

14th International Conference on Multi-Organisational Partnerships, Alliances & Networks



MOPAN 2007, 28-29 June, LEUVEN (Belgium)

“Learning for Interdependence”

Hosted by Research Group for Work, Organisational and Personnel Psychology - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

RELATIONAL PRACTICES, REPRESENTATION AND SELF-REGULATION: COLLABORATION IN THE HR FORUM OF THE SUPPLIERS TEAMS AT VOLVO CARS (STVC) GENT.

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a process-oriented description of some selected aspects of the functioning of the Human Resources Management Forum of the Suppliers Teams of Volvo Cars at Ghent. (STVC-HRM). The Forum is an outgrowth of the Supplier Teams network of the Volvo Cars site in Ghent. It functions as an information, advice, and coordination collaborative task force with regard to issues as recruitment, selection, evaluation promotion and dismissal, work and vacation planning, wage comparisons, training and quality management, dealing with industrial relations, grievances and strikes, and other interdependencies between the network partners.

In the paper we discuss the founding events of the collaborative, the formulations of goals, and the tasks it performs. We then characterize the nature of the relational practices of the platform: convening the stakeholders, membership roles and the “bridging function” to the community or the partners, the issue of leadership in a multi-party context, the development of ground rules, activities and realizations of the platform. In the final section we further develop the more critical success issues which foster the social learning of the collaborative: self-regulation, the quite exceptional form of stakeholder representation which we call the “bridging function”, and the overall quality of their relational practices.

To study the relational practices of the platform several data sources were used including the company website, documents, reports of meetings, process oriented observational notes and in-dept interviews.

INTRODUCTION

This paper contains the process oriented description of the functioning of the Suppliers Team Volvo Cars Human Resource Forum (STVC-HR Forum). The forum is an inter-organisational collaboration between the assembly plant of Volvo Cars Gent and some 20 suppliers, situated on and off the operational site, all of them linked together by the just in time (JIT) method of operating.

This paper is a sequel to a case study made of the British Petroleum Neighbour's Platform at Geel (Taillieu, Prins, Christiaens & Plateau, 2006; Taillieu, Prins, Bouwen & Dewulf, 2006) which was reported at Mopan 2006. That study concerned the collaboration between The British Petrol unit at Geel and the surrounding communities. The purpose of the platform is to find a balance between BP and the surrounding community such that the viability of the environment is protected and improved, while at the same time the continuity and potential growth of BP is assured. The study was a report on the relational practices of the stakeholders (the way they manage their tasks and their relationships) with a special focus on self-regulation and the issue of representation of constituencies. The same issues will be studied here in a different setting.

In this paper we will develop the history of the STVC-HR forum, the need for coordination which led to its installation and its current form of operation. We then describe the relational practices of the form: the interrelationships between the members and their task oriented activities. Finally we turn to the issues of self-regulation and managing the boundary between forum members themselves and their constituencies. The discussion will entail a comparison with the BP platform, originated on a voluntary basis between largely unorganized stakeholders.

RELATIONAL PRACTICES IN MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDER PROJECTS

As theoretical model for the development of multiple stakeholder collaboration processes, we follow the description by Gray (1989, p.56). She describes the critical procedures and processes that require a minimally stable resolution in order to make progress on the tasks and relational dimensions: (1) defining the problem domain (2) direction setting, (3) implementation.

The first generic phase entails the development of a common definition of the problem situation; identifying the most relevant stakeholders; getting their attention and engagement; exploration of the different perspectives with respect to the issues; obtaining a common vision. These are the first set of crucial processes. Next comes organizing and getting agreement about the roles and processes acceptable to convene the stakeholders and identifying and procuring the resources necessary for executing and continuing the project.

The second phase involves giving direction to the project and the problem approach according to the issues at hand. Differences in analysis and action alternatives are explored, common interests are identified, and a continuous dialogue supports the further exploration of perspectives and intervention possibilities. Different forms of dialogue and work methods (scripts) often are crucial to bridge the emerging diversity.

The third major phase considers the process of implementation. The engagement and planning of realistic action supposes a negotiation of new roles and identities. In addition to that, the different parties need to get the engagement of their constituencies, before concrete

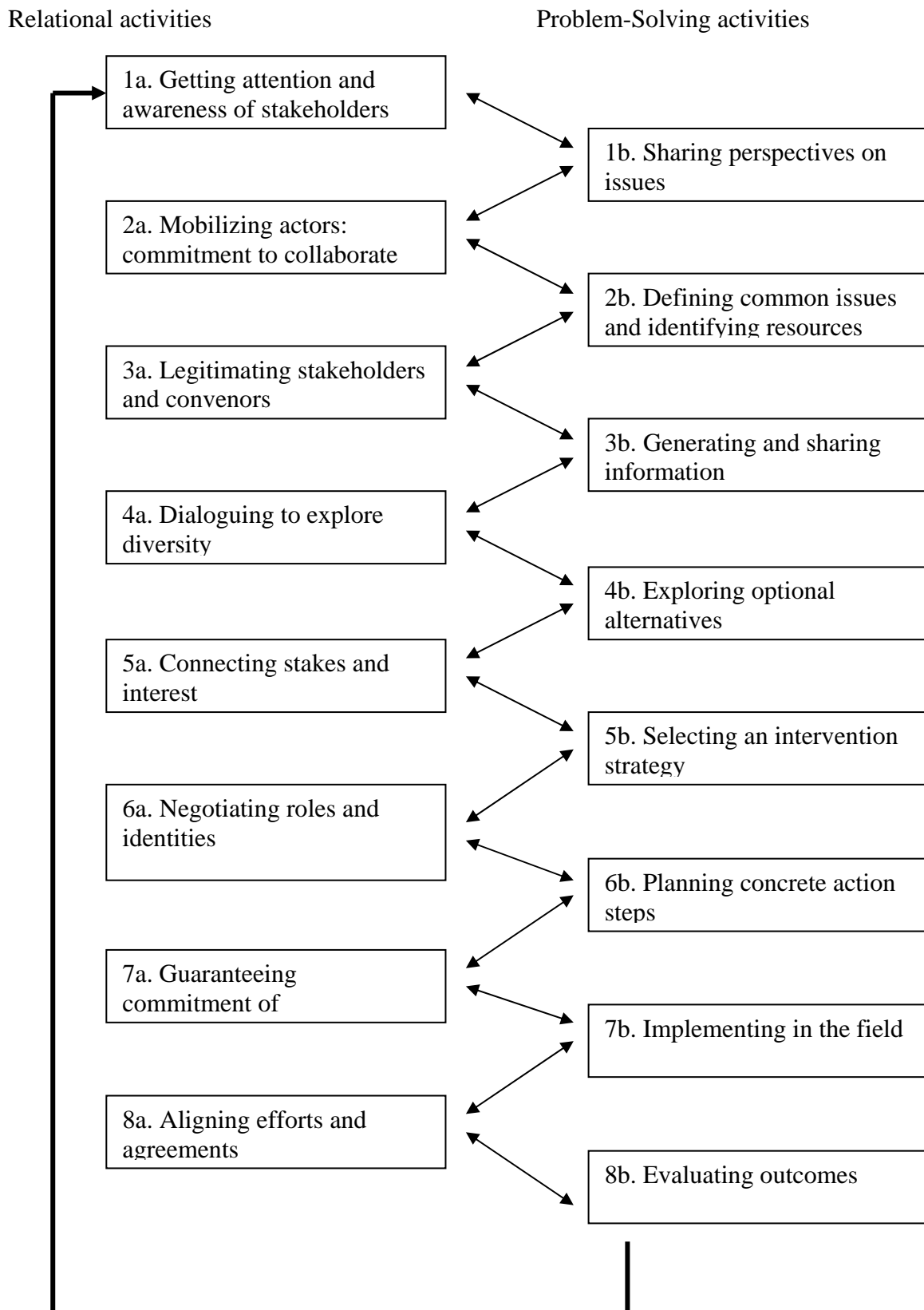
intervention steps can be taken in the field. This process needs to be guided by evaluation and feedback and continuous checking for synchronisation and alignment of effort.

The intertwinement between interactive and task requirements is given by Figure 1 (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Bouwen 2001). The interaction processes concerning content and the interplay between the actors constitute the challenge of multi party projects. We term these processes relational practices (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004). They form the basis of social learning.

In essence the actors have to learn how to recognize mutual dependence and how to deal with it, given their differences in knowledge, expertise and resources. In many instances we observe that multi party collaboration efforts leave behind the expert modus, characterized by top down planning and implementation. They evolve towards active stakeholder involvement, leading to joint ownership and responsible membership.

The essence of these processes consist in the development of some communality in experience and expression of ideas, actions, interests and goals. By engaging in mutual interactions and exchanges, the actors exert influence on each other and position each others membership role with a certain degree of influence or power difference.

Figure 1: Sequences of intertwined relational and problem solving activities



A relational practice (Bouwen, 2001) is any interactive project or exchange between at least two actors, it has a consequence for the relationship and some perceivable outcome. Simple concrete examples of a relational practice are: a joint field visit, a common training session or simulation, a project starting event, a moment of spontaneous celebration, but also an open interview, a good conversation, or an open constructive meeting.

Relational practices are essentially task-oriented actions with relational qualities of reciprocity and some kind of reflexivity. A major development task of a multi party project can be to identify those relational practices. Those practices occur in different contexts of project work, in different phases of development of the project and on different levels (local, intermediary, national) and interfaces among levels.

To characterize the quality of the relational practice, one can look into the following observable qualities (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004): (a) a shared ownership of the task or project, (b) open, concrete and personal communication, (c) mutually energizing and mutually rewarding activity, (d) mutually testable and contradictable statements (e) allowing for 'deep' learning, similar to double loop learning, in the meaning of Argyris and Schön (1978).

The concept of relational practice is used in contexts such as innovation (Bouwen, 2001), multiparty collaboration (Taillieu, Bouwen, Craps, Dewulf & Prins, 2003, Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004) and organizational change (Lambrechts & Grieten, 2007).

THE MAKING OF THE STVC–HR FORUM

The case study involves the Volvo Car assembly plant located in the industrial area of the city of Gent. The plant was inaugurated in 1965 as the first Volvo plant outside Sweden. Today Volvo constructs more than 50% of its passenger cars in Belgium. About 5000 people, working in shifts assemble about 250000 cars yearly, consisting of different models: S40, S50, S60, S70 and C30. The different models provide flexibility for the company and stability for the workforce, by making the plant less dependent on the life cycle of a single model, as is the case for the other major car makers in Belgium.

Up till about 2000, STVC used a few on site suppliers and regulated the interdependencies by strictly adhering to contracts concerning sequential delivery and quality. Whenever one of the partners failed with regard to delivery or quality, a contractually defined penalty was imposed. There was a system of plant manager meetings on an irregular basis (1-3 times a year). As the Just In Time system became more prevalent with more suppliers, the Volvo Management realised that this state of affairs, hardly could be called a partnership. Gradually the plant manager meetings were complemented by a number of workgroups designed to deal with specific information and coordination issues. As for now, the following five platforms are operative at different degrees of intensity: Human Resources, Quality, Logistics, Finances, IT and software. This paper will focus on the HR platform. (STVC-HR).

Elements leading up to the installation of the HR Forum.

The following elements led to the installation of what we can call a HR coordination platform, instigated by the Plant Managers forum. There already was the supply chain delivery and quality control system, which operated basically with contractual rules, and was perceived as a poor vehicle to handle the partnership with Volvo and the suppliers. In 1999, the production from the plant in Born (The Netherlands) was transferred to Gent and so the business was booming and the number of JIT suppliers went from 6 to 14, involving 22 products,

components or modules. Around 2000, for the first time, strikes with the suppliers halted the assembly line at Volvo, putting 3000 people out of work. This dramatically showed the JIT system to be the Achilles heel of the production line. Volvo wanted better information and coordination among the suppliers. One of the production line HR managers was assigned to take action and developed what became the STCV-HR forum. For the sake of clarity he will be indicated as the convenor in the text.

Physical location and suppliers

To get a feeling of what the JIT revolution means for an assembly plant, it is illustrative to consider the chronology of the development at Gent. A pioneering effort in 1984 involved the external supply of car seats, followed in 1989 by bumpers. A second wave (1995-1996) added engines, fuel tanks, floor mats, instrument boards, and wheels. From 1999 on, additional components but also subassemblies and systems were externally provided. Today, in addition to what is mentioned we find suppliers for whole cockpits, wheels, tailgate including fifth door, exhausts, rear axles, side panels, overhead systems, window systems, airbags, safety belts, cable systems, door modules. In order to coordinate the operations there is a multitude of information exchanges between Volvo and the suppliers concerning the status of the assembly line, synchronisation information for product specifications once the final assembly sequence is fixed, forward and feedback information about actual parts movement and arrival at the plant. Due to the location of the suppliers, and the conditions of the site (houses, railroad, major roads) Volvo has no overall conveyor for the sequential flow. Only five items: wheels, driving unit, power pack, bumpers and seats are automatically delivered and unloaded. The other components require about 450 transports a day.

Turning back to the HR forum, it is remarkable to observe the adaptability of the suppliers. Worldwide they may be competitors, but on the site they call each other partners, frequently helping each other out with equipment, logistical issues or particular skills and competences (e.g. selection, IT, robots). Similarly, they see Volvo Goteborg as their client, but Volvo Gent as their partner. Moreover, in the automotive world, competitors today may well be partners tomorrow. This attitude is reflected in the openness which has grown over time. Few subjects are off limits, and although particular financial and logistical aspects, or new products and innovations, are kept private, a lot of information pertaining to the operations on the site is made available for each other, partly informal, mostly plain.

Vision and goals of the STVC-HR Forum.

To reduce the vulnerability and to improve the joint learning of the platform members, a common vision of the forum's functions was conceived.

- When a new JIT partner starts (mostly international firms), counsel is offered (including written materials and checklists) about the local labour market, recruitment, selection, pay and employment systems, industrial relations and unions. Often this takes the form of a joint starting project to realise plans and meet targets and deadlines. A proper start-up is beneficial for the supplier and for Volvo as well.
- To proactively prevent spreading difficulties among the partners, there is the day to day spontaneous information diffusion about organizational, social and technical events which might affect the partners. This could include the report of difficulties which may lead up to a strike, technical or logistical problems and delays etc. While the partners do not get directly involved (e.g. mediation), there might be some talking or lobbying in the background with different constituencies. After the trouble is over, there generally will be

joint action and mutual help for restarting, from Volvo and from the other suppliers as well.

- In a longer time perspective, the forum organizes meetings, activities and sometimes projects to learn and develop together a HR policy. After all, Volvo has been on the site for 42 years, and is willing to share experiences and to learn from joint activities e.g. fringe benefits, absenteeism, recruitment of young people, teamwork, on the job training, etc. As the partners are different in background, technology, size, origin, culture, industry federation for collective agreements (metal, textile, chemicals) few copy-paste solutions are possible, but valuable experience and know-how is available.

Convenor and stakeholders

Historically the convenor of the forum was the HR manager of the Volvo Production line. He organized the forum and individually invited the HR managers of each of the JIT suppliers. Whenever someone left the network, or a new supplier became operative, they were personally approached and invited to take part of the network. Very soon all the JIT suppliers became and remained member of the forum. In addition to the JIT suppliers, two of the logistics companies, situated in the harbour, are active members of the HR-forum, although they are not represented in the STVC of the plant managers. Their interest is more directed towards the operational information of the forum (holiday plans, maintenance and repairs, overwork or temporary layoffs). They actively participate in several projects as well .

Activities by the STVC-HR forum.

Over the years, there is a growing stream of bilateral information generated between individuals in the network by using telephone, mobiles and emails. As to common activities, about every six weeks a forum session is planned. There is an annual theme which is followed through and evaluated. For each meeting an agenda is made some days in advance. There is also an open “varia” at the end of the meeting. Any subject can be brought in. If something is too sensitive, that will be made clear at the table by the participants (“Is this something we should discuss here? “).

Minutes of the meetings are made by college students, apprentices at Volvo, who attend the meetings and do some scientific and administrative work for the forum. Attendance is and stays high over the years. In fact one of the HR managers of a new supplier told that the first year he needed permission from his plant manager to attend the forum. Now he has to ask permission not to go to the forum.

The meetings are task-oriented but informal, starting at about 9 am with coffee and cake in the facilities of one of the partners who take turns at hosting the meeting. Either the convenor or the host HR manager chair the meeting. Quite often the host gives a presentation or has invited an external person, related to a particular project or event in his plant (e.g. Managing teams, training on the job, youth employment, etc). At the end of the meeting the acting chairperson proposes some agenda points for the next meeting, and asks who will host the next meeting. Some of the smaller partners may not have the facilities to receive 15 people, so they are excused.

Every two three years, or when there are newcomers in the network, some time is reserved for a visit to the operational facilities of the hosting supplier. Although most members are

competitors on the international scene, they freely inform each other about work and employment systems on the site.

The collective activities of STCV–HR can be grouped into some categories:

- Since a couple of years external speakers are invited about relevant and pressing issues: youth employment and training, the Belgian generation pact, systems of time-credit, bottle-neck jobs, policy of the governmental employment agency and of the interim offices in the region.
- A second set of activities concern taking stock of each other's practices and share the learning: dealing with absenteeism, training of first line supervisors, turnover of personnel, job-fairs, etc. Very often a sub-group is formed of partners willing explore and discuss these issues. There is no obligation to participate in these special projects.
- A last set of activities are project oriented: an annual overview of wages and benefits among the partners (voluntary participation), a system of price reduction for all workers of the companies, a protected parking for all companies, a joint child reception centre, a partial benchmark of interim employment offices in the network, the job centre for collective recruitment. These project activities are open for everybody, but nobody is obliged or pressured to take part. Developing the projects often involve subgroups with separate meetings, organized and chaired by one of the partners.

The formative impact of the Automotive Job Centre.

An event which had a critical impact on the STVC-HR forum was the creation of the Automotive Job Centre, a temporary organization to deal with an acute need to recruit 2400 people for the whole network. In 2004 the volume of work increased rapidly at Volvo car (new models, night shift), and it became clear that Volvo needed about 1600 extra persons, and the partners about 800 to follow the pace. Managers at Volvo realized that unless the supply network got appropriately staffed in time, the final car assembly would fail to materialise. There was a problem finding suitable employees in the area. Usually large recruitment campaigns draw people from adjacent companies (Harbour, Volvo Trucks, Sidmar Steel). Moreover the suppliers (who on average pay 15% less than Volvo) were suspicious and afraid that Volvo might take their best workers, and asked for guarantees.

After reflection and intensive debate, the forum members agreed to set up a joint Automotive Job Centre, responsible for the recruitment of personnel for the whole network. To avoid the suspicion that Volvo would take the best recruits for its own needs, it would be an open book system, in which each of the partners would specify what profiles they needed for their jobs, and the testing system would match people according to the requirements of the specific company. After some internal debate Volvo assigned almost 2fte for a period of 18 months to the project. Joint work was done to specify criteria and worker profiles that were realistic for each of the 9 companies that joined the project. The licences for a test system were acquired, and about 12000 persons were tested over a period of 18 months, on a single location. The recruitment and selection staff involved some Volvo personnel and two consultants of VDAB, the employment office of the government. As this was a collective network operation, the VDAB could legitimately join in to set up a job fair, and to supply personnel, give political visibility and support. After the recruitment phase, some subsidies for training on the job were obtained as well. In retrospect, some of the interviewees thought that the centre

should have stayed in operation for about a year after the final recruitment to deal with turnover problems that developed.

The project was a boost for confidence and trust in the supplier's network, strengthened the identity of the STVC-HR forum in the national automotive world, and gained visibility in the whole country. The partner companies could verify that candidates were properly tested and matched, they had real time overview of what happened, the testing system provided a quality which few could have afforded by themselves, the collaborative task force could handle peaks of personnel influx ranging from 10 to 200 a week. The potential workers were given choices and possibilities in companies, they otherwise would not be aware of.

THE RELATIONAL PRACTICES OF THE STVC-HR FORUM

If we now apply the framework of relational practices on the forum, we recall that the original plant managers meeting was complemented by five other workgroups in order to deal with increasing needs for information and communication. The HR Forum became exemplary in the network, first because manpower issues affect the whole network, and secondly because of its unique working style. The real value of the HR forum consists in providing channels of information that otherwise would not be available to HR officers and not even to the other managers of the network at all.

Communication, openness and trust.

The informal and personal way the convenor still approaches the members of the network is recognized to be crucial in building commitment and willingness to take personal responsibility for action. The effect shows in intensive bilateral contacts, and almost complete attendance of collective activities. The same style also applies to the forum members dealing with diversity in interests and constraints. Members are invited to take part, there is never pressure and obligation, they have a real choice to participate in special projects, and their choice is respected by all.

The HR forum does not really involve much mutually binding decision making. In as far as it does, informal influencing and searching for consent are more important than formal choosing between positions and alternatives. The situation is characterized by one of the interviewees: "We have a kind of equality with some latent veto power (the big suppliers) that we avoid to use". The different impact on decisions is not so much related to big or small companies, or branch and technology. It's rather the personal style of the person, whether she is assertive, proactive, etc which leads to differences in influence and impact. Because of the informal style, it seems not difficult to restore the balance. The implicit rule however is that nobody gets attacked personally.

A major aspect that keeps the forum attractive, and is recognized and used by all members, is the abundance of information available on the operations aspects of the work in the supplier network. The daily and interim contacts are unique for receiving information to which the HR managers (and even their plant managers) otherwise have no access.

The above description of the origination and development of the Automotive Job Centre shows that the participants of the network engaged in high quality relational practices, agreeing upon a number of rules which regulated the essentially distributive nature of the recruitment procedures at hand. In the perception of several participants, this project generated a dividend in trust which made it possible to openly deal with similarly difficult personnel issues.

In a similar way the annual project of reviewing pay and benefits among the network members fosters openness and trust. The members are free to participate, the project is coordinated by a volunteering forum member, often stimulated by the convenor. The results are distributed and discussed, and the members are free to use that information in their HR practices. The acquired degree of openness and trust had led to a situation in which turnover and career switches are acceptable issues to deal with among the suppliers. When somebody of the network applies for another job in the supply network, they will call each other, have a talk to see whether or not the choice of moving is definitive. If that is the case, the person will be advised and can look for another career move in the network: “we try to keep the competence in our own automotive community, we consider that a positive thing “. By choice and because of the ongoing outsourcing, several persons have been employed by different suppliers on the site.

The interviews reflect a shared relational responsibility (McNamee, 1998) for the HR Forum. The members actively stimulate contact, call upon their own or other plant managers to get initiatives or mandate for action, they demonstrate a real concern for the partners, they are aware and know how to handle – confronting and yet respectful- the personality and company style differences in terms of tendencies to control, centralize, delegate etc. The above illustrates what Zucker (1986) has described as processes of institutionalisation of trust: (a) a part of trust based upon a record of respectful interactions in the past, (b) a part of person-based trust based on some form of similarity (HRM profession), (c) a part institution based trust linked to formal mechanisms due to third parties (plant managers forum).

Leadership and influence patterns

Leadership is largely shared and is fluently moving from informal to formal mode depending on task and situation. The Volvo convenor who started the network very much fulfils the standback facilitator role described by Vansina ea (1998). He makes personal contact to invite and introduce the network to potentially new members. When members repeatedly fail to attend the six-weekly meeting, he inquires for difficulties, offers help and support. He quite often makes phone calls and personal visits to the sites of the member suppliers. He considers frequent contact and lots of information about operational matters as cues for added value which links the partners to the forum.

A part of the leading role consist of chairing the periodical meetings. Formally the chair coordinates the priorities of the partners, derives the annual theme of the year, finds a host place for the forum, sets and updates the agenda for the meetings and introduces the theme and the speakers. Interestingly in the interviews the role of the chair is described as task oriented, but for at least 50% as stimulation, motivation of the members and their constituencies. In practice when the work together, the setup of the situation is very informal, the meeting start with a coffee and some informal talk, the host mostly chairs the session, gives his contribution or introduces a speaker, guides an occasional visit to the operations of his site, facilitates the open-ended question session at the end, collects agenda points for the

next session and finds a meeting place. Given the maturity of the group members, they spontaneously rotate the formal roles, and all of them formulate process and procedure interventions whenever necessary (Schein, 1999; Vansina, e.a., 2002). After the forum meeting, the members are invited but free to join for a lunch somewhere around. When the Forum has finished a more substantial work or project (e.g. Automotive Job Centre) they organise a social event in a touristical resort.

Special attention is given by the convenor to turn incidents into learning material for the group. When in the dyadic contacts, he learns about difficulties related to personnel issues (turnover, recruitment, absenteeism etc) he certainly will try to convince his colleague to debate the case in the forum for the purpose of joint learning. Over time most participants gained trust in the partners, enough autonomy in their own organization and enough personal confidence to present such issues in the forum.

The above observations are in line with what Vansina (1999) described as the essence of leading in multi party collaboration: “helping to create and maintain conditions to maximally utilise the diversity of perceptions, competences and resources of the parties, and at the same time making it possible that they also realise their own interests”.

Diversity, commitment, action orientation, reciprocity and learning.

In all interviews, two basic factors holding the parties together are frequently mentioned. The first is a common identity characteristic, in the literature often seen as a natural basis for network formation (Powell, 1991): “We are all HR professionals eager to learn from each others practice”. The second aspect is the recognition and acceptance of interdependency (e.g., Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Bouwen & Fry, 1996): “HR issues are highly interwoven, we are in the same boat, if something goes wrong, within 90 minutes the line stops at Volvo”. The fact that the other car assembly sites in Belgium envy the forum, but could as yet not realize such a network proves that accepting interdependence is not a simple matter.

There was a remark in an interview which relates to the identity issue. The working language in the Volvo and suppliers network is English. Members of the platform speak Flemish and the foreigners comply as well as they can. This is unusual in the Flemish culture where switching to English is a norm, whenever even only one foreign person attends a meeting. This particularity might symbolise a sign of identity of the forum: we are all members of (competing) international companies, but for this site we are one group (Van Beselaere, 2001).

Concerning larger projects, which may involve only part of the forum (deciding on a common parking lot, exchanging data about salary en benefits), they form a subgroup and invite either a specialist, or a junior member to chair the project group. Mostly people take a project for which they are competent, in this way the complementarity of the forum is utilized (personnel practices, OD and change, labour law and industrial relations). This self-assignment to tasks fosters authorship (Shotter, 1993, 2004), ownership (Schein, 1999), and the feeling of learning possibilities in the group.

The convenor pointed out that there is still a tendency, certainly from the part of Volvo to consider the suppliers as a homogeneous group. This perception is misleading. The suppliers

differ in size (30-500 employees), technology, products, strategies, small or large (international) mother companies (30-150000), sector of industry and union affiliation: chemicals, metal, textile. These differences create different identities for members and constituencies of the forum, and at the same time constitute a rich complementary pool for learning (Vanina & Taillieu, 1997).

Due to open communication (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978) and mutual trust, the partners know each other's companies, visions and working styles very well. The priorities of the yearly working agenda offers for the forum members a number of actual HR issues, which are developed and discussed in the context of the actual JIT network. An optimal mix between theory and application is sought. There is candid reporting on what one tried and learned about particular issues, and the partners have to translate their observations and learning into an action strategy which fits their own company context. "While you are implementing a particular action, the colleagues are willing to share, advise and give feedback". The forum members are aware of their differences, of the substantial asymmetry of resources and competences, differences in giving and taking, but point out that what they get back from the forum is immensely valuable. Especially the larger suppliers with more resources are quite willing to share and help the smaller companies, fully realizing their shared fate. There seems to be a strong norm operative: "We don't let each other down" (Prins e.a., 2006).

Ground rules, norms and values.

Out of the interview we can derive some norms, values or principles underlying the interactions in the platform which are probably quite implicit and have become sufficiently consistent to be termed the ground rules of the platform.

Following Hovelynck (2000a) we can sort our observations according to process, product or content and procedures. In terms of content (product) we observe the shared eagerness to learn about the common theme: HR management in a multiple party collaboration project. This resulted in opening unusual and unique channels of information regarding each others operations on the site, and the successful completion of multiple projects, helpful to deal with the interdependence of the suppliers and the client company.

With regard to procedures and work forms, we have noted the following pattern or elements. There is a conscious effort towards frequent bilateral and network contact, formal and informal as well. Quite often personal visits are made whenever the issue or the colleague merits special attention.

The convenor and others as well watch for a good balance between individual freedom and submission to collective authority (Mills, 1967). Personal choice and responsibility is highlighted. What we can call contractual obligations are kept minimal, each party can determine its own effort and engagement, can draw its own conclusions from meetings and projects and freely transform and apply what it has learned (Taillieu e.a., 2000). Yet, the chosen tasks are completed and worked through, issues are followed up, timings of meetings and projects are respected, new types of projects are started. This visibly shows that the task dimension and getting valuable output are of absolute importance for the platform.

Finally if we focus on the quality of the interaction process, the following characteristics emerge from the observations. A major achievement is the openness of communication, be it formal or informal depending on the context ; "You have to feel where the boundaries of

formal and informal are”. That implies that there is no need for mind guarding, anything can come to the table, and it will be dealt with by the group. It has already been indicated that the forum knows how to use diversity in competences and background. Several people have a Volvo background, and as such know the systems better or have access to other means and channels. The platform members know, ask for and appreciate the surplus-influence that can be derived from such links.

Different interests, individual autonomy, respect and tolerance were underlying themes in the discussion and illustrations. The different parties and their stakeholders are international competitors, have different aims and strategies, but they are able to define a common ground (e.g., Gray, 1989; Weisbord, 1992) around their tasks in the supplier network. Real interest in each other, listening and respect for each other were reflected in the way project collaboration was described: “There was never a personal attack in the seven years we meet together”. Although the forum is a task-oriented device, it seems to operate heavily under norms of cooperation and inter-personal obligation rather than rules and contract, and the basis is formed by some sort of community of shared values residing the network of business relations.

Elsewhere (Vansina e.a., 1999) we have described some minimal conditions to deal with diversity. Our observations show these to be fulfilled: (1) social validation of the value of differences in the collaboration. Diversity then is seen as an asset in relation to the task, and as such legitimized for use, (2) participants need a feeling of trust before they psychologically feel free to open up and share their appreciations with each other, (3) at least implicitly some ground rules need to be shared as to assure members that it is possible to work effectively.

There is a strong feeling of reciprocity associated with organizational learning (Bouwen & Hosking, 2000) and social learning (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004). The automotive world is small. Integrity and transparency as a partner is a necessity : “We don’t put each other for a fait accompli, if you observe something, you proactively take action for the partner of the network”. An unusual combination of self-interest and care for the interests of the collaborative system speaks from this quotes (Prins, 2006).

Representation and constituency.

Representatives in multi party situations experience the “dual conflict”. On the one side they have to represent the interest of their constituency, and as such they can be in conflict with the other representatives, on the other hand they are closely watched by their constituency, and eventual concessions to other parties raise conflict with their own constituency. So they have an interpersonal problem to solve around the table, and to deal with an intergroup issue with their constituencies (Vansina, e.a., 1998).

The HR forum is composed of the current HR managers of the suppliers. Not the procedural aspects but rather the style of working together became the instrument of managing the boundary between constituency and HR forum. Drawing attention, inspiring, suggesting, persuading, avoiding to create obligatory situations, seem part of the mechanism to keep the responsibilities shared among the partners and to gain commitment for action on the basis of personal choice. Although the HR managers in the forum are representatives for their

organisation, the relational practice is constructed as to make them act on the basis of personal initiative and choice. They approach each other to act as their own men, and the convenor plays an important role in that dynamic, being an example of relational contracting in his behaviour.

From the interviews we learn that the valuable output of the forum also functions as the (convincing) argument to get a large mandate and even autonomy from the parent company. Most HR managers systematically report in their company meetings the information from the Forum, and take care to check and get mandate whenever their company point position, views or resources are needed. They quickly learn to be mandated when they come to the meeting (Trist, 1983; Prins e.a., 2006a).

One of the points stressed by the convenor is his way of avoiding to become the sole contact person of Volvo, and thus becoming a bottleneck in the system. To avoid that position he invited other Volvo colleagues and speakers, and asks forum colleagues take up the contacts. This way authorship (Shotter, 2004) and ownership is extended into the network, which stimulates broader relational responsibility (McNamee, 1998). Other HR managers also regularly send their co-workers to the activities. They argue: this is an open, non-elite club. The motto is that the closer the whole network becomes, the better for the community.

Since a few weeks it is known that the convenor is taking up another position, hence leaving Volvo. In the eyes of several interviewees this is an interesting event and opportunity. Choosing a successor will entail a delicate balance to fulfil the needs of the platform: the informal nature of the network requiring a particular sensitivity of the person fulfilling the role, the information and coordination needs of the principal actor Volvo, and the business interests of the JIT partners as common ground of the platform. Whether or not a non-Volvo chairperson will be assigned could be a symbolic act for the network.

With respect to the unions as stakeholders in the network, we find that they have good working informal networks among Volvo and the suppliers. All parties take each others workgroups as a matter of fact and show a neutral attitude to each other. Depending on the issues they inform each other formally and sometimes informally. Some unions have difficulties overcoming their branch related identity (metal, textile etc) which makes it difficult to show a common face to the employers subgroups as the HR forum. While most of the suppliers from time to time have to remind the unions that they are less resourceful than Volvo, there seems to be a positive spin-off from the historically good relations between the unions and Volvo.

DISCUSSION

Below we will compare the findings from the earlier study about the British Petroleum Platform in Geel with our observations on STVC-HR with regard to the way the platforms are functioning and governed. We will introduce the concepts of self-regulation and self-governance for that purpose. After that we will consider how the members of the platforms perform their role as representative organs for the community they serve.

The BP platform in Geel

The BP Neighbours platform was installed in September 2001 (Taillieu, e.a., 2006a; Taillieu, e.a. 2006b). The purpose of BP management was to maintain and increase the societal support for the long term activities and survival of the company. BP took the initiative to develop a collaborative form in which diverse groups from the community could think about solutions and follow the implemented actions. It was intended to provide an open dialogue among the members, based on equality. It would be composed of community leaders, influential people in the community, even action groups, to represent the opinions of the surrounding community.

A first meeting, about 25 invited community leaders brainstormed on the conditions necessary to keep BP viable and supported by the community. The meeting produced a large variety of opinions, suggestions, but especially complaints. The people present at the meeting were invited to come back for a second meeting some weeks later. The second meeting reached a breakthrough. The PR manager of BP, chairing the meeting had to reply to questions and complaints. Aware of her dual role incompatibility, she brought her role conflict under attention (chair and interest party) and asked somebody else to take the chair. This process intervention altered the dynamics of the group and immediately led to a discussion in which the participants expressed that the goals of the forum unilaterally served BP: growth and community support. The issue was taken up and the participants then were explicitly asked to speak up for themselves and not as representatives of external groups. Within two hours the group negotiated a new set of goals stressing the continuity of the company and the viability of the community as equally valuable goals of the forum. The participants then nominated an respected regional journalist as chairperson for the platform, a role which he still performs in 2007.

The platform has been meeting every ten weeks and took initiatives to investigate an study several issues: continuous monitoring of environmental emissions, periodical research in the community, health hazards in the area, screening of the population, cancer deaths in the large area, study of zoning laws and buffering of the industrial area, study of improved safety and signalling procedures in the community involving Cable TV and internet (see for more information on www.bp.be).

In addition to the neighbourhood platform, around the same time the Consultation Commission was installed. This commission was imposed by a special clause at the occasion of the renewal of the operation licences of BP Geel. As such it has a legal character. Purpose, composition, frequency of meeting, access to information are specified by the government, BP composed the “household rules” together with the participants, administrators, elected officials and some civilians. The Consultation Commission can be seen as a “conditioned self-regulation” as most of the governance issues have been unilaterally imposed by the

government (goals, membership, leadership, working procedures, decision making). The purpose of the Consultation Commission is formulated as "To minimally keep an inventory of the complaints of the community, to present possible solutions, to inform neighbours and officials of environmental actions envisioned or in operation". (www.bpgeel.be). The Consultation Commission is constructed to collect and remedy complaints from the surrounding habitats, through input from elected officials, action groups, local and provincial environmental services. The formal goals seem unilaterally focused on the interest of the neighbours.

The following interview fragments characterise the collaboration with the Consultation Commission: "A number of people disagree with everything, and the BP management is doing nothing but defend itself". "The people there have a different attitude, probably because they are not formed on a voluntary basis. The members of the committee focus on procedural questions and refuse to talk about the heart of the matter". Characteristic of the perceptions are the one-sidedness and the polarisation.

Self regulation.

There is a tendency in business as well as in governments to use autonomous groups (self regulating, self managing groups) to deal in more effective ways with local situations, instead of using hierarchical programs or general laws (Sips & Hovelynck, 1998; Sips & Bouwen, 1990). Some time ago the concept of autonomy (Susman, 1976) was used as the overarching term to deal with, on the one side, self-regulation as operational activities (who does what when and with whom), and on the other side self-governance (deciding on issues of membership, leadership, rewards, evaluation, working conditions etc). Especially in the Anglo-Saxon literature the distinction has faded. The literature stresses aspects of self-regulation and remains vague about issues of self-governance. In a similar way public governance shows an evolution towards forms of self-regulation rather than general laws, focussing on acceptance rather than compliance as mechanism of influence. Self-regulation however is a difficult process, so the governments resort to several hybrid forms to keep a certain degree of control, just in case. (Van Petersen & van Vree, 2006).

Comparing the STVC forum and the BP forum and the Consultation Commission, we will first raise some observations about the effects of different forms of self-regulation, and goal framing. The major difference between the STVC and BP versus the Consultation Commission lies in the sphere of self-governing issues: Membership: invited, voluntary versus assigned by law; Leadership: shared, nominated by participants, assigned by law; Agenda: joint planning and initiatives versus obligatory issues ; New projects and innovations and expansion of horizon: initiative members and participants versus fixed task conception. Considering the Self-regulation issues, the differences are less dramatic, be it that the procedural rigidity on the part of the Consultation Commission is much higher, impoverishing the quality of the relational practice: e.g. degree of communication, openness, flexibility, initiative etc. Above all the framing of the goals of the different institutions quite likely is the most determining factor with regard to their effectiveness. Both STVC and BP framed and keep reframing their purposes in terms of their interdependence, allowing and facilitating each party to reach their own and the common goals, while serving at the same time the long term interest of their constituencies.

Dewulf (2006) has demonstrated the power and dynamics of such framing processes. Any particular framing of a problematique or of goals (issue framing) determines to a large degree

the aspects which will be in focus or neglected, foreground and background, by consequence the inclusion and exclusion of particular actors as relevant or important, and finally what is overarching, who is playing in whose play.

Bridging function or representative of a constituency.

The above description of the platforms and the commission highlighted the differences between them in goals, composition, procedures and relational practices. The question raises as to how we can understand this behaviour on the level of the individual representative. As we have indicated, the representatives deal with an intergroup relation vis a vis the constituencies, and with an interpersonal relation with regard to their colleagues around the table (dual conflict). How to find a balance for these different requirements?

The STVC-HR forum was designed by the HR managers as an exchange and coordination space for HR issues pertaining to the supply chain members. On a voluntary basis all of them joined, including some other logistical partners on a limited basis. Consistently the working style has promoted individual initiative and responsibility taking by the representatives of the partners, linked to their professional HR identity, and carried by the explicit acceptance of interdependence between all suppliers and Volvo. These elements have prevented intergroup stereotyping and win-loose positional bargaining.

The BP neighbourhood platform is exceptional as to the relation representative-constituency. The members were invited on the basis of their contacts in the neighbourhood. Their knowledge and ability to interpret what is going on served as criteria. Their commitment was solicited on a voluntary basis. They have an identity as key figures in the environment, and although some are strong opponents, they respect each other. From the first meeting, BP insisted that the participants would bring in their own ideas, and not serve in the first place as representatives of interest parties (“everybody is expected to act from a responsible individual conviction based on his contacts with the environment”). They are seen as “antennas” of their neighbourhoods, functioning as two way communication systems of course. Lacking a better term we call it the bridging function.

The members of the Consultation Commission, on the contrary, are assigned as representatives, to fulfil a mission as guards for their constituencies. Their constituencies, and some absent authorities (local, provincial, federal) seem to watch over their shoulders (Vansina, 2002; Prins, 2006). Their mandate is based on standard administrative rules, explicit and almost non-negotiable. This locks the commission members into intergroup stereotyping and win-loose dynamics.

We can understand the different work styles in terms of a process- versus procedural logic, analogous to the way group development phases evolve (Hovelynck, 2000a). Characteristic for groups that frame the collaboration in terms of procedures (structures and roles) is the fact that people talk in terms of “we versus they” and therefore in stereotypes. At a point in time, groups normally find this procedural logic too restrictive. Members get to know each other and see that stereotypes are restrictive, hinder creativity and that stressing equality too much hampers decision making. So they move to a practice in which personal input and inter-individual differences are more important. Me and You are more prevalent, more room for individuality and utilization of everyone’s personal capabilities becomes acceptable. So from a developmental group dynamics perspective, the difference in work style between the “representative” and the “bridging” function becomes very clear. Elsewhere we have

formulated a typology to capture similar differences in attitude and work by the multi party members in an inter organizational network (Roose, Taillieu & Sips, 2001). In that study we also found that the typical way in which the participants fulfil their role in the collective has an enormous impact on the collaborative potential within the network.

The difference between the platforms and the commission for a large part can be understood in terms of a process versus procedural logic: the nature of the start, formality of membership of a particular community, stressing the role as representative versus the personal contribution. So for the representative, “We” is the only legitimate expression, while the bridging role explicitly is invited to speak as “I”. The first situation acts as a brake, the second as a stimulant for the forum. This relates to the degree to which the speakers become visible to each other, meaning the degree they can create relational security allowing them to be focused on the task, without suspicion that one’s interests will be invaded.

The differences between the three systems largely originate from the dynamics described above, which have been identified as crucial in other multi party settings as well (Dewulf, 2006): framing of the product (goals and output), the process (interaction rules) and procedures (composition and work forms).

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