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CONFERENCE PAPER

A little more conversation please: Identifying the mechanisms of collaborative performance summits

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Abstract

Collaborative governance is popular among practitioners and scholars alike, but getting a grip on the performance of collaborations remains a challenge. Recent research has made progress by identifying appropriate performance measures, but effective performance management also requires appropriate performance routines. Performance routines help actors to explicate goals, exchange performance information, examine the implications of this information, and explore potential actions. Collaborative performance summits, bringing all network partners in a room to collectively review the joint performance, are a favored performance routine. However, their exact mechanisms are poorly understood, resulting in many endless, pointless, even counterproductive, meeting rounds. This article systematically examines ten collaborative summits conducted by networks fighting functional illiteracy in the Netherlands. Observing the summits through various existing theoretical lenses helps to identify various key mechanisms that block or aid collective performance insights and sheds lights on the broader dynamics of performance dialogues.

A little more conversation please

Collaborative governance is popular among practitioners and scholars alike, but getting a grip on the performance of collaborations remains a challenge. Recent research efforts have made progress in identifying performance *measures* appropriate for collaborations (e.g. Emerson and Nabatchi 2015; Page et al 2015), yet effective performance management also requires *routines* for making sense of this performance information (Gerrish 2016; Kroll and Moynihan 2016). Performance routines help actors to explicate goals, exchange performance information, examine the implications of this information, and explore potential future actions (Douglas and Ansell, 2019).

A performance routine especially important for collaborations are so-called performance summits, which bring together the various network partners to collectively review their joint impact (Douglas and Ansell, 2019). These summits serve as inter-organizational "dialogue routines specifically focused on solution seeking, where actors collectively examine information, consider its significance, and decide how it will affect future actions" (Moynihan, 2008; 33). Collaborative summits are utilized by collaborations at different levels of government (e.g. International AIDS Conferences on the global level, US Presidential Anti-Drugs Summits on the national level, the Northern England 'Powerhouse' economic development summits on the local level).

Collaborative summits can be instrumental in realizing better performance. Performance summits can help partners to make sense of performance data (Moynihan et al 2011), enable collaborative learning (Gerlak and Heikkila 2011), and motivate performance improvement (Moynihan and Kroll 2016). Behn (2014) cautions that these results can only be secured with good preparation and process guidance. However, the exact process dynamics of performance dialogues remain poorly understood (Laihonen and Mäntylä, 2017), with existing scholarly contributions perhaps more focused on the craft than the science of collaborative performance summits (Quick and Sandfort, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, the dynamics of collaborative performance summits could be viewed in different ways: A first perspective views summits as a honest attempt by participants to rationally solve performance puzzles, emphasizing the role of performance information "as a stimulus for shared discussion, and this performance dialogue is expected to result in an actionable solution, which preferably has a positive impact on performance" (Laihonen and Mäntylä, 2017: 416). A second, more political, perspective would focus on the powering dynamics of summits, arguing that performance information is largely ignored as maintaining or attacking the division of resources between parties is the key function of such summits (Wildavsky, 1975).

Authors such as Ansell and Gash (2008) or Moynihan (2008) formulate a middle ground by exploring the interaction between politics, personalities, process, and performance information in collaborative sense-making and performance dialogues. Moynihan (2008; 112), for example, argues that during performance discussions "[t]he political nature of decision making will interact with, rather than be replaced by, performance information. Advocacy and ideology will continue

to shape allocation decisions, using performance information as a tool. Rather than present information comprehensively, giving equal balance to all, actors will highlight specific pieces of data and offer plausible explanations for why performance occurs and how it can be improved." Moynihan goes on to argues that these interactions are so complex and context-based that the outcomes of performance summits are hard to understand afterwards, let alone predict beforehand.

This paper examines offers a close observation of the interaction between politics, personalities, process, and performance information during collaborative performance summits. The study draws on the observation of ten summits organized for networks of municipalities, schools, libraries, and community organizations working together to reduce adult illiteracy. The ambition of the study is to systematically assess the interaction between the various factor shaping performance summits and identify any recurring mechanisms which can better explain the outcomes of these summits.

Understanding collaborative performance summits

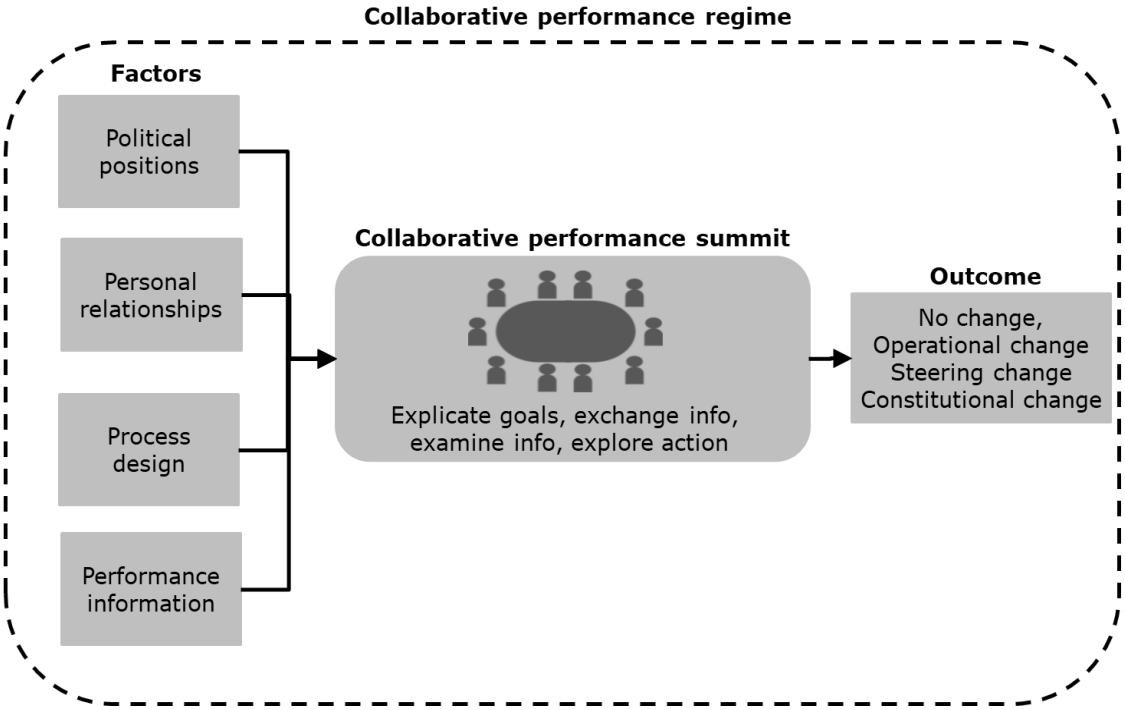
The components of collaborative performance summits

Collective performance reviews have variously been described as stakeholder conferences (Innes, 1992), goal review workshops (Bryson et al 2016), PerformanceStat reviews (Behn 2014), and learning forums (Moynihan 2005). Douglas and Ansell (2019) call these gatherings collaborative performance summits and define them as "interactive dialogue routines bringing together the various actors involved in a collaborative initiative to jointly (a) explicate their performance goals, (b) exchange performance information, (c) examine performance information, and (d) explore actions for potential performance improvement."

Collaborative summits are not considered isolated events, but placed within the wider context of the collaborative performance regime; the predominant mode through which the partners set and review performance goals. In some collaborations, partners may work largely parallel to each other (Bingham and O'Leary 2006), with the summits providing a rare moment for interorganizational discussion. In other cases, partners may have formally committed to shared goals and decisions-making, building al full-fledged collaborative governance regime (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015). In most cases, the collaborative performance regime will be a hybrid between parallel play and full integration, with partners working together at some times and going their separate ways at

others (see Douglas and Ansell, 2019 for a full discussion of the different collaborative performance regimes).

Figure 1. The components of collaborative performance summits



The summit is a focal point in the collaborative performance where actors come together to review their joint progress. Despite the variety in names and conceptualizations of summits, authors seem to agree on the same basic key components that make up a summit (see figure 1). Summits are thought to be shaped by four different factors: The *political positions*, or the particular interests and convictions the various actors bring to the conversation (Moynihan 2005; Douglas and Ansell, 2019;). The *personal relationships*, the relationships of trust, conflict, and status between the individuals sitting round the table (Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011; Couturier and Sklavounos, 2019). The *process design*, constituted by the agenda for the meeting, the formal and informal rules governing the conversation (Mengis and Eppler, 2008). And finally, the *performance information*, a combination of objective, subjective, and expert data brought to the discussion (Moynihan, 2008). The interaction between these four factors shape the explication of goals, exchange of performance information, examination of its consequences, and exploration of actions.

A summit can lead to different outcomes, as detailed in Douglas and Ansell (2019): "First, nothing much may happen. The actors gather to review their joint performance, […] but this energy often dissipates when the meeting is over and the participants return to business-as-usual (Innes, 1992). Second, there may be a learning effect, in which the insights generated at the summit lead to operational changes, such as streamlining the coordination between services (Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011). Third, the collaborative summit could lead to changes in the steering arrangements. For example, actors may formulate shared targets at the summit and agree to review progress on these indicators (Bryson et al., 2015). Finally, the summits could lead to constitutional choices being made (Ostrom in McGinnis, 2011), where the regime of the collaboration is significantly redefined. For example, a summit may be the first time that actors meet and, as a result, they may institute a network-centric alliance where collective decision-making becomes the norm (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015)."

The mechanisms of collaborative performance summits

How the different components interact are thought to produce different outcomes depends on the fundamental view on the nature of collaborative summits. Some authors focus on the role of only one of the four shaping factors. For example, Behn (2014) sees these summits as rational performance reviews designed for performance improvement, arguing that the quality and content of the performance management information is of paramount importance. Wildavsky (1975) sees performance summits more as a political arena's where actors seek to maintain the status quo or advance their particular interest. In this view, performance information is hardly used and the political positions will be the primary shaping forces. If the summit is considered as an attempt at an 'authentic conversation' (Innes and Boohler, 2002), the interaction between the personal relationships and process design will be considered as the main drive for the conversation (Mengis and Eppler, 2008).

More nuanced perspectives would focus on the interplay between politics, personalities, process, and performance information. Ansell and Gash (2008), for example, could view the summits as part of the collaborative process, which ideally consists of a positive cycle between building personal trust, aligning political positions, and jointly exploring the performance information. Moynihan (2006), casts learning forums as performance dialogues, where political positions and performance information interact as actors seek to bolster their arguments by selecting agreeable

data from the content available. Moynihan (2006: 151-168) observes that these interactions can be so complex, that the outcome of a summit cannot be predicted "[W]hat one group of decision makers concludes is a reasonable interpretation and an appropriate response may be completely at odds with another group's assessment. … [D]ecision outcomes are unlikely to have a systematic relationship with performance information in a way that is easily observable to researchers, but they may exhibit the characteristics of a reasoned discourse between relevant actors."

This research exercise is aimed at testing what is 'observable to researchers' during collaborative performance summits. The first question is whether one of the key factors -politics, personalities, process, or performance information- dominates the discussion dynamics or whether these factors interact with each other. The second question is, if these factors do indeed interact with each other, whether there are recurring mechanism at play. These questions will be addressed by studying ten summits in actions.

Methodology

Studying summits in actions

The data is drawn from the close observation of ten collaborative performance summits in ten Dutch cities. These summits brought together the various partners working on reducing functional illiteracy among adults. These summits were hosted by the local alderman responsible for social affairs and education, and included participants from local community colleges, libraries, employers, and charities all involved in the efforts to reduce illiteracy.

The summits themselves were designed and hosted by the researchers. The participants for each summit were selected by the researchers in consultation with the local project leader supporting the collaboration, striving to get a cross-section of the various partners and interests involved. All participants were sent a survey before the summit, asking them to rate the performance of the collaboration on various elements (stakeholder involvement, operational processes, outputs and outcomes).

Every summit was opened by the researcher, taking the role of chairperson, restating that the purpose of the meeting was the jointly review the quality and performance of the local collaboration. To open the discussion, the participants were then asked to select a picture from a

range of photo's which best captured their impression of the collaboration (i.e. a photo of a rowing team in sync versus a photo of a tug-of-war). The participants were then presented with an anonymized overview of the survey results, showing where partners felt the collaboration was doing well and where improvement was required. Each meeting ended with a discussion of potential improvement actions, but stopped short of formalizing these discussions into decisions.

Four types of data were collected during this process: Individual interviews with each of the participants before the summit in the first five of the ten participating collaborations. Survey results of the separate participants before the summits. A full participative observation of the summit itself. And a follow-up report three months after the summit.

Similarities and differences between cases

The data collected always for the observation of the interaction between politics, personalities, process, and performance information. These key components of the summits were to some degree constant across the eight summits, but also varied between on some dimensions (see table 1).

The political position in all the summits were characterized by a dependency relationship between the alderman and the other partners as the municipality distributes the illiteracy budget across the network. The various partners were allies in the fight against illiteracy, but also competitors in the struggle over limited resources. This division could in practice be tempered or bolstered by the personal relationships between the individuals representing the various organizations at the summit, with some participants having built up personal trust or animosity over the years.

The process design or summit agenda was kept constant across the ten summits, but could vary slightly based on the topics breached by the various participants during the discussion. The performance information, here the survey results on the various elements of the collaborations provided by the participants, was presented the same in format across the ten summits, but could differ in content. In some collaborations, the participants were united in their positive judgement, where other collaborations were very negative about their results, and yet other collaborations were strongly divided, with some partners being very positive and others strongly negative.

Table 1. *Overview of key elements of the ten summits (to be completed)*

Case	Political positions	Personal relationships	Process design	Performance information
1.	Controlling local government, push to broaden program beyond immigrants	Group never met, domineering alderman, only one other strong actor	Start with exchange of impressions, then sharing survey results, formulating next steps	Results of survey participants , survey not on paper, survey was highly critical on resources
2.	Shared and public commitment to goals, pressures on budget allocation between partners	Group was well-established, met regularly, egalitarian modus	Start with exchange of impressions, then sharing survey results, formulating next steps	Results of survey participants , survey shared on paper, survey was critical on key elements
3.	Ambitious network, but no formally shared goals and interests	Large gathering, most people knew each other, did not meet in this constellation	Start with exchange of impressions, then sharing survey results, formulating next steps	Results of survey participants , survey shared on paper, survey was largely positive
4.	Ambitious network, with clearly stated goals, and task allocation	Large gathering, met before in this constellation	Start with exchange of impressions, then sharing survey results, formulating next steps	Results of survey participants , survey shared on paper, survey was largely negative
…	…	…	…	…

Mechanisms observed

Explicating performance goals: From ritual reaffirmation to constant renegotiation.

Even though the process design did not plan for it, all the summits commenced with an impromptu explication of the goals of the collaboration by the participants. It did not matter whether the goals were formally explicated already or not (some collaborations had specific performance targets, where other ones did not), or whether the goals were supported by all participants or not (some participants would voice objections to the goals, where others would actively voice support).

This need to explicate the goals played out in different ways. As part of the collaborative process of alignment and group building, this reaffirmation of intent serves as a ritual to confirm a shared purpose beyond the different. Looking more closely at the statements of the participants also shows that they were often renegotiating the purpose of the collaboration from their perspective. For example, the schools would say ‘as we know, our shared goal is to fight illiteracy and get as many people as possible certified at the appropriate language level’, whereas the libraries would say ‘as

we know, our shared goal is to fight illiteracy and get as many people reading.' In one and the same sentence, they reaffirm the shared goal and advocate their particular interest.

> *Goal explication mechanism 1:* However clear the goals of the collaborations have been made previously, the participants of the collaborative performance summit will want to reaffirm their shared goals.

> *Goal explication mechanism 2:* The political positions of participants will influence how they reaffirm and rephrase the goals of the collaboration, serving their particular political interest.

Exchanging performance information: Controlling the means of knowledge production

In exchanging the information during the session, there was a clearly visible interaction between political dynamics and performance information discussed. Firstly, the aldermen at the various summits and senior executives were much more pronounced in their judgements and keen to signal their judgement of the network. The performance assessment of aldermen responsible for policy making was more pronounced than the assessment of the lower level executives working at the libraries, schools, and charities involved in policy execution. Aldermen either gave very high or very low scores, while the executive partners were much more nuanced in their assessments.

Furthermore, when given free reign, the most powerful players on the table would actively seek to control what information was exchanged or given attention. Dissenting opinions were only able to come out when actively supported through process design interventions, such as specifically asking for contrasting opinions. For example, in the first summit, the survey results were read out, allowing the alderman to selectively pick the numbers interesting to his role. In subsequent sessions, the surveys were printed out for everyone, allowing people to physically point out points that were overlooked by the dominating participants.

> *Information exchange mechanism 1:* Greater distance to execution equates to more extreme opinions about the performance, closer proximity to execution equates to moderation in the scores.

> *Information exchange mechanism 2:* Participants will use their political positions and personal relationships to declare performance information valid or invalid

> *Information exchange mechanism 3:* The process design and format of the performance information can neutralize attempts to sideline performance information.

Examining performance information: Ignoring facts, both the good and the bad

A consistent pattern across the collaborations was that participants argued there was insufficient data to feed the discussion. Even though people were presented with a survey which offered a detailed assessment of their collaboration on 24 dimensions, filled out by all participants, at every summit the point would be made that there were elements of the collaboration left unexamined.

Some collaborations reported higher satisfaction rates than others. Three of the collaborations scored themselves significantly higher. Ironically, these were also the collaborations marked by the national illiteracy foundation as moderate to poor performers. It was the high performers that were more critical of their achievements. This may be a network manifestation of the Dunning Kruger effect (Kruger and Dunning, 1999), where individuals with low competency tend to rate their abilities high and people with high competency tend to rate their skills low.

> *Information examination mechanism 1:* Whatever the amount of performance information offered, there is never enough to satisfy the specific interests of the participants.

> *Information examination mechanism 2:* Underperforming collaborations tend to overestimate their abilities, overperforming collaborations tend to underestimate their abilities.

Exploring actions for performance improvement

The final phase of each summit was discussing potential follow-up actions. Most remarkable at this stage was the sudden narrowing of the discussion. If it had not come up already, more money would be put on the agenda by the partners in this stage at all of the summits. The usual pattern was the executive partners asking for more, and the alderman arguing that money does not solve problems. There was little relationship between the discussion and performance information reviewed before, the point was made regardless, even if the partners had agreed earlier that the existing money should be better used rather than increased.

Furthermore, all sessions ended with a resolution that this discussion was useful and the group should meet again. In some cases, that did happen (because the summit was part of a regular cycle of events or the summit was indeed followed-up by a next meeting), but for half the summits there was no follow through. Collaborations act here like estranged friends saying at the end of an unsuccessful reunion 'we should this again some time'.

The summit groups which had the largest degree of consensus were most likely to follow up the summit with concrete actions. It did not matter whether this consensus was positive (everyone agrees it is going well) or negative (everyone agrees it is going badly). Divided groups would only implement actions if the powerful players saw a need for change.

> *Action exploration mechanism 1:* There is selective performance information loss in shifting from examining data to exploring actions.
>
> *Action exploration mechanism 2:* It is impolite to not say to want to meet again, even if that is not actually the intention.
>
> *Mechanism D3:* It is better to all agree it is going badly than to disagree over how well it is going exactly.

Discussion and conclusion: Complexity and opportunity

The observation of these ten summits generates a first list of mechanisms. These finding must be placed within the context of the limitations of the research design. First of all, these mechanisms may be the product of the policy field (i.e. illiteracy), level of government (i.e. local), and national setting (i.e. the Netherlands). Summits in other contexts may produce different mechanisms. Moreover, the researchers themselves played a prominent role in this exercise, preparing and leading the summits, vetting and rephrasing the mechanisms. Other researchers and research methods may help to identify other mechanisms. This list of mechanisms is there strongly positioned as the beginning of a long list to be expanded and refined by further research.

On the whole, this first list of mechanism supports the validity of a more nuanced perspective on performance summits as forwarded by Moynihan (2005) in his dialogue theory or Ansell and Gash (2008) in their description of the collaborative process. There were honest attempts to just puzzle

through the performance information, just as there were displays of power politics. However, most mechanisms can be characterized as an ongoing interaction between performance information and political positions, with support roles for the personal relationships and process designs. These findings frame collaborative performance summits as complex social interactions between politics, personalities, process, and performance information.

The question is whether this interaction is indeed as unsystematic and unpredictable as proposed by dialogue theory. The recurrence of several of the identified mechanisms across at multiple summits suggest that this interaction is not completely random, that certain mechanisms or reflexes are likely or even bound to occur during summits. A pattern in these dynamics signals an opportunity for research and practice. Further research could focus on identifying these dynamics, with practical interventions testing whether undesirable effects can be remedied through process or performance information interventions.

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