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**Talking about talk: Making sense of communication
in inter-organisational relationships**

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Communication is often claimed to be the ‘glue’ that holds inter-organisational relationships together. But how do the individual actors charged with managing collaboration make sense of communicative acts? In this paper we examine some of the discursive strategies used by individual network participants as they try to ensure stability and to facilitate change in supply chain relationships. In their attempts at sensemaking in these collaborative contexts, we regard managers’ knowledge as a nuanced construction of reality that produces particular ‘espoused theories’ about the self as a practitioner and the environment in which they practice. Everyday managerial practices take place within the context of these theories. We argue that a subtle analysis of managerial talk can enhance the study of inter-firm partnerships by revealing the espoused theories on the basis of which boundary spanners act.

To demonstrate the construction of managers’ knowledge, we introduce and explore material collected in interviews with marketing and purchasing managers in several industrial contexts. We restrict our focus to talk about instances of communication to examine in depth how this talk establishes perceived ‘facts’ about inter-firm communicative work. Our aim in isolating this practice is to be able to more fully explore how one activity (communication) may be variously constructed to at once create and support particular managers’ theories and their working identities. This focus allows us to show how it is consequential, in network theory terms, that an activity is constructed in one way rather than another and thus to generate a detailed understanding in one micro-area that can be carried back out to studies of a broader focus.

Despite the diversity and wealth of ideas that have been generated in previous studies of business/marketing communication, work to date has had a common realist concern that has been addressed with methodologies that include survey methods, observational techniques and contextual case studies of the communication that ‘actually’ takes place. In contrast, we

are concerned with how the activity of communicating is made sense of by network actors and how their accounts of communication feature within their network theories, thus shaping their possibilities for action. In this endeavour we draw upon discourse analytic methods associated with the disciplines of discursive social psychology and social linguistics.

From our analysis we believe that discursive repertoires of communication are more than mere haphazard selections of words to explain events and fill interview space. We identify several key repertoires that are deployed to establish the range of communicative work, the difficulty in managing the directionality of communication and the complexity of managing in the sometimes ambiguous situations that occur in collaborative contexts – managerial ‘facts’ that are absent in much business communication research. We show that these forms of knowledge variously pattern the practitioner self and structure the proximate network environment in ways that are important in enabling and restricting modes of engagement.

Our study therefore suggests that the way relationship participants communicate about communication (or ‘talk about talk’) is of significance in network studies. Use of diverse repertoires in diverse contexts and with their different outcomes provide one means of understanding and portraying the complexity of inter-firm partnerships and the ambiguity of certain theoretic constructs (for example power) in practice. Moreover, they demonstrate how the self is understood and produced as a manager able to cope with and act appropriately with that diversity. In these ways the discursive production of communication plays a role in structuring the world(s) of inter-firm partnerships and establishes some of the network ‘facts’ into which managers act.

Key words: inter-firm relationships, communication, discourse analysis, sensemaking