Expanding Relational Coordination to Tackle Global Crises:
The Relational Society Project

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**Executive Summary**

Relational coordination is a theory supported by a strong evidence base, with real-world applications for bringing stakeholders together to solve challenges of interdependence.

Building on this work, the Relational Society Project has brought together communities from North America, Europe, Africa and Asia to develop relationships at the micro, meso and macro levels to solve population health challenges they are facing. This Project will generate actionable evidence for change and a model of coordinated collective action that citizens and practitioners can implement to address challenges around the globe.
The Complex Nature of the Crises We Face

We live in a world that is highly interconnected - socially, economically, environmentally, and evolutionarily. As a result, our crises are increasingly global in nature. These crises may be cumulative, as with climate change, human-on-human violence, and rising inequality. Or they may be catastrophic, as with pandemics, earthquakes, wildfires, holocausts and riots. These crises are often intertwined over time as cumulative crises give rise to intermittent catastrophic crises. And they increasingly permeate geopolitical boundaries, ultimately affecting life around the globe. These crises therefore require a global response. Yet while human beings are increasingly interdependent, we are also deeply divided by race, gender, economic inequality, nationality, religion, political orientation and more. While humans have the evolutionary capability to respond to crises through either competition or coordination, coordination is often the more practical response.

Building Relational Coordination Within and Across Boundaries

Coordination is defined most simply as the management of interdependence (Malone & Crowston, 1992). To manage growing interdependence, social and organizational behavior theorists have worked to understand how people and their organizations coordinate within and across boundaries to achieve their desired outcomes (Weick & Roberts, 1994; Gittell, 2011, 2006; Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Stephens, 2021). Mary Parker Follett (1949) was the first to offer an explicitly relational approach to coordination:

“It is impossible … to work most effectively at coordination until you have made up your mind where you stand philosophically in regard to the relation of parts to wholes. We have spoken of the relation of departments—sales and production, advertising, and
financial—to each other, but the most profound truth that philosophy has ever given us concerns not only the relation of parts, but the relation of parts to the whole, not to a stationary whole, but to a whole a-making.”

Relational coordination theory was built on this foundation. Relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect help to support frequent, timely, accurate, problem-solving communication among key stakeholders by helping them to see the whole - while relationships of fragmented goals, exclusive knowledge and disrespect give rise to infrequent, delayed, inaccurate and blaming communication among the parties involved. Both of these dynamics form mutually reinforcing cycles. Positive cycles of relational coordination help stakeholders to effectively manage their interdependence, and to find integrative solutions that enable them to achieve desired outcomes. Negative cycles enable some stakeholders to dominate others, resulting in win/lose solutions that ultimately have negative consequences even for the winners, given their interdependence with the losers.

[Insert Exhibit 1]

How can change agents build relational coordination among key stakeholders to enable them to find integrative solutions that meet their needs in a sustainable way? There are three types of interventions to consider - relational, work process, and structural interventions - in the Relational Model of Organizational Change (Gittell, 2016). Together these interventions work to create and sustain positive dynamics of relational coordination, driving desired outcomes such as quality, safety, well-being, efficiency, and the ability to innovate and learn (Exhibit 2).

[Insert Exhibit 2]
**Relational interventions** aim to build shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect, based on principles of social psychology (Edmondson, 2004; Schein & Schein, 2021; Stephens, 2021). These interventions include humble inquiry, psychological safety, relational mapping, sharing RC survey findings with participants, role plays, conversations of interdependence, and more. For relational mapping, facilitators invite participants to identify a work process that needs better coordination and is critical to their organization’s success. As participants identify each role involved in that work process, they often discover more interdependent roles than they were previously aware of. They’re invited to reflect together on the strength of relational ties between each set of roles, using green lines to indicate high, blue to indicate moderate, and red to indicate low levels of relational coordination. Once the network is complete, they reflect on the root causes behind the observed patterns, how desired outcomes might be impacted, and where the biggest opportunities for change might be (Gittell, 2016). We have observed this mapping intervention in many countries and sectors around the world, including community-based chronic care in southwest Scotland, elder care in Tokyo, troubled youth in Denmark, behavioral health in San Francisco, and the repair of oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

**Work process interventions** are rooted in improvement science (Deming, 1986) and occur at three stages of the improvement cycle. *Assessing the current state* can be facilitated by process or value stream mapping, as well as outcome measurement by key stakeholders. *Identifying the desired state* can be facilitated by bringing stakeholders together to hear each other’s needs and identify a shared vision. For *experimentation to close the gap between the current and desired state*, stakeholders identify possible solutions and experiment with new
ways of working together. Through this inclusive process, work process interventions can further strengthen shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect (Gittell, 2016).

Structural interventions redesign existing bureaucratic structures or create new structures to support shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect based on principles of organization design (Argote, 1982; Galbraith, 1974). Some structural interventions, such as shared meetings, shared protocols, and boundary spanners, can be introduced with the support of frontline leaders. Others, such as hiring and training for teamwork, shared conflict resolution practices, and shared information systems, can be introduced by mid-level managers. Still others, such as shared accountability and shared rewards, may require top leadership support or even support from external stakeholders such as investors, customers, suppliers, regulators or policymakers. Shared accountability structures could involve leaders holding each role accountable for its impact on the organization’s success, or policies holding organizations accountable for their impact on outcomes such as population health or environmental impact.

Testing the model of change. Since its initial discovery in the airline industry (Gittell, 2005) and its subsequent take-off in healthcare (Gittell, 2009), relational coordination has been studied widely in the commercial, education, healthcare and human service sectors, and in 36 countries (Exhibit 3). A systematic review has discovered 81 percent of empirical findings to be consistent with the theory (Bolton, Logan & Gittell, 2021). The most reliable findings thus far are about the impact of shared accountability, shared rewards and shared meetings on relational coordination - and about the impact of relational coordination on well-being, learning and innovation.

[Insert Exhibit 3]
Following a plethora of cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies are now exploring how relational coordination happens. Erika Gebo and Brenda Bond (2020) studied two cities that were working with over a dozen stakeholder groups to combat youth violence, comparing them to two matched cities. The two intervention cities carried out relational and work process interventions and experienced significant improvements in relational coordination across their stakeholder networks, relative to the two matched cities. But these improvements in relational coordination were only sustained in the city that also adopted structural interventions, including a boundary spanner role to continue convening stakeholders in shared meetings over time.

In sum, relational coordination is a way of connecting across boundaries to solve challenges of interdependence. Relational coordination is elegant and powerful at the same time, in that it appeals to certain fundamental values - the development of shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect - that are crucial for humans to live in harmony with each other and their natural environment. Relational coordination highlights the inherently relational nature of human action and offers a robust practical approach to coordinating human actions through problem-solving in response to crises. Relational coordination is a practical and flexible theory for analyzing the current state and for creating positive change. It has been supported since 2011 by a global community of scholars and practitioners called the Relational Coordination Collaborative. However, it cannot take on the larger challenge of societal change by itself. To address the interdependencies that humans are experiencing today and the grand challenges that result from these interdependencies, we need to go further.

**Building a Relational Society**
Relational society is a state of generalized reciprocity and robust social capital, created through goodwill, empathetic fellowship, and virtuous social interactions among individuals and stakeholders in a community as parts of a whole (Sharma, 2020). Building a relational society is a monumental enterprise. However, humans are hardwired with an innate capacity for relating with their fellow human beings, for expressing empathy, for building solidarity, for being resilient in crisis. Early in their evolution, as hunter-gatherers, humans learned to value empathy and interdependence as crucial to their survival as a species, providing an impetus for creating a social order embedded in solidarity and recognition of their shared destiny (Rifkin, 2009; von Hippel, 2018). Building a relational society is therefore possible. Building a relational society is also imperative, given the diversity and complexity of grand challenges facing human society and the larger ecosystem around it. As Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in a letter from his Birmingham Alabama jail cell (1963), humans are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not enough to surmount the core challenges of our day.

The Relational Society Framework offers a roadmap for how to build a relational society through three interconnected levels of engagement as shown in Exhibit 4. At the micro level, human empathy is an essential underpinning for belonging and connection; at the meso level, relational coordination enables interdependent stakeholders to engage in coordinated collective action to achieve shared goals; and at the macro level, equitable economic and social policies can be designed to support these dynamics. Actions at these three levels are in a state of constant reciprocal action and adaptation, echoing the dynamic nature of multiple ecosystems in the universe. We hypothesize that building sustainable connections and iterative feedback
loops at these three levels of engagement - from empathy to relational coordination to supportive policies and institutions - will enable people to work effectively together to address a wide range of crises.

[Insert Exhibit 4]

**Micro level of engagement.** Building empathetic connections is foundational to building a relational society. Empathetic connections between individuals have been core to the evolutionary success of humans and are essential to individual health and well-being. These connections are even more crucial in times of crisis, as they tend to unlock pathways to solidarity based on shared values, in turn enabling agency for all to respond to crisis and initiate coordinated collective action for a shared purpose. The power of empathetic connection was apparent in the public outrage in the United States and many countries around the world in response to George Floyd being brutalized and killed at the hands of police in Minneapolis Minnesota in Spring 2020.

**Meso level of engagement.** Relational coordination enables stakeholders to engage in coordinated collective action by developing shared knowledge of each other’s roles and capabilities, identifying shared goals in the presence of competing goals, and developing mutual respect. These high quality relationships in turn help stakeholders to engage in timely, accurate, problem-solving communication to address challenges that no one stakeholder – no matter how powerful - can address on their own (Caldwell, Roehrich & George, 2017). While this process of relational coordination often starts through micro interventions such as humble inquiry to build empathetic connections among diverse individuals, structural interventions like shared
accountability and shared rewards are needed to support and sustain it, as shown above, including structural interventions developed at the macro level.

**Macro level of engagement.** A well-functioning relational society requires supportive policies and institutions at the macro level that complement empathy-driven engagement at the micro level and coordinated collective action among stakeholders at the meso level. It is imperative that these macro policies and institutions are consistent with democratic governance principles for distributing public goods across communities and sectors. An absence of democratic governance of public goods, especially over a sustained period of time, poses a grave risk to the sustenance of an equitable societal order, pitting various stakeholder groups against each other in pursuit of a greater share of finite public goods.

Hardin (1968) called this competition over finite public goods - “a pasture open to all” - the tragedy of the commons; i.e., “when each [individual] is locked into a system that compels him to increase his [share] without limit in a world that is limited.” Hardin noted that this tragedy of freedom [to choose] in a commons “has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension of morality,” perhaps akin to Bentham’s goal for “the greatest good for the greatest number [Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)].” Elinor Ostrom, a political economist and a Nobel Laureate, proposed a set of design principles for tackling Hardin's tragedy of the commons. Citing evidence from numerous studies in which public goods or common pool resources were managed successfully with neither centralized governmental control nor privatization, Ostrom argued for a third approach to resolving the problem of the commons: the design of durable cooperative institutions organized and governed by the resource users themselves. Ostrom proposed that such nested enterprises must be established within the
hierarchy of larger resource systems and political jurisdictions in order to increase the probability of lasting collective action by users of shared resources (Ostrom, 1990, 2010).

While collective action by users of shared resources can resolve the problem of the commons, macro-level governmental interventions are essential to creating a viable societal order in times of major crisis. The American Rescue Plan (2021) is an apt example, aimed at repairing widespread devastation brought upon millions of individuals, families, and small- to mid-size entrepreneurs by the COVID-19 pandemic, preceded by five decades of growing inequality and social breakdown. The American Rescue Plan is a systematic intervention at the macro level to rebuild the American economy more equitably from the bottom-up. There are other parallels of national and international undertakings amidst monumental global crises, such as the New Deal, the Marshall Plan to help Western Europe rebuild post-WWII, the Great Society, and the 2021 global COVAX initiative co-led by the World Health Organization to accelerate equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Equitable fiscal and social policies like these, carried out at a large scale, are imperative for breathing new life into the lives of citizens and businesses after catastrophic events and restoring public faith in governance structures at the macro level.

**The Relational Society Project: Local Action for Global Solutions**

We launched the Relational Society Project in Summer 2020 to begin the process of building a more relational society based on the Relational Society Framework. This project is being piloted in nine communities in the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Nigeria, Pakistan and China, with a focus on meeting the health and social needs of vulnerable populations (see Exhibit 5). These nine communities were chosen for their commitment to
empathy-driven relational approaches to addressing the health and social needs of vulnerable populations. Why this focus? Growing evidence suggests that persistent health and socioeconomic disparities are emerging as a public health crisis around the globe (Murray et al., 2020; Robertson & Chernof, 2020; Finkelstein et al., 2020; Francis, 2019; Solomon & Kanter, 2018), further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet health and well-being are foundational for a relational society because they are vital for individual success and for creating vibrant communities and inclusive economic growth. Because much of our health is created not in doctors’ offices or hospitals but in our homes and communities (Evans & Stoddart, 1990), interdependent efforts will be required from multiple stakeholders across health and community-based social sectors.

[Insert Exhibit 5]

In each community, we have started by observing what local stakeholders are already doing in response to existing crises. In Cincinnati Ohio, the largest children’s hospital there has developed a network of key stakeholders to create more equitable outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. In Haderslev Denmark, the municipality is launching an initiative among key stakeholders to focus on improving care in the first 1000 days in the lives of vulnerable children. In Abuja Nigeria, non-profit groups are working with the Ministry of Health and regional stakeholders to address a long standing crisis of poor childbirth outcomes. In North Cumbria UK, the National Health Service is experimenting with integrated care models to improve the physical and social well-being of the local population. In Portland Oregon, a local stakeholder network was created to partner between health providers and community organizations to provide culturally sensitive care to diverse populations. In Peshawar Pakistan,
regional leaders, healthcare providers and community organizations have partnered to respond to the pandemic in a way that is far more collaborative than with previous crises. In Oslo Norway and Shanghai China, health systems are partnering with stakeholders in the primary and specialty care sectors to improve population health outcomes with fewer wasted resources. And in New Orleans Louisiana, a local health system is working with its own clinicians, patients and community stakeholders to improve health and social outcomes for vulnerable elders.

Each community is leveraging the Relational Society Framework to first understand the relational work that stakeholders are already engaged in, then strengthen and sustain it by tailoring relational coordination and other interventions to meet local needs. Through this experiment, the Relational Society Project aims to demonstrate how citizens and stakeholders at multiple levels of interdependence can leverage relational coordination to address the systemic power differentials and relational breakdowns at the root of our most daunting population health challenges, then apply this knowledge to other grand challenges humans are facing.

Conclusion

Building and sustaining a more relational society is a lofty aim. However, the lack of cohesive social action for the common good is unacceptable when the very future of our planet and the survival of our species are in peril. We expect that the Relational Society Project will generate actionable evidence for change and a model of coordinated collective action that citizens and practitioners of all stripes can implement to address grand challenges around the globe. We are hopeful that these efforts will be well underway before the next global crisis that
may further divide our society, paralyze our economy, and threaten our natural habitat and survival.
Exhibit 1: Mutually reinforcing cycles of relational coordination for better or worse
Exhibit 2: The Relational Model of Organizational Change

Organizational Structures
- Select & Train for Teamwork
- Relational Job Design
- Shared Accountability & Rewards
- Shared Conflict Resolution
- Boundary Spanner Roles
- Relational Leadership
- Shared Meetings & Huddles
- Shared Protocols
- Shared Information Systems
- Shared Space

Relational Coordination
- Frequent
- Timely
- Accurate
- Problem-Solving
- Communication
- Shared Goals
- Shared Knowledge
- Mutual Respect

Performance Outcomes
- Quality & Safety
- Efficiency & Finance
- Learning & Innovation
- Worker Well-Being

Relational Interventions
- Psychological Safety
- Empathetic Connection
- Humble Inquiry

Work Process Interventions
- Assess Current State
- Identify Desired State
- Experiment to Close the Gap
Exhibit 3: Industry and country contexts for studies of relational coordination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry contexts (n = 73)</th>
<th>Education Sector</th>
<th>Country contexts (n = 36)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial Sector</td>
<td>Education Sector</td>
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<td>• Early child education</td>
<td>• Canada</td>
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<td>• Airlines</td>
<td>• E-learning</td>
<td>• United States</td>
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<td>• Asset management</td>
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<td>• Banking</td>
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<td>• Consulting</td>
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<td>• Manufacturing</td>
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<td>• Veterinary care</td>
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Exhibit 4: The Relational Society Framework at three levels of engagement

- **Macro: Institutional Context**
  Social policies for healthy, equitable communities

- **Meso: Coordinated Collective Action**
  Relational coordination among key stakeholders and the organizational structures that support it

- **Micro: Human Empathy Among Individuals**
  Listening, needs assessment, shared decision making and self-determination tools
Exhibit 5: The Relational Society Project

Building a Relational Society
Local Action for Global Solutions

Macro: Institutional Context
Social policies for healthy, equitable communities

Meso: Coordinated Collective Action
Relational coordination among key stakeholders and the organizational structures that support it

Micro: Human Empathy Among Individuals
Listening, needs assessment, shared decision making and self-determination tools

Shanghai China
Ohio USA
Oslo Norway
Oregon USA
North Cumbria UK
Louisiana USA

Abuja Nigeria
Peshawar Pakistan
Haderslev Denmark
References


