

## **Contribution to relational coordination and social capital through consultancy on communication in the context of the organisation**

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### **1. Introduction**

Relational coordination, a concept developed in The United States, and Social Capital – a concept developed in Europe, have a lot in common. (Gittell, 2012, Moltke & Graff 2014) Relational coordination focuses on *shared goal, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and frequent, timely, precise, and problem-solving communication*. Social capital focuses on *the ability to cooperate around the organisation's core task*, and on the levels of perceived *justice and trust*. Research shows that a high presence of either relational coordination or social capital (the two seem to address more or less the same issues despite their different wordings) corresponds with job satisfaction, quality and efficiency at the work place. But they do not deliver answers as to *how* high levels of relational coordination and social capital are created. We will describe examples of consultancy work that structures communication either between leadership levels or between different professional groups in the work place – either around the core task or around a special, strategic focus of the organisation. Through this structured consultancy work we find that we enable communication for better cooperation and at the same time enhance mutual respect, trust and a sense of perceived justice in the organisations. We illustrate this through two cases.

### **2. Methods**

Often it is in the vertical relations in organisations – or in the relations across professions that the ingredients of relational coordination and social capital are not so present. Therefore, bringing together different layers of leadership in organisations – partly inspired by Leadership pipeline (Charan et.al., 2001) or different professions working together around clients or tasks, and structuring communication, make visible the interdependence of the groups or professions in creating results. We have worked with this with top management in a municipality (across leadership levels) and with the entire staff of a homeless shelter (across professions).

In both cases the participants became aware of 1) the contribution of each group (including themselves) to the shared goal and 2) the needs of the other groups in order to do their part of the job. Different layers of leadership tend to speak mostly among themselves or each leader will be preoccupied with his or her area of responsibility. A structured and down-to-earth dialogue focusing on a simple question like a) *“In order that you – at your*

*level (or in your profession) – can succeed with your contribution to this task, what do you need the other (levels or professions) to do?”* And the question b) *“What do you believe that the other (levels or professions) need from you in order to succeed with their contribution to the task?”* will often prove quite difficult to answer in concrete details. The sharing of the answers to these questions usually leads to 1) enhanced mutual respect and the bonds created during the dialogue leads to a growth in 2) trust and 3) clarity of mutual goal and 4) efficiency and productivity.

Across professions the above way of working has also proved efficient. Another way of creating awareness of the interdependence and shared responsibilities across professions or teams working together is also to ask them to answer the following questions: 1) *“As you see it, what are the important contributions of (other team/other profession) to the work we are doing here”*, and 2) *“which one of your own team’s contributions do you think matters most to (other team/other profession)?”*.

Using questions that have an interlinking effect creates enhanced awareness of the interdependence and makes cross-communication and cross-appreciation (across levels, across professions, across teams) much more likely to take place after the intervention, thus creating more relational coordination and boosting social capital.

Creating relational coordination and social capital takes – whatever one is an external consultant or a leader or employee – a strong ability to navigate in and to influence the local context: To tune expectations in conversations and meetings, to communicate clearly whether the context is one of information or of involvement, to agree on what is appropriate communication in new constellations of people working together – and, not least, to be able to facilitate unexpected situations in the spur of the moment. Clarity around framework and preparedness to deviate from plans are powerful ingredients.

### **3. Results**

The above describes examples of how creating a framework for focused and structured dialogue can create a clear view of the shared task, trust in the contributions of others, enhanced efficiency and a strong sense of interdependence and thus contribute to more social capital and better relational coordination.

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