How to lead and facilitate Relational Coordination in temporary project organizations: A mixed-method case analysis of collaboration in the Norwegian construction industry

Introduction
Studies show that the Norwegian construction industry suffer from mistrust and a lack of collaboration within project organizations, leading to conflicts and poor performance (Swärd, 2015). In 2010 the Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA) established a requirement to implement and execute a “collaborative practice” in all construction projects. The aim is to improve the foundation for collaborative relationships, create trust and respect between the actors and establish procedures and practices based on shared goals (Halvorsen, 2015; NPRA, 2016). While the collaborative practice bears many similarities with the dimensions of Relational Coordination (RC) theory, there seems to be a focus on structural rather than relational aspects of coordination of work in the execution of the practice. There is also some challenges towards implementing and facilitating the collaborative practice, as the process managers lack relevant experience and knowledge (Halvorsen, 2015; Sward, 2015). Recently a process manager training program has been introduced at NPRA, where the aim is to teach process managers the relevant methods and knowledge required to facilitate the collaborative practice.

This study focuses on expanding the concept of relational coordination by applying the theory and testing it in temporary project organizations within the Norwegian construction industry. Furthermore, the study will explore how process managers can facilitate relational coordination within temporary project organizations through the collaborative practice. Consequently, we hope to contribute to resolve the concurrent challenging situation within the construction industry in regards to poor performance and a lack of collaboration.

Theory
We propose that relational coordination is a way to overcome the central challenges for collaboration in the construction industry. The Norwegian road infrastructure consists of complex projects that require planning and design with the involvement of various actors. The projects are often extensive and stretch over a longer period of time. The work processes are characterized by uncertainty, as plans continuously need to be adjusted as changes and new information emerge (Klemsdal, 2003). The performance of a construction
project depends on the effective coordination of the interdependent tasks and contributions of multiple actors (Bygballe, Swärd & Vaagaasar, 2016). Mutual interdependence and mutual adjustment between the different actors are therefore vital for the construction projects to succeed. A review of the literature shows that the same key factors examined through the theory of relational coordination are relevant towards collaborative working in the construction industry. As an example, open communication, trust and willingness to compromise/collaborate along clear roles and responsibilities, has been found to be important factors in order to achieve successful collaboration in the construction industry (Jacobsen & Choi, 2008). Other researchers point to reaching a shared understanding as an important and significant challenge when collaborating in the construction industry (Venselaar, Gruis, & Verhoeven, 2015).

Research on relational coordination theory show that a focus on creating high quality relationships in coordination contributes to better implementation of labor through improved productivity and job satisfaction (Gittell, 2002). Success may therefore be achieved by improving collaboration at the individual and relational level (Bresnen & Marshall, 2000). As an attempt to improve collaboration, NPRA established a requirement to implement and execute a “collaborative practice” in the initiating phase of a new construction project in 2010. The aim is to improve the foundation for collaborative relationships in projects, creating trust between the parties (client and contractor/subcontractors), establish goal oriented procedures and practices, and contribute to a common contractual understanding. The principles of the “collaborative practice” are similar to the concepts of relational coordination, however, there seems to be a focus on structural rather than relational aspects of the collaboration processes.

Context

Recent studies (e.g. Halvorsen, 2015; Swärd, 2015) show that there have been several challenges related to the execution of the collaborative practice. Project participants lack knowledge about what collaboration really means and do not use the practice as intended (Halvorsen, 2015). Moreover, it does not seem that the project organizations manage to transfer principles of the collaborative practice to individuals joining the projects at a later stage. The collaborative practice requires new forms of leadership and the project managers are not used to work in this manner (Swärd, 2015). In order to meet some of these challenges, a process management training program has been initiated at the NPRA in the
fall of 2016. The training program is aimed at NPRA employees who will act as “neutral” process managers throughout the project. The process manager is responsible for planning and executing the collaborative practice in collaboration with the client and contractor. Through the training program the participants will become familiar with the role of the process manager in the projects, learn tools and methods for implementing collaborative practice and gain knowledge about collaboration. The first process management training is currently ongoing and consists of 2+1 day of lectures and group work, with individual tasks before, during and in between the two training periods.

Research objective
Our literature review has identified two research gaps that we wish to address. First, there is little research on the leader's role in facilitating relational coordination. Gittell and Logan (2015) propose that relationally designed leadership and supervisory roles support participants in understanding and bridging across differences, and thus supporting the development of relational coordination. The introduction of the process management training may well be seen as an intervention in order to create high-quality relationships. Our aim is therefore to look at how process managers facilitate for collaborative practice and examine whether they do in fact contribute to the creation of high-quality relationships.

Second, we have not been able to find any research connecting relational coordination to temporary project organizations. The projects within the construction industry are mostly based on temporary, inter-organizational project organizations, which give us an opportunity to study relational coordination within this context. We seek to identify factors that enable successful collaboration practice within the construction industry and examine how these are related to relational coordination. With this study, we therefore wish to respond to the call for advancing relational coordination research by applying it to new contexts, both inter-organizational and in temporary project organizations.

Research questions
- How do process managers facilitate for successful collaborative practice in temporary work-groups within the construction industry?
- What are the factors that contribute to successful collaboration practice and how are these related to relational coordination?
Methodology
The research design is an exploratory mixed-method case study analysis. The qualitative data will be gathered through in-depth interviews with the process managers and a sample of participants from the temporary project organizations, in addition to observations and archival data. Quantitative data will be gathered with the use of the Relational Coordination Survey. The survey will be used to map the quality of the collaboration in construction projects.

Preliminary findings
Based on two days of observation during the first round of process management training in September 2016, we have made the following observations:

- A culture of mistrust and negative attitude towards contractors in NPRA
- Work processes interventions: NPRA have identified the current and the desired state, however, they have not managed to close the gap (due to lack of knowledge/abilities?)
- Focus on structural interventions, does not acknowledge the importance of relational interventions
- The training program only “scratches the surface” of what collaboration/coordination entails
- Lack of practical grounding related to the realities they face in projects
- No effort to increase shared knowledge of what “collaborative practice” really signifies for the actors involved in projects
- Difficult to establish shared goals when there is an inherent “us vs. them” thinking
- Participants are still not sure what is expected of their role as a process manager

Contact info

Runa B. Thrap-Meyer  
MSc Student, BI  
runa.b.thrap-meyer@student.bi.no

Taran E. Hellenes  
MSc Student, BI  
taran.e.hellenes@student.bi.no
Reference list


Research Approach
• Case study
• Mixed method
  • Qualitative
  • Quantitative

Research Question
• How do process managers facilitate for successful collaborative practice in temporary work-groups within the construction industry?
• What are the factors that contribute to successful collaboration practice and how are these related to relational coordination?

Norwegian Construction Industry
• Extreme level of conflict
• Mistrust
• Opportunism

Collaborative Practice
• Required since 2010 in all NPRA construction projects
• Study showed poor effect
• Introduced process manager training

Preliminary Findings
• A culture of mistrust and negative attitude
• Current state → ?? → Desired state
• Structural interventions > relational interventions

Research Objective
• Expand Relational Coordination by applying it to temporary project organizations
• Contribute to the knowledge about the leader’s role in facilitating relational coordination

Contribution to Relational Coordination

Taran Hellenes & Runa Thrap-Meyer, BI Norwegian Business School