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Emmanuel Josserand,  
Stewart Clegg, Martin Kornberger  
and Tyrone S. Pitsis 2004

Friends or Foes?

Practicing Collaboration—An Introduction

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# Friends or Foes? Practicing Collaboration—An Introduction

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Emmanuel Josserand . Stewart Clegg

Martin Kornberger . Tyrone S. Pitsis

Université Paris-Dauphine  
CREPA  
eMail: emmanuel.josserand@dauphine.fr  
University of Technology, Sydney  
Faculty of Business  
eMail: s.clegg@uts.edu.au  
University of Innsbruck  
eMail: martin.kornberger@uts.edu.au  
University of Technology, Sydney  
Faculty of Business  
eMail: tyrone.pitsis@uts.edu.au

We might question the concept of collaboration when so many contradictory messages are produced in the field of management. On the one hand, a strong focus is put on the sharing of resources, inter and intra organisationally—especially the sharing of knowledge as an absolute source of competitiveness and progress. On the other hand, some pessimists describe an apocalyptic and hostile world, where collaboration is more of a utopia than a reality—something desirable but rarely achievable. Externally, time-based competition is derived from globalisation and the shortening of innovation cycles. Industry boundaries are vanishing and companies are caught in the ambiguity and complexity of shifting games of multiple alliances. Internally, if we don't subscribe to a description, *à la* Crozier, in which individualism is only limited by constraining structure, we must accept the idea that information technology has brought panopticism within easy reach of every manager. Even if total control is not the driver, then the competition between profit centres, combined with the pressure of “necessary” redundancies, can easily compromise any form of collaboration.

Friend or foe, how do we establish the difference? Are the friends of today the foes of tomorrow; are the foes of today the friends of tomorrow? Or are they just two faces of the Janus-headed monster called collaboration that can only be dissected in the academic laboratory? How can collaboration still exist in a milieu where paranoid opportunists are facing blind individualists? How can we build alliances and encourage internal knowledge sharing? Even in the face of scepticism collaboration is a reality. We also know it is a necessity in hyper-competitive environments. So, how do we collaborate in practice?

The Special Issue addresses the contradiction and tensions between managerial and academic discourse on collaboration and the difficulties of collaboration inherent in a competitive, opportunistic, individualist and power-driven world. Collaboration can be better understood when we take a broad perspective that considers collaboration as embedded with the tension and contradiction inherent to competition, bureaucracy, cultural diversity and incomprehension. These tensions

can jeopardize any collaborative efforts between, as well as within, organizations. In this perspective, power appears as an omnipresent principle antagonist to collaboration. Nevertheless, the empirical contributions tend to identify possibilities for the development of collaboration as an interstitial activity, an activity that can play with the rules and the system it is embedded within. The cultural diversity of contributors adds to the richness of the debate, as do the broad range of perspectives on collaboration research, theory and practice. Our contributors responded to the challenge that we threw out in various ways.

## **A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COLLABORATION**

The first group of contributors are distinctly grounded in a critical perspective. Modernity has presented a uniform and rationalist conception of collaboration. Collaboration can be perceived as a mask placed on diversity, under the name of a convergent culture. The uniformity of culture is an illusion forwarded by the manipulative organizational discourses. Culture is in fact fragmented, composed of contradictory and conflicting elements (Pitsis, Kornberger and Clegg). Under the surface of official discourse lies a potential chaos of incomprehension (Tyrrell) derived from the ambiguity and manipulation associated with language games (Jørgensen). Thus, the critical perspective on collaboration cannot be dissociated from a power perspective. Nevertheless, a critical perspective is fully useful only if accompanied by some form of reconstruction effort. Building on the deconstruction of collaboration, the three critical papers also offer a wide range of concrete as well as theoretical propositions.

Tyrone Pitsis, Martin Kornberger and Stewart Clegg set the scene with their integrative essay, drawing on the work of ICAN (Innovative Collaborations, Alliances and Networks) Research. They look at the synthesis that occurs when interorganizational collaborations are effective. While there are many definitions of interorganizational collaboration, there is a distinct lack of emphasis on the importance that synthesis plays, both as a process and an outcome, in any collaborative relation. The paper presents what they call the building blocks of interorganizational synthesis as they have researched these issues across a number of projects in the construction, meetings, and events industries.

Marc Tyrrell argues that many discussions of alliances and collaboration assume a common meaning of organic solidarity. Yet, if solidarity is to be organic then we need to know what is happening in terms of social relationships, communications strategies and symbol systems. The paper draws from both anthropological and communications theories in order to construct a taxonomic model of social relationship/communications strategies as a first step towards constructing a larger theory of alliances-collaboration. Because specific forms of relationships are culturally and sub-culturally defined as appropriate to specific situations, conflict can easily arise around which form is appropriate to a specific situation. Even if the same basic form of relationship is

assumed by all partners in collaboration, the exact details of how that form will be enacted may well differ. Hence the need for fine-grained conceptual and ethnographic analysis, suggests Tyrrell. When we consider collaborations and alliances, he suggests, we will find that they are, of necessity, “designer cultures”—limited, contingent and, above all else, obviously artificial but accepted as appropriate by the stakeholders. The key is the construction of cultural components—alliance cultures, leadership, symbols, visions—that mesh into the interiorized cultures of stakeholders. Effective collaboration requires the presentation of a motivating vision, the construction of a symbolic interface and rituals designed to create/recreate that culture.

Kenneth Mølbjerg Jørgensen’s paper explores collaboration in an innovative project at a production firm, looking at the relationship between change agents and project participants, with an emphasis on the relations of power in the discourse of change. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s concept of language games and Foucault’s concept of power, he demonstrates how the change discourse constructs its own image of the participants, and how these constructions shape the main content of the change project. Rather than becoming employee-driven and guided with reference to employee identities and life forms, project participants and project activities are constructed by concepts, methods, and techniques that are opposed to the extant identities and life forms. Collaboration may be considered as a set of language games in which the action researcher is also implicated, he suggests. Projects are constructed through these games, and common understandings between actors become embedded in tacit rules for using words, methods, and procedures in collaboration projects. Relations of power are inscribed in the way language is used and the way language games are played out. Seen this way, it follows that common understanding and the rules associated with it are in some senses illusory. People in the organization pretended that they understood but never really did because change discourse was a language completely different from their own. The value-based collaboration was an illusion, ungrounded in everyday life in the company.

## **COLLABORATION, OPPORTUNISM AND IDENTIFICATION**

The critical perspective finds an echo in three other contributions that underline the ambivalence of collaboration. Opportunism is probably the more frequently discussed threat to collaboration. We remember of course the passionate debates between Williamson and Ghoshal and Moran published in 1996 in the *Academy of Management Review* (vol. 21, no. 1) on the advantage of the firm. The implication of this debate is important to the acceptance of a collaboration that is not just grounded on a logic of short-term self interest. The competition between firms certainly puts a strong pressure on collaboration that is long-term and innovation oriented. Hyper-competition also introduces distortions in the internal incentive systems that can reinforce individu-

alism. This is especially the case if market incentives are introduced within the firm. Competition in that case is institutionalised in the control system and thus makes collaboration uncertain. The three contributions from Xavier Lecocq, Stéphanie Dameron and Frédérique Chédotel shed light on the ambivalence of collaboration and the complex articulation of calculative and forgiving behaviours. A first step in this understanding is to reconceptualize opportunism in a socio-cognitive perspective (Lecocq). Identification then appears as an important concept in order to understand the ambivalence of co-operation (Dameron) but, as argued by Chédotel, identification does not necessarily lead to collaboration or co-operation.

Xavier Lecocq takes a socio-cognitive approach to the analysis of opportunism in an international inter-firms network. Breaking with the dominant traditions of transaction costs economics, he brings together social network and sociological neo-institutionalism to develop a socio-cognitive view of networks. His research question enquires into the behaviours that actors involved in interorganizational networks consider as opportunistic. Opportunism emerges from his study as something that is not easy to identify by any individual. On the contrary, he shows that it is only the knowledge of taken-for-granted relational norms regulating a network that allows one to qualify a given behaviour as opportunistic. While relational norms, as micro-social institutions, constitute a framework with which to evaluate the behaviour of partners, it is the degree to which they are taken for granted by each actor that finally defines the perception (as opportunistic or not) of the behaviour of partners violating the norms. Finally, opportunism is not a monolithic construct and the means by which a friend becomes perceived as a foe varies from one actor to another inside a given interorganizational network according to prevalent social norms in the network.

Stéphanie Dameron investigates how teams operate in different modes. "Complementary co-operation" occurs when each member makes use of his/her skills in order to gain power or obtain some form of compensation, which is based on individual interest, work division and inter-individual agreements. On the other hand, people operate on a "pro-social" or "community mode" which is triggered when the participants strive to be recognized as members of the group, sharing a common identity. "Community co-operation" is based on common objectives, membership and agreements with out-groups. Although these two kinds of co-operation seem to be mutually exclusive, the empirical study of their development process reveals the limits of their opposition. Three common dimensions of co-operative relationships are used to explore the relationships between the two kinds of co-operation. Dameron's methodology is based on a longitudinal analysis of two design teams within two industrial firms through participant observation. Her findings show that teams develop both kinds of co-operation. More specifically, three parameters can lead to change from one co-operating mode to another: ambiguity, enrolment process, and team boundaries. The results suggest an original vision of leadership. Management is based less on the line authority than on a form of relational management. The management role is to support co-operative

behaviours by managing the tension between opportunist and pro-social mode.

Frédérique Chédotel continues the focus on teams, looking at the dark side of organizational identification, in order to understand why some members of work teams and organizations engage in co-operative behaviours, whereas others do not. The aim of her article is to study how and in which context someone identifies and cooperates with a work team. Again, the approach is based on a longitudinal field study, in a French-based electronic market-oriented manufacturing plant. By comparing different operational teams, Chédotel studies how identification takes place within the teams and the co-operation potential that emerges or does not emerge from this identification. She shows that several context variables (work team design, its demography and organizational context) have an impact on co-operation practices. Generally, identification appears to have an ambivalent impact on co-operation. The results thus contribute to a more balanced approach, integrating the positive and negative effects of identification.

## **COLLABORATION AS A SOCIALLY EMBEDDED ACTIVITY**

Situations of collaboration must also be put into the perspective of a wider context. The next three contributions of this Special Issue do so by adopting explicitly or otherwise a structural point of view. Collaboration between actors at a moment in time is dependent of a wider set of relationships; as argued by Kathryn Pavlovich and Kate Kearins, the configuration and characteristics of this wider network has a direct impact on the capacity to collaborate. The two other contributions focus on the recursive links between trust and business relationships. Interestingly enough, both contributions use different means to show the importance of a progressive co-construction of both dimensions of the relationship. Cristóbal Casanueva and José Luis Galán González rely on the empirical study of a network of the Spanish shoe industry while Bo Nielsen reaches converging conclusions through a literature review.

Kathryn Pavlovich and Kate Kearins contribute to an analysis of structural embeddedness as an organising phenomenon within interdependent networks, using data from a longitudinal case study of a major tourism destination. They illustrate how the network has structural attributes of heterogeneity, interconnection, and reciprocity that contribute to its anti-hierarchical state, enabling an infinite number of structural possibilities to occur, some of which will be developed to form specific strategic capabilities. Structural redundancy proves to be positive in aggregating patterns in the network and building reciprocal obligation for long term exchange patterns that help form an embedded macro-culture. The paper takes a conceptual approach towards structural embeddedness, looking at how it assists or impedes organization within networks. The data indicate how heterogeneity and interconnection assist the reciprocal flows of resources and information for the development of strategic capabilities.

Cristóbal Casanueva and José Luis Galán González research social and information relations in networks of small- and medium-sized firms, looking at the importance of the links existing between social relations and relations of trust on the one hand, and economic and business relations on the other, in networks of firms, particularly networks of small firms that have formed involuntarily. They seek to discover the ways tacit and explicit information flows are established within the network and the conditions in which these occur, by looking at the Spanish shoe industry through the methods and concepts of social network analysis. Tacit information exchange occurs more readily when there are close and strong links between firms—links which range from commercial relations to social relations, such as the interchange of workers or friendship between entrepreneurs or executives. The main contribution consists of demonstration of an association between the tacit or explicit nature of the information that is exchanged and the strength of the relation between the firms; there is also an association between the way firms are linked together and the direction of the information flows.

Finally, Bo Nielsen takes a multi-dimensional approach to the role of trust in collaborative relations. Much of the literature has treated trust as a residual term for the complex social-psychological processes necessary for social action to occur, meaning that the relationship between trust and performance remains somewhat elusive in collaborative relationships. Based on a synthesis of research on trust with research on other aspects of collaboration, he distinguishes between the different roles of trust pertaining to different phases of alliance evolution, recognizing the recursive nature of collaborative trust. Future research needs to maintain a simultaneous focus on trust as an antecedent of relationship development, a moderator of these in terms of outcomes, as well as looking at its direct effects.

## **COLLABORATION AND CONTROL**

Collaborative efforts are also subject to the effects of control mechanisms. On the one hand excessive control is a direct threat to collaboration between individuals, departments or organizations in the sense that it does not give enough freedom to individuals to allow for the mutual autonomous adjustments necessary for direct co-operation. As argued by Tania Bucic and Siggie Gudergan, organic organization of alliances is essential where innovation, creativity and learning are desired. On the other hand, a complete absence of control mechanisms can lead to a form of chaos where trust and thus co-operation is no longer possible. This is the argument developed by Thomas Loilier and Albéric Tellier in their Linux case study. Rather than an in-between compromise, Emmanuel Josserand suggests that communities of practice can be a way to introduce the freedom necessary to co-operation within bureaucratic structures.

Focusing on the alliance team as the unit of analysis Tania Bucic and Siggie Gudergan ask whether organizational structures affect renewal

in collaborative settings. Alliance teams are characterized by both formal and informal relationships that enable boundary-spanning initiatives, collaborative management techniques, mutual interests, reciprocal relationships and resource sharing. The roles, behaviors and interactions of the team members influence the process of innovation and renewal within the collaborative context. The logic underpinning this framework is that structural facets of the alliance have an impact on the interactions and progress within the alliance team. Thus, the authors argue that interorganizational structures affect renewal in alliance settings. Their study provides explicit insights into the relationship between structural formality and centrality and renewal within alliances. Theoretically, it specifies how organizational structure is linked to the literature on dynamic capabilities, and how the organizational structure renewal link can be examined within alliances. The findings suggest that the greater the degree of structural formality and centralization the more adverse the impact will be on alliance learning. Looser, more collaborative alliances, where the alliance team is involved in determining objectives and has wide latitude in making job-related choices, learn better. Mechanistic structures in alliances hinder innovation and renewal, compared with more organic structures.

Thomas Loilier and Albéric Tellier investigate the importance of virtual networks with no territorial boundaries—made possible by the development of information and communication technologies—looking at the modes of coordination between the members of virtual innovation networks. Trust is the main mode of coordination of the hybrid forms built through knowledge of other people and face-to-face interaction. Trust can develop from technical competence or moral reputation, the paper argues, analyzing how free software team developers operate in the Linux project, based on a community of independent developers distributed geographically and, very often, with little or no commercial interest. Within this network of virtual teams, face-to-face interactions are almost non-existent. Even though trust is the privileged mode of coordination of the network, tools for conflict resolution and for defining sanctions and obligations are nevertheless necessary. It is imperative to have rules of reciprocity which ensure the equity of transactions. In the case of innovation networks, individuals who are not trustworthy are expelled. This rule acts as a safeguard, makes the actors feel secure, and encourages co-operative behaviour (for example, through the transmission of information) which, in return, breeds trust. Thus, not only are control and trust complementary modes of coordination, they also act upon each other. Nine conditions are proposed for the development of trust which requires particular mechanisms. In the network people do trust others whom they never see—under certain conditions. Institutional trust can develop without interpersonal relations but these relations are essential to create and develop personal trust. Institutional non-personal based trust requires formal control mechanisms, which can include sanctions.

Emmanuel Josserand investigates what happens when, stuck between bureaucratic rigidities and internal competition due to market mechanisms, organizations have to reinvent their competitive advan-



tage by attempting to introduce or reintroduce some form of co-operation within their internal boundaries. Do communities of practice facilitate co-operation within bureaucracies? These communities, as interstitial structures, he suggests, are supposed to give us the Holy Grail: the capacity to cooperate and develop practical knowledge within a reasonably bureaucratic structure. It is especially in their strength—the capacity to escape organizational paradigms—that communities of practice can be threatened as soon as they start to be perceived as productive. The literature has neglected the role of power in communities of practice, so we don't really know much about the actual articulation between the communities and the control mechanisms of the organizations that comprise them. Emmanuel Josserand contrasts the experience of three organizations—two successful and one less so—to contribute to a more realistic assessment of the risks encountered in developing communities of practice in a competitive and bureaucratic environment. The research shows that communities of practice can stimulate co-operation far beyond simple knowledge exchanges, they evolve from learning to doing. By their inherent resilience they contribute to organizational resilience: they introduce some network flexibility within bureaucratic arrangements. Nevertheless, if the form is resilient, each community is fragile; management intervention must be adapted to the organizational context. Emmanuel Josserand describes in this research the first contribution to what can become a complete contingent framework for the cultivation of communities of practice.

We believe that this special issue of M@n@gement presents a remarkably diverse set of intellectual, cultural and methodological approaches to the analysis of collaborations, alliances and networks. With paper contributions from Australasia, Europe and North America, we have no doubt that this international editorial collaboration, between France, Austria and Australia, within the framework established by ICAN Research at the University of Technology in Sydney, will do a great deal to advance reference points for further organization and management theory research into collaborations, especially that which seeks to be innovative in terms of methods and theories, breaking with the economic models that dominate the strategic management approaches. In its place, we find detailed empirical ethnographies, longitudinal analyses, compelling cases, and creative theoretical syntheses that draw on the wider panoply of the social sciences: psychology, sociology, anthropology and, yes, even philosophy. As the end product of collaboration between different individuals, disciplines, and countries, we believe this Special Issue shows that collaborations do work!

Emmanuel, Stewart, Martin and Tyrone

**Emmanuel Josserand** is Assistant Professor at Paris-Dauphine University and researcher at the CREPA research center. He recently published *The Network Organization: The Experience of Leading French Multinationals* (Edward Elgar).

**Stewart R. Clegg** is Professor of Management and Director of the Innovative Collaborations, Alliances and Networks Research Centre, Faculty of Business at the University of Technology, Sydney. His most recent publication is Clegg, Kornberger, and Pitsis (2005), *Management and Organizations: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

**Martin Kornberger** is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the School of Management at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**Tyrone S. Pitsis** is a Senior Research Associate and Lecturer in the Innovative Collaborations, Alliances and Networks Research Centre in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology, Sydney.

## Acknowledgment of Reviewers

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