A New Management Meme for Arctic 2050 Projects

THE PROBLEM

The road is long, supplies are costly, seasons are short, fortune is fickle.

Development in the Arctic, driven in part by climate change, is constrained by these factors; whether that development is new infrastructure such as ports, roads, fiber optics or repairing of existing infrastructure caused by degrading permafrost. This work will be costly and difficult to achieve and may be too high for any one business, region or country to be able to afford.

Scale is what drives these decisions and is the prime impediment to tackling these problems. A new approach utilizing multiple parties, multiple users, multiple uses and multiple financiers - an alignment of strengths in ways that make a systems weaknesses irrelevant – is needed.

CONFLICT — COMPETE — COOPERATE — COLLABORATE

These projects are highly complex dealing with multiple parties in different countries, different businesses, as well with different cultures. Our problem of practice then becomes how can people work together coming from different places and cultures shift on a scale from outright conflict; to competition with only winners and losers; to cooperation with a negotiated solution; to a true collaborative approach where new and innovative solutions can be found to address this wicked problem.

One of the key features of a wicked problem is that there is no single "solution" to the problem. Collaboration, by its very nature—where individuals or organizations seek to find a way to build on the strengths of all parties—is possibly the only approach to follow in these situations.

Our goal - to explore factors which can curb or facilitate collaboration in projects that are made up of multiple parties (entities) each of which come to a project with unique motivations and where parties originate from multiple nationalities and cultures.

THE TAKE AWAYS

FIRST - understanding, organizing and managing for cultural differences is a go/no go process – if you don't lead, manage, train and plan for those different cultures you won't get through the gate, but once you're through cultural awareness training alone will not guarantee collaboration.

SECOND - in this environment getting people, the team, to relate or connect is key and is based on empathy and trust Empathy is first on the list and focuses on understanding the other parties constraints, expectations and needs, not just feelings.

THIRD - without trust there will be no collaboration. You are trusted or not and it can be lost in a moment. Trust is earned and is built on experience, it is based on action and it takes time and that time must be built into the process.

FOURTH - the creation of a fused identity is the outcome of empathy and trust. A fused identity is the result of individual identities coming together in the context of the team and project – parent, engineer, environmentalist, project manager – where your identity is not lost and your voice is heard.

FIFTH - The ability to adapt and continue to refine your vision, one that morphs and grows from the collective view as you learn more about your universe is key to any complex system or wicked problem which work in the Arctic surely is. Rather than a shared vision an ADAPTIVE SHARED VISION is key. This requires an iterative approach, eating the elephant one bite at a time, which interestingly enough provides the time needed to build trust, learn about each other through empathy and along the road create a fused identity. It is a system with the goal of true collaboration.

> If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea. — Antoine de Saint-Exupery

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Our research was designed to identify and understand how a variety of factors such as culture, identity, interconnectedness, trust, empathy, shared vision facilitate collaboration in such settings. In particular, we address the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What factors explain successful transnational, cross-cultural multiparty collaboration?

RQ2: What role do culture, cultural intelligence, and identity and role identity play in facilitating multi-party collaboration in cross-border settings involving multiple cultures?

RQ3: What are the relationships between empathy, trust and shared vision as they influence collaboration?

RQ4: How can these factors be combined into an impactful model of cross-cultural collaboration?

Utilizing a sequential mixed methods approach – our research encompassed 30 hours of interviews totaling nearly 500 pages of transcripts representing seven countries and five indigenous populations from business, military, finance, NGO and trade organizations. A survey was sent via email to approximately 2000 participants located in or working in the Arctic or working on Arctic projects. The final sample consisted 300 participants that represented eleven national/cultural sectors - 63% representing as Anglo, 12% Nordic European and 7.5% Indigenous. Work was conducted in a two year period from 2015 - 2017.

Three key management theories framed our problem of practice: Intentional Change Theory, which defines how individuals and groups can effectively work together based on shared vision, interconnectedness, empathy and trust; Social Identity Theory which grounds our analysis of identity both at the individual, role and group level; and Cultural Intelligence Theory which helps us understand the role and impact of culture as people from different cultures collaborate.
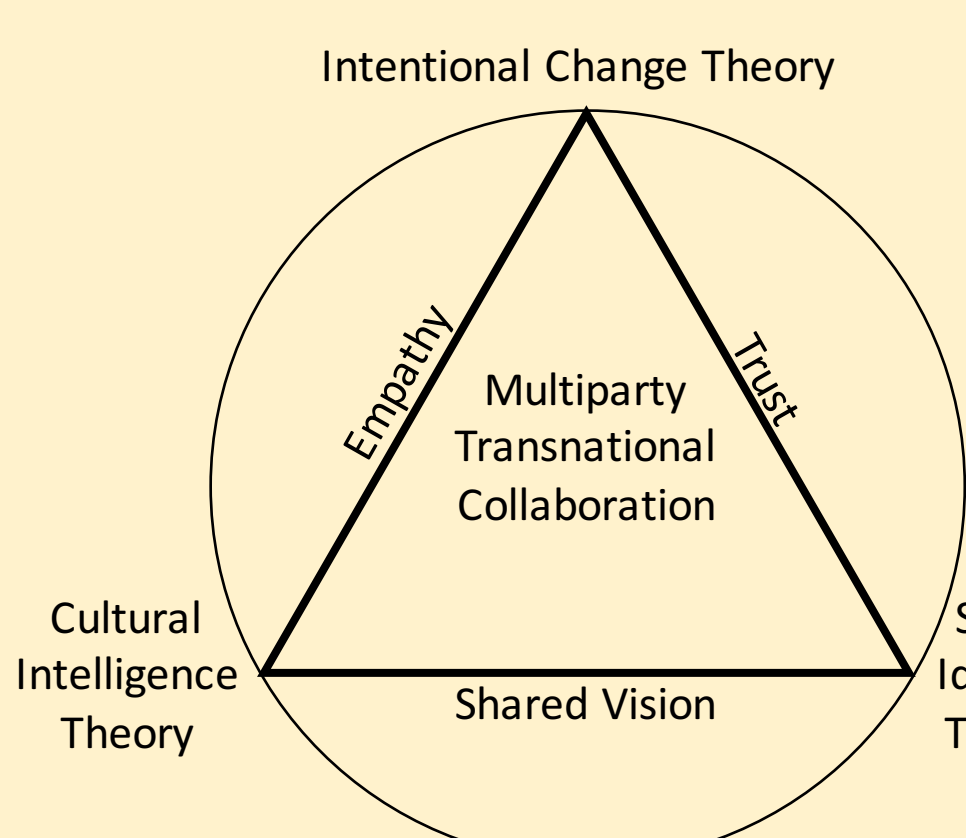
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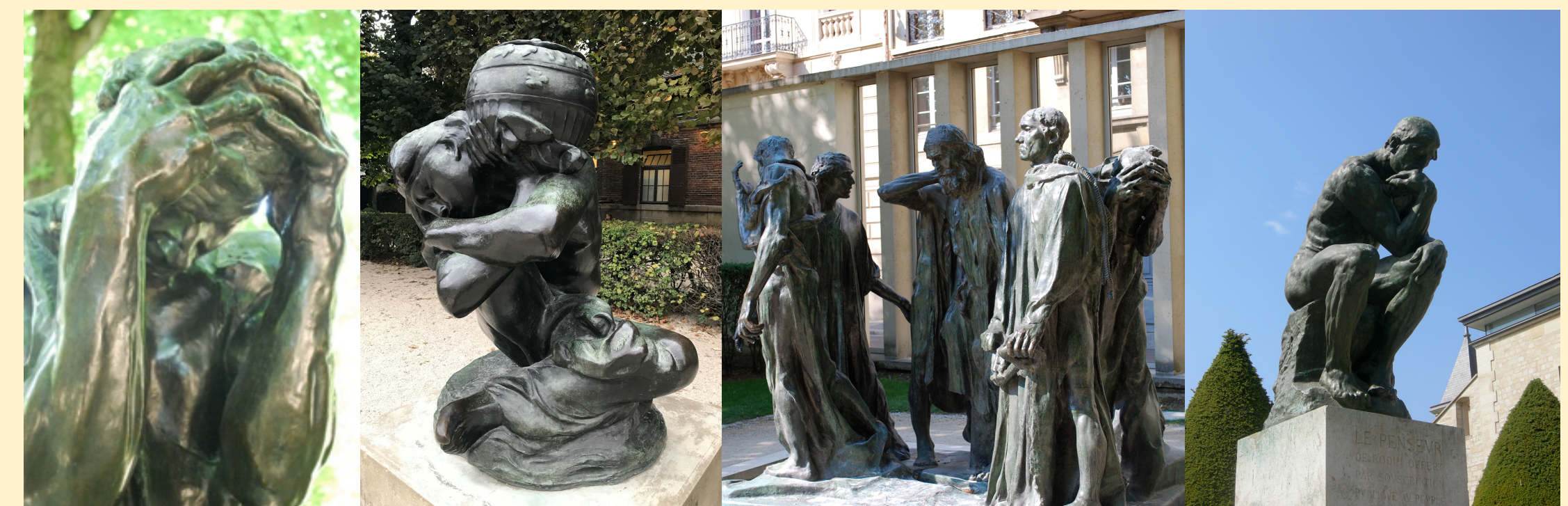
The findings from our research, like the problem itself, are nuanced and in some cases quite subtle:

Finding 1: Differences in cultures need to be acknowledged, respected and managed but once they are accommodated they have no additional impact on collaboration.

Finding 2: The degree of connectedness or interconnectedness as demonstrated with trust and empathy are key drivers in achieving collaborative success, without these two components collaboration will not take place.

Finding 3: Identity is varied, no individual has a single identity. Individual identity must be allowed to come out, too strong of a group identity (corporate, professional or cultural) will impede collaboration.

Finding 4: A unified shared vision is an impediment to a collaborative environment, a shared understanding of the greater purpose, while allowing the constructive conflict of differing visions are necessary to create a collaborative environment.

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