

## New Directions for Relational Coordination Theory

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### Abstract

Relational coordination theory makes visible the relational process underlying the technical process of coordination, arguing that coordination encompasses not only the management of interdependence between tasks but also between the people who perform those tasks. This chapter introduces relational coordination theory, then proposes five potential directions for its further development, each of which deepens the contribution of the theory to positive organizational scholarship. The first proposed direction is to develop the social psychological foundations of relational coordination theory, placing it more firmly into the context of relational theory. The second is to extend relational coordination theory from its focus on role relationships to include personal relationships and to explore the interplay between them. Third is to broaden relational coordination networks beyond the core workers who have typically been considered, to include multiple other participants: so-called *noncore workers*, the customer herself, and participants outside the focal organization who are involved in the same value chain. Fourth is to extend the theorized outcomes of relational coordination beyond outcomes for the organization and its customers to include outcomes for workers as well. The fifth proposed direction is to go beyond the linear model of organizational change implicit in relational coordination theory toward a more dynamic and iterative model of change. These new directions will be previewed briefly in anticipation of their future development.

**Keywords:** Relationships, communication, coordination, relational coordination

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) is a humanistic approach to the study of organizations, emphasizing the importance of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and meaning at work (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Relational coordination theory contributes to POS by offering a theory of coordination that makes visible the relational process underlying the technical process, arguing that coordination encompasses not only the management of interdependence between tasks (Malone & Crowston, 1994) but also the management of interdependence between the people who perform those tasks. The theory reveals the intersubjectivity of the coordination process, therefore paying close attention to the quality of communication and relationships among participants, as well as to the technical requirements of the work.

This theory shares common threads with other intersubjective or relational approaches to the coordination of work (Bechky, 2006; Faraj & Sproull, 2000; Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Gittell, 2002b; Heckscher, 1994; Heckscher & Adler, 2006; Quinn & Dutton, 2005; Weick & Roberts, 1993) but differs in several important ways.

First, relational coordination theory starts by conceptualizing coordination as occurring through a network of relationship and communication ties among participants in a work process, where a work process is a set of interdependent tasks that transforms inputs into outcomes of value to the organization. Second, this theory identifies three distinctive dimensions of relationships—shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect—that together are argued

to underlie the effective coordination of work. Third, these dimensions are conceived as existing between work roles rather than between individual participants. Fourth, the theory explains how relational forms of coordination influence quality and efficiency outcomes, and how this influence is weaker or stronger depending upon the nature of the work. Fifth, and finally, the theory explains how formal organizational structures can be designed to support relational forms of coordination, rather than suggesting that formal structures are necessarily substitutes or impediments to relational coordination. Despite providing a unique perspective on coordination, and despite promising results of empirical testing thus far (as well as perceived usefulness to multiple practitioner communities), the theory of relational coordination remains at an early stage of development. This chapter describes these theoretical propositions at greater length, then proposes five new directions for its further development.

### Relational Coordination Theory

Mary Parker Follett appears to be the first theorist to have proposed a relational theory of coordination. She accepted the then-prevalent argument that the primary function of organizations was to coordinate work. She argued uniquely, however, that coordination at its most effective was not a mechanical process but rather a process of continuous interrelating between the parts and the whole. In her words:

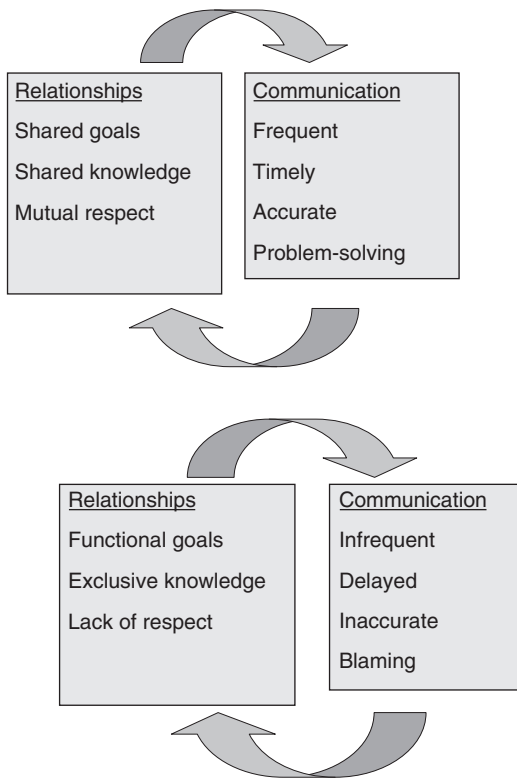
It is impossible . . . to work most effectively at coordination until you have made up your mind where you stand philosophically in regard to the relation of parts to wholes. We have spoken of the relation of departments—sales and production, advertising, and financial—to each other, but the most profound truth that philosophy has ever given us concerns not only the relation of parts, but the relation of parts to the whole, not to a stationary whole, but to a whole a-making. (Follett, 1949, p. 91)

Consistent with Follett's argument, Thompson (1967) later suggested that coordination as a process of reciprocal relating, or "mutual adjustment," can indeed be beneficial. But he offered a contingency argument, suggesting that this is true only when tasks are reciprocally interdependent, or in other words, when outcomes from one task feed back and create new information for participants who are performing related tasks (Thompson, 1967). Moreover, Thompson saw mutual adjustment as playing a limited role in organizations. Because mutual adjustment is prohibitively costly, he argued,

coordination more commonly occurs through coordinating mechanisms such as supervision, routines, scheduling, preplanning, or standardization.

Since then, the nature of work has changed. Work is characterized by increasing levels of task interdependence, uncertainty, and time constraints, expanding the relevance of mutual adjustment beyond what Thompson originally foresaw and forcing the exploration of coordination as a relational process. Organizational scholars have responded by developing relational approaches to coordination that build on Follett's concept of coordination, including the concepts of sense-making (Weick & Roberts, 1993), expertise coordination (Faraj & Sproull, 2000; Faraj & Xiao, 2006), coordination as energy-in-conversation (Quinn & Dutton, 2005), role-based coordination (Bechky, 2006), and collaborative community (Heckscher, 1994; Heckscher & Adler, 2006). As part of this stream, relational coordination theory has sought to extend Follett's work by offering a unique way to conceptualize the relational dynamics of coordination, its expected outcomes, and its structural predictors.

First, the theory of relational coordination specifies the nature of relationships through which coordination occurs, proposing that these relationships include *shared goals* that transcend participants' specific functional goals, *shared knowledge* that enables participants to see how their specific tasks interrelate with the whole process, and *mutual respect* that enables participants to overcome the status barriers that prevent them from seeing and taking account of the work of others. Together, these three relational dimensions reinforce and are reinforced by communication that is frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving. For example, knowledge of what each participant contributes to the overall work process enables him or her to communicate in a timely way with participants in other functions, grounded in an understanding of who needs to know what, why, and with what degree of urgency. Shared knowledge also enables participants to communicate with each other with greater accuracy due to knowing not only their own specific tasks but also how their tasks relate to the tasks of participants in other functions. Shared goals increase participants' motivation to engage in high-quality communication, as well as increasing the likelihood that they will resort to problem-solving communication rather than blaming when things go wrong. Mutual respect increases the likelihood that participants will be receptive to communication from their colleagues in other functions, irrespective of their relative status, thus increasing the quality of



**Fig. 30.1** Relational coordination as a mutually reinforcing cycle of relationships and communication.

communication, given that communication is a function of what is heard as well as what is said. Relational coordination is therefore defined as “a mutually reinforcing process of interaction between communication and relationships carried out for the purpose of task integration” (Gittell, 2002a, p. 301), as illustrated in Figure 30.1. Together, these mutually reinforcing relationship and communication ties form the basis for coordinated collective action (Gittell, 2006).

Second, consistent with Follett’s thinking about the relational approach to coordination, the relational dimensions of relational coordination are not personal relationships of “liking” or “not liking” but rather are task-based relationship ties. They are conceptualized as ties between work roles, rather than personal ties between discrete individuals who inhabit those work roles. We will revisit this aspect of the theory when we propose new directions for further theoretical development.

Third, the theory of relational coordination extends Follett’s work and subsequent work on relational forms of coordination by exploring *how* this approach to coordination is expected to impact performance. Follett proposed that a relational approach

to coordination is more *effective* than more mechanistic approaches, but the theory of relational coordination proposes specifically that both quality and efficiency outcomes can be improved simultaneously, moving beyond the tradeoffs between quality and efficiency that are typically found, by enabling participants to achieve better results for customers while engaging in less wasteful and more productive utilization of resources. How? In contrast to the traditional bureaucratic form of coordination that is carried out primarily by managers at the top of functional silos, relational coordination is carried out via direct contact among workers at the front line, through networks that cut across functional silos at the point of contact with the customer. Relational coordination thus improves performance of a work process by improving the work relationships (shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect) between people who perform different functions in that work process, leading to higher-quality communication. Task interdependencies are therefore managed more directly, in a more seamless way, with fewer redundancies, lapses, errors, and delays.

But this performance argument is not universalistic—rather, it is a contingency argument. Again going beyond Follett’s conceptualization, relational coordination theory builds on information processing and contingency theories by arguing that relational forms of coordination are particularly useful for achieving desired performance outcomes under conditions of reciprocal interdependence (Thompson, 1967), task and input uncertainty (Argote, 1982; Galbraith, 1972), and time constraints (Adler, 1995). When tasks are reciprocally interdependent, feedback loops are created among them, therefore increasing the need for relational coordination to enable participants to mutually adjust their actions in response to the outcomes of each others’ tasks. Furthermore, when task and/or input uncertainty is high, relational coordination becomes more important for enabling participants to adjust their activities with each other “on the fly,” as new information emerges in the process of carrying out the work. Finally, as time constraints increase, as in high-velocity environments, relational coordination becomes more important for enabling participants to adjust their actions rapidly in response to each other and newly emergent information, without wasting additional time referring problems upward for resolution.

Relational coordination theory extends Follett’s work and subsequent theory in one final way, by arguing that, although relational forms of coordination can and do emerge spontaneously from the

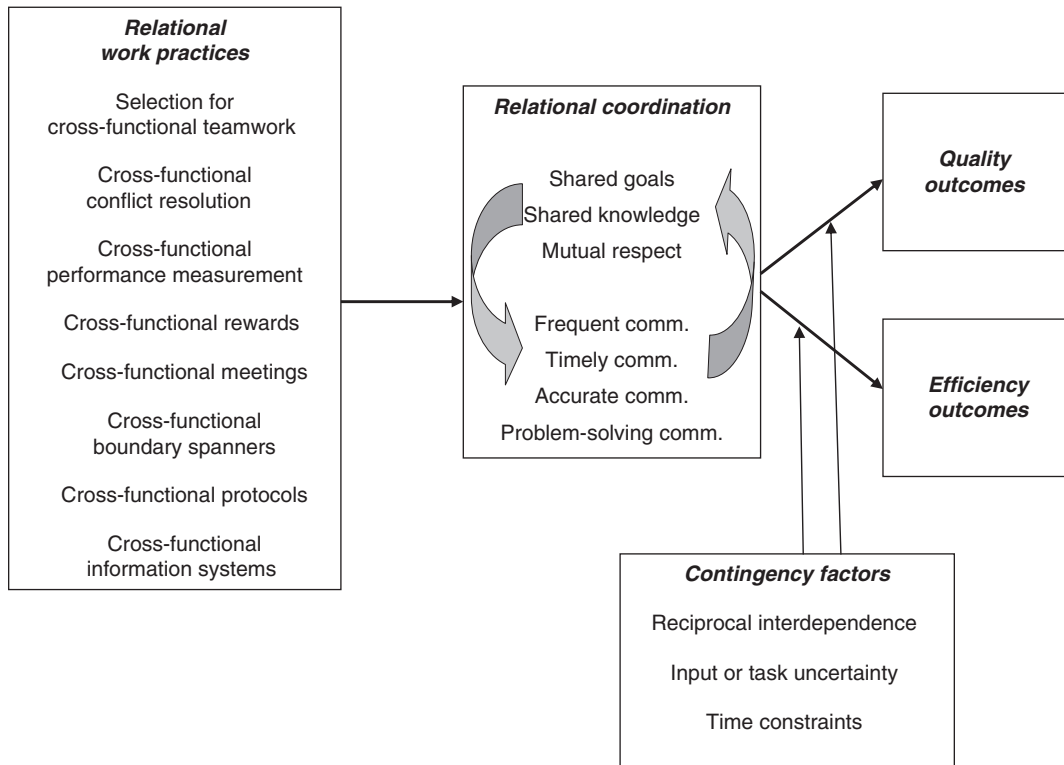


Fig. 30.2 Structure/process/outcomes model of relational coordination.

actions of individual actors, they are also fundamentally shaped by organizational structures. In organizations with traditional bureaucratic structures that tend to reinforce functional silos, relational networks are expected to exhibit strong ties within functions and weak ties between functions, resulting in fragmentation and poor handoffs among participants at the front line of production or service delivery. By contrast, in organizations with structures that cut across functional silos (structures that include, for example, selecting participants for cross-functional teamwork, measuring and rewarding participants for cross-functional teamwork, resolving conflicts proactively across functions, developing work protocols that span functional boundaries, designing jobs with flexible boundaries between areas of functional specialization, and designing boundary spanner roles to support the development of networks across functional boundaries), relationship and communication networks are expected to be more cohesive. These cross-cutting structures represent a redesign of traditional bureaucratic structures, and together they constitute a relational work system that strengthens cross-functional networks of relational coordination without sacrificing the benefits of the division of labor.

Together, these extensions of Follett's relational approach to coordination suggest a structure/process/outcomes model in which relational modes of coordination represent the process component; quality and efficiency performance represent the outcomes component moderated by task interdependence, uncertainty, and time constraints; and relational work practices represent the structure component. (See Figure 30.2 for an illustration.) This theory thus departs from information processing and organization design theories, which have tended to argue that networks *replace* formal organizational practices as information processing demands increase (Argote, 1982; Galbraith, 1972; Tushman & Nadler, 1978), and post-bureaucratic theory, which argues more universally that bureaucratic structures are *replaced* with networks in the ideal post-bureaucratic organization (Heckscher, 1994). By contrast, relational coordination theory calls for the redesign rather than the replacement of formal structures, specifically redesigning these structures to reinforce and strengthen relational processes across functional boundaries, where they tend to be weak (Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010). In so doing, relational coordination theory contributes to high-performance work systems theories, proposing—along with Leana

and Van Buren (1999), Collins and Clark (2003), Evans and Davis (2005), Vogus (2006), and others—a type of high-performance work system that strengthens employee–employee relationships, distinct from but potentially complementary to high-performance work systems that reinforce employee commitment to the organization, or that build employee knowledge and skills.

Although relational coordination theory is at a relatively early stage of development, it has received a fair amount of empirical support. Findings thus far suggest that relational coordination is an empirically coherent concept that meets standards of both internal and external validity. Furthermore, findings thus far suggest that the strength of relational coordination ties among participants in a work process predict an array of quality and efficiency outcomes that are of strategic importance to organizations (e.g., Gittell, 2001; Gittell et al., 2000; Gittell, Weinberg, Bennett, & Miller, 2008; Gittell, Weinberg, Pfefferle, & Bishop, 2008; Weinberg, Lusenhop, Gittell & Kautz, 2007). The contingency hypotheses in relational coordination theory have been explored to a more limited extent, with initial findings suggesting that the performance effects of relational coordination increase as input uncertainty increases (Gittell, 2002b). The hypothesized predictors of relational coordination have also received empirical support, with evidence suggesting that cross-cutting formal organizational structures do indeed increase the strength of relational coordination ties as reported by participants (Gittell, 2002a,b, 2002b; Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010; Gittell, Weinberg, Bennett, & Miller, 2008).

Although further empirical testing is under way, the theory itself is also in need of further development. Accordingly, the following section proposes five directions for further development of relational coordination theory.

### **New Directions for Relational Coordination Theory**

#### ***Building the Social Psychological Foundations of Relational Coordination Theory***

Relational coordination theory is relatively unique in specifying the relational dimensions of coordination—shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect—and specifying how these relational ties reinforce and are reinforced by communication ties to enable the effective coordination of work. But one promising new direction for relational coordination theory is to explore more deeply its relational underpinnings, returning to social psychological theories that posit

the self as a self-in-relation, then connecting those underpinnings in a coherent way to the organizational phenomenon of coordination.

Theorists as early as Follett (1924) have argued that relationships are the fundamental building block of human identity. “Reality is in the relating,” argued Follett, “in the activity between” (p. 36). Furthermore, when we consider “the total situation,” we come face to face with the “possible reciprocal influence of the subject and object” (p. 37). Through this reciprocal influence, or what she calls a circular response, “we are creating each other all the time” (p. 41). Elaborating the argument, she claims further that “I can never influence you because you have already influenced me; that is, in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both become something different” (p. 42).

Consistent with Follett, Buber (1937) argued that the self is always by necessity constructed as a “self-in-relation,” meaning that the human subject is defined through its relationships with other subjects. Based on this argument, Buber challenges the Cartesian foundations of Western ontology, in essence replacing “I think, therefore I am” with “I relate, therefore I am.” Freud (1930) also gives primacy to relationships, but treats the broken relationship as the starting point for the human condition, arguing that “a primary separation [of infant from mother], arising from disappointment and fueled by rage, creates a self whose relations with others or ‘objects’ must then be protected by rules, a morality that contains this explosive potential” (p. 46). He points to an urge toward union with others, and calls it *altruism*, a replacement for or perhaps a return in a more limited way to the “oceanic feeling” that is left behind on the path to moral development. Connection thus appears central to civilized life.

Miller (1976) transformed the psychology of human development by questioning the Freudian conception of human development as revolving around individuation and separation. She theorized that this conception is rooted in the male experience, and is one that either ignores the female experience or interprets the female experience as an anomaly or an absence of full development. The prototypical developmental path, when considered from the standpoint of the female experience, is growth through connection, rather than growth through separation. Miller argued that the one-sided view of development ignores the reality that the human subject, and our notion of individuality, is itself socially embedded, meaning that individuation itself occurs through mutual recognition by other human subjects.

Furthermore, Miller argues, life is possible only through connection with others, starting with the mother at birth. We are, therefore, relational by nature.

Building on Miller's argument, Mitchell (2000) argued that attachment and relationality are so fundamental to the human condition that, contrary to dominant psychological theories, a concept of drive is not necessary to explain them. "To argue that we need a concept of drive to describe what the individual seeks in interactions with other people presumes that the individual qua individual is the most appropriate unit of study. It assumes that the individual, in his or her natural state, is essentially alone, and then is drawn into interaction for some purpose or need" (p. 105). "To define humans as relational is quite different from specifying object-seeking as a specific drive. . . . It is simply what we are built to do, and we do it without intentionality" (p. 106).

The common thread among these theorists is that relationships are fundamental to the life experience and identity of human beings. But what insights, if any, can we gain from these theorists regarding the role that relationships play in the coordination of work? It appears that Follett was the first to attempt to connect the relational nature of human identity to the coordination of work. Follett's writings suggest that a relational understanding of human identity is somehow connected to a relational understanding of coordination. Just as human identity and causality are characterized by reciprocal influence, so too is coordination. Coordination, Follett argued, is most effective when it occurs through mutual adjustment among the factors of a situation, starting early and continuing throughout the process. What is the rationale behind this intriguing parallel that Follett has identified between the relationality of human identity, relationality of the nature of causality itself, and relationality of the coordination of work? Are these simply analogous, or is there something more?

Other organizational theorists have drawn important insights from social psychological arguments regarding relationality, and over the past decade have begun increasingly to apply the concept of relationality to organizational life. Fletcher (1999) introduced the concept of relational practice, arguing that it tends to be "disappeared" from organizational discourse and reward structures due to our tendency to relegate it to the private sphere of women's work, despite its potential to serve as a powerful driver of organizational performance. Fletcher's work draws particularly on Miller's insights regarding the gendering of relationality, due to the tendency for males

to be socialized into the self-as-individual identity and for females to be socialized into the self-in-relation identity. Other scholars have continued the translation of relationality from the realm of social psychology into the realm of organizations, exploring relational conceptualizations of job design (e.g., Gittell, Weinberg, Bennett, & Miller, 2008; Grant, 2007; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), learning (Edmondson, 1996, 2004; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), professionalism (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; Fletcher, 1999), and coordination, as we have seen (e.g., Bechky, 2006; Faraj & Sproull, 2000; Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Gittell, 2002b; Heckscher & Adler, 2006; Quinn & Dutton, 2005; Weick & Roberts, 1993). But these scholars have not addressed the fundamental question of how the relationality of human identity informs or explains the relationality of organizational life. Furthermore, how does this dynamic play out in contexts in which the relationality of human identity is made relatively invisible through a gendered process of socialization; that is, when relationality is associated with female qualities rather than human qualities more broadly? This theoretical work remains to be done.

### ***Extending Relational Coordination Theory to Include Personal Relationships***

As noted above, relational coordination theory has been built on the concept of relationships between work roles, rather than relationships between unique individuals. The strengths of role relationships are clear from a logistical standpoint: They enable individuals to come and go without disrupting the web of relationships through which work is coordinated, thus facilitating scheduling flexibility for operational benefits, as well as for accommodating the work/life needs of employees. But are role relationships "real" relationships, in the sense of having the humanistic attributes and the potential for emotional connection that gives relationships their power to shape organizational life in a positive way? In other words, to be consistent with the humanistic strengths-based orientation of POS, must the concept of relational coordination incorporate or account for personal relationships, or can it focus solely on relationships between roles, a foundation that is arguably more flexible and sustainable over time? Much of relational theory focuses on relationships between individuals rather than roles, even in POS, where theorists have explored how relationships drive organizational performance as well as individual well-being (e.g., Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007).

Gilligan (1982) offers insight into this question by comparing the trajectories of male and female moral development. She summarizes the research that supported established psychological theories that women tend to have a different moral sensibility than do men. Although psychologists from Freud onward had interpreted women's differences as a failure to complete moral development, Gilligan questioned that interpretation. She listened to the ways in which girls and women spoke about moral choices relative to the ways in which boys and men spoke about moral choices. What she heard was not a deficiency in moral development, but rather a distinct voice or conception of morality. As she later summed up: "The different voice . . . is a relational voice: a voice that insists on staying in connection . . . so that the psychological separations that have long been justified in the name of autonomy, selfhood, and freedom no longer appear as the sine qua non of human development but as a human problem" (p. xiii). The notion of deficiency had come from the assumption that male moral development, predicated on achieving separation and autonomy, was the normal human development, and that other paths that deviated from it could thus be judged as lacking. She argued that "instead, the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life" (p. 2).

In this respect, Gilligan's argument mirrors that of Miller, and provides additional research evidence to bolster it. But, in one of her studies, Gilligan finds other aspects of these alternative male–female moral codes, in addition to the contrast between autonomous and relational models of human development. In particular, when observing patterns of play among girls and among boys, she notices that girls play in smaller groups, have a greater focus on preserving relationships than on playing the game itself, and make less use of rules to govern their play. As Mead (1934) argued earlier, girls therefore learn less to take the role of "generalized other" and learn less the abstraction of human relationships. Gilligan states the contrast in the following way: "This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules" (p. 19).

This notion of personal connection versus generalized connection emerges again in Gilligan's analysis

of Freud's (1930) "oceanic feeling," which gives rise to altruism. As Gilligan points out, this altruism is not specific to an individual person. It is a broader, more humanistic urge that does not require a personal relationship; rather, it is more a relationship among roles—e.g., between human being in a position to help and human being in need of help. One of her interviewees expresses a similar sense of collective connection, which Gilligan interprets in the following way: "In seeing individual lives as connected and embedded in a social context of relationship, she expands her moral perspective to encompass a notion of 'collective life.'" But Gilligan questions whether this is adequate, and whether indeed it qualifies as a connection at all.

Do generalized or role relationships even *count* as relationships? Can role relationships serve as a basis for effective coordination and at the same time as a source of positive connection at work? Or, must role relationships be supplemented by personal concern for individual people as specific human beings? If so, which precedes and gives rise to which?

### ***Extending Relational Coordination Theory to Include a Broader Network of Participants***

Another new direction for relational coordination theory is to extend the network of relational coordination to include a broader network of participants. These additional participants include workers who are considered to be "noncore" or peripheral to the strategic goals of the organization; customers, who are typically seen as recipients of products or services rather than participants in their production; and those who reside outside the boundaries of the focal organization and yet are participants in a work process that extends beyond the focal organization—often members of a supply chain or network.

Consider the noncore worker. Relational coordination in theory includes all workers who are engaged in interdependent tasks in a given work process. But the theory has evolved, through the studies that have been conducted, to focus on workers in the "operating core" of the organization, thereby neglecting participants who may be perceived to have "peripheral" roles but who nevertheless have tasks that are highly interdependent with those in the operating core. Thus, in practice, relational coordination theory has evolved toward a neglect of the noncore or peripheral worker, for example neglecting the skycap's role in the flight departure process, and neglecting the housekeeper's and nursing aide's roles in the patient care process, despite anecdotal evidence that these noncore

functions play critical roles in achieving the desired outcomes due to their interdependence with the so-called core functions. As Wright (2010) argues, “By expanding relational coordination theory to include noncore personnel, whole organizations may benefit from improved coordination through a greater understanding of the organizations’ core purpose; particularly in environments of change and uncertainty” (p. 1).

The explicit extension of relational coordination theory to include noncore workers would run counter to a more recent argument in the human resource management literature, the argument that human resource management is more “strategic” in its use of resources when it focuses attention on the core workforce—the so-called *knowledge workers* who are less replaceable and who drive those outcomes that are of strategic importance to the organization (Lepak & Snell, 1999). This argument is short-sighted from the standpoint of relational coordination theory, which implies that a work process (and its desired outcomes) is only as strong as its weakest link, thus suggesting that any participant whose tasks are included in that work process falls within the scope of strategic human resource management. Both relational coordination networks and the formal structures that are designed to support them should therefore be conceptualized explicitly as including both core and noncore workers.

Next, we can extend the relational coordination network to include the customer him- or herself as a key participant in the coordination of work. This move is already justified implicitly by the theory itself, to the extent that the customer is indeed expected to carry out tasks that are part of the work flow and are interdependent with the tasks carried out by employees. The move to include customers in the network of relational coordination is also consistent with a growing recognition of the customer as a key coproducer of outcomes in service settings. Motivations behind this trend include efficiency gains for organizations and, potentially, higher-quality outcomes, to the extent that customers can better customize services to meet their unique needs and can become empowered rather than passive recipients of services (Chappell, 1994; Marschall, 2004). This move is also consistent with the paradigm of client-centered services, and in health care with the emerging paradigm of patient-centered or relationship-centered care, both of which recognize the client and/or patient as a focal point for provider interactions, and also as an active participant in the work process, at the very least providing input regarding desired outcomes and information that will better inform providers as to the nature of the tasks

that are needed to achieve those desired outcomes. In health care, for example, certain tasks are to be carried out by the patient, once labeled “compliance.” These include taking the correct medications at the correct times and engaging in appropriate exercise or diet. These tasks can readily be understood as coproduction tasks that are critical to achieving desired health outcomes, when performed in cooperation with the care provider team. Engaging the customer in coproduction in such settings is increasingly understood to require a relational process of some sort (Eaton, 2000; Safran, Miller, & Beckman, 2006; Stone, 2000; Suchman, 2006), suggesting the possibility that relational coordination theory can be fruitfully extended to encompass the customer (Ple, 2009; Ryan, 2009).

Finally, we can extend relational coordination networks to include participants who are located outside the boundaries of the focal organization. Drawing upon Rousseau’s (1985) guidelines for the development of multilevel theory, Gittell and Weiss (2004) developed a multilevel model of coordination networks in which relational coordination within organizations is conceptualized as extending beyond the organization to include relational coordination with other organizations in the same supply network. Network concepts are highly conducive to being conceptualized at multiple levels, from individual to organizational to cross-organizational. More recent work by Gittell, Weinberg, and Hagigi (2010) shows how relational coordination networks can be modeled across a supply chain, thus hypothesizing that these networks tend to have modular characteristics, with stronger ties within organizations than across organizations, due to the limitations posed by bounded rationality. They hypothesize further that system integrator roles are required for effective coordination of these modular networks, that system integrators require system knowledge in order to play their role effectively, and that the integrator can either bridge structural holes or serve as a connector between modules in the network. This theorizing requires further development but is promising as an avenue for expanding the relevant participants in relational coordination networks beyond the boundaries of a single organization to include the broader value chains in which organizations participate.

### ***Extending Relational Coordination Theory to Include Outcomes for Workers***

As argued above, relational coordination theory has well-developed hypotheses regarding the simultaneous effects of relational coordination on quality and efficiency outcomes, particularly under conditions



of reciprocal task interdependence, task or input uncertainty, and time constraints. But the theory has largely overlooked the impact of relational coordination on outcomes for workers themselves, taking for granted that more positive and more effective working relationships would serve as a source of job satisfaction for workers. What is needed is a theoretical exploration of how and why relational coordination might affect workers, considering the potential for both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, we might anticipate that relational coordination increases job satisfaction by increasing workers' ability to accomplish their jobs (Gittell, Weinberg, Pfefferle, & Bishop, 2008). We know that having the resources necessary to accomplish one's work is a source of employee satisfaction (Hallowell Schlesinger & Zornitsky, 1996) and, similarly, that social networks enable people to more effectively accomplish their work by increasing their ability to mobilize resources (Baker, 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Moreover, we know from organizational scholars that positive relationships are a source of well-being at work (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Dutton and Heaphy (2003) argue that high-quality connections are energizing due to creating a keen attunement and high awareness of the needs of others, as well as recognition and validation of one's self by others. In addition, recognition and validation of one's professional contribution might be expected to lead to a heightened sense of professional efficacy. These represent two compelling rationales for why relational coordination might enhance worker outcomes.

But on the negative side, it is important to explore the potential discomfort caused by transforming a siloed organization that values professional expertise and autonomy into a cross-functional organization that places increased value on relational competence and interdependence. This change may be experienced as a loss of professional status and autonomy that reduces satisfaction with work and other related outcomes, particularly for high-status workers (Adler, Kwon & Heckscher, 2008). In sum, relational coordination theory should be extended to consider the potential for both positive and negative outcomes for workers that may result when organizations seek to bridge functional boundaries to achieve a more collective or systems perspective.

### ***Extending Relational Coordination Theory to the Process of Organizational Change***

To date, relational coordination theory has not explicitly addressed the question of organizational change.

But there is an implicit theory in the existing model, as portrayed above. One tenet of relational coordination theory is that relationships and communication networks reinforce one another in a virtuous or vicious cycle, suggesting that this cycle is mutually reinforcing and thus not easily reversed. Another tenet of relational coordination theory is that the positive cycle of relational coordination is supported by a set of cross-cutting organizational practices that span functional boundaries between participants who are engaged in a work process—a process of transforming inputs into outputs of greater value. The negative cycle of relational coordination is supported instead by traditional bureaucratic organizational practices that foster strong ties within functional silos at the expense of ties between functions.

But some have questioned whether the implementation of a set of formal organizational structures—selection for cross-functional teamwork, cross-functional performance measurement, cross-functional rewards, cross-functional conflict resolution, cross-functional protocols and meetings, and so on—is even possible in the context of a strongly negative cycle of relational coordination. Will participants adopt the newly introduced work practices and participate in them in a meaningful way, or instead follow the letter but not the spirit of the newly introduced work practices, or even reject them outright? We know from theories of organizational change that numerous conditions are needed for change efforts to succeed. These conditions include a shared vision of the change, an understanding of the behaviors that are required for the change, and a belief that the change is necessary. To successfully implement practices that foster relational coordination may require, paradoxically, the shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect that are supposed to be *outcomes* of those new structures, not their antecedents. It is therefore likely that the theory of change implicit in the current theory of relational coordination is too simplistic and mechanistic, not taking sufficient account of the possibility that feedback loops exist between the newly adopted structures and the processes that they are intended to support. Indeed, a study that assessed the impact of external pressures on relational coordination found that more intense external pressures predicted higher relational coordination among participants, mediated by perceived work stressors rather than by changes in formal structures (Gittell, 2008). Changes in formal structures were the strongest predictor of relational coordination, suggesting the possibility that structural changes are

important for *sustaining* changes in relational coordination, but also suggesting the possibility that changes in relational coordination may *precede* changes in formal work structures.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the basic contributions of relational coordination theory, and has proposed five new directions for further theoretical development: to deepen the social psychological underpinnings of the theory drawing upon relational theory; to explore and challenge the proposition that relational coordination ties are based on role relations to the exclusion of personal relations; to extend the reach of the relational coordination network to include additional participants in the work process under consideration (in particular, noncore employees, customers, and members of the organization's broader value chain); to theorize about outcomes for workers, as well as for organizations and their customers; and finally, to explore and deepen the theory of change implicit in relational coordination theory. This chapter thus outlines an ambitious agenda for theory building that deepens the potential contribution of relational coordination theory to the broader discipline of POS.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, POS emphasizes the subjective and intersubjective experience of work, thus highlighting the need for human beings to connect and relate. To the extent that organizations create the conditions for connection and relationship to occur, they tap into this aspect of the human condition, thereby unleashing the potential for high levels of individual and collective performance. Although traditions outside of POS offer arguments about quality/efficiency trade-offs, relational coordination theory argues that organizations move beyond that trade-off by tapping into the relational nature of human beings.

At the same time, POS is the study of generative dynamics and endogenous resourcefulness. Relational coordination is the embodiment of organizational generativity and resourcefulness because, at its best, it brings together numerous parts of the organization in the pursuit of a shared and superordinate purpose. Relational coordination also captures generative dynamics because it is an inherently processual approach, as is evidenced in the interplay between shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect and the ongoing communication needed to produce generativity and resourcefulness. Relational coordination theory thus provides grounded insight into the subjective and intersubjective process of

coordinating and into the dynamics and experience of that process.

Positive organizational scholarship is also about finding meaning in work (e.g., Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Relational coordination theory substantially contributes to that ideal because relational coordination at its best entails more connection through one's work and with one's work, enabling front-line workers to better live out their professional ideals. Finally, relational coordination theory embodies the POS approach of viewing organizational strength as a distributed property of an organization, celebrating those on the front line and not only in the executive suite as drivers of organizational excellence.

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