

What are the potentials of interorganizational collaborative management research in mobilizing leadership agency?

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Abstract

Interorganizational collaborative management research (ICMR) offers new insight into action research, reflexivity, and collaboration in research practice. The article develops the research area especially in terms of uniting managers from different organizations with researchers, and outlines how ICMR creates a psychologically safe learning and development space.

Our study introduces an interorganizational learning and development space, where managers from diverse organizations collaborate to develop their leadership capabilities and perform actions in their own organizational systems, supported by a systematic research design collecting qualitative data. We provide a description of ICMR as a research approach, outline our methodology for ICMR and illustrate the outcomes of an ICMR project, discussing learning mechanisms, strengths, challenges, and opportunities for future development in the field.

Keywords: interorganizational collaborative management research, action research, leadership agency, leadership development, learning space

Introduction

Contemporary organizational contexts face multifaceted problems, and changes in organizations are continuously happening at an accelerated pace (Millar et al. 2018). These problems often tend to be “wicked” problems (Churchman 1967; Rittel and Webber 1973; Turnbull and Hoppe 2019; Grint and Jones 2022), for which there are no clear and simple solutions. In such a context, traditional management approaches are often insufficient. We argue that it is crucial for managers to collaborate on learning to navigate these challenges effectively (Watkins and Marsick 2019). Managers must deal with wicked problems in a more collaborative, inquiring, and critically reflexive manner to find new, creative, and possible ways to respond and act adequately to multifaceted challenges in their daily practice. This is best achieved through interaction with peers in a learning space characterized by critical reflexivity (Cunliffe 2004) and psychological safety (Edmondson 2023).

However, many managers lack such a collaborative learning space and are often left alone to deal with complex issues, decisions, and actions. Furthermore, sharing experiences and speaking freely with colleagues about (personal and managerial) challenges pose a risk and can be difficult for managers due to formal power relations and positioning in the organization. Simultaneously, managers from the same organization often tend to reinforce the thinking that is prevalent in the organization. Often, they could benefit from getting new ideas, challenges, and perspectives from outsiders, e.g., managers from other organizations, researchers, or consultants. We will argue that a psychologically safe dialogic learning space can be advantageously placed outside the manager’s own organization. To create development and achieve an effective outcome, access to such a learning space must be facilitated, e.g., by researchers or consultants, and be linked to experimentation with new actions in the manager’s own organizational practice.

In this article, which is based on a research project, we will explore the importance of creating a collaborative learning space between researchers and managers from different organizations.

The project investigates/examines the following research question: *What are the potentials of interorganizational collaborative management research (ICMR) in mobilizing leadership agency?*

Leadership agency can be mobilized and supported in many ways, e.g., practicing, sparring, trusting relationships, goalsetting, social support, role models and a collaborative environment (Frost 2006; Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Goller and Harteis 2017; Bandura 2018; Chen-Levi et al. 2022). Many of the mobilizing elements are also mentioned in the ICMR literature as possible ways to follow in the practical implementation of an ICMR study, and therefore it is assumed that participation in an ICMR project will support the mobilization of leadership agency.

In contrast to many collaborative management research (CMR) projects, collaborative inquiry in this project is established in a dialogic and critically reflexive learning space consisting of researchers and managers from *different organizations*; therefore, we call this space *interorganizational collaborative management research* (ICMR).

Only sparse research has been made into the field of ICMR. We need more empirical-based research and knowledge on what a dialogic and critical reflexive learning space made up of managers and researchers from different organizations can provide in terms of benefits, challenges, and impact.

One possible objection to/criticism of our research could be that leadership development based on action learning (AL) shares similarities with ICMR when an AL group is established across different organizations. However, action learning does not include research, as its primary purpose is to create learning and development (Volz-Peacock et al. 2016). ICMR is based on both research and development through the same process. In this article we will present our research and findings in relation to a project on ICMR in Denmark consisting of a group of five managers from large private and public organizations and two researchers. Finally, we will discuss strengths, challenges, and opportunities for future development in the field. In the next section, we will present and define collaborative management research and briefly present inspiration from research in interorganizational groups.

Collaborative management research

Collaborative management research (CMR) is an approach that aims to create change in organizations while simultaneously studying the change process to generate new knowledge. CMR rests on the assumption that organizations are learning systems, and chang-

es within these systems require active participation and collaboration from their members (Lewin 1946; Shani 2023).

Thus, CMR can be seen as part of the collaborative inquiry family, which includes for example action research, participatory action research, action learning, collaborative research, and CMR (Coghlan 2023). These forms of collaborative inquiry and CMR align with mode 2 research (Gibbons 1994; Gibbons et al. 2011), which covers applied research in specific contexts addressing real-life issues in practice.

As a research methodology, CMR is distinguished by its application within specific organizational contexts where tangible managerial actions are necessary. The essence of this approach lies in the formation of a community of inquiry (COI), whose key elements are a problematic situation, scientific attitude, and participatory democracy (Shields 2003; Coghlan and Shani 2008). In the COI, internal organizational leaders and external researchers jointly investigate questions of shared interest. The investigation often employs transdisciplinary, multiple scientific methods, and various learning mechanisms are designed to create a learning space. Learning mechanisms are formal processes, methods, spaces, structures etc., created to support development of performance and learning. The underlying assumption is that the capability to learn arises from the design of specific learning mechanisms that fit the purpose of the CMR project. Overall, the purpose of establishing a learning space is to improve performance in the organizations and to generate new academic knowledge (Canterino et al. 2016; Cirella et al. 2016; Coghlan et al. 2016; Shani 2023).

This study uses Pasmore et al.'s definition and understanding of CMR:

Collaborative management research is an effort by two or more parties, at least one of whom is a member of an organization or system under study and at least one of whom is an external researcher, to work together in learning about how the behavior of managers, management methods, or organizational arrangements affect outcomes in the system or systems under study, using methods that are scientifically based and intended to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions from the data collected,

with the intent of both improving performance of the system and adding to the broader body of knowledge in the field of management. (Pasmore et al. 2008: 20).

In CMR, collaboration is understood, among other things, as genuine cooperation between managers and external researchers in co-creating the research agenda, including selecting the research theme, choosing methods and design, gathering empirical data, conducting preliminary analyses, as well as identifying and planning managerial actions. In the established learning space, cyclic processes are often employed, focusing on experimenting with managerial actions within the organization, dialogic exploration, reflection processes, sense-making, and other learning mechanisms that support both performance and learning (Shani et al. 2012; Canterino et al. 2016; Shani 2023).

Although Pasmore et al.'s definition of CMR includes the possibility of interorganizational groups, this aspect is rarely described or researched. Most CMR literature describes studies where the managers come from the same organization. However, there are also a few examples where the group of managers come from different organizations. This form of interorganizational CMR can be seen as related to network action learning, interorganizational network, and interorganizational learning (Coughlan and Coughlan 2008; Mirvis 2008; Coughlan and Coughlan 2015).

From these approaches, we find learning networks (Coughlan and Coughlan 2015) particularly useful in the study of how ICMR might support managers leadership agency. In learning networks, managers meet to explore learning opportunities both within participating organizations and between them. Issues faced by individual managers or organizations are brought to the network for discussion and analysis, with the insights and ideas generated then taken back to their respective organizations for implementation. These networks aim to enhance knowledge and capacity to act (Coughlan et al. 2021). Mirvis found that despite the diversity among participants and the participating organizations, a shared professional identity and common interest in the network's topics (in our study, a strong interest in leadership and an identity as managers) united the managers. Mirvis also notes that, over time, there is a shift towards a "we," a collective identity, where participants see themselves less as

representatives of their respective organizations and more as members of an informal “give and take” group. Being a manager in an organization can be emotionally and physically demanding, and the opportunity to share experiences with peers in similar positions in other organizations and the mutual support encourages participation in an interorganizational group (Mirvis 2008).

Methodology

In this section, we describe our methodology and research design in relation to ICMR.

In CMR as in action research, researchers and the participants collaborate to make sense of and create a desired change or development, while research is carried out during the process. The collaborative process aims to generate actionable knowledge (Argyris 1996) that addresses real-life problems while contributing to academic theory development.

CMR often takes place in a cyclical research process, where purposes and contexts are examined prior to constructing (theme, development, challenges), planning action, acting, and evaluating action (Coghlan 2019). The approach is grounded in pragmatism (Dewey 1933; Dewey and Bentley 1949), participatory inquiry, practical knowing, experience, and reflexivity (Chandler and Torbert 2003; Shani et al. 2012; Shani 2023;).

Practical knowing is always incomplete, processual, and aimed at finding out how to think and act in relation to a challenge or concrete situation. In this way, researchers and practitioners engage in the messiness that characterizes the development of knowledge about collaborative management research (Shani et al. 2012).

To establish a learning system in the ICMR group, we conducted relationship building and designed a set of learning mechanisms that allowed the ICMR group to co-inquire, co-create, and collaborate to develop each manager’s leadership agency in relation to current challenges and pressing issues in their role as managers in their respective organizations. In addition, researchers and managers in the ICMR group collaboratively investigated and developed the learning mechanisms and were analyzing, generating hypotheses, and validating data throughout the process. Examples of learning mechanisms used to develop leadership agency is the reflective team (Andersen 1987) and Karl Tomm’s reflective question types

(Tomm 1988). These mechanisms were used systematically to facilitate dialogue and explore and jointly challenge the managers' experiences, opinions, assumptions, values, and narratives about themselves, each other, and their managerial challenges.

The project was carried out over half a year, during which a full-day start-up, three four-hour workshops and a final full-day workshop were held. Between the workshops, the managers worked with experimenting actions in their own organization, which then became the subject of an evaluative and collaborative inquiry at the following workshop, which led to identifying new actions, etc. Data has been generated from all workshops in the form of audio recordings, which have been transcribed. Furthermore, through each manager's work with a development theme, a researcher has created a visual scaffolding (Jordan 2016), where the most important themes and statements were written down on a poster. In a following joint inquiry process, the participants in the ICMR group practiced "gift giving" in the form of Post-its with reflective questions, suggestions, and thoughts, which have been placed on top of the visual scaffolding poster to promote learning, critical reflexivity, leadership development, and actions for each manager's developmental work. This was documented through photos of all posters during the project period. In addition, the researchers have given presentations on central theories and management-related research themes, i.e., positioning theory and reflexivity. These presentations are stored in the form of PowerPoint presentations.

After the third workshop, the researchers analyzed themes and patterns across data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Against this background, the researchers prepared a presentation of preliminary findings, focusing on how ICMR might support and promote managers' leadership agency. At the fourth workshop, the ICMR group collaboratively validated these findings (Flick 2022). The group discussed whether they could recognize the findings and if they reflected their experiences. Additionally, the participants were asked about any missing elements in the findings and what could enhance the descriptions. The participants were able to identify the central themes and, simultaneously, provided several suggestions for improvement, including adding themes not initially included in the preliminary findings. The groups' corrections and suggestions

for adjustments were incorporated into the findings presented in the next section.

Findings

Below, we present some of the joint findings on the potentials of ICMR in mobilizing leadership agency. We point out that fulfilling the following conditions in ICMR provides a strong foundation for the group's support for managers' development and actions.

Foundational conditions in ICMR

First, all participants must be genuinely committed to collaborative inquiry within the ICMR group, to a significant extent, and to the self-chosen development project within their own organizations.

Secondly, psychological safety, support, and recognition are crucial. This environment allows for the discussion of "difficult topics" and the expression of a manager's uncertainty and vulnerability as a manager. It is advantageous when the ICMR group can openly discuss managerial problems and leadership issues without fear of competition or loss of status and respect. This contrasts with the positioning and power relations within one's own organization, which are often experienced as obstacles to open communication.

The importance of psychological safety is stated this way by two of the managers.

A: You can be competitors in your own organization, and that is not the case here.

B: So here you can talk beyond those roles, and have a free space to maybe express what really matters, uhhmmm...

Two other managers discuss the nature of relationships within the group, emphasizing that relations should include the desire and courage to challenge one another.

C: And we also know each other so well by now, that we know where we can and should challenge each other.

D: Yes, where we can push each other. And how hard we can push!

Thirdly, the collaborative work involving critical reflection and reflexivity is highlighted as promoting development and agency. In-

sights from external participants from various organizations in the joint inquiry and sparring have, among other things, led the managers to become more reflective and clearer about their own opinions and the underlying assumptions at play. This has facilitated both clarity and decisive action, as one of the leaders mentions.

It is the contradictions that drive it [...] it is a different space when someone from the outside comes in [...] Otherwise, I'd just stick to my own beliefs [...] So talking it through with others, I actually find out what I really mean.

Outcomes

It has been important for the group members that their participation in the research project yielded tangible results for their organizations and for the managers themselves. The empirical data indicates numerous outcomes, some of which are presented below.

One manager stated that if he had not participated in the ICMR group, he would have abandoned his change project in the organization. The commitment to the group and the strong relationships established within it encouraged him to persist. He acknowledged, thanks to the group's support and insistence, that changes often take longer than his patience typically allows. The manager highlights how experiences from other organizations have reinforced his decision to continue with the project, which, after four months, is beginning to show an organizational outcome:

And then you might say, as a group, it is extremely inspiring to hear what others are doing. Your experiences and practices that challenge my practice. I think it's great to learn from tried and tested examples from other companies. So, if it works in another context, maybe it could work in mine too.

Another participant gave an example of a personal outcome. The manager faced a very complex task without support from the other managers in the organization. This lack of support caused such frustration that it led to sleepless nights and other issues.

The collaborative inquiry within the "free space" of the ICMR group changed the manager's perspective. The diverse inputs made

the challenges more manageable, partly because the manager was able to move from emotional frustrations to viewing the problem as a task that can be addressed.

So, I get the chance to see myself a bit from an outside perspective, and suddenly I see it as a situation that can be improved. It's all about separating the task from the person. There's some frustration [...] but now I can do something about it.

We conclude the description of the findings with three brief examples of how participation in the ICMR group has mobilized and enhanced leadership agency within the managers' organizations.

Inspired by a group member's experiences in acknowledging mistakes, one of the managers introduced discussions about "the week's mistakes" in a project manager forum as a concrete element in promoting psychological safety.

Another participant from a highly practice-oriented and data-driven organization was inspired to adopt an academically investigative approach by conducting interviews in his change project. This systematic approach led to greater acknowledgment and support from the director, as the project was now based on data.

A third leader, inspired by ICMR methodologies, established two leadership networks across departments within her organization. The purpose is to create access to a facilitated space for discussing leadership and sharing knowledge among departments.

In addition to the above findings, we provide examples of potential tensions that may arise when working with ICMR.

Simultaneous commitment – a double-edged sword?

As previously described, the managers' full commitment and strong relationships in the ICMR group contribute to the quality of the group's work and the sense of unity. (If everyone does not commit, the ICMR group's work becomes less inter-organizational). Additionally, an ICMR group is characterized by the managers having to also handle a wide range of leadership and management tasks in their own organization, which also simultaneously requires their commitment. The study shows that doubts, guilt, and feelings of failure can arise among the managers, as they try to balance their

commitment. That is why it is particularly important that the projects are relevant for the organizations and that the struggles and feelings are facilitated by the researchers.

The importance of differences in ICMR processes

The managers in the study each dealt with complex problems in their own organizations. To address these issues, we designed the learning mechanism “giving gifts” (as described in the methodology section) within the ICMR group. This mechanism leveraged the participants’ diverse perspectives and varied understandings. During the project period, two patterns emerged in these “giving gifts” activities, revealing at least two different ways of perceiving support, recognition, challenge, and problem-solving.

Questions/comments focusing on	Questions/comments focusing on
Challenging	Supporting
Structural/organizational handling	Relational/psychological handling
Creating progress	Confirmation and reassuring
Rational arguments	Emotional arguments
Offering completely new perspectives and thoughts	Offering perspectives that enrich/strengthen known thoughts

We assume that some of these differences arise because the managers differ as individuals. Additionally, we believe that local organizational cultures influence the patterns that emerge in the managers’ questions and comments. Throughout the process, the group became aware of the value of these differences and the importance of diverse pre-understandings in reflection processes and the facilitation of these differences. For future ICMR projects, we suggest maintaining ongoing attention to these mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the significant potential of interorganizational collaborative management research (ICMR) in mobilizing leadership agency and fostering leadership development. By using specific learning mechanisms in establishing a psychologically safe, dialogic learning space, managers from diverse organizations engage in collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, and mutual support. This environment promotes openness, trust, and the willingness to challenge one another and one's own assumptions, enabling managers to explore new perspectives, validate their experiences, and develop actionable strategies for and in their organizations.

Our findings highlight the importance of psychological safety and the positive impact of external perspectives, which enhance managers' clarity and decision-making capabilities. The collaborative structure of ICMR facilitates tangible organizational outcomes, motivating managers to persist in their change initiatives and leading to meaningful improvements in their leadership practices. Additionally, the study underscores the value of diverse perspectives in problem-solving and the need for balanced commitment to both the ICMR group and individual organizational responsibilities.

Overall, the research contributes to the understanding of ICMR as a robust approach in mobilizing leadership agency and development, emphasizing its role in creating a supportive and dynamic learning environment. Future research should continue to explore the nuances of interorganizational collaboration to further refine and expand the applications of ICMR.

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