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Revisiting Shared Meaning and It's Utility for Understanding Multi-party Collaboration

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Shared meaning is frequently referenced as a critical component of multiparty collaboration (Bechky, 2003; Miranda & Saunders, 2003; Hagel III & Seely-Brown, 2005; Standifer, & Bluedorn, 2006). Partners are expected to have shared goals, shared understandings of the issue or problem and ultimately to share interpretations about what should be done about it. While such meanings are not inherent when collaborative partners first meet, there is a powerful (often unspoken and untested) assumption that eventually, if the collaboration is successful, the partners will reach some common interpretations (Gray, 1989). Other scholars, however, have been more circumspect about collaborative partners reaching coincident meanings (Donnellon, Gray & Bougon, 1986; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) or having shared aims (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), leaving open the question about whether or not shared meaning is an essential component of collaborative partnerships.

To answer this question, we draw on a wide array of literature in which shared meanings or collective cognitions have been investigated. Interestingly, this general construct has been operationalized rather differently in different theoretical traditions. For example, social psychologists refer to shared mental models (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994) while institution theorists study the importance of shared logics for institutionalization (Zilber, 2002; Lounsbury, 2002). Still others have examined cognitive maps (Carley, 1997; Eden & Ackerman, 1998) and even scholars studying discourse conceive of it as broadly-shared constructions of meaning (Potter & Weatherall, 1990; Heracleous, 2006). Although these various conceptualizations of shared meaning purportedly capture the same underlying construct, there are subtle, but important differences, in how each theoretical tradition constructs the meaning of shared meaning.

Our ultimate purpose in conducting this review is to sort out these various constructions of shared meaning and explore the relevance of the shared meaning construct for collaborative alliances. Several theoretical traditions claim a direct relationship between the establishment of shared meaning and the achievement of successful collaboration. For example, mental models folks (Mathieu, Heffner, Goodwin, Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2000) and transactive memory researchers (Brandon & Hollingshead, 2004) have found that teams with shared meaning outperform those

without it. Sensemaking scholars, however, are more circumspect, arguing that plausible, not necessarily coincident, meanings may be sufficient to coordinate parties' actions (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Discourse scholars (Heracleous, 2006) suggest some meanings are shared, but others are suppressed. Together these studies raise questions about what exactly is it that is shared when scholars refer to shared meanings.

Consequently, we propose the need for a configurational view of shared meaning that breaks down the notion of shared meaning into several key components. A configurational view suggests there is considerable variation among approaches with respect to “what” is shared and how much overlap constitutes “sharing”. For example, shared meaning can arise when parties: (1) Use the same signifier to describe their understanding of a situation or phenomenon, (2) adopt the same connotation for the signifier, (3) have a proportional amount of shared meaning (e.g., some overlap and some differences in their interpretations of the signifier; (4) Know what another means by a signifier, (5) Know the extent of overlap in the meanings signified by the signifier. Additionally, configurations of shared meaning can shift over time suggesting that static conceptions of the term may be insufficient.

We tease out the components of a configurational model of shared meaning, show how different configurations emphasize different assumptions about what is shared (and, by implication, what is not shared), to what extent, and for how long. We then propose an elaborated model of how shared meaning may be linked to outcomes of collaborative partnerships such as trust and performance.

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