

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN NETWORK COOPERATION

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Abstract

It is obvious that interaction and communication between team members promote team efficiency. Even if organizations are cooperating, it is individuals that interact. The aim of this conceptual paper is to explore group mechanisms and group processes such as interaction and communication in the context of interorganizational cooperation.

The paper focuses on interorganizational networks, group dynamics and communication, exemplified by findings from case studies of interorganizational networks. The empirical examples suggest that not only cultural or structural factors but also group dynamics and communication between individuals involved are of vital importance for successful network cooperation.

Introduction

The global economy, organized around networks of capital, management and information, more or less forces companies to cooperate in network systems. Interorganizational networks such as business alliances, strategic business networks, and networks of Triple Helix models might be the key to meet environmental requirements in challenging times (Jaffee, 2001).

Intraorganizational networks are common within industrial organizations. Some examples are project organized production and professional teams operating across divisions in the organization.

Much has been written about interorganizational as well as intraorganizational networks, describing the logic of the network, how to create a network and how to organize the cooperation. There are also a large number of literatures describing group dynamics, team work, and team management and so on. We have however been less concerned about socio-cultural and group mechanisms that actually make the cooperation work.

When discussing intraorganizational networks, in terms of project teams or working teams, it is easy to relate empirical observations to group dynamic theories. But, even if divisions or organizations are cooperating, it is individuals that interact. This fact is obvious in intraorganizational networks, but it works the same way in cooperation between organizations. Organizations cannot plan, act or decide. It is the individual representing an organization who acts.

The aim of this paper is to explore group mechanisms and group processes such as interaction and communication that have a great impact on how effective the cooperation between the individuals and, indirectly between the organizations will be.

The paper focuses theoretically on interorganizational networks, group dynamics and communication, illustrated with empirical examples from case studies.

Network cooperation can be analyzed on different levels and from different perspectives. One level is the local society and its social culture. A second level is the network itself, and how it is initiated and structured. A third level is the cooperation level, and how the individual representatives form an efficient team.

Interorganizational Networks

A network can be described as a multi nodal structure, a whole consisting of a set of related nodes, but not tightly coupled. As soon as the nodes become tightly coupled in an organizational like fashion, technically or by chain of command, it is no longer a network but an established organization. The members of a network are autonomous organizations, with their own goals and decision making processes (Provan and Milward, 2001; Castells, 1996; Mayntz, 1993). Networks are open structures that can be expanded and new nodes can be integrated. A social structure based on network is a very dynamic and innovative system (Castells, 1996).

Networks take different shapes and develop on different levels and by different purposes. The organizational logic is horizontal rather than hierarchical. Organizations forming a network are in principle cooperating voluntarily, by interest in and ability to contribute to a common goal. No single organization is supposed to command other organizations involved. The network logic is negotiation and exchange (Chisholm, 1996; Mayntz, 1993).

A network cannot be created or established by any external agent and no external organization or authority can demand or direct interorganizational networks (Hofmeier, 1999; Chisholm, 1996). Cooperation between organizations is always a bottom-up activity based on a common problem that has to be solved (Hofmeier, 1999). Reasons for organizations to search partners for cooperation are often to reduce risks, to

allocate resources or to cope with an uncertain environment (Jaffee, 2001).

An external agent, such as a Chamber of Commerce, a finance institute or local authorities can however initiate the establishment of interorganizational networks by organizing meetings to discuss a recognized problem within a specific trade or a local society. An external agent can also provide capital for common activities in the interorganizational networks or volunteer to take the role as administrator or coordinator of the activities (Brulin, 2002; Hofmeier, 1999; Mandell, 2001). It is important to notice that administrating or coordinating does not mean to decide the activities. That has to be done by the members of the network.

The logic of the network is, as noted, negotiation and exchange. Negotiation follows certain rules. Walton's (1969) two-stage model is one of the most common negotiation models. In the first differentiation stage, the parties identify and structure the problem. In the second stage, the integration stage, the parties set goals and decide strategies how to fulfill them (Lennér Axelson and Thylefors, 1996). It is important in network cooperation that the members of the network are active in these processes. The differentiation and integration cannot be carried out by an external agent, because the agent does not own the problem. Asymmetrical dependences or asymmetrical distribution of power within the network creates conflicts. This does not mean that a network cannot be coordinated or managed by one of the networking organizations, but the leadership must be authorized by the members of the network (c.p. Mandell, 2001).

Every network is unique and creates its own rules, routines and control system which are continually remodeled. According to Castells (1996), a network can be expanded as long as it is possible to communicate within the network, that is, as long as the same communication code, and the same values and expectations of the results are shared.

The Socio Cultural Context

The socio-culture in a local society or the so called social capital is a result of a socialization process that has been ongoing for generations and includes peoples' way of living and thinking in a local society (Coleman, 1990). The social capital influence all kinds of social phenomena in the society, as well as it promotes or prevents interorganizational networks in the local society. A strong and developed social capital has both a promoting and restraining effect on the establishment of interorganizational networks (Rantakyrö, 2002).

Whether the social capital promotes or prevents interorganizational networks depends on how it was developed in a historical perspective.

Interorganizational networks can be built either on social relations or business relations. Findings in a previous study (Rantakyrö, 2002) indicate that local business cooperation built on social relations is related to an endogenous attitude to local industrial development and, that business cooperation built on business relations is related to an exogenous attitude.

Every network is, according to Castells (1996), creating its own rules and control systems and it is important that those who build a network share the same communication code manifested in values and expected results of the cooperation. Cooperation between businesses focuses on the business relation. The value of business exchange is what makes the members of an interorganizational network cooperate. There is an ongoing process within a network that reinforces the relations between the businesses and the network develops its own system of values and norms. According to Putnam (1996), the most important factor in interorganizational networks is trust. But, on the other hand every business relation is to some degree built on trust. It is necessary that the partners trust each other enough to set up a contract and rely on each other to fulfill it (Rantakyrö, 2002).

Networking built entirely on social relations might develop resistance against changes and make actors less innovative (Levi, 1996). Social networks with strong personal ties might also be excluding to other organizations and there is a hesitation to allow other organizations to join the network. Network cooperation built on business relations is more tolerant to outsiders and more willing to expand the network. In a long term perspective interorganizational networks built on business relations and an exogenous attitude to development of the local industrial development, will probably better cope with uncertainty in the global economy (Rantakyrö, 2002).

Networking is never an end in itself. The purpose of being a part of a network is that the organization has identified a problem that is shared with other organizations and that the organization is interested to contribute to get this problem solved. The cooperating organizations expect a fair exchange or a fair distribution of the costs and benefits in a given problem solving process. There must be a common goal to strive to fulfill and the benefits or the exchange can be valued in intellectual, functional or economic values (Hedberg et al. 1994). Although there is a common goal, the reason to cooperate might differ from one organization to another. The expected benefits for one organization can be intellectual such as developing their knowledge in a specific subject. For another organization it can be to develop a process or to find a tool to deal with a specific problem (functional). For a third organization, the expected benefit can be

economic, e.g. to decrease their costs (Rantakyro, 1997).

Group Dynamics and Interorganizational Networks

Interorganizational networks are as earlier mentioned, depending on interpersonal relations, irrespective of the cooperation initially was based on social relations or business relations. Organizations cannot act; it is the individual representing the organization that acts.

The decision to cooperate with another organization or other organizations in a network is made at the top management level and normally a person in the organization is appointed to accomplish the cooperation. Delegation must include a reasonable space to act and to make decisions. It is also important that the management show a genuine interest in the cooperation, continually follow up the process and, give feedback and support the person representing the organization (Mauritzson-Sandberg and Rantakyro, 2000). It is also important that the person representing the organization is motivated and competent to fulfill the task. Other important skills are team working and communication (Rantakyro, 1997). If the manager does not show interest and give feedback, the individual's motivation and performance in the network will decrease (Mauritzson-Sandberg and Rantakyro, 2000).

In one studied network with both public and private organizations cooperating, an asymmetrical distribution of power was evident. The small private organizations were represented by their owners or managers, while the public representatives were middle managers without delegation to make decisions even in quite simple issues. This asymmetric distribution of power slowed down the processes and created irritation and conflicts in the network (Rantakyro, 1997).

The representatives from each organization are those that actually carry out the interorganizational cooperation. They are forming a group that is supposed to work efficiently and contribute to solve common problems. The solutions are supposed to support the individual organizations' goals and expected benefits.

A group is defined as two or more interdependent individuals that are influencing each other through social interaction. The term group dynamics is used to describe the processes that take place in a group, how individuals act and react in a group. Important to notice is that a group as defined above is not just a gathering of people, it exists for a specific reason and has a goal to fulfill (Goffman, 1959; Forsyth, 1999).

Groups change over time and develop in different ways, but there are also common patterns in the group development process. There are different theoretical models describing group development but most theorists agree that groups pass through several stages as they are formed and developed. The numbers and

names of the different stages vary among theorists, even if the general assumptions are quite similar and based on Bruce W. Tuckman's definition, published in 1965. He identified five stages and labeled them: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning (see e.g. Forsyth, 1999).

In the first stage, the forming stage, members know little about each other. They observe each other's behavior and adopt a wait-and-see policy. They start to share information and to trust each other. During this stage the group members start to discuss the goals and also accept someone to coordinate or to lead the group. The second stage, the storming stage, is where the members struggle to define the goals, their relations to each other and their individual roles. This stage may also center on relationship between a coordinator and the group and the relationship between cooperating organizations. Conflicts are very common and also necessary for creating group cohesion. Conflicts stem from different knowledge, skills and experiences, different needs that are to be satisfied and, different perceptions of self and others. Conflicts do not have to be destructive, but if neglected they tend to escalate until they become destructive and may destroy the group (Forsyth, 1999). Most conflicts in groups are caused by communication inability (Lennér Axelson and Thylefors, 1996). In a network perspective it is also important that the distribution of power is balanced during the storming stage, because if an organization experiences that they do not have the same rights as other organizations they will leave the network. An organization will also exit the network if they experience that their voice is not heard by the coordinator (Rantakyro, 1997).

During the third stage, the norming stage, the group becomes more unified and organized. Mutual trust and support increase, members start to cooperate, and they learn to communicate better. They start to resolve problems that earlier caused conflicts, and they become able to make decisions. Norms emerge more clearly to guide the group members in their interaction. All groups do not reach the fourth stage, the performing stage. In earlier stages the group has been focusing on interaction and is in the fourth stage focusing more on activities and how to fulfill goals. The members accept criticism and the relations can be analyzed in relation to a member's importance of accomplishing tasks and not only related to personal or emotional attributes. The group creates a balance between social needs and tasks that has to be done. Group members know each other and social roles are more flexible and complement each other. Norms are clearly formulated and articulated and failure to follow norms and rules are oriented towards correction and normalizing rather than punishment (Forsyth, 1999). An observed reason why all groups do not reach the

performing stage is that no one in the group wants to take responsibility to coordinate the network or that the group is not able to identify the real problem and hence cannot define goals.

A group's entry into the adjourning stage can be either planned or spontaneous. Planned dissolutions take place when the group has fulfilled its goals or exhausted its time and resources. Dissolution is spontaneous when an unanticipated problem arises that makes continued interaction impossible (Forsyth, 1999). The members might also decide that maintaining the group is waste of time and resources. If interpersonal needs, or in interorganizational networks the participating organization's needs, are not satisfied, the group or the network is abandoned. Another reason to exit the network is when a participating organization finds out that there is no balance between costs and rewards. If the previous stages last too long, the network does not perform anything that gives benefits. When a network is initiated and managed by an external agent the network can be dissolved if the agent leaves, and the member organizations have not been enough involved in the processes (Rantakyro, 1997).

The communication process. Communication is an interpersonal interaction through several channels at the same time, verbally through language and speech and non-verbally through body language and symbols. The language is very important, but even if we speak the same language or belong to the same organization we cannot be sure that people understand what we are saying. Different professions has their own mumbo jumbo and different groups have their own jargon. Symbols are symbols just because a specific group has a silent agreement about the meaning of that symbol. Symbols are part of a collective identity and sometimes they help to strengthen the group cohesion (Hargie et al., 1994; Engquist, 1992, Goffman, 1990).

When we communicate we use codes to convey a message. This codification process means that by using symbols and non-verbal communication along with the language, we can bring other persons to understand our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and values. We can however never be sure of the results because it depends on both sender's and receiver's willingness to understand, to perceive and interpret and also our capability to express ourselves in a clear and distinct way. The receiver does not interpret the message itself, but the meaning of the message based on his/her own preferences. The interpretation can hence be more or less in accordance with what the sender really meant. If there is none or fragmentary correspondence between the sender's intention and the receiver's interpretation we have an interference in the

communication. Interferences cannot be avoided, but reduced (Hargie et al., 1994).

We are constantly communicating with others because our behavior also includes messages. There is no non-behavior and hence there is no non-communication. Even total silence is a form of communication that is interpreted by others. Communication with strangers seems to be a more conscious process than communication with persons we know well. We are more aware of our behavior, what we say and how we codify a message while communicating with strangers. This means that communicating with people we are closely related to is more complicated and brings more misunderstandings (Hargie et al., 1994; Pease, 1994).

There is always a hidden, embedded or underlying message in what we send while interacting with others. These messages show how we perceive or understand ourselves, what we think of other people and how we relate ourselves to others and also how we interpret the present situation. The interpretation of the situation guides how we act and interact with others (Goffman, 1990; Charon, 2001).

Communication depends on socio-cultural factors like common understanding of facts and knowledge, shared values, norms, attitudes and rules but also on social identity, social roles and internalized interpersonal relationships. The meaning of symbols and body language are culturally depending and differently interpreted in different cultures. It is thereby easy to bring about misunderstandings and so called cultural clashes (Forsyth, 1999; Hargie et al., 1994, Pease, 1994).

Communication is ongoing at two different levels: the tenor level referring to the literal meaning of words and, the relation level related to behavior and non-verbal language. Usually a message corresponds to both levels and if not, it creates confusion, misunderstanding and conflict. While communicating, the sender is concentrated on the tenor level and the receiver on the relation level. What we hear is not always what the sender actually sent out, but what we perceive will guide our actions. That is the reason why we have to argue about what was really said in a specific situation (Hargie et al., 1994; Pease, 1994; Goffman, 1990).

Cutting sentences or omitting words will only cause confusion and leave to the receiver to interpret and draw conclusions about the sender's meaning and intention. This is a very common way to create conflicts. Feedback is very important to avoid misunderstandings and create an open communication climate (Hargie et al., 1994; Lennér Axelson and Thylefors, 1996).

It is only possible to give feedback and to come to a common interpretation of a message if we have a

dialogue, a two-way communication. The most common way to communicate is more likely the false dialogue, i.e. when the receiver neither can nor wants, or maybe not dares to give a genuine response. This situation occurs when there is an asymmetric division of power giving one of the individuals a feeling of inferiority. The false dialogue is often experienced as a dialogue by the individual in power. The cause of conflicts is usually shortages in the ability to communicate and the genuine dialogue is a necessary tool to solve conflicts (Engquist, 1992; Lennér Axelson and Thylefors, 1996).

Empirical Illustrations

The theories discussed above are illustrated with the following empirical examples.

A previous study including 25 small manufacturing companies with less than 50 employees, 12 in Sweden and 13 in the state of Minnesota in the United States shows that the managers interpret the concept of networking in many different ways.

Many companies are cooperating with other regional or local companies, and the cooperation is usually based on business relations and quite formalized. They buy or sell material or semi-products to each other or they subcontract each others companies in times of a heavy work load. Half of the Swedish companies are located in a district in Sweden regarded as a industrial district where the cooperation has been described as more or less informal and based on social relations (see e.g. Berggren et al., 1998; Agndal et al., 1999). The companies in that area, included in my study, have however a more formalized cooperation with other organizations in the district, based on business rather than social relations (c.p. Rantakyro, 2001). There is in this district a cluster of about 150 small metal fabricators that are not especially specialized or having their own niche. Most of them are subcontractors to car or machine industries and many companies produce similar products. It is quite common in the Swedish as well as the American companies that the customer supplies the subcontractor with raw material. The customer sends the subcontractors the right quality of steel for working different kinds of parts. In this way the manufacturer is related to the customer in what can be regarded as a horizontal integration. It is surprising that the managers of these small manufacturing companies do not regard these kinds of business relations as cooperating with other companies. They define it as ordinary "doing business" activities.

Networks vs. institutions. Many companies are related to a formalized network that they do not regard as network cooperation such as a Chamber of Commerce and in Sweden, the Federation of Private

Enterprises (Företagarna). Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Private Enterprises are member organizations established long time ago to support the organizations with different kinds of information and support such as information about taxes, rules and regulations or support like leadership courses, marketing or export issues. A reason why the managers of these small companies do not regard these kinds of network as interorganizational networks, might be that the associations have been institutionalized and are managed by a hired manager and a board of representatives for the companies.

Some companies in the north of Sweden were members of a network called BIFUN. This network was originally initiated by the regional Swedish Employers Confederation and the regional Swedish Trade Unions Confederation as a project focusing on developing the basic industry's related service- and subcontracted companies' competitiveness, in order to reduce their dependence on the basic industry's needs. The reason to reduce their dependence on the basic industry was that small companies' (often subcontractors) production has been very dependent on the basic industry's needs at the expense of their own development. The association was managed by a hired manager and an administrator and offered its members a program for business development. The organization became more or less institutionalized and is now merged with a national funded organization. Network theories describe interorganizational cooperation as a bottom-up activity based on negotiation and exchange (c.f. Chisholm, 1996). A reason why the companies did not regard their membership in this organization as networking might be that they experienced the network as a top-down managed organization in which they did not have influence enough on the activities provided by the association.

Some of the American companies in my study are members of AMFA, Arrowhead Manufacturers and Fabricators Association. AMFA was originally initiated by external agents with the ambition to "help" the organizations to find cooperation partners to better cope with a changing and more challenging environment. The forming, norming and storming stages lasted quite a long period, but as the network reached the performing stage it has also expanded and is continually receiving new members. An external agent is still involved but at an early stage the agent's role was transformed from initiator and coordinator to administrator. The network is managed by a president and a board consisting of managers from the member companies.

Most of the companies in the industrial district in Sweden are associated to the local industry association (Gnosjö Industriförening), originally established by local manufacturers in 1947. The association is still

managed by an active board consisting of managers representing the member organizations. The association works with issues important for the local industry. It has been expanded over the years and has today about 220 members. These two associations, AMFA and Gnosjö Industry Association, are comparable to each other. ASEM was initiated by an agent but has by time adopted a structural model quite similar to Gnosjö Industry Association. Discussing the relationship to these associations, the managers describe it as networking, and the associations are not experienced as institutions. One reason may be that the members have kept the power up and are still managing the organization.

Social networks. The personal social network is of great importance to the interviewed small business managers. The managers experience the personal network as especially important in marketing and environmental analysis, and for financing investments. Several of the managers are members of organizations like the local Rotary Club, where they meet managers from other organizations, competitors or related industry, bankers and managers of insurance companies. The managers state that these kinds of contacts are very important for developing their own companies. Some of the managers also state that learning to know each other in this kind of social networks makes it easier to do some “horse trading” with each other (Rantakyro, 2000).

To sum up, small business managers make a difference between institutionalized networks and networks based on members’ activity and management. The more closely involved the members are in goal setting, decision making as well as effecting the decisions, the more they regard the cooperation as interorganizational networking. Even if the managers define their relation to other companies as ordinary business activities and do not refer the relations to networks cooperation, they are also stating that their personal social network is very important for developing their businesses. Some of these personal contacts are business managers that they also do business with in a formalized way.

Conclusions

Interorganizational networks means to form a group of individuals representing many different organizations. This group is supposed to fulfill a common goal or solve a shared problem. Each organization expects the exchange to give specific benefits in their own organization. Cooperation is an interpersonal interaction and it is important that the individuals forming this group not only have competence for the task and motivation to work on it, but also interpersonal communication skills.

A local society where the attitude to local industrial development is endogenous, interorganizational networks is more likely based on social relations than in a local society where attitudes to local industrial development are exogenous. Interorganizational networks based on social relations often develop business related cooperation, while networking initially based on business relations will in time develop social relations within the network.

According to Castells (1996), a network can be expanded as long as it is possible to communicate and as long as the same communication code, same values and expectations of the result is shared. This indicates a strong connection between communication and socio-culture, both important factors for network cooperation. Interorganizational networks built on social relations and personal ties might be excluding to new organizations while a network built on business relations might be more willing to include new members and expand the network. Expanding a network makes it possible to add new competences needed to cope with changes in the environment.

Networking is based on negotiation and exchange. Interpersonal communication skills are necessary to form a group, to differentiate and integrate what the cooperation is all about and to realize activities to fulfill common goals.

Communication depends on socio-cultural factors like common understanding of facts and knowledge, shared values, norms, attitudes, rules and our interpretation of the non-verbal language and of symbols. These facts indicate that cooperation built on social relations and strong personal ties will probably go through the forming and norming stages quicker than a group consisting of strangers. On the other hand, communication is more complicated and brings more misunderstandings with closely related persons than with strangers, which indicate that the storming stage of group development might be more fraught with conflicts in a group based on personal ties. On the other hand, forming a group in business related networks there are lots of interpersonal and socio-cultural differences to overcome which extend the forming, norming and storming stages.

Interpersonal communication skills are of vital importance because network cooperation is based on negotiation and exchange. Dialogue between the individuals representing different organizations is necessary to negotiate and to solve conflicts. Communication skills are very important to be able to differentiate and integrate in the negotiation process. If the network is not able to formulate goals and strategies to fulfill them, the interest in cooperation cools down and organizations exit the network. It is hence important in the negotiation process that the participating individuals have interpersonal

communication skills to avoid struggling of power and positions, and instead focus on the problem to be solved or the field to be developed. If participating individuals are not given a delegation that allows them to act and make necessary decisions it leads to an asymmetric distribution of power within the network which also influence the negotiation climate. The result may be that organizations exit the network, threatening dissolution of the network.

Networking is not an end in itself. There is always a reason why organizations spend time and money to join an interorganizational network. The organization expects a pay off, an exchange related to their efforts. The expectations of exchange differ from organization to organization depending on their individual needs and goals. If it takes too long time to come to the performing stage and the organizations cannot see any benefits of the cooperation, they will one by one exit the network.

Network cooperation cannot be built by an external agent and no external organization can demand or direct interorganizational networks. When a network organization is run by a professional manager and the members are no longer involved in planning and realization of activities, the network has developed from interorganizational networks to an institutionalized organization. The members are no longer experiencing the network as network cooperation but rather as a service organization giving its members exclusive service in specific issues.

It is not unusual that interorganizational networks are initiated by external agents, Chambers of Commerce, financing institutes or local authorities. While initiating interorganizational networks it is important to be aware of not only structural issues such as how to organize the cooperation, but also of how socio-cultural factors and group dynamics promote or prevent an efficient cooperation that gives the participating organizations a fair exchange.

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