Bridging Boundaries in Networked Military Organizations

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TNO | Knowledge for business

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Purpose of the presentation

• What is integration and why is this a problem for networked military organizations?
• Overview of integration mechanisms
• Why is boundary spanning a key enabler to achieve successful results in networked military organizations?
• Boundary spanning research model
• Good liaison practice: Case study
• Implications for practice
• Directions for future research
Our research: Purpose

• Help the Netherlands Armed Forces to manage boundaries and to bridge breakdowns in organization networks (e.g., staffs) that hinder performance
• Literature research, interviews with key personnel, observations during field exercises, and multiteam lab experiments
Our research: Background

- Organizations share the problem of coordinating their internal activities, e.g., with external environment.
- How to achieve cooperation and coordination across boundaries in ways that aid performance?
- The Netherlands Army is currently experimenting with new staff concepts and integration mechanisms to bridge breakdowns due to functional specialization leading to stove pipes.
- Important questions:
  - What are effective integration mechanisms; and
  - How should they be properly deployed?
Barriers to integration

• Breakdowns in networks:
  • Functional or divisional boundaries;
  • Physical distance (even floors in a building);
  • Hierarchical levels; and
  • Project or key account team lines.
Integration mechanisms (1/2)

- Organization design and personnel movement
  - Organization structure, team composition, roles, responsibilities
- Training
- Interface ‘management’ groups and integration teams
- Work procedures and processes
  - Interface contracts
- Rewarding systems and work rotation
- Participant and manager mediation (e.g., liaison)

Integration mechanisms (2/2)

- Improved information and communication technologies

*Which mechanisms are most effective in networked operations?*
Boundary spanners

• Boundary theory: Crucial role of individuals in establishing and maintaining interorganizational relationships: boundary spanners*
• Boundary spanning: Social behaviors to manage interactions across boundaries and bridge breakdowns
• Several studies have demonstrated the importance of individual communication roles within organizations
• Highly influential in shaping and facilitating network form
  • Help overcome information asymmetries and breakdowns in networks

* networker, broker, collaborator, cupid, civic entrepreneur, boundroid, sparkplug, collabronaut, informational intermediaries, and catalysts
The immigrant, captive, and emigrant

- Immigrant: outsider who joins the group voluntarily
  - Motivations to join may vary from needing another job, to wanting to work with a particular set of people
- Captive: assigned to the group, often despite a desire to be elsewhere
- Emigrant: leaves to team in order to represent it to outsiders
  - The emigrant has strong similarities with military liaisons
When is boundary spanning successful? (1/2)

• Organizations that:
  • Work in relatively uncertain and demanding environments with diverse components, or
  • Have high interdependency with outside individuals and groups, or
  • Experience high task complexity

• Networked military organizations combine high interdependency, high uncertainty, and multiple forms of interdependence with multiple groups
• >>Boundary spanning is a key enabler to achieve successful results in networked military organizations
When is boundary spanning successful? (2/2)


Figure 1: Opposing Process Model of Internal and External Activities

Individual level antecedents
- Disposition to trust
  - Leadership
  - Extraversion
- Interpersonal knowledge and technical skills
- Need for power and affiliation
- Prior experience with external groups

Group level antecedents
- Product importance
  - Novelty of task
- Interpersonal trust
- Cohesiveness
- Deadlines
- Team composition
- Group development

Organizational level antecedents
- Multiple-team membership
- Competing teams
- Security emphasis

Mediators
- External activities and boundary spanning behaviors (e.g., interunit coordination and communication)

Moderators
- Environmental characteristics
  - Interdependence
  - Task complexity
  - Temporal fluctuations

Positive consequences
- Higher effectiveness
- Viability
- Higher satisfaction
- Increased power and probability of advancement (better career opportunities)
- More individual influence and status

Negative consequences
- Role overload (stress)
- Group think (too much focus on internal activities)
- Too much focus on external activities
- Perceptions of uncertainty, frustration, and role ambiguity
- Decrease in team's cohesiveness
- Task conflict

Antecedents and consequences of boundary spanning
The liaison as integration mechanism

- Boundary spanners are of crucial importance to effective integration in networked operations
- To achieve the best utilization of resources or employment of services of one organization by another
- Usually part of the organization embeds a LNO in another part of the organization to provide face-to-face coordination (emigrant)
- LNO’s main task is to make sure that the interaction between parts of the organization are optimal
  - Monitoring, coordinating, communicating, advising, assisting and reporting
Good liaison practice: Case study

- What are the success factors and consequences of good liaison practice in networked operations?
- Observations and semi-structured interviews with LNOs
  - 2 international headquarters exercises in 2008 and 2009
Setting: Joint headquarters

- Split up in a forward staff element and a reach back
- Forward staff element situated in the operational environment
  - Direct contact with the actors and key leaders in the field
  - Operational threat was immediate
- Reach back was based at peace time location, working extended office hours
- Geographical and operational separation constituted a large boundary / breakdown in organizational network
What does a good LNO look like

• Sociable or people-person: externally oriented
  • The danger of being ‘glued’ to the computer screen
  • Personal face-to-face communication
  • A social network has to be set up at an early stage
• Working experience and domain knowledge
• Adequate rank
• Good in communicating the commanders opinions, interests and intent in the receiving headquarters
• Speaks the language of the sending and receiving headquarters
• Good in transmitting ‘off-the-record’ and emotional information
  • “Was the decision made instantly or was there a lot of discussion and emotions concerned with it?”
Other findings

- Coordination role was acknowledged and appreciated
- The role of the LNO was not clear to all
  - Staff personnel misused the LNO for information requests
  - LNOs were often consulted as subject matter experts
- LNOs were not always familiar with the staff, procedures and processes, and sometimes even missed relevant information
- Job openings were found to hamper effective integration
- Boundaries enlarge when while under time pressure
Some practical implications

- Match boundary spanning to temporal fluctuations
  - Invest in establishing basic relationship
- Keep distance between LNO and commander small
- The organization has yet to find a mechanism to handle stress
- Make clear role and contributions of LNO to staff processes
- LNO is no add-on to the staff
  - LNOs need to be present and preparing with their receiving staff during the preparation phase and beyond
- Make boundary spanning responsibility of all staff members (and not just to LNOs)
  - Mitigates personal costs
Wrap up and future work

- Integration is a problem for networked military organizations
- Boundary spanning is a key enabler to achieve successful results
- Social integration mechanisms are of great importance, including the role of the LNO
- Instruments are needed to select and train personnel, to monitor quality of integration, and assess effects of interventions
- Mechanisms to handle stress are needed
- Size and impact of antecedents on boundary spanning need to be determined
Thanks for your attention

Questions?

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