

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ADVANCES  
IN MANAGEMENT

2



# Contributions to Theoretical and Practical Advances in Management

A Viable Systems Approach (VSA)

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## About aSvSa and the ‘Studies and Research on Viable Systems’ Book Series

Some years ago, the Italian University system, on the crest of a wave and enjoying an ideal phase - at least in theory – marked the break in its lengthy path of ascent in the social firmament and determined involuntarily the conditions for an inevitable phase of decline. It was during the pleasant and carefree interim that precludes the start of any downturn, that a group of keen researchers, lulled in their sense of wellbeing, began debating on the systems thinking vision of reality.

The intriguing studies of Authors such Korzybski, Bogdanov, von Bertalanffy, von Foerster and later Beer, Varela, Flores and others were provoking a growing interest in the scientific community relative to concepts of systems thinking. This triggered the development of an innovative conceptualization of systems thinking in the social sciences: the Viable Systems Approach (VSA).

With the English version of Professor Gaetano Golinelli’s work – who in recent years has systemized the fundamental concepts of VSA – there has been an extension of the approach to a multidisciplinary audience of international scholars. Acknowledgement of the validity of VSA relative to organisations and organisational behaviour has arrived from numerous researchers and scholars engaged in investigating individual and collective features of social organisation as a whole. To date, VSA-based studies are to be found not only in the context of management, marketing, organisational theory, but also in that of anthropology, psychology, sociology and in some pioneering aspects of physics and neurology.

## VI *About ASVSA*

With the aim of disseminating the findings of research carried out to date and not least, in an effort to favour the interest and participation of an ever wider number of researchers attracted and intrigued by the conceptual trends of the Viable Systems Approach (VSA), the Association of research on Viable Systems (ASVSA) has been created.

The VSA research stream counts now hundreds of contributions of scholars and researchers from different disciplinary domains. With the aim of stimulating an ongoing debate at international level, fostering a rich production of theoretical and practical contributions and favouring a knowledge co-creation process through interaction between different perspectives on the basis of a multi- and interdisciplinary approach, the Studies and Research on Viable Systems Book Series has been founded.

The book titled *Management sistemico vitale. Decisioni scelte in ambito complesso*, by Sergio Barile, founder of the ASVSA and one of the main Italian reference for studies on complexity and viable systems approach, opens the Series in 2011.

Within the series, the section *Theoretical and Practical Advances in Management* collects books with contributions from Various Authors. The first issue, titled *Contribution to Theoretical and Practical Advances in Management. A Viable System Approach*, was published in 2011 and proposes reflections inspired by system thinking and in particular by VSA.

The present book, edited by Sergio Barile, is the second issue and collects further theoretical and practical advances in the VSA research context that Author aim to share with the wider systems research community.

Rome, May 2013  
Marialuisa Saviano

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## Preface

Scholars of business economic disciplines are aware of how difficult it is to define their field of study; such definition concerns both the specific objective of study –*what* the business economy studies–, but also the survey methods adopted –*how* business economics conducts its studies–. This problem is common to many not formalized disciplines, which aspire to the discovery of general laws but are affected by the lack of homogeneity for what concerns approaches and purposes.

It should be said, indeed, that this difficulty is in absolute terms for disciplines such as philosophy, economics in its various branches (including business economics), sociology, psychology, and for all the related disciplines. It should also be noted that the difficulty exists, even if to a lesser extent and with different shades, for medical disciplines, for natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) and even math. At the risk of oversimplification, it could be argued that if “social” disciplines are addressed to the adoption of the scientific method from the natural (formal) sciences, what is detected as a hardly surmountable difficulty must be brought back to the “ontological” phase (which is, how the object of study is made, how it behaves?), and not to the procedure suitable to the growth of the scientific knowledge (epistemological path). It should be noted that, while the path dealing with the identification of the field of study is almost always formalized and, consequently, not transferable from one research area to another, the methodological advances consolidated in the context of the exact sciences, are profitably recoverable in the less formalized sciences.

## VIII Preface

The intent of this book is to provide the information needed to define, in a sufficiently complete way, the concept of paradigm, and then, to make it possible to develop further advances useful to frame the Viable Systems Approach (*vSa*), proposed as a new paradigm for organizations management . In effect, the interest for the approach or, in *vSa* terms, the *consonance*, is already a reality; here, we propose the information in a form that could be accessible, for what concerns the “language patterns”, to the scholars who were already thinking along those lines, in order to generate “resonance”.

Here, the reference is not to information, but to *ideas*, as we believe that what really counts is the *general scheme* underlying an idea, not the specific scheme through which, from one context to another, ideas take shape. This means that, if we deal with a *product* or a *service*, rather than with a *structure* or a *system*, it does not make much difference, if it is clear that both specific schemes originate from the most general *cause-effect* scheme . In this logical context, the various manifestations of the same conceptual trend easily emerge. Similarly, as in business sciences the emphasis moves from product to service, in the psychological sciences from individual to context, in sociology from the social structure to the social process, in epistemological studies from reductionism to holism.

The contribution of *vSa* consists in highlighting the existence of general schemes as fundamental “laws” that act on the way we perceive reality and, consequently, in encouraging scholars from different disciplines to recognize the possibility of bringing their concepts, not in terms of content (otherwise falling into the trap of a kind of epistemological reductionism), but in terms of the process of elaboration of the constructs, to find a common denominator. In essence, *vSa* has highlighted that, when a concept is likely to be explained through a metaphor, and if the metaphor explains several concepts, it is possible to identify a general scheme. The metaphor finds its basis on such a general scheme which supports the specific schemes that take shape in different contexts and different concepts.

In the light of the above, the attempt to find a logical connection based on a specific scheme characterizing the contributions collected in this volume, is logically not a feasible goal. The “set theory” description, structural in itself, is hardly appropriate

for such a requirement. Contributions find a cohesive reason to exist only by virtue of an interpretation process that the reader, subjectively, derives from his/her information variety and cultural aims.

*Our hope is that you enjoy reading the volume!*

Sapienza, University of Rome, Italy, May 2013     ***Sergio Barile***