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Publication details

Keast, RL & Mandell, M 2009, 'Learning, language and leadership : conduits to dynamic public service networks', *13th International Research Society for Public Management Conference (IRSPM XIII)*, Copenhagen Business School, Fredericksberg, Denmark, 6-8 April, IRSPM.

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International Research Society for Public Management Conference X111
Copenhagen Business School
6-8 April 2009

Abstract for the Open Track: Governance, Networks and Inter-organisational Arrangements in Providing Public Services

LEARNING, LANGUAGE AND LEADERSHIP: CONDUITS TO DYNAMIC PUBLIC SERVICE NETWORKS

by

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Networks are having a profound impact on the way society is organised at the local, national and international level. Networks are not 'business as usual'. The defining feature of networks and a key indicator for their success is the strength and quality of the interactions between members. This relational power of networks provides the mechanism to bring together previously dispersed and even competitive entities into a collective venture. Such an operating context demands the ability to work in a more horizontal, relational manner. In addition a social infrastructure must be formed that will support and encourage efforts to become more collaborative.

This paper seeks to understand how network members come to know about working in networks, how they work on their relationships and create new meanings about the nature of their linked work. In doing so, it proposes that learning, language and leadership, herein defined as the '3Ls' represent critical mediating aspects for networks.

Learning, Language and Leadership: Conduits to Dynamic Public Service Networks

INTRODUCTION

As organisations and sectors look to address increasingly complex social issues, networks and other forms of inter-organisational arrangements have come to the fore (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Huxham & Vangen, 1996; Klijn, 2008; Mandell, 1994; O'Toole, 1997; Powell, 1990; Rhodes, 1996; Kickert, et al,1997) . The refocusing of a single body of effort into a collective endeavour has the potential to solve 'wicked issues' (Clarke & Stewart, 1997) or intractable problems, maximising scarce resources and, in doing so, reducing duplication and overlap. Further, networks are argued to facilitate shared information, tap into new knowledge sets and create opportunities for innovation spill over considered necessary in the current knowledge driven society (Castells, 2000; Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr, 1996).

A network has as its primary function linking, facilitating and leveraging joint action. Within the network paradigm interpersonal relationships are central. Networks rely on relationships to provide the connective tissue to bring together previously dispersed and even competitive entities into a collective venture (Connick, 2006; Mandell, 2001; Mandell & Keast, 2009 forthcoming). The success of a network therefore depends on the ability to bring together diverse stakeholders into a functioning collective 'whole'. Within this context the issues of language, learning and leadership – the '3Ls' – present as important considerations for network members and administrators to understand and implement.

The 3Ls are interrelated and present a process by which networks can develop and grow into effective tools for solving problems that cross organizational lines. First, participants of networks should be aware that learning new ways of behaving are needed in order for networks to be effective. Second, participants need to develop and use a different type of language in order to lay the foundation for learning to occur both within and outside the network, and to enable the leadership in the network to be effective. Finally there is a need for a new type of leadership, one that facilitates learning and capitalizes on the synergistic impact of networks (Mandell & Keast, 2009 forthcoming).

In the next section, each of the 3Ls will be described in more detail and how each of them has an impact on the effectiveness of networks. The literature is used to draw out the key contributions of each of these elements in relation to networks and network operation. In addition, the suite of actions to be undertaken based on the 3 L's is highlighted and the implications of such an approach is indicated.

LEARNING

Learning is considered to be both a central process and outcome of networks. As Stacey (1996) contends networks are the sites of major, complex learning which takes place through social interactions (385). Since the emphasis on both learning and networks is likely to be ongoing there is a need to understand the concept of learning and how to function in and design optimal learning opportunities and processes of learning in networks.

Learning is a key process in understanding practices in organizations, particularly how work gets done and what people expect. Learning contributes to and maximizes collective knowledge, generates insights and ways of working, and aids in solving problems and creating innovations (Connick, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2000, 1999). An

essential aspect of the network learning process is the interaction between network members, and the information and knowledge exchanges that take place among members of networks. Trust and reciprocity are key factors in how learning occurs (Klijn, 1996, 2008; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004; Mandell, 1988). It leads to embedded sharing of views, interpretations and discovery. Different networks allow for different types of learning. Following the distinctions made between organisational learning and learning organisations (Easterby-Smith, Snelll and Gherdardi, 1998), two types of learning can be distilled from the network mode – learning networks and network learning (Knight, 2002).

Learning networks are groups of organizations and/or individuals that come together with the express purpose of learning together, from one another. Members of these types of networks are interested in moving from what they know to beyond their individual constraints. In this mode, derived learning is taken back to the individual organizations represented in the network for their benefit. These types of networks have also been referred to as communities of practice (Snyder & Briggs, 2004). According to Snyder & Briggs (2004:173) learning networks "…can combine disciplines, interests, and capabilities across boundaries to take on national priorities." According to these authors, a learning network or "community of practice" "…is a particular type of network that features peer-to-peer collaborative activities to build member skills as well as organizational and societal capabilities"(174). The focus in learning networks is on the learning of individual group members and is evidenced by an individualistic focus and a link back to apply the learning to the individual members of their organizations.

Network learning is learning that occurs through a group of organizations. It is collective learning that is directed to assist the network itself. The focus is on making a contribution that is wider than learning back to the individual or individual organization as with learning networks. The emphasis is on the broader community and is evidenced by shared cognitive structures, norms, shared interpretations and collective practice. In this way network learning becomes more than the sum of the learning of the individuals, groups and organisations that constitute the network; it results in changes to the attributes of the network, such as interactions, behaviour, processes and shared narratives (Dunford and Jones, 2000). Knight and Pye (2005: 384) add the element of sustainability to network learning outputs, indicating that " To be considered as learning, change to network level properties would have to endure for some time".

In many ways the differences between learning networks and network learning and their outputs can be aligned against the different network types depicted by Brown and Keast (2003) and Keast, Brown and Mandell (2007): cooperative, coordinative and collaborative. Table 1 sets out these distinctive types.

Put Table 1 here

Under this model cooperative and coordinative networks are focused mainly on doing business as usual. The emphasis is on participating agencies working together to a sufficient level to support their individual goals or to do the same work more efficiently. In cooperative networks learning is limited to sharing information and/or expertise. In coordinative networks learning is focused on doing the same work more efficiently. Cooperative and coordinative networks can be considered learning networks. Accordingly, learning within these modes is predominantly directed at the benefits to participants and their parent agencies.

By contrast, since collaborative networks are about systems change, the learning orientation is focused on changing the ways that people work together and the structures and processes that support and sustain such change. Moreover, through these adjustments the cumulative learning of network members can be directed beyond the network to create broader social benefit. In collaborative networks learning centers on developing strategic advantage leading to systems change. This calls for network learning.

Collaborative networks are considered network learning networks. Network learning in collaborative networks involves knowing how to select partners, identify required resources, build relationships, maintain and adjust the relations and how to keep them on hold ("relational capital").

Learning in all networks is key and ongoing. Learning through networks is part of the modern way of working. Different networks provide different learning opportunities. All have merit and application. The key is knowing what fits best for each type of network and communicating this to all members. In the next section, the focus turns to language as a key element in this communication process.

LANGUAGE

A core aspect of the success of networks is their ability to bring together a diverse set of people and mould them and their resources into a coherent and functioning whole, with a common mission, values and vision (Innes & Booher, 1999; Keast, et al, 2004). Central to this creation or forging of a whole is the ability to communicate: to share ideas, interests and issues to understand where others are coming from. Language is a subtle and complex instrument used to communicate the shared information, direction and meaning required for network functioning. Through language and communication the culture of a network (how it will function, the expected behaviours and social norms) is established and maintained.

The impact of culture and language is well known by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and social psychologists (Bobrow, 2006; Morgan, 1986). Articles on cross-cultural management highlight the importance of language differences (Lauring, 2008; Holden, 2008). Lauring (2008) argues that "…language as a facilitator of internal and external communication and of relationship building and cooperation is of crucial importance to the responsibilities of the expatriates" (346). According to Holden (2008), there are key differences between different languages and language is a means to influence "the quality of interpersonal relationships, the communication of information and instructions and shaping organizational self-reference" (243).

Language is also critical in establishing a social identity, status and power positions in groups (Lauring, 2008). Language is a means of socialization and is used to create bonds and/or divide individuals and groups because "the roles and social relations available in the greater community or organization are transmitted and internalised through language" (Mueller, 1993 as cited by Lauring, 2008: 347-348). In addition, Lauring (2008: 348) notes that "language … can be strategically used as a symbolic tool in the formation of collective communities. Therefore, the existence of language within a group can lead to both polarization and accommodation, depending on the context".

In light of the importance of the ability to communicate in networks, it is interesting to note that the concept of language has not been a major focus of network research and writing. There are, however, a few key exceptions. In 1988, Mandell wrote about "communication networks" (410). She indicated the emphasis needs to be on the ability to network within "a system of organizations"(410). For her, instead of an emphasis on management taking place within the individual organizations making up the network, "…the emphasis instead is on management that spans organizational boundaries which must be accepted as an integral part of the managerial perspective" (411).

Despite the attention directed to networks including the more recent efforts to differentiate network types and distil their various elements Agranoff, 2003, 2006; Connick, 2006; Huxham, 2000; Innes & Booher,1999; Keast et al., 2004; Klijn & Teisman, 1997; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2005; Provan & Kenis, 2005), few studies have emphasized the need to understand the impact of language in networks. The idea that language sets the tone and direction of where the interactions in a network will lead is of prime importance. One of the problems in networks, however, is that members come from different types of organizations, not only with different ways of operating but with different values, attitudes and perceptions of each other and this is refected in the language they use with each other (Mandell, 1994). In order to be effective, therefore, members of networks must "learn to talk *to* each other, not *around* each other. This requires the ability 'to step into each other's shoes' and adjust their behaviour based on this changed perspective" (Mandell, 2001:141). This, in turn, needs to lead to a new way of thinking and behaving with each other based on developing a shared perspective (Mandell, 1994; Bobrow, 2006). Mandell & Steelman (2003) refer to this as the orientation of members. According to them, "this relates to members' background, value systems and perceptions going into the new interorganizational arrangement and how these are reshaped by the interactions occurring within the arrangement" (205).

Many members will have preconceived notions of what it means to work with each other (Bobrow, 2006). Very often, these will simply be based on stereotypes of the other groups. In order to be effective, members of networks need to overcome these preconceived notions and develop shared meanings. This is accomplished not just in the traditional manner of agreeing piecemeal or one at a time, but rather discussing ideas "that *might* be acceptable, under the right conditions" (Innes & Booher, 1999: 19). This leads to shared social, intellectual, and political capital and builds interpersonal relationships, and joint learning (Innes & Booher, 1999; Connick, 2006; Keast et al, 2004).

The process has been described as the difference between discussion and dialogue (Innes & Booher, 1999; Bobrow, 2006). Dialogue "refers to the exploration of options while [discussion] refers to making decisions … dialogue involves listening, respecting what others have to say, suspending judgment (i.e. avoiding the tendency to defend pre-existing beliefs), and voicing reaction" (Bobrow, 2006: 270). The key is to get people to not only listen to what each other has to say, but to build a better understanding of what each other is saying. The notion of 'collective understanding' arising from shared meanings and language has been identified as a core feature of successful networks (Keast et all, 2004).

In essence, there is a need to develop a "meta-language", a language that incorporates the views and values of the individual members, and focuses on reframing the problems and approaches. Along this line, language can be used judiciously to redirect attributed responsibility from one member (often the

leader/coordinator) to the collective membership rather than one person. This is the difference between “you should” and “we should”. A meta-language provides an overall meaning and understanding of words, actions and meanings. Instead of using the “jargon” of the individual organizations and/or groups represented in a network, a meta-language provides a new way of expressing the explicit processes that are specific to networks and network interactions. For instance, instead of meetings, there are network gatherings; instead of memorandum of understanding there are terms of engagement; instead of agendas, there are work programs..

The use of a meta-language, with new symbols and notions of reality results in the reframing of the problem(s) (Bobrow, 2006). Rather than a collection of individual problems, the process leads to a new collective whole. Innes & Booher (1999) sees this as similar to the creative process of composing tunes. Just as composers see familiar elements in new ways, participants of networks are able to see new possible relationships and develop collective and unexpected solutions to complex problems.

Establishing a meta-language requires time spent on the development of a more sophisticated ‘relationship language and vocabulary, simply to enable us to talk to each other, learn from each other and talk about how we are in a relationship (Taylor, 2006). To be of use such a network vocabulary will need to reflect a much deeper understanding of how relationships are built, sustained and the knowledge passed on. As in all networks, however, this is not always an easy thing to do. It requires the establishment of trust, time and effort and depends on a specific type of leadership effort to make it work. The next section elaborates on this new type of leadership needed in networks.

LEADERSHIP

One of the unique features of networks is the synergy that can be created by the diverse membership represented in them (Lasker, Weiss and Millier, 2001). But synergy will not occur without the type of leadership that is able to build relationships, identify and capitalise on the opportunities that arise from the pooling of resources and the merging of human capital. Leaders need to leverage the particular mix of properties inherent in networks that allow the synergies to be created. As Goleman (2007) notes this requires more than leaders who influence and direct; rather it is about leadership that is fully engaged in the process “fully present and being in synch” (Goleman, 2007:106
).
At the same time, there needs to be a level of stability maintained within the network. This duality and the differing types and purposes of networks presents network leaders with several roles and styles. For cooperative and coordinative networks this is generally achieved through a distributive approach to leadership (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Korac-Kakabadse & Korac-Kakabadse, 1997; Murrell, 1987) where the leadership functions and tasks are shared across the membership according to expertise or the assignment of a leadership ‘turn’. That is network leadership is about creating the space and processes to enable members to learn about and from and appreciate each other, push the boundaries and look for areas of commonality and joint effort. Although more informal in these types of networks, the leadership role needs to focus on maintaining good relationships and open lines of communication.

Since, however, collaborative networks are characterised by a more complex, dynamic process the leadership function shifts from the attributes of the leaders to focus on the interactions and processes that are required to build strong and ongoing relationships capable of breaking through existing mechanisms and creating new

systems and innovative responses.. The term “process catalyst” (Mandell and Keast, forthcoming 2009) helps to denote this new type of leadership. For this type of network, the emphasis needs to be on setting the environment for collective, network learning. It is one of facilitating and minding the process. Network leadership is a balancing act or an alliance between the more facilitative and nurturing functions and the need to leverage relationships and drive for outcomes. This was also identified by Vangen & Huxham (2003) who described this phenomenon as the simultaneous enactment of both the facilitative (spirit of collaboration) and the directive (collaborative thuggery) roles.

There are a number of elements involved in this type of leadership. For one thing, leadership in collaborative networks involves an emphasis on establishing new terms of engagement by getting participants to listen to each other and to recognize each other’s worth. The focus needs to be on relationship building and using these new relationships to extend far beyond the members’ individual programs. The key is to not only begin to understand and respect each other, but to be able to capitalize on these relationships for further efforts.

Second, rather than an emphasis on the individual organizations represented in networks, there needs to be a shift toward a collective, shared vision that includes all participants. The key is not on reaching agreement among members, per se, but rather recognizing the overriding need to be committed to the program as a whole. In addition, “partners need to fully explore alternatives and avoid agreeing simply to maintain harmony” (Edwards & Stern, 1998:13). Leadership in collaborative networks is about building a new whole through developing collective goals. Within this role the emphasis is on the need to learn new ways of behaving and dealing with each other. To do this requires a high level of trust among participants and takes much time and effort to develop. New rules of behaviour (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004) need to be developed that are based on flexibility and the norm of reciprocity (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Keast et al, 2004; Mandell, 1994, 2001; Schimank, 1988).

Finally, a suite of communication elements have been identified (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Innes & Booher,1999) that are considered to be related to the new approach to leadership, including the task of structuring meaningful dialogue, framing and reframing perceptions to secure a cohesive view and guiding questions and discussions to better elicit concerns and highlight common points of interest.

Traditional leaders have a narrow expertise range, speak a language that can be understood only by their peers, are used to being in control and relate to people as subordinates rather than partners. By contrast a process catalyst type of leadership calls for a leadership style that is able to make connections, to bridge diverse cultures, and is able to get participants to be comfortable sharing ideas, resources and power. When this type of leadership is coupled with the new ways of learning and new meta-language, networks can indeed make a difference.

IMPLICATIONS

The previous sections have highlighted the important function of the 3Ls – learning, language and leadership – in building and sustaining networks. Without a doubt, there will be many obstacles to successfully implementing the 3Ls in networks. To overcome these obstacles, a suite of actions will be needed. The first step will be learning about each other and in effect “stepping into each other’s shoes”. This will

have the effect of getting people to see each other in a different light and also to get additional information out into the open that might shed light on complex problem solving. The second step will be to impart these new perceptions to the parent organizations represented in the network. The key will be to recognize the political position of the parent organization and to insure their buy in, at least at a minimum, of the process. Third, participants will need to find common ground to build a new foundation and create new types of behaviour. This will be accomplished by establishing a new "meta-language" that pulls all the participants together in terms of how they are able to understand and communicate with each other. Finally the focus of the leadership in networks will need to be on the processes that build synergy in networks. In some types of networks (cooperative and coordinative) this process will lead simply to more efficient provision of services; in others (collaborative networks) this will lead to new ways of doing things and system changes.

To accomplish these steps will rely on the establishment of agreed upon ground rules of behaviour and in some cases may even require specific training programs in new ways of behaving (Connick, 2006; Keast, et al, 2004). For all networks even small accomplishments and new agreements need to be "celebrated" along the way (Vangen &Huxham, 2003).

In addition, there are a number of caveats that participants need to understand about the 3Ls. In terms of learning, the key is that there are different types of learning and that learning in the different types of networks will not be the same. There is no "one best way" for participants to learn in networks. Both learning networks (cooperative and coordinative networks) and network learning (collaborative networks) are valuable means of learning. The key will be to be knowledgeable up front about what is hoped to be achieved. Then, the focus turns to selecting the relevant partners who can make a difference in achieving the outcomes desired, identifying the required resources to make the process go smoothly and most important, building, maintaining and adjusting relationships within the network (among the participants) and between the network and the external environment (particularly the parent organizations, but also with key stakeholders) and thereby building "relational capital".

For networks to function well, the impact of language can not be underestimated. There are two points to consider. The first relates to the language used within the network. The difference between dialogue and discussion has been noted. In order to use the two types of communications to the best advantage, participants will need a period in which they can begin to overcome previously held stereotypes of each other and build mutual respect. A common language where members have a shared understanding of terms and expectations can help to 'fast track' network work (Keast et al, 2004). The development of a common language however does not emerge overnight. It is the result of time spent learning about the network and its members, building rapport and continuous relationship monitoring. The development of a common or "meta-language" that incorporates everyone's norms and beliefs, as well as one that treats networks as different from other types of organizational arrangements (Porter, 1990) will at least lay the foundation for new types of interactions to occur. This leads to the second point.

The second point relates to how we think about networks and what kinds of interactions will make a difference in networks. This relates, in part, to the preconceived notions participants have about networks when they come into them. A large piece of this is based on their understanding of what it means to work in their individual organizations. In order for a "meta-language" to be developed these preconceived notions have to be adapted to the realities of working through networks

(Porter, 1990). In this regard, the language of intergovernmental and interorganisational relations (IGR), rather than helping in this process, hampers it. The language of IGR is based on the assumption of what individual organizations need to do when they work with other organizations. Instead, a new way of thinking is needed, one that incorporates the intricacies of working within a network and not just an individual organization.

For instance, in IGR and IOR, we think of boundary spanning as strategy to reduce uncertainty in an organization's environment. In networks, the key is to eliminate boundaries and incorporate all of the relevant stakeholders within the network. By thinking in terms of boundary spanning, participants behave as if they have to protect their own individual organization from the other organizations within the network instead of trying to find mutual grounds for new ways of working together.

Finally, in terms of leadership, there will be much resistance from existing authorities to the new type of leadership needed in networks. A feature of networks is that it is sometimes necessary to spend time and effort building bridges and smoothing over 'ruffled feathers' to engage or mobilize involvement. As suggested above, clearly the nurturing role within networks can be a very time consuming and emotionally draining function. Moreover, as highlighted by Vangen and Huxham (2003) an overemphasis on nurturing may come at a cost of other leadership actions or may isolate other members. The relational orientation of the nurturing and facilitation functions also point to the centrality of communication and listening as conduits for cohesion in networks.

The process will be frustrating at times, but if both the participants within the network and those outside the network can see some kind of progress over time a commitment to the process and the network itself will be achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

There is wide agreement that in order to manage the increasingly complex and uncertain tasks of business, government and community, organisations can no longer operate in supreme isolation, but must develop a more networked approach. Learning, language and leadership – the 3Ls – play a central role in the establishment and sustainability of these networks. Although learning, language and leadership are fairly common ideas, few in the field have emphasized their key importance for the operation of networks. The development of the 3Ls is therefore provided in this paper as a way to move the field forward in this regard. In addition, this paper has also sought to uncover and operationalise the 3Ls sufficiently well to make them useful in practice.

Although the 3Ls are key components of network effectiveness putting them into practice is not necessarily an easy process. Problems within the network, as well as constraints outside the network will act to maintain the "status quo". Both internal and external constraints will lead to a constant "push and pull" between adapting and finding new ways to interact on the one hand and resisting change on the other. Outside stakeholders, as well as the parent organizations represented in the networks will have a major impact on the ability of network participants to make changes. They will need to be kept constantly informed and made part of the feedback loop in order for them to see the benefits of making needed changes. In addition, internal factors such as norms, beliefs and perceptions will play a role in the network's ability to move forward.

In many cases participants will not necessarily change all of their views, but based on the 3Ls they will at least be able to develop mutual understanding and respect for each other's problems and recognize the points of agreement among the different views of the participants. This is in itself, is a major step, one that can set the foundation for a new kind of working relationship.

Table 1: Differentiating Network Types

Network Types		
COOPERATIVE	COORDINATIVE	COLLABORATIVE
Low trust — unstable relations	Medium trust — based on prior relations	High trust — stable relations
Infrequent communication flows	Structured communication flows	Thick communication flows
Known information sharing	'Project' related and directed information sharing	Tactic information sharing
Adjusting actions	Joint projects, joint funding, joint policy	Systems change
Independent/autonomous goals	Semi-independent goals	Dense interdependent relations and goals
Power remains with organisation	Power remains with organisations	Shared power
Resources — remain own	Shared resources around project	Pooled, collective resources
Commitment and accountability to own agency	Commitment and accountability to own agency and project	Commitment and accountability to the network first
Relational time frame requirement — short term	Relational time frame medium term — often based on prior projects	Relational time frame requirement — long term 3-5 years

Source: Keast & Brown, 2003; Keast et al 2007

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