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Pro-active neutrality: The key to understanding creative facilitation

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Pro-active neutrality: The key to understanding creative facilitation.

Abstract: Facilitation is a critical means of supporting creative processes in teams. Previous studies have shown that neutrality is central to effective facilitation but no clear conceptualisation of neutrality has been provided to date. The aim of this paper is to explore how neutrality is enacted by facilitators, what its key elements and mechanisms are, and how it is perceived in the creative facilitation context. We adopt a theory building mode and conduct an in-depth case study, following an innovation project in the IT sector with a series of facilitated creativity workshops. Our results show that neutrality is a multi-dimensional construct that interacts with several outcome dimensions of facilitation, i.e. people, process and product. We introduce a pro-active neutrality framework, which explains the mechanisms of neutrality in facilitation and thereby extend theory on both neutrality and facilitation. We further outline a number of propositions that could be explored by future research as well as provide important creativity management implications that will enhance creativity and innovation in the workplace.

Keywords: creativity, facilitation, neutrality, case study

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly changing business environment, creativity and innovation are key determinants of successful organizational performance and a vital source of competitive advantage (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). Particularly, creativity management is at the centre of organizational innovation (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996) and thus its antecedents and enablers have been an ongoing subject of investigation (e.g. Caniels, De Stobbeleir, & De Clippeleer, 2014; Chong & Ma, 2010). Whereas prior creativity management research shows that

factors such as appropriate methodological support (Schöfer, Maranzana, Aoussat, Bersano, & Buisine, 2018) and a specific design of space (Lewis & Moultrie, 2005) can enhance employees' creativity, it is direct human facilitation, in conjunction with effective creativity management, that is critical to the optimal use of these methods and physical spaces (Lewis & Moultrie, 2005).

Facilitation is defined as a practice where a people- and content-neutral person (Rasmussen, 2011) helps a team to effectively reach a desired outcome by bringing process and structure to interactions (Bens, 2012; Schwarz, 2002). Although prior studies have shown that groups assisted by trained facilitators (particularly when dealing with creativity) perform better (e.g. Isaksen & Gaulin, 2005; Offner, Kramer, & Winter, 1996; Oxley, Dzindolet, & Paulus, 1996), questions remain regarding how facilitation actually mediates team processes in practice. Specifically, there are several features that characterise facilitation as a general practice and are considered core, while not being clearly defined in the literature. In particular, it is the concept of facilitator's 'neutrality' that allows facilitators to be a 'third-party' rather than a member of the team, and which has been mentioned by numerous authors as a key differentiating feature of facilitation (e.g. Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk, & Berger, 2007; Lee et al., 2018). Despite forming a defining feature of facilitation (Rasmussen, 2011), there is no a coherent conceptualisation of neutrality able to explain its varied descriptions across the literature, and further, little is known about its underpinning elements and mechanisms. As such, we aim to extend current understanding of facilitation in the innovation context and to reconceptualise facilitator's neutrality to better align with the reality of facilitation in practice.

We address this research aim via two Research Questions (RQ): *How is facilitation performed and perceived in the innovation context?* and *How is neutrality enacted by facilitators and what are its key elements and mechanisms?* This is supported by an in-depth case study. In answering

the RQ's we contribute to theory on creativity and facilitation by reconceptualising neutrality as one of the fundamental concepts in facilitation and provide important managerial implications.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Creativity and facilitation

Creativity, understood as the development of novel and useful product, service or process ideas, is a key driver for innovation (Amabile et al., 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993) and occurs throughout the innovation process (Anderson et al., 2014; Paulus, 2002). Prior studies have explored a range of antecedents for team creativity (e.g. Barczak, Lassk, & Mulki, 2010; Caniels et al., 2014), also in the organisational context where creativity is determined by organizational and workplace characteristics (Constantine, 2001). In this context, a vital perspective is a sociocultural approach, which conceptualises creativity as a social construction (Glăveanu, 2015, 2018) that emerges collaboratively over time, through encounters between team members (Sawyer, 2012). A common and important means for improving team creativity in practice is group facilitation (e.g. Hatcher et al., 2018; Oxley et al., 1996), where a trained facilitator assists the team through the creative process. In the light of the organisational and creativity management literatures, facilitation can be seen as a key means to manage and organise creativity in the workplace (Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007). A skilled facilitator is able to suggest methods, ask questions, and challenge the team, to help them reach their creative potential (J.-A. Stewart, 2006). Through this, he or she can indirectly influence the organisational climate and culture, or even inspire more facilitative leadership styles in management, that foster creativity. Facilitators are often an external third party in order to allow them to remain 'neutral' towards the team, its members, and their ideas (in comparison to, for example, a team leader). At the same time, drawing

on the sociocultural view, the role of the facilitator in the team is critically important, seeing as their presence during the creative process and their active dialogue with the team would affect how ideas are conceptualised (Glăveanu, 2018). Further, we expect that this would vary depending on the level of facilitator's neutrality towards the team, as it regulates the extent of possible interventions in the team creative process (Astor, 2007; Kramer, Fleming, & Mannis, 2001; Rasmussen, 2011). As such, the concept of neutrality is central to facilitator's role in a creative context and hence needs a more detailed understanding in order to support creativity both in teams and at the organisational level. This is mirrored by a number of calls for further definition of creative support, including facilitation, in the creativity management literature more generally (Berman & Kim, 2010; Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007).

Facilitation and neutrality

Facilitation is a rather new area of research interest, being only vaguely described in current creativity management research (Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007). Consequently, current theoretical understanding of the facilitator's role is still limited, and while it provides a basic understanding of the phenomenon, it also leaves many questions unanswered. Scholars generally agree on the supportive role of the facilitator, their overall goal of improving group's effectiveness, focus on influencing process, and 'neutrality' towards the people and content (Berry, 1993; Schwarz, 2002; J.-A. Stewart, 2006). However, prior research does not specify the scope of facilitator's neutrality, its link to decision-making authority, and the extent this affects their responsibility for outcomes. For example, Schwarz (2002) describes the facilitator as a person "(...) *who is substantively neutral, and who has no substantive decision-making authority (...)*" (p. 5). Rasmussen (2011) adds to this by stating that the facilitator should act person- and content-neutral. Bens (2012) extends this by linking facilitation to outcome, defining the facilitator as "*one who contributes*

structure and process to interactions so groups are able to function effectively and make high-quality decisions. (...)” (p. 5). However, there is no current explanation of neutrality in facilitation that captures the range of attributed behaviours, besides pragmatically advising the facilitator to be an “external third party” (Schwarz, 2002). This is elaborated by Stewart (2006), who highlights that it is not clear what it means for a facilitator to act effectively and to what extent the facilitator is able to control the external factors affecting the group. Ultimately, this lack of understanding with respect to facilitator’s neutrality is fundamental barrier to further theory development in this area.

Neutrality in other fields

Neutrality is a concept discussed across fields, such as philosophy, politics, jurisdiction and mediation (e.g. Agius & Devine, 2011; Astor, 2007). In particular, the mediation literature links to facilitation as conceptualised in the creativity and innovation context, and provides a possible foundation for understanding the varied aspects of facilitator’s neutrality described above.

While neutrality is commonly understood as a feature or characteristics of a person or practice such as facilitation or mediation, in this paper we take a broader process view on neutrality as something that can be enacted and practiced in itself, rather than being an attribute of another activity. Having said that, the majority of researchers in mediation research agree that neutrality is a complex concept, which is “*not singular in nature (...); it comprises several parts*” (Cohen, Dattner, & Luxenburg, 1999), but disagree on its definition (Astor, 2007). Definitions include: “*(1) Low or no power over the parties, (2) high credibility with the parties, (3) focus on the process rather than outcome, and (4) the importance of rationality and good information in achieving settlements.*” (Bernard, Folger, Weingarten, & Zumeta, 1984 in Cohen et al., 1999), as well as frequent links to impartiality and equidistance as other components of neutrality (Cohen et al.,

1999). Here, *impartiality* is passive and refers to the lack of engagement on any side and having an unbiased relationship with the parties, while *equidistance* is active and refers to equally assisting the parties, in order to create symmetry in the process (Cohen et al., 1999). In addition, neutrality is often related to fairness, which can be divided into procedural fairness – referring to the process, and distributive fairness – referring to the outcome (Gilliland, 1993). Hence, fairness and impartiality are sometimes seen as conflicting since reaching a fair outcome usually requires intervention, which sacrifices impartiality (Astor, 2007).

While in both mediation and facilitation neutrality is viewed at the individual and interpersonal level, there are two important reasons why the definitions from mediation cannot be directly transferred to facilitation. First, mediation usually happens at the dyadic or triadic level with the aim to improve relationships between the mediated parties (Wall, Stark, & Standifer, 2001), while facilitation is commonly applied in teams of three or more people but treated collectively (Dolan & Lingham, 2008) rather than as separate parties. Therefore, mediators deal with different group dynamics and structure than facilitators (G. L. Stewart, 2006). Second, mediation is typical for resolving conflict situations (Wall et al., 2001), which implies a different relationship between the mediator and the mediated parties, compared to the facilitator and the team. Therefore, it is necessary to reconceptualise neutrality with respect to the facilitation context.

Research framework

Drawing on the mediation approach to neutrality, and contrasting it with the facilitation literature, we identify seven elements associated with current descriptions of facilitator's neutrality: impartiality, equidistance, fairness, authority/power, focus, responsibility and decision making. We explore each of these elements with respect to three core dimensions of facilitation, drawn from prior works on creativity management and innovation: people, process and product

(content). By doing so, we aim to determine the elements contributing to facilitator’s neutrality and how are they enacted in practice. The research framework with the operationalised definitions of the above concepts is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research framework including operationalised constructs for the purpose of the case study.

Impartiality	Is the facilitator expressing any judgements or opinions about people, concepts, ideas etc.?
Equidistance	Does the facilitator actively create symmetry in the process, assists participants equally, encourages disclosure of information (even if it means temporary support for someone)?
Fairness	Is the facilitation process transparent and honest, with a two-way communication and the opportunity to participate and give feedback? (procedural fairness only)
Focus	What is the facilitator focusing on (in speaking/gestures)? Is it process-, people- or content-related?
Responsibility	What is the facilitator’s responsibility with respect to each dimension?
Decision-making	Does the facilitator have decision-making authority in any of these dimensions? What kind of decisions does he or she make?
Power/authority	Does the facilitator have authority in the process? What is the power relationship and hierarchy between him/her and the participants?
People	Is the facilitator’s action concerning the workshop participants directly? Is it personal?
Process	Is the facilitator’s action concerning the process? Does it involve method choice, time management, or other organizational issues?
Product (content)	Is the facilitator’s action concerning the company’s product or the content of the workshop? Does the facilitator refer to ideas and solutions being discussed?

Given the lack of theory on neutrality in facilitation, this study adopts a theory building mode and aims to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: How is facilitation performed and perceived in the innovation context?

RQ2: How is neutrality enacted by facilitators and what are its key elements and mechanisms?

METHODOLOGY

The literature review revealed major theoretical gaps in facilitation. Specifically, while acknowledging the importance of neutrality, prior empirical research does not explain how

neutrality is enacted in the facilitation context. Thus, theory building is needed (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As such, an exploratory approach was adopted using a single in-depth case study approach (Yin, 2014), which is especially appropriate for building in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and allows closer investigation of theoretical constructs (Siggelkow, 2007). In particular, a single case can provide more depth and richness to theory by unfolding how constructs interact in a specific setting (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

Case selection

The company chosen for this study was a Danish SME in the IT sector. The case was a radical innovation project to develop a new product, allowing the company to target new customer groups. The creative stage of the project was facilitated by a professional with extensive experience in facilitation of teams in the innovation context. The case was selected for the three main criteria: its theoretical suitability for illustrating the external facilitation, the contextual suitability for creativity and innovation, and practical suitability, including accessibility and completeness of the case.

The case project ran in four stages: (1) identifying user needs and first ideas, (2) finding the specifications for the concept, (3) product development, and (4) testing. The four-stage approach was developed specifically for this project. The company had no prior experience with external facilitation in the innovation process.

The observations took place during the three consecutive workshops in the first stage of the project, which was the most open-ended and creative part, and thus the most suitable for the purpose of our research. In this stage, the participants followed a Double Diamond design approach (Brown, 2009), which is a method of organising a creative process into four divergent and convergent phases: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver, the two former ones focused on

defining the problem and the two latter ones on finding a solution¹. Since this approach allows for observation of both divergent and convergent phases, it was suitable for the study as it helped to obtain a more complete picture of facilitator's role in different aspects of the creative process.

Data collection

Data collection for this study took place over a period of three months, from February to April 2017, in which one of the researchers was following the facilitated project workshops in the company. The role of the researcher was limited to being a silent observer, and did not involve participation in the workshops. As video recording was not allowed, reporting was done according to standard procedure for field notes, as explained in the section below. The participants were aware of the researcher's presence in the room during the workshops, however, it has not been reported as disturbing by any of them. While it might have had a minor influence on the process, it was constant throughout all the workshops, and thus we consider it negligible. Furthermore, the confidentiality of data has been secured by an agreement with the case company prior to data collection. The results of this paper were presented to and approved by the key individuals involved in the study, following the member check procedure, which is a common strategy in qualitative research to ensure credibility of data, and thus study validity (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, due to the qualitative character of the work described above, triangulation of methods and sources was used to achieve a higher level of reliability and validity (Patton, 1999, 2002). We used the three following types of data: observations of the workshops, semi-structured

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.justinmind.com/blog/double-diamond-model-what-is-should-you-use/> on October 14th, 2019.

interviews with the facilitator and the participants after the first and last workshop (replaced with a qualitative survey after the second workshop), and written documentation from the project.

Observations

Direct observation took place during the three consecutive project workshops in the case company. The duration of the workshops was from one to two days, ca. six hours per day. The setup included six participants from different departments in the company, including sales, marketing and software development, and the process was run by a professional facilitator from a consulting company. During each workshop field notes were taken according to the research framework, and following the standard research practice when direct recordings are not possible (Bryman, 2012). This setup allowed for direct observations of facilitator's actions during the sessions and the participants' responses to those actions, as well as the interactions within the team and between the team and the facilitator.

Interviews

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted: four with the workshop facilitator, eleven with the participants (the majority of the participants were interviewed twice – after the first and last workshop), and one follow-up with a company representative six months after the project ended. The questions to the facilitator and the participants were targeted at understanding how the experienced facilitation practice and facilitator's neutrality were perceived. Since it was not possible to arrange interviews after the second workshop, an online questionnaire was sent to the participants. It was based on the interview questions and designed for qualitative analysis. The purpose was to keep track of how the participants' perceptions changed throughout the project. Finally, the follow-up interview with the company representative focused on the results of the

project and the impact of the facilitated workshops on the company. The overview of data collection for the case study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of data collection for the study.

Workshop theme	Methods used	Duration	Interviews with the facilitator	Interviews with the participants	Qualitative online survey responses	Direct observation
Workshop 1: problem definition	Customer journey, fishbone diagram, personas	1 day	2	6	-	6 h
Workshop 2: ideation	Points of view, brainstorming, brainwriting 6-3-5	2 days	1	-	4	12 h
Workshop 3: concept development	Brainstorming, value proposition canvas, prototyping	2 days	1	5	-	12 h
Total	-	5 days	4	11	4	30 h

Secondary documentation

The written documentation of the workshops was obtained from the facilitator and the consulting company. It included the PowerPoint slides presented at each workshop and the facilitator's internal agenda for each session, which was not explicitly communicated to the participants, but contained the exercise flow and the timing. Furthermore, the case company provided a documentation of the innovation process to be followed, which was part of an agreement between them and the consulting firm. This data was used to enhance understanding of the facilitation process and the context in which it was taking place.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and coded according to the elements of the research framework, but allowing for the emergence of new codes where needed. The responses to the online questionnaire and the field notes from the observations were coded using the same coding scheme. The coding was done in Atlas.ti 8 software, and the grouping of the codes and the quotes

was done in Excel. We used the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), and extracted themes by comparing the researcher's observations with participants' and facilitator's views across the three workshops. The primary coding was done by one researcher, while the grouping of codes and theme building involved all co-authors, who were familiarised with the data and took active part in interpreting it. In practice, this process was done via a number of iterative workshops, where one researcher's interpretations were presented and discussed with the other co-authors (independent of data collection). This resulted in the refined versions of the themes, which were then confronted with the data again, strengthened and further developed to build the final results. This followed general case research best practice in ensuring iterative, multiple perspectives on the data, the coding the theme development, and the final results, as outlined by (Neuman, 1997, pp. 512–514).

RESULTS

This research produced two main results in the facilitation context. First, it provided insight into facilitator's neutrality as a multi-dimensional construct. Second, it revealed an interaction between neutrality and outcome dimensions of facilitation, i.e. people, process, and product (content).

Facilitation in context

Before coming to the main results it is important to understand that our study showed a representative case of external facilitation and followed prior descriptions in highlighting neutrality, responsibility, and authority, as essential aspects of facilitation practice, as well as draw attention to the issue of participant's expectations towards the facilitation process. Accordingly,

we also discuss the outcomes of the case as a creative process, which were satisfactory with respect to the current understanding of facilitation and its expected effects.

First, the facilitator faced a range of practical responsibilities, such as providing the relevant methods and materials for the workshop, time management, and organisation, as well as guiding and assisting the team in reaching their goals: “(...) *guiding the process so we do the different steps and this design thinking process (...)*” [Participant 6] and “(...) *help us reach our different goals or expectations*” [Participant 3]. The facilitator added that creating a shared understanding and team learning were also important: “(...) *to move them [the participants], (...)* I mean I feel it's my responsibility that they have... this is also learning about design thinking and moving their mind-set”. Most participants recognised this and found it beneficial to have their views challenged and to see different perspectives on a problem.

In terms of responsibility, this was seen either as shared between the facilitator and the team: “(...) *I don't believe it's only the facilitator's job to make us reach our outcome. It's also our own responsibility to reach it (...)*” [Participant 3] or more on the facilitator side: “*I think when it's a job she has at COMPANY NAME [she is] of course interested it leads to something useful (...)*” [Participant 6]. Similarly, setting up clear goals and aligning the expectations between the facilitator and the participants showed a range of views. While clear for the facilitator, the participants found the workshop goals ambiguous: “*I'm not sure what I expected exactly (...)*” and others, when asked what they did not like about the workshops, said “*Not knowing the complete plan. (...)*” [From survey].

Finally, we also observed that a certain level of authority and power is required for the facilitator to be able to run the process smoothly. The power relationship between the facilitator and the team evolved throughout the project, and also determined to what extent the facilitator could be neutral,

as an external person. For example, the first workshop had a very fixed program, with the facilitator acting more as a lecturer, presenting the content and strictly guiding the exercises, creating a visible distance between herself and the participants. In contrast, the last workshop was more open with regards to structure, allowing the participants to guide the content while the facilitator stepped back. We could observe that the need for clear roles and facilitator having more power was evident in the beginning of collaboration, and when a certain level of respect and authority was established, the atmosphere became more open and the participant could act more freely.

Process outcomes

An important part of facilitation is the successful outcome of the workshop(s), where we understand ‘successful’ as fulfilling the initial agreement between the consultancy or the facilitator and the client i.e. the case company. To further ensure that the studied case can be used as a representative and successful case of facilitation, we summarised the important information regarding the process outcomes. Interestingly, the data shows that one of the most important outcomes of facilitation is its learning effect on the team, which allows them to develop and conduct similar processes within the company in the future, rather than the tangible concept developed at the end. The workshops were described by some participants as an empowering experience, and the facilitator highlighted that “[the process] *it's not only getting from A to B, it's also like seeing them transform (...)*”. This is in line with the information received from the company via a follow-up interview approximately six months after the last workshop. This confirmed the above points and showed that the concepts developed during the workshops with the facilitator were not implemented in the company as such, but served as an inspiration to rethink the product development process in the firm and to create a target workforce for innovation processes, resulting in a launch of a new product for the customers as soon as two months after

concluding the workshops. Importantly, both facilitator and company perceived the workshops to be successful.

Together with the above description of responsibility and authority, these findings set up the context for this study.

Perspectives on neutrality

Given this context, the first main result was a novel perspective on neutrality that linked several previously disparate elements and their application along a number of lines in the creativity and innovation context. Specifically, we found that neutrality encapsulated a combination of impartiality, equidistance and fairness. Specifically, the majority of the participants referred to interactions between at least two of these constructs when describing neutrality, and all three were observed to interact during each workshop.

The participants found the facilitator impartial towards the content and the outcome of the workshops, seeing her as an external person with no personal interest in the discussed product or company. For example, Participant 2 explained that the facilitator was impartial “(...) *because it was someone from outside the company and I didn't think she had any interest in controlling the content or ideas towards any specific goal. It is not in her interest to affect us in any way I think*”. The facilitator supported this view by stating: “(...) *I don't want to be the one formulating something, interpreting what they said, so when I write on the board it has to be the true... most true to what they are saying*”. On the other hand, while generally perceived as neutral, the facilitator was not equally impartial at all times. Despite no explicit interest in the product, she did propose some solutions, as illustrated by Participant 3: “*I believe it was only maybe one time, she came into a solution mind, as she called it. She kind of came with the solution, on something. It wasn't that bad or anything, we didn't have to use it, so sometimes it's fine, she can come with*

ideas as well (...)”. However, the participants did not perceive this as a problem and still felt they had freedom in how to proceed. Similarly, the facilitator was said to be “*a bit partial*” at times, and to take different sides in the process, but once again it was not regarded a problem: “*I believe she went a bit into a customer role, and that was fine, because we need to know how they are, but not too much, so she didn't take any... then she was on the company side for example, how we maybe think. So I don't believe she was partial.*” [Participant 3]. Therefore, as long as the facilitator’s attention was distributed evenly between different roles, and the intervention in the content was moderate, the facilitator was perceived as neutral. It shows that both impartiality and equidistance, as purposive action-taking to create symmetry in the process, were present during the workshop, and despite their contradictory nature both contributed to constituting facilitator’s neutrality.

Other instances of the facilitator acting equidistant were also observed, for example, when she asked the participants to take turns while presenting their ideas or actively encouraged them to speak, both verbally and through body language. The interviewees highlighted the importance of this kind of facilitator’s support: “*I believe she was good to make us talk a bit more, asked the right questions, and encouraged us to do something, maybe go a bit outside of our boundaries, that's good I believe.*” [Participant 3], as well as the use of different approaches and means of expression (speaking and writing) to involve everyone to equal extent: “*I'm an introvert person, so I'm not gonna be the one that says a lot of stuff around the table, so it felt nice to write your thoughts down and be actually forced to contribute.*” [Participant 1]. This would sometimes compromise the impartiality of the facilitator, when more attention was given to a quieter person, allowing them to speak but at the same time creating a sort of inequality towards the others. Interestingly, it did not adversely affect the process, as the participants appreciated that everyone

could contribute: *“I think everybody was heard and everybody had a chance to say something”* [Participant 2].

Similar to equidistance, fairness received less attention from the facilitator than from the participants, who valued consistency and clear procedures during the process. Only one interviewee stated that the facilitator did not have transparent rules, but it did not compromise her fairness: *“I don't think she had any clear rules. (...) but I think she was very fair”* [Participant 6]. Furthermore, one of the participants argued that the facilitator *“shouldn't even be considered to be fair because she did what we [the company] told her to”* [Participant 1], which shows differences in perception of what constitutes a fair process or outcome in this context. In spite of that, both the interviews and the observations revealed extensive two-way communication between the facilitator and the participants, giving everyone a chance to reflect on the process and give their honest opinion, which was always included in the outcome.

These results point to a combinatory conceptualisation of neutrality, combining impartiality, equidistance and fairness. All three elements were found to collectively create the perception of the facilitator as neutral. In addition, they were shown to be directed at different outcome dimensions of facilitation depending on the situation, which we discuss in the next section.

Neutrality with respect to facilitation outcome dimensions

The second main result was that we observed the three elements of neutrality, described above, interacting with three major facilitation outcome dimensions: people, process and product (content). First, the observations from the workshops showed that the facilitator was in control of, i.e. not neutral towards, the process most of the time and made all the relevant decisions about it. Activities such as choice of methods and exercises, time keeping and monitoring team's progress (e.g. deciding about additional breaks during workshops 2 and 3) required constant judgement of

the situation and participant's inputs by the facilitator, and thus compromised her process impartiality. At the same time, the facilitator was able to remain impartial towards the content of the workshops and refrain from judgement in most situations. For example, in each workshop the facilitator instructed the participants on how to progress with the exercise and answered the related questions but avoided commenting on the actual problem and content. Similarly, she would always treat participants with respect and without favouritism or personal remarks. This shows that the facilitator was simultaneously impartial towards some dimensions, for example content and people, while being partial towards another dimension – here: process. This applies also to the other elements of neutrality, i.e. equidistance and fairness, and their relation with people, process and product (content) respectively. For example, by actively trying to engage the participants in the process, the facilitator was equidistant with respect to content by encouraging everyone to share the same amount of information, but at the same time compromised her equidistance towards people, since not everyone was always given the same time to speak. Accordingly, everyone had a chance to state their opinion and ask questions, which indicates fairness in the process. Therefore, we found that not only different elements of neutrality but also their interplay along the lines of facilitation outcome dimensions, i.e. people, process and product, are relevant to understanding facilitator's neutrality. Specifically, neutrality is constructed via an active management of the interactions between: impartiality/equidistance/fairness and people/process/product. Together, this creates a perception of the facilitator as neutral.

This dynamic approach to neutrality is primarily managed through equidistance – as an active creation of symmetry in the process – but also its interplay with the other elements. The study revealed that the facilitator uses practices such as encouragement, examples, suggestions and role-play to get the relevant information from the participants and help them solve a task. For example,

actively encouraging interactions and sharing information between people (as observed in day 2 of workshop 2, when the facilitator asked the participants what they thought of each other's ideas) can be seen as a form of equidistance, where the emphasis is put on everyone having an opportunity to participate to the same extent. On the other hand, by giving examples or suggestions the facilitator intervenes, even if indirectly, in the content of the workshop, by affecting the participants' line of thought and their ideas. A particular instance was inviting a guest to workshop 3 to give a presentation on technological solutions from other industries, to inspire the participants. Similarly, asking the participants to think outside the box and think beyond their current customer groups or products in the initial workshop, was both encouraging creativity but also constraining their solution space. Furthermore, giving suggestions requires the facilitator to make a prior judgement of the participants' inputs, which compromised content impartiality. For example, during workshop 2 (day 2) the participants were formulating 'How might we...' questions, and the facilitator helped them to determine whether the question was appropriate, too narrow, or too broad, to get the results they expected. Finally, role play can be seen as both non-neutral, as the facilitator takes sides and shares opinions from that perspective (e.g. a company or customer perspective, as mentioned by Participant 3), affecting the content of the workshop, as well as neutral, since if done evenly, by taking different roles throughout the workshops and showing all the relevant perspectives to the same extent (e.g. company, customer, supplier, etc.), the facilitator can create symmetry in the process and bring together different views.

Together, these results show that in the creativity and innovation context, facilitator's neutrality should not be seen in isolation, as solely an interplay between impartiality, equidistance and fairness, but also in relation to people, process and product (content), the key outcome dimensions of facilitation. The final perception of neutrality is constructed through the interaction between

these, and while the facilitator cannot always be neutral in all dimensions, the neutrality can be achieved over time, for example over the duration of a workshop.

Neutrality over time

As mentioned in the previous section, it is important to consider a time perspective when talking about neutrality, particularly because neutrality is a dynamic process-related construct that requires a temporal, longitudinal perspective. In our case, we observed that neutrality is not only built throughout the duration of a single workshop but also evolves from workshop to workshop over the course of the creative process. Figure 1 represents the changes in each of the components of neutrality, i.e. impartiality, equidistance and fairness, throughout the three observed workshops, overlaid with the phases of the Double Diamond model (adopted from Brown, 2009). The increasing/decreasing trends reflect a general change in conversation patterns observed, where the occurrences of each behaviour in a given workshop appear at one of the three qualitative levels: not present at all or only in a minimum extent (1), partially present in about 50/50 balance (2), or highly present and extensively used for the majority of time (3).

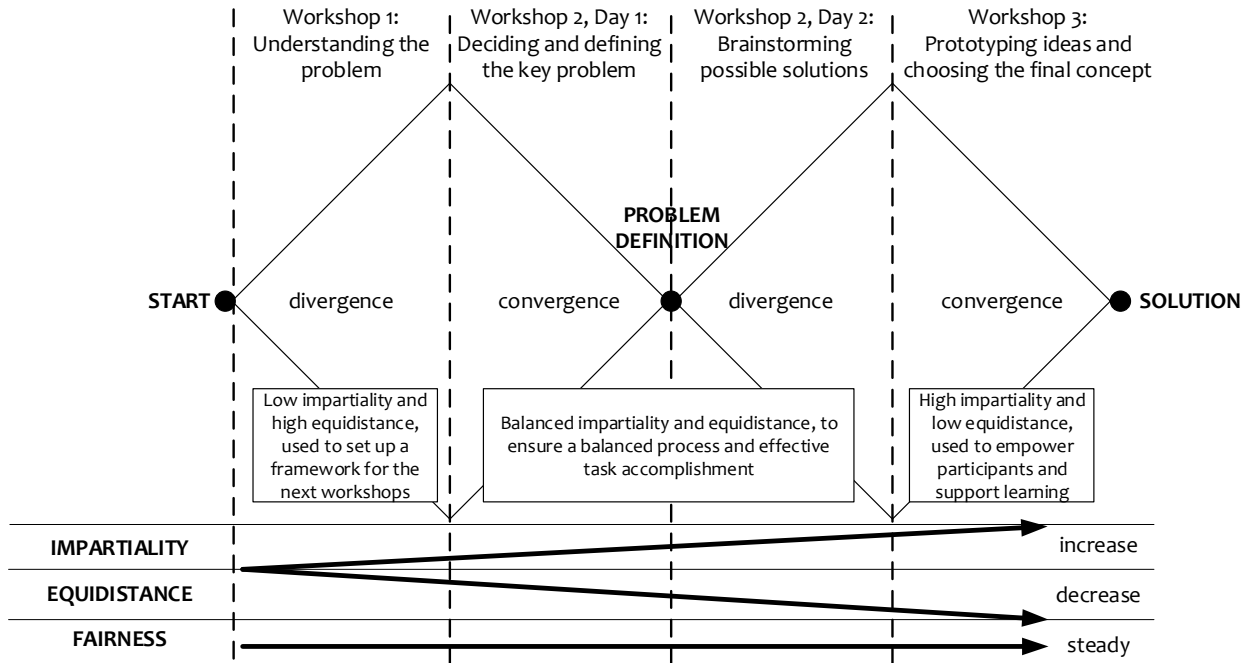


Figure 1. The graphical representation of the changes in the key components of 'pro-active' neutrality over time, throughout the creative process (based on Brown, 2009).

First, facilitator's impartiality increases over time, meaning that in the last workshop facilitator's neutrality is almost solely expressed as impartiality, and the participants are given almost absolute freedom in how they perform the tasks, discuss and even organise their time. With respect to the outcome dimensions of facilitation, impartiality is expressed towards people and process, as well as towards the product – understood as workshop content. However, the facilitator has a clear personal interest in the workshop success and ensuring that the company is satisfied with the effect, thus in that sense she is not entirely impartial towards the outcome. The character of impartiality and its relation with the outcome dimensions of facilitation does not change over time.

Second, equidistance displays the opposite trend to impartiality, i.e. it decreases over time. In the first workshop, equidistance is a core part of the facilitator's neutrality and is used in many

critical moments to create symmetry in the process. Throughout Workshops 2 and 3 the interventions of the facilitator in the process decreased, with increasing impartiality and decreasing equidistance. Equidistance was primarily related to the process rather than people and product (content) dimensions.

Finally, fairness was a steady component of neutrality that did not vary over time. In each workshop the facilitator displayed a range of behaviours, such as asking the participants about their reflections on the process or encouraging them to ask questions and thus allowing a two-way communication, which illustrate fairness with respect to people, procedures, and product (content).

In summary, the facilitator's neutrality displayed dynamic variation across the creative process and overall collaboration. In particular, fairness was constantly high, while impartiality and equidistance trade-off in importance over time. These results suggest a more complex conceptualisation of the dynamic interaction between the various elements of neutrality.

DISCUSSION

Based on our results, this paper makes two major contributions to facilitation and creativity management. These are based on the fact, that the observed case context confirms the general view on facilitation as discussed in the literature and describes the facilitator's role in terms of their responsibility and authority. First, we elaborate the central role of neutrality in creative facilitation, synthesising a number of previously disparate conceptualisations. Specifically, we define neutrality as consisting of three interdependent elements: impartiality, equidistance and fairness. Second, we show that these elements are directed at three key outcome dimensions: people, process and product (content). We link these in order to propose the concept of 'pro-active neutrality', which refers to the active management of interactions between the components of

neutrality and the above outcome dimensions. Based on this we propose a pro-active neutrality framework (Figure 2), which we use as a basis for the discussion.

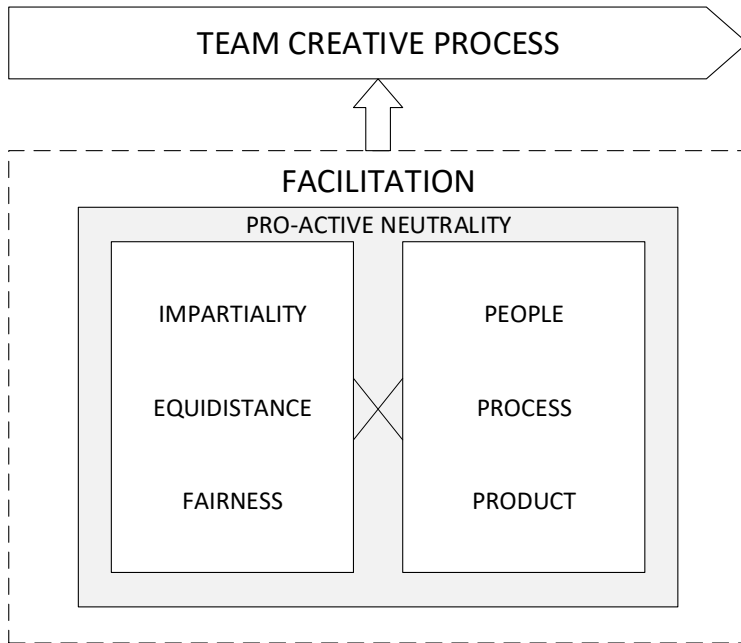


Figure 2. The framework representing 'pro-active neutrality' in facilitation.

Facilitation and facilitator's role

Before discussing our pro-active neutrality framework, we will briefly discuss our observations of facilitation in context. Importantly, the results shown that perceptions of the practical responsibilities of the facilitator are consistent with the facilitation and creativity management literatures (Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007; Rasmussen, 2011; Rasmussen, Hansen, & Jacobsen, 2013). The participants mentioned process help and guidance as the key role of the facilitator, as well as a range of responsibilities related to workshop organisation: time management, method selection, as well as preparation of materials and setting, which is in line with the facilitator competency guidelines from Schuman (2005) and their further development by Azadegan and Kolfshoten (2014). This further aligns with descriptions of facilitation in creativity management

(Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007). In addition, the responsibility for the final outcome was somewhat unclear i.e. it was perceived differently by different interviewees and the statements were often contradictory. While this might appear problematic, it is not uncommon in client-consulting relationships (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005), including process consulting like facilitation during creativity management (Handley, Clark, Fincham, & Sturdy, 2007; Hill & Johnson, 2003). As such, although the alignment of expectations is crucial for collaborations (e.g. Schuman, 2005), clients often have preconceived beliefs about the process which leads to misunderstandings (Nikolova, Möllering, & Reihlen, 2015).

We also observed the normally expected power dynamics for an external facilitator, who applied some of the typical trust-building practices to build a relation with the team, while retaining her credibility and reputation as a process expert (Nikolova et al., 2015).

Finally, we have revisited the outcomes of the facilitated creative workshops and shown that they were satisfactory, from both the team's and the facilitator's point of view. Even though the actual results of the workshops were not used by the company, it inspired other ideas that allowed them to thrive in the market and thus showed an unexpectedly high importance of the learning effects of facilitation, consistent with descriptions from creativity management which positively link learning culture with team creativity and effectiveness (Berman & Kim, 2010; Huber, 1998; Mejias, 2007; Yoon, Song, Lim, & Joo, 2010).

Based on these contextual findings, we can conclude that the observed case followed expectations from both facilitation and creativity management literatures, and forms a theoretically robust foundation for further discussion of facilitator's neutrality.

Multi-dimensional concept of neutrality

Previous studies on facilitation emphasise the importance of neutrality as a central feature of facilitation (Kramer et al., 2001; Rasmussen, 2011). However, prior discussions of neutrality have taken a number of disparate directions, specifically focusing on impartiality (e.g. Carnevale & Arad, 1996), its combination with equidistance (e.g. Rifkin, Millen, & Cobb, 1991), or fairness (e.g. Stulberg, 1998). While our study confirms these as individually critical to neutrality in action, in explicit contrast prior research, which described these elements statically in isolation, we show that impartiality, equidistance and fairness are both co-existing and dynamically interdependent in constructing overall facilitator's neutrality.

The first element of our conceptualisation of neutrality is impartiality. It is expressed through refraining from judgement and treating everyone equally, and it was observed at several occasions during the workshops, as well as discussed with the interviewees, which is consistent with prior studies (Astor, 2007; Lucy, 2005). However, we also observed interactions between this element, equidistance and fairness, which have not previously been described in the literature. Specifically, impartiality-equidistance relationship was visible in the first two workshops, when the facilitator was encouraging the participants to share their ideas and the relevant information with others, by frequently asking clarifying or even challenging questions. Such action requires prior judgement of the ideas and concepts that have been presented so far in terms of novelty, quality, or other criteria, in order to determine who should be asked for more contribution, what kind of contribution should be made next and how to ask about it. Judgement of ideas, in turn, and provoking the team to come up with more, or different ones, or change their focus, contradicts the content impartiality, because it makes the facilitator influence the workshop outcome. Yet, it achieves a positive effect on the team. The same happens when the facilitator shows different examples to the participants,

which is a common practice in facilitation. The examples can be said or represented in a visual way and can consider either a way to do an exercise or a solution used in another industry – no matter which is the case, it influences the way in which the team thinks about the problem, and in consequence shapes people’s choices and indirectly influences the result of the workshop. Likewise, the relationship between impartiality and fairness was explicit throughout the workshops. For example, when adjusting the schedule and deciding about making breaks which were not initially planned, the facilitator intervened in the workshop procedures (referring to fairness) which required judgement of the workshop progress as well as people’s attitudes and needs, which contradicts impartiality in its core meaning, but helped to keep an optimal flow of the workshop.

As mentioned above, the second interacting element was equidistance. It was present throughout the workshops, through behaviours like giving people turns and actively encouraging the quieter (“weaker”) ones to speak (for example by asking the participants to present their ideas one by one). This is consistent with the literature, which refers to such approach in the mediation practice (Cohen et al., 1999; Van Gramberg & Teicher, 2006), however, once again we observed additional interdependencies beyond prior descriptions. As exemplified in the previous paragraph, both impartiality and equidistance were observed during the workshops, even though they contradict each other in theoretical terms: the first one is based on complete lack of judgement, while the latter assumes assessing information (which involves judgement) in order to create symmetry in the process. While they were not observed to exist simultaneously, their roles in the observed workshops were interdependent, and by being present in different situations and at different points in time overall, they create the process which is perceived as neutral. Further, we also observed equidistance and fairness co-existing throughout the process. In fact, equidistance

could be viewed as supporting fairness: for example, active creation of symmetry in the process through asking each of the participants to speak up, one by one (i.e. being equidistance) supports the premise of procedural fairness, which includes two-way communication and opportunity to perform (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005; Johnson, Korsgaard, & Sapienza, 2002).

The third element of neutrality in our framework is fairness. Fairness, especially with respect to procedures, has been extensively researched in leadership literature, showing a positive effect on trust and team performance (e.g. Bstieler, 2006; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). It has also been an area of discussion in mediation, where the importance of fair process and fair outcomes has been emphasised (e.g. Shapira, 2012; Stulberg, 1998). Nevertheless, there has been dispute around the contradiction between fairness and impartiality, which are both critical to the mediator's role (Astor, 2007). As with the other elements, we again observed fairness explicitly during the case, in line with prior creativity management research (Khazanchi & Masterson, 2011). In our case, the facilitator expressed fairness by, among others: following a certain set of rules during the workshop, allowing two-way communication and feedback, as well as explicitly considering participants' input. These align well with prior research, as mentioned above (e.g. Johnson et al., 2002). However, as exemplified with respect to impartiality and equidistance, we also observed specific interdependencies between fairness and these elements. Specifically, while the previous examples show that fairness might interfere with impartiality, since a fair decision in the process requires judgement, fairness and equidistance can support each other as described above, because they both use the same active mechanisms to create, for example, symmetry in the process (equidistance) or fair outcome perception (fairness). Therefore, we consider fairness as one of the elements of neutrality, together with impartiality and equidistance, and show that just

like these two complement each other, even if enacted at different points in time, fairness also contributes to the overall neutrality perception and the facilitator being viewed as neutral.

Based on these findings, it seems impossible to consider facilitator's neutrality as only attributable to one element as in prior literature. Specifically, we develop a following proposition:

Proposition 1: The elements of neutrality: impartiality, equidistance and fairness, are interdependent, and fulfil roles that complement each other and contribute to building a combinatory neutrality construct.

Neutrality and outcome

In the previous section, we discussed neutrality as a multi-dimensional construct, built on the three main elements: impartiality, equidistance and fairness. In this section, we add to this explanation by showing that these components are not only interdependent, but also interact across three key outcome dimensions: people, process and product (also referred to as content). In other words, we propose that in facilitation, neutrality is created through an active management of impartiality, equidistance and fairness directed towards these three outcome dimensions. In addition, we show that *how* this management is done by the facilitator varies from workshop to workshop over the duration of the creative process. This again substantially extends prior research in facilitation and creativity management, which has not connected these two aspects, and does not provide a temporal perspective on facilitation or neutrality in the creative context (Dubina, 2006; Mejias, 2007). As an 'absolute', neutrality would mean no effect across any dimension (Douglas, 2008), thus we propose 'pro-active neutrality', to explain how neutrality with respect to one element of the framework can be coupled with distinct non-neutrality with respect to another element, in order to achieve an overall perception of facilitator's neutrality over time. As such, our

work contributes to the recent discussions in creativity management research, and especially the process view on creativity, understood as an activity that – similarly to facilitator’s neutrality – can be practiced or enacted over time (Fortwengel, Schüßler, & Sydow, 2017).

From the companies’ perspective, product (content) of the workshop is an important dimension, because this is where the business value is located. According to prior literature, the facilitator should always remain content-neutral (Rasmussen, 2011) but this raises two major issues, namely: how is this content-neutrality enacted in practice and how is it contributing to workshop success, both in terms of effective facilitation and team performance. Through our study we observed that certain aspects of neutrality with respect to content are in fact purposively compromised by the facilitator in order to provide a more effective process for the team. For example, the facilitator often used equidistant action to actively encourage participants to share information with the team, as shown in the example in the previous section, which provokes prior content judgement and compromises facilitator’s impartiality in this dimension, but at the same time supports information sharing, which is desirable (Hoever, van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Barkema, 2012; Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg, 2003). Similarly, providing examples (such as successful case stories or inspirational material like in workshop 2) affects the participants’ thinking patterns and ultimately also decision making, which is reflected in the content of the workshop. Although not in line with ‘traditional’ content-neutrality, this influence can be positive and bring new perspectives to solve a problem. Thus, content impartiality is often compromised, nevertheless, if it serves a purpose of enhancing team’s creativity and productivity, it is not only harmless but even desired in the facilitation process. This explicitly extends prior understanding of facilitator’s neutrality by showing a positive aspect of intervening into content, i.e. a positive effect of non-neutrality in a

certain dimension, which at the same time does not prevent the facilitator to be perceived as generally neutral, because he or she can build neutrality through other dimensions, e.g. people.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the facilitator should be neutral towards people, i.e. participants of the workshop, simultaneously with being neutral towards content (Rasmussen, 2011). Elaborating this, our study shows that although the facilitator is generally trying to keep an unbiased relationship with the participants and act as a neutral third party, some elements of people-neutrality are purposefully compromised by action directed toward process or product, in order to establish a wider perception of neutrality. For example, by being equidistant the facilitator might manage the process so that less contributing participants will get more time to express their ideas. Even though the purpose here is to create symmetry in the process, it is likely to be perceived by the participants as violating impartiality and fairness rules, as one person is treated differently than others. In our study, participants perceived the facilitator as “a bit partial” at times, and at the same time as very objective. As such, they did not see this temporary partiality as a disturbance in the process, but rather something that was necessary to move forward. In addition, in our case the relationship between the facilitator and the participants evolved from one workshop to another, which means the neutrality towards people has been at different levels throughout the process. Last but not least, we found that in agreement with the previous studies, facilitators are never truly neutral towards the process as they hold the primary responsibility for its guidance and organisation (Bens, 2012; Rasmussen, 2011). Thus, the following propositions:

Proposition 2a: In facilitation practice, there exist interactions between the specific elements of neutrality: impartiality, equidistance, and fairness, and the facilitation outcome dimensions: people, process and product/content.

Proposition 2b: Facilitator's neutrality is built through balancing neutral and non-neutral behaviours across the above elements, to achieve the facilitation goal.

To complement the above propositions, it is important to emphasise that our results also show neutrality as varying over time, which is particularly visible in the case of impartiality and equidistance. While they are often referred to as conflicting concepts (Cohen et al., 1999; Rifkin et al., 1991; Rock, 2004), we show that it is more of a trade-off which is managed dynamically by the facilitator. Depending on the stage of the workshop, its goal, and/or the type of facilitator's relationship with the participants, one or the other approach might be more effective, which substantially extends prior theory (Astor, 2007; Cohen et al., 1999; Rasmussen, 2011). Further, despite the changes in impartiality and equidistance, fairness remains a consistently important variable, as previously suggested by the literature (Korsgaard et al., 1995).

Seeing as neutrality behaviour is dependent on the phase of the creative process and the facilitator's relationship with the team, we find it vital to include a third proposition, which would set facilitator's neutrality in the context of the creative process:

Proposition 2c: Facilitator's neutrality varies dynamically depending on both the stage of the creative process and the facilitator's relationship with the team. Specifically, the level of impartiality as a component of neutrality increases over time, the level of equidistance decreases, and fairness remains at the same level.

In this light, our temporal, process-based view on facilitator's neutrality might contribute a useful perspective to managing creativity as a process that can be practiced over time, where facilitation could be seen as one of the practices seeking to enhance organisational creativity (Fortwengel et al., 2017).

A ‘pro-active’ approach to neutrality in facilitation

Given the interdependencies described in the previous sections, pro-active neutrality can be seen as an ‘aggregate’ that changes in time, depending on the task, situation, and the team dynamics in a given moment. As such, and in contrast to prior literature (Dubina, 2006; Rasmussen, 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2013), we conclude that a completely people- and content-neutral facilitator does not exist in practice, because each aspect of our pro-active neutrality framework interacts and trades-off with the others: for example, being impartial towards people does not always mean reaching a fair result, or being equidistant in the process might compromise impartiality towards content. However, rather than a problem, it is this interdependence that is the actual mechanism through which neutrality is created and managed to achieve the desired results. In other words, being entirely neutral in all the described dimensions at the same time, would not only be impossible but also undesirable in facilitation, especially during creativity management such as observed in our case. Hence, we confront the view of the facilitator only in neutral – non-neutral categories:

Proposition 3: To achieve the facilitation goals and support effective creativity management, facilitators pro-actively manage the neutrality framework and the interactions between its elements (impartiality, equidistance and fairness) with respect to the different outcome dimensions (people, process and product).

While we describe the mechanisms and also the limits of facilitator’s neutrality, we take a generally positive stance. We conceptualise neutrality as facilitators generally working towards an overall neutral ideal, based on both our observations and prior creativity literature. We did not observe or conceptualise partisanship i.e. explicitly taking sides to support one of the parties or ideas. However, this might have distinct consequences for team creativity. While this is

substantially outside of the scope of this work, it could form the basis for future multi-case or contrast-focused studies.

Implications for theory and practice

Our study presents a number of theoretical and practical implications. First, it contributes to development of theoretical understanding of neutrality by providing a new, multi-dimensional definition which draws together prior theory and can be applied not only in facilitation but also other fields, for example mediation. Second, it extends the theory on facilitation in creativity management by advancing the current understanding of neutrality, and consequently revealing a novel perspective on the facilitator's role and activities. Last but not least, this paper contributes to the creativity and innovation management literature in general, seeing as facilitation is a part of effective creativity management directly related to workplace creativity.

From a creativity management perspective, enhanced understanding of the facilitator's role and the importance neutrality plays in it will allow for more effective use and design of the facilitation process by companies. It also shows why it is beneficial in some cases – for example for creativity workshops – to involve an external facilitator, who will bring an additional level of neutrality to the process. From the consultants' view, our results will also contribute to more focused and thus effective facilitator training. Overall, improved facilitation practices will support the management of companies' innovation processes and workplace creativity.

Limitations and further research

Despite the rigorous data collection and analysis procedures, our research has certain limitations resulting from the choice of methodology and approach. Because it is a single case study, we can support robust analytic generalization (Yin, 2014, p. 68), and pose theoretical insights as discussed

above, however, our results are not statistically generalizable, i.e. they are specific to the observed case. Furthermore, the focus of the study is theory development, and thus testing the proposed relationships between the elements of neutrality as well as its determinants was out of our scope. Future research could focus on developing and validating the framework through more focused studies, such as experiments, which would help to determine the optimal ‘neutral’ approach to facilitation. Researchers could also explore the phenomenon of relationship development between the facilitator and the team in a long-term perspective, with neutrality as one of the evolving factors, as well as investigate the effect of facilitator’s neutrality on team performance, and in particular, team’s creative output. Finally, while neutrality is one of the key approaches used by facilitators in the creative process, no studies to date explored the opposite approach, i.e. partisanship, and its effects on creativity, which could allow further development of theory on facilitation and establishing the boundaries of facilitator’s neutrality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this paper we introduce a new, multi-dimensional framework of facilitator’s neutrality, consisting of impartiality, equidistance and fairness. We link these with three main outcome dimensions of facilitation: people, process and product (content). Together, these form our ‘*pro-active neutrality*’ framework. Our findings contribute to extending theory on neutrality and facilitation, as well as its general understanding in creativity and innovation management. We show how via enhanced facilitation practices managers can improve creativity and innovation in the workplace. In a broader context, this study not only brings a new perspective on facilitator’s neutrality, but also extends the general understanding of the facilitator’s role and its underpinning mechanisms in real-world situations. We suggest that future research could focus on developing

and validating the proposed framework and investigate facilitator's neutrality in more contexts and settings.

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