MANAGING RESEARCH PROJECTS
An ESRC Researcher Development Initiative

ESRC Research Methods Festival

St Catherine's College, Oxford

17 - 20 July 2006

Informal workshop: background paper

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Workshop aims:

This workshop aims to involve researchers in sharing their experience of collaborative working on research projects and the challenges, from a variety of perspectives, of project management. It will also introduce researchers interested in undertaking project management responsibilities as part of their career development to a project that is intended to support the career development of researchers.

Background:

This workshop is one of a series of activities being undertaken by the project team on an ESRC Researcher Development Initiative Project on 'Managing Research Projects: Supporting Researchers in Collaborative Project Management' (2005 - 2008). For project website, see: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/mrp/

The project focuses on the development of researchers interested in project management and collaboration on research projects with partners at institutional, national and international level in the social sciences. It seeks to identify the skills needs of researchers as they begin, progress and conclude work on a project and to compare and contrast development needs between early career, mid-career and established career researchers. The project intends to produce a model framework for developing institutional strategies for researchers' skills development.

Working across the different career stages will raise awareness of the importance and value of developing project management and collaboration skills amongst researchers almost all of whom will be, at certain points in their career, managing others. Hence at one level, the project will 'train the trainers' to support and promote the development of project management and collaboration skills in others. At another level, the project will use a 'train the trainers' approach to disseminate the findings and the outcomes of the project and to help partner institutions to develop strategies for the development of their researchers' project management and collaboration skills.

The project recognises the wealth of project management expertise and skills in setting up large-scale institutional, national and international collaborative projects already held by experienced researchers in the Social Sciences. It also recognises the lack of relevant and timely guidance currently available to support the development of project management and collaborative working skills in researchers at all stages of the academic life course.

The aim of the project is to identify and harvest existing experience and expertise in project management and collaborative working and to re-package it appropriately to meet the development needs of early, mid-career and established researchers in a timely and relevant way.

This project has interrelated strands:

- to develop good practice guidance to help research staff with different existing levels of expertise to manage collaborative research projects.

- to identify and trial the most effective methods for developing researchers' skills in relation to project management and collaboration.

- to build up a community of practice with expertise in project management and collaboration.

A recent survey of research staff at the University of Warwick identified 'the development of project management skills' as the first most frequently identified request for support and 'support in setting up and maintaining effective collaborative research projects' as the second. This was the starting point for an investigation, funded as part of the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative, into how to support researchers in gaining an understanding of, and sharing experience of, the challenges involved in project management and sustaining good working relationships in collaborative projects.

The goals of this project are to

- identify, engage with and harvest the wealth of project management and collaborative working experience and expertise gained by social science researchers in HE

- share this with the broader HE community in a useable and `time-relevant' format.

The project aims to bring together groups of researchers with similar experiences and issues to jointly develop better ways of establishing and maintaining effective collaborative working relations in research project teams. The project team has set up a discussion group and will be regularly posting to it with project management anecdotes, tips and pointers to useful articles and websites that we have found during the course of the project. See:
http://groups.google.com/group/managing_research_projects

Issues arising from the early interviews and already signposted in the discussion forum (contributed by Mark Childs of the project team):

1.   Differences in values
One of the aims of the MRP project is to identify the issues (and strategies for dealing with these issues) that are specific to working with partners from other sectors. Differences in normative values and practices may lead to conflict, often because they are implicit rather than explicit, so participants may not even be aware of the need to articulate them.

Identifying these normative values can be determined using a cultural study such as those described by Hofstede (1980; quoted in Hofstede, 1998) or Cartwright (1993; quoted in Cartwright et al, 1999) and Webley and Cartwright (1996; quoted in Cartwright et al, 1999). These studies attempt to measure the culture of an entire organisation through administering questionnaires to the entire workforce and then analysing the answers.

This is obviously impractical if you just want to get on and do the project, but sharing and elucidating the differences in normative values that we have already experienced may reduce the potential for misunderstanding in the future. For example, differences in normative values also exist between different HEIs. In one project I worked on (it was EU-funded) six months into the project, the institution I worked in was the only HEI doing any work. This meant the project got off to a very shaky start (with trust diminishing fast). The reason was that no funding had appeared (of course, it was EU-funded) but unlike the HEI I worked in, the others were far more risk-averse. They would not put up any money in advance to hire staff and assumed that was the normal way things were done. We, similarly, assumed the normal thing was to front the money from our own budget and claim it back once Europe came through. Because from each point of view this was normative practice the behaviour of the other institutions appeared quite suspicious and was only resolved when the money actually arrived.

Identifying possible clashes of culture at the start of projects would be highly advantageous. We will collect these examples as we go through the project.

Cartwright, J. (1993) Motivation in a quality work environment, Newton Abbot, Quality Dynamics

Cartwright, J. et al (1999) 'A methodology for cultural measurement and change: A case study', Total Quality Management, 10 (1): 121 - 128

Hofstede, G. (1980) Culture's Consequences; International Differences in Work-Related Values, Beverly Hills, CA; Sage

Hofstede, G (1998) 'Identifying Organizational Subcultures: An Empirical Approach', Journal of Management Studies, 35; January 1998, 1 - 12

2. Importance of trust and socio-emotional relationships

In a study by Ring and Rands (1989), situations were observed in which two individuals: "experienced the ability of one another to deliver the terms of their psychological contract, (so) their reliance on trust deepened. As a consequence, these individuals increasingly worked "outside" the terms of the formal agreements between their organizations (Ring and Rands,1989; quoted in Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; p104)."

The implication appears to be that inter-organisational collaborations succeed through socio-emotional relationships rather than instrumental relationships. In fact, Ring and van de Ven go as far as to claim that "if personal relationships do not supplement formal role relationships over time, then the likelihood increases that conflicts will escalate (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994, p109).

It is therefore important to build (and renew) networks of people who you trust and with whom you could work in future.

Ring, P.S. and Rands, G. (1989) 'Sensemaking, understanding and committing: Emergent transaction processes in the evolution of 3M's microgravity research program'. In Van de Ven, A.H., Angle, H. and Poole, M.S. (eds.) Research on the management of innovation: The Minnesota Studies: 337 - 366, New York: Ballinger/Harper & Row

Ring, P.S and Van de Ven, A.H. (1994) 'Developmental processes of cooperative inter-organizational relationships', Academy of Management Review, 19 (1): 90-118

3. Trust, or lack of it, within a collaboration is often the element most difficult to confront

This is the converse of the point made above. Ring and Van de Ven (1994; p93) define trust as: "faith in the moral integrity or goodwill of others, which is produced through interpersonal interactions that lead to social-psychological bonds of human norms, sentiments, and friendships (Homans, 1962) in dealing with uncertainty. Trust

between the organisations within a collaborative partnership is not a given, since the trust required by organisations is high within collaborations."

The ability to presume that partners are acting responsibly towards and within a collaborative relationship is highly valued and likely to influence where commitment to collaborative activity is directed. To presume, however, that others are being open about their motives, interests, information, decision-making and changes in circumstance, at least as they affect the collaboration, requires heroic thresholds of trust, or acceptance of risk (Cropper, 1996; p95).

"Trust between parties occurs through a process of 'repetitive sequences of negotiation, commitment and execution stages or events' (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). If this process fails for whatever reason, then the trust between partners is diminished, and the level of commitment will also be reduced." In the study previously mentioned distrust built up between the partners for the following reasons:

- unequal power relationships between organisations – for example, when one is the project leader.
- unexpressed agendas.
- one organisation's control of the gatekeeping role
- control of information
- passing on misinformation
- modifying goals during the project to meet one partner's agenda

Re-building trust, once mistrust starts to build up, is far more difficult, of course. Some of the strategies I have seen help are:

- developing a meta-decision-making process that all the partners agree to
- holding an event where all partners can meet so goals can be clarified and tasks assigned with clear responsibilities and timescales
- establishing working groups within the project based around the successful partnerships that have been established
- bringing in an external (and independent) mediator in order to identify the problem areas.
- altering the tasks to make them less interdependent

Cropper (1996) 'Collaborative action as a model of conduct' in Chris Huxham (ed.) Creating Collaborative Advantage, Sage Publications

Homans, G. (1962) Social behavior: Its elementary forms, New York; Harcourt

Ring, P.S and Van de Ven, A.H. (1994) 'Developmental processes of cooperative interorganizational relationships', Academy of Management Review, 19 (1): 90-118

4.   Necessary elements necessary for an effective structure for a large project

(1) Task co-ordination

Clearly defined tasks, assigned to particular individuals and those assignments agreed upon need to be established within the project. This could be something along the lines of workpackages with clear targets and responsibilities, or it could be a simple list of outstanding action points that are regularly disseminated and updated.

(2) Decision-making

Projects need an explicit path of decision-making, on which partners all agree, i.e. meta-decision-making needs to occur. This is so that partners know:

- who needs to make what decision,
- what needs to happen for a decision to be made
- when a decision has been made

(3) Avoid allocating responsibility without authority

A problem with a previous project I evaluated was the lack of time that senior people could bring to the project. Most of the liaison was between people who cannot make decisions on behalf of their organisations, so the process of making decisions was lengthened because of the amount of checking back with the boss that had to take place. The problem here is that organisations cannot afford the cost of the involvement of senior people. Many of these people are only working part-time on the project and so cannot dedicate sufficient time to attend meetings and to correspond on problems.

(4) Don't skimp on the narrative

Quantifiable data is easier to disseminate, criticise and interrogate. There is therefore a tendency for qualitative data such as policy and agendas to be overlooked. Extra care needs to be taken to ensure that these topics are addressed.

(5) Technical competence

The common knowledge required for working on a project needs to be established, and efforts made to ensure that all project members are provided training in the subject matter if necessary. This need not be limited to technical expertise regarding information technology, for example, a project on social policy may require all participants to have a basic understanding of social policy.

(6) Contracts

The introduction of legal documents to a project can be constructive if it helps to underpin the degree of trust between partner organisations. The use of licensing agreements and other legal contracts is not an indication of a breakdown in trust. Ring and Van de Ven (1994; p93) describe this distinction: "even though the parties may be confident of each other's trustworthiness, they also may be uncertain whether to rely exclusively upon it. Reliance on trust developed at the interpersonal level may be conditioned by legal systems or organizational role responsibilities, mitigating the ability of the parties to rely on trust as a matter of first preference." They illustrate this

point by using the following analogy: "My co-author and I take a boat out on an afternoon sail on the Pacific. If I fall overboard I trust that my co-author will give his life in an effort to save mine. The sentiment is reciprocal. Nonetheless, the uncertainties (even the risks) of an ocean sail make it prudent for us to wear life-jackets and not rely exclusively on our trust in each other. (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; p93)"

Are there any other factors which people think are relevant? Or experiences that reflect these comments (or contradict them?)

Ring, P.S and Van de Ven, A.H. (1994) 'Developmental processes of cooperative interorganizational relationships', Academy of Management Review, 19 (1): 90-118

5.   Problems due to differing interests or poor communications

Dawson (1992; p194) warns beware the view that 'poor communication is the biggest problem in our organisation'. Her rationale being that a focus on effective communication cannot, of itself, reconcile divergent interests. I agree that it is a mistake to assume that once the communications are solved then you'll have a successful project. However, in a project for which I conducted a review in the late 1990s communication problems were getting in the way due to:

- the number of working groups
- the interdependency of the working groups
- the number of organisations within each working group
- the high number of communication routes that are required
- the inconsistent use of media of communication.

The following seem to me to be the main elements needed to get communication working effectively:

- one single medium of communication should be adopted by all organisations within the project, which should be formally agreed to by all participants
- effective communication between different organisations requires a change in the working culture of those organisations within a project that do not use this medium as a matter of course to bring them in line with the dominant channel of communication utilised by the majority of members of the project.

You cannot assume everyone is familiar with the latest technology so there'll be a learning curve, which you might need to train them through - but also, don't let them get away with not using whatever platform you've adopted. You'll create more problems in the long run.

A culture of informing and disseminating information as a matter of course must be implemented within a project. Omissions to this principle must be identified and criticised by the project management. Good communication is integral to the functioning of any project. (In other words, observe, reflect and review the

communication -don't just assume it's happening, or that everyone knows how to do it effectively).

Anyway - those were my pearls of wisdom. Do those seem reasonable? Practicable? Does anyone have any additional comments to make on how to make communications work - or experiences of them not working?

Dawson, S. (1992) Analysing organisations 2nd ed., Basingstoke: Macmillan

6.   Complexities in the management structure of multi-institutional projects

One of the biggest issues we've encountered with our discussions with managers is the problem with how to structure the management of the project. The usual literature details Project Owner, Project Director and Project Manager (usually the funding body, the person making the decisions and the person running things - in that order). More complicated is how to organise the individuals that need to have some input into the planning process, particularly when this is a multi-organisational collaboration.

One strategy we've come across, instead of having a steering group and separate working groups, is to have an executive group comprised of representatives of each partner working on the project. The constituent members of the project were the most senior members of the partner institutions involved in the project, but all of them were actually working actively and directly on the project. The group then met every month. This meant that decisions could be turned around very quickly, and that all members of the project felt closely involved in the decision-making process. It also meant that the meetings became an important part of the research process. Since all the members were active researchers, bringing together the expertise in one room and capturing the key points of the discussions led to the generation of a lot of ideas.

Does this reflect other people's experiences? Are there better ways of structuring the decision-making within projects? Is there any value in having traditional steering groups comprised of people who aren't directly involved in the project?

Some suggestions for issues for discussion:

In your own experience of working as a researcher on collaborative projects what aspects of project management **worked particularly well and what problems did you encounter in relation to :-**

- **working collaboratively:**

- **allocating / co-ordinating tasks:**

- **communication:**

- **decision making:**

- any other issues.