

Creating associability¹

Dr Leandro Herrero

If these 'organisations within the organisation' do exist (in the way the literature points to them), do they matter anyway? I suggest they do. The condition of 'associability' is perhaps one of the main sources of the so called 'social capital' of the firm. It is worth distinguishing between 'associability' and 'sociability'. Whilst 'sociability' has to do with the universal propensity to socialise, 'associability' is defined by the 'willingness and ability of individuals to subordinate personal goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions'. In other words, a sociable environment where people meet, discuss, interact and interchange communication is a prerequisite for 'associability', but does not necessarily lead to it; to the enormous added value of the 'association'.

The social capital of the firm is based upon internal and external relationships. It produces mutual benefits, for the individual and for the organisation itself. It is an asset different from other forms of capital such as bricks-and-mortar (physical capital) or knowledge and technical ability of the individuals (human capital). As an asset, it must be managed like other types of capital. Volatile, short-term or superficial relationships will invariably also generate volatile and ephemeral social capital, or a so-called 'low social capital environment'. In these organisations, any form of leadership appeal for collective goals is a contradiction in terms. Individuals may get on with their jobs (as in their 'job descriptions'), and even do them well, but they may not be interested in anything else, certainly not in any form of collective collaboration that, in most cases, entails 'going the extra mile', beyond formal responsibilities. And it is in those circumstances where the real added value is generated and a real difference is made.

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Robert Putman - a political scientist who has researched American social habits - discovered that, progressively, people are less inclined to join in collective activities, engage in communitarian projects, give money to charity etc. In other words, less donations, less voluntary work, less voting is converting American society – he says - into ‘a nation of loners’, where - and here’s the metaphor - ‘bowling alone’ has replaced league bowling (See his book *Bowling Alone*).

Putman also refers to the concept of ‘social capital’ which he defines as ‘connections between individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arises from them’. When social capital is diminishing, something precious in the fabric of the civil society is disappearing.

Is there a contradiction between Putman’s findings in a society that, to him, is composed of members ‘bowling alone’ and organisational life in that same society, where a constant sermon about ‘league bowling’ (we are a team, we work as a team etc.) seems to dominate?

Is it possible that there are two societies: the nine-to-five of ‘bowling together’ and the five-to-nine and weekends of ‘bowling alone’? Is Putman - by the very nature of his target research - ignoring that (professional) people spend most of their time ‘at work’, and therefore, bowling with others in the nine-to-five teamocracy? Are we in a schizophrenic society? At the cynical end of the questions, could Putman be right and his ‘bowling alone theory’ be extended to the nine-to-five world? In other words, is the bowling together in the teamocracy just a superficial appearance whilst in the individual’s heart he is still bowling alone?

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- [Leadership and ‘home effects’](#)
- [The investors metaphor](#)
- [Leadership and social capital](#)
- [Leading the organisation you can’t see](#)
- [Bowling regardless?](#)

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1. [Time and Space](#)
3. [Legacy](#)

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