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Back to the Future

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TRACK 32:

Tragedy of the Commons at Work: How to Mitigate Social Dilemmas

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Abstract:

Tragedy of the Commons is a concept rooted in Hardin's (1968) seminal article in *Science*, describing a situation where a number of herdsmen graze their herds on a limited area of common grass. Each herdsman rationally decides to increase his herd size which eventually leads to a disaster and a collapse of the commons, as the consumption exceeded the available good (grass). Hence, a true conflict – social dilemma (Tullock, 1974) - between individual optimization and collective benefit.

As such *Tragedy of the Commons* is a classic and meaningful concept relevant even today in understanding business and management dilemmas that occur in pursuit of individual optimization and the collective good in the context of work. The *Tragedy of the Commons*, have been used by scientists in many disciplines such as population control, economics, sociology, biology, etc. (Messick and Brewer, 1983). Social dilemmas are used extensively by social

psychologists and behavioral economists. The focus for much of this usage has been on the individual versus group/society.

However, the *Tragedy of Commons* is an umbrella concept that is also applicable at the organizational level, i.e. comparing organizational responsibility and optimization with societal expectations and objectives, as well as groups within organizations vis-à-vis the collective good. Bazerman & Watkins (2004) refer to “special interest groups” with little or no concern for the overall effect of their goals on society, even when the gains to their group are much smaller than the total social cost. The tragedy of the commons concept can serve to bridge a wide range of relatively disparate fields of study and writing including competition, cooperation, organizational design, negotiation, change, conflict resolution, corporate social responsibility, ethics, empowerment and collective action, discrimination, inclusion and diversity at work. Therefore, the proposed track will welcome transdisciplinarity, allowing for dialogue across disciplinary perspectives and relational perspectives problematizing the multilevel nature of the phenomena. Whilst being excited about the conceptual power of the *Tragedy of the Commons*, we should keep in mind the nature of *Tragedy*, namely that it is a song of sacrifice, symbolizing the fact that we have important societal and human issues that we fully understand and yet have not been able to find relevant and applicable solutions to.

We would like to invite conceptual, empirical and methodological papers which help us address the *Tragedy of the Commons* and offer theoretical explanations and practical solutions.