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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a paradigm for evaluating an inter-organizational relationship (IOR) wherein two or more independent organizations agree to pool their authority, resources, and energies in order to achieve the goals they desire. Indicators of IOR effectiveness are clustered into four major categories: organizational situations, structural characteristics, relational characteristics, and process characteristics. Organizational characteristics conducive to a collaborative IOR include the existence of potential resources, a generally cooperative environment, and congruence between the organization's goals and IOR goals. Structural characteristics of IORs include coordinating mechanisms, demographic conditions, and resource contributions. Relational characteristics of IORs include interactions among individual representatives of member organizations, and complex and multiple ties at various levels. Process characteristics of IORs include degree of formality, features of the exchange process, and patterns of influence. Evaluations of IORs need to attend to these four components in the paradigm. (BW)

EVALUATING INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

by

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EVALUATING INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Context .

The federal role in education has changed dramatically over the past three years, and will continue to do so, as the administration of educational functions and programs is delegated to the states and locals. It has been predicted that this change will significantly effect school improvement activities, because it was the federal education system that had the opportunity, interest, ability and resources to engage in improvement efforts.

There has been some concern, however, about the readiness and willingness of state governments to assume these additional responsibilities for school improvement. Brickell posits a cogent explanation when he suggests that "... the primary role of government agencies is to assure the minimum behavior of individuals and organizations needed to keep the society running...(therefore, they) virtually never appropriate money for administrative agencies to conduct general-purpose, broad-band, unfocused efforts to improve general behaviors of individuals or organizations beyond some acceptable minimum."

Although local school districts differ widely in their interest and ability to develop a substantive school improvement agenda, they too are governed by boards that tend to enable or regulate minimum behavior. In addition, they are facing serious problems that interfere with their maintaining a level of organizational health conducive to growth and change. Declining enrollments, financial crises, serious staff morale problems and public dissatisfaction with educational outcomes have forced the local schools to deal with issues of organizational survival, rather than growth or renewal.

Within the educational system there are a number of organizations that

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either have engaged in, or that have the potential to contribute to school improvement efforts. They include regional education agencies (REAs) and schools, colleges and departments of education (SCDEs). In addition, the business and industry sectors have demonstrated an interest in school improvement. In essence, the responsibility for the improvement of conditions of professional practice in the public schools has now shifted almost completely to these agencies and to the local schools themselves. Importantly, neither the local schools nor these salient agencies in their environment appear to have the resources and/or the capacity to engage in school improvement efforts independently.

Therefore, a major challenge now confronts the current organizational actors in school improvement efforts. REAs, SCDEs and industry/business organizations need to find ways to connect with the local schools during each phase of an improvement effort. Similarly, local school systems need to develop viable procedures that will enable them to interact with and optimally use the resources of these other agencies in order to conduct improvement activities. These needs have fostered a growing interest in the research community in devisioning mutually satisfying inter-organizational arrangements that would facilitate successful school improvement efforts. In practice, developing formal inter-organizational relationships among collaborating organizations has become a feasible and viable strategy for accomplishing educational improvement efforts. In addition, having the ability to design and evaluate such interorganizational structures and processes will enable us to move beyond attending to procedures and to concentrate on determining the effectiveness of the actual improvements that we wish to institutionalize.

The Problem

This paper presents a paradigm for evaluating an increasingly important organizational arrangement wherein two or more independent organizations agree to pool their authority, resources and energies in order to achieve a goal or goals they desire. These arrangement, called inter-organizational relationships (IORs) in this paper, also appear under the names of collaboratives, cooperatives, coalitions and consortia. Studies of IORs have been conducted in the fields of health, social welfare, rural community development, municipal governments, business and rehabilitation, as well as in education.

Current IOR research has, for the most part, treated relationships among organizations as properties of organizations. Although that approach adds a dimension to organizational analysis, it fails to help us understand the interorganizational field. My research focuses on inter-organizational behavior as a relational attribute, as well as an organizational property. Data has been analyzed as representative of the relationship among organizations, rather than as simply representative of individual member organizations. This work derives from observation and in-depth interviews conducted with participants in two types of voluntary inter-organizational relationships: Massachusetts IORs formed by school districts to deliver specialized programs and services, and a University-school system IOR formed to deliver administrative training to public school practitioners in Maryland.

The conceptual problem is to think about the great variety of possible relations and transactions that may occur among different organizations. It is my thesis that successful inter-organizational relationships have a collaborative focus --that is, because member organizations define themselves as interdependent,

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they ag a part of in a shared decision-making process in order to accomplish the formation, and goals of the IOR. Member organizations structure the reacting a new organizational entity, with its own director, staff in This new organization becomes the vehicle through which member thous accomplish IOR goals, with all parties assuming mutual and equitable esponsibility for IOR planning and operations. The major question becomes: how can we structure and manage the interaction among IOR member organizations, and between the IOR and its member organizations, in order to insure collaboration.

√Thé Evaluation Paradigm

This paradigm for evaluation directs attention to the prior organizational situations of members of the IOR, and then delineates structural, relational and process characteristics of successful IORs. Finally, the attention of the audience is directed to local level characteristics. An analytic framework is presented for designing evaluations of effective IORs.

To reiterate, the goal of inter-organizational arrangements is to create a defined interdependency among member organizations and a perceived commonality of purpose, goals, interests or clients that allows them to collaborate in joint programs. True collaboration, or shared decision-making, is the most difficult and most powerfully predictive element in the design and operations of effective inter-organizational relationships.

Prior Situations of IOR members

There are a number of organizational characteristics and properties that are conducive to an individual organization's ability to design and conduct an inter-organizational relationship that has a collaborative focus. The first

of these is the existence of potential resources that may be gathered in the interests of IOR programs and functions. In some cases, the expanded goals of an IOR may permit capturing of external resources that are unavailable to any individual member of the collaborative. In addition, even though organizations may not be able to make major financial contributions to the IOR effort, people, programs, allocation of time as well as high level administrative endorsement all may constitute significant internal resource contributions by member organizations to a successful IOR.

A second characteristic that is significant in determining the success of IOR efforts is the <u>general cooperative environments</u> of individual member organizations. Incentives and/or supports, other than resources, for engaging in voluntary collaborative relationships may be available from governmental agencies, regional planning groups or from public policy programs. Organization internal reward systems may provide personal or group incentives that would encourage personnel to participate in IOR activities. Futhermore, some potential members have a history of accomplishing some goals through outreach activities and interorganizational arrangements. This predisposition to interact with other organizations will contribute to the potential success of a new joint effort.

The amount of <u>congruence between</u> individual organization <u>goals</u> and the IOR superordinate goal is the third factor in the prior situation that facilitates successful collaborative interactions. Indeed, a necessary condition for IOR effectiveness is agreement by all member organizations on a superordinate goal — that is, a common purpose that each of the parties can agree to accomplish jointly through the inter-organizational arrangement. As a general guideline, the primary purpose for each member in joining the IOR should be directly related to .

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its own internal operations and minission in order to secure commitment. By extension, the IOR's superordinatese goals and functions are defined as being of immediate and recognizable util II ity to member organizations' individual missions.

All of these properties of insodividual organizations prior to participating in an inter-organizational resolutionship have the potential to positively influence the collaborative focus of the IOR and thereby cause it to be successful.

Structural Characteristics of IORs =

Structural characteristics of = IORs include types of coordinating mechanisms; demographic conditions, including i homogeneity, geographic location and size; and resource contributions.

Selection of an appropriate co-coordinating mechanism is influenced by a number of cultural and organizational fact-tors. Members may chose to formalize the joint effort by the development of a cont tract that clarifies each member's role responsibilities and organizational odomain. Members may plan activities cooperatively, with an agreement that the joint activity belongs primarily to one member. Another option is formembers to crareate a new organizational entity, within which they plan and conductall activities and functions collaboratively. The latter coordinating mechanism is most condiducive to establishing an effective collaborative IOR. As the relationship mattures, however, IOR functions increase and IOR interactions become more complex. Under those conditions, a number of different coordinating mechanisms may be added so that the IOR can remain effective.

Structural properties of effective IORs are also influenced by demographic conditions. They are composed of members with similar organizational structures.

If the composition of membership in a these structurally similar organizations is

homogeneous, there will be more opportunities for sharing information in the IOR about each member's goals, services and resources -- a necessary condition for collaborative interaction. In addition, several studies have confirmed the 13 importance of IOR members being located in contiguous geographic regions.

Ease of access of organizational members to each other facilitates the expansion of IOR functions and increases the opportunity for multiple linkages being formed among the participants. These are also necessary conditions for effective collaboration. Finally, the size of an IOR influences its success. In general, size should be compatible with member organizations' abilities to make cooperative decisions when required. It would also appear that the appropriate size of an IOR is most dependent upon both the amount of resources available to support IOR functions, and by extension, whether or not resource contributions are a requirement for IOR membership.

The conditions under which resource contributions are made to the IOR, as well as the degree of flexibility that is used to assess such contributions is the final property of IOR structures that in luences effectiveness. Direct financial contributions to an inter-organizational arrangement --even in very small sums-- demonstrates commitment to the IOR infitiative. In addition, member organizations must be willing to reinterpret the importance of available resources both in terms of fiscal flexibility and recognition of legitimate, evolving a contributions in kind.

In order to get a complete assessment of IOR effectiveness, data that describes the relationships among IOR members a and the relationship between the IOR and its member organizations must also be collected. In general, the interaction processes in successful IORs are delineated in such a way that each member organi-

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zation has an equitable opportunity to participate in the collaborative decision-making process.

Relational Characteristics of IORs

Relational characteristic of IORs include both the nature of the involvement of individual representatives of member organizations and the extent to which multiple and complex ties are formed between and among the organizational participants. Member organizations appoint individual representatives to the IOR, who typically constitute an advisory or policy board for the collaborative.

In practice, the interactions that occur among individual representatives of member organizations are very complex. IORs are designed by people who carry with them to the interaction a set of personal agenda. Moreover, the same individuals will function at some times in a personal role and at other times in an organization representational role. In fact, these individuals typically use their participation in the IOR as a means to accomplish personal goals in their home organizations. At the same time, when these individuals serve in an organizational role, they function in the IOR interaction as supporters of the IOR, as advocates for their own organizations' needs, and as protectors of their own organizations' domains. Thus, they bring to the inter-organizational relationship two sets of expectations: the first relates to their own independent organizational goals; and the second relates to their interest in sustaining the inter-organizational arrangement. Importantly, there are instances when these two sets of competing role expectations are not congruent and do not allow them to make decisions that are in the best interests of the joint effort. Such dissonance in the individual organization representatives interferes with successful collaboration, and therefore with IOR effectiveness.

Another indicator of dysfunction in the IOR would be an over-reliance on personal relationships between and among policy board members to sustain inter-organizational ties. This information can be ascertained by the frequency with which individual representatives view their participation in the IOR as a part of their personal roles rather than their organization representational hole.

In addition, collaboration will become disrupted when the role incumbents (current representatives) from some or all of the participating organizations orange.

Successful collaborative efforts circumvent these unanticipated consequences of dependence on particular individuals to insure member commitment to the IOR, first by using a formal IOR organizational structure as the coordinating mechanism.

Second, the development of complex and multiple ties at various levels of the participating organizations obviates this over-reliance on specific individuals to foster a collaborate level of interaction in the IOR. Indeed, several IOR studies have indicated that inter-organizational arrangements contain both single level linkages and multiple level linkages among individuals in different positions The greater the number of multiple linkages among in each organizational unit. IOR member organizations, the more that participants view the IOR effort as success ful --mostly because more benefits accrue to the individual organizations that they attribute directly to their involvement in the IOR. It should be noted that loosely coupled connections among IOR member organizations are most conducive to Thus, effective IORs tend the development of these multiple and complex ties. to initiate loosely coupled relationships among member IORs, rather than relying exclusively upon structural ties. In sum, developing a variety of both formal and informal ties with each member organization in the IOR facilitates the development of a collaborative or shared decision-making process in the inter-organizational arrangement.

Process Characteristics of IORs

The final component of the evaluation paradigm focuses on the characteristics of interaction processes in effective IORs. Process characteristics include degree of formality, features of the exchange process and patterns of influence.

Formality is defined as the extent to which each member organization has officially sanctioned its participation in the IOR. IOR interaction processes are influenced by the degree of formality present in the inter-organizational arrangement in two ways. First, representatives of organizations that have formally sanctioned IOR membership tend to have stronger, bangaining positions when negotiating an inter-organizational agreement. That is, they speak with the strength of their own organizations' support. Second, the formality of IOR membership aids individual representatives when they serve as advocates of IOR activities in their home organizations. That is, they speak with the strength of IOR consensus. Similarly, inter-organizational relationships are considered to have a high degree of formality when participating organizations officially sanction their involvement in an interorganizational arrangement. My research has indicated that successful IORs are composed of organizations that have each formalized their participation in the IOR.

A second process characteristic of IORs is the <u>exchange process</u>. IOR members exchange goods and services with other participating organizations in the collaborative arrangement. There are several aspects of the exchange process that influence the degree of collaborative interaction that can be attained in an IOR.

First, features of the exchange process need to be standardized. That is, both the units of exchange and the procedure for making the exchange need to be clearly delineated. In addition, attaining a reasonable degree of standardization in IOR

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interactions is a pre-requisite to the establishment of a formal coordinating mechanism for the collaborative.

The number of joint interactions and the amount of resources (including people, programs, services and funds) that are allocated directly to the IOR by each participating organization are both indicators of the intensity of the exchange process in an inter-organizational arrangement. Furthermore, the intensity of the exchange process that guides inter-organizational transactions is influenced both by the extent to which the terms of the exchange are mutually reached and by whether the exchanges are viewed as reciprocal. Thus, a collaborative inter-organizational relationship is also defined by a voluntary and reciprocal transfer of resources between and among member organizations. Further, all member organizations must believe that they can make input that will be valued and used. In sum, collaborative arrangements depend upon standarcized, intense and reciprocal exchange behaviors. In effective IORs, member organizations use the exchange process as the basis upon which they transact the inter-organizational relationship.

The third process characteristic of collaborative interactions is the patterns of influence present in the relationship. Effective collaborative arrangements will develop only when inter-organizational transactions are not dependent upon the use of power and status differentials among member organizations. Therefore, each member organization's domain must be acknowledged and consensus must be reached on organizational prerogatives in defining and accomplishing IOR goals and functions. Domain consensus, or agreement about the appropriate role and scope of each member organization in the inter-organizational arrangement, is a necessary prerequisite for building collaborative interaction processes. Importantly, agreement must be obtained bout both the domains that are to be shared and the domains that are

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to be reserved to each member organization. Therefore, the achievement of domain consensus in the inter-organizational relationship may be dependent upon clear understandings about the degree of compatibility of member organizations' goals, reference orientations and philosophies.

Lines of authority must be carefully delineated as another important pattern of influence in an inter-organizational relationship. Benson has suggested that the primary reason to create an IOR is the pursuit of increased authority and additional money, each of which is viewed as a resource by member organizations. Similarly, Huberman et. al. suggest that "It is important to identify various sources of power in the interorganizational arrangement...Power can derive from an organization's structural position in the interorganizational arrangement, as well as from resource dependencies, expertness and/or legitimacy." Finally, organizational participants in an IOR seek to form exchange relationships that cost the least in terms of autonomy and power. In sum, successful IORs have deliberately identified superordinate goals and interaction processes for the IOR that can obviate individual organizational concerns about the loss of autonomy and power.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an analytic framework that may be used to evaluate effective inter-organizational relations. Indicators of effectiveness are clustered into four major categories, each of which represents a major component of the evaluation paradigm. Table 1 contains a brief outline of these components. (p. 13)

Insert Table 1

Table 1

Evaluation Paradigm for Inter-organizational Relationships

ORGANIZATIONAL SITUATIONS PRIOR TO IOR MEMBERSHIP

- existence of potential resources
- general cooperative environment
- congruence between member and IOR goals

STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IORS

- coordinating mechanisms
- comographic conditions (homogeneity, location, size)
- resource contributions .

RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IORS

- involvement of individual representatives
- complex and multiple organizational ties

PROCESS CHARACTERISTICS OF IORS

- degree of formality
- the exchange process (standardization, intensity, reciprocity)
- patterns of influence (domain consensus, authority, power)



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Evaluations of IORs need to attend to the four components in the paradigm. Each of the components will provide the evaluator with discrete sets of data about (1) organizational properties prior to IOR membership; (2) structural characteristics of IORs; (3) relational attributes of IORs; and (4) characteristics of the IOR interaction processes. In addition, analysis of the interactions within and between these data sets will provide a comprehensive view of the complexity of inter-organizational collaboration. Also, evaluation designs that utilize this analytical fra ework will provide a total look at the potential for IOR effectiveness.



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