

## CHAPTER 2

# Defining the Term *Samhandling*

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**Abstract:** In this chapter we will demonstrate that *samhandling* has a different qualitative meaning from other similar concepts. The term “*samhandling*” is used by many organizations, researchers and textbook authors without clarifying the rationale for its use (Torgersen & Steiro, 2009). The word *samhandling* is built on a distinct cultural foundation. Therefore, we think it is necessary to describe Norwegian culture briefly, to enable the reader to understand the basis of *samhandling*. The chapter presents a definition of *samhandling* that was originally presented by Torgersen & Steiro (2009). *Samhandling* is distinguished from cooperation/teamwork by three core attributes which we can call the identity of *samhandling*: focus on complementarity, exchange and utilization of the participants’ various skills, experiences, backgrounds and cultures, and coordination of these factors in efforts towards a common goal in a work situation or meeting. *Samhandling* has a higher relative ambition level than the corresponding processes covered by the expressions “collaboration”, “cooperation” and “coordination”. Increased complexity and relations between stakeholders call for a focus on complementary handling in action, that is, *samhandling*. The following competencies were identified in order for good *samhandling* to occur: trust, assurance, well-being, belonging, clarity, time and tolerance.

**Keywords:** *Samhandling*, interaction, collaboration, cooperation, coordination, training, unforeseen.

Citation: Torgersen, G.-E., & Steiro, T. J. (2018). Defining the Term *Samhandling*. In G.-E. Torgersen (Ed.), *Interaction: ‘Samhandling’ Under Risk. A Step Ahead of the Unforeseen* (pp. 39–54). Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.36.ch2>

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that the term *samhandling* plays a key role in meeting the unforeseen, both in predicting the unforeseen, during an impact and in the aftermath of an incident. “Interaction” is often used synonymously with traditional notions of “collaboration”, “coordination” and “cooperation”. Different terms can cover the same processes, and we can get the impression of “the emperor’s new clothes”. Conceptual change in itself does not, of course, automatically provide benefits. The term “*samhandling*” is used by many organizations, researchers and textbook authors, without clarifying the rationale for its use (Torgersen & Steiro, 2009). It is important to clarify what is meant by the concepts one uses. Clarification makes it easier to identify underlying factors and assumptions in the processes covered by the term, respond to them, and streamline processes in order to improve products or processes. We will find that there are several overlapping and complex meanings for these concepts, both in literature and in organizations. We will demonstrate in this article that *samhandling* has a different qualitative meaning from the other concepts. Since “interaction” has become a popular contemporary concept, there is a risk that it may be used as a sales pitch rather than a deliberate scientific justification. However, use of the term may also be related to new circumstances, such as technology, unpredictable and risky events, new organizational structures and the division of labor. These are linked to traditional processes, such as “teamwork”, “cooperation” and “coordination”. On the whole, this is perceived differently to the common understanding of the terms “cooperation” and “coordination”. There is a need to choose other terms to cover this, despite any differences that are clearly identified or articulated.

## The concept

The Norwegian concept of *samhandling*, has no direct equivalent in the English language and since *samhandling* is rooted in a Norwegian context, we have kept the word *samhandling*. The closest translation of *samhandling* is “interaction” or “joint action”. Although these words do

not equate with “interaction” precisely, it is still better than the words and expressions that might otherwise be used for collaboration and group processes, such as “teamwork”, “cooperation”, “collaboration”, or even “join forces with”. There are many definitions for these words and they are relatively similar in terms of common knowledge, the focus being on people working together. For example, here is a definition of “collaboration”:

*“The collective work of two or more individuals where the work is undertaken with a sense of shared purpose and direction that is attentive, responsive, and adaptive to the environment.”* (Beyerlin & Harris, 2004:18, sec. ref. Nemiro et al., 2008:1).

In this definition, the act and the situation are not as prominent as they rely on the interaction. In such classic definitions, the focus is “collective”, i.e. to do something together (teamwork), either simultaneously or following one another sequentially, each contributing to the whole with his own specialty. In other words, a kind of collective effort. After examining several definitions of “team”, we have chosen Assmann’s (2008):

*“Team is a small, multidisciplinary group composed for a common purpose and the members feel a common responsibility to ensure that they achieve results”.* Assmann (2008:37).

Levin and Rolfen (2004:69) have a similar definition, but focus more strongly on the relationships between team members:

*“A team consists of at least two people who have face-to-face relationships, it must exist over a certain period of time, establishing emotional connections between members, they must have a common purpose and understanding of performance requirements, and must meet specific criteria for membership”.*

These definitions describe, in principle, a form of organization rather than the process or work being carried out, but nevertheless suggest a process carried out by the “team”, in which the collective and joint are central. Each individual makes a unique contribution to this holistic process, complementing the others involved in an interactive development process; individual participants not only contribute with their competence, they also develop and learn from each other during the process.

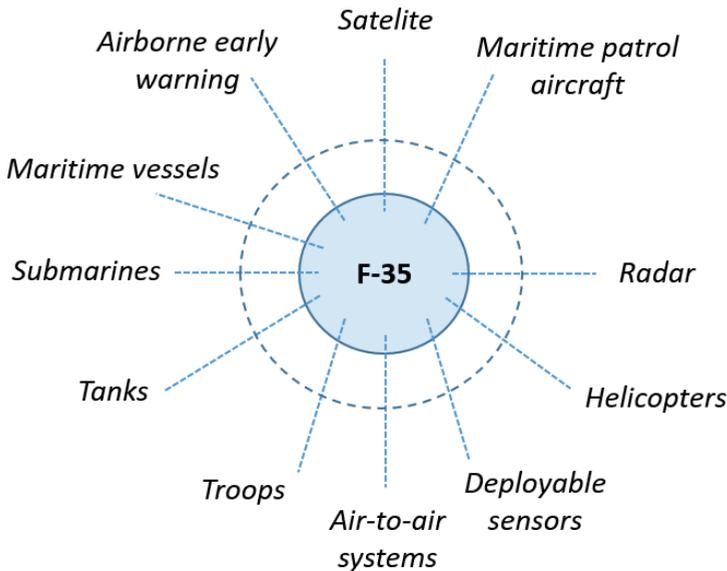
Technology or equipment is crucial in many complex tasks. This is how we perceive the term “interaction”, which we believe describes something qualitatively different from the concepts of “cooperation” and “collaboration”.

## The cultural context for *samhandling*

The word *samhandling* is built on a distinct cultural foundation. Therefore, we think it is necessary to describe Norwegian culture briefly, to enable the reader to understand the basis of *samhandling*, making it easier to interpret and justify the relevance of the concept. Norway has a small economy with a lot of international contact. Historically, the country has been highly influenced by social-democratic values (Skorstad, 2002). Work and education have been seen as important means for participation of citizens, creating welfare and equal opportunities for everyone. The Norwegian model of organization is based on a belief in rules and regulations, but in an informal manner. In Norway, there has been a long tradition of tri-party collaboration, between the authorities, representatives of both employers and employees, working in close cooperation to develop organizations. The Norwegian Labor Act of 1978 can be seen as a result of this. This legislation places a great deal of emphasis on *medvirkning*, the Norwegian term for “participation”. In Norway, this is perceived as a value in itself, worth striving for. In Hofstede’s (1991) taxonomy, the Norwegian culture is characterized by low power distance and “feminine” values. Justice and caring for others are seen as important values. A central value in the culture is cultural difference is to limit power aspects (Skarpenes, 2007). In Norway, as in other Nordic countries, trust is seen as important and as a value in itself. Trust is seen as being more beneficial and having lower transactional costs than control. This has led international figures to advocate looking to the Nordic countries, in developing concepts for efficient economic practices (Covey, 2003). However, the Norwegian, or rather Nordic view of trust must be seen in relation to both historical and cultural contexts. *Samhandling* can be seen from a perspective of valuing interaction and trust, as a means of developing organizations and efforts in the community.

## The technological context for *samhandling*

We see that technology play an increased role in modern society. The technological elements play an increasing role for *samhandling*. One example is the F-35 that has several advanced sensors that enable it to communicate more efficiently with forces on the ground, with other aircrafts and ships (Figure 2.1). It collects and distribute information better and provide a better situational understanding and alignment which again create a better framework for decision making and in particular meeting the unforeseen.



**Figure 2.1** Illustration of the concept of F-35 (The Joint Strike Fighter) where *samhandling* is a holistic principle. Many actors are involved and there is flow of information between all actors (network).

In order to utilize the weapon platform; *samhandling*, decision making processes, plans and procedures need to be developed accordingly to use the capacity of the weapon platform.

## Definition of *samhandling*

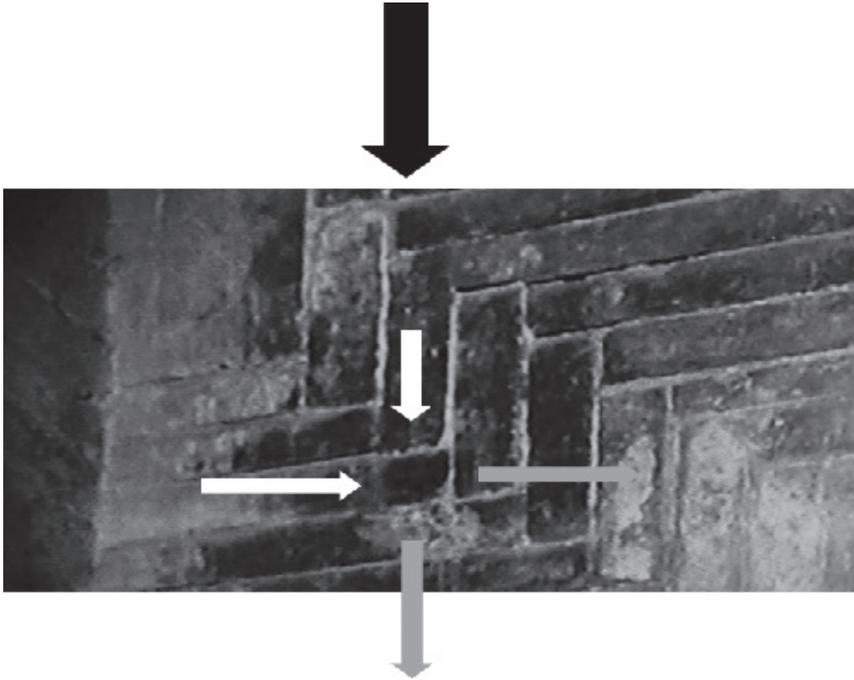
Based on a study of 15 organizations (Torgersen & Steiro, 2009), which we extracted from the aforementioned examples in table 2.1, we have developed this definition of *samhandling*:

*“Samhandling is an open and mutual communication and development between participants, who develop skills and complement each other in terms of expertise, either directly, face-to-face, or mediated by technology or by hand power. It involves working towards common goals. The relationship between participants at any given time relies on trust, involvement, rationality and industry knowledge.”* (Torgersen & Steiro, 2009:130).

Based on this definition, we see that *samhandling* is not a process that is solely reserved for management and leadership, but also takes place in production and common labor processes in which people work together. *Samhandling* is primarily a way to work or act. Central to interaction is “action”, first and foremost a targeted action. This action is shared or exchanged expertise – often extensive, specialized, and used in a complementary manner (Steiro & Torgersen, 2013; Torgersen & Steiro, 2009). The focus on complementarity can also be seen in the work of Miles and Watkins (2007), supporting the notion that interaction is more than the sum of its parts. The definition also covers the use of technology. It covers the mediation of technology that assist humans like a shuffle. It also covers *samhandling* over distance by the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It also includes *samhandling* between robots and robots and humans.

Another illustrative example is the foundation of the dome of Florence Cathedral, designed by Filippo Brunelleschi between 1417–1434. Brunelleschi had the bricks laid in a herringbone pattern to support the inner dome. This is illustrated in Figure 2.2. King (2000) explains this as an action and reaction between the bricks. We can argue that they are the same bricks but assigned different roles, and that the action and reaction creates interaction, redistributing the forces of pressure outwards and downwards. This prevents the dome from collapsing inwards.

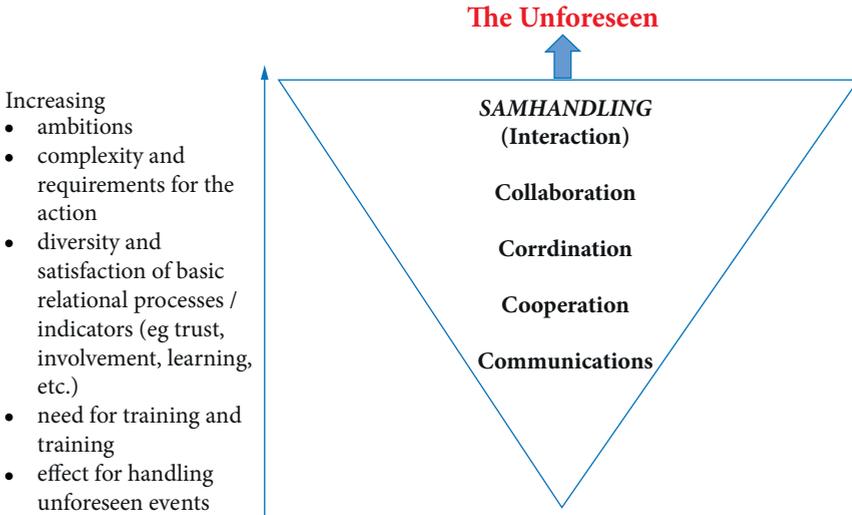
For *samhandling* to occur, one must also be aware that each participant contributes with their unique situational understanding (“shared situational awareness”), based partly on their own perspective and position in the organization, and their experiences, culture, knowledge, attitudes, emotions and job satisfaction, including recommendations to the interaction process (Sandeland & Boudens, 2000). In other words, while traditional collaborative and cooperative processes are, in principle, subject



**Figure 2.2** The herring-bone pattern of brickwork designed by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), for the inner dome of Florence Cathedral, which effectively divides the pressure downwards and outwards, avoiding an inward collapse (grey arrows). The white arrows symbolize action and reaction, thereby creating an interaction. (Photo: Trygve Steiro, 2017).

to collective actions in common vision and understanding, it is in the nature of interaction that different situational understanding is required. Furthermore, it is the process or “way forward” towards a common understanding or use of the various skills, such as problem-solving tools, to create a product or reach a goal, which is unique to the interaction process. Interaction subsequently includes an awareness of relationships and the participants’ interactions or exchanges (Steiro & Torgersen, 2013). Martin, Nolte & Vitolo (2016) have investigated crisis management and underlined the importance of the four Cs; communication, cooperation, coordination and collaboration (Figure 2.3).

Increased complexity and relations between stakeholders call for a focus on complementary handling in action, that is *samhandling*. We scaffold on the work of Martin et al. (2016), but argue in this article that *samhandling* is closest to the unforeseen.



**Figure 2.3** The relation between the unforeseen and *samhandling* [interaction], based partly on Martin et al. (2016).

## Fifteen indicators of *samhandling*

In table 2.1, we have listed a number of underlying processes that are essential for effective interaction to take place, based on a study carried out by Torgersen and Steiro (2009). Of course, this does not mean that the indicators can be viewed as universal to all organizations and businesses. Each organization must choose to develop the conditions that are the most meaningful for their activities. However, the list may still be a good starting point for such development.

We believe that *samhandling*, with the points mentioned in the table 2.1 and a greater focus on activities and how they are performed within the interaction, constitute something that is broader and deeper than cooperation. However, these conditions do not constitute a direct cause and effect relationship in the phenomenon of interaction, but represent rather key assumptions and characteristics in our opinion. In other words, the organization should consider these factors in the development of interaction processes within the organization. Awareness and training in these underlying processes should be carried out, so that they become a natural part of the daily interaction processes. This can be achieved through formal training and concurrent learning.

**Table 2.1** Key underlying processes that are important for effective interaction, based on the experiences of a variety of businesses and theoretical approaches (modified after Torgersen & Steiro, 2009:157).

Underlying process	Explanation
<i>Coordination</i>	Distribution and transfer of duties to the right place, with the right skills.
<i>Complementary Expertise</i>	Participants complement each other with their unique expertise.
<i>The Ethical Aspect</i>	This assumes that all participants have equal value and dignity, respect for each other and are willing to take responsibility in the interaction process.
<i>Learning</i>	Participants learn mutually from each other in the interaction process.
<i>Interaction Training</i>	Consists in practicing the above-mentioned conditions that are important for interaction.
<i>Involvement and Awareness</i>	Show a willingness and awareness of the need to contribute actively.
<i>Mastering Tools</i>	Be able to master various tools that are part of interactions, such as technology, equipment and other materials, in a professional and instructive way.
<i>Organizational and Cultural Knowledge</i>	Awareness about the organizational structure and culture of the organization; be aware of "what is".
<i>Power Balance</i>	Absence of dominance/power balance between participants, with a consciousness that the power structures and the experience of these may be somewhat different in an interaction process than in traditional teams and cooperation.
<i>Precision in Communication</i>	Participants express themselves clearly; the knowledge and use of presentation skills.
<i>Role Awareness</i>	Participants understand each other's roles, functions and distribution of tasks in interactions.
<i>Professional Logic</i>	Development of a common understanding of the language and industry jargon. This is not necessarily universal and objective but may have developed within the organization and only have relevance there. The participants must be made aware of the jargon, to enable good communication and establish a foundation for interaction.
<i>Sense</i>	Development of a kind of accurate understanding of the growth that takes place during a <i>samhandling</i> process, and what should be done.
<i>Shared Situational Awareness</i>	Participants are conscious of their own understanding and contribute to this in the process, creating a mutual understanding and focus which accumulates during the interaction process.
<i>Trust, transparency and confidence</i>	Participants experience confidence in each other, trust each other and are able to give of themselves.

## The identity of *samhandling*

Activity Theory or Business Theory emphasizes that learning and development in humans occur in the interaction between people and their environment. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (2003) have developed perspectives on learning, and stress that learning occurs through participation in a community of practice. Yrjö Engstrom (1999) links this more closely with relationships and processes in organizations in general. The core of this thinking is action (“human activity”) and interaction (here understood as *samhandling*) between the individual, the other participants and the environment they are operating within. In other words, activity theory is concerned with the interaction and the processes that occur in and during a business operation or action. In this theory, it is clearly stated that the various participants complement each other in the overall development process. This means that each individual contributes something unique. In activity theory, we find clear traces of complementary perspectives tied to both learning and the production of something. High-quality knowledge is a critical resource of competitive advantages, which relates the concept to *samhandling*. The less standardized the outcome is, the greater its basis on “tacit knowledge”. “Tacit knowledge” can be defined as knowledge based on intuition and experience (Polyani, 1963; 1967). Nonaka et al. (2001) adds that knowledge is developed through interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, and that knowledge development thus consists of one “... continuous, self-transcending process...” (Nonaka et al., 2001:15–16). In this process, they claim that the boundaries of the old self are exceeded so that a new self is created, and that this occurs by acquiring a new context, new knowledge and a new world order (Prigogine, 1980, in Nonaka et al., 2001:17). At the same time, the boundaries between one’s self and others are exceeded as knowledge development occurs through interaction between individuals, and between individuals and their surroundings (Nonaka et al., 2001:16). Furthermore, the authors claim that it is necessary to have a context in which knowledge can be created. With regard to the unforeseen, this is a crucial factor, which is also covered in the definition of *samhandling* (Torgersen & Steiro, 2009). Trust can be regarded as a requirement that allows *samhandling* to function as expected. Trust increases the degree of knowledge exchange (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), also making it more

likely that the receiver will make use of this expertise (Lewin et al., 2004). All this is highly important for good *samhandling* to occur.

In the definition, we see that *samhandling* is a process that is not only reserved for management and leadership but also occurs in production and common work processes, where people work and act together. “Collaboration” is primarily a way to work or act. This includes “coordinated actions” (see for instance Dale, 1999). In “coordinated actions”, comprehensive and specialized skills are shared or exchanged by participants, which complement each other. Therefore, it is reasonable to use the term “action competence” to refer to the skills needed to contribute in a collaborative effort. Furthermore, interaction depends on both individual characteristics and cultural components – and an awareness that diversity of expertise is necessary for interaction. Formulated more specifically, we can say that dealing with diversity is a skill. The lack of diversity adversely affects the effectiveness of complementary expertise. *Samhandling* is distinguished from cooperation/ teamwork, by three core attributes, which we can call the identity of *samhandling*:

- focus on complementarity,
- exchange and utilization of the participants’ various skills, experiences, backgrounds and cultures,
- coordination of these factors in efforts towards a common goal in a working or meeting process.

In practice, this means that *samhandling* is built and developed on a common understanding, with different skills and knowledge contributed and exchanged during the working process. *Samhandling* is both a mind-set and a working method. In sum, *samhandling* involves strategic measures that must be planned and organized, and included in the organization’s strategic business plans. The goal is “efficient” *samhandling*. However, we do not distinguish between “effective *samhandling*” and *samhandling*. If a situation or workplace has developed interaction in practice, then “efficiency” is already a part of its nature. However, “efficient” is often used in everyday speech and strategic terms, usually to emphasize that a measure is effective and that it helps to achieve set objectives and results in a satisfactory manner. Consequently, we have incorporated “efficient”

*samhandling* into our discussion of the term *samhandling*. “Effective” *samhandling* is identified with the following competencies, four of which are identified in Torgersen and Steiro (2009) – namely trust, assurance, well-being and belonging. Trust is essential. Based on recent research, literature and feedback from lectures, some additional competencies have been identified and we present them in table 2.2. They are clarity, time and tolerance. On the basis of this, each organization needs to develop more specific criteria for “effective” *samhandling*.

**Table 2.2** Competencies for *samhandling* and sources of influence.

Competencies for <i>samhandling</i>	Sources of influence
Trust (Norwegian word <i>tillit</i> )	Torgersen & Steiro (2009)
Assurance (Norwegian word <i>trygghet</i> )	Torgersen & Steiro (2009)
Well-being (Norwegian word <i>trivsel</i> )	Torgersen & Steiro (2009)
Belonging (Norwegian word <i>tilhørighet</i> )	Torgersen & Steiro (2009)
Clarity (Norwegian word <i>tydelighet</i> )	Weick (1987), LaPorte & Consolini (1991), Weick & Sutcliffe (2001), Løfdali (2014), Steiro, Johansen, Andersen & Olsvik (2013), Fredriksen & Moen, 2013, Eggen & Nyrønning (1999), Simensen (2005), Leitao (2010)
Time (Norwegian word <i>tid</i> )	Weick (1993), Steiro et. al. (2013), Steiro & Saksvik (2018), Chapter 22 in this book.
Tolerance (Norwegian word <i>toleranse</i> )	Kant (1795/1991), Derrida (2005a; 2005b; 2000), Torgersen & Steiro (2009), Steiro & Torgersen, 2012, Steiro et. al. (2013), see also Steiro and Torgersen (2018), Chapter 10 in this book for further elaboration regarding tolerance.

## Conclusion

*Samhandling* describes something that is completely different from “collaboration”. It has a deeper meaning which is more focused on interaction, complementary skills, and competencies and how to utilize them. *Samhandling* can be beneficial for occurrences and accidents, as illustrated in the Bow-tie in Chapter 1. However, this chapter does not provide a standard formula for organizations to develop *samhandling*. Each organization needs to conceptualize this term individually. A definition of *samhandling* is a recommended starting point. However,

this chapter presents a foundation that could be useful. In Chapter 14 (Steiro & Torgersen), 2018, relational aspects regarding *samhandling* are presented and discussed further.

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