

Framing involvement: rationale construction in an interorganisational collaboration

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An analysis of the different rationales articulated and utilised by partners in an interorganisational collaboration is the focus of this paper. The Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) Program in Business is an initiative involving 12 US universities, nearly 40 multinational corporations, a federal government agency, and a non-profit organisation working together to introduce underrepresented students to business education and careers in business. Major themes emerging from an extensive field study of the partnership dynamics in LEAD are that rationales (1) range from altruistic to utilitarian in nature, (2) are not sedimentary but continue to evolve in conjunction with environmental and organisational changes, (3) display varying degrees of directness, and (4) vary in terms of their meaning and importance to actual programmatic outcomes.

Keywords: social partnership; collaboration; interorganisational relations; diversity

Introduction

The generation of explanations for behaviour has important consequences in social interaction (Turnball 1992). It has been noted, for example, that reason giving performs critical functions of building, solidifying, and repairing relationships (Tilly 2004). Theory and research to date have focused on the role of reason giving in interpersonal relations and contexts. By comparison, the study of this phenomenon in interorganisational relations has been quite limited in terms of its depth of analysis. The dramatic rise to prominence of collaborations involving universities and other entities, however, offers a singular opportunity to observe the social process of reason giving (Tilly 2006) in formal organisational settings, with an eye toward expanding our understanding of the nature and uses of explanatory accounts in partnership creation and maintenance.

Coalition partners, of course, have a variety of reasons for joining forces. These tend to centre around considerations of efficiency (Williamson 1975), resource dependence (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977), competitive advantage (Doz and Hamel 1998), reciprocity (Alter and Hage 1993), mutuality (Brinkerhoff 2002), and large-scale problem solving (Trist 1983). Helpful though these classifications may be, they do not invite a particularly textured appreciation of the role and implications of rationales in the lifespan of a collaborative project beyond start-up.

Indeed, in the vast literature on interorganisational collaboration, rationales for involvement typically travel under pseudonyms or synonyms such as motivations (Schmidt and Kochan 1977), motives (Hagedoorn 1993), inducements (Ahuja 2000),

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determinants (Oliver 1990), conditions (Gray 1985), or origins – all terms that depict rationales as antecedent and fixed. Seen in this light, rationales are relevant in the initial stages of partnership formation but have little substantive effect in later developmental phases. Such a static view of rationales appears to miss crucial aspects of rationale construction as an ongoing adaptive process. It is worth investigating whether a rationale is immutable, in the sense of being merely a snapshot of why an organisation enters into an interorganisational relationship, or fluid, so that the picture is continually being brought into view. This line of questioning goes considerably deeper into the rationalisation process than has been customary in scholarly inquiry.

The central thesis to be explored in this paper is that rationale construction can be understood as an ongoing process that makes its own set of contributions to interorganisational collaboration quite apart from those attributed to other behaviours. Put in the form of questions, how do partners justify or explain their involvement in an alliance, and how do rationales condition the conduct of collaboration? Theoretical and practical benefits may flow from isolating and elevating the importance of rationales in the collaborative process.

The study reported in these pages seeks to uncover the reasons for involvement in a collaborative social venture to address and ameliorate minority underrepresentation in academic and business life. How the reasoning process itself helps to ‘enact the collaborative agenda’ (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 1171) is of particular interest. Social venturing is distinct from – and not nearly as well-documented as – other types of joint ventures or partnerships that are primarily focused on technology, innovation, or research and development for economic gain (see, for example, Hagedoorn 1993; Powell and Owen-Smith 2002).

Significance of rationales: a brief review of the literature

Sociologists, social psychologists, economists, and organisational theorists have provided various frameworks for understanding rationales, both in the domain of interpersonal relationships and in the context of organisational behaviour. For example, Oliver (1990) asserts that the major causes of alliance formation can be grouped into the broad categories of necessity, asymmetry, reciprocity, efficiency, stability, and legitimacy. From the perspective of resource dependence theorists, organisations seek partnerships in order to establish greater control within a scheme of interdependent relationships (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Institutional theorists stress the power of cultural norms in producing and reproducing certain organisational and interorganisational forms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The transaction cost approach (Williamson 1975) emphasises efficiency gains that are facilitated by interorganisational structures. Each of these major theoretical traditions implies that rationales have little utility beyond relationship formation.

Another way of coming at the phenomenon is to treat rationalisation as an open system or ecological process. For the moment, this approach is not recognised in the field, but several independent streams of inquiry move in the direction of a middle-range theory (Merton 1967) along these lines. From the literature, we can piece together salient properties of rationalisation as an ongoing process in interorganisational collaboration: it helps frame involvement over time, is relational, and tends

to represent a dynamic and shifting range of motivations from altruism to utilitarianism.

The question of framing goes to how members of an alliance represent their common enterprise or how they conceptualise the problem to be solved by collaboration (see, for example, Brown 1998). How an alliance is framed can set the tone and direction for a partnership, and incongruent or incompatible framings can derail the arrangement or present difficulties in moving along to subsequent stages of commitment and execution (Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Doz and Hamel 1998). The ways in which participants conceive of and articulate their rationale, then, may have important implications for outcomes or judgments of value. As Morgan (1986) has observed, 'A wide and varied reading can create a wide and varied range of action possibilities' (p. 12).

Within the framework of an interorganisational relationship, however, misreads of a partner's wishes or intentions can constrain or curb these possibilities. According to the voluminous body of scholarship on the topic of interorganisational collaboration, there are many assumptions – based on imperfect information, the residue of previous alliance experiences, faulty cause maps, substitutions of generalised sector-level logics for specific organisational ones, or other miscalculations or misconceptions – about what drives entities to collaborate in specific instances. Doz and Hamel (1998) refer to this problem as a frame gap, and they argue that it can be obviated by seeking to understand how alliance partners view the collaboration in the early stages. But rationales also get revised, amended, or scrapped over time – they are organic. Their obsolescence or modification can present challenges (a sort of moving target syndrome) to partners trying to operate on fixed notions about rationales.

Seeking and offering explanations is an integral part of relational work (Tilly 2006). While much of the research in the area of reason giving focuses on its role in the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relations, there are clear connections to organisational behaviour (see, for example, Bies and Sitkin 1992). Gittell (2003) and Austin et al. (2004) assert that it is important to understand the motivations guiding alliances because such an understanding contributes to greater self-awareness (of one's own motivations), encourages responsiveness to partners, and helps direct the relationship toward mutually important objectives. From this perspective, motivations guiding entry into collaborations provide a solid foundation for the later work to be done in concert. Rationales are compact narratives embodying expectation and encoding the criteria that may be used to evaluate performance and effectiveness; a rationale contains blueprints and functions as a form of shorthand for the controlling principles that guide an organisation's involvement in an initiative.

Austin and his colleagues (2004) have developed a Partnering Motivation Spectrum to capture the different motivations driving partnership formation. The spectrum is anchored by altruistic and utilitarian motivations, and it is acknowledged that most organisations enter into alliances with a mix of self-interested and other-directed purposes. (Indeed, the reasons for *remaining* in an alliance may vacillate between considerations of benefit to self and benefit to others.) Sustainability is most likely when partnerships are characterised by either strong utilitarian or strong altruistic motives; strength or intensity is held to be more important in the formulation than orientation. But what happens when there are

multiple partners in an alliance, all of them bringing to the collaborative task an intensity of motivation grounded in the cultural realities of their unique contexts? Such potential for conflict has been a fixture of the literature on university–business partnerships, which takes a cautious, critical, and sometimes even a hostile tone toward the development of these relationships, with one line of argument holding that the values of the marketplace are fundamentally incompatible with the values of the academic commons (Bowie 1994; Washburn 2005). Criticism notwithstanding, collaborative activity between the academic and corporate sectors grows apace.

Background of the study: rationale and context

Despite the ubiquity of material on partnerships and collaborations of various types (see, for example, Galaskiewicz 1985; Kanter 1994; Kezar 2005), attention to a dynamic process of rationale construction in such relationships has been lacking. The present study was motivated in part by the belief that an investigation into actual rationales as described by the participants themselves would go some distance toward establishing a more complex and comprehensive view of the subject. Ideally, new data can help collaborators know one another better, make better decisions about partnership formation and development, develop social trust, work more effectively together to solve complex social problems, and reduce the likelihood that attribution errors (that is, wrongly guessing a partnering organisation's motivations) will threaten the vitality and longevity of relationships. Ultimately, greater knowledge of rationales may improve 'partners' ability to take the other's perspective' (Mohr and Spekman 1994, 148) in ways that promote partnership success. Such data may be particularly relevant to multi-sector alliances, which are vastly underrepresented in extant scholarship.

The particular configuration of universities, corporations, government agencies, and non-profits has not been studied in depth. Studies of dyads – partnerships between corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), for example, or those involving universities and local school systems – are far more commonly discussed in the literature (see, for example, Slater 1996; Austin 2000). The interest value of multi-sector clusters, by comparison, is that they provide a glimpse at the interplay of many organisational cultures, missions, value systems, and idioms trying to find common ground.

For approximately 15 months spanning 2005 and 2006, I studied the dynamics of collaboration in the Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) Program in Business.¹ The stated mission of LEAD, which has been in operation since 1980, is 'to influence students from diverse cultures with outstanding academic performance and demonstrated leadership skills to pursue careers in business' (LEAD Program in Business 2005, 2). In order to do this, a powerful coalition of organisations has been recruited to the task. Twelve universities² (primarily their business schools), nearly forty multinational corporations,³ a federal government agency, and the non-profit coordinating body (LEAD Program in Business) pool resources to deliver 3–4-week Summer Business Institutes for approximately 30 students – all rising high-school seniors – at each of the participating universities.

While on campus, students receive instruction from senior business faculty and corporate executives in a rigorous curriculum that covers accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, leadership, entrepreneurship, and ethics, among others. The

classroom experience is supplemented by site visits to corporations, where students observe first-hand the various operations of leading businesses.

Upon completion of the programme, students become members of an extensive alumni network (totalling over 7000 individuals at the time of the study), and they are recruited for admission to campuses and tracked for internships and permanent employment by member corporations. Based on information received from 156 (48%) of the 326 students who participated in the programme in 2004, 50% of LEAD alumni subsequently attended one of the universities hosting a LEAD Summer Business Institute (SBI), and 23% indicated that they were attending the institution that hosted their SBI. Top corporate employers of LEAD alumni include Goldman Sachs, IBM, JP Morgan Chase, Merrill Lynch, Merck & Co., Motorola, and Intel.

LEAD identifies itself as an interorganisational partnership, and this is not just a descriptor of how it does its work but is also elemental to the identity of the enterprise as a systemic approach to pipeline development. The fact that organisations choose to join LEAD – as opposed to, or in addition to, other diversity-related initiatives – suggests that the partnership element is significant, that partners are drawn to this form of organising in order to address the problem of underrepresentation in their respective sectors, or that they are even drawn to the partners themselves (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999). On one level, this analysis can be understood as a case study of what happens when members are asked to explain why they join a cause or a network.

Methodology

As part of a larger study of the partnership dynamics in the LEAD Program in Business, members were asked to describe their organisations' reasons for joining the network in the first place and for staying with the initiative over time. Data were collected from three principal sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with academic, corporate, government, and non-profit members (a total of 77 individuals across 12 universities, 20 corporations, a federal government agency, and the non-profit coordinating organisation); (2) field-based observations of partnership interactions as they unfolded at five Summer Business Institutes; and (3) relevant documents from each of the academic, corporate, government, and non-profit entities involved in the programme. Interviews constituted the primary data source for this particular examination of rationale construction. Except for eight corporate interviews conducted by telephone, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in campus, corporate, government, and non-profit settings.

A comprehensive list of contact persons at each participating organisation was provided by LEAD's president, who also sent an introductory letter on my behalf explaining the purpose of the study and encouraging the full participation of members. I worked from this list to establish email contact with all individuals in the network for purposes of scheduling site visits. Each of the participating organisations has at least one liaison responsible for managing the LEAD relationship. These include programme directors at the member schools (called SBI directors) and managers at the participating corporations and federal government agency. The non-profit coordinating body, LEAD Program in Business, is the hub of the network and is managed by a president and programme

director. Additional participants in each organisation were identified by key contacts using the snowball sampling method.

There was 100% participation from the academic, government, and non-profit sectors. However, only 20 of the 36 corporations elected to participate in the study. The two reasons offered for non-participation were scheduling conflicts and a lack of substantive involvement in LEAD beyond financial commitment.

During the data collection phase of the investigation, I spent a minimum of two days at each university. Corporate and government site visits were usually accomplished in a single day, due to fewer interviews. Two site visits were made to the non-profit coordinating organisation in order to conduct interviews with the president and programme director and to analyse archived documents on the premises. Separately, I conducted direct field-based observations of portions of five Summer Business Institutes in an attempt to experience the learning environment in context. These were one- to two-day visits, and they allowed for observations of corporate interaction with the students in university classrooms, in corporate boardrooms, in manufacturing plants, and in other business facilities.

Each of the digitally recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim, imported into NVivo qualitative software for managing and manipulating text data, coded and grouped into themes. Informants included deans, faculty members, admissions directors, corporate and foundation relations officers, workforce development specialists, heads of diversity recruiting, vice presidents of human resources, corporate foundation directors, and the president and programme director of LEAD.

Analysis of the data proceeded through three primary levels, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994): (1) initial coding, in which text segments from transcribed interviews were assigned to categories; (2) pattern coding, a further data reduction technique in which categories were meaningfully related to each other in order to generate an initial rendering of the landscape; and (3) construction of a conceptual framework containing sets of interrelationships. The findings reported herein isolate those codes and patterns pertaining to organisational rationales for participation in the programme. This is justified on the grounds that rationale giving, by itself, has more to tell scholars and practitioners about the entry, exit, and sustainability of members in cooperative ventures than is usually acknowledged in published accounts of such relationships.

An important limitation should be kept in mind. Some allowance must be made for the possibility that the reasons for involvement supplied by informants to an outsider/researcher are not the same ones shared exclusively within the group, either because informants want to present their organisations in a more favourable light or because they wish to preserve social cohesiveness among the network.

Themes

The major themes arising from an inquiry into the rationales generated (*a priori*), adopted (*ex post facto*), or at least operative (actively being constructed) within LEAD were that (1) rationales range from *self-interest to altruism*; (2) these have *evolved* over time; (3) rationales vary in their degree of *directness*; and (4) the dynamics of rationale construction often translate into *meaningful* programmatic distinctions. As a general observation, the responses to the question, 'Why did your organisation become involved in the LEAD Program, and why do you continue to

participate?’ suggested that informants began by framing LEAD in various ways (as a partnership, as a pipeline development project, as a diversity initiative, as a common social cause) and then articulated a rationale appropriate to – or based on – those framings.

Self-interested and altruistic rationales

Various rationales were articulated by informants. This range demonstrates the multiplicity, versatility, and simultaneity of motivations for joining the LEAD network, from Hobbesian self-interest to social obligation.

Self-interested rationales

Naturally, organisations must promote their own interests and consider their own welfare, even in collaborative contexts. The most prominent self-interested rationales cited by LEAD member corporations were early access to talented minorities, pipeline development, the opportunity to create ‘mind share’ with a strategically important demographic, acquisition of market intelligence, positive public relations, rounding out a portfolio of other diversity-related initiatives and commitments, and securing a competitive advantage over rivals.

Access to talented students was the rationale most commonly cited by corporate interviewees. Only one corporate representative suggested that his firm did *not* expect to secure talent through LEAD, and this was largely because the organisation’s philanthropic arm managed the LEAD relationship. *Early* access was paramount to every other corporate informant. As one recruiter explained,

LEAD gives us...the correct entry point in building our pipeline. And if we have access to those kids as early on as we possibly can get our hands on them and as early as LEAD is able to identify them, that just helps us, as these kids are going to our target schools.

An executive offered a similar view:

We really have to start at very young ages to make sure that minorities are getting the right opportunities to spur their interests in areas around business – to understand more about the business environment, business careers, to understand that they can go to college, that they can be successful in college.

A Wall Street informant emphasised the advantages of early contact, noting, ‘When you start to build those relationships earlier, you sort of help to build up that level of loyalty’.

A related theme among the corporate sector was that competition was a significant driver, and this was most often cited by those in the financial services industry. One executive commented:

There are smart people in all those demographic groups, and if they’re not working for us, they’re working for our competitors. And that’s not what we want. So, there are brilliant people who are tracking into law or medicine or other areas of industry that could absolutely benefit and add value *here*. And so we just need to make sure that those people are considering us foremost, then our competitors after (laughing). That’s why we do this.

The creation of competitive advantage has been identified as one of the prominent utilitarian drivers of alliance formation (Austin et al. 2004).

Several university informants referenced the idea that LEAD was important for purposes of building a student pipeline directly into their schools, but not nearly to the extent that corporate members said pipeline development into their firms was a central consideration. Business deans observed that corporate recruiters expected or required a diverse student body from which to recruit, and responding positively to such pressures was deemed to be in the schools' self-interest because it would protect valuable relationships with these businesses. According to one dean, diversity (and participation in initiatives like LEAD to encourage it) 'is being market driven'. Indeed, three business schools were approached by corporate partners to join LEAD.

Self-interest was occasionally difficult to distinguish from community interest and therefore seemed often to fall into the category of *enlightened* self-interest. Take, for example, the following quote from a dean:

For the last three or four years, we have been talking quite a bit about how do we attract a more diverse student body to our school, because we think that is very important for us, for the quality of education, and for making the whole student body much richer in terms of diverse ideas and opinions and everything else.

Clearly, the dean was making the case that diversity was in his school's self-interest, but the proposition was framed in terms of enhancing the service (namely, education) that the school provided to its students. One commonly referenced instance in which self-interest and community-interest were linked was the 'filtering down' phenomenon, wherein the benefits from involvement in LEAD would become manifest over time. A dean commented, 'If we don't contribute to building this pipeline, we can't expect to get out of it what we need to get out of it. So, wherever that needs to start, that is where we need to start'.

Altruistic rationales

Altruism, according to Batson and Shaw (1991, 108) 'is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare'. It can be argued that a collaborative social venture is, by definition, a form of altruism that extends beyond organisational self-interest. This ethic was demonstrated most clearly whenever informants spoke about (1) their organisations' interest in promoting other-directed aims such as student exposure or building a pipeline for the marketplace, the industry, or particular specialty areas that were underrepresented by minorities; (2) the obligation to use resources and influence for the advancement of social equity; (3) the social good of participation in LEAD; or (4) an explicit philanthropic motivation for involvement. Whenever an informant referenced the need to 'do our part' or used language suggestive of citizenship or contribution, it was taken as emblematic of a collectivist orientation.

All twelve universities subscribed to the idea that LEAD was 'the right thing to do' or necessary 'for the greater good' or 'socially responsible.' Indeed, the single most consistent finding across the interviews with business school members was that the LEAD partnership was pursued out of some degree of self-interest, but self-interest was uniformly presented as subsidiary to the broader aim of social progress. Communicating a sentiment that was quite prevalent among university informants, a graduate business dean stated, 'Ours was a public interest in the sense that we thought this was an important thing to do'. A former dean indicated that his

graduate school of business continues to be motivated by ‘the social altruistic fact that we think this is the best thing to do, even though we don’t have any tangible, right now, sort of evidence that it’s going to benefit *us*’.

Informants at all of the universities and all of the corporations viewed their participation as contributing to the larger social objective of diversity. From this perspective, involvement in LEAD approximated a kind of citizenship in a cause. To be sure, it was a cause in which all members would benefit eventually. Representative of the quotes from university informants was one from a dean, who noted that his school recognised ‘our need to commit to this as part of the larger community to create a larger pool that we all would then benefit from’.

One of the unexpected findings in the data was the *extent* to which corporate partners and graduate schools of business were willing to take an expansive view of returns. How far did the concentric circles of citizenship and altruism extend? According to one business school official, his school’s assessment of the opportunity was that ‘this is something that sounds like it is going to be a real plus. We are doing a great service – it would be good for the school, it would be good for the students, it would be great for the benefit of American business’. Similarly, a former dean recalled, ‘This seemed to us to be something that was not directly helpful to us but helpful to the issue’.

Waving the banner for business in general was also seen in informants’ references to competing for ‘share of mind’ against other professional fields like medicine, law, and religion. A business school informant explained:

I guess the primary motivation was – the story we tell at (this school) is – that minorities are better represented in law and medicine than they are in business, and we think one of the reasons that they are not better represented in business is that they really don’t understand all the components and possibilities within a business framework, and the thought is if you brought them here, gave them that kind of experience, that we would do that.

The imagery of the ‘pool’ and ‘the pipeline’ was prominent in the accounts of informants. As one observed, ‘We know that competing for the same small little pool doesn’t really help. You need to expand the pool’. Another informant explained that the rationale guiding her institution’s participation in LEAD was at the ‘pipeline level’. A corporate informant asserted that the strategy embraced by her firm was one of ‘building the talent pool that we can tap into’, and an executive echoed that point, saying that the reason his company was involved in LEAD was ‘to *do our part* in building those pools’.

As a general observation, university informants routinely described their motivations in terms of social obligation first and self-interest second. This pattern was also evident in a limited number of the corporate accounts. According to one corporate informant, recalling the reason her firm was interested in participating in LEAD:

My understanding is that they saw the value and the opportunities that it presents the students, and the developmental growth that they see with those students. And so, if we could take part in helping the community grow and become educated, the company felt good about that.

Another interviewee explained her firm’s dual rationale for involvement as a desire ‘to do good in the community and also from a talent acquisition perspective’.

As another indicator of a spirit of cooperation and community interest, members actively promoted the other schools and corporations in the network. A university informant, for example, indicated that at his institution, ‘We sell, “We want you to come [here]. If not, we really want you to go to one of these other LEAD schools.” We consider that success’.

Evolution of rationales

The literature on collaboration details many of the evolutionary dynamics – the emergence, growth and dissolution – of cooperative ventures (see, for example, Ring and Van de Ven 1994) but tends to treat reason giving as a one-shot antecedent condition rather than a continual process of negotiation. The evolution of interest here, by contrast, is not just a linear chronological one that marks the difference – or distance – between reasons for entry and reasons for staying; it also aims to capture the movement back and forth of explanations for involvement. It was clear from the accounts of informants that the rendering – making sense of involvement in LEAD and justifying it in ways that addressed shifting priorities and interests – was an ongoing process that served to reframe and restructure the initiative. Evolutionary processes played out at network and organisational levels, and they occasionally left instances of misalignment in their wake.

Changes in LEAD’s rationale

According to the president of LEAD, the programme’s ‘story’ has evolved from a ‘heart strings’ narrative during the 1980s and 1990s to a modern day ‘hard investment’ case for support. His observation tracks a wider societal evolution of diversity from a moral or ethical imperative to a strategic or instrumental one. This dynamic has been observed before (Siegel 2006). An informant at a long-time member university confirmed the impression of LEAD’s metamorphosis:

[In the beginning], it was probably more the sentiment that this was the right thing to do. I’d hate to sort of describe it as primarily an act of charity to help prepare people, but I would think that that was more of the line of thinking of the universities that got involved. I think it was more for the benefit of the students. And I think companies kind of felt that way, too. I think over time there’s been a shift...because there are so many other kinds of ways to spend your diversity dollar. I think the shift has been more towards getting a return on the investment, and can LEAD attract these kids to our schools or companies.

What appeared to be driving the change, in addition to the growing number of initiatives making a claim on corporate diversity budgets, was an emergent sense that LEAD could provide competitive advantages. With the growing emphasis on diversity in employee hiring and collegiate admissions over the last 25 years (roughly coterminous with LEAD’s existence), pipeline development programmes have taken on considerably more importance for firms and higher education institutions. Not surprisingly, those informants who had been involved in LEAD since its inception had observed a distinct evolution toward greater corporate interest in access to students. In the early days of the programme, according to one SBI director, companies did not try to ‘pitch internships’ or promote employment opportunities. That had all changed, however. Her observation was confirmed by corporate informants who shared accounts of their organisations’ migration over time from a

philanthropic to a strategic interest in LEAD. Indeed, a key indication of this emerging focus on access to students was corporate demand for a searchable database of LEAD alumni. Today, one of the central functions of the national non-profit coordinating body (LEAD Program in Business) is managing the database and ‘pushing’ alumni out to corporations.

Changes in organisational rationales

Specific organisations within the LEAD network evidenced a progression or transition in their rationale construction; the reasons offered by some informants for joining the network were not the same ones for staying in the programme. One university, for example, recalibrated its LEAD involvement to focus on more aggressive recruitment of students, and this shift was occasioned by a change in leadership, wherein a new associate dean assumed oversight of the LEAD Program on her campus and immediately began asking what the school was getting from its association with the initiative. Similarly, a former SBI director observed the changing rationale at his institution by noting, ‘I think the second key benefit, and this has proven to be true over time – it may not have been why we originally started, but it quickly became one of our key rationales – is recruitment’.

A corporate executive, whose organisation had joined lead from a purely philanthropic perspective, said:

I think over the years, I have seen the shift in how we want to leverage and use LEAD move from one of a philanthropic type of effort to one of a strategic partnership as it relates to talent, gaining access to talent.

This shift, he continued, had been brought on partly by pressures from the corporate contributions arm of the company, which had started taking a greater interest in the return on its monetary investment in LEAD.

Misalignment

An interesting pattern was revealed in the stories of partner exit from LEAD. One Summer Business Institute director related:

I’ve had conversations with previous supporters who – let’s just say that because of the mix of students not always being from underprivileged backgrounds – felt that they couldn’t justify their involvement, because there were two justifiable reasons for supporting the program.

He explained that in order for a company to make the case that its investment in LEAD was the right thing to do from a charitable standpoint, the programme would have to focus on at-risk populations, not privileged ones. The other justification would be return on investment in the form of recruits. If the programme failed to produce on either count, companies might have to leave the fold.

The foregoing vignette is partly about discrepant understandings of LEAD and the student population it targets (and illustrative of a common tendency to conflate minority students with at-risk students), but it is also about how a misalignment between rationales can derail involvement, as Doz and Hamel (1998) have noted. Several corporate and university informants noted with concern that the profile of students had become far less diverse from a socioeconomic standpoint, so that students appeared to be coming from ‘much greater affluence’, in the words of a

former programme director. Another shared his impression that more LEAD students seemed to be coming from ‘prep schools...and their dads are doctors or attorneys’. In other words, there was concern that LEAD was reaching out to students who would have an excellent shot at attending the elite universities in its network anyway (without LEAD), leading several informants to wonder whether they were ‘really helping those who truly need the help’. When these new realities failed to merge with the starting assumptions of members, the justification for involvement had to be re-evaluated.

It is worth asking whether an organisation’s embrace of a new or different rationale triggers related structural and procedural changes or whether these, in fact, lag. The evidence from this study shows that not everything evolved at the same rate in member organisations experiencing such changes. For example, some corporate informants described how their organisations had adopted a more strategic view of LEAD but couldn’t marshal the staff resources necessary to effectively work the new strategy. Informants at one of the earliest member companies described their firm’s evolution from a philanthropic to a strategic interest, with some continued comingling of the two rationales that created a little confusion about whether the organisation’s LEAD-related objectives were being met. Their story provides a look at what happens when actions trail rationale revision; in this case, the reasons for involvement changed, but the standard operating procedures were still being driven by the outdated rationale. The routines supporting the LEAD relationship, in other words, had become ossified over a period of years, so that even a new mandate for engagement was insufficient to dislodge them.

In the university setting, changes to a particular undergraduate business programme – namely, a new policy of accepting undergraduate students two years earlier than it had originally – elevated LEAD’s profile within the school as a potential feeder of talented underrepresented students. This development had the effect of focusing more attention on LEAD as a supplier of applicants, and the rationale for involvement was revised to accommodate the new situation.

On the whole, then, evolutionary changes interfaced with rationale construction in differing ways. Infrastructure had not caught up to rationale in one case, and the rationale was updated following an internal policy change in the other case.

Directness and indirectness of rationales

The rationales articulated by informants across sectors possessed varying levels of directness. One might be tempted to equate directness and indirectness with self-interest and community-interest, and it is true that there are evident correspondences between the constructs. But the quality under analysis in this section goes beyond that formulation. There were noticeable spatial, temporal, and instrumental elements of the directness–indirectness theme. For analytic purposes, these elements are treated separately even though they clearly intersect.

Spatial elements

A rationale’s spatial contours were brought to the fore whenever informants discussed the locus of pressures or forces recommending involvement in LEAD. Informants discussed the ultimate (environmental) conditions impelling them toward the establishment of interorganisational linkages, as well as the more local or

proximate (organisation-specific) factors. The emergence of a global economy, the rise of multicultural markets, growing recognition of the advantages of a diverse workforce, pressures for corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship on a broader scale, changing demographics, and the business case for diversity were identified by corporate informants as the key drivers of an overall strategy of minority inclusion in American enterprise. For example, a workforce development executive offered:

With diverse representation and diverse backgrounds comes diversity of thought, innovation, increased collaboration – all of the things that are necessary for us as a company to remain viable and competitive in years to come in the marketplace that we operate in.

The conditions most frequently cited by business school members included the desire to build a recruitment pipeline in recognition of the value of diverse perspectives to the overall learning environment, corporate desire for diverse talent, and a general awareness of the problem of underrepresentation of minorities in business education and business careers. All of these forces identified by academic and corporate informants were couched as context or backdrop – descriptors of a wider set of circumstances that stimulated a need for involvement in LEAD, in contradistinction to local considerations (such as access to students and competitive advantage) that have already been discussed. It is important to note that the impression of these operative conditions was uniform across interviews and sectors.

Temporal elements

In temporal terms, the lack of immediacy of the benefits of participation in LEAD was noted by all informants across sectors. Indeed, an expectation of delayed gratification carried the day, owing principally to the fact that student participants were rising high school seniors; member organisations clearly understood that they would not be able to capitalise on their investment for several years. Even then, of course, there was no guarantee that the organisations would succeed in their efforts to recruit and attract LEAD alumni. But there were plenty of other more immediate benefits that registered in the calculations of informants – benefits such as enhanced public relations, word-of-mouth advertising, the development of brand loyalty, use of the LEAD alumni database for purposes of recruiting experienced hires, and so on. These benefits might pay out more quickly, even as their measurement might prove to be a difficult proposition. An informant observed that her school ‘has a long-term view of helping to support the need of people of colour in corporate America’, and this allowance of an extended time horizon seemed to characterise the whole enterprise.

Instrumental elements

LEAD was described and discussed on its own terms and in terms of its helping organisations to meet other objectives. Informants in the university setting, for example, routinely discussed LEAD’s contribution to diversifying the student body, a desirable goal (according to informants) in the sense that it would improve the education experience for all students. Seen from this angle, LEAD was a strategy in the service of a broader objective. A former SBI director explained that LEAD was

viewed ‘as a *tool* to bring in highly qualified students, because we felt that the LEAD program – geared to these highly talented students – would fit our profile very well’.

The concept of fit – of LEAD’s helping to round out a portfolio of commitments or support existing priorities – was mentioned by several informants. All of the corporations had multiple diversity-related initiatives, so that LEAD became part of a larger suite of activities. One Wall Street executive commented, ‘LEAD is an organisation that helps us in our pre-college outreach efforts’. There was intentionality in pursuing a collaborative approach; several corporate informants indicated that they were aggressively seeking partnerships to address their firms’ diversity recruitment priorities and were doing due diligence to uncover programmes that would help their organisations source, develop, and channel talent. LEAD, in other words, was reviewed and evaluated as one of many possibilities.

Several individuals also said that LEAD functioned as an expanded recruitment apparatus – LEAD helped to extend capabilities in finding, screening, and attracting talent. A recruitment executive at one company called LEAD, ‘An extension of our college relations efforts to do some early relationship building’. Generally, corporate informants appeared to make more connections between LEAD and other aspects of organisational strategy than their counterparts in the university setting. Connecting to community relations, recruitment, public relations, and other areas was part of the rationale construction process. As an example, one recruiter recalled, ‘In addition to the recruitment angle, I really saw a good connection to what we do from a community relations standpoint. So, I thought this was a two-fold good thing for the organisation’. Another informant indicated that LEAD was attractive to her precisely because it tied together two of her organisation’s strategic hiring objectives. For several corporations, LEAD helped to ‘complete the pipeline’, a reference to segmentation of the market that was moving farther and farther back to younger candidates.

The sub-theme of instrumentality was most evident in the frequent allusions to how LEAD activated or enabled an organisation’s credo or mission. This was clearly an indirect rationale, in that it deliberately used LEAD as a tool or instrument to address an intangible aim. For example, a corporate informant stressed that LEAD was ‘an important part of one of the ways we live out our purpose’. A similar idea was expressed by other corporate informants. A university informant explained that participation in LEAD was partly a matter of ‘serving a mission of outreach’ embraced by her institution. The fact that informants performed this act of relating LEAD to larger organisational purposes – connecting the initiative to a sense of mission or using it to cement together various cross-cutting initiatives – suggested that the rationale for LEAD could be best understood not as a thing in itself but by virtue of its ties to other objectives. The effort to situate LEAD within a broader framework of meaning and value was an ongoing project for members.

The meaning of rationales to the programme

Perhaps the most critical question to be asked of the rationales detailed here is what difference they make to the experience of collaboration or to the nature and conduct of a jointly developed programme. This gets at how the dynamics of rationale construction translate into practical benefits for students or member organisations.

Findings from the study indicate that differences were made in terms of (1) shaping the content or conduct of the programme to reflect the preferences and priorities of partners; (2) signalling the suitability of prospective new collaborators; and (3) realising particular benefits from – and achieving sustainability through – community-interest and an expansive rendering of the project.

Shaping content and conduct

If we understand engagement by partners (especially the corporate partners) in terms of an evolution that spanned philanthropic and utilitarian stages, it is evident that this evolution became significant in the quality of interaction desired and engineered by the multinationals. That is, each stage resulted in more and deeper involvement with the programme (including more frequent and more substantive contact with partners over programmatic details) and the students (in terms of content development, number and character of activities, and touch points). There was evidence that members asked their partners in the network what they wanted or expected out of involvement in LEAD, and those preferences got incorporated into the programme with few exceptions. In one case, an investment bank wished to generate more exposure for itself in an effort to boost its recruiting success among LEAD students. The firm approached a Summer Business Institute director with a request for three specific engagements with students over the course of the three week programme; the director felt that such a programme enhancement would benefit the students and advance the school's relationship with the firm, so the request was honoured.

Efforts by organisations to secure the advantages of involvement drove other similar advances in programme quality that ultimately redounded to partners and to students. Those organisations with clearly defined objectives and a measurable sense of return on investment worked hard to extract value, which they ensured through more active involvement in curricular design, interaction with students, and tracking LEAD alumni over time for potential admission or employment.

Signalling suitability

One of the uses of rationales, according to informants, was that they could help to delineate a field of prospective partners, effectively serving as a criterion for inclusion or exclusion. A LEAD official explained that there are organisations that 'get it' and those that do not, and LEAD wanted the ones that understood its philosophy of pipeline development, because they would be less of a tax on resources (time and labour) in the long run, have the potential for less disruption (in terms of incongruent expectations), and would be less likely to leave the fold when frustrations set in. Knowledge of motivations, in other words, could suggest where to invest resources in new partner identification and recruitment. LEAD was willing to pass on partners – even those with significant sponsorship dollars at the ready – if the fit did not seem right.

Benefits of an expansive rendering

One of the patterns to emerge from the data was that each organisation employed a mix of several rationales, and the simultaneous usage of multiple rationales served to

protect or sustain the initiative. That is, failure to satisfy one rationale was not an automatic blow to the initiative, since there were other rationales standing by. The more functional areas where LEAD could be made to matter, the better its prospects for longevity within the organisations. For champions or advocates who supported the ideals of LEAD and wanted their firms or institutions to participate, it was often a matter of finding a rationale that would suit decision makers – a way of interpreting LEAD into existence within an organisation, a way of making it work.

Engagement in LEAD, with its ethic of citizenship in a common cause, was seen by various informants as having a salubrious effect on the organisations subscribing to this philosophy, creating a sense of ‘spiritual oneness’ and projecting that image to students and other members. From this perspective, the positive energy flowing from LEAD was said to be a ‘signalling device’ to minority communities and others interested in the project of diversity. The initiative, many felt, signalled the interest and seriousness of a broad range of American social institutions in the goals of diversity and promoting social change. Within the network, it was also a reminder of the zone of citizenship that all member organisations inhabited – a space formed by overlapping interests. There was a prevailing recognition that fulfilment of self-interest ultimately depended on a systemic approach in which each of the partner organisations had a role and a part to play.

There was a time, however, when the altruistic rationale placed the sustainability of the programme in a precarious position (especially at business schools), and that was when there was a change in the dean’s office. Informants related stories of the fragility of the programme at such times, stories that often ended with the programme being saved only through the persistent salesmanship of those closest to it. While the policy of delayed gratification and the sense of a larger civic purpose might have been generous and generative, it was also the case that the farther away from an immediate return on investment a programme was perceived to be, the more vulnerable it was in times of resource scarcity, leadership transition, or other jolts to smooth functioning.

Discussion and implications

Cross-sector alliances like those represented in LEAD can be understood as responses to environmental challenges that are too big or too messy (Trist 1983) for organisations, or classes of organisations, to solve on their own. Beyond this relatively superficial description, however, are several more specific drivers of coalition formation and development. As universities and various other organisations increasingly band together to address many of the complex and interconnected social problems of modern times, a clearer understanding of the rationales for joining and staying in such coalitions is potentially useful. This study has attempted to enlarge our conception of the uses of rationales in collaborative contexts.

Without question, organisations are more than bundles of rationales. The isolation of rationales as an object of study is not meant to suggest that they have more carrying capacity than other developmental phases. However, raising rationale construction on the attention scale of scholars and practitioners may yield benefits for theory, research, and practice.

As the findings from this study demonstrate, rationales can play a pivotal role in partnership initiation, development, maintenance, and strengthening. Two related

disclaimers seem prudent. First, certain features of the rationale-giving process as presented in this analysis may rest somewhat uneasily in their assigned conceptual bins. For example, the assertion that the rationales themselves evolved over time may occur to other observers to be characteristic of general evolutionary dynamics affecting collaborative ventures, not something isolable in the realm of rationales. To illustrate the point with an even more specific example, Oliver (1990) refers to environmental forces as *conditions* that influence the creation of interorganisational bonds, whereas the present study renders these a more active part of the continued process of rationale construction. The second disclaimer is that the process of rationale construction in this particular alliance may not hold up across contexts. Future studies of multi-partner alliances might further test the claims made in this study.

By considering the interaction of many partnering organisations from multiple sectors, this study adds to the body of empirical evidence on interorganisational relations, and it specifically extends the framework supplied by Austin et al. (2004) highlighting altruistic and utilitarian motivations for coalition building. Evidence from this study suggests several additional dimensions – evolutionary aspects of rationales across network and organisational contexts, qualities of directness and indirectness, and tie-ins to programmatic outcomes. Future empirical research and theory development around the rationale construction process might incorporate or continue to examine these ideas. More generally, scholars might engage the proposition that it is not just the background motivations, but the ongoing constructivist approach to making sense of an organisation's reasons for participation, that contributes to actual collaboration beyond its genesis.

We operate with potential misconceptions about what it is that organisations (whether they are universities, corporations, government agencies, or non-profit entities) want out of their involvement in a particular initiative. The critical literature on academic–industry alliances, for example, often portrays companies as motivated strictly by profits and universities as concerned exclusively with the pursuit of knowledge. While such generalisations may be illustrative for certain purposes, they do little to advance the cause of healthier, more productive working relationships in an era of increased collaboration. The fact of the matter is that when these organisational types get together to work on a project of mutual interest, their commonalities often bridge whatever divides or gaps are extant. Multi-sector coalitions bring together organisations animated by different value systems, motivations, and logics; the collaboration tends to push these differences to the background and pull essential similarities to the foreground for the effective functioning of the venture. One implication is that rationales that stitch together organisational interests across the divide can be beneficial to the larger project of university-business relations; they offer occasions to build trust and understanding that can then be applied to additional relationships on a larger scale.

New questions flow from the data presented in this analysis. For example, to what extent does partnership itself dictate and circumscribe the rationale construction process? How do the relational aspects of an established interorganisational partnership – the set of rules and norms governing conduct within the collaboration as an organisational form – condition reason giving, such that limits are placed on the variety of rationales deemed to be appropriate or legitimate candidates for discussion? One of the evolutionary dynamics of collaboration noted

by investigators is that a homogeneity effect can present itself as relationships develop; isomorphic forces (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) tend to smooth out differences in many features of organisational life when entities occupy the same social space. Interorganisational relationships provide particularly fertile conditions for exposure to the rationales of partners, so that the overall project of rationale giving by members may come to incorporate a common script.

We might predict, then, that collaborative ventures winnow down the stock of acceptable rationales from which members are able to fashion their own accounts over time, thereby forming the very language in which motives can be expressed and ultimately acted upon. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be a scenario in which members describe their motivations in ways that invoke partnership, such as when there is an indication of a desire to 'do our part' (as a role player in a larger interconnected scheme) in an effort to move the needle of progress on a social issue.

Another question concerns how collaborative enterprises are able to simultaneously address the rationales (some of them possibly competing or working at cross-purposes) of so many different partners. Organisations clearly self-select into voluntary cooperative ventures based on some combination of common interests and social ties, and this fact may appear to automatically take care of 'weeding out' on the front end those divergent or dissenting rationales that would otherwise upset a collaborative project. Even when organisations are in accord over the big picture rationale(s) guiding involvement, however, it is still the case that there are countless smaller-scale departures from the common account that must be negotiated. As this study shows, one of the ways in which this is accomplished is that the relational structure itself – the collaborative context – goes to work on rationales in a way that potentially leavens variations and differences over time.

As a final overarching observation, perhaps the success of a partnership like LEAD is that it is open to interpretive work by members. Indeed, the common subtext of the four themes is that they independently and collectively emphasise the process-related and meaning-making aspects of rationales. LEAD becomes that which the rationale can support. If a firm can only justify participation from a charitable standpoint, LEAD will take on the mantle of an act of charity. If it can only be rationalised as a recruiting tool, it will become a pipeline development initiative. The structure of the initiative, in other words, will fit the prevailing rationale for it, and an infrastructure will develop to support the actualisation of the thing LEAD is becoming. Efforts will be made to recruit students to prove the initiative's worth as a recruiting tool, for example. Since LEAD is a constellation of different organisations justifying their involvement on different grounds, there is of necessity a manoeuvrable interpretation of what LEAD is. Because it is a collaboration operating on principles of mutuality, part of membership in LEAD is learning to accept, conform to, or coexist with the positions of others. It is understood that organisations do not get to call all of the shots in the partnership, including the interpretive shot.

Notes

1. Lumina Foundation for Education provided a generous grant to conduct this study.
2. Affiliated institutions are the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, UCLA, Duke University, the University of Minnesota, the

University of Virginia, Dartmouth College, Cornell University, Stanford University, the University of Illinois, and Georgetown University.

3. Corporate (or other organisational) partners are 3M, Alcoa, American Express, Apple, ArvinMeritor, Bank of America, Campbell Soup, Credit Suisse First Boston, Dell, Deutsche Bank, ExxonMobil, Ford Motor Company, General Mills, General Motors, Goldman Sachs, Hilton Hotels, IBM, Janssen, Johnson & Johnson, JPMorgan Chase, Lehman Brothers, Marsh/Guy Carpenter, McKinsey, MCI, McNeil, Merrill Lynch, Owens Corning, PepsiCo, Pfizer, Popular, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Rohm & Haas, SC Johnson, State Street, UBS, U.S. Department of State, and Young & Rubicam.

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