

# **Dynamics between Organisational Change Processes and Facilitating Dissensus in Context Inquiring Dialogues**

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The article examines the dynamics between organisational change processes and facilitating dissensus in a dialogic organisational action research project. The article has two purposes. Firstly, it shows how earlier organisational change processes become present in the social interaction between partners and action researchers as tensions between different interests and voices. Secondly, based on understanding facilitating as enactment of power, it discusses if and how dissensus can be facilitated as context inquiring dialogues where dissensus becomes the vehicle of future changes. This discussion shows that facilitation of dissensus even at team level deals with a complex situation.

The article presents these two purposes in relation to co-operation with the joint team in the Citizen Service of the Municipality of Silkeborg (CSMS) in Denmark from August 2008 to September 2009.

In dialogue with different theories, the article defines theoretical concepts as complexity and organisational change, power and facilitation, participation and voice, and dissensus approach.

**Key words:** dialogue, power, participation, organisation, facilitation

## **1. Introduction – focus and purpose**

The article examines the dynamics between organisational change processes and facilitating dissensus in a dialogic organisational action research project.

Dialogic organisational Action Research focuses on Action Research projects in public and private organizations, in contrast to for example AR in communities and studies dialogue as an object and a method (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 1997). Dialogue as a method means that together with our partners we talk about topics of mutual concern. Dialogue as an object means that concurrently, we examine how dialogues are practiced, develop methods of organising them, and competences of relating dialogically (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Like many Action Reserachers, we learned about the organisation when trying to change it with our partners (Lewin, 1948). The article shows how we met earlier organisational change processes as tensions between different voices and interests in the social interaction with our partners. Based on understanding facilitating as enactment of power, it discusses, too, if and eventually how dissensus can be facilitated through context inquiring dialogues where dissensus becomes a vehicle of change.

Context inquiring dialogues are dialogues where contexts become the object of the conversations, because different understandings fight to define what the context should be. Thus power becomes a central component of these conversations questioning who defines the agenda.

The article discusses these two purposes in relation to a concrete case in the Citizen Service of the Municipality of Silkeborg (CSMS) in Denmark. Here, earlier organisational changes encompassed a number of recent organisational development projects caused by a major national municipal reform where three minor municipalities had been merged into the large municipality of a larger town, Silkeborg. The biggest change was the implementation of a new interdisciplinary team structure, where most of the employees were

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<sup>1</sup> In Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen (2005), we defined dialogues as conversations where you share knowledge, dare question your own basic assumptions, and care about your partners. We were inspired then by Buber's philosophic anthropological concepts of meeting, in-between, and ways of relating (1965, 1923); by Bohm's (1996) epistemological concepts of thought, perception and proprioception, and by Gadamer's (1989) philosophic hermeneutical concepts of fore-projections, horizon, and historically effected consciousness. However, self-evidently, these philosophical approaches do not have concepts of organisations. In this article, I examine the relation between communication and organisation.

organised into service teams as opposed to the former work division in offices with separate fields of expertise.

The Action Research project in CSMS was about developing employee driven innovation in teams through dialogues. The project was funded by the Danish Council of Technology and Innovation, the Ministry of Science and was carried out in 2008 and 2009. Teams from two private organisations: Danfoss Solar Inverters and Computer Sciences Corporation participated in the project besides teams from CSMS. As outside Action Researchers, we collaborated with 18 teams and management in the three organisations and became part of the organisation for a short period (Eikeland, 2006). The purpose was to investigate if through dialogues, our partners and we could develop new work routines of use to the employees, the 3 organisations as well as their customers and citizens.<sup>2</sup>

When starting our collaboration with CSMS in August 2008, we met employee experiences with earlier organisational changes in the social interaction between us. The article focuses on our collaboration with one of these teams, the joint team, in the period from August 2008 to September 2009. It was here we experienced the greatest challenges of dissensus in CSMS.

This article ‘only’ deals with changes and facilitation in the interaction between partners and action researchers at a group or team level. However, meeting the joint team made us realise that we were faced with a complex situation, with tensions between different interests and voices and repetition of communicative patterns. Recent literature on action, participatory and collaborative research deals with similar dilemmas of different interests and voices, also at a group level (Burns, Harvey, & Aragón, 2012; Aragón, 2012; Hynes, Coghlan, & McCarron, 2012; Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen, & Gunnarsson, 2012). Inspired by Stacey’s (2001, 2007) theory of complex responsive processes, the article discusses how to understand the relation

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<sup>2</sup> The project was made in collaboration with Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen, Associate professor, Aalborg University, DK. I use the subject “we” and the possessive pronoun “ours” as a denominator of our joint work. Together we have written several articles about the project. Unlike these, this article focuses on the dynamics between organisational change processes and facilitating dissensus in context inquiring dialogues. This means I have left out examples of employee driven innovation.

between communicative patterning in a team and organisational change in an AR project.

The article has two interdependent purposes:

Firstly, it will show how we met earlier organisational change processes in the social interaction between the joint team and us, as tensions between different interests and voices that fought to define 'reality', including the context.

Secondly, based on understanding facilitating as enactment of power, the article discusses if and how these different interests and voices can be facilitated through context-inquiring dialogues where dissensus becomes a vehicle of change. The article builds on the concept of dissensus approach developed in the project with teams in CSMS and in the other two organisations (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010, 2011, 2012) and adds the understanding of facilitating as enactment of power and the concept of context inquiring dialogue to this approach.

The article shows that temporarily it was possible to reach consensus across different interests and voices in the joint team, by questioning and changing a communicative pattern of postponing and making space for new action and goals. However, it was not possible to build a permanent bridge across different team interests due to different work tasks and cut downs in the public sector.

The article starts by presenting CSMS and the action research project (Section II). Then it presents the theoretical horizon of the article (Section III). Here I define the following concepts: complexity and organisational change, power and facilitation, participation and voice, and dissensus approach. The rest of the article is an analysis of our co-operation with the joint team from August 2008 to September 2009 (Sections IV-VI). Finally, the article concludes by discussing possibilities and limits of facilitating (Section VII).

## **2. Background**

### *CSMS*

CSMS serves about 50,000 people (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2012). There is one senior manager, three team managers and seventy employees.

Most of the employees have a fairly short office education, and work in areas of public service such as taxation, passports etc. When we began our co-operation with them in 2008, they were involved in a number of organisational development projects caused by a major national municipal reform, where three minor municipalities had been merged into the large municipality of a larger town, Silkeborg. Recently, management had introduced a new interdisciplinary team structure, where most of the employees were organised into service teams, as opposed to the former work division in offices, with separate fields of expertise. According to the director of CSMS, the new team structure was a means of tackling reductions in public budgets, where fewer employees should handle the same or a growing number of cases or contacts.

Besides these service teams, there were two teams of specialists. One of them was the joint team. It was composed of four different work groups whose main responsibility was different kinds of contact with citizens such as work at the Citizen Service reception desk.

#### *The Action Research project*

The project began on our initiative. We applied for funding and contacted CSMS. Together with the senior manager, the HR senior manager, the local HR consultant and the team managers we negotiated the initial draft of the project at a meeting early in 2008. The employees were not involved at this stage of the process. The main aim of the project was, if possible, to create new working routines through dialogues with the new teams in which all employees and managers participated.

We reached an agreement on the number of participating teams, on audio-taped documentation of the process, and on the formation of a project group with representatives from management and all teams, to continuously evaluate and adjust the process in collaboration with us. Finally, we agreed that each team and its manager were going to decide the goals it wanted to pursue. Our intention was to practise participation in the sense of co-determination.

The project was organised as a series of so-called Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings (DHTM) with all teams from August 2008 to November 2009. They were designed as a supplement to team action meetings, close to

day-to-day operations and separated from them in time and space. They differed from ordinary team action meetings by looking at daily routines from above, i.e. from a helicopter perspective so to speak. They were off-line close to in-line (Tidd & Bessant, 2009). The meetings lasted about 3 hours and were planned to take place every second month during 2008 and 2009. They were organised as on-going conversations between team members, including the team manager, and between them and us, if possible followed by decisions about changes. They were taped to document results and prepare the next meeting. At the first meeting, the team decided the issues they wanted to handle during the process within the framework decided by management and the project. Between meetings, the teams tried to implement their decisions and proposals for new routines which were then evaluated at the next meeting. Thus ideally, DHTMs oscillated between conversations, actions and new reflections as a repeated, local, emergent Action Research process (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Herr & Anderson, 2005).

#### *Collaboration with the joint team*

The article describes the concrete ways the organisational changes of CSMS were enacted in the interaction between the joint team and us as tensions between different interests and voices and how facilitating dissensus worked. As will be shown later, the AR process with the joint team was far from the cyclical process described above. It became an emergent process questioning basic contextual assumptions in order to find out if joint action was at all possible.

### **3. Theoretical horizon**

As mentioned above, the project was organised as a series of Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings (DHTM) close to day-to-day operations, but separated from them in time and space. The article problematises this separation between communication within DHTMs and the external organisation of CSMS, because we met the organisation when communicating with the joint team at DHTMs. In this section, I present the theoretical horizon of the article to be used later when conceptualising the process with the joint team.

*Stacey and complex responsive processes in organisations*

Stacey's (2001) theory of complex responsive processes in organisations presents a theoretical understanding of the relation between communication and organisation.<sup>3</sup> He argues that complex responsive processes of relating are "the basis of all forms of joint action" including "the collective identities of ... groups, organisations and societies". All of them emerge in these processes (Stacey, 2001, p. 164). Thus within this theory, there is no separation between communication and organisation or an individual, a group, or an organisational level (Stacey, 2001, p. 6).

Complex responsive processes mean that human bodies are situated in complex situations, where they participate in processes of interaction by gesturing and responding. Stacey defines 'complex' in an analogy between complexity theory in science and responsive processes in communication. In this article, I define complex as referring to situations where different voices and interests meet in unforeseen ways.

Stacey understands organisational change as changes in the thematic patterning of communicative interaction, for example in conversations (Stacey, 2001, p. 182). He argues that organisational change implies conflicts between enabling and conflicting constraints and shifts in power relations (Stacey, 2001, pp. 176, 189). In particular, organisational change means conflicts between legitimate and shadow themes (Stacey, 2001). A shadow theme is defined as patterns of communicative interaction, which are not usually talked about as opposed to legitimate themes.

Stacey's theory of complex responsive processes has inspired this article in the following ways:

As action researchers, we do not only meet employees communicating, but also the organisation when paying attention to the local interaction be-

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<sup>3</sup> Within theories of organisational communication, there has been a long discussion of how to understand the relation between communication and organisation (Putnam, 1999). In early functionalist theories, organisations were understood as containers of communication, in which communication took place (Axley, 1984; Putnam, 1999; Asdal & Moser, 2012). In more recent years, communication researchers have argued that communication constitutes organising and organisations, the so-called CCO perspective (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

tween our partners and between them and us. Thus, this article does not distinguish between communication and organisation. In more concrete terms, this means that the organisational past is carried into the present, when we interact with our partners at DHTMs as tensions between the past, the present, and the future and between different voices and interests. Thus, this article does not only explore future possibilities of change, but also what seems difficult to change through social interaction.

Like Stacey, I direct my attention to the study of communicative interaction between team members and between them and us. Here, I examine how communicative interaction works, look for communicative patterns, and for how the team and we succeed or do not succeed in changing them when trying to produce new action. In particular, I discuss how we and the team meta-communicate about a shadow theme when naming a communicative pattern of postponing. In Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen (2005), we called shadow themes for 'Thirds' or the hidden conductors of conversations.

Like Stacey, this article understands organisational change as conflicts between enabling and conflicting constraints implying shifts in power relations. These power relations include the ways team members position themselves in relation to themselves and each other and how we position ourselves as facilitators in relation to our partners.

### *Power and facilitation*

In line with paying attention to how interaction works, the article focuses on how power is enacted or works in the social interaction within the Joint team, in relation to CSMS and between them and us. The article is inspired by Foucault (2000) and Giddens (1981, 1984) who understand power as a component in all kinds of social practice (Giddens) and social relations (Foucault).

The article examines how power works when defining different situations by in- or excluding different versions of 'reality' (Foucault, 2000; Chambers, 1997). Enactment of power is defined as "whatever creates empowerment or constraint" (Hayward, 1998).



As facilitators, we are not neutral, but positioned in ways that have an impact on the research process and the outcome of the project (Burns, Harvey & Aragón, 2012; Hogan, 2002; Ravn, 2011). In this article, facilitating is understood as enactment of power contributing to creating empowerment and/or constraint in projects.

### *Participation and voice*

In the project, participation was conceptualized as collaboration between different partners characterised by co-determination through dissensus (Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). Collaboration entails that we recognise the various partners: managers, employees and Action Researchers, as equally important professionals with different fields of expertise, interests, and competences (Schrijvers, 2001). Ideally, co-determination through dissensus means that we and our partners practise dialogues as sites for the co-production of objectives, co-design of processes, co-validation and co-communication of research results. This maximalist understanding of participation (Carpentier, 2011) implies ongoing communication about where to make which decisions, as well as ongoing reflections on the tensions, dilemmas, and paradoxes of the Action Research processes (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008).

In this article, I also understand participation as tensions between different voices, and define voice as groups of embodied voices (Phillips, 2011; Hynes, Coghlan, & McCarron, 2012).

### *Dissensus approach*

The dissensus approach is a special way of facilitating dialogues in dialogic organisational action research (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010, 2011, 2012). Through dialogues, it inquires into if it is possible to create consensus and joint action across different interests and voices.

Inspired by poststructuralist approaches to dialogues focusing on difference, tensions, and dissensus (Phillips, 2011; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008; Pearce & Pearce, 2004; Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004), the approach builds on a basic assumption that tensions and conflicts between different

interests and voices might work as a vehicle of producing joint action or solutions. The approach tries to make employee criticism and different interests a legitimate part of the process, by including them. Thus, it does not understand tensions, and different interests or conflicts as something to overcome, i.e., as an anomaly (Vindeløv, 2007) trying to re-install normality and consensus, but as a possible vehicle of change. The overall purpose is to open up for more voices and interests and for more democracy in decision processes (Deetz, 2001). Inspired by Bakhtin, Phillips (2011) argues that dialogues oscillate between a centrifugal tendency of opening up for plural and different voices and a centripetal tendency of closing down, or a unity of voices. I understand this as movement between dissensus (opening up for different and conflicting voices) and consensus (closing down trying to find a unity of voices).

So far, the approach has included dissensus organising and dissensus sensibility. Earlier, dissensus organising was defined as attempts to organise processes in ways where partners voiced their opinions by using rounds, changing compositions of small groups, pro- and con groups etc. (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). Dissensus sensibility was defined as a relational quality dealing with "openness to address possible disagreements or tensions in (team) conversations whether they are categorial (different points of views) or relational." This article adds an understanding of facilitating as enactment of power, contributing to empowerment and/or constraint to this approach as well as the concept of context inquiring dialogues.

#### **4. Organisational changes as tensions in interaction**

##### *Tensions between past team experiences and an ongoing action research project*

At the beginning of our first meeting with the joint team in August 2008, we were told that top management of CSMS had just rejected a business case that the telephone group, a work group in the joint team, had been working on for a half a year. This case designed the outlines of a new telephone contact centre. The rejection meant an increase in work load for the employees. Yvonne from the group described their reactions in this way:

We are really sorry that all our efforts will not bear fruit due to cut backs ... We feel we have lost, that we have been promised too much, that several ships have been launched without checking if they could stay afloat ... So we have worked in vain for the last half year. We think it is insipid. That's how we feel.

As outside action researchers, we step into an organisational context where we learn about the team's past. Yvonne, from the telephone group, tells about a development project that was launched apparently without attuning expectations sufficiently: what was up for a dialogue in the team, and what did top management in CSMS decide themselves. It looks as if the team has been caught in a classic tension between ostensible involvement and management use of direct power. Why should the team now spend a year together with us on a new project, when they have just worked in vain for half a year? Already before we start, the AR project is situated in a tension between old, chilled off and disappointed team experiences, and our attempt to start a new action research project with them.

Organisational changes interfere in different ways throughout the meeting:

#### *Tensions between managerial and employee views on team organisation*

We meet organisational changes as tensions between management and team views on the new team structure. This happens in an introduction round where we learn that the joint team, consisting of 10 employees, do not understand themselves as a team with shared goals and tasks. They see themselves as four, specialist work groups: an interdisciplinary development group responsible of intranet, distribution of news, work flow analyses; this group works in close contact with management; a control group responsible of citizen fraud in the municipality; a group responsible for civil marriages at the Mayor's Hall and national registering; finally, a telephone and reception group responsible for the daily direct or phone contact with citizens. Thus, several team members question why they are organised in one team:

Inge: Generally in this process, I think we have some special problems in the joint team, because we have completely different work tasks and fields of work. So actually, throughout this process I think they have placed a

Gordian knot in our team. We work with completely different work areas and with different kinds of contact with colleagues, with citizens or with? So I think we are faced with a very difficult task. No one has told us at any time why we are organised in one team; besides, we are the leftovers.

Jørgen: The ones nobody wants to play with?

Inge: Yes.

Yvonne: We prefer to play with ourselves [smiles].

Jørgen: Does this mean that you are only a team by name and not in fact?

Inge: Yes, I think this is true.

Marian: I agree.

Charlotte: Yes, this is probably our experience.

Seen from the perspective of the joint team, the new team structure does not make sense. They continue to work as a group of specialists with different tasks and fields of work and describe themselves with metaphors like “the leftovers”, the ones the others “do not want to play with”, as a “Gordian knot” and later as a “garbage can”. From a management point of view, the new team structure is seen as a means of handling cut backs and maintaining good citizen service.

#### *Tensions within the joint team on how to understand a garbage can*

During the rest of the meeting, we examine if across different fields of work, the team can/will define some common goals they will work with during the project period. When the four work groups present their results, we notice there are different voices in the team. At this meeting, there is a difference between the development group consisting of 3 younger women (Charlotte, Karen and Lene) and the control group consisting of 2 somewhat older, experienced women (Inge and Susanne).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A third voice, consisting of experienced employees working at the telephone and reception desk, become audible at a meeting in November (section 5.3).

The goals of the development group are about changing the views of the joint team, its identity and communication. They want a number of improvements:

- from grumbling to ownership and responsibility of one's workplace:  
"That you take the responsibility instead of grumbling and turning against your work place"
- from receiving information to knowledge sharing with the rest of CSMS and giving information as a team:  
"We talk a lot about knowledge sharing and how we get information. This is also very much about how we ourselves give information ... The more visible we become in the information we give, the more our colleagues will think, okay, actually, they have something to give ..."
- from invisibility to rendering the team visible in CSMS:  
"It is obvious that we have service teams, a team in charge of training, and a management team. We are the ones who stand alone. The ones who are sometimes forgotten. We would like to make the joint team visible, so that we became much more integrated in CSMS than we feel we are right now".
- from experiencing ourselves as a 'garbage can' to developing a new team identity:  
"I dream of a different word to replace the term garbage can. That is the place where you discard the tasks you do not know where else to place. I think this has some very negative overtones ..."
- from working in isolation to social gathering in the team.

The control group has a different understanding:

Inge: We followed the steps laid out this morning that we do not share professional interests in the joint team, only in our small work groups. We think perhaps it is time to realise that actually, sharing professional interests, as indicated in the word the joint team, will not happen in this team. On the contrary, we think a common goal of our team meetings could be sharing something social, because we all need this and ... sharing information between us and the team leaders. I think most information will

come as one way information from our group leader who is supposed to pass on information from top management. We think, too, it is difficult to find a common goal for the AR project.

The control group cannot point at common tasks and goals for the AR project, because the team has different fields of work. Their goal only deals with sharing social activities and information, which they mainly understand as one-way communication from the team leader. The group does not share the dream of making the team become visible, changing identity and communication.

Even though DHTMs are separated in time and space from day-to-day operations, the analysis shows that they are already organisationally contextualised. We meet the organisational changes in the social interaction with the joint team in their descriptions of an earlier development project, in their different ways of talking about the new team structure as well as the team. Thus organisational changes emerge in the interaction as tensions between the past, the present, and the future and between different and conflicting interests and voices.

As outside action researchers, we find ourselves in the middle of a tension between the old and the older employees, and the new and the younger employees, trying to balance between the two groups and finding our own place. If not, an (unacceptable) alternative might become that we reduce the AR project to a modern management tool where as action researchers, we include some employee definitions of team 'reality' while excluding others. We meta-communicate about this below:

Marianne: When looking at this from a helicopter perspective, I think this is also about how we as human beings understand and use words differently depending for example on our position in an organisation. To some people, the word garbage might mean dirt, to others it is a neutral word. We try to respect that these differences exist in your team. We could, e.g., agree with you, Charlotte, but I do not think this will work, because it would have an impact on the project. I think this project is also about making space for differences in your team and between you and us trying to find out if it is possible to reach joint goals and actions across them.

## 5. Can dissensus become a vehicle of action research changes in context inquiring dialogues?

*From 'why are we here' to 'we can become strong together'*

Two months later in November 2008, we meet with the joint team again. The DHTM-meeting develops from criticism of being organised in one team and of the action research project to decisions about three new goals in the team. On behalf of a small group, Susan describes these changes in this way:

Susan: Already after three quarters of an hour, all of us thought: stop this, why are we here. Why don't we just get up and leave. But then suddenly, we start to change this and all of us contribute with something positive. We begin to realise that after all, there is something we can do, so that we can become stronger together ...

Lene: I think this was precisely what happened when at one point we began creating some solutions.

This section describes how dissensus became a vehicle of change by zooming in on some aspects that seemed to contribute to the changes Susan and Lene talk about. The description includes analyses of how facilitating was enacted as power contributing to empowerment or constraint by analysing dialogues as:

- an object, i.e., the contexts which were questioned at the meeting
- a method, i.e., the ways they were organised (dissensus organising) and
- practiced (dissensus sensibility).

### *A survey of the November meeting*

The survey of the meeting below might look as if we facilitated the DHTM as a planned process, starting with two rounds before moving on to group work, decisions, and evaluation, thus practicing organisational development as 'ready, aim, fire' (Weick, 1993). This was far from the case. When we left the meeting, we did not understand exactly why the joint team and we apparently succeeded in reaching a joint decision. We only had a vague idea that we had recognised criticism, and gone with the flow of it (Schein, 1999). In

retrospect when listening to the tapes, I began conceptualising the meeting as inquiries into the contexts of the AR project and the joint team. The survey below focuses on dissensus organising (the left column) and on context inquiring dialogues, proposals, and evaluation (the right column):

Dissensus organising	Phases of the meeting
First round	Context inquiring dialogue: Does the joint team want to participate in the AR project?
Second round	Context inquiring dialogue: How would team members like to be organised if they could choose?
Group work across professional workgroups	Can and will the joint team suggest solutions that might contribute to improve working conditions in the team?
Plenary	Presentation of proposals and a new dialogue of manning the reception desk
Group work in professional workgroups	Can we prioritise the proposals?
Plenary	Presentation and decision of proposals
Pro and con groups and plenary	Evaluation and future directions

### 5.1 The first context inquiring dialogue:

#### *We could not say no to participate in the project*

At the beginning of the meeting, we are faced with an unforeseen situation, where it does not make sense to follow the planned agenda. We have agreed with the team manager that he should mail our minutes of the last meeting to the team in due time, so they could prepare for the meeting. He has not done so, and is not present at the meeting. We choose to facilitate the first part of the meeting as a round where everybody tell what they expect of the AR project:

Jørgen: Just to check, what do you expect of this meeting?

Bodil: Well, I have no expectations of this project and did not prepare for this.

Helle: Nor did I.



Yvonne: I can't say that I am really motivated to attend this meeting. We are 3 months behind starting the new contact centre, which will make some of our colleagues available to work in the telephone group. Personally, I think it is a pity that so much has been put into work at a time when everything is up in the air and we do not sit together as a team.

Jørgen: I really understand this, because I, too, have a feeling of sitting in a waiting room.

Susanne: I am angry, too, because I feel this is a story of the Emperor's New Clothes. We talk about something that is not there. I feel anger and powerlessness. It is simply too bad that management does this.

Susan: Our team manager is not here to-day. He did not come to the last meeting. It seems as if he lacks ownership.

Jørgen: Yes, it might be difficult to interpret this differently.

Susan: Why must we participate in the project, if he does not?

Inge: I feel the same way.

Jørgen: Are you sure that the management group is to be blamed? Marianne and I might have phoned and checked if you had received the draft of the minutes that we mailed to your team leader after the last meeting. I do not say this to place the blame on somebody, but to find out what to do in the future.

Susanne: I do not think we could say no to participate in the project.

MK: Did you want to do so, if you have had the option?

Susanne: Yes, of course, I would.

Marian: I would, too.

Charlotte: I would like to participate in the project. At the last meeting, I realised that it offers some prospects for us as a team.

Karen: I agree with Charlotte.

Lene: So do I.

I understand the round as an example of a context-inquiring dialogue. Except the development group, everybody question why they must participate in the AR project when several problems with their working conditions have not been solved yet, and their team leader does not attend DHTMs. We are

situated in a classic action research dilemma (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009; Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2006; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008), where different understandings of participation (Carpentier, 2011) and power seem to clash:

Several of the employees, like e.g. Susanne, tell that they could not say no to participate in the project and that they are not motivated to join. Seen from their perspective, participation might mean forced involvement in a development project decided by management (Chambers, 1995). This might be the case despite all teams are represented in a project group and we have refused to begin the project before the so-called teams actually worked in 'real' teams.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the date of when to start the AR project has been postponed from September to November 2008 and is postponed again to February 2009 after this meeting.

Management has stressed that CSMS employees are involved in activities that they have decided when introducing the new team structure. This means that employees are involved in plans of re-designing offices and the AR project. Seen from a management perspective, participation can be understood as meaning 'only' involvement, i.e., employees are co-determining the most efficient means of reaching the goals decided by management (Nielsen, 2004; Carpentier, 2011). In this way, management might be said to exercise 'power over' (Göhler, 2009), i.e. the right to make decisions about goals and projects that employees cannot decline.

As mentioned earlier, we understand participation as an attempt to practice co-determination through dissensus. Ideally, in co-operation with management and us, employees co-decide objectives, co-design processes, co-validate and co-communicate research results. We understand this as an attempt to contribute to increased employee empowerment, i.e. to 'power over'.

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the limits of this article to describe the complicated negotiation processes that characterized this project. It never became an option if the teams could choose to participate in the project. But it became an option when to start the project. The project was postponed several times, because the teams did not work in the new teams yet and because we refused to start before they had begun working together. The director of CSMS wanted to start right away. I understand the negotiation process of when to define the starting point of the project as an example of enactment of power.

Can we involve the joint team in a project where they co-determine objectives, when several of them tell that they would have refused to participate if this had been an option? In the situation, I think we practice dissensus sensibility by expressing that we understand their situation (Jørgen) and by checking if the team would have said no (Marianne). But what do we do when facing this dilemma? Should we stop our collaboration with the joint team now? Should the joint team and we ask management if they can say no? Or should we inquire into if they and we can find a shared platform that makes sense? We choose a combination:

Jørgen: We suggest that you look at the proposals that you decided at our last meeting. Does it make sense to do something about them now? If not, we suggest closing the meeting and the process.

As facilitators, I think we enacted power as constraint by defining the agenda. In this way, we indirectly excluded some team members' wish of declining to participate in the project.

### ***5.2 The second context inquiring dialogue:***

#### ***Can we change our affiliations to the joint team?***

The team do not seem to think they can do anything about the goals they decided at the last meeting: "because we do not sit together, because the contact centre has not started yet, because we await information from management" etc. Earlier Charlotte from the development group spoke about team ownership, now she suggests:

Within my world, it does not make sense to continue talking about why we sit here. We must stop playing the same record if we want to move forward and not get stuck in the same groove. Can we do something about it? If we cannot change where we work physically in CSMS, can we then change our affiliation to the joint team? This might change our feelings of not belonging.

This proposal triggers a number of new problems: "Whom will our team leader then become leader of?", "What will management say"? "We need more information" etc. After a while, Jørgen meta-communicates about a communicative team pattern as Charlotte did above:

Jørgen: It worries me ... I just need to tell that I am a bit impatient as a person ... but I start getting tired of postponing things. In this organisation, I think there is a tendency to postpone or to kicking the ball into the long grass.

Yvonne: We get impatient, too [laughing]

Jørgen: Well, just as you postpone now when you say we cannot tell because ... And then somebody else says we cannot say, because we do not know. Then I get a picture of a snow plough shoving everything in front of it.

Lene: We feel the same way, too [smiling]

Jørgen: And then I begin thinking that I'll bet 5 bottles of wine that the plan of moving together [as a team] in January will be postponed, too [smiling]

Lene: Actually, we think like you

Jørgen: Excuse me, but damn it, we cannot be bothered with this any longer, now we begin to move forward. Take that! [speaks with a loud voice and laughs]

Marianne: I would like to know with whom you work. Inge, you said earlier that you are going to work with Susanne?

Inge: Yes, this is something new, because we did not work together before. But it will not influence the rest of the team how Susanne and I are going to work together.

Jørgen: No, precisely ... So, do you think it would be a good idea to examine what you imagine to be the best affiliation for everyone in the team, and then make a proposal afterwards?

Inge: I think we should try.

Susanne: I agree.

Yvonne: It sounds very good.

Susan: Let us do it.

Lene: Yes.

Jørgen's meta-communication is an interpretation of how the team postpones when saying this is not possible "because" ... It seems to resonate with their experiences: "We feel the same way, too" and produce laughter and smiles.

From earlier work in the project, we know that some communicative team patterns seem to work against producing employee driven innovation. These patterns deal with postponing, changing subjects very often, presenting contradictory points of view mainly, or focusing on content details when talking about a topic etc. (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). In different teams, the team and we have chosen a bystander to meta-communicate about team patterns like for example: "Now, we change subject again". We have not gone done so yet in the joint team. Here Jørgen works as a bystander, by meta-communicating about the team pattern of postponing.

Seen from a Stacey perspective, meta-communicating of a communicative team pattern can be interpreted as a way of naming a shadow theme, and initiating a change process where the team start discussing future action across different interests.

Seen from a power perspective, on one hand, meta-communication seems to contribute to empowerment by producing a shift from focusing on old and present problems to supporting inquiries into new scopes of action: How do we want to be organised if we ourselves could choose? The development group (Charlotte, Lene and Karen), the telephone and reception group (Yvonne and Susan), and the control group (Inge and Susanne) support this proposal.

On the other hand, meta-communicating might also be interpreted as working as an example of constraint. It is Jørgen who defines the agenda. It is possible that the team could not decline his proposal, due to the strength he meta-communicated when speaking humorously and in a loud voice. As facilitators, we might be said, too, to ally ourselves with some team voices, i.e. with Charlotte and the development group who earlier presented similar proposals. We try to include the voice of the control group, by inviting Inge and the team to tell with whom they are going to co-operate.

The process ends by everybody supporting the idea of checking with whom joint team members want to be affiliated. This happens in a new context-inquiring dialogue organised as a round. The round shows that 6

members prefer to work in the joint team. They are Yvonne and Susan from the telephone and reception desk; Inge and Susanne from the control group; Bodil from civil marriages, and Charlotte from the development group. Earlier their interests differed, here they seem to coincide. There are three who choose differently. They are Karen and Lene who would prefer to return to where they worked before and Helle. She works on a special work permit which is still being negotiated. After the round, the team says:

Charlotte: Well, this is actually not so bad.

Inge: No, it is a bit surprising.

Susan: Yes, it certainly is.

Yvonne: Okay, now we have come this far.

It looks as if consensus is reached by combining metacommunicating of a communicative team pattern of postponing with context-inquiring dialogues and dissensus organising as rounds where everybody voices their wishes. In this process, as facilitators we enact power that seems to work towards empowerment.

### ***5.3 From dissensus to consensus?***

After the second context inquiring dialogue, the team decides to examine if there is anything they can do to become more satisfied with working in the joint team. We organise the inquiry as dialogues in changing small groups, first across and then within their ordinary work groups, alternating with plenary sessions where they present and finally decide which proposals to choose. In this way, we hope to share knowledge across different team interests and include everybody.

Changing constellations of subgroups present these proposals:

- *We accept that we are different in the Joint team:*

Yvonne, Bodil and Susanne: We propose we accept we work within different fields. We think this will contribute to producing tranquility in our team, so we can develop some kind of feeling mutually connected.

– *A different way of organising team meetings:*

Lene, Karen and Susan: We suggest sparring in our workgroups and a short, regular team meeting. This way of organising meetings will match differences in our team.

– *Social gathering and Wednesday coffee with knowledge sharing:*

Inge, Helle and Charlotte: We focused on our social milieu and suggest we have a 15 minute coffee break every Wednesday morning where we share knowledge and information.

– *New managerial style:*

Marian, Susanne and Yvonne: We propose a new managerial style where management give information earlier ... and involve us as employees on issues we think important like for example a plan for manning telephone and reception.

*A shift in communicative patterning: from postponing to acting*

The last idea initiates a dialogue in the plenary session and ends with a new proposal:

– *Plan for manning telephone and reception:*

Yvonne: They [management] keep saying they do not understand that it [the manning plan] is so important for us. But it is, because it is critical for us to know if Bodil and Marian can work here for 15 or 20 hours ... If they [management] would co-operate with us who know the day to day routines, they could use all the great possibilities we have to sort things out.

Jørgen: I agree. Would it be possible for one of you to make a draft?

Susan: We could do this easily.

Yvonne: Yes.

Charlotte: Does this include a plan for manning the telephone and reception desk?

Susan: Sure.

Inge: That is good, because you have the big picture.

Karen: I just want to say that the next team meeting is scheduled to next Tuesday, so there is a deadline for items to be discussed at 12 o'clock today. I do not think you can make it.

Susan: We will make sure you have a copy of the plan before the next meeting, so you will be able to comment on it.

I think an important shift in communicative patterning takes place here. It is a shift from postponing, focusing on problems and the past to also focusing on solutions, actions, and the future. As facilitator, Jørgen initiated a change process when naming the shadow theme of postponing. Now, Susan and Yvonne seem to continue this process when rejecting to postpone their proposal of manning the telephone and reception desk. They will mail a copy of the plan to everybody before the next team meeting. Thus, I think there is a shift, from a communicative pattern of postponing to acting.

I also interpret this shift as a movement towards team empowerment. Earlier, the team might be said to enact counter power towards management. Here, Susan and Yvonne act as professional authorities who, of course, know how to make a manning plan. This also means a change in the relation between the team and us. We seem to play a less important role as facilitators, because the team organise the contents of the process. I understand this as an example of empowerment. Finally, this shift may also be seen as a minor shift from dissensus towards preliminary consensus. This does not imply that criticism, different interests and different voices disappear.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Postponing – an example of a social concrete block?*

In retrospective, I think the team pattern of postponing can be understood, too, as a social concrete block characterising not only the team, but the whole organisation of CSMS (Kristiansen, 2007, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We define a social concrete block as man made organisational patterns which gradually appear as natural and/or objective and thus difficult to change. I think we were faced with the organisational culture of postponing in

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<sup>6</sup> One of the groups allowed us to listen to their taped conversation. We could hear there were still differences and disagreements which were not addressed in plenary sessions.



CSMS, i.e. with a social concrete block where the whole (CSMS) was enfolded in the part (the team) (Bohm, 1983) or where the organisation was patterned in the responsive processes of communicating (Stacey, 2001).

The telephone and reception desk talk about how apparently, management do not listen to their problems, but seem to postpone a decision:

Susanne: May I comment on this? I do not understand the manager saying he does not understand why these problems are so important to you. I mean, they can hear you shouting.

Susan: Yes, but they do not listen to us.

Jørgen: Did you try to explain why this is so important to you?

Susan: Certainly. Everybody has tried. Several of us have had one to one conversations with management.

Yvonne: To me it is also a question of how long you can keep on fighting. How does this influence you psychologically? Will it end in a sick report? I think you continue to give and give, but one misses something in return. I do not know how long one can stand this.

Seen from a power perspective, the question of shouting out loudly versus possibly postponing a managerial decision might be understood as a fight about who defines the agenda: the team or management. Whose reality counts and is included and whose is constrained or excluded? Yvonne's last words indicate they fight for staying healthy in her group.

At the end of the meeting, the team agrees on all the above mentioned suggestions. However, their decisions do not include a commitment to participate in the AR project. They only choose to focus on practical team results. Thus, their consensus excludes our interests as action researchers.

## **6. Changing power relations?**

When meeting the joint team in the early spring of 2009, we faced again the communicative pattern of postponing:

- The new structure of team meetings had not been introduced yet.
- The plan of manning the telephone and reception desk had not been implemented.

- Wednesday coffee meetings had been rare, because the manning plan with substitutes had not been implemented.

Without managerial support it was impossible to implement the goals the joint team decided at the November meeting (Smith, Kesting, & Ulhøj, 2009). As facilitators, we decided to tell the team manager that we would stop our co-operation now, if he did not participate in DHTMs and started implementing the manning plan of the reception desk and the new structure of team meetings. In this situation, we enacted power by trying to define the agenda and to constrain the team leader's scope of action. As outside action researchers, we did not have any formal power to do this. In the following months, the team manager implemented a number of changes, including the ones decided by the joint team, and we continued our conversation.

In spite of these changes, the joint team continued to think the AR project did not make sense in their team. They worked in different fields and did not have time to listen to colleagues in different work groups, because they were very busy themselves handling more tasks due to cut downs in the municipality. This meant the AR project continued to focus only on practical results in the joint team.

## **7. Some conclusions**

The article shows doing dialogic organisational action research, even at a team level, might mean facing a complex situation with tensions between different interests and voices. When trying to find common goals, a communicative team pattern of postponing emerged, working in this case as a social concrete block, as well as past organisational experiences with earlier development projects. Thus, working towards the future in this AR project seemed to imply changing past, constraining communicative patterns in order to make space for new action and ideas.

The dissensus approach succeeded in reaching preliminary consensus, because facilitation as enactment of power also implied context inquiring dialogues. It did not succeed in tackling the organisational complexity by building a permanent bridge across different team interests and voices due to differences in work tasks, work overload, and cut downs in the public sector.

Thus, facilitating could not tackle fundamental organisational or political power mechanisms.

The article has dealt with facilitation as enactment of power, by mainly focusing on individual facilitators, conversations, and on team and interteam processes. In the future, it will also be necessary to reflect on the ways power is enacted in AR projects, not only by partners and facilitators, but also by organisations and society.

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