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Sub-theme 18:

Pragmatism, Organizing and Learning

Collaboration: Balancing on an unsecured association

Collaboration between public sectors as Complex organizing and Learning

Introduction

In an attempt to efficiently make use of public means in the last decades, collaboration has been tested and become increasingly popular within public sectors (Danermark 1997; Danermark 2000; Danermark 1999; Huxham 2010; Hörnemalm 2008; Lindberg 2006; Lindberg 2009; Ohlsson 2008; Taylor 2001). There are many examples of situations in which the actual implementation of political decisions on collaboration have been delegated to civil officials and employees. Collaboration in the form of coordinated health care between units within a public health care system or work rehabilitation of the long-term sick, such as regional social insurance offices, employment offices and social services, are two examples of situations in which collaboration issues become tangible and concrete. Despite good intentions, a number of problems may arise when collaboration is implemented in actual work situations (Huxham 2000; Lindberg 2003; Lindskov 2010; Taylor 2001).

This paper focuses on the collaboration in a region where the regional delegate commissioned the Public Health Committee to form sector-integrated health-promoting networks together with other units in the region. The Public Health Committee in turn handed over this assignment to their secretarial office (i.e. the civil officials).

However, this commission turned out to cause a number of problems that are addressed in this paper. The decision seems to have been based on the belief that it is easy to start collaboration (Aspegren 2010). No one, at least publically speaking, had thought on the complexity and difficulties that collaboration between units and sector in the region could give rise to in the practical work (Kreiner 1993). This became very apparent in the relations between collaborating participants (Augustinsson 2010; Kreiner 1993). In this paper, it is shown that the processes cannot possibly be controlled or guided by an individual person towards a specific objective or direction. It is a movement, without predetermined objectives, in which collaboration is guided forward through learning in the form of formation of new ideas about the future and previous events (Feldman 2005).

The aim of this paper is to identify and discuss processes in this type of collaboration that includes abstract questions and see how these processes may be explained and understood in terms of theoretical concepts. It will also offer tools for aiding those who practically work with collaboration.

***The research objective:** Which impediments, obstacles and possibilities are offered when it comes to dealing with problems in co-operation, collaboration and coordination based on actual experiences and research of these processes?*

Theoretical background and model of analysis

Space-in-between

The term space-in-between¹ forms the basis for explaining and understanding processes that occur in co-operations and collaborations. This invisible concept, however obvious it may be, is described by sociologist Dan Porsfelt as "the space of contradictions or relations" in which "... demands, structures, possibilities, values and practices in relation to one another form a sort of boundary..."(Porsfelt 2001).

Generally speaking we use the word *relation* in order to identify the relationship between two points; a relation between people, between people and technology, between people and nature, between reader and text, and between a work of art and an observer. Relations, says Porsfelt, are never made up simply of straight lines. One should rather understand relations as the space between two points, a *space-in-between*, in which *something* occurs. This *something* is composed of movement of practical interests. In other words, it is within this space we may identify movement. Something occurs within this space-in-between, and it is here questions and thoughts arise in a collaboration situation. As pointed out in this paper, if the content of this space-in-between is predetermined the space becomes smaller than would be the case if few things are predefined.

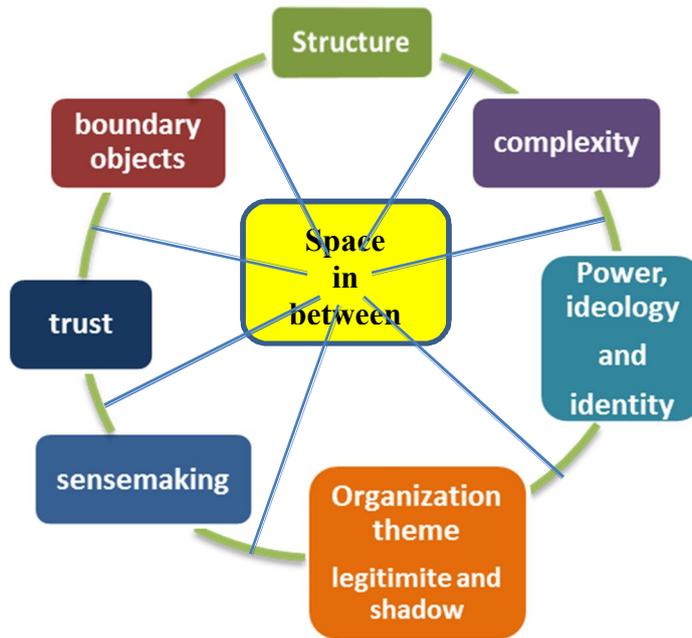
Organization and organizing

When you take a closer scientific look at collaboration between organizations two concepts are difficult to ignore (Abrahamsson 1986; Chia 2002). In order to understand and explain collaboration and cooperation, we must understand these phenomena and the historical contexts in which organizations that collaborate today have arisen (Mintzberg 1979). Within each organization people take on different *roles*. Roles form the basis of work identity including its norms and values in an organization (Simpson 2008). All of this means that the history, work, traditions and identity of an organization affect those people who eventually collaborate and cooperate within it as regards their views on what to do and how. The figure below (figure 1), however, describes the movement at the space-in-between within organizing (Anderson 2006).

¹ It is also possible to use 'intermediate space'.

A model for understanding, explaining and developing

Figure 1: 7 areas that may form pragmatic understanding and explanation of collaboration events



Structure (form) is the framework of the collaboration that is to occur. We have named this form, which should not by any means be confused with the actual events that later occur (Lidman 2006). Collaboration is a result of cooperation in the sense that is a framework for prerequisites that are more or less formally established between organizations or between units (Arya 2007). The visionary programme of the region and its efforts for sustainable development including public health is an example of more formally structured preconditions. Cooperation is the form and the formally structured prerequisites for collaboration. The other six areas of the figure, however, are connected to actual events.

In order to understand collaboration and its content, we need to have a reasonable level of understanding of the characteristic traits of things that are *complex*, which collaboration is one example of. A typical trait of complex things is that known and unknown factors are simultaneously present (Norretranders 2002; Stacey 2010). This is a paradox that we simply have to accept and deal with as best we know how (Czarniawska 2005). Through comparisons of complex with complicated we gain new insights into the things we need to handle (Abrahamson 2002). A general difference between these two is that complex things include situation, context and coincidences (Uhlir 2001). Complicated things, however, are more predictable simply by studying their form.

The basis of all collaboration is communication (Mead 1976; Taylor 2004). No collaboration can occur without communication that also includes *power, ideology* and *identity* (Hogg 2001). Ideology consists of norms and values. Different things, events and phenomena are individually valued. Identity is a third phenomenon which, in short, entails “who am I in this context?” (Simpson 2008). All communication mirrors and

maintains identity, at the same time as communication creates and builds identities (Alvesson 2001). Power, ideology and identity are, thus, innate parts of all human relations (Stacey 2003; Vlaar 2006).

The next step of the analysis and the basis of how collaboration may be understood and developed is that every organization, including cooperation and collaboration, contains *two themes that organise our everyday lives*. The “legitimate” and “the other thing, shadow” which are both present at the same time. The first theme is the formal, conscious and politically correct part alongside structure and official texts. Furthermore there are, in this first theme, things that may have been agreed upon between two or more managers based on their respective roles. Meetings that are organised and executed and what should be considered appropriate to discuss and polite to talk about and things that we should not mention are other examples of the content of the theme of legitimacy (Stacey 2010).

The other theme, “the shadow” or “the other thing”, which is has also been named, include openness and personal approaches to people that we trust and have faith in. In these situations we may express things that in other, more official situations, we tend to avoid talking about or do not dare mention. The point of this, apart from separating the two, is that both themes are simultaneously present in the organising of collaboration.

The construction of *meaning* is a central and essential activity for human beings. If the construction of meaning is essential, then collaboration needs to be looked at from this approach (Weick 1995; Weick 1979; Weick 2009; Weick 1996). Construction of meaning occurs through the utilisation of some resources. Three examples of such resources are identity, social- and material contexts, and history. In relations, in the space-in-between, meaning is constructed through the utilisation of various resources, one of the more important ones being identity. Consequently communication, organizing themes, power, ideology and identity are also vital parts of *the creation of meaning* (Bosma 2005). We utilise the terms creation of meaning and learning as two phenomena that are closely connected to one another, sometimes even used as synonyms (Bateson 2000; Everett 2004; Gherardi 2003, 2007; Gherardi 2001)

Then we also have some other central aspects of collaboration; boundary objects (Star 1989) and trust (Vangen 2003; Zhang 2009). The first for understand coordination and trust for understanding some important parts in social relationships in the light of the space-in-between (Cooper 2005).

So, in this work we discuss each of these seven areas in relation to the execution of the examined project. Even more so we discuss how important these concepts are in order to understand, develop and execute actual collaboration which also supports the intentions of politicians who aim to increase the level of collaboration between various sectors, for instance in a region. We have to begin in the complex practice of organizing (Chia 2002; Stacey 2010).

What is missing in the research?

Research about collaboration and cooperation include two individually complex organizations that need to collaborate on some level. Extensive research- and knowledge material is available as regards studies on company collaboration. The same is also true for relatively concrete collaboration within public sectors, e.g. health care,

regional social insurance offices and employment offices. However there is very little research to be found about areas, included in this paper, that deal with abstract collaboration issues and at the same time have a direct pragmatic interest when it comes to achieving actual changes. On a civil official level in a region, it is easy to see the connection to what later occurs within the areas of housing and industry. We also have to begin in the complexity of collaboration for pragmatic interests.

Approaching the phenomenon

The background of the analysis of this particular project about healthy networks comes from a more extensive project that included the collaboration of five regions during the years 2008-2010, which focused on how to increase collaboration between public health issues and regional development in several regions in Sweden.

Methods

The method used for this analysis may be described in the words of Schein (1988) as a dialogue between “insiders”, in the form of project leaders (one of the authors) and “outsiders” in the form of researchers (one of the authors). Both the “insiders” and “outsiders” produce this paper. Insiders provide the practical and experience-oriented part (Shotter 2006) whereas the researchers provide theoretical viewpoints and knowledge about previous research on collaboration (a sort of participatory observation). In this exciting space-in-between us as practiser and researcher, new learning and knowledge between theory and practice new is constructed and established. New knowledge is produced in this space-in-between through the utilisation of concepts as tools and practice. These tools have been important when it comes to bridging the space between practitioners and researchers as authors of this paper. In preparation for these conversations we have used diaries written by the project leader. A research evaluation was also conducted by external researchers (Donatella 2009) whose material we also use. The researcher (one of the authors) has on two occasions interviewed staff members at the Public Health Committee office who have been involved in the collaboration with sectors outside of the public health system.

Some preliminary main conclusions

Problems that arose in the studied collaboration project are related to organizing seen as processes and movements, in which the content is complex and it is impossible to predict the results beforehand in any greater detail.

Our conclusions when looking at current research on collaboration and collaboration processes, as well as the studied project itself, reveal that we need to look at events and movements in collaboration as being more complex than previously believed. The seven areas suggested by us alongside organizing, space-in-between and learning offer analytical tools for identifying and discussing processes (we choose to call them movements in this paper) included in collaboration, tools for explaining and understanding the possibilities that exist for guiding this type of processes.

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