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Transnational, trans-sectorial, and transgenerational collaboration: A proposal to build social capital using the SPLIT Framework

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Abstract

Building social capital is crucial for the effective collaboration, project implementation, and successful team working within project teams. These elements can be especially imperative when running global teams across national boundaries and diverse businesses industries, with participants from different age-ranges. The importance for participants to spend time and effort building social capital, to advantage both the project itself and one's own career, is not always fully understood or appreciated by those within a team. Equally, for those facilitating, it can be difficult to find activities and opportunities which suit a highly diverse team. Using the SPLIT Framework, this paper sets out ideas to overcome these issues and accelerate the social capital underpinning a major international research project operating across five countries, multiple industries, and which includes participants from different generations. The aim is to enhance relationships between project participants, to ultimately sustain collaboration beyond the end of the funded project.

1. Introduction

International mobility facilitates social mobility, and one way in which universities contribute to society is through the development of global citizens [1]. An ability to build relationships across national borders is central to this endeavour, whilst

simultaneously satisfying young people's main professional aim of advancement [2]. A purely instrumental approach, resulting only in behavioural engagement, is unlikely to produce deep intercultural relationships [1]. Instead, shared values and experiences must be developed. Fostering social capital within a team consisting of different aged individuals, from a range of countries, drawn from diverse industries (including higher education, global manufacturing, small business support and micro start-ups) – each with their own way of operating in different cultures – provides both a significant challenge, and a special learning opportunity.

This paper emerges from the Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management 3 project; a 4-year research and innovation staff mobility project of 16 institutional partners in 5 European and Asian countries. Variable attitudes towards, and understanding of, the effectiveness and methods of building social capital have developed in the first two years. With another two years of the project to run, with the additional aim of developing sustainability beyond project end, a specific work-stream has been established to support and facilitate the development of social capital. This assumes an enhancement of the concept of 'shallow' networking.

The concept of 'social capital' has ancient philosophical roots in both Europe and Asia and gained currency in the 1990s [3]. Definitions are many and disputed, pertaining a shared sense of identity, understanding, norms, values, trust, co-operation and reciprocity. We use Aldrich's sub-definitions of 'bonding capital' (friends and family) and 'bridging

capital' (the relationships between friends of friends) [4]. Neeley [5] has found that communication can rapidly deteriorate when teams are dispersed across countries, backgrounds and locations, and misunderstanding can degenerate into distrust. To prevent what she describes as this 'vicious dynamic', Neeley has studied 'social distance' the "*degree of emotional connection among team members*" (p. 78). High levels of social distance exist between those who are geographically separated and so mitigation social distance becomes the "*primary management challenge for the global team leader*" (p.78). She therefore developed the SPLIT Framework covering five components: Structure, Process, Language, Identity and Technology, all of which can cause or overcome social distance and build social capital. Project teams can use this framework to prevent and resolve problems.

2. The SPLIT Framework

2.1 Structure and the Perception of Power

Those who are co-located with the project leader or in the largest team are perceived (whether true or not) to have the greatest power. When a power imbalance is suspected, 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' are imagined. The project team must therefore focus on communicating the unity of the team, a shared common purpose and availability for each other.

2.2 Process & the Importance of Empathy

Empathy is crucial to reducing social distance and the lack of regular 'facetime' in teams working internationally, in different industries and across generations means 'deliberate moments' are too important to leave to chance. The project team should discuss routine interactions to elicit 'reflected knowledge' i.e. awareness of how others see them. Paradoxically, unstructured time should be built into more formal time spent together, such as meetings. 'Small talk' is a powerful trust builder but can be culturally influenced. Disagreement should be encouraged in the right forum in order to build buy-in and avoid problems.

2.3 Language and the Fluency Gap

Good communication underpins all other aspects of project implementation. In multilingual teams, varying levels of fluency in the lingua franca heighten social distance. The SPLIT framework recommends evening out this imbalance by requiring fluent speakers to slow down and check understanding.

Less fluent speakers should strive to contribute and admit when they have not understood. Some 'rules of engagement' for team meetings can help ensure these behaviours.

2.4 Identity and the Mismatch of Perceptions

Understanding one another's values and identity – and the meaning of different behaviours – helps lubricate teamwork. Extra effort must be made to understand through give and take of questions and answers in open conversations.

2.5 Technology and the Connection Challenge

Technology can both reduce and increase social distance. Teams should consider and decide whether or not communication needs to be (or can feasibly be) instant, e.g. through videoconferencing for example, or if delayed communication is preferable or more realistic e.g. through email. Multiple communication platforms can be used to reinforce important messages and 'redundant communication' e.g. follow-up email after a meeting, can also be a good reinforcement. The SPLIT framework suggests that a team will follow the leader's examples and so consideration should be given by the leader to the type of communication they use.

2.6 Framework Implications

With this framework in mind, certain activity can be actively/partially planned in order to facilitate, or enhance the natural facilitation, of building social capital within a project team. Using a major international research project at the basis, ideas can be proposed to accelerate the social capital underpinning which, although often overlooked, is imperative to project success.

Whilst interlinked, three main perceived elements have been identified in the process of building social capital within an international setting, being; the *transnational* (here operating across 5 countries), the *trans-sectorial* (specifically between higher education institutions and active business industries) and the *transgenerational* elements of a team. Considering these with respect to the SPLIT Framework will add an extra contextual layer to the process of managing a global team, whilst proposing specific activity to alleviate any associated issues.

3. Transnational Teams

The team in this specific example consists of businesses/institutions operating out of headquarters in five different countries across Europe and Asia. It is further worth noting that within this the institutions themselves often house participants/employees from outside the headquartered region; resulting in a participant team of dozens of different nationalities.

With 7 different Partner Universities working across 5 countries in EU and Asia the potential for Structure and Perception of Power problems to arrive is rife.

The 'Structure and the Perception of Power' element is extremely important within this project, as if different countries/nationalities feel more/less involved with the project subgroups could occur, which can either be disengaged, or even disruptive. A multi-leader approach has been created through the development of set work-packages (agreed deliverables), which have been distributed across separate locations. This has resulted in the active creation of subgroups, however they have a defined, proactive purpose, as opposed to the artificially transpiring 'out-groups' which occur through lack.

As social capital is often built on personal, one-to-one relationships, the importance of these subgroups within a project is even higher. Participants may feel very associated to their subgroup due to personal interactions, which then endear them with the wider project.

Despite these created subgroups, it is essential that the individual participants feel close to the overall project, considering 'Process and the Importance of Empathy' it is vitally important that individuals feel like their opinions and thoughts can be taken on board regardless of their location. A clear line of feedback, allowing anyone to submit their thoughts, opinions or ideas could be created, wither a physical meetings or digitally in ongoing form. A process or system to facilitate this needs to be transparent and articulated to all team members. Consideration of whether the system allows for anonymity has both advantages and disadvantages, however the needs to be a clear, complete feedback loop either by showing clearly that such suggestions have been taken on board, or by rationalising when this is not the case.

4. Trans-sectorial Teams

The aspect of having a trans-sectorial team within a project poses a very interesting element to the building of social capital. Broadly speaking there are 2 main partner 'sectors' within the project; being higher-education institutions (universities) and active SMEs (businesses). Each individual institution may have a different objective or rational for joining the project, and

thus creating situations which develop social capital, whilst being framed in a worthwhile fashion for the business, is particularly challenging. Additionally, the businesses represented in the project come from a range of different sectors, including; producers/manufacturers, training and business support agencies, and consultants, across a range of different business to business (B2B) and business to customer (B2C) industries.

Both the broad sector differences, and the individual industry sectors, combine to add challenge when managing a trans-sectorial team.

Difficulties regarding 'Structure and Perception of Power' within trans-sectorial teams can be extremely common. Deeper than geographic location alone, there may be a perceived distance pertaining the sector within which the team-leader resides, compared with other sectors. Although not a physical distance, there may be a significant barrier between sectors, specifically when considering higher education institutes against dynamic, small businesses. The implication of this could be disengagement, withdrawal or lack of participation from an individual or partner organisation, and this in-turn effects the remaining team members adversely.

Considering 'Process and the Importance of Empathy', the constraints, limitations and pressures on participants from different sectors will be different, and a contextual understanding of this, with a communicated empathy, is required to ensure that members feel part of the team, regardless of how hands-on their participation is. Empathy is required for both the business on the whole, and the individual representatives working within them. SMEs for example often face extreme time constraints, and knowledge of this limitation allows the project management team to encourage/allow certain key activity to take place in pre-allotted, set times.

Management of expectations can be key when creating empathy within a trans-sectorial team, linked to 'Technology and Communication Constraints' it is important to discuss, set-out and articulate clear requirements of all sector partners – what are their roles and requirements within the project, and are these different between different participants. This is a difficult element to manage within a trans-sectional team specifically, how can a management team articulate that there are different rules and requirements for partners based on which institution they come from. Whilst blanket recommendations and rules can benefit team cohesion, this becomes difficult when individual situations need to be considered – this individual approach to participants helps build empathy, when suitably articulated, without alienating team members.

Whilst on the surface one may assume that language would be consistent once within a county, this

is not always the case in trans-sectorial teams. Many businesses or industries have industry specific terminology which they use internally. Arguably when a shared understanding of a common language is high, this is actually where the greatest potential for misunderstanding occurs – as individuals may assume their message has been understood without the usual clarification of confirmation someone may seek if there is a perceived language barrier.

The role of ‘Technology and Communication’ in dissemination information is of clear importance for building social capital within any team. Between trans-sectorial teams this poses a specific issue, as there are many different commercially available platforms and software for communication, and different sectors will often have experience or preferences regarding which to use. It can be highly disruptive for an individual to move outside of their currently adopted technology choice – for example if all internal and current communication for one individual takes place on Google Applications, moving to Microsoft Software (and remembering to keep active and up to date) can be a challenge for the worker, leading to important messages being missed and an perception of being out of the loop which diminishes social capital.

This is a difficult element to manage within a trans-sectorial team, as adopting one main communication platform could be seen as alienating those not currently on it, and therefore communication is usually moved to platforms everyone has (such as email), rather than what is potentially best for the team or project. However, this inclusive nature is imperative from a social capital perspective – communication is extremely important for eliciting togetherness, and a manager must consider ease of access to information – specifically reducing things down to the simplest form. Distributing the same information through a number of different channels maximises the chance of messages being seen and shared, and active recommendations and flexibility on this is advised.

5. Transgenerational Teams

As with the other team elements outlined, working with a transgenerational team has many benefits, including increased perspective and diversification of ideas. This said, generational differences, and managing these, is extremely important in the effectiveness of a disperse team.

Due to the hierarchical nature of any project, and the experience required to gain a senior position within an organisation, people in positions of power are understandably frequently from an older generation. Project structure could lead to individuals feeling

isolated or omitted based on their hierarchical position, which could relate to generational aspects.

It is important to draw a distinction between seniority and generation, as exclusion due to seniority (such as meetings where only Work Package Leaders are required) needs to be articulated effectively to ensure there is not a feeling of structural power difference based on generation alone. Although hierarchical structures can be extremely important in running large projects, a consideration of actively encouraging a range of perspectives could be incorporated as input needs to be clearly valued, regardless of the generation of the individual who proposes this.

Although ‘Structure and Perception of Power’ is primarily based on proximity to main location, this potential distancing of certain generations is worth noting. Any project team must therefore focus on communicating the unity of the team, a shared common purpose and an accessibility for all.

Another important consideration is inter-generational language. Even within the same base language, the terms used can mean very different things to different generations. This is especially important when collecting research – for example if research about student ideals are being collected, it could well be worth having questionnaires / responses considered from a generational perspective; especially with qualitative research where the intricacies of what is said, and the nuance, is so crucially important.

As research grows, it becomes clear that different generations have different sets of values and needs pertaining to their identity. Due to social, societal or anthropological reasons, often generations within a set country can be extremely different when it comes to values. This ‘Identity and the Mismatch of Perceptions’ adds an extra layer on to the understanding from a management perspective, as generations across different locations may have more similarities than cross-generations within a single location.

Equally, at a personal level, the career-stage that a participant is at (which can often be predicate by generation) is a worthwhile consideration.

6. Developing Social Capital

6.1 Face-To-Face Settings

The SPLIT Framework outlines some very actionable elements for reinforcing social capital and then building on these foundations at a distance over time. One major emphasis here is the requirement for bonds to form through informal, non-work related situations or experiences. Although this does not

implicitly need to happen in a face-to-face capacity, if such occasions arise where meeting in-person does occur (either by luck or design), then arguably such situations should be fully utilised for building social capital.

One important thing to note here is the importance of allowing social bonds to be formed and develop. Often the focus when such in-person meetups occur is one purely of task i.e. prioritising only working activity which immediately advances the active task of the team. However, to reduce the team purely to a task/output machine frequently overlooks the many other important elements which a team provides each other and the wider organisation; specifically the emotional connections, trust elements and support systems which once established enhance both the overall output, and the individuals' future collaborative work.

Such activity is becoming increasingly popular in practice within technology based businesses with virtual teams where quarterly / annual team get-togethers are becoming the norm in order to illicit social capital and the associated benefits this brings. Often the focus here is specifically *not* work related, however by building stronger team bonds, cohesion and social capital, individual team members show more commitment towards business activity following this, highlighting both a business case, and an individual one.

It could be argued that many of the functional, task-based objectives of any project *can* be managed remotely (especially considering the SPLIT Framework), however the building of social capital (at least when initially forming relationships) can *only* be done (or much more easily be done) in a person-to-person setting, and thus should take priority in any physical meet-up situation. Potentially, therefore, when a team does not meet face-to-face on a regular/semi-regular basis, the main objective of any in-person meeting should be primarily building social capital – with the team's task or project objective as a secondary element to the function of the team.

This is often extremely hard to articulate to the members of the team; who in many instances are time-poor and task driven; seeing only the immediate benefit of attending such activity if it 'moves the needle' of the wider project. Often perceived immediate needs (such as conducting administrative tasks) are prioritised over non-pressing tasks which have benefit over the long-term (or perhaps little perceived value), and the concept of delayed gratification needs to be emphasised for the sake of both the wider project, and the individual team members.

Such activity therefore may need to be specifically planned and then actively 'marketed' to the

team members in a way to show full benefits, both for the project itself, and for the individuals' future career.

An identification of whether such activity is simply not perceived as important by team members, or is seen as important but not often urgent, needs to be understood, as this will shape the way building social capital can be introduced into formal / semi-formal sessions in the future.

6.2 Sector Buy-In

Considering that the businesses represented within the project put themselves forward for involvement, their perceptions of outcomes should be considered. From a business perspective the opportunity to build networks and increase the chance of expanding their businesses comes through collaboration. The benefits for businesses to 'network' are now generally very accepted, and arguably the individuals put forward for this project will simultaneously be good at networking, whilst seeing the clear requirement for building social capital as a caveat for this.

The partner businesses' objectives for joining the project, matched with their existing familiarity with the concept of, and advantage to, networking could position them as an important motivator for increased focus on building social capital throughout the project. This could include using business members' presence at certain non-formal events as a 'carrot' for participation from other team members.

6.3 Social Capital Limitations with Vast Teams

A large-scale international research project comprising of a project team drawn from different industries, sectors and generations does propose a unique case. One notable difficulty for building social capital comes from the ever morphing or realigning members of the team. As individuals are often put forward by their partner organisation for elements including the international mobility or secondments during sandpits – different and new people enter and leave the project on a monthly basis. While this may suit from an organisational point of view (they cannot afford to keep sending the same worker away on business time after time), from a project and individual perspective this can be debilitating. It is hard to build the personal relationships required for effective social capital development if the representatives from organisations frequently change.

This is a potentially volatile situation, arguable some international collaboration is better than none, however it becomes hard to build real social capital if a

different representative from a firm attends or contributes at each different meeting. Understanding the limitations that certain businesses or sectors have regarding their staffing capabilities needs to be considered here.

7. Conclusion

The SPLIT Framework suggests that flexibility and an appreciation for diversity are at centre of a high-functioning team and that attention must be paid to all five dimensions. The emphasis of this framework is based around what the manager or leader can do to facilitate this.

A range of considerations have been proposed here relating to the framework, with a specific focus on the contextual elements and challenges of transnational, trans-sectorial, and transgenerational teams.

The requirement to build greater social capital is clear, both for the success of this project and the potential of future projects, however the way in which this is facilitated within the project, and the activities for achieving this will be analysed and refined as part of the ongoing international research project over the next 2 years.

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