflexivity.

Thus, while the conceptual tools apply universally, application must be context-sensitive. The cross-phenomenon analysis reveals that organizational complexity is not a barrier to understanding - it is an invitation to integrate perspectives. When we combine theory (Institutional and Contingency), behaviour (Psychological Safety), and metaphor (Political System and Organism), we illuminate both the visible structures and the hidden dynamics of organizational life. Rather than reduce complexity, this approach makes complexity actionable - helping scholars and practitioners see not only what is happening, but also why it matters and how to intervene.

4. Conclusion

In today's volatile and interdependent world, organizations across sectors face overlapping disruptions digital innovation, ESG imperatives, hybrid work transitions, and politicized internal environments that defy simplistic or one-dimensional analysis. These challenges demand an integrated conceptual framework that captures the institutional, structural, behavioural, and symbolic dimensions of organizational life.

This paper has responded to that demand by synthesizing Institutional Theory, Contingency Theory, and the construct of Psychological Safety, enriched by the metaphors of the organization as political system and organism. Applied to four complex phenomena, this framework illuminated how organizations adapt (or fail to adapt) not just through formal structures or market logic, but through normative pressure, power struggles, identity dynamics, and adaptive learning.

Key insights from this integrated approach include: The critical role of legitimacy in shaping responses to digitalization and ESG pressures, The importance of contextual fit in hybrid work design and strategic structure, The need to sustain psychological safety to ensure innovation, engagement, and ethical voice, and The symbolic and political nature of organizational actions and resistance.

These findings demonstrate that organizations cannot afford to treat change as a technical exercise alone. Instead, they must attend to sensemaking, power dynamics, stakeholder alignment, and the emotional climate in which change occurs. Without such a holistic lens, even well-intended reforms risk failure.

Implications

Leaders must act as institutional entrepreneurs navigating pressures for legitimacy while crafting novel structures that fit their environments. This requires: Building coalitions across silos, not just issuing top-down mandates, Investing in psychological infrastructure-especially in hybrid or remote contexts, and Engaging in symbolic leadership, ensuring that values are not only stated but embodied.

Design efforts should be contingent, modular, and people-centered: ESG governance cannot be grafted onto existing compliance systems without revisiting organizational values and roles, and Digital change should be accompanied by redesigning job identity, communication protocols, and learning systems.

For Sector-Specific Managers: In higher education, shared governance bodies must be reimagined to include digital pedagogy experts and climate strategy leads, In non-profits, balancing mission-driven decision-making with digital agility and data literacy is essential, and In corporate sectors, long-termism, stakeholder integration, and ethical leadership will define competitive advantage.

This paper contributes to theory in several ways: It offers a multi-theoretical integration, showing how institutional and contingency lenses, typically treated separately, can be complementary, It expands the scope of psychological safety by embedding it within macro-organizational dynamics (e.g., ESG, hybrid work politics), It affirms the utility of organizational metaphors in revealing power, symbolism, and adaptive systems logic, and It bridges levels of analysis, linking individual behaviour (safety), organizational design (contingency), and field-level dynamics (institutional logics).

Future research could deepen this approach by: Conducting empirical studies across sectors using this framework, Exploring how different metaphors (e.g., organization as culture, brain, or flux) shape strategic choices, and Investigating how digital tools affect institutional legitimacy and behavioural climate simultaneously.

As organizational environments grow more entangled and contested, scholars and practitioners must resist reductionist thinking. Complexity is not a liability; it is an intellectual and strategic frontier. By engaging with multiple theories, behaviours, and metaphors, we equip ourselves not only to understand the present but to shape the future.

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