

Developing collaborative interorganizational relationships: an action research approach

Developing collaborative relationships

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to address the group dynamics that evolve when representatives from various organizations come together to develop and work on a joint goal. Its aim is to share the author's learnings when it concerns the understanding of the group dynamics of interorganizational relationships and the development of collaboration between these organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The perspective taken draws on social and organizational psychology, systems psychodynamics and organization development.

Findings – The paper concludes with reflections on generic learnings about collaboration, its dynamics and its development.

Originality/value – Various action research projects are presented that have been conducted in different sectors.

Keywords Interorganizational collaboration, Group dynamics, Action research

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Societal concerns in all spheres of life call for collaboration between organizations and institutions so that parties can combine their core competences and thus address these concerns. One can think of global crises such as climate change and large-scale immigration, but also in sectors such as infrastructure, health, education and so many others, collaboration between organizations is imperative. Working together is always a challenge, be it between individuals, within groups and organizations or between groups and organizations. The key to successful collaboration is the quality of the relationship between the protagonists. Can they deal with diversity, can they work constructively with otherness or are they so threatened by it that they tend to dominate or withdraw? Research shows that relational dynamics such as political behavior and distrust have a major impact on their functioning (Laan *et al.*, 2011; Sharma and Kearins, 2011). A greater understanding of these dynamics is in order, especially how to develop collaborative relationships.

Interorganizational collaboration takes place at various system levels simultaneously, levels that influence one another (Curseu and Schruijer, 2018; Schilke and Cook, 2013). Organizations are represented by individuals who act on their organizations' behalf and engage in a relationship with other representatives. Together these different representatives form a group. And of course, these representatives have their personal characteristics. It is the level of this heterogeneous group, embodying different organizations and individuals creating complex group dynamics, that is the focus of this paper. These groups often are



underorganized, in the sense that they are temporary, informal, unstructured (having no formal boss, no trust at the start, nor a clear joint goal) (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a), either operating in the exploring phase of collaboration or intended as lubricant in between existing hierarchically structured organizations that cannot simply transform into network organizations.

Sometimes, they co-exist with formal interorganizational structures. This underorganization makes collaborating even more complex (Gray, 1989). Not much research literature addresses the level of these heterogeneous groups and their group dynamics. The social psychological intergroup literature hardly looks into the full complexity of what is actually happening in real life here-and-now settings. There is a host of research done within the domain of project management, e.g. on trust, but again, hardly anything on group dynamics and on how to develop collaborative relationships. The aim of this paper is to share my learnings when it concerns the understanding of the group dynamics of interorganizational relationships and the development thereof. I hope to demonstrate to team researchers that there is value in studying interorganizational dynamics in its complexity, as it manifests itself in real life.

My understanding and practice are informed by social and organizational psychology, which was my original training, and a systems-psychodynamic perspective to which I was introduced later, a perspective that aims to unearth the emotional dynamics of social systems, conscious and non-conscious, and takes into account various system levels (Vansina and Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). This perspective, grounded in the systems theory and psychodynamics, also has an action orientation, in the sense that it fosters understanding through trying to enact change. Not surprising as psychodynamics as well as the systems theory are clearly embedded in a consulting – clinical and organizational – practice. It means that learning through experience is key, while the action researcher or consultant engages in a relationship with the client system and uses his or her own experiences as a means to further the understanding and development of this system. Given my interest in change, my third perspective is organization development (Cummings and Worley, 1993).

First, I will describe my understanding of what interorganizational collaboration is and what its development entails and then sketch my perspective and practice. After that, I will give examples of the projects I have been involved in, share my lessons learned while I end with some reflections.

Interorganizational collaboration and its development

Interorganizational collaboration refers to the relational process when people from different organizations come together to address a concern or an opportunity and explore their interdependencies and how they could add value to one another, resulting in a joint problem formulation and a joint goal – a joint goal that also serves the interests of the individual organizations (Gray, 1989; Schrujfer and Vansina, 2008). It is difference that brought these organizations together: different interests, means, perspectives, etc. Rather than merging into one new organization, they aim to work together while keeping their legal autonomy intact. It means they have to capitalize on the diversity present. However, working with diversity is not simple.

Individuals representing their organizations need to work with diversity in interorganizational meetings. The group dynamics around the table are often complex (Schrujfer, 2008; Schrujfer and Vansina, 2008). Representatives experience a double conflict (Adams, 1976): they need to build relationships with the other representatives while feeling loyal to their respective constituencies that may or may not closely monitor what is happening around the table. They need to build a positive emotional climate that fosters

collaboration while also bring in their differences. If there is too much focus on building a positive climate, this may happen at the expense of the constituencies' interests, while a too strong focus on the constituencies' interests may make it difficult to build trust around the table (Schrujfer and Vansina, 2008). And of course, the larger context has an impact too on the group dynamics – one can think of societal events, political developments, media attention, etc. Typical for interorganizational collaboration is this multi-layeredness which adds to the complexity as a result of the participation of multiple parties, while the lack of formal structures and clear-cut goals fuel ambiguity (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b).

Given the relevance and difficulties of interorganizational work, questions emerge such as how can protagonists work with and work through the various tensions that are inherent in interorganizational collaboration so that their burgeoning relationships get a chance to develop – if that is indeed valuable for all parties involved? How can prematurely terminating the relationships be avoided? Development, for me, in line with organization development thinking (Cummings and Worley, 1993), stands for arriving at a qualitative change of a social system reflected in the quality of the relationships between subsystems as well as between the social system and its environment, which helps the system to realize its goals in a more effective way (where effectiveness includes social and economic criteria).

Development is open ended, in the sense that what is to be achieved is not predefined; it refers to a process of growth, i.e. developing relationships, that may proceed in different ways with different outcomes. An organizational development (OD) practitioner (consultant, facilitator, action researcher) creates conditions for development and helps the client change. The whole process, in line with OD principles, is designed, executed and evaluated with the client system.

Developing interorganizational relationships means developing healthy ways of relating among the different organizations as they are represented by individuals so that the protagonists can arrive at a joint problem definition, develop and realize a joint goal, which also serves the interests of the individual organizations. A healthy relationship implies that there is space for difference, that one can deal with difference and that difference adds to the relationship – it is valued and even stimulated, be it a two-person relationship, intragroup relationships or interorganizational relationships. A relationship between two persons where a “you” and an “I” do not exist is not a relationship, perhaps an infatuation where “you” and “I” are one – temporarily. A relationship where there is only space for “you” and not the “other” is not a relationship either, and the same applies of course when there is only the “other” and “I” is absent. Being able to deal with difference in a constructive way implies that there is a positive self-identity, including self-worth, and sufficient boundedness. Boundedness is needed to arrive at togetherness, and one can only be together if there is difference.

Within the context of interorganizational collaboration, these same basic principles apply, but of course, the setting is much more complex. There are multiple parties and multiple system levels. There are individuals who relate as individuals, as group members and as organizational representatives. These representatives form a temporary group, while on top of this, there are the relationships between organizations at the interorganizational level. And, all this happens in a larger context. Besides the quality of relating and the extent to which diversity can be constructively worked with, specific for interorganizational relational health is the complex and multifold relational character. This calls for whole system awareness and capabilities to work with the complexities. Further, protagonists need to be able to tolerate ambiguity and complexity due to the multilevel interactions and the multitude of interests.

I suggest that the quality of interorganizational relating is characterized by the way diversity (the basis for wanting to collaborate and the essence of the actual success of collaboration) is explored, recognized, acknowledged, tolerated, confronted and validated (Vansina and Taillieu, 1997; Schruijer and Vansina, 2008). The willingness and courage to engage in task conflict is key. Being able to do so requires an emotional climate in which constructive confrontation is possible. Protagonists need to feel contained and experience sufficient safety to “engage in difference.” Within such a climate, perspective-taking is possible, empathy can be enacted and repairing can be done if doing difference stirred up difficult emotions or was misinterpreted. Suspending judgment (Vansina and Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008) is an important element of such a climate. A climate in which diversity can be worked with constructively is not likely to be present at the start of a collaborative process as trust has not been built yet. Trust can be developed by actually engaging in a relationship and giving people a chance to demonstrate that they can make and hold appointments, fulfil expectations and demonstrate reliable behavior (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

Being able to work with differences constructively needs development, based on learning by doing. To this end, reflective space is important, in which protagonists take time and space to review their dynamics so as to get a fuller awareness of the dynamics were while working on the collaborative task and how those present experienced what was going on. Such reflections (on how the task was tackled and on how the relationships among protagonists evolved) help to gain a richer experience, get a better understanding of the different perspectives around the table, stay in touch with reality, repair any perceived injustices or wrongdoing and, based on a working through of these experiences, adjust the way of working together (Vansina and Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008).

Groups and individuals need to develop themselves. As an action researcher or consultant, one can only create conditions under which such a developmental process can unfold and further one can assist the client during the process of experiencing, reflecting and learning. My programs and interventions, jointly designed with the stakeholders, aim to give clients an experience of interorganizational relating and joint reflection thereof, on or off the job (Huzzard *et al.*, 2000). The interventions are designed to create a transitional change process to help protagonists experience and work through the tensions that are inherent to complex interorganizational work and jointly determine where they want to go to (Amado and Ambrose, 2001; Amado and Vansina, 2005; Vansina and Schruijer, 2013).

As an action researcher or consultant, I engage in a relationship with the client system and use that relationship for learning, being open to how the client system affects me and what feelings may be stirred up, which may tell me something about the client system. I share my observations and experiences on what is happening in the here-and-now so as to arrive at a joint understanding. In the reflective space, we look back and share experiences what has happened and based on that we look forward while still attending to the here-and-now dynamics. On the one hand, I bring in a body of knowledge, but on the other, my stance is one of not knowing (Bion, 1970). Reality does not obey to concepts – one may use concepts to try to understand reality, but concepts are always imperfect and less complex than the actual reality.

Project examples

I will now provide some examples of interventions to help people learn about the group dynamics of interorganizational relationships and develop the quality of their interactions.

Simulation

The first pertains to a two-day simulation I have been playing for many years with my colleagues, based on a real issue that arose in the St. Petersburg area in the past century (Vansina *et al.*, 1998). Seven involved parties have a little more than one day to deal with a regional development concern. There is no objective given – they are asked to identify as much as possible with the interests of the party they have been assigned to (mostly their own choice). The simulation is set in real time – a minute is a minute and an hour is an hour. Participants are asked to deal with the reality of only having limited time to get acquainted, explore the issue and the interests and make plans if so desired while also staying in touch with the information provided and the parties present. They are allowed to extrapolate but not fantasize unrealistically. They are free to use the time given to meet, talk, make plans, compete or whatever they want with only one restriction: they cannot meet with more than three parties in the same room. Unless there is a so-called town hall meeting, of which, there are several. During these meetings, a representative can be sent to the table while the constituencies can sit behind him or her and send notes to their representative. The number of participants vary between 20 and 30. The facilitators do not interfere but only observe (so here we do not comment on the here-and-now dynamics). After the simulation is ended, we spend a full day reviewing the group dynamics, jointly finding out what has happened and why. The simulation is run as an open as well as an in-company workshop. The simulation proved to be a valuable tool in helping participants learn about the complex group dynamics of interorganizational processes. For example, regarding intergroup behavior, trust dynamics, power plays, multilevel phenomena and leading collaborative processes.

Improvisation

I improvise when having less than a day, asking the group of participants to select an issue fulfilling certain criteria (a live issue with multiple parties, where one of the participants is actively involved in). The person whose case is chosen briefly describes the issue and the parties involved, highlights their interests and formulates the reason to hold a meeting. Then, he or she appoints others to take up the representative roles, including his or her own role, while also choosing the constituent members who sit directly behind their representatives and who can send notes. A fictitious meeting then starts. Anyone around the table or myself can stop the meeting for reviewing or having a discussion with their constituents. After reviewing, we can start up again, possibly with a change of role takers.

After a few rounds, we review the whole exercise. The person whose case was chosen often ends up with new insights into the group dynamics and his or her own role in it. As he or she is played by someone else, one's own behavior can be seen from an emotional distance and in context. It is amazing how such a short improvisation session, often lasting not more than a few hours, can create group dynamics that are recognizable by all involved and offers a platform for learning about one's own situation back home. Once I asked a group of project developers to list what they think are the most important behavioral ingredients of successful interorganizational collaboration. The list was impressive and exhaustive. In the afternoon, we did an improvised role-play based on an actual project the organization is involved in. The discrepancy between what they knew and how they acted was striking. Making them aware of the discrepancy and jointly finding out how this could happen proved to be a powerful learning experience.

Grace

In one project, a working conference was organized where the main stakeholders in fighting child trafficking and taking care of the victims were present. The purpose was to explore the

stakeholders' interdependencies, get in touch with and work through the tensions inherent to working across organizational boundaries and to build trust. Two internal change agents and myself prepared for the conference which was to be centered around a real yet also fictive case. A scenario was written based on the issues and problems encountered by each of the stakeholder organizations when working on an actual case. To this end, each organization was interviewed. The case involved a Nigerian girl found at Schiphol airport. She went through all the formalities at the airport, involving various organizations; at some point was assigned a guardian and obtained a place in protected care, while toward the end of the scenario, the girl had disappeared. Nigerian girls who were residing in protected care were asked to make a doll to represent the girl. They named her Grace. She was a little more than 1 m in height, was made of cloth and other materials and was seated on a cart with wheels.

In total, 19 organizations were present during the conference, such as the police, a governmental organization responsible for immigration, an agency for the reception of asylum seekers, public prosecutors, mental health organizations, guardians, lawyers, an agency for youth care. Each organization was represented by two members who were seated at their own table. The tables were placed in a large circle. Grace was put in the middle. One of the internal change agents read aloud the scenario. Any organization that felt the need to act could walk towards Grace, draw the cart nearer to its table and speak aloud while describing the plans and actions taken and the rationale why. As the scenario described different phases in registering Grace, administering the legal procedures and providing support and care of Grace, different organizations came into action. Thus, the day unfolded. Sometimes, organizations were unclear what to do or who was to act, and sometimes, organizations wanted to act simultaneously. The participants were asked to clarify the rationale underlying their actions in public. As a result, organizations could explore their interdependencies, get a better understanding of one another's roles in relation to the whole system, get in touch with the images or stereotypes of the different organizations and discover unclarities and unresolved issues.

During the day we organized two reviews to find out how the organizations were working together, what the group dynamics in the here-and-now entailed and how these could be worked with. We spent a lot of time reviewing one particular moment when Grace disappeared and we took her out of the circle. There was an ear deafening silence until one participant broke the silence with a strange joke. Nobody laughed. During the review, we jointly tried to understand what was going on dynamically when Grace disappeared. We arrived at a glimpse of the emotional climate that characterized their interorganizational system, possibly having accounted for inertia: feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness were present as trafficked children rarely receive asylum, are sent back to their families (possibly complicit to trading the children) in their country of origin, with children often disappearing in the host country (being re-trafficked) or reaching the age of consent and possibly ending up legally in prostitution. Simultaneously, hardly any trafficker is convicted. We could explore how these feelings impact the interorganizational relationships. It could explain their apparent omnipotence as well as their need to deny differences which they did in the very beginning – all organizations had the same interests it was said, namely, to save and protect all the children. It also became clear how painfully the reality fell short of what they proudly stated as their ambitions and how that influenced their interactions. At the end of the day, action plans were made based on the learnings, one of them was to create interorganizational platforms to continue working on the themes identified.

Developmental program

Another project consisted of designing and delivering a program on the development of interorganizational collaboration for project leaders, project managers and specialist staff in a construction company. The program was based on experiential learning and included the aforementioned simulation, follow-up workshops in which the collaboration in actual projects was discussed through improvised role-play and large-group meetings in which groups shared their insights while we also engaged in reviewing. Experiential learning was quite countercultural in an organization with a clear hierarchy and with employees who excelled in technical expertise. I trained some of the HR personnel so that they could be part of the facilitating team, thus consisting of internal and external consultants. The directors and senior managers first enrolled in the program that in total consisted of six days, spread out over four sessions. They then functioned as ambassadors for the next level. In total more than 200 employees took part in the program. After each cohort of about 20 people, we reviewed the dynamics with the sponsors and made adjustments, if deemed necessary.

While the director level was openly enthusiastic, resistance emerged in the layer underneath. Many felt they had no choice but to participate, they had better things to do and were humiliated that they needed to participate. Had they not shown for many years that they were capable of collaborating? We worked with the resistance as it surfaced. Anger at various moments was projected onto the staff and especially me: the leader of the program, an external consultant, female and direct. They sometimes split the staff where one was approached as the wise and appreciated staff member, while the other seemed to be neglected. By addressing these dynamics and allowing for them to be aired, containing their anger, we could talk about it. I remember one session where there was an open confrontation with me. They were surprised that space was provided to voice their emotions openly. They said that they had told their bosses how awful the program was. Funny, I said, we had a meeting last week and I was told the participants shared positive feedback. It appeared that they had not discussed their true feelings with their boss. We explored why. At some point, I asked them whether they were angry with me or with [...] [...]. They started laughing and completed the sentence – their bosses. The rest of the day we had very open and constructive dialogue on relationships between hierarchical levels within the organization, between departments and between their organization and external stakeholders. And, how these worked out in the here and now of the program. We collaborated.

The company's cultural or perhaps the sectoral culture clearly had an impact on how they behaved as a group in the program. Apart from experiencing the changes in the group dynamics over time, I had various evaluative sessions with the sponsors who were aware of the resistances as I shared all observations with them (of course anonymously). They themselves felt that the program brought them a lot, and that they experienced this in their day-to-day interactions within the organization. They also based this judgment on the outcomes of an annual in-house questionnaire that included questions on the experienced quality of collaboration.

Highway

A final project pertains to the redevelopment of a highway (Schruijer, 2013). The involved contractors and the principal agent wanted to overcome the traditional win-lose climate characteristic of their sector. They had initiated an informal table that met regularly with all stakeholders present, including contractors who were also competitors. The idea was to jointly define and discuss the problems, mobilize the constituencies if needed and deal with the concerns rather than escalating the problems to formal contract tables. Collaborative relationships were built among the various contractors and the governmental principal.

However, over time, parties became careful not to destroy their burgeoning collaborative relationships. As a consequence, real concerns and potentially divisive issues were avoided, giving the impression they all agreed, and that there were no concerns. From the individual interviews, I knew the opposite was true. For example, there was a growing concern that the deadline could not be met. Yet, at the informal table the issue was not raised, which thus undermined its own *raison d'être*.

In the individual interviews, they blamed a tunnel builder. If only they worked harder, the problem would be solved. However, the tunnel builder needed to redesign the tunnel, as the safety law had changed after signing the contract because of a major fire in Europe. Also, the key people in the constituencies found it hard to voice their concerns. They felt they were poorly informed by the project leader and did not want to ask directly for it. Further, a governing body, alternated between, on the one hand, being irritated because they felt they did not get the right information, while simultaneously ardently advocating that a governor should not sit on top of the project. Other signals that things were possibly avoided was that the meeting always started late despite very busy work schedules and despite the fact that all members were on time. After the meetings ended, it seemed they could not say goodbye. Their humor expressed sometimes fear and doubt. Once protagonists tried to save days in their planning, three years ahead of delivery, rather than openly and jointly discussing their concerns.

Their collective denial of possible failure and pointing to a scapegoat is typical of an emotional climate of fight-flight (Bion, 1961). Any conflict was avoided, which helped keeping the illusion of harmony and success alive (Janis, 1972). Further there was a shared conviction that being one day too late would be total disaster, even though the delivery date was brought forward seven years. Their collusive dynamics needs to be seen in light of a threatening context:

- a major national building fraud, exposed years earlier, was still in the back of their minds;
- the infrastructural world has a history of win-lose conflict, a consequence of tendering based on the lowest price;
- the protagonists involved sincerely wanted to show the world that collaboration between contractors, on the one hand, and the principal, on the other, was possible, they had a strong personal drive and felt very committed to the project. Simultaneously, they were confronted with their constituencies who did not believe this was realistic; and
- negative newspaper articles circulated concerning the financial and time excesses of large infrastructural projects.

I intervened during informal group meetings while also creating time and space for reflection so as to help them get in touch with the emotional dynamics and take corrective action if felt desirable. The comforting yet false illusion that the deadline could be met without discussing the problems could thus be broken. In the individual interviews, I explored how the interviewee related to the project and its context (history, relevant others, key events) and how they defined the problems and challenges. I stimulated them to reflect on their convictions, tensions and actions and on how others might react if the respondent did what he or she deemed necessary, sometimes challenging them by actively questioning their views. Thus, I tried to make them aware of the interorganizational relations and systemic contexts. Finally, I organized a working conference where I fed back the findings to all stakeholders to absorb the findings,

discuss their implications and reflect on needed actions. Through the interventions, the protagonists became more aware of their collusive behavior and its contributing factors, creating an impulse to engage in difference differently.

Some learnings

In every project, there was a lot of learning. What was learned exactly differed between projects. Here, I want to share some of my learnings that are more generic. First, group dynamics definitely manifest themselves at the table where organizations meet. Such dynamics are a function of the pressures and support of the constituencies, each having its own interests, of contextual influences arising from societal events, political discourses etc., and also of personal styles. The dynamics are complex. There are different system levels, multiple parties and dynamics varying over time. The simulation, for example, results in learning about generic interorganizational dynamics, but also learning that is different for each particular run as people differ and bring different experiences, early events have an impact on later events, in-company dynamics have an influence on how diversity is worked with, etc. One, therefore, cannot simply predict across situations yet one has to understand each case in its proper context. It is much more about *Verstehen* than *Erklären*. And, one has to understand the idiosyncracies if one wants to develop the individual case.

Second, I have learned that intentions are almost always good as are the cognitive competences of those involved. Yet, people have difficulties understanding the complexities of the emotional group dynamics, and they tend to oversimplify. Seeing the whole system and the multitude of influences simultaneously is not easy. In my experience, group dynamics are often wrongly attributed to individual dispositions, scapegoats or the lack of personal competences, which is not helping the collaborative process. Of course, individual styles do play a role, but often, particular individual behavior may be an expression of an underlying group climate as was the case in one particular simulation where narcissistic interorganizational dynamics were especially visible through particularly vocal individuals who had a valency for narcissism (Schrujjer, 2015). Equally, the larger systemic and multilevel nature of group dynamics is often neglected, thus finding faults among one another rather understanding the dynamics in context. Another unjustified simplification is not wanting to work with all stakeholders simultaneously, as this gives rise to a fear of an uncontrolled chaos.

Third, I am often struck by the expectation that collaboration is conflict-free. Politeness and going through the motions are taken for collaboration. Actively avoiding tensions apparently creates the impression among protagonists that are collaborating well. However, people seem to confuse collusion in which difference is avoided with collaboration in which difference is confronted (Harvey, 1988, 1999; Schrujjer, 2018). Diversity is dreaded, as engaging difference can hardly be conflict free. It stirs up emotions and can be unsettling. Yet, authentic task conflict in the end it is likely to deepen the relationship and improve collaboration.

Fourth, regarding the development of collaborative relationships, I am often amazed how fast people can learn and develop when they see the relevance. And, the best way to understand the relevance is by experiencing the dynamics. Once participants open up to their own and others' experiences, trust they can voice what they experience and then engage in joint sense-making, a necessary condition for developing their relationships is fulfilled. They learn while doing so. As it is about unhappy learning, there will undoubtedly be frustration and resistance. Yet, there is also frequently a sense of pleasure, excitement, wonder, that they build a bridge while walking so to speak. And of course, one cannot reach everyone, certainly not in the same speed.

And fifth, over the years, I am learning how to use myself in helping a client system to develop. In the process of joint exploration, one can share observations from the outside, which may be very helpful for the client. I have learned that the more I move in, the more I can sense the group dynamics. This sensing, how the dynamics have an impact upon me, provides me with valuable information for the client system to work with. Of course, one should not lose oneself in the group dynamics as one then loses one's potential added value. Finding the appropriate distance is like hedgehogs making love, referring to an anecdote by [Schopenhauer \(1851\)](#) in which hedgehogs who wanted to warm themselves experience the pain as a consequence of coming too close, which made them move further apart again. For an action researcher or process consultant, the challenge is not coming too close as that may mean losing one's critical judgment, while staying too far apart makes it impossible to get in touch with the deeper emotional dynamics.

Two final reflections

My experience as an action researcher and consultant has helped me tremendously in gaining insight into the dynamics of complex and real life interorganizational relationships. I also learned that when protagonists become aware of the emotional dynamics and are facilitated in working with these, relationships can be developed. And, it taught me how to take up my role so as to become more useful to the client system. One may question: is the change durable, and what does it have to do with science?

With respect to the effectiveness and sustainability of change, it all depends on how effectiveness is defined. In any case, I do not use an experimental design and conduct no systematic survey afterward. Based on the client's actual behavior and changes therein, I make a professional judgment. This professional judgment resembles that of a coach or a psychotherapist, who continually assesses the relationship. Mind you, it is not simply my professional judgment; it involves those of my colleague staff members, internal and external change agents, as well as the clients themselves, and the sponsors, obtained through numerous discussions over time. Whether such changes in behavior lead to better outcomes of interorganizational projects I cannot prove (and of course, besides relational quality, there are other factors that have an impact on actual outcomes). But, in line with [Janis and Mann \(1977\)](#), one can look at the process criteria instead of outcome criteria. Process criteria I adopt are the way of relating and systemic awareness and how these evolve over time.

One may question whether what I am doing is science or has any scientific relevance it all. Of course, it depends how one defines science – in a narrow positivist fashion or whether one is open to a more interpretive manner that would embrace psychodynamics and also phenomenology. And, whether one thinks in terms of a particular methodology or in terms of a scientific attitude. For those with a positivistic taste, studying real-life phenomena in its complexity could be induction and input for deductive research. In my conception of science, it is about understanding phenomena from without and within that takes priority, adopting a scientific attitude rather than adhering to a strict and particular methodology. That is not denying the importance of positivistic research where variables are isolated and fundamental relationships between them are demonstrated. It has great value in developing and testing arguments. Yet, for me, taking up action research and engaging in a relationship with the client system generates deep understanding, helps development and results in actionable knowledge – knowledge that protagonists can work with ([Coughlan and Coughlan, 2015](#); [Yström et al., 2019](#)). After all: “If you want truly to understand something, try to change it” (attributed to Kurt Lewin; [Tolman, 1996](#)).

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