



Editorial

# Introduction to the special issue on cooperation and responsible management

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*European Management Review* (2005) 2, 1–2. doi:10.1057/palgrave.emr.1500022

This issue of EMR marks the 5th annual European Academy of Management Meetings, held in Munich in May 2005. The conference theme was ‘Responsible Management in an Uncertain World.’ We invited keynote speakers who were interested in writing about the more specific themes of ‘cooperation and responsible management’ to submit papers for review, which resulted in this special issue.

The subject of the volume reflects the changing realities of a globalizing world. Extreme forms of competition, although still apparent, are less evident today than they have been in the last few decades. Alliances, outsourcing and other cooperative strategies are increasingly common. Partnerships with suppliers often are assumed, and links with buyers throughout value chains are strengthening. Within the firm, command and control, though still evident, is also losing ground. More distributed forms of leadership now are required by flatter organizational structures. Organizational participants are pushed to operate more quickly and efficiently in multiple, often multinational, settings. In other words, responsible cooperation – defined as ‘working with others for a common good’ – is moving to the center of the economic stage.

It is particularly appropriate that a European journal produce a special issue on cooperation as a strong, enduring form of economic activity. The European Union is increasing cooperative action in areas that national governments and individual companies have long considered their own provenance. Managers in the public and private sectors are definitely part of the picture, and are faced with new opportunities and risks. As researchers, we must be prepared to help organization participants and observers understand ways to make mutual benefit possible and desirable around the world.

## Overview of articles in this volume

Janine Nahapiet, Lynda Gratton and Hector O. Rocha begin this special issue on cooperation by pointing out the narrowness of economic theories that assume actors always maximize their own interests. Echoing Sumantra Ghoshal’s recent observations in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (2005), they suggest that an alternative starting point could make a great deal of difference to management practice as well as management

theory. The paper identifies Aristotle’s writing about excellence as a particularly useful basis for facilitating knowledge exchange and building cooperative relationships.

The authors begin with an important argument that is echoed by several other authors in this special issue: basic ontological assumptions not only channel subsequent theories, but to the extent they affect behavior, they create the conditions that they assume. The enactment argument has been discussed for some years with particular cogency by Karl Weick (1979). Nahapiet, Gratton and Rocha go beyond this work to suggest design principles that grow out of the assumption that human excellence is possible, and can be encouraged as a habitual basis of interaction.

The second article in this issue, by Africa Ariño, José de la Torre, and Peter Smith Ring, focuses on a particularly important condition for effective interaction – trust. Trust has recently enjoyed extraordinary popularity as a focus of managerial effort and is often used as a variable in research explanations for desirable organizational outcomes. These authors move to new ground, however, through a discussion of the organizational aspects of trust. Arguing that trust is intrinsically a creation of individuals, they propose ‘relational quality’ as a separate organizational level construct.

Relational quality is described as growing out of preconditions (including assumptions developed in previous interactions), negotiation processes, ongoing interactions and events outside of the relationship that have an impact on agent expectations. The authors develop propositions about the interaction of these variables, trust among individual agents, and their effect on relational quality. Although the focus is on alliances, it is possible to extrapolate their arguments to other kinds of collaborations.

Raphael Ramirez moves the conversation about relationships forward by discussing the aesthetics of cooperation and responsibility in the following article. His claim is that the first formative impressions about cooperation are ‘pre-judgmental’ – reflecting an emotional, aesthetic response. Further, he argues that Europeans have given unique attention to issues of aesthetics that capture this response, though toward the end of the paper he suggests that an internationalization of attention might be expected, influenced especially by the economic style of Americans.

Armand Hatchuel continues the philosophical conversation, but turns attention to epistemology. His article proposes that management science cannot proceed without a more effective understanding of the epistemology of action. More broadly, he sees that Western science as a whole is in need of such an epistemology, because it has come to rely on collective judgements about scientific practice and evidence. Given current scientific principles, management has the potential of moving from a borrower of theory and method from more established sciences to become a significant contributor because we should especially understand the collaboration that scientific knowledge generation requires. This is a challenging and inspiring end to the theoretic chapters in this special issue.

The last four chapters continue to be concerned with theory, but also report on empirical evidence. Johan Roos and Roger Said's concern is with individual managers who are relatively uninvolved in the strategies of their organizations, even the strategies they are responsible for developing and implementing. Their article reports on three workshops that used serious play to unleash more creativity and concern. Group collaboration is critical to the sessions that these authors develop as action researchers. Individual symbolic constructions are discussed among workshop participants, and a common construction is agreed upon. The tangible nature of the play materials is essential, according to these authors, and they provide theoretic arguments as well as examples of its effectiveness in creating transitional objects for expressing often taboo subjects that affect strategy.

In the following article, Paul Hibbert and Chris Huxham report on their action research with experienced collaborators attempting to establish new relationships. These authors expected to be able to focus on the substantive learning from collaboration that the previous experience of these participants would facilitate, and they have reported on some learning outcomes in other outlets. This article emphasizes, however, that participants in the networks they facilitate have relatively little early interest in the practical concerns that trigger their activities. Rather, collaborators are absorbed in issues of understanding the potential of the relationships they are beginning to forge. As a reader, I was usefully reminded that every collaboration requires unique and ongoing effort.

Christoph Berger, Kathrin Moeslein, Frank Piller and Ralf Reichwald have also been involved in designing strategic workshops, but as part of a larger cooperative project. Their article gives a more extended example of the complexities of practical and research collaboration. Over the last 5 years the accumulated experience of these authors allows them to describe (1) collaboration with customers in the co-design of products and services, (2) collaborations across organizations (manufacturers, retailers and intermediaries) in the delivery of mass customization solutions that emerge from customer interaction, and (3) collaboration between academics and managers to jointly expand understanding of this new approach to customer-based strategy.

The last article of this special issue, by Nicholas Adler, Charlotte Glasser, and Britt af Klinteberg, provides a final example of the challenges of collaboration. These authors

are also action researchers, in this case trying to support youths with serious psychosocial difficulties. The article details the extreme challenges of this context. The disorder that concerns them has only recently been named. Coping strategies and treatment draw on the understanding of very different academic disciplines. A case study from one organization describes the social service networks involved in supporting individuals with these difficulties. This descriptive article from the public sector is a good reminder of the complex economic and social concerns that drive cooperation, and the tremendous costs of failure. It also emphasises the importance of using new research knowledge to change older, less effective structures for collaboration.

### An Ongoing Agenda

Taken together, the articles in this special issue illustrate the range and excitement of needed work on collaboration. I am also pleased that they collectively establish a robust and interesting agenda for further research on responsible cooperation. In my mind this issue discusses but also establishes the need to further:

- Clarify ontological and epistemological assumptions that inevitably shape not just understanding of cooperation, but cooperation itself.
- Develop the vocabulary of cooperation, especially at the organizational level.
- Explore multiple disciplinary perspectives on cooperation.
- Understand and improve cooperation as the basis for knowledge generation efforts by researchers as well as practitioners.
- Locate the roots and implications of cooperation at the level of the individual.
- Describe and understand collaboration as an ongoing interactive process.
- Unite company and research interests in cooperation.
- Recognize the systemic complexities that require cooperation, and the complex bridging efforts that have to be put in place to achieve cooperation across organizational boundaries and disciplinary practices.

Kathrin Moeslein and I, as co-editors of this special issue of the *European Management Review*, would like to thank the 19 authors involved in creating this special issue and raising these and other issues. We share an enthusiasm for a topic that is of increasing importance, but still under theorized and under researched. If this volume helps energize further research on cooperation we can all be well-satisfied with our efforts.

### References

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