Dialogic feedforward in group coaching

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Contact and purposeful exchange between people in dialogue is seen as a precondition for the co-creation of meaning and for new insights to emerge. Emergence cannot be planned and predicted, but an enabling environment can be created that allows for inquiry into a subject. This article presents a dialogic approach to group coaching developed from an action research project. Dialogic feedforward is one of the crucial methods evolved through this project. The dialogic feedforward model has four steps (observing, reacting, clarifying and wondering) and the article discusses dialogic feedforward as a way to stimulate collaborative inquiring processes in group coaching.

Key words: Action Research, group coaching, dialogue, inquiry, feedforward

> So dialogue is not restricted to two-person communicating, and it is an event where meaning emerges *through* all the participants. (Stewart & Logan, 1999, p. 227)

Facilitating management group conversations

This article is based on an action research project conducted throughout one year in collaboration between the management groups in the Elderly Care of a Danish municipality, and four action researchers (Alrø, Dahl, & Kloster, 2013; Alrø & Dahl, 2015). The action research project has had a dual purpose. At the organisational level the project has aimed at facilitating and

developing new practices of the management groups within the Elderly Care. The purpose has been for the participating leaders to learn together and create a common ground and direction for their leadership. At the research level it has aimed at developing knowledge about how such a process can be facilitated through coaching of management groups, and specifically in this regard to develop a dialogic approach to group coaching. During this project the concept of feedforward in group reflection processes has appeared to be important and challenging both from an organisational and from a research perspective. This article is primarily concerned about the research purpose of the project.

The project has been initiated by the Head of Elderly Care who wants to support the capability of the management groups to cope with the new economic challenges in the field. She is convinced that savings in the social sphere should not necessarily lead to deterioration in the quality of assistance to citizens. She is also convinced that such challenges require an increased focus on leadership, both within the specific areas and within the Elderly Care as a whole. In collaboration with two organisational consultants who have been acquired to support the management groups in this process, she suggests that coaching of all management groups should be one of the methods to facilitate common leadership challenges that originate from the new situation. The Head of Elderly Care is very positive to development processes and research of new methods in the field of leadership, and therefore two action researchers are invited to engage in the project.[1]

The action researchers and the management groups agree on preliminary organisational and research goals of the project. These are negotiated at a meeting with all the leaders, where everyone is asked about their wishes, interests, and reservations towards the project. Participation is voluntary, but subsequently all management groups indicate that they want to participate in the project.

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[1] These action researchers are the authors of this article, who have undertaken the coaching sessions and the research process with the management groups in collaboration with the two consultants.

After the meeting a contract is made about duration and frequency of coaching sessions, use of audio and video recordings and anonymity of participants.

The action research project does not start from a fixed concept of dialogic group coaching that is going to be applied in the organisation. On the contrary, the aim of the project is to develop such a concept from the course of coaching sessions performed in the organisation. However, the research is based on the basic assumptions of the concept of dialogue (see below). Further, the action researchers have previously co-developed a concept for dialogic coaching in dyadic relationships (Alrø & Kristiansen, 1998; Alrø, Dahl, & Frimann, 2009), and they are experienced dialogic coaches as well as action researchers in organisational contexts, but they only have preliminary ideas about dialogic coaching of groups. Together with the management groups they plan an action research process with both organisational and research purposes. Together they experiment with group coaching from preliminary ideas that are reflected in initial meetings as well as during and after the coaching sessions. Here new ideas are generated for future analysis and coaching practice. Detached from the coaching practice, the action researchers conduct close analyses of the video recordings, and discuss them with each other. From these analyses ideas occur that are presented to the management groups in order to try new group coaching practices that inspire new theoretical considerations, and gradually a concept of dialogic group coaching (including feedforward) emerges. Thus, the dialogic approach to group coaching is developed in the interaction between dialogue theory and the performance, reflection and close analysis of video-taped coaching sessions with the management groups.[2]

The following discusses the concept of dialogue and the basic theoretical assumptions of dialogic group coaching developed from the action research project.

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[2] The study is based on 12 2-hours coaching conversations in 5 management groups of 3 to 7 leaders. The action researchers have had a dual role as coaches and researchers.

Dialogue

A dialogic approach to group coaching calls for a clarification of the concept of dialogue. A dialogue is understood here as a conversation with certain qualities in relation to learning (Alrø & Skovsmose, 2002). A dialogue is a conversation of inquiry, i.e. it is open-ended, wondering, dwelling, challenging in order for the participants to let insight and knowledge emerge.

This understanding of dialogue refers to two different theoretical approaches to dialogue (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). One approach considers dialogue to be a certain form of communication that is essentially different from discussion, debate or monologue. Key references for this understanding of dialogue are Bohm (1996) and Isaacs (1994, 1999). According to this approach, dialogue is something you 'do' in a specific context when thinking aloud together and inquiring into a subject. The second approach considers dialogue to be a particular 'way of being' in relation to others that is characterised by specific qualities of interaction e.g. getting and staying in contact, being open towards the diversity of others, paying attention to vulnerability, and being congruent and empathetic. Significant sources of inspiration to this concept of dialogue are Buber (2004 [1923]), Cissna & Anderson (1994) and Rogers (1957, 1962, 1971). (See also Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen (2005); Alrø and Dahl, 2015). Both of these concepts have inspired the dialogic approach to group coaching, like also Pearce and Pearce (2004, p. 45) refer to both Buber and Bohm when describing dialogic characteristics of communication:

> When communicating dialogically, one can listen, ask direct questions, present one's ideas, argue, debate, and so forth. […] The defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of the speech acts are done in ways to hold one's position but allow others space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others' positions without need to oppose or assimilate them. When communicating dialogically, participants often have important agendas and purposes, but make them inseparable from their relationship in the moment with others who have equally strong but perhaps conflicting agendas and purposes.

Dialogic group coaching

Just as coaching in dyadic relationships can be understood as a learning process, coaching of groups is aimed at learning through facilitated reflection. Group coaching deals with common challenges *of* the group, not with individual coaching *in* or *by* the group.[3] Thus, in the action research project the purpose is for the participating leaders to learn together, and create a common ground and direction for their leadership.

Dialogic group coaching is considered to be a facilitating non-directive conversation in which one or two coaches help the group to investigate and handle common challenges. Being non-directive means for the coaches not to diagnose and come up with solutions to the group's challenge, but rather to facilitate a group conversation that allows the participants to inquire into a common concern or challenge, and in this way help them qualify the basis for their decision making. The coaches would act from a 'Process Consultation Model' and not from a 'Doctor-Patient Model' or 'Purchase-of-Information or Expertise Model' (Schein, 1999). They would emphasise, mirror, summarise and challenge the contributions of the group members, but they would not bring their own perspectives and suggestions to the table: even if the group wants them to do so. The reason is that the leaders themselves, not the coaches, are seen as the experts on their leadership. However, the non-directive coach cannot be neutral, because any contribution can influence the direction of the conversation and thus the content. But the intent of the non-directive coach is to let challenges, understandings and decisions remain the responsibility of the group.[4]

The action researchers have a dual role as researchers and coaches that is characterized by a dialogic approach to participation. This is according to

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[3] According to Brown and Grant (2010, p. 32), though, some approaches to group coaching focus on individuals and individual goals within a group setting. This is not included here.

[4] In this respect dialogic group coaching is also inspired by Transformative Mediation that also emphasises the principles of non-directive conversations in helping relationships (Bush & Folger, 2005; Folger, 2010; Alrø & Dahl, 2015).

Streck (2013) associated with three factors: Transparency, task sharing and co-determination. Transparency implicates for the action researcher/coach to be clear and open about the project, responsive to objections and sensitive to the group dynamic. In the group coaching project, these factors are articulated in the initial meetings, but also in the coaching conversations where the coaches aim at being transparent to the group about the role they take[5]:

Coach: We are committed to develop a dialogic concept of group coaching, which develop while we are doing it. We aim to be present in a way that should be supportive for your process, while also challenging it. [...] This basic mindset has not changed in that our role is to bring you to reflect on what is important to you and it is you who are the experts in your professional life.

Task sharing implies that both researchers and the management groups see the point of the project and the project tasks. This relates to co-determination, which ideally is about action researchers and management groups that together determine the design and direction of the action research process. In this project such issues are discussed both at the initial meetings, during the coaching conversations, and in the joint evaluation and dissemination of results.

Entering feedforward in dialogic group coaching

Dialogic coaching recognises the importance of establishing a *coaching contract* as an oral agreement between the coach and the parties in order for them to stay on the track they have chosen for the coaching conversation. This is what we call the common concern, the joint matter or the group challenge. During the action research project the idea of feeding forward emerged from this process of sharing and inquiring into a common concern of the management group. The following excerpt from a group coaching

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[5]   This can be seen as an example of first-person reflection skills where the action researcher catches internal responses to conflicting demands and deals with them. This is used in the second-person practice where the action researcher negotiates his role with the participants (Coghlan & Shani, 2008; Torbert, 2001).

conversation serves as an entrance to identify the concept of dialogic feedforward.

Betty, who is a manager, talks about the common concern that the group and the coach have formulated in the coaching contract. One of the group members has written the contract on the whiteboard: 'How do we prioritise the right tasks?'

Betty: I think, this is a complex issue, because when I was reading this one sentence I thought: 'Prioritise' ...almost like Meg said: What are the criteria for our priorities, after all what is more important than anything else? And 'right', 'the right tasks' what are the right tasks in relation to what? And I think it is hard to see a structure in it, because the 'right tasks' for us as a management team, if we see the organisation as a whole, are not necessarily the same when we talk about the local districts.

Betty refers to what her colleague, Meg, has previously said ('almost like Meg said') when meta-communicating about the negotiated contract: 'How do we prioritize the right tasks?' She addresses the words one by one. 'Prioritize': what is more important than anything else? 'Right tasks': compared to what? She does so in order to discuss the importance of the context, in 'the organization as a whole' or in 'the local districts'. Betty adds to it that sometimes it is not possible to decide what is the 'right' priority until decisions have been implemented and tried out.

Betty's contribution may be seen as an example of feedforward, where she comments on something brought forward by a colleague, asks onwards and produces new ideas and perspectives that can be elaborated further in the group. Our interpretation is that Betty uses an investigative approach, feeding forward, which encourages a nuanced reflection on the organisation as a whole and an insight that decisions cannot be automatically implemented top down. This example has nurtured the concept of feedforward developed during the action research project.

The concept of feedforward has been used within different theoretical and practical approaches to helping relationships. Penn (1985) has introduced the concept in systemic family therapy. She describes feedforward as a technique that encourages participants to take a future perspective on the subject,

imagining what possibly 'could be' instead of evaluating 'what is'. Questions about the future combined with positive connotation are supposed to "promote the rehearsal of new solutions, suggest alternative actions, foster learning, discard ideas of predetermination, and address the system's specific change model" (ibid., p. 299). Such questions can support a view of the future that includes fantasies, hypotheses, wishes and hopes (ibid., p. 300).

McDowall and Millward (2010) argue that within coaching psychology the concept of feedforward is inspired by Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry. They share the future-focused approach to feedforward including a positive orientation towards 'what could be'. They suppose that "it is more fruitful to put those who are about to receive feedback into a positive frame of mind first by focussing on strength, then getting them to think about the future before feeding back performance information." (ibid., p. 70).

The dialogic concept of feedforward also focusses on supporting reflection of a certain subject in order for the participants to widen perspectives, but it is not necessarily positive and future-oriented in terms of imagining a better future. The purpose of dialogic feedforward is to examine perspectives and ideas related to the presented topic, not by evaluating but by inquiring into a subject. This means dwelling, following, supplementing, thinking aloud, reflecting, questioning, challenging in an open manner without trying to convince each other about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and without the purpose of deciding who and what is right. Dialogic feedforward is about searching for not yet present ideas to emerge. In what follows, the focus will be on dialogic qualities of communicating feedforward.

Dialogic feedforward

A coach is primarily in a questioning position. The coach asks questions in order to make the group participants reflect on the chosen common concern. A questioning position in coaching means inquiry into a phenomenon and this also includes wondering (Johnsen-Høines & Alrø, 2012). Inquiry is a dialogic position that is characterised by a curious investigative stance, as for example described by Lindfors (1999). She describes inquiry as an open and invitational position that aims at examining what is not known (yet) (ibid.).

Inquiry thus operates into what Vygotsky (1978) would call the zone of proximal development, which is located in the tension between what you already know and what you can get to know with the support and coaching of others.

Lindfors (1999) distinguishes between two kinds of inquiry, both of which are curiously investigating. One is *information seeking* of issues where the person who asks does not know the answer beforehand. Such questions ask for clarification and understanding and can be answered in terms of facts, for example: 'Who is responsible for this area?' or formulated indirectly: 'I do not know who is responsible for this area'. Plausible answers could for instance be: 'The nurses are' or 'I actually don't know (either)'.

Inquiry as clarifying and information seeking is opposed to *wondering* in the sense that wondering questions cannot be answered factually. The hallmark of this sort of inquiry is not to close the conversation about one answer, but rather to preserve the investigation in the open. Both information seeking and wondering can be investigative activities that may lead to new insights, but they are associated with different qualities in the conversation. The first stance searches for understanding, while the latter seeks different perspectives for joint reflection.

We have included these principles of inquiry in the development of dialogic group coaching. The coach facilitates investigative, wondering conversations where participants jointly curiously wonder and where each contributes to explore a field. The group members are preoccupied with things that they do not yet know, but can get to know together in dialogue. Or, as Gadamer (2004 [1960], p. 371) puts it: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were". The role of the dialogic coach is to make the group reflect on the basis of information seeking and wondering, i.e. in a dialogic way, and to facilitate a dialogic space where participants can take a clarifying and wondering stance.

Dialogic questions are tentative, lingering and exploratory. It may for example be hypothetical questions like: 'Could it be that...? What if... ? I wonder what it would take to... ? Should we try... ? How come that... ?'. Dialogic

statements of 'inquiry' can be phrased as questions, but they can also be phrased differently: 'I would imagine..., Let's try to..., Perhaps we could put it another way..., It sounds a bit strange, but...'. Such formulations invite others to explore different perspectives without a commitment to transform ideas into immediate decision making.

For the dialogic coach this would take a certain way to listen to the conversation and to highlight and reflect back what is actually being said by the participants in the conversation without either having selective hearing or put his own interpretation into it. Davis (1996) thus distinguishes between three types of listening: evaluative, interpretive and hermeneutic listening: "In sum, then, evaluative listening is an uncritical taking in of information that is out there, interpretive listening involves an awareness that one is projecting onto one's understandings particular biases that are in here, and hermeneutic listening is a participation in the unfolding of possibilities through collective action." (ibid., p. 118). Both evaluative and interpretive listening judges what has been said. Hermeneutic listening does not focus on judgement of participants' views, but on the insights produced by the participants of the group: "...the tone of these conversations was not what-I-think; what-you-think, but more toward what-we-think." (ibid.). Hermeneutic listening can also be understood as dialogic listening, where participants are concerned with the insights they produce together (what-we-think) (Johnsen-Høines & Alrø, 2012). Dialogic listening requires an effort to be aware of what is happening in the here-and-now relationship. Reflecting back (paraphrasing) what the parties say is one way to demonstrate this, and thus encourage one another to further reflection. Stewart and Logan (1999) use the term 'paraphrase plus' to describe a paraphrase that connects while adding a question or a questioning intonation to a statement, and so encourages further reflection. The coach can support such reflective processes through dialogic feedforward.

Feedforward is basically a way to facilitate an idea-generating process. As opposed to feedback, feedforward is prospectively investigating not (yet) realized matters. Thus, dialogic feedforward is an investigative process where the coach tries to make the group reflect in a clarifying and wondering manner. The coach paraphrases perspectives produced by the participants and facilitates a joint examination of the multiple perspectives in the group.

Figure 1: *Dialogic feedforward model*

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│ 1. OBSERVING                             │
│ External perception, paraphrase          │
│ • I see, I hear...                       │
│ • I notice...                            │
│ • "XXX", you say...                      │
├─────────────────────────────────────────┤
│ 2. REACTING                              │
│ Internal perception, personal response   │
│ • I become...                            │
│ • I feel...                              │
│ • My reaction is that I...               │
├─────────────────────────────────────────┤
│ 3. CLARIFYING                            │
│ Information seeking, challenging          │
│ • Does that mean...?                      │
│ • Can you tell more about...?            │
│ • How does it relate to... ?             │
├─────────────────────────────────────────┤
│ 4. WONDERING                             │
│ Hypotheses, tentative ideas              │
│ • What if... ?                           │
│ • I wonder if...                         │
│ • Let's try to...                        │
│ • Could you imagine that...?             │
│ • Maybe it was an idea to...             │
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The presented feedforward model consists of four interdependent parts: observing, reacting, clarifying and wondering.[6] *Observing* concerns accurate examples of what is being said and done in the group. This makes the basis of the feedforward clear and recognizable to all participants. Observing is used to inform reflecting back, which is also an important tool for the coach in other parts of the coaching conversation. *Reacting* means for the coach to explicate how he or she reacts to what is observed. This makes the coach

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[6] The dialogic feedforward model is inspired by the feedback model presented by Alrø and Kristiansen (1998). Thus, the first two steps are identical. The other steps in the feedback model are 'interpreting' and 'proposing'. Feedback is oriented towards evaluation of what has been, while feedforward is oriented towards reflection of possibilities.

congruent, which can be important for staying in contact in order to facilitate the group conversation. Further, the coach becomes more specific and less general and evaluative about what is reflected back.

The coach can highlight perspectives produced by the participants and facilitate a joint study in the group by asking forward. 'Paraphrase plus' is an example of how feedforward may be practiced. The coach observes a statement that appears in the conversation, paraphrases it, and puts a *clarifying* question or a *wondering* statement in continuation of the paraphrase, thus giving both the person who is the originator of the paraphrased expression and the remainder of the group the possibility to continue the reflection process.

The coach paraphrases a specific statement or expression and invites for a curious and wondering examination, for example: 'I have noticed that the word 'gap' has been mentioned several times'. This allows participants of the conversation to focus their attention on just that particular expression: or to let go if this is of no importance to them.

The dialogic coach is non-directive, and so he does not bring his own ideas, topics or suggestions to the table, but he can still make himself part of the conversation by explicating his reactions to what he observes in the group. These reactions can serve as explanations why the coach pays attention to a specific observation, e.g. becomes aware, curious, uncertain, confused, etc. in relation to what happens in the conversation. From that platform the coach can challenge the group reflections through clarifying, investigating, or challenging questions in relation to the observed: 'Does that mean that... ? Has this something to do with what you said before about... ? Or through wondering hypothetical questions 'What if your wishes come true... ? How would it be to cope with this... ? I wonder if there could be more to it...'. Clarifying and wondering statements can generate each other, and they serve to bring reflections further with the purpose of reaching a new place where ideas and opportunities can be presented and examined by the group.

Feedforward is not only of relevance in coaching, but also in the methodology of action research. Thus, clarifying and wondering can be seen as an example of second-person practice (Torbert, 2001) where action researchers "engage in inquiry with others and work to create a community of inquiry.

This involves not only the design and management of shared responsibility for the design and execution of the project that enhances co-inquiry. The collaborative nature of the inquiry is central to the quality of action research process and its outcomes" (Coghlan & Shani, 2008, p. 644). Observing and reacting implies that the action researcher is self-aware in terms of first-person praxis-reflection (ibid.; Torbert, 2001). Feedforward therefore requires a dual attention: to the self of the action researcher and to the group in the relationship. "First-person skills focus on holding and managing this tension between closeness and distance" (Coghlan & Shani, 2008, p. 647). In this sense feedforward can be related to reflexivity in action research, where researchers engage in explicit, self-aware reflection of their own role and of the intersubjective relationships to participating others. "Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself." (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). Such processes of reflection are very important to support a non-directive approach to coaching as well as to action research.

A dialogic versus a systemic approach

The conversation qualities of dialogic feedforward may on the surface seem to be similar to the four question types: linear, circular, reflective and strategic presented by Tomm (1988) and used in systemic coaching (Moltke & Molly, 2009; Huffington, 2008). Linear and strategic questions look like clarifying questions, while circular and reflexive questions may look like wondering questions. It is not that simple, though. First, there is no direct overlap of the categories. Second, asking clarifying and wondering questions have different purposes and functions within a systemic and a dialogic approach.

Linear questions in systemic coaching have an information seeking intention, e.g: "What is your role in the organisation?" (Huffington, 2008, p. 25). They correspond with clarifying questions in the dialogic approach, for example: 'What is the challenge? How is this challenging for the group?' Here, there seems to be no difference between systemic and dialogic coaching.

Circular questions are information seeking, but they focus on the relational part of the challenge. The systemic coach would not explicate his own reactions, but rather focus on the client's interpretation of his or her relationships, e.g: "What do you think your colleagues think about your performance with clients?" (ibid., p. 26). The dialogic coach, however, would ask clarifying and wondering questions about information (i.e. about relationships) that is put forward by the group members. Such questions would be based on exact observations and reflected back to the group in order to make the members elaborate and clarify, e.g.: 'How did your staff react to the strategic plan? How was it for you as a group to get this response?' If the dialogic coach would ask about the relationship, the inquiry would be based upon his observations and reactions, e.g.: 'When XX mentions this 'gap' and YY says that about the gap (observation), then I wonder (reaction) if they talk about the same thing'.

The systemic coach would ask reflective questions in order to create an adequate disturbance in the group. The systemic coach would want to 'disturb' by asking hypothetical-speculative questions in order for the group to develop new ideas and interpretation of others or of a possible future, e.g: "If you were to share with a colleague how you experience the conflict with your boss, what do you think he would do?" or "How do you think junior colleagues would react if you offered to mentor them on how to win new projects?" (ibid.). The dialogic coach would only feedforward issues that are brought up by the group, e.g.: '[Paraphrase]+ What could be achieved by this?', where 'this' refers to a proposal that has been put forward by the group.

Strategic questions in systemic group coaching also have the intention of disturbing or affecting the group, but here the coach would put forward his or her own proposals: 'How about doing this... ? Why don't you try to...?' Such questions aim at "creating corrective disturbances in the coachee." (Moltke & Molly, 2009, p. 131, (authors' translation)) and "tend to be more manipulative and controlling" (Tomm, 1988, p. 12). The pitfall of strategic questions is that the participants may try to please the coach, and so the systemic coach should handle such questions very carefully, but "…occasional strategic questions can sometimes be extremely constructive […]. These questions can

be vigorously used to challenge problematic patterns of thought and behaviour without having the resort to direct statement or commands. If the questions are carefully worded, clients often can be confronted with the limitations, constraints, or contradictions in their own system of belief" (ibid.). The dialogic coach would not intend to 'correct' the interpretations of the group, push them in certain directions, or make his own suggestions to the solutions. The dialogic coach, however, would ask for clarification as to whether the group itself has ideas and suggestions.

In what follows an authentic example of dialogic feedforward is presented. The analysis originates from the action research project on dialogic group coaching mentioned above, and, among other coaching conversation analyses, this analysis has nurtured the development of the dialogic feedforward model.

Dialogic feedforward in group coaching – an example

Coach: The 'gap' is certainly something that everyone has talked about. So this might be important for everyone here, so I interpret it, [Karen: Yes, mm] and it is something that everyone has mentioned in relation to a challenge. And Meg, what you are into is to try to explore 'what do we actually understand by 'gap'? We should not avoid gaps, but what exactly do we mean by the word? And what do we want to do with it?' Is it something like that?

The coach feeds forward by summarising some of what the group has been saying about 'gap' so far. She paraphrases some of the contributions in a (pseudo)quotation form: 'what do we actually understand by 'gap'? We should not avoid gaps, but what exactly do we mean by the word? And what do we want to do with it?' All these questions relate to what has been put forward by the group so far, and they can be understood as wondering questions referring to the 'gap', inviting the group to further investigation of what 'gap' might mean. The coach checks out whether the group recognises her wondering questions through a clarifying question: 'Is it something like that?'

The leaders co-produce various ideas about handling the 'gap', including that it is important to keep focus on their role as leaders and as members of a

management group. The group decides that the goal of the coaching conversation should be to investigate the group's reactions and responses when they experience gaps between management decisions and practices, and what they can learn from their way of dealing with gaps.

After a long process of reflection about the role of gaps as regards policy and practice, the coach takes the floor again:

Coach: If I may say something here? What strikes me is that the word 'completed' is used repeatedly, if a case is completed. Does it affect your ability to act on the... gap between policy and practice? If a case is completed, is that important?

The coach refers to a specific observation and reflection of the word 'completed', that she has heard several times in the group reflections. She also tells her reaction ('What strikes me'). The observation serves as a base of inquiry into the phenomenon, by relating it to the contract for the conversation. 'Is that important' for the investigation of the gap between management decisions and practices, 'if a case is completed'? The questions can be interpreted both as clarifying and wondering, but the group perceives them as wondering in what follows.

Meg thus elaborates on the importance of clarity in decision-making and implications for their daily practice. This makes the coach ask a clarifying question:

Coach: So when something is completed, it means that...

Meg: ... it means that I know that there is a clear explanation as to how we should work with this…

Coach: ... clear explanation, which comes from this group?

Meg: [nods]... from this group... in general affairs, yes.

The coach challenges Meg's reflection by opening a specific opportunity for her, 'So when something is completed, it means that...' and Meg completes the sentence by clarifying that something is completed when there is a 'clear explanation' how the management decision should be implemented. The coach paraphrases 'clear explanation' and adds a clarifying question (paraphrase plus): 'which comes from this group?' Meg confirms this by nodding

and repeating 'from this group' and add the words 'in general affairs, yes.' This exchange makes the group engage in a mutual reflection on various examples from the past, where the decisions of the group have had little impact on their practice. The word 'completed' is still used as a focal point in the conversation in relation to a variety of perspectives, and after a while the coach suggests a summary of the discussion:

Coach: If I may try to sum up what I hear, I think there are two kinds of 'completed' present in the discussion. One has to do with the framework defined in this group. In addition there are some 'stages', and some 'processes' and 'dynamics' and a 'bottleneck' between the frames and the implementation. So the 'gap' is between the static and the dynamic, did I get that right? [Everybody nods]. So where is it, I would ask, where is the bottleneck for you? It sounds as if all of you think that there must be clear decisions from this group. But to implement them depends a lot more on each of you, it is a dynamic process […]

The coach summarises the discussion, which is of course an interpretive presentation. At the same time feedforward (clarifying) is included: Could it be that there are two different aspects of the phenomenon of 'completed' at play in the conversation where one has to do with decisions ('framework defined in this group') and the other with 'processes', 'dynamics' and 'bottlenecks' associated with the implementation of the management decisions in everyday life? The quoted words have all been used by the group members during the discussion. The coach checks her interpretation ('Did I get that right?'), and as the group confirms this by nodding, she continues her feedforward by referring to the contract of the conversation about the group's own role in relation to the 'gap' between decision making and practice: 'So where is it, I would ask, where is the bottleneck for you?'. She does not make the group reflect on this immediately but explains her interpretation by pointing to apparently clear group agreements on management decisions, while implementation seems to be realized by the leaders individually. This makes the group discuss how important it is for leaders to have room for diversity in their implementation practices. But they realize that it is a challenge for them to share individual experiences in the group. The coach sums up this interpretation to the group:

Coach: [...] You implement decisions differently, so your processes are different, but you do not share your experiences with each other in this group?

The group members confirm and emphasise this as a possibility for mutual learning. One of the leaders makes a proposal to make experience sharing and follow-ups a standing agenda issue at their meetings:

Susan: I think yes, it might be interesting to follow up because I think it is a management tool and one of the things we have in common [...] if it was mandatory and got some time.

Coach: … if it was mandatory and got some time, what could be obtained by that?

The coach reflects Susan's proposals 'if it was mandatory and got some time' and feeds forward a question of the opportunities that could be included in such a practice. These are the options that are left as the result, as the coach completes the coaching conversation by asking where the group is now in relation to the contract of the coaching conversation.

The coaching session helps the group to see different strengths of diversity. The dialogic approach to coaching allows them to cope with diversity and dare have a curious investigative conversation on common management challenges that go beyond the quick decision-making that characterizes the daily operations and meetings they normally have in the group.

The group members do not compete on attitudes and proposals related to the operation of decision-making. Instead, they are eager to listen to each other's reflections, examine perspectives, open them up, think aloud and along rather than against one another. This inquiry mode allows for and legitimises diversity in a completely different way than a decision-making mode, where the aim is to arrive at the best possible solutions.

The aim of the coaching conversations is not to reach a common management decision on a concrete level of action. The goal of the coaching conversation is rather to qualify the basis for managerial decisions by co-creating a variety of perspectives on a given subject. Dialogic feedforward and the focus on clarifying and wondering seems to assist such processes.

Conclusions

The action research project has aimed at developing a dialogic approach to group coaching. This has been done through actions and reflections with the management groups during the coaching sessions about what has been helpful to the groups. This not only includes inquiry into the group conversations, but also into pre-conceptions and perspectives of the researchers. Thus, the action researchers have endeavoured to have an open and inquiring attitude towards the leaders but also to themselves and their own perspectives and theoretical assumptions and pre-understandings. Further, it has been done through reflections within the research group while analysing the coaching sessions and preparing for new sessions. Dialogic feedforward is one of the key constructs of group coaching that has emerged from these efforts.

From an organisational perspective, the leaders have apparently developed their way of working and communicating together through shared reflection. During the coaching sessions they have gained dialogic competences by being open and inquiring to themselves and to each other during the process. Group members began to feed forward in the coaching session even without any help from the coaches. Further, they have developed an ability to make dialogic feedforward among themselves also after the project is finished. Thus, some of the groups have adopted the dialogic approach in their weekly meetings after the actions research project finished the coaching sessions (Alrø, Dahl & Kloster, 2013). They have made it part of their way of communicating dialogically, and they have decided to start their meetings one hour earlier in order for them to have a dialogic conversation about a chosen common concern. Feedforward has appeared to be helpful in these conversations, because it has given them the opportunity to investigate and connect to the ideas of one another. They have learned to pay tribute to diversity in order to let new ideas emerge in the group.

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