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Research on Collaboration in Action

Sandra G. L. Schruijer

In this paper I will focus on the psychological dynamics of multiparty collaboration, illustrated by two projects in which I have been engaged. First I describe what I mean by multiparty collaboration. Next, I outline the principles of designing and executing action research projects. The theoretical background for these principles is derived from the domain of Organization Development and from a psychodynamic perspective on organizations and organizational change. Subsequently I present my experiences with running a complex behavioral simulation of multiparty processes. I share some main observations pertaining to the social difficulties people encounter when working across system boundaries. The second project concerns an action research project of an organizational change process in a nursing home. I describe the action research process and my role as a consultant. I then review some generic issues related to multiparty processes that are typical for both projects. I end with some reflections on universities and multiparty collaboration.

Key words: Multiparty collaboration, action research

Introduction

Collaboration is 'hot'. Public-private partnerships and network organizations are designed, organizational forms for which an underlying concept of collaboration is essential. Books appear that reflect an academic interest in the structural and strategic characteristics of these new organizational forms, or that address managers who are faced with interorganizational challenges.

Collaboration within organizations, for example between different business units or different departments, has been on the organizational and academic agenda for many years, but has gained renewed attention given the fact that organizations have become more complex, more international and generally more diverse. However, the desire and intention to collaborate across system boundaries (organization, unit, department) are not always matched with experience of success. It is easy to talk of collaboration, but the practice seems more difficult. Of all potential obstacles, financial and strategic considerations receive the most attention from researchers, and social difficulties the least. This is despite the fact that it is especially the social facets of collaboration that are troublesome to protagonists.

Elsewhere I have argued why psychology, a discipline 'par excellence' to study processual difficulties, has largely failed to do so, especially when it concerns 'multiparty collaboration' (Schruijer 2007). Still, insights derived from and developed within psychology may contribute to the understanding of collaboration and to its success. When complex collaboration is involved, i.e. collaboration across multiple system boundaries, it is imperative that collaboration in action is researched (i.e. real, ongoing collaboration) and that the researcher adopts the role of consultant-facilitator while being reflective on what is going on. In other words, when an action research position is taken.

Below I first define the term 'multiparty collaboration' and describe its most essential features. Then I explain what I understand by action research. Subsequently, I briefly describe two projects in which I have been involved, and discuss the main issues when confronted with collaboration in action. Finally I share some reflections and concerns with respect to the discipline of psychology vis-à-vis research on multiparty collaboration, as well as the role universities play in preparing students for the complexities of society.

Basic concepts

Multiparty collaboration

When explaining why some colleagues are preferred to others, people often say "I can collaborate well with him or her as s/he does what I want him or

her to do". When the co-operation of all employees is required, their "noses need to point in the same direction". Such common-sense notions though have nothing to do with the real meaning of collaboration. Collaboration is sought after when one party (person, group, organization) possesses something that is of value to another (person, group, organization) while the latter has something to offer that is of value to the former. Both parties can thus help one another in achieving one's goals and experience interdependence in doing so, while retaining relative autonomy. They do not become one, yet keep their distinctiveness as an independent party. In my common-sense examples, diversity is reduced serving the aim of one party only: 'collaboration' as servitude, control, subjugation and conformity. Real collaboration means *working with diversity* rather than reducing it via power, stereotyping, conflict avoidance, or conformity.

Multiparty collaboration can be defined as "the characteristic of an emerging or developing work-system of people who, because of their membership of other groups, institutions or social categories, come to work together on a largely self-constructed task or problem domain" (Vansina, Taillieu/Schruijer 1998:162). It is especially *because* parties are different, have different resources, identities, power bases, interests, perspectives, etc., that an interest in collaboration is triggered. Collaborative relationships are formed to address a concern, problem or opportunity, though an explicitly formulated joint goal often is not the starting point. Rather, parties gather to address a shared concern or minimally are vaguely aware that collaboration is necessary or desirable (Gray, 1989). While relating, a common goal crystallizes and becomes accepted. Each party has a unique contribution to this common goal; they are interdependent but otherwise remain autonomous (Vansina et al. 1998), unlike mergers or acquisitions. Solutions to the jointly defined problem or opportunities emerge because ideally differences are constructively dealt with, in function of the jointly defined goals (Gray, 1989). Parties share the responsibility for problem-solving, implementing the decisions, and future actions.

Successful collaboration then means being able to work with diversity: being able to identify the relevant diversity in view of commonly developed goals, and value that diversity as it needs nurturing to realize the joint ambitions. In practice however, diversity gives rise to distrust, stereotyping and

conflict (Vansina et al. 1998). Preparations for alliances or partnerships are ended 'because of cultural incompatibilities'. Apparently dealing with differences is difficult, differences that gave rise to mutual interest in the first place! ('culture', as always, constituting an easy scapegoat, preventing protagonists to dig deeper and really find out what the difficulties were all about).

Social psychologists have contributed greatly to an understanding of the determinants of intergroup conflict (such as competing for scarce resources (Sherif, 1967), creating a positive social identity (Tajfel/Turner, 1979)), and its concomitant processes (such as negative intergroup attitudes, attribution processes, stereotyping). It appears for example that mere categorization of people into different groups is a sufficient condition for negative stereotyping to develop (e.g. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy/Flament, 1971). Unfortunately, social psychological research on intergroup relations has predominantly used laboratory or field experiments, studying two (often ad hoc) groups only. Rather than understanding the conditions that are needed for collaboration, social psychologists have focused almost exclusively on the determinants and processes of conflict. What is needed is a deeper understanding of the complexities and psychological dynamics of multiparty collaboration that involves more than two parties. Further, rather than using ad hoc groups, research with and for real organizations, that are engaged in a real and often enduring relationship, and are confronting real difficulties, is called for.

Action research

Kurt Lewin taught us: "if you try to understand something, try to change it" (Nystrom/Starbuck 1981:xii). Only by trying to change something do we become aware of resistances, possibilities and impossibilities. Description from a distance is insufficient – only through one's own experiences can one develop a real understanding of a social system. Action research couples research with action. The purpose is to help the client system change and develop; the action researcher is explicitly engaged with the client system and its problems. As a secondary aim, learning experiences and generated insights are made available to other organizations and researchers, so that they

may learn about these too. Publishing is not seen as the main goal. Implementation validity is deliberately strived for. Knowledge should lead to new and more effective action (Vansina/Schruijer 2004).

In action research, the client system and researcher jointly define and analyze the problems. It is based on a collaborative relationship. Data, collected to define and analyze problems and to study the effects of action, are collected on behalf of the client system and are owned by the latter. The meaning of the data is interpreted by the client system and the action researcher, and jointly it is decided which action to take. Interventions are evaluated, and data collected to this end are interpreted together, leading to possible new action, etc. Action research thus is a cyclical process. Action follows research and research follows action (French/Bell 1973).

Working with data is a value inherent in action research. These may result from formal interviews, questionnaires or even experiments, but also from day-to-day contacts, observations, experiences and intuitions, that can be further explored and tested with the client system (e.g. Eden/Huxham 1996). In line with a psychodynamic perspective (Vansina 2005a), here-and-now dynamics as they emerge in the interactions within the client system and between the client system and the consultant are worked with. Not only the formally gathered data, but also these emerging processes are the input for joint inquiry, insofar as they seem relevant to identify problems and issues. Such inquiry is intended to be truly open, as one does not know what, in that particular setting, with these organizations and individuals, in that context, is occurring. One has to find out together, and not be blinded by concepts that are uncritically 'applied' to the situation (Vansina 2000).

The action research process itself is open ended. One cannot know what the next step will be. It depends on the joint fact finding, meaning attribution and decision-making. An action researcher attempts to create conditions for change, but cannot make change happen. Characteristic of action research processes is a continuous reflection on events; review sessions become institutionalized (Vansina 2005b). Through joint learning from past experiences, one aims to make improvements in the future. Finally, an open system perspective is adopted (cf. Cummings/Worley 1993). The whole organization is

addressed; organizational change is facilitated by working with all stake-holders and their relationships acting in a particular context.

Multiparty collaboration in action

The need for understanding and working with the social psychological dynamics of multiparty collaboration is imperative, if collaboration is to be successful. Below I present two projects. The first is intended to help people learn about the social difficulties of collaboration, through taking part in an experiential learning workshop. Not only participants learn but also the workshop organizers. As indicated above, systematic research into the dynamics of multiparty projects is lacking. The second project involves a large-scale change process of a nursing home where I was involved as a consultant. The nursing home experienced difficulties working constructively between departments and hierarchical layers. A change process was envisaged that aimed at creating collaborative multiparty relationships, working towards a shared goal.

The Yacht Club: learning to collaborate through experience

The simulation 'The Yacht Club' helps people gain insight into the complexity of conflict and collaboration between multiple organizations, by taking part in a complex problem concerning regional development (Vansina/Taillieu 1997; Vansina et al. 1998). As an instrument for experiential learning, 'The Yacht Club' generates important insights on how individuals, groups and organizations deal with one another in a situation that is characterized by many problems, interests and interdependencies.

   'The Yacht Club' is based on a real issue that emerged ten years ago in and around the island of Kotlin, Russia, in the Gulf of Finland. Unemployment loomed large after the Russian marine stopped building war ships, ordered from the shipyards located on the island, as a consequence of political developments in Eastern Europe. Seven legally independent organizations had a stake in the problems and the potential developments: besides the shipyards there were three yacht clubs interested in developing tourism (one from the island, one from St. Petersburg and one from Finland), a Russian bank, a

group of young rich entrepreneurs with emotional ties to the island, and the local authorities of the island.

We took that real problem setting as the input of a behavioral simulation that would help people understand the social psychological dynamics of engaging in complex multiparty relationships. At the start of the two day experiential learning workshop, the problem setting is introduced, as well as the seven interest parties. Participants are then asked to choose a party. They are not asked to play a role. Rather, participants are asked to identify as much as possible with the interests of their party. Each party is assigned a separate room. Furthermore, there is a plenary room where collective meetings between representatives of the seven parties can be held. During such meetings organizations send a representative to the discussion table, while constituencies work behind them, and can contact him or her via notes. For such collective meetings approximately half the time of the simulation is made available. During the remaining time parties can meet freely as long as no more than three parties (or their representatives) gather simultaneously (see further Vansina/Taillieu/Schruijer 1998, 1999).

The simulation lasts for some thirteen hours. We (Leopold Vansina, Tharsi Taillieu, Sandra Schruijer) refrain from intervening and try, by continuously exchanging our observations, to gain insight in the dynamics. Further, the participants complete a questionnaire at three different moments in time: at the start, halfway through the simulation, and at the end. After the simulation is finished we spend a full day reviewing the dynamics, together with the participants. We share our observations and invite the participants to share theirs. The joint inquiry is intended to understand why the events happened as they happened, and explore what could have been done differently. Also, we ask the participants to reflect on the collaboration in their home organization and whether they recognize some of the dynamics. We then try to prepare them for future collaboration by exploring alternative behaviors and introducing relevant concepts. If desired, we convene a second meeting several weeks later to review the dynamics in the simulation and their own practice more deeply. Naturally, the here-and-now dynamics of the reviews are also input for discussion. We have run 'The Yacht Club' on some seventy occasions with in total some 1500 managers and professionals with different

nationalities, in open management programs, in in-company programs, and as a separate stand-alone workshop.

Of course the dynamics of each workshop is different, as the participants are different as well as their back home organizations. However, in each workshop similar difficulties have to be dealt with: How to deal with intergroup images and distrust? How to arrive at a joint problem definition? How to explore interdependencies? How to develop trust? How to form relationships? How to deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in multiparty issues? How to develop a joint problem-solving strategy? How to get organized? How to become a work system? How to govern the system? And many more. The observations presented below may not charactize each of the seventy occasions to the same extent but they do reflect the dynamics of a large majority (see also Vansina et al. 1998; Vansina/Taillieu 1997; Schruijer 2002).

We mostly observe a strong win-lose dynamic characterized by limited information exchange, perceptual biases, mutual distrust, negative stereotyping and positional bargaining. The ensuing power-game is about winning and outsmarting the other groups. It is startling how quickly these dynamics emerge. Sometimes conflict seems absent. Interactions and discussions take place in some sort of peaceful atmosphere. No negative words can be heard, and no feelings of frustrations, irritation or anger can be sensed. In such situations language is often vague and few requests to become explicit are made. A similarity of meaning is assumed without checking. In such situations participants created a collusive climate in which all attempts are directed at avoiding conflict. Neither the win-lose climate nor the collusive one brings the parties any further in dealing with the problem domain.

A fear of being excluded from a possible (final) agreement can often be observed (Vansina et al. 1998). A fear of dependence tends to result in 'playing hard to get', that may be detrimental to all participating organizations, as it stimulates a climate of positional bargaining. It then becomes exceedingly difficult to explore interdependencies and establish trust. Over time, strong leaders are demanded by the parties. The local authorities usually chair the meetings, initially intending to 'facilitate'. However over time they succumb to the demands of the other parties to abandon a facilitating stance and to

start managing, coordinating and judging. Thus they are unable to bridge different views so as to facilitate integrative solutions. Interestingly, participants often think that they have collaborated successfully. When reviewing, however, the social psychological dynamics, expressed for example in win-lose behavior or collusion, come to light and can be talked about, although it is a slow and possibly painful process.

The simulation is based on the interaction of real organizations, yet participants do not belong to these organizations and do not work on their own issues. Still, their behaviour is real and much less artificial then when exhibited in laboratory experiments. Participants normally get quite carried away with their tasks and continue working until late at night. That participants recognize the simulation dynamics in the dynamics of their home organization is one source of validation for our observations. Also, we share our findings with researchers and practitioners at conferences on multi-organizational partnerships, asking for their feedback. My own research confirms that distrust, lack of open communication and power games are seen by directors and senior managers as the most important obstacles in collaborating (Schruijer 2006).

Organizational change of a nursing home

Thus far the focus has been on the psychological dynamics of collaboration between different independent organizations. I now turn to the dynamics of intergroup relationships within an organization, such as between different departments and hierarchical levels, and interventions aimed to facilitate multiparty collaboration. Before proceeding, some crucial differences between the two types of relationships need to be noted. Multiparty collaboration within organizations can take the shape of project or temporary teams, but more often it is inherent in the organization design (for example in the existence of management teams where different organizational functions work together). Interdepartmental and interhierarchy collaboration is expected as a matter of course, and no new work systems are necessarily formed to achieve this. The choice for collaboration is made by signing an employment contract (which naturally does guarantee actual collaboration). Interorganizational collabora-

tion seems more voluntary, although it is not uncommon that such collaboration is enforced. Finally, leadership of interorganizational collaboration is different from that of collaboration within organizations. In the latter case, leaders enjoy formal authority within an existing hierarchy unlike the former where leaders need to work without formal authority or power (Huxham/Vangen 2000a; Schruijer/Vansina 2004). Nevertheless, intergroup dynamics within organizations share many characteristics, although relationships between more than two or three groups have rarely been studied. A remaining question is how to work with these dynamics and achieve collaborative relationships.

The next project concerned an organizational change process in a health care organization. One of its homes, where approximately 250 persons worked, had received a negative evaluation from a governmental inspection body. I was called in as a consultant. During the first discussions with the sponsors (a regional director representing the board of the health care organization, the interim nursing home manager and the medical director) their views on the causes for the negative evaluation were shared, among which communication problems and cultural difficulties. It was decided that I would conduct a series of interviews with employees in different hierarchical positions, with different roles and from different departments. The findings were to be reported and worked with during a series of large group meetings in which the whole organization was to be represented.

Based on 25 interviews, I concluded that problems were experienced in terms of interdepartmental hostilities, and distrust between hierarchical levels. These negative feelings were related to competition for scarce resources. It went hand in hand with a culture of non-confrontation and a well-developed grapevine. Moreover, a strong efficiency focus prevailed while tasks, roles and responsibilities were unclear. The personnel felt not taken seriously and undervalued, while they desperately tried to keep up their professional dedication. These problems needed to be situated in the context of developments in the whole health care sector (e.g. negative image, introduction of market-based thinking, financial difficulties) and within the larger health care organization itself. Awareness of these larger systemic developments was largely lacking among the workforce. Rather than understanding how the

nursing home was put under enormous pressure due to financial constraints (enforced from higher up), employees looked for causes among themselves, and blamed others within the nursing home. The findings were sent uncensored to all employees of the nursing home.

Together with the sponsors and a support group consisting of a broad representation of the nursing home, a series of four large group meetings were designed, each lasting for a full day. During these conferences the whole organization participated as much as possible. In practice this meant that at each conference approximately 125 people were present representing all functions, roles and departments. The sponsors, departmental heads, and some key medical and support staff personnel were present during all four conferences, while other personnel rotated so as to be able to having everyone participate at least once. Key principles in the design of the conferences were: (a) compatibility, meaning that the decisions concerning and interaction processes during the conferences were in line with how the nursing home would like to function as an organization, (b) psychological equality, implying that all employees, irrespective of rank or status engaged in respectful interpersonal interaction, while not denying real differences in roles and tasks, (c) a design that would ensure maximum sharing of information, attitudes, experiences and feelings across departments and hierarchical levels (realized through working in homogeneous, heterogeneous and plenary settings, in function of the set conference task). I was active in all four conferences as a consultant-facilitator. The conferences were held within a time frame of seven months.

During the conferences the present was analyzed, relationships across departments and hierarchies were built, problems were jointly defined, strategies were developed, goals were set and action plans put forward. More precisely, the four conferences centred on the following themes. The first one was about sharing and working through the interview findings that were reported at the start of the day. The purpose was to arrive at a shared problem definition at the end of the day. The start was tense and scepticism prevailed. At the end of the day a positive climate seemed to have been established, bordering on overoptimism. The second conference was intended to come to a shared vision of the nursing home as a place to live and work. Heterogene-

ous groups expressed their visions in a physical home made from paper, clay and other attributes. These were extensively discussed between the different subgroups and formed the basis of the beginnings of a shared vision. The model homes were exhibited in the nursing home during the whole change process, serving as a kind of transitional object (cf. Ambrose 2001). The third conference addressed the question 'How to get from here to there?' During this day (heterogeneous) project groups were formed based on elements from the jointly defined mission. At the fourth conference the project groups reported on their actions, experimentations and progress. Problems of implementation were discussed. Since it was the last conference for the moment, the question of how to continue was addressed. Plans for continuation were proposed, and a new change organization, in view of the next phase of the change process and the newly recruited nursing home manager were suggested.

Having reviewed the last conference with the sponsors and the support group, my formal role as a consultant, that lasted for eight months, had ended. The nursing home decided to continue with regular large group sessions during which ongoing and new business was to be discussed. I attended the first meeting that took place, organized without me, informally. The new nursing home manager introduced herself. Progress of the project groups was reported with enthusiasm and zeal by different people occupying different positions in the organization. Taking stock of the changes within the time period of my involvement, a change in climate could be noticed. Communication had become more direct and more constructive. A collaborative spirit between subsystems was visible and commented upon. There was a feeling of being in it together, while energy to change and active involvement were present. The self-organizing capacity seemed to have increased, although the home realized that a long road was still ahead of them. A continuing concern was how to sustain the momentum, and involve also those who had been less active in the change process.

These observations were confirmed by the interim nursing home manager and the regional director, whom I both invited to address my students half a year after my assignment had finished. They reported that the governmental inspection body had paid another visit to the nursing home and that it had ex-

pressed satisfaction with the changes in the care provision that the nursing home had realized. Sick leave moreover had decreased. The departmental heads were being coached while some had left the organization. Some jobs were redefined and the home was working on redesigning itself. More money for the nursing home had been made available by the larger health care organization.

Lessons learned and domains for future attention

The dynamics of multiparty collaboration have been looked at in two ways: at the level of interorganizational and at the level of intergroup relationships within an organization. The first was based on observations from behavioral simulations and the latter one on action research. Differences between the two levels of collaboration were noted but there are also some similarities in the issues with which participating parties are confronted, as well as in the ensuing psychological dynamics. Both types of collaboration deal with multiple complexities and ambiguities, multilevel issues, needs to arrive at a joint problem definition and joint strategy, diversities and conflict. Some examples of action research working with interorganizational multiparty issues, conducted from a psychological perspective, can be found in the literature, but they are scarce (e.g. Alparone/Rissotto 2001; Bartunek/Foster-Fishman/Keys 1996). Literature on large group interventions (Bunker/Alban 1997) exists, but does not systematically address psychological multiparty dynamics. What are some of the lessons learned, based on the two projects I discussed above?

Convening all relevant parties and keeping them involved

A crucial question is which parties to invite for taking part in a collaborative system. Relevant parties are those who can influence the process and outcomes of the collaboration, or are influenced by it. Of course, at the start one cannot really tell what the joint problem and strategy will be. Therefore one casts the net wide rather than narrow. Parties that cannot engage themselves, as they do not see how collaboration will further their own interests, will leave anyway. The reverse strategy is more harmful: If one is too exclusive in inviting parties, some may feel uninvited or unwanted. If interdependencies

exist with such parties, they are likely to resist plans they could not shape themselves with the others from the very beginning.

Also, in organizational change projects, a common mistake is to exclude relevant parties from the start. Conscious fears may exist that the inclusion of 'difficult parties' from the start may block the change process, not realizing that when these 'difficult parties' are excluded or only included later on, the damage is much worse. In the nursing home project the technical-maintenance staff was not invited for the conferences. This was not a conscious omission, but an omission nevertheless in its consequences. It resulted in their dissatisfaction. This was corrected after their frustration came to the fore.

Related concerns are how to sustain the momentum and how to involve all constituencies; ongoing concerns for the nursing home. Having a plan or an agreement is not the end: the proof of the pudding is in the eating, in this case, the implementation. Further, not all participants are equally active in the change process. It takes patience and persistence to continue creating conditions to help them make the change.

The importance of working with diversity and trust building

In collaboration, a main issue is how to deal constructively with diversities in interests, identities and power. The simulation demonstrates how quickly a win-lose climate emerges, characterized by negative stereotyping and distrust. If early manifestations of these processes are not dealt with constructively, it may escalate further and it may become harder to intervene successfully as time passes by. Relational conflict is a common occurrence; it was also prevalent in the nursing home. Relational conflict occurs at the expense of essential task conflict in which the relevant diversity or even contradictions (in terms of for example interests, perspectives, identities) are put on the table so as to be able to find out about the interdependencies. Just as detrimental for successful collaboration is collusion, unconsciously agreeing not to confront reality (Gray/Schruijer 2006). It embodies an avoidance of the necessary task conflict: the diversity among parties in interests, contributions, power differences insofar relevant to the task is not confronted but glossed

over so as to preserve a harmonious atmosphere. There is no collaboration without conflict.

Trust takes time, patience and nurturance to develop (Schruijer/Vansina 2004). A paradoxical situation, as managers indicate that in their view collaboration can only be successful if trust is present from the very beginning (Schruijer 2006). It may already help realizing and acknowledging that trust is unlikely to be present from the start. Rather than expecting trust to be present, the question becomes: How to accept the reality of initial distrust while not getting trapped by it, and being able to move forward by continuing to explore and develop a common aim? One needs to think in terms of conditions under which trust can be developed step-by-step, namely by creating a minimal structure and some ground rules or rules of logic that provide some security (Gray, 1989), facilitating face-to-face interactions and securing equity and fairness (Schruijer/Vansina 2004).

The need for contextual and systemic thinking

In both the simulation as in the health care organization I encountered a lack of systemic awareness. This is confirmed by survey results that show that frustrations are easily attributed to persons – managers see representatives' egos as one of the most important obstacles in interorganizational or intergroup collaboration (Schruijer 2006). Of course individuals and their personalities may be a source of difficulties, but it is important to sort out whether difficulties experienced are due to the underlying intergroup relationship, to (incompatibility of) organizational goals, to task complexity, lack of progress, to pressures arising form the context, or indeed to individuals. Individuals may be blamed incorrectly for difficulties, as they are perhaps most visible. Such 'psychologizing' however, is unlikely to solve the problems (Schruijer/Vansina 2006). It is imperative to think in system terms when engaging in multiparty interactions, and to continually sort out whether what is said or done is to be explained at what systemic level (individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup or interorganizational relations, situational), and at what systemic level(s) interventions have to be directed.

Avoiding excessive complexity reduction

Multiparty interactions are complex and get more complex, the larger the number of groups or organizations that take part. The nature of the increased complexity is informational (information overload), social (increased social differentiation), procedural (it gets more difficult to reach consensus) and strategic (a 'tit-for-tat' strategy is more difficult to realize, more coalitions are possible) (Kramer 1991). In dealing with multiparty interactions, a premature and excessive reduction of complexity can be observed. Rather than exploring the goals and interests from a multigroup or multi-organizational perspective extensively and then deciding to collaborate with all parties, with a few parties, or not at all, bilateral agreements are made and coalitions (formal or informal) formed early on in the process. Sadly, coalitions tend to persevere based on relational considerations rather than on task considerations (Polzer, Mannix/Neale 1995). Complexities are also reduced by formalizing the interactions, and overstructuring the process, suppressing possibilities of exploring possibilities spontaneously and generating energy and new insights that way. Finally, calls for a strong leader can be heard; leaders who can reduce the uncertainty, show the way forward and take decisions that everyone can agree with. The latter is unlikely to materialize, certainly not in interorganizational relations where no hierarchy is present and interests may be strongly diverging.

Leadership and multiparty issues

What are the main tasks and competences then of collaborative leaders? How can one avoid reducing complexity prematurely and excessively and promote systemic thinking? Managers themselves list the ability to listen, perseverance, the capacity to bring parties to the table, and insight in the psychological and social dynamics of collaboration as the most important qualities of successful collaborative leaders and sticking to one's principles, building a power base and pushing through one's own ideas as the least important (Schruijer 2006). In case of interorganizational collaboration leaders have no formal authority or power position, and do not try to acquire one. They do however attempt to minimize the influence of power differences between or-

ganizations on the collaboration process. Adopting a neutral position is imperative. He or she needs to be able to create conditions for trust building, by providing for a minimal structure. Finally the leader needs to tolerate uncertainty, be able to stay with 'not knowing', and be capable of dealing with frustrations that are projected onto the leader (see also Chrislip/Larson 1994; Huxham/Vangen 2000a; Schruijer/Vansina 2004). The latter competences proved their importance for the organizational change process of the nursing home. The sponsors did not make plans or decisions on what needed to happen upfront, but allowed a process to take place which helped working through some basic issues, and mobilized the whole organization to jointly define the problems and work towards shared solutions.

Final reflections

Psychology as a discipline can make a contribution to a further understanding and development of successful multiparty relationships, in collaboration with perspectives from different domains such as policy science, sociology, law and economics. To this end it needs to reorient itself, from merely understanding the determinants of conflict and conflict reduction, towards the development of collaboration (Schruijer 2007). Absence of conflict is something quite different from proactive collaboration. Collaborating is hard work and hardly happens without conflicts, frustration and fatigue. Some recommend against collaboration unless there is no other option left (Huxham/ Vangen 2000b). Given the need to collaborate as a consequence of the increasing interdependence between organizations and institutions, collaboration makes an important and interesting field of study. And, given the reported difficulties that pertain to relational issues (distrust, power games, etc), psychology's contribution is necessary. An action research approach rather than an experimental one seems called for, to be able to fathom the complexities and the dynamics over a longer period of time of multiparty collaboration. Action research helps the client system solve its problems; it is needed to understand the complexities of multiparty collaboration, and allows for experiential learning in collaboration.

Yet how can we replace the dominant rhetoric of competition in society and business, or at least complement it, with a rhetoric of collaboration? Universities potentially play and should play an important role in such an endeavor. However, the current university culture can be characterized as instrumental, disengaged, conformist and oriented towards individual performance (Schruijer 2004). Due to a 'publish or perish' ideology, developed as a consequence of a growing competition between universities, research is done that is publishable in the short term. This reinforces a severe reduction of complexity at the expense of implementation validity. Performance indicators, that measure what can be measured, have become an important part of the rhetoric. They offer an illusion of control besides opportunities for comparison. One's place in the ranking serves to convince the larger public about the institution's excellence. Publications numbers, citation indices and student satisfaction scores are seen as indicators of performance. The exclusive focus on indicators induces instrumental behavior such as allowing colleagues to free ride as co-author in return for a similar favor or in terms of mutual citations. Time spent on community activities, either within or outside of the university, is reduced to practically zero. Consistent criticism on the system that is acted upon (rather than on 'malperforming individuals') is rare.

Such a culture stifles a collaborative attitude, a community spirit and engagement with science as a means to contribute to society. If the university does set an example, it is in reinforcing individualism rather than communalism. If we do prepare students for society we prepare them to uncritically sustain the status quo rather than to critically think about change, to think in simple and universal solutions rather than to think in complexities, contingencies and localities. Changes in the teaching and research behavior of academic staff and management, in the universities' priorities and climate and of society's attitudes and expectations concerning science and the business of knowledge are called for. Higher education has a responsibility to prepare students for the complexities of society and help them learn (experientially) about collaboration. It can do so by (i) Creating a climate in which learning from and working with diversity is valued – diversity in terms of demography, discipline, idea, ideology, interests. (ii) Ensuring that diversity among staff and students is present in all its varieties and that the university compo-

sition reflects the population at large. (iii) Creating structures and systems that reinforce such a culture (e.g. truly encouraging multi- or even interdisciplinary adventures rather than just paying lip service to it, reflected in reward, appraisal and career systems). (iv) Building an internal community characterized by dialogue, inclusion, critical reflection and mutual support. (v) Stimulating true collaboration, among staff and students, and learning from such collaboration. (vi) Descending from the ivory tower, being in continuous dialogue with and about society, reflected in for example stimulating action research, (vii) Looking at oneself as a subsystem of larger society and being able to reflect on its role in and contributions towards society (de Bettignies 2000; Reason 2002).

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