

Prior ties and trust development in project teams – A case study from the construction industry



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Abstract

The limited duration and the high time constraints facing projects may pose challenges to the development of working relationships in project teams. Relationships can be influenced by the history of interactions and prior ties between team members. Development of trust is crucial but challenging in the context of cross-functional project teams and prior ties can have imperative influence on the team's ability to create trust. Through a case study in the construction industry, we explore *how* prior ties between team members influence the development of trust. We identify four important aspects; early formation of integrative work practices, development of a common philosophy, open communication, early and clear role expectations, all contributing to development of trust in an early phase. Our findings offer new, empirical insights into the complex nature of temporary project work and underscore the significance of prior ties in facilitating early trust and integration within project teams.
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1. Introduction

Temporary forms of cooperation and working constellations, such as projects, are becoming increasingly widespread (Bakker, 2010). Projects are by definition characterized by finite time spans and this transient feature may influence working in such temporary systems. Teams in a project setting face different challenges when it comes to the development of working relationships, compared to ongoing work teams. Relationships and interactions between team members are temporal phenomena that can be influenced by the history of interactions and prior experiences between participants (Poppo et al., 2008).

Project teams are a group of people responsible for complex tasks over a limited period and are typically cross-functional, consisting of members who have complementary skills and

come from different disciplines and functional areas in the organization. The advantage of cross-functional project teams lies in their capacity to do multiple activities simultaneously, rather than sequentially, which saves time (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995). The inherent functional diversity should facilitate a team's ability to interact across team boundaries to its members' "home" departments, thereby enhancing performance. However, to utilize the potential benefits of functional diversity, cross-functional teams must engage in collaborative interaction (Daspit et al., 2013). Thus, the ability of a cross-functional project team to execute a project successfully relies on its ability to integrate the relevant knowledge and skills that are distributed among its members. This integration of the capabilities in the team depends on the way they work together and their interpersonal relationships, such as the degree of trust. Trust may thus be particularly important in these teams, because many sub-tasks are interdependent, with team members relying on the functional expertise of their colleagues. In this setting, the temporal aspects of relationships may affect the work and consequently influence the success of the project. Relationship duration is of particular

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importance for trust development in a project team setting (Levin et al., 2006). The inherent need for collaboration and the high interdependency facing this form of work require trust between project team members. This is because trust has been identified as an important component of teamwork (Webber, 2008) and researchers have acknowledged its critical role in the development of effective work processes and the successful performance of traditional operational teams (Dirks, 1999; Kirkman et al., 2006). While trust has been proven to create various benefits for the team and the overall project, researchers also point to the difficulties of establishing trust in such a setting (Maurer, 2010). Trust rests on expectations and predictions of other people's behavior based on an evaluation of their trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995), but in a project team setting, members may lack prior collaboration and experience on which they could base their expectations and predictions (Gulati, 1995). The high time pressure often facing project teams (Nordqvist et al., 2004) makes it difficult to develop familiarity and to prove each other's trustworthiness. Hence, the formation of trust is a pivotal but simultaneously challenging task that has received only limited attention within the field of project management so far (Maurer, 2010). Even though the interest of trust in construction projects has grown in recent years (Chow et al., 2012), the focus has mainly been on inter-organizational trust (Lau and Rowlinson, 2010, trust among project stakeholders (Black et al., 2000; Laan et al., 2012; Pinto et al., 2009), and contracting in construction (Wong et al., 2008). Empirical research on team trust in general is underdeveloped (Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006), and we argue that exploration of the role of trust development in project teams operating in complex project environments is warranted.

Team members may work with colleagues with whom they share a history of collaboration or they may work with new and unfamiliar team members. This may have a significant effect on trust development and is especially important in the early phases of a project. Prior experience between project members and knowledge of each other can create social relationships between members. These relationships are called prior ties in our study. Recent studies have shown that prior ties have a positive effect on trust in inter-organizational projects (Maurer, 2010), in teams (Webber, 2008), in project partnering (Laan et al., 2012), and on project performance (Huckman et al., 2009; Reagans et al., 2005). Still, there is a shortcoming in the literature regarding identifying in greater depth *how* prior ties influence trust development in a project setting. Recently, Pinto et al. (2009) have also called for more research on the various antecedent conditions or actions that can affect trust in a project setting, and Maurer (2010) recognizes that more in-depth qualitative approaches are needed to explore the complexity of trust.

Our study is set up to meet these shortcomings through developing a deeper understanding of the temporal aspect of relationships in project teams by exploring the following research question: "How do prior ties between team members influence trust development in cross-functional project teams?" Our focus is on trust development *within* the project team. Although trust can exist at different levels, we focus on trust development at the team level of analysis. The majority of trust

research has focused on interpersonal trust and organizational trust and there is a lack of research examining trust at the team level (Webber, 2008). We take an explorative approach to answering the research question with the use of a qualitative case study of a project team in the construction industry. The construction sector is a prime example of a project-based industry, in which new product development involves not only non-routine production processes, but also complex working relationships and interrelations (Bresnen et al., 2004). Our findings offer new, empirical insights into the complex nature of temporary project work and underscore the significance of prior relationships and shared experience in facilitating trust and cross-functional integration in the project team.

2. The temporal aspect of trust development in project teams

Trust has received research attention across multiple disciplines with different definitions and approaches. Nevertheless, there has been some convergence on the central elements of trust. Trust is viewed as both multidimensional and dynamic (Kramer, 1999; Rousseau et al., 1998), and scholars seem to agree that it includes "positive" or "confident" expectations about another party and a "willingness to accept vulnerability" in the relationship, under conditions of interdependence and risk (Kramer, 1999; Lewicki et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust within the project team has been associated with several outcomes that are expected to contribute positively to the success of the project. Examples of outcomes are knowledge sharing (Andrews and Delahaye, 2000; Ding et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Park and Lee, 2014), commitment (Costa and Anderson, 2011), team satisfaction (Costa et al., 2001), formation of social networks (Shazi et al., 2015), and team performance (Costa, 2003; De Jong and Dirks, 2012; Webber, 2008). As noted, trust is a complex phenomenon and may have a variety of meanings and impacts, depending on the type of team and the context (Chiocchio and Essiembre, 2009). In construction, Kadefors (2004) has argued that the specific characteristics where contractual relationships dominate can counteract mutual trust development. It is recognized that successful trust building within project teams could improve project outcomes (Wong et al., 2008) and mutual trust has been found to be an important success factor in maintaining a partnering relationship (Black et al., 2000). Pinto et al.'s (2009) research on the role of trust among project stakeholders in construction projects showed that trust had different meanings for contractors and owners, thus demonstrating its context-specific nature (Ding and Ng, 2010).

Bakker (2010) recognizes that trust and social relations are areas that will most likely be affected by the duration of temporary organizational forms. Poppo et al. (2008) depict two perspectives on the origins of trust: the shadow of the future and the shadow of the past. The first perspective advances the notion that the shadow of the future – that is, the expectation of continued interaction – is necessary to promote cooperation and trust. The other position is that the shadow of the past – that is, prior relations – promotes trust as it is developed over time by a history of mutual interactions and experiences. Poppo et al. (2008) studied the interplay between these two origins of trust

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