

Applications

Problem structuring methods as intervention tools: Reflections from their use with multi-organisational teams[☆]

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Abstract

Problem structuring methods (PSMs), also known as soft OR approaches, are most commonly employed with teams formed by members who tend to operate within an overall framework of authority and accountability, and most of whom have the ‘power to act’ on their recommendations. However, other PSM users include teams whose members are drawn from different organisational settings to work on a problem of common interest. The multi-organisational nature of such multi-organisational teams (MOTs) adds further complexity to the PSM modelling and facilitation processes by increasing the potential for conflict regarding the problem. In addition, members of MOTs tend not to operate within an overall framework of authority and accountability and, therefore, do not necessarily have full authority to commit themselves to their joint agreements. This paper reports on the design and application of a PSM-based methodology with three such groups, within the context of a multi-organisational collaboration in the UK construction industry. The paper reflects on the apparent success of the intervention, discusses the appropriateness of PSMs in this particular intervention context, as well as the generalisability of the findings to other PSMs and/or multi-organisational contexts. Directions for the research and practice of PSMs with MOTs are also presented.

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1. Introduction

Problem structuring methods (PSMs) are a family of ‘soft’ operational research methods aimed at assisting groups in tackling a complex problem area of common interest [1]. PSMs handle such problematic situations through group modelling and facilitation, with a view to generating consensus on problem structure, and usually, on initial commitments to consequential action [1]. Examples of well-established PSMs include: strategic options analysis and

development (SODA) [2], soft systems methodology (SSM) [3], strategic choice approach (SCA) [4], drama theory [5], group model building [6], and decision conferencing [7].

The typical user of PSMs have been top management teams working on ill-defined strategic situations characterised by high levels of complexity, uncertainty, and sometimes conflict [1]. Members of such teams tend to operate within a single framework of authority and accountability, and most have the ‘power to act’ and commit themselves to whatever conclusions might have been arrived at during their meetings (see, for example, [8]).

There is, however, other type of PSM user whose characteristics are in sharp contrast with those exhibited

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by top management teams. Such teams are multi-organisational in nature, their members usually drawn from a wide variety of stakeholder organisations with diverse goals, values and working practices, and whose main purpose is to work together to resolve complex issues of common concern, and which no single organisation can resolve unilaterally without collaborating [9–12]. A direct consequence of the multi-organisational nature of such teams is that further complexity is added to the PSM intervention process because the potential for conflict regarding multiple beliefs and values associated with the problem is increased [13–15].

In addition, and contrary to top management teams, multi-organisational teams (MOTs) do not exhibit an overall framework of authority and power [10,13], and are more likely to have different degrees of accountability to outside interests. This means that MOT members will not necessarily have full authority to commit their own organisations to the products of their joint decision-making [16,17]. As a result, MOT members have to engage in the legitimisation of their joint commitments within their own organisational constituencies before actual implementation takes place. Such legitimisation attempts will require MOT members working as competent ‘boundary spanners’ within and across organisations [16,18].

Most of what has been reported about PSMs in the OR literature has focused on management teams operating within single organisations. However, published studies on the use of PSMs with MOTs are increasing e.g. [10,12,19–21]. This paper makes a further contribution to this emergent body of PSM research and practice by reporting and reflecting on an intervention that used a modified version of SCA [4]. The aim of this paper is thus to increase our understanding and use of PSMs as organisational intervention tools, with particular reference to the MOT context.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides contextual information of the intervention. The following sections describe the intervention design and application of a modified version of SCA with three MOTs drawn from a UK construction partnership. The subsequent section then presents and discusses the evaluation of the PSM intervention from the participants’ perspective. This is followed by a discussion of the significance of the experience and its implications for the research and practice of PSMs within multi-organisational contexts. The final section presents the conclusions and identifies future research directions.

2. The intervention context

The intervention reported here was carried out during 1997–99 in a major company operating in the leisure sector (LeisureCo —a pseudonym), as part of a larger action research programme in the UK construction industry (for further information about this research programme, see [22]). At the time of the research, LeisureCo were engaged in a series of refurbishment projects of their hotels to meet the standards of their recently acquired American four-star hotel franchise, as well as in building new hotels. This construction work was taking place within a then recently established collaborative partnership between LeisureCo and their major contractors and subcontractors, led by LeisureCo. This move reflected a bigger move within the whole UK construction industry from traditional contractual arrangements towards more collaborative ways of working [19,23,24].

The LeisureCo partnership was entered with great expectations by the partners. For LeisureCo, partnering was seen as a way to reduce uncertainty about the product. LeisureCo wanted to move away from a traditional tendering process in which the least costly tender was likely to be favoured by them, but where the quality of the final product was not always warranted. The LeisureCo partners also saw the partnering relationship as a means to reduce uncertainty. In their case, however, the benefit of uncertainty reduction would lie in ensuring steady future work through a continuing partnering relationship.

To demonstrate their commitment to developing a trusting relationship with their partners, LeisureCo moved away from traditional written contracts and fully documented project specifications. This move meant that both project specifications and partnership roles and responsibilities were initially ill-defined. At the operational level, the main interface between LeisureCo and their partners was the (construction) project teams. These teams would have regular meetings to review project progress. At the more strategic level, LeisureCo had separate periodical meetings with representatives of their partner contractors, partner project managers, and partner quantity surveyors, respectively. These meetings were aimed at reviewing both the projects and the partnering process. No forums for cross-discipline partner meetings at this level were in place during the projects.

Overall, the partners’ high expectations, the ill-definition of the project brief and of roles and responsibilities, and the lack of cross-organisational interfaces, comprised a set of initial conditions which

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