Additional case studies

Knowledge Sharing and Co-creation in Cross Functional Teams: Transcending Knowledge Differences

Relevant to: Chapter 13 (Cross Community Knowledge Processes)

Majchrzak et al. (2012) present their analysis of three qualitative case studies of cross functional collaborations which were tasked with addressing challenging and novel problems. Their key research question was to identify the practices that these teams used in developing solutions for the problems they were addressing. In terms of Carlile's framework of boundary types, the type of collaboration they examined involved the spanning of pragmatic boundaries. Carlile's typology of boundary types suggests that collaboration of this type involves dealing with conflicting knowledge-based interests and that there will be an inevitable need for some participants in the collaboration to change and transform their knowledge. Majchrzak et al .argue that to do so involves 'deep' levels of dialogue, where people require to develop a shared understanding of each other's perspective through communicating and sharing deeply held values and knowledge in a language that is understandable to others. Such processes are typically time consuming to engage in, and are also risky, in that the conflicts of interest involved may mean that these communication attempts do not succeed. Majchrzak et al. label this the 'transverse' approach to knowledge integration.

However, in all three collaborations that Majchrzak et al. examined, a different approach to knowledge integration and problem solving was utilized. In all cases this method avoided the need for people to both directly confront any difference of interest or perspective that existed, or even engage in a process of 'deep' dialoguing. Majchrzak et al. label this a 'transcending' approach to knowledge integration. The focus of their paper is on describing the five practices that were involved in the process of transcending knowledge differences. Before examining these practices, it is useful to give a little detail on the research methods they used, and on the type of cross functional collaboration they were examining.

The three collaborative projects examined all had similar characteristics. Firstly, they were intra-organizational cross functional collaborations, involving people from different parts of the same organization. Secondly, they were novel collaborations concerned with addressing complex and challenging problems that affected their whole organization. Thirdly, membership of the project teams was fluid, and people had typically weak ties with each other, possessing limited inter-personal knowledge. For example, one project, labelled Team Space was within an industrial design firm. The company had grown significantly in size, both in terms of numbers of employees and the number of sites that they worked at. There was a concern that the growth of the company was undermining the open and collaborative culture that had typically characterized the company. The project team, involving staff from all corporate sites, was tasked with rethinking how space within the company was used so that the open, collaborative culture could be retained. With all three project teams that were researched, in depth qualitative studies were undertaken which involved interviewing project team members before and after the project as well as observing project team meetings.

The remainder of the case gives a brief overview of each of the five practices that, combined, helped the project teams that were researched to transcend their knowledge differences and produce successful solutions without the need to directly engage with any knowledge-based conflict that existed. The first practice the teams engaged in was labelled '*voicing fragments*'. This involved project team members quickly sharing very brief individual observations and initial thoughts about the problem. These thoughts were not evaluated, critiqued, or elaborated, and they were also depersonalized as the people articulating them didn't give details of their personal background. The sharing of these fragments created an environment of psychological safety where people felt it was safe to share their insights into the nature of the problem being addressed, and also helped create a sense of shared endeavour.

The second practice utilized was labelled '*co-creating the scaffold*'. While Majchrzak et al. don't use the terminology of boundary objects, the scaffold can be conceptualized as a boundary object. The scaffold consisted of a visual or verbal representation that encompassed a diverse range of the fragments that had been articulated. This stage was still not directly focussed on finding a solution to the focal problem but was instead concerned with developing a shared understanding of the nature of the problem being examined. The creation of the scaffold avoided the need for people to engage in deep dialogue as people articulated their ideas in relation to the emergent scaffold. For example, in one project team, the scaffold was a visual image of a long corridor with different doors on it that people would walk down. Once this team focussed on this image as a scaffold, project team members articulated their understanding of the problem in terms that directly related to the corridor metaphor.

The third practice, where initial solutions to the problem being examined were proposed and considered was labelled, '*dialoguing around the scaffold*'. This stage involved different people proposing solutions which related to the scaffold that had developed. Different possible solutions were rapidly considered until one was agreed upon by people as being suitable. Inter-personal conflict was avoided at this stage through people remaining focussed on the shared problem, and the collectively developed scaffold rather than any differences of opinion that existed.

The fourth practice was labelled '*moving the scaffold aside*' and involved the project team presenting their tentative solutions to external stakeholders who were not involved in the projects. At this stage, when presentations were made, the project teams found that they could more effectively communicate their ideas to these stakeholders if they focussed on describing the proposed solution rather than trying to give details on the scaffold they had used to develop it. When attempts were made to describe the scaffold to stakeholders they typically found them difficult to understand.

The fifth and final practice of these project teams identified by Majchrzak et al. was labelled '*sustaining engagement*'. This involved people avoiding the temptation to address individual differences in understanding, and instead remain focussed on the common solution that had been co-created in the teams

Question:

1) In the three cases examined, despite the differences of perspective possessed and the novel and complex nature of the problems addressed, significant inter-personal conflict was avoided. How typical do you think these cases are? To what extent do you think it is possible for inter-personal conflict resulting from people's different perspectives to be avoided in such situations?

Source: Majchrzak, A., More, P., Faraj, S. (2012). 'Transcending Knowledge Differences in Cross Functional Teams'. *Organization Science*, 23/4: 951-970.