

## **Relational Space: The Heart of Sustainability Collaborations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Corporations are now collaborating to meet complex global sustainability challenges heretofore considered beyond the mandate of business leaders. Multi-organizational consortia have formed, not as philanthropic efforts, but to find competitive advantage. In order to examine the dynamics of such collaborations, we pursued an in-depth multi-method case study of “The Sustainability Consortium,” in which many Fortune 50 senior managers have convened since 1998. Our analysis uncovers the primacy of “relational space” – a rich context for aspirational trust and reflective learning, which gives rise to collaborative projects. Within this space, representatives of an ecology of multi-national organizations work toward sustainable development of their global economic systems. The Sustainability Consortium attests to the importance of tackling sustainable development within a context of the interdependence of multiple organizations. We propose a model that emphasizes the importance of first establishing non-transactional relationships among business leaders and draw theoretical and practical implications for interorganizational collaborations.

## INTRODUCTION

A new organizational form is emerging: inter-organizational consortia of companies that span multiple industries, through which “business can be a leading force in eradicating poverty, enhancing the environment, and advancing peace—while still prospering financially” (BAWB/AOM Global Forum, 2006; see Waddock, 2008). Compared to ‘traditional’ R&D consortia (Browning, Beyer & Shetler, 1995; Faulkner & DeRond, 2000) these multi-sector alliances (Glasbergen, Biermann & Mol, 2007; Wondolleck & Yaffe, 2000) are addressing issues of unprecedented scope that go well beyond conventional business mandates and market boundaries (Gray, 1989; Austin, 2000; 2007). Of particular interest are “sustainability collaborations” such as The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the Social Venture Network, and the UN Global Compact, which are composed of large, for-profit companies exploring how to transform their business and their societies into more sustainable systems. Although some participant companies in these collaboratives may be “greenwashing” their efforts with symbolic gestures, sustainability consortia do provide unique opportunities to create a high degree of system-wide change, reflecting deeply held values and norms that express a profound respect for the role of business in mitigating or improving the environmental and social outcomes of their actions.

Such “sustainability collaborations” are rife with paradox (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). For example, these consortia aim to foster long-term strategic benefits for their organizations, while also seeking to institutionalize innovations that have implications across industries, sectors, and regions (e.g. Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002). Like multi-sector collaborations designed to solve societal problems (Rondinelli & London, 2003; Rangan, Samii & van Wassenhove, 2006), these consortia are often motivated by the projected benefits that member

organizations perceive can be generated through working together rather than separately on specific issues. However, in contrast to most of the research on inter-organizational relationships (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Cropper, Ebers, Huxham & Ring, 2008), sustainability consortia are tackling complex, ill-structured problems for which goals cannot be articulated in advance, and which require innovations of enormous complexity (Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999; Glasbergen, Bierman & Mol, 2007; Roth & Senge, 1996). Given the breadth of the issues being faced and the wide range of expectations from member organizations about goals, process, and outcomes, how do such consortia generate shared agreement and identify appropriate projects to collaborate on?

In order to gain insight into these and other dynamics, we studied the early years of the Sustainability Consortium – a voluntary association of about a dozen corporate members that have an interest in moving their companies and their diverse industries toward a more sustainable future. Most members are large corporations including Ford, Nike, Shell, GM, BP, and Unilever; the Consortium also included a few smaller firms such as Plug Power (a fuel-cell company) and a small number of non-profit organizations, e.g. the World Bank. Initiated through The Society for Organizational Learning and its founder, Peter Senge (1990; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur & Schley, 2008), the Consortium aims to apply principles of organizational learning and dialogue (Senge, 1990) to develop new business practices that incorporate concern for broader social and environmental issues.

In our study we asked, what accounts for the collaborative work among these organizations and their leaders? What we found at the heart of these interactions is “Relational Space” – a dialogical context of shared inquiry, trust and learning that was created before the emergence of shared expectations or negotiated projects, and which helps fuel the execution of

those projects over time. Our study thus explores the quality and dynamics of Relational Space, and how that led to tangible projects and learning by individuals and organizations.

We begin by drawing some distinctions between sustainability consortia and collaborative innovation more generally, focusing on how trust might be created and how learning might be facilitated in these highly complex and ill-structured situations. Next we introduce our data and analytic methods, and present the results of our analysis – the identification of four dynamic contexts in the Consortium: Relational Space, Collaborative Action, Participant Influences, and Governance. We conclude by reflecting on the interdependence of these contexts, and on specific qualities they embody including Aspirational Trust and Dialogical Learning.

## **TRUST AND LEARNING IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATIONS**

### **Distinguishing Business Alliances from Sustainability Collaborations**

The theoretical context for our study is the wealth of empirical studies of collaborative innovation in business organizations (Inkpen & Currall, 2004; Olk & Earley, 2000; Rangan, et al., 2006; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994) and in multi-sector alliances that seek to solve specific problems (Brown & Ashman, 1999; Gray, 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003). According to a wide review of the literature, most research into inter-organizational alliances and collaborations is based on participating organizations that have some set of common characteristics: Partner firms may share an industry or product market (Rangan, et al., 2006; Ring, Doz & Olk, 2005), may be organized around a specific institutional need (Browning, 1995; Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004), or they have identified specific projects that catalyze either a business collaboration (Arino & de la Torre, 1998) or a “social alliance” (Rondinelli & London, 2003;

Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2004). In cases where specific goals or outcomes may not be articulated in advance, researchers have explored the process of negotiation that leads to shared beliefs and congruent actions over time – a “domain consensus” (Gray, 1989) that leads to a consensus of exchange (Olk & Earley, 2000). Such a consensus reflects an awareness of the environmental interdependence that participants share because they all operate within a single industry, market, or environmental region (Wondolleck & Yaffe, 2000; Ring, et al., 2005).

We contrast this wealth of research with members of sustainability consortia, which are not formed around single-market interdependence, nor by institutional risks and threats that are widely perceived; rather, sustainability consortia tend to emerge due to a value-based (versus purely economic) recognition of their social, environmental, and global interdependence. This perceived interdependence goes well beyond the short-term and mid-term issues (or crises) that motivate most other inter-organizational collaborations (Gray, 2000; Wondolleck & Yaffe, 2000), and instead reflects a much broader sensibility about the role of business in society writ large, which generates a longer time horizon of leadership and organizational learning (Senge et al., 2008). Although some mid-term business issues may be on the horizon for some firms in sustainability consortia, by and large their members are not guided by shared institutional pressures (c.f. Garud et al., 2002), nor is it easy to define formal goals or deliverables in advance of formation (Gray, 2000; Hart, 1999).

We suggest that the dynamics of organizing and implementation in these multi-industry, system-wide efforts will be different from the processes found in industry-based consortia in a variety of ways, including the lack of a formal basis for trust between the firms (Currall & Inkpen, 2000; Faulkner, 2000) and significant uncertainty in how knowledge and learning can be generated in these ill-structured contexts (Tenkasi & Mohrman, 1999). We focus next on these

two general issues of trust and learning in multi-organizational collaboratives.

### **Trust in Sustainability Collaborations**

Research has recognized the important role that trust plays in the success of traditional collaborations and strategic alliances (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Inkpen & Currall, 2004). This research focuses on the economic or strategic benefits that accrue to partner firms (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Rangan, et al, 2006) or on the long-term benefits to the shared industry (Browning et al., 1995, Garud, Sanjay & Kumaraswamy, 2002). A good summary of this approach was presented by Currall and Inkpen (2000: 328): “Joint venture trust is defined as reliance on another party (i.e. person, group, or firm) under a condition of risk.” In this view, reliance reflects the possibility that one party’s fate can be determined by the other party, and such reliance is risky precisely because “a party would experience potentially negative outcomes, i.e. ‘injury or loss’, from the untrustworthiness of the other party” (ibid, pg. 330). These potentially negative outcomes are central to this view, for “without risk, trust is irrelevant” (ibid). Of course, the risks are clear in joint ventures and business alliances that aim to generate knowledge and institutional change, for only to the degree that the benefits are truly *shared* will the contributing partners accrue the strategic (economic) gains that motivate their participation.

Other researchers have argued that trust develops over time, incorporating more “relational” aspects during the process, an idea summarized by Bachmann & Zaheer (2008:537) in their recent analysis of this literature: “[S]tage model[s] of trust...suggest that calculative trust can make the transition to relational trust, which derives from repeated interactions, and which further can become identity-based trust at its limit.” According to Inkpen & Currall’s “co-evolution of trust” model (2004: 589), this is especially important in the formative stages of a collaboration: “In newly formed alliances between firms without prior interactions, a basis for

trust may be absent and the partners are often suspicious of each other... As interactions increase and individual attachments develop, trust may increase.”

Social Exchange Theory provides a basis for the early creation of relational trust. According to Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1965, Muthasamy & White, 2005), early levels of trust may be sparked by specific exchanges (or promises) of resources, including a publicly stated and high-level financial commitment to a long-term alliance that will provide economic and business benefit for all firms involved. This is clearly seen in industry-based consortia with pre-defined strategic goals; even if member companies (competitors) have few previous interactions, their public commitment to an ongoing *financial* contribution – an initial exchange – creates a high level of relational trust that guides further social exchanges.

A good example of how Social Exchange Theory explains the rapid creation of trust is found in an in-depth analysis of the SEMATECH consortium, an R&D collaboration which started in the early 1990s by Intel, IBM, AMD, National Semiconductor and others to retain American advantage in the semiconductor manufacturing industry (Browning, et al., 1995). Each company paid up to \$1.5 Million dollars per year for five years (with matching funds from the US Government), in addition to contributing half a dozen or more full-time employees for a 2-year commitment. “The result of this reciprocity was a group-based trust that allowed members to cooperate” (Browning et al., 1995). In effect, the up-front commitment of time and resources by member organizations generates a concomitant exchange of information, knowledge and trust among all participants, through the shared goal of strengthening the industry as a whole.

*Differentiating Sustainability Collaborations from Traditional Alliances.* In contrast to SEMATECH, however, the initial commitments to the Sustainability Consortium were relatively

small: an annual fee of only \$40,000 was used to support the two consultant-leaders of the project. As a benefit of that fee, a few company members were allowed to participate in a two-day systems thinking workshops offered by the Society for Organizational Learning. Each company was asked to send up to five of their members to the Sustainability Consortium's semi-annual meetings; most (but not all) meeting participants also had their travel costs covered by their organizations. Further, all projects and collaborations that arose from the interactions at these meetings were voluntary – unlike other business forums like WBCSD, there was no funding for consultants nor any personnel to pursue project tasks; all such work was to be accomplished by consortium participants on their own time in their companies. Given such a low up-front commitment of time and resources, Social Exchange Theory would predict that initial levels of information sharing and trust might be relatively low.

A different basis for initial trust may be gained through social and professional networks that exist prior to the founding of a consortium (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Many (but not all) of the companies in the Sustainability Consortium were members of the Society for Organizational Learning, which provides a professional network of managers committed to organizational learning from a systems thinking perspective (Senge, 1990). In addition, many of the companies who joined the Sustainability Consortium had recognized the potential economic benefits of the collaboration, at least in the sense that exploring sustainability could reduce business risks, e.g., from future regulation such as those developed or developing in Europe.

Even so, the research on trust in collaborations suggests that shared networks and perceived company benefits may not on their own generate enough confidence and trust in a collaboration member who is new to another participant – the primary context in this Consortium (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Bachmann & Zaheer, 2008; Inkpen & Currall, 2000; 2004). The high

degrees of relational trust necessary for sustainability consortia is still based on “past satisfactory experiences or partners’ reputation... [Thus], trust building must be a cyclic process within which positive outcomes form the basis for trust development [and which] may be articulated in formal agreements and contracts” (Huxham & Vangen, 2005: 154).

Curiously, as our analysis will suggest, the vast majority of individual participants – executives and middle managers in member companies – had virtually no previous experiences with each other regarding sustainability or other projects, nor was there significant reputational knowledge across the participants. Moreover, neither agreements nor contracts were developed nor affirmed by participants during the process. Further, although companies may have stated values around sustainability, the actual participants in the Consortium were individuals, and initially most of them had neither interacted nor met with their counterparts from other companies. These issues generate one of our research questions: On what basis is trust developed in sustainability consortia, and what are the conditions that support the creation of trust and mutual respect in the Sustainability Consortium?

### **Learning in Sustainability Collaborations**

Closely associated with the creation of trust is the generation of learning in sustainability consortia. Organizational learning has been identified as one of the key benefits of business collaborations generally; this is especially true when inter-organizational learning can increase both partners’ competitive advantage (Crossan & Guatto, 1996; Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996). Numerous scholars have examined the importance of learning alliances, especially in periods of uncertainty and rapid change (Khanna, Gulati & Nohria, 1998).

By and large, scholars have identified two interrelated types of learning in joint ventures: “learning about” partners, and “learning from” partners (Inkpen & Currall, 2004). *Learning*

*about* a partner “facilitates relational understanding and can provide the foundation for trust development” as the parties share knowledge that can be applied to the exploratory project venture (Inkpen & Currall, 2004: 593). Extending our earlier description, the production of trust requires a (sometimes extensive) period of interaction and information sharing in order to understand partners’ values and interests, and the resources and skills that may be available through the collaboration. This *learning about* partners reflects a type of “behavioral learning” in the alliance (Lubatkin, Florin & Lane, 2001). Secondly, *learning from* a partner can lead to knowledge which may be applied by another to exploit their own operations, thus constituting “the private benefits that a firm can earn unilaterally by picking up skills from its partner” (Inkpen & Currall, 2004: 593; see also Holmqvist, 2004). These interactions reflect “cognitive learning,” through which alliance partners come to understand what resources are available through the relationship (Dyer & Singh, 1998), and the ways in which these resources might be “...blended and leveraged in a manner that is independently meaningful to each, [as they] realize their ‘goal interdependence’” (Lubatkin et al., 2001: 1371). At the same time, the more valuable the knowledge that is sourced by any partner, the more likely the partner can exploit it for private rather than shared benefit (Noteboom, 2008). Thus, “While many organizations often talk in glowing terms about their alliances’ learning potential, learning is a difficult, frustrating, and often misunderstood process” (Inkpen, 2000: 777). We would expect that this inherent tension in strategic alliances’ learning process will also be felt within multi-sector alliances (Lawrence, et al., 2002; London, Rondinelli & O’Neill, 2004).

This view has been clarified by scholars using Social Learning Theory to explain the motivations and outcomes of collaborations involving uncertainty and interdependence, like the sustainability collaborations we are interested in. Whereas *learning about* and *learning from*

partners is especially relevant in the organization-level focus of strategic alliances, the focus of sustainability collaborations is often much broader, involving “changes in societal institutions and patterns of behavior” (Brown & Ashman, 1999: 156). Based on the few studies involving issues of Social Learning, we suggest that it’s important to explore this systemic process, focusing on sets of interactions that might lead to the formation of new institutional practices (Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002).

*The Contexts for Collaborative Learning.* Although previous studies have explored learning within industry-based consortia (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Lubatkin et al., 2001; Ring & Van de Ven, 2004), there is very little empirical attention on *how* that learning occurs. For example, Doz, Olk & Ring’s (2000) study of 84 R&D consortia in the U.S. identified six types of learning by member companies, but they give no detail as to how or why such learning took place. Similarly, even in Arino & de la Torre’s (1998) detailed study of two product-based collaborations, virtually no mention is made of what learning took place and how it was enacted by the member companies. We agree with Brown & Ashman (1999) that learning in multi-stakeholder alliances may be generated at the different levels of program learning, organizational learning, and social learning. At the early stages of collaboration, however, these three may not be well distinguished. For example, what begins as a negotiation between two organizations may generate a specific project or program, which may lead to practices that disseminate throughout the collaboration, across multiple organizations (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Following this approach we focus on the *context* for learning in sustainability collaborations, and on how organizational learning is described by participants. Others have used specific contexts as the basis for understanding collaborative action and the learning it produces. For example, in their study of social learning in sustainability collaborations, Bouwen

and Taillieu (2004: 144) identify a “relational practice” as their unit of analysis; they define this context as “any interactive project or exchange between at least two actors.” Another approach to exploring the context within which learning can be generated is exemplified by Tenkasi & Mohrman (1999), who focus on “interpretive spaces” as contexts for mutual learning and joint meaning making. Similarly, Bradbury & Lichtenstein (2000) explore “the space between” actors as the locus for interactive efforts like learning. In this study we focus on “collaborative context” as a general unit of analysis.

As mentioned above, the complexity of the task at hand leads to our expectation that significant time will be spent understanding the challenges being faced *before* any particular projects are defined, negotiated, and executed (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004). As such, the process dynamics may be as much concentrated on relationship-building overall rather than on project-based action, especially early in the consortium’s development. For these reasons we focus attention on the interactions preceding and leading to the creation and execution of collaborative projects.

## METHODS

### Setting

The Sustainability Consortium was founded in 1999 as a special program within the Society for Organizational Learning ([www.solonline.org](http://www.solonline.org)). Their stated purpose is to “...build the learning capacity to achieve economic, ecological and social sustainability [through] a ‘learning community’ of companies committed to accelerating the creation of knowledge needed to achieve a truly sustainable economy” (Laur & Schley, 2004). As mentioned in the introduction, the Consortium was created as a voluntary collaboration of mostly large

corporations including Ford, Nike, British Petroleum, and Unilever, as well as some smaller companies including Plug Power, and a few NGOs including the World Bank. The collaborative was founded by two associates of the Society for Organizational Learning who later agreed to organize and run the collaboration as paid consultants. All other participation is voluntary and without compensation.

Guided by the facilitators, Consortium members established limited governance structures including a steering committee, membership fees, and an evolving set of practices around meetings and projects. Member organizations rotate responsibility to host the two or three day semi-annual meetings, typically at or near the host company's corporate headquarters. Approximately 50 participants attend each meeting, one-third of whom are new. Non-member attendees must be invited by a member organization or by the facilitators, ensuring a balance of experienced and new participants. Meetings include opportunities to create new projects and collaborations. Not all organizations participate in all projects, but the organizers encourage such participation. Like other aspects of participation in the Consortium, projects are carried out by volunteers from the member organizations rather than by staff hired from member fees as in most other business consortia.

### **Sample and Data Collection**

Roughly 200 individuals from the member companies participated in meetings between 1999 and 2004, including executives, line managers, engineers, internal consultants, and other individual contributors. Four researchers (including two of the authors) also attended Consortium meetings between 1999 and 2004. Individual field notes from the meetings were discussed post hoc in regular teleconferences among research team members. Communal observational data were double checked with facilitators and, where appropriate, with participants. During that period, 42 interviews were conducted with participants on the topic of collaboration; interviewees

included 29 executives/senior managers in member companies, six managers from non-profits, five internal/external consultants, and the consortium facilitators. All but one of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Demographic details about our data sample are presented in Table 1.

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*Please See Table 1: Demographics of Interviewees*  
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Following our theoretical framing, we asked each interviewee to discuss their experiences within a “collaborative context,” defined as a specific project or a series of interactions that were meaningful to the participant. Using an approach that is similar to the “critical events” method utilized by other researchers (Arino & de la Torre, 1998), each interviewee was asked to describe the characteristics of a “successful” collaborative context (i.e. the project or other set of interactions) in the Consortium, and then an unsuccessful one (Motowidlo & Carter, 1992). Interview questions elicited a high degree of detail through semi-structured questions which allowed the interviewees to emphasize various aspects of the collaborations, and through directive probes about who was involved, how they were involved, what seemed to work well, and what things the participant could have done differently.

Through the interviews and observation notes, the researchers developed a time-line highlighting key events and the most significant projects to emerge in the first four years of collaboration. This time line is presented in Table 2. Note that although the Consortium had its kick-off meeting in 1998, no formal projects emerged for more than 18 months, i.e. not until June, 2000. The first round of interviews took place in 2001 and the second in 2002.

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*Please see Table 2: Timeline of Consortium Projects.*

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### **Coding and Analysis**

As mentioned above, our unit of analysis was the collaborative context defined by the interviewee. In a formal sense, we see these contexts as a series of interactions between two or more participants focusing on a specific project, event, or arena for learning and shared action (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004). Thus, rather than limiting collaborative contexts to the recognized projects (see Table 2), we chose to let participants describe any set of interactions that was meaningful to them. Although many of these collaborative contexts were projects (30% of all mentions), participants described a wide range of contexts for collaboration. Overall the interviewees reported 86 total collaborative context; these are presented in Table 3, in the Results section below.

Our qualitative research process unfolded in several phases, following a traditional grounded theory approach. Within each context for collaboration, we performed open-coding of each transcript, using words and phrases to identify the issues that appeared to be salient and important to the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Guided by our research questions, we paid close attention to (a) the characteristics of the collaborative contexts described by participants; (b) the trust, learning and other dynamics that emerged within those contexts, and (c) any other qualities that may have influenced the collaborations.

We gained inter-rater reliability in several ways. The first and second author started by coding a subset of the interviews, iteratively reducing codes to a limited number of themes, which were then organized into four main categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authors then came together to compare their themes, identifying similarities and differences in their

coding schemes. Together we worked out a parsimonious set of 18 themes across four categories that best summarized the qualities and characteristics both authors had identified in their analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These 18 themes are shown in Table 4, below.

Next, as a means of further increasing coding validity, an MBA research assistant who had not been connected with the project coded another subset of interviews, using the coding scheme developed by the first two authors. Agreement between the third coder and the first two authors was 81.8%. The second author and the third coder then worked together to resolve any differences until 100% agreement was reached. Finally, the third coder coded the rest of the interviews, using the final coding scheme. These codes, developed across all three researchers, became the basis of our results (see Table 4).

Eighteen distinct themes seems quite a lot, however, this relatively large number of themes should not be a surprise, for several reasons. First, although each of these themes is conceptually distinct, we see them as interdependent – each one affects the other in a holistic way (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), particularly within each of the four categories. Second, in line with this, we feel our primary contribution is in our aggregation of themes into the four categories (see below), especially the category of “Relational Space,” which seemed to be at the heart of successful collaborations in our data. Thus, our findings will focus on describing the four core categories, as well as the interdependent themes (qualities) within each. Finally, we note that using a similar theory-generating approach to their 15 years of qualitative data, Huxham & Vangen (2005) identify seventeen themes which together describe the key issues in inter-organizational collaborations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of their themes are similar to ours; however we became aware of their themes only after our initial analysis. More importantly, due to the fact that we carefully followed the analytic methods of qualitative

analysis, we are confident that the themes which emerged from the data accurately reflect our best assessment and most parsimonious analysis, the results of which we present next.

## FINDINGS

### Contexts for Collaboration

We begin by exploring the range of collaborative contexts mentioned by Consortium participants, which are listed in Table 3. As described above, these interviewee-defined collaborative contexts reflect a set of interactions through which they enacted and experienced collaboration. Almost a third of these contexts refer to specific projects that emerged and were formalized in the Consortium, e.g. the Materials Pooling project, Distributed Generation, and Sustainable Transportation. Another 20% referred to the bi-annual consortium meetings – the semi-annual events hosted by Consortium companies. According to our field notes each of these meetings had a unique feel, owing to the particular agenda and specific issues being covered; the host company worked with the consultants to organize their meeting.

In addition to formal projects and formal meetings, another 42% of the collaborative contexts reflected sets of interactions within the consortium as a whole. That is, 36 of the 86 contexts identified by interviewees were simply “the Sustainability Consortium,” indicating that the Consortium itself was the most relevant and salient locus of collaborative learning and action for them. This result was somewhat unexpected, and led us to broaden our “unit of analysis” to incorporate the Consortium in general *as well as* the collaborative projects that emerged within it. Supporting our broadening of boundaries, two other participants discussed internal company projects whose ideas were catalyzed by one of their collaborations at the Consortium, and one CEO talked about his interactions with a senior manager in the Consortium – a serendipitous

meeting which led the CEO to invite this colleague to leave his current organization and join the CEO's executive team.

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 Please see Table 3: **Collaborative Contexts Mentioned by Interviewees**  
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We are intrigued by the fact that projects make up less than one-third of all the collaborative events mentioned. Given our focus on learning in collaborations, this finding suggests that collaborative projects were important but not the only catalyst for learning. Instead, we found that peer interactions account for the majority of reported collaborative events.

#### **Four Categories of Collaboration**

Our in-depth qualitative analysis revealed 18 themes or qualities of collaboration, which we aggregated into four categories. Drawing on these data as well as our field notes and post-meeting discussions, participants' most salient categories of interaction were *Relational Space*, and *Action Projects*; the two other categories are *Participant Influences* and *Governance*. These four categories, and our definitions and an example from each of the themes within them, are listed in Table 4 below. Next we briefly summarize these findings.

##### ***Category 1: Relational Space***

Interviewees consistently mentioned the rare quality of relationships they experienced inside the Consortium, using descriptors such as openness, respect, inspiration, support, safety, proximity, and friendship. We were able to identify six distinct (but interrelated) themes in the data which, as a whole, reflect a high-quality ecology of relationships that we call Relational Space. We briefly describe each of these themes, then suggest how they interact in the creation of Relational Space as a whole.

- ♦ *Aspirational Trust.* A unique form of trust gained through a vision to “make the world a better place.” Whereas values-based trust depends on *past* actions that demonstrate corporate principles, Aspirational Trust reflects a vision of *future* potential that may transcend one’s organization, expressing one’s personal, “pro-social” ideology and motivation for action.
- ♦ *Reflective Learning.* A mutual learning process – the simple but rare opportunity to give open consideration to all ideas and perspectives. This type of learning appeared to involve a balance of advocacy and inquiry in conversations, and participants noted a “dialogical” process (Isaacs, 1993) of checking assumptions, building upon each others’ thinking, and focusing on learning rather than on problem-solving or negotiation.
- ♦ *Peer-Connect.* Although rare in most business interactions, peer-like relationships were ubiquitous in the Consortium. Peer-Connect reflects an experience of mutual support and that transcends rank, making most participants feel accepted and heard regardless of the size of their company or their role within their organization.
- ♦ *Helping.* People offered help, ideas, and a willingness to share their insights to support each other. The sense of emotional connection in the Sustainability Consortium appeared to be deeper and more personal than one might expect from traditional business relationships or learning consortia (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004).
- ♦ *Commitment to Process.* Over time participants formed strong, positive relationships – these were crucial in deepening their engagement in the Consortium. Process and temporality thus stood out as a key quality of Relational Space, incorporating specific exercises, face-to-face interaction, and a wealth of iterative interactions among participants.
- ♦ *Whole-Self Presence.* Interviewees referred to the uniqueness of sharing both personal as well as business goals within and between individual meetings. The acceptance of personal

stories and the inclusion of topics relating to one's whole self – e.g. values, family, feelings, and concerns far beyond one's company, offered a powerful dimension to the meetings which appeared to be fundamental to the creation of Relational Space.

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*Please see Table 4: Qualities of Collaborations – Categories and Themes*

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### ***Deepening Relational Space.***

As mentioned above, these six qualities are interdependent and operate together to create the experience of Relational Space. This sense of interdependence across themes is reflected in the following quote: “Collaboration takes a lot longer. It’s a lot more uncertain. There’s a lot more opinions to deal with.... But the benefits are that people can really inspire one another to do stuff.” (50) This participant references *Commitment to Process* in highlighting the time-dimensions of interactions; at the same time the process is inspiring, reflecting the *Helping* quality of the collaborative context. Another useful perspective is exemplified by a middle-manager from Ford, whose following description of Relational Space – “the environment that we create” – involves a three-way connection between *Reflective Learning*, *Commitment to Process* and *Whole-Self Presence*:

I don't know if it's the environment that we create or the learning principals, but [fellow participants] do tend to bare their souls more and set a precedence for showing truly what's going on and where the challenges are. And I think there are other collaborations where if you don't take the time to adhere to and practice some of the learning principals, that doesn't happen. So...I've seen people be more open and sharing of what they're doing. (RF)

Overall, participants explained how the quality of Relational Space appeared to influence action projects that emerged in the Consortium; in addition, they described how their collaborations were affected by prior influences and by the way the Consortium was facilitated

and organized. Next we elaborate upon these three other categories of interaction, and how they shaped and supported the Relational Space which appeared to be central.

### ***Category 2: Action Projects***

In addition to participant's experience of Relational Space we also found that most of the interviewees reflected on the importance of tangible outcomes and projects that emerged through the Consortium. As one executive explained: "We are not just hoping, we are also engaging in concrete projects." Another participant noted: "Over the time of the consortium, I think the conversation shifted towards action. What are the things that we can start to do with one another...and where might we start to join one another in fairly common projects." Our analysis of the data revealed five qualities reflected in Action Projects, including *Tangible Goals*, *Outcomes*, *Aligning Interests*, *Project Structuring*, and *Resources/Risks* (see Table 4).

### ***Category 3: Participant Influences***

The values, goals and aspirations of participants and their home organizations set the stage and shaped a good deal of the interactions within the Consortium. We identified three themes of Participant Influences: *Organizational Context*, *Organizational Goals*, and *Personal Aspirations*. These were reflected in the following quote:

This [i.e. sustainability] is something very important to me personally, but it's also, I think, very important to the company. And lately, the company has in fact invested a lot of resources in trying to understand this issue. [Overall this made me] extremely definitely passionate about going to the meeting. (49)

Note how this participant's *Personal Aspiration* for sustainability is reflected as an *Organizational Goal* that has led to an *Organizational Context* of investing resources. These three qualities are hugely motivating, leading this person to be "extremely definitely passionate" about the meetings. We were surprised to see this expressed over and over in the data, suggesting the important role that *Personal Aspirations* played in the Consortium, especially

when these passions are shared by their sponsoring organization.

#### ***Category 4: Governance***

We use the term Governance to describe the facilitation and the administrative routines that emerged in the Sustainability Consortium. These are captured in four themes: *Internal Control*, *Meeting Structure*, *Leadership*, and *Participant Balance*, this last referring to finding the right number of business members vs. consultants and NGOs in Consortium Meetings. Table 4 presents our major findings – the presence of these four categories – and the themes within them.

### **TRUST AND LEARNING IN RELATIONAL SPACE**

#### **Aspiration, Trust, and Pro-Social Motivation**

One key theme in our analysis – *Personal Aspiration* – may provide an avenue for explaining the motivation for trust building in the Sustainability Consortium. This aspect of Participant Influence is clearly expressed in the following quote by one senior manager: “I have great personal aspirations for this work and a sense of pride.... Frankly, I think of this as doing God’s work.” (SC03). This degree of commitment is rare, but has been described as the "motivation to make a pro-social difference" (Grant, 2007). This idea was also framed by Thompson & Bunderson (2003: 572) as ideological currency: “...the ‘real motivation’ for many employees ‘comes from believing that their work has a purpose, and that they are part of a larger effort to achieve something truly worthwhile.”

*Personal Aspiration* thus describes an individual’s passionate commitment to sustainability and their willingness to go far beyond the expected in donating their time

and efforts. As explained by one participant: “These people are committed, I mean really committed, beyond what I would have believed if I weren’t involved.” Research into collaborations for sustainability like this one have found that managers with such strong personal aspiration may be compelled to express it in projects that far exceed their accepted job roles and job scope, a finding recently confirmed in the context of employee support programs (Grant, Dutton & Rosso, 2008). Like “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), the values held by individuals may or may not be reflected in the missions of their host organizations. Yet, as complexity science shows, personal aspiration leads individuals to access a broader range of resources for change, and thereby may help catalyze emergence, as we see in the self-organization of consortium projects (Lichtenstein, Carter, Dooley & Gartner, 2007; McKelvey, 2004).

*Aspirational Trust.* Drawing on this view of *Personal Aspiration*, we turn to our first research question which asks how trust was developed in the Sustainability Consortium. In a third round of analysis, we identified some intriguing patterns of trust development – patterns which build on yet go beyond current research on trust in collaborations.

One the one had, our data did show the expected forms of trust. For example, one participant explained how his trust of a partner was due to the high degree of technical information they offered to the Consortium, reflecting the effects of Social Exchange Theory:

And the technical detail provided on behalf of [BigCo] helped build the trust. Me personally, I don’t know that much about [product line], but I know enough to know that they’re sharing very deeply around the technical content of what they did. (49)

In another case that reflects the influence of reputation, one senior executive explained that he had previously worked with several of the other CEOs in the consortium, and already held their

companies in high esteem:

They were all people that we had worked with in the past who have high integrity, and I think it makes a big difference. I also think it was the companies involved as well. (BK)

However, in addition to these more common forms, participants described a third form of trust that was extended without projected exchanges nor prior reputation. Instead, this form of trust also seemed to reflect the *Personal Aspirations* of participants:

I would say that it [trust] was there more at the beginning [than may be typical], just because we were all coming together trying to have this common vision of helping the world. (SC02)

It took [only] about 24 hours before I was really much more open and trusting... I think just the level of openness that other people were exhibiting, how much they were really sharing about their own dreams, their own fears, and their own hopes. (41)

I would say the thing that makes [these collaborations] happen is just leading with trust, and having that trust fulfilled, warranted, justified, enforced. (42).

We use the term “Aspirational Trust” to describe this form of shared certainty, and in so doing we distinguish it from other types of trust identified by researchers of collaborations. In particular, this Aspirational Trust seemed to emerge right away – almost instantly – simply by virtue of the broad visions shared and articulated by participants and leaders in the Consortium. Curiously, it appears to bypass the period of negotiation which is predicted for broadly-based consortia (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Inkpen & Currall, 2004); it also transcends the “reciprocal trust process” found by Huxley & Vangen (2005) in their practice-oriented model of collaborations.

Others have argued that trust can be created through shared values, i.e. due to “one’s confidence in another’s goodwill... [based on] faith in the moral integrity or goodwill of others” (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994: 93). In this case, however, the trust we found seems to be based on

shared *aspirations* – the “hopes” and “dreams” for a sustainable world that are expressed by individuals and in many cases by their organizations as well. In this way the presence of Aspirational Trust goes one step beyond “shared values,” thus offering a broader view into how trust may be generated in sustainability consortia.

### **Reflective Learning in Relational Space**

Like the three forms of trust in these collaborations, the ways that participants described their learning does correspond with the previous findings of collaboration scholars, especially in the ways that participants “learned from” others, which revolved around how their peers were exploring and effecting sustainability in their organizations. For example:

[I appreciated] learning what other people are thinking and what other organizations are doing in this area. (39)

I have learned a lot about how companies think about sustainability.... And those were not necessarily collaborations between...our organizations, but more us sharing a lot of ideas and learning from each other. (46)

[Some] companies didn't quite know what sustainability meant to them. So, for them it was a matter of ...how do I deal with sustainability but not destroy my business. (BK)

However, a host of interviewees presented a different type of learning that was neither *learning about* nor *learning from* their collaboration partners. Instead, participants seemed to be *learning together*, collaborating for mutual benefit and shared learning. For example:

So I guess the key learning there was [that] even though it is our project, we wanted to make sure that it was a two-way collaboration... where knowledge is shared in collaborative efforts [rather than] just coming to us. (40)

And because of the consortium getting together, we heard about this project... And then we recruited companies within the consortium to help out. So they were willing to collaborate on learning together. ... this idea of collaborative learning is really pretty different from most people's interactions with suppliers or customers or competitors. (38)

These quotes reflect a kind of learning that we term “Reflective Learning.” Reflective learning is inherently dialogical and mutually supportive, rather than some forms of “knowledge creation” that are more opportunistic and focused on the individual firm (e.g. Noteboom, 2008). The quotes above suggest that these participants are “*learning with*” each other, reflecting what might be called collaborative learning. Like dialogue, reflective learning can engender significant institutional innovations that go beyond the knowledge boundaries of all participants (Roth & Senge, 1996; Waddell, 2005). Lubatkin and colleagues (2001: 1362) refer to this as reciprocal learning, a new form of collaborative relationship “whose primary intent is to co-experiment and leverage each others’ unique, but complementary, knowledge structures.”

Another aspect of the Reflective Learning we found is *learning how to learn* about sustainability, in an environment that encourages inquiry about challenging issues. As one participant reported: “My mental model about the consortium is it’s companies learning to learn about tough problems. ... the companies are paying to create the learning environment.” (49)

This kind of shared inquiry leads to personal and professional learning outcomes:

I want to learn and reflect and think about the hard parts of running the business... It’s the only place I can go with a group of people that I can reflect and utilize all four parts of my learning wheel. ...That’s why I’ll continue [with] it. ...I like to learn, I like to soak the different views up. (SC02)

### **The Primacy of Relational Space**

At the heart of Relational Space is trust and learning – qualities that appear to be interdependent with peer-connections, helping, commitment to process and ‘whole-self’ presence. Together these six qualities of Relational Space reflect an ecology of reflection, trust, and systemic thinking. According to our participants, these interdependent qualities make Relational Space especially useful for exploring the

systemic challenge of sustainability. Like all ecologies Relational Space is dynamic and evolving; these dynamics also extend to Action Projects as well as to Participant Influences and Governance. Our next analysis briefly explores these dynamics in the Sustainability Consortium.

### **DYNAMICS OF RELATIONAL SPACE**

Although we have insufficient evidence to propose a formal model, our analysis and intimate knowledge of the Consortium leads to a dynamic framework, shown in Figure 1. This framework summarizes the relationships among Relational Space, Action Projects, Participant Influences and Governance. In our view, Relational Space and its characteristics are the centerpiece of organizing in this sustainability collaboration; it is a critical precursor to the emergence of collaborative projects. Relational Space is supported by Participant Influences such as participants' aspirations and the business goals of member organizations, and also by Governance features including the meeting structure, internal controls, and leadership. These inter-connections are modeled in Figure 1, and presented next.

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#### **Figure 1 – Dynamics of Interaction in the Sustainability Consortium**

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#### **Relational Space → Action Projects.**

Many participants suggested that the depth of listening and learning about sustainability required Relational Space, which then led to specific collaborations and Action Projects. For

example, one participant showed how *Reflective Learning*, when done well, rapidly generates

Action Projects:

Collaboration doesn't occur simply by listening. Collaboration in my mind occurs when the listening turns into an understanding...when the group understands that I understand them. And when that occurs, trust immediately is created and collaboration occurs. (37)

Another made the link between the creation of trust and how it can be applied into specific projects:

How can we work together toward sustainability? We've got this consortium, we've been meeting, we've established a level of trust...in collaboration and now how do we want to move forward with that? And the whole point of [a key meeting] was to try to come away with some ideas for those types of projects. (50)

Finally, several elements of Relational Space are briefly described in this next quote, which recognizes how successful new projects involve a combination of *Peer-*

*Connecting, Helping, Aspirational Trust, and Whole-Self Presence:*

I looked at it as a way to build a community of friends who are trying do this work together, learn the best practices in something that's been relatively new...primarily learning methodologies. Build a network, and then try to work on some real cool projects together to kind of...to change the world. (SC02)

### **Participant Influences → Relational Space**

As Zilber (2002) reminds us, meaning attracts actors to action. Some forward-looking participants see the business mandate changing in ways that align more closely with their personal values, providing opportunities to redirect their corporations. As one participant explained, "My work is anchored in personal commitment. I need to align my personal values and express those in work." Connecting personal values to workplace values expands intrinsic

motivation, through an increasingly recognized mode of “ideological currency” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003) that we discussed above.

### **Governance → Relational Space.**

The quality of facilitation and the intensive yet open structure of each meeting enabled a stronger experience of Relational Space and development of trust and commitment. Participants described the role of meeting structure:

The first day was fairly regimented...And the next day was in fact loosely structured around dialogue. And I think it's because we were so engaged the first day with actual [X-company] issues and successes and failures that the rest of the two days' openness allowed us to engage in conversations that were meaningful.

Likewise, ineffective Governance compromised Relational Space: “And I was floored that there were more consultants in attendance than there were practitioners. All of a sudden, I was feeling very uncomfortable. And feeling low levels of trust.” Our findings suggest that the participants' positive experience inside the Sustainability Consortium depended on the presence of Relational Space, on a supportive *Organizational Context*, on the right mix of participants in the room, and on minimal formal controls.

Overall, these examples suggest that Participant Influences and Governance play an important role in the creation of Relational Space; in turn, Relational Space seems to be a foundation for the creation of Action Projects. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of these dynamics and other findings from the study.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Implications for Research on Collaborations

In seeking to understand the dynamics of a sustainability collaboration, we drew on two connected literatures – research on corporate R&D consortia and strategic alliances (Cropper, et al, 2008; Faulkner & De Rond, 2000; Inkpen & Currall, 2004), and studies of multi-sector collaborations (Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Gray, 2000). Whereas researchers of corporate alliances focus more on transactional issues including trust, governance and control, researchers of multi-sector constructive partnerships tend to focus on the relational dynamics of shared values and social exchange (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Muthusamy & White, 2005). However, in all situations when the initial goals and aims are unclear and difficult to agree upon, the necessary production of trust, and the concomitant learning that ensues, is predicted to be a slow and challenging endeavor which requires many cycles of commitment, execution and exchange which allow all parties to test their confidence in the goodwill and satisfactory behavior of their partners.

Our study of the Sustainability Consortium throws new light on this process, highlighting several qualities that have not been expressed in this literature. First, we identified a unique form of trust in the Consortium – Aspirational Trust – which was not “earned” in a transactional way, but seemed to be conferred only because of a shared aspiration among participants. Although other forms of trust were present, Aspirational Trust is distinct in that it goes beyond perceptions of *past* behaviors, and relies on the *projected visions* of self and other. We hope this finding helps others explore how aspiration and trust are connected in sustainability collaborations.

Secondly, we identified an expanded kind of learning in the Consortium which we call *Reflective Learning*. Incorporating a less-utilized stream of organizational learning research,

this kind of learning involves a balance of advocacy and inquiry (Senge, 1990) and reflection-in-action (Schoen, 1983) which can lead to a transformation of both parties (Carlisle, 2004) and potentially of the system itself (Lubatkin et al., 2001). Although we identified more common kinds of learning in the Consortium, we were intrigued by the presence of this mutually-beneficial style of learning, especially because it was exemplified in relationship-building more than in action projects. We hope others will explore further the role of *Reflective Learning* in sustainability consortia.

Third, and most importantly, we identified Relational Space – an ecology of high-quality interactions -- that form a precursor to Action Projects. This finding builds on the recognition that negotiation and direction-setting are always present in inter-organizational collaborations (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). However, Relational Space extends that idea by showing how a trustful, learning-based interactions can be created *before* the existence of formal goals or the emergence of even exploratory projects. Indeed, for the most broadly systemic issues like sustainability, Relational Space may be essential to provide an appropriate “container” for collaboration (Senge et al., 2006; 2007; 2008).

Although we have not seen Relational Space described formally by others, we believe the notion is present in other studies showing how supportive and respectful interactions play an important role in producing uncommon innovations. For example, the term “relationality” (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000) emphasizes how such high-quality innovations may be generated in this “space between” individuals and organizations. Nonaka and Konno (1998: 46) use the term *ba* to describe “a shared space that serves as a foundation for knowledge creation...[which] includes qualities of care, trust and commitment, interaction and reflection, reconciling mental models,

and enacting these qualities in action with others” (Nonaka & Konna, 1998: 46-48). We believe that the notion of Relational Space fits well with the movement toward Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), and that it can be useful as a frame for a range of interdependent qualities – six of which were identified in our study.

### **Implications for Practice**

In a separate study of learning-based collaboratives such as the Sustainability Consortium, our research group reported several insights we have gained for “building a healthy ‘learning ecology’ for systemic change” (*citation temporarily removed*). Here we integrate those insights with our current findings, to offer our suggestions for business leaders and organizational change-agents seeking to direct their organizations toward positive social and environmental change.

- 1) **Bring the system’s key representative stakeholders together.** In seeking to grapple with how to become sustainable, the level of analysis is more properly that of the *entire system or ecology of business* in which practitioners find themselves. For example, a retailer concerned with customer complaints about environmental quality and product safety might convene representative retailers, factory owners, consumers, suppliers, logistics experts, and transporters to begin sharing their views of the system.
- 2) **Leverage a preexisting social network.** Convening stakeholders in dialogue is more natural when the participants share networks in advance. A balance must be sought between enough and too much familiarity, mixing new with old faces to challenge outmoded viewpoints.
- 3) **Put relational space before project focus.** It takes time to generate coherent movement toward collaborative action. Emphasis on dialogue and cultivating comfortable self

expression, inviting engagement of the whole person, creates a tension between getting value in exchange for participants' time. Awareness that the desire to "hurry things along" may subvert optimization of the process is therefore key. Dialogue is a way to change mindsets and a mechanism to generate collaborative social action (Habermas, 1989).

- 4) **Build commitment through co-investment.** Consortium members who view membership as "fee for service" are not as engaged as those who share the work and commit funding for supportive resources such as professional design, facilitation and creation of technical tools that help move a group toward coherent action (Senge et al, 2006).
- 5) **Carefully structure governance.** Good meeting design and light-handed facilitation can help create adequate time for dialogue. Dialogue is itself an intervention, given the fast-paced workflow at the executive level and among line managers and contributors. Keep the vision present for all.
- 6) **Crystallize collaborative projects.** At frequent and regular intervals it is helpful to acknowledge potential interest in a collaborative project, while also reminding participants that it will take time to gain traction. The more tightly bound to the daily business tasks of those present (as opposed to a good idea for "someone else" to do), the more likely the project can move forward.
- 7) **Link individual and collective efforts.** Personal aspiration is a key driver of system-wide efforts for change, and individual schema change is at the heart of these efforts. At the same time, creating a culture of collective learning and community is essential for the emergence of shared schema which are necessary to coalesce individual efforts in complex, multi-level change processes.

## **Limitations and Extensions**

Our study has a number of limitations. First, the data are based on retrospective interviews, although Druskat and Wheeler (2003) indicate that the validity and reliability of retrospective self reports are stronger when events described have occurred within the past year, as ours did. We attempted to mitigate the potential problems with qualitative case-based analysis through the use of multiple coders across multiple stages of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yin, 1994), as well as through triangulation of the interviews with our longitudinal field notes (Kirk & Miler, 1986). Our research team meetings were often lively debates through which we processed our data.

Moreover, the Sustainability Consortium is only a single case, albeit based on well-known multi-national corporations observed over a multi-year period. Indeed, the capacity of the participants to work together was considerably expanded by the attention to organizational learning practices (e.g., dialogic conversation) and reinforced by the facilitators until they became more automatic. However, the data are highly consistent with other reports of particular types of consortia focused on complex and ambiguous issues and transformational learning (Ring, Doz & Olk, 2005). The difficulties in generalizing notwithstanding (Numagami, 1998), additional studies are required before more formal hypotheses may be developed.

## **Conclusion**

Corporations are recognizing that seemingly intractable system-wide problems can be approached through innovation-based collaborations with their business counterparts across multiple industries (e.g. WCBSD; Glasbergen, et al., 2007). Our study explores the Sustainability Consortium, a collaboration of corporations that aspired to create the leading edge of system-wide change. Our results suggest that the enduring collaborations were founded on an

ecology of high-quality interactions, aspirational trust and reflective learning – the combination of which we term Relational Space. We found that out of this space there emerges a broad spectrum of collaborative contexts – projects, events, and meetings -- that provide avenues for learning by individual participants and their companies.

Business relations are increasingly defined by economic and technical transactions which give little place to relational endeavors. Sociologists from Weber to Habermas suggest that this “system” of techno-rationality will increase as the lifeworld, most readily analogous to the practices associated with relational space, diminishes. The danger is that it will become more difficult to grapple with messy problems that confront us at this stage of economic development, i.e., a time in which the need to embrace what amounts to a sustainability revolution if we are to survive as a species. We may therefore say that emphasizing the importance of Relational Space is one of the necessary building blocks of a sustainable revolution. Relational space calls our attention to cultivate the internal landscape for human endeavors from which life-benefitting technology may eventually emerge.

These novel collaborations, based on personal values and relationships as well as on business strategy, represent exploratory attempts to institutionalize sustainability-seeking change across industries. In this way, corporations that allow for highly complex, assumption-challenging learning may find new ways to transform competitive relationships into truly sustainable partnerships across multiple stakeholders with tangible benefit for many.

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**Table 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF INTERVIEWEES**

<b>Code number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Participant Category</b>	<b>OrgRank</b>	<b>Meeting Frequency</b>	<b>Organization</b>
SE1	F	Senior Executive	Senior	Low	HP
SE2	M	Senior Executive	Senior	High	Plug
SE3	M	Executive	Senior	High	BP
SE4	M	Executive	Senior	High	Harley
SE5	M	Executive	Senior	High	NE Utilities
BK	F	Executive	Senior	Low	BP
BT	M	Executive	Senior	High	Pratt
JM	M	Executive	Senior	Low	Shell Chem
SC02	M	Executive	Senior	High	Ford
SC03	M	Executive	Senior	High	Interface
SC04	M	Executive	Senior	High	Harley
SC05	M	Executive	Senior	High	NE Utilities
SC06	F	Executive	Senior	High	Nike
SC10	F	Executive	Senior	High	Interface
SC13	F	Executive	Senior	Low	Nike
SC14	F	Executive	Senior	High	Schlumberger
SC19	F	Executive	Senior	Low	HP
SC20	M	Executive	Senior	Low	Pratt
MM1	M	Manager	Middle	Low	DTE
SC15	M	Manager	Middle	Low	Interface
SC16	M	Manager	Middle	Low	Plug
SC17	M	Manager	Middle	Low	Harley
CV	M	Manager	Middle	Low	HP
DR	M	Manager	Middle	Low	
RF	M	Manager	Middle	Low	Ford
Sc12	M	Manager	Middle	Low	Ford
SC22	F	Manager	Middle	Low	Visteon
SC18	F	Manager	Junior	Low	Visteon
SC18	M	Manager	Junior	Low	Visteon
037	M	Consultant	Senior	Low	HP
039	M	Consultant	Senior	Low	NativePeoples
045	M	Consultant	Senior	Low	Nike
044	M	Consultant	Middle	Low	Nike
038	M	Consultant	Middle	Low	DTE
SC07	M	Senior Executive, Non-profit	Senior	High	S.W.
SC01	M	Manager – Non-profit	Senior	High	Sustainer
SC08	F	Manager – Non-profit	Senior	High	TNS
043	M	Manager – Non-profit	Senior	Low	Mentor program
046	F	Manager – Non-profit	Middle	Low	Mentor
050	F	Manager – Non-profit	Middle	High	
JC	M	Researcher	Senior	High	MIT
<i>SC11/W</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Facilitator</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>SeedSys</i>
<i>SC09/M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Facilitator</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>SeedSys</i>
<i>SC21/M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Facilitator/</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>SoL</i>

**Table 2: Timeline of Action Projects in the Sustainability Consortium.**

<b>DATE STARTED</b>	<b>Event/ Project Name</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>	<b>STATUS in 2008</b>
June, 1998	<i><b>Origin of Consortium</b></i>	Conversation among representatives from multi national corporations gathered at the Society of Organizational Learning led to a white paper defining the Sustainability Consortium.	
January, 1999	<i><b>Semi annual meetings begin</b></i>	First 'official' meeting hosted by a company (Xerox).	Most recent meeting held in May, 2008, hosted by Nike in Beaverton OR..
June, 2000	<b>Frameworks</b>	Conceptual model describing how sustainability frameworks can be related and operationalized inside companies.	Frameworks document has been made public. It is referred to as a common document by participants in the consortium
December, 2000	<b>Proteus</b>	Distributed energy generation using fuel cells to improve economic/socially disadvantaged areas of the world.	The group disbanded in 2004, some of the ideas continue to percolate in the more discrete efforts of the customer design focus groups.
December, 2000	<b>Cool Fuel</b>	Partnership between energy and carpet company to establish energy use and to offset that use; carbon reduction certified by third party.	Expanded to other companies after initial success. Continues as a vibrant program between companies and uses a third party certification process.
December, 2000	<b>Women Leading Sustainability</b>	Dialogue group for women in the consortium.	Meets by teleconference every 6 weeks. Hosted its first international meeting April 2006 at Nike with 80 participants, 40 from the developing world. All meetings of the Consortium include a WLS sub-meeting.
June, 2001	<b>Distributed Energy Generation</b>	Exploring with member companies the value and draw-backs to using distributed generation technology	Small group developed a preliminary framework to inform marketing. Disbanded after learning had been crystallized.
2002	<b>Materials Pooling</b>	Companies working together on eliminating toxins from their value chain by addressing their market needs to the chemical suppliers.	Continues to evolve in regular meetings, teleconference and in person. Emphasis is limited to removal of 3 primary toxins from shared materials.
2003	<b>Green Marketing: Cultivating Markets</b>	Companies exploring how to create more customer demand for green products.	Group disbanded.

**Table 3: Collaborative Contexts Mentioned by Interviewees**

<b>COLLABORATIVE CONTEXT</b>	<b>NUMBER (%) PARTICIPANTS MENTIONING</b>
<b>General Consortium</b>	<b>36 (42%)</b>
<b>Consortium Projects</b>	<b>26 (30%)</b>
Proteus Project	7
Distributed Generation Project	6
Materials Pooling Project	5
Cool Fuel Project	4
Sustainable Transportation	2
Frameworks Document	1
Janus	1
<b>Bi-annual Meetings</b>	<b>17 (20%)</b>
Nike Meeting	11
Xerox – Lakes Meeting	2
Aspen Meeting	1
BP Meeting	1
Harley Davidson Meeting	1
HP – Corvalis Meeting	1
<b>Internal Company Projects</b>	<b>3 (3.5%)</b>
Alliance for Regional Stewardship	1
EWEB Schools project	1
Seed Project	1
<b>Consultants</b>	<b>2 (2.3%)</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>2 (2.3%)</b>
Plug Power	1
Honda invitation	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>86</b>

**TABLE 4: Themes of Collaboration, Across Four Categories**

<b>RELATIONAL SPACE</b>	<b>QUALITIES OF RELATIONAL INTERACTION IN PARTICIPANT'S EXPERIENCE OF THE CONSORTIUM</b>
Aspirational Trust	I would say that it [trust] it was there more at the beginning, just because we were all coming together trying to have this common vision of helping the world, right? (SC02). And so I think that they [our collaborators] have a lot of similar values to us that we would not necessarily find somewhere else. I would say the thing that makes [these collaborations] them happen is just leading with trust, and having that trust fulfilled, warranted, justified, enforced. (42). To me the key to building trust and for open sharing of ideas and projects is that truly the companies are coming with no agenda. They're just coming to give their time potentially and/or resources towards a common goal. (CV)
Reflective Learning	Particularly for a business like ours it's very important for us to be part of interesting conversations ...because we are learning what other people are thinking and what other organizations are doing in this area. (SE1). [T]he intent was to... come together and to explore the question. (41) [We have been] sharing a lot of ideas and learning from each other...(46) This is a special group of people with high capacity for telling the truth, thinking about complexities without oversimplifying. They can see the big picture.
Peer-Connect	It really has been, I would use the term, "collaborative" and that we're all in this together, and there not a client-vendor relationship—which is where most of spend our lives—it's more we're on an equal level. We're peers. (43) [I]t's very much a peer-like space... Organizationally, the [participants] are not at the same level hierarchically. But in the space of the meeting, that's never [been a particular focus or issue. It appears to me that the level of engagement and trust that exists really, really just washes [that] away... (49)
Helping	And I think, my hope is anyway, that the next time someone wants to do a collaborative effort like we helped [Company Y] to do, that we'll again be able to help them craft the design of their project and help them identify some pitfalls to watch out for and give them some advice. ... We get that we are here to help one another.... I get support, both psychological [and] practical advice [from fellow participants]. (40) [A fellow participant] called me and he said "You know, I believe in you. We are going to be successful. I'm going to do my part." So yeah, you feel trust and support by your peers. Validated, understood. And I don't think there's much more support than that that you can get. (42) I find the folks are innovative, creative, cooperative. They've tended to support each other. They've tended not to be judgmental and not overly demanding. (43)
Commitment to Process	It's the process that really builds the trust. (SE2) [A]s long as the process is done in a sort of straightforward and respectful way, ...the outcome almost becomes immaterial. ...And it's the process that really builds the trust. (49) [We] build on personal relationships, build our guiding principals through that, and then out of that comes a specific [project]like this, that we could do. Then... there's a multiplier effect [as others] say "Oh, I want to do the same sort of thing."
Whole-Self Presence	So when we were at [one particular meeting]...we virtually had the trusted space because we were all in the same room and over the course of the three days we got to know one another and have a beer together and all that kind of social interaction. (40) I don't think you can underestimate still the sort of personal connections that are made at these meetings...when you actually meet someone, the chemistry that takes place [is] incredibly important. (39) I didn't understand before the Sustainability Consortium the real power of getting in the room with other folks and actually speaking the truth rather than trying to bullshit each other like we do at conventional business meetings. (42) . ... Well-intentioned, vulnerable, willing to be vulnerable to some extent. Willing to sort of let their hearts out and be real. (50)People check in and out, they talk about their family life, just where they are with what is going on in their lives. We make sure everyone is heard. [Our] emotional reactions are shared, e.g., people are asked to share how they felt about a meeting. (JM)

<b>ACTION PROJECTS</b>	TANGIBLE, OUTCOME-ORIENTED ACTION THAT CONTRIBUTES TO CONSORTIUM-WIDE PROJECTS.
Tangible goals	<p>And we see that in that kind of opportunity that I mentioned, where there's a clear win-win in terms of the business case and an environmental benefit for the company.</p> <p>I think one of the things that has not been as pronounced, is...saying "Okay, what are the goals and the desired outcomes of this activity and how do we measure those?" Again, I think that's tended to be more anecdotal or qualitative.</p> <p>We've got to get value, and one way to do that is to provide value through developing projects that address business concerns while evolving some of the social and environmental issues ... <u>On-the-ground type projects, real things that you can touch, feel, show results.</u></p>
Outcomes	<p>So I think it's very important that you can demonstrate that there are benefits to each of the individual participants who are also wearing their corporate hats otherwise you're not going to make any progress.</p> <p>So it's been a strong... collaboration. As a matter of fact, we're going to be in (X-city) in about a month to sit down and debrief what's worked, what hasn't worked, what we've learned—all with a goal of trying to carry it forward next year either at the same scale or, potentially, I think ideally, on a larger scale.</p> <p>We were really looking for...basically, we wanted to learn...we were really concerned about having a product at the end of the day. Our product or what we thought we were going to take away from that was the knowledge we gave and the deeper understanding that we gave.</p>
Aligning Interests	<p>We found that people who have not been involved in the Consortium are just not aligned, so they hear us talk about wanting to learn like we're making a product pitch to them, and don't want to let you in the door. So we really had to learn how to navigate, to talk about this language of collaborative learning that the Consortium is aligned around and it's different from "We want to come try to sell you a project."</p> <p>I would say not only a lot, but the goals have to be common goals. I can't walk into a collaboration and say "Here are the goals of the collaboration." It's got to be common. And you don't have to have unanimous consent, but every person that's involved in the collaboration needs to understand and subscribe to and feel a part of those goals.</p> <p>"I did a lot of trying to come back to, again, what are the goals of the project, which in turn bring back to what are the goals of the Consortium."</p> <p>"I think you can have fairly fuzzy objectives to start with, and then as the conversation evolves you have to probably make the ultimate objectives more and more clear."</p>
Project structuring	<p>I think we tried hard to structure tasks and to create [momentum]. If I was frustrated about anything, it's just that in the way of the structure it's hard to get work done between face to face meetings. Getting down to the details is a crucial element of these projects: "For an effective collaboration to happen, logistics need to be very clean, very concise, high quality. Because when that doesn't happen, trust breaks down quickly." At the same time, we saw that senior people pulled in more junior people from their organization as projects began to take off: "Oh well, first of all, you've got to understand that I'm the President and the CEO and I'm not working on a lot of the operational details. There is someone by the name of ___ who has been doing. And she is in a far better position to comment on [project X] than I am."</p>

Resources/ Risks	<p>This [project] had been identified as an initiative that a number of companies had felt was...sufficiently important to justify some additional resource [which] they were willing to identify and recruit.” On the other hand, sometimes this created internal challenges: There’s an issue around how much budget people can commit to these....they profess to be really interested in the starter projects...but they say “Well, I just can’t justify that internally and we’re going to have make a choice here...”</p> <p>...At the end of the day many of the things that [X-company] would need to do to make more sustainable [products] would actually put their whole franchise at risk. So, for them it was...how do I deal with sustainability but not destroy my business.</p> <p>We this as we’re trying to mitigate risk by trying to pull together a wider coalition of companies who will share the risk—so it wouldn’t just be [Company A] or [Company B] speaking out on global climate change, it would be all of us.”</p>
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<b>PARTICIPANT INFLUENCES</b>	PRE-EXISTING ASPECTS OF PARTICIPANTS’ HOME COMPANY AND THEIR OWN PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS, WHICH AFFECT BEHAVIOR WITHIN THE CONSORTIUM.
Organizational Context	<p>I think that if you look culturally, [Z-Company]and [our company] were probably the biggest competitors in the room. And although we are very different companies...we also share some cultural values that I think are important to both of us and that make us more willing...to be more open with each other than we might be with a company that didn’t share those values.</p> <p>If I go to the meeting and I feel like...the company doesn’t support this, that really does influence sort of the quality of the collaboration.</p> <p>This is a subject that [our company has] been thinking about—sustainability—for some time. ... If you look culturally we share [with our competitor] some cultural values that I think are important to both of us and that make us more willing [to] be more open with each other than we might be with a company that didn’t share those values.</p>
Organizational Goals	<p>In the context of [the] consortium...the concerns that are raised are the concerns I have for [my company]... Me saying ”this is something very important to...the company.” And lately, the company has in fact invested a lot of resources in trying to understand the [sustainability] issue. And so I think it’s becoming less a personal issue and more clearly a business issue.</p> <p>Frankly our goals are pretty modest compared to those of some other companies and so our goals were very much accommodated within the overall curve of the project as it got defined.</p> <p>And lately, [my] company has in fact invested a lot of resources in trying to understand this issue [of sustainability]. And so I think it’s becoming less a personal issue and more clearly a business issue.</p>
Personal Aspirations	<p>My work is anchored in personal commitment. I need to align my personal values and express those in work.</p> <p>[Attending a special workshop on sustainability] was just something that I was going to do regardless of whether or not [my company] was going to pay for it. Many were champions for sustainability. Their long-standing commitment to these ideals is partly responsible for arguing the business case of sustainability to their executive colleagues, and for putting in the many hours of personal and professional time to help make things happen within any given collaborative event.</p> <p>What I [have] in common with them is, we’re all very interested and committed to sustainability.... They’re more passionate about sustainability before going in and kind of chose that job as a route to try to express that. (42)</p>

<b>GOVERNANCE</b>	CONTROL MECHANISMS AND STRUCTURES WITHIN THE CONSORTIUM, INCLUDING MEETINGS, MEMBERSHIP, AND THE MIX OF PARTICIPANTS AT ANY GIVEN MEETING
Participant Balance	<p>There were times during the meeting where I felt like ...a paid commercial for consulting services. Because it was a very heavy mix, it felt like, of consultants that were in the room [who] were almost dominating the conversation. And the meeting, you know, my desire was to hear more from the businesses, not to hear from the consultants and the market research that they'd done.</p> <p>And I was floored that there were more consultants in attendance than there were practitioners. All of a sudden, I was feeling very uncomfortable. And feeling low levels of trust.</p> <p>As mentioned earlier, the Consortium was designed to support executives and managers, with a limited number of participants from NGOs. The latter perceived themselves to be less valued than the corporate members: "I'm a non-profit organization. I'm sort of there as a guest, and sort of on the fringe....we're not the real members." As one executive said: "When you get to have as many consultants as companies, I'm clear that they can't all contribute... And that makes me really uncomfortable."</p>
Internal Control	<p>It's hard to understand where you fit in the process. It's ambiguous and somewhat confusing. ... [and] at the moment [I] feel that that's somewhat the nature of the Consortium, the nature of the beast. And you just learn to live with it and you learn how to work within the context of that kind of an organization.</p> <p>I think all of us know what is a trade-secret and what's not. And obviously we won't go across that line without getting some kind of appropriate assurances. But my sense is this is more of an individual...it's what we're supposed to know as opposed to setting out hard, fast roles.</p>
Meeting Structure	<p>Well, there aren't a lot of environments where people truly collaborate. ...But at the end of the day, I think that the reason that this group...was more collaborative was that we were put in an environment where collaboration could occur and there weren't a lot of agendas going on and because we all really wanted to and we were all willing to contribute.</p> <p>I found that the small groups and the lunch meetings were actually the most productive for me, because it was an opportunity to really interact with a small group of people, really stop and say "What is it that you really, really do?" and "What are some of the challenges that you face within your business?"</p> <p>And during the [____] meeting, we were given the opportunity to kind of suggest subjects which we felt were topical and of interest to other members of the consortium. And this [topic was successful], and then a little working group kind of developed around that, during the meeting. [Note: This topic became one of the action projects listed in Table 2]</p>
Leadership	<p>[The SoL Founder] was involved as a project design coach and he helped with a couple of the key interventions.</p> <p>Well, you have, at [C-company], you have [____] who is a key player. He has very enthusiastically picked this up.... And I think [____] has a similar amount of enthusiasm. So you have a senior manager [and] a junior manager at [C-company], that are really very responsive...and the impression that I got is that the [project] has been...terrific."</p> <p>But I think people are just so distracted and so time poor that they don't have the ability to, you know, just kind of run with these things without someone taking a very obvious leadership role.</p>

**Error!**

**Figure 1**  
**Dynamics of Relational Space in Initiating Collaborative Action Projects**

