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Neue
Aufgabenfelder
für die
interkulturelle
Forschung
New areas for
intercultural research

2011

Cooperation Competence – A Problem-Oriented Model for Successful Interaction in Commercial Alliances

[Kooperationskompetenz – ein problemorientiertes Model zur erfolgreichen Interaktion in Unternehmenskooperationen]

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Abstract [English]

Although alliances gain increasing importance in day-to-day business, they often tend to fail due to interaction problems between the involved. The article outlines the results of a qualitative study of interaction processes in alliances, building on interviews with 52 cooperation experts from seven companies and their alliance partners. It presents a problem-oriented model of successful interaction in alliances that differentiates between typical interaction principles, problem symptoms and causes as well as potential solutions. Due to its problem and interaction perspective, the model transcends traditional approaches of cooperation competence that tend to link alliance success to certain ideal skills of the involved or a "cultural fit" of the partnering companies. Instead it provides practical tools to address and overcome interaction problems in alliances.

Keywords: co-operation, international alliances, intercultural interaction, conflicts in alliances, tools for problem-solving, principles of interaction, cooperation competence

Abstract [Deutsch]

Obwohl Kooperationen im Alltag von Unternehmen eine immer größere Wichtigkeit einnehmen, scheitern sie häufig aufgrund von Interaktionsproblemen zwischen den Beteiligten. Der Artikel beschreibt die Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Untersuchung von Interaktionsprozessen in Kooperationen. Dabei wurden 52 Experten aus sieben Unternehmen und ihren Kooperationspartnern zu ihren Kooperationserfahrungen befragt. Auf dieser Basis wird ein problemorientiertes Modell zur erfolgreichen Gestaltung der Interaktion in Unternehmenskooperationen entwickelt, das zwischen typischen Interaktionsprinzipien, Problemsymptomen, Problemursachen und Lösungsmaßnahmen differenziert. Aufgrund seiner Problem- und Interaktionsorientierung überwindet das Modell übliche Ansätze von Kooperationskompetenz, die den Kooperationserfolg von bestimmten Idealeigenschaften der Beteiligten oder einem "Cultural Fit" abhängig machen. Es liefert die Grundlage für praxistaugliche Instrumente zur Bearbeitung von Kooperationsproblemen.

Stichworte: Kooperation, internationale Allianzen, interkulturelle Interaktionen, Konflikte in Allianzen, Instrumente zur Problemlösung, Interaktionsprinzipien, Kooperationskompetenz

1. Objectives

When asked what cooperation means to their business, most managers will offer the standard response that “cooperation is on the rise and is more global than ever”.

Today, some form of inter-business cooperation is routine in nearly all large organizations. The gradual increase in the importance of alliances among business organizations in the last decades has been well documented (Juch et al. 2007). The prediction that strategic alliances – cooperation between partners that preserves their respective legal and economic sovereignty – would challenge the importance of mergers and acquisitions (Gilroy 1993:114) appears to have come true. Since the 1990's, the number of corporate partnerships of all kinds has increased dramatically while international cooperation has become twice as common as national partnerships (cf. Stüdlein 1997:3, Anand / Khanna 2000:296, OECD 2001:25). At the beginning of the new millennium, the top 500 global businesses are estimated to manage an average of 60 major strategic alliances each (Dyer / Kale / Singh 2001:37). The increased importance of partnerships has been precipitated by a number of factors. First of all, rapidly changing market conditions have left many companies unable to bear the costs and risks of e.g. new product development without external assistance, due to their lack of necessary resources on relevant levels of value creation or in relevant markets. Entry into some kind of business alliance has thus become an inevitable reality (cf. Kauser / Shaw 2004:17), especially due to the notion that it is not possible to simply buy up every potential partner (Zentes et al. 2003:20). This development has been facilitated by the liberalization of world trade, the global opening of markets, and the further development of new information and communication technologies (cf. Holtbrügge 2003:876, Friedli / Schuh 2003:496, Berg / Schmitt 2003:297f.).

But just as plentiful as the good reasons for the establishment of commercial alliances are the reports of cooperation gone wrong. Some early authors present exorbitantly high failure rates for business alliances reaching up to 70% in some reports (Spekman et al. 1996:346, Geringer / Hebert 1991:250).

There is, however, relatively clear consensus that the reasons for the obviously high rate of failure to reach expected business goals in a cooperative venture cannot be reduced exclusively to failure in the economic sphere. While technical, financial, and strategic missteps certainly contribute to high rates of failure, inadequate communication and interaction between the organizations involved appear to be central reasons for frequently disappointing results.

Various studies on the subject identify a number of potential sources for the problem. Friedli and Schuh, for example, address the role of conflict, restrictions in the cooperative environment, unclear or incomplete goal-setting and an over-emphasis on the importance of the initial cooperative conditions (2003:498). Many sources discuss existing cultural differences as a frequent source of difficulty in commercial alliances (Stüdlein 1997:92, Apfelthaler 1999:14, Strähle 2004:207, Juch et al. 2007).

In this way, commercial alliances are increasingly being understood as complex communicative systems of interaction between the representatives of multiple organizations. Strategic alliances are especially precarious in this respect since, as the partner has not been “acquired”, the cooperation remains one of constant negotiation that can be potentially endangered by any conflict that may arise. The ability of a company – or of the individuals representing it – to create a productive environment for the establishment of genuine interaction must then be recognized as a central criterion for successful commercial cooperation.

To date, there is no single comprehensive theoretical model that addresses commercial cooperation as a system of complex interaction, from which specific standards of success and solution strategies might be derived (Nippa et al. 2007:282).

The objective of this article is to present an overview of the results of a study that has been conducted to describe the ability of an organization to cooperate, that is, its *cooperation competence*, within the framework of an interaction-oriented model. The study addressed the following key questions related to the successful practical management of alliance interaction:

- What are the fundamental principles of communicative interaction that are most relevant in a context of commercial cooperation?
- How can developing conflicts in interaction be recognized at an early stage?
- What are the best solution strategies in dealing with interaction conflicts in an alliance?

2. Methodology

The investigation was undertaken from 2005 to 2008 under the auspices of the Bertelsmann Foundation’s “Corporate Culture in Global Interaction” project (Rathje 2008). The study examined the responses of a total of 52 experts on business alliances from seven different companies and their

partner companies. The participants were engaged in one-hour interviews on the subject of their experiences involved in business alliances. The conditions for participation were as follows: candidate organizations must be involved in at least one cooperative venture in which the companies involved retained financial and legal sovereignty. Participating companies were Airbus S.A.S., Arcandor AG, Deutsche Bahn AG, Endress + Hauser GmbH, IBM GmbH, Melitta GmbH & Co. KG and SAP AG.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research objectives, the study employed a qualitative empirical approach. The acquisition of data was achieved through the use of open but thematically guided expert interviews. Interview topics included descriptions of standard problems in business alliances as well as success factors and problem-solving strategies while engaged in commercial cooperation. Economic, political, and legal considerations were essentially eliminated from the discussions, ensuring that the interview subjects would concentrate on the challenges of cooperative interaction.

Interview candidates were chosen based upon their leadership positions within the alliance or from the top management directly. Candidates must have been either directly active in the cooperation process or have been involved in the planning and conceptualization of the actual alliance. Altogether, there were 24 face-to-face interviews and 28 telephone interviews in German and English undertaken by two trained interviewers. All conversations were recorded and transcribed. The evaluation of the results followed a three-level coding process consistent with the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1979). In order to ensure the quality of the model formulation, the first phase of coding was accomplished by three independent coders and their results compared. The end results of the modeling were finally validated in a series of workshops with the participation of interview participants and external observers.

3. Results of the Study

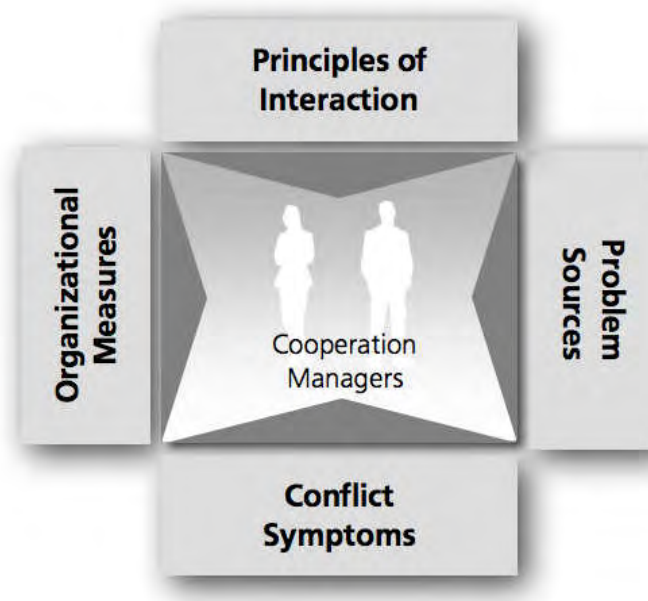
Because of its grounded nature, emphasis in the study was placed upon the analysis of concrete experiences in specific cooperative situations and the individual cases offered by the interview participants. The results were developed into a problem-oriented model for the establishment of successful interaction in commercial alliances that postulates no ideal standard, but rather describes the interaction process within an alliance from the perspective of the participants. This approach ensures that the model can then serve as a source for

practice-oriented behavioral management recommendations in cooperative environments.

The model itself is composed of four interdependent elements present in a context of commercial cooperation: a) principles of interaction, b) symptoms of conflict, c) problem sources, and d) organizational measures (see exh. 1).

As a result of the study, it has become possible to recognize a number of principles of interaction (a) that appear to be crucial to successful commercial cooperation. The violation of these interaction principles typically elicits a variety of conflict symptoms (b) rooting in specific problem sources (c). At the center of the model is the cooperation manager that operates and observes the cooperative process and, in the event that any problem symptoms arise, analyzes their sources and proposes appropriate organizational counter-measures (d).

The individual elements of the model will be described in more detail below.



Exh. 1: Problem-oriented interaction model of cooperative competence

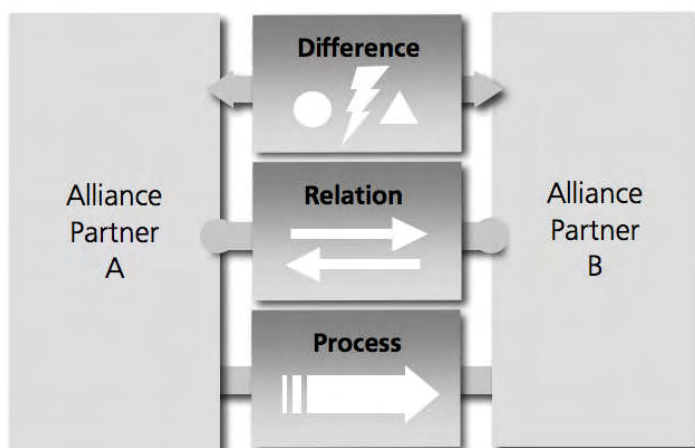
3.1 Principles of Interaction

Although every commercial alliance is unique in its structure, goals, and the individuals involved, the results of this study demonstrate that there are indeed certain fundamental conditions present in cooperative efforts regardless of the precise type of alliance in question (see exh. 2):

- *Difference*: In every commercial alliance, the fact that the partner organization is itself an entity that is not one's own must be accepted. The participants must therefore be willing to learn how to deal with difference in much

more intensive ways than needed in their daily working context.

- *Relationship*: In every alliance, one must understand that cooperation is only possible after a relationship between the participants has been established and maintained, since cooperative interaction is not controlled by hierarchical power structures.
- *Process*: To be successful, every partnership requires the active establishment of a functional communication and work process within a certain (usually limited) amount of time.



Exh. 2: Universal conditions of interaction in commercial alliances

From these three fundamental challenges, general behavioral principles can then be drawn that help in dealing with difference in the cooperative environment, in establishing work relationships, and in creating appropriate work processes. The study revealed six central principles of interaction for each of the three challenges (see exh. 3), the implementation of which has been shown to be of critical importance to successful interaction in commercial alliances.

3.1.1 Principles of Interaction related to Coping with Difference

Transfer of Perspective – This principle describes the ability to adopt the cooperation partner's perspective. One important requirement in this respect is the distance one has to his or her own role in the organization. Cooperation managers who possess such "role distance" regularly place themselves in the position of their partners to find out whether the goals and conditions are adequate for both sides. If such a transfer of perspective is lacking, it is likely that feelings of alienation or an adversarial atmosphere arise during the partnership.

Willingness to Compromise – This principle represents the recognition that one's own demands may never be fully met when acting in cooperation with partners. If this willingness is not present on both sides of the cooperative venture, the result may be a hardening of the opposing positions leading to great frustration within partnered teams.

Recognition of Cultural Relativity – This principle describes the ability to recognize that a cooperation partner will necessarily have different values and behavioral standards than might be present in one's own organization. "Cultural relativity" in this case does not refer exclusively to national characteristics, but instead comprises a much broader usage referring to various forms of regional, corporate, or professional culture. If the ability to recognize that unexpected behavior is not necessarily less correct or less valuable is missing, as a result, the partners tend to engage in highly inefficient standardization activities, losing track of the actual goals of the cooperation.

Belief in Similarity – This principle corresponds to the ability to concentrate on commonalities in interaction with alliance partners. The sympathetic concentration on common ground in the face of clear differences between the organizations can form a strong foundation for a shared sense of community. Without a belief in similarity, team spirit will be adversely affected potentially leading to an escalation in conflicts to follow.

Respect – In this study, the concept of respect is used to indicate one's willingness to treat cooperation participants as equals regardless of the actual partnership conditions. This investigation shows that mutual respect is, in fact, a rare commodity. Most companies feel themselves to be superior to their partners, and from this assumption they derive justification for contemptuous or even insulting behavior. Every example of disrespectful communication, however, leads to a deterioration of the cooperative relationship starting with a poor work atmosphere and leading up to a "loss of face," that may cause irreparable damage to the partnership.

Willingness to Learn – The last of the principles of interaction describes the ability to recognize the value of the cooperation with the partner for the further development of one's own organization. From this perspective, difference might be interpreted as a learning opportunity. In the long term, a lack of willingness to learn can lead to stagnation in the company or gridlock in the specific partnership in question.

3.1.2 Principles of Interaction in the Establishment of Relationships

Transparency – This principle indicates the implementation of active measures to allow cooperative partners comprehensive insight into all matters relevant to the partnership. Should this openness be refused, the natural work dynamic will often be disrupted resulting in mistrust on the relationship level and an increased likelihood that the partnership will end unsuccessfully.

Demonstration of Commitment – This principle refers to both the ability and the commitment of both partners to regularly prove their desire to contribute to the success of the existing partnership. Without these frequent demonstrations, the cooperation will lack a significant communicative function. Any progress made in the building of personal trust and relationships may be rendered worthless and the cooperation itself found to be deficient.

Attention to Situational Detail – As every partnership is unique in its development and the constellation of personalities involved, previous experience cannot be applied to present situations without modification. This principle recognizes that organizations tend to project previous (negative) involvement into their present partnerships. If the recognition that each cooperation is unlike any other not present among the participants from the very beginning, the potential for an innovative partnership can be seriously limited.

Balance of Advantages – This principle describes the willingness, on the part of both parties, to draw a fair and equal level of advantage from the partnership as well as to purposefully forgo one-sided short-term gains. If this is not the case and the parties are unwilling to balance the advantages with those of their partner, one side may become dominant leading to a fatal imbalance in the cooperative relationship.

Anticipatory Trust – From the very beginning, alliance partners should be ready to offer their trust to their counterparts in the allied organization without necessarily requiring that the trust be earned. Despite the high risk of being taken advantage of in such situations, this strategy of anticipatory trust has been shown to be more effective in practice than the failure to reach a productive relationship due to initial mistrust.

Relational Rationality – This principle in the establishment of relationships seems paradoxical at first: Despite the necessary personal engagement required to build a strong professional relationship, managers directly involved in the cooperation must retain a certain emotional distance from the interactions

related to the partnership to promote sober decision-making. If, however, relational rationality is absent and the hierarchical cooperative structure is instead completely replaced by excessively emotional conditions, simple disagreements can escalate into serious private conflicts.

3.1.3 Principles of Interaction in Process Formation

Timeliness – This interaction principle refers to the ability to react and to solve problems or overcome obstacles in the cooperation process quickly and efficiently. Although this demand is certainly relevant to general project management in a variety of contexts, it is of critical importance in cooperative situations due to the looser organizational framework that lacks influential regulation. If timeliness is impossible, existing unsolved differences between the parties may quickly develop momentum in one organization in a way that is completely intransparent to the partner.

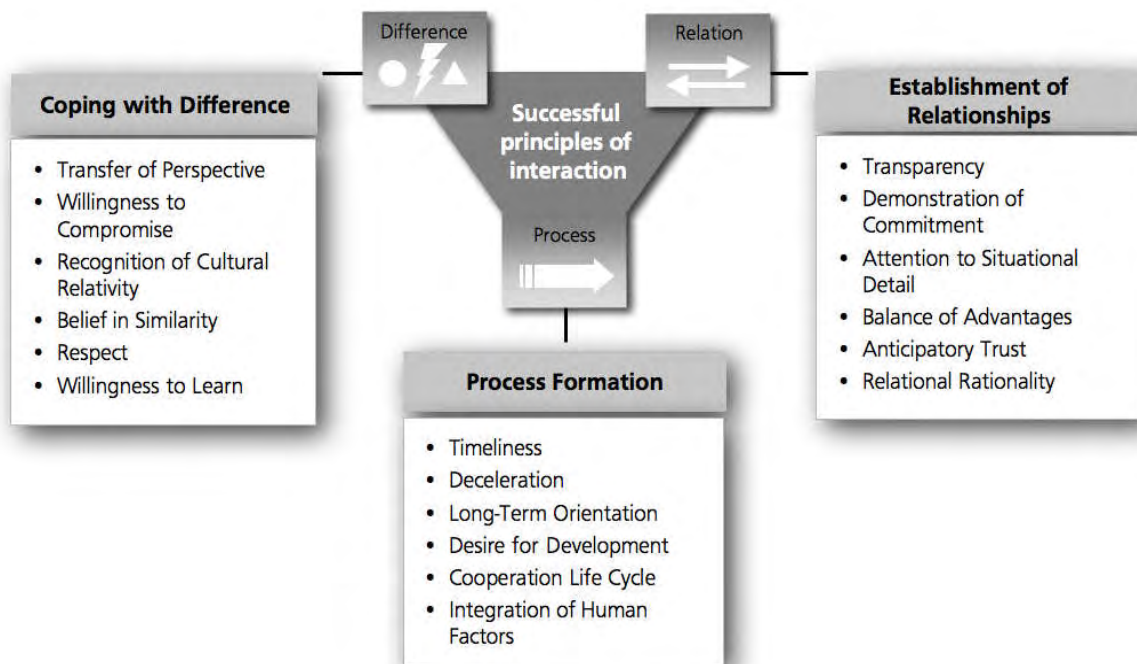
Deceleration – This principle indicates the necessity of escalation control in the management of cooperative processes. Possible escalation situations and their channels need to be identified prior to the beginning of the alliance. If this is not done adequately, escalation might proceed uncontrolled through several levels of the hierarchy. At that point, the partnership typically reaches a “point of no return” when a “loss of face” at the highest levels has occurred.

Long-Term Orientation – This familiar term refers to the recognition that the establishment of every partnership represents a significant investment of resources that is returned only in the middle- and long-term. If partners do not possess patience and a long-term perspective, the necessary initial investments are avoided and lead directly to the failure of the cooperation in the earliest stages.

Desire for Development – This principle is closely aligned to the long-term orientation principle. It represents a willingness to work together with the alliance partners even beyond the stated goals. If this principle is not practiced among the cooperation partners, long-term efficiency and the potential for synergy may not be recognized and properly exploited.

Cooperation Life Cycle – An understanding of the life cycle of the cooperation is expressed in the ability to adapt work processes to the present phase of the cooperative effort. This study demonstrates that alliances between firms need different working processes at different times throughout the partnership. If there is inadequate process flexibility, the initially defined processes become ends in themselves resulting in frustration among the participants.

Integration of Human Factors – This principle refers to the ability to systematically integrate phases for personal exchange into more operative activities of the cooperation. Due to the common understanding of professionalism oriented towards rationality and performance, this principle is often overlooked leading to gradual reductions in motivation. In this case, the cooperation stays vulnerable to the smallest differences despite operational efficiency.



Exh. 3: Successful principles of interaction in commercial cooperation

3.2 Symptoms of Defective Interaction

If, in fact, the principles of interaction are not observed in a cooperative partnership, problem symptoms arise. The manifestation of certain underlying problem sources in certain symptoms progresses according to a dynamic process of its own: The existence of a specific symptom, therefore, does not necessarily lead back to a single related cause. The symptoms of defective interaction are plenty and therefore cannot be exhaustively addressed. Building upon the Conflict Escalation Model of Glasl (2004:234 ff.), it is possible, however, to reduce the overall complexity of symptom variety into several degrees of severity.

The following segment presents this classification of problem symptoms into three different categories.

3.2.1 Recognition of Opposition

The various symptoms of the first phase of conflict are characterized by the recognition of opposition. Often, these symptoms occur in the initial phases of the alliance when the partners are unfamiliar to each other and a sense of community among the participants is still lacking. Typical symptoms in this phase include the feeling of insecurity towards the partner, the use of stereotypes to describe the partners and their behavior, unclear roles or interpersonal tension.

Should these symptoms arise at a later phase in the cooperation after the partners are better acquainted, they may indicate the existence of a deeper conflict in the partnership.

3.2.2 Choosing of Sides / Defensiveness

The second level is characterized by the choosing of sides and the hardening of the fronts, indicating the existence of serious cooperation problems. In such a situation, the partners are no longer seen as such, but are often rather considered to be opponents. At this point the relationship is no longer built upon a sense of common effort, but rather upon categories of "us and them." Typical symptoms of this kind include general mistrust of the partners, feelings of antipathy and frustration towards the cooperative venture, accusations and blame, and a decrease in the intensity of the engagement with the other group eventually leading to a total lack of communication. Symptoms of this type require quick and long-lasting solutions to prevent their further decline into the third phase and the complete failure of the partnership.

3.2.3 Uncooperative Behavior

The third phase and the most serious symptoms of deep problems in the partnership are characterized by uncooperative behavior that can be described as harmful to further cooperation. Demonstrations of power, competitive behavior, and even challenges (explicit or implicit) to the partner organization become normal forms of interaction at this level. If no action is taken to intervene with these forms of destructive behavior, they will continue to escalate. Although improving relations and saving the partnership in this phase is still possible, albeit requiring external help, the leadership on both sides must consider either ending the partnership or seriously analyze the costs and benefits of trying to preserve it.

The study demonstrates that, when confronted with the kinds of problem symptoms described above, managers tend to develop countermeasures as quickly as possible. These countermeasures will, however, often only address the symptom. According to one interview partner, "Work groups will

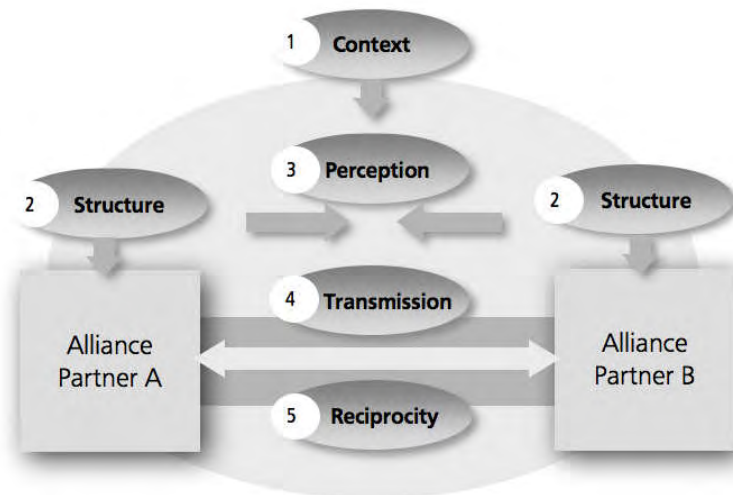
be organized ad hoc and the countermeasures are put into place. But the more you try, the more you start to think that the real problem might be that you have the wrong partner.”

A number of examples from this study show that a careful root cause analysis as a standard procedure when dealing with other business-related problems often simply does not occur because problem symptoms are perceived as a permanent condition in cooperation settings. As a result, participants focus on a sporadic curing of symptoms. An example might be the decision to react to a perceived lack of communication from the partners by deciding to call more often. While increasing the intensity of communication may indeed revive a damaged process of interaction, the deeper source of the partners' reluctance to communicate is not addressed. The examples from this study clearly show that the opposite is actually the case: Fighting symptoms alone does not cause them to disappear completely, but rather they will reappear in a new form.

3.3 Problem Sources of Defective Interaction

As has already been shown, the symptoms of defective communication in a cooperative venture may serve as indicators that certain fundamental principles of interaction have been violated. The symptoms do not, however, offer clear evidence of precisely which of the principles are not being observed nor what the actual source of the conflict could be. The study did not suggest any direct connection between certain symptoms and a single related cause, allowing the assumption that the diagnosis of symptoms and the discovery of the problems that cause them have to be treated separately and independently.

The origins of the problems, as one might expect, are as various as the symptoms that they produce. The study revealed, however, that they can be organized according to their most appropriate solution strategy, leading to a useful typology of interaction problems in cooperative ventures that inherently contain the key to promising operational measures. Overall, the study identified five such types of problem sources: a) context, b) structure, c) perception, d) transmission, and e) reciprocity (see exh. 4).



Exh. 4: Typology of problem sources in commercial cooperation

Context Problems – This type results from the peripheral conditions that lie beyond the influence of either party. Examples include political influence (e.g. state control or market regulation), uncertainty in market developments, or forced cooperation (e.g. in markets characterized by monopolistic activities in which cooperation partners cannot be chosen freely). One typical result of context problems is the limitation of the pace of the cooperative effort along with unsatisfactory work results, delays in the various processes and the repetition of known difficulties. According to the research, context problems have a large presence in the many discussions regarding problem diagnosis, most likely because they allow the partners to complain about the conditions of the cooperation without having to accuse other individuals directly.

Structure Problems – This class of problems includes those difficulties originating in either the organizational layout of the partner institution or in the framework of the cooperation project itself. Some standard structural complaints might include a project structure that is incompatible with the goals of the partnership, unclear distribution of responsibilities or decision-making capabilities, a lack of support for the cooperative venture on the part of upper management, or even a decline in motivation among the employees involved. Structure problems appear to be unavoidable because they are rooted in the organizational differences of the partnering companies. Since they frequently result from factual systemic conditions that can be analyzed and addressed, they generally prove to be resolvable.

Perception Problems – Problems of this type originate in the inaccurate assessment (mutual or otherwise) of the cooperation partner, specifically and frequently related to perceived differences in the estimation of a partner's competitiveness.

This study shows that nearly all companies tended to attribute a lower competitive value to the partner organization than to one's own. Other examples of perception problems included perceived cultural differences and, accordingly, differences in their evaluation. In day-to-day cooperation scenarios, these assessments of the partners' competence and culture are often mixed and intertwined. In general, perception problems are much more difficult to deal with than structure problems since they are directly connected to the partners' self-perception.

Transmission Problems - Transmission problems are those related to the processes of exchange and the flow of information between the partners in the cooperation. These are often expressed through disruptions in the normal exchange of information, internal data access and retrieval processes as well as in simple language difficulties between the parties. This type of problem is usually easily identified and can normally be solved by implementing strictly procedural measures. Due to their seemingly trivial origins, however, such as in the example of foreign language difficulties, the effects of this class of problem are frequently underestimated and "hushed up" for fear of losing face.

Reciprocity Problems – This final category of problem refers to the relational equivalence and balance between the cooperation partners as the foundation of all cooperative relationships. Since the partners in the business alliance constantly find themselves in a state of interdependence, they are forced to actively maintain their reciprocal status in order to keep the partnership viable. The standard causes of reciprocity problems are, for example, an unequal power distribution among partners, tension between concurrent cooperative and competitive relationships among the partnering companies, and a lack of common goals or hidden conflicts between cooperation objectives. The solving of reciprocity problems is essential to save the continuity of the partnership. Due to the fundamental nature of issues of reciprocity, dealing with problems of this type requires that partners are able to effectively cope with conflict situations.

3.4 Organizational Measures

Based on the classification of problem types according to their potential solutions, each problem type is directly linked to adequate organizational measures. That is, for each problem type, a general rule for acting has been identified as a rough guide for the appropriate handling of the problem in question.

For *context problems* the simple rule becomes “assess and accept!”. There can be no actual solution to context problems, since the problem source lies beyond the jurisdiction of any member of either team. To deal with context problems, therefore, one must engage in a careful estimation of the problem’s real significance, which must then be accepted by all parties. The following measures correspond to this kind of strategy:

- Clearly identify the context problem in accordance with the cooperation partner
- Evaluate its significance for the cooperation
- Exclude all potential ways of influencing or controlling the problem (or otherwise: adjust the problem classification)
- Determine a way of dealing with the context problem.

In this way, for example, the context problem of changing political influence in a state-owned enterprise can be anticipated at the beginning of the cooperation by establishing flexible time buffers in the cooperation roadmap around election time in anticipation of reduced productivity.

The rule for *structure problems* might be formulated this way: “change it or leave it!”. Either the cooperation team determines a certain structural element to be inappropriate and changes it, or the teams make a decision to arrange themselves with the structures as they are. Organizational measures for structural changes include:

- New definition of the project structure
- Clear alignment of responsibilities and decision-making processes
- Confirmation of a commitment from upper management
- Motivation of the employees involved in the project.

In case of limited ability to act or lower priority of the problem, there is always the option to simply resign oneself to the structures as they are. In this case, it is crucial to ensure that the structure problem be seen as solved by the members of both groups involved in the partnership.

Perception problems can only be solved when the cooperation partners are capable of enough self-reflection to appropriately communicate about their differences and show willingness for personal development. The rule for this class of problem, therefore, should be “reflect and grow!”. Strategies to deal with perception problems draw heavily from human resource development as well as from professional training and coaching. Some common examples include:

- Individual training (e.g. general intercultural training to increase awareness and the expression of differences, language courses to develop an appreciation of the language of the partner organization)
- Group training or coaching (e.g. team development)
- Face-to-face accomplishment of tasks (including the sending of employees to the partner organization).

When dealing with perception problems, success depends on the awareness of each cooperating partner that improvements in this area are only possible through changes of oneself.

Unlike perception problems, there are no excuses for *transmission problems* since they tend to be easy to discover and can typically be solved procedurally. The simple formulation of the rule thus would be "identify and solve!". Difficulties in transmission must be addressed as quickly as possible since they have the potential to adversely affect the entire process of cooperation. Depending on the cause of the individual problem at hand, the following measures might be taken:

- Re-definition of direct channels of communication
- Redundant use of various communications media
- Effective IT-access in relevant branches
- Development of a knowledge management database for the partnership
- Professional support from translators, interpreters, etc.

The solution to transmission problems should take first priority since it assures the continuity of communication between the cooperation partners.

Reciprocity problems cannot be solved quite so quickly and easily. The rule of thumb for this category of problem is "analyze and talk and talk!". Problems rooted in a lack of equality must be examined very closely by means of a cause-and-effect analysis, and can finally only be solved through intensive communication with the relevant partner. This study has revealed that in many cases, it seems necessary to first increase the intensity of communication in order to reestablish a functioning work climate. Only then it becomes possible to address the fundamental problems of reciprocity. Measures in this category include:

- Joint establishment of goals (uncovering of potentially conflicting objectives)
- Mapping of the conflict potential between competition and cooperation (e.g. open communication regarding competitive overlap, necessary organizational borders like “Chinese Walls”, agreement on sanctions for violations of the agreed terms)
- Control of conflict escalation (including agreements for behavior in conflict situations).

When working on solutions to reciprocity problems, one must always consider the possibility that the alliance should be terminated when conditions of balanced reciprocity simply cannot be established.

The various measures related to potential problems presented here cover only a small segment of the broad spectrum of possibilities. When developing appropriate organizational strategies, it is critical that the measures undertaken directly address the problem at hand. Team building trainings, for example, would not be effective measures against serious problems in the reciprocity among project partners. The identification of the relevant source of the problem must thus be embedded in the cooperation process as a task of crucial importance. Particularly, when performed collectively with the partner, the likelihood of finding a successful solution to the problem rises significantly.

4. Conclusions

In the concluding segment, the proposed problem-oriented model of cooperation competence will be placed into the larger context of research in the field and will then be briefly evaluated according to its practical usefulness.

4.1 Theoretical Placement of the Model

The model of interaction-oriented alliance competence presented in this article appears to be compatible with existing research approaches that describe and investigate alliance competence as a multidimensional construct (cf. Spekman et al. 2000, Meyer 2004, Von der Oelsnitz / Graf 2006). Addressing both individual competence of alliance managers as well as organizational competence of the companies involved, the model commits itself to synergetic approaches of alliance competence that emphasize the interdependency of differing dimensions of competence on different organizational levels (Meyer 2004:142, Von der Oelsnitz / Graf 2006:90).

In addition, there is frequent overlap between the principles of successful interaction identified by the study and some dimensions of existing structural models of alliance competence. Principles like e.g. *willingness to learn*, *anticipatory trust*, *balance of advantages* or *transfer of perspective* bear equivalences with structural dimensions found by Meyer (2004:145) like willingness to learn, ability to trust, cooperation mindset, and shared understanding.

Unlike the existing approaches, the principles of interaction derived from this study, however, do not conform to the common division into cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of competence. Instead, they are grouped according to the three universal conditions in cooperation (difference, relation, and process), thus allowing for a stronger and straighter grounding in the research topic: The model identifies only those competence dimensions that are crucial for the process of cooperation and avoids the common weakness of standard list and structural models that tend to accumulate an unmanageable number of sub-competences describing nothing other than general social competence.

Through the addition of problem symptoms and the typology of problem sources and organizational measures, the model reaches beyond the static descriptions of various competences to offer perspective into the interaction. While existing competence models typically suggest the possibility of ideal standards that can be attained through perfect implementation of the necessary competences, the model offered here assumes that in fact conflict situations in cooperations are absolutely normal. Parties involved in cooperative interaction should hence not chase the ideal of perfect communication but rather focus on permanent and systematic problem diagnosis and handling.

Furthermore, with its contents the model transcends the concept of “cultural fit” (Juch et al. 2007) that is present in much of the international management research on alliances. This common approach that strongly emphasizes the necessity of a cultural “fit” as a requirement for success assumes that cultural compatibility can be measured and estimates of the cultural fit can be used to predict the likelihood of success. Research results, however, do not support the demand for cultural homogeneity between partners in an alliance. Independent of the level of objective similarity between partner organizations, differences arise in every cooperation, and dealing with these differences remains the fundamental task for all cooperative ventures. The perception of the difficulties among the interview partners in the study did not correspond to their estimation of their own similarity with their partners, but was rather assigned to specific situational circumstances

of the cooperation. Success-oriented cooperation should therefore not be based on the chimera of “cultural fit”, but rather an overall emphasis should be placed on the individual and collective development of interaction competence.

From a more critical standpoint, limitations of the model are mainly due to the limitations common in qualitative research: Although the model does possess pragmatic plausibility, its individual components and their dimensions (e.g. the principles of interaction or the typology of problem sources) have yet to be quantitatively tested for mutual exclusiveness and collective exhaustiveness. Further quantitative confirmation of the model is recommended to overcome its hypothetical character and ensure its validity.

4.2 Practical Value of the Model

Due to its problem-oriented nature, the model is designed to support successful practical applications for the management of alliances. So far, several different practical tools that help managers in their daily cooperation work have been derived from the model, including a computer-based symptom diagnostic or a moderation tool for problem analysis (cf. Rathje 2009).

The results of the before mentioned validation workshops show that the components of the model (interaction principles, problem symptoms, sources and measures) follow a logic that proves to be highly compatible with the common way of project planning in management, thus making touchy concepts like interaction and communication more easily accessible. This compatibility proves to be a major prerequisite for managers to assign equal importance to communication issues versus more tangible aspects of business cooperation and thus to establish systematic communication processes.

In this way, the model furthermore fosters a revised, more communication-oriented understanding of management. It calls the standard model of the manager as a high-performance personality whose individual competence serves as the guarantee for success into question. Instead, it emphasizes the systemic embedding of the acting individuals in complex reciprocal relationships. It points out that cooperation success does not depend on the quasi-superhuman efforts of selected top managers, but rather is a result of constant collective strive for continued communication. The acceptance of conflicts and difference as unavoidable systemic aspects of any cooperative venture can, under optimal conditions, reduce the pressure to perform and lead to improved resilience among the individuals involved.

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