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Facilitating Organizing in Business Processes

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Abstract. The paper studies the role of co-orientation, i.e., the alignment of attitudes and activities, in the development of collaborative business processes and how a facilitator can support the emergence of co-orientation and the organizing of collaboration. The development of collaborative business processes is seen as a communicative process of collaborative organizing. Conversations in a co-creative workshop are analyzed to understand the process. The paper sheds light on communication tactics that a facilitator can employ to enable collaborative organizing of inter-organizational business processes towards sustainability.

Keywords: Communication, organizing, facilitation, business processes

1 Introduction

Organizing collaboration in inter-organizational context is often achieved through the development of inter-organizational business processes [1]. The development of collaborative business processes requires a participative approach [2, 3] and application of co-creative methods [2, 4]. Co-creation also enables sustainability [5]. External facilitators can provide an important support for the collaborative development effort [6]. However, little is known about the communicative process of organizing in this context and how it can be managed and facilitated. This paper reports the findings of a study analyzing facilitators' activities in this context and how these activities contribute to organizing and sustainability. Insights from the communication as constitutive of organization (CCO) view are brought into the context of collaborative development of business processes.

2 Theoretical Background

The role of communication in organizing has gained an increased attention of organization scholars during the recent years. The constitutive view of communication maintains that organizing is a communication process and that this process produces enduring patterns that constitute the organization as a whole [7]. According to the Montreal School, organization is achieved through co-orientation, i.e., actors tuning in to one another and a mutual objective [8, 9]. This alignment is produced through interplay between conversations and textual objects [8, 10]. Eventually, collaborative dialogue produces the alignment of interests which can be inscribed in joint textual objects. These objects can become distanced through reification and abstraction and as a result, gain authoritative power in the relationship [10, 11].

According to Vásquez and Cooren [12], three kinds of spacing practices take a central role in the communicative process of organizing by constructing spatial and temporal relationships between actors and elements: presentifying, ordering, and maintaining coherence. Presentifying refers to making an organization and various interests present in a time and space through different materialities. Ordering refers to defining relationships between actors, activities, and responsibilities as well as creating temporal frameworks. Maintaining coherence refers to setting goals and criteria for consistent actions [12]. All these three practices are supported by conversations and textual objects that represent the organization. Through materialization of the organization, representational objects help reveal gaps in alignment and create alternative modes of organizing [13].

Organizing inter-organizational collaboration is a challenging process that sometimes requires an intervention by a neutral facilitator. Facilitation can be defined as a process in which a neutral person diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions to increase its effectiveness [14]. In this paper, facilitation is understood as an outside intervention to the communicative process of organizing collaboration between companies. Facilitation itself is also understood as an essentially communicative endeavor. It consists of communication activities aimed at creating conversations and textual objects that support the creation of co-orientation and organization.

Cooren, Thompson, Canestraro and Bodor [15] showed how a facilitator can support structuring of an event by enabling dialogue and the agency of nonhuman textual objects as well as interplay between them. We continue the study of facilitator practices from this and focus on the ways facilitators can support organizing by enabling the production of elements that constitute an organization. By elements we mean definitions of relationships between actors, activities, and objectives that are produced through spacing practices [12] and that are inscribed in textual objects and intended to produce collective action [10]. In our study, we focus on business process charts and process discussions, because we are interested in the organizing of business processes.

The main research question of this study is what kinds of communication tactics a facilitator uses to support organizing in business processes?

3 Methods

The study uses qualitative data gathered from a participatory action research [16] project conducted for an airline company that produces flight dispatch and preparation services together with other service companies at the airport. An introduction of centralized load control and a supporting IT system required the development of the collaborative service process. A facilitated workshop was organized for the companies to support the collaborative development of the process by applying a process simulation method [3]. The data consists of the transcriptions of video-recorded conversations that focused on describing and developing the collaboration process with the help of as-is and to-be process models (textual object). The author of this paper did not act in a facilitator role in this workshop but as an observant. However, she participated in the planning of the PAR project which helped her understand the context of the study.

The transcribed conversations were analyzed using discourse analysis, specifically a method called speech act schemas (SAS) that combines speech act analysis with narrative analysis to study episodic structures formed by speech acts [17, 18, 19]. The method defines 6 different types of speech acts (assertives, commissives, directives, declaratives, expressives, accreditives) and a narrative schema of 5 phases (manipulation, commitment, competences, performance, sanction) that are used to interpret coordination of action. SAS focuses on analyzing the performative character of discursive interaction and the organizing effects of speech acts and textual objects [18].

In this study, the analysis focused on the communication practices of the facilitator: how the facilitator guided the conversations and used process models for organizing collaboration and how the participants responded. In the following section, the findings are illustrated by excerpts from the data.

4 Results

The facilitated workshop started with the presentation of the project, greetings from the management, the objectives and agenda of the workshop, and the presentation of the participants. The first discussion topic for the workshop was the current collaboration process and the experienced challenges in it. This was followed by the discussion about the future collaboration process. In the end of the workshop, some group work was conducted on important development challenges but since the role of the facilitators was minor in them, the analysis focused on process discussions closely guided by the facilitators.

The first process discussion started with the facilitator introducing the objective of the discussion and the as-is process model that the facilitators had prepared for the workshop based on interviews. After this, the facilitator encourages participants to describe the collaboration process by explaining each role and activity depicted in the process model.

Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	During the last couple of months, we have prepared together with your representatives a digital model of the flight dispatch process... At first, I could explain the notation so that everybody has an understanding how the model is read. [Explains the notation] Would somebody have something to ask about this notation?	Directive
Performance	<i>Participant:</i>	Maybe a small clarification that all the systems are not taken into account in it...	Assertive
Sanction	<i>Facilitator:</i>	That was a good clarification. Only the most essential actors and systems are depicted here...	Expressive

As we see in the above excerpt, the facilitators have materialized the collaboration process into a textual object that they claim representing the process. The participants accept this claim with certain conditions confirmed by the facilitator. Right after this, the facilitator asks the participants to describe the actual process depicted.

Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	Could you tell briefly with a few sentences in your own words what is the role of pilots in this process?	Directive
Competence	<i>Participant A:</i>	I could try to comment the part that I can but all the others, put an effort into this...	Commissive
Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	What is the role of the pilot?	Directive
Performance	<i>Participant A:</i>	The pilot takes the flight under his execution...	Assertive
Performance	<i>Participant B:</i>	There emerge also the major problems that we need to come back to, that we discuss in our [unit].	Assertive
Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	Well, next is [this unit]. Could someone tell,... what is the role of [this unit] in this process?	Directive

The excerpt above consists of one episode and the beginning of a second. Here the facilitator encourages the participants to dematerialize the process model by explaining the roles of the process actors. The discussion continues with the facilitator asking the participants describe step by step the activities performed in the process. As the first episode above shows, the participants start also to bring up the challenges in the collaboration process in the discussion. In this way, problems in the alignment of collaborators are brought to light.

The above examples illustrate the ways facilitators can support the organizing of collaboration through presentifying. They prepare objects that represent the organization and use them to create conversations describing the organization and to support the revealing of gaps in the alignment of actors. The findings suggest that facilitators materialize alignment for conversations, support contextualization of the objects, and enable focusing on points of disalignment.

As the discussion continues, new kinds of episodes appear in the data. In the following excerpt, the facilitator realizes that the process model does not correspond to the actual process.

Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	Does the pilot take contact to dispatch at this phase?	Directive
Performance	<i>Participant:</i>	It goes so that after the pilot has received this briefing package, they go through it and can ask for replanning... And in case of long distance flights they often	Assertive

		take contact and ask for more information.	
Sanction	<i>Facilitator:</i>	So, some kind of contact making could be depicted also here.	Assertive
Performance	<i>Participant:</i>	Yes, indeed.	Assertive

The above episode is exemplar in respect to similar episodes in the data that the facilitator suggests the process model be corrected. As the discussion continues, the participants start to bring up deficiencies of the model spontaneously and the facilitator translates the observations into modifications of the model.

New kinds of interaction appear in the data as the discussion moves to the future collaboration process. The process model prepared by the facilitators describes the to-be process which has not yet been completely agreed on. This time the deficiencies in the process model generated discussion about the actual process and how to improve that. Since the future process was still partly open, the result was an understanding that negotiations between partners should be conducted in the near future in order to align activities.

Performance	<i>Participant A:</i>	In fact, it should be added... that cargo is responsible for cargo only, and can there be notoc-articles in the mail?	Assertive
Performance	<i>Participant B:</i>	No, we do not accept.	Commissive
Performance	<i>Participant A:</i>	But then new information can come from the check-in and then catering... That information has to be fed into the [system].	Assertive
Sanction, manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	Yes. Is there yet any alternative to how this information is fed?	Directive
Competence, commitment	<i>Participant A:</i>	Well, with catering we have not yet agreed on this, nor even negotiated about this. They have quite detailed process nowadays... but the system changes and we have to negotiate on this at a more detailed level.	Commissive

The above excerpts from the conversations show how the facilitators can support the organizing of collaboration through enabling ordering. They help define the collaboration process by capturing modifications to the model as well as encourage alignment where missing. The findings suggest that a facilitator can support ordering by helping define an organizational structure or by encouraging improvement in the organization.

The discussion about the future collaboration process was preceded by a presentation of the goals of the company and reasons for change. This presentation was given by a representative of the airline company. This presentation can be considered as an effort to set goals and create criteria for performance, i.e., to create and maintain co-

herence. The role of the facilitators in this effort was to give space for discussion about the goals and to mobilize commitment.

Manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	...I have asked [F.L.] to tell about the centralized load control and the [new system] at this point.	Accreditive
Performance	<i>Participant F.L.:</i>	Now, we have this [new system] coming ...Now, in this connection there could be a good opportunity to move into a more centralized model... So, there is a will to achieve a more centralized model...[Q&A]	Directive
Sanction, manipulation	<i>Facilitator:</i>	Yes, thank you very much. Keep in mind what came out and emerged in this presentation and now, let's continue the discussion about the future flight dispatch model...	Directive
Manipulation	<i>Co-facilitator:</i>	So, we have modelled also this future model during the project... Now, the purpose is to start developing it together... The changes have been marked with pink in here... How does it sound to the cargo is it a good thing that you get this information automatically?	Directive
Commitment	<i>Participant:</i>	Yes, it is if it comes automatically, why not.	Commissive

In this excerpt, the facilitator gives the floor to company representative who explains the aims of the management in the change process. After discussion about facts and reasons, the facilitator expresses her gratitude for the speaker and asks the participants to continue the discussion and development of the future collaboration process by committing to the goals set by the management. After this, a co-facilitator introduces the future model and starts asking questions about it from the participants who commit to the changes. The findings suggest that a facilitator can support the creation and maintenance of coherence by providing goals and motivating and by engaging people in a joint effort.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study show how a facilitator can support organizing by communication activities. First, a facilitator can support presentifying by materializing the

organization, by supporting contextualization of the objects, and by focusing attention. As previous research has found strategy development to be supported by the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization [20], our findings reveal how a facilitator can support these processes. The function of objects in revealing gaps in understanding has been recognized earlier [13], but we show how facilitators can make use of it. Second, our findings indicate that a facilitator can support ordering by helping define the organization or by encouraging improvement in the alignment of actors and activities. Research in the development of work practices has recognized the role of collaborative modification of objects in supporting development [21] and we reveal the role of conversations in this process and how a facilitator can enhance the interaction. Third, our findings suggest that a facilitator can support the creation and maintenance of coherence by motivating and by mobilizing commitment. Innovation research has previously shown the importance of change vision for development [3] and activity theory emphasized the role of object-orientedness of human activity [21, 22]. We show how facilitators can provide a purpose for collaborative development.

Altogether, our findings indicate that the role of a facilitator can be important in creating and modifying objects that help define the organization and maintain coherence. They also show that a facilitator can create conversations that help create alignment between actors and activities. Furthermore, a facilitator seems to enable effective interaction between these objects and conversations to advance organizing. The observations confirm the findings by Cooren and his colleagues [15] that the facilitator enables the agency of both human and non-human elements. Our findings contribute to CCO theory and organization theory by presenting activities a facilitator can use to support organizing.

The findings contribute to literature on the co-creation of inter-organizational business processes by describing collaborative business process development as a communication process that supports organizing and can be facilitated, managed and influenced by different human and non-human agencies. The findings help understand how business processes can be defined through the interplay between process models and conversations and how a facilitator can support this through communication activities. The findings give support to the observation by Lavikka, Smeds and Jaatinen [6] that interventions can support the creation of shared understanding about a collaboration process and the co-development of coordination mechanisms. We looked at the phenomenon on a micro-level and add that facilitation of conversations can support organizing by helping collaborators to align attitudes and activities and to define the collaborative business process. Organizing through co-orientation also helps create sustainability. Through presentifying various interests are given voice; through ordering the alignment can be improved; and through purpose creating activities, sustainability as a goal can be brought in.

This study focused on analyzing data from a facilitated workshop but indicated that more research is needed on the role of the facilitator before and after a workshop when textual objects are created and organization enacted.

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