

**EXPERIENCING  
RESPONSIBILITY IN THE  
CONTEXT OF  
PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

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# Abstract

This portfolio presents my research on organisational change, comprising four consecutive research projects and a synopsis which brings together the emerging themes of my enquiry. My work shows the movement of my thinking during a three year period, as I engaged in an emergent exploration of my experience (Christensen, 2003; Stacey & Griffin, 2003). When I began my enquiry, I was mainly concerned about the limits of control and predictability while offering strategic options, focusing on the discipline of strategic management as a framework to my practice. While engaging with my experience of participating in management change projects, I gradually realised that I was more concerned about the emotional responses evoked in the context of project management. As my research developed, I started to associate those emotional responses with the experience of responsibility, understanding that experience as an important theme for my practice which influences how people are able to work together.

I came to articulate the notion of responsibility as an experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something, an enabling constraint associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond or to give account for it, justifying one's actions or omissions. I claim that responsibility emerges in communicative interaction (Mead, 1934), as people continuously negotiate its meaning while power relating (Elias, 1970; 1998). Further, I point to how project management has developed surveillance-based management techniques, such as project planning and control tools, which functionalise responsibility through disciplinary processes (Foucault, 1975) in order to attain deliberate control. I argue that the assumption underpinning those techniques is that holding people to account for the completion of their tasks (the passive form of responsibility), will influence those people into taking active responsibility for how they are expected to perform (Bovens, 1998). Drawing on my experience of participating in management change projects, I argue that this is not always the case and I point to how more complex work dynamics may develop. I also argue that those surveillance-based management techniques rely on the positive valuation attached to behaving responsibly (responsibility as value), as well as on how being responsible is incorporated in an organisation's formal and informal rules



(responsibility as norm). Retaining both the qualities of value and norm (Joas, 2000), responsibility is then incorporated in emergent organisational ideologies (Stacey, 2004), sometimes taking the form of cult value (Mead, 1923).

Narrating my experience, I illustrate how experiencing responsibility in the context of project management evokes emotional responses, such as shame, guilt or pride, which are not accounted for nor referred in project management literature (Pinto, 1998; Turner, 1999; Burke, 1999; Dixon, 2000; Lock, 2003). This portfolio contributes to expand that literature, focusing on the emotional aspects of project management which are left out in its straight-forward and rational approach. Furthermore, understanding my experience of responsibility in relation to communicative interaction, power relating, emerging ideologies, cult values, disciplining processes and emotional responses has shifted my practice, enabling me to work differently.

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# Introduction

I present in this portfolio the results of my research on the experience of organisational change. It captures, I hope, the movement of my engagement with my research programme, as well as the feeling of how my questions and insights emerged as I explored my practice. Before engaging in that exploration, however, I think that I need to explain what drew me towards this particular research programme. What was the motivation for such a long and difficult path of discovery and transformation?

When I applied for this programme, three and a half years ago, I put together a narrative to answer that question, a statement to explain why I was applying. In that statement, I explained that I was applying for this programme because I had come across particular books that had triggered my curiosity and my will to know. The first of those books was James Gleick's (1987) *Chaos: Making a New Science*. I was only sixteen years old when I first read it in 1990 and I was fascinated by it because it questioned why and how things happen. The beauty of fractal geometry and of the mathematics involved in the chaos theory was breathtaking for me.

The second book was David Ruelle's (1991) *Hasard et Chaos*. I read it a year later, when I was starting my undergraduate studies of business management. Ruelle's suggestion that the world economy could be compared to a chaotic dissipative system captured my deepest interest. I asked myself, then, if those ideas could also be relevant to business management. I started looking for more references and books. That quest led me to buy Ralph Stacey's *Managing Chaos* (1992) and *The Chaos Frontier* (1991) as soon as those books were published in Portugal.

I wrote in my application statement that Stacey's books were 'more than what I hoped for'. I do not explain in that statement what I mean by that expression, but I think that it is essential for me to understand and to explain why I engaged in this programme. I recognised myself in Stacey's questioning of some of the taken for granted assumptions of business management. At the same time, his questioning legitimised my own questioning, as his books provided me with a respectable voice in which to ground my own doubts



concerning the prescriptions that I was being taught at college then. It was through his books that I eventually found Ralph Stacey's email address, beginning a conversation in which I learned about the existence of this research programme, in which I hoped to explore further my doubts about management.

I wonder why I chose to narrate my process of wanting to engage with this research programme through a sequence of books as I did in that application statement. At that time, I would not have been able to answer that question. As I see it now, I looked for legitimate voices of authority of my own choice in those books. Almost contradicting myself, I wanted to be free to choose who I wanted to follow. Books provided me with the opportunity to make such choices. I see that process now as part of my ambiguous relationship with authority. I wanted to challenge 'authority' (for instance, the position of authority of my college teachers) but, at the same time, I wanted to please 'authority', in this case, grounding my questioning in other sources of authority, such as books of my own choice.

What I did not know was that this doctor of management programme would give me the opportunity to engage in a process that was going to change my own sense of identity, enabling me to understand and articulate differently what I do as a professional manager. Finding a voice that I recognize as my own made me move beyond that pattern of relating with authority. But the process of letting that voice emerge was painful and difficult. When I started this research programme in organisational change, I feared that I would not be able to complete it. My fears were almost confirmed in my progression assessment, when I was so anxious to succeed that I nearly failed. Moving from that position was surprisingly an experience of personal freedom. I started to really enjoy writing. Witnessing my own progress from one draft to the next became a pleasure, even if mixed with anxiety, fatigue and stress.

I conducted my research in four consecutive projects. Each project is a research paper in which I explore the emergent research questions that concerned me the most at the time of writing. Together, they show the movement of my questioning, through which my contribution to knowledge emerged. In the synopsis, which closes this portfolio, I highlight that movement and that contribution.



The emergent nature of my questioning means that when I started this programme I did not know what I was trying to answer about my practice. I tried to avoid the anxiety of not knowing exactly what my question was. I also feared letting myself go into a methodology of research that I was not familiar with and which allowed the opportunity for questions to emerge. That is part of the reason why I focused the beginning of my research on the discipline of strategic management, which I regarded as familiar ground as I had already done some research on that subject (Grilo, 1996). My initial question was about how the limits of control and predictability were reflected in the vicissitudes of offering strategic options and solutions.

As I engaged with my Project 2, that question started to fade. My practice was about managing change projects rather than participating in the strategic process. Losing my question made it difficult for me to focus on what I wanted to discuss in that second project. I was having a sense of loss of direction back then and I associate it now with the title I chose for that project, 'Helplessly in charge'. I was feeling indeed helpless and frustrated while dealing with difficult work situations and trying to grasp what my research was actually about. Significantly, though, it was in my Project 2 that I started to explore project management as a framework for my practice, taking that exploration further in my Project 3. It was while writing that third project that I felt that I was moving away from that helpless position, getting a sense of what I was actually concerned about: responsibility. I started discussing it in association with power and control in project work.

Back then, I feared that my enquiry was not leading me to any new insight or original idea. I had a feeling that I was touching something new but I was unable to grasp it. It was only while working on my Project 4 that I had some sense of clarity about what I was exploring and about what I was arguing. I was exploring how responsibility is part of the ongoing interactions through which we work together in organisations. Questions started to emerge: How is it taken up as a theme as we communicate? How is it related to the notions of power and control in the context of project management? How is it negotiated and articulated? How is project planning related to the articulation of responsibility? How is that articulation taken up in the procedures of project control?

As my Project 4 developed, I started getting the notion that I was finding some answers. Some insights that were forming a new way of discussing the experience of responsibility in the context of project management. I came to articulate responsibility as an experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something, associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond, to give account for, justifying one's actions or omissions. This understanding directed my attention to how responsibility is intrinsically social, arising in our everyday interactions. There is always someone to whom we must respond, even if that someone is ourselves.

With this introduction I wanted to sketch the movement of my research. I wanted to provide the readers of this portfolio with some context for what follows. In the following section, I will try to answer the questions related to how I conducted my research in terms of methodology. Then, I will present each of four research projects, closing this portfolio with the synopsis, in which I make sense of what changed in my practice.



# My methodology of research

As I have mentioned in the introduction, when I started this research programme, I was not familiar with its methodology. I was afraid of engaging with the unknown and I struggled with it. As I see it now, in the beginning I tried to mimic the suggested methodology, engaging superficially with my experience and articulating apparently “clever” pieces of writing, thus avoiding the unknown. As the programme progressed, those tricks were clearly exposed both by my supervisor and by my learning group colleagues. Having that struggle reflected back to me through their responses encouraged me to face my own sense of the unknown. I tried to free my writing, struggling to let my fears go. That struggle still goes on and, while writing this section, I remind myself that avoiding difficult questions is the negation of what I am trying to accomplish, which is to find my own voice about central issues that concern my professional practice.

Therefore, I will begin my account of methodology by articulating the difficult questions that I am engaging with. Some of those questions are: Why did I choose this methodology and not another one? What informs my methodology and how is it related to other methodologies? How has this methodology informed my research? How did I experience this research programme as a methodology? How do I address the questions of validity and generalisability? How do I ground my claim to be contributing to knowledge and practice? I think that the only way of addressing these questions is to explore what I actually did while conducting this research. The process through which I came to formulate the questions themselves in this paper is, in itself, an inspiring starting point to engage with my research experience.



## **How am I experiencing this methodology?**

This section on methodology was initially part of the synopsis. I engaged writing the synopsis just after my Project 4 was accepted by my supervisor. I tried to put together a first draft that would capture the movement of my thinking since the beginning of the programme but I was afraid of not being able to articulate my own conclusions. Ultimately, I was (and, to be honest, I still am) afraid to fail. Therefore, I started by revisiting the four projects, putting them in perspective of my learning process. Then, I tried to expand the conclusions of the last project, making it become my overall conclusions but, in that first draft, I was only able to restate what I had already stated. Something similar happened when I tried to account for my methodology. I wrote a section on it, trying to be congruent with what my supervisor had written about it (Aram, 2001) and with the latest paper produced by the members of the faculty of the programme (Stacey & Griffin, 2004). The outcome was a quite detached section on methodology, in which I carefully avoided all of the questions that I have formulated above.

When I completed that draft, I sent it by email to my learning group and to my supervisors. I understand my draft as a gesture, an invitation to have responses in the form of comments. This language of gestures and responses refers to Mead's (1934) understanding that meaning emerges from the continuous iteration of gestures and responses which together form the social act. The responses I received gave me the opportunity to reflect more, responding to myself and reformulating my synopsis into a second draft. Those responses brought up the 'hairy issues' that I had been avoiding to deal with. My supervisor told me that the links I was making between my written work and what informs it were abstract and feeble, failing to convince the reader that I had internalised the programme's methodology. One of my learning group colleagues pointed out that I seemed to be 'skimming the surface', asking me what I was afraid of.

In reflection, I see that, for instance, this last challenge was recurring, sounding like new words in a familiar melody. That same colleague had repeatedly challenged me to be more critical, finding my own original voice. What is interesting about this is that, until now, I had been almost unable to acknowledge this challenge. Being able to hear it, I could now



respond to it. After receiving those comments about my draft, I took some time to engage with it. I first reacted defensively, a part of me wanted to reproduce a discourse that would be in conformity with what seemed to be expected but I resisted to it. I was unable to write for a couple of weeks. I took that time to read my projects again, review my own first draft of the synopsis. I answered to the responses and engaged by email in conversations about our methodology. I also engaged with the drafts produced by my learning group colleagues, responding to their work. Engaging with their drafts enabled me to read my own written work from a different perspective. At the same time, I took on new experiences at work. I reflected on those experiences, on the patterns which were similar to events that I had written about. I browsed through my books, reading some sections and reflecting on what I was reading, relating it to my work. While doing that, I thought about which authors influenced me the most. I discussed my methodology with other people, articulating how I believed that my conclusions were valid and differentiating my methodology from other methodologies.

I eventually got back into writing, taking notes in a small notebook, sketching ideas along the pages of the books I was reading and finally getting back to the computer to begin writing the next iteration. While writing, I went through my ideas, trying to capture how I was thinking at that moment. Then I left it, getting back to it later, rephrasing, deleting, replacing, thinking, reflecting... While writing, I remembered the comments I had received. I reformulated the difficult questions I had been asked, making those questions my own, and adding some others that troubled me. That was how I articulated the questions in the beginning of this section, as yet another gesture to others and to myself, as an invitation to find answers.

I think this explanation of how I have been writing illustrates two of the central issues concerning my methodology. First, it expresses how the enquiry is collaborative and participative (Reason, 1994). I conduct my research in collaboration with my learning group colleagues and my supervisors, enquiring my experience, in which I obviously participate, while participating further with others in its exploration. Even while being individually responsible for my own writing, I must acknowledge that it is the result of a process of collaboration that went on since the beginning of the programme. This programme gives the structure for such a collaborative process, both through our responses



to each others written work and through face-to-face meetings, in the context of learning group meetings and residential units for all the participants on the programme. Through responding to each others work, I found myself engaging in conversations, from which insights emerged, sometimes as novelty arising from misunderstandings (Fonseca, 2002).

Second, this account highlights the reflexive nature of my enquiry. Reflexivity (Steier, 1995) involves the circular and self referential process of sense making that takes the enquirer into account as an active observer. That process involves describing my experience, narrating it as part of a conversation with myself and with others. It also involves reflecting upon those narratives, allowing for insights to emerge as patterns. This aspect of the methodology is clearly expressed in the iterative way of producing the written work. By submitting draft after draft of each project, then getting responses and engaging with it again, I had the opportunity to let insights emerge, noticing patterns that I had not been aware of when I first wrote about a particular experience or series of events. This was particularly evident to me while writing my Project 4, which took about nine months to complete. During that period, I started over twice, writing again from scratch about the events that I had written about in the previous draft. I found that experience liberating, in the sense that it detached me from how I had articulated the sense I was making before. It was only while writing the final drafts of that project that my argument emerged clearly, enabling me to go for the final iteration, focusing the paper on that argument. Taking this reflexive approach centres my research on my personal experience, while questioning and making sense of it as a process of continuous interaction with other people.

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## **How did I experience the programme as a methodology?**

In the email exchanged following my submission of the first draft of the synopsis, I argued that I had chosen the programme rather than the methodology which was part of it. In response to that, one of my learning group colleagues replied that it sounded as if I was placing responsibility on the programme and the supervisors rather than on myself. I believe that he meant something with that comment, which helped me take responsibility for the methodology, make it my own and becoming able to discuss it as I am trying to do in this section now. Another response was from my supervisor. She claimed that the methodology was not part of the programme; the course was its methodology. That response also struck me. I had not thought of articulating the sense of structure that the programme provided as a methodology in itself. But that insight made sense to me: the programme provided the opportunity to negotiate the structure of my exploration. In order to clarify what I mean by this, I will briefly describe my experience of participating in this programme.

This programme of research in organisational change is offered by the Complexity and Management Centre of the University of Hertfordshire in association with the Institute of Group Analysis. When I applied for its second cohort, I was familiar with some of the programme director's writings on complexity and management (Stacey, 1991; 1992; 1996; 2000), but I did not know what to expect from the group analytic influence on the programme. The programme was composed of five residential units, lasting for five days each, at an isolated conference centre. I remember arriving at the conference centre for the first residential feeling extremely curious about what it would be like. I had received the timetable of the residential, and I was aware that each day we would start and finish with a large group session of ninety minutes. In the middle of the day there would be two more sessions with variable settings.

I felt exposed in that large group. Experiencing it, I was impressed by how tolerant everybody was with a couple of minutes of silence and I was fascinated with the apparently random movement of turn taking in speaking. I remember sitting quietly, taking very elaborate notes on my small palmtop computer, actually avoiding to speak. When I



did speak, I tended to fall into a stream of consciousness, often losing myself and apparently losing everybody else's attention, as I was later told by another participant on the programme. On reflection, I think I was enacting a fantasy that a large group was some kind of transcendental setting, in which I was supposed to make very profound and revealing statements. While preparing this synopsis, I went back to the notes I had taken in the five residential units. I was amused to notice the shift that occurred in the middle of the programme. The detailed notes, almost verbatim, of the first two residentials were replaced by increasingly shorter notes in the final units of the programme. I was amused because that movement was a reflection of an opposite movement of participating in the group, gradually finding my own voice in the group.

The programme offered the opportunity for the participative and collaborative nature of my research. As part of the programme's requirements, my research had to be presented as a portfolio, assembling four research projects and a synopsis. Each one of these papers was to be developed iteratively in the context of learning groups, composed by four or five participants of the programme with a supervisor. Those groups were formed on the third day of the first residential. The process was emergent, in the sense that we were to negotiate the formation of the groups on our own. We had the opportunity to try different configurations and to declare that a group had been formed when the members of that group were happy with it. Then, each group invited a member of the faculty of the programme to be their common first supervisor. The anxiety of having to make those choices dominated my experience of that first residential to the point of avoiding choosing a group. I became part of the last possible group, formed by the four of us whom, in the end of the process, had not joined any of the other groups.

This episode was very important for me. I think that I was so afraid of choosing a group that I colluded into letting the group choose itself. That fear, ultimately the fear of failing, seemed to have paralysed me. When the group was finally formed, I remember wondering if we were the undesired ones, the ones excluded through the choice process. After an initial moment of stress, I think that I accepted the group and I began to turn the bitter feeling of being excluded into a drive to 'prove myself'. I wanted to show that the 'worst group' was a 'good group'. That was also a very important theme for me at that time at my workplace, as it will become clear while reading my Project 2. Maybe as a reaction to the



difficult group formation, we quickly chose which supervisor we wanted to work with, inviting the youngest member of faculty, who had voiced before her fear of not being chosen as a supervisor by any of the forming groups. It was as if we wanted to prevent the kind of psychological pain that we were going through.

Since the group's formation, tension remained present, emerging several times in our conversations, particularly during the residential units. One of the group members voiced repeatedly his unhappiness with the group, even exploring the possibility of moving to another group. I think that I tried to ignore my own emotional reaction to that situation when it happened, but I see now that I felt it as a rejection, reinforcing my fears of not being good enough to be in this programme. That fear of being exposed as incompetent has been particularly present when I have to comment on my learning group colleagues' drafts, leading me to silence myself more often than I would like. I felt sometimes silenced, unable to respond, overwhelmed by how I thought I could never attain the standard of a draft I had just read. Even when we met in person, there were times when conflict was avoided, moving away from some challenging conversations. Participating in this pattern of relating in the learning group was essential for me to become aware of it, recognising similar patterns at my workplace. Muddling through its difficulties, my learning group remained together until the end of the programme. One of us has already graduated as Master of Arts by Research and the other three of us are presently working towards submitting our doctorate portfolios. It is likely that the 'worst group' will end up being one of the most successful groups of this programme.

The learning group was also important because of the intimacy that we developed with each other's work in progress, enabling us to confront each other with what we were avoiding to deal with and revealing patterns in which we were so involved that we had become blind to them. Working in the learning group was also about negotiating and taking responsibility, in the sense that we had deadlines to meet and it was a requirement to comment each other's drafts. We negotiated these responsibilities, fought for it and learned how to do it. All those experiences made me continuously reflect about how I participate in workgroups, how I sometimes take active responsibility for leading and how I, some other times, simply avoid participating.

I think that it was only through this methodology of participating and collaborating with each other that it was possible to reach a new understanding of myself as a reflective practitioner, increasingly able to have useful insights into my own experience. The programme offered the opportunity for this structure to emerge. Negotiating how each one of us was understanding the constraints and how we might meet the requirements, we participated in the co-creation of this structure. This is similar to what we do at our workplaces, not being able to design the emerging pattern of relationships but participating in sustaining it and, sometimes, in shifting it.

For me, the programme is the pattern of power relating, the figuration, that emerged (and is still emerging and evolving) as our experience of researching together is carried on. Together with my colleagues, I participate in the formation of pattern. This is why I defend that the programme became my methodology.



## **What informs my methodology and how is it related to other qualitative methodologies?**

This particular qualitative methodology of research that I am using has been developing through the past five years by participants in the first cohorts of the Doctor of Management Programme at the University of Hertfordshire. This approach was initially referred to as participative enquiry through reflective narratives, but this label was abandoned because it might obscure the differences from other qualitative methodologies, such as the action research methodologies of collaborative and participative enquiry (Reason, 1994; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). There are, however, some aspects in common with those methodologies as well as with the methodology of reflexivity (Steier, 1995), to which I have also pointed out while describing my experience of the programme.

This particular methodology, albeit influenced by those methodologies, cannot be simply framed in those existing categories as it incorporates the insights of understanding organisations as complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000). That perspective takes into account the emergent patterning of relating as people engage in communicative interaction in organisational contexts. This understanding of organisations influences the approach to research that I have taken in the context of this programme. First, I have been especially aware of the notion of emergence as an analogy from the complexity sciences, which demonstrated how “order” (a pattern) can result from interaction rather than from a blueprint or a plan (Holland, 1998; Kauffman, 1996). Second, I became increasingly sensitive to how people interact with each other, drawing on Mead’s (1934) notion that meaning emerges from the continuous dialogue of gestures and responses. Third, I was also keenly aware of power dynamics, understanding power as being part of every human relationship, in varying figurations of enabling constraints (Elias, 1970). This perspective became part of my own ideology as I gradually incorporated these insights in my reflections about my experience of participating in my work experience. Christensen, one of the graduates from the first cohort of this programme, referred to this methodology as an emergent exploration of experience (Christensen, 2003). This description draws attention to the three key aspects of the



methodology: how meaning emerges from experience instead of being either denied or confirmed by it; how that exploration is taken as a process; and how experience is central for the research.

What is common, then, between the methodologies of emergent exploration of experience, action research and reflexivity? These three perspectives are theories of social action which try to avoid splitting theory and practice. Action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) was developed by Kurt Lewin (1946) and his followers, on the basis that there is no action without research and no research without action. According to Reason and Bradbury (2001), action research became a 'family' of research methodologies, comprising collaborative and participative enquiry. The methodology of collaborative inquiry (Reason, 1994) involves the participation of others in the process of making sense of one's own experience, trying to make different meaning through the richness of interaction, as happened in the learning group experiences that I have described.

Reflexivity is also important because it involves the circular and self referential process of sense making that takes the inquirer into account as an active observer (Steier, 1995). Taking this approach centres my research on my personal experience, questioning and making sense of it in my interaction with other people, acknowledging how the meaning I find in my own experience is socially constructed. Steier (1995) identifies two ways of thinking about reflexivity, 'small circuit' reflexivity and 'long circuit' reflexivity. By 'small circuit' reflexivity I came to understand the process through which an inquirer describes his experience the way he does. While working on my research, I see this as the process through which I come to articulate the descriptive parts of my narratives, not as an individual process but as the result of ongoing conversations with myself and others. 'Long circuit' reflexivity then accounts for a more contemplative or detached reflection on the situation that is described, allowing for insights to emerge as patterns of the meaning I am making (Steier, 1995).

Action research, however, understands human interaction in terms of systems constituted by individuals. Reason and Bradbury state that they 'believe in the power of conscious and intentional change which can result from action research work of individual and committed groups' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.xxvi). That is at odds with the perspective of



understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes of relating, which informs my methodology of research. This perspective understands differently the meaning of participation, relationship, experience and emergence (Stacey & Griffin, 2003). Engaging in an emergent exploration of experience, one does not understand participation as a contribution to a 'greater whole', as action research suggests. As an alternative to the systems thinking suggested by the notion of 'greater wholes', I understand participation as a temporal process of relating, which is developed in a permanent conversation of gestures and responses (either vocal or not) through which experience is constituted (Mead, 1934).

Having taken this methodology, the exploration of my experience was the starting point of my research. This led me to an intensive exploration of the literature that was relevant for that exploration, instead of an extensive literature review. This means that I did not attempt to cover everything that was written about my main themes, such as responsibility, power and control in the context of project management. I chose instead to explore selected authors, such as Elias (1970; 1998) on power, Mead (1934) on communicative interaction, Foucault (1975) on power and discipline, or Bovens (1998) on responsibility.

Furthermore, my literature choices were informed by my exploration of the complex responsive processes perspective, which led me to engage with Stacey (2001; 2003; 2004), Griffin (2002), Fonseca (2002) and Aram (2001). Those authors present a complex responsive processes perspective of organisations, particularly of strategic management, leadership, innovation and education. Elias (1970) and Mead (1934) are two of the main influences of that perspective, which motivated me to explore their writings while making sense of my experience. Although not directly related to that perspective, Foucault (1975) presents a particular point of view about power and discipline which was important for my process of reflection about my experience of project control meetings.

In addition, I explored literature which was representative of the dominant discourses related to my professional practice and to the events that I was narrating. That was why, when I started out my enquiry, I tried to cover some of the most representative authors on strategic management, such as Ansoff (1988) and Mintzberg (1994a). When I later focused on project management, I engaged with its most influential authors, such as Pinto (1998), Turner (1995; 1999; 1996) and Lock (2003). Dissatisfied with the superficial way in which

responsibility, my emerging theme, was approached by those authors, I searched for literature which covered that theme in an organisational context. That was how I engaged with Bovens's (1998) work on responsibility, with Joas's (2000) discussion of values and norms and, latter, with other perspectives on responsibility (McNamee & Gerden, 1998; Lucas, 1993; Jonas, 1984; Fischer & Ravizza, 2000).



## **Why not a quantitative methodology?**

When I tried to explain to a work colleague how I was conducting my research and what were my conclusions, she answered that my insights were very interesting, so it would be exciting for me now to select groups and conduct questionnaires to test those insights and make them 'scientific'. Her response triggered a very interesting conversation in which I tried to explain how I was taking a different approach to research than the conventional analytical hypothetical-deductive 'scientific method' of the natural sciences. What I find revealing in this episode is how that positivistic approach to science is so deeply embedded in our western way of thinking. The quantitative methodologies of research were developed with large success in sciences which dealt with the objects, phenomena, or laws of nature and the physical world, such as physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology or mathematics. That success was so impressive that it became common sense that all scientific research ought to follow a quantitative hypothetical-deductive methodology in order to attain valid conclusions.

When people refer to the notion of the 'scientific method', people do not usually mean the vast array of procedures through which scientific research tries to contribute to knowledge. People usually use this phrase in a specific sense, which implies that there is a unique, standard way to attain scientific knowledge based on hypotheses and deductions. In that sense, scientific knowledge is said to come from observation and description of phenomena, the formulation of a hypothesis to explain it, the use of that hypothesis to predict other phenomena, and the performance of experimental tests of the predictions. Understanding this method as 'the' scientific method implies a rather circular argument, which claims that if scientific knowledge is obtained through that particular method, then using that method is the criterion to appraise if some kind of knowledge is scientific. I believe that science is not as straightforward as following a preset sequence of logical steps or operations. Even cooking requires much more than a cookbook: it requires sensitivity, improvisation and openness to new experiences.

But, why have I not conducted my research through questionnaires? About a year ago, as part of the programme's requirements, I had to submit a progression report to be discussed



in a progression viva, in order to determine if I could move on to the final year of the doctorate programme. During that viva, I was asked if it would be possible to conduct my research using other methodologies. I was so anxious at that moment that I did not take a moment to think about what I was being asked. I immediately understood the question as an invitation to mention other quantitative and qualitative methodologies and to differentiate the methodology I was using. I promptly answered 'yes' and started talking about the different research methodologies. The point I want to make now, one year later, is that it simply would not be possible to conduct this particular research using any other methodology. I would not attain the same insights, nor would I be able to let my question emerge from my exploration as I did.

But my colleague's original question still stands. After articulating those insights, why do I not confirm them 'scientifically' through a quantitative method, such as questionnaires? For one simple reason: I would do that if I was claiming that my insights can be generalisable or universally valid. I am not claiming that. I claim, however, that my conclusions can be meaningful for a relevant number of practitioners, particularly those who work in the context of project management. My research is an invitation for practitioners to reflect upon their own work experience in relation to my account of my experience and the sense I make of it.

The hypothetical-deductive scientific method is largely sustained because it is said to minimize the influence of bias or prejudice in the experimenter when testing a hypothesis or a theory. In this sense, it is a tool of self-discipline for the researcher in order to balance his or her involvement and detachment with the object of their research. But is this approach adequate for the social sciences? What differences must be acknowledged when the subject who enquires reflects about 'objects' of research who are also subjects interacting with each other? How can the enquirer then balance his involvement and detachment? How can an alternative methodology of research argue for its validity? That I what I will try to answer now.



## How do I deal, then, with the question of validity?

Norbert Elias published in 1956 an important essay about the problems of involvement and detachment in scientific research (Elias, 1998, pp.217-248)<sup>1</sup>. His argument is that the scientific method has been uncritically and often dogmatically transferred from physical sciences to social sciences, regardless of the different nature of their problems. Elias suggests that the superior achievement and status of the physical sciences has empowered their discourse, imposing it on the younger social sciences, striving for recognition. He argues that the power differential is so compelling that the social scientists themselves often attribute their difficulties and the inadequacies of their work to not having gone 'far enough in copying the method of physical sciences' (Elias, 1998, p.230), thus internalising that power relation. According to Elias, social investigators are frequently induced 'to ask and to answer relatively insignificant questions and to leave unanswered others perhaps of greater significance' (ibid., p.231). That is how he points to how research is directed towards the questions that can be studied with the hypothetical-deductive method, instead of focusing on the most relevant questions.

Elias argues that science deals with a continuum of models, ranging from one pole in which the constituents of the unit are loosely associated to the opposite pole in which units are composed of constituents so interdependent that 'they cannot be isolated from their unit without radical changes in their properties as well as in those of the unit itself' (ibid., p.235). His claim is that the hypothetical-deductive method is more adequate for studying loosely associated elements and increasingly inadequate to study more interdependent realities, such as human groups. Norbert Elias concludes his reasoning encouraging researchers to develop more adequate methodologies to what they are studying, instead of

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<sup>1</sup> After being originally published in English in 1956, this essay was later translated to German with important differences. As Norbert Elias was involved in that translation process from October 1977 until October 1978, he expanded the original essay with substantial notes and replaced the concepts of systems and wholes by figurations, meaning interdependent human beings. Although I refer to the original English version of this essay, I compared it with the Portuguese version of the German translation, retaining the ideas expressed in this later version.



blindly and dogmatically applying a methodology that might not be appropriate. I agree with Elias's argument and I take on his challenge, striving for a methodology to explore my experience in a meaningful way.

I also agree with Elias when he claims that both involvement and detachment are required to understand human behaviour. On the one hand, 'in order to understand the functioning of human groups one needs to know, as it were, from inside how human beings experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know without active participation and involvement' (Elias, 1998, p.228-9). On the other hand, detachment is needed for us to 'stand back and look at the course of events calmly like more detached observers' (ibid., p.224), thus obtaining greater understanding of human interaction. It is along this paradoxical path of being detached and involved at the same time that I have been pursuing my research as a process of emergent exploration of my experience.

This line of reasoning takes me into arguing for a different notion of validity. My research is not valid because it is generalisable. It is valid for its rigour, for how I reflected with seriousness, honesty and openness about my own work experience, maintaining my involvement and my detachment at the same time. The rigorous exploration of my experience was grounded on a process of personal reflection, engagement with relevant literature and thorough discussion in the context of the research programme, particularly with my learning group. The rigour of that exploration emerges in my ability to answer the questions of why and how in relation to my experience. I answer those questions in my research when I explore why something happens and how it happens, when I point to how patterns emerge, evolve, repeat and transform themselves. That rigour was fought for and developed through the sequence of research projects which I now present in the following sections of this portfolio. In those projects, whenever possible, I have changed the names of people and organisations in order to protect their identity. That also enabled me to reflect with an increased freedom about how my work relationships are constituted, without thinking about how the people involved might react to the sense I am making.



**Project 1:**  
**Managing while learning**

July 2002

## Beginnings

In this project, I will try to account for the influences and experiences which inform my current practice in organisations. In order to do that, I will start by looking into my personal development.

I was born in Évora, a small old town in the interior south of Portugal. I spent most of my childhood at home and one of my strongest memories is the fascination I felt when I first saw Carl Sagan's series *Cosmos* on television. I was nine years old then but, when the series was broadcasted again several years later, I still remembered exactly what was in each and every episode. That series aroused my imagination in an awesome way. I cannot express how enthused I was when I learned that each person is composed of atoms that once belonged to distant stars, gone even before the Sun was born, or that when one looks at the sky at night one is seeing stars that are no longer there, because the light we see was sent thousands of years ago. In a way, *Cosmos* made me realise how small I am in such a huge cosmos, but at the same time how absolutely unique each living creature is, because there is nothing like it in the far reaches of the universe. *Cosmos* introduced me to the secrets of space and time, transforming my rather common interest on space and astronauts in a quest for knowledge and inspiration. Seeing that series was probably why I started reading so many science and science-fiction books when I was about twelve years old.

As I did not have any friends in the neighbourhood, I had to play alone or with my younger sister. That was also why I read so much. It was something I could do all by myself, projecting my mind onto some distant fantasy land or grasping some exciting ideas about the origin of the universe. At school, I started getting used to always having the higher marks, except in sports. I remember wanting to keep my own standards, without letting down my teachers and my parents expectations about how I would perform. I managed to do that, even though I never was the kind of student that does his homework every day. I always preferred to do something else, relying on my capacity to improvise something when needed, rather than memorising entire books.



Computers were another of my sources of fascination. I received my first computer on my eleventh birthday. It was a ZX Spectrum clone, a great computer at the time (1985). Besides playing games with it, I started doing my own programmes and learning the subtleties of its working. As my father was working as an electrician then, I started playing around on his workshop, making experiences and assembling electronic kits. Computer engineering was the most exciting thing that I could think of doing when I would grow up, and so I chose to follow that area when I finished the ninth year of school.

But my life unexpectedly changed shortly after. When I was fourteen, during the summer holidays, I started doing radio programmes with a friend of mine at a local radio station. One of the conditions to get that radio airtime was that we had to raise some advertisement money for the station. It made me start going around town, selling advertisement time, engaging in conversations with all sorts of people. It made me realise that I was good at it. After all, I did not have any problem in relating to other people and it was quite a rewarding experience that made me get to know very well my hometown's companies. One year later, because of a regulation change, the station was closed down for six months and we started writing a supplement on a local newspaper. I got to know the people who ran that newspaper and I ended up selling their advertisement space as well for a couple of years.

The new communication skills that I was perfecting on my radio programmes and my ability to relate to other people made me have second thoughts about my choice to become a computer engineer. When I finally decided that I wanted to get into business management, a profession where I thought I could make the most of those skills, I was already starting the eleventh year of schooling. As I was only two years away from college, changing my options then meant that either I had to go back one year or I would have to do the two years' work in one, doing half the subjects in the usual way and the other half in exams. I chose the second option, which made me go for a whole year with forty one hours of lessons every week. I did not quit what I was doing on the radio and on the newspaper, which increased the pressure I felt upon myself. But the outcome was even better than I could hope. My average mark was eighteen (in a scale of twenty) and I felt that I had proved that I could make my own options, both to my teachers, who said that I would fail, and to my parents, that wanted me to quit the radio and the newspaper.



The following and final year, before going to college, I had a lot of spare time because I only had three subjects to attend. That gave me time to read even more and one of the books that caught my attention was James Gleick's *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1987). The beauty of the new ideas that the book talked about, under the label of chaos theory, had an enormous impact upon me. The notions that order could come from chaos or that fractals looked about the same regardless of scale, filled me with desire to pursue those ideas further. I bought all the books on the subject that I could find and I started exploring some things on my own. I took my old computer and started programming a black and white model of the Mandelbrot Set, the most beautiful fractal that was shown in Gleick's book. After a couple of attempts, I succeeded at getting some good pictures, even though each image took a couple of days to be drawn.

In order to keep my hobbies, I chose my hometown's university to do my first degree in business management. That allowed me to keep on doing my radio programmes. My first year at college was rather disappointing. I had the expectation that management would be all about people working together to reach common goals. Instead, I was being taught of accounting rules and ancient management theories, such as Taylor's 'scientific management' ([1911] 1967), that reduced human beings to mere tools to perform specific tasks. I felt disappointed because I had traded computer engineering for something that was not even what I thought it would be.

The following year my mood changed, mainly because of the way a teacher was lecturing us about strategy and change. One day, he pointed out the good business book reviews that were being published every Monday in the economy supplement of a daily Portuguese newspaper. I started buying it every week and, a short time after, I read a review on Ralph Stacey's *Managing Chaos* (Stacey, 1992). The book had just been published in Portugal and I could see by the review that it established a connection between the ideas that had fascinated me in Gleick's book (1987) and my own field of study, business management. Just after finishing reading the review, I ran to the first bookstore to buy Stacey's book.

Ralph Stacey's ideas resonated powerfully within me. What he proposed made sense with all that I had already experienced and his approach was the perfect means for me to keep on exploring my deep interest in science and chaos theory. I introduced the book to the



teacher who had told me about the book reviews and he liked it enough to make it a prescribed reading in one of the disciplines he taught. I did not need to write a final dissertation to be awarded a degree, but when I was finishing my college studies I decided to do it, in order to sketch a critique of mainstream strategic management prescriptions, influenced by Stacey (1991; 1992) and Mintzberg (1994a). I ended up doing a thesis relating the changes that I thought were required in the field of management to a broader shift in science and society. I argued that the mainstream strategic planning tools were being misused and were no longer helpful for today's organisations. As I was challenging what was being taught by my own teachers, the viva was quite intense, but I ended up receiving the best mark ever given to a final dissertation, nineteen in a scale of twenty.

## **My first management experiences**

I always felt myself being dragged along by chance on a number of crucial occasions. Being in the right place at the right time made me do things in life that I would not have done otherwise. When I was barely starting my third year at college, I decided to go to a students general assembly with no personal agenda in mind. At the time, the higher education students in Portugal were in the middle of a tough struggle against the Government's decision to multiply by forty five the amount of tuition fees.

As the discussion heated up in the assembly, I started putting forth some ideas and getting involved in the debate. Some of my ideas gained support and, in the end, I was enrolled in a small task force that was meant to do what had just been decided, working together with the students' union board. In the following weeks, we had a whole campaign going on, with a special edition of the students union newspaper and a play in the city's central square, in which I played the part of the 'accusation attorney' in a mock trial of a puppet representing the Minister of Education.

Suddenly, I saw myself playing a leading role in the campaign against the Government's decision. One thing lead to the other and I ended up being elected president of students' union at university, roughly one year after I went to that general assembly. At the age of 19, I had to manage a board of about fifty voluntary members, ten departments, half a dozen employees, a budget of about £300,000 and all the politics of external affairs with the other students unions.

I did not find the traditional management tools of planning and control very helpful to manage all the messy and unexpected events that I had to cope with. On the contrary, this experience fitted perfectly with the ideas that I had read about in Ralph Stacey's books (1991; 1992). The concepts of emergence and self-organisation provided a new way of understanding what was going on around me.

Self-organisation means that order may emerge from interaction rather than from design. Emergence is a process by which order, or patterns, comes about in a way that was not



completely planned or intended, that is, in a self-organising way that nevertheless makes collective sense (Holland, 1998). What continually results from a self-organising process is not intended by any of the ones interacting, although the recognised pattern, or the order, comes from the interweaving of everybody's intentions. This was a perfect way of expressing what I felt was happening with me, as my own intentions were being changed and co-created along the way since that first students assembly towards unexpected results.

I noticed that even the roles of each member of the students' union board changed over time, moving away from what had been written in the organisational chart. People withdrawn, others joined in. The strict division in thematic departments (financial, counselling, information, employment, sport, culture and academic celebrations) was subverted as well as the long hierarchical chain of four levels (president, vice-president, head of department, member of department). The hierarchical and divided formal organisation became a flat team, oriented to solve the specific problems we had to face. I believe that having allowed this new type of organisation to emerge enabled us to cope more effectively with change and unexpected problems.

This perspective is quite different from the mainstream approach to management, where design and control would leave no room in the manager's mind for emergence and self-organisation. Management prescriptions would rather recommend that a leader should stick by the designed roles of each board member, instead of letting a new set of roles emerge and evolve. But the good results I obtained reinforced my feeling that the 'prescribed' way of managing was not the 'best' way. Intended and unintended goals were indeed achieved and my students' union gained a very important role both inside the University and in the national students' unions movement. Having won the respect of the Dean and of most of the members of the University's Senate, we were able to influence important decisions on issues such as the local welfare policy or the design of new academic regulations. Breaking the implicit rule that what counts is what the students' unions from Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra say, we started to be included among the leading academies. Our influence was felt on most decisions and one of our crucial proposals to the government, a new model for the students' welfare system, was based on a document written by me.

Leading the students' union gave me a lot to think about, trying to choose sides between the mainstream management theories I was being taught and the new ideas I had read about in Stacey's books (1991; 1992). Some important questions kept on popping up: How far was I in control of what happened, although I ended up being in charge of the students union? How could so much have happened 'just' because I decided to go to a meeting? To what extent could the limits of intention and design change the management prescriptions? Should there be any prescriptions at all? I still have not found a satisfactory answer to most of those questions, but I see them now as different aspects of a central question: How to be in charge if one has strong doubts about the limits of control and predictability?

This question was especially disturbing for me because almost every brick of management theory is built on the assumption that one can be in control of what happens in an organisation, by knowing, predicting and acting accordingly. This assumption relies on the possibility to always know or find out what is needed to predict and act. If one takes away this steppingstone of the mainstream approach to managing organisations, what remains? How can the ones in charge deal with the anxiety of not being in control? And what can I do as a manager to justify my wages and contribute to achieve a 'better' outcome? These doubts have a growing importance in my practice as a manager today and in the organisation where I now work they are clearly at the foreground of my concerns.



## The complex limits of Government control

The party which was in office when the tuition fees were increased lost the following elections and a new left wing Government entered office. By the time I was finishing my management degree, the tuition fees were back into their old value. The new Secretary of State for Youth had known me from my involvement in the students union and, due to that leadership experience rather than because of my good marks, invited me to become his adviser. I accepted his proposal and moved to Lisbon.

Although I was still very young, he appointed me to help him redraw the whole public funding system to the students' unions, as well as to participate on his behalf in several task forces with other ministry's representatives. I had countless meetings to manage projects that spread from creating a national database with all the education and training offers available in the country, to building a new support system for young entrepreneurs, to be funded by the European Union.

This rewarding experience lasted for a year and a half and, when the member of Government with whom I worked moved to another position, I was invited by the Prime Minister to become his adviser for education and youth. I accepted his invitation and spent the following two and a half years in the Prime Minister's Office. When the Minister of Education was promoted to become the Minister of the Presidency (and, later, also Minister of Finance), he invited me to be to be his *chef de cabinet*, an important position in which I had to manage his team of advisers who were, in average, twice my age.

During those years in the Government's staff, I had a very clear perception of the limits of control and predictability. In the Prime Minister's office we tried to set the daily agenda by the events we chose for the Prime Minister to attend. We tried hard, but our goal almost always seemed to slip between our fingers, as the press would only be interested in comments about the day's top story.

Each time, we tried even harder to do everything we could so that our political message would go through the press. One day, we were visiting a school to illustrate the enormous



growth of investment in new schools. Everything was done as planned, with meticulously arranged pieces of information, well written press releases, clear charts, and inspiring speeches. By the end of the visit, we were confident that this time we had done it! But, as the journalist's questions began, we understood that once more their focus had nothing to do with what we were trying to show. What they really wanted was to get comments on who would be the new chairman of the Portuguese airline company and on what the Government was doing about a suspected fraud on a private university. The growth of fifty per cent in the investment to build new primary and secondary schools never reached the news.

The Government's actions ruling the country also made me think about the limits of control. Every Government tries to manage a country's society and economy as if it was a machine, complicated but controllable, whose behaviour can be roughly predicted. But that way of seeing things underpins many policy measures that did exactly the opposite of what was intended. As an example, the government decided on a tax reform, intending to tax financial profits in a fairer way. The holding companies' profits and the earnings obtained by buying and selling shares would start paying more taxes. With those measures, the Government wanted to increase the public revenues. Instead, investors started leaving the capital markets, taking down the main stock exchange indexes. Several holding companies simply moved out of Portugal, establishing their fiscal headquarters in Holland or on the Caiman Islands. This measure also reduced the investors' confidence, contributing to less economic growth. In the end, a 'perfect' decision on paper turned out to be disastrous: the Minister of Finance who championed that tax reform was dismissed and the whole affair contributed heavily to the Prime Minister's resignation later.

As Paul Ormerod states in his book *Butterfly Economics* (Ormerod, 1998), Governments suffer from the delusion of control. Government agencies try to issue reliable predictions using the same mathematics as the 19<sup>th</sup> century engineers and politicians make important decisions based upon those forecasts. But very often indeed, the predicted values have to be reviewed several times. Historical data itself has often to be corrected as information becomes available. How can a country's Government manage a complex society and economy when it bases its actions on unreliable predictions about what may happen in the future?



In the short period during which I was at the Ministry of Finance, I had a very clear picture of how much importance everyone (from journalists to the top ranks of the Ministry) gives to economic predictions. The expected inflation rate, public deficit and gross national product (GNP) growth are systematically subject to intense scrutiny. But those are also the predictions that need to be reviewed over and over, making newspaper headlines each time the Government admits that the inflation will be higher or lower than predicted. It seemed to me as if the main task of the Ministry of Finance was to make reliable predictions. Taking the illusion of control seriously, this task becomes unfortunate as it is doomed to fail.

In my opinion, withdrawing from the obsession of control can potentially release a Government to deal with other issues potentially more important than making correct predictions for the rate of inflation and GDP growth. As Ormerod (1998) defends, instead of directing their main efforts towards short-term accomplishments, Governments could give more time and attention to what is behind the main problems its country faces. Focusing on creating favourable conditions for long term growth, improving the performance of public services and removing legislative obstacles to innovation and entrepreneurship are some examples of what could be worked on.

Even the way decisions are taken in Government, as in any large company, involve more complex dynamics than a linear weighting of the arguments for and against each option. Towards the end of my experience in the Government's staff, I witnessed a powerful example of it: In an attempt to reduce car accidents, the Government decided to lower the maximum allowed alcohol level in the blood from 0.5 to 0.2 grams per litre. The number of accidents were indeed reduced, but the wine producing companies led a fierce campaign against this resolution, putting forth the accusation that the Government was 'burying' the wine industry.

The doubts I had about this decision disappeared when I saw the statistics that showed that the number of road casualties had diminished. Most of my colleagues in the Government's staff had a similar reaction and everybody I talked with defended that we should not withdraw on the matter. By maintaining this decision, we could also show that, when needed, the Prime Minister would stand by difficult decisions against powerful lobbies.

But as local elections got nearer, I witnessed an increasing pressure for the Government to suspend that decision. The wine producers organised large demonstrations and even some people in the Prime Minister's own party seemed to follow the wine producers' campaign.

I was fearful of the way things were going, but I knew that, apparently, the dominant opinion was in favour of maintaining the new law. Regrettably, most of the members of Parliament from the Government's own party thought otherwise and announced that they would vote to suspend the alcohol reduction decision. The Cabinet had an emergency meeting and the Prime Minister stayed until very late to discuss the subject with his ministers. In the end, the Government decided to make a statement against the suspension, but it was perfectly clear to everybody that the Prime Minister was not using his authority to determine the vote of the members of Parliament from his own party.

The Parliament approved the suspension of the alcohol reduction law and the press criticized the Government for the lack of authority that it had shown. The Prime Minister lost much of the public's support, reinforcing what was perceived as his major flaws: a tendency to make too many compromises and being unable to make difficult choices. Two weeks later, the Prime Minister's party was defeated in the local elections and he resigned. I had already decided to move to a new job, away from politics, but I was as disappointed as everybody else in the Government's staff was. We could not believe in what had just happened.



## **Different ways of dealing with uncertainty**

When those events took place, I was leaving the Government's staff. I felt then that I needed to do something else; I wanted to face new challenges and get to know new organisational realities. I had the opportunity to move to a private telecommunications company, to which I will refer to as Telco or Telco Group. I accepted the invitation to become a senior member of its strategy and business development department. The Telco Group is one of the largest Portuguese companies, offering several telecommunications services, such as landlines, mobile communications and Internet access.

The strategy and business development department where I now work is a small team of ten persons whose most prominent official task is to help the company's board to make decisions that affect the global strategy of the company. That usually means evaluating possibilities of mergers and acquisitions, making business plans for new products or designing ways of cutting costs, as well as capturing synergies between the various business branches of the Group.

Most of my colleagues come from the consulting business, having worked in big consultancy agencies such as McKinsey & Company or the Boston Consulting Group. Some came to work here after completing an MBA in prestigious American business schools, such as Harvard Business School or Michigan University, while others are gathering momentum to take the same step. Although some have management degrees, most have degrees in engineering and, on the whole, a very different background to mine. My Government experience is something alien to them, let alone the doctorate programme I am doing while working. I find myself reacting with a blend of curiosity, eagerness to learn and doubt to the analytical tools they use. This diversity creates, as I feel it, a tension that has not dissipated yet.

One of the goals of my department is to give answers to strategic questions. We are expected to find which one is the 'right' choice among all possible options. In order to do that, we must gather knowledge to try and predict what will be the outcome of each different action. The underlying assumption is that with appropriate knowledge we can



predict what will happen. This thinking has its roots deep in the systems and contingency approach of management, which are a major part of today's mainstream strategic management perspectives. A system is defined as an 'organized, unitary whole composed of two or more interdependent parts, components or subsystems and delineated by identifiable boundaries from its environmental supra-system' (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985, p.15). Under that perspective, an organisation is understood as composed by a structural subsystem, a psychosocial subsystem, a goals and values subsystem, a technical subsystem and, weaving everything together, a managerial subsystem. Managers, as the ones in charge of the managerial subsystem, are supposed to set goals, plan, design and control the activities of an organisation, as well as relate it to its environment (ibid).

By focusing on design and control, this management theory incorporates uncertainty in the form of what Kast and Rosenzweig call 'contingency'. This concept points to the necessity of reaching a 'middle ground between "universal principles" and "it all depends"' (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985, p.18). Developing that statement, this approach 'recognizes the complexity involved in managing modern organizations but uses the existing body of knowledge to relate environment and design, given a specific situation' (idem). I find this concept of contingency an easy way out of the problem of dealing with uncertainty. It is little more than a disclaimer saying 'this is the proper prescription but one never knows'. Nevertheless, the contingency approach recognizes that there are limits to design and control, but simply reduces it to the analysis of some 'specific situations'. This understanding leaves out the idea of an open ended process of continuous change, in which novelty can emerge with a real transformative potential.

Drawing this analogy from the complexity sciences helped me to deal with the paradox of being in control and not in control at the same time in a much more satisfying way. The notions of emergence and self-organisation enabled me to make sense of my own past experiences. Taking the unknowable as a result of a self-organising process, where the outcome arises from the interweaving of each one's intentions, keeps alive the paradox and avoids collapsing it. Each one is 'in control', because their intentions do contribute to the results, but at the same time no one is 'in control', as no single individual determines the exact outcome



## **Making sense of current and past experiences**

When I joined the Telco Group, I was assigned to a small project to determine if the company was allocating wisely its marketing resources on sports sponsorship. Being a newcomer and not knowing my way around the block very well, the head of my department went with me to the kick-off meeting with the head of the corporate communication department and two persons who work for him. As the meeting progressed, it became clear to me that my task would be to test some hypotheses that the corporate communication department had already outlined. Some of the options at stake could balance the power relations between the corporate headquarters and the marketing department in each of the Group's companies, so that was the most sensitive issue at stake.

As the work progressed, I had to collect congruent information from the subsidiary companies, check the reliability of some indicators about the return obtained with the sponsorship and, finally, cross these two groups of information to reach conclusions. To overcome all the difficulties that would come along the way, I had to establish a good working relationship with the person from the communication department who had been assigned to follow the project. So, to do the new tasks required, the most important 'tool' I had to use was the same one that I have always been using: communication.

It should have been obvious for me that no matter how different I imagined this new job to be, I would have to keep on working with other people, so the quality of the relationships I would inevitably establish was sure to be the driver of my performance. That conclusion had a feeling of *déjà-vu* for me. All my practice of management had been shaped by how well I could get along with the people with whom I was working. That has always seemed to make the difference in times of trouble.

I can trace this trend to my first real management experience, that of being elected president of the students' union of my university at the age of 19. Looking back at, what I have done since then was to establish relations of trust (and often of friendship) with the people with whom I have been working. That allowed me to face hard pressing times both at the students' union and at the Government's staff. I think that the feeling of belonging



and being able to rely on one another made us all stick together and work harder even in the face of adversities.

During my work at the students' union, I think I participated in shifting several traditional power balances simply by bridging traditionally opposed sides. Having good personal relations with most of the other leaders of students' unions often enabled me to help solve situations of conflict and move us all forward, out of dead-end situations. Looking back, I think that the pattern of always trying to 'build the bridge' is based on my perception that some conflicts may be disentangled if one understands what underpins each side's argument, becoming able to communicate with both sides.

Shortly after the new Government entered office, a big struggle was likely to happen because the leader of the Lisbon students' union admitted to a newspaper that we might accept a moderate growth of tuition fees if the Government was to accept some conditions. As this statement went against our common strategy, the leaders from Coimbra and Porto promptly replied through another newspaper, without speaking with the first one. They were angry at the Lisbon leader because he had ignored them, but they did exactly the same thing. Seeing this happen, I had the clear perception that we could fall in a vicious circle of public confrontation that might go against our interests. With this fight we could jeopardise our chances of influencing the new Government's education policy.

Underlying this episode was a broader power struggle between those three students' unions leaders. I was an outsider to that fight because I did not support any of the sides and I was not a contender myself (my small students' union had already gained as much influence as it could). Having worked with the three of them for some time, I had developed very good personal relations with all of them, in a way that made me feel that I could re-establish communication between them. At least, I felt that had to try to do it, so I phoned each one of them proposing to have an emergency meeting in my students' union, in Évora, on the following day. As they also knew that this fight was in no one's best interest, they accepted and came.

I think I took upon myself the role of the peacemaker then, sitting them around a table, trying to facilitate the uneasy conversation that started with each one expressing how angry



he was. My own position on the subject was not clear. On the one hand I agreed with what the Lisbon leader had said, but on the other hand I also had the notion that this was not the right time to say something like that. So, in a way, each side was actually right, but both sides could hardly be right at the same time. I recall not having given it much thought, consciously avoiding taking a side, because a neutral position suited better the conciliator role I was performing in the meeting. Getting over the rough start, the conversation started flowing and, in the end, I think each one kept their grudges but the fight was over. No more news was produced about that episode and we faced the first meeting with the new Government undivided.

Thinking about this episode, I realise that I tried to turn the difficulty of choosing a side into an advantage, playing what I felt to be a useful role. I used my skills of communication and sensibility to try to control what was going on, fulfilling my intention of 'stopping the fight'. Although I am more conscious now of the limits of this attempt of being in control, I still see communication and understanding as the most important skills I developed, which goes somewhat against the mainstream view on what is important when managing an organisation: hard facts and figures.

## Emerging questions

My practice as a manager has been deeply influenced, almost from the start, by ideas that challenge the mainstream management theories. That has not meant, though, that I have given up control. That can be seen even in my writing through the words I have chosen to describe my experience. My concerns about making the ‘right’ choices to reach ‘better’ outcomes reveal how I always try to have control over the processes in which I participate. Looking back, I was startled to notice that I have a particular way of trying to control the situations, establishing bonds of trust and responsibility between myself and the people I work with. My communication skills help me do that, as well as my attention to what the others might feel about what I am saying. Other more obvious means I often use to try to have more control over what may happen is knowledge. My search for more and more knowledge is strongly driven by a search for new and better ways to understand and predict.

When I first found out about complexity and Ralph Stacey's books, what I was really looking for was a better way to control. As mainstream management did not provide me with good enough tools to effectively control, I think that I hopped to find in this complexity approach new tools to understand and control in a different, more effective way. By the way Stacey was writing at the time (Stacey, 1992) it was indeed easy to read his work in a sense that oriented me (and other readers, I believe) to find new prescriptions on what a manager should do to ‘thrive in chaos’, even though I must state that Stacey explicitly rejected the quest for prescriptive knowledge. It was only when I rediscovered Stacey's works in 2000 (Stacey, 2000) that I started engaging with more explicit challenges to the control paradigm. I think I rationally adopted those new ideas, but I did not let them come into my practice and into my way of making sense of what goes on around me. Indeed, I keep on trying to predict, control and direct what goes on, sometimes achieving my intentions, other times not being able to do it.

Being aware of the paradox of being ‘in control’ and ‘not in control’ at the same time is something hard to cope with for me, because of the anxiety provoked by the notion that, as a manager, I am accountable for many things that are not fully controllable. How can I be



held accountable for things that are not in my power to control? How can I help the strategy process when I doubt our ability to predict the future?

This obviously leads me to what I think may be the central question for my research: How to manage, especially in the sense of offering strategic options and solutions, while being aware of the limits of control and predictability? I think I can see clearly now from where my enquiry departs, but I do not know where it will lead. At least, the following steps seem clear enough. I need to reach for a deeper understanding of why it is so important for me to feel in control, looking for some new awareness that may enable me to make sense of it. I also want to reflect on what it means to manage and lead in today's organisations, coping with the feelings that come from an increased economic turbulence and personal uncertainty. The quality of human relations in the workplace, maybe as a way to cope with the vulnerability to change, is a theme that clearly emerges from my experiences. I wish to explore the questions that it raises, especially in terms of how it may influence my approach to strategy and strategic management. Even the concepts of emergence and self-organisation, which are familiar to me since college, need to be questioned again.

I have the sense that there is so much to explore around the concept of strategy, change and human relation that I can indeed reach a more coherent way of making sense of my own experiences. That can allow me to go a step further, fulfilling my explicit intention for this programme: to develop an original contribute to the management practice and theory.

**Project 2:**  
**Helplessly in charge**

April 2003



## **An opportunity to prove myself**

In this second project for the Doctor of Management programme, I will draw on my current practice to explore the emerging themes which shape my inquiry. In order to do that, I will reflect on current experiences of working in change projects.

It was a mid July and I was sitting at my desk, organising the data that I had gathered so far for a project I was working on. I started noticing that the two colleagues who work in the same room as I do were becoming increasingly agitated. They were working in another project, the launch of a new Internet access product, and something seemed to be going wrong. One of them, Bernardo, who was in charge of that project, asked me how busy I would be in the following week. I replied that I was waiting for additional data that I had requested, so, until receiving it, I would not be that busy. I was not that excited about the project I was working on, so I wanted to leave the door open to do something else.

Shortly after, Pires, my boss, asked me to meet him in his office. He told me that the new Internet access product would be sold by telemarketing and he needed someone to start up the operation. Bernardo was busy and he needed someone else to do it. He was considering whether he should assign me or another colleague to do the job. For that moment, he just wanted to know if I was available. I told him that I was and he replied that he would get back to me.

I left his office feeling demeaned by his doubt. I had the notion that he kept on doubting my competence. My department, although small and without a formal hierarchy, has a very clear distinction between its 'senior' and 'junior' members. The 'senior' members lead projects, earn better wages and have a company car. Even though I was part of the 'senior' group in terms of pay and fringe benefits, I had never been given the same kind of responsibility and trust since I had joined the company. To me, Pires's doubt was the confirmation that I was still one of the 'junior' ones to his eyes.

When I joined the strategy and business development department of the Telco Group, six months before, I felt that I was jumping into hostile territory. Coming from an important



government position (*chef de cabinet* of one of the most important ministers), I felt that I had to prove myself again, starting from a de facto entry level position. I was, indeed, starting a new career. I did it as my own choice, but that did not prevent me from having to deal with the psychological injuries provoked by it. I wanted to be a legitimate member of my department, I wanted my competence to be recognized and I had not been given the opportunity to achieve it yet. Maybe this Internet access project could be it.

A few moments later, Pires came into my workroom. He told me that I was the one he had chosen to coordinate the telemarketing campaign. I was happy, but I reminded him that I would be starting my summer holidays in a week's time. He replied that it was no problem: the telemarketing operation had to start in the following Wednesday, so I had 'plenty' of time, he said... Three days to have it started and two more to do some fine-tuning.

### **Project management as a framework for my practice**

The work at my department is organised through projects. We are assigned, individually or in a group of two or three analysts, to achieve a certain result in a given time frame. Most projects aim at introducing some kind of change, which may result in a new work process, the launch of a new product or the acquisition of some firm. Kick-off meetings are often arranged to make sure that everybody is conscious of what is to be expected in terms of deadlines and outputs.

The nature of our work clearly points towards a specific field of business management: project management. Project management is an organised way to introduce change. In my organisation, projects are often used when the top management does not trust the line managers to introduce that change or when some co-ordination between several companies of the group is required. I think both of the conditions were true for the project in which I was becoming involved. Selling this new Internet access product would require the joint effort of at least three companies of the Telco Group.

According to the *Body of Knowledge* of the British Association for Project Management (Dixon, 2000), project management is 'the discipline of managing projects successfully' (idem, p.14), involving everything that is required to achieve the objectives that are set in



advance. The way to introduce change is prescribed by the APM *Body of Knowledge* (Dixon, 2000) as involving four steps. First, one has to define what has to be accomplished, setting the parameters for time, cost and quality. Second, one should develop a plan to achieve those goals. Third, appropriate tools and techniques must be used to plan, monitor and maintain progress, keeping the project under control. Finally, one must employ people skilled in project management in order to assure the accountability of the professional involved.

The step by step approach offered by Dixon (2000) accounts for a very organised and foreseen way of managing projects and it is probably useful when one has the required time and opportunity to plan everything in such detail. There are, however, circumstances in which these prescriptions seem to fail. Having been given just two days to prepare a complex campaign I could not take this systematic, formal approach to deliver change. I had to improvise, count on whomever I had to work with, dynamically attribute responsibilities and tasks. I even had to establish myself as project leader without a formal hierarchy to support me. This makes me think that the project management *Body of Knowledge* (Dixon, 2000) may be leaving out some important aspects of the actual practice of managing projects under extreme pressure and with a tight schedule. As a discipline, project management is clearly focused on how to design and control a work flow to deliver intended results. This requires the definition of “key performance indicators” (KPIs) through which performance may be measured. This approach is clearly used by my department, although we do not always use its full formal procedures, sometimes skipping some planning phases.

This telemarketing project was framed in a broader project that was meant to introduce a significant change by mass-marketing a new broadband Internet access product. In order to keep the company’s managers focused on that broader project, the sales targets were quite ambitious and the annual bonus of almost every manager of the company depended largely on attaining them. The telemarketing sales, which launch I would coordinate, were supposed to represent a substantial amount of the overall sales. My task was to help building a team and a commercial approach to call thousands of people, enrolling them as subscribers to that new Internet access service.

This highlights one of the main functions of project management, to make sure that some strategic decision comes into practice. Project management claims to be a way to turn strategy into real change. Through my account of how I lived this project for four and a half months I want to draw attention to what went on in this particular project. I want to explore what is not accounted for in the dominant discourse on project management.



## **The kick-off meeting**

The day after Pires assigned me to this project, I started getting my hands on it by finding out the names of those that I would be working with and arranging meetings. Although the product was marketed by the Internet service provider company of the group (to which I will refer to as Dot Com), it was the fixed line telephone company (which I will call Landline) that was going to sell the Internet access product as an agent of the Dot Com Company. A third company played a major role in this project, the Call Centre Company, also belonging to the Telco Group. Moreira and Augusto were the ones in charge of the project at the Landline Company and I had to work also with Eugénia, the telemarketing director at the Call Centre Company. I got in touch with the three of them and arranged a meeting to review what had been done so far and get things going. We would meet at 3 p.m. on that same day. Bernardo had told me that I should focus on the commercial approach, translated into the script the agents would follow.

At the time scheduled, I met Moreira and Augusto. Eugénia would arrive later, so we got the meeting started. They seemed to be cooperative, but I felt that they were defensive. I wondered how they might feel about me being part of the project. Both of them were from the marketing department of Landline, but neither of them had a management position. Anyway, Moreira seemed to assume he was in charge of the project and so I thought that my participation could be regarded as a threat to him. Coming from the holding company of the Group, I had the potential authority to take away from him that leadership. But our roles were not clear and I contributed to that ambiguity by presenting myself as having been sent there simply to help them, as Bernardo was doing. I consciously twisted my given task – to coordinate the launch of the campaign – to make it less threatening. Augusto was introduced to me as ‘the one who wrote the draft of the script’. I became curious of how he would react to the changes I wanted to propose.

### **On power and status**

To understand what happened in this meeting, I will draw on the concept of status. Keith Johnstone (1981) developed this notion to make theatre more life-like, making sense of the



power games that we play in our social interactions. Johnstone states that everybody is a status player, either trying to raise or lower his own or somebody else's status, playing what he calls 'status games'. Johnstone understands status as 'something one *does*' (Johnstone, 1981, p.36) and not as something one *is*. He understands this concept as a dynamic expression of power, always being co-created by the ones interacting.

This notion is quite similar to Griffin's (2002) notion that leadership is action and not an individual characteristic. Griffin states that the role of a 'leader emerges in the interaction and those participating are continuously creating and re-creating the meaning of the leadership themes in which they are involved' (Griffin, 2002, p.195). Elias described a related idea stating that 'power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another' (Elias, 1998, p.116). Power is 'an integral element of all human relationships' (idem, p.115), where chances of power are seldom evenly distributed.

Status, then, can be understood as the expression of how the players perceive and enact the initial distribution of chances of power. One can be a high status player, assuming to have a greater change of power, or a low status player, assuming to be more likely to submit. But a low status player can effectively constrain the actions of a high status player and some people excel at shifting their status, using its shifts to better try and influence the others' responses.

The beginning of the meeting showed Moreira as a high status player and Augusto, almost absent, as a low status player. Trying to seduce them into cooperating with me. I deliberately lowered my status, placing myself in a helper position, but keeping the tension alive, occasionally playing high status, reminding them of my position nearer to the top management of the company. We played this status game, testing how far each one of us could be pushed, while we discussed the timetable of work. After having done that, we started working on the most important issue we had to settle, the campaign's script.

Every telemarketing campaign has a communication script, a flow of text that appears on the computer screen to help the person who is making the call to lead the conversation. It is both a tool for inexperienced agents (if they have not yet developed their own sales discourse, they can read what the script says) and a way to standardize the commercial



approach that the campaign follows. In my opinion, the draft Augusto had written for the script had some flaws. But, as I had no experience on the subject, I was not confident enough in my own judgement to impose on something. I wanted to discuss my ideas with them in order to reach agreed decisions.

Augusto gave me a new printed version of the text and I suggested that we could start by browsing it together and making comments. He seemed to take rather well my first critical comments, but reserving for himself a final word about the changes, demonstrating how a low status player is far from being helpless. I relaxed and started saying more of what I thought could be improved. Eugénia joined us then, coming from her previous meeting. I had understood from our telephone conversation earlier that day that she was quite assertive and I was curious to see how she related to the other two. She clearly knew Augusto but I was not sure if she was acquainted with Moreira. I briefed her on what we had done so far and we resumed our analysis of the script. Eugénia started playing very high status and her comments about the text were a lot more critical than mine. She strongly disagreed with some of the commercial approaches and the way she made her comments clearly lowered everybody else's status. She had been working on telemarketing for the past eight years, so she was the expert. Augusto and Moreira began acting defensively and I started arbitrating the discussion and making it move forward as I thought a conclusion had been reached. That shift in the group's pattern of relating enabled me to abdicate from being on one side of the discussion, moving into the comfortable role of mediator. I had done that kind of role often and I certainly felt much better doing that than having to really engage in a discussion about a subject in which I was not quite sure of what was right or wrong. Each one of us seemed to play a role designed by our interaction. The meeting ended with a new version of the script to work on, but we would look at it again on the following day.

### **On intention and control: complexity as a source of analogy**

This meeting was quite significant and I think it can be used to illustrate how one can understand the interaction of people in organisations in the living present. Each one of us entered the meeting with a personal agenda and a set of intentions. I wanted to get myself into the project, learning what needed to be done without harming my ability to develop



further work with the ones involved. Eugénia seemed to wish to protect her own team, by shaping our work request (the script) into a form that could be worked on without much hassle. Moreira appeared to want to make sure that the new guy from the holding (me) would know who was calling the shots (him). Augusto looked more relaxed, trying to do his job and admitting the possibility that what he had written could be improved.

We stood by our intentions skilfully, using our expertise to constrain the others' responses, for instance, through the careful use of status. Eugénia's high status play seemed to be a personal approach she had developed to improve her chances of controlling what goes on. So are my abilities to shift status, lowering and raising my own status in order to seduce and control. Moreira seemed to be less skilful in his usage of high status play, because his influence in the outcome of the meeting was not as large as he seemed to desire. Even Augusto's discrete approach seemed to me as born of his own skilful way of interacting with others, reserving his energies for something that might really be important for him.

But the fact was that none of our individual intentions fully prevailed. From the interaction, novelty arose. The script became better than what each one of us could individually have done and the decisions we reached were not exactly what any of us had intended. How can this be understood? That is where the complexity sciences can be a meaningful source of analogy to understand human interaction in organizations. By source of analogy I mean that complex systems' properties cannot simply be applied to human action. Instead, the abstract sets of relationships that form those properties can be used a source of analogy, requiring 'imaginative acts of translation' (Stacey, 2001, p.71). To do that translation, Stacey drew upon Mead's (1934) theory of human interaction, based upon the concepts of gesture and response which I will discuss later.

Complexity sciences explore a general hypothesis that a pattern, coherence or order can emerge 'in the local, self-organising interaction of the entities' (Fonseca, 2002, p.71). That seems to be the most important contribution of the complexity sciences to knowledge: a way to understand how order can exist without a blueprint or a plan. Self-organization is the key concept to understand how a pattern may emerge from interaction. But, then, how can novelty arise? The pattern that emerges in some complex adaptive systems has the paradoxical nature of being 'both stable and unstable at the same time' (idem), allowing



small changes to escalate in a way that may change the global pattern. According to this point of view, novelty arises from diversity, as small differences get amplified into changing the global pattern through continuous interaction. Order and change, transformation and continuity arise from the interaction of entities.

During the meeting, each one of us played for his or her intentions the best way he or she could. Through interaction, we developed a new understanding of our own task and, gradually, a pattern of group work emerged. But even that pattern evolved. We negotiated changes to the script, played with our status and our roles, changing the sense we were making as we kept on interacting. Each one of us responded to the other's gestures through new gestures that were replied to. When Eugénia arrived, the pattern of relating that was emerging between Moreira, Augusto and me shifted. As each one of us responded to that shift, the pattern kept on changing, but still remaining recognizably similar to what it had just been. Continuity and transformation could be identified as we struggled to find new meaning, negotiating both the text of the script and each other's roles. This notion that change and continuity arise from a continuous process of interaction between human beings is the basis for the theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000). Through the process of relating, human beings change and are continuously changed in the living present by the interaction with themselves and with others.

### **Getting back to project management theory**

This kick-off meeting was quite unlike what is prescribed on the project management literature. First of all, I had joined the project when it was already moving. The notion of it being a kick-off meeting is true for me but for nobody else, as Moreira, Augusto and Eugénia were already working on it. Besides this circumstance, the time available to launch the telemarketing campaign did not leave the opportunity to formally set key performance indicators nor to establish a project management plan. Instead, we focused on the tasks that required our most urgent attention, dividing the work load among ourselves.

This goes against the prescription that states that 'success criteria should be documented and the manner in which it is proposed that they be achieved should be described' (Dixon,

2000, p.19). The project management plan is regarded as the 'most important document in the overall planning, monitoring, and implementation of a project' (idem). It should explicitly include the objectives of the project, as well as its budget, quality policy, timings, critical tasks and KPIs. The plan should be agreed with the sponsor of the project and, as far as possible, with other project stakeholders.

There was no such thing in the telemarketing project, not because this prescription was not known to the ones involved, but because it would consume precious time and resources that were required to deliver the required results. There was no pressure at this time from the project sponsor, Pires, to give a formal expression to what we were doing and why. He accepted that in order to get the job done we had to improvise and concentrate in doing things rather than write down what we would do.

This situation draws my attention to the limits of the prescribed approach to project management. By trying to keep everything under control, writing down every task and objective in a formal document, project managers seem to fight their own anxiety and their fear that the project might fail. If a project manager does everything as prescribed he can always claim that he did everything he could and that he cannot be blamed for the failure of the project. By improvising, as I was starting to do, I was giving up that safety net. I had to deal with the fear of failure by just accepting it and doing whatever I could to succeed.



## Developing the campaign

As I wanted to see how a telemarketing script appeared on screen, after the meeting, I asked Eugénia if I could go to the call centre to see how things worked there. I carefully avoided admitting that I had never been to a call centre before because I thought that it would undermine my ability to coordinate the project. I could not play high status when needed after admitting that I was an absolute beginner in the telemarketing business. When we arrived, I immediately liked the ambient of the call centre. Everybody seemed to be in a good mood. I met José, who was the commercial advisor, and Manuel, the computer programmer. There was warmth between Eugénia's staff there, which made me think that they would probably work well as a team. After looking around and finally seeing what a script looked like in a running telemarketing campaign, I felt more confident. It was not that strange to me. It was all about communicating and I could link it to things I had done in the past, like writing and making radio programmes. Maybe I could help make it work.

The following morning, I met with Moreira, Augusto, Eugénia and José to get the script finally closed. I had done my homework and so had everybody else. When in doubt, I relied on the experience that Eugénia and José had on the subject. We got the job done and moved to explain the whole thing to Manuel, who was going to programme it in the computer. As he started doing it, I accompanied Moreira who was going to meet the people who would make the calls to give them their first training session. The telemarketing agents are temporary workers and most of them do it as a part-time job while studying at college. Therefore, they are quite young, about twenty years old. Some of the people we were going to work with did not even have a previous telemarketing experience. So, at least some of them were in the same boat as I was.

Moreira had brought with him a detailed PowerPoint presentation with all they needed to know on the new Internet access product. He adopted a detached posture, even threatening sometimes. He used statements like 'if you do not have any questions, it means that you know everything and we will test it later...' I perceived him as not connecting with his audience. As I was watching the session develop, I started struggling with the impulse of taking over the training. I thought I could do it better but I remained cautiously silent.



By the time the session ended, Manuel had already finished the computer programming. So, we had the opportunity to show the script to the agents and tell them about the commercial approach that was behind it. I took a more present role then, explaining most of it, making jokes and trying to motivate them to work hard on this campaign. After going through it a couple of times, we all moved to the call centre to make some test phone calls between themselves and to some friends of mine who did not mind giving some of their time to it. As things went on, I moved frantically from one place to another, reassuring one of the agents, giving a hand to another on a difficult question or just listening to how the conversation was going. Things did not turn out too well, as they obviously had difficulty selling such a technical product after having got to know it on that same day. Besides, most of them were not Internet experts and mixed up basic concepts like a bit and byte.

As I realised that they did not have the confidence and the knowledge that they needed, I started the following day by writing down some help files to add to the script. That way, the agents would have some support when they encountered difficult questions or situations. To do that work, I asked for some place where I could work in the Call Centre's building. I worked the whole morning on my laptop, often asking Eugénia, José or Manuel to make comments. I think that by doing my work there I was trying to say that I would like to be part of the team and that I would do my own part of the job. I asked Manuel to make a further effort to include the help files on the script on time for that night's calls and so he did.

I think I must reflect upon the meaning of that action of mine. Anxious about how I was unable to control the performance of the people making calls, I took upon myself the responsibility to help them. Instead of asking someone to improve the help files, I chose to do it myself. What was the meaning of it? On the one hand, I had the notion that I would do it better and faster. I could justify my decision as pragmatic. On the other hand, I think I wanted to be admired for having done it. It was indeed a way to seduce the project team, showing clearly that I was not some hotshot bossing them around, I was in the same boat and, when needed, I would do whatever was necessary and I do it very well. For me, this is a time-tested way of earning a position in a group. This line of action, however, often works for the establishment of some dependency towards me. As the group sees what I can



do, they might simply abdicate from acting. In that sense, I may be used by the group to get things done.

That same day, I worked with José and Eugénia to further improve the script. In order to keep everybody involved, I called Moreira to ask for his approval on the changes we had introduced. He joined us and, after reading the new version of the script, he told us that he had no changes to propose. He was, however, reluctant to say that it was okay to go. As far as I was concerned, he was the one in charge on Landline's side, so what was he waiting for? It was only then that he said that Augusto was not just someone working for him who did the first draft of the script. He was actually at the same rank as he was and he was in charge of developing scripts for telemarketing campaigns at the Landline Company. I was struck by it. I might have understood that if I had paid attention to Augusto's uneasiness when we were working on his first draft but I had not understood that he was accountable for the end result. Augusto finally arrived and he gave his approval to the final version of the script. Eugénia came up with some last minute changes, but at 5 p.m. everything was set and ready.

I knew the agents needed another training session and I took that responsibility myself. I asked Augusto if he could come with me, to make sure that I would not miss anything relevant. He accepted and we got in the training room, welcoming everybody inside. They were about twenty people, almost all of them visibly anxious about this new campaign. I tried to break the ice, making them laugh and attempting to relieve the tension. I showed them the new help files they had, making clearer some of the concepts. I regularly looked at Augusto, to see if he was approving. He was. I ended the session with a motivational speech. They had a crucial part to play in this project; they were the ones who could make it work.

I left the room feeling happy about my performance. Augusto congratulated me on it and he seemed to be a lot warmer towards me. As our roles were becoming clearer, I think we were starting to really appreciate each other's contributions to our common task. Every agent that had the training went to the phone. After a few additional training calls we gave it a go. The campaign was launched. Even without selling on that first day, we had met the schedule and the campaign had started on time. A nice feeling of achievement took over .



But there were some up and downs along the way. On the following day, Thursday, I had the opportunity to speak with Eugénia in private. She was beginning to trust me, I think. She told me that things were not always that easy between the Landline and the Call Centre companies. There was quite a culture clash between the people at Call Centre's telemarketing department and the people from the marketing division of Landline. There were two main reasons for it. First, the people from Landline struggled to keep their power, regarding Call Centre simply as a supplier of a service they required. As the Call Centre Company was owned by the Landline Company, this power struggle was clearly biased. Second, Eugénia, José and their boss, Vicente, came from a different customer service school than Landline's managers. They had extensive experience in telemarketing and they were frequently dragged to the point of having to stand by their opinions, refusing to do things the way Landline wanted them to do. I understood from what she told me that my presence had contributed to shifting the pattern of this particular interaction.

I had decided to work at the location, moving myself to the office building of the Call Centre Company. By working closely with Eugénia, José and Manuel, a shared sense of trust had emerged. I had turned to them in search of recognition, Eugénia was now responding with trust, sharing her private concerns. By making my choices, I had actually brought both Moreira and Augusto closer to the people at the Call Centre Company. They had to go there to meet me, so they became more involved, they began to see why Eugénia and José were so concerned about what could work in the script. From a customer-supplier relationship, I think we were beginning to move into a work group. But this conversation with Eugénia also had another meaning for me. I thought she was acknowledging our working alliance and, by doing that, I was to choose their side when facing the Landline Company.

### **The emergence of meaning through gestures and responses**

This conversation had been possible because a shared sense of trust had emerged through our interaction. This notion that meaning emerges from interaction through a continuous process of gestures and responses is the basis for Mead's (1934) theory for the emergence of mind, self and society. Mead, a social psychologist from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, established a framework to understand the interaction of living creatures. As I have already



referred to, Stacey (2001) drew upon Mead's work to translate the abstract properties of complex adaptive systems to the interaction of human beings.

Mead grounds his theory in the process of gesture and response between living creatures. To illustrate his ideas, Mead focused on the animal interaction as a rudimentary form of social behaviour. When one dog approaches another it makes a gesture. The response it may evoke on the other dog may be a threatening snarl. The first dog may then move away or make a counter-snarl and fight. In the first situation, the meaning that emerges is that of victory of one dog over the other, in the second case, is that of fight. Mead argues that meaning arises from the interaction of individuals and not from isolated gestures (Mead, 1934).

There is an important difference in what concerns the interaction between human beings because we use spoken language. One does not see one's facial expression but one can hear one's own voice. That way, one can respond to his or her own vocal gestures, enabling him or her to anticipate or imagine the other's response. That way, human beings respond to their own gestures, thus creating meaning and developing an idea of the response his gesture may provoke in others. The ongoing process of gesture and response is then common both to the silent conversation that we develop with ourselves which we call thinking, and to the relationships we establish with others. That is the point that Mead tries to make when he argues that both mind and society are different aspects of the same phenomena.

My conversation with Eugénia was possible because our gestures and responses created a shared meaning of trust. She trusted me to speak openly and I trusted her, also speaking openly and considering her points of view. As the conversation developed, I became more attuned to the responses my gestures provoked in her. As I spoke, I could evoke in myself the same kind of response that my gesture provoked in her. I could then shape my ongoing gestures to communicate. I have the notion that she developed the same sense, so the shared meaning of trust that had enabled the conversation evolved into a richer work relationship.



That same day, early in the afternoon, Moreira's boss, Fernando, went to the call centre without warning and started listening to calls just beside the agents. I was not there at the time, but I heard later all sorts of tales about how terrified the young people that were making calls had felt. Eugénia was tipped off about what was going on and came from her office to the call centre, trying to reassure the frightened agents. She told me that some of them were shivering as Fernando made disapproving gestures about their performance. The self confidence that had been so hard to build on the previous day had obviously been lost. When I arrived, Fernando was about to leave. He greeted me coldly and later I understood that he was quite annoyed about how the 'people from the holding' were taking over the project, his project. Had I been careless?

My choice had been to win the trust of Eugénia and José, first, and then Augusto too. I had failed to establish a deeper working relationship with Moreira, but he was the one whose contribution I thought to be less relevant. Clearly, he had not liked it and his reaction had been to complain to his boss, Fernando, how I, 'the guy from the holding', seemed to have pulled away the strings of the project from his hands. I was aware of it, but it had been a calculated risk. I had done what I thought and felt to be the best way to do what was required on time.

The day after was Friday and also my last workday before starting my summer holidays. I wrote a memo to my boss, Pires, describing what had been done and how the telemarketing campaign was planned to grow. He was quite pleased with my work. The campaign had started on time (the first milestone of the project had been successfully achieved) and we had already made eight sales on the second day. I told him about how I felt the Landline people were resenting our participation on the project, but he did not seem too concerned about it. 'Enjoy your summer holidays!'



## Back from holidays

Two weeks later, when I came back from my summer holidays, the setting had completely changed. After the campaign had been launched on time, the focus had shifted to making it grow and obtaining results. The tension with Landline's managers had evolved into a new project management setting. My department's involvement had become an official part of the project structure and we were now accountable for the telemarketing operation. Pires, my boss, was the project manager for the launch of the new Internet access product. Fernando (Moreira's boss, from Landline) was in charge of all actions regarding Landline, while Bernardo and me would manage the telemarketing operation, under both Fernando's and Pires's supervision.

Bernardo briefed me on the changes. We now had a project plan with assigned tasks and deadlines for everyone involved. The plan had been devised by Pires, Fernando and Bernardo as a way to make changes happen and in order to control what was being done. The next tasks concerning telemarketing were a major improvement for the commercial script and the launch of a new commercial offer. The customers who subscribed the new Internet access product by phone would have the opportunity to try it free of charge for thirty days as a try-and-buy offer. In terms of project management, weekly meetings had been arranged to monitor project progress.

Those changes meant that after the unstructured pressure for having the operation started, the managers involved were trying to grasp some control by using the established project management routine, setting up a plan and regular progress monitoring meetings. This practice is grounded on the understanding that 'the Project Management Plan is the most important document in overall planning, monitoring, and implementation of a project' Dixon (2000, p.19). Although the plan for the telemarketing project did not cover all the prescribed items (there were no budget estimates, no quality policies and no health policies), it did include the description of each task, who was responsible for delivering it and when it should occur.



That same afternoon, I started by having a meeting with Bernardo and Fernando, who was a lot warmer towards us now. After the meeting, I went back to the Call Centre Company to work on the new script with José and Augusto. After we had the work done, I negotiated the changes with the senior programmer Diogo, who had come back from his holidays in the meantime. We reached a compromise version and he developed it on time for a training session that I held together with Augusto. We quickly conveyed the new commercial approach to the agents. Both the new script and the increased motivation must have done something because the sales reached a new maximum value.

The first task was completed, so I focused on the second one for the following days. In the meantime, Bernardo had been moved to other projects, so I would be managing the telemarketing sales on my own. I worked with a marketing manager from Dot Com and Moreira from Landline, who had just finished his holidays, to devise a way to make the try-and-buy offer possible. After a couple of meetings we reached an agreement that worked both for Dot Com's billing procedures and for Landline's sales process. We could incorporate it in the campaign immediately.

And so we did. The try-and-buy offer was a big success and the sales went sky high. The sales results doubled on the first day and tripled on the second one. A few days after, telemarketing became the largest retail channel for the new Internet access product. Even though the results were very good, they were not enough to attain the objectives. I participated in the design of a plan to expand the operation to three other call centres and to attain the expected sales rate. The plan was actually executed and, in three weeks, the sales were multiplied by four.

In the meantime, the weekly monitoring meetings were regularly held, starting every Tuesday evening at 6 and often lasting until 10 o'clock. Those long hours were spent analysing the week's results and examining if each due task of the project plan had been accomplished. Besides that formal side of our gatherings, the Tuesday meetings served as a crucial moment of contact between everyone involved. Problems tended to be solved more easily face to face and those meetings provided the chance for people from the different companies involved to meet and talk freely.



Mid August, Pires ceased to be the head of my department to be appointed as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Dot Com, the Telco Group's Internet service provider company, which sell the new Internet access product. He made sure that my new boss, Sequeira, who was previously his 'number two', would keep me on the project. A week after that change, Pires asked me to meet him and Fernando in his new office. We would be having an important meeting with the CEO of Landline on the following day and he wanted to review his sales forecasts with us. The scope of my action had just been expanded to also include inbound call centres. I had the freedom to introduce whichever changes I thought wise in order to increase the overall sales efficiency in all these phone-based channels. I gave him my forecasts and we ended the meeting at about midnight, reaching the conclusion that telemarketing was likely to contribute heavily to get near the ambitious sales objectives that had been previously set.

As I drove back home that day, I felt self-satisfied for having successfully run such an important project with so little background experience on the subject. Of course it had not been my lonely achievement but my skills and experience in leading groups had been crucial to what I had contributed to the process. Through this process, I was restoring my own sense of competence, an issue that was quite important for me. I had the notion of starting to be perceived as a competent professional, capable of delivering results. The way I felt good about it reflected back on my own confidence. I was freer then to do things in the way that I thought to be best, even if it meant challenging somebody else's point of view. I also felt good because of the relationships I had developed with the people I was working with. I had the notion that I could trust them and that they trusted me.

On the following morning I went to the major steering committee meeting. The meeting was lead by the CEO of Landline and almost all of the Group's managers were present. Pires chose not to present our forecasts because he felt that it was a scenario too optimistic and he did not want to take the responsibility for putting it forth. As Pires could not spend that much time anymore in coordinating the overall telemarketing project, Jerónimo had been appointed (at Pires's request) as the corporate executive manager of the project. Jerónimo was also the CEO of a smaller company of the Group and his main task was making sure that every company in the Group would do everything in their reach to attain the sales objective. Jerónimo presented the way he had designed to control the project. He

spoke very favourably of me and of what I had been doing, but the mood of the meeting was disappointing because his main conclusion was that we would not reach our sales target. New sales actions were discussed, but everyone seemed to be very cautiously managing expectations.



## **In the middle of a power struggle**

The Call Centre Company was a lot bigger than the telemarketing business unit. It was a large call centre company that included also a customer services business unit, focused on managing inbound call centres, as well as support departments, such as human resources and information systems. The CEO of the Call Centre Company decided to restructure the company right in the middle of the development of the campaigns to sell the new Internet access product. The director of the customer services business unit was promoted to commercial director and his deputy directors moved one step up. The head of telemarketing, Vicente, felt implicitly demoted. To mess things up a little bit more, two people were moved from telemarketing to other departments. One of those workers was Diogo, who had the crucial role of developing and maintaining every planned campaign.

Besides jeopardising his contribution of the project, his departure brought everybody's morale to the ground in the telemarketing department. I knew in advance what would happen (Eugénia had told me), but it was only after going there and witnessing that he had actually departed that I decided to do something. I called Jerónimo and told him that a crucial man for the project had been moved. Although the telemarketing team had received some reassurance that he would be fully working for them, I was sure that such a move was certainly not done to leave everything as it was. Jerónimo listened to me and asked me if I thought that he should talk to the Call Centre Company's CEO. I told him that it might be the best thing to do. That was exactly what I wanted him to do as I had the hope that she would listen to Jerónimo.

I was wrong. Jerónimo called her and on the following day he told me what had happened. He tried to tell her that he was worried about the results of the restructuring that was going on at Call Centre, because of the crucial role Diogo had in the telemarketing project. As the whole Group was focusing on that, anything that could jeopardize the project was very dangerous. She reacted badly and asked him if he was second guessing the way she was managing her company. He tried to argue that he was only concerned about the impact this might have for his project but the conversation was indeed over. As Jerónimo told me that, I had the sense that my move could easily backfire.



I had told Eugénia about what I was trying to do, so I called her to let her know that it had not worked and that I was afraid that it could backfire against herself or Vicente. She told me that she had just been with Vicente when he received a tough call from his CEO, reproaching him for letting me know so much about what was going on. Vicente's relationship with his CEO became colder and I was clearly to blame. My well intended effort had failed and backfired against the people I was concerned about. I felt devastated.

It took me a whole weekend to get over the depression into which I fell that day. It had not helped me to talk to Vicente, saying that I was sorry about what happened. He did not blame me, but I still felt I was indeed to blame. I had been powerless to control the results of my actions. Everybody seemed very appreciative of the work I had done with Landline and Call Centre but, when it mattered the most, nobody could really do anything. The restructuring at Landline had left Fernando without a management position; he was now assigned exclusively to the telemarketing project. On Call Centre's side, the situation was even worse and for meddling I felt that I had contributed to worsen it even more. At the moment, the thought that I might be taking too much responsibility upon my shoulder did not even cross my mind. As I reflect now about what happened I can see clearly that it was the case.

Although being in charge of an important part of the project, I felt helpless to make a difference. I was faced with the limits of what I could control. To contain my anxiety, as I now see it, I focused on what I could indeed do. I had a commercial inbound team for Dot Com to create and a lot of campaigns to manage, so I called for a meeting with everybody involved, including José and Diogo. I started leading the meeting in Vicente's office, as he had left for another meeting. We outlined task after task, campaign after campaign, everything that we had to do in the following month. When we had about half of the work done, Eugénia jumped in and made us aware that we had been too optimistic setting deadlines, leaving no room for any kind of failure. I smiled at her and told her she was right. We started over almost from scratch, now with Eugénia's participation, and came to a detailed plan with the dates we thought we could meet. I agreed with them to add some days to those new deadlines, in order to manage expectations, leaving room to solve unexpected problems. I was learning to be cautious.



I was happy with myself for having conducted the meeting in such a productive way. But at that time I was not aware of how manipulative I had been through the whole discussion. They were dragged along by me, by giving and taking turns in speaking, summing things up, making the discussion move to another subject, discussing over and over the same thing until I was comfortable with the decision “we” reached. It was only some weeks after that, while discussing leadership concepts with Eugénia, she told me that she thought I had been manipulative at that meeting. It struck me, because it was right and I had not been aware of it.

As the campaigns were being done on time, getting over one problem after the next, these messy problems did not fade away. Diogo started having increasingly conflicting agendas. The telemarketing business unit was demoted to an “operational department”. Vicente tried to fight back his CEO, but things got even worse. Telemarketing ceased to be allowed to have direct contact with customers; everything had to go through the ‘proper commercial channels’. Eugénia was led to the edge by this whole situation, trying to maintain herself as the pillar for the whole telemarketing team while dealing with her own anxiety. Fernando was left hanging for some more time without knowing what he would do next. Pires kept on phoning me asking one thing after the other, an action plan for this, a campaign for that, a creative idea to solve that other problem. Finally, Sequeira thought that I should leave the project because I had already done my part. As Pires wanted me to keep on coordinating things until the end of the year, they fought over it and reached a middle ground. I stayed, part time, but only until the end of November.

The scheduled date for me to leave the project finally arrived. I had a deep sense of relief because I was feeling drained and exhausted and I had the notion that I had done my job. The telemarketing sales objectives would be attained, my work was clearly recognized both by the people on the project and by my peers at my department. But, at the same time, I was sad for leaving the people I had been working with so closely. Those four months had been so intense that it seemed like if I had known Eugénia, José, Augusto, Diogo and Fernando for ages. I would miss them.



## **An unexpected comeback**

About two weeks after leaving that project, I was already starting to get my hands on a new project I had been assigned to. It was Wednesday, and the afternoon's work was almost over. Sequeira came rushing into his room, which is besides my own working room. As he was stepping inside he told me: 'Pires is very angry at you! He says you left everything in a mess and that about half the sales are fake...' My adrenalin rushed into my blood stream and I did not think twice before replying, raising my voice. 'If Pires thinks that way, he ought to think better. Pires simply refuses to acknowledge that the delivery takes time and that some people say "yes" by impulse but refuse the hardware kit when it arrives to their house. If he does not want to accept it, it is not my problem!'

Sequeira was startled by my reaction. I do not usually react in an aggressive way. I think I did it because I felt undermined. In the past few days Pires had been pressing Fernando very hard to do all sorts of things to chase some mythical 'lost sales'. Although I was no longer on the project, I had helped Fernando a couple of days before to draw a good plan to get a grasp of the situation. We could not ask a customer for the fifth time if he was sure that he did not want the service! The main problem was that the logistics information was not reliable. We did not really know which kits had been delivered and which had been refused. I thought the matter had been cleared, but Sequeira's comment made me aware that it was not the case. Sequeira tried to calm me down, saying that my competence was not being doubted. Knowing Pires's usual behaviour, I simply smiled.

Later in that evening, Pires himself called me. He sounded extremely tired. He had called me to ask me if I could go to a meeting on the following day at 9. I was still hurt by his comment to Sequeira, so I told him that I could not speak with him at the moment, I was having dinner with the former Minister of Finance, besides I had to call Sequeira to see if I could meet him because I had other things scheduled. I called Sequeira to ask for his opinion and he told me that I should go because Pires was under heavy stress, as his company could be merged with Landline and he could be demoted. I thought it was no reason to scapegoat others because of his own anxiety, so I was still mad at Pires. A while later, I called him back to let him know that he could count on me. I would be there at nine.



Actually, I arrived to Dot Com a bit before nine. I went to the top floor to meet Pires in his office. He was in a sour mood. We waited a bit for the others to arrive. Fernando would be there with Joaquim, the logistics director. Some people from Dot Com would also attend the meeting. After having everybody in the room, Pires got the meeting started, asking one of his staff to brief us on the situation. He told us that from the overall sales only about half the customers had requested for the activation of the new Internet access service. There was a lack of information from the logistics to know what had happened to one third of the sales. Joaquim picked it up at that moment and started to give a very long explanation on how the logistics system was being reshaped. Looking into his eyes, I do not think Pires even heard the first few seconds of what Joaquim was saying. He was breathing heavily, looking out through the window or looking up at the ceiling. Everybody else was dead silent, aware of the tension growing. Pires finally decided to ask Joaquim to say no more. 'What has happened is unforgivable', he said. 'This situation means that everybody involved is simply incompetent, even I, because I did not call for this meeting sooner.' All my senses became totally alert. I fought to control a burst of anger that was growing inside me. Pires kept on talking. 'There will be an atom bomb exploding on your head when this gets out of this room. All of you are at risk; nobody is out of this boat. I will personally make sure that everybody in this room will feel the consequences of this.' He turned to Fernando. 'What about what I ordered you to do some days ago Fernando? Are the 4.000 contacts already made?' Fernando shivered. He started saying something that Pires was clearly not hearing. Pires interrupted him, speaking louder now, 'Is it done or have you ignored my order?'

I had reached my own limit. Fernando was in a weak position as he still did not have a new job. He had worked harder than most for this project and he was clearly not to blame for this mess. Pires had no right to treat him this way. I had to speak. 'Pires, you should know that it is not simply a matter of calling some thousand customers.' I used my bodily expression and projected my voice to be heard clearly as a voice of authority. Pires was silenced. 'One cannot call the same customer five or six times for him to tell us for the fifth or the sixth time that he does not want the bloody Internet access service. As you know Pires, we have been doing a systematic follow up one month after each sale. We know exactly what happened to each and every customer that was contacted by that follow up. There is no use in calling those clients again. What Fernando did, and he did it very well,



was to know exactly which customers had been contacted by the follow up, which had not. He gave the order for the number of agents doing the follow up to be tripled and instead of calling one month after, those calls started to be done only two weeks after. The problem is that the logistics data keeps on failing; for one hundred times we have been reassured that “this time we can rely on the data” but each and every time we come upon its flaws. Joaquim has just said again, a minute ago, that today he will have a comprehensive database. I have heard the same before and I cannot rely on it.’ I proposed that we should concentrate the follow up on just one call centre, put everybody there doing it to attain quick results and that we should call everybody who was not contacted before and who had not asked for the service to be activated. We could put into practice Pires`’s idea of offering those clients special conditions to win them back, like offering them the hardware kit, as it was being done on Dot Com’s online store.

Fernando jumped into the discussion, saying that what I had just said was exactly what he had been trying to say. He supported what I had proposed. Pires looked uncomfortable. He wanted to call everybody instantly, but he knew that it obviously was not possible. In order to level the expectations with what I thought was the case; I said that this operation was nothing new. We had just finished doing one thousand similar contacts and only one tenth had resulted in a new activation request. Now Pires could not say he had not been warned about the most probable result of his move. The meeting had reached an ending. Pires was unable to fight against my proposal because everybody supported it, so what we had to do next was put it into practice. I called Sequeira and asked him to allow me to coordinate it personally, so I would be back into the telemarketing project for that day. We had ten tough hours ahead of us.

### **On leadership**

The way Pires led this meeting is illustrative of his style of leadership. He seems to assume that the best approach is to push everybody to their limits. The way by which he manages to do that, at least most of the times, is by putting one’s sense of competence on the line. Pires seemed to be keenly following the prescriptions that say that by setting stretching targets and placing people under stress one will make them try harder. Ralph Stacey argues against these prescriptions, claiming that its result on people is simply to ‘make them feel



more anxious and so less likely to develop the kind of conversational life that makes creativity possible' (Stacey, 2003, p.418). I agree with Stacey's statement and as I felt pushed by Pires's approach I had the need to react to it, setting some limits of what I would do and how. That confrontation may have prevented us from discussing in depth what the best way to deal with the problem was.

My own way of leading and relating is quite different from Pires's approach. As one can probably see through this narrative, what I do is mainly to try and capture the trust and willing collaboration of the ones I am working with. When I need to ask someone I work with to do an extra effort, I seldom follow Pires's approach of putting that person's sense of competence in jeopardy, 'if you are competent you must do this'. Instead, I ask it as a personal favour, like if I said 'this is more than you should do, but please do it for me because I count on you'. To acknowledge this pattern in myself was not a comfortable process of self-discovery. It was painful. I asked myself troubling questions, such as: Do I have the right to ask so much? Am I manipulating the feelings of the ones I am working with in order to get my job done? Is my style of managing and leading ethical?

Hirschhorn (1997) argues that, in the post-modern organisations, leaders must 'present themselves to their subordinates as human beings', becoming 'more psychologically present'. I find this concept of being psychologically present quite useful to describe my personal experience. I always felt myself strongly present in my workplace. My work relationships often become personal relationships, to the extent that most of my friends are people that I met in the several places where I worked. My hypothesis is that by being psychologically present, by presenting myself as a full human being and not just a professional doing a task, I ended up establishing strong bonds of trust and often of friendship with who I work with.

Another way to understand this trend is to see myself as a seductive leader, a person who 'uses seduction to manipulate the needs of dependency and the feelings of frustration that exist among the members of a group<sup>2</sup>' (Pracana, 2001). I may understand my gestures

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<sup>2</sup> My translation.



(being open, sensitive and psychologically present) as a way of seducing the people I work with, to gain their trust and willing collaboration. To seduce, in the sense I am referring to and following Clara Pracana's (2001) definition, means to lead on, to attract, to enchant, or to fascinate. By bringing myself into the role I am playing, by making the others aware of my vulnerability to their performance, by establishing personal bonds that often take the shape of friendship, by trying to protect the people that I work with, I may be encouraging the dynamics of dependency.

Both Pracana (2001) and Hirschhorn (1997) seem to understand leadership as a personal attribute, something located in the individual. This approach is clearly revealed, for instance, in the way Pracana (2001, p.120) formulates some of her questions: 'How do charismatic leaders motivate their followers fostering emotional bonds?' 'How do they obtain a "voluntary" participation from their followers?'<sup>3</sup> I do not find this perspective satisfactory, as it ignores the way by which the group use the leader to perform a function fostered by the group. I take this different approach influenced by Griffin's (2002) notion of leadership as a process that emerges in the relationship between human beings.

### **Getting the job done**

After the morning meeting, Pires called Vicente and Eugénia from Call Centre to ask them to do everything that we requested. He told them that they had to make about seven thousand contacts in a few days. They became a bit scared by his request and they started asking questions. Pires said to them that I would reply to those detailed questions and handed over the phone to me. We arranged to meet at half past two at their office. A bit later, Eugénia sent me a text message saying that she was happy that I was back in business. It was as if she was telling me that they felt that my return to the project would fix everything. When Fernando had a moment in private with me, he told me that he had really appreciated what I had done for him. He said he would have been 'fried' if I had not articulated in such a powerful way what he was trying to say. I smiled and told him not to worry about it. 'It was only fair.'

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<sup>3</sup> My translation



Everybody seemed to be relaxing. While driving towards the Call Centre Company, it felt as if Pires was playing the role of the aggressor and me the role of the champion that stands right in the middle of the aggressor's path, protecting his folk. As Fernando's and Eugénia's anxiety seemed to be lowering, mine was clearly rising. I had done what I thought was right, but I had no illusions that Pires would resent the way I had stood up to him in that meeting. Sooner or later, he would make me pay for it. From another point of view, the way everybody seemed to depend on me increased my sense of responsibility. How could I fail? I could not. After what had happened, Pires was ready to tear me apart at the slightest mistake. The only thing that could protect me was to succeed in assembling the new campaign on that same day, designing it, programming it, training the agents and start making the phone calls. And I knew how hard it would be to do such a thing.

I spoke to Eugénia before the meeting and told her about what had happened and shared with her my plan to do the difficult task we needed to accomplish. She agreed it could be done and she would stand by me. Everybody started to arrive for the meeting: Diogo, José and Fernando. We started working on a draft version of the new follow up script, talking over the difficult parts of it. I refrained from leading the meeting. Everything I said seemed not to be bright enough in my own opinion. José joked that I was out of shape after having left the project just two weeks before. I was clearly anxious. The group work reached a consensus and we split up. Diogo and Fernando would determine the list of clients to be contacted; José would write down the texts for the script while Eugénia and I would review those texts and get other details ready. The texts were very difficult to write, but the task was finished on time. Diogo reached a reliable list of clients to call and managed to programme the new campaign in a record time. José and I assembled the first twenty agents in the training room. I explained to them what they were about to do, why it was so important and what was different from the previous follow up that was being done. I showed them the new script and taught them how to use it. I think I could communicate and motivate them as I intended to do. They went to their positions and started making call. I stayed there with Eugénia, José and Fernando to try to solve any unexpected problem. It worked fine. We did it.

Pires asked me if I could meet him later that day, bringing Fernando along to check the progress. We met at about 10 p.m. in a meeting room at the Telco Group's headquarters.



While we were going to the meeting, Fernando told me that he would pay a great deal of attention to what I would be doing in that meeting. He wanted to learn how to tackle Pires. Fernando is about ten years older than I am. I felt under pressure again. I was nervous but I managed to keep that nervousness inside. On the outside I was as cold as I could be. Pires was tired. I told him everything that had been done. Explained him the new script, how we had selected the clients that were being called and how the training had gone. He had a few comments about a couple of small changes, but that was all. There was nothing else to say.

I left the room feeling drained. All my energies had been used up and I was feeling like a walking ghost. I still got back to Call Centre to see how things had ended. Everything had gone as good as our best expectations. On the following day, everybody, about fifty people, would be doing those follow up calls. Most calls would be made in one to two weeks. A couple of days after I met other top managers involved in the project. Pires had told them about how worried he was but they simply felt he was over-anxious. It was clear to them that telemarketing sales were only an effective sale when the client would receive the kit and ask for the activation. What was the big deal?

Through that day I became gradually aware of some of my relating patterns. On one hand, I noticed how attuned I was to play the leader in a group that depended on me. My sense of responsibility, my ability to articulate ideas and express myself quickly won the group's support on such a setting. That kind of performance was very gratifying for the narcissistic side of my personality. On the other hand, I became aware of how I could influence or even manipulate the ones around me. Pires had much more formal power than I, but it was me who decided what to do, preventing him from fulfilling some of his intentions. Being aware of those processes and patterns hit back on me, raising my anxiety throughout the day. I felt the burden of this awareness with a sense of ethical responsibility.



## **The movement of change**

This telemarketing project that I have just narrated was probably the most intense work experience I have ever lived. I felt myself struggling for recognition, trying to restore my sense of competence and worth through very hard work. As I was doing that, I started to examine my own practice, reflecting upon it and challenging myself in the process of doing so. I was confronted with the results of my actions and also with my own limits when I tried to influence the outcome of some situations. I keep on struggling to make sense of my actions, my goals and my relationships. The first step to be able to do it may be to find words to express the feelings that come with the experience. That is the point where I feel that I am now, trying to find concepts that might help me in this process.

Presenting project management as a framework for my practice, I want to underline how important are relationships that are formed around the project. My main argument is that the prescribed tools to manage a project are just basic tools that may help to structure one's practice. I would argue that a project's success does not depend on the strict usage of those but instead in the quality of the relationships that the ones involved established. I see this telemarketing project I was involved as a messy success. The unforeseen problems were overcome and a strong feeling of group accomplishment was attained. That was not a result of detailed plan or formal procedures; it was the result of the rich interaction between human beings, each with their own set of intentions, goals and emotions.

**Project 3:**  
**Accountability and**  
**project control**

September 2003



## Introduction

This paper is a further exploration of my main concern around what it means for a manager to be accountable for results of which he is not fully in control. I live this theme of enquiry everyday in my professional life. As a manager, I find that I never have enough information to be sure about my decisions. When I do choose, and almost every action in management involves some kind of choice, I face the fact that I cannot control most of what can make the outcome of that decision a success, a failure or something between those extremes. I am, nevertheless, accountable for what I do. By being accountable I mean that I answer for the results of my work and that I am responsible for those results. My performance is evaluated and I can keep my job, be promoted or be fired because of that constant evaluation. Even if I do not experience more severe consequences, every time I fail I feel shame and sometimes guilt. This awareness of my own vulnerability to failure provokes in me varying degrees of anxiety, understood as the reaction to a threat of loss (Bateman, Brown & Pedder, 2000), the fear of the shame of failing. This anxiety is difficult to deal with and makes me feel uneasy and insecure when having to choose. I do not accept this discomfort passively. I want to understand what makes me feel the way I do and how my thinking and acting can evolve in a way that may enable me to become a better professional, whatever that can specifically mean. This is the motivation of my enquiry, to develop my ability to go on with my work in spite of the anxiety I may feel.

The way management is described in the literature focuses precisely in the attainment of objective accomplishments. According to Kast & Rosenzweig's influential textbook on management (1985), a manager is supposed to 'get things done by working with people and physical resources in order to accomplish the objectives of the system' (p.6). There are two aspects in this definition that I want to underline: the goal of getting things done and the subordination of the manager's actions to some preset global objectives. I think both these aspects need to be examined.

By articulating that a manager has to get things done, Kast & Rosenzweig draw our attention to the objective accomplishments for which a manager is accountable and to the means a manager has to accomplish his goals: people and physical resources. The implicit



statement in this formulation is that the manager has a significant degree of control over those resources in order to fulfil his objectives, so he can be blamed if he does not get things done. I obviously will not challenge the idea that a manager has to contribute to 'get things done', but I will challenge the way in which this statement focuses exclusively on the manager on an individual level. The manager engages in his practice interacting with everyone around him, for instance his subordinates, other managers, shareholders, clients and people from other organisations. This process of interaction involves so many people in complex relationships of power that it is an over simplification to simply state that it is the manager as an individual who has to get things done.

The statement that the manager has to work for the accomplishment of the 'objectives of the system' presumes that he has some kind of preset objectives. On one hand, this specific formulation implies that the objectives are simply there to be accomplished or not. This has not been the case in the organisations where I have worked. My experience is that the objectives of an organisation are continually under transformation because of the events that take place in the living present that reshape continually the relations of power that come into play in the process of establishing goals or objectives. On the other hand, this phrasing is quite revealing because it reifies the organisation as a system and then personifies it, attributing the objectives not to the people in charge, the top management, but to the system as if it was a living thing. This statement is illustrative of the mainstream organisation theory that informs most management practice, focusing on the responsibility of the manager to perform as expected, which will lead me to further discuss systems thinking and its influence over management practice later in this paper.

I live every day with the expectation that I can be in control of what I do as a manager. But I also live with the paradoxical awareness that I am in control and not in control at the same time. I am in control because I can choose my actions and constrain others. I am not in control because I cannot determine everyone's actions and my success or failure can depend more on things beyond my capacity to influence than on my own actions. Streatfield (2001) examines this paradox in a way that resonates with my experience. He points to how the literature on management builds the expectations that 'managers are "in control" of an organisation's movement into the future, that their choices are the cause of the organisation's movement, and that competent managers design their organisation's



future in advance of realising it' (p.6-7). He then examines his own practice which leads him to a 'reappraisal of what it means to manage effectively' (p.80), coming to 'understand effective management as the quality of courage to carry on participating in the creation of personal and collective meaning, if only in small ways, in spite of the anxiety and helplessness engendered by the loss of direction' (p.80).

While Streatfield's (2001) view on the paradox of control does resonate my experience of controlling and not controlling at the same time as a manager, it does not answer fully my concern about accountability. Regardless of how I understand my role as a practitioner, I cannot change the expectations nor the standards by which my performance is evaluated. I still answer back for the results of my work and I can still be blamed for failures. Therefore, I want to examine my own practice of participating in management change projects. I will ground my reflection in the framework of project management as a specific discipline of management that was developed to be 'the most efficient way of introducing unique change' (Dixon, 2000, p.14). Most literature on project management (Andersen *et al.*, 1995; Burke, 1999; Lock, 2003; Pinto, 1998; Turner, 1999) focuses on planning and control techniques, such as CPM (Critical Path Method), PERT (Programme Evaluation and Review Technique) or GDPM (Goal Directed Project Management). Those techniques are refined sets of prescriptions that focus on what a manager should do in order to successfully manage a project, establishing procedures to attribute responsibilities and control the completion of tasks.

I will argue that although those tools and techniques are useful to manage a project, focusing exclusively on them is a way for project managers to avoid dealing with the anxiety of being accountable for the project's success while being vulnerable to events beyond their control. In dealing with the paradox of control in this setting, I found that the quality of my interaction with the people with whom I work enabled me to have the courage, in Streatfield's (2001) sense, to keep on engaging with the change process, being aware of its vicissitudes, while being able to communicate to the top management using the language of project management tools and techniques. In my discussion of this theme, I will acknowledge how some project management literature (Turner *et al.*, 1996) is taking into account the importance of relationships in project work, but I will argue that without

considering the paradox of control that perspective is still not congruent with my experience as a practitioner.

In order to take into account the paradox of control in human interaction, I will draw on the theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2001; Streatfield, 2001; Fonseca, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003) as a framework to discuss my experience as a project manager. Understanding the interaction of people in an organisation as an on-going conversational process, where meaning is constantly formed and reformed, points to the importance of self-organisation and to the role of power, enabling and constraining interactions. I find these aspects of human relating crucial to my practice as a participant in management change projects.



## The discipline of project management

Project management appeared as a discipline of management in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, associated with the development of major engineering projects, such the ones required to build new boats, to construct bridges or to design and assemble new airplanes. Nowadays, however, the tools and concepts of project management are used in a much wider range of situations, as project management started to be understood as an effective way to introduce all kinds of change in organisations. The project management approach was even incorporated in general management thinking in the form of project-based management (Turner, 1999). The assumption underlying all this enthusiasm about it is that change is more controllable if it is managed in the form of a project than it would be otherwise. Most literature on project management is therefore focused in proposing effective tools and techniques to control project work (Andersen *et al.*, 1995; Burke, 1999; Lock, 2003; Pinto, 1998; Turner, 1999).

This broadening field of project management is clearly illustrated by Dennis Lock (2003) when he identifies four different kinds of projects: construction projects, manufacturing projects, research projects and management projects. The two first kinds of projects are clearly industrial, focusing on the production or design of some kind of hardware, reflecting the origins of project management. The two later kinds of projects give account of new fields where project-based management is being introduced. Research projects aim to produce some kind of new knowledge through the allocation of human, financial and technological resources. Management projects encompass the deliberate introduction of change in organisations, like headquarters relocation, the development and introduction of a new computer system, the launch of a marketing campaign or an organisational restructuring.

The work I do at the strategy and business development department of the Telco Group clearly falls in this last category. We organise ourselves in temporary teams of one to three members of the department and we are placed in one of the Group's companies to achieve a certain goal. As I have given account in the previous project, I spent five months in 2002 developing the telemarketing sales of the new broadband Internet access product of the



Group. Although that project was longer than most, that was a typical situation in the department and, while I was doing that, other colleagues were engaging in projects such as the launch of a new company for the corporate market segment or trying to achieve a financial turn-over of the information technologies companies of the Telco Group. Developing this kind of work, we use the basic tools of project management: Gantt charts, project task lists, regular progress control and, sometimes, the Critical Path Method in order to determine how long it will take to complete.

To understand why project management came to be regarded as a controllable way to introduce change in an increasingly dynamic and complex business environment (Turner *et al.*, 1996) one has to trace its roots. The pioneer of project management is commonly accepted to have been Henry Gantt (1861-1919). Coming around the need to plan and control shipbuilding projects, he started using bar charts as visual aids in the early 1900s, representing each activity, when it would start and when it would be completed. Those charts are still called Gantt charts today. Using those tools, he managed to visualise the whole process, identifying sequences and dependencies of activities. That enabled him to literally see where time could be saved by doing activities in parallel that were previously done sequentially, thus reducing significantly the time required for building ships (Burke, 1999, p.11).

Gantt's invention was such a breakthrough that it still influences today's project management. The project management planning and control tools and techniques suffered major development only in the 1950s, with the development of CPM and PERT. CPM stands for Critical Path Method and it was developed by Remington Rand Univac as a tool to reduce to a minimum the turnaround time from production to sales. It is a method to address the time cost trade-off (Burke, 1999, p.15), determining the shortest possible time to complete a project for each cost level, identifying the activities that can influence its overall duration and are, therefore, critical. At the time when it was developed it suffered from the low data processing capabilities of computing equipments available.

The Programme Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) was designed by the US Navy with the management consultant Booz Allen & Hamilton in the late 1950's as a technique for planning and controlling the design and development of the Polaris submarine. The



success of that project gave this technique some recognition. Describing it in short, PERT takes into account the most likely, the optimistic and the pessimistic times that a certain task would take to be completed. The expected time is then calculated through a formula that assumes a normal distribution of probabilities. A critical path is then produced, using this statistical approach. As software planning tools began to be used, both CPM and PERT began to be used almost interchangeably, although the designation PERT may be often misapplied (Lock, 2003).

The usage of this set of tools and techniques of project management started to identify a community of practice and a discipline of management. In 1965, that community took a more formal form with the establishment of the International Project Management Association (IPMA), followed by the creation, in 1969, of the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the United States and, later, of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the United Kingdom. These associations have been gathering and updating the body of knowledge of the profession. The PMI was the first one to publish it, in 1986, being followed by the APM in 1992, whose body of knowledge is now in its fourth edition (Dixon, 2000).

The appeal project management has over managers comes, in my opinion, from the seductiveness of breaking down work into small pieces with predefined deadlines and clear attribution of responsibilities. A clearly laid out project seems effectively much more 'controllable' than a mere sketch of what one thinks must be done in order to attain a certain goal. But those tools of project management do not provide managers with a straightforward solution to introduce change, because there is no shortcut for the two harder aspects to manage: how to make people work to complete the tasks required to attain a certain goal and, before that, how that goal came to be set in the first place. That last question is what I want to discuss through the following account of my experience of participating in the negotiation of the scope of a project.



## **Negotiating the scope of a project**

From February to April, I worked full time in the restructuring of the Telco Group's Internet portal. I became aware that there was some work to be done there after Pires, the CEO of the Dot Com Company which owns the portal, phoned Sequeira, the head of my department. He wanted to ask for my department's help to restructure the Internet portal as it was part of his responsibilities and he had not had the opportunity yet to improve it. They agreed that it would involve a two people during a two month period. When staffing the new projects, Sequeira assigned me as the senior business analyst for the project and Alberto as the junior one. Both of us would work under Resende's supervision as project leader. Resende is the senior project manager in my department, sharing with Sequeira the top responsibility for the projects in which we engage. He had joined the department a few months before, coming from the Lisbon branch of a major consultancy company, where he was also senior project leader.

I was quite enthusiastic about working in that project because I have always been fond of Internet based businesses, but I was uncomfortable with not having a clear goal or a project scope. Sequeira articulated it to me simply as 'Pires wants us to make a turnaround in the portal' and he told me to contact Pires in order to know exactly what he wanted. I phoned Pires but, as he was away on holidays, he told me to contact the portal's chief executive, Baltasar. I phoned him and we arranged a meeting for the following day. When I arrived, he received me in his office and invited me to take a seat. He briefed me on how the portal Internet portal had been born as a university's project in the early 1990's. As the Internet became more and more popular, that Internet portal became the leading Portuguese search engine and directory service. Baltasar was one of the executives of a publishing company who bought the portal and the right to use its brand from the university, selling it afterwards to the Telco Group when the Internet boom started.

When the Telco Group bought the portal, Baltasar kept his position as the portal's chief executive. He told me how the costs did not matter when the Internet businesses had all the hype in the world and the only figures everybody wanted to see were how many page views and unique visitors they had attained. But after the Internet boom came its bust. The



portal's staff was reduced from more than one hundred people to little more than thirty. He understood this project as Pires's reaction to the poorer performance that fewer people were able to deliver. He argued that although the top management had been focusing on cutting costs by firing people, they were now surprised that the portal did not perform as usual. His views made sense to me as well as the metaphor he used: 'they turned a Ferrari into a Mini and now they want to drive the Mini as if it was a Ferrari'. He was succeeding in his attempt to win my sympathy.

I told him that Pires had told me that they had already prepared some work for the portal's restructuring. He confirmed it, telling me that he had the whole strategy articulated in a one hundred pages long presentation that his team had prepared. But he was having trouble communicating it to Pires. Part of that strategy was to redesign the portal, updating its look and feel, and Pires was focusing just on that aspect, ignoring everything else. From his words it looked as if Pires was stepping out of his role of CEO of the company to almost become a senior web designer, giving precise guidelines for the new homepage design. For Baltasar the problem was how to give financial credibility to the new strategy in order to communicate it. That was what he wanted our help for, to translate his team's work into a language that Pires might listen to and approve.

At this stage of the conversation I started to feel uneasy. Baltasar engaged in the conversation playing a teacher-like role, telling me about the portal's story, a narrative that I already knew. He was stating that he was the one who knew the business from the start, so I should rely on his opinion. It was a power play, but I had no interest in contesting his superior knowledge on the portal. Then the conversation evolved into another pattern of interaction, as Baltasar tried to persuade me to serve as a translator between himself and Pires. That did not make sense to me. Either there was something for us to do at the portal from which some novelty would arise or being there would be a waste of precious time. That was the rationalisation I came up with to justify my negative emotional response. How could he presume that I would simply support his conclusions and act only as a go-between?

The meaning that was arising from our interaction was that he was in a position to determine my actions. I did not like that, so I held back during the rest of the meeting and



reserved my position about how we would engage with the project for the moment after I would talk to Resende and Sequeira about it. When I reported my impressions both to Sequeira and to Resende, it sounded weird to them too. Sequeira thought that it was far from what Pires had in mind so he called him, interrupting his holidays. We improvised a loudspeaker conference call with him, gathering around the phone.

Sequeira started the conversation by telling Pires that Baltasar wanted us to examine the strategy proposal he had come up with and work out the financials. He reacted promptly. 'It is not that at all'. He did not want any financial analysis and he had not listened to the portal's proposed strategy because he did not really trust its conclusions. He wanted us to do four main tasks: analyse the portal's channel structure in order to redesign it (as the portal is composed of several thematic websites), coordinate the design of an innovative new homepage, articulate a plan for a further improvement of the whole portal and prepare the launch of a new broadband channel. After some discussion on how much time this would take, Sequeira and Pires finally agreed that it could be done in about two to three months. But Resende wanted to draw clear boundaries around our work scope because he feared that Pires might do his usual trick of asking more and more things to be done. So, he proposed that we should have a start-up meeting to define clearly what would be done, by whom and when. Pires accepted.

After that phone call I talked to Baltasar. Pires had already told him what he had asked us to do and he seemed to accept it, although he displayed some discomfort with the situation. After all, his superior had overridden his point of view. After that conversation, in which Baltasar told me who he would assign from the portal's staff to assist us, I prepared a small presentation with the project's main objectives (its scope) and the main tasks and deadlines (the milestones). That document constituted on the basis for the formal kick-off of the project, serving the purpose of reassuring everyone about what had to be done, by whom and when. Pires chaired the meeting himself and it served the purpose to convey that he was personally committed to get the results he wanted from it. The first would be to give the portal a new, improved homepage.



## **Power, control and accountability**

The theme running through the narrative of this project's start up is far from being a distinctive feature of project management. Indeed, the dynamics of power and influence that were at play here can be found daily not only in the business world but in all human activities. The sociologist Norbert Elias (1998) argues that trials of strength are part of all human relationships, as people feel the drive to test who is stronger. In this narrative, that kind of test can be seen, for instance, between Baltasar and me, between Sequeira and Pires or between Pires and Baltasar. After a while, all those situations arrived to a certain balance of power more or less stable. That temporary balance does not mean, according to Elias, that power is something that any of us might possess as if it was a thing. Instead of that reified notion of power he proposes the idea that power is a structural characteristic of all human relationships (Elias, 1998, p.116) that only exists when at least two people interact.

There is one point that I think must be cleared though. Saying that power is not a thing that some people might have more than others does not deny the unequal distribution of chances of power. Pires obviously has a position that increases his chances of power when interacting with Baltasar or Sequeira. But the initial distribution of the chances of power does not determine the balance of power to which a given interaction can arrive after some time. The way each person plays out their chances of power in their interaction with other can shift that balance. That was what happened when Sequeira and Resende persuaded Pires to accept a well defined project scope or when I influenced Sequeira and Resende in order not to do the role that Baltasar had asked of me. Elias (1998) calls this shifting balance 'power figurations'.

What is then the function of the plan that we came up with for the start up meeting? In the light of this discussion of power, I think it became for us a significant symbol that represented the power figuration underlying our relationships at that moment in time. The plan would influence the chances of power in our future interactions. Someone who would want to follow the plan would have greater chances of power than someone else who might want to change it. This makes me see the plan also as a disciplining tool of control. Having



been agreed upon by all of us, we became accountable for its success. If we did not manage to transform the intended achievements into real ones, we would have to respond for it and be blamed for failing. The fear of shame and guilt associated with failure would then have the disciplining effect of keeping our efforts focused into reaching the milestones on time.

This understanding of the role of that initial project plan is illustrative of the interplay I see between control and accountability. On the one hand, Pires took the initiative of starting up this project because he is accountable for the portal's performance and he believed it should be improved. On the other hand, the plan served as a tool of control for Pires to measure our work, making us accountable for meeting the deadlines and delivering tangible results. Having participated in the discussion of the plan and having accepted (or even proposed) the deadlines, I became personally accountable for it and, in my turn, I would try to control the people I would be working with in order to have the work done on time, thus avoiding the shame of failing. This circular relationship between accountability and control, control and accountability seems to me to be an organising theme running through my experience. I believe this theme is especially felt in project management or project-based management because of the highly articulate form of breaking down work in tasks whose completion can be evaluated. But that control is all about managing people, making them do what someone intended.

According to J. Rodney Turner, one of the most influential experts on this field of management, project management literature often ignores the role of the project manager as a manager of people (Turner *et al.*, 1996). Together with Kristoffer Grude and Lynn Thurloway (1996), that author tried to account for that missing aspect, arguing that the project manager is often a change agent, having to influence the organisation without a position of authority but with all the responsibility of completing the project in time. Although the actual word used in the text I am referring to is 'responsibility', it is used in the same sense as I am discussing accountability, understanding it as having to answer to someone or for some activity, being liable or responsible. In this sense, both accountability and responsibility may express the meaning of a kind of force that binds us to do what we come to think we must do.



The way those authors (Turner *et al.*, 1996) propose to succeed in influencing the organisation is to ‘treat people as if they were volunteers’ (ibidem, p.126) and to develop an ‘influence strategy’. That strategy would include sequential steps of identifying who needs to be influenced, thinking how those people can be persuaded to support the project and then succeeding in actually influencing them. This step by step approach is based on the assumption that ‘the key factor in influencing anyone to do anything is to ensure that the rewards for doing it are greater than the risks’ (Turner *et al.*, 1996, p.128). This assumption is highly questionable because it only acknowledges for the purely rational aspects of human action, ignoring more emotional responses such as the ones evoked by personal loyalty or by a seductive kind of leadership.

Nevertheless, this rational balance of what one may win or lose is present in the sense of accountability in the form of what one thinks one can win or lose. Being accountable for a project, I have felt the sense of having rewards or punishments waiting for me if I succeed or fail. Sometimes, the fantasy about those rewards and punishment is greatly exaggerated in relation to what actually happens. Succeeding in a very demanding task can only evoke an approving nod as a reward and failing to meet a deadline may mean only that the deadline has to be postponed to some later date. Reminding myself that the world will not end if I fail has been an effective way for me to lower my anxiety, enabling me to have the clarity of spirit that may enable me to succeed.

Jeffrey Pinto, another influential project management theorist, equates power with politics (Pinto, 1998), claiming that those aspects play a substantial role in project management. He argues that political behaviour is ‘any process by which individuals and groups seek, acquire, and maintain power’ (Pinto, 1998, p.256). The understanding of power underlying this statement is that power is like a thing that one can get and keep. This notion of power is quite different from the one formulated by Norbert Elias that I referred to earlier. Elias (1998) understands this widespread tendency of treating power as if it was a thing, an amulet, as a ‘relic of magico-mythical ideas’ (Elias, 1998, p.116). But why is this reification of power dangerous? It is dangerous because it diverts the focus of our attention from its relational nature. Power does not exist for itself; it is only present when in relation to others. Even then, his formal ‘power’ is only part of the initial distribution of the chances of power that change as the interaction develops.



Pinto (1998) identifies three reasons that justify why political processes are so important in project work. First, he argues that project managers seldom have high status or formal authority, which forces them to influence others to get the resources they need. Second, the fact that projects exist outside the functional structure forces project managers to continually negotiate and bargain for what they need. Finally, project managers do not usually conduct the formal performance evaluation of their project team subordinates, which takes away from them an important source of formal power. Although I do not agree with the perspective that Pinto takes on power, the reasons he identifies for the importance of political processes in project management do resonate with my experience. Stepping into an unknown organisation, with support from the top management but without authority over anyone I have to work with what became a common theme for the start-up of almost all projects I engaged with at Telco. That situation leads to a tension between being held accountable by the management for having results, while having to bargain for attention and resources to deliver those results.

The approach Pinto (1998) prescribes to deal with the issue of power and politics in project management is based in increasing the awareness project managers have of those issues. He proposes that one should acknowledge and understand the political nature of most organisations, learning appropriate political tactics, accepting conflict, levelling the playing field with line managers and learning how to use the 'fine art of influencing' (Ibidem, p.263). The techniques described by him are very close to sheer manipulation. For instance, he argues that in order to establish sustained influence, a project manager should 'prioritise social relationships on the basis of work needs' and 'develop a network of (...) persons who can be called upon for assistance' (Ibidem, p.264). I react strongly against this deliberate manipulation of human relationships in order to gain influence and increase one's chances of power. But even though I feel that reaction, I end up establishing relationships in project work that end up enabling me to do my work.



## Getting a project on track

The day after the kick-off meeting, both Alberto and I went down to Dot Com's headquarters, as the Internet portal is part of that company's activities alongside the Internet service providing departments. We had an office assigned for us on the top floor, just besides Pires's own office and quite near to Baltasar's. After settling in the place where we would spend the most part of our next couple of months, we dropped by Baltasar's office. He was free, so we had the chance to sit together and explore further the next steps we should take.

Our first milestone was to redesign the portal's homepage, updating its look-and-feel and giving it a fresher, more appealing look. The second largest Portuguese portal was increasingly popular and a third player, had appeared a couple of years before. Both were strong attackers and Internet portal's homepage had remained unchanged for more than one year, which meant an awful lot of time for an Internet business. Baltasar was convinced that the portal had to be appealing both to teenager Internet heavy users and to the older occasional net users. I agreed with that perception and we discussed the methodology to take it into account. As the portal staff had already done some work benchmarking and sketching some alternative web design options for the homepage, the three of us decided to build upon that work, testing it in one or two focus groups to fine tune it before having a final proposal to submit to Pires in the first control meeting of the project.

After our short meeting, Baltasar introduced us to Tomás, the managing director of the portal. He was in charge of the contents and services department of the portal, composed by about twenty people who worked to keep the portal going. Besides Tomás's department, there was also a commercial department and a technical department. Baltasar and Tomás assigned one of the staff members to help us almost full time. She would help us gather all the available material and arrange for the focus groups to take place.

Focus groups are very often used when trying out new products. We would hire the services of a customer survey company to make two meetings of about ten people each,



selected in order to be representative of the main customer profiles. The sessions would be conducted by a professional (a trained psychologist or sociologist) and could be followed by the clients through a mirrored glass window. We managed to arrange the focus groups to take place in less than one week. Until then, we ought to have a clear picture of what the options were, with some drafts to show and test.

Alberto and I started to dig into every Internet portal, identifying patterns in their approaches and comparing how different looks were dominant in different national audiences. Having spent some days doing that research, we got deep into the web design options the staff had already come up with. Tomás introduced us to Norberto, the web designer who was assigned to work on the homepage. We discussed with him the reasoning behind some options and we asked for his opinion on some of the design issues. Should we use a two, three or four column design? How should we arrange the information in the page? Where should we place the advertisements? How could we lighten up the channel bar (where people can find links to more than twenty thematic channels that are part of the portal)? How should we integrate web mail and services access on the top of the page? Which search options should we provide?

Norberto seemed happy to participate in the discussion. Later I knew that he made the remark that we obviously did not work there because we were doing something as strange as asking for his opinion... I smiled at that remark and felt happy for having asked for his active involvement. Baltasar and Tomás joined in afterwards and we narrowed down the options to three alternative sketches. Norberto worked out the changes that we agreed upon and, in the day before the focus groups, we had prints of our new design options as well as hardcopies of the most relevant competing portals. Before the first session started, I briefed the person who was going to conduct the sessions and we agreed on a simple sequence. He would first enquire about each one's usage of the Internet, comprising which kind of access they had, which was their favourite portal and why did they choose it. Afterwards, he would show in a computer screen the images from the portal we had selected, discussing what they liked and disliked in each one. Finally, he would show our proposals for a new design, conducting the same kind of discussion. Resende showed up, because he wanted to personally witness the discussions.



The two focus groups were quite useful for our work and after spending more than six hours listening to raw customer feedback I felt that we might easily deliver a final product. They considered the current Internet portal homepage to be outdated but very rich in information and resources. We could not make the new design too light. The two groups of users came clearly into focus. The younger ones (to whom we started calling the ‘broadband generation’) had their computer always on and connected to the net, through a broadband connection. They disliked farfetched designs and what they called “too many letters”, while preferring simpler, straight forward approaches with no news nor advertisements. Their favourite Internet service was peer-to-peer file exchange<sup>4</sup>. The older users (to whom we called ‘narrowband generation’) connected their computers occasionally to the web, searching for news and entertainment content. The Internet service they use the most is simply email. Surprisingly enough, both the ‘narrowband generation’ and ‘broadband generation’ users agreed upon the same sketch for the new portal homepage. That sketch happened to be almost everybody’s favourite, which we welcomed because it would enable us to get it approved in an easier way.

Resende was quite stressed about the control meeting with Pires that was approaching. He seemed more anxious about the meeting than about getting our work done. In order to relieve his anxiety, in my point of view, he came to Dot Com and took the project leadership away from me. I resented that, because I felt it as an attitude that was undermining my ability to do my job. I started reacting in a more aggressive way, in a power struggle, claiming my own space. Some tension built up as a result of it and Alberto was placed into the uncomfortable position of being between two fires. That emerging rivalry, which seems meaningless to me now, could be traced to the way we were having trouble recognizing one another. On one hand, I did not recognize Resende as a legitimate boss because I did not acknowledge the full value of his past career in the consulting business. I tended to view him as a caricature of himself, as someone scared of Pires’s power and obsessed with adding charts to build up a PowerPoint presentation. On the other hand, I think Resende did not rely on my ability to effectively lead a project. He did not

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<sup>4</sup> Peer-to-peer file exchange allows users to freely exchange files (songs, video clips, movies, etc.) that are stored in their personal computer’s hard disk.



trust the value of my past experience in the government staff and he knew that I was having my first experience leading a project team of this kind. Tangled in this web of lack of recognition, we made our lives more difficult, taking each web design option as a power struggle.

Eventually, we came up with a solution that had the agreement of Baltasar, Tomás, Resende, Alberto and me. I prepared personally the document that we would present to Pires, grounding our choices both in the results of the benchmark we did and in the outcome of the focus groups. The new homepage proposal was presented in the end as the logical outcome of our reasoning, with call-outs explaining the reasons behind each option. I was pretty confident that Pires would agree to it but I was a bit stressed before the meeting started, as I was the one who would be giving the presentation. Our goal was to get the new design approved in order to present it to the public, inviting users to give us their feed back. But, to do that, we needed Pires's approval.

The meeting started. Pires chaired, stating in a good mood that he had big expectations about our work. I smiled and gave him a copy of the document we had prepared. He quickly jumped to the final page to see the proposal. Everybody in the room stood still and silent. Baltasar, Tomás, Resende, Alberto and me waited for his reaction. 'I like it', he said and the tension dissipated a little. He then added that he would do some things differently, but I asked him to follow our reasoning in order to understand why we had made those choices. He accepted and I guided everybody's attention through the document, explaining what we had realized while seeing other portals' design, what the two groups of users we had identified were expecting and what the most visited areas of the current homepage were.

Resende added a few ideas along my presentation but everybody else was silent, including Baltasar, who I had thought would like to take the lead sometimes. The presentation was built in the logical demonstrative language in which Pires was used to communicate. I agreed upon our conclusion. His doubts were aesthetic as he wanted to change the order of the column on the homepage design. I did not agree with that option because it would break a balance that I thought we had reached through the progression from thinner to wider columns. I argued my case and both Resende and Baltasar stepped into the



discussion, supporting a point of view similar to mine. Pires was hard to convince but he finally agreed to the beta test of the new homepage. We would post it for two weeks in a test address, inviting users to give us their feedback.

We had reached exactly what we intended and that gave birth to smiles on everybody's faces. Baltasar had been struggling to have this decision taken for some time and he was cheerful that we had managed to pull it through. The sense I made from that situation was that it was all a matter of verbal communication. We presented our reasoning to Pires in his McKinsey-like language of an inductive presentation, where each chart was present for a reason which was to demonstrate a point that was presented in the end. Baltasar communicated to him in a less structured way, taking for granted some of his own assumptions from his intuition or his vast knowledge of the business. We also relied on our intuition and on Baltasar's feelings, but we gave it a 'scientific' flavour. We were making choices with reasons that were presented as objective. I think this way of presenting things greatly lowered Pires's anxiety about taking the risk of changing the face of the leading Internet portal of the country.

The new design was cheerfully welcomed by the users, who gave an extremely positive feedback in a poll we conducted. When the test period was almost over, we had another meeting with Pires to show him the results of the poll and to have his approval to make the definitive change. He was delighted with the results and easily agreed to it. The new homepage design was launched on time and I felt that I had accomplished something, at least helping Pires and Baltasar to communicate and reach decisions.



## Project control and systems thinking

While writing this account of the development of the project, I started reflecting on the role of the regular meetings as procedures of control. While the plan expresses a power balance in terms of general goals and determining who is accountable for each action, the control meetings enforce that plan, making people answer for its development. Resende's anxiety before the first meeting is illustrative of the dynamics at play. He feared to fail at the eyes of Pires and so did I. In that anxious state we politely turned against each other, engaging in a power struggle that could have undermined the actual work that we had to do. And why did that happen? I believe that the anxiety to deliver results and to identify myself with being competent prevented me from understanding Resende's behaviour. I can imagine that a similar process might have happened with him.

Project control is performed under the cult of performance, holding each person accountable for his responsibilities. Although that is my experience of it, which is not what is argued in the influential book 'Goal Directed Project Management' (Andersen *et al.*, 1995). The authors claim that 'control is doing something about what the reports show', whose purpose 'is not to establish grounds for punishment or reward' but to 'establish whether there is a need for corrective measures' (Ibidem, p.151). They insist that control is not persecution but deciding instead what needs to be done and doing it. Is this just a politically correct statement or is it what really happens in real life project management? My experience of control meetings is that the fear of the humiliating shame of showing a failure provokes a state of anxiety that may drive people into action. Those actions, taken in that anxious state, can be effective in fulfilling a goal but at times can actually get in the way of what needs to be done. I think that before the first control meeting that I wrote about, Resende was more anxious than I was. It was his first project with Pires and he wanted to make a good impression. I think I was not that anxious because I already knew Pires for some time as it had been him who had employed me in the Telco Group and he had been my boss before moving to the position of CEO of Dot Com. I also knew how he behaved in control meetings and I knew what to expect, how to defend myself and how to effectively communicate with him.



After the last control meeting, when the new homepage was definitely approved, I stayed for a while chatting with Resende. I was in the process of looking for more literature on project management, so I asked him if he could recommend me any project management book that he might have found influential. As he had been managing projects for most of his professional life, it seemed like a straightforward thing to ask. It was not. He looked surprised and stood silent for a short while, as if I had asked him some funny question. He replied with another question, asking me why I would need such a thing. I answered him that project management was the obvious framework for our department's practice and, as I was examining my own practice and the ideas that underlie it, I had to explore and make some sense of it. I had already come up with plenty of references. I told him, but I wished to know what his personal influences on the issue were. As an example, I showed him an article published in the *International Journal of Project Management* and a copy of the *Body of Knowledge* (Dixon, 2000) published by the Association for Project Management. He looked at what I was showing him and said that he could not understand how people could waste their time writing about the issue. It was my turn to look surprised, so I asked him what he meant. He argued that project management did not require fancy literature. It was as simple as setting tasks, establishing deadlines, appointing who is accountable for each task, and then making regular control meetings, using punishments and rewards. No theory was needed; one had simply to focus on what had to be done. It was as simple as that. And, as he was suddenly in a hurry to leave, the conversation ended there.

This conversation was quite illustrative to me, as I found it quite representative of the community of practice in which I develop my work. Resende's point of view is quite contrary to what is argued by Andersen, Grude & Haug's. He takes control meetings bluntly for the function those meetings perform for him. He is prepared to judge and be judged in those occasions, determining what 'punishments and rewards' should be applied. Although Resende refuses theory, this way of his to make sense is clearly grounded in systems thinking, more specifically in cybernetics. Systems thinking was imported to organisation theory in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century as an answer to insufficiencies found in the early theories of management proposed by Taylor ([1911] 1967) and Fayol ([1916] 1949), among others, like their difficulty to account for the interaction that takes place between the people who work at the organisation and of those people with clients, suppliers, or competitors.



In this context, a system is defined as an 'organized, unitary whole composed of two or more interdependent parts, components or subsystems and delineated by identifiable boundaries from its environmental supra-system' (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985, p.15). Under this perspective, control is understood as being a function of management. The manager is supposed to step outside of the organisation to observe and analyse it rationally, in order to plan and design where he wants to lead the organisation and what are the actions he must take to make that desired future state come true (Streatfield, 2001, p.126). This point of view is grounded on cybernetics, a part of systems thinking.

Cybernetics is based on the notion that a system can be controlled by an outside regulator through feedback (Wiener, 1948). In a system regulated through negative feedback, the outcome of an action is compared with the desired outcome in order to feed back into the system the next action in order to reduce the discrepancy until it is eliminated. In a heating system, a sensor notices the discrepancy between the actual temperature and the desired temperature, turning the heating appliance on or off to reduce the discrepancy. In the case of this heating system, it never reaches a stable equilibrium, but the temperature floats orderly around the desired value.

Organisation theory imported these notions from cybernetics, introducing the notion of desired states such as plans, budgets, forecasts, or visions; regulators in the form of control meetings or regular reporting documents; and feedback actions in the form of corrective measures. In his textbook on project management, Dennis Lock (2003) explicitly refers to an electric cybernetic system as an analogous process to project control. He argues that 'the competent manager will ensure that (...) corrective actions do take place, so that the control loop is effectively closed' (Ibidem, p.470). Because of the particularly close analogies he finds between the two processes, he calls project control 'cybernetic control'.

Resende's way of talking is clearly embedded in this perspective when he draws attention to the importance of control meetings to compare the actual state of development of the project with what had been planned. The feedback that he proposes to use is the distribution of rewards and punishments to the ones who were accountable for each task. Assuming that they can fulfil the task in the given time if they work hard enough, rewards and punishments can make them work harder in order to accomplish the goal that had been



set. This is a rather simplistic way of looking at what happens in complex projects, where the ones who answer for the completion of each task are subject to events and actions that they cannot influence or avoid.



## Conclusions

Project management literature focuses on how an individual can achieve a greater degree of control, using accountability as a tool to achieve it, making specific people accountable for performing given tasks in a determined time frame. In this project, I proposed the idea that accountability is actually central for the practice of project management as it underlies the interaction of the people involved in the project, motivating their quest for control. Accountability has become a very strong theme organising my experience of participating in change projects. The interplay between accountability, guilt and shame seems to turn it into a powerful tool that some managers try to use in order to grasp some control of what happens in their organisation.

I also acknowledge how the notions of control and accountability can feed upon each other in a circular way in which one activates the other: being accountable can motivate the quest for control, as the expectation that one should be in control can make one accountable for what actually happens. What makes this perspective different from the mainstream prescriptions is how it deals with the paradox of control instead of collapsing it and how it acknowledges the role of interaction between people as crucial instead of focusing in the individual. To take into account the paradox of control in human interaction, I drew on the theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2001; Streatfield, 2001; Fonseca, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003) as a framework to understand my experience as project manager.



**Project 4:**  
**Negotiating responsibility in the  
context of project management**

August 2004



## Introduction

While examining the vicissitudes of project management in my Project 3, I started to discuss how accountability is present in my experience of participating in change projects. Being accountable for whether the intended project results are attained or not, I am continuously confronted with the expectation of being 'in control', in spite of often feeling 'not in control' at the same time. As I have the capacity to choose my actions and I can try to persuade others into doing what I intend, I am to a certain extent 'in control'. However, as I cannot influence all the actions and events that will make me succeed or fail, I am 'not in control' at the same time. I am not even in control of what the categories 'success' and 'failure' exactly mean, because those categories can also be negotiated and revised as a project progresses.

The anxiety provoked by this paradox of control drew my attention to what is meant by being responsible and accountable in this context. Why do I feel responsible and how does that feeling influence my actions and the actions of my colleagues? Developing further my reflections on this issue, I started to notice that the concepts of responsibility and accountability, although closely connected, do not have the same precise meaning. I will explore that difference in this project, understanding how the sense of responsibility relates to the notion of power in project work.

This is the point of departure that I will take for this project. I will try to shed some light onto the role that responsibility plays in project management, examining the related dynamic of power from a process perspective. Under that perspective, project control could be much more than just applying bureaucratic processes of accountability and control in a systematic and unproblematic way. Therefore, I will be asking the following questions: What happens when people relate in control meetings? Is project management just a simple and straightforward way to introduce change? Or can it be understood as a set of tools and techniques (a 'technology', in Foucault's sense) designed to try and sustain a specific balance of power? How are the constraints formed in interaction? How does a plan serve to communicate a certain balance of power?



I will conduct my exploration of how I experience participating in change projects, trying to highlight how the theme of responsibility as an enabling constraint arises in my interaction with my work colleagues and how it involves dynamics of power, control, authority, accountability, discipline, guilt, and shame.

In order to do that, I will explore my practice and my work relationships in light of the relational notion of power introduced by Elias (1970). I will also draw on Bovens' (1998) understanding of active and passive responsibility and Foucault's (1975) notion of discipline as a technology of power. In addition to those theoretical influences, having changed my position within the company twice during this last year has also influenced the way I make sense of the process of responsibility and its related dynamics, as described above. I will spend some time in this project discussing and exploring how these perspectives impact on my thinking, my relationships with my colleagues and the way I work.

### **Framing my experience**

In this project, I am exploring my experience of what happened after the Internet portal project that I discuss in my Project 3. When that project was getting near to its conclusion, in April 2003, I was offered two opportunities to move to new positions within the company. On one hand, Pires who had become chief operating officer (CEO) of the Dot Com Company, the Internet business unit of the Telco Group, offered me the possibility to become a line manager, as contents and services director of the Internet portal. On the other hand, I was invited to take on the position of 'number two' at the corporate communication department. Acácio, a close friend of mine, had recently been appointed to set up that department and he wanted me to work with him. We knew each other since we had both been leaders of students' unions and we had even shared a flat for about two years, when I moved to Lisbon after college.

It had been Acácio who had introduced me to the people at Telco, including Pires, who later invited me to work there. He had been working there since 1998, as media adviser to the Telco Group's CEO. His role was quite influential in the shift of how the company was perceived by the media and that earned him a high status within the company. That



position of influence enabled him to engage into power struggles to be given a broader scope of action. I helped him along that process, during the second half of 2002, giving him a hand in discussing possible ideas, preparing presentations and coming up with action plans. That effort of his finally resulted in his promotion to the position of head of the Group's corporate communication department.

I had doubts about which offer to take, but I was sure that I wanted to leave the strategy and business development department where I worked. Emotionally, I had the notion that I could not be much happier there. I did not want to fit into the dominant discourse espoused by my colleagues and I wanted to do something else. I wanted to engage into working relationships that would last longer than just the couple of months that an average project lasted and I wanted to find a place where I could feel more comfortable. As I see it now, I was looking then for a sense of inclusion and recognition. I was tired of being the 'odd one' and I also wanted more responsibility and status. Acácio was offering me that. He placed very high expectations on how I could contribute to the group that he was forming. Pires's offer was also appealing because the Internet business fascinated me. It would mean a substantial pay increase and I thought that it meant some kind of ultimate recognition of my worth. It was this last aspect that made me decide to accept Pires's offer instead of Acácio's. On reflection, I see this notion of 'ultimate recognition' as a fantasy that I developed around my need to restore my professional self-esteem. I was seduced by Pires's display of power and status and I wanted to identify myself with his apparent image of being a flawless professional. I found myself devaluating Acácio's recognition because it was something I took for granted as we were friends.

After accepting Pires's invitation, I started working as head of contents and services of the Internet portal portal by the end of July 2003, depending hierarchically on Baltasar, the portal's chief executive, and on Pires, the CEO of the company. I was in charge of a team of about twenty people. Pires suggested that we should use project based management in order to introduce change and deploy new services. I followed that suggestion because it also made me feel more comfortable. I had become used to it while working at the business development department. In that setting, an important part of my work happened to be to constantly negotiate and renegotiate with Pires what my department was responsible for accomplishing and when. Another part of it was negotiating with the people involved in



each project their responsibility for tasks and deadlines, exploring together how we could deal with the expected and unexpected problems that we came across. This constant negotiation of responsibility was far from being a rational transaction between us, as I will explore later in this paper. Feeling actively responsible for something involves an emotional commitment that can be grounded, for instance, on a sense of duty or on the emotions of fear, shame, embarrassment or pride.

In January 2004, six months after I began working at the Internet portal, the organisation was subject to major changes. First, Dot Com, the Internet business unit was fully integrated in the fixed line company of the Group, Landline. The portal kept its autonomy, but another board member took over Pires's role, although he stayed in the board of Landline, but in charge of another area. During the time that preceded that change, Pires kept me in the dark about what would happen. When I asked him directly if the gossip running through the whole organisation about it was true or not he replied with evasive statements. I felt hurt by this behaviour of his, because it shattered my fantasy of being recognised by him. But there were still surprises to come.

In a quite unexpected turn of events, two weeks later, the CEO of Landline was gently removed to a less important company and the CEO of the Group became also CEO of Landline. The board of that company was completely reshuffled and Pires was moved to a less prominent position in another company. These events were framed in a power struggle among the members of the Group's board. In that context, Acácio ended up also being appointed as head of Landline's communication department. I was abroad on holidays when all this happened. Acácio phoned me to tell me what was happening. He told me that he had the opportunity to take that position at Landline but that he would only do that if he could count on me in his team. I felt a bitter sense of being manipulated to take joint responsibility for his decision, but I was also seduced by the idea. He added that it would be a formidable challenge to coordinate the whole Group's internal and external communication and that the two of us would be the perfect team to lead it. It would be, indeed, an ascending movement for him. Heading both the corporate communication department and Landline's communication department, he would lead almost one hundred people.



During the following days, I tried to rationally weight if I should accept his invitation or not, as I could simply stay at Internet portal, but I found myself having already made my emotional choice. The day after coming back, I met Acácio and I accepted his invitation. Reflecting on it, I think I was happy with the idea of stepping back into some kind of spotlight, having substantial responsibilities in a high profile position. I also felt guilty for not having accepted his previous invitation. By then, I was starting to consider that I had accepted Pires's offer instead of Acácio's based on a sense of recognition that was indeed a fantasy. At the same time, I was afraid of taking on too much responsibility working with Acácio. I feared the idea that work might take over the whole of my life, as seemed to be happening with him. The kind of negotiation of our responsibilities towards each other was clearly influenced by these concerns, as I will discuss later in this project.

After six months in the corporate communication department, my role is still being negotiated and formed. Although not being formally part of it, my first task was to come up with a new formal structure for Landline's communication department, engaging in a series of conversations, in order to make meaning of how that department could work. I ended up articulating a structure that fitted most of the constraints. After that, we moved on to explore how the two departments could work together. It was in the context of that exploration that the responsibilities of the senior members of both departments (including myself) came to be discussed. The work in these departments is also organised around the notion of projects. I think this kind of project based management brought the issue of responsibility even more into focus. After what seemed to be an endless series of conversations, we came up with a matrix structure, conciliating a vertical, hierarchical responsibility with a horizontal, project based, responsibility. In that matrix, my main role is to coordinate the collaboration between the two departments, as well as with the communication departments of other companies of the Group. I am also project manager of three change projects with joint project teams. Those projects concern the reviewing the Group's Internet presence, developing its Intranet network and establishing a network of internal information sources.



## **Responsibility discussed in the context of project management**

Although having had quite different work experiences during the past year, project management was always present as the discipline in which my practice was framed. Becoming aware of how important the theme of responsibility was becoming for my enquiry, I tried to find out how it was discussed in the project management literature. I was disappointed to notice that it was only briefly mentioned. Lock (2003), for instance, refers to the allocation of responsibilities as one of the project manager's tasks because, as he puts it, 'people must know what is expected of them' (Lock, 2003, p.454). It is taken for granted that workers will feel responsible for the tasks imposed on them. Turner (1996) urges managers to develop influence strategies, Pinto (1998) advises them to learn the 'fine art of influencing' (ibidem, p.263) and Burke (1999) cautions them against the responsibility-authority gap. What I found lacking was deeper discussion of how a sense of responsibility comes to be formed in a work context. How is my sense of being responsible constituted?

In my Project 3, I narrate a conversation that I find illustrative of this dominant perspective on responsibility. I was talking to Resende, who was then the deputy director of the department in which I worked. He told me that he did not understand why so many people cared to write about project management. For him, it was as simple as setting tasks, establishing deadlines, appointing who was responsible for what and holding control meetings. Resende seemed to believe that making people feel responsible for tasks and deadlines was as simple as pushing a button. Resende's point of view is congruent with the perspective espoused in the project management literature that I have just referred to. While performing the role of project manager, he takes responsibility for allocating other people's responsibilities. As I reflect upon it now, his understanding seems to be that people become responsible because someone who possesses the power (or the authority) has attributed that responsibility to them. I understand this as very linear attempt to account for the connection between power and responsibility. As I will discuss in greater detail later in this project, I do not espouse this reified understanding of power as something one can use to impose one's will over someone else. While working with Resende, I would not feel responsible for something just because he allocated that responsibility to me. I think that my sense of being responsible for something also involves, for instance, my



acceptance of that responsibility, my emotional responses to it, and my perception of my own capacity to do it. I also believe that the potential for negotiation is always present when responsibility is discussed.

As my exploration of responsibility evolved, I came to understand it as a much richer aspect of human relating in the context of project management than could be implied from the way it is discussed in the literature that I have referred to. When I say that I feel responsible, I am expressing a notion of commitment that can be associated with strong emotional responses, such as fear, shame, anxiety, joy or pride. Fear of failing, fear of being exposed as incompetent. Shame for having my failures exposed while accounting for something I was responsible for. Anxious about what I expect of myself and what I imagine others expect of me. Joyful and proud when I perceive myself as having succeeded at doing something that I was responsible for. The way these emotions are present in my experience motivated me to try to make sense of what responsibility means for me.

### **What do I mean by responsibility?**

While writing my Project 3, I started to explore how holding people to account may be associated with attempting to grasp control over project work. I identified that theme in my experience naming it accountability, but I used the term responsibility to convey the same meaning. When I was asked if the two words meant exactly the same to me, I was puzzled, wondering if I was misusing those expressions, as English is not my mother tongue. That confusion motivated me to engage in conversations about that topic, while trying to find references that might shed some light onto those discussions. What do I mean when I talk about responsibility and when I talk about accountability? What do people generally mean by those words?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, responsibility may express 'the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or of having control over someone', 'the state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something' or 'the opportunity or ability to act independently and take decisions without authorization' (Soanes & Stevenson, ed., 2003, p.1501). I would understand then responsibility to be then closely associated with duty.



control, blame and ability. The word has its origin in the Latin verb *respondere* (to answer, to offer in return). Accountability comes from the adjective accountable, which means to be 'required or expected to justify actions or decisions', 'responsible', or 'able to be explained or understood' (Soanes & Stevenson, ed., 2003, p.11). Accountability can therefore express both the ability to explain something and the position in which someone can be held liable for something, being asked to respond about it. These dictionary definitions called forth more discussion as well as personal reflection, leading me to reach the conclusion that responsibility can be understood as a broader concept, encompassing accountability but going beyond it.

In order to broaden the discussion, I started searching for references on how responsibility was taken up as a theme in organisations. Most of the discussions of responsibility as framed in the fields of moral philosophy and law. Smiley (1992), for instance, discusses responsibility in association with the attribution of blame, arguing that our judgements are based on social roles and the distribution of power. Fischer and Ravizza (2000) explore how responsibility is related to causal control, as individuals are held morally responsible for actions, omissions, consequences and emotions. Although also coming from the field of philosophy and law, Bovens (1998) brought the discussion of responsibility to an organisational context in his book 'The Quest for Responsibility: Accountability and Citizenship in Complex Organisations' (1998).

Bovens illustrates the crisis of responsibility in what he calls complex organisations with events such as the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, the accident with the Exxon Valdez, or the accident of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. Departing from those events, Bovens tries to find answers to questions such as 'who can be held responsible for the behaviour of complex organisations?' (Bovens, 1998, p.4) or 'what constitutes responsible conduct inside complex organisations?' (Ibidem). When he uses the adjective *complex* to qualify these organisations, he is not making a reference to the sciences of complexity nor using complex adaptive systems as a source of metaphor or analogy. He is simply using *complexity* as a way to express 'the result of a combination of two or three elements: large scale, bureaucratic structure, and formal status' (Bovens, 1998, p.10).



How do these ideas help me in articulating what I mean by responsibility? On one hand, my confusion about the meaning of responsibility became legitimate, as it was shared by people who had written about it before. As Bovens described it, 'if a word were ever to be described as a "container concept", then that word is "responsibility" [,] (...) a complex idea that has many equally plausible definitions, though these definitions are rarely compatible.' (Bovens, 1998, p.22). On the other hand, broadening this discussion of responsibility enabled me to start voicing what I mean by it, while feeling that meaning reflected back to me in other people's words. Responsibility became to me a way to articulate the experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond, to give account for it, justifying one's actions or omissions. In this sense, I believe that responsibility is intrinsically social, because there is always someone who asks the question, even if that someone is oneself.

### **Articulating different aspects of responsibility**

The way I articulated what I mean by responsibility reveals in itself different aspects or forms of responsibility: Responsibility in the sense of feeling a compulsion to act as well as responsibility in the sense of having to give account. These aspects can be linked, but I believe that being able to articulate precisely what I mean by each form of responsibility can help me move on with my exploration. Bovens identified five forms of responsibility, following Hart (1967) in the first four:

1. Responsibility as *cause* – being responsible in a sense that indicates a causal connection: being responsible for something that resulted from one's actions or omissions.
2. Responsibility as *accountability* – being responsible in a sense that expresses liability: giving account before forum.
3. Responsibility as *capacity* – being responsible as being able to do something, to be in a position to exercise a certain amount of responsibility.
4. Responsibility as *task* – being responsible in the sense of having a role to fulfil: responsibility as something that is associated with duty and authority.



5. Responsibility as *virtue* – being responsible in a sense associated with the positive value judgement of taking one's tasks and duties seriously, while considering himself answerable towards others.

I take these forms of responsibility as different aspects of its meaning. Naming these aspects of responsibility enables me to articulate differently how responsibility is present in my experience. For instance, when I am held accountable for something I did as part of my job, I can express it as responsibility as accountability associated with responsibility as cause and responsibility as task. This way of speaking can lead me to articulate that a casual connection is often associated with being held to account for something. In a similar way, when I choose to take responsibility for something because I feel I must do it and I believe that I can do it, I can say that responsibility as virtue is present there in association with responsibility as task and responsibility as capacity.

Responsibility as virtue, being associated with a positive value judgement, implies commitment. I have just articulated that commitment saying that I may feel that I must do something, therefore freely taking responsibility for it. Joas (2000) makes sense of this feeling, arguing that 'value commitments clearly do not arise from conscious intentions, and yet we experience the feeling "I can do no other" which accompanies a strong value commitment not as a restriction, but as the highest expression of our free will.' (ibid., p.5). Stacey (2004) pointed to how this notion of value presents the paradox being a compulsion and a voluntary commitment at the same time. I will take on this paradoxical approach, describing values as 'voluntary compulsions' (Stacey, 2004), for instance, to take active responsibility.

After articulating those five forms of responsibility, Bovens chose to discuss in depth responsibility as accountability, calling it passive responsibility, and responsibility as virtue, calling it active responsibility. He makes this choice based on his evaluation that these two forms of responsibility are the most important within an organisational context and because he finds that responsibility as virtue is rarely dealt with. Bovens presents responsibility as task as the connecting element between active and passive responsibility, as it is important both in 'determining responsibilities after the event and in determining a responsible line of conduct in a concrete situation' (Bovens, 1998, p.27).



Why should one restrict passive responsibility to accountability and active responsibility to virtue, as Bovens proposes? The meaning I make of active responsibility is that it is a way of describing how the feeling of compulsion associated with responsibility lead to action, to activity. In this sense, I would associate it not only with responsibility as virtue but also with responsibility as capacity, because the awareness of the ability to act is closely related to action. In a similar way, I understand passive responsibility as the retrospective account of what one has done or caused. In this sense, I would also associate responsibility a cause to accountability as passive responsibility. I find this way of describing active and passive responsibility more congruent with my emerging understanding of responsibility than Bovens', even if I agree with him when he argues that responsibility as task can be a connecting element between these two sides of responsibility.

What about the relationship between active and passive responsibility? Bovens points to the interdependency of these two forms of responsibility, claiming that 'the moral acceptability of the passive form will mostly be dependent on the availability of the active form' (Bovens, 1998, p.27). What he is arguing is that one is more likely to accept the idea of being held accountable if one had the opportunity to behave responsibly. Bovens goes a bit further, offering a casual nexus between the two forms of responsibility by stating that:

'to feel responsible for something and to take action on it happens mostly in the realization that you will at some point have to answer for your action or inaction: whether to a formal institution, such as a tribunal or commission of enquiry; to an informal, but no less concrete, forum such as your circle of friends, your parents, or your children (even if they are not yet born); or to a more metaphysical type of forum such as God or humankind. In the case of responsibility as virtue, the forums are thus often internalised in the form of what George Herbert Mead has called the 'generalised other'.' (Bovens, 1998, p.28)

I find this link to Mead's theory of human interaction particularly important for the discussion of responsibility. Mead (1934) argued that individual mind and social interaction are different aspects of the same fundamental phenomena: communicative interaction in the medium of significant symbols. That interaction takes place in the form of a conversation of gestures and responses, which together constitute the social act from



which meaning emerges. Those gestures and responses can be either public and vocal or private and silent. A central argument of Mead's thinking is that our own sense of self consciousness emerges from the conversation of gestures and responses between the 'I', the subject, and the 'me', the subject taking itself as an object. Mead argues that each human being takes the attitude of specific or generalised others towards himself as the voice of the 'me', thus internalising his perception of how the generalised other might respond to the 'I' in what he call the 'I'/'me' dialectic. That perception of what might be the generalised tendency of a number of people to react to one's gesture is developed socially, through the interactions in which we engage.

Responsibility can then arise as meaning from the 'I'/'me' dialectic, being also present as part of that dialectic as the 'I' is in the position of being accountable towards the 'me'. In this sense, I can argue that responsibility is embedded in communicative interaction, as we respond towards external and internal forums. When I feel those forums internalised in the form of the 'generalised other', responsibility becomes part of the 'I'/'me' dialectic, as the 'I' is in a position of being accountable towards the 'me', that represents that 'generalised other'.

I will now draw on my experience to discuss how the negotiation of responsibility may be associated with power relating while a new professional role is being formed. Then, I will bring planning into focus, exploring the possibility that it might provide a structure for the negotiation and articulation of responsibility in a project management context. Finally, I will enquire into how responsibility is functionalised in project control meetings through the experience of examination, in which the notion of responsibility can be taken up as part of disciplining processes.



## **Negotiating responsibility for new roles**

This discussion of responsibility enabled me to find a language to discuss how it comes lively into my practice. I had a clear notion of that the negotiation of responsibility is an essential aspect of how responsibility is present in my experience when my professional role changed twice in this last year, as I described earlier. First, I joined Internet portal, one year ago; then, six months ago, I joined the corporate communication department. That is the experience that I will examine now. In both situations, I was in a position of choosing whether to accept or not the invitations that were formulated to me. The main theme that came out of both situations was how power relating was associated with the negotiation of responsibility, mostly in the form of responsibility as task. Power and responsibility were bound together in these processes, as responsibility associated with a role influences the chances of power of performing that role, as well as the status associated with a role also influences the responsibilities that come with it.

As I reflected on these events, I found the notion of trials of strength (Elias, 1970) particularly enlightening. Elias argued that we are always testing each other's capacity to deny what we want. When Pires invited me to work with him as a line manager of the Internet portal portal, I deliberately downgraded my enthusiasm. On reflection, I think that I did that as an attempt to limit his awareness of how important it was for me what he could withhold. Pires wanted my work and commitment and I wanted to be recognised as being competent while having the largest possible pay increase. When Acácio invited me to work with him as 'number two' of the corporate communication department, nine months afterwards, we also engaged in a 'trial of strength' (Elias, 1970), but that time it was around my fear of taking on too much responsibility with my new role.

### **Engaging in trials of strength while being invited to move to new jobs**

The notion of trials of strength is essential to Elias's ([1939] 1994, 1970) notion of power, understood as a paradoxically enabling and constraining property of human action. Elias pointed out how, when someone enters into a relationship with another, one is constrained by and at the same time constrains that other. But, through relating, one also enables each



other; which gives power its paradoxical nature of being enabling and constraining at the same time. Elias (1970) pointed to how patterns of power relating (which he called figurations), emerge in interaction, calling forth dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through which people constitute their sense of belonging and identity. I believe that responsibility can be taken as part of power relating, as it enables and constrains at the same time. Having to account for one's actions and omissions, one is constrained by responsibility, in the sense that it reduces the scope of possible acceptable actions. At the same time, by the positive value commonly attached to acting responsibly, responsibility enables action as it provides the possibility to take active responsibility.

Elias argues that people measuring their strength against each other is 'the basic situation encountered whenever people enter into or find themselves in relation with one another' (Elias, 1970, p.73). Under this perspective, my awareness of engaging into trials of strength with Pires and Acácio becomes nothing extraordinary. But why is it hard for people to admit that they are playing a powerful game? Elias argues that power ratios have been so unequally distributed during the development of human societies that the concept of power itself came to be associated with offensive connotations, such as brutality, abuse and domination. Discussing power in the open has an 'unpleasant flavour' (Elias, 1970, p.74). I believe that another reason for it is because admitting to be playing a powerful game shifts the balance of that game, bringing it into the open.

Elias argues that power is about interdependency and that it is an integral part of all human relationships. He claims that balances of power are not extraordinary but everyday occurrences, being at least bi-polar and often multi-polar. Under this perspective, there is always some reciprocity in power. No one has absolute power over someone else. Even when the power differential is extreme, as between a baby and his parents or between master and slave, there is always reciprocity. The baby has a function for his parents as a slave has a function for his master. Therefore, a baby also has power over his parents and a slave power over his master, even though power chances are distributed very unevenly. Elias sums up his understanding, claiming that 'whether the power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people' (Elias, 1970, p.74).



This makes sense to me, in relation to my experience, and it challenges the way power is commonly referred to, as something some people have and others do not. Understanding power like this is a way of reifying it, treating it as if it was a thing that one could carry about in his pocket. Elias argues that ‘this use of the word is a relic of magico-mythical ideas’ (Elias, 1970, p.74) when, for instance, amulets were seen as power in a material form. Elias argues against this notion that power can be treated as if it was a thing, stating that power is not something one may be given or that one may acquire. I would say, under Elias’s point of view, that there is no power without relationship because it is when people engage in relationship that they have functions for each other. Having functions for each other, each one has power to withhold something that the other needs or wants. Friends have a function for each other, parents have functions for children, children have functions for parents, and enemies have functions for each other. When people relate to each other, they become to a lesser or greater extent interdependent, exercising constraint over each other.

Elias felt the need to come up with a new way to express this notion of interdependent human beings and its patterns, choosing figuration as a way to express it. This was his way to move away from the notion of system. If he used the word system to refer to this ensemble of interdependent individuals, he would be considering the individuals as parts of a whole, the system, which would be reified and treated as if it was actually a thing. This way of speaking would draw our attention to the function people might perform for the ‘whole’, the system, instead of drawing attention to the function people perform for each other. The perspective that Elias wanted to introduce with the notion of figuration is quite different from the systemic understanding. He wants to draw attention to interdependence and to how patterns emerge from interaction. Figuration then stands for the ‘basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of people’ that ‘can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created’ (Elias, [1939] 1994, p.366). Elias adds that ‘from this interdependence of people arises an order *sui generis*, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it’ (Ibidem). This perspective is consistent with the modern sciences of complexity (Kauffman, 1996; Holland, 1998), which introduced new ways to understand how order may emerge from interaction without rules, through self-organising dynamics. What is



surprising is that this quote from Elias comes from his work 'The Civilizing Process', first published in 1939, long before the development of the sciences of complexity.

Power relating was lively present in my conversation with Pires, while we were negotiating my recruitment. We both knew that each one had the power to withhold what the other wanted. His invitation shifted the structure of our interdependence, introduced novelty and that gave rise to the opportunity for both of us to question each other's power of constraint, initiating a trial of strength. Elias would say that power struggles emerge when in a certain figuration the 'potential for withholding' is questioned, thus giving rise to trials of strength. This way of understanding resonates with my experience but only when I think in retrospect. When I was deeply involved in my discussion with Pires, I was mostly aware of my emotional responses to what we were saying to each other. I was happy to have that opportunity, fearful of what it would mean to work with Pires after some difficult preceding experiences (as in the telemarketing project<sup>5</sup>), anxious about how I would cope with the new responsibilities. By this, I mean that Elias's understanding of the trials of strength makes me think about my interaction with Pires and Acácio on those terms, but that interaction was not about the rational weighting of each other's power to withhold, it was about emotionally responding to each other's gestures.

### **Taking a complex responsive process perspective**

Elias's (1970) notion of power relating and Mead's (1934) theory of communicative interaction are two fundamental aspects of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey 2001; Griffin, 2002). That theory appeared as a novel way of understanding organisations, challenging the dominant discourse on management. Drawing on the sciences of complexity, the complex responsive processes perspective provides a different understanding of stability and change in organisations as part of the paradoxical process of relating in which we engage in our ordinary interactions with other people.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the section *An unexpected comeback* in my Project 2



Stacey (2004) articulated the complex responsive processes perspective as a way to understand the interactions between human bodies as continuous nonlinear iterations taking place in the living present but involving both narratives of the past and expectations for the future. As the narratives of the past influence the expectations of the future and those expectations also influence the way one narrates the past, Stacey argues that the living present has a circular time structure ‘in which the past changes the future and the future simultaneously changes the past, all in the action of the present’ (Stacey, 2004, p.4). These iterative processes are self-organised in the sense that patterns emerge, taking the form of narrative themes that make significant the experience of interacting. Under this perspective, organisations can be said to be a recurring theme in our social evolution, providing structure for interaction. In the context of organisational life, I can say that responsibility is also a recurring theme, as it is commonly present in the way in which we comprehend our experience of being together. This understanding of responsibility that I am starting to propose here, using the language of complex responsive processes, is radically different from the way in which it is taken up in management literature and in project management literature, portrayed there as a tool to grasp control over individual actions.

This theory of complex responsive processes has become central in my understanding of my experience. When I discuss the responses that an event has evoked in me, when I identify an emerging theme, or when I discuss what I feel to be enabling constraints, I am using the language of complex responsive processes. Using that language has become an enabling experience for me, in the sense that it enables me to articulate and interpret my practice in a way that I feel to be both more precise and more truthful than other alternative discourses (such as systems thinking). What I seek to accomplish in this paper is to discuss responsibility under a complex responsive process perspective, expanding on that theory and questioning the common assumptions about what it means to be responsible.

### **Negotiating mutual responsibility**

When I finally accepted Acácio’s invitation to work with him, it was mostly an emotional decision. I felt that I should do it, even if my awareness of the risks involved gave rise to further discussions about what would be the responsibilities associated with my new role. I



had just come back from holidays and I met him in his office. He looked anxious for my answer as we started talking and I did not take long to tell him that I was accepting his invitation. He was happy with my answer, but I was mainly concerned about what my new job might mean in terms of commitment. We did not even discuss pay in detail; we just agreed that it would be at least the same as what I had at Internet portal. I told Acácio that I was willing to commit to working with him but that work was not going to take over my life. I had a personal life that I valued and a doctorate to which I was committed, so working had its limits in terms of available time.

This was an issue because I know Acácio very well. He works until very late every day, even during the weekend, when he is often thinking about work and planning it. His personal life has suffered with it and I did not want the same thing to happen to me. My concern was lively because I imagined that I would be more emotionally involved with work than I had been since I joined Telco, so I wanted to set boundaries from the start. We discussed it and he seemed to take my arguments seriously. I was afraid that he would say yes to anything just to have me onboard, but I was reassured by the way he recognised my concerns. But what would I be responsible for? He reflected the question back to me, inviting me to shape my own role. He wanted to delegate as much responsibility as possible and I would choose what I would do. I remember smiling. It made sense, even if it was unclear. My first task would be to restructure Landline's communication department, of which Acácio had just become director, reviewing roles and redesigning the formal structure. When I left his office, I was happy and looking forward to moving to my new job.

Six months before, when I phoned Pires and accepted his invitation to join Dot Com's Internet portal, he proposed that we could meet the following day after work. We met at a bar, near the river. We did some small talk before he handed over to me a written financial proposal. It would mean a substantial increase in my wages and I did not have much doubt about accepting it. We talked then about the people working in my new department. I would become the contents and services director of the portal, replacing Tomás, with whom I had worked in the portal restructuring. Pires had already told me that I would be replacing Tomás but it was something which made me uncomfortable. I did not want to be considered responsible for the dismissal of Tomás. I knew that he was generally liked by



the people of the department and I had established a good working relationship with him. However, Pires wanted to replace him because he did not trust him as a responsible manager. According to Pires, Tomás used to come to work near lunch-time and he missed too many meetings without warning. Tomás did not conform to Pires's ideal. Pires told me that I could decide what to do with Tomás. The options were to keep him working for me, if he accepted the demotion, or dismiss him. By giving me the chance of taking active responsibility for that decision, Pires would also hold me accountable for what would come out of my choice. I felt it like a trap but one that I could not escape, so I accepted.

I was curious to know what Pires's was expecting from me in my new job. I had the notion that I would be taking on the responsibility for the portal's structure and design, its thematic channels, the partnerships with content providers and the development of the portal's services, such as email, web page hosting or instant messaging. Pires had a different idea. What he really wanted was that, besides those tasks, I would take on an informal position as leader of a project that he was launching to increase the company's market share of narrowband Internet access. He was doing the project management personally and he had already come up with a detailed action plan that he wanted to implement with weekly control meetings.

The reason behind this priority of his was that while leading the broadband segment, the company was a lot less competitive in the narrowband segment. Besides, the revenues that came from Internet access were a lot bigger than the portal's direct revenues (advertisement, e-commerce and paid services and contents), while the portal was the obvious entry point for narrowband clients. His rationale sounded wise to me. I knew that he was offering me what sounded like extra work with no formal authority. He was suggesting that I should take on the power to lead that project. I would be accountable for it, but he would not give me the authority over the marketing and sales department which he had the formal responsibility for it. There would obviously be some tension coming from that deliberate ambiguity. But there was also a tempting idea of identifying myself with the role of being a champion who would step in and prove that Pires's goal could be attained. That idea seduced me at the time and I remember agreeing with a smile on my lips.



## **Responsibility in relation to norms, values and ideology**

The negotiation of responsibilities only makes sense if there is a commitment to those responsibilities. That commitment is linked to the notion of values. While discussing earlier the notion of responsibility as virtue, I addressed that issue, associating responsibility and value in the sense of 'voluntary compulsion'. But I am not referring to value as something universal or in any way separated from interaction. I agree with Bovens when he argues that 'responsibility or responsible are terms that express values, but the values they embody are not generally accepted, and differ from time to time, place to place, and speaker to speaker.' (Bovens, 1998, p.22). I would go even further, as I believe that the meaning of being responsible is itself continuously negotiated and recreated as people understand their experience.

But if responsibility as virtue is mainly about values, accountability is about the possible transgression of a norm, either explicit or implicit. Reflecting about values and norms, I felt the need to articulate what I mean by those concepts. Joas's (2000) discussion of this theme is particularly illustrating as he proposed such a distinction, associating values and norms to desires and drawing on the ideas developed by pragmatists such as Mead (1934) to explain how those notions arise in human interaction.

Joas understands desires in the sense of preferences, as bodily impulses or motivations for action. But, he argues, desires do not always lead to action as human beings have the capacity to have second order desires, desires directed to their own desires. One can desire not to desire something or one can desire to desire something else. Second order desires introduce judgement or discrimination between the impulse or the motivation and the action or omission. This choice implies the notions of norm and value. This account of values and norms emerging from the dialectic between first and second order desires is appealing to me but not entirely satisfying. It makes more sense for me while discussing my experience if I was to say that values and norms arise through the emotional and verbal gestures and responses evoked by invitations for action, such as desires or external requests. I think that those gestures and responses involve explicitly or implicitly acknowledging different and conflicting possibilities while choosing what to do in the light of those responses.



How can I differentiate values from norms? I agree with Joas' understanding that norms are constraints with an obligatory character, providing criteria to judge desires and actions in terms of what is right or wrong. Norms are described by him as being sustained by social processes, through which we are held accountable for our actions before external and internal forums. We respond emotionally to that account, experiencing, for instance, what one can describe as emotions of pride or shame. Also according to Joas, values provide criteria for judging desires, actions and even norms in terms of good and bad. Where norms are concerned with what is right; values are essentially about what is good or bad to do or desire. In this sense, where norms are obligatory compulsions, values are voluntary compulsions that give a sense of purpose to one's actions. Joas (2000) argues that values are continually arising as we engage in interaction with others, as values have to be reinterpreted each time we face a particular situation. Deciding what to do in a situation involves dealing with often conflicting values, therefore requiring negotiation and choice between those values. It is through that choice that we functionalise the values present in each situation, establishing priorities and deciding which are the most important in that context. When I took active responsibility for the telemarketing project<sup>6</sup>, going beyond what was to be expected of my role, I neglected other parts of my life, working until 10 or 11 p.m. almost every weekday. That meant that I chose to commit to the positive value judgement attached to professional competency instead of committing to other values present in the situation, such as keeping a balanced personal life.

I believe imagination plays a role in the emergence of values as values are related to the imaginary person that we want to be. Imagination presents to us an idealised whole that we express as a value and to which we feel related when we act according to that value. Feeling the voluntary compulsion to act as a competent professional, I feel intensely related to the imaginary idea of 'the' competent professional. In this sense, values involve an experience of self transcendence. Joas draws on Dewey ([1934] 1999) to argue that values are not only associated to self transcendence but also to self formation, as they continually arise in social interaction. Stacey (2004) points to the paradoxical nature of this theory of values, as values arise 'in processes in which the self is simultaneously formed

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<sup>6</sup> See the section *An opportunity to prove myself* in my Project 2



and transcended' (Stacey, 2004, p.9), in intense actual experience and in idealising acts of imagination at the same time. This is why Stacey argues that values cannot be set or deliberately chosen by anyone, as that would mean claiming that 'someone could form the identity, or self, of others and form the self transcendence of others' (Stacey, 2004, p.9). I agree with this argument, but it does not mean that I am indifferent to other people's values; it means that the values I espouse cannot be deliberately designed (not even by myself). If a value was to be designed, it would become a norm instead of a value, because it would not be a voluntary compulsion, becoming an obligatory constraint.

The interaction of individuals in certain groups has given rise to the emergence of what George Herbert Mead called 'cult values' (1923), incommensurable values that become a condition to be part of the group to which those values have become ascribed. The most obvious example of such groups is nations, to which the cult values of patriotism or democracy can become ascribed. In his book 'The Corrosion of Character', Richard Sennett (1998) showed how 'teamwork' has become a cult value in some organisations (although he does not use Mead's term), becoming an ideal to which people should conform in order to keep their membership of group, in other words, to keep their job. But Mead argues that cult values, as incommensurable ideals, need to be functionalised in order to influence our actions. As cult values become functional values in our everyday interactions, we become aware of conflicts between the different values present in a situation. That calls forth the need for negotiation. This aspect is ignored when cult values are thought of as overriding universal norms, ideologies.

In my workplace, at Telco, there is a discussion currently going on about what are our shared values and about the general lack of commitment to values such as being 'oriented towards the clients'. In the past nine months, the top management of the company has been repeatedly stressing the importance of client orientation for the company's long term sustainability. Those efforts have been producing no noticeable results and I have repeatedly observed cynical responses to those gestures, as people question in small groups if that is not what the company has been doing for years. Just after joining the corporate communication department, six months ago, I tried to introduce the discussion of what the orientation towards the clients could mean. I did that while participating in a workshop with the managers of the communication departments from most companies of the Telco



Group. My three consecutive invitations to start the discussion were refused by the group. Observing the way I was looked at, I felt that my question did not make sense to them, evoking an emotional response in them that I might label as embarrassment or shame. I felt silly for asking and unable to express how the rather vague expression 'orientation towards the client' did not make sense to me without a discussion of what it could mean in terms of our experience. In Mead's terms, it sounds as if I was questioning a cult value trying to functionalise it. By refusing to engage in that conversation, I believe that the group might be refusing to take that would-be cult value into their everyday interactions, therefore disowning it by considering it beyond discussion.

Stacey (2004) articulated the notion of ideology as 'a whole that is simultaneously the obligatory restriction of the norm and the voluntary compulsion of value, constitutes the evaluative criteria for the choice of communicative interactions and the sustaining of power relations' (Stacey, 2004, p.10). I have come to understand responsibility as such an organising theme, an ideology that retains both the voluntary compulsion nature of values (in the form of responsibility as virtue) and the obligatory nature of norms (in the form of responsibility as accountability). Organisations provide the forums for one to account for conformity towards explicit or implicit norms, thus functionalising responsibility in the sense of accountability as an obligatory restriction. At the same time, responsibility as virtue is taken as a value, a voluntary compulsion (paradoxical in itself) to act responsibly. This is why I argue that responsibility can be understood as a value and a norm at the same time in the context of project management, an ideology sustaining the power relations involved in project work and providing criteria to evaluate the choices of communicative interactions.



## **Articulating responsibility through planning**

When I began working with Pires at Dot Com, by the end of July 2003, there was a relaxed mood in the company. August was about to begin and plenty of people were already on holidays. I arrived quite early in my first day there. I wanted to display commitment and I knew how early Pires usually arrived. I went directly to the top floor, to meet him in his office. He looked pleased to see me and made some remark about how I was starting early. My gesture had been understood. Baltasar had not arrived yet and we waited for him to start the kick-off meeting. Both Pires and Baltasar would be going on their holidays in the following weeks, so I would have time to get acquainted with the new role with little pressure. When Baltasar arrived, Pires repeated to both of us what he had already told me. He wanted to focus in increasing our narrowband Internet access market share and he would hold both Baltasar and me accountable for that. He added, looking quite serious, that our yearly bonuses would depend heavily on attaining the objectives that he had set for that market. I smiled in a cynical way and so did Baltasar. We both knew that the yearly bonuses at Telco were attributed through a rather bureaucratic process of performance appraisal and depended more on a subjective general appreciation than on the attainment of objective goals. Pires would have an influence in that process, but it would not be nearly as linear as he had put. Anyway, neither one of us challenged Pires's statement. Baltasar made a humorous remark, saying that it was good thing, because that would be a way to know what those objectives were, because he did not have a hint at what sales objectives Pires was talking about. Pires ignored Baltasar's remark and did not seem to relate to Baltasar's sense of humour. On the contrary, I was quite amused by it.

Pires kept his strict task oriented approach, asking us to put together a detailed action plan for the portal. He wanted that plan to have clear milestones and deadlines for the last four months of that year. Baltasar suggested that I could prepare that document. Pires agreed and we booked a meeting for the second half of August, when both of them would be back from their holidays. Again, we were negotiating responsibility for a task. Pires was in a position of authority or status to ask that plan from us, leaving open how we could take on that responsibility. Baltasar asked me to take it on me and I accepted, nodding. It was part of what I considered to be my job and I felt I was perfectly capable of doing it.



Finally, we discussed what to do about Tomás. Baltasar and I had already come to a conclusion that the best option was to keep him. I would have him coordinating the portal's broadband channel while also negotiating the partnerships with our main content providers. Although I knew that I would have to deal with the tension of the situation, I believed that Tomás could take on those responsibilities, as those were the things in which he liked best to focus his attention. Baltasar told Pires the conclusion we had reached and his reply reinforced how he held us accountable for that decision. He said something like 'if that is what you consider to be the best choice'. We ended the meeting and, later that day, Baltasar formally introduced me to the people that I would coordinate my new job, in a short, tense meeting.

### **Why is planning so attractive?**

I understood this kick-off meeting as part of the ongoing process of negotiating both active and passive responsibility. There was a new element, though, in that negotiation. Pires wanted to negotiate responsibility in a more detailed and task oriented way as he asked for a plan. I wondered why planning is so popular in business management. This may sound as a self-evident question, as planning has become so embedded in management that it almost became second nature to managers. When there is a goal to be attained, managers plan how to get there. When something goes wrong, bad planning is often the first explanation people can come up with. When people are anxious because of having ambiguous tasks or for being asked to do too many things at the same time, planning is called for to provide some order and relieve that anxiety. When I feel subject to things that I cannot control, I sometimes turn to planning as a way to try and maintain a certain degree of control. But why is planning so attractive?

Even Henry Mintzberg (1994a), who is very critical of strategic planning<sup>7</sup>, describes planning as something very appealing. He defines it as 'breaking down a goal or set of

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<sup>7</sup> In 'The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning' (1994a), Mintzberg argues that strategic planning often spoils strategic thinking, confusing strategy with the manipulation of numbers. His argument lies on the understanding that strategy is about synthesis, involving intuition and creativity, while planning is about



intentions into steps, formalizing those steps so that they can be implemented *almost automatically*' (Mintzberg, 1994b, p.108; emphasis added). I believe this may be precisely the point that makes planning so appealing. After something has been planned, people believe that it can be implemented *almost automatically*, nearly without effort. Planning provides some reassurance while stepping into the unknown, establishing a causal nexus between intention and action. In my workplace, planning is not understood simply as articulating an intention in writing. A plan is expected to include a detailed list of tasks with its timing and a clear identification of who will perform each task. This kind of plan is used in project management and most people understand project management as using plans to attain a specific goal. The tool, planning, has almost become synonymous with the discipline, project management.

The fantasy that a plan can be implemented 'almost automatically' is not, however, the only reason why I believe it is so popular. The other explanation is, I think, because plans provide the framework to openly discuss responsibility and accountability. When a plan includes for each task the definition of what is to be done, when and by whom, it enables the group to discuss it. It is a tool of communication, setting the stage for a process of negotiation, in which each person will naturally play out their chances of power, trying to gain or avoid taking on responsibility and negotiating the circumstances in which they will be held accountable. After a consensus is reached (even if that consensus is imposed by someone taking on the authority and no one challenging it), a plan is also a symbol of commitment. As if it was an external and physical manifestation of an internal commitment, establishing the forum towards which people will be held accountable.

Plans seem to rely upon a hypothetical causal nexus between passive and active responsibility. Bovens articulated it, saying that 'the realisation that one will or might be held to account, the passive side of responsibility, stimulates people to behave responsibly, the active side' (Bovens, 1998, p.39). Bovens goes even further, claiming that:

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analysis. Mintzberg points to that mismatch between strategy and planning, proposing that planners make their contribution around the strategy-making process rather than inside it.



‘By holding each other to account, people maintain a certain order and regularity in society. Norms are (re)produced, internalised, and, where necessary, adjusted through accountability. The person held to account is told about the standards he must hold to and about the fact that in the future he may again (and, in that case, more strictly) be called to account in connection with his conduct.’ (Bovens, 1998, p.38)

I do not challenge the notion that plans are indeed useful tools for management and required for managing a project. But I want to question their actual effectiveness. Do people really do something just because they have their name in a task of a project plan? How responsible can I feel if the task is complex and it involves other people as well? I think that real life planning involves a continuous process of negotiation of responsibility, not a linear tool to ‘do this’ to ‘get that’. Even an over-emphasis in holding people accountable can have the opposite effect. While trying to tighten his grip, a manager like Pires can create the conditions under which people may feel unjustly held accountable. This can hinder people’s willingness to take on active responsibility, fearing the way which they may be held accountable, while leading to defensive patterns of behaviour like trying to pass on the blame instead of building something. This kind of dynamics is connected to what Bovens describes as hierarchical accountability. He argues that ‘holding natural persons accountable in accordance with a strictly hierarchical scheme is therefore sometimes a little like trying to grab hold of a piece of soap in a bathtub; whenever you think that you have found someone, first at the top and then a little lower down, who meets all the necessary criteria, he once again slips through your fingers’ (Bovens, 1998, p.89).

### **The paradox of shared responsibility**

This aspect is connected with the problem of shared responsibility. Bovens calls this problem the ‘paradox of shared responsibility’, although his description of it is quite linear, instead of paradoxical. He claims that ‘as the responsibility for any given instance of conduct is scattered across more people, the discrete responsibility of every individual diminishes proportionately’ (Bovens, 1998, p.46). This understanding avoids what can be the true contradiction of shared responsibility: One can be accountable for a collective task and, at the same time, not feel actively responsible for it because collective passive



responsibility does not necessarily imply or evoke active personal responsibility. This is, I believe, the true paradox of shared responsibility. This paradox brings forward the need for more interaction, as the ambiguity it creates induces the need to negotiate further each one's role. That negotiation can be the ground for other patterns to emerge, such as narratives to make sense of that ambiguity. I think plans can be seen as a form of such narratives. Planning, therefore, can be interpreted as a process of articulating narratives to make sense of how we can share responsibility. Planning can also serve to articulate the idea that responsibility is indeed shared and not located in one individual.

The question of shared responsibility raises the discussion of how responsibility is understood in terms of the connection between the individual and the social. Bovens's notion of responsibility is clearly centred on the individual. When he asks 'who can be held responsible for the behaviour of complex organisations', he is striving to locate responsibility in an individual, in order to assign blame or credit, to punish or reward. Locating passive responsibility in an individual is deeply embedded in how responsibility is talked about in organisations. This is particularly evident as discussions of responsibility are almost always centred on a question of 'who': 'Who was responsible for that task?' 'Who can take up responsibility for this?' 'Who should be held accountable for that?' Although dominant, this perspective is challenged by alternative discourses such as social constructionism. McNamee and Gergen (1999) discuss responsibility in light of social constructionism, arguing that the discourse of individual responsibility is severely limited, thus proposing an alternative notion of relational responsibility.

Instead of locating the responsibility in the individual, relational responsibility understands it as a result of the relations between individuals. To ground their argument, McNamee and Gergen turn to the ideas of internal others, conjoint relations, relations among groups, and systems. By internal others they mean the notions of how the incorporation of the other is central for the emergence of the self, such as in the 'I'/'me' dialectic proposed by Mead (1934). Conjoint relations express what Shotter (1980) termed joint-action, an 'identifiable phenomenon [that] cannot be carried out alone nor (...) reduced to the mere summation of individual actions' (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p.13). By relations among groups they draw attention to how collective entities (such as organisations) are talked about as if being individuals, for instance when someone says 'the government decided'. Systems are also



evoked as expressing the idea of relatedness, namely through the notion of an ordered whole, 'producing outcomes greater than the sum of the individual parts' (McNamee & Gerden, 1999, p.16).

In order to move away from the individualist notion of responsibility, I believe McNamee and Gerden ended up going to the other extreme. If all action is joint-action, how can an individual be held accountable? They divert this question by stating that, instead of locating the source of the problem, they wish to invite new patterns of relationships. 'for example, to move from the position of authority to questioner, from the assured to the ambivalent, or from the angry to the sympathetic' (McNamee & Gerden, 1999, p.27). This makes me feel ambivalent towards what McNamee and Gerden propose. On one hand, their notion of relational responsibility does introduce important themes, such as the importance of relationships or the notion of joint-action. But, on the other hand, in order to account for the importance of group processes, they end up losing focus of the individual

This discussion resonates with the paradox of control that I referred to earlier in this paper. As I have the capacity to choose my actions, my individual agency, I am to a certain extent 'in control'. As I cannot influence all the actions or events that will influence my work, such as the responses I get from the group, I am 'not in control' at the same time. Being paradoxically 'in control' and 'not in control' at the same time is then related to the notion that an individual and the group can be responsible and not responsible at the same time. Acknowledging the importance of the group aspects of responsibility does not imply that one must lose focus of individual responsibility if one holds the paradox instead of collapsing it.

Sharing responsibility can then mean to deal with the ambiguity of not knowing. That was how I felt when I took active responsibility to put together a plan for the last four months of the year. How could I start? How would I make sense of the team, their skills, their projects, Pires's goals, Baltasar's goals, my goals? As I did not know, I engaged in talking. Following the kick-off meeting with Pires and Baltasar, I spent my first weeks at the portal getting acquainted with whom I did not know yet and trying to sort out what was important and what could be done in the last third of the year. At the same time, I became aware of how the group was resentful of management changes and how everybody had a very keen



memory of the events that followed the “dot com” crash, when all the so-called Internet companies had to cut costs and fire people. There was still tension about job security and people seemed to have distanced themselves a lot from their job. There was no one who was really enthusiastic about what he or she was doing. When I first became aware of it, I felt powerless to change it. I knew that the mood would not be too high, but I did not have the awareness of how low the morale was. The sense I made of that situation was that the plan that Pires had asked for was the perfect arena to try and gain commitment both from Pires and from the people working with me. With Pires I would play the carrot game of offering my active responsibility for everything that he wanted, giving him a good plan, while asking of him permission to hire more people for the department while not firing a worker whose contract was nearing its end. The other half of my move was to present to the group how I had won those commitments from the top management. I wanted to project the image of a leader on whom they could depend, asking in return for their commitment towards the plan. I would be held accountable for that plan and I wanted them to feel actively responsible for it, helping me.

Articulating my intentions in this way seems extremely manipulative and linear, but those were my intentions then. What makes it become not linear is when intentions are played out, while engaging in interaction with others. First I had to negotiate with Baltasar his agreement with the plan. He was receptive and appreciative, but changes were introduced and we reached some compromises. Then, I had to present it to Pires. I think we both knew the game we were playing and he accepted it. The final part of it was the hardest, as I wanted to gain the trust and willing collaboration of the people working with me, controlling without having to call forth a position of authority. I was espousing Larry Hirschhorn’s (1997) view that organisations have been going through a shift that is changing the patterns of leadership. In the industrial age, he argues, a leader could manage by fear and coercion; while he now must gain the willing collaboration of the ones working for him. Hirschhorn claims that in the post-industrial milieu a manager depends more deeply on his employees’ skills and on their willingness to collaborate. That was what I tried to do. I presented to them Pires’s commitment to hire more people and how he would support us and I conveyed the meaning that it had been possible because I had become responsible for doing what was on the plan that I presented to them. If they would help me fulfil it, then I would be able to keep on taking responsibility for them. The response I got



was not enthusiastic. They had heard too many pretty management speeches and they would wait and see. I would have to gain their trust by actions and not through nice presentations. Nevertheless, the effect had been positive, but not near what I had expected. At least, through that process I had participated in the negotiation of a narrative to make sense of shared responsibility. As that narrative had become commonly accepted, I could move on from there.

### **Trying to design responsibilities for projects and roles**

My negotiation of role after joining the corporate communication department was quite different from my experience at Internet portal. Acácio wanted me to take a position of de facto 'number two' but he did not want to do that at the expense of diminishing the scope of action of Anabela, who had been performing that role. I discussed it with him and we agreed that I would be presented to the group as entering at the same level of Anabela. That sounded wise to me both because I valued Anabela's professional ability and also because I did not want to be overwhelmed by my new job. I had the sense that if I tried to involve myself in everything from the start I would not be able to grasp it. Another thing going on was that I disliked seeing myself as taking someone else's position, as had happened when I replaced Tomás at Internet portal. Instead of replacing Anabela, I was fonder of crafting a new position for myself, through an ongoing negotiation with Acácio and Anabela.

Acácio wanted to manage together both the corporate communication department and Landline's communication department. He called that 'transversal management' and his intention was to gain an increasing influence over the activities of the communication departments of every company of the Telco Group. He intended to use Landline as a first step in order to gain momentum for that. But, before all that, Landline's communication department had suffered the loss of some people and more people were in the process of considering leaving it. Acácio was afraid to spread himself too thin, so he chose Irene to help him coordinate the department. Irene had worked at Dot Com and she had moved to Landline a year before, joining the communication department as head of one of the sub-departments. When I started working with him, Acácio asked me to reshuffle Landline's department with Irene. I spent two weeks doing it, engaging in conversations, getting to



know most people around, while making and discussing drafts of how the department could work. Finally, we reached a compromise to divide the department into four sub-departments. Irene would formally head one of the sub-departments, but her role was explicitly that of coordinating the work of the whole department.

I was happy for the result of that negotiation, but there was a problem in which I had not moved forward: how to establish connections between the two departments Acácio headed? I asked myself if it made sense to manage both departments transversally. At that time, Acácio was fixed to that idea as he saw it as a solution for his problems of growth. I feared the ambiguity that it would introduce, as lines of responsibility and authority would become fuzzier. There was also the problem of how to fit Renata in the new structure. Renata had also helped Acácio to put the department together and, being a senior journalist, she headed the edition of the Group's internal media: a bimonthly newsmagazine, a monthly newsletter and the intranet. Acácio wanted her to coordinate the content production at Landline as well, but that was being undermined by covert trials of strength that were taking place between Renata and Irene and between Renata and Anabela. To make things more complicated, we had five 'transversal coordinators': Acácio, me, Anabela, Irene and Renata. How could we cope with so much coordination? I did not have the answer for that. I engaged in several conversations with Acácio about it, but his phone never stopped ringing and our conversations were constantly interrupted. I think it was him who came up with the idea of making a retreat day in a hotel to discuss how we could manage it. That conversation would include the five of us, and our agenda would be on how to work together. Acácio asked his secretary to make the arrangements and we put aside a whole day for it, meeting the first Monday of April.

The meeting started with Acácio expressing what he saw as the responsibilities that he could not delegate, to relate with the Group's CEO and board members, as well as coordinating media relations. He wanted us to take responsibility for 'everything else'. Before exploring what 'everything else' meant, we stopped for a while, thinking about what were our concerns. Among other issues, Anabela and Renata pointed out to an excessive dependency on Acácio to do all sorts of things. Acácio mentioned that senior members of the department were unwilling to take on responsibility and I brought up the issue of lack of a clear and understandable attribution of responsibilities in the team. The



invitation for discussion was not taken up and we engaged into identifying who did what in similar areas in the two departments. Tension developed among us, first between Renata and Anabela and then between Renata and Irene. I started getting annoyed at how the conversation was going and I forced myself to take extensive notes in order to concentrate myself on what was going on there. Acácio looked at me as if he was expecting that I would take the lead but I was feeling confused. I had the sense that we were going round in circles, avoiding the difficult issue of discussing how we would share responsibility. I was participating in sustaining that pattern of avoidance and being aware of it reinforced my annoyance. In retrospect, I think I feared getting into a clear discussion of who did what. There were too many different interests to conciliate, too many emerging roles and I was not sure how to deal with that.

After having lunch, we started to articulate some conclusions. I proposed that we should divide the problem, assigning responsibilities concerning what I called each one's 'main role', then we could assign coordination roles per function and, finally, choose a project leader for each joint project. The response was not enthusiastic but my proposal was accepted and we moved on from there. Acácio proposed that Irene would coordinate Landline's department and Anabela the corporate department. I would coordinate joint work in a general way and Renata would lead content production across both departments. It fitted in what we were already doing, except for my role, which was quite ambiguous anyway. After that, we discussed area-by-area and project-by-project, who would do what. The final result was not extraordinary nor really novel, but it seemed to make sense. After writing it down on paper and having gone through the process of joint discussion, I felt that the outcome of the meeting was a restatement of what was already happening but it made a slightly different sense as was articulated and agreed upon. In the end, Acácio asked me to write down the conclusions. A couple of days later, that task turned into preparing a slideshow that Acácio ended up presenting to both departments in a joint session.

In the end of all that process, I felt that I had a publicly articulated design of roles and responsibilities, which was indeed quite vague. The process to come up with that statement that was intended as a solution ended up producing a different articulation of the problem. Instead of a plan, we had a matrix of responsibility and a list of projects leaders. I had the feeling that we had agreed to that matrix structure in a superficial way, as I noticed no real



shift in our way of working together in the following weeks. As I think about this situation in retrospect, I start to associate my feeling of discomfort with the fear of being blamed based on the definition of responsibility as role. In previous situations, as when discussing the responsibility associated with my new role at Internet portal, that discussion provided me with some sense of trust, as it offered a basis on which to work. What was different about how the five of us had articulated our responsibilities was that our concerns were more about avoiding blame than about taking active responsibility. Maybe there was too much tension in the group for real trust to emerge. We had just begun working together and there was too much unspoken potential conflict. For instance, my position might threaten both Anabela and Irene, Irene was threatened by Renata. Acácio was insecure about how to deal with his new role, I was very much aware of not wanting more than I could take, Anabela seemed to feel undermined by Renata, Renata was in a defensive mood and seemed to be resenting having less of Acácio's attention. As I come to think about that one day retreat at the time of writing, I think I had the intention of trying to shift that pattern of interaction through the discussion and articulation of each other's responsibilities. Having a structure written down on paper that seems workable was reassuring and anxiety relieving. But I find that it was also a way of avoiding dealing with the conflicting issues that were not spoken about. While the process of planning provided for me a context in which the negotiation of responsibility could lead to commitment, the discussion of roles seemed to leave out too much unspoken themes, thus hindering the negotiation of responsibility. I think this is related to how role is associated with personal status in a way that makes it more difficult to be openly discussed.



## Functionalising responsibility: discipline and project control

As responsibility gets to be continuously negotiated and articulated, it is also taken up in the context of power relating as people try to control other people's actions. In this sense, responsibility is functionalised in interaction. By articulating clearly what is to be done and by whom, project management provides a singular context which, I believe, fosters the functionalising of responsibility. The best example that I found of that are project control meetings, arenas in which a project team is confronted with giving account for their responsibilities and the project manager is in a position of authority to examine each one's performance. As each person's work is objectified into the categories of conformity or non conformity with the plan, their responsibilities serve the purpose of control. Reasons are presented and brought to light and a reaction is served. It is expected that the project manager should act as if a project was a cybernetic system, controllable through feedback<sup>8</sup>. so justice is served in the form of approving and disapproving comments, revised deadlines or other corrective measures. Responsibilities are renegotiated and a new iteration begins a movement towards the next control meeting.

One day, while participating in a control meeting, I felt that I was under examination. Foucault's description of the process of examination suddenly became lively, as well as the ways in which it serves the purposes of discipline as a technology of power. That is what I will examine in this section. Coming back to my experience at Internet portal, the plan for the last four months of the year that I had negotiated with Pires constituted a source of direction for my department, but it did not take fully into account our participation in the narrowband Internet access project. Just after coming back from his holidays, Pires started holding weekly meetings to monitor the progress in what he called the 'shock action plan'. He asked both Baltasar and me to attend those meetings.

The project team involved nine people, coming from the portal, marketing and sales, Internet technology and information systems departments. I knew most of the participants

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<sup>8</sup> As argued in the section on *Project Control and Systems Thinking* in my Project 3.



since I had worked with them in the launch project for the new Internet access product. Pires lead the meetings himself and Sílvia (who was product manager for narrowband) was responsible for updating the plan every week. When I went to the first meeting I was surprised to see that I was being held accountable for some tasks of which I had not known about. I did not feel responsible for those deadlines and the main theme of that first meeting was a negotiation of deadlines and resources. We were negotiating what were the most important things to be done and what could be realistically set as deadlines. Pires would always try to stretch deadlines a bit but an understanding was reached. There was little room, however, for unexpected problems.

### **Control meetings as a process of examination**

As meetings took place, a regular structure emerged. Pires would start by reviewing the figures of the past week, monitoring how many new clients we had won, how the number of active clients evolved together with the traffic generated (measured on time spent online). After having that often disappointing perception of the market evolution, he would check each and every task of the action plan, asking each person to respond for his or her commitments. As the deadlines were not designed to accommodate unexpected problems, the status of most tasks was 'LATE', written in capital letters. This set the stage for a pattern of repeated humiliation to develop. Pires would express his anger for the lack of results, each person would be unable to communicate that they were doing all that they thought they could, then Pires would argue back, trying to demonstrate that more could have been done. Simple questions were devastating, such as why the telemarketing follow-up letters were four weeks late, why the new, simpler authentication method was two months behind schedule, and so on. Then Pires would serve new tasks, new attempts to try and change the situation. The way I write about this pattern seems that it was something that Pires had the power to impose on the group. I do not think that was the case. This process was co-constructed by everyone involved. Pires had a prominent role in the group, being able to withhold things people needed, like job security or recognition of competency, but the participants of group had the power to withhold from Pires their commitment to this project that was so important for his personal agenda. He wanted to move up the ladder of the organisation and he hoped that this project would help him do that.



The meetings were getting stuck in a pattern of humiliation as objectives were not met. I started to fear going to those meetings. The implications of changing processes provoked substantial delays and when commercial campaigns were deployed, the results were much lower than the high expectations we had developed. Therefore there was a dynamic of guilt and submission which reinforced Pires's opportunity to express his anger for feeling powerless to change that course of events. Holding people accountable was not enough to reach his goal and so he would be harder at holding people accountable. Instead of making people work harder, this made the group develop defensive strategies. Before each meeting with Pires, we started to meet on our own, reviewing status, negotiating amongst ourselves how to manage Pires's expectations and colluding into postponing the meeting whenever the previous week's sales figures were unavailable. In the conversations outside the meetings, people discussed what they were doing, acknowledging that we were doing all we could. At the same time, scapegoating emerged as some people started to be blamed for the failures. The information systems director was seen by almost everybody else as the bottleneck of most projects and the frustration that was not direct towards Pires was diverted towards him.

Participating in that dynamic was disappointing. I had the high expectations that I could do some work in that arena but I became gradually aware that I had better stay out of the spotlight. I feared the exposure that came with taking the lead at something outside my formal scope. I became quite defensive about setting deadlines and when I was behind schedule, I tried to anticipate the negative reaction, explaining why before I was asked. I was more concerned with accounting than I was with taking active responsibility. I gradually came to understand those control meetings as disciplinary arenas, a panopticon of surveillance (Foucault, 1975), providing the stage for everybody to be exposed in their failures, an arena where shame was present as a result of that exposure. I came to think about that experience in relation to Foucault's notion of discipline as a technology of power. I am referring to discipline here in the sense of punishment or coercion, not as a set of skills or field of study. As Elias, Foucault also does not understand power as a thing that is held and used by individuals, but rather as part of the relations between different groups of society. Power changes with circumstances and time. In this context, Foucault identified discipline as a technology of power:



“Discipline” may not be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology.’ (Foucault, 1975, p.215)

In this sense, Foucault describes the process of examination as being part of the techniques of discipline. I believe project control meetings fit perfectly into his description of the process of examination: ‘a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish’ (Foucault, 1975, p.184). It is through the visibility that the process of examination makes it possible to differentiate and to judge. That is precisely what is done in a control meeting: each person’s work gains visibility and is classified into categories, thus objectified. Then the individual can be subject to corrective measures, which may take the form of punishments. Indeed, the experience of being publicly exposed as not being competent after failing meeting a deadline is the most common form of punishment that I have experienced or observed. As control meetings provide a forum in which one may be held accountable and disciplined, it is curious that every member of the group participates in that pattern, sustaining it. Why is that? Maybe because it is part of what we take as commonsense as there is a discourse of management that naturalises the fact that managers like Pires are entitled to discipline people who depend hierarchically on them. Foucault called this kind of power power-knowledge and bio power, power coming from taking human beings as scientific objects of study, thus subject to regulation, measuring and controlling.

As Elias claims that there is no absolute power, no absolute constraint, may Foucault’s ideas be congruent with Elias notion of power? Reformulating the question, under Foucault’s perspective, is there a way to escape the forces of power which manifest themselves through the working of its technologies? I think so and Danaher et al. (2000) argue that there is. On one hand, Foucault does not argue that there is a single discourse in society, he points to how alternative discourses compete for supremacy. On the other hand, Foucault draws attention to how power should not be thought of in purely negative terms, as it is first and foremost productive, producing resistance to itself. It is Foucault who uses prisons as an example of the failure of the technologies of power. Instead of producing compliant individuals, prisons end up reproducing crime, functioning as ‘criminal



factories`. Danaher et al. sum up Foucault's thought on this, arguing that 'power is successful in "writing" people, but the effects are not what was intended' (Danaher et al., 2000, p.80). In this sense, the technology of power enforced around planning and control meetings was successful in constraining our pattern of interaction, yet the results were not what Pires intended.

### **Acting into new responsibilities**

As weeks went by, my own sense of being accountable for that project began to erode. There was not much that we could do after all. In October, though, Pires brought me to the spotlight when he told us that he was ashamed of the customer subscription experience. He said that it was a miracle that we had any clients at all, because the process was so poorly designed. He then stared at me, asking me why that had not been changed yet. I was surprised so I explained that it was beyond our scope, that I did not know that I was supposed to look into it. I was refusing to be held accountable for that. Actually, I noted, the websites for promoting the Internet access products were a responsibility of the marketing and sales department. I was passing on the blame, it was in the neighbours' backyard. He answered that now it was my concern and asked me if I could have it fixed until the end of the week. I replied that, as I was hiring a new web designer, I could have a proposal by the end of the week, but not the final version.

I felt anxious, but he was offering me the possibility of taking active responsibility for that and I was taking it, setting some terms. He smiled and said that it was good enough. We scheduled a meeting to examine that proposal. I should also bring an overall vision to improve customer experience. I took on that responsibility and, the following days after the meeting, I coordinated the work to completely redesign the most important Internet access promotion sites. Two members of my web design team were involved in that and I remember trying to convey to the two of them how important that task was and how the CEO of the company was concerned about it. In doing this, I think I was again trying to share my own responsibility with them. Acknowledging my dependency towards them. I was hoping to win their commitment and make them feel responsible for doing that work well. It was not simply because of that, but we did a good work together and the subscription experience was greatly improved with the new website.



By mid November none of the inventive things we did was producing any result. Our competitors were promoting faster but a bit more expensive dialup services, whose increased speed was obtained through acceleration techniques based on compression of text and image. They had licensed that technology from American companies that had proposed it also to Telco. At the time, Telco's product managers had decided not to take that offer because they did not believe that it would be attractive enough for the clients. Events were proving that they had misjudged that decision. Meanwhile, Mário had been developing with his department an alternative acceleration technology, based on open source programmes, customised by them. That solution would enable us to attain the same kind of performance with an internally developed solution. An independent test reassured us of the performance of our product. Having that card to play, we could choose between two options: either we could launch a new accelerated product at a similar price as our competitors', or we could offer it as an add-on to our present offering without raising the price.

I favoured that latter choice, because it was the only one that might shift the balance in our favour. As the cost of it was negligible, that option also made economic sense. Baltasar agreed with me and so did Mário. When we came to that week's control meeting, we understood that Pires wanted to explore both choices and that he was leaning towards launching a new and more expensive product. I multiplied myself in arguments and so did Baltasar. The rest of the group remained almost silent during the conversation and started to speak openly after they understood that Pires had been convinced to do it the way we were proposing. I wonder if he was just testing or if he was really considering the other hypothesis. The meaning I made of it was that fear of confronting him was preventing people from talking, silencing them. In my private conversation I started to develop a sense of 'us' (Baltasar and me), the fearless, as opposed to 'them', the ones who allowed themselves to be silenced, the yes-men. This dynamic is also woven in the threads of shame, as I was fighting against the idea I was also, sometimes, someone who abided to the voice of command. Playing the one who takes a stand was indeed a way for me to try and identify myself with who I wanted to be, denying a part of me that I was becoming aware of.



After that meeting I mobilised most of the design team to work on the promotion of the new accelerated product. It would only to be promoted online (no budget for TV, outdoors or press advertisements), so that campaign had to be smashing. Together with Baltasar we were present in the whole creative process, suggesting some approaches, refusing some others, allowing the designers to follow some wilder creative ideas which lead to a very strong campaign based on the motto of 'faster at the same price as always'. The first week after the product was launched the figures did not seem to move. But the following week there was a 50% increase of new users and 70% in the week after. We were very enthusiastic about it. We were finally getting some results! It was mid December then and the control meetings started to be postponed. Pires could not schedule the meetings so we were unable to communicate the good results to him in that context. The company's gossip started telling that Dot Com would finally be functionally merged with Landline, the big fixed line company. The word in the corridors was that Pires would no longer be in charge of Dot Com and that another board member of Landline would be the one to take it. Meanwhile, Pires had also become member of the Landline board and he would be given new increased responsibilities in managing sales. That information was confirmed just before the new-year, when Pires announced it to the whole organisation in a corporate meeting. It was only the day before that Pires took some time to tell Baltasar and me that he would be having different responsibilities.

How do these events contribute to my discussion of responsibility? As I reflect upon it now, I find it fascinating how the pattern of interaction in the group shifted from a helpless position of submission to disciplinary control meetings to actively taking joint responsibility for the new accelerator product. The commitment was not designed nor enforced; it emerged when we believed that we had the opportunity to achieve something. It was then that each one found the opportunity to take and share active responsibility.



## Conclusions

Writing this project spanned for almost nine months. Most of my initial intentions for it were abandoned and I feel as if it took a life of its own, as themes emerged from the exploration of my experience. I started struggling with the notion of responsibility to examine how it is negotiated. In that process, I differentiated two main forms of responsibility: active and passive. I tried to show how I experience responsibility to be formed and negotiated, as part of power relating and communicative interaction and in the context of defining a role, even when that role is continuously changing. Then I tried to understand how planning seemed to provide a context in which the negotiation of responsibility became particularly lively. Finally, I tried to point to how passive responsibility is present in project control meetings, which I claim to be similar to what Foucault describes as processes of examination. What do I retain from this path?

First, that responsibility became for me a way to articulate the experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something, associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond, to give account for it, justifying my actions or omissions. This understanding directed my attention to how responsibility is intrinsically social, because there is always someone who asks the question, even if that someone is oneself.

Second, I see responsibility as part of power relating, as it enables and constrains at the same time. Having to account for my actions and omissions, I am constrained by responsibility, in the sense that it reduces the scope of possible acceptable actions. At the same time, by the positive value attached to acting responsibly, responsibility enables action as it provides the possibility to take active responsibility.

Third, responsibility is incorporated in communicative interaction as we respond towards external and internal forums. When I feel those forums internalised in the form of the generalised other, responsibility becomes part of the 'I'/'me' dialectic, as the 'I' is in a position of being accountable towards the 'me', that represents that 'generalised other'.



Fourth, sharing responsibility can be a paradoxical process that calls forth more interaction and further negotiation. One can be accountable for a collective task and, at the same time, not feel actively responsible for it, because collective passive responsibility does not necessarily imply or evoke active personal responsibility. This dynamic, I believe, emerges as a pattern in the complex responsive processes of relating, particularly in the context of project management.

Fifth, I believe that responsibility is part of the ideologies that arise in organisations, as it is both a norm and a value at the same time. Responsibility in the sense of accountability is functionalised as an obligatory restriction, therefore a norm. At the same time, responsibility as virtue is taken as a value, a voluntary compulsion to act responsibly. In this sense, being responsible is paradoxically about value and norm at the same time, becoming a particular kind of ideology which sustains the power relations involved in project work and provides criteria to evaluate the choices of communicative interactions.

Sixth, planning can be interpreted as a process of articulating narratives to make sense of how we share responsibility. A plan can also serve as a symbol of commitment, as if it was an external and physical manifestation of an internal commitment, establishing the forum towards which people will be held accountable. Planning provides a structure for the negotiation and articulation of responsibility.

Seventh, planning also provides the context for disciplinary processes in project management. When control meetings are held, the plan is part of a process of examination. Performance is objectified in relation to what had been planned, thus enabling a classification of subjects. Punishments and rewards can then be served as means to try and control what happens in the project. But discipline is not inescapable and its working can be and are indeed subverted, as we engage in further interaction.

These insights have emerged, as this project showed, through my reflection on the processes of negotiating, articulating and functionalising responsibility. As I became aware of those insights, my own practice evolved over time, in a movement where reflection and action blended, each forming and being formed at the same time. I think this movement



can be witnessed in this project through my account of how I experienced similar and yet different situations throughout this last year.



# **Synopsis**

December 2004



## Introduction

Just after submitting the final version of my Project 4, one of my learning group colleagues sent me an email telling me that she had the sense that the work I had done had really changed me. She said that she looked forward to reading and hearing how I would make sense of how I had changed with the movement of my thought through the projects. When I read it for the first time, I was pleased by the compliment that her words expressed, but I was also afraid of not being able to account for my own changing. The whole process suddenly seemed overwhelming, too large to be explained, involving both professional and personal transformations. I wondered how I could express such a profound shift in this synopsis.

I will try to do that in two iterations. By now, the reader has had the opportunity to read my four projects, experiencing the transformation of how I write about my practice. In the first iteration, I will try to highlight and explain further that movement, revisiting each project in the following section in order to reflect upon the evolution of this portfolio. In the second iteration, I will take on the emergent themes of my research, highlighting how I am currently understanding the experience of responsibility in the context of project management. Finally, I will end this portfolio by presenting my contribution and summarizing how that contribution has been changing my practice.



## **My learning process**

In order to account for my learning process, I feel the need to revisit my four projects, putting them in the perspective of how I was thinking and acting while writing each one of them. I had a sense of strangeness while reading the first projects. Actually, the only project which reflects how I am currently thinking is the last one, Project 4. This, in itself, shows how my learning process has fulfilled its potential for transformation, changing my own sense of identity. But, paradoxically, each project is me and not me at the same time. For instance, I do not identify myself any longer with who I was writing Project 1, but I recognise myself there, so it is me and not me at the same time. Aram (2001) refers to education as a paradoxical social process in which identity emerges as continuity and potential transformation.

This was how I experienced this programme of research, as a powerful learning experience which sometimes threatened and challenged my sense of identity. For instance, while writing Project 2, I asked myself who I was, manipulating and seducing as means to achieve my goals. I was ashamed of how I was seeing myself and so I was refusing to recognise myself. That sense of shame was arising while I feared exclusion from how I wanted to see myself, a competent professional, someone who was ethically 'in control'. Participating in this programme was an opportunity for me to face that shame, exposing myself to the learning group and in my writing and trying to make sense of it. During that process, there were times when I had experiences of panic, feeling sick and weak, often after having an important insight of how I was behaving and participating in my work relationships. Aram (2001) argues that the processes of shame and panic are always associated with potentially transformative learning processes. I recognise myself and my learning process in that statement.

As I have already explained, each project was written iteratively, each draft being submitted to be commented by my learning group colleagues and by my supervisors. Those comments, my reflection and my engagement with literature triggered successive rewritings, until the projects were considered finished. Each project took between six to nine months to be completed, which means up to ten successive drafts. Chronologically,



Project 1 was completed in July 2002, Project 2 in April 2003, Project 3 in September 2003 and Project 4 in August 2004.

### **Project 1: Explaining what informs my practice**

As I have already stated, when I started writing my Project 1, I had the intention of exploring the limits of control and predictability associated with strategic management. I was mostly concerned with challenging mainstream management literature (for instance, Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985) which was grounded on the assumption that it was possible to predict and control. My arguments against that assumption were grounded on Ralph Stacey's first book (Stacey, 1992) and Mintzberg's (1994) critique of strategic planning. I had been fascinated for the past ten years by chaos theory (Gleick, 1987) and by the possibility that its notions could be applied to management, so I took a stand, opposing that point of view to what I called 'mainstream prescriptions'. As I come to see it now, even though I was so explicitly concerned about it, I was really struggling with my own obsession for control, and I resented when the people I worked with were not in control. In the section titled 'The complex limits of government control', I describe my frustration for what I perceived as a mistake of the Portuguese Prime Minister, with whom I worked, who had resigned after having been unable to control his own party.

In reflection, I think that the way in which the theme of control was so much present in that first project reflected my own sense of vulnerability that was so vivid then, evoking an emotional response of fear. I wrote that project just after starting working at the Telco Group. I accepted an invitation to join the strategy and business development department in Telco's corporate headquarters in January 2002. I had previously worked for five years in the Portuguese Government's staff, where I had reached prominent positions, as adviser to the Prime Minister and, later, as *chef de cabinet* to the Minister of the Presidency and to the Minister of Finance. The main reason why I left the Government staff was because I felt too vulnerable to events that I could not control. I was afraid that I could lose my job at any time, as a result of something that I could not control, as a cabinet reshuffling or some other unexpected political event. Precisely when I was in the process of moving to Telco, the Prime Minister resigned after losing the local elections. If I had not moved to Telco, I would have become unemployed when that happened.



I equated not being in control with being vulnerable and I did not want that. But, at the same time, I overtly espoused a theory, the complex responsive processes perspective, that accounted for how control and predictability were sometimes impossible. Thinking about how I can account for that, I believe that I was trying to explain to myself why I should not feel frustrated for not being in control of my own life. When I chose to move to Telco, that did not make me feel less vulnerable; it only shifted the focus of how I felt vulnerable for not being 'in control'. On one hand, joining Telco I was no longer fearful of losing my job because of some sudden political shift. I had a long term contract and the company was financially healthy. On the other hand, I became more vulnerable to how my professional competency was perceived. Sometimes, I feared that I was not competent enough to perform my new role. I felt often that I was the 'odd one' in a department where almost everyone else had worked before as consultants at McKinsey or at the Boston Consulting Group and had done their MBAs at top schools, such as the Harvard Business School, the Kellogg School of Management or the INSEAD Business School.

In that context, I feared being exposed as someone incompetent and that was a powerful threat to my identity. By that time, the fear of failing was extreme. My accomplishments of having always had the best marks and having somewhat easily attained high status positions were very important for me to define myself. Even while writing Project 1, I can notice now how almost all of those accomplishment are present in the text, even while I tried to cover up my pride for it. When I moved to Telco's business development department something shifted. On one hand, the methodology of this doctorate programme involved the opportunity to reflect about myself as I had never done before. On the other hand, I was in a completely different setting. I was no longer the 'bright one' that most people seemed to like or protect, I had become just one more in a department where I had to fight for respect. In that process, I missed the high levels of responsibility and autonomy that my previous jobs involved.

### **Project 2: Engaging with my practice in the context of project management**

When I was starting to write my Project 2, I was resentful of the lack of autonomy that I was feeling at work. Since I had joined Telco's business development department, I had only been asked to perform minor roles in the context of ongoing projects. Pires, the



department's director, who had decided to employ me, did not seem willing to risk giving me any kind of responsibilities for which he had hired me as senior analyst. I did not feel recognised in my professional competency and the fear of not being competent enough to be there was suffocating. That was why I was eager to take every opportunity to 'prove myself', as I named it in the first section of that second project.

Project 2 is an exploration of how I dealt with being given the responsibility of leading the telemarketing operation to sell the Group's new Internet access products. I took that project as a test of my competency. Not being recognised by my peers was getting me angry and I think that I turned that anger into a powerful drive, although I often felt to be helplessly in charge, as I explore in my Project 2. Nevertheless, my work at that project was appreciated by the people with whom I worked (including Pires and my peers), which made me feel happier about my professional role at the department.

At that time, I was very much aware of how what I did as a professional was reflected back to me in the relationships that I established with whom I worked with. I do not explicitly point to the theme of responsibility throughout my Project 2, but it is implicitly there, when I express guilt for not being able to do what I tried to do. There is a particular section, 'In the middle of a power struggle', in which this feeling is particularly evident. In that part of the project, I explain how I tried to protect the group with whom I was working, preventing the move of one of the members of that group to another department. I tried to influence that decision indirectly, asking the project leader to speak to the CEO of the company, explaining that making that transfer would jeopardise the project. My attempt of manipulation did not work, backfiring against the head of the department that I was trying to protect, because the CEO became angry at my interference. I was left with frustration and guilt, feeling responsible for not having been able to look after the people I was working with.

It was through those feelings of frustration and guilt that I became aware of how the theme of responsibility was present in my practice. As I was consciously reflecting about everything I did, while writing the Project 2, I started being keenly aware of how I had the tendency to lead through seduction (Pracana, 2001). I started reinterpreting the bonds of trust and mutual responsibility that I had identified in my Project 1 as attempts to



manipulate the people I worked with in order to grasp some control over their actions. That made me feel uncomfortable because I questioned the ethical nature of my behaviour. That questioning led me to take even more responsibility for the outcomes of everything I did, leaving me with a bitter sense of being helplessly in charge and driving me into introspection.

I struggled to find a consistent argument in which I could focus my Project 2. The themes of power, control and responsibility were there, but I was not really sure of what sense I could make of it. So, instead of focusing around the exploration of a question, I centred the project on the narrative of the events that had taken place, engaging with relevant literature along the story I was telling. While explaining my practice, I became aware that it was grounded in the discipline of project management (Dixon, 2000; Lock, 2003). As my work was organised around change projects within set timetables, it should have been obvious from the start. But it was not, probably because project management was not discussed in my department as a grounding discipline for our practice. It was actually taken for granted as a self-evident way of doing things.

While I was writing my Project 2, I went through a personal crisis triggered by becoming aware that I had been ignoring a feeling of discomfort that had been there for some time. I felt unable to cope with that process alone, so I started a psychotherapeutic process which is still going on. Being a personal process, it is not directly reflected or referred to in any of the projects, but I think that I must account for it here, as it is part of the process of change that I am going through. In therapy, I became aware of how much I was concerned about my own image, in the sense of what I imagined that the others saw in me. I started dealing with how I covered up my insecurity and with how I was eager for recognition, praise and admiration. Rephrasing it, I became aware of how I tended to give up on myself to apparently please others. I came to understand that as a pattern of dependency that prevented my autonomy. As I see it now, this personal process is connected with what I wrote in my Project 2 about 'proving myself', my need of recognition, and with my feeling of guilt for imagining that I had let other people down.



### **Project 3: Dealing with the experience of being held accountable**

A short time after concluding the telemarketing project that I wrote about in Project 2. I was asked to coordinate a project to restructure the most important Portuguese Internet portal. I took that assignment as a confirmation that I had been accepted as a legitimate senior member of the department. In reflection, I think that I was in a process of restoring my professional self-confidence and I remember feeling in quite a powerful position when I engaged in that project. That made a change to how I revisited the themes of power and control in project work, probably contributing to how the theme of responsibility started to come out, even if I labelled it accountability. I was interested then in exploring what it means for me, as a manager, to be accountable for results of which I am not fully in control. In that project, I expressed for the first time why this theme is so important for me as a professional: I feel vulnerable for being held accountable for my choices and actions when I have to act and decide without knowing enough to be sure of what to do and without being able to control most of what can come out of my actions and choices.

Dealing with that sense of being held accountable, control became a means to try to avoid the shame and guilt associated with being exposed as having failed. Feeling constantly under scrutiny and evaluation provoked in me varying degrees of anxiety, understood as the reaction to a threat of loss (Bateman, Brown & Pedder, 2000). In that case, I feared losing again my sense of competency; I feared the shame of failing. I accounted for that anxiety as a feeling of discomfort associated with acting into the unknown. I think that dealing with that anxiety motivated me to explore the themes of accountability and control. I associated that anxiety with how some management literature (as Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985; Burke, 1999; or Lock, 2003) builds up the expectation that a manager can indeed be in control of what happens in his organisation or his department.

I argued that dealing with that assumption, which seems to be shared by most managers, builds up the tension that comes with the paradoxical awareness that I am in control and not in control at the same time. I am in control because I can choose my actions and constrain others. I am not in control because I cannot determine everyone's actions and my success or failure can depend more on things beyond my capacity to influence than on my own actions. I drew on Streatfield (2001) as he examines this paradox in a way that



resonates with my experience. He points in particular to how the literature on management builds the expectations that competent managers are the ones who control their organisation's movement into the future, and how that point of view is not consistent with his experience as a practitioner. Refusing the idea that control can be simply equated with competence, Streatfield came to 'understand effective management as the quality of courage to carry on participating in the creation of personal and collective meaning, if only in small ways, in spite of the anxiety and helplessness engendered by the loss of direction' (Streatfield, 2001, p.80).

Regardless of how I understand my role as a practitioner, I cannot change the expectations nor the standards by which my performance is assessed. The way I examined my own practice reflected the awareness of this tension between meeting someone else's standards while being aware of the limits of my own ability to control the outcomes that will be evaluated. While engaging in that reflection, I grounded it into the framework of project management as a specific discipline of management. As project management was developed to be 'the most efficient way of introducing unique change' (Dixon, 2000, p.14), most literature on project management (Andersen et al., 1995; Burke, 1999; Lock, 2003; Pinto, 1998; Turner, 1999) focuses on planning and control techniques, such as CPM (Critical Path Method), PERT (Programme Evaluation and Review Technique) or GDPM (Goal Directed Project Management). Those techniques are refined sets of prescriptions that focus on what a manager should do in order to successfully manage a project, establishing procedures to attribute responsibilities and control the completion of the tasks required to attain the project's goals.

As project management literature reinforces the belief that control can be obtained following those tools and techniques, I question if that is the case. Reflecting upon actual events of my practice, I argue that those tools and techniques end up performing the function of an organisational ritual (Hirschhorn, 1997) through which managers defend themselves against the anxiety of being held accountable for an eventual failure. If they did everything as prescribed, how can they be blamed for a failure? I also argue that those tools and techniques perform another function, providing managers with a common language to communicate while engaging with change projects. Gantt charts became a standard to communicate what tasks are required to reach some desired goal, while the



meaning of being in the 'critical path' became a significant symbol in the communication that takes place in organisations. Instead of enabling a manager to effectively control, those tools and techniques became ways of communicating and acting in an expected, standard way that might protect managers against their own notion of being held accountable.

The emotion which is left unwritten in my Project 3 is pride. Being in the process of restoring my professional sense of competency, I became proud of how I was able to cope with individuals who I saw as powerful and threatening, such as Pires, who had recruited me and with whom I had been working until then. My growing self-confidence was pretty much grounded on that pride. In reflection, I think that it was related to the covert pride that is present in my Project 1 when I narrate my professional and academic achievements. What I find different is that I was beginning to tolerate a certain degree of conflict, starting to move away from the dependent position of wanting everybody to like me in order to like myself. But I was still eager for recognition and that need influenced what I chose to do afterwards and the way I made sense of that choice.

#### **Project 4: Exploring the processes of negotiating responsibility**

In my Project 4, I narrate how I left the business development department to move to the position of contents and services director of the Internet portal and how I left that position six months later to start working at the corporate communication department. Those changes gave me the opportunity to relate my choices with my need for recognition, which informed the way in which I have just put my first three projects in perspective. It also enabled me to make sense of similar, albeit quite different, experiences of stepping into new roles, negotiating responsibility and engaging with new projects, examining how responsibility came to be negotiated, articulated and functionalised.

I was dealing again with the anxiety provoked by being confronted with the expectation of being in control. This time, however, I related that anxiety to the event of being held accountable without being 'in control'. This drew my attention to the sense of responsibility associated with being held to account. What does it mean to feel responsible for something? How does that feeling influence my practice? In the context of project management, responsibility is constantly negotiated when we discuss who is responsible



for doing what and when. But that negotiation goes beyond a rational transaction or an exercise of authority. Feeling responsible for something also involves a sense of emotional commitment, a sense of duty, grounded on the emotions of fear, shame, embarrassment or pride.

Project management literature does not seem to discuss responsibility in much depth. It is merely mentioned in relation to the distribution of tasks (Lock, 2003, p.454), as something important for influence strategies (Turner, 1996, p.263) or as part of the 'responsibility-authority gap' (Burke, 1999). It is simply taken for granted that workers will feel responsible for the tasks assigned to them. That assumption goes against my repeated experience of having to negotiate and make sense of what each one is responsible for. Actually, responsibility seemed to me to be a crucial theme running through my practice, an essential aspect of working together. In project management, holding people to account for their responsibilities is an intrinsic part of project control meetings.

Responsibility is also related to the notion of role. That is a central aspect of my Project 4, as I reflect upon how having changed my role twice in a year has sharpened my awareness of how negotiating responsibility is part of the process of moving to a new position. When I first moved from the business development department to the position of head of the contents and services department of the Internet portal, I spent the first weeks making sense of what I was responsible for. Part of that process resulted in articulating a project plan for the following four months. Reflecting upon it, I realised that planning provided me with a structure to discuss and negotiate my own sense of responsibility. The process of coming up with a plan involved engaging in conversations with the people I was working with, making sense of what we should and could do.

When I later moved from the Internet portal to the corporate communication department, the negotiation of responsibility was also an important part of how my role was formed. In this case, as the department was going through a substantial restructuring, the discussion of each one's role and responsibilities was taken up explicitly, trying to reach a way to articulate how we would work together. At that time, I was becoming increasingly aware of how feeling responsible influenced my ability to engage with my work. I feared the ambiguity of the role my new boss had offered me (unofficial 'number 2'), so I wanted to



make clear what I would take under my responsibility and what I would not. As I see it now, I was then more concerned with avoiding taking too much responsibility than I was with my own status in the department.

These experiences drew my attention to how responsibility is related to values and norms. When I say that I feel responsible for something, I am expressing that I have taken the commitment of responding for that something. The notion of commitment evokes in me the idea of duty; therefore associating being responsible with doing what is right, following a norm, or doing what is good, expressing a value. I came to understand this aspect of responsibility as crucial for how it is taken up in organisations. If being responsible is both right and good, when I account for what I have done, I subject and expose myself to an examination that has the potential to evoke the emotions of fear, shame, embarrassment or pride.

That insight led me to associate the main tools of project management, such as project planning and control meetings, with the notion of disciplinary processes introduced by Foucault (1975). A project control meeting is a forum towards which the members of a project team account for the tasks for which they were responsible. Being examined, their performance is measured and judged in the light of what had been planned. These procedures foster the opportunity for experiences of shame and embarrassment to take place, as tasks get delayed and goals are not met, therefore disciplining the project team members into conformity. The rational intention for these meetings is explicitly about controlling the project development. In my narrative, I offer an example of how, instead of controlling, these meetings ended up sustaining a pattern of defensiveness, in which people refrained from participating and from taking active responsibility.

I am arguing neither for nor against project control meetings. What I want to draw attention to is to how responsibility plays an important role as an organising theme of our experience of working together, particularly in the context of project management. I want to shed some light into how responsibility is an aspect of power relating, constantly being negotiated as communicative interaction and becoming incorporated in emergent ideologies. This new awareness of responsibility has had an important impact on how I understand project planning and control as well as on how I understand the ethics of



responsibility. In the following section I will explain how experiencing responsibility has changed for me.



## **How I am currently experiencing responsibility**

Right now, while writing these lines, I am experiencing responsibility. I have a deadline to meet to submit this paper and I feel responsible for meeting that deadline. I feel a duty to do that, as I imagine that my supervisors and my learning group colleagues have allocated time to read it and I do not want to let them down. At the same time, I have just had an impulse to check my email, to see if anything happened in the company, as I did not go to work today. Momentarily, half a dozen pending work issues for which I am responsible crossed my mind. I am feeling guilty because I chose to stay home today, working on this paper. Making that choice, I compromised my responsibilities at work, eventually letting down people who were depending on my answer or guidance. In making my choices, for which I will be accountable, I am constantly confronted with the experience of responsibility at a moral and emotional level.

Working in the context of project management highlighted my awareness of the how responsibility is important. I started exploring project management in my Project 2, but it was while writing Project 3 that responsibility started to emerge as a main theme. I started that project by asking what it means for a manager to be accountable for results that he cannot fully control. The understanding that I was sketching then was that, while dealing with uncertainty, managers hold people to account, apparently trying to grasp control of what happens. I was examining responsibility from the perspective of being held accountable or liable.

Responsibility can be examined from so many perspectives that the largest part of the work involved with writing Project 4 was struggling to articulate what I mean by responsibility and which are its different aspects. After looking at how responsibility is discussed in project management literature and to how its meaning is articulated in the Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes & Stevenson, ed., 2003), I turned to other sources, such as Bovens's (1998) discussion of responsibility in the context of complex organisations. Bovens described responsibility as a container concept, a word that can have many equally plausible but incompatible definitions. Drawing on Hart (1967), Bovens identified five forms of responsibility, which cover the most important aspects of responsibility in an



organisational context. These five forms<sup>9</sup> are responsibility as cause (associated with a causal connection), responsibility as accountability (in the sense of liability), responsibility as capacity (as an ability to act), responsibility as task (associated with role and duty) and responsibility as virtue (in the sense of the positive value judgement associated with being responsible).

These forms can be grouped as active and passive responsibility. I use the expression active responsibility as responsibility which has the potential to lead to action, both in the form of responsibility as virtue and responsibility as capacity. Passive responsibility expresses the other side of responsibility, a retrospective account for what has happened, taking the form of accountability and responsibility as cause. Responsibility as task binds together these two sides of responsibility, being associated with both its passive and active form. In my Project 4 I point out how these two sides of responsibility often come associated, both because one is more likely to be held accountable after having the opportunity to behave responsibly and also because one can take active responsibility in the realisation that one will eventually be held accountable.

Through this exploration, responsibility became to me a way to articulate the experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something, associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond, to give account for it, justifying one's actions or omissions. This understanding directed my attention to how responsibility emerges in interaction, because there is always someone who asks the question, even if that someone is oneself. Experiencing responsibility is then about dealing with the uncertainty of what it means to be responsible while I engage in continuous unpredictable human interactions. It is also about choosing, deciding what to do when conflicting responsibilities arise.

This is the framework which emerged through my enquiry. I will now point to and develop the novel insights that I want to propose. Examining responsibility from a new angle, I will explore how it is an aspect of power relating, how it is negotiated through communicative

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<sup>9</sup> These forms of responsibility are discussed in more depth in the section *Articulating different aspects of responsibility* of my Project 4.



interaction, how it is part of emergent ideologies and, finally, how articulating responsibilities is related to project control.

### **Responsibility as an aspect of power relating**

How is responsibility related to power? In order to answer this, I will first make clear how I understand the notion of power. I started discussing power in my Project 2, examining project meetings as 'status games' (Johnstone, 1981), in which each player tries to play out his or her intentions raising or lowering his or her apparent status. Drawing from his theatre background, Johnstone argued that power was about doing and not about being. I endorsed this point of view, challenging the taken-for-granted understanding that individuals *are* more or less powerful, as if their power was something they owned. In that project, however, my argument against that perspective is limited to a restatement of Elias's (1970) claims that power is not an amulet that one might take, but instead it is an integral part of human relationships. Along the project, though, I express how I often feel powerful, for instance, while facing the Dot Com CEO in the section 'An unexpected comeback', or powerless, as when I describe how my attempted manipulation failed in the section 'In the middle of a power struggle'.

In my Project 3 I engage with power again, this time motivated by the dynamics of power and influence at play during the project start up. After returning to Elias's notion of power arising in interaction and being part of it, I reflect on how the chances of power can be unequally distributed, therefore influencing how the balances of power may be sustained or shift. The way I was thinking then about power was quite focused on its transactional nature, an ongoing real-time power game where each one played out his or her intentions. I think I was seduced by this metaphor of understanding power as if it was a game, probably because I considered myself to be a proficient player in that game. As I see it now, power is a lot more about interdependency than it is about playing games.

It was in Project 3, though, that I first related power to accountability, wondering if feeling accountable might be a restriction to the power games, as people were aware of what they might win or lose while accounting for a success or for a failure. Controlling people through accountability is actually something which is proposed by influential project



management experts, such as J. Rodney Turner: 'the key factor in influencing anyone to do anything is to ensure that the rewards for doing it are greater than the risks' (Turner *et al.*, 1996, p.128). Responsibility is actually commonly referred to in project management literature as a means to control. That is the case when Pinto (1998) equates it with organisational politics or when Turner (*ibid.*) takes his argument further, warning project managers that they must develop influence strategies in order to survive having the responsibility without having the authority. Burke (1999) makes a similar argument around what he calls the 'responsibility-authority gap'. Dennis Lock, who has recently published the eight edition of his successful project management textbook (2003), takes a slightly different stand referring to the allocation of responsibilities as one of the key tasks of a project manager.

But is responsibility only a rational means to control or manipulate people, as these arguments imply? I think it is not. Responsibility, for me, is about commitment, enabling and constraining, and that is how I came to associate it to power relating. Having to account for my actions and omissions, I am constrained by responsibility, in the sense that it reduces the scope of possible acceptable actions. At the same time, by the positive value attached to acting responsibly, responsibility enables action as it provides the possibility to take active responsibility. Responsibility as an enabling constraint is much more about interdependency than it is about power games. Responsibility becomes an everyday occurrence, a reciprocal force present whenever people relate to one another and communicate.

While writing Project 4 I found this experience particularly evident while negotiating responsibilities for new roles. What will be my role? What will I be responsible for towards you? How will I be able to count on you? Engaging in negotiating the responsibility associated to a role (responsibility as task, as it was identified before), I was aware that I was influencing my present and future chances of power. I was participating into the patterning of the process of relating with the manager with whom I would be working with. I was influencing and being influenced on what I would be liable for and towards which forum.



The notion of responsibility as interdependency is clearly related to Elias notion of 'figurations' (Elias, 1970). Elias chose this new concept to express the emergent and evolving patterns of interdependent human beings as they pattern and are patterned by their interaction. My argument is that responsibility is a very important theme in that patterning, especially in the context of my practice in the field of project management.

### **Negotiating responsibility as communicative interaction**

As responsibility is part of the patterning of my interactions with the people I engage with, it is also part of my conversations with those people. So it is through communicative interaction that I participate in the ongoing negotiation of responsibility, taking active responsibility and being held accountable. But how does the meaning of being responsible come to be formed? How can I understand the way in which it is part of my conversations? Or, what do I mean by meaning?

The common sense understanding of what 'meaning' means is largely influenced by cognitivist psychology (Bateson, 1972) and by its understanding of how knowledge is formed. According to that point of view, human brains process information much like a computer does. The information is stored as electrical impulses and may be transmitted through symbols, for instance, in written or vocal form, following a sender-receiver model. The meaning is therefore embedded into the symbol, as a shared code of communication. Curiously enough, computers were developed following this perspective how the human brain might work. Later, cognitivist psychology took up computers as a metaphor for how the human brain functioned in a rather circular argument (Stacey, 2003, p.45).

I will not engage into a discussion of how the human brain functions. I will, however, question if meaning is ascribed to the symbol. If meaning was an intrinsic part of the symbol, why would I feel the need to explain what I mean by meaning? It would have been obvious; there would not have been any chance of misunderstanding. Misunderstandings are often an opportunity to explore new perspectives and reach new meaning (Fonseca, 2002). Novelty often arises from the exploration of misunderstandings. As I illustrate in my Project 2, as I had never been to a call centre before engaging in that project, I had the



opportunity to engage in conversations which led us to find new ways to work. This is why I do not accept cognitivist psychology as an appropriate way to understand meaning.

George Herbert Mead (1934) had an alternative point of view on the subject. As part of his theory of mind, self and society, Mead argued that meaning emerges as people respond to each other's gestures, gesturing in response. His argument is that meaning is neither in the gesture nor in the response, it rather emerges with that movement. I first engaged with Mead's thinking while reflecting about a conversation that I narrate in my Project 2<sup>10</sup>, in which a shared sense of trust had been established. I argued then that trust was the meaning emerging from that conversation of gestures and responses.

Mead (1934) argued that individual mind and social interaction are different aspects of the same fundamental phenomena: communicative interaction in the medium of significant symbols. That interaction takes place in the form of a conversation of gestures and responses, which together constitute the social act from which meaning emerges. A central argument of Mead's thinking is that our own sense of self consciousness emerges from the conversation of gestures and responses between the 'I', the subject, and the 'me', the subject taking itself as an object. Mead argues that each human being takes the attitude of specific or generalised others towards himself as the voice of the 'me', thus internalising his perception of how the generalised other might respond to the 'I' in what he call the 'I'/'me' dialectic. That perception of what might be the generalised tendency of a number of people to react to one's gesture is developed socially, through the interactions in which we engage.

Taking this reflection further, in my Project 4 I point to how responsibility can arise as meaning from the 'I'/'me' dialectic, being also present as part of that dialectic as the 'I' is in the position of being held accountable towards the 'me'. In this sense, I argued that responsibility is embedded in communicative interaction, as we respond towards external and internal forums. When I feel those forums internalised in the form of the 'generalised

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<sup>10</sup> See the section *Developing the campaign* from my Project 2.



other', responsibility becomes part of the 'I'/'me' dialectic, as the 'I' is in a position of being held accountable towards the 'me', that represents that 'generalised other'.

But responsibility is not necessarily nor even commonly experienced as something individual, it is often shared. Sharing responsibility is seen as something dangerous. As Bovens puts it, 'as the responsibility (...) is scattered across more people, the discrete responsibility of every individual diminishes proportionately' (Bovens, 1998, p.46). My experience in the context of project management illustrates how people fear making more than one person responsible for one thing, equating collective responsibility with no responsibility. Facing this problem, people tend to collapse their position in one of the extremes: either locating responsibility in the individual, as Bovens (1998) does, ascribing to each individual his share of common responsibility; or locating responsibility in the group, as McNamee & Gerden (1999) do, refusing from holding individual people accountable.

I believe that these ways of examining shared responsibility collapse a paradoxical process into its extremes. Understanding it as a paradoxical process, in which the group and the individuals are responsible or not responsible at the same time, one can focus on how sharing responsibility fosters the opportunity for more interaction and further negotiation. For instance, one can be accountable for a collective task and, at the same time, not feel actively responsible for it. Collective passive responsibility does not necessarily imply or evoke active personal responsibility, which challenges the taken for granted understanding that holding people to account will influence them into taking responsibility.

My conclusion is that responsibility is fundamentally relational, embedded in the communicative interaction that we establish with other people as well as with ourselves. What 'being responsible' means is then continuously being negotiated and eventually changing as we engage in our everyday conversations at work. Individual and collective responsibilities offer plenty of opportunities for misunderstandings and for shifting power balances, therefore constituting an important theme for our communicative interaction at work.



## **Responsibility as part of emergent ideologies**

It seemed somewhat obvious to me that responsibility was related to a sense of commitment and therefore to an ethical or moral evaluation. I struggled, though, to find a way to discuss it. It was only in one of the last drafts of my Project 4 that was able to articulate how I might relate responsibility to the notions of values, norms and ideologies. As I see it now, it is one of the most important aspects of my experience of responsibility. Discussing my experience of responsibility would not be that relevant if being responsible was not such an important norm and value in organisational life. I will explain how I am using these concepts.

Drawing on Joas (2000), I refer to norms in the sense of constraints with an obligatory character, providing criteria to judge desires and actions in terms of what is right or wrong. I understand values differently, also drawing on Joas (2000), as 'voluntary compulsions'. I experience values when I judge desires, actions or even norms in terms of good or bad, when I feel that I can do no other (a compulsion), even if no one forces me to do that (therefore being voluntary). Understanding values as voluntary compulsions points to its paradoxical nature, being voluntary and compulsory at the same time.

As I engage in this discussion in my Project 4, I argue that responsibility is becoming a particular kind of value, a 'cult value' as Mead (1923) articulated it. Cult values are incommensurable, too large to be measured or compared with other values. Cult values therefore become unquestionable, even a condition to be part of the group to which those values have become ascribed. Mead argues that cult values are ideals, because when any value is taken into our everyday interactions, influencing our actions, we become aware of the conflicts between the different values present in a situation. With cult values that aspect is ignored as they are thought of as overriding universal norms. Responsibility may take the form of a cult value, when what it means to be responsible is considered above discussion and when being considered irresponsible is taken up as a criterion for exclusion from a group.

Working at an organisation, being responsible is both a norm and a value. It is a norm because having to account for one's actions is obligatory in several occasions. It is the right



thing to do, particularly in the context of project management and its regular control meetings. Although more related to passive responsibility, being actively responsible for what is part of one's role is also a norm in an organisation. Being responsible is a value too, particularly in the sense of responsibility as virtue. The notion that being responsible is good is deeply embedded, for instance, in myself, often feeling that I can do no other than taking responsibility, both active and passive.

Stacey (2004) drew on Joas (2000) and Mead (1923) to propose a notion of ideology as 'a whole that is simultaneously the obligatory restriction of the norm and the voluntary compulsion of value, constitutes the evaluative criteria for the choice of communicative interactions and the sustaining of power relations' (Stacey, 2004, p.10). Organisations provide the forums for one to account for conformity towards explicit or implicit norms, thus functionalising responsibility in the sense of accountability as an obligatory restriction. At the same time, responsibility as virtue is taken as a value, a voluntary compulsion (paradoxical in itself) to act responsibly. Responsibility can then be understood as a value and a norm at the same time in the context of project management, an ideology sustaining the power relations involved in project work and providing criteria to evaluate the choices of communicative interactions.

### **Articulating responsibilities and project control**

The theme of control has been a pervasive theme throughout my enquiry. In my Project 1, it is explicitly present through the discussion of how uncertainty is part of organisational life. I tried in that project to ground on the sciences of complexity my argument against how mainstream management literature prescribed ways to be 'in control'. But even if I was arguing against the possibility of being in control, I expressed in that project my own emotional response of frustration when the person that I saw as the leader (the prime minister) was unable to be in control. That division between my rational argument and my emotional responses runs throughout that project, as if I was speaking from the position in which I thought I should be, instead of expressing how I felt about those issues.

Probably because it was difficult for me to sort out that ambiguity, I re-iterated the theme of control in my Project 2, when I equated it with a feeling of being helplessly in charge.



feeling unable to fulfil my own expectations of control. I intended to prove my competency and the means to do that was showing that I was able to take control of what I was in charge of. When I suddenly felt that something was out of control, I panicked, equating not being in control with incompetence and taking it as a personal failure. Again, as in Project 1, my writing was divided from the emotional responses that were present in what I was writing about. I related control to leadership, seduction and manipulation, referring that there was an ethical questioning about it, but never really dealing with that questioning.

My emotional response to control was a bit different in my Project 3. I was proud of being able to keep a complex project under control, delivering the expected results. My discussion of control was mostly grounded on how managers had a cybernetic perspective of control, using methods to give positive or negative feedback to their workers, in order to steer the company towards success. I drew on a conversation with a person I was working with to relate management and project management in particular to systems thinking and cybernetics. I argued against that point of view, introducing instead the way in which patterns are co-created in groups, drawing on Elias (1998) and Mead (1934) to argue against the ideology of 'hierarchical control through monitoring of facts and figures', as Streatfield (2001) put it. I was unable, however, to make a convincing point to explain why I was so obsessed with control myself.

I believe that I can make it clearer now. Being in control was part of my ideal of what it meant to be a competent manager. I think it still is, even if I am gradually valuing more in myself and others the courage to face the uncertainty and the ambiguity without pretending to be in control. In my Project 4 I present a different view of control when I discuss how people try to control and constrain each other's responses to their actions. Particularly, I examine how articulating responsibility through planning and functionalising it through meetings of the project team were indeed ways to try and control. What function do plans and control meetings serve in my experience?

Planning is a very useful tool of my professional practice. Through planning I can engage in meaningful conversations with myself and with the people I work with, exploring how to fulfil an intention. But planning can also be a defensive behaviour. In my Project 2 I describe how I turned to planning when I was feeling that I could not control or grasp what



was going on. My plans were not fulfilled but I felt better after writing on paper what I thought the future might be. It seemed as if the intention was a step closer to be fulfilled. Project management takes planning as a fundamental tool to fulfil its promises of being the most effective way to control change, as the Project Management Body of Knowledge (Dixon, 2000) claims.

My argument about this issue is that project planning can be interpreted as a process of articulating narratives to make sense of how we share responsibility. A project identifies who is supposed to do what and in which timeframe. A plan can also serve as a symbol of commitment, as if it was an external and physical manifestation (through ink and paper) of an internal commitment, ready to be used by the forum towards which people will be held accountable. Planning provides a structure for the negotiation and articulation of responsibility.

When a plan is taken up in a control meeting people are invited to expose themselves as having or having not fulfilled their responsibilities on time. In my projects 2, 3 and 4, I narrate how such meetings evoked in me emotions of shame, fear, embarrassment or anger. I felt subject to an examination which purpose was to make sure that the project manager was controlling what I was doing. That made me gradually understand those control meetings as disciplinary arenas, a panopticon of surveillance (Foucault, 1975), providing the stage for everybody to be exposed in their failures, an arena where shame was present as a result of that exposure. I related that experience to Foucault's notion of discipline, in the sense of punishment or coercion, as a technology of power.

Foucault describes the process of examination as being part of the techniques of discipline. I believe project control meetings fit perfectly into his description of the process of examination: 'a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish' (Foucault, 1975, p.184). It is through the visibility that the process of examination makes it possible to differentiate and to judge. That is precisely what is done in a control meeting: each person's work gains visibility and is classified into categories, thus objectified. Then the individual can be subject to corrective measures, which may take the form of punishments. Indeed, the experience of being publicly exposed as not being competent



after failing meeting a deadline is in itself the most common form of punishment that I have experienced or observed.

This shows how responsibility is related to power and control, while planning provides the context for disciplinary processes in project management. When control meetings are held, the plan is part of a process of examination. Performance is objectified in relation to what had been planned, thus enabling a classification of subjects and appropriate punishments or rewards. This way to try and control what happens in the project is not inescapable, as the events I narrate in the latter part of my Project 4 show. its workings can be subverted.



## Conclusions

This whole synopsis is, in itself, the conclusion of this portfolio. There are, however, concluding questions to which I want to answer as clearly as I can. First, I want to summarize how I came to understand the process of responsibility in the context of project management. While answering to that, I want to revisit my key themes, putting my insights together. Then, I want to account for how this understanding has changed and influenced my practice. In order to answer that, I will highlight the implications of my research to my way of working. That will also allow me to make clear what my contribution to knowledge is. Finally, I want to point to how my research can be further developed.

### **How have I come to understand the process of responsibility?**

The main insight that I draw from the emergent exploration of my experience is that responsibility is a very important theme in my professional practice, which is based on the discipline of project management. As a theme, responsibility is taken up in conversation over and over, being part of how I influence and of how I am influenced by others. What I propose is an understanding of responsibility in the context of project management based on ideology, power, surveillance and control. My position is informed by the understanding of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating.

I came to articulate responsibility as an experience of feeling a compulsion to do or not to do something, associated with the event or the expectation of having to respond, to give account for, justifying one's actions or omissions. In this sense, I drew attention to how responsibility can take active and passive forms. I use active responsibility to refer to the forms of responsibility which have the potential to lead to action, such as responsibility as virtue or responsibility as capacity. As passive responsibility, I refer to the retrospective account of what has happened, in the forms of accountability and responsibility as cause. I also mention responsibility in the form of task or role, which is associated both to the passive and active sides of responsibility.



Responsibility is part of power relating between individuals in the context of organisations and, more specifically, in the context of project management. My point of view is that responsibility is about commitment; enabling and constraining action. In this sense, responsibility reduces the scope of possible acceptable actions while enabling action through the positive value attached to 'acting responsibly'. This led me to argue that responsibility is a crucial theme in the pattern of interdependency that is constantly reconfigured as human beings interact, patterning their interaction.

Pointing to how responsibility emerges in interaction, I claimed that it is fundamentally relational, in the sense that it emerges in communicative interaction, in a process of continuous negotiation. What it means to be responsible, with the positive value attached to it, is then negotiated, in a paradoxical process of continuity and transformation. As we engage in our everyday conversations in the context of participating in a change project, we are continuously making sense and changing the sense of what each one of us is responsible for.

In organisations, responsibility arises both as a norm (an obligatory constraint) and as a value (a voluntary compulsion). In this sense, it becomes part of the emerging ideologies, being a very important criterion for the choice of communicative interactions and for the sustaining of power relations. Surveillance-based management techniques, which are prevalent in the field of project management, provide the forums towards which one is held to account for conformity to the organisation's explicit and implicit norms, setting the context for attempts of functionalising passive responsibility as a means to control. In this sense, responsibility sometimes takes the form of a cult value (Mead, 1923), an incommensurable value that becomes a condition to be part of the group to which that value has become ascribed, therefore patterning the configurations of power relating (Elias, 1970; 1998).

Planning as a tool of project management can be interpreted as a process of articulating in writing how we share responsibility, thus sustaining the implicit power balances. Using the plan as a tangible symbol of commitment, project control meetings can then serve as a panopticon of surveillance to constitute the project team members as subjects to a



disciplinary process. These processes can lead to defensive patterns and to the avoidance of taking active responsibility, thus subverting the intentions underpinning it.

This is a novel understanding of the process of responsibility in the context of project management, drawing attention to how it is related to communicative interaction, power relating, emerging ideologies, disciplining processes and to the emotional responses it evokes.

### **How has this understanding changed and influenced my way of working?**

Understanding my experience of responsibility in relation to communicative interaction, power relating, emerging ideologies, disciplining processes and emotional responses has shifted my practice, enabling me to work differently. As my research progressed, I became more keenly aware of how responsibility is important in my work relationships and how I participate in the way in which it is used as a means to try and control. Through that process, I became aware of my own emotional responses related to how I take up responsibility. That made me become more self aware and selective in choosing which responsibilities I would take on myself and in understanding why I was doing it. Gradually, that process led me to relate to my work colleagues more openly, being able to express a wider range of emotional responses, enabling the emergence of different (and better, in my current opinion) work patterns.

I started to engage differently in project work, discussing and negotiating more openly what each one of us is responsible for, for instance, while engaging with project planning. My gestures have been often responded to, thus enabling different conversations to emerge about what we are doing in our workplace, conversations in which emotional responses are acknowledged instead of being covered up. That enables me now to respond differently to other people's gestures, being able to conduct and participate in project control meetings differently, exploring together how the work can be done instead of disciplining into conformity. In those situations, I feel more aware of what is happening and less anxious about constantly having to prove myself.



## **What is my contribution to knowledge and what can be further researched?**

Narrating my experience, I illustrate how experiencing responsibility in the context of project management evokes emotional responses, such as shame, guilt or pride, which are not accounted for nor referred in project management literature (Pinto, 1998; Turner, 1999; Burke, 1999; Dixon, 2000; Lock, 2003). This portfolio contributes to expand that literature, focusing on the emotional aspects of project management which are left out in its straight-forward and rational approach.

My enquiry has enlightened my practice and I believe that it can contribute to enlighten other people's practice through their own processes of reflecting and critically engaging with my understanding of my experience, contrasting it with their own experience. As project management becomes an increasingly important technique of management, I think that being more keenly aware of how responsibility can be related to power, communicative interaction, ideologies and control can contribute to the evolution of other people's practice.

My contribution to knowledge is then my changed practice and what informs that change, that is, what emerged from the exploration of my experience which this portfolio constitutes. My contribution emerged from the critical appraisal of my own experience and the sense I made of it. Some practitioners may find it insightful, useful, or interesting, thus becoming part of their own critical engagement with their practice. In this sense, this portfolio is a gesture which can open up the opportunity for a wide range of unpredictable responses which may take this research further.

Without trying to anticipate those responses, I can express how I would like deepen my enquiry about power in relation to responsibility, engaging further with Elias's and Foucault's works, considering how their thinking is being reinterpreted by contemporary authors, such as Smith (2001) and McNay (1994). I also think that it might be worth exploring further how responsibility and planning have become cult values (Mead, 1923), emerging as a requirement to be accepted in today's organisations. I am also open to the critical reactions that my research may evoke, particularly from project management practitioners who espouse other perspectives of management.



I believe that relating the experience of responsibility in the context of project management to a complex responsive processes perspective of communicative interaction, power relating, emerging ideologies, cult values and disciplining processes can be a further source of insights. I hope that this research work may contribute to it.



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