Exploring the repertoire of in-between managers in multi-actor collaboration for innovation: Uncovering intentional, temporal and situated practices

Anna Yström, Linköping University

Susanne Ollila, Chalmers University of Technology

Kamilla Kohn Rådberg, Chalmers University of Technology

Background

- Who are the 'in-between' managers?

    - Can have many titles - coordinator, process leader, project manager or even director

    - orchestrating a collaborative space, both physically and mentally (de Certeau, 1984, Ollila & Yström, 2020)

    - simultaneously within and outside organizational boundaries (both/and - neither/nor (Bhabha, 1994)).

- Deals with ambiguous tasks, shifting conditions, multiple agendas etc.

    - combining a multitude of roles (Gray & Wood, 1991; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Ollila & Yström, 2015, 2017)

    - work from a position of little formal authority – they are 'not the boss of anyone' (Karp & Helgö, 2008)
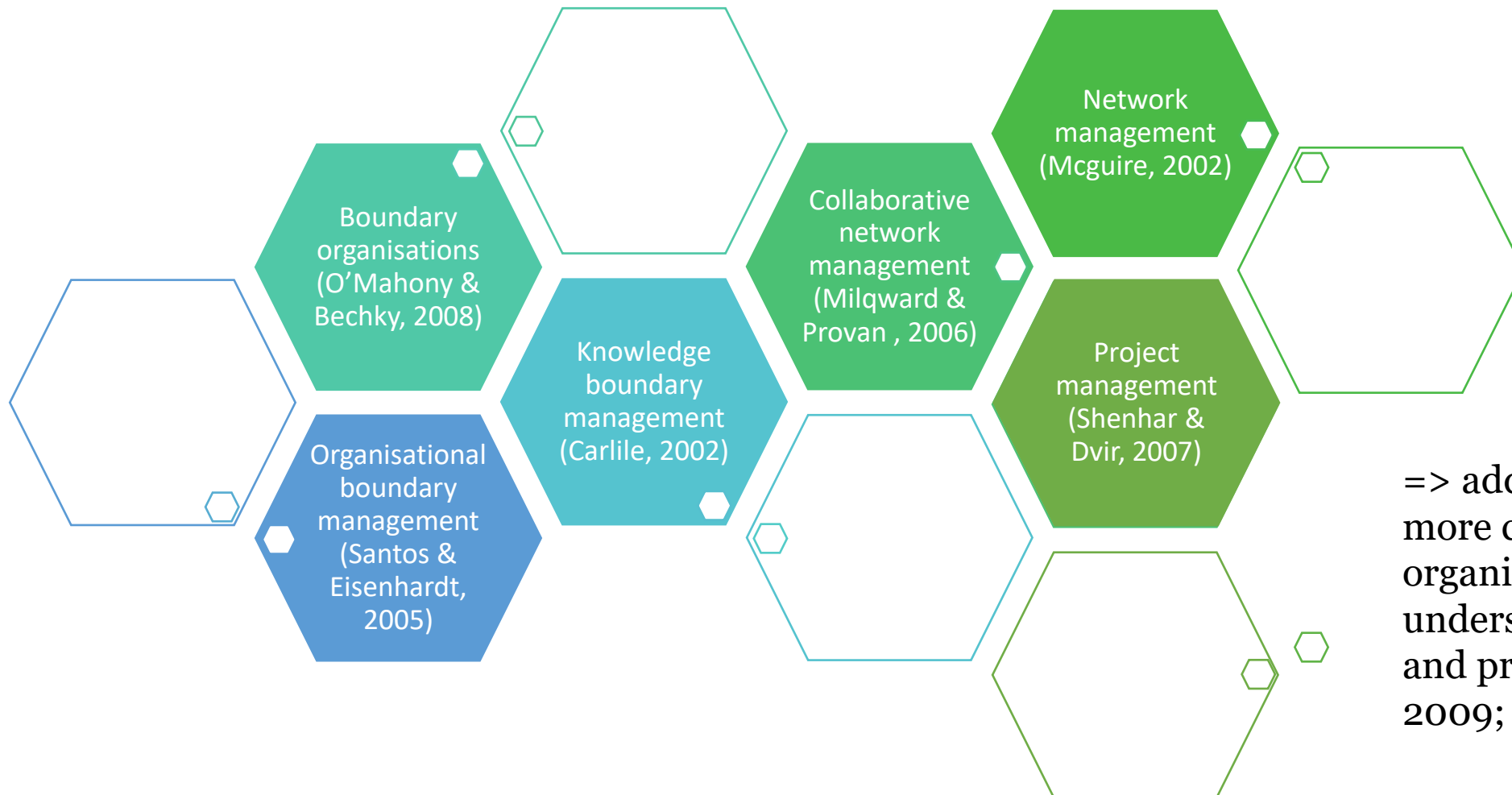
Why are in-between managers interesting?

- Collaboration is a continuous accomplishment, dependent on on-going negotiated relationships among participating members throughout the life of the collaboration (Hardy et al., 2005; Lawrence et al., 2002; Ollila & Yström, 2016).

- Accomplishing effective collaboration involves (Hardy et al., 2005):

1)   leveraging the differences among participants to produce innovative, synergistic solutions

2) balancing divergent stakeholder concerns

- *"How can the particularities of in-between managerial practices be understood?"*

A contingency perspective from previous literature

Boundary organisations (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008)

Network management (Mcguire, 2002)

Collaborative network management (Milqward & Provan , 2006)

Knowledge boundary management (Carlile, 2002)

Project management (Shenhar & Dvir, 2007)

Organisational boundary management (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005)

=> additional research needed that more clearly 'weaves' the organizational context into our understanding of managerial roles and practices (Dierdorff et al., 2009; Mowday & Sutton, 1993)

Methodology

- A qualitative study of in-between managers

Selection criteria (all fulfilled):

> 1. The individual is working in a collaborative initiative involving multiple types of actors (e.g., from academia, industry, and society)
>
> 2. The individual is working under the premise that innovation and/or knowledge creation is an explicit, joint goal in the collaborative initiative
>
> 3. The individual holds a leading operational role (formally appointed) within the collaborative initiative

- Data collection: 28 interviews with in-between managers in Northern Europe (2009-2020) – to capture managers' accounts of their practices

- Data analysis:

  - Step 1: Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of interview material, we mapped out the practices that in-between managers use, through open and axial coding to identify descriptive 1st and 2nd order codes and categories using the method of constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), resulting in four central practices

  - Step 2: Cross theme-analysis to find commonalities and recurring patterns in the practices, from which we elucidated central descriptive characteristics

LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
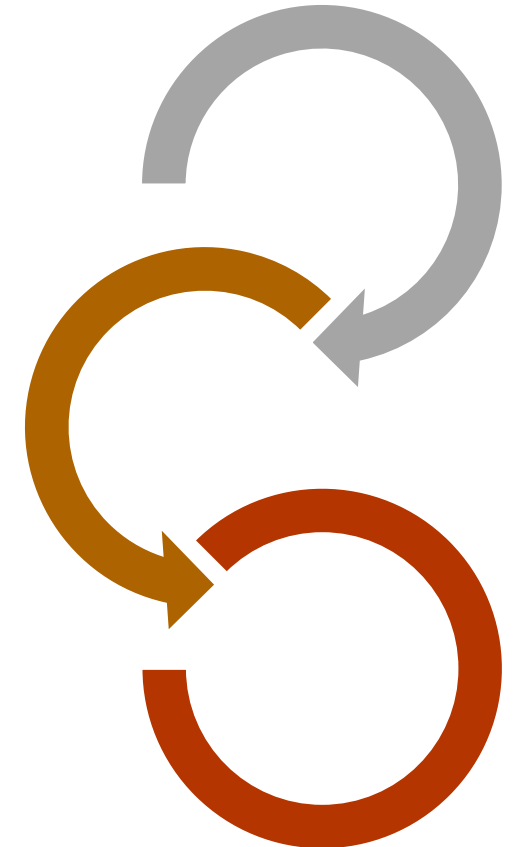
Data structure

In-between managerial practice (aggregate dimensions)	Activities composing the practice (2nd order categories)
Transcending boundaries	Connecting organizations
	Focusing on motives
	Enabling emergence
Attending to relationships	Acknowledging people
	Forming relationships
	Continuously attending to relationships
Shaping collaborative behaviour	Promoting collaborative behaviour
	Creating routines and structure
	Continuously reflecting on the collaboration
Propelling progress	Emphasizing results
	Pushing for action
	Embracing learning

Findings – Transcending boundaries

- Connecting organizations

- Focusing on motives

- Enabling emergence

"Often, in the beginning, most of the tools and workshops are aimed to build relationships and to get everyone to know each other. Instead, I mainly use those workshops in order to understand the roles of the participants, and for them to understand their own, as well as learn who is the best at what". (Elise)

Findings – Attending to relationships

- Acknowledging people

- Forming relationships

- Continuously attending to relationships

"It is required that you know a little about many things. You need to know a little group psychology; you need to have some leadership experience. You need to have experienced complex contexts yourself. One needs to have been in several different contexts to be able to put that (process) puzzle together. Also, you need to have a network that you can use if you need to. There are many more ingredients, such as these, which can't be taught in school." (Emma)

LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

CHALMERS
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Findings – Shaping collaborative behavior

- Promoting collaborative behavior

- Creating routines and structure

- Continuously reflecting on the collaboration

"But anyway, in these contexts, it is very important to let people formulate why they perceive that they are there. Then they get to formulate [it]for themselves. They have rarely thought of it before, expressed so explicitly. It is a process in itself." (Simon)

Findings – Propelling progress

- Emphasizing results

- Pushing for action

- Embracing learning

"Often collaborating partners think about the collaboration as a self-playing piano, as soon the arena or project is visionary defined, has its first stage financed, it is as they believe results will come automatically. Often there are too many assumed understandings that are not expressed or explained, that I need to work on in collaboration with the set of representatives in the collaboration." *(Catherine)*

Findings – a repertoire of in-between practices

Practices	Situated Ad hoc, not plannable, improvised	Intentional Future oriented, forward-looking, progressive	Temporal Time sensitive, historically bound
Transcending boundaries Breaking, bridging, building boundaries	Connecting organizations by searching for alignment between various perspectives	Focusing on motives of the organizations to understand their expectations	Enabling emergence by acknowledging preceeding activities and relationships
Attending to relationships Creating and re-creating weak and strong ties	Acknowledging people and meet them in their emotions and perspectives	Forming relationships to enable progress in line with the aim of the collaboration	Continuously attending to relationships to ensure adequate group dynamics
Shaping collaborative behaviour Supporting in-bound and out-bound collaboration	Promoting collaborative behaviour to ensure that participants' knowledge and expertise is utilized	Creating routines and structure to promote knowledge sharing and collaboration	Continuously reflecting on the context of the participants to support the collaboration
Propelling progress Pushing reflexivity for learning and actions driving results	Emphasizing results to show progress and value created in the collaboration	Pushing for action to get beyond merely building relationships	Embrace learning and acknowledge timing for next step

LIU LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Findings – particularities of in-between management

Intentionality

- A way to achieve agency & control

- Positive & negative

Temporality

- Practices have different meaning at different times

- Combining seemingly paradoxical practices, e.g., pulling apart, opening up, with e.g., pulling together, alignment, coherence

Situatedness

- Mitigates between the ongoing or emerging circumstances of the surrounding world and the inner situation of the actor

- Emphasize not only re-active but also constructive/proactive

LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

CHALMERS
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Outlining three contributions of our study

1. Directs attention to ***the multitude of practices that an in-between manager need to use***, acknowledging e.g. temporality and need to engage in paradoxical practices

2. Identifies essential aspects related to the process of in-between management: ***intentionality, temporality and situatedness of the practices***

3. Contribute to theorizing specifically attending to ***the managerial level of analysis in processes and practices of inter-organizational collaboration***, supporting e.g. discussions on how to train and support in-between managers.

Managerial implications

1. In-between management is not "bad/sloppy" management

2. Managerial practices matter because they have a direct impact on the outcomes of knowledge-intensive collaboration

3. In-between managers often feel alone or isolated in their work, leading to work overload and burn-out. New ways of supporting these managers could help mitiagte work-related sick-leave.

Thank you!

anna.ystrom@liu.se

susanne.ollila@chalmers.se

kamilla@chalmers.se

liu LINKÖPING
UNIVERSITY