

# Ensuring project success through collective competence and creative conflict in public–private partnerships – A case study of Bygga Villa, a Swedish triple helix e-government initiative

Inkeri Ruuska<sup>a,\*</sup>, Robin Teigland<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Helsinki University of Technology, Industrial Management, P.O. Box 5500, FI-02015 HUT, Finland*

<sup>b</sup> *Center for Competitiveness and Strategy, Stockholm School of Economics, P.O. Box 6501, Stockholm SE-113 53, Sweden*

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## Abstract

This paper presents a study of one public–private partnership in e-government in Sweden, Bygga Villa, that involved 16 organizations from academia, government, and industry to develop an innovative internet portal for the private construction industry. Our research purpose was to answer (1) What are the challenges to developing collective competence in public–private partnerships? and (2) How can these challenges be overcome to achieve project success? We found that the potential for conflict due to differing goals, resource scarcity, and interdependence of tasks was the greatest challenge for Bygga Villa's ability to develop collective competence while the partnership overcame this challenge through (1) co-developing a clear project charter, (2) recruiting a project leader with strong knowledge broker skills, (3) conducting joint problem-solving tasks using boundary objects, and (4) ensuring an understanding of the “big picture” through continuous open and balanced communication. Moreover, the project was successful due to members' ability to embrace conflict and turn it into creative conflict through dialogue while ensuring a high level of project satisfaction by the partnership's individual members. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Public–private partnership; Conflict; Project management; Collective competence; E-government; Construction; Community of practice

## 1. Introduction

Projects as a means to organize operations have become increasingly widespread in both the public and private sectors. Yet project-based organizations face many challenges to project effectiveness. Since they are unique, goal-oriented systems where technical, procedural, organizational, and human elements are integrated, they are consequently complex in their nature [1]. All the elements of the system need to be in balance since they are parts of a whole with each part affecting the others through interdependent rela-

tionships. A large number of projects are cross-sectoral and include partners from multiple organizations. One such collaboration is commonly referred to as public–private partnerships or PPPs. These inter-organizational project-based organizations consist of members from both the public and private sectors and are “cooperation[s] between public and private actors with a durable character in which actors develop mutual products and/or services and in which risk, costs, and benefits are shared” [2]. PPP projects are generally dispersed in their nature as partners are located in different organizations and in various geographical locations. In addition, partners encounter specific issues such as variability in team composition and multiple relationships between the partners [3], further increasing the number of challenges for project effectiveness.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 501963.

E-mail addresses: [inkeri.ruuska@hut.fi](mailto:inkeri.ruuska@hut.fi) (I. Ruuska), [robin.teigland@hhs.se](mailto:robin.teigland@hhs.se) (R. Teigland).

Although public–private partnerships have existed for centuries, it is only within the past two decades that the number has significantly increased within Europe and across the globe [4]. To date, research on PPPs has tended to focus on those producing more tangible results, such as increasing the supply of regional housing or improving access to public medicine. However, there are a growing number of public–private partnerships that focus on the creation of more intangible results, such as the promotion of sustainable growth and regional competitiveness. Despite the growing interest and increasing resources invested in this type of public–private partnership, they have received surprisingly little attention from researchers and practitioners [5].

To address the above, we conducted a case study of one complex public–private partnership, *Bygga Villa*<sup>1</sup> in Sweden. This PPP involved 16 organizations from academia, government, and industry with the purpose of developing an innovative internet portal for “all information and services that are required for ‘The Andersson Family’ to effectively plan, build, and live in their house”.<sup>2</sup> Using an abductive research process, we focused on two research questions: (1) What are the challenges to developing collective competence in public–private partnerships? and (2) How can these challenges be overcome to achieve project success? To anticipate the results, we found that the potential for conflict due to differing goals, resource scarcity, and interdependence of tasks was the greatest challenge for *Bygga Villa*’s ability to develop a collective competence. *Bygga Villa* was able to overcome this challenge primarily through (1) co-developing a clear project charter, (2) recruiting a project leader with strong knowledge broker skills, (3) conducting joint problem-solving tasks using boundary objects, and (4) ensuring an understanding of the “big picture” through continuous open and balanced communication. Moreover, the project facilitated collective competence management in which conflict was turned into creative conflict through dialogue and ensuring the satisfaction of the individual project member’s goals to the best degree possible. After a discussion of the above, we conclude the article with a discussion of the implications for practitioners and limitations.

## 2. Theoretical background and development of research questions

For the purpose of our study, we draw upon the literature on project management (e.g., [6]), teams comprising diverse members (e.g., [7]), and alliance organizations (e.g., [8]) as well as on the growing body of public–private partnership literature, e.g. [2,5]. With regard to the first literature, recent work in the project management field has found that successful projects are those that are able to

achieve collective competence. Collective competence has been described as a group’s ability to work together towards a common goal and results in the creation of a collective outcome, an outcome that could not be accomplished by one member alone due to its complexity [9,10]. This competence is argued to be at the group level and as such is a collective competence that integrates both practical as well as interpersonal competence. Practical competence refers to the project members’ ability to integrate their individual competences and solve problems together and includes a combination of learned skills, working routines, and processes as well as thinking chains and reasoning. Interpersonal competence refers to the ability of project members to interact and collaborate with other members while accomplishing the project’s tasks [9]. Thus, this approach to project management is similar to the community of practice concept [11], suggesting that competence is constituted while project members collaborate in the course of joint action or practice and creates a set of inter-subjective meanings that are expressed in and through their artifacts [12,6,13,14]. Thus, collective competence is based on a shared understanding by the members of the project as a whole that enables the group to successfully achieve the ultimate goals of the project [6].

The literature on diverse teams and alliances, however, suggests that public–private partnerships are faced with significant challenges to achieving shared understanding and collective competence. First, research has found that team members from diverse organizations have underlying differences in their behaviors, values, and attitudes while they not only notice different information but perceive the same information differently [7]. As a result, diverse organizations tend to lack a shared social reality with members and their organizations failing to have a common “here-and-now” and perspective [15]. Second, research on alliances, or temporary organizations combining individuals from different corporations, has found that alliance members have unique organizational identities and different corporate loyalties. Additionally, these individuals and their organizations may even have differing motives for entering an alliance and that these motives may change over time [16,8]. Finally, research on both diverse groups and alliances has found that such organizations often suffer from ineffective communication leading to obstacles to effective performance and in the case of alliances, frequent failure [7,8].

The above findings are echoed in the public–private partnership literature. While this literature has grown considerably in the past two decades, much of it focuses on joint ventures between government and private businesses as an alternative to privatization that emerged during the 1990s [17]. These partnerships often include universities, government agencies, and industrial firms, and they are often characterized by cooperation and not competition since they are designed as joint ventures with the purpose of spreading financial risks between the public and private sectors. While this literature tends to focus on collabora-

<sup>1</sup> In English – To build a house.

<sup>2</sup> The beta version is at [www.mittbygge.se](http://www.mittbygge.se).

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