Collaborative Trust: Interpreting Meaning and Exploring Impact

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Preliminary Conference Draft: Not for Citation

For presentation at
International Conference on Performance Management and Leadership
Portland State University, October 1-2, 2011
Introduction

Contemporary governance illustrates a paradigm shift regarding the ways in which individuals and organizations work together to produce public value (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004). No longer is working within traditional organizational structures and systems sufficient for solving shared public problems (Kamarck 2003). Reliance on hierarchy, command-and-control, and “silo” problem solving does not fit the challenge of addressing the priorities that span boundaries and jurisdictions.

The emergence of networks, partnerships, and collaborative arrangements illustrates the inadequacy of traditional structures and techniques in meeting shared goals and addressing common needs. And these emergent governance approaches require new approaches to problem solving, namely, boundary-spanning leadership and coordination. Effectiveness in these contexts rests not on traditional authority structures and systems, but on the foundations of relationships and trust.

Trust is repeatedly noted as key to effective collaboration. It is identified, for instance, as a foundational element for building collaborative capacity (Bardach 1998); as the mechanism for sustaining collaborative relationships (Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006); as a critical element that can be enhanced over time (Agranoff and McGuire 2003); as a source of momentum for the collaborative group (Linden 2010) and as both a “most valuable ingredient” and at the same time, a “slippery notion” to study (Gazley 2008).

Identifying appropriate ways to enhance collaborative trust, then, is a priority. But first, basic questions exist, including: what is meant by the term collaborative trust?
A second, and connected question is: how does it differ from existing conceptualizations, frameworks, and definitions of trust? This manuscript takes a first step in the direction of answering these questions by presenting qualitative narrative analysis that explores the meaning and impact of trust as presented by experienced collaborators.

The use of qualitative inquiry is especially well suited for this investigation. This approach seeks to explore multifaceted phenomenon such as trust that is not easily captured by other methods (Lin 1998). Examining qualitative narratives for this purpose is appropriate as it allows the researcher to inductively interpret meaning (Feldman et al 2004) and contribute to conceptual frameworks. Interpretive research offers an opportunity to both build foundational knowledge and make valuable connections to practice (Dodge et al 2005). The end goal of contributing to an improved understanding of collaborative trust should ideally correspond with improved collaborative practice, which is a goal that extends beyond individuals and organizations to potentially benefit society as a whole.

Considering Trust and Collaboration

The collective scholarly effort to understand the concept of trust spans disciplines and levels of analysis. Trust has been viewed as an individual attribute, a behavior, a situational feature, and an institutional arrangement. The lenses of psychology, sociology, economics, business administration, and political science have each been used to examine this multifaceted phenomenon. Considered broadly,
scholars have worked to frame trust in three overarching ways: global, relational, or organizational.

Global, or generalized trust, reflects expectations toward people in general (Rotter 1967) and has been assessed using such instruments as the Philosophies of Human Nature Scale and also the General Social Survey. Included questions seek to determine the degree of trust individuals have in others, generally speaking. Survey trends indicate decreasing levels of global trust over time, which may also affect the ability to build and sustain trust in collaborative settings. For instance, the percentage of Americans indicating trust in others fell from an all-time high of nearly 50% in 1986 to just over 30% two decades later (General Social Survey 2008).

Relational trust differs from global trust in that it centers on specific partners, including an element of faith in that individual and the belief that he/she acts in fairness and honesty (Rempel et al 1985). The Dyadic Trust Scale and Emotional Trust Scale are two instruments used to assess this type of trust. While this may seem appropriate for application to collaborative settings, the research on relational trust tends to focus on the trust that exists between known partners. Collaborative relationships contrast in that they may involve a degree of unfamiliarity that does not neatly correspond with this framework.

Considered through the lens of organizational behavior, trust is identified as an important element for improved performance. This is reflected in such instruments as the Reina Trust Scale (Reina and Reina 2007) and also the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (previously known as the Federal Human Capital Survey). It is expected that in
high trust organizational environments, employee attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors help build social capital that contributes to improved organizational effectiveness. Collaborative arrangements, however, permeate organizational boundaries and thus present challenges for applying this framework as well.

Together, these treatments of trust echo some shared tenets: trust is key to interpersonal, social, and organizational functioning. Improved trust is expected to have positive results at all three levels: individuals are better able to connect with others, find satisfaction in relationships, and contribute to building social capital for performance. However, even the existing research on these levels of trust leaves important unanswered questions. It is unclear, for instance, how trust facilitates these desired outcomes (Dirks and Ferrin 2001) or how best to assess the degree of trust that exists (Miller and Mitamura 2003).

These challenges are particularly relevant in the context of collaborative governance where trust is repeatedly noted as a foundational element for effectiveness. However, the concept of trust in this context is regrettably (but perhaps unsurprisingly) vague, due to its dynamic nature in the context of conflict, competing agendas, competitive processes, power differentials, and accountability imbalances (Linden, 2010). The very nature of collaborative governance, often marked by unfamiliarity among partners, mixed motives, and lack of understanding, stresses the fabric of trust.

In these contexts, it is often the job of public managers to build relationships and integrate incentives for participation in collaborative arrangements (Milward and Provan 2006). However, in the absence of hierarchy and command-and-control
structures, this job is made that much more difficult. Trust, then, becomes the mechanism for action and commitment. The focus on trust, says Grey and Garsten (2001), reflects the “unstitching” of traditional organizational forms and places new demands on collaborative arrangements. Yet, given the importance of trust in these environments, the lack of specificity surrounding this concept complicates the discussion of how best to assess, build, and enhance trust among partners.

Existing treatments, frameworks, and levels of analysis must together be reconsidered in the context of collaborative governance. First, a basic question: what do we mean when we refer to collaborative trust? As noted by Bigley and Pearce (1998), a concept only has meaning when it reflects reality and a shared understanding. Our existing lists of descriptors, supporting forces, and barriers to trust (see Fairholm and Fairholm 1999) contributes to the conclusion that the “story” of collaborative trust lacks a plot or integrative theory for improved understanding and explanation (Kramer, 1999). This research offers additional insights to help build the collective shared understanding of collaborative trust by scholars and practitioners.

Methods and Data

Given the challenges associated with framing and studying trust, qualitative inquiry is a fitting analytic approach. While the positivist approach to research is predominant in the social sciences and is characterized by identifying and testing causal relationships to predict outcomes, qualitative inquiry is grounded in the interpretist tradition of research (Lin 1998). The interpretist approach explores phenomenon that
are not easily captured by positivist perspectives. While the positivist approach focuses on validity and reliability as key indicators of study strength, interpretist research emphasizes authenticity and relevance. Like positivist approaches, interpretist studies benefit from rigor, context considerations, and above all, meaningfulness (Patton 1999).

Under the interpretist approach, research may take an inductive or deductive approach to examine multifaceted concepts like trust (Elo and Kyngas 2007). For this study, an inductive approach is employed to interpret meaning and explore impact using narratives as the data source. As noted by Feldman et al (2004), narratives are appropriate data sources for interpreting meaning as they reflect the ways in which actors make sense of reality. The goal of narrative analysis in this context is not to determine accuracy of the account, but to understand the author’s perspective. Concepts such as trust are especially well suited for this type of analysis, which provides an opportunity to improve the connection between scholarly understanding and practice (Dodge et al 2005; Ospina and Dodge 2005).

Qualitative collaborative narratives serve as the data source for this investigation. The Foundation Center Nonprofit Collaboration Dataset includes a total of 250 narratives (2009 data). Narratives include collaborations that were nominated for recognition and those that received recognition from the Foundation Center. Criterion, or theory-based sampling (Patton 1990) was employed to select narratives of interest. For this research, 34 collaborative narratives were selected for analysis based on the explicit consideration of trust as an element of interest.
The 34 narratives represent a variety of collaborative focus areas (including: health, environment, arts & culture, education, children/youth, and social welfare), geographic location, and type of collaboration (including: joint programming, confederation, and merger). Narratives were analyzed in two phases: summative content analysis and inductive content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Summative content analysis is used to consider frequencies and identify patterns in narratives. Inductive content analysis is used to observe specific examples in qualitative narratives and group categories into broader abstractions.

Findings

Summative analysis of the narratives reveals patterns in the ways in which collaborative representatives communicate about key challenges, including trust. For the collaborations in the sample that did not receive recognition for their efforts (n=23), narratives reveal problem-focused accounts. Emphasis is placed on the challenges of collaboration, including managing relationships and arrangements. Pattern analysis uncovers notable key descriptors including “difficult,” “overcome,” “issues,” “need,” and “challenge.”

Contrasting with this analysis, the sampled collaborations that were recognized for their efforts (n=11) employ descriptions that focus on the relationship aspects of collaboration. Pattern analysis reveals the most frequently used descriptors include, “coalition,” “community,” “partners,” and “relationships.” Notably, the use of the term
“trust” is largely absent from these collaborative narratives, suggesting an opportunity for further investigation.

Using inductive analysis to interpret meaning from these narratives, coding provides an opportunity for identifying groups, categories, and abstractions. To begin to examine the meaning of collaborative trust in these collaborative arrangements, qualitative analysis revealed three broad abstractions: security, respect, and reciprocity. The element of security reveals a safe and supportive environment for collaboration. Respect in the context of collaboration indicates an approach that values others’ expertise and input. The element of reciprocity is marked by mutual investment, transparency, and an approach that is non-territorial.

The inductive analysis further revealed ways in which collaborative trust is developed among partners. Coding and grouping uncovered two abstractions related to foundational, or initial, trust. First, history is a key element and is characterized by inexperience or unfamiliarity with partners. Second, fear of losing autonomy, being overshadowed by other partners, or losing competitive advantage are critical components of initial trust among collaborative partners. Beyond initial indicators of trust, narrative analysis reveals that collaborative trust is developed by individual actions, including frequency of communication, group processes, including effective planning and coordinating, and shared values, including commitment to equity, transparency, and accountability.

Inductive analysis was further employed to explore impacts of collaborative trust. The collaborative narratives reveal five key threats to collaborative trust,
including: communication challenges, unresolved fears, incompatibility, independence, and inequity.

Communication challenges include miscommunications and lack of face-to-face communication. Unresolved fears include loss of control or a feeling of being “crowded out.” Incompatibility is illustrated by missions, personalities, or goals/values that are incongruent. Independence threatens collaborative trust when it is related to preservation of individual/organizational resources or goals rather than collaborative resources or goals. Inequity among partners can threaten collaborative trust, particularly when related to unequal representation or recognition for accomplishments. The impact of collaborative trust is further illustrated in the narratives by serving as the foundation for learning, relationship building, and sharing, which are together considered critical to collaborative processes and outcomes.

Next Steps

Given the centrality of trust in establishing and sustaining collaborative relationships, big questions remain related to defining and explaining the role and impact of trust in these arrangements. Continued attention to this multidimensional concept will have implications for scholarship, practice, and society at large.

This qualitative analysis is a first step in a long-term research plan designed to assist in the broad effort to uncover meaning and explore impact of collaborative trust. A key goal of this research agenda centers on providing insights on the ways in which trust is assessed and sustained in emergent collaborative arrangements.
Anticipated next steps include expanding this qualitative analysis and employing additional analytical tools to further illuminate the concept of trust in collaborative settings. Further, quantitative data will also be examined to consider additional dimensions of collaborative trust as well as the application of existing measures and frameworks in these emergent contexts.
Works Cited


