

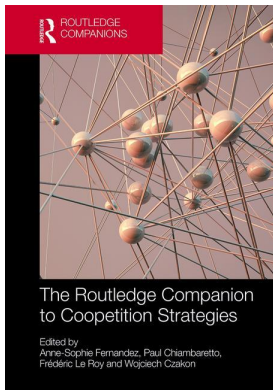
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A multi-level perspective on managing coopetition

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A multi-level perspective on managing coopetition

Stefanie Dorn and Sascha Albers

Introduction

The initial contributions to coopetition research have primarily emphasized the potential positive outcomes of combining cooperative and competitive elements in a relationship (see, e.g., Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996). Simultaneously, the potential risks of doing this have also been increasingly acknowledged. For example, cooperating with a rival involves high risks of knowledge transfer as the obtained knowledge by a rival partner may result in a direct disadvantage for a focal firm (Das & Teng, 2000; Khanna et al., 1998). Coopetitive relationships can thus give rise to various tensions. Empirical studies on coopetitive relationships have, among other things, examined the tensions between value creation and appropriation (Fernandez et al., 2014), or information sharing versus protection (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). Due to these tensions, it is suggested that coopetition relationships require specific ways of managing. Only via these specific approaches to managing relationships could conflicts be avoided (Tidström, 2014) that might disrupt the relationship and lead to it missing the relationship's goal.

Consequently, recent contributions on coopetition have shed more light on the specific management challenges, instruments, and outcomes of such relationships across various levels of analysis (Le Roy & Czakon, 2016). While some studies have focused exclusively on the individual level and the traits or characteristics that an organization's members need in order to cope with coopetition, others have adopted a firm-level perspective and looked at structures, mechanisms, and their effectiveness. Such foci are crucial for a still-nascent field such as coopetition management, where there remains a need to gain in-depth insights to spawn and substantiate constructs (Gnyawali & Song, 2016).

In this chapter, we draw attention to the interdependencies between three different levels of analysis: the individual level, the inter-firm level, and the industry level. All of these levels are interconnected and the characteristics of one level influence how the other levels of a coopetitive relationship function (Chiambaretto & Dumez, 2016; Dahl et al., 2016).

We start by consolidating the knowledge on specific management parameters at the different levels of coopetitive relationships. We then highlight the connections that potentially exist between these levels and how they are relevant for managing coopetition. We finally illustrate the promises of a multi-level approach to coopetition by a current empirical study in the event industry before concluding.

The level of the individual in cooperative relationships

Following Dahl and colleagues (2016), cooperation can be understood as a strategy that depends on the actions and interactions of individuals (see also Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006). Consequently, the way in which cooperative relationships work is highly influenced by the traits and ways of interacting of the involved individuals (Dahl et al., 2016; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016).

The individual level plays a crucial role in cooperation research, since most of the tensions that have been studied are cognitive, manifest in the minds of individual organization members. For example, the need to share and protect information at the same time results in a tension that affects employees directly (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). Stadler and Van Wassenhove (2016) suggested that specific individual capabilities play a crucial role in the success of a cooperative strategy, as individuals need to be able to handle cooperative and competitive interactions simultaneously. Other studies have implicitly assumed that individuals are not able to integrate both cooperation and competition at the same time (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000), which necessitates structural solutions. As such, an empirical study by Raza-Ullah and colleagues (2014) showed that individuals may become uneasy when partnering with a competitor; while some of them prefer to engage in the cooperative activities, they also feel forced to exploit the partner and therefore engage in competition. These paradoxical demands related to their tasks can create a state of emotional ambivalence (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014).

Studies on cooperation have advocated that, in order to withstand the tensions triggered by simultaneously cooperating and competing, individuals must develop a cooperative mindset (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Oliver, 2004; Seran et al., 2016). Such a mindset is created by organizational learning and building routines (Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016; Seran et al., 2016). The current body of literature lacks an in-depth investigation into cooperative mindsets. However, Le Roy and Fernandez (2015) suggest that, within their specific empirical context, project managers have developed such a mindset: "They understood the benefits of collaborating with a competitor as well as the risks due to this collaboration" (Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015: 681).

Other studies have emphasized the concrete capabilities and activities at the individual level (e.g., Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). For example, it has been found that employees who work in a cooperative relationship may, in certain contexts, be able to prioritize cooperative and competitive activities (Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Individuals can integrate the companies' goals with those of the cooperation, and therefore undertake actions that are conducive to achieving these goals (Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). In doing so, the employees "demarcate" the cooperative and competitive logics and, counter-intuitively, are able to act upon both at the same time (Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016).

The inter-firm level of a cooperative relationship

The discussion of cooperation management at the inter-organizational level usually focuses on cooperative agreements between competitors. Therefore, cooperation management depends on the governance structure that the partners agree upon. At the outset of their relationship, the partnering rivals determine the structure as well as the rules and guidelines, which they act upon during the ongoing relationship. Two broader issues have garnered attention with respect to cooperation management: (1) targeted efforts to establish a balance between cooperation and competition (e.g., Park et al., 2014); and (2) an active approach to managing cooperative tensions (e.g., Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). Scholars have specifically discussed the following facets in these domains.

The first aspect comprises formal issues. More specifically, a bandwidth of forms of cooperative relationships have been investigated, including more rigid forms such as equity partnerships and loose forms such as oral agreements (Dorn et al., 2016; Hung & Chang, 2012). Another formal issue relates to the allocation of tasks and responsibilities. For example, it has been found that a clear assignment of the rival partners' tasks and responsibilities may be conducive to cooperation and prevent the risks that stem from competition between the firms (Faems et al., 2010).

Second, the cooperation literature discusses three generic structural options regarding the allocation of cooperative and competitive tasks: separation (e.g., Bengtsson & Kock, 2000), integration (e.g., Chen, 2008), and hybrid versions combining both logics (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2014). Separation refers, for example, to a segregation of teams and personnel of cooperative and competitive task domains, as it implicitly assumes that individuals are incapable of dealing with the paradoxical tensions resulting from cooperation (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Herzog, 2010; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). By contrast, integration emphasizes the enhanced creativity and learning potential created by a closeness to the partner, thereby promoting the integration of cooperative and competitive domains. This implies the development of a certain culture or the employment of individuals with certain experience and capabilities (Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Chen, 2008; Oshri & Weeber, 2006; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). As such, it becomes apparent that the structure and design of the cooperative partnership and the individual level are highly interdependent.

Third, the literature on cooperation has acknowledged the importance of informal coordinating mechanisms within the partnership (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). Mutual adjustment while performing the tasks is necessary in order to develop routines and structured actions (Nickerson & Zenger, 2002). Trust is crucial for cooperation as well, since without trust it is barely possible to effectively and efficiently cooperate with a partner (Ring & van de Ven, 1992; Tidström, 2014).

Finally, theorizing has started on a potential cooperation capability at the organizational level (Bengtsson et al., 2016). Bengtsson and colleagues (2016: 28) stated that such a cooperation capability builds "the ability to think paradoxically and to initiate processes that help firms attain and maintain a moderate level of tension, irrespective of the paradox intensity level." They linked cooperation capability to the balancing of contradictions or to understanding when to enter a cooperative relationship or developing alternatives (Bengtsson et al., 2016: 23). Moreover, they related cooperation capability to managers' attention and ability to handle cooperative tensions (Bengtsson et al., 2016: 28). This reiterates the close link between the individual and inter-firm levels.

The industry context of the cooperative relationship

The structure and characteristics of a market or industry can have a relevant influence on how cooperative relationships function. For example, cooperation between firms has been studied in various highly dynamic contexts, such as high-technology sectors (Bouncken & Friedrich, 2012; Gnyawali & Park, 2011); industries that are highly consolidated and mature (Bonel & Rocco, 2007; Gnyawali, 2006; Lechner & Dowling, 2003); or in markets that pressure firms to set standards and are therefore at an earlier stage (Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Oshri & Weeber, 2006).

More generally, the cooperative and competitive behavior of firms is influenced by the way in which it is socially and economically embedded (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). Therefore, the cooperative structure of the industry plays a crucial role. For example, firms may meet each

other in several arenas, such as at different regional or product markets (Yu & Cannella, 2013) or various industry coalitions (Albers, 2017). Some empirical studies have shown that these competitive interdependencies may yield a state of “tacit collusion” (Ketchen et al., 2004); this may influence if and how competitors cooperate, as opportunistic behavior is always viewed against the backdrop of the partners’ future behavior on other markets (Baum & Korn, 1999; Stephan & Boeker, 2001).

While the above situation refers to the number of economic encounters, the quality of these encounters is interesting for coopetition management as well. For example, a high competitive intensity with regard to similar resources and market segments in which firms operate (Chen, 1996) may influence the characteristics of their coopetitive relationship and vice versa. While contributions on coopetition advocate that balanced (strong) cooperation and competition are advantageous (Park et al., 2014), increased competition between firms may lead to negative emotional responses by managers (Vuori & Huy, 2016), thus potentially amplifying coopetitive tensions. Hence, the competitive intensity can have a strong influence on how managers handle coopetitive relationships (Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014).

With regard to social ties, it has been discussed how social capital (that is, beneficial relationships with third parties) emerges and influences the firms’ actions (Chung et al., 2000). Since a major risk of coopetitive relationships consists of opportunistic behavior and its relatively severe consequences for the other party, such social ties can present additional safeguards (Lui & Ngo, 2005; Parkhe, 1993). Acting opportunistically could reduce the firm’s (access to) social capital. This, in turn, may influence how firms choose their form of agreement; failure to recognize their embeddedness or its mechanisms adequately could lead coopeting partners to deploy more rigid safeguards.

Table 19.1 summarizes and gives an overview of the selected approaches to coopetition management on the three levels of analysis. In the next section, we will briefly present the highlights from an empirical study that created a multi-level model and sheds light on the interdependencies between these levels.

Table 19.1 Summary of concepts for managing coopetition at multiple levels

<i>Individual Level</i>	<i>Inter-firm Level</i>	<i>Industry Level</i>
Developing coopetitive mindsets (Gnyawali & Park, 2009; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016)	– Formal mechanisms: – allocation of tasks and responsibilities (Faems et al., 2010) – structure of the partnership (Hung & Chang, 2012)	Considering the economic interdependencies: – number of encounters, such as multimarket contact (Yu & Cannella, 2013)
integrating the companies’ and the cooperation’s goals (Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016)	– integration or separation of cooperative and competitive domains (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016)	– quality of encounters, such as competitive intensity between the firms (Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Park et al., 2014)
Deploying demarcating behavior (Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016)	Informal mechanisms: – emphasizing the project manager role (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016)	– considering the social interdependencies (Chung et al., 2000; Granovetter, 1985; Parkhe, 1993)
prioritizing cooperation or competition depending on the context (Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016)	– developing trust (Tidström, 2014) – developing a distinct organizational culture (Chen, 2008) – developing a coopetition capability (Bengtsson et al., 2016)	

Connecting different levels of analysis: Insights from coopetition in the trade fair industry

A recent study from the German trade fair industry specified the interdependencies between the different levels of a cooperative relationship (Dorn, 2017). That empirical study focused on two distinct cooperative agreements between competing trade fair companies and was based on over twenty interviews with informants from different hierarchical levels, archival data, and on-site observations.

The German trade fair industry provides an interesting setting in which to study coopetition, as overcapacities, mature trade show topics and formats, and new international market entrants have led competition to increase dramatically. However, more and more trade show organizers have teamed up—despite being fierce rivals—in order to jointly cope with the industry's challenges. The trade fair organizers under investigation own venues and organize a variety of trade shows throughout the year, most of which are large international trade fairs.

In both of the studied cases, two competing trade show organizers joined forces by organizing a joint event. This close form of cooperating is especially critical, as trade fairs are an intangible service and the result of the cooperation does not become apparent until the day of the event itself. Jointly organizing an event also makes it necessary to work closely with the competitor and exchange information on areas such as marketing strategies, customer acquisition (in this context, the exhibitors and visitors), and technical aspects at the event site.

The study identified the aspects that make the relationships between the competitors work, and most of these aspects overlap across different levels of the cooperative agreements. As such, the cooperative relationships both have a certain formal frame, albeit a relatively loose one (case 1: oral agreement; case 2: a simple contract without a clear definition of roles and duties) and, in both cases, the companies refrained from a detailed contract. This was surprising considering that coopetition is connected to opportunism and comparatively high risks of knowledge transfer (Das & Teng, 2000; Yami & Neme, 2014). Additionally, coopetition can involve tensions on the level of the employee (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2014) and loose formal guidelines could promote uncertainty regarding task allocation, thereby amplifying these tensions (Tidström, 2009).

The above-mentioned study (Dorn, 2017) drew on organizational embeddedness to explain these rather loose forms of agreement. It provides the following key insights. First, the informants stated that they considered the industry to be a close family. Specifically, persons from all hierarchical levels exhibited certain links to rival companies. For example, some of the employees and managers have worked with their competitors before. Moreover, frequent meetings and social events in the scope of the industry's associations' activities ensured that the firms' representatives met each other on different occasions throughout each year. There, they exchanged relevant knowledge and discussed recent trends and issues. Additionally, all of the firms exhibit multiple vertical business connections and have competitive encounters in various markets; thus, there is a high economic interdependence. Consequently, a potential explanation for the rather loose formal structures can be sought in the social and economic embeddedness that ensure that the firms will not exploit the others and behave opportunistically, as they might thereby lose access to social capital (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001).

The rather loose formal structure also gave rise to another important aspect: informal interaction mechanisms between firms (see Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). These loose structures enabled the cooperation team to create a trusting atmosphere and to increase cooperation (Dorn, 2017). The project managers were free to communicate to the team and promoted the pursuit of a mutual goal with the competitor, applying certain gestures that established an equal footing

between their firm and the partner (Dorn, 2017). For example, they let the representative of the competitor appear in press meetings and granted them visibility, which increased trust (Dorn, 2017). The informants reported that if the structure had been more rigid and formal, they would not have been as free in their decision making. Therefore, this empowerment seems crucial for effectively working with a competitor.

The study also revealed that deploying such demanding informal mechanisms requires that individuals “overcome” the tensions created by simultaneous cooperation and competition. The developed conceptual model shows how individuals handled certain forms of dissent with high pragmatism and appeared to adopt a long-term perspective that ultimately prevented certain tensions from escalating into conflicts. Similar to the study of Stadler and Van Wassenhove (2016), the present study also highlights that individuals might sometimes blind out competition and focus on cooperative tasks. Regarding the communication, a high transparency and ability to accept criticism in a constructive way seems very important for overcoming tension.

Overall, the study by Dorn (2017) shows how the different levels of a cooperative relationship are intertwined. It also promotes a more holistic perspective on such partnerships, as individual capabilities or the relationship structure alone may not always fully explain why and how cooperation can work.

Conclusion

Coopetition is characterized by the multifaceted interdependencies between the actors involved, which are reflected at the different levels in a cooperative relationship. This chapter has aimed to shed light on the interdependencies between these different levels of analysis—the individual level, the inter-firm level, and the industry level. We started by sketching the current state of the literature and consolidated managerial approaches to handling coopetition for each level. We then presented an empirical study that illustrates the interdependencies between these levels.

From a multi-level perspective, there are ample opportunities for future research on cooperation. For example, the interdependence between the characteristics of the partnership at the inter-firm level and its influence on the individual level and vice versa would benefit from future investigation. As the trade fair study shows, a loose structure in terms of flexible contracts or oral agreements may foster the deployment of informal mechanisms as individuals can independently develop their own approaches and tools to cope with cooperative tensions. However, the exact facilitators, inhibitors, and consequences of this effect are not yet explored. Longitudinal case studies could help to clarify if and under which circumstances there are also negative influences on the individuals if a cooperative relationship’s structures are relatively loose. In doing so, we also suggest more studies to incorporate the characteristics and structure of the industry in their theorizing. As highlighted before, the social or economic embeddedness and the competitive intensity might influence the firms’ and employees’ behavior and therefore could explain how and why firms and the individuals behave in certain ways within a cooperative relationship. From a practitioner perspective, the issue of cooperation capabilities at the firm level and cooperative mindsets at the individual level is of special interest.

It is our hope that this chapter will contribute to a clearer understanding of cooperation and its multifaceted nature. Practitioners should be aware that decisions at one level of analysis might require considerations at other levels. This is especially important when designing a cooperative partnership with a competitor and assigning or hiring individuals who work within such potentially tension-laden relationships.

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