

Development of Intergroup Cooperation with Action Research

Maarit Lahtonen

Information Society Research Center
University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract

Intergroup co-operation of different professions or groups with cultures of their own is a more complicated and demanding method than co-operation in a simpler team. Still, it has become usual in the private as well as in the public sector, because it includes many opportunities. For instance, it can improve the quality and efficiency of services, it can broaden the work contents and competence of the personnel, and it can create innovations. Action research is one method to develop and study intergroup co-operation. It offers discussion forums, where different groups can create a common language, visions and goals as well as build understanding and trust on each other.

The starting point of my paper is my experiences in two action research projects, one in the municipal sector and another in the IT sector. The projects are based on similar methodologies of action research, the so called communicative development model and its next version, the concept-based development model. Co-operation has been one central theme in the projects. In my experience, the special challenges of intergroup co-operation deal with social identities, cultures, trust, responsibility and power as well as with management. In my paper, I present two cases from the municipal sector and two cases from the IT sector and how the intergroup cooperation showed out there.

Keywords : intergroup co-operation, action research, trust, social identity, culture, management

1. Introduction

Projects, networks, multiprofessional work groups and other modes of intergroup co-operation have become usual in the private and in the public sector. Co-operation has many aims, e.g. rationalisation of the overlapping functions or flexible use of resources. Often organizations or smaller groups simply do not have all the competence or other resources needed for solving the problems they meet. (Alter & Hage 1993.) This kind of wider co-operation of different professions or groups with cultures of their own is a more complicated phenomenon than co-operation in a simpler team. Often co-operative groups do not even work physically together, but communicate mainly via net and mobile phones. Thus, questions of telework are very common.

Action research is one method to develop and study intergroup co-operation. It offers discussion forums, where different groups can create a common language, visions and goals as well as build understanding and trust in each other. Action research can also support mutual learning and building of a new kind of social organization, which develops innovations that any single organization could not produce on its own.

The starting point of my paper is my experiences in two action research projects, one in the municipal sector (Kasvio et al. 1999) and another in the IT sector (Kasvio et al. 2000). The projects are based on similar methodologies of action research, the so called communicative development model emphasising the links between language and action (Gustavsen 1992) and its next version, the concept-based development model (Gustavsen et al. 1995; 1996). In spite of very different environments, the projects also have rather similar goals. Their first aim is to analyse the way the work cultures of municipal/IT organizations are changing in Finland. The second goal is more pragmatic: to find ways whereby the IT/public organizations can serve their customers better and more efficiently than before, and at the same time improve the working life of the personnel. The research theme that interests me in both projects is intergroup co-operation and how it can be improved with action research methods.

2. Communicative and concept-driven action research

Action research has two goals: to change organizations and to do research. It is never value-free, but a normative method based on democratic and human values and aiming at change. It is also a very pragmatic and context-driven research method. The main aim is to solve real problems in work organizations. These problems are defined by the actors of organizations, not by researchers, although they can help organizations analyse the problems. Research data is collected during the change process, which is often one object of research. Both the researchers and the actors of organizations actively participate in the process. This shared participation and responsibility of the process is a very essential feature of action research. (Elden & Chisholm 1993.)

Action research projects are typically described as a cyclic process starting from problem analysis and proceeding to the creation of a vision, development measures and their evaluation. Our projects consist of the following phases:

1. Preliminary analysis of the organization, its mode of operation and developmental needs – made usually by interviewing the management and personnel in different positions, sometimes complemented with a survey
2. Arrangement of work conference and other kind of discussion forums to build the vision for the development process and to make a development plan
3. Planning and implementation of concrete development measures, e.g. pilots and work groups
4. Follow-up and support of the process, e.g. annual reports, networking with other development and research projects
5. More thorough evaluation of the development process and its outcomes in the end of the project

The methodological roots of both our action research projects are in the communicative development model with democratic dialogue and work conferences (Gustavsen 1992). This method is very participative and process-centred, aiming at building new communicative structures, which generate a self-driven change process in the organization. The task of the researchers is to arrange forums in which people working in different positions can meet to practice dialogue with each other. Dialogue has normative rules based on the theory of communicative action by Habermas (e.g. 1984; 1987). The

main rule is that everyone has an equal right to express their experiences and opinions in the dialogue, no matter what their position in the organizational hierarchy is.

Democratic dialogue is practised in work conferences, seminars consisting of four group works dealing with the following themes: (1) vision of a good workplace in about five years' perspective, (2) problems in fulfilling the vision, (3) solutions to solve these problems and (4) development plans. After the conference, the core of the developmental organisation is usually a multiprofessional project group, which steers the concrete development projects at the workplace. Networks of workplaces from the same branch or region are also often used to support the development work.

In communicative action research one can see a clear connection with the theories of social learning and learning organization. For example, in our projects we study how the organizations create their communities of practice (Wenger 1998). And good communication is a prerequisite for a learning and knowledge-creating organisation (Senge 1990, Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). The final goal of communicative action research is to strengthen the organization's competence to learn, innovate and renew its practices. During the three and half years of the municipal action research project we clearly observed some development of communicative competence or social capital, by which we mean interaction based on mutual respect and communicative equality, in which all the actors participate actively to reach a common goal (Szeter 1998). This kind of competence is vital for all kinds of co-operation.

The communicative action research model has been criticised about lack of appropriate design and process tools for medium range development, which gives rise to various problems with process control. As a result, many projects applying it have suffered from an energy-drop soon after the initial enthusiasm and first work conferences (Naschold 1993). Partly as a reaction to this critique, the communicative model was developed during 1990s further to incorporate conceptual and programmatic elements that help to structure developments (Gustavsen 1995; 1996). This more concept-oriented development model makes the role of researchers many-sided. The researchers do not only organise discussion forums but act as active co-partners who also offer their substance competence and experience to the use of organizations. We have used communicative and concept-driven development approaches side by side in the action research projects.

Co-operation has been one typical theme in projects carried out with communicative action research. In my experience, in the development of intergroup co-operation, the special challenges address social identities, cultures, trust, responsibility and power as well as with management. In the following, I will present two cases from the municipal sector and two cases from the IT sector and how intergroup cooperation showed out there.

3. Cases from the municipal sector

Intergroup co-operation was a major goal in two workplaces of our municipal action research project, carried out in 1995-98, in the home care services for the elderly and in the cultural center (Kasvio et al. 1999).

Home care services for the elderly: Multiprofessional team work

In the services for the elderly, the big challenge was to improve co-operation between social and health care services which had functioned very separately. At first, we arranged a discussion about the future of the services, including a big work conference for the whole region. It gathered together all the main professional groups of the home care for the elderly to discuss the services. One could say that a new kind of communicative infrastructure was created at the conference. In my paper, I will concentrate on the second phase of the project, in the multiprofessional team pilot of home-helpers and visiting nurses.

A number of studies have been carried out in Finland about the co-operation between social services and health care, and the results are more or less consistent: there is an obvious need to increase co-operation, but in practice it has not succeeded very well. Obstacles have included difficulties of communication, professionalism, lack of common goals and joint planning, administrative problems, problems of management as well as cultural obstacles (Kaasalainen 1991, Mustonen et al. 1993, Nikkilä 1986, Vartiainen 1996).

The multiprofessional team experiment was a significant step forward in collaboration between social and health care services in the case of our project unit. There had been plans about similar experiments earlier, but they had run into operational and attitudinal obstacles. Home helpers and visiting nurses had been working separately although they took care of the same clients.

The pilot team worked at the health station, and it was a big change for home helpers to move there. Despite all the preparations, the team had difficulties in the first phases of the experiment, until the people really got to know each other and each other's work, and agreed on the rules of co-operation. After this, the attitudes towards co-operation and appreciation for the work of other profession improved significantly. Still, it demanded a lot of energy from the senior visiting nurse, who was the leader of the team, before all the team members became committed to regular team meetings and mutual planning of work.

The pilot showed that multiprofessional teamwork is a good approach to home care. It helped improve the flow of information and it was conducive to a more balanced sharing of responsibilities. The staff found they had more autonomy than before, and their competencies and work contents were broadened. The work stress decreased when employees could share the customer responsibility with other team members.

The experiment also made it clear that multiprofessional teamwork is a demanding method, which does not automatically succeed once the employees have been organized into teams. In this case, the team received vocational and team training as well some work counselling. In addition, we researchers had regularly meetings with the team and the management of the home care services to evaluate and plan the pilot further. The most important tool of co-operation proved to be discussion. The team had regular meetings, and a common room and mobile phones made continuous interaction possible.

The most critical issue in the experiment was the management and administration of co-operation. A senior visiting nurse was a team leader, but home-helpers were still employees of the social centre. Thus, the team was under two offices, which had separate resources and steering systems. Still, the experiment was so encouraging that multiprofessional teamwork was taken up also elsewhere in the district. In the following phase, more home-helpers and one home help coordinator moved to the health station to start another team.

In this second phase, some more problems came out in multiprofessional teamwork. For instance, team work proved to be vulnerable when there is so much hurry that regular team meetings are not held anymore. If the co-planning ends, then also the positive aspects of teamwork, like shared responsibility and flexible work division, easily disappear. When the management responsibility of teams was shared between the senior visiting nurse and the home help coordinator, and they had rooms nearby, their co-operation increased remarkably. Still, the rules of shared management and administration remained somewhat unclear when both parties wanted to keep to their old practices.

What did I learn from this case?

The team pilot highlighted the possibilities of and obstacles to multiprofessional co-operation. When working together under the same roof and team leader, the co-operation developed into a quite new level. The proximity and everyday interaction proved to be the key elements in the development of co-operation and trust. The team also had some important tools which supported co-operation, like mobile phones, communicators, mutual care and service plans for the customers and customer information systems. Still, face-to-face interaction seemed to be the most important.

Both social services and health care services have strong professional cultures of their own, and one could see some power struggle in the team pilot. The home-helpers and visiting nurses saw the many advantages of co-operation and were motivated to develop it further. However, the management and

administration of teams were more problematic and sensitive issues, in which it was extremely difficult to make any major changes. As a result, the roles of the senior visiting nurse and the home help coordinator remained somewhat unclear.

The multiprofessional co-operation was carried out mostly according to the practices of health care, mainly because the team was situated in the health centre. Still, it would be important to protect the identities and cultures of all the parties of multiprofessional co-operation to get the most out of co-operation. It also became evident that co-operation demands continuous work and support from the management, otherwise it will collapse.

Cultural centre: Co-operation between several administrative units

A district cultural centre participating in our project was a multipurpose building, which had started only one year before the action research project. The facility housed programmes arranged by the City Cultural Centre, City Library, Finnish Adult Education Centre and the Youth Department, and a café run by the City's Catering Services Centre. A cleaner team was from the City's Real Estate Service Centre. In addition to activities falling under the scope of the City's administrative departments, the building also housed private schools for dance, music and art. All the units of the cultural centre had strong cultures of their own, but the centre had also a joined management group, which emphasised the unity of the centre.

The preliminary analysis of our project showed that personnel in the cultural centre were very satisfied with their own jobs and the work climate was good, but co-operation between different units did not function that well. Thus, intergroup co-operation became the major theme in the action research project.

A project group representing management and personnel of the four main administrative departments of the centre was established in the beginning of the project. This group planned how the project was implemented, and it organised various seminars and other events for the whole centre. The cultural centre and its charismatic manager had always been the most active advocates of co-operation, and she also became the leader of the action research project group. Co-operation of the group was not very easy, because the four units had different expectations from the project and its implementation. Some thought that it is mostly a discussion forum to change the attitudes of people and the culture of the centre, while in some other's opinion it should carry out very concrete development projects. These differences in opinions reflected the different cultures of units.

As a matter of fact, co-operation was so sensitive a theme in the cultural centre that the development process was started by making a common customer feedback system for the whole centre. The first minor work conference was organised around this theme although the discussions at the conference dealt also with co-operation.

Next, the project group decided to prepare a joint development programme for the cultural centre. To commit the personnel in the programme, a big applied work conference was arranged for the personnel of the four biggest city departments. At the conference, people made visions about the centre by writing and drawing metaphors of the cultural centre, and planned concrete development measures dealing with issues like joint meetings and internal and external information.

After the seminar the project group discussed how to proceed with the plans made at the seminar. This was a difficult phase, where the different views about the project culminated. The final conclusion of the rather hot debate in the project group was that some concrete measures have to be carried out, but the wider goals of co-operation must not be forgotten. No new work groups were established, but many measures planned at the conference were realised by the initiative of existing groups and active individuals.

In addition to minor events, a work conference became a yearly practice at the cultural centre during the action research project. The next work conference dealt with customer service and teamwork. After

the conference it was noticed that in spite of all the efforts, some people still considered co-operation and work conferences as a waste of time, not as a part of their work. The project group decided to speak and work for the co-operation even harder. For instance, they tried to motivate people to go to other units for a day or two to get to know other departments better, but only a few people used this opportunity. Others were too shy or busy to do it.

The theme of the last work conference of action research project was knowledge management, because flexible use of various competences and other resources of the departments could be a key issue in the co-operation in the cultural centre. All the members of the project group were enthusiastic about the idea of collecting information about the competences of the personnel into a data bank. However, the reaction of the rest of the personnel was quite opposite. Many people saw the system as a threat. It raised many questions, like how the information about competences is used, and whether all the units of the centre can demand services from people who have some special competences. Some people saw the information system also as a kind of ranking list. This heavy resistance was a surprise to the project group. The idea was not totally buried, but it was left for further discussions when the project ended at the centre.

What did I learn from this case?

People got to know each other and the various functions of the centre, and the small-scale everyday co-operation increased at the cultural centre during the project. However, the borders between different administrative units did not fall down, and co-operation proved to be a many-faceted challenge. All the units had strong cultures and developed their inner practices actively, but commitment to co-operation was much weaker. The central challenge of co-operation in the cultural centre was to find a stability between the identities of different units and the unity of the house and to synchronise the cultures of the different units.

Co-operation was a policy agreed by the managers of the units, but many people working at the grass root level, seemed to have rather suspicious attitudes to it. They did not trust co-operation with other units and did not believe it could really produce some synergy. Rather, they considered it as an unnecessary extra work.

Division of responsibility and power seemed to be very important, but difficult issues in co-operation. The cultural centre unit was most active in the development of co-operation, and other units easily left the responsibility of the common tasks, like information, to it. The co-operation was also identified strongly with the manager of the cultural centre, who had most experience about cultural centres and strongest opinions about how they should be organised and managed. As a result, the cultural centre unit had the most power and responsibility of co-operation, which was a strain for all the parties of co-operation. The action research project tried to change the basis of co-operation into something more equal, which produced both conflicts and fruitful agreements in the project group. Unfortunately, it seemed that despite all the common events and other efforts, the same spirit did not spread all over the cultural centre.

4. Cases from the IT project

In the IT sector we operate in a very different environment from the municipal services. As a matter of fact, there is a very interesting phase in the IT sector just now. The economic situation and future prospects as well as the whole atmosphere have changed dramatically during the past year. The rapid growth of the business and recruitment of competent personnel are not the main challenges any more. Now the key words are productivity and economic efficiency. It looks like the IT companies have started to resemble more traditional business companies. This sets new challenges also to their personnel policies.

At the moment, we have two companies involved in our project: an Internet service provider and a provider of outsourced IT services. Co-operation is a central issue in both companies. The project has been going on for four months, which means that we are only in the beginning of the action research process in these two cases. Thus, the following case descriptions are based on preliminary analyses.

Customer services of an Internet service provider: Integration of three cohesive groups into one unit

In this company, the action research project takes part in the development of customer services, which consist of four service units. In the spring, it was decided to integrate these units, except technical services, into one unit to improve the efficiency and quality of services. The change has been prepared since then, and the new organization is taken in use in the end of this summer.

Work conference as a kick off

We started the project in this company by arranging a work conference, in which some personnel and managers from all the units of customer services discussed the future prospects and developmental needs of the services. The personnel of the customer services had been informed about the coming organisational change before the work conference, but it was still under preparation when the conference was held. Some people complained that the conference should have been organized only when the new organization was known. This was probably a good point, but the company had problems with putting the change forward, and the conference was used as a kick off. It also served as a forum for co-planning of the change.

The most remarkable impact of the conference was the experience of a wide dialogue between people from different service units and positions. The visions dealt with the quality of customer services, with organization, as well as with personnel and management issues. Co-operation was not the key theme although it was in some way present all the time. The conference as such was also an intervention in the interaction between different units, and it succeeded in producing some good new ideas about how to develop the services.

Preliminary analysis of customer services

To get to know the customer services and to collect ideas for its change, we also made a preliminary analysis by interviewing people from different units and positions. The analysis revealed that all the customer service units have systematic and good co-operation both at the unit and at the team level. They have discussion-oriented meetings, special development seminars and regular development discussions between employees and foremen. Also the everyday co-operation seemed to work well: problems are solved together, and knowledge is delivered openly inside the teams. All the people interviewed for the analysis praised the youthful, relaxed and trustful spirit of their team. Some teams have developed even into peer groups, which spend time together also outside work. Still, nobody complained about too heavy pressures to confirm in their teams.

The management of customer services is based on a very equal relationship, many people described the foremen as their work mates. The foremen also pay a lot of attention to keep the team spirit good and the personnel satisfied and motivated.

The co-operation between the customer units did not get as much positive feedback. Many people said that the cultures of the four teams are so different that their integration will be difficult. Units have lived separately, and they have developed strong cultures of their own. When a group is very cohesive, people commit strongly to its practices at the expense of co-operation. The people interviewed did not know much about the people and the work in other units, which easily produces problems also in appreciation. In addition, there were problems in organising the work. Some tasks overlapped; on the other hand, nobody took responsibility for some customers.

Another feature which has a strong impact on co-operation has been the huge growth of the company during the last couple of years. One manager described the change by saying that the company has

changed from a team into a factory. Some people who have worked for the company and its forerunners had nostalgic memories from the time when everybody worked along the same corridor and knew each other. At the copying machine one could have a chat with the managing director. Nowadays the company functions in three buildings, which means, for instance, that some people know each other's voice and email style, but not the face. There are also more problems in communication, and co-operation has in many cases become more formal.

When we asked the people about co-operation not just inside customer services but also elsewhere in the company, the further the other unit was, the more problematic was the co-operation. Production, product development and marketing seem to have so different principles of action that they easily misunderstand each other. It is also usual in IT companies that technical services are valued higher than customer services. We found this trend also in this company. Technical experts did not necessarily take very seriously the questions coming from customer services, or their reply may take an unnecessarily long time. Thus, improvement of the significance and appreciation of customer services is one key issue in the development of co-operation.

All the events, in which people from different units have got to know each other, have solved mutual problems and made common procedures, got a positive feedback. The company has arranged these events with various methods, and many people felt that co-operation has improved as a result. Still, there was room for making the support of co-operation more systematic.

What have I learned so far from this case?

The action research project has just started in this company, and the real developmental measures will be taken in the future. In that phase, the co-operation will be put to a real test and its obstacles will become more visible.

Already now it has become obvious that the co-operation is most successful within small teams in which people are in almost continuous face-to-face interaction with each other. Of the people we interviewed, only the managers and some experts sometimes did telework at home. People in direct customer contact preferred to work close to their work mates to exchange views and help each other in problematic customer cases. Also the very cohesive climate of the teams encouraged working in the office, although it would be technically possible to work also at home.

The proximity was important also in co-operation with other groups. The closer the units were to each other, and the more they had interaction, the better was co-operation. Email is used actively as a communication tool within the company, but it could not replace face-to-face interaction. The problems are sometimes so complicated that they are not easily communicated in an email message, or people want to get the answer immediately. It also seems that building trust and positive attitudes towards co-operation needs face-to-face interaction, e.g. meetings between different units.

The challenges for the organizational change of customer services are, how to make the very cohesive units work together and not lose the good spirit and the best practices of the units when building the new organisation. This needs both strong management and collaborative development of practices, in which action research can serve as a support.

Provider of outsourced IT services: Telework and company culture

The unit of the other company, which takes part in the action research project, provides IT services for its customers. At the widest, it can take care of all the computers, networks, programmes and IT personnel of the customer company. Or the customer can buy only some services from the unit and take care of others itself or buy them from some other companies. Most of the personnel of this unit work in the sites of customer companies. Only some people work in the main office of the IT company. This makes the development of a coherent company culture a real challenge. In addition, in this case the theme of co-operation is most relevant also in relation to customers.

Preliminary analysis of the unit

The preliminary analysis is still being made, but the some results concerning co-operation can already be seen. The kind of business the unit does demands a long-term co-operation with customers, because the decision to outsource as important services as IT services demands a strong trust. Many people told us that the most critical issue in the relationship with the customer is to make the customer understand that co-operation needs to be based on partnership. If the customer and IT company do not trust each other, but both just try to maximise their profits from co-operation with win-or-lose mentality, it does not succeed.

Customers treat the personnel of the IT company, who work in the customer site, in different ways. Some companies treat them as equal with the personnel of the company. Their work environment is taken good care of, and they can participate in the meetings and events of the company. In some other companies, the IT personnel feel themselves outsiders in many ways. Their work environment can be worse than that of the company's personnel's, and they can be kept also mentally outside of the work organization. In this case, the climate inside the IT team and the relationship with the IT company become especially important.

All the people we interviewed were satisfied with their own team. They thought that the team spirit is good and their colleagues have good competence, work moral as well as positive attitudes towards co-operation. The team members often share a room, or they are otherwise in contact with each other several times a day.

Most of the people we interviewed thought that it is sensible to work at one customer site, the systems of which one gets to know well. The closeness of the customer, immediate feedback and independence at work were named as the prerequisites for this kind of work arrangement. The problems in telework were isolation and lack of information from the IT company. Many people working in the customer site felt that they are partly members of the customer company and partly members of the IT company. Thus the identity of the people was more or less splitted between the two companies. The longer they had been working at the same customer and the less they knew people working elsewhere in the IT company, the more they felt at home in the customer site. These people could feel themselves so much of an outsider in the main office of the IT company that they rather did not take part in the events arranged there, which made them even more isolated.

The IT company has systematic procedures and processes how to serve its customers, but sometimes people working in the customer site rather adopted the practices of the customer. Many people also felt that they have two foremen, one from the IT company and one from the customer site. Although people did not complain, it must be sometimes confusing to work according to two different systems and under two foremen.

The management of the IT company is situated in the main office, and the people in customer sites felt that their activities and interests are there too. Because of the distance to the management, they easily felt themselves inferior to the people working in the main office. Some people wanted to invite the top management to the customer sites to get to know their everyday reality.

The IT company uses their intranet actively in informing. In the interviews, intranet was praised as a good information channel, people in the customer sites used to read company news from it every day. Also the foremen of the teams were active in informing, but all this did not seem to be enough. The people in the customer sites still felt that they have lost real touch with the IT company. They do not know where the company is going and what the climate is like. This kind of feeling-based knowledge can be gained only when working near the management in the main office.

The IT company has arranged common training and other events for people working in different customer sites so that they get to know each other, can exchange views and develop the work procedures in the customer sites further. Those people we interviewed were very satisfied with these events. The company has also tried to facilitate work circulation to offer people possibilities to develop their competence and to get new ideas at work, but it has not raised much interest among the personnel. This is not surprising, because moving to another customer site always involves a risk that the work

environment becomes worse, and at least it demands a lot of work to adopt into a new team and into a new company.

What have I learned so far about this case?

This case showed that in spite of the highly developed operational procedures and information systems of the IT company, the development of a coherent company culture is difficult when the personnel is distributed at several sites. The problems are related to questions of telework. A very essential feature in telework is that the personnel work mostly in customer sites. This makes the relationship with the customer very important not only from the business but also from the personnel point of view. And however good environment the customer company provides for the IT personnel, there are still problems with lack on information, isolation from the IT company and with splitted identity.

Also this case proved the importance of proximity and face-to-face interaction in co-operation and in the development of a trust-based company culture. When people work all the time in the same customer site, they commit mainly to their own team and probably also to the customer company, but not so much to the IT company. Like one person said in the interview, if some people working in his site would be waked up in the middle of a night and asked who is their employer, they would immediately answer that it is the customer company.

There are no easy answers to the question, what should the IT company do to develop a more coherent culture. We have not yet discussed with the company, how the action research will continue there, but one alternative is that we try to find answers to this question of coherent company culture together with the personnel and management of the case unit. It could be started for example with a work conference, in which the personnel together with the management could make future visions and development plans for the unit.

5. Conclusions

I have only recently started my theoretical research of intergroup cooperation, and I still look for suitable theories and questions to approach the theme. However, I have already some experience of the development of cooperation in practice, and I have found it an interesting theme in organisation development. Co-operation includes many positive opportunities. For instance, it can improve the quality and efficiency of services, it can broaden the work contents and competence of the personnel, and it can create innovations. The boundaries of groups, where different groups interact, are very important locations for social learning. They are the likely locus of radically new knowledge and the place where new practices often start (Wenger 1998).

Intergroup co-operation is also very demanding. It does not automatically start when two or more groups meet each other. On the contrary, the contact can increase competition when providing an opportunity for comparison between groups. People in groups have a tendency to make comparisons, which shows their own group in a positive light. This enhances their social identity based on group membership. It has been found in many studies that positive co-operative relationship demands long-lasting operational collaboration, which is based on close interaction, common goals and positive dependence between groups. This kind of keen co-operation diminishes the differentiation between groups. In addition, the groups should be as equal as possible, and they should be able to save their own identity in co-operation. (Brown 1988, Hewstone & Brown 1986, Hogg & Abrams 1988, Turner 1981).

Trust is also a very important prerequisite for co-operation. People's decisions about whether to cooperate are based on their estimates of the probability that others will reciprocate that cooperation (Tyler & Kramer 1996). Trust typically develops from calculus-based trust to knowledge-based and finally to identification-based trust, which demands a long and keen co-operation to develop (Lewicki & Bunker 1996). From the perspective of trust, it is not surprising that co-operation within organization is significantly more likely, compared to cooperation across organizational boundaries (Zucker et. al. 1996).

The main problems of intergroup co-operation in my four cases were management and administration, which were often closely connected to the division of responsibility and power. In addition, the questions of trust, social identity, telework as well as strong cultures and cohesion of groups were problematic. The importance of face-to-face interaction could be seen in all the cases. The physical distance seemed to imply psychological distance. The municipal cases also proved that co-operation cannot be dictated top-down, although it needs support from the management. It develops better from bottom up when groups work together on a daily basis, have common operational goals and are interdependent in their achievement. The multiprofessional team of elderly care was a good example of this.

Intergroup cooperation is a challenge to action research and its methods. Co-operation is not a stable state, but changes all the time, and its development is rather a long-term learning process than a number of separate interventions. As a matter of fact, communicative action research provides a good basis for this kind of process, because communication seems to be the most important tool in cooperation. Action research can offer forums for the development of communicative competence or social capital, interaction based on mutual respect and communicative equality, in which all the actors participate actively to reach a common goal (Szeter 1998).

References

- Alter, C. & Hage, J. (1993). Organizations Working Together. Sage Library of Social Research 191. Newbury Park: SAGE.
- Brown, R. (1988). Group Processes. Dynamics within and between Groups. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Elden, M. & Chisholm, R. (1993). Emerging Varieties of Action Research: Introduction to the Special Issue. Human Relations Vol. 26, No 2, 121-142.
- Gustavsen, B. (1992). Dialogue and Development. Social Science for Social Action: Toward Organizational Renewal. Volume 1. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum & Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Gustavsen, B., Ekman-Philips, M., Hofmaier, B. & Riegler, C. (1995). Arbetslivsfonden som förändringsprogram. Delraport 2. Erfarenheter från 93 fallstudier genomförda av Arbetslivsfondens arbetslivssekreterare. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum & Arbetslivsfonden.
- Gustavsen, B., Hofmaier, B., Ekman-Philips, M. & Wikman, A. (1996). Concept-Driven Development and the Organization of the Process of Change. An Evaluation of the Swedish Working Life Fund. Dialogues on Work and Innovation, 3. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Habermas, J. (1984). The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1. Reason and the Rationalization of Society. London: Heinemann.
- Habermas, J. (1987). The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2. Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason. London: Heinemann.
- Hewstone, M. & Brown, R. (1986). Contact is not Enough: An Intergroup Perspective on the 'Contact Hypothesis'. In Hewstone, M. & Brown, R. (Eds.). Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hogg, M. & Abrams, D. (1988). Social Identifications. A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kaasalainen, M. (1991). Yhteistyön monta todellisuutta. Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon yhteistyö kuntatasolla. Kokeiluprojektin loppuraportti. Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö, kehittämisosaston selvityksiä 1991:5. Helsinki.
- Kasvio, A., Lahtonen, M., Varis, M. & Airaksinen, J. (1999). Kehittäminen arjen voimavaraksi. Tutkimus toimintatapojen kehittämisestä Helsingin kaupungin työpaikoilla vuosina 1995-1998. Tampere: TaJu.
- Kasvio, A., Haapakorpi, A. & Ruohonen, M. (2000). Joustavat työjärjestelyt. Esitutkimusraportti. Tampereen yliopiston tietoyhteiskunnan tutkimuskeskuksen työraportteja 12/2000. Tampere: TAY.
- Lewicki, R. & Bunker, B. (1996). Developing and Maintaining Trust in Work Relationships. In Trust in Organizations. Frontiers of Theory and Research. Kramer, R. & Tyler, T. (Eds.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Mustonen, A., Sinkkonen, S. & Niiranen V. (1993). Vanhustyö sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon yhteistyöalueena kunnissa: Yhdistettyjen ja erillisten

hallintokuntien henkilöstön käsityksiä ja kokemuksia yhteistyöstä ja hallintokuntien yhdistämisestä. In: Hallinnonuudistus ja sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon yhteistyö kunnissa. Kuopion yliopiston julkaisuja E. Yhteiskuntatieteet 9.

Nikkilä, J. (1986). Ammatillinen vuorovaikutus ja valta sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollossa. VALTAVAN seurantatutkimus. Osa 6. Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö, tutkimusosasto. Suomen virallinen tilasto, Sosiaalisia erikoistutkimuksia XXXII:123. Helsinki.

Naschold, F. (1993). Organization Development: National Programmes in the Context of International Competition. In Naschold, F., Cole, R., Gustavsen, B. & van Beinum, H.: Constructing the New Industrial Society. Social Science for Social Action: Toward Organizational Renewal. Volume 3. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum & Assen: Van Gorcum.

Nonaka, I. & Takeuchi, H. (1995). The Knowledge-Creating Company. How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation. Oxford University Press.

Senge, P. (1990). The Fifth Discipline. The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization. Chatham: Century Business.

Szeter, S. (1998). Social Capital, the Economy and the Third Way. Unpublished manuscript.

Tyler, T. & Kramer, R. (1996). Whither Trust? In Trust in Organizations. Frontiers of Theory and Research. Kramer, R. & Tyler, T. (Eds.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Turner, J. (1981). The Experimental Social Psychology of Intergroup Behaviour. In. Turner, J & Giles H. (Eds.). Intergroup Behaviour. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Vartiainen, P. (1996). Yhteensaatetut erilaiset. Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon yhteistyö vaasalaisesta näkökulmasta. Vaasan yliopiston julkaisuja. Selvityksiä ja raportteja 15.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity. New York: Oxford University Press.

Zucker, L., Darby, M., Brewer, M. & Peng, Y. (1996). Collaboration Structure and Information Dilemmas in Biotechnology: Organizational Boundaries as Trust Production. In Trust in Organizations. Frontiers of Theory and Research. Kramer, R. & Tyler, T. (Eds.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.