

## Business relationships: from interface management to inter-development

The ability to deliver high-quality, cost-effective products and services to customers is today increasingly recognised as dependent on the quality of business relationships within the value stream. Often, crucial relationships need to be developed and managed across organisational boundaries, which can pose obstacles to effective communication and collaboration. Such relationships may require extra care, attention and developmental effort.

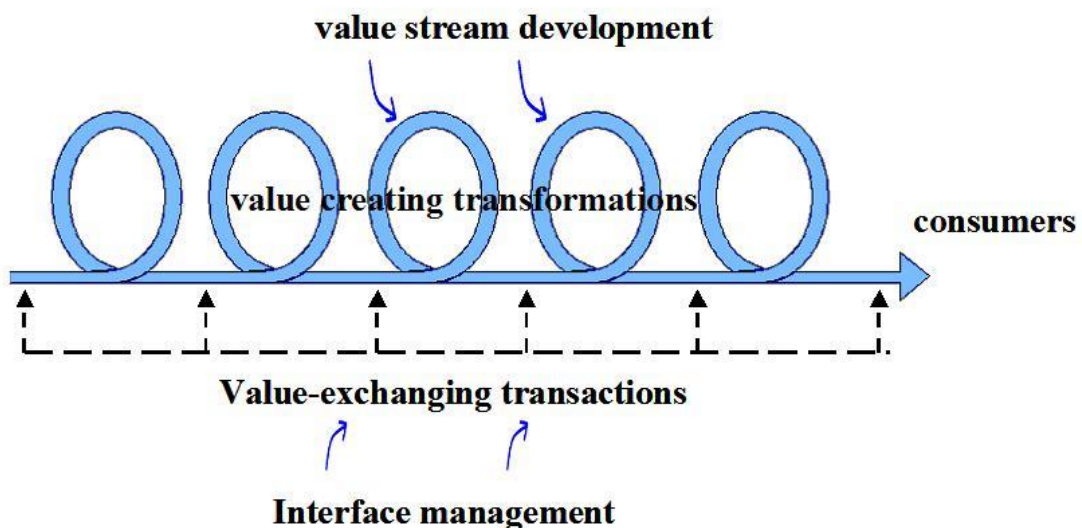
Rubicon's highly successful Negotiation Skills courses are based on understanding and managing the "dynamics of interdependence", which we see as a key concept in any inter-organisational relationship. Recently we have added a range of further consultancy services in this field to our portfolio, and can now offer clients customised versions of the following:

- A **relationship audit** offers an excellent way to start improving any organisational interface. It measures how the relationship is experienced by key individuals on both sides, and provides a common frame of reference for joint improvement initiatives. Surveys can be designed to provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence on key factors such as compatibility of values and culture, clarity and adequacy of contractual agreements, quality of communication, levels of trust, openness and empathy, and effectiveness of issue resolution procedures. Because the relationship audit is carried out against a background understanding of best practice in interface management, it is itself - unlike many types of organisational survey - already a development activity, raising the awareness of participants and directly opening up the potential for increasing the value which the relationship brings to both sides - and to their customers.
- **Coaching** teams with complex and challenging interface tasks - for example in the regulated, newly-competitive energy supply sector - helping them to set and prioritise their objectives, uncover the needs and interests of stakeholders, and develop effective interface strategies.
- **Partnering** our clients in planning and conducting "live" negotiations, helping them represent their interests effectively and obtain the optimum outcome both for the issues and for the relationship involved. A recent example was the help we gave to an entrepreneur in agreeing the (highly profitable) sale of the business he had built up, to a larger company.
- Where severe problems arise in a relationship, **mediation** offers the chance for people in dispute to pause and reflect. Helping the parties to go to the heart of an issue in a structural and facilitated setting often allows them to find new and productive agreements and overcome the impasse. Mediation can be described as "third party negotiation": it is confidential, forward-looking and cost-effective, often saving significant litigation costs as well as endless time and effort. In commercial

mediation, 90% of people who agree to mediation reach an agreement. Mediation preserves people's sense of dignity and responsibility - and they are more likely to comply with a solution they have negotiated through mediation, than with one which has been imposed.

- Best practice will ultimately lead to “inter-development” sessions, involving both sides of a business relationship - learning together, reviewing their interactions and agreeing ways of improving the effectiveness of the relationship. Together with our partner Phoenix Consultancy, we have been able to apply this approach in a range of high-profile contexts, including interfaces between the NHS Executive and the

## The value stream across multiple organisations



BMA, Civil Service unions and management, and within the electricity industry.