

Improving Business Collaboration through Dialogue – Facilitated Workshops as a Method for Joint Learning

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Introduction

Collaborative relationships between companies have become more and more common in current organizational life. In recent years the collaborative actions have expanded closer to the organizations' elementary operations, e.g. research and development (R&D), new product development (NPD), and marketing. The collaborative relationships may vary in length, intensity, formality, objectives, the content of collaboration, and the number of partners. More and more often collaboration is established on a long-term basis, aiming to provide benefits that a company could not achieve alone. Kogut (1988) has presented three main drivers for interorganizational collaboration: reduction of transaction costs, new positioning in markets, and access to new knowledge and capabilities. Many authors (e.g. Dyer and Singh 1998, Knight 2002, Grant and Baden-Fuller 2004) suggest that the relationship, where the aim is to acquire and share knowledge and to learn between organizations, is the best vehicle for gaining competitive advantage and improving strategic positioning.

Building a successful long-term collaborative relationship between two organizations seems to be more demanding and complicated than often expected. Potential synergies evidently exist but interorganizational relationships are not problem-free (Spekman et al. 1998, Kelly et al. 2002, Bamford et al. 2004). A collaborative relationship brings more or less different organizations together, which can turn out to be challenging.

Fit between the Partners

Diversity between the partners is seen as one critical factor causing alliance failures (Blomqvist 2002, Doz & Hamel 1998). Diversity creates and leads to divergent expectations, misunderstandings and uncertainty (Blomqvist 2002). However, it is not these differences that cause problems but the misfit, or more precisely, the incapability to match together. According to Kanter (1994), compatibility is needed on historical, philosophical and strategic grounds. Common experiences, values and principles, and hopes for the future, i.e. the less tangible aspects, should be compatible in addition to the financial viability of the partnership. It is most probably impossible to find a perfectly compatible partner. Therefore awareness about the differences as well as willingness and ability to match together in the relationship is required. Furthermore, factors like inadequate planning, strategic mismatch, different assumptions, attitudes, and expectation, as well as unclear roles and responsibilities

are associated with problems in interorganizational collaboration (Koza & Lewin 2000, Kelly et al. 2002).

Douma et al. (2000) argue that in interorganizational collaboration the management should focus on achieving and maintaining a good fit between the partners. Doz and Hamel (1998) emphasize strategic, and organizational and cultural fit between the partners. Also Kanter (1994) has identified that operational and cultural differences in collaboration tend to surprise the partners as similarities are seen more often than dissimilarities when selecting the partner and formatting the partnership. It is not until the actual collaboration starts that the experience shows the real situation and the dissimilarities. The bridging of gaps, managing and maintaining the fit as well as integration on all levels can sometimes be hard. Matching together requires recognition of the partner and its culture and practices as well as having open mind to learn in the relationship (Doz & Hamel 1998). The dissimilarities require working them out because they do not disappear but can be handled (Kanter 1994). Time needs to be taken to learn from the differences and to take them into account (Doz & Hamel 1998, Kanter 1994).

Willingness and Ability to Learn

A collaborative relationship is a dynamic and living system that evolves over time (Kanter 1994). Its development is hard to predict (Doz & Hamel 1998). Often unanticipated changes and requirements will emerge. Thus readiness to learn and adapt is needed from both organizations (Kanter 1994). According to Doz and Hamel (1998), learning and adjustment are the keys to longevity and avoidance of dissolution of the relationship. Successful alliances go through continuous learning cycles as well as re-evaluation and readjustment over time (Doz 1996, Doz & Hamel 1998).

Learning in interorganizational collaborative relationships takes place at individual, group and organizational levels. Both behavioral and cognitive changes and adaptation is expected to occur if learning takes place (Knight 2002). The primary obstacle for learning in a collaborative relationship is the inability to access, assimilate, and disseminate knowledge in the partnership (Inkpen 1996).

Learning through close collaboration is often difficult or even frustrating, and sometimes learning opportunities are missed because the partnership knowledge is undervalued, potential connections are not put into place, or the knowledge itself

makes learning difficult (Inkpen 1998). In order to learn from close collaboration, companies need to acknowledge the value and purpose of partnership knowledge. Companies must agree mutually what knowledge is to be transferred, and how people are supported in the comprehension and utilization of the knowledge. In this partnering organizations need to have empathy and willingness to help each other.

Larsson et al. (1998) suggest that the partners' way of managing the collective learning process is fundamental for the success or failure of the strategic alliance. Interorganizational learning can be hindered by the lack of motivation or lack of ability to absorb and communicate knowledge between collaborating organizations. In addition, the dynamics of power, opportunism, suspicion, and asymmetric learning strategies can constitute barriers to collective knowledge development. In contrast, prior interaction, high learning stakes, trust, and long-term orientation are likely to empower the collective learning process. Learning in interorganizational collaboration may take place if both partners are concurrently transparent and receptive. Both partners also need to be equal in transparency and receptiveness.

The partners should consciously learn about the collaborative process itself. This can be supported by taking some distance and getting an external view of the process, letting a neutral and objective party observe the process, stimulating collaboration actively and sorting out the misunderstandings (Doz & Hamel 1998). Capacity for constructive dialogue between the partners is needed. According to Lewis (1990) referred to by Kelly et al. (2002) a constructive and proactive strategy reduces surprises between the partners and builds confidence.

Building a new relationship requires learning and adaptation from all individuals involved (Wenger 1999). Elkjaer (2005) calls this kind of process *social learning*. Learning how to collaborate is taking place during all interactions between collaborating parties, not as a separate and delimited action, but as an elementary part of interaction. Adapted from Liedtka (1996), Bantham et al. (2003) consider both mindset and skill-set of the individuals as critical enablers in collaborative relationships. They define the mindset as an awareness of dialectical tensions and willingness to address these opposing forces. In addition, the skill-set is mostly about communication behavior that facilitates the managing of the dialectical tensions. This means communication skills like non-defensive listening, active listening, self-disclosure, and editing.

Need for Dialogic Communication

Communication behaviour is seen as a determinant of interorganizational collaborative relationships and their success (Mohr & Spekman 1994). According to Kanter (1994), communication is of utmost importance, even more so than anyone has anticipated. Communication is described as the “*glue that holds relationships together*” and the “*key ingredient of successful partnerships*” (Mohr & Spekman 1994, Tuten & Urban 2001). Kelly et al. (2002) have found that people and relationship issues caused most of the problems and challenges (over 50%) in the early stages of alliances. This includes communication problems, which accounted for over 25% of the total problems. Nevertheless, previous research has not analyzed communication in the interorganizational collaboration context in detail. The researches cited above only mention the importance of communication without analyzing it in more detail.

Learning how to collaborate seems to require more or less intensive interaction between the partners over a period of time. The management has a key role to enable individuals to interact and build working relationships with each other (Doz & Hamel 1998). The most efficient ways for this are informal situations in which people can learn to know each other as persons. Enabling the development of personal relationships between key individuals of the partnership seems to be one fundamental precondition for learning how to collaborate

Successful collaboration requires shared working practices as well as shared meanings and language between the collaborative parties. According to Burr (1996) shared meanings are constructed locally between interacting partners through a mutual social process. Thus, building shared meanings requires mutual discussions and reflections of experiences between individuals from both organizations. The challenge seems to be that in everyday interaction communication tends to be very task oriented and little space is left for discussions about the relationship itself. Furthermore, a challenge might also be that talking about the relationship requires readiness to expose oneself in a certain extent as well as to listen genuinely to the other. This demands both dialogic communication competencies and mindsets supporting relationship building.

Facilitated workshops

How is it possible then to improve mutual communication and strengthen shared understanding about the relationship in a collaborative setup? Often transformation

processes in organizations require external support or facilitation to get started. However, involvement of externals can be a delicate process. As Schein (1999) points out in his book of process consultation the outside consultant *can only help a human system to help itself*. Thus, it is important that the facilitator respects and supports the thinking and interpretations of the participants. Schein (1999) emphasizes that the goal of the process consultation is to increase the client system's capacity for learning, not to provide fixed solutions. According to Abel and Simons (2000) constructionist approach to consulting seeks to support participants ability to 1) heighten understanding of the complex interplay between relational processes and organizational development, 2) create a forum for the expression of multiple stories, 3) offer opportunities to reflect upon guiding beliefs, values, and attendant actions, and 4) offer a venue for joint collaborative reflection. The process can provide an opportunity for the participants to construct together new meanings and to consider the implications of these new meanings for further actions.

The role of the facilitator is considered pivotal in the dialog process (Dixon 1998, Senge 1990). The facilitator must be able to ensure atmosphere of security and equal involvement of all the participants. Furthermore, the facilitator has an important role in keeping up the dialogue. Without a facilitator dialogue tends to turn to ordinary discussion (Senge 1990). In the context of a collaborative relationship joint dialogic interventions provided by an external, neutral facilitator can significantly improve the relationship and mutual understanding. Nevertheless, arranging a dialog intervention in a collaborative setup can be more complex than in a single organization. The both partners must be committed and the intervention process must fit to the overall developmental situation of the relationship. Furthermore, there must be enough trust and sense of security between the partners.

Research Design

This study was a part of a multi-case research project on social dynamics of collaborative relationships. Three of the cases represented business relationships between two partners. In each of these three cases a separate development workshop between the partners was arranged. The purpose of the workshops was to create a joint developmental intervention for collaborating organizations as well as to experiment new approaches to improve collaborative relationships.

The workshops were arranged in each case in cooperation with the persons responsible for the overall relationship management. The participants represented mainly the management level in all the cases. The researchers acted as facilitators and observers in the workshops. The workshops were based on social constructionist philosophy and dialogic approach. Each workshop followed the similar working process with some case specific differences. The workshops were documented and the experiences were reflected in the end of the each workshop.

The overall aim of this study was to explore how dialogic interventions can be utilized in the development of collaborative relationships. The research questions are:

- *What experiences did the participants consider meaningful in the workshops?*
- *How did facilitated workshops support joint learning between the partners?*

The joint learning refers here (1) to development of shared meanings and understanding about the relationship itself and collaboration dynamics in general, and (2) to enhancement of mutual language and new ways of talking about the relationship and collaboration between the partners.

Materials and Methods

The study included three cases each representing a business relationship between two different companies. The cases were: (1) an IT outsourcing partnership between a big domestic service company and a global IT service supplier, (2) a strategic R&D partnership between a Western client company and an Asian vendor company, and (3) a client-supplier relationship in a highly dynamic technology industry supplying large industrial hardware systems. Each case was a clear client-supplier/vendor relationship meaning that the client was paying money to get aimed added-value from the collaboration. Nevertheless, in order to achieve business value both organizations needed to invest time and resources jointly in the endeavor.

Case Descriptions

The first case was about a strategic IT outsourcing partnership between a large service company, TransServ and its global IT partner, GlobeIT. TransServ operates in the service industry, providing its services mostly for individual customers. Although IT is not the core business of TransServ, it is very critical for the services provided. Due to the difficult market situation in its industry, TransServ had undergone several restructurings in the recent years to make the business more profitable. Also

TransServ's IT functions encountered restructuring and it was decided to outsource the IT department. There were several reasons behind this decision. The main economical reasons were cost savings and releasing of capital for the core business. In addition, TransServ strove for better services to promote its own competitiveness. GlobeIT was seen as a stable global partner satisfying TransServ's needs. The partnership was established a couple of years before the case study was conducted.

The second case concerned a multi-site collaborative relationship between a European and an Asian company, called EuroCorp and AsiaComp. The context of the collaboration was in complex new product development and it included several product programs and projects. EuroCorp was a global technology company with a strong position in its industry. AsiaComp was a rapidly growing vendor company specialized in technology utilized by EuroCorp. EuroCorp was seeking a new long-term partner for its product development operations aiming to enhance its own competence base with external resources. Furthermore, the aim was to shorten the time-to-market for new products and to add flexibility to product development. The collaboration between the partners was very intense in practice. Cross-boundary communication between project groups and management from both companies took place on a daily basis and there were continuous needs to mutually adjust joint operations. The partnership was established in the year 2000 and had grown in size and scope ever since.

The third case studied the social dynamics in a context of a complex demand-supply chain. The focus was on one dyadic relationship between a client, ClientCorp and a supplier, SupplyComp. ClientCorp is a global technology company producing complex industrial systems in an extremely competitive business environment. SupplyComp is an important supplier for ClientCorp supplying core elements for ClientCorp's customized systems. ClientCorp and SupplyComp had an expanding relationship for over 10 years. During this time the relationship has developed more strategic and deeper. SupplyComp built a new plant nearby the ClientCorp's existing plant and operations were integrated closely. This led to a close and intensive supply relationship between ClientCorp and SupplyComp requiring weekly and sometimes even daily coordination of the joint operations. Due to the increased customer requirements and technology development the product has become more complex and the number of configurations has increased heavily during the recent years. This has

made the supply chain more complex and needs for mutual coordination have increased remarkably. The product is a so called high mix, low volume product and not very scalable.

Data Gathering and Analysis

As a part of the case studies, a facilitated development workshop was arranged in each case. Table 1 summarizes the facts of the workshops in each case: time point, duration, participants and the site.

Table 1 Workshop description

	<i>Case 1</i>	<i>Case 2</i>	<i>Case 3</i>
Time	May 2004	March 2005	November 2005
Duration	Half-day	One-day	Half-day
Participants	11 (6 from TransServ, 5 from GlobeIT)	21 (10 from EuroCorp, 11 from AsiaComp)	16 (7 from ClientCorp, 9 from SupplyComp)
Site	TransServ facility	AsiaComp facility	ClientCorp facility

The participants in each case represented the operational management of the relationship including relationship or partnership managers from both companies in each case. The relationship managers were persons that had an overall responsibility of the relationship management and development on behalf of their companies. In the first and third case the workshop took place at the facilities of the client organization. In the second case the vendor organization provided the facilities for the workshop.

The working methods in the workshops were quite similar based on principles of dialogue and process consultation. However, some development in the used methods and facilitation occurred from case to case. In general, the workshops included presentations, discussions and reflections in various settings. In each workshop there were two or three researcher present. In the first and the third case one of the researcher had the active role as a conductor and facilitator of the session. The other two made observations and took notes. In the second case two researchers interchanged roles during the workshop. In the facilitation process different working methods were applied. It included presentations about the general features of the collaboration dynamics and the preliminary findings from the case study, setting up discussions about the relationship in various set ups, and feeding the discussions with questions. Furthermore, the role of the facilitator was to take care of the agreed time boundaries and the agenda.

All workshops started with an introduction in which the agenda, the working principles and the roles were agreed. In the second and third case also two frameworks that were created in the project and preliminary findings from the particular case study were presented. During the workshops the participants worked both in smaller groups as well as jointly discussing about the various topics. The topics included discussions about the nature and the developmental stage of the relationships, perceived strengths of the collaboration, developmental needs and improvement opportunities of the relationship. In each case considerations of concrete developmental actions were done in the end of the workshop. The representatives of both partners listed at first what their own company should do differently or more to improve the relationship. Then the lists were presented and discussed with the representatives of the partner. The next stage was to consider and list what the own company could do to support the partner in listed improvement actions. After that the action lists were prioritized. Finally, short evaluation and reflection discussions were conducted. Table 2 summarizes the processes of the conducted workshops.

Table 2 Workshop process

<i>Case 1</i>	<i>Case 2</i>	<i>Case 3</i>
- introduction (agreeing principles or working)	- introduction (agreeing principles or working)	- introduction (agreeing principles or working)
- discussing partnership in general	- presenting frameworks	- presenting frameworks
- discussing the state of the particular partnership	- presenting preliminary findings from the case study	- discussion about strengths of the relationship
- discussing improvement possibilities	- discussion of strengths and improvement opportunities	- presenting preliminary findings from the case study
- evaluation	- evaluation	- discussion and generation of improvement ideas
		- evaluation

All the workshops were documented. During the sessions issues discussed and ideas generated were written to flip charts. In addition, one or two researchers were observing the workshops and writing notes about the discussions. After each workshop the researchers elaborated a feedback document for the participants, in which issues that were discussed and handled were summarized. The documentation formed the data for this study including flip charts, written memos and observations. The researchers summarized the general findings from each workshop right after it was accomplished. The overall analysis was done after the third workshop.

Results

The results are presented in two parts according to the research questions of the study. The first part of the results pinpoints *the participants' experiences* concerning the workshops. The results are based on the participants' statements during the workshop and in the evaluation discussions.

Participants' experiences

In general, the workshops were considered useful in every case. In the evaluation discussion of all the cases, the participants mentioned the neutrality of the workshop, the neutral forum and the neutral facilitators to be important for this kind of dialogue about the relationship. The external facilitators kept for example the talk on the right level. Especially in case 3 the participants felt this very important. In this case, the meetings were usually only dealing with operational issues due to the strong operational nature of the relationship. Even more strategic management meetings used to turn into operational meetings.

The participants indicated that the holistic view the researchers provided about the relationship was needed. The researchers saw the relationship from a different angle providing new insights about it. In addition, the participants expressed that the conceptual frameworks, which the researchers presented in case 2 and 3, supported mutual talk about the relationship. In general, the talk about the relationship in a different way was considered important. Participants felt that usually there is no time and space for this kind of dialog. The everyday work is usually too task-oriented and concentrating on the operational issues that there is no room left for the relationship talk.

The evaluation discussions show that, at least in these cases, there is a need for similar workshops and dialogue on a regular basis. For example, in case 2 the participants proposed that there should be reserved time for talk about the relationship on the agenda of the management meetings. Furthermore, dialogue and relationship talk between the counterparts would be needed also on other organizational levels.

Although the evaluation discussions of the workshops were quite similar in the three studied cases, there were also some differences. In case 2 the generation and presentation of improvement initiatives and cross-commenting the ideas were found a fresh approach. The session produced many ideas that could be elaborated further. In

case 3 the workshop in general as a method was considered very good and useful. However, the participant didn't consider the ideas and comments as fresh as in case 2. It was commented that the workshop did not reveal anything new.

Workshops supporting joint learning

This second part of the results considers *how the workshops did support joint learning in the cases*. The results are based on the participants' statements as well as researchers' observations and interpretations. Five factors were found how the joint learning was supported through the workshops. These factors were aligned with the participants' experiences presented in the previous section. The factors are listed in following:

- *Creating a forum for the mutual talk about the relationship*
- *Providing conceptual frame of references about collaboration dynamics*
- *Putting people to take the view of the other*
- *Enabling different voices about the relationship to be heard*
- *Fostering mutual development initiatives*

As mentioned before, the participants considered the workshops as important contributions to their mutual discussions by expanding the range of the communication topics. The external facilitators were able to create neutrality that was found important for mutual relationship talk. Neutral facilitators eased tensions that existed between the partners in each case and enabled more diverse discussions about the "hot" issues. The facilitated forum also provided time and space for a mutual relationship talk. It was stated that in regular meetings, agendas are full of substantial issues and there is no space for talking about the social aspects of collaboration. One further benefit from the external facilitation was keeping the focus of discussion on the agreed issues.

In each workshop conceptual frame of references about the collaboration dynamics were presented. In two cases also preliminary findings from the inquiry were reflected against these frames. Based on the presentations mutual discussions were generated. In all workshops participants found conceptual frames a useful way to get an external view to their relationship. Generated discussions and presented ideas opened new perspectives and strengthened mutual understanding about the relationship in each case. For instance, developmental stage of the relationship, and the strengths and the improvement opportunities were reviewed in each workshop. Thus, joint

understanding of the general collaboration dynamics was strengthened as well as mutual view of the state of the relationship.

In each workshop participants listed the improvement initiatives which their own organization should foster in order to improve the collaboration. The focus was in social aspects of the relationship. In the latter part of the section the participants took another view and considered how they could support the initiatives the partner had listed. The results of different considerations were cross-presented between the partners in each workshop. This switch of the viewpoint was regarded as refreshing in each workshop. The participants stated that the sessions strengthened mutual commitment to the improvement initiatives. The exercise provided also a minor experience to consider the partner's intentions from a strongly collaborative perspective.

In the beginning of the each workshop mutual rules for working were agreed. One aim was to practice more sensitive listening and to give space for diverse ideas and issues concerning the relationship. The facilitator supported these aims by asking questions and encouraging different views. In each workshop some dialogic moments were experienced and diverse ideas presented. In the case two both partner's expressed openly own perceived weaknesses and inadequacies in the collaborative relationship. Furthermore, some own earlier mistakes and false judgements were also mentioned. These statements strengthened open atmosphere and realistic mutual image of the relationship. The partner's experienced that they were able to talk more straightly and honestly about the relationship.

In each workshop a list of mutually agreed improvement initiatives was generated. These lists included mostly familiar issues from earlier discussions but also some new perspectives were added. The action lists were found important for the future joint development of collaboration. The presence of externals in the workshop was felt to strengthen the seriousness of the presented improvement initiatives. The generation of the improvement ideas strengthened the joint understanding of the relationship and its developmental needs.

Discussion

In all our cases the participants of the workshops evaluated them to be beneficial for the joint collaboration development. This was true even if our three collaboration

cases were in different phases in terms of their maturity or life-cycle. The partnership in the case 1 was in its early stages and facing some major contradictions at that moment. The participants concerns were connected to the definition of the partnership, what does 'partnership' mean and what are the expectations for each partner. Furthermore, the development initiatives concerned some basic rules, information flow, and role clarification. The partnership in the case 2 was described to be in a well-established and solid stage despite some challenging projects. The participants were committed to work together and new insights were presented. The partnership in the case 3 was highly operational and in a constant problem solving mode. The discussion was considered good but anything quite new ideas were not generated.

Our study supports the previous findings on the significance of communication and learning in collaboration relationship. Facilitated workshops showed the partners' need but also the benefit of mutual discussions and evaluation of the relationship as such. From the viewpoint of joint learning, a conceptual framework of collaboration dynamics provided by an external facilitator helped the partners to form a shared understanding about the purpose and goals of collaboration and about the processes through which collaboration evolves. Learning in workshops took place in different levels. Among workshop participants learning was social, every participant learning from each other in an interaction context that was partly new for them. Instead of operational level problem solving participants concentrated on the strategic meaning and content of the relationship as such. Too often in joint management meetings there's no time for this kind of elaboration. Learning took also place on individual, group and organizational level. On individual level every participant had naturally her own experiences about the workshop method that on group level converged to the general notion of usefulness of dialogue in collaboration relationship development. Through workshop participants' organizational positions (middle or top-level management) also organizational level learning can be assumed to have taken place. In the workshops, learning focused on upraising the awareness level of dialectical tensions in collaboration relationship not only in participants' own work but on all organizational levels.

Important practical implication from this study is that neutral facilitated discussion sessions can be a useful approach to improve mutual understanding and deepen joint learning in collaborative relationship. An external facilitator can enable different talk and focus the mutual discussions to issues that are not discussed in regular meetings. It became evident through this study that talk about the relationship and collaboration itself is significant for the development of the relationship. However, it is hard to get into the agendas of the normal meetings. It was mentioned that this kind of talking requires different mindset. A practical challenge seems to be how to implement dialogic sessions between the counterparts to the regular meeting agendas.

From the research point of view we feel that this issue is worth studying further. In further studies the intervention and investigations should be planned more profoundly. The intervention should have two or more consequential session forming a transformation process. The participants can have some intermediate practical tasks between the sessions. The intervention process must be connected to overall improvement intentions of the collaboration. All the sessions must be documented carefully. Furthermore, participants must be interviewed afterwards in order to find out the impacts and experiences. The important research questions would be how mutual talking and reflection about the relationship and collaboration can be implemented to the regular meeting agenda in the partnership.

Our study had some limitations. In each case only one workshop was conducted and thus the impacts were mostly limited to the participants. There were no follow up or any kind of post investigation about the experience or how the listed action points were implemented further. The workshops were arranged as a part of a larger case study and thus they were not the main focus of the inquiry. The data was gathered only through perceptions and written memos. Recording or videotaping could have enabled a deeper analysis of each session. Despite these limitations we feel that the data and the overall inquiry gave us a valuable insight to the challenges of improvement of collaboration from both practical and academic points of view.

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