

AUTHORING SHARED DIRECTION

E-PLM 2.0 - Experiment 5.1

Thinking about what **pronouns** can do

This information sheet has been created within the E-PLM 2.0 project, Experiment 5.1. For questions, please contact:

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Authoring shared direction: Thinking about what pronouns can do

Take a look at the image displayed on the right and imagine that what you are seeing here is an interorganizational team. Members are discussing **what exactly to work on** in their collaboration. This is important as members need to agree on a shared direction to successfully collaborate and mutually benefit.

In their discussion, the team members might bring forward their own professional interests but also the concerns and objectives their organizations have. For instance, the man in the blue shirt might speak about increased product variability as an important challenge that his organizations would like to tackle as part of this collaboration. The woman right next to him might bring forward her own interests: She wants to learn how customers' needs and wishes can be better understood through social media. Yet another team member might point everyone's attention to the rising number of co-creation platforms that other industries have already been experimenting with. And finally, there might also be a member who speaks as the team or as one "we", very explicitly stating what the team should work on. Their conversation could look something like the following:



Man in white: So I would really like to work on co-creation platforms in this project. In the fashion industry, everyone seems to be already doing that, or at least they have started to explore what the options are. I think that we're running behind. A lot actually, at least at *Company-X*. So yeah, I would really love to work on that in this project, to learn more about it. Not sure how things are in your companies? Have you started to look into co-creation platforms already? Or are you just as new to that topic as we are? Would be great if we could learn from how others do this, of course!

Woman in white: At *Company-Z*, we have been experimenting with customer co-creation already for a bit. So I guess I could share with you how we are doing things, maybe there's something that you can learn from that. But to be honest, I

wouldn't like it if this project would be all about co-creation platforms... I also want to learn something new... And one thing that we realized at *Company-Z* is that co-creation platforms sound very engaging, fruitful and productive in theory but successfully implementing this form of collaboration with customers is just so difficult! You open your doors to your customers, which is great, but many of them will use this freedom to the max, asking for features that you simply cannot deliver, neither now nor in the future. And then they get all frustrated, saying that you only set up this co-creation platform for marketing or image purposes but not for really engaging and collaborating with the customers. So from my experience, I think it is a very thin line that companies are balancing on when experimenting with co-creation. So we would be more interested to find out how we can better understand our customers' needs and wishes via for example social media channels. I mean, we do want to tailor our products to customers' needs but in a more implicit way than what happens in co-creation.

Man in blue:

I can totally understand your concern about co-creation platforms and I also think that we should not work on that topic in this team. At *Company-Y*, we're already finding it very difficult to keep up with our steadily increasing product variability, I can imagine that co-creation platforms would make that even more complicated. Maybe we should work on topics as customer engagement, needs responsiveness, those sorts of things. When you ((*addressing the man in blue*)) speak about wanting to learn more about co-creation platforms, that is probably because you, as a company, want to better tailor your products to your customers, right? And there I see a link to what you said ((*addressing the women in white*)), you also want to better understand customer needs. And for us, at *Company-Y*, customer needs are a big part of the problem too: Because these become more and more diverse, our products also steadily increase in variety. So maybe we can take that as a starting point for what we want to work on in our team?

In team meetings, especially when trying to agree on **what to work on**, we tend to be the voice of what preoccupies us. If you put together professionals with different functional backgrounds and from different organizations, they will come with different concerns that match their interests, their expertise or their organization's objectives. And when they speak, they will make present these concerns¹. Let us scrutinize the above example from this perspective: What do we see when we pay close attention to which voices and concerns are being brought forward?

¹ See also: Haug & Cooren (2020) "The magic of meeting necessitates having multiple voices heard" *Communiqer* 29

Table 1: Some of the concerns and voices brought forward in the example

Man in white	Women in white	Man in blue
<p>“so I would really like to work on co-creation platforms”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Voicing his own (professional) interest to suggest what to work on 	<p>“at Company-Z, we have been experimenting [...]”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Speaking as an org. representative, speaking for her organization 	<p>“I also think that we should not work on that topic in this team [...] we should work on topics as [...]”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Starting as an individual, then switching to speaking for the team as one collective
<p>“in the fashion industry”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Invoking the voice of another bigger industry, to make a better case for his suggestion 	<p>“I wouldn’t like it if this project would be all about co-creation”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Voicing her own (professional) interest 	<p>“at Company-Y, we’re already finding it very difficult”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Bringing forward an organizational concern
<p>“we’re running behind [...] at least at Company-X”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Speaking for his organization, claiming how they are running behind 	<p>“one thing that we realized at Company-Z is [...]”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Bringing forward the experience of her entire organization 	<p>“you, as a company, want to better tailor your products to your customers, right?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Addressing a team member as an org. representative
<p>“not sure how things are in your companies?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Addressing the others not as team colleagues but as organizational members and representatives 	<p>“so we would be more interested to find out how we can better understand our customers’ needs [...] via [...] social media channels”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Speaking for her entire organization, bringing forward their concern 	<p>“So maybe we can take that as a starting point for what we want to work on in our team?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Speaking in the name of their team, as one collective

When we pay close attention to the voices and concerns that are brought forward in (interorganizational) team meetings, we quickly realize that situations can be more complex and that more compromises or integrations might be necessary than we often initially think: Team members can voice individual concerns, can speak on behalf of their organizations, can invoke the voices of other parties (such as the fashion industry) but also can speak in the name of the collective we. This complexity is the very condition of integration, we believe: Only when every concern that matters is brought forward can true integration be achieved. Team and meeting leaders are hence asked to pay extra attention to this complexity – and to professionals’ pronoun use in particular as this can help understand whose perspective or concern is being brought

forward. Figure 1 visualizes the main possibilities of how pronouns can be used. It hence provides a more systematic overview of all the perspectives and viewpoints that can play in interorganizational collaboration and that might impact how a collaborative direction is formed. Next to the individual, organizational and collective perspective that we introduced, we also saw in the data an external voice that sometimes was brought to the table. In the cases and teams that we have studied, this often referred to “the E-PLM project”, but it also could refer to other external bodies.

Figure 1: The complex voices and perspectives that can matter in interorganizational collaboration

	Intrasubjective I	Intersubjective You	Intersubjective We	Generic It
Individual	<i>I-as-individual</i>	<i>You-as-individual</i>		
Organizational	<i>I-as-organization</i>	<i>You-as-organization</i>	<i>We-as-organization</i>	<i>It-as-organization</i>
Collective		<i>You-as-team</i>	<i>We-as-team</i>	<i>It-as-team</i>
Other				<i>It-as-ext. party</i>

Our research within E-PLM 2.0 indicates a few important insights regarding this complexity of concerns and perspectives:

- Team members **switched between the various perspectives all the time** and with much ease. In their attempts to contribute to the collaborative direction, they invoked their professional as well as their organizational interests but also referred to broader viewpoints (such as of the overall initiative).
- All these various voices were mixed together to form a collaborative direction. Put differently, **what the team decided to work on was an entanglement of the various perspectives brought up.**
- Importantly, this means that **perspectives that were not brought up also did not contribute to the team’s direction.** If a team was composed of members from four organizations but only two members brought up their organizational concerns, then also only these organizations’ concerns ended up in the team’s direction.

In the following, we will outline some strategies and practices that managers and team members can adopt to manage and respond to this complexity.

Individual against organizational concerns.

As a team or meeting lead, it is a good idea to be aware of the possible variety of concerns that are brought forward. To better grasp where a certain suggestion is coming from, you can try to understand whether the suggestion in question was motivated by an individual or an organizational objective, for example. Did your team colleague talk as an “I”, or did she talk as a “we” to refer to her organization? She might also mask her individual interest as a company-wide one, in order to speak with more power and authority (it is not just her pushing for her suggestion then, but also her organization and all its members). We tend to take our pronoun use for granted, but especially in settings where diverse professionals come together, paying extra attention to the question of *who a professional is talking for* can reveal a lot about the underlying dynamics of the situation.

As part of our broader research, we learned that differences between organizations can have a high risk of hampering collaboration (see our deliverable on *Member Differences*). In interorganizational teams, members need to cut a few of their ties to their organizations in order to form a new, albeit temporary and co-existing collective. Shifting perspectives—from organizational to individual to team—can help this process, as we will explain next.

In our example conversation, we saw the **man in white** and **the woman in white** doing this. Both argue only from their individual and organizational viewpoints.

Shifting from organizational to individual to team.

Is one of your team members constantly talking from her organization’s perspective? Is she bringing up organizational concerns and objectives again and again? And is she maybe even trying to dominate the concerns of other team members and their organizations? When we form part of an interorganizational team, we are of course driven by the organizational reasons that brought us there. And of course, for our organization, we want to get the best possible out of the collaboration. However, it is difficult to establish a shared direction and form a collective team voice and identity when everyone is only focusing on their own organization. That is exactly why organizational differences can easily hamper collaboration.

If in your team you feel that organizational concerns are dominating too much and stand in the way of creating a shared direction and team voice, you might want to try to twist members' perspectives from organizational to individual. Ask them about what they, as individual professionals, would like to get out of the project and see if you can find some common ground that way. A very mature organization might find little value in learning from a very young one, but this does not mean that team members cannot learn from each other as individual professionals. Actively reminding people to think from different perspectives can help to find common ground and to form a collective team "we".

In our example conversation, we saw the **man in blue** doing this. He tried to translate his colleagues' individual and organizational concerns into one shared team concern.

We as one team: Something to be created.

The "we" as one team is not something that immediately exist. Instead, such a "we" needs to be created and actively worked on. If you wonder whether the group of people you brought together as one team really is a team, maybe pay attention to the words and pronouns each of you uses when talking about the team. Do members talk about *us*, *our team*, and *we*? And if so, do really **all** members do that? Or are just some of them talking about *us* and *we* while the rest speaks from their own or their organizations' perspective?

Collaboration is ultimately all about forming a collective we: If there is no we, there is hardly a reason to speak of collaboration and teamwork at all. Team managers might want to purposefully invoke pronouns and phrases as *we*, *us* and *our team* in conversations and their questions to others. Or they might want to translate others' organizational and individual concerns into collective or team concerns.

In our example conversation, we saw the **man in blue** doing this. Check again!

Distinguishing between a *real we* and a *claimed we*.

The team's collective "we" can be a powerful resource: Those that use it are in a position to author and define what the team should work on. Some members might try to mask organizational objectives under the team's we—they would simply present what they want for their organization as that what also matters for the team. Team leaders need to sensitize for that. A truly collective we reflects and brings together the concerns of diverse voices and not just one organization or one individual. This condition is something to always check against.

In our example conversation, we saw the **man in blue** speaking with a real we: this we brought together the individual and organizational concerns invoked so far and hence reflected the complexity of integrated viewpoints.

How to work with pronoun use in general.

We said this already before but want to repeat: We believe the complexity of perspectives and viewpoints is the very condition of integration. Only when all opinions are brought up can these be merged in such a manner that a new collective voice emerges with which all team members can identify. For team managers it is hence important to make sure that all relevant perspectives join the conversation as only then do they all have the chance to contribute to a team's shared direction. Maybe go and ask your team members about answering the very same question from different perspectives—you might be surprised in how far answers can differ. Especially when we adopt our organization's perspective, we are often unaware of that: Thinking from our organization's viewpoint is a very normal part of everyday work, which is why this thinking can easily become an automatism that we ourselves are blind to. As an interorganizational team leader, maybe remind your colleagues of this automatism from time to time.

- *In (interorganizational) collaboration, pronouns use matters.*
- *The way pronouns are used can reflect the current stage of the team or can be used to force a team towards a different direction.*
- *Many different viewpoints need to be integrated.*
- *Awareness of and attention to pronoun use can help understanding which perspective is being brought up and can help forming a truly integrated, collective team voice.*

Credits and acknowledgements

This report has been created within the E-PLM 2.0 project, Experiment 5.1. All insights, findings and recommendations are based on interviews conducted with members of E-PLM 2.0, analyses of video recordings made, and field note data taken while observing team meetings (as non-participant observer). For questions and suggestions, please contact Ellen Nathues (e.nathues@utwente.nl) or prof. dr. Maaïke D. Endedijk (m.d.endedijk@utwente.nl).

We want to thank the members of the E-PLM 2.0 community for their continuous support and valuable insights.

The photo used on the title page of this report is by Marianne Bos on Unsplash.