Chapter XVII
Reflections on Organizing and Managing in Self–Managed Knowledge–Work Teams:
A Constructionist Turn

James J. Keenan
Fairfield University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter employs social construction, communication, and leadership perspectives as framing for a retrospective analysis of the construction and management of two highly syntalic, cohesive self-managed knowledge-work teams in a service organization operating across culturo-graphic boundaries. The retrospection focuses on the social-narrative construction and development of the self-managed teams and teamwork in the context of fast changing conditions in the business environment. Grounded in the constructionist epistemology, the self-managed teamwork is re-examined from an updated symbolic convergence perspective. The bona fide teams’ stages of development and progress toward convergence and coalition are described. The high cohesiveness and syntality of the teams are re-examined as mindful and heedful interrelating in the light of constructionist theory. The chapter posits communication, especially talk, as critical to constructing and organizing the sets of interacts, roles, and behaviors that are involved in self-managing and self-leading teams.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a reflection from the constructionist perspective on two groups of experienced knowledge-work managers who worked together as bona fide teams that were self-managed to accomplish personal goals, which they created in common and toward which they had never before conspired. The two teams were successful in self-managing their tasks and relationships and their
teamwork was marked with high cohesiveness and syntality.

It is not easy to be succinct about teams in large part because there are so many variations of small, purposive, non-hierarchical human work groups. To cite a few of the many types of groups, there are formal and informal, short-term and long-term groups, social and work, support, small and large, face-to-face, and virtual. There are project teams with the ability to organize their own work and there are the prefabricated rigidly structured service teams apparent in the fast-food establishments dotting byways and business landscapes. Teamwork varies among industries, firms, locations, and levels of managing and leading. Teamwork varies with the characteristics and transactions among actors and actants: people, technologies, ambient physical conditions, organizations, nations, and cultures.

One variant of work-team form and process is the self-managed team, which has seen increasing use by large organizations (e.g., Kirkman, Gibson, & Shapiro, 2001; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997, 2001; Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995; Wellins, et al. 1990). In addition to charting the spreading use of self-managed work teams, research focused on the characteristics of such teams and their advantages and disadvantages has been growing (e.g., Chaston, 1998; Gibson & Tesone 2001; Kirkman et al., 1999; Moravec, Johannessen, & Hjelmas, 1997; Stewart, & Manz, 1995; Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991; Zarraga & Bonache, 2005).

Conceptualizing and performing self-managed teaming and working are particularly salient needs in the context of fast-changing organizational forms and work technologies. Acceleration in the scale and scope of such changes earmarks much contemporary human work and is centrally a process of increasing, spreading, and speeding social interaction among multiple constituencies including different groups of producers, investors, consumers, and regulators (Bijker, 1995). Complex human performances and organizations constitute, and are constituted by, technological change. Self-managed teams are such constituent processes (Murray & Moses, 2005). At the same time, technologies are constituents of teams.

In the abstract, all teamwork involves communicatively constituted task-work and relationship-work. This chapter employs a constructionist perspective in reflecting on the communicative constitution and the multidirectional, multidimensional managing and languaging of two self-managed teams. Self-managing teams are defined here “as small numbers of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, have a defined set of performance goals, and execute an approach for which they hold themselves accountable” (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Self-managing teams share leadership, decide working procedures, and schedule and conduct their own meetings. Self-managing teams develop relatively unique attributes such as group culture, image, vision, cognitions, emotions, syntality, synergy, and cohesiveness (Harris & Sherblom, 2005, p. 157). Self-managed teams are co-emergent with the on-going cognitive and emotional experiences and the behavioral routines in individual worklives. Some such experiences become transformed and institutionalized in organizational action taking (Crossen, Lane, & White, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Reframed in the constructionist epistemology, teams are viewed here as systems of interlocked sensemaking behaviors (e.g., Krippendorf, 1971). Teams are sets of interacts that are assembled into processes that constitute organizations (Weick, 1979). Teams are socio-cognitive processes that emerge in communicating and through the agency of language.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on and conceptualize from constructionist communication perspectives the emergence and characteristics