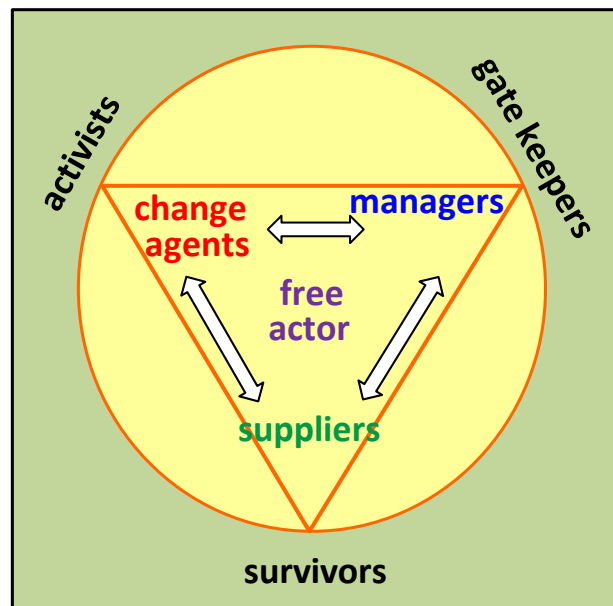


The Triangle of Co-Creation

Focusing on Positions



The Triangle of Co-Creation visualises different positions in the process of generating something new.

Co-creation builds on the contribution of all. When shared interaction leads to results beyond what anyone involved had in mind beforehand, then genuine co-creation has taken place.

This goes beyond what is often seen in interactions between stakeholders, which typically includes:

- Struggle over solutions; with that of the most powerful actor winning.
- Negotiation about interests; actors try to balance give and take to find a solution that serves shared interests. When more attention is given to what actors really need, more options will appear.

We can compare the interaction process to dividing a pie. Struggling over solutions makes the pie smaller, as struggle inevitably leads to damage, leaving less to share. Meanwhile, negotiation about interests might make the pie bigger, since there are always more interests than what was initially put on the table. Co-creation goes even further than this: it means that actors bake a new pie altogether, utilising the qualities of everyone involved.

Actors must learn how to relate to each other in ways that elicit cooperation and creation within their network. The Triangle of Co-Creation illustrates constructive and destructive positions in relation to the structure:

The Triangle of Co-Creation visualises positions people can acquire. Some positions contribute to changes in the existing structure, whilst others do not. Interaction within a network can lead to co-creation of desirable outcomes if actors acknowledge that complementary positions are necessary.

Healthy network processes require actors in complementary positions:

- *Change Agents* as driving forces
- *Managers* taking responsibility for the structure
- *Suppliers* contributing knowledge, labour or whatever is needed

Actors might also adopt positions that do not contribute:

- *Activists* driving change at the cost of the structure
- *Gatekeepers* merely maintaining positions of power
- *Survivors* putting their own interests and survival first

Any network requires at least one free actor:

- *Free actors* do whatever is needed for healthy interaction in a network, whether they have the mandate to do so or not.

The Triangle of Co-Creation visualises positions in relation to an existing structure

The Triangle clarifies the influence of formal structures on what change agents actually do. Change agents are not just doing what they are told; they don't limit themselves to their formal job description. Does their formal mandate matter? Is there optimal task division to enhance innovations in networks? Or is it simply a matter of personal qualities, meaning it would be better to invest in people only? Perhaps it is a combination?

We need to be more precise in distinguishing between functions and actual behaviour. The terminology in use is fuzzy, meaning different things to different people. We redefine functions, positions and roles as follows:

- A *function* is a formalised task in a system, with duties and mandates. This indicates what formal means someone has to influence others, and what others expect them to deliver. Functions relate to power.
- A *role* refers to the behaviour someone exhibits in a system, whether consciously or not. It tells something about his their willingness to act, or lack thereof. Roles relate to ambitions.
- A *position* indicates the actual influence someone has within a system (team, organisation etc.), and the kind of influence someone requires to achieve what they want (as they see, it at least). This relates to interests. The division of positions emerges from interaction and is usually shifting over time.

Someone may have the *function* of a gatekeeper. Meanwhile, they might try to take on the *role* of a change agent, trying to mobilise people to go along with new plans. However, they might not get the *position* of change agent, which depends on the behaviour of the other actors

involved. If they lose the game, they might end up in the position of a survivor, just trying to save their reputation.

The terms used in the Triangle of Co-creation are applicable to functions, positions and roles:

- *Change agents* start an initiative for change or they become partners. They see opportunities or want to solve problems. They share an ambition and this generates energy. Change agents usually find each other in informal networks. To convert their dreams into action, they must connect with others in the system.
- *Managers* feel responsible for the structure. They contribute to change by organising what is necessary, mobilising resources and keeping risk taking within acceptable limits.
- *Suppliers* deliver the building bricks that are needed for change. Experts might offer technical know-how or process skills to add quality to the initiative, for example.

A successful process of co-creation requires all three of the above positions to be fulfilled. However, in each corner of the triangle is the possibility that actors may also act in a disconnected manner:

- *Activists* equally strive for change, but they do not connect with the system. They try to force change from the outside. A network of activists shares an ambition, which gives them energy, but they use it for struggle.
- *Gatekeepers* feel responsible for the structure just like managers, but they resist change. They do not connect with the change movement and defend their own position of power.
- *Survivors* are primarily concerned with their own interests, rather than the good of the group. They are not connected in the sense of feeling responsible for either maintaining the system or changing it for the better.

If the threshold is low for actors to engage in processes of co-creation, the probability of innovations is high. Co-creation requires a high level of trust. Something really new can emerge if people are ready to leave behind old views and patterns, to explore new ideas and practices. Accepting the risk of failure is also a part of the process.

Actors have to overcome their suspicion first

In practice a lot of stakeholders' energy seems to be spent on acquiring positions. Only if there is sufficient acceptance at that level, does co-creation become a possibility. Sadly, many programmes and projects, though intended for stimulating collaboration, never surpass the struggle for positions.

We assume that the competition for acquiring positions is inevitable. Changing structures or procedures won't change this. It is an essential part of any process, necessary to build trust (see also the *Circle of Coherence*). Partners have to test each other, to find out what they can expect if and when things get more complicated. What is needed here is the ability to recognise when

this challenge is helpful, and when it is turning into a destructive struggle.

Looking at the Triangle of Co-Creation, actors in any connected position can carry the suspicion of being their disconnected counterparts in disguise. In the testing stage others seek evidence to confirm this suspicion. If an actor succeeds in convincing them that their suspicion is not justified, trust will grow. On the other hand, if actors are denied their genuine ambition, their role may shift into the disconnected version.

- *Change agents could be activists in disguise*, undermining the structure, positions of power and safety of others. To foster trust, they must show understanding and compassion. On the other hand, others may turn their suspicion into a self-fulfilling prophecy by ignoring the genuine ambitions of sincere change agents.
- *Managers bear the suspicion of being gatekeepers*, primarily concerned with maintaining control. If they don't show any ambition or flexibility, they will confirm what others fear and provoke reactionary strategic behaviour. This in turn reinforces their conviction that strict control is necessary. Such escalating patterns block the way to co-creative, interaction and innovation.
- *Suppliers bear the suspicion of being survivors*, only in it for the money and inclined to deliver minimal output for maximal reward.

Functions are linked to expectations and means of power. Someone with the *function* of manager is likely to perform the *role* of a manager as well, having more means than others to adapt the corresponding *position*. This indicates that functions are linked to suspicion. For example, experts who are hired to assist in a project have the formal function of supplier of knowledge, but the suspicion is that they only contribute for the money; doing the bare minimum, for maximum profit.

These issues are rarely, if ever, a part of the formal agenda. When power games are being played out under the guise of discussing content, it is energy draining. When actors succeed in creating mutual acceptance concerning positions, this releases energy to really learn from each other and co-create.

The Free Actor lubricates healthy interaction.

It is necessary that there is at least one person who is already in a position beyond suspicion. Moreover, this person should have the insight to recognise unhealthy patterns and the skills to intervene, to remove blockages to connection. This is the position and role of the *Free Actor*. They have a central position in the figure of the Triangle of Co-Creation. Observing well-functioning networks, dependent on the voluntary contributions of members, the free actor can almost always be recognised as such.

In rigid and target driven structures there is limited space for free actors. Following this analysis, this is why it is likely that the threshold to do what is necessary to create innovation is high.

Origins:

The tool builds on the Triangle of Change, which was developed by Eelke Wielinga in his PhD thesis "Networks as Living Tissue" (2001). In a research project of Wageningen

University and Research, the model was used to investigate structural barriers and incentives in the Dutch Green Knowledge System for innovators. When these innovators were asked about it, they easily recognised the distinct roles in the model. But when the managers and governors were asked, most did not like to see themselves as gatekeepers, let alone survivors. The research team, with Marijke Dijkshoorn, Jifke Sol, Eelke Wielinga and others, then added new roles, making distinctions between those who do and do not contribute to responsible change. The position of the Free Actor became better understood. The difference between function, role and position also appeared important.

The model was first called the "Triangle of Change 2.0" or "The Advanced Triangle of Change". "The Triangle of Co-Creation" is more appropriate for what it actually illustrates. The original Triangle of Change still has value, but does something different.

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Wielinga, H.E., Dijkshoorn, M., Sol, J. (2010): In Search of Structural Innovations in the Dutch Green knowledge system. In: Darnhofer (ed) 2010: Proceedings of the 9th European IFSA conference, Vienna, Austria.