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Developing the “best” project: Interests and strategic partnering in an interorganizational sensemaking perspective

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Abstract

This paper takes a sensemaking perspective on partnering, a form of interorganizational relationship prevalent in the construction industry. It is well established that partnering enhances project performance, but this paper illustrates how project performance is more than objective given measures. It is the result of a continuous process, where different organizational actors align their interests and establish a shared understanding of optimal project performance. This shared understanding evolves over time, imposing alterations on the formal structures related to the partnering arrangement. The paper is based on a longitudinal case study of two cases, each consisting of a client, a contractor and an advising engineer. Even though they are involved in the same project, the development of the relationship and mutual understanding unfold completely differently.

Introduction

The construction industry has been known for a lack of cooperation between buyers and suppliers, resulting in project delays, cost overruns litigations and poor project performance in general (Chan *et al.*, 2004). The industry is characterized by make to order one-off projects, SMEs lacking resources for investing in collaboration support, and a fragmented market of main contractors and subcontractors. This complexity and uncertainty combined with a sole focus on price, have led to a high degree of adversarial relationships, represented through opportunistic behavior, high levels of conflict and ineffective communication (Fulford and Standing, 2014). As a response, “partnering” evolved during the early 90s as the mean for eliminating the confrontational culture in the industry, by increasing integration and collaboration. Partnering was defined with particular reference to the construction industry and was associated with a particular blueprint for successful collaborative relationships. Much literature adopts the definition of partnering by the Construction Industry Institute (CII) as “*A long-term commitment by two or more organizations for the purpose of achieving specific business objectives by maximizing the effectiveness of each participant’s resources. This requires changing traditional relationships to a shared culture without regard to organizational boundaries. The relationship is based upon trust, dedication to common goals, and an understanding of each other’s individual expectations and values. Expected benefits include improved efficiency and cost-effectiveness, increased opportunity for innovation, and the continuous improvement of quality products and services*” (Construction Industry Institute (CII), 1991, p. 4). There has been a strong emphasis in the literature on the normative part of partnering, including the formal structure and specific techniques for implementation (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000). These include charters and dispute resolution arrangements, teambuilding exercises, workshop facilitation, continuous improvement processes, total quality management, project process mapping and benchmarking, and integrated IT platforms (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000). The benefits and positive effects on project performance have been proven, concluding that partnering leads to a reduction in both project duration and costs associated with claims, compared to non-partnering projects (Gransberg *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, the specific partnering elements have positive effects on cost, time and quality performance, while also enhancing client satisfaction (Ling *et al.*, 2013). One of the key elements of partnering is that the parties commit to optimization of project performance. However, this may negatively affect each actors’ interests in the sense that optimum project performance may not necessarily equate optimum performance for each actor in the project. Maintaining the focus on the projects, while balancing it with each partners’ interests is therefore one of the critical managerial tasks in construction projects. The involved companies possess different interests that need to be aligned in order to reach a mutual understanding, build trust and establish a shared culture. Despite having a blueprint in place, partnering cannot just be implemented and planned beforehand, rather it evolves as a consequence of

collaborative interaction as needed during projects (Lavikka *et al.*, 2015). It emerges in the socially complex interaction process (Cicmil and Marshall, 2005). Reaching a mutual understanding is the common ground for collaboration and it involves balancing the divergent interests of the involved actors (Kadefors, 2004; Nyström, 2005). As opposed to the instrumental view on partnering, in terms of the techniques and tools mentioned above, trust and mutual understanding cannot be formally implemented. On the contrary, these components are the results of continuous interaction. Aligning organizational actors by reducing discrepancy of interests, leading to this shared understanding, becomes a central process for managerial action and decision making, which is the foundation for realizing the success of partnering (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Suprpto *et al.*, 2015). The parties need to establish joint sense of the best performing project through a sensemaking process that must balance own interests with project interests. We therefore adopt a sensemaking perspective on partnering, and investigate how collaborating actors in construction projects develop a mutual understanding of project performance over time. The objective here is to understand how the divergent interests of the organizational actors affect the process of collaboration, which over time institutionalizes as the mutual understanding of the ‘best’ project. There is a substantial lack of explanations of such dynamics in interorganizational relationships and a more detailed investigation of the underlying processes is seen as valuable contribution (Agostini and Nosella, 2017). The paper contains the following elements: 1) an elaboration of the theoretical foundation for this paper, 2) a short description of the applied method, 3) an overview of the findings and 4) a discussion and conclusion summarizing the main contributions.

Collaboration through partnering

Actors engaging in interorganizational relationships possess several different and maybe even contradicting interests, but in order to realize the collaborative benefits related to partnering, balancing these interests can be the decisive differences between success and failure. Over time, the different parties engage in continuous adaptive processes, aligning and developing mutual interests (Medlin and Törnroos, 2014). The organizing and coordinating mechanisms of partnering are then no longer a managerial decision, it becomes the emergent result of actions affected by previous structures, generating new structures (Sewell, 1992; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). The tension between divergent interests among the different actors, combined with the process of partnering, constitute the foundation for this paper. Partnering is based on the shared mindset of all project partners acting solely in the best interests of the project (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015). However, objective criteria for high project performance rarely exist. Performance is highly subjective and can involve a huge set of measures ranging from project costs, duration and claims, to collaboration satisfaction, client satisfaction and other softer goals. These project objectives must be balanced with divergent interests, attitudes and business objectives. This balancing act has been seen as the answer to maintaining and secure the partnership (Das and Teng, 2000). In this paper, tensions and instability are not seen as characteristics of a dysfunctional partnership with poor performance, leading to termination of relationship. However, it is the process of accommodating the conflicting forces, which ensures successful partnering performance (de Rond and Bouchikhi, 2004).

In order to understand this continuous process of establishing a mutual understanding and culture of acting in the interest of the project, this paper relies on sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The theoretical framework has been condensed and is illustrated in

Figure 1. Sensemaking is seen as a social process, where diverse members interpret the environment and construct accounts through interaction. These accounts are then acted upon collectively (Maitlis, 2005). When the continuity of the partnering relationship is breached, or when the specific execution at the project

level encounters unfamiliar situations, interaction and efforts occur in order to establish plausible sense. This common sense normalizes the unfamiliar through decisions and thereby alters future expectations, leading the collaboration to continue (Weick *et al.*, 2005). Noticing and bracketing cues are central parts of sensemaking, where attentional stability, vividness and coherence constitute the triangle of this proactive identification of cues with potential consequences for the relationship, organization or project (Rerup, 2009). Heterogeneity among the involved parties becomes a central element of sensemaking. During the first phase of bracketing a set of cues, different participants will bracket different cues based on their own interest. Moving on to the second phase, the participants apply their frame of repertoire to bracketed cues, which eventually may result in a shared understanding (Seidl and Werle, 2017). Sources of breaches within the relationship can range from between-partner differences such as goals, cultures or practices, to external sources being market changes, industry competitiveness or general uncertainty (Majchrzak, 2015). Furthermore and maybe more profoundly, the multiplicity of distinct schemas among diverse actors, applied similarly across issues, can result in unsuited solutions, which creates tension leading to change in the underlying schema or understanding of good project performance (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

This iterative process of sensemaking leads to coordinated actions, which over time institutionalizes in the collaboration making the partnership more efficient when future issues arise (Bygballe *et al.*, 2016). Establishing this mutual understanding creates a certain kind of coordination mechanism, which on one hand aligns the interests of the actors ensuring an efficient collaborative environment by reducing tensions. While on the other hand, this alignment process can lead to a reduction of the organizational attention, exposing the actors to undetected danger. Transferring unknown danger into managerial risks that can be planned upon is the core process in all types of project management (

Figure 1). This paper unfolds the ongoing sensemaking process and the interplay of interaction among individuals at the operational level, while being attentive to how the constructed meanings affect the overall relational structure.

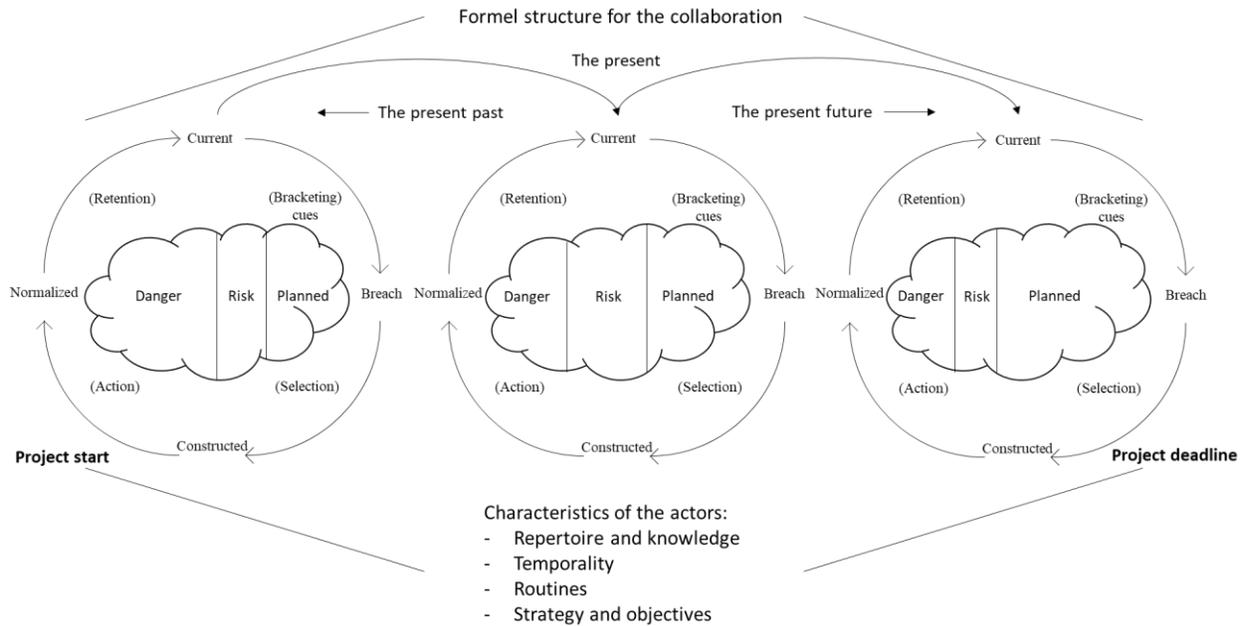


Figure 1. The iterative process of interorganizational sensemaking

Method

This paper is a longitudinal study of two triads (public client, contractor and advising engineering company). They are both part of a larger project named ‘Vandpartner’, where they have won the contract for separation of the sewage system from 2015 to 2021. Both cases are working on similar projects, located in two different geographical areas. Through observations combined with repeated interviews, the cases are followed for 18 months, initiated and ended by a collaboration satisfaction survey conducted internally in the partnering arrangements. The table below summarizes the main differences in the two triads, renamed ‘COMPLEX’ and ‘SIMPLE’. Furthermore, the table illustrates the collected data half through the data collection period.

Table 1. Case and data overview

Organizational level	Description	COMPLEX	SIMPLE	
Client	Experience within partnering, size, revenue	15 years, 207 employees , 486.1m DKK	1 year, 39 employees, 74.7m DKK	
Main Contractor	Structure, size, revenue, assets	14 Danish companies, 4,327 employees, 7,926m DKK, 4,063m DKK	Family-owned without leasing, 141 employees, 174.5m DKK, 94.8m DKK	
Advising engineer	Size, revenue	192 employees, 84.8m DKK	586 employees, 336.2m DKK	
Project complexity	Geographical area	City (730 person/km2*)	Country side (89 persons/km2*)	
Data source	Type	Amount COMPLEX	Amount SIMPEL	Across cases
Observations	Field notes from workshops and meetings	77.5h	69,25h	42h

Interviews	Semi-structured interviews with managers and key personnel	18 interviews	11 interviews
Documents	Presentations, surveys, tender material, meeting minutes, pictures, charts and other internal documents	-----	132 documents -----

**Data derived from 'Danmarks Statistik' – www.dst.dk*

Findings

The data has been coded and analyzed through a sensemaking perspective. Even though the process of sensemaking has not beginning or ending, the process is relatively visible in an interorganizational context, where the tacit sensemaking process becomes articulated through communication making it observable from a research point of view. Table 2 illustrates condensed examples of six specific sensemaking processes unfolding at three different levels of the partnering relationship. 'Top' is the overall partnering agreement, where the actors are mainly CEOs and top-managers representing the separate firms. 'Project managers' are where the collaboration is most extensive. Here they have daily interaction, which is summarized in larger weekly meetings. At the 'operational' level, it is about the execution of the projects. It is acknowledged that interaction at these different levels are highly entangled, but in order to comprehend the sensemaking process, a clearer distinction was needed. Followed by Table 2, the ongoing processes of sensemaking illustrated in

Figure 1 have been elaborated based in the two cases.

According to the data, cue identification is the first part of the sensemaking process. The individual actors possess different interests, which constitute the mental schema decisive for where the different actors focus their attention, and thereby which cues ends up as bracketed cues. Overall, the factors influencing cue identification can be categorized into three groups. 1) Environmental issues being project complexity, regulations, external stakeholders. 2) The actor characteristics exemplified as individual experience, and pressure from home organization. 3) Both formal and soft governance mechanisms, such as profit/deficit sharing, IT systems, contracts, budgets, and co-developed routines and shared practices. The two cases illustrate that this is not a fixed schema; it is constantly changing through interaction, which over time builds up a mutual understanding.

The identification of a critical cue leads to a breach of continuity, which becomes visible in the cases through communication as a discrepancy, surprise, opportunity or tension among the interest of the actors. Due to the equivocality of the cues, with several potential meanings, the process of cue selection was a central sub-process for ensuring efficient collaborations. The different actors used different micro practices in order to influence the sense-making process. As examples, in COMPLEX, the client often used their role as a customer with the decisive power to provide sense such as urgency or preferences. In SIMPEL, the contractor regularly calculated scenarios, in order to persuade the others about their solutions. Through these sense-giving practices, the actor communicated their interests and their understanding of how to tackle the issue. Based on this, the sense-taking actor either accepted and acknowledged or countered by their own understanding and interests. This iterative process continued until a mutual understanding was reached. The objective details matters less in this process, but sense is constructed when the benefits are perceived to outweigh the downsides. This could be estimation of lifetime costs on specific solutions or fairness in changes of projects, where this negotiation process is about perceptions based on bounded rationality. It is in this process where the alignment of actors' interests really has an effect on the collaboration. The more aligned the actors were around a mutual understanding of doing what is best for the project, the easier it became to reach a common understanding of bracketed cues. This was illustrated through the two cases and

especially the role of economic issues. When the identified cues were related to the project execution or technical expertise, actors' interests were well and easily balanced. There was a respect for each other's capabilities and responsibilities. The contractor knew how to handle the execution and building process, the client was good at handling citizens and other stakeholders, while the adviser knew the regulation and potential pitfalls. However, when economy was involved, the boundaries between the diverse interests were enlarged. In SIMPEL the contractor simply acknowledged "we do not sit and fight for the last cents, we have never done that. Maybe we missed some revenue and we have probably been cheated several times. But we make money" (Interview, CEO). In the other case, there was a higher level of accusing and responsibility discussion in relation to any economic issues. "Client: Your budgets showed control, but the budget was just exceeded by several times without you stopping it". Contractor: "Already months earlier, we informed about overrun", "I mean that everyone in this team has a responsibility. Right now we are looking for the scape goat, but that is not fair at all" (mail correspondence, overall project managers). This illustrates a small piece of a larger sensemaking process. The two cases are not different per se, but these differences in approaching economic issues are the result of balancing interests over time.

The sensemaking process always leads to action taking or decision-making (Table 2). When actors have reached a common understanding, they decide how to act on it. This can be everything from dropping ideas, to decide to decide something in the future, to have a new meeting about the topic, to develop further inputs for the decision, to make an action plan or to implement specific initiatives. There are clearly different degrees of action, from deciding on radical changes at once to taking smaller steps over time. The data shows that larger difference among interests, led to a longer sensemaking process before any decisions were made. The decision has some degree of precedence by becoming part of the future frame of repertoire, where the decision affects the future collaboration and sense-making process, by affecting the mutual understanding what is the best project. This can be exemplified through differences in the cases where COMPLEX developed large projects based on water-on-surface solutions, which over time constituted as the 'best project'. On the other hand, SIMPEL continuously decided not to adopt similar surface solutions due to the uncertainty. Most significantly was it when a shared belief regarding a test-area, across several meetings became a more and more plausible solution. However, during a meeting groundwater and assumed reluctance among citizens were identified as potential cues, which altered the evaluation of the test-area. The test-area ended up being dropped after 5 months of work and meetings. However, by dropping water-on-surface solutions, they just emphasized their perception of these solutions as being unsuitable. In a more formalized way, COMPLEX illustrates how the repeated decision to negotiate the profit/deficit split is being constituted as a formal procedure over time, which alters the established partnering procedure for splitting 50/50 from the contractual arrangement.

Case	Issues	Bracketed cues	Interests affecting sensemaking	Action or decisions	New current state
COMPLEX (Top)	Pricing of more complex solutions	Several projects with accelerating costs resulting in large deficits	Client: 1) Controlling costs at a justifiable level 2) Reducing the risk of paying out large surplus to a private company Contractor: Lowering the number of projects with deficits Adviser: Having complex solutions requiring advising hours Mutual: 1) Making sure that everyone wants to support innovation, by testing and trying new solutions 2) Reducing the contractor's need to mark-up the pricing in order to account for potential risks	Several meetings, working through all previous projects to identify risk factors, standardizing new solutions making pricing easier	1) Clear definitions of what is extra purchase and what is included in target 2) Negotiations replaces the official 50/50 split
COMPLEX (Project managers)	Development of water-on-surface solutions	Difficult areas requiring new solutions	Client: 1) Being frontrunners within more sustainable solutions 2) Testing these solutions for the future Contractor: 1) Pleasing the client 2) Deriving references for future work Adviser: 1) Develop competences within this 2) Obtaining more business by handling these complex solutions Mutual: Developing satisfying solutions for the citizen with high level of sustainability	Continuous use of surface solution in a larger area across 4 projects	1) Refining and standardizing the system 2) Developing a catalogue of specific solutions 3) Establishing a larger project as the showcase for these solutions
COMPLEX (Operational)	Selecting specific drain system	1) Road with large stripes of grass, but divided by driveways 2) A supplier offered to produce special samples	Client: 1) Finding the future solution for guiding water across driveways 2) Using an interesting supplier Contractor: 1) Price 2) Availability Adviser: 1) Guiding water with high certainty 2) Make a system with enough capacity according to regulations Mutual: 1) Satisfied citizens 2) Find something compatible with the overall solution	Asking the supplier to produce 50 by hand, also for future projects and implementing them as a test	1) Supplier buys a mold for future production. 2) The new preferred solution for crossing driveways, if the test proves successful.
SIMPLE (Top)	Earlier involvement of the contractor in the planning phase	1) Too many changes in the proposal from the planning phase 2) No knowledge of execution issues among planners	Client: Reducing the specific project planning and do-overs, reducing costs and enhancing efficiency Contractor: 1) Increasing their importance 2) Developing more rational projects 3) Do not want to realize saving potential before the execution Adviser: 1) More business 2) Prove themselves in relation to the planning companies Mutual: 1) Making the most optimal project earliest as possible 2) Cover all potential issues prior to execution	Contractors are sporadically asked to assist. Paid by hour	Becomes a common procedure, where the boundaries between planning, design and execution are blurred
SIMPLE (Project managers)	The use of surface solutions in a test-area	1) Area without option of traditional sewage, poor current pipes, too expensive for tunneling 2) Reducing capacity will save the project	Client: 1) Price 2) Life time costs 3) Obtaining knowledge and learning Contractor: 1) Needs to be significantly more sustainable than other options 2) Reducing the chance of flooding at the private grounds Adviser: 1) Prove their capabilities 2) Making sure that the test area fits into the rest of the city in terms of dimensions and height of the system Mutual: 1) Solving a problem efficient without risk for the citizen	1) Measuring the current water streams 2) Deciding on delaying water on the private grounds.	Ending up being dropped

SIMPLE (Operational)	Implement ation of a water delaying well	1) A continuously need for retaining water, when the sewage system operates on maximum level 2) Contractor presenting his own invention	Client: 1) New solution compatible with traditional sewage 2) Downscaling pipe dimensions Contractor: 1) Using self-developed invention 2) Providing safety for the people 3) Testing this new product Adviser: Following their role as a subcontractor to the contractor Mutual: 1) Reducing the chance of flooding 2) Downsizing the pipes 3) Saving costs in the longer run	Calculating prices on 3 scenarios	Established as an option needed to be tried out later in another project
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Table 2 - Examples of sensemaking at different levels

Discussion and conclusion

The sensemaking process of reaching a mutual understanding of what constitutes the best project is a complex iterative process with no clear beginning or end. This mutual understanding is over time produced and reproduced through interaction, where individual actors engage in sense-giving and sense-taking practices in order to develop a shared understanding of the optimal project performance (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Medlin and Törnroos, 2014; Bygballe *et al.*, 2016). This paper dives into the paradox with a partnering arrangement aiming at increasing the possibility of capturing potential issues by increasing diversity, while simultaneously aligning actors by establishing a shared understanding. This is clearly a balancing act, where too diverse schemes and interests makes the actors aware but hinders the attention stability of critical cues, while too aligned actors becomes blind towards potential damaging issues (Rerup, 2009). The paper shows that conflicting interests can actual be beneficial, if they are acknowledged and understood by the opposite party (Das and Teng, 2000). This mutual understanding smoothens daily collaboration, where decisions are not taken based on accuracy of information but more on plausibility and perception (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Seidl and Werle, 2017). Partnering was the answer to the impeding blaming culture characterizing the construction industry (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015). However, the cases show how accountability and responsibility disappear, when all decisions are taken together. The issue here then becomes, when everyone is accountable for the success of the projects, the incentive to actually take responsibility is reduced. This paper opens up this governance issue where, through interaction over time, the sensemaking process is actually altering the organizational procedure for these coordination problems (Bygballe *et al.*, 2016). This paper investigate two triads (client, contractor, advising engineer) consisting of several individual managers possessing diverse sets of interests, developing mutual understanding through interaction within the ‘in-between’ (Medlin and Törnroos, 2014). This interaction space is constantly changing, either by altered interests or by accommodating stakeholders outside the triad. This implies that the sensemaking process of developing a shared understanding cannot be limited to the interests of the three main companies in the relationship. In order to fully comprehend this process, it is central to be aware of external stakeholders influencing the ‘in-between’, either indirect through the main actors or by directly engaging in the interaction process. Finally, time is a central dimension in sensemaking, without timeouts, sensemaking is an ongoing process constantly framing and reframing the relationship. The unit of analysis in this paper spans from one episode of conversation, to one meeting, to sensemaking across several meetings. Future research incorporating the impact of time when applying a sensemaking perspective, would provide novel but beneficial insights for fully understand this process.

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