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Facilitating innovation in networks composed of non-mandated relations

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This paper explores the processes of transforming a network of non-mandated exchange relations into a cohesive and innovative partnership. The question this paper attempts to answer is how to speed up innovation processes in such networks. The paper demonstrates that transformation of networks is a consequence of participants' ability to set the agenda and provide the justification necessary to mobilise others for shared ends. However, to utilise the individuals' interests in worthwhile directions requires facilitation able to bridge local discourses by nurturing inquiries and comparison of the differences among the present operational contexts. This calls for grammatical inquiries in which the participants examine the different ways of wording a phenomenon as a means to build a shared language from within their everyday conversation. The paper builds on a seven years research project of constructing and developing an inter-firm network among eight SMEs in the electronics industry in Norway. The paper concludes by outlining four recommendations for facilitation that aim to speed up innovation processes in networks consisting of non-mandated exchange relations.

Key words: facilitation, business network, innovation, power, dialogical inquiry

Introduction

The concept of networking has gained significant attention from those involved in the comprehension of innovation processes. The ability of inter-

firm networks to innovate may be considered an outcome of the energy actors intentionally inject into the process (Thorsrud, 1972). It is well-established knowledge that organisational development can be regarded as political processes in which actors' ability and willingness to exercise power plays a significant role (Clegg, 2002; Coopy, 1995; Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000; Elg & Johansson, 1997; Lukes, 2005). In the same way as the most powerful actor influences the outcomes of organisational development, innovation in networks can be understood as a consequence of interaction among mutual and conflicting interests (Elg & Johansson, 1997; Fox, 2000; Håkansson & Johanson, 1988). Bringing in a perspective on political dynamics in inter-firm networks allows one to critique of the contemporary literature on networks, for such literature has a tendency to overlook how interdependencies become organised and established, due to willingness and ability of individuals to influence the process (e.g. Elg & Johansson, 1997; Foucault, 1980; Fox, 2000; Swan & Scarbrough, 2005; Vince, 2001). The question of how to utilise the participant's interests to speed up the process of innovation in inter-networks is fundamental to developing industrial clusters and firms' that prevail in the era of hyper-competition (Grabher, 1993).

Power has traditionally been perceived in structural terms, i.e., as the constant influence party A holds over party B. If we, on the other hand, learn from the Machiavellian approach, power may be regarded as something that is distributed and exists as a consequence of actors' changing abilities and motivations to mobilise others for shared ends. Leaning from this perspective, power is not a constant force, but rather something that circulates due to the fact that different individuals' possess different intentions and abilities to explicate the interests of others who may not strive towards the same goals. Ideas stemming from Actor Network Theory have made substantial contributions to our understanding of how innovation processes in networks of non-mandated exchange relations materialise, due to the ability of strategic actors to set agendas and provide the underlying energy and reasoning required to obtain particular achievements (Callon, 1986). This perspective adheres well to the notion that power operates discursively, and that social transformation can be regarded as a consequence of the way in which words are used and arguments conveyed (Foucault, 1980). The study of how power operates

discursively may be an appropriate approach for explaining the process that transforms networking into innovative, interdependent, and complementary roles. Although the structural characteristics of innovative networks have been thoroughly scrutinised, there is a relative lack of understanding of the methods and practices that transform non-mandated exchange relations into innovative and sustainable business networks.

This paper, which builds on a seven years endeavour into facilitating an inter-firm network, argues that to speed up innovation processes among actors neither linked by value chain nor other task dependencies, requires facilitation that makes dialogical inquiries a part of the participant's everyday conversations. Building on Wittgenstein (1953 [1997]), language simulates reality and our ability to present meaningful pictures of this reality depends on how words are used in accordance with the rules embedded in a particular language game. Wittgenstein never provided any definition of language-games. What he does, however, is emphasise the relational aspects of language-games and the situational dependence of language. Accordingly, meaning is difficult to develop solely by conceptualising a particular phenomenon, but develops on the background of a specific context where the vocabulary is taken into use (Wittgenstein, 1953 [1997]). This reminds us that, "It is our acting that lies at the bottom of the language-games," (Wittgenstein, 1969 § 204 [2006]) and it is our practice that constitutes the background for gaining meaning from a particular conversation. To understand words in use requires, according to Wittgenstein, that we inquire the meaning of a concept by relating it to a practical situation. This perspective on dialogical inquiry has tremendous consequences for facilitation that aims to bridge distinct local discourses in a network setting.

Before outlining the case, this paper will describe the Norwegian context, and outline some characteristics of networks composed by non-mandated exchange relations. The argument advanced is that the transformation of non-mandated exchange relations is episodic in nature, and occurs due to agencies' deliberate attempts to influence communicative patterns and exchange. This paper concludes by identifying key features of facilitation that are able to transform these episodes into a common ground for joint action. The conclusion responds to the industrial networking literature, which has insuffi-

ciently explored the characteristics of facilitation that speed up network innovation processes.

1. The Norwegian context

Firms' capacity to create dialogues and to learn across different organisational and institutional contexts seems increasingly important in order to meet the new era's requirements for rapid learning and change (Ekman et al., 2011). The widely held belief in networks as drivers to innovative business environments has aroused great expectations among politicians. These expectations have resulted in major EU and national R&D programmes aiming at building industrial networks and clusters as the basis of the economy. The Norwegian government has funded several research programmes and provided incentives that support the development of regional environments for industrial development and growth (Gustavsen et al., 1998, 2001). The purpose of these programmes has been to develop small and medium sized firms' (SME) ability to engage and utilise the resources of inter-firm networks. This study was sponsored by two successive Norwegian research programmes that encouraged inter-organisational collaboration: the Value Creation 2010, launched in 2001, and Means for Regional Innovation, which was commenced in 2007.

The case outlined below describes a seven yearlong project on developing and maintaining a network among eight electronics companies in Vestfold County. Vestfold hosts some of the world's leading manufacturers of ICT and microelectronics. The total number of electronics and ICT firms located in this region is 400. Regardless of the challenge imposed by low-cost countries, the electronics cluster has, since the 1970s, managed to expand and stay competitive as one of the few Norwegian industrial sectors. A major explanation of this cluster's competitive advantage is numerous independent network relations. In the age of hyper-competition, networks of non-mandated exchange relations become a significant means to innovation (Hanssen-Bauer & Snow, 1996). The question is simply how to understand the facilitation that makes such networks innovative.

2. Networks of non-mandated relations and discursive power

Networks composed by non-mandated exchange relations are established due to participants' belief in the potential benefits from pursuing collaboration, and not because of coercive governing agencies or value chain dependencies (Cummings, 1980). The presence of deficient regulations regarding task accomplishments, along with an unclear purpose, make it difficult to identify common ground among non-mandated exchange relations. With common ground out of view, networks consisting of non-mandated exchange relations are likely to be subjected to dissolution, due to a lack justifications for being co-ordinated, the absence of a role structure, and perhaps most significantly, the poor definition of interdependencies (Brown, 1980; Cummings, 1980). The missing operational and interpersonal basis for collaboration requires the partners deliberately co-create a shared reason for collaboration (Clark, 1996; Weisbord, 1992). Otherwise, perceived benefits will be out of view and the partners' motivation to interact may evaporate. This corresponds to Cumming's (1980, pp. 326) statement that:

"Frequency of interaction is purported to be high when the collaborative partners perceive benefits from interaction; conversely, frequency of interaction is hypothesised to be low when neither organisations perceive benefits".

The lack of mandated reasons to collaborate in combination with variations in culture, interest, and language brought in by representatives from independent organisations may strengthening the filters that are preventing the actors from holding a sense of membership and engaging in high level interactions. These weakly structured relationships combined with a lack of justification to collaborate provide a space for actors to influence the content of collaboration by setting the pattern of discourse. The ambiguity inherent in networks of non-mandated exchange relations may cause some participants to control the ability of individual firms to impact networking activities in ways that may restrict their ability to maintain their specific interests (Elg & Johanson, 1997).

The absence of structured authority, interdependencies, or an agreed procedure for decision-making, are all elements that make negotiation and mobilisation pivotal means in creating activities that meet the partners' particular business interests. Hence, what connect non-mandated exchange relations are neither formal contracts, nor peripheral agencies governing the

interaction at a distance, but rather the social interaction that instils a sense of confidence and mutual engagement among the actors (Uzzi, 1996). This contrasts the argument advanced by Transaction Cost Theory (Williamson, 1975), in which formal contracts between supplier and buyer regulate the relations and activities of the relevant actors, thus preventing opportunistic behaviour and supplying reason to collaboration. The difficulty in enforcing rules of collaboration in networks composed by non-mandated exchange relations underscores negotiation and creation of meaning as fundamental dimensions in facilitating a common ground for joint action (van de Ven & Ring, 1994). Although several studies of networks composed by non-mandated relations have highlighted the need to create social obligation among the partners (e.g Kreiner & Schultz, 1993; Sydow, 2004, 2005; Uzzi, 1996), few studies build on data gathered from long term practices that actually commit actors on equal footing to collaboration. In response to this knowledge-gap, a concept of "development coalition" has been put forward to address the need to account for collaboration as something that evolves from within the relational terrain due to participants' engagement in constructing shared discourses (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999). However, this contribution neither explores facilitation practices nor methods that may speed the formation and transformation of non-mandates exchange relations. Accordingly, this forms the background for exploring facilitation that bridges mutual and conflicting interest among non-mandated relations into networks that prevail.

3. Methods

The longitudinal and action-oriented research strategy, which composes the prominent search and development method in this study, differs radically from the majority of contemporary networking studies, in that it transcends knowledge production processes anchored in researchers as neutral and distant observers. A prolonged engagement, in combination with the researcher facilitating a series of iterative cycles of action and reflection, helped to gain robust data about the social process (e.g. Heron, 1996). By co-creating networking activities with the practitioners, the researcher was able to interpret discussions, nurture joint actions, and reveal altering power structures, due to processes of completing the series of action and reflection cycles.

A major methodical approach underpinning this study builds on a work form of establishing communicative arenas bridging the different business interests and supporting the development of a shared language among the networking partners. A flexible use of methods in combination with the orchestration of communicative arenas connecting different experiences and agencies in joint efforts, constituted the fundamental design criteria for generating and validating knowledge from within the network's practice. The longitudinal case study and interventionist design (Pettigrew, 1990) not only allowed for facilitating and observing the process closely over a prolonged period of time, it also allowed for capturing transformational moments from within the practice of networking. These transformative moments, which changed the patterns of interaction due to individuals' ability for persuasive argumentation and alliance formation, comprised the situations from which the data upon which this paper builds was gathered and analysed.

Table 1 provides a brief overview of the type of data and the different activities performed during the seven years process of constructing and maintaining the network. The brackets indicate the numbers of performed activities. The table displays three identified phases (foundation, expansion and stabilisation phase) in the network development process and the subsequent numbers of activities performed in each phase. The transformational moments brought the network from one phase to the next. Each phase is featured by distinct patterns of networked innovation.

Table 1: Summary of the fieldwork and networking activities

2002-2003	2003 -2006	2006 -2008
Foundation phase	Expansion phase	Stabilisation phase
Networking activities: - Searching for a common ground - Establishing a shared language	Networking activities: - Team leader programme - Experiments with team-based organisation - Establishing an E-learning portal - Developming E-learning programmes - Union leader training programme	Networking achievements: - Co-counselling programme - Completing started projects - Initiating new routes of joint action

This model resembles several other longitudinal studies addressing network development among non-mandated relations (Kreiner & Schultz, 1993; Gray, 1989; Sydow, 2004). However, neither of the above mentioned contributions scrutinises the social dynamics that transforms networks, nor do they provide insight in the facilitation practices that cause this transformation.

4. The collaborative processes

In the foundation phase, the researcher conducted several rounds of interviews with manufacturing managers from the electronics industry. These interviews provided the researcher with rich information about the firms and their major challenges. This knowledge enabled the researcher to initiate a network formation process among manufacturing mangers from SMEs. There were no interdependencies among the firms. The manufacturing managers agreed to commence a collaborative process. Furthermore, they decided to circulate the meetings among the firms to get acquainted with the partners' work contexts. However, the initial visiting round, which lasted approximately one year, only produced new agreements of when and where to convene next. The practitioners neither shared a common language nor a joint reason to collaborate. In a meeting, a manufacturing manager expressed a need to change the communicative pattern, bringing them nowhere. He suggested conducting a workshop to build positive interdependencies to create profitable action. Without scrutinising this suggestion further, they agreed to set up a workshop with the aim of identifying shared challenges as the basis for collective action. The researcher designed and facilitated the workshop in collaboration with the practitioners.

The workshop, which built on a participative design, identified five issues for collaboration. These issues were (1) quality improvement, (2) collaboration about maintenance, (3) shared leadership training, (4) interchange of labour, and (5) reducing short time absenteeism. The participant who had claimed the need to build positive interdependencies argued strongly for the need to reduce short-term absenteeism. The other participants neither examined the idea to check for fit, nor did they inquire into the complexity of dealing with this problem in practice. Without examining any of the other

issues further, they concluded the workshop by sketching out a plan for dealing with short-term absenteeism. During this process, a production planner (referred to as A) displayed a lack of enthusiasm when the argument to reduce absenteeism was put forward. When confronting A with my observation, she responded:

> "It is difficult to understand why everybody applauded this ambiguous concept, which is so easy to discuss, but immensely complex to deal with. I am not an engineer and it is a bit difficult for me to get acceptance if I oppose what seems an established perspective. I can't combat their perspectives on my own, I feel not in position to do that".

For the following meeting, the network invited several external experts to a seminar on absenteeism. However, while all the external experts attended, only three of the networking firms were present at this meeting. Although the workshop had encouraged participation and critical inquiry, this situation indicated that it had produced a false agreement, which neither embodied any risk for the participants nor paved the way for joint action. This failure to create positive interdependencies caused new rounds of meetings to explore potential issues of collaboration. In this process, the individual partners' ways of framing their needs changed from one meeting to the next. The conversation changed while the process stood still. Nobody held sufficient legitimacy or the energy required to steer the discussion in a productive direction.

4.1 The first transformational moment: Entering the expansion phase

In one of the meeting, the participants frequently applied the phrase "rules of the game" in a way that indicated that the phrase conveyed shared meaning. The practitioners seemed to believe that they were discussing an identical phenomenon and hence, that the meaning of the phrase resembled across the firms' contexts. If the phrase actually conveyed identical meaning, it is reasonable to assume that the practitioners held analogous experience in applying equivalent words to identical situations. When the partners were asked to clarify the phrase "rules of the game", the following conversation took place:

B: I think this is quite difficult…I try to govern by principles related to management by objectives, but what makes thing work out…I don't know.

C: Flexibility…it gives opportunities for people to do a decent job. You have to reward achievements and hard efforts, support employees…

Me: Yes….but what do you do when doing it…..

Silence

A   …it is difficult to say anything about it…about things that create rules of the game in my daily work

D: Our teams are responsible for their work and for achieving their goals…..it is important to create space that enable people to reflect on what we are doing….

E: Rules of the game is about developing excellent ambassadors who know how we (the firm's management) the coaches think.

B: Yes, now I know it…this is all about developing peoples' motivation for work. As a manager, you have to be visible and make people feel that you are there for them.

As this conversation indicates, the participants applied the phrase "rules of the game" differently. In spite the use of an identical expression, the examination revealed that the local meaning they ascribed to it diverged considerably. The phrase conveyed a representation that made the practitioners believed they were addressing an identical issue when they in fact had entered into several discussions containing different issues. The phrase "rules of the game" became a wide-ranging and all inclusive expression that caused parallel conversations without anyone noticing. This may have happened because the phrase did neither relate to a shared practice nor did the participants examine it as part of a collective clarification process. The parallel talk continued until the researcher intervened, by asking the participants to clarify the term by use of examples.

As a part of the clarification process, one of the participants reflected on his work context, claiming a need to distribute tasks that empowered opera-

tors and thereby committed them to continuous improvement. This reflection, which highlighted an actionable approach to condition empowerment, nurtured a joint awareness towards the task structure and the organisation of manufacturing departments. The question of how to organise manufacturing departments more effectively formed a common point of reference that supplied new energy into the discussions, that subsequently set off a number of shared development projects (see table 1). The intervention of the parallel conversation had created a new sense of awareness towards sharing and collaboration.

The use of the word "empowerment" illustrates rhetoric that nurtured positive feelings and a sense of mutuality among the networking participants. Hardly any leader will deny the need to improve operators' commitment to productivity aims. The word "empowerment" caused a value oriented discussion promoting inquires of basics assumptions relating to leadership practice, human recourse management, and conditions that may stimulate innovation and improved productivity. The term "empowerment" constitutes a powerful framing device that helped the participants to explore the firms' underlying systemic and structural conditions in ways that incorporated distinct local discussions and beliefs. This common ground allowed for bridging distinct perspectives into a coherent picture that transformed the network into a phase characterised by extensive expansion. In this phase, the number of simultaneous on-going projects caused a complex web of interdependencies among the networking partners, and between the networking partners and external supportive actors.

4.2 The second transformation: Toward reconciliation

Three years of expanding project activities, and increases in the numbers of actors claiming their interests in the networking activities, led to a counteraction that redirected the discussions toward the need for reconciliation. In particular, one of the practitioners displayed an unwillingness to further expand the activities. He argued strongly to consolidate and re-establish the network's boundaries. Otherwise, he claimed, the network would disintegrate.

There was a strong confidence among the practitioners, and he considered the relationship to be sufficiently mature to allow for an open exchange of ideas about practice and to make the other individuals' practices subject to critical inquiries. He offered to design and conduct a peer-coaching programme to improve leadership practice. His attempt to mobilise support for reconciliation and to conduct a peer-coaching programme took place between the meetings. It later turned out that the actor arguing for commencing this programme had a plan to commercialise it for personal benefits.

These episodes indicate that the transformation of the network emerged as a consequence of parallel talk and actors' attempts to achieve personal benefits. Different actors' attempts to pursue individual interests, on several occasions, railroaded the network's discourses in particular ways. These outlined episodes indicate that the transition of non-mandated exchange relations requires facilitation to identify particular business interests and to bridge local discourses into a shared language that supplies meaning. Skilled facilitation can therefore become a significant means to speed the transformation of non-mandated exchange relations. The question is simply, how?

5. Four recommendations for facilitating networks of non-mandated exchange relations

Individuals possess different abilities to supply arguments and to provide energy into a debate (Blackler & McDonald, 2000). In a conversational landscape, some are able to mobilise support for a particular agenda, while others are not. Accordingly, this supports a shift from the notion of power as a constant force that operates non-discursively, and which manifests through permanent social structures satisfying the most powerful partner's interests, towards recognising power as a relational force that circulates due to the ability of individuals to mobilise others for a shared purpose (e.g Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000; Coopey, 1995; Foucault, 1980). This perspective on power calls for skilful facilitation to utilise the partners' energy into productive and desirable directions. This skill is not about following particular workshop recipes and techniques. Rather, it is about attaching and developing the existing conversations in ways that release the energy that exists among the

networking partners, without causing power structures that derail the partnership. As this case illustrates, unexamined argumentation risks causing conditions that breed false consensus and groupthink (Ataov & Kristiansen, 2012; Janis, 1982). If we neglect the requirements for dialogical inquiries, in the sense of examining how words work in the daily environment, it will be difficult to develop a conversational pattern that builds a shared language and positive interdependencies that commit non-mandated relations to collaboration.

I suggest the following recommendations for facilitation that attempts to build and transform innovative networks of non-mandated exchange relations:

1. Identify a shared problem-space that bridges distinct knowledge and interests.

2. Nurture membership by building on everyday conversation and familiar problems.

3. Agree on how to ensure transparent decision-making processes.

4. Take into account the requirement for direct and indirect intervention.

5.1 Identify a shared problem-space that bridges distinct knowledge and interests

As the case demonstrates, the process of establishing a common ground should not involve an attempt to identify and solve a particular problem. Rather, it should be directed at developing a problem-space with the potential to incorporate the varieties of the present business interests. The problem space does not entail a particular problem or entity that is approachable by means of technical procedures for decision-making and action. On the contrary, it connotes a direction-setting concept that is sufficient blurred to bridge numerous meanings and local discourses. In this case, the term "empowerment" exemplifies a conceptualisation of a problem-space. This concept resembles what Schön (1983) has termed "generative metaphor." These metaphors influence our thinking and emotional reactions, and how we interpret and understand a particular phenomenon (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The generative metaphor "empowerment" allowed for incorporating numerous distinct interpretations and formed a shared referential ground that brought the actors together in accomplishing several projects.

To identify a problem-space that incorporates various interests and local discourses requires facilitation that:

– possesses knowledge about the particular contexts and local practices from where the various arguments stem

– identifies significant statements with a potential to function as generative metaphors

5.2 Nurture membership by building on everyday conversation and familiar problems

A shared purpose is difficult to reveal by enforcing a particular discursive order (Ataov & Kristiansen, 2012). The use of techniques or workshops that install a particular conversational order may carry the danger that the target group will perceive it as something coming from outside, and not something building on their everyday conversations. In the foundation phase, the attempt to organise a workshop installing dialogical procedures, with an aim to facilitate transparent argumentation, failed. The reason that this attempt failed may relate to dependency behaviour inbuilt in the group, facilitation that failed to properly incorporate the participants' perspectives, or because the group had not yet developed a shared and mutual language. Despite a workshop design building on the idea of reconstructing the existing dialogical pattern, the inbuilt interaction tended to prevail. The consequence was that alternative perspectives and arguments did not surface.

In the foundation phase, the facilitator should aim for a stepwise process of building a shared language into the group, rather than attempting to install the most appropriate technique to create interactivity. To transform a network of non-mandated exchange relations into innovative partnerships is hardly attainable by setting up a fixed conversational order. Rather than leaning to dialogical techniques, which in the end may prove unsustainable, heedful facilitation should aim at orchestrating arenas in which the participants themselves identify conversational rules (Searle, 1969[1992]). The problem

is that the same rules that condition skilful participation in a dialogue may also prevent us from discovering the illusionary aspects of a conversation. We might be led to believe that we have entered a language game, while we in fact have entered numerous parallel conversations. Therefore, the introduction of questions that need to be answered by examples, or by comparing the differences among the operational contexts, may be a powerful way to make the participants themselves inquire into the different ways of wording a phenomenon, and build a mutual and shared language from within their conversation. Subsequently, the development of a shared language, among otherwise disconnected participants, is necessary, both for creating meaning and for nurturing responsive actionable relationships (Shotter, 2005).

5.3 Agree how to ensure transparent decision-making processes

The participants' reluctance to examine the patterns of interaction, such as decision-making by self-authorisation, parallel talk, the deficient examination of arguments, attempts to lead by persuasion, and the lack of inquiries of the actor's business interests, composed major pitfalls in agreeing on desirable action. The practitioners' reluctance to explore these issues created a dialogical pattern that prevented them from discovering how to function more effectively together. The unwillingness to scrutinise the decision-making process railroaded the discussions into unmanageable decisions and futile plans for joint action. What emerged was a false consensus that made it impossible for the network participants to identify common ground for joint action. Attempts to scrutinise and reveal these aspects of interaction are demanding, since such attempts tend to evoke feelings of disharmony and conflict (Janis, 1982). Therefore, the individual's fear of challenging the patterns of interaction may constitute a key issue to solve in order to speed up innovation processes in inter-firm networks.

An issue of major concern in dealing effectively with this process is how to help the actors scrutinise and confront the settled patterns of interaction, in order to minimise decision making detaching participants from a mutual learning process. As this case demonstrates, the latter requires facilitation that supports examination of issues that the networking partners may perceive as

un-discussable. Otherwise, the consequence may be the existence of unconscious and tacit assumptions about roles and embedded authority structures, which over time may cause people to feel unable to publicly contest decisions that are made. The result may be decision-making processes based on taken-for-granted assumptions and unconscious biases (Janis, 1982). As this case evidently demonstrates, unchallenged power structure and inadequate inquiries into decision processes brought the collaborative efforts into a deadlock situation. This displayed itself in the extended time used to identify a common ground that nurtures positive interdependencies. However, to speed up this process in a network setting requires facilitators to be acquainted with the relevant operational contexts, and the different ways of wording practice.

5.4 Take into account the requirement for direct and indirect intervention

Facilitation of networks composed by non-mandated exchange relations should similarly provide direction for the energy and power that individuals bring into the process and ensure fair play. To balance these two requirements calls for two types of interventions: 1) "direct" interventions on the networking arenas and 2) "indirect" interventions after or before network meetings.

Direct intervention constitutes a means for re-vitalising communicative patterns in ways that instil new collective meaning into a debate. This can include mediation of various perspectives, interrupting parallel talk, identifying generative metaphors, nurturing comparison of practice, and so on. Indirect interventions, on the other hand, create reflections in ways that reveal new perspectives and mediate disputes at a distance from the networking arena. To direct the energy injected by individuals in a networking process is quite difficult, unless the facilitator understands the contexts from which the various discussions and interests emanate.

Although people are continuously exposed to an infinite number of problematic situations in their daily work, it is unreasonable to assume that these problems, as such, are easy to identify and delimit in an inter-firm arena. By facilitating processes outside meetings, the facilitator gets access to local

contextual knowledge that provides insight about the local language and particular interests that may surface during meetings. An understanding of these various contexts forms an indispensable knowledgebase for facilitation that aims to create collaboration among non-mandated relations.

6. Conclusion

The requirement for rapid innovation processes has accentuated the need to bridge business organisations. However, creating innovative partnerships among firms and institutions that are not linked through a joint value chain, is demanding. The distinct language, particular business interests, and distinct organisational cultures brought in by actors from different firms, may cause ambiguous situations that hamper and prolong the process of identifying common ground. This calls for facilitators to be able to achieve the negotiated meanings and memberships necessary to bridge different firms into sustainable partnerships.

This case demonstrates that to speed up processes of innovation in networks composed by non-mandated exchange relations requires facilitation that is able to translate individuals' ideas into collective action. In particular, examination of the underlying systemic and structural conditions of the different operational contexts seems to be a key issue to pursue in order to identify common ground. Facilitation that develops the participants' skills in inquiring and comparing the differences among the operational contexts seems fundamental to speeding up innovation processes, and the partners' ability to think together in a relationship. The reason is that people's perception of meaning is inevitably a consequence of their ability to explore others' utterances as figure by creating a connection to their own local practices as ground. Thus, linking the "words in use" and the worlds of practice requires facilitation that nurtures participants' awareness and responsiveness towards the others' voices (Shotter, 2002). This process, of constructing meaning from conversational situations resembles Wittgenstein's grammatical enquiry, which describes a process of clarifying and making clear our use of words by exploring their potential connexions to other words and comparable situations. The grammatical inquiry aims to produce a kind of understanding

which consists in seeing a pattern from what is before our eyes, but which we neglect or overlook. This conveys a perspective on our everyday expressions as something that changes over time, thus unconsciously preventing us from seeing meaning that is obvious, and which according to Wittgenstein (1953: §126[1997]), "lies open to view." To see what is unseen is not about developing peoples capacity to engage in a particular discourse, but rather a way to develop peoples understanding by making previously concealed connections visible by means of language. Accordingly, our ability to perceive the intelligibility of an utterance, or to examine the meaning of an utterance, is a consequence of our experience with the words in use. This emphasis on the connection between skilful participation in dialogues and everyday experiences bring into prominence the fact that, "the speaking language is part of an activity, or a form of life." (Wittgenstein, 1953 §23 [1997]) Therefore, to bridge non-mandated relations is not feasible through engineering the rules of conversation or by imposing a particular conversation. Leaning from Wittgenstein (1953 [1997]), the successful facilitation of networks cannot be achieved by "giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known." (No. 109) In doing this, descriptions and comparison of practise must take the place of explanations. Consequently, we should recognise that facilitation of networks composed by non-mandated relations requires a particular kind of professional competence, which aims at grammatical inquiry. This means that facilitation is able to inquire into how operational contexts influence ways of wording everyday experiences. Today, there is a lack of institutions providing such facilitation competencies as a means to transform innovative networks. This lack of knowledge is a major challenge to business environments that intend to speed up innovation processes by means of networks composed of non-mandated exchange relations.

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