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4. Coping with conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes through constructive hybridization

Jacob Torfing, Sofie Loklindt Christensen and Eva Sørensen

4.1 COPING WITH CONFLICT, DILEMMAS AND PARADOXES

The introduction of co-creation in the public sector leads to conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes that call for the use of coping strategies aimed at finding ways of blurring, mitigating, bridging or exploiting the tensions without necessarily removing them. Coping strategies are adaptive behavioural responses to aversive situations and are studied in relation to both animals and human beings. Modern psychology studies how people respond emotionally to stress by using different coping strategies (Carver et al. 1989). It also aims to identify the personal and contextual determinants of the deployment of different coping strategies (Holahan & Moos 1987).

In the field of public administration, there have been many studies of how frontline staff cope with stress caused by high workloads (Tummers et al. 2015). Much of the research on the coping strategies they use refers back to Lipsky's seminal study of street-level bureaucrats who deliver services to the citizenry based on unclear rules and with considerable discretion in their decisions (Lipsky 1980). Street-level bureaucrats are caught in an unsustainable cross-pressure between client demands from below, legislative demands from above and their own professional standards. To avoid being overcome by stress, they develop and apply a range of self-protective coping strategies, such as reducing the clients' demands for output, rationing output through a combination of creaming and parking, and automating output through the adoption of standard operating procedures and the stereotyping of clients. According to Lipsky, the combined effect of how street-level bureaucrats use these different coping strategies is that public policies are thwarted, and implementation problems become standard.

The type of coping strategies we shall discuss in this chapter are slightly different (Torfing et al. 2022). While their usage is still prompted by aversive situations, the overriding motive for using coping strategies is not the individual self-preservation of public employees but rather a collective wish to lead and manage co-creation in ways that allow the involved actors (as well as society in general) to reap the fruits of a distributed and creative problem-solving process. As such, public and/or private leaders of co-creation may detect conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes that somehow frustrate the co-creation process and hamper the realization of some of its potential benefits. Realizing that the conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes cannot be removed, the leaders aim to find appropriate coping strategies that they think will help them to bring the co-creation to a successful conclusion.

Our use of the term ‘coping strategies’ has affinity with the work of Thacher and Rein (2004) and De Graaf et al. (2016), who describe how policy makers deploy different strategies to cope with the value conflicts inherent to public policy making. While their focus is on how to cope with conflicts between equally supportable but incommensurable values, we tend to see the attempts to cope with conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes from the co-creation perspective. Coping strategies seeking to either balance or create trade-offs between different governance paradigms can help us to reap the fruits of co-creation.

The effort to use coping strategies in this manner rests on three conditions. First, the leaders of public–private co-creation processes must be driven by public service motivation (Perry 1996), which urges them to take a co-creation approach to solving complex problems and to do what they can to scaffold the co-creation process to make it run as smoothly as possible and to generate desirable results. The problems emerging in relation to a particular co-creation process may place personal pressure on the leaders and their work lives, but the important thing is that they remain focused on the collective benefits that will accrue from the right choice of coping strategies.

Second, the leaders must be reflexive in the sense of taking time to pause and reflect on how the co-creation process is going, identifying the problems and challenges, and determining what can be done about them. Leaders should ideally have a small leadership team with which they can confer and that can help them to detect emerging conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes; ultimately producing a good response. Some leaders may even be a part of a leadership network in which they can discuss the challenges they are facing and find inspiration for the design of an appropriate coping strategy.

Finally, yet importantly, the leaders of co-creation processes must be resourceful in the sense of having sufficient knowledge, experiences and skills to design and implement the right coping strategy. The most precious resource is time. Most co-creation leaders are also responsible for leading and managing a large bureaucratic organization, its staff, and a large number of projects. As

they are extremely busy, the time for reflection and proactive leadership and management in various co-creation arenas will tend to be limited.

4.2 COPING WITH CONFLICTS

When introduced in the public sector, perhaps in a particular niche, co-creation may come into conflict with particular principles, values and procedures emanating from extant forms of Old Public Administration (OPA) and New Public Management (NPM). While this is a conflict between different ideas and principles, it will often 'get personal' and end up as a conflict between individuals supporting different governance paradigms. To illustrate, the mayor's office may remind the facilitators of a co-creation process that the mayor will have the final say about the new solution; the municipal CEO may insist on instructing those in charge of the co-creation process about what type of outcomes are acceptable; or the budget office may require detailed documentation for expenditures and request regular performance reports. Such external demands on the co-creation process may trigger conflicts calling for the deployment of different coping strategies.

Strategies for conflict resolution may take different forms following the classical Thomas–Kilmann model for conflict management, where the conflicting actors are focused in varying ways on satisfying their own concerns (assertiveness) or satisfying the concerns of their opponent (cooperativeness) (Thomas & Kilmann 1974). A first strategy, neither assertive nor cooperative, is the avoidance of the conflict at hand by means of trying to ignore or sidestep it, hoping it will resolve itself or dissipate. The actors may be aware of a conflict between two different governance logics and have different preferences. Hence, they disagree about which logic should prevail but remain silent and try not to step on each other's toes, thus aiming to prevent an open conflict. Perhaps the conflict is not worth pursuing or maybe the context will change and undermine one of the opposing positions in the conflict, thereby making it disappear. Ignoring and suppressing the conflict may not work in the long term, however, and it may grow bigger and ultimately explode. Hence, depending on the nature and character of the conflict, another coping strategy must be considered.

A second strategy is competition: the survival of the fittest. Proponents of different governance principles are merely concerned about being right and having it their way, and they do not explore the prospect of finding a common ground. The conflict will therefore persist until one party wins and the other loses. For the organization as a whole, the cost will often be considerable. The loser may leave the co-creation process or become inactive, and the solution will tend to contain little or no flexibility; as such, it may not be very robust.

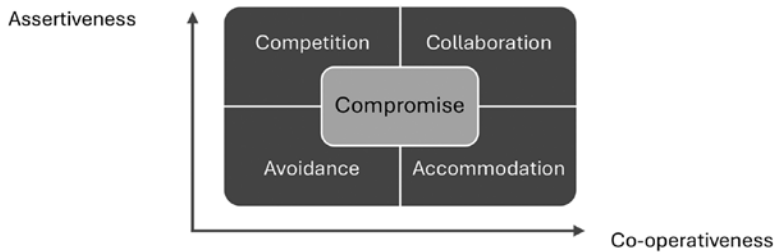
A third strategy is accommodation, whereby authoritative decision makers rule in favour of one side of the conflict at the expense of the other. The leaders of a co-creation process may be a part of the conflict and ask a higher-level authority to decide which of two conflicting governance principles should be honoured. Hence, conflicting parties will be unable to assert their own concerns and must accept the ruling of a superior authority, which is expected to consider all concerns. This will bring a formal solution to the conflict, but the solution may produce much grievance and bitterness among those who are ruled against. Hence, the conflict may not disappear entirely, despite its formal solution. Indeed, those who are ruled against may question the right of somebody outside the co-creation arena to impose a particular solution, and there is a risk of the conflict flaring up again.

A fourth strategy is compromise, involving an acceptable resolution that will partly, but not entirely, satisfy the concerns of all of the parties involved. Such a compromise may either be based on a give-and-take bargaining process at the end of which both parties reluctantly accept something of great concern for the other party or rely on the identification of the least common denominator; that is, something to which both parties in the conflict can agree despite it not really being a major concern for either of them. In both cases, the conflicting parties might be able to live with the compromise, but none of them really got what they hoped for. Hence, in compromise formation, both the assertiveness and cooperativeness of the actors is relatively low, although not entirely absent.

Finally, there is the collaboration strategy, which encourages the parties involved in the conflict to work through it and to find a solution that entirely satisfies all parties. This coping strategy requires the effort of all parties to construct a common ground where the conflict and what lies behind it can be properly assessed and the prospects for conflict resolution can be discussed openly. The ensuing attempt to resolve the conflict based on constructive dialogue may involve attempts at destabilizing each of the conflicting principles by means of showing their limitations. This exercise may be followed by an effort to see both of the conflicting principles as a part of a third option through which the goals of the conflicting parties can be achieved, albeit in a new and different way from that which was originally envisaged. Hence, some kind of synthesis is created that makes the conflict fall apart and seem irrelevant. Innovation and reframing are important ingredients in this strategy.

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the more or less assertive and cooperative strategies for coping with conflict.

Coping strategies based on avoidance are extremely defensive, as they completely refuse to deal with emerging conflicts. The competitive and accommodation strategies are also rather defensive; although they aim to resolve the conflict, they do so without interrogating the opposed principles to explore the prospects for finding common ground. The compromise and



Source: Adapted from Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI®) (Thomas 1976).

Figure 4.1 Strategies for coping with conflict

collaboration strategies are more proactive and offensive, as they both seek out ways of combining the opposed concerns, either in a minimalist (compromise) or maximalist (collaboration) manner.

4.3 COPING WITH DILEMMAS

Dilemmas present us with a difficult choice between two equally (un)attractive but mutually exclusive normative options (Haan 2001). We are forced to choose but know that the choice of one normative defensible option will come at the expense of another equally (un)defensible option. To illustrate, we may face the question of whether or not we should allow the needs-based co-creation of service solutions in local eldercare centres to undermine the bureaucratic concern for ensuring that senior citizens all have the right to the same public service. The choice between needs-based solutions and equal treatment may seem impossible but must be made. Another dilemma may arise between the endeavour to bring together public and private actors in the co-creation of green urban solutions and the NPM preference for contracting out green urban solutions to competing private contractors.

Strategies for dealing with such dilemmas are hard to find, as no ‘right answer’ exists. There is no readily available template or procedure that can be used to resolve dilemmas that continue to exert psychological pressure on us to do the right thing in a situation where we are paralyzed and cannot choose. The uncomfortable feeling, they generate, creates a temptation to shy away from dilemmas, either by refusing to deal with them at all or resolving the moral tension they create by denying the complexity of the situation. Indeed, social and political actors can be very good at denying the existence of normative dilemmas in public governance. They may tell themselves that the dilemma is not real, that nobody else is aware of it, or that dealing with it is not their

responsibility. Alternatively, they may convince themselves that the choice is not really that complex or difficult; either because their hands are tied and they are forced by some higher-level authority to choose one option rather than the other, or because new circumstances make one of the options seem impossible to achieve. The preference for not having to confront a governance dilemma tends to encourage people to invent excuses and/or self-deceptive accounts of the situation.

A more proactive strategy for coping with dilemmas must first identify, name and accept the governance dilemma: it exists, it is real and persistent, and it must be confronted. A next step is to talk openly about it with the group of actors involved in co-creation. Unlike personal dilemmas, organizational dilemmas have to be addressed at a collective level. Here, it may be a good idea to discuss where the group is right now in terms of having a preference for one of the options in the dilemma and where it wants to be in the immediate future. The dilemma may have already been ‘decided’ by default by the current practices, but the group may want to change those practices. This requires an interrogation of the dilemma to understand its nature and the implications of choosing one or the other of the two poles.

A truly proactive coping strategy must go on the offensive by analysing and confronting the governance dilemma. Here, a first strategy involves questioning the underlying assumptions of the different courses of action and their implicit normativity. Will a certain governance decision really lead to a particular sequence of events? Is it certain that these events will support a particular normative preference? Another strategy is to explore whether it is possible to find a bridge connecting the two options; for example, by identifying a higher-order principle containing aspects of the two competing values or a third solution containing elements of both options. Finally, one might try to turn the dilemma on its head by asking how the reality of governance can be reshaped to fulfil a more comprehensive list of values. Hence, if the choice is between ensuring equal and standardized service quality and engaging in the needs-based co-creation of local services, the question might become: what does it take to provide the same needs-based solutions to all citizens?

If none of these coping strategies work and the dilemma is as unendurable as it is persistent, the fall-back option is to think through the likely consequences and select the best (or ‘least unattractive’) option – and subsequently trying not to be too hard on oneself for choosing it.

Figure 4.2 presents the array of strategies for coping with dilemmas.

4.4 COPING WITH PARADOXES

A standard paradox when co-creating public solutions is that broad-based participation appears to deepen democracy while potentially undermining the

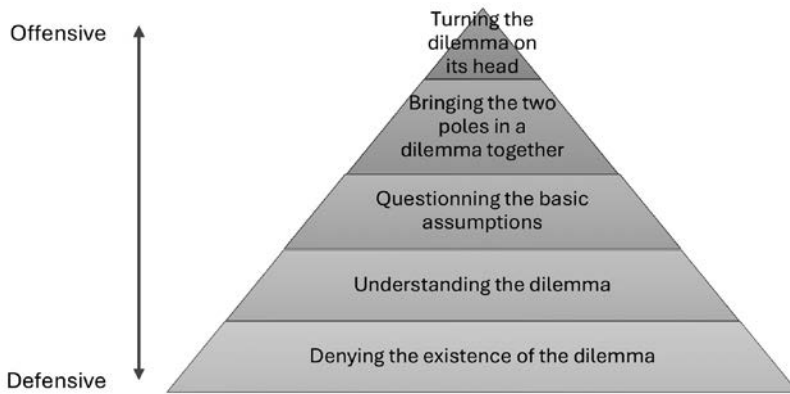


Figure 4.2 Strategies for coping with dilemmas

influence of democratically elected politicians. Another paradox may emerge when co-creating actors aim to think outside the box but must comply with existing laws and regulations. Finally, a well-known paradox in relation to co-creation is when lay actors are involved in processes requiring extensive professional knowledge.

The strategies for coping with these and the other paradoxes emerging in relation to co-creation span from reactive and defensive strategies that deny the existence of paradox, regress to a pre-paradox phase, or accuse external actors of being the source of the paradox to proactive and offensive strategies aiming to confront and deal constructively with a paradox (Cameron & Quinn 1988; Christensen 2021; Lewis & Smith 2014; Poole & van de Ven 1989). We distinguish between three main coping strategies: marginalization strategies, splitting strategies and confrontation strategies.

Marginalization strategies aim to untangle and isolate the two contradictory and combined elements in a paradox to suppress one of them, thereby removing the contradiction. The existence of one of the disentangled elements may not be totally denied but relegated to a marginal position to prevent or mitigate clashes with its counterpart. Hence, despite widespread criticism of performance management for crowding out intrinsic task motivation and public service motivation, it may be used as a part of the annual budget procedure that reviews the overall results of different administrative departments and units. The marginal use of performance management may prevent it from undermining the trust-based management that sets public agencies free to pursue the co-creation of public value; for example, through the involvement of users, volunteers and other civil society actors who will react strongly to any attempts to subject their efforts to a systemic measurement exercise. The

marginalization of one of the two elements in a paradox may, as here, take the form of limited usage of a particular governance practice, but may also involve downgrading the status of a particular governance principle; for example, by turning bureaucratic rules into guidelines or introducing a new contingency rule: A applies as long as it is not in conflict with B. Marginalization strategies may both be pursued by leaders of co-creation and by higher-level authorities who realize that the hierarchy between different governance principles must be changed to allow for new things to happen.

Splitting strategies aim to polarize and dissociate the two contradictory elements of a paradox in order to mask their mutual relation and interconnectedness. By splitting the paradox into its two components and isolating them from each other, the opposing elements are allowed to prevail in different realms without coming into contact with each other. This removes the contradiction between combined elements. There are two key splitting strategies. The first is spatial separation, which aims to confine the contradictory ideas, values, processes or goals in their own respective spaces, which can either be a particular process, team, department or organization. Spatial separation is made to avoid open clashes between the two contradictory elements. A classic example is having a research and development department that is physically separated from the daily operations in public service agencies and thereby facilitating both the creative exploration of new options and routinized exploitation of past inventions. The second splitting strategy is temporal separation aimed at creating separate sequences, each dealing with the polar opposite elements in the paradox. For example, we are creative and innovate and experiment in the first phase of a collaborative process, whereas in phase two we implement, scale and optimize based on the measurement of results. The success of splitting strategies depends on their ability to lock each of the contradictory elements of a paradox into their respective confined space – where they can reign undisputed without clashing with each other.

The confrontation strategy paradox includes acceptance, scrutiny and rethinking. Acceptance involves coming to terms with the paradoxical situation and the contradictory (but mutually related) demands, processes and goals, thereby recognizing the paradox as a basic condition for action. Acceptance may lead to scrutiny, where the actors openly discuss and analyse the nature of the paradox, its sources and its consequences. Rather than denying the paradox, it is seen as a challenge. Humour may be used to pinpoint and neutralize the irrationality associated with the paradox (Hatch & Erlich 1993). The actors may even engage in a rethinking of it. Rethinking adopts a second-order perspective on the paradox and critically explores its assumptions, truths, organizational conditions and habits in order to discover new ways of exploiting the different aspects of the paradox to one's own advantage. This response is described as the quintessence of paradoxical thinking, as it is the antidote of

paralysis, which is typically the immediate effect of facing a paradox (Fletcher & Olwyler 1997; Miron-Spektor et al. 2018; Westenholtz 1993). Rethinking involves the reframing of the paradox and may be facilitated by how a paradox – by bringing together two related, but contradictory elements – may express a truth. While it may be difficult to get one’s head around it, there seems to be little doubt that public organizations must both innovate their services and secure stable service production – and that the separation of exploration and exploitation is a bad idea. Hence, the two contradictory demands must be integrated in organizations with a high degree of ambidexterity.

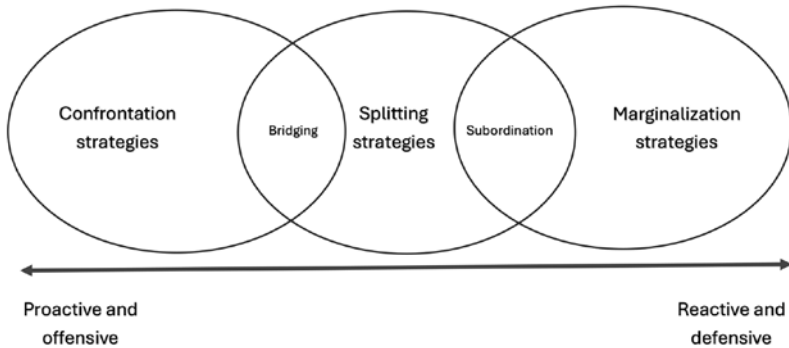
Confrontation strategies are more proactive and offensive than the more reactive defensive marginalization strategies, with splitting strategies somewhere in-between. The three strategies can be seen to overlap in two pairs; confrontation strategies overlap with splitting strategies when actors aim to accept the contradictory elements based on a combination of differentiation and integration. Hence, spatial and temporal separation may be combined with some kind of bridging that views the two contradictory elements as two sides of the same coin and eventually as mutually supportive. Smets et al. (2016) emphasize the need to combine differentiation and integration: differentiation alone may create the short-term mitigation but long-term escalation of the paradox, whereas integration alone will foster false synergies and syntheses by denying the basic contradiction.

Splitting and marginalization strategies overlap in much the same way, as marginalization strategies presuppose splitting, while splitting may lead to the construction of a hierarchy between the two poles that subordinates one to the other, but without trying to marginalize or eliminate the subordinate element. Subordination strategies give credit to both poles but place them within a hierarchy that presents one pole as more important or legitimate than the other.

Figure 4.3 provides an overview of the different coping strategies that can be used when encountering paradoxes in relation to the increased use of co-creation in the public sector.

Designing, Implementing and Evaluating Coping Strategies for Successful Co-creation

Designing and implementing coping strategies to deal with emerging conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes is an important additional task for co-creation leaders. They must first construct a platform and an arena for co-creation and subsequently facilitate the co-creation process to make it inclusive, trust-based, collaborative, innovative and so forth before being able to look for the problems and challenges arising from the clash between co-creation and other governance paradigms – and then begin thinking about how to cope with them. Most leaders will be unaware of the importance of designing and



Source: Christensen (2021)

Figure 4.3 *Overlapping coping strategies*

implementing coping strategies despite the fact that such coping strategies may be crucial for the co-creation outcomes. They may not even be aware of how they are developing and applying coping strategies, although they may do so because they are facing real conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes that require action.

Designing and implementing a coping strategy in response to an emerging conflict, dilemma or paradox is a difficult task. It requires the detection of problems and challenges and the efforts to precisely diagnose them in order to understand fully what is at stake. Some problems and challenges may disappear on their own, because they are the results of misunderstandings or some rapidly changing circumstances, whereas other problems have greater staying power and prompt the development of an appropriate response. Designing the right coping strategy will often be a matter of trial and error. Solutions to a particular problem or challenge may be suggested, and the most promising one may be tried out. The result of the trial may be more or less satisfactory, and new strategies may be attempted if the first did not work. After much pragmatic muddling through, the leaders may rest their case, either because their strategy seems to work or because new problems and challenges call for their attention. In short, we should not expect the design and implementation of coping strategies to be an overly rational process aiming to optimize co-creation processes and strive for perfection.

Nevertheless, the evaluation of the coping strategies that are implemented is important. Leaders of co-creation processes may test a particular coping strategy to see if it works as expected, and they may want to evaluate the results to see if they are on the right track. Tweaking the coping strategy might make it

work better; or perhaps the result is so bad that an entirely new coping strategy must be developed. Evaluation requires the formulation of expectations regarding the result of the implementation of a particular coping strategy and collection of data that enable leaders to assess whether the expectations were met. The EU-financed COGOV project used design experiments to test and evaluate different coping strategies in local co-creation settings (Torfing et al. 2023).

There is much to gain from designing and implementing effective coping strategies. As seen above, some coping strategies may merely aim to conceal the clash between co-creation and the pre-existing governance paradigms, either by denying the existence of conflicts, dilemmas or paradoxes or by trying to separate the opposed logics so that they do not openly clash with each other. Other strategies may try to mitigate the problem by smoothing the edges of the opposed logics and finding some balanced compromise between incommensurable demands. The most advanced strategies may try to learn from the problem and address it in a constructive manner by re-contextualizing the whole process to exploit the tensions and create even better solutions. As such, we claim that public officials and other actors aiming to lead and manage co-creation processes may choose between three fundamental coping strategies aiming for the separation, compromise and integration of opposed logics.

The choice between different strategies for coping with conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes can be crucial, as it impacts the ability to reap the fruits of co-creation. Hence, if possible, the actors responsible for initiating, convening and facilitating co-creation may want to choose proactive and offensive coping strategies aimed at the integration of opposites rather than reactive and defensive strategies aimed at merely separating or balancing opposed demands. In reality, this is easier said than done, and moving from reactive and defensive coping strategies to more proactive and offensive ones clearly requires extensive experience, commitment and learning.

4.5 CONSTRUCTIVE HYBRIDITY

Actors who are encountering conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes in relation to the enhanced use of co-creation in the public sector will often be reactive and defensive and deploy coping strategies aiming to conceal or mitigate the tension. Based on experience and learning, these unproductive responses may give way to more proactive and offensive coping strategies aimed at exploring the possibility of creating synergies between the opposed elements; perhaps based on a productive reframing or rethinking of the divergent logics.

The use of proactive and offensive coping strategies that accept and try to deal with the tensions implicit in conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes brings us to the land of constructive hybridity. Constructive hybridity is a new and

explorative governance space created by all those who do not accept being victims of public sector reforms that create a growing number of competing and clashing governance paradigms that make it increasingly difficult to manoeuvre in and around the public sector. Refusing to be paralyzed by conflicting demands and the rise of hard-to-solve dilemmas and paradoxes, they begin by interrogating the tensions they are encountering as the first step towards creating synergies. The result is the construction of hybrid forms of governance, where dissimilar elements are pragmatically articulated to allow new things to happen.

There is a growing interest in hybrid forms of governance resulting either from mixing and matching the different ways of governing through the reliance on either state, market or civil society (Vakkuri & Johanson 2020), or from purposefully combining different paradigmatic governance tools (Koppenjan et al. 2019). Many policy arenas skilfully combine different forms of governance and may, thus, be examples of governance hybridity. However, constructive hybridity is more than the peaceful co-existence of competing public governance paradigms within a certain policy area. Finding creative ways of combining opposed elements of governance in the pursuit of innovative public value solutions requires active and deliberate effort. Conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes provide important drivers for the development of constructive hybridity, but public missions and curiosity may also be accelerants.

Constructive hybridity is by no means an attempt at eliminating tensions and clashes by creating a public governance ‘dream team’ consisting of appealing elements from different governance paradigms and fitting them together in a seamless pattern that enjoys support from all quarters. Rather, it aims to create a bricolage of different governance paradigms that works in practice in the sense of allowing political, administrative and social actors to reap the fruit of particular governance paradigms by coping with the tensions arising from the clashes with other governance paradigms, while also exploring the possibility that the weakness of one governance paradigm can be compensated by the strength of another.

Constructive hybridization is context-dependent, as different contexts may call for different coping strategies that create different articulations of layered governance paradigms. Even within a specific context, there will be no ‘one best way’ of combining public governance paradigms and coping with conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes. The world changes, meaning that coping strategies that seemed to work well yesterday may no longer do so. New coping strategies may come up against unacknowledged conditions that tend to make them monstrous in the sense of generating more or new conflict and closing down possibilities. In sum, constructive hybridization is a work in progress, always testing new ways of making the most of the complex world of conflicting and co-existing governance paradigms.

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