

# Building blocks for Cooperation

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## My reflections

I should like to invite you to join me briefly in some reflections on cooperation. After all, one of the reasons we have come here is to see if we can step up our cooperation. Allow me share with you some of my own personal experiences.

When I was 5 years old, I decided that cooperation did not exist. I was a child, and adults made all the decisions. That was perfectly obvious.

## The outside adaptation, the inside free world.

On the outside I conformed, and meanwhile I created my own world. Carefully protected within my own body. A haven where I was different, more myself. On the outside I was someone who could cooperate well with adults. I did what was expected, and dreamed of later, when I would be able to make all the decisions myself.

## At school?

When I was studying to become a teacher, I could reverse the roles. I thought: "Now I'm free, and it's me who decides how the children have to behave." But in that pattern of thinking too, I absorbed the rules prescribed by the designers of educational systems, and complied with them: that's called being "professional."

## University?

Studying at university. A sanctuary for ideas, that was how I had imagined it. Finally I could follow my own ideas. But while it was true that I could experiment, I discovered a new norm with which I had to comply: I had to follow narrowly defined routes on the path to "the truth."

## Bussiness?

The business world: Ah yes, that was where I could finally develop my own ideas, and do so 100% in my own way. However, it soon became clear that property relations determined much of what I could do. The laws of the market economy determine whether you succeed or fail. Once more I found that I had to subordinate my ideas to "objective" norms.

I got married, had children, played my part in the life of the community. I conformed to expectations that had been unknown to me before.

## No cooperation

So the conclusion is that there's no such thing as cooperation. Instead, there's conforming and adjusting: following the laws of scholarship; the laws of market forces; the laws of management. The laws of marriage. My life is a successful story of constant conformity.

Before you start thinking that I have sunk into a deep depression and am about to reveal plans to put an end to all this misery, allow me to talk about the other side of the coin. For there is one. There is hope.

## **My real life**

The other, secret, line nourishes me in the midst of all the conformity, extracting what I need. This line is not subject to rules and compliance. And it's a line I keep secret. My "real life" is what I call it. Since I was 5 years old, in my real life, I feel and think quite differently. I dream distant journeys. Have encounters that truly move me, with people whose lives are utterly different from mine. And intriguingly, they're always willing to share their wisdom with me, to initiate me into their world view. Life opens up for me. I still have that life today. In fact, it feels as though that's where I live. Sometimes part of that life coincides for a time with the shared, cooperative life outside, but usually it does not.

I don't know any way of joining these two lines, other than the way I'm about to describe.

## **Building Cooperation?**

One day – by then I was 45 years old – I read an academic article about "building up cooperation." The subject made an enormous impression on me, quite unexpectedly. I still study it today. Since then, I have read everything that has been written about it. But how does it work in practice?

## **Priority of the whole**

According to the accepted theory, cooperation is based on two basic principles. One is that the whole has priority. Everything has its own place, and if everything is in its designated place, everything will go well. All you need to do is to correct the deviation. I'm familiar with that: my secret life-line is my escape route.

## **Priority to the individuals**

The other principle revolves around individuals. Every human being pursues his own objectives, strives to develop his own talents, and because he needs other people for them, he forges coalitions. Sometimes for long periods of time, sometimes only temporarily. Every human being is driven by two basic needs: self-fulfillment and the desire to belong. These two needs lead him to forge cooperative links with others. This was a helpful idea. I started to think: "How can I build bridges and forge cooperation with others, from the premise of my own dream world?" I felt liberated from the dilemma of having to choose between subordination and exclusion.

How could I live according to this new, liberating concept? I was, and am, a perfectly well-adjusted man, the ideal employee, son-in-law, father. A model member of society. How could it work?

## **Rules of conduct**

Research turned up some simple rules of conduct. You want to build up a cooperative relationship? Then start by offering cooperation. The first gesture is "giving." But here's an important rule: if the other doesn't take up your offer, don't pursue it. Not interested? OK, then forget it. It's their turn to act if they want it. And if they don't want it, and leave me to my own devices? Hmm. Will there always be people who will want to work with me? How many "no's" can I bear, before I decide to conform? And another thing: what I show someone when I meet up with them – will that be interesting enough to persuade the other party to take up my offer?

## **Giving**

Giving: that's not a problem. But I do have trouble stepping back after a rejection. So I'm supposed to just shrug my shoulders and wait for a response? I've also discovered a

weakness in myself: I'm afraid that if I don't make the next move, I'll remain excluded for ever. I forget who plays tricks on me, and continue to give to someone who is exploiting me. I don't make lists of tricks that people play on me. Very unhelpful – for me in any case, not for those who know this about me.

### **How to prevent being exploited?**

Now I delve even deeper. What kind of behavior is needed, to produce good cooperation? Oh, that's not so easy. I must be capable of selfishness. I must know what I want myself and what the other party wants. I must be capable of calling it quits if my goals are incompatible with the other party's. I must also be able to draw a line when the other party expects more from me than I want to give. I have to brave the competition. Otherwise, others will always walk off with the prize. I also have to want to win, and to become good at it. And one more thing, the area in which I'm most vulnerable: I must be able to give without drawing any immediate benefit from it. I don't like that, because I know that I have that tendency anyway, which means I'm easy to exploit. I can easily be induced to give.

### **Many losers?**

But is there any point in learning these vulnerable kinds of behavior in a world, in companies, between companies, where competition is the norm? Where there is one winner, and a great many losers. A world in which someone may take everything you have and breeze off with a smile. Leaving me empty-handed. Only the strongest survive.

### **Cooperation will survive.**

Can cooperative and altruistic behavior survive at all in a society based mainly on competition and selfishness? I'm happy to report that this question has been answered in studies that have "calculated" the consequences in computer simulations. So what did they discover? Even in a society that is based almost entirely (up to 95%) on competitive, selfish behavior, altruistic and cooperative behavior will survive. People who often apply such patterns of behavior will survive.

**How?** By seeking kindred spirits. By forging alliances with others who also favor cooperation – who see altruism and cooperation as valuable and useful kinds of behavior. People who have "calculated" the added value of such behavior to themselves and the other party. They're not softies – they can be selfish when necessary. And in competition, they also like to be the best. They want to win, to cooperate with one another. They build up win-win relationships to fulfill all the important conditions of life. Caring for each other, helping each other, saving for each other. One may give now, while another will give later. They help out when necessary. Then it doesn't hurt if they occasionally miss the boat in a competitive clash, or if they are occasionally exploited by self-seekers.

The family may be the pivotal alliance that helps to forge these relationships.

### **Challenge.**

There is a challenge for organizations here. The challenge of creating an internal culture that promotes the kinds of values and behavior that will produce a strong structure, able to withstand external competition. Forging alliances with clients who have the same attitude.

Of course, all this only works if it's voluntary. I give and I take.  
Thank you.

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