

Human Processes Keith Harrison-Broninski

Creating a network

Recently I was part of an interesting Webinar to discuss the challenges of forming effective special interest networks. The conversation reminded me again how awareness of useful research in this area is, strangely, higher in the tech world than in areas such as sociology where you might expect it to have been the subject of much discussion and investigation. For example, the seminal paper on language action theory was published in an obscure IT journal ("A Language/Action Perspective on the Design of Cooperative Work", Terry Winograd, Human-Computer Interaction 3:1 (1987-88), 3-30). Similarly, the more general concept of autopoiesis, describing systems capable of reproduction and self-maintenance, may have emerged in biology but was taken up mainly by systems theorists. Here I will summarize two key ideas that evolved from this research into the theory of Human Interaction Management, and which are particularly relevant to the human processes of network formation.

Firstly, it is critical to distinguish between the four types of conversation between potential or actual network participants. A conversation for **Context** is about laying the groundwork – what sort of things are we preparing to discuss together? A conversation for **Possibility** is about the options for going forward – is there enough synergy to make it worth trying to collaborate in some way? A conversation for **Disclosure** is about terms and conditions – what can each participant offer, what do they need in return, and what constraints apply to both? Finally, a conversation for **Action** (the main subject of Winograd's paper) is about actually doing something – and here the theory has moved on since 1987.

Winograd and others who adopted a Language/Action approach tended to see collaboration as being about different types of formal exchange – Request/Promise, Offer/Accept, Report/Acknowledge, and so on. In practice, this proved too narrow to support real world human interaction. A more helpful approach is to embed the fundamental insight of the Language/Action approach – that communication is not so much about information as about intent – into a simple set of five principles that help ensure productive collaboration:

1. Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities
 - All those involved must understand not only their role but also the roles of others that they work with
 - Each role must have responsibilities set out in plain language
 - Each person must be asked what resources they need to fulfil their own responsibilities, which will be provided
 - Each person must then formally accept their role responsibilities

2. Effective communications
 - Create simple communication channels, both face-to-face and digital, to allow timely sharing of information at multiple management levels
 - Give each channel guidelines to ensure that messages are purposeful rather than time wasting, and that messages generate the necessary responses
 - Manage channels to follow up on outstanding actions and remedy persistent issues
3. Recognize all contributions
 - Encourage all those involved to notice contributions by others, especially where people have gone above and beyond expectations
 - Recognise such contributions by shout outs in various ways, to ensure people feel valued and appreciated
 - Make shout outs to those who are diligently doing their bit in a quiet way
4. Work towards goals rather than to do lists
 - Expect people to manage their own time for maximum effectiveness, making their own judgement of priorities
 - Explain our underlying aims to all involved so that they can understand for themselves how best to help achieve them
 - Where people find new ways of working, give them the opportunity to share them so others can adopt best practices
5. Notice and respond to internal and external events
 - Do not expect to know everything that will happen to our clients or services during the project lifecycle
 - See change as normal and always be on the look-out for it
 - Incorporate all new events into updated plans

In [previous columns](#) I've labelled these principles Commit, Contribute, Compensate, Calculate, Change. They are common sense, aren't they? But that doesn't mean they are followed.

There is more in Human Interaction Management that helps in creating effective networks, such as:

- The distinction between Strategic, Executive, and Operational control
- Guidelines on how to work (REACT = Research Evaluate Analyse Constrain Task) and learn (AIM = Access Identify Memorize)
- The multiple types of personal characteristic required for overall effectiveness

I've discussed these also in previous Columns. The main take away, however, is this. Creating a network is no different from creating any other type of organization (for that is what it is). There are fundamental principles that if followed will help to ensure success – and if ignored, are very likely to lead to frustration and a lot of well-meaning but ultimately wasted effort.

Suppose one person assumes they are having a conversation for Context, a second believes they are having a conversation for Disclosure, and a third is trying to have a conversation for Action. They will all be talking at cross-purposes to one another – and after the event, no-one will understand why nothing useful ever emerged. They

will chalk it up to yet another example of how hard human interactions are to manage, when in fact there is no intrinsic difficulty. There is structure, that's all, and if you recognize it then the apparent problems will simply vanish.

Author

Keith Harrison-Broninski is a writer, researcher, consultant, and software designer. His book "Human Interactions" (2005) was described by reviewers as "the overarching framework for 21st century business technology" and "a must read for Process Professionals and Systems Analysts alike". Keith founded the social enterprise [Role Modellers](#), a Gartner BPM Cool Vendor that provided the UK National Health Service with NHS GATHER, an award-winning cloud service for large-scale collaborative innovation in healthcare. With Royal Society of Arts, NHS, and council sponsorship, Role Modellers now provides the Web platform [Town Digital Hub](#) where communities (geographic or thematic) can manage resources and help people use them.