A Reappraisal of the Involvement
of an Internal Consultant
in Processes of Culture Change
in a Public Transport Organisation

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Abstract

Key words: culture change, complex responsive processes of relating, internal consultant, temporary leadership, local interaction, social control, conflict, spontaneity, experience, reflexivity, appreciative leadership, reflective narrative, managerialism, systems thinking

Key authors: Dewey, Elias, Geertz, Mead, Mowles, Schein, Shaw, Stacey

Reappraising the involvement of a consultant in processes of culture change

In the dominant management discourse, managers and consultants are credited with the ability to move their organisation in a planned, controlled way towards an idealised future. The assumptions underpinning this discourse include the following: organisations are thought of as systems that can be designed and steered in an intended direction; culture is seen as a control system to align employees' conduct in support of the organisation's strategy; consultants are viewed as experts in designing and implementing effective and efficient interventions, being on top of the process. These assumptions are grounded in the natural sciences of certainty, in which rational, formative and linear causality are presumed. I argue in this thesis, through a reflexive enquiry of my own practice, that these assumptions do not sufficiently resonate with my experience as an internal consultant on leadership and culture change. I am offering a critique of the dominant way of understanding organisations, culture and control, with the implication of coming to reappraise the involvement of a consultant in processes of culture change.

In understanding organisations to be self-organising patterns of human interaction, culture is a social phenomenon, as it continually emerges as social control in the day-to-day local interactions of people making sense of experience. Using webs of significance, present in one's personal history and in society, people interpret and give order to their life as they negotiate and evaluate their engagements together. In

their engagement, participants will negotiate how to functionalise general values in particular situations that involve differences and can cause anxiety or even conflict. In this process of negotiation and evaluation, they are forming and being formed by each other. In this interaction no one is in control, determining in a predictable way what will happen. The participants have an influence that impacts on potential next steps in their interaction.

An internal consultant's involvement is in facilitating these processes of local interaction, enabling participants to have the conversations they tend not to have themselves, perhaps due to the anxiety of the interaction being unpredictable and predictable at the same time while no one is in control of the process or the outcome.

A consultant is, as fellow participant, involved in the interaction while forming and being formed by it. He[1] is at the same time detached: by inviting participants to work with and reflect on their experience of engaging, he enables reflexive awareness of what they are involved in together. The internal consultant, through temporary leadership, facilitates the conversation by focusing on the present, and working with differences, allowing the potential for novelty and change to occur. This temporary leadership is not a designated role or the authority of being the expert, but emerges in social interaction, through recognition and acceptance of participants acknowledging the consultant as leader in having a stronger influence than others.

I propose that this alternative perspective does not offer a set of techniques, a causal framework to improve organisations in an intended and controlled way, as supposed in the dominant discourse. Rather, the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating enables a better understanding of human interaction processes; of culture emerging as social control and consulting as a social process, within the paradoxes

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[1] Here and elsewhere, I use the masculine form for convenience only, referring to both genders.

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of predictability and unpredictability, of being and not being in control, and of stability and change at the same time. It requires an internal consultant to assume a form of temporary leadership by enabling participants, through reflexive understanding of their experience, to be responsible in a critically aware manner of the ways in which they influence the next steps of engaging.

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Introduction

My motivation to participate in the Doctorate of Management programme (DMan) was my ambition to come to a better understanding of organisational life, and specifically of my work as an internal consultant on leadership and culture change. I was experiencing a gnawing discomfort with the ideas and methods that I had used for many years, as they no longer sufficiently resonated with my day-to-day experience as a consultant. It was in writing Project 1 that this motivation became explicitly apparent, while enquiring into the assumptions that had steered my thinking and acting. In a taken-for-granted way, I had pursued the dominant perspective on organisations and on consulting in which the assumptions of predictability, control and certainty are central, and where organisations are thought of as systems. While continuing to acknowledge the genuine importance of the theory of systems thinking, I became critical of its assumptions as I began to question their applicability to my way of participating as an internal consultant in processes of human interaction.

This thesis describes the process of coming to challenge the dominant assumptions, researching into ideas on culture, change and control, as well as their influence on the expectations regarding the role of a consultant. I enquire into my experience as an internal consultant, using reflexive narratives of my work to describe the movement of my thought from considering myself to be in control of processes of change towards rigorously exploring my involvement as a consultant in processes of local interaction.

The context

The public transport organisation I work for, founded in 1834, has a monopoly concession to use the main infra network in the Netherlands until 2015; it would like to retain this concession beyond that date. In the company's negotiations with the Dutch government, three issues are crucial to their bid to retain the concession: good business performance, customer satisfaction, and employee involvement. On all three issues, improvement is required.

Central to the thesis is my work in facilitating the organisation in its intention to become an appreciative organisation, where managers lead appreciatively. The essentials of an appreciative organisation cover three main elements. The organisation is to become an appreciative organisation where leadership is characterised – as described in an internal publication – as:

- Being transparent on what is expected of the employees. Therefore, employees will receive information on business issues and on their performance. They will be given clear direction on their performance and how this relates to the strategy of the organisation.
- Paying attention by appreciating the competences of the employees. The personal well-being of employees is a key point of reference. Employees' wishes are taken seriously as an important part of overall organisational objectives.
- Focusing on recognizable manners – our ways of behaving – that allow us to talk about performance, learning and points for improvement. We have zero tolerance on drugs, alcohol, fraud and intimidation.

What becomes apparent in this culture change process (as well in other culture change processes I have been involved in) is that whatever may be intended – in this case, the meaning of 'appreciativeness' – is interpreted differently by those involved. This local interpretation cannot be controlled or fully predicted; the process of change is iterative and cannot simply be facilitated through controlled, designed interventions, with managers and consultants on top of the process. These insights have led me enquire into another perspective, based on the sciences of complexity, as an alternative way to understand and make sense of my experience.

I come to argue that thinking of organisations as complex responsive processes of human relating – taking seriously our experience of change processes being iterative, unpredictable and uncertain in outcome – implies alternative concepts of culture and control. Moreover, this entails a rigorous reappraisal of the role of a consultant. I contribute to this process of reappraising by developing my argument on what I have come to see as characteristic of the involvement of an internal

consultant in processes of local interaction: facilitating participants – through temporary leadership – in working with their experience of getting things done together, in interpreting and making sense of their experience in its context, in order to potentially change the experience. The aim of the involvement is to facilitate coping with uncertainty and the risk of acting into the unknown while experiencing the anxiety of not being in control in the conventional sense.

Research method

My method of research resembles in many ways my method of consulting: a social, reflexive and responsive process of intensifying experience. I use Ryle's (1971) 'thick' narratives (reflections on and interpretations of experience within its context) to explore how we make sense of and interpret our own experience. In my research, I also compare my ideas with those of authors who have contributed to the relevant discourses, and examine and develop my thinking in interaction with peers and members of my cohort on the DMan programme. Although I use my own experience as raw material for my research, it is in the patterning of the narrative themes and through reflection on these themes that readers can discern any general relevance for their work.

Invitation to the reader

This thesis consists of four constituent projects in which I give narrative descriptions of my work as a consultant in processes of culture change and explore ideas of authors relevant to the themes I take up; and a synopsis, in which I attempt to construct a coherent representation of my research. This leads to a description of my argument on the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of local interaction, which differs profoundly from the conventional idea of a consultant as a designated expert; and an account of what I regard as my contribution to ways of thinking and talking about consulting and to the development of the practice of a wider community of professionals.

Being an internal consultant myself, my thesis naturally explores that perspective; but it does so without intending to diminish the relevance of my research findings for external consultants. The position of an internal consultant – being an employee within the same organisation as the colleagues with whom one is working as a consultant – allows for a first-hand understanding of what is going on: one can experience culture emerging and evolving, as a member who is involved as both employee and consultant in many interactions within the organisation. Where appropriate, I will explicitly designate the involvement of an internal – rather than external – consultant in processes of culture change.

I invite my reader to join me on my journey as recorded in the thesis: to experience through my experience; to see how my experience resonates with their own; and to critically appraise alternative ways of thinking about organisations, culture and control in search of a richer understanding of what it is we find ourselves doing in processes of culture change, specifically as an internal consultant.

Project 1

Coming to question the dominant way of thinking about organisations and consulting

Introduction

In this project, I describe how the perspective of systems thinking has been a great influence on me as a teacher, as a professional in educational technology and as a manager of learning and development. Since my focus has changed towards leadership development and culture change, I increasingly recognise the need to critically enquire into the paradigm of systems thinking that I had come to take for granted.

At the end of this project, I will examine questions around the dominant influence that systems thinking continues to exert, and how this is beginning to shape my enquiry into alternative views on organisations, culture and change. Before exploring and reflecting on my work experiences in more detail, I will describe this dominant mode of thinking in the context of my career.

The paradigm of systems thinking

Systems thinking is used by various authors, such as Jackson (2003) and Checkland (1999), as a generic term for various system approaches for solving real-life problems. At university, studying my first book on systems thinking (Kramer & de Smit 1982) helped me to gain insight into objects of study by offering a method and perspective for interpreting them, such as a learning environment or a work situation. Crucial to all approaches is that a system is seen as a whole in terms of its environment, the functioning of which depends on its components and the interactions between these components.

Some approaches in systems thinking, such as hard systems thinking, see a system as actually existing in the world (Ashby 1956; Beer 1985). The system can be modelled, for example using a computer. The reason for doing this can be to solve a problem. A problem is defined as a discrepancy, a gap, between the current state of a system and the desired state (Checkland 1999).

To be able to define the problem and design a process or intervention to fill the gap, systems approaches make the assumption of there being an objective (value-free) position that is external to the system. By making observations from this point (for example, someone examining a central heating system in a house), one can design an intervention (such as adjusting the thermostat) to achieve the desired state of the system (a comfortable temperature in the house). Systems thinking approaches that make this assumption are called 'first-order' systems. Organisational cybernetics (Beer 1985) is one such approach.

In some systems thinking approaches (e.g. Senge 1992), the external observer is positioned in another system, which influences the first-order system at stake. This other system is called the 'second-order' system, and it includes the first-order system. By including another system, the boundaries are expanded. This immediately raises the question of whether there is a limit to this expansion, since there might be an external observer in a third- or fourth-order system. At the time I was introduced to the systems thinking approach, I was not aware of these different orders of system; in retrospect, though, I can see that I often positioned myself as a professional in a second-order system, diagnosing and designing interventions for the first-order system.

Methodologies used in the systems thinking paradigm to intervene into (models of) organisations show similarity in the way they phase activities. Most methodologies contain two main phases, separated in time and often also in the number of people involved: first, the phase of preparation – with problem analysis, goal definition and design of an intervention – where thinking is dominant; next, the phase of acting, implementing and evaluating the intervention. Taken for granted here are the assumptions that one can define a desired state, that there is a reasonable degree of

consensus on the desired state or purpose of the system, and that what is designed will be implemented as planned and result in the projected outcome (predictability).

Both managers and professionals designing interventions for the system can make use of feedback processes in systems thinking. Some approaches include negative feedback in their modelling, where negative feedback counteracts deviations from a goal. Other approaches include positive feedback loops – for example systems dynamics, where positive feedback works as an amplifier. The role of management in systems thinking is twofold: to inspire and persuade others to act in the best interests of the whole organisation, and to be in control of its direction.

In my first job assignments – as a teacher and educational technologist – I followed the paradigm of systems thinking without being aware of it. Aspects of systems thinking – such as solving a diagnosed problem within a system, and designing interventions as detached objective observer in a planned and controlled manner towards a predictable intended outcome – were dominant in my work. I describe my experiences of this in the following section.

Didactics: A methodology of teaching

For a long period, the learning and development of children had been the central theme in pedagogy and learning psychology in the Netherlands, with emphasis on aspects such as mental processes, content and stages of development of the child. With his book *Didactical Analysis* (1969), van Gelder called attention to 'the other side' of learning: the process of teaching, including the role and actions of the teacher. He describes a methodology for this process, *didactics*: a systematic, intentional and continuous support of the child's teacher in their learning process.

By analysing the didactical process carefully and in detail, the actions a teacher should undertake, when designing and executing a lesson, can be defined. Van Gelder's theory on didactics focuses on how a teacher can best support the pupil – the optimal support being defined as efficient, goal-oriented and consistent with the curriculum. Van Gelder (1969: 27) describes the actions of a teacher in a model that has five phases: defining the objectives; determining the actual situation of the

child; planning the way teaching will be delivered (including teaching materials, didactical methods and the sequence of content); implementing the process; and evaluating and measuring the results. This model is a plea for thorough, structured preparation, rational choices and testing the effectiveness of the teaching process through measurement of learning outcomes.

As a teacher-to-be, I found this model useful because it forced me to think ahead, making my choices explicit to myself and others; and it helped me to structure my practice as a teacher. For every lesson, I prepared a didactical analysis scheme based on objectives, materials, methods and interventions. My professors were my sparring partners in the discussion beforehand: had I prepared the lessons well? However, in spite of these discussions, and although the preparations were considered adequate, in practice they often proved otherwise in the classroom. There were many times when the children (re)acted completely differently from the way I had anticipated, and did not fit into my prepared schemes. They were either too tired, too busy or not focused enough to carry out activities such as reading, drawing or observing insects.

This could have demonstrated conclusively to me that, as a teacher, there are many factors at play in the instructional process that can diminish the impact of even the most careful preparations. However, I did not experience this effect. Instead, the feedback that I was given persuaded me that I should improve by preparing even more thoroughly. I did so by preparing several scenario-schemes per lesson, to increase the chance that I could carry out a 'successful' (i.e., as planned) job in the classroom. However, in reality this extra planning did not bring me the success that I had anticipated. Even several prepared schemes for a single lesson were still often insufficient and did not match the actual events.

Since the model of didactical analysis emphasises the preparation of a lesson, rather than its actual delivery in the classroom, I persisted in the belief that the better the planning of what ought to happen in the classroom, the better the instruction process would be. As a junior teacher, in my interactions with the children I was so focused on myself as a professional and on the intended activities that I found it difficult to let go of the prepared schemes and improvise what was actually happening in the

classroom. My preparation had become crucial, and thereby constraining: working with the model skewed my focus too much onto the preparation phase.

With experience, I gained skill in the interaction process of the instruction and my reliance on meticulous preparation became less acute. I became aware of this growing confidence when a colleague came to me one morning when I had just arrived at school. He was visibly agitated: two colleagues had just announced their absence due to illness; a third, without notice, had not shown up at all. He then told me, although he knew that I was just a junior, 'I need to ask you to stand in today, as there are only four of us instead of the usual seven'. My first reaction was the feeling that I also should announce my absence due to instant sickness, but I decided that I would see it as a new experience. So I went into the classroom, anxious, without any preparation, with no knowledge of the starting situation or any input from the children's usual teacher. I decided to collaborate with the children by inviting them to help me construct a programme for the day. They took up this responsible task, and at 4 o'clock I went to thank my colleague for the confidence he had shown in my ability. Unwittingly, he had given me the opportunity to prove to myself that I was capable of improvising successfully on specific content, the class's actual situation, and the teaching process. This experience made me break the vicious circle of over-preparing; from then on, I began to really enjoy the interaction of the instruction process in the moment.

Designing learning interventions

In 1981, a Dutch university launched a 4-year programme in 'Applied Educational Technology'. I joined the first cohort. Its main elements were curriculum development, instrumentation development, methods and techniques. Central to the syllabus was the application of knowledge; models helped this to take place in an effective and efficient manner.

The focus of the course literature was similar to that I had encountered in primary education: understanding teaching processes by analysing and structuring them. But there were two major differences: first, applied educational technology focused on the use of instructional materials, rather than on interaction between instructor and

students. This gave a major emphasis to the quality of the material: materials could be designed for stand-alone use (such as computer-based training programmes), and with a representative, fictitious learner in mind, instead of the interactive teaching process between human beings. Another difference was that the learners that I now focused on were adults working in organisations and not in a process of general development, as was the case with the children. The motivation for these learners within organisations to develop themselves was often exclusively based on the fact that they were occupying a job but were not performing as well as they were supposed to.

The authors I was introduced to at the university used the systems thinking approach (e.g. Kramer & de Smit 1982; Romiszowski 1983). In line with this paradigm, an educational technologist will exercise their profession as an external observer to the system, observing the system, its characteristics, the current state and input, and the desired output. Within the profession of an educational technologist, the object of the intervention is the state of the system in which learning, teaching and change processes take place. By studying the feedback, the professional can adjust the intervention, the processes. Furthermore, it is supposed, doing so will produce the necessary modifications to improve the performance of the system.

In an organisational setting, the learner is supposed to develop more competent behaviour by being trained in knowledge and skills that support them in their job. This systems approach focuses on solving practical problems, since the gap between actual and desired state is defined as problematic. Checkland and Poulter (2006) stress the importance of tackling perceived problematic situations in an organised way; they offer a method – the soft systems methodology – that is action-oriented, where the action will bring improvement. Interventions in education and training could be seen as an action of repair to improve situations and to solve a problem: the malfunctioning of the (sub)system.

The systems thinking paradigm helped me to structure the complex world of an organisation, by setting boundaries to keep focus and by rigorously dividing situations into a dichotomy of 'actual (unwanted)' and 'desired (good)' states. Just

like learning to handle a machine or use a tool, desired learning outcomes can be set out in detail. The systemic way of working with several types of variables that influence the system, and thereby the assignment, also helped me to structure the assignments. Kramer and de Smit (1982) determine five types of variable; of these, input (elements of the learning interventions), system state (the current state of the system, e.g. the starting situation one has to deal with as teacher) and output (learning results) variables are most important in this situation.

Romiszowski (1983) transfers the success of the systems thinking paradigm from organisations and disciplines that he indicates as complex systems, to the complexity of human education and training. He is convinced of the success of the systems approach in problem-solving (ibid.: 11):

> It has been used successfully in vastly different areas such as electronic engineering, product design, economics, military projects, ecology, education and training. The factor in common between these areas is that they are concerned with complex systems. Hence the systems approach is essentially a way of thought, a tendency to think about problems in systems terms. But it is also a methodology: a scientific method applied to complex systems.

Based on my own experience, I would question this. I have found systems thinking easy to apply to vocational and basic skills training, for instance due to the highly specific desired learning outcomes and the way it helps to model the organisation or the situation in which the actual intervention will take place.

An example that proves the applicability of the systems thinking approach was my assignment to develop instructional materials on how to bone a pig's shoulder. The competences that make a butcher a good boner were relatively easy to define from accounts by experienced butchers. It is determined, for example, by the amount of meat that can be taken from a pig's shoulder and the size of the pieces of meat; but also by the time it takes the butcher to do the job.

However, it is not always the case that the actual and desired state is easy to determine and that the variables are clear and explicit. I experienced that for less tangible interventions, such as developing interpersonal and social skills in leadership programmes, setting the norm and outcome for the right desired situation is far more difficult. Although serious attempts have been made – including by myself – to state desired outcomes in this area, such as lists of competences, I am dubious about the adequacy of these lists and their quality as norms. I envisage a considerable difference between defining the desired competences of a butcher when boning a pig's shoulder and defining the desired performance and behaviour of a manager.

The far more complex processes of teaching and learning social and leadership skills, with wide variation in what might happen during the interventions and often with unexpected and unplanned outcomes, in my opinion cannot be handled fully within the systems thinking paradigm. I will come back to this later in this project.

An engineering approach to learning interventions

I began work at Philips Electronics, a company that spends a lot of money on training activities worldwide and is familiar with the use of technologies in its core processes. I joined the company as an educational technologist, and was involved in activities to enhance the efficiency of training programmes by developing instructional materials such as checklists, toolkits, simulations and games. Since a lot of money was spent on training activities, and since business competition was tough (especially from Asian countries), being highly efficient was also necessary in training. I tried to optimise the instruction processes by standardising them, by making blueprints and scenarios. Optimising the processes was also seen in the core processes of the company: the total quality systems ISO 9000 and TQM were being implemented throughout the organisation. There was a tendency to make processes as explicit as possible and to make sure that they could be repeated time and time again with the same, almost predictable, outcome and effect. This was also expected of the training and development function: it fitted unquestionably into the company's culture of technical engineering, and I went with this flow. As is

congruent with the systems thinking paradigm, organisations are managed with an emphasis on forecasts and control. By putting emphasis on highly predictable processes that were quality controlled, we ensured that there would be no 'light' visible between forecasts and outcomes.

Doubt did set in, however, when I was assigned jointly with a US colleague to develop a company-wide leadership programme for our American and European managers. The aim of the programme was to raise the quality of their performance in motivating and supporting their employees to improve business results. Together, my US colleague and I began to try to design scenarios using standardised content and materials. We soon found ourselves stuck, as we could not define the desired outcomes of the leadership programme: in what respect should the performance of the managers improve? What behaviour should they display in the organisation to increase motivation and support? We also experienced cultural variations in the approaches taken and definitions of the desired outcomes of the leadership programme.

A major difference was the US tendency to focus – described, for example, by Margerison and McCann (1990) and Pratt (1980) – on redressing a person's weaknesses, to fill a gap or solve a deficit. The European way preferred to emphasise the 'growth' and exploitation of personal talents and potential. The two different stances, problem-solving and talent development, started me thinking about whether or not there was a norm or standard. The notion of problem-solving does imply that we already know what behaviour is good or needed. We spent a great deal of time exploring the current situation and noting its discrepancies compared with the desired situation. We also tried to come to an agreement on the desired situation, to be explicitly stated in the definitive 'good' leadership style and accompanying competences for the management.

Our bilateral struggle was reflected in our meetings with representatives of the organisation, in which we discussed with them the kind of leadership style that they thought would serve the company best. In these meetings, views such as 'it's a personal thing', 'we should not strive for uniformity' and 'many leadership behaviours will contribute in their own way to a better-performing organisation'

were often expressed. There was only limited agreement on whether a better leadership style could actually be learned, and if so, whether this would be the solution to ensure more motivated personnel.

We ended up making a fairly general programme outline with suggestions on how to orchestrate a limited process in which the actual situation, characteristics to improve this situation and outlines of the desired situation would be constructed according to the local situation. In a way, this offered a convenient escape from our dilemma, but paradoxically it also felt like a failure: we offered powerful suggestions for local actions, hoping that condensing the size and complexity of the global system into local systems would be a good solution. However, we also had to give up the idea that this process could be extended more widely when we came to realise that there were too many flavours, interests and other variables to make one programme viable as a global solution.

For me, this was vital proof that the systems thinking paradigm, despite its positive contributions for me as a professional so far, had serious constraints when applied to the development of social skills in order to improve organisations.

Facilitation of learning

Having worked for several years in various roles as a manager and (external) consultant, I joined my current employer, a national public transport organisation, in the year 2000. In the early 1990s, the organisation had tried to become privatised, bringing to an end a 150-year period of management by 'uniformed personnel', with a high degree of autonomy in their work. The privatisation process was halted, and the government remained the only stakeholder; but already, many new and highly educated managers had entered the organisation.

The arrival of these new managers in head office coincided with a decrease in the power of uniformed personnel. At the end of the 1990s, these managers and directors devised new solutions in response to decreasing customer satisfaction and competition on the mobility market in the Netherlands. These new ideas had a considerable impact on the logistics and management of the business process and

were seen as negatively affecting the day-to-day work of personnel, causing anxiety in the organisation and prompting strikes throughout the country. The gap between management and employees became painfully apparent.

In the year 2000, the need to fundamentally improve the organisation and results for customers was recognised as critical. One of the points considered essential for improvement was internal cooperation: working effectively as a team in the chain of business processes. The Board of Directors chose to make a clear statement and announced that a mandatory organisation-wide programme would be implemented, with managers setting an example. The assumption was that improvement of internal efficiency would diminish the anxiety and the gap between management and personnel, and that this in turn would lead to an increase in customer satisfaction. I was invited to play the part of facilitating this major programme, 'Destination Customer'. The programme was, as I understood the invitation, intended to enhance the social skills of all employees and to improve their planning skills.

In my first encounter with the programme manager, it was explained to me what the intentions were for the role of facilitator. I was told about the materials that had been developed by an external organisation of educational technologists, about the model that covered the main content and the method described in binders for each participant. Pretty soon, the table was covered with a pile of the available materials: time schedules per session, schemes with didactical methods, binders for managers and employees, a small pop-up pyramid model showing layers for content (at the top), procedures and interaction processes (broad at the bottom). I was impressed. It gave me, in my first encounter with this organisation, the impression that they knew how to handle these kinds of programmes; they were well prepared.

After scanning through the materials, I asked the programme manager about the specific expectations she had of me as facilitator. She expressed her wish to use the materials to achieve the goals of the programme and the organisation. And there I was: the educational technologist, experienced in designing and developing instructional materials, now confronted with extensive materials produced by other educational technologists. Furthermore, I was expected to use it all exactly as they

had intended. Some years earlier, when focused on vocational training and skills, I might have adopted these materials with great enthusiasm, because I would have been convinced that they would help me to bridge the gap between the actual and the desired state of the system, to cure an analysed problem. However, now, given my experience of assignments on interpersonal skills and leadership development, the emphasis on interaction processes and the ambition to improve the organisation in a broad sense by improvement of the interpersonal skills, I felt very uncomfortable. For the moment, I kept quiet and decided to see how things would turn out.

We discussed the desired outcome of my work, which had to do with bringing all personnel up to the right level concerning interpersonal and planning skills. The programme manager gave me some examples of the lack of competences of our colleagues, but had no data to indicate that such problems were widespread or accounted for the organisation's poor performance. She admitted that not much research had been done on this, but assured me that 'as a whole' the skills level would be worth increasing. She sounded very determined and enthusiastic; I perceived this as an opportunity to work with a highly motivated colleague and to become acquainted with my new work environment.

The programme manager asked me to be facilitator for six departments; with a laugh, but also in a rather low voice, she assured me that these six were 'one of a kind'. This made me curious and anxious at the same time: what on earth could that mean? Were they obstinate, negative, completely unskilled and untrainable…? She could not be more specific, but invited me to arrange an initial meeting with each of the six managers. I decided to take up the challenge and gather information and impressions first-hand from each of the managers. I arranged each meeting via their secretaries and was made welcome at short notice. Each meeting took about two hours and was surprisingly similar to the other meetings. The managers of 'my departments' each started off by explaining why they were not willing to use all 'that stuff' that was mandatory; it was completely irrelevant to what kept them awake at night, worried them and took up all their time. Quite ironically, some complimented the programme office via me for all the clever (but useless) design

work. Although each of them admitted that there was always room for improvement in interpersonal competences, they felt that their real needs were very different.

I was completely taken by surprise by their attitudes and by the similarity among them; on the other hand, I could also understand their different priorities as they described these to me. I had to conclude that none of the departments to which I had been matched were open to this Destination Customer programme. In each of the meetings, directly or indirectly, I was asked whether as facilitator I was willing to skip the programme set-up and offer real facilitation for their actual process and business issues. In a way, it was a professional dilemma: I found myself torn between what the programme manager had asked me to do – executing the Destination Customer programme – and the departmental managers' request for help in facilitating their improvement process. For me, realising positive effects with our efforts in each department was most crucial. So I made a deal with all six managers, and we took off.

I chose, per department, the strategy to intensively co-create an improvement process with each manager and their employees. In no time, an overview was available on points for development, based on critical incidents; interventions were designed on-the-spot during meetings, and often implemented before being explicitly communicated. The improvement process included several items, including one of becoming more skilled in performing together as a team and in the relationship with other departments and customers.

When the contours of our activities became visible, I invited myself to a meeting with the programme manager. As I entered her office, she enthusiastically handed me a small booklet that had recently been produced as supplement to the materials of Destination Customer that I already had. This made me feel awkward, so I chose to lay things openly on the table. I revealed to her what I had encountered and done so far. To my surprise, she kept listening for a long time, hardly interrupting me at all; finally, she asked 'Do you feel that this will help us really improve the organisation?' I heard the question, but even more important the tone of her voice. There was nothing cynical or ironic about it; she was simply enthusiastic about my style and extremely surprised that all the departments were engaged in an ongoing

improvement process. She admitted to me, 'I'd never thought of an improvement process with these kinds of characteristics, so totally different from the Destination Customer programme'.

The programme lasted for quite some time, during which I worked intensively with my six departments on improving their performance. We did not use the materials from Destination Customer, but I am convinced that we contributed to the improvement of the organisation.

Reflection

Having worked for more than 25 years as professional in various contexts, I feel that several aspects are worth reflecting on. One is the influence that the dominant paradigm of systems thinking had on my way of thinking. My experiences with the Destination Customer programme can be seen as an accumulation of my prior experiences – working with the paradigm of systems thinking as a teacher, with the model of didactical analysis; as an educational technologist, designing learning interventions to bridge a gap and to restore balance in the system; and as a consultant, on learning and development around required knowledge, skills and learning strategies. With the Destination Customer programme, I experienced the impact of systems thinking as though prior experiences were enlarged by a microscope: this was a large-scale intervention, involving over 25,000 employees. I will therefore reflect on this programme, and in doing so take prior experiences into account as well.

Behaviourist perspective and systems thinking

The Destination Customer programme may be a good example of understanding experience and change from the perspective of the behaviourist model (Skinner 1945), where change is a matter of developing specific skills in individuals, based on the belief that it is behaviour that changes behaviour. The presumption that dominates is that of the detached observer – in this case, management – who from outside the system can determine what is necessary to solve a defined problem; they

predicted that when the employees extended their skills, the organisation would flourish again due to good cooperation.

Senge (1992) takes another perspective by searching for leverage points in organisations that will help change behaviour over time. His perspective involves changing structures to change behaviour. This was not the perspective taken in the Destination Customer programme, where the idea was to change the organisation through a mandatory programme that involved everyone – both individually and per department – in the system. This belief, congruent with systems thinking, has been dominant in many of the assignments that I have carried out.

Detached observer

By seeing the organisation as a system and by observing the system from the outside, the role of detached, objective observer is created. This role is crucial in systems thinking. In my prior assignments, one could see both the professional (me) and the manager as being outside the system. Argyris and Schön (1978) widen the boundaries of the system to include the observer, so that one could also view the professional or manager as being part of the system: the observer is seen as a system standing outside a lower-order system and designing it. They call this system a second-order cybernetic system; the lower-level system, then, is the first-order system.

The situation of the Destination Customer programme looks quite complex in this regard: there were several layers of managers, and it was the top executives who had initiated the company-wide activity. All other managers were included in the programme – due to the model of cascade and thus being part of the first-order system – and at the same time detached from it, in a second-order system, while assigned to initiate and implement the programme in their own departments.

Role of management

At the time of the Destination Customer programme, learning was not seen as a group process or as interaction among interdependent people. The hierarchy – with

a system as an assembly of subsystems – was the dominant view. The initiative for leading and control of the programme was part of a manager's job. What does this mean for leadership? Stacey (2010) argues that in the dominant discourse the designing and planning for maximal or optimal outcomes are seen as the very essence of the management role. In my role as 'manager in the classroom', I certainly had responsibility for designing and planning good outcomes, with short feedback loops to monitor my success.

Later, in my work as an educational technologist, managers often delegated the direct design and control of interventions in a (sub)system to me; they themselves were staying in control of the total system. In the Destination Customer programme, the managers were both learners – as part of the system to be changed – and, at the same time, leaders who were to implement and control the programme in their own departments. Many authors, like Zaleznik (1992) and Weggeman (1997) make a distinction between the role and focus of leaders versus managers. In the Destination Customer programme, one could see the top executives as leaders who knew what had to be done. One could then expect the head of a department to have the role of manager with the focus of executing and controlling the stated 'what' within that particular department. The fact, however, that the leading executives announced both the 'what' and the 'how' to improve, and ensured that this was extensively described in the instructional materials, somewhat diminished the role of the managers.

Vandendriessche (2007) warns against splitting the role of leaders and managers in organisations. In his view, both leaders and managers should share the role of defining the desired and necessary outcomes (the 'what'), as well as criteria that are relevant. The role of employees is to operationalise the way they are going to achieve these outcomes within the stated criteria (the 'how'). The rationale behind this is the assumption that employees, given their knowledge and experience, will know the best way to reach the stated outcome. Both distinctions in roles – leaders versus managers, or leaders/managers versus employees – split activities into thinking and acting, presuming that the leaders or leaders/managers know best.

Weggeman (1997) even proposes that executives or leaders are paid to act as though they do know best, even if they cannot be sure.

The six departmental managers I worked with in the Destination Customer programme openly doubted the thinking and knowing of their leaders, expressing their view that the proposed mandatory programme and materials would not solve their departmental problems. They acted as leaders of their own departments; in doing so, with my support, they found a method by which they and their employees could define the 'what' and the 'how' together. Their role was not typical of a traditional leader or manager; I would call them stimulators of change and of improvement activities.

Results

Reflecting on the results of the Destination Customer programme, one can conclude that much effort and money has been invested in the organisation. I do believe that many of those involved have taken the opportunity to learn and practise the skills that were originally intended: many people do realise the importance of giving feedback, of planning in the business chain, and so on. However, 10 years later, given the amused reaction that greets any mention of the programme, I think I can conclude that it did not fully have the impact that was expected. My personal belief is that this is because the idea that things such as learning and change can be planned by detached observers, predicted and controlled, is demonstrably unsound. I do wonder, however, if the management, using the paradigm of systems thinking, had or could have seen another option at the time they initiated this programme.

The actual situation

Customer dissatisfaction with the services and products of the organisation remains a point of concern. The huge gaps between management, experts and uniformed personnel are also still apparent, and have been confirmed by the results of employee motivation surveys from the last few years. Nowadays, several ideas are simultaneously expressed within the organisation of which is most dominant:

'Whatever way of intervening we choose is alright, as long as it's not of a company-wide prescriptive nature'. This leads to the following issues on organisational change that require a choice to be made in one direction – or as paradoxical but not mutually exclusive thoughts, where the choice is to have both directions at the same time within the organisation:

- Implementing change through company-wide programmes and/or facilitating local emergence of initiatives and activities
- Being in control as a manager when planning and constructing the future and/or being able to control processes at the same time
- Seeing groups as a collection of individuals with their own personal drives and/or as interdependent people in interaction.

So far, I experience various (culture) change processes, all within the paradigm of systems thinking. The way the familiar paradigm of systems thinking will enable or constrain us in developing the organisation, is still unknown.

Conclusion: Coming to question a dominant way of thinking

Reflecting on my career and my work experiences, I recognise a consistent way of looking at the world: the dominant paradigm of systems thinking. This paradigm has had, and still has, a major impact on how I, and the organisation I work for, look at leadership, learning and change. The systems thinking approach is congruent with the engineering way of managing and acting. But times are changing; former experiences such as the Destination Customer programme have broadened our scope. This causes me to doubt the adequacy of the systems thinking paradigm and its impact for the future. I want to research the implications of this impact, the way it enables and constrains change in an organisation and its effects on leadership (development) and consulting.

One cannot just change a current paradigm; but it might be replaced by another that empirically proves to be more successful. This might, as Laudan (1977) puts it,

cause a crisis. I do not believe we have come to this point, although Stacey (2010) offers much evidence to undermine the continued confidence in the dominant paradigm – describing cases, like the current recession and financial crisis. Yet as human beings, especially leaders, we continue acting as if we can design, plan, predict and control change processes.

The tension of the dominant paradigm is present in my work. My work experience nowadays proves that I am not the only one sensing this tension, although it might be less of a conscious awareness for others. I observe examples of management struggling with giving room to emerging local initiatives and feeling the need to stay in control at the same time. I see many formal learning settings, but also experiments with free-format meetings to encourage interaction on concerns people have about their work, such as in communities of practice (Wenger 1998). I observe employees taking responsibility for their development through interacting with others, and their managers feeling set aside and unable to control the factors that impact on their work.

Further research

Through the DMan programme and reflecting on my experiences so far, I have come to see the possibility of questioning the dominant way of thinking about organisations, leadership and change. In the current dominant discourse the impact of managers –assisted by consultants – on the way employees engage and interact in an organisation is seen as substantial: managers are thought to be able to determine the way employees work.

In my further research, I will reflect on my current work as an internal consultant, as a way of trying to understand what we are doing and move to a different approach to consulting that could be of benefit to colleagues in my profession. Stacey (2007) and Stacey and Griffin (2005) describe a different approach to thinking about our experience of organisations, leadership and change processes: the perspective of complex responsive processes. Here, the emergence of patterns through local human interaction processes is central and managers have another role

than in the systems thinking perspective. I want to pursue in this the possibility of reflecting from a different perspective on the involvement of an internal consultant in change processes.

Project 2

Perspectives on intervening in a public transport organisation with the intention of the organisation becoming appreciative

Introduction

As an internal consultant in leadership development, I am asked to help implement the value of 'appreciativeness', starting with the team managers through my involvement with the team managers' development programme. While the value of developing an appreciative organisation as a way to improve performance is generally accepted, it is not yet decided how to achieve this.

The main question for me in this project is how this change process of 'becoming an appreciative organisation' is taken up in the organisation. I intend to consider how this experience resonates with what various authors have described when writing about comparable processes. My enquiry will take two approaches: one that is familiar to the organisation, and another taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating – an approach that is central to the DMan I am participating in. I will begin to explore their effect on the involvement of an internal consultant.

Background

In the largest business unit of the company (11,000 employees), the national public transportation activities are organised. In this business unit, there is a board of directors, several staff departments and 13 regions, together covering the whole country. Every region has its own Manager Service and Operations (MSO) and

first-line managers. The first-line managers lead the train drivers, conductors and service employees in a region.

In employee motivation surveys, employee satisfaction has been evaluated as inadequate. In particular, the relationship between manager and employee is a point of dissatisfaction, as are team spirit (working together to meet targets) and staff accountability. To increase the social cohesion between manager and employees, as well as among employees more generally, a change of group size has taken place: instead of about 60 people per first-line manager, there are now about 20–30 people per team. The assumption is that closer interaction among team members increases employee satisfaction. Along with various other interventions, this is expected to increase business results and customer satisfaction. The correctness of this anticipated positive relationship does not appear to be questioned; it seems to be a generally agreed assumption.

This reduction in group sizes required more first-line managers, now called team managers. The total group of team managers numbers 350 people. To support their development, a team managers' development programme was initiated: several centrally developed and organised seminars on general knowledge (e.g. customer typology and business strategy), as well as regional activities based on local needs regarding leadership style and management competences. The regional activities are carried out in all 13 regions by selected trainers, one per region; I coordinate these activities.

I argued strongly for the development activities to take place within each region, to facilitate learning that would be related to work and involve close colleagues. In my experience, this makes learning more real and immediate, addressing current priorities and local issues. I have found in many assignments during my career that this 'on-the-spot' creation of learning interventions, in close cooperation with those involved, is crucial to their success. My idea was adopted. In each region, the MSO and the trainer decide to a large extent how they will implement the team managers' development programme. This way of working results in variation between regions; I give priority to effectiveness rather than uniformity.

In bimonthly national meetings, I invite the 13 trainers to exchange experiences and ideas on their activities in the regions. We use techniques such as open space and theme-conversations as methods of interaction, in which the trainers take the lead in choosing what we will focus on. Soon, the MSO and HR advisor of each region join these meetings too.

The Director of Operations, Ellen, has developed her personal vision on organisations and leadership. She is determined to create an appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership style, which she hopes will improve the internal quality of the organisation: the way managers and employees work, interact and perform together. Being an employee myself, I recognise that there is certainly 'room for improvement' regarding the often procedural and mechanistic attitude of managers, based on rules and regulations.

Ellen's vision was inspired by the presentation of an external consultant, about a year ago, on 'neglectful organisations' – using as his example a large municipal bus organisation in the Netherlands. The HR director who attended recognised much of our organisation in the consultant's presentation, and invited him to repeat it for the whole board of directors, of which Ellen is part. Their reaction was that, while recognising common features with the bus company, they preferred not to view our company in such negative terms. Rather than focusing so heavily on how things were now, the board considered it more useful to aim for what we want to be. The term 'appreciative organisation' was quickly agreed to be the central theme of our future direction.

Two Directors of Operations, Ellen and Maria, form a project team in which they both take part, together with a HR advisor and myself. I take part in the project team because of my involvement in the team managers' development programme. The directors want (me) to integrate the idea of the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership into this programme, which is currently being rolled out. I see this as an opportunity, since leadership is getting full attention due to this programme.

An appreciative organisation

We start a process to define what we as an organisation 'want to be'. As a project team, we discuss many real-life situations within our organisation to explore how employees and (team) managers engage with each other and with customers. In several one-hour sessions with brainstorming as the main activity, we construct a rough outline of the basic attitudes and behaviours we seek. An appreciative culture entails transparency in ways of engaging, clarity on mutual expectations, monitoring and providing feedback on one's contribution to the business performance and so on.

Besides the essentials of an appreciative organisation, we agree on the need to keep the change process small and focused instead of large-scale, and simple rather than sophisticated. This is mainly based on former experiences with, for example, the Destination Customer Programme that I described in Project 1; that was a large-scale, pre-designed, mandatory intervention.

As a project team, we agree on the desired change and design a page to summarise the concept. From the first meeting on, we enter into a 'flow' of designing, as described in the following narrative, in our work as a project team.

Defining the value of appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership as a project team

I am expected at the first appointment with Ellen and Maria, the two Directors of Operations, to discuss the appreciative organisation. The HR advisor is absent. Hanneke, a regularly used external consultant, is also invited. We have both received the material on the neglectful bus organisation, used some weeks earlier in the presentation to the board of directors. This information has inspired Hanneke (she tells me in the hallway) with all kinds of ideas on what we can do to make the leadership of team managers appreciative.

Both directors start by describing all kinds of situations they are aware of, in which team managers did not perform well. I conclude from these examples that many team managers are managing in a way that is procedural and mechanistic, following rules and regulations too rigidly. The others agree with this conclusion: team managers lead based on regulations, without taking into account the specific situation they are dealing with, and without taking into account the specific employee. Rules are rules, they seem to think.

Although the examples mentioned are all absolutely problematic and negative, the other three project team members agree immediately that we should not use the term 'neglectful'. First of all, because our organisation is not seen as being as neglectful as the bus organisation; secondly, because this might create a negative feeling, rather than encouraging faith in opportunities for improvement. Maria states that she herself always draws far more energy and inspiration from a positive perspective on the near future than from negative examples based on the present situation. Hearing her say this, I notice that in our meeting it is mainly negative examples that trigger our conversation: we feel the urge to solve problematic situations. Ellen adds that she sees, however, what she would like team managers to do differently in these negative cases: she has a picture in her mind of what the team managers ought to do.

This triggers Hanneke: she suggests making an inventory on how we want the team managers to behave. Ellen immediately sees a connection between three elements and jumps up to write them down on a flipchart. The feeling of consensus is dominant: 'these are the elements that are crucial: provide transparency, pay attention, clear manners of engagement'. They seem quite obvious to me; I cannot think immediately of other elements, but I am not sure whether this covers it all. To check we have captured everything in the stated elements, we explore roughly how each would work in practice. Ellen makes a note of these too. Thus, for example, for the element of 'Provide transparency' she writes: 'We are explicit on what we expect of the employee by telling him our expectations' and 'We are generous in providing information to involve employees in business issues'.

I am surprised how quickly we define these elements; the flipchart is filled in no time. I also wonder whether we really agree on our definitions and whether it can really be as straightforward as it seems right now. If so, I cannot imagine why we haven't taken this up much earlier! I take my chance and ask the other three: 'Are these the three elements that will provide us with managers that will lead in a better way?' All three immediately respond with relief: 'Yes, these are the main points and we can be happy that it is not too complicated, which will make implementation not too complicated as well.' And: 'If we improve on these elements, we will definitely improve as organisation'. We find no time (and probably, as a group, do not feel the need) to check on the defined values by exploring together how we expect them to be taken up in daily practice. We seem to share confidence that (team) managers can do that easily themselves, and that it will not be too difficult for others to understand what we, as the project team, expect them to do when acting appreciatively. Personally, I have my doubts on both elements. My attempt to have us, the project team, make appreciativeness more explicit, more practical for our own work, fails – it is set aside as not contributing anything useful right now, since 'we know what we mean by it'.

All of a sudden the meeting ends; time is up and everyone goes off to another meeting. I find myself leaving the room with many more questions than when I entered an hour ago. I get the feeling that the others have quite a good picture of what to do next; they are in full flow, while I am getting more and more questions. What is it that the others expect me to do to integrate these ideas of appreciative leadership into the team managers' development programme? What would one see if a team manager leads appreciatively?

At our next appointment, we have a paper summarising the outcome of our last meeting, I take my chance to gain more insight into the others' expectations about the implementation. Although neither director is explicit on how to implement the concept, they tell me what they do not want: no organisation-wide programmes as Destination Customer (see my Project 1), nor the use of the term 'neglectful'.

Ellen and Maria both start to mention, again, many examples that they have recently seen or heard of. This, we conclude, highlights the importance and correctness of

our piece of paper. Although this is not expressed out loud, I get the impression that 'it' can now be brought into the organisation, since we have the concept written down. I notice that I do have a kind of picture when reading the concept, but I also have serious doubts that the team managers will have more or less the same intended picture. While expressing this to Ellen and Maria, I suggest organising a meeting with several team managers, to talk with them on their leadership style and way of engaging with their employees, and to explore with them ideas on appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership. Both Maria and Ellen are enthusiastic about this; Maria immediately offers to help me with this meeting.

The meeting, however, does not take place: the regional MSOs reject the idea, insisting that they want to take up the appreciative organisation in their regions themselves. Maria and I are both disappointed, but we also understand the MSOs; after all, they are responsible for their own region and do not want us to intervene.

Reflecting on the meeting as project team

It appears that there is an overall consensus in the project team on how we ideally want our organisation to be and how we want the behaviour of organisational members to be: appreciative. There is a shared assumption that the performance of employees will improve when they are treated appreciatively. This assumption is not questioned at all; it is taken for granted. The project team members quite unconsciously take the stance of focusing on positive examples. Although in our own meetings negative examples of management behaviour are accepted as a motivation for change, we prefer to face the future with an optimistic, positive perspective. This is made explicit in the decision not to focus on improving a neglectful organisation, but rather on the intended, desired future of the organisation: the appreciative organisation. In the project team meetings, this value of appreciativeness is dominant, based on the assumption that what is given attention will amplify: a positive attitude – appreciativeness – will expand into positive attitudes more generally, thus – it is assumed – positively influencing everyone's performance. In this, I recognise the characteristics of Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) 'appreciative inquiry', with its focus on what works in an

organisation and valuing the best of what is. I will explore this more deeply later in this project.

In defining the concept of the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership style in several elements, we as a project team highlight what we value in the way people within the organisation (should) engage. By doing so, the project team – and more specifically, the directors – manage culture, as Alvesson (2002: 1) calls it, by 'underscoring what is important and what is less so and framing how the corporate world should be understood'.

The stated values are generic, very abstract statements of an idealised future state of the organisation, which one cannot, as I see it, argue against. As we do not make the generic statements more specific, as a project team, possible differences in view do not become apparent in our meetings. It can be compared with questioning the value of 'good health for every citizen in the country'; who would argue against this? But differences in how to deal with this general value will become apparent in the way (for example) politicians or doctors interpret and respond to it. For the organisation differences will, I presume, become apparent as soon as individuals start to act out 'appreciativeness'. Then we will see how appreciativeness is interpreted by each individual in specific situations they cope with.

My participation in the project team is due to my activities and role in the team managers' development programme. The project team members expect me to start implementing our ideas on the appreciative organisation in this training activity. Since the activities of the development programme are mainly regional, linked to daily activities of team managers and to their concerns in their work, this seems like a good opportunity to operationalise the concept in every region by making it more specific to each situation. Here I see a role for each MSO, but am not yet clear about exactly what this might be. However, my view of this as an opportunity is confirmed when the MSOs offer to take the lead in their region.

A follow-up with the MSOs

I find it important to further concentrate as a project team on how to progress from here, now that the general concept has been committed to paper. I propose to the project team members that we should invite people to explore the concept together, make sense of it in the actual present, and choose to adjust their behaviour according to their experience. This will provide us as project team with feedback on the concept: Do people understand what we are asking of them? Can they cope with it? – and so on.

As an alternative to the team managers meeting, I suggest organising a meeting with all the MSOs. I aim to create an opportunity for discussing the actual status of leadership competences and quality in their regions, for exchanging ideas with MSOs on how we see the appreciative organisation and how they intend to take it up in their own region.

During this meeting, the MSOs jointly discuss the appreciative organisation. It strikes me that the concept itself is taken for granted: none of the MSOs critically questions the idea. Their focus is on what they plan to do to implement the concept, and on desired behaviour that will be visible in the appreciative organisation: complimenting well-performing employees, highlighting good performance, being transparent on expectations, and so on. The MSOs all seem to agree on the concept and assume that they will play a role in incorporating the values of appreciativeness in their own regions. As with the project team, our meeting is characterised by consensus, action orientation, and harmony.

Thus, central to the narrated situation of the project team, are: reaching shared understandings, developing orderly agreements, and capturing output. We seem to be successful, in that we already have a concept written down in general statements on one page. And the MSOs want to take it up in their regions.

What we do not know yet is how to have the value of appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership taken up in the organisation. What is made explicit is what

the directors want: their message. The way it could or should be brought further into the organisation is still vague.

Themes emerging

The directors, by establishing a project team, have taken the initiative in formulating what they regard as a crucial step for the organisation: becoming an appreciative organisation in which managers have an appreciative leadership style. The defined concepts of the appreciative organisation and an appreciative leadership style are stated as obligatory values for the organisation: important ways of thinking and acting. This is often called organisational culture (see for example Alvesson 2002; Hofstede 1991; Peters & Waterman 1982; Schein 2004): the way people engage (think, feel, and act) within an organisation is based on shared ideas, meanings and beliefs – on what matters to them, both individually and as a group.

We are accustomed to taking up projects and activities in a systemic way, in a conventional change process of step-by-step implementation. The directors took the lead by choosing and formulating the desired values, but it is not clear how – or, indeed, whether – they will take the lead in the process of incorporating the values into the organisation as a whole.

It is possible that there are other ways – than the conventional way – of ensuring that values become enacted in the organisation. Within our organisation, we have limited awareness of and experience with other approaches to change. In this project, I want to enquire into perspectives on changing culture, changing the shared values. I will consider the more familiar systemic, planned way of change, and compare this with the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, where the focus is on human interaction in which people, while acting into the unknown, perpetually and spontaneously co-create organisational futures. I see these two perspectives as profoundly different ways of looking at what it is we are doing in organisations, why we are doing what we are doing, and what assumptions we have.

In this project, I will first examine theories on organisational culture and values to gain more insight into what various authors have said on these topics; then I will explore different perspectives on changing values, and in doing so, consider the consequences of these perspectives on the involvement of a consultant. It brings us to the question of how values are put into practice in the organisation, and what role a consultant has in this regard.

Organisational culture and cult values

Organisational culture and shared values

Over the past decades, organisational culture has been defined in many ways. All of these definitions concern what Schein (2004: 12) describes as 'things that group members *share* or hold in common'. He continues:

> Culture somehow implies that rituals, climate, values, and behaviors tie together into a coherent whole; this patterning or integration is the essence of what we mean by 'culture'. Such patterning or integration ultimately derives from the human need to make our environment as sensible and orderly as we can (Weick 1995). Disorder or senselessness makes us anxious, so we will work hard to reduce that anxiety by developing a more consistent and predictable view on how things are and how they should be (ibid.: 15).

In Schein's view on culture, there is focus on shared ideas that constitute a group as a whole, as well as on patterning in ideas through which the environment becomes more orderly and sensible to the members. Alvesson (2002) describes the use of metaphors to describe a culture; this aims not so much to define the culture, but rather to grasp its structure and image. This also provides insight into the focus within an organisation. One of the metaphors Alvesson describes, and which I recognise in my organisation, is 'culture as sacred cow' (ibid.: 33):

Crucial here are organisational values, which can be seen as the idealisation of a collective experience of success in the use of a skill and the emotional transfiguration of previous beliefs. These values are the result of a historical process in which people gradually accept and internalize beliefs and values based on a leader's … vision once it has been shown to be successful … Through the idealization process, the rational acceptance of beliefs gives way to emotional identification with values.

I see the appreciative organisation reflected in this metaphor: the directors share a vision that being appreciative will bring us success as organisation. For individuals, one could say that acting appreciatively will result in a feeling of being part of the appreciative organisation. In this sense, as Alvesson sees it, strategy is ultimately controlled by the level of individual commitment to the value of appreciativeness (ibid.: 33).

Schein sees culture more or less in the same way as Alvesson's metaphor of the sacred cow: 'as a mechanism of social control and as such as a basis for explicitly manipulating members into perceiving, thinking, and feeling in certain ways' (2004: 19). Thus leaders, by stating organisational values, steer employees to act accordingly, based on the way they ought to think, feel and act. Not conforming to the culture results in exclusion; engaging with the values results in inclusion, being part of the whole. Here again, thinking, feeling and acting appreciatively will result in an individual being appreciated by the other members of the organisation as part of that group/organisation.

Willmott (1993) focuses on this aspect of manipulation in the article 'Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom', proposing that 'In managing culture in modern organisations the strengthening of corporate culture enhances organisational performance by securing greater commitment and flexibility from employees'. He sees the aim of culture as 'to win the "hearts and minds" of employees: to define their purposes by managing what they think and feel and not just how they behave'. He continues: '[I]t aspires to extend management control by colonising the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently totalitarian'

(ibid.: 515–517). Thus, we see a view on culture and values in which a sense of obligation exists paradoxically alongside the feeling of free choice to act.

Alvesson (2002: 118) sees culture as something that fulfils a positive function, providing 'group members with shared understandings, feelings of clarity, direction, meaning and purpose'. But, similar to Willmott, Alvesson also sees a dark side of culture (ibid.: 118):

> When leaders influence culture or act based on a set of understandings and meanings that all involved take for granted, a subtle and frequently penetrating form of power is being exercised. Cultural meanings that are engineered by powerful and skilled actors counteract questioning and independent thinking. The power aspect of socially dominating ideas about what is true, natural, good and possible must be taken seriously. That a work group or an organization seems to share certain ideas, beliefs and values do not necessarily mean that this should be viewed as an expression of consensus or harmony. Before drawing this conclusion one should seriously consider the possibility of powerful actors or ideologies being central for the development and reproduction of these orientations. It is also important to investigate whether a commitment to ideas and values are 'genuine' or a matter of conformism and compliance.

Alvesson is saying here, as I see it, something that I recognise clearly within my organisation. First, the value of the appreciative organisation is not (openly) questioned. It is taken up automatically as impossible or useless to openly argue against, as it is perceived as mandatory. Alvesson argues that through the power of socially dominating ideas, people cannot do other than conform; they cease all independent thinking and do not critique these ideas. I saw this with the MSOs not questioning the correctness or adequacy of the appreciative organisation openly. Secondly, within the organisation the directors have made the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership style mandatory by using their power and powerful position. There is no proof of employees subscribing to these values, or of group consensus. It seems there is, because there is no conflict or negating; but this may well be due to conformism and compliance, as Alvesson suggests. The value,

here, is taken up as an 'external' force upon the organisation, to which one has no choice but to submit.

By viewing the power aspect of values, the powerful can use values to control or manipulate (or both) the behaviour of group members. Although the directors, in imposing the appreciative organisation as a value, did not appear to take forceful action, nevertheless they wield considerable power and influence – both formally and informally. They decide on what is important, what gets more attention than other things; thus, being appreciative is now valued highly and gets a lot of attention, more than (say) being result-oriented or customer-oriented, which could also have been considered important values. It is the directors who intentionally send the message of the value of the appreciative organisation, which is to be received and enacted by the employees.

Alvesson (2002: 107), on the other hand, relativises the impact of the role of leaders on culture and cultural change: 'The actions of the leader must then be fine-tuned to the frameworks and norms of those that are to be influenced. In this sense the subordinates as a collective – sharing certain cultural ideas – "decides" what works in terms of leadership'. He goes on: 'Cultural change then tends to be gradual, partial and an outcome of social processes in which a group of subordinates have as much if not more to say than the leader' (ibid.: 107). He sees the direct impact of leaders in changing values as affecting only their immediate environment – the inner circle of the handful of people that leaders engage with daily.

The leaders are seen, and see themselves, as having the power to initiate, choose and use values to control and/or manipulate, while at the same time their impact in doing so is seen (e.g. by Alvesson) as limited because ultimately, it is their subordinates individually and throughout the organisation who determine whether and how they take up these values.

The authors mentioned above see as the role of leaders as determining the values to be imposed onto the whole organisation. I understand them to see a leader as the initiator in the process by defining the organisational culture and its values.

Mead takes a profoundly different stance, by focusing on communicative interactions among people. I would like to explore this perspective further in my enquiry into values and the way they emerge, change and are enacted in organisations.

Mead's cult values

Mead (1934) built a theory of human communicative interaction in which meaning and change emerge in conversation, in gesturing and responding. Mead called this gesture–response process a social act, an ongoing responsive process of interaction, where interdependent individuals form and are being formed by others at the same time. As an individual matures, they develop the capacity to take the role of the generalised other, taking account of how others expect them to act. People have the capacity to generalise the attitude (this is the generalised tendency to act) of many. Mead (1925: 264) called the generalised other in larger groups (organisations), with many others, 'social object'. Social objects are not things, but generalised tendencies, common to large numbers of people, to act in similar ways in similar situations. A social object appears in the experience of each individual as habitual patterns of interaction. By generalising these patterns of interaction, humans construct some kind of unity of experience, an imaginatively constructed whole. This enables an individual to anticipate how the others are likely to act and thus forms the basis for interaction. Mead argued that humans have a tendency to idealise these wholes, these collectives or social objects, and to treat the wholes as if they have overriding values. Mead called these idealisations 'cult values', and described them as emerging in the evolution of a society or an organisation.

Mead alerted us to the danger of cult values being applied directly to daily action, without allowing situation-specific variation. Then a group of individuals form, as a group, a cult in which they exclude all those who do not comply with the cult's values. Griffin (2002: 117) describes a cult as 'an idealized group with values to which individuals must conform if they are not to be judged selfish or sinful, thereby raising the question about their continued membership of the group'. This resonates with my experience within the meeting as project team, but also in the

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meeting with the MSOs: in order to remain a member of the group, we do not question or critique the value of appreciativeness. The value, then, seems to be taken for granted – as correct; or it may be that people are simply reluctant to critique it.

Griffin (ibid.: 117) argues that 'when organizations are said to be caring, or to have a soul, then that organization is being idealized as a cult'. This draws our attention to the organisation I work for, which aims to be(come) an appreciative organisation. Here the cult value might cause what Willmott (1993) refers to as slavery. Or, as Griffin (ibid.) says: 'a universal idealization ascribed to collectives understood as if they were individuals and to be applied in all circumstances – silences people into conformity'.

Enacting values

Above, we see various authors describing values in organisations as shared values, providing direction for and harmony as a group/organisation, by directors expressing what is important with regard to the future of the group. Many authors take up values that are defined in visionary statements as guidelines for the many individuals in an organisation to individually internalise and conform with. In this view, enactment of the values is grounded in the sender–receiver model of communication in which 'good' communication makes both the sender send, and receiver receive, the message correctly. It is assumed that every individual (receiver) will give meaning to the sender-transmitted value in their own mind and enact the value directly in their practice. We can recognise this in the statements on the page on appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership style. The directors and project team intentionally transmit a signal – value of appreciativeness – that has a clear meaning in itself already formed in the mind of the sender. This signal is decoded by the receiver(s) so that the value then arises in the mind of the receiver.

Mead (1925, 1934) interprets values and the enactment of values differently: he sees values as emerging in the interactions of people. It is in the social act of gesturing and responding that people will enact the generalisations (cult values) by

having them functionalised in particular local situations. Through the way that values are enacted in contingent situations, the generalisation will evolve. An example of this in the appreciative organisation can be found where the generalisation 'all information is open to all' was edited out of the concept (the page) when the HR department warned that this was neither realistic nor practical, given that there will always be confidential information.

So far, I have described two distinct views on values: firstly, designed and top-down transmitted values that are applied as shared values to the whole organisation; secondly, Mead's idea on values emerging in the social act of people, and cult values emerging in the evolution of society in social objects. I will further explore how various authors see the process of change of values. Since, in my organisation, we are most familiar with the more conventional way of looking at change and change processes, as intentional and designable, I will start with this perspective, before enquiring into the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating where local interaction is key.

Intended, designed change of values, and the role of a consultant

Designed change

It is conventional (e.g. Jackson 2003, Checkland 1999) to regard human organisations as systems, based on systems thinking derived from the natural sciences. A key feature of this perspective on change is the notion of a detached, objective observer (a manager, project team or consultant) who analyses the system in question from the outside, defining opportunities for improvement, solutions for problems, and optimal change. He designs actions to realise, through change and control, the desired, intended future state of the system. The observer is seen as having free will to choose, and as making rational choices. Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) call this 'rational teleology'.

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The assumptions on causality in this perspective are linear in time, and efficient: 'If one first does X, then Y'. These assumptions are based on the future as something that can be known and predicted. The implications of this are twofold: one assumes an action having a predictable result ('if this, then that'). And, through clearly defining the intended future (here: an appreciative organisation), one can distil the required actions to be taken ('to realise this, we ought to do that') in order to realise this future. It is the role of the manager, possibly together with a consultant, to decide and control. Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (ibid.) call this 'formative teleology', where the enfolded future is unfolded. We see the rational and formative teleology in the narrative on the project team.

In this perspective, there is a split between thinking and acting. We can see this split also in the narrative on the project team, where the system is diagnosed (team managers leading in a way that is too procedural) and a solution (the concept of appreciative organisation) is implemented.

From this perspective, the consultant takes explicitly the role of external (to the system), detached observer, to be able to comment and intervene effectively and efficiently. This leads – as for example in Checkland's writing (Checkland 1999; Checkland & Poulter 2006) on soft systems methodology, and other authors who take the systems thinking perspective – to the task of consultants to choose and develop smart interventions.

Within the perspective of systems thinking, there is an emphasis on participation and learning to facilitate change. Once again, it is often the role of consultants to choose smart interventions to stimulate both – always assuming that they themselves do not equally participate in, but remain detached from, the process.

Normative cultural change programmes

Several decades ago, the conventional perspective on planned normative change was dominant, as can be seen in normative change programmes on cultural change. I regard these normative change programmes as the ultimate form of intended, designed change. Based on the research of Peters and Waterman (1982) on the

impact of organisational culture on business performance, many normative change programmes have been, as Garrety (2005: 68) writes, 'heralded by some as the royal road to corporate "excellence"'. Many companies implemented these normative change programmes, for example to change their culture to a more Japanese style. These normative change programmes were designed to impose new values and culture onto organisations. Uniformity in thinking, feeling and behaviour within the total organisation, a controlled process and outcome, and conformity with the values were essential in these programmes.

Alvesson sees such change programmes as 'grand technocratic projects'. According to this view, cultural change is a project that is initiated and run from above; the 'top management is the agent from which superior insight about the needed change emerges and also the chief architect behind the plan for change' (2002: 178).

These normative change programmes aim to change and impose values within a whole organisation. Often, these programmes are very instrumental, focused on imposing new values through skills training activities, resulting in changed thinking, feeling and behaviour. Such programmes emphasise the importance of 'right communication', based on the sender–receiver model. Here the focus is on sending the right message (of the directors), in such a way that the receiver (employees) will receive the message correctly. Within the normative change programme, Destination Customer, that was executed in the year 2000 within the organisation (see Project 1), standardised materials for receivers, training schedules for trainers and formats for managers were developed by consultants, to facilitate communication and to ensure that a uniform message was spread.

Garrety (2005) claims that these programmes invade employees' subjectivity, eroding their autonomy and capacity for critical thought. Here again we recognise the critique of (for example) Willmott (1993), who described the propagandistic effects of values. Although I acknowledge the validity of his critique, I will restrict myself here to the way new values were imposed – such as through these programmes.

Through the normative programme Destination Customer in the past, we have experienced that imposing is not an attractive option, because of the risk of being propagandistic and/or totalitarian, and its limited business results. These experiences laid the foundations for our current preference not to implement the concept of the appreciative organisation through such organisation-wide cultural programmes.

Instead of one leader or board of directors imposing the core values onto the whole organisation via normative change programmes, various authors describe other approaches to implementing change. These authors usually focus on the participation, interaction and involvement of organisational members as a way of creating a shared future together. One of these methods is 'appreciative inquiry'. I will describe this method in more detail, since it is a known (though rarely applied) method within the organisation.

'Appreciative inquiry'

Cooperrider (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider 1990), as one of the founding fathers of appreciative inquiry, argues that it is time to rethink human organisations and the idea of planned change. In his view, deficit-based modalities were increasingly falling short when he started to develop his ideas on appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry – with its focus on what works in an organisation – appreciates and values the best of 'what is'. Hammond and Royal, building on Cooperrider, state: 'Appreciative inquiry assumes that organisations, like people, adapt their behaviour and move in the direction of images that are the brightest, boldest and most compelling – that it is possible to move from individual images of possibility and develop collective images of possibility' (1998: 43). I consider these collective images as possible cult values.

There is a parallel between the ideas of appreciative inquiry and the appreciative organisation. Both assume that by focusing on and valuing good examples, good behaviour, and successes from the past, these will amplify. Thus, for example, it is assumed that complimenting good employee behaviour will result in them repeating

this behaviour more often; and that making explicit the details of past successes provides direction for similar successes in the future.

Appreciative inquiry (Hammond & Royal 1998; Anderson et al. 2008) relies heavily on the interaction of people: it is through our relationships that we determine what is real and valuable for us. Meaning is seen as constructed in relationships (through talking and acting together). In appreciative inquiry, change occurs through people participating in formulating an idealised design of the future that the group desires, and in creating ways of achieving it. I consider the participative group to be the substitute for the individual designer of the system, often the leader.

Through interviews, past and present successes are identified, and in conversation provocative propositions are formulated that build up shared positive images of the future (Hammond & Royal 1998). For changes of value, this implies formulating the value(s) in provocative propositions as a group, to enlarge ownership of and commitment to the value(s). Provocative propositions, however, are formulated in very generic terms. We can see this in what can be called the provocative propositions on appreciative organisation, formulated by the project team and written down on one page. Thus, to agree to the provocative propositions of the generic value is also to agree on an abstraction. Moreover, the designers of the method of appreciative inquiry assume that people can act according the provocative propositions of the value, even though these propositions are generic.

In the narrated situation, it is the project team that executes an appreciative inquiry process as a team, being inspired by various examples and defining provocative propositions. An appreciative inquiry process on values would gain quality, in my opinion, if extended to include conversation outside of the project team, in which these generic terms are functionalised and made meaningful in specific situations that the participants deal with in their daily activities. Now that there are provocative propositions, it does not seem very logical to me to start an appreciative inquiry process with managers/employees as though no value has yet been stated.

Although appreciative inquiry provides us with a method whereby employees are encouraged to participate in enquiry and contribute with their personal ideas to a shared image of the future, one can see in appreciative inquiry (as in other methods of intervention within the perspective of systems thinking) an emphasis on participation in planned and orchestrated interventions (e.g. interviews), designed by a consultant or leader, to obtain a desired future state of the system. The method aims to create order and a controllable process, with goal-setting, designing, and planning being the basic activities. The ultimate aim of the method is to obtain group consensus on the solution of a problem and/or the desired future state. A product of an appreciative inquiry process is an agreed plan or strategy to structure implementation and measure progress.

Grand plans?

But isn't it a common experience for each of us in everyday life, that things most often turn out differently from what we intended, agreed upon, and planned? Stacey (2010) describes various examples to illustrate how things are less certain and predictable, with less progression according to grand plans, and with individuals being less in control than we tend to assume.

He takes the perspective of seeing human interaction as complex responsive processes of relating, where meaning, change and novelty emerge through self-organising (i.e. with no agent outside of this human interaction itself) patterning, due to the amplification of small differences. I myself experience this emergence of meaning, change and novelty in conversations of people in responsive interaction, while meeting two colleagues – both team managers – on my way home from work.

Two team managers in need of an arbiter

On my way home from work, I run into two team managers I know, Mark and Paul. Both are also on their way home. Each spontaneously tells me about a situation that happened to them today. One of Paul's employees has asked him to rearrange her holiday plans. She wants to switch her weeks off to 3 weeks earlier than planned, in

order to join a music festival. She did not know about this festival when she had first scheduled her holiday, months ago. She is eager to join this festival, and asks Paul to change the dates of her holiday. Paul, so he tells me, does not want to do this, because this might cause problems in scheduling all the shifts on the trains that are required. In holiday seasons it is always difficult to make sure that all shifts are arranged, he assures me. He tells me that he has advised this employee that he will not change her holiday schedule; her request has come too late.

Mark nods his head while listening to his colleague, but I can see on his face that he does not agree with Paul's decision. Paul sees this nodding as well, and this prompts him to offer more arguments to convince us that he has made the right decision by following the rules on holiday scheduling. I try not to let them see from my body language whether I agree or not. But when Paul seems to have finished his story, I ask both gentlemen: 'Are both of you happy with the outcome of the chat with this lady?' Both team managers look at me, as if I am posing an unethical question: does it matter whether they are happy with the outcome?

Right after posing my question, I reach my destination. To my surprise, both team managers decide to disembark from the train as well. They invite me to continue our conversation at the station's restaurant. They will take a later train to their destination. Of course I agree, and we find ourselves a quiet spot in the restaurant. When we are seated, and Mark has arrived with three coffees, Paul asks me directly: 'What do you think I should have done?' Because I do not have the right answer, but even more because I haven't got an answer to my own question yet, I bring up my own question again first. This creates a lot of energy in both team managers: one example after the other flashes over the table, with which they want to illustrate that all employees have these kinds of requests; that it is impossible for a team manager to fulfil all these wishes, even in cases where they would like to go against procedures and regulations. 'Employees do know the rules themselves, they even have them on paper; but they expect us to make exceptions to these rules for each of them personally. Well we won't, because what, then, would be the effect of doing so?' Paul asks, in despair.

They iterate the examples they bring up, asking me what I think should be decided in each of the examples. I sense that they want me to be an arbiter, telling them what to do or not to do. I feel tension between, on the one hand, wanting to ease their mind and diminish their anxiety, and on the other hand finding it more helpful to sustain this interplay of mutual sense-making. I notice that, when I do not answer on a question from Mark on what he should do, Paul brings in his own ideas on what might be helpful in the situation, and vice versa.

After having listened carefully to many of the examples of their daily work, I ask: 'What exactly is your question, if we look at all the situations you both mention? What is it that holds each of you back in making a decision per situation, that you think is right?' Mark looks intensely at both of us, then says: 'I do not know enough of what I am allowed to do, how much freedom I have to decide what I think is right, even if it is against the rules'. Paul immediately adds: 'And if I would decide against the regulations, I do not know what consequences I might expect. We are told by our manager to lead our employees appreciatively by focusing on right behaviour, to compliment them and to be transparent about our expectations. Well, by following the procedures, for example on holiday scheduling, I seem to not lead appreciatively, but I think I am being very transparent as manager. Why is the MSO not more clear about what he wants me to do?'

But then he says, with a smile from ear to ear: 'I never realised until now that in the end, it is up to me to decide what I think is right in a specific situation, as long as I can come up with arguments when asked for, and I can explain why I think my decision in a specific situation is contributing to our organisation being appreciative. And as long as it is beneficial to our customers, employees and our business, it must be a right decision, I believe'. He seems pleased with his own conclusion. When I do not immediately agree on this, he continues: 'We should not ask you what to do; we can decide that ourselves. Remarkably, you do not tell us what we do wrong, nor do you tell us what to do to act correctly. And still I know now – without being told – how to act and be appreciative in a situation'.

Mark then asks: 'But are we really allowed to do this – not to obey rules, but to interpret them as we think is right? And is it really up to us to decide how to lead

appreciatively?' I cannot respond other than by saying: 'Can you, now that we have discussed it this way, not do it and hold on to the rules in a specific situation, although it does not seem right to you?' Both team managers start to laugh. Mark suggests: 'So far, I have decided on my own, based on regulations, but it would be helpful for me if you and I, Paul, could discuss decisions in the future. It might be sensible to fine-tune a decision one of us is about to make, don't you think? And it might end up that we will both decide differently, I assume'.

We have finished our coffees and decide to go home. They thank me for what they describe as raising difficult questions, being critical and prompting them towards these important insights in their role as team manager.

At home, I realise that the organisational change is this process itself, rather than an end product of it. Where Paul and Mark thought that I had the power to decide on their acting, they now have the power themselves: they will make their choices based on a general framework, guiding their choices in being appreciative. From now on, Mark and Paul will act differently – not blindly following rules, that's for sure.

Reflecting on the encounter with two team managers

Both team managers are, so it seems, in need of an arbiter who will tell them what (not) to decide and what (not) to do to lead appreciatively. They explicitly bring up the question of what is right. This assumes that there must be a generic correct answer for specific situations. They expect there to be one answer, due to the way they tend to take up their MSO's presentation on the appreciative organisation. From this presentation, they have taken on the role to lead appreciatively; they received the message on the advantages of and need for appreciative leadership, but they feel uncertain as to how to enact it as team managers.

During our conversation, we come to the conclusion that it is they themselves who need to make general rules and ideas specific in situations. While doing so, however, for example in the case of the holiday scheduling, immediately conflict

emerges: each team manager makes a different choice. It is revealing to discuss so many situations where each team manager functionalises 'leading appreciatively' differently from the other. At the beginning of the conversation, with the goal of coming to an agreement on the best decision, they assume that this means both making the same choice.

It is also remarkable that both team managers do not question the value of appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership. Their questions concern functionalising the value: what do I have to do to be appreciative as leader in various circumstances? They seem to be uncomfortable with general statements on appreciative organisation and leadership, because now they have to interpret these themselves, with all the anxiety that comes with such a responsibility. They are confused that the appreciative organisation is presented as crucial, while they experience it to be vague in their daily work situation. Moreover, since team managers tend to lead in a procedural way, the statements on the appreciative organisation strike them as too abstract.

By engaging in almost real-time and real-life examples, all three of us are deeply involved. This creates, in my opinion, a strong opportunity for change: decisions, actions and choices are made, acting in the present. In these micro situations, instead of organisation-wide interventions, change occurs in an intense manner: both team managers change their way of interacting – together now, and later with their employees. This is because change occurs in patterns of accounting to one another for what one is doing.

The situation, for me as consultant, is very different from organised and/or designed interventions that are intended to cause change, where people feel in charge of the change and in control. Here I join in conversations where patterns of conversation change, while I take the role of participant. At first glimpse, it seems as though I, as consultant, do nothing specific – yet in my encounter with the team managers, I experience the contrary: everything I do and say, as well as what the others do and say, matters and influences the others as well as myself. I see myself in this situation as helping to keep exploration open, allowing us each to have different ideas, and stimulating discussion on possible ways to functionalise the concept of

appreciative organisation and leadership. This way of engaging with the two team managers is, as I see it, an appreciative way of engaging. Or, to state it differently: the three of us enact the cult value of appreciativeness in this specific situation by not being judgmental, by taking each other seriously, by exploring each other's view, and so on.

So, how can I make sense of my experience of changing values, in my (undesigned, unintended and spontaneous) encounter with the two team managers who were trying to make sense in their leadership of the value of the appreciative organisation? I consider the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, since this perspective might resonate with this particular experience.

Many of the ideas of complex responsive processes of relating are grounded in the theory of G.H. Mead on human interaction, which I described earlier in this project. I will now concentrate on Mead's theory on the enactment of values by making generalisations (i.e. cult values) particular in specific situations.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating and change of values

Particularising generalisations

As described, the directors have designed a page that summarises, in generic statements, the values of the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership. These statements are what Mead (1923) would call 'generalisations'. The directors expect these generalisations to be effected throughout the organisation, and expect all employees to act accordingly.

When a generalisation is idealised it becomes, as Mead (ibid.) called it, a cult value. It thereby represents an idealised future for the organisation. Thus, people construct in their interactions perceptions of unity in the population-wide patterning of their interactions: as organisational members, we (will) all engage appreciatively. These population-wide patterns form one part of a social object – the generalisation; the

other part is the local interaction. This is the particularisation of the general. Both phases are part of one social object. One can, as I see it, compare this with the gesture–response, being part of one social act between a few people.

People tend to prefer to act in a way that conforms with the generalisations; they make choices and act with intention, in expectation of realising some future population-wide pattern (cult value) of activity they desire. Mead (ibid.) argued that it is not, however, the generalisation, or cult value, itself that is enacted, but the particularisation of a cult value in specific situations: the enactment of values in the ordinary, local interaction between people.

As could be seen in the narrative on the two team managers, it is not possible for them to enact the generalisations in their daily work: they need to make these generalisations applicable, meaningful, specific. The way individuals particularise generalisations depends largely on their history and their emotions regarding a specific situation. Their spontaneity and creativity also have an important influence (Stacey 2007).

Stacey and Griffin (2008: 1) stress that through differences in particularisation, 'conflict inevitably will emerge'. Grant (2005) distinguishes between polarised conflict and explorative conflict. Conflict is usually understood as the polarised form, where some people are right and others are not. Explorative conflict, as Grant takes it up, is conversational, negotiating processes in which people explore how to interpret generalisations and negotiate different interpretations with each other in order to particularise them. It is these differences that cause conflict. 'Such conflict requires us to carry on exploring with each other what our differences are and negotiating the meaning of the generalization' (Stacey 2007: 307). We see both interpretations of conflict in the narrative on the two team managers, where the conversation starts with the potential to become a polarised conflict – especially if I had taken up the role of arbiter – and later turns out to be a more explorative conflict: the two team managers negotiate on the meaning of appreciativeness in specific situations.

Stacey (2007: 314) proposes that '[i]t is possible for individuals and groups of individuals, particularly powerful ones, to intentionally articulate and even design a desired generalised pattern, but the particularising involves an interplay of many intentions and values and this interplay cannot be intended or designed'. In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey 2007), no single individual is assumed to be in control of the interplay; no one is so powerful as to choose population-wide patterns of activity. The population-wide patterns, or cult values, emerge through the ongoing responsive adjustments of each individual participant's intentional plans and actions in relation to each other.

The emergence and change of values from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating

Reflecting on the first narrative, I see that, as a project team, we do not functionalise the cult value we design for the whole organisation, but remain with the generalisation of appreciativeness. Since we speak as a project team about the desired future in very generic terms (generalisations), this enables us to communicate as though we fully agree together; conflict arises outside of the project team, such as when the team managers take up the functionalisation of appreciative leadership differently. In their interplay, individual team managers adjust their plans and actions. In doing so, population-wide patterns will emerge in an iterative process, through responsive adjustments of the value of the appreciative organisation as originally stated on the page.

The project team members are accustomed to formulating and implementing change towards the required values that will contribute to improvement of the organisation, in an intended and planned manner. The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating makes me look differently at what it is that we are (also) doing within the organisation and the cult value of the appreciative organisation. I still observe a tendency to design and control the change of values, but at the same time there are many conversational negotiating processes of particularising generalisations. These processes are not intended or designed by the project team or directors, but taken up in various interactions – as, for example, in the MSOs

negotiating on a regional basis what 'appreciative organisation' means, and team managers discussing how to interpret the generalisation in the practical situations that arise in their daily work.

I also experience in the narratives that there is a (coherent) need to avoid conflict, as well as to have clarity on what is right or wrong in enacting the cult value given. How should a consultant deal with this need? What can a consultant contribute to the process of particularisation and generalisation of cult values, or to change that is inevitably conflict-ridden? I will take up this question next.

The role of consultant within the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating and change

To Mead, humans are in constant conversation. There are no situations or points in time that can be distinguished as being and then not being in conversation – even when there is silence. In all situations, constantly, people interact; and through this, we influence and are influenced by others.

Stacey (2007: 286) argues that

> Processes of human interaction are fundamentally conversational in nature. Not only do people accomplish and change their joint activities in these processes, their very identities are sustained and potentially transformed in them too. Conversational dynamics in organizations are thus of primary importance. Whether such conversational dynamics take the form of stuck, repetitive patterns or more fluid, spontaneous ones depends upon the nature of power relations between people, the way they find it possible to deal with the inevitable anxieties of organizational life and the conversational practices, particular rhetorical practices, they have together evolved. Repetitive conversations block the emergence of innovative strategies while more fluid forms of conversation create the possibility but by no means the guarantee that creative strategies will emerge. The activity of strategising is also, on this view, fundamentally conversational.

This view has major consequences for the way one sees the role and position of a consultant: by definition, the consultant is participating – not detached, or outside; the consultant is not in a position to (solely) determine and orchestrate the interaction, nor the outcome of interaction. The consultant can make change feasible, as do others, by contributing to changes in conversation that emerge through differences and conflict; they can also help to cope with the anxiety that accompanies such differences and conflict.

The consultant, then, should – Stacey argues – focus attention on the fluidity of the conversation, since this is critical for change to emerge (ibid.: 286):

> The purpose of this attention is not to control the conversation or somehow produce efficient forms of it but understand it so to participate more effectively. The dynamics of more fluid, spontaneous conversation rely on enough trust and ability to live with anxiety, as well as power relations that are both co-operative and competitive at the same time and rhetorical conversational practices that do not block exploration.

Shaw (2002) sees a consultant participating in conversation, helping to deal with uncertainty, risk and anxiety, but without covering over the uncertainties, risk and anxiety of not-knowing and not being able, or to pretend to predict and control. She calls this a 'participative change practice'. She sees the role of consultants as helping to keep open the act of exploration and to value the experience of not-knowing. In this role, by definition, a consultant is fully participating in conversation, thus forming and being formed at the same time by others.

Stacey (2007: 286–287) describes what the role of a leader can be in this process: 'Part of the leader's role, then, is to help create the emergence of fluid, spontaneous forms of conversation'. He continues: 'Given the power relation of the leader to others, he or she is in a particularly well-placed position to create opportunities for conversation that may foster greater spontaneity'. I consider the ideas of Stacey applicable to the role of consultant, taking the consultant being in a 'cooperative relation to the leader', as Block (1981) distinguishes the role of consultant. What, then, can consultants do to contribute through participation in conversation to make

the conversation (more) fluid, and to keep opportunities for exploration and change open?

Participative change practice

The main elements in the role of consultant within the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating – taken from what Stacey (2007) writes on the role of leader – as a participant in conversation are to encourage others towards taking responsibility, to promote active participation that arouses interest, and to enable people to search for meaning for themselves. The consultant can do this by letting his/her contributions come in response to the members of the group; this is in contrast to designed, intentional interventions as we see in the more conventional style of consultation (Schein 1999). The consultant will be, as Shaw (2002: 172) calls it, 'an intentional fellow sense-maker in conversation after conversation'. The consultant might add extra value to the conversation through being competent in dealing (longer) with anxiety and risk than other participants, as Stacey (2007) sees leaders do as well.

Whatever applies to the consultant, however, also applies to the others involved in conversation: all individuals are being enabled and constrained in what they do by others. They are not on their own capable of realising their own intentions, but are influenced by their fellow participants in conversation (and even wider). In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, this is referred to as self-organising: no single individual can determine what will happen – processes, and thus patterns, organise themselves. This defines the role of the consultant even more as being one of the participants in the conversational process of negotiating – in contrast to the conventional perspective on the role of consultant, where a consultant is external to the system.

Summary and conclusion

While the project team formulated the values of the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership, the question of how the stated values would be

implemented was left open. Some interventions were designed, such as the meetings with the MSOs in which the values and their implementation were discussed. This is the more conventional way of dealing with change in my organisation, based on the idea of rational and formative teleology and design of interventions for controlled implementation; the perspective of systems thinking.

At the same time, team managers tried to enact the values in their daily practice, struggling to work out how to interpret the generally stated values. This led to local conversations in which the generalisations were functionalised in particular situations through negotiating processes. These local interactions are central to the theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

In this project, I have explored both perspectives on change – more specifically, on change of values. I have described the more conventional perspective and its methods. Within my organisation the method of mandatory normative change programmes is not considered as an option, based on former negative experiences with such programmes. Change methods that are based on the participation of all those involved in the change are better aligned with preferred company practice. Methods such as soft systems methodology and appreciative inquiry aim to structure and control the activities of change. In both methods, employees are involved in interventions that are designed and intended by leaders and/or consultants. In order to change towards appreciativeness, these methods are assumed to facilitate implementation – for example, via meetings in which the value is discussed and made 'vivid'. Meetings with various groups of colleagues, to discuss the need to change the way we engage with each other, help to make the value of appreciativeness better understood. The value itself is, however, defined and 'sent' by the designers of the interventions (leaders and/or consultants), then imposed onto the whole organisation.

I have compared the aforementioned perspective with the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating and Mead, where organisations are seen as patterns of interaction – fundamentally conversational in nature – between individuals. Here, conversations are the 'place' where the generalised value is made particular through social acts, the ongoing conversation of human individuals in which meaning arises

and evolves through conflict and negotiation. Here there is no implementation of designed values; rather, global patterns emerge out of local patterning and vice versa, in a self-organising manner – that is, without being designed by an agent who is external to the system, as in the conventional perspective. The complex responsive process perspective emphasises the need for fluid conversation, in which people potentially change the way they engage. In this view, the role of a consultant is to contribute to conversations in a way that sustains as much fluidity as possible, such as through keeping exploration alive and by coping with anxiety and conflict. Fundamental to the consultant's involvement is their participation in local processes of interaction – not as the designer or determinator of what will happen, but as a fellow sense-maker.

Insights and follow-up

In my first project I came to the conclusion that for many years I have been preoccupied by the conventional, systemic perspective on organisations and change, articulating my role as a consultant through intended, designed and planned interventions on change and learning. In this perspective the role of consultants – as well as the role of managers – seems transparent: they (are assumed to) add value through solid analysis, efficient interventions and taking the lead. Moreover, management development programmes are based on this perspective, thus influencing managers to take up their role in this way. Such programmes themselves are developed in a designed way to obtain predetermined learning objectives in a controlled, manageable manner.

In this second project, I experience the significance of local interaction, where humans engage in conversations and where change emerges through self-organising processes in patterns of communication. In my organisation, the focus is not so much on what happens in local interaction processes, taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, as I describe in this project, has a major impact on the involvement of a consultant: there is a shift from

detached designer to involved participant in local interaction processes. I intend to explore in my third project what it is that a consultant does in local interaction processes. I therefore intend to enquire further into the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, and specifically into local interaction in my next project.

Project 3

The involvement of a consultant in processes of local interaction

Introduction

In Project 2 I have described how I became involved in conventional, formal interventions for learning and change, as well in spontaneous conversation with managers. I concluded in Project 2 that within mainstream thinking about organisations and change, there are various ways of intervening in a structured, designed and controlled manner. Learning and change, then, will basically be 'in the hands and in the heads of the people in control of the transformation', as Levin (2004: 72) states. These people, often consultants and considered as experts, are the driving force in assisting the managers in implementing the changes that are expected to move the organisation towards a desired future state. Taking this stance, the role of a consultant within the organisation is quite conventional and clear.

I have also begun to explore the implications of taking organisations to be processes of human interaction, where change emerges in self-organising patterning of interaction. In my organisation we pay little to no attention to the processes taking place in the everyday interaction; where change takes place through changes in the way people engage. We are, within my organisation, not familiar with the involvement of a consultant in these engagements.

In Project 3, I intend to enquire into the nature of a consultant's involvement in this local interaction. I will focus on the contingent engagements that a consultant takes part in. By 'contingent engagements', I mean conversations in which I participate that occur spontaneously and which could take different courses; that is, they are unplanned and undesigned.

Background

A first cohort of 350 team managers have just finished their team managers' development programme, in which the concept of appreciative leadership plays an important part. Now there is again a group of 50 new, internally hired colleagues. They too need to develop themselves into successful team managers.

I am asked to wait with the start of a development programme until all 50 team managers have entered their new position; this will be around 3 months from now, as they all need to make the transition from their current positions; this cannot be done overnight. Several Assistant Managers Service and Operations (AMSOs, to whom team managers report) asked me to explore together what we might organise in the intervening period.

A request for learning activities

I am invited to a meeting with an AMSO and two of his team managers. These team managers have started in their new position a few weeks ago. Since they have heard that the formal 'New Team Manager's Development Programme' will not start in the near future, they have invited me to discuss together what these team managers can do in the months prior to the start of the formal development programme. We meet at the office of the AMSO at one of the railway stations.

The AMSO, Chris, starts by stating the objective of our meeting, explaining that he has given both team managers information on the appreciative organisation and has stimulated them, as he puts it, to act as managers in an appreciative manner. He seems confident that by using the one page with the definition of the appreciative organisation he has obtained their full understanding of the concept. However, Chris has observed that neither of the two team managers has entirely succeeded so far in demonstrating the qualities of an appreciative manager, and now he wants to take action. He explicitly tells me that he has invited me to arrange a coach for each of these team managers. His question seems clear to me, but then one of the team

managers, Ben, tells me that he would prefer to attend a training course on this, explaining: 'I would like the opportunity to see the other participants in the training act appreciatively, and this will make it clearer to me what appreciative leadership is'. Dick, the other team manager, immediately endorses this view. I notice that this conversation feels like a typical routine meeting where I am asked to organise effective learning interventions to solve learning needs. I am expected to conduct a thorough needs analysis and deliver a proposal at short notice.

Before I can respond, two conductors burst into the room. They apologise for interrupting our meeting; but at the same time, they are so angry that they do not check whether their sudden intrusion into our conversation is OK for us. They have come straight from their work, having discovered that they were giving customers the wrong information. They themselves were not informed in enough detail about the test period of 'every 10 minutes a train', which has a major impact on time schedules. They are furious that their team manager, Ben, has not informed them properly on this: 'Do you think we, as employees, are not involved in the organisation, but just robots checking tickets?'

In seconds, the atmosphere has changed from that of a familiar (to me), routine conversation into a fighting-and-blaming confrontation between the managers and the conductors. Ben tells them that he was unaware that they felt he had briefed them inadequately, and that they should have read the internal announcements on the test period that hang 'everywhere in the building'. This seems to make the conductors even more furious. As they leave the room in fury, Ben advises them to 'tell your colleagues about the "every 10 minutes a train" test as well, when you run into them'.

I am quite astonished by this incident. Dick takes the lead by saying: 'this happens so often: them blaming us that we did not do something they expected us to do for them'. Ben agrees, and I can see that he is upset by the way this situation has escalated. Chris asks: 'So, what now?' and looks around to all of us for some response. Ben and Dick clearly feel awkward, and I suggest that we reflect a little more together on what has just happened, before continuing with our original topic of the coaching or training.

I first ask each of them what they think has just happened. They respond with their own perceptions, and contribute to the observations shared by the other two. Dick also asks me what I think happened. I bring the focus onto the appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership. Together we examine what could be considered to be 'appreciative' and why, as well as exploring what could be considered *not* appreciative. We talk for a couple of minutes, reflecting on what has happened and what the team managers have done or failed to do. There is much focus on the conductors; examining their own role and assumptions is difficult. But when I keep insisting on taking this perspective, each of them concludes that another interpretation of the experience is also possible.

I then spontaneously decide to suggest continuing the conversation with the conductors. To their surprise, I suggest that I go to the restaurant to see whether these two conductors are still in the building, and invite them to re-open the conversation. I see Chris hesitate, but he leaves it up to the team managers. They do not reject my suggestion, although it is obvious that none of us feels certain about this follow-up or secure in the outcome.

I leave and find my way to the restaurant. The conductors do not see me coming; this allows me to overhear them talking about the incident with a colleague and definitely not saying nice things about Ben. They characterise him as a 'slow starter', adding: 'What does this imply for the future?' Joining them at this point, I invite both to accompany me back for another conversation with the team managers, to see if we can formulate an answer to their last question. They are extremely surprised; indeed, too surprised not to come with me. I have not the slightest idea what will happen next, but I try to trust in everyone's willingness to find a way out of the impasse where we all find ourselves.

After entering the AMSO office, I find it polite to restart the conversation myself by explaining why I have made the suggestion to invite the conductors back. I explain that I see this meeting as an opportunity to exchange thoughts, assumptions, suggestions and ideas. It might help us all to deal with what has happened and with what will happen in future meetings.

After some moments of silence, in which I decide not to say anything but first observe what is happening, Ben takes the initiative: 'What is it exactly that makes the two of you so angry?' To cut a long story short, the conductors describe how they feel neglected, and not respected as colleagues doing an important job for our company. They do not repeat the word 'robot', but explain how important it is to them to be kept well-informed about all business regarding our customers. I ask the conductors: 'What in these circumstances would have enabled you to do your job well?' Over the next few minutes, we discuss roles and responsibilities. Statements such as 'I need to know what you expect of me, so you need to inform me to do my job well' and 'It does not feel OK if you receive customer's complaints about my performance if you have not given me support to perform well' cross the table. But also, in response: 'You as conductors are responsible for ensuring that you have the information you need to do your job, and I might be one of your sources for that'.

I reflect on how they are often expressing what the other should do and putting the responsibility on the other's shoulders. They are surprised by this reflection, not having noticed this pattern themselves, although they do feel they know exactly what 'the other' should do. This triggers discussion on responsibility and accountability. It becomes evident that they each interpret these words differently, and expect different behaviour. Though explicit about how they see the others' responsibility, they do not specify what they see as their own responsibility to enable both themselves and others to perform well.

It requires some effort on my part to keep the exploration of responsibilities open: both the managers and the conductors keep referring to formal job profiles to resolve their differences. Since we tend to cover up differences as quickly as possible, I facilitate the conversation by highlighting their apparent assumption that there can be only one best way of acting (one reality, one truth). Furthermore, I note that there are patterns in the way they engage that make it less easy to support each other in doing their respective jobs: they blame the other for not being supportive, and see them as not taking a professional approach to the work that has to be done. This is a tough point to discuss, but after a while they all recognise this pattern in their engagement. Dick says, 'We seem to know best what the other should do,

instead of concentrating on our own job and supporting each other'. They all agree on this. I experience this as a very solid reflection and summary, and label it as such.

To be able to move in the conversation from what it is we are doing together and how we are doing this (blaming) towards what we think we can do to support each other in serving the customer (appreciative), I put focus on appreciativeness; and for the moment we come to a kind of agreement on the behaviour and attitudes that we all expect to cover it. My role in this part of the conversation is mainly to help to handle the variety of ideas on appreciative behaviour, where there is again a tendency to reduce the variety to one short list of required behaviour. I discuss this tendency with the participants, who seem surprised. I tell them that I have experienced the various ways of being appreciative in our current conversation, and ask them if they recognise this too. I ask this question because I find it important not to have, as the only result of our conversation, a better atmosphere, but also some concrete, shared experiences on how to engage together in a more constructive – appreciative – way. They find it a difficult question, because I ask them to examine our conversation itself, to look at patterns, instead of considering only the content of the discussion. But with a little prompting, they all recall moments of appreciativeness.

After a while, I observe a completely different atmosphere than in our first angry encounter and at the beginning of this conversation: everyone seems more relaxed and more able to listen and respond to the others. After some more talking, the conductors leave to join their train. Before I leave, the managers and I take a few minutes to reflect on what we have just experienced.

Taking up the narrative more reflexively

Above, I describe a meeting of a kind that is common in my work as a consultant in Leadership Development. Managers who want to develop themselves can seek my advice on training, coaching and other development activities. I am seen as the consultant, as being the expert in this field; and they know that I am also in the

position to organise these development activities, e.g. the team managers' development programme and matching coaches to coachees. Apart from the obvious description of my job title, many colleagues know about my role based on former interaction: they have experienced personally, or have seen from outside, what I do and how I perform as a staff member. Since this meeting at first felt like a routine situation, it made me think that I knew what I was expected to do, and I had the intention to act accordingly.

However, the scene changed profoundly and suddenly when the two conductors entered the room: this brought a sharp turn in the flow of conversation that required another role of me – as participant. In this interaction I felt, as the consultant, my usual responsibility for the flow of the process, and I often found myself wondering whether or not to take the lead, to intervene, or to facilitate in any other way. I take this feeling to originate in my conventional role as a consultant, where being in the lead and being in control is the usual way of acting. It took me some time to shift my stance in order to be able to participate in a new and spontaneous way.

In their ambition to take up appreciativeness in the organisation and in their management style, the managers think they have found a strategy: an external coach, or a training activity. In both proposed strategies, it is assumed that learning needs to take place in a formal setting, an organised intervention where they are assisted to become an appreciative manager by an expert (coach, trainer). They seem to assume that an expert possesses the knowledge and can help implant this knowledge into each of the team managers. Moreover, in their view there is nothing negotiable about the content of an appreciative leadership style; it is taken as a fact, defined by expert opinion. The one-page summary of appreciative organisation and appreciative leadership supports this assumption. I do not find it odd that all three managers suggest this formal strategy for learning, because in our organisation this is the typical way of dealing with learning questions. Much effort is put into defining learning needs, talents and points for improvement, and selecting appropriate learning strategies to address these. This is then referred to an expert who designs and develops the appropriate learning interventions.

In this view on learning, there is a split in time between thinking and doing, designing and implementing interventions. These activities are seen as sequential: first something is planned, then it is implemented. Moreover, there is also a split between the location of learning (away from work, in a training setting or in conversation with a coach) and developing and applying competences at work (in this case, in the conversation with the conductors). This latter situation is not regarded as a learning situation by the men involved. It is only through my reflections on our collective engagement that they become prepared to accept that 'something of interest' has just happened. This experience resonates with what Wenger (1998: 9) says about views on learning: '[O]ur perspectives on learning matter: what we think about learning influences where we recognise learning, as well as what we do when we decide that we must do something about it – as individuals, as communities, and as organizations'.

To conclude: what I did not do in the conversation with the five men was attempt to implement designed interventions to improve our conversation and its outcome – that is, I did not adopt the familiar, mainstream perspective on change processes. There was not even the opportunity for doing this, because the engagement was undesigned and even unplanned. Instead, I participated fully in the conversation, while in the process trying to reach an understanding of the interaction: what are we doing together, and why? This would inform my own participation in the interaction, as well as enabling me to heighten the others' awareness of the interaction and the way they could influence it, e.g. by keeping exploration open, allowing differences of opinion without negating each others' ideas.

For myself, the main themes emerging in the narrative are the different perspectives on organisation and change, and their influence on the involvement of a consultant.

Key discourses taking up the themes of the narrative

In the narrative there are two distinct perspectives on how to realise learning and change. First, in formal meetings, with the aim to stimulate and facilitate an effective and efficient learning and change process (through training and coaching).

Secondly, change is seen to emerge in the way people engage with intention in local interaction while accomplishing whatever it is they do. Here there are no organised meetings, but people act in their regular engagement (work situation). Change is seen as emerging due to (small) changes in the way people interact. These changes in local patterns, as I will take up in my treatment of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating below, help us to understand changes in global patterns (Stacey 2007).

As a related issue, I consider the discourses on the involvement of a consultant. I am experienced and respected in the role of consultant in the first setting, designing and implementing interventions to accomplish change. That is the reason that I am invited by the AMSO. In the recent past, I have become aware of my more frequent involvement in the second form of change in interaction. Here I improvise, based on the experiences and competences that I have acquired while working within the first perspective. However, in this setting I experience my involvement as profoundly different from the more familiar role within the mainstream way of thinking. Where the expectations of a consultant's involvement in the first perspective on change seem clearly defined, such a role is more ambiguous in the engagements in work situations. In this project I intend to find arguments that will enable me to consider the involvement of a consultant within these undesigned, spontaneous engagements.

Various authors describe the role and activities of consultants in formal situations, to a lesser or greater extent away from work; settings of interaction for which consultants design interventions to facilitate change processes. I will enquire into what is seen as essential in these situations by taking up authors such as Wierdsma (1999), Levin (2004) and Schein (2005). I will also enquire into what authors see as essential in interaction, change and the work of a consultant, when taking the perspective of the theory of complex responsive processes. Here I will explore the ideas of Mead (1934), Shaw (2002), Friis (2006), Larsen (2005, 2006), Billing (2007) and Stacey (2007). I intend to clarify my understanding of what a consultant can do in such encounters with participants in their work situation, and how this resonates with my experience as an internal consultant.

Participating in processes of change

Designing interventions to facilitate change

Tailor-made conversational platforms for co-creation

Wierdsma (1999) emphasises the importance of managers and employees learning cooperatively to act and reflect upon their acting to become able to cope with the increasing complexity, or variety as he calls it, around and within organisations. To be able to do so, it will not be sufficient, according to Wierdsma, to enlarge individual competences; focus should be on collaborative learning and co-creation of new organisational situations. He creates what I would call 'pressure cooker' meetings where people, away from work, reflect on existing taken-for-granted assumptions on organising to make sense of reality. Wierdsma has developed a method for learning, a method for enlargement of collective competences, that consists of tailor-made programmes facilitated by a consultant. Wierdsma's method aims to initiate and facilitate a dialogue that is focused on the deconstruction and reconstruction of taken-for-granted patterns of organising. The method is grounded in the perspective of social constructionism, where it is those involved who construct reality together and where 'sense-making is the result of a process of mutual coordination through language' (ibid.: 75), in conversation.

I see Wierdsma create temporary organisations (the tailor-made programmes with conversational platforms) as a setting for conversation, to stimulate collective knowledge creation through experiences in a shared reality. In the tailor-made programmes Wierdsma considers collective, contextual learning to take place; these are temporary work systems in which participants work on real-life themes, and where common ways of communication and cooperation become visible. He describes how this enables reflection on the collective competence of coping with variety. It seems that Wierdsma assumes that the ability to reflect is easier to do in organised temporary work systems than in the ordinary work situations of participants.

Essential for Wierdsma is sense-making and collective reflection to construct mutual (new) realities together. Actors (ibid.: 135) 'need to realize that consent on these realities is the result of a process of constructing meaning, and that these meanings can change'. Wierdsma states (ibid.: 135) that 'The quality of social systems can be expressed in the degree to which actors are challenged to contribute to the reality constructing and are willing to change current meanings'. This requires focus on temporary agreements instead of on 'timeless truth'. Consultation, for Wierdsma, is the method of exploring and disturbing ways of thinking and based on this, come to action; through consultation and interaction, temporary workable agreements emerge.

Wierdsma sees specific activities for consultants in the temporary work systems: the consultant as a professional assists the managers in their search for new, better ways of organising processes, and acts primarily as process facilitator. The consultants 'face the challenge to develop interventions that will help managers to improve the actual process of organizing' (ibid.: 61).

In his tailor-made programmes with conversational platforms, Wierdsma sees the role of consultants as facilitating and stimulating the actors in the activities of exploring, disturbing and acting of constructing shared meaning/realities through discussing and negotiating principles of organising – 'the cognitive maps' (ibid.: 43) that individuals use to interpret and understand experience. Although he describes that a consultant is also a participant in the programme and not solely determining the course and the result of the process, the consultant is seen as responsible for creating and guarding the conditions under which the actors can do this together. More specifically, a consultant stimulates group responsibility; increasing awareness of unconscious relational processes and patterns; and reflection on assumed patterns in thinking (the cognitive maps) and (inter-)acting. Where necessary, the consultant will disturb these customary patterns and principles of organising.

In the conversational platforms, the patterns will become apparent and they will be representative for the patterns and principles of organising in other contexts the actors operate in, according to Wierdsma. He states that consultants focus on these

patterns by using their 'generative ability' (ibid.: 78). Wierdsma cites Gergen (1978: 1346), who suggests that this generative ability is the capacity 'to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted" and thereby furnish new alternatives for social action'. Wierdsma considers it as a fundamental premise that participants will allow the consultant to act in this way, and assumes objectivity and detachment to be the criteria legitimising the consultant's participation. It is these qualities that, for Wierdsma, enable the consultant to add value to the change process. Block (1981) and Schein (2005) also take these to be the typical qualities of a consultant. This is negated by Billing (2007), as well as by Alvesson and Deetz (2000), who argue that it is not possible for consultants to be objective and stand outside the content of their client's situation, paying attention to process alone. I will come back to this later when taking up the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, where I will explain why the latter perspective resonates with my own experience.

In the situation narrated above, the participants explored together the question of what it means to perform well, and the appropriate stance to take as manager. At first it was obvious to all the participants that every individual, including themselves, wants to do the job well, and that others are responsible for helping them to do so. In our conversation I disturbed this assumption by challenging the participants to focus on the question 'What can I do in enabling the others to perform well?' This conversation opened up a dialogue on taken-for-granted assumptions ('the others are there for me') and offered opportunities to generate alternative views and actions ('we are dependent upon each other to be able to perform well'). It also worked as an invitation to reflect on our current conversation, where there was a strong tendency to talk about the responsibilities of others, sometimes referring specifically to formal job descriptions; accusations of feeling unsupported; and blaming others for certain activities or for so-called passive behaviour.

Participative arenas for collective reflection

Levin (2004) focuses on creating joint learning situations, where insiders and outsiders join in the same learning process. He calls this the co-generative model of organisational development, in which he emphasises the importance of both participation and collective reflection. Insiders' participation is important to him for democratic reasons – 'participating is a right in itself' (ibid.: 73) – and as an opportunity to benefit from the insights and creativity of the participants by ensuring that they all have a voice.

Participants, according to Levin, need to understand their current situation and discuss what they see as desirable solutions for the future organisation. Through participants' conscious collective reflection, which I see as analysis of the current situation, solutions are developed that are supposed to transform the organisation. Collective reflection creates a theory of action. 'This "theory of action" is shared among the members of the organisation, and identifies and communicates the understanding of how the organization operates' (ibid.: 74). Collective reflection is seen by Levin as a meaning-construction process, a way to develop shared understanding, leading to a theory of action.

In the narrated situation, we began to develop a theory of action ourselves regarding their tasks to be performed at both individual and team level. We began to explore how their jobs relate to one another, how they see individual and team responsibilities. As already mentioned, this was not an easy conversation, because they often referred to job profiles as the definitive truth, thus closing down the conversation; I kept stimulating further exploration of what it means in their daily practice to be an appreciative manager, conductor, or colleague.

How does Levin see the role of a consultant in this process of change? He takes the consultant to facilitate the process, but not to be the one who conceptualises the organisational theory of action. Here he takes the same stance as Wierdsma, Block and Schein: that the consultant should concentrate on the process and patterns in interaction. The consultant will not only be the facilitator, according to Levin, but will also participate in the reflection process, although in a different role than the

other participants. The consultant has, according to Levin, the responsibility for creating processes by which the organisation's learning capability is enhanced. Precisely how a consultant does this is not explained by Levin, but the importance of two cornerstones – participation and collective reflection – is stressed.

These two cornerstones of organisational development require a 'suitable arena', as Levin calls it. A suitable arena is not by definition an organised setting parallel to work settings, as Wierdsma elaborates on in his method. Levin is less explicit on the exact location of these arenas; they simply require active participation and collective reflection. Choosing a suitable arena is not the consultant's exclusive responsibility, although I understand Levin to see the consultant as the professional in this, dominating the decisions on initial design by bringing 'with him or her a professional conceptualization of organizational development as it will guide the structuring of the change activity' (ibid.: 82). In the context of unplanned, undesigned engagements that I research, the arena is given, being the work situation or a meeting in the work situation.

I propose that, taking up Levin's ideas, there are important similarities between the activities of the consultant in a created arena, and in more spontaneous interaction: facilitating participants in becoming aware of existing patterns and in creating new patterns of interaction based on collective reflection, creating a theory of action. As already mentioned, Levin is not explicit in how these activities take place and what the role of a consultant is in these activities. However, he does state as a responsibility of the consultant – the 'friendly outsider', as he calls them – to be monitoring the development process: 'figuring out if problems have been solved, understanding where learning stalls, making sense of potential conflicts, and remedying adequate response' (ibid.: 82). In taking up this monitoring function, the consultant should stimulate a gradual take-over of this responsibility by the insiders (the group of colleagues), according to Levin.

In my view, this concept of the consultant's involvement is characterised by the notion that in formal interventions the consultant is dominant through designing the setting itself, and is well prepared to facilitate the process; in the informal engagements based on this view, the consultant cannot be prepared (no designed

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interventions at hand), but will participate in facilitating the process based on their own expertise and experience; I take this as meaning that the consultant remains an outsider, focusing with detachment on the interaction process. This view of the consultant's role – focused on improvement of the patterns in participants' interaction towards a defined, better future state of the organisation – seems to remain within the assumptions of mainstream thinking.

In the narrated situation, I felt that the participants were too immersed in the actual content of the conversation, and too inexperienced in observing patterns of interaction, to be fully conscious of what was happening. As consultant I facilitated awareness on what was going on in the conversation through stimulating collective reflection on the interaction, mainly by posing questions regarding the way we talked together and the assumptions that might underlie certain ways of acting. I also kept focusing on how their thinking and acting in practice could be regarded as appreciative, and the other way around: how the intention of leading appreciatively would, as a shared meaning, influence their thinking and acting together. It helped us in making sense of both the concept of appreciativeness and the experience of conflict that we had taken part in together. Reflexively, I can see that I remained to a large extent within my conventional role by focusing on facilitation of the interaction process. I managed to do so because of my experience and expertise in facilitating human interaction processes in a variety of meetings.

To summarise: Levin, with collective learning and reflection, and Wierdsma, with collaborative learning and collective competences, focus on the social (groups of people engaging in joint activities); they reflect on what it is that humans do together. To enable this, Levin and Wierdsma take the role of a consultant to be that of organising suitable arenas or temporary work systems in which common, habitual patterns in the interaction of participants become visible, are made explicit and are discussed with the aim of improving the organisation. They see it as the consultant's role to facilitate the group's interaction, in which they create meaning together and form new – and in their view, more effective – patterns of organising. Together with Block (1981), they see the consultant as the detached participant who

uses a professional approach to raise the group's awareness of, and perhaps disturb, habitual patterns of interaction.

Dialogues

Wierdsma describes created meanings as temporary agreements. Shared meanings that were formed previously, according to Wierdsma, may be destroyed and alternative or new meanings are created. Boonstra and de Caluwe (2006: 13) state that 'New meanings can be achieved by exchanging points of view, reflecting critically on them, thoughtfully evaluating various viewpoints and the assumptions behind them, opening a dialogue to discover new perspectives, and acting to create new possibilities'. The significance of dialogue in effecting change in social systems is endorsed by Schein (2005), who suggests that multiple-voiced communication offers the opportunity for a rich exchange of ideas, with potential to influence each other's attitudes and opinions. How does Schein see the role of a consultant?

In dialogue, the consultant, according to Schein (ibid.: 217), emphasises 'the importance of being aware of one's own internal assumptions which "automatically" determine when we will speak and what we will say'. Like Levin and Wierdsma, Schein believes that the consultant focuses on patterns; but these patterns are regularities of behaviour of the different individuals. Where Levin and Wierdsma focus on the group, the collective, Schein focuses on the individual. Schein takes, as I see it, the individual as autonomous person who first creates their own assumptions autonomously and secondly, again autonomously, determines when to speak and what to say.

Schein concentrates on dialogues, where participants exchange and discuss their assumptions and reflect on shared experiences. From this exchange, each can make choices with the aim of improving the situation. He thus takes the future to be defined and realised through the improvement of one situation into another, desired situation. In doing this, I take Schein to address a major influence on the intervening consultant, viewing the consultant as determining to a large degree the course and outcome of the interaction. To fulfil this role, a consultant should have 'mental

models of how the world is organized, models that will help to see, understand, simplify, explain, predict and control what happens' (ibid.: 87). Here, I understand Schein to take 'predict and control' from the perspective of mainstream thinking, which is consistent with his view on process consultation 'with the aim to improve a situation as is defined by the client' (ibid.: 20). Here, consultants facilitate interaction of participants – the dialogue – by observing patterns and choosing ways to share these observations with clients as input to realise a defined future.

The role of a consultant in designed interventions to facilitate change

I conclude that Wierdsma, Levin and Schein focus on (local) interaction as a way to improve an organisation, facilitated by a consultant who concentrates on the process of interaction by making assumptions and patterns explicit, and who stimulates reflection and making sense for co-creating new ways of organising. I will, in the next paragraphs, look in some more detail into the ideas of these and other authors regarding local interaction, change and the role of a consultant, before examining the work of authors whose ideas originate in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

Local interaction

In Project 2 I have described perspectives on change in organisations that typically make long-term plans and implement these plans as actions, with the focus on the whole organisation. Within my organisation, we experienced our change programme, Destination Customer, as such a normative change programme (see Project 1). Local interaction is then to be understood as the process of implementing a plan or design within the whole organisation through formal, designed interventions. Experiences with this way of stimulating change were not very positive; the directors have therefore chosen not to facilitate change through normative change programmes any more.

Considering the current desired change towards an appreciative organisation, and in taking up the ideas of Wierdsma, Levin and Schein, I see the perspective on change shift from planning to processes of learning. I am asked to integrate the concept of the appreciative organisation into the development programme for team managers; the AMSO requests a coach or training for his team managers, all to make the managers competent in appreciative leadership, to manage the organisation appreciatively. Wierdsma, Levin and Schein support this perspective by assuming that global patterns (such as dealing with variety, or an appreciative organisation) can be identified beforehand and changed directly through operating on leverage points (within my organisation, for example, the leadership style of team managers) that can be identified in temporary work systems and participative arenas. Their idea is to operate directly on the global; they focus on the global, long-term perspective ('appreciativeness') in their intention to improve the system. In their attempt to improve patterns of organising, the meaning of process within the system, then, is that of interaction to produce a (better) system.

I see local interaction then become working in teams to learn and create local theories of action, and shift individual mental models based on collective decisions regarding the future. This, I see, is their argument to organise away-from-work interventions to effectively change the global patterning through local interaction in these meetings in an efficient, predictable and controllable way. The authors focus on the importance of participants learning their way into the future: becoming aware of what is going on in their interaction, which patterns are present, how they construct reality within the organisation/group, and how they create shared meaning in interacting – all with the aim of realising a desired global pattern, for example the outcome of being an appreciative organisation. I notice that in the organised settings, this act of reflecting and making patterns explicit is assumed by the authors to be easier and more effective than in the regular engagements of participants, their everyday work. The authors do not further elaborate on this assumption, other than to say that it allows 'the right people in the room' within the organised setting.

Change as a linear movement in time

Again looking in more detail, we see Wierdsma, Levin and Schein – as well as other authors whose ideas are rooted in mainstream thinking – take processes as taking place while thinking of time in a linear way. Their thinking of time implies a linear movement from the past to the present and on into the future. Here, Stacey and colleagues (2000: 26) distinguish two directions in which meaning of the present arises. If one thinks in terms of formative teleology, one takes the enfolded future to be unfolded in the present – meaning that the present arises as movement from the future (ibid.: 35). Simultaneously change can be seen as linear movement of time from the present leading to intended, rationally chosen changes for the future. This is thinking in terms of rational teleology.

In their interventions, both Wierdsma and Levin design interventions in which existing (past) patterns of interaction will be observable in interacting in the present, and these will be brought to the participants' attention. This will then enable participants to become aware and make sense of the patterns and to create more effective patterns for the future. Here, the process of learning is – as Stacey (2007) describes – from the past, in terms of sophisticated tools for identifying and assessing whole patterns in order to design more desirable whole patterns. Schein also takes this stance of seeking patterns in the way situations are handled; and if processes of change and interaction are enacted differently than planned and designed, 'the consultant will need improvisational skills to create the right scenes and manage the process towards a desirable outcome' (Schein 2005: 113).

Kolb and colleagues (2002: 58), in describing their ideas on conversational learning, suggest that one of the dimensions in which this occurs is the discursive process, 'a linear process of naming and describing individuals' ideas and concepts generated in conversations from past, present to future in a continuous flow of activities'. They see the discursive process follow a linear time progression from pre-course, to discourse, to post-course, where in the pre-course begins 'a process of "framing" and then proceeds to elucidate the implications of these assumptions, a process of "naming"' (ibid.: 58–59). The post-course is a process of sorting 'what to

keep from the conversation and what to throw away' (ibid.: 60). They also describe the recursive process, which they call cyclical in nature, 'where ideas and concepts acquire new meaning as individuals return to the same conversation to question and inquire about their experience anew' (ibid.: 58). Both processes are interconnected in conversation, according to the authors.

I see Wierdsma, Levin and Schein as mainly focusing on the discursive process, the linear time perspective, in taking existing patterns and challenging their adequacy in the light of the desired future competences and organisation (rational and formative teleology).

In retrospect, I conclude that I have made various attempts in my conversation with the managers and conductors to keep exploring, within the experience itself (recursive process), how we (for example) assumed mutual responsibilities. This discussion at times felt repetitive, as well as extremely open-ended – despite their efforts to close it down by referring to existing job profiles; we generated a broad range of interpretations in our collective efforts to construct our ideas within the conversation, based on recent and actual experience. At the same time I personally (as, I sense, did the others) struggled with my need to influence the process, which led to conclusions or ideas about the desired future of acting appreciatively. I consider this a recursive process with a mixture of rational and formative teleology in my way of thinking. I will further enquire into the issue of time, and more specifically time in terms of circular time, later in this project.

An external professional to facilitate the process of interaction

All three authors – Wierdsma, Levin and Schein – take the consultant to be external to the process, and to be competent to 'judge' the effectiveness of planned interventions. Hughes (2007) presents a classification framework featuring eight questions that could be asked of a change management technique in order to inform understanding about its utilisation. This framework, according to Hughes, forms the basis for consultants to make informed choices of interventions. Boonstra (1996) states, however, that there is no theory yet that indicates which intervention is best in what circumstance. Building such a theory, according to Boonstra, is difficult

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because of the many variables per situation and the implicit considerations of consultants. 'In practice it will be the experience of the consultant and his/her preferences and values that influence the choice of a specific intervention' (ibid.: 91).

Stacey and colleagues (2000: 26) discuss 'rational teleology', where an outsider can make rational choices about the system at stake. To be able to do this, the consultant is to a large extent detached from the client's system. I recognise this in the attitude that the authors imply for the consultant's role: the consultant concentrates on the process in a group in the sense of helping to define 'how things are said and done', and brings this to the attention of the participants in order to enable reflection and improvement (Schein 2005: 153). In taking a consultant – as in mainstream thinking – to focus mainly, or exclusively, on the process between the participants, I see an isolation, or abstraction, of 'process' as being a separated element (a subsystem) of the organisation. Stacey (2003: 272) states that

> As part of a system, individuals are interacting with each other to produce a system. Participation means that they participate as parts of the system that their interaction creates. The meaning of process within the system is that of interaction to produce a system. In all these cases, interaction creates something that is abstracted from the direct experience of interaction itself. Interaction creates a system above the interacting individuals who continue to be thought of as the individual systems.

Along with Stacey, I see that a possible consequence of this abstraction of process is that the actual experience of participants of their engagement may diminish; it can become – even more when the intervention is organised away from work in a designed, temporary work environment – that the experience will become a 'thing' that one can talk about afterwards. In my own work as a consultant, as Billing (2007: 13) also notes, I find it unhelpful to 'assume that content can be split off from process in organisational change'. It has been my experience that colleagues see my role as facilitator of a good process of cooperation and communication, and assume that I distance myself from the content of a conversation, since 'you are not directly involved in the specific business we are going to discuss'. At the same time,

however, I have in these situations always felt myself as a conductor of an orchestra: although I fulfilled another role than the other participants in concentrating on the ways of interacting (the process), I felt no less involved in the 'music' we produced together.

To sum up: Where does this bring me so far?

The authors so far discussed emphasise the importance of change as a process that implies participation, collective reflection on patterns and actions, making sense of what happens, and taking place in social engagements outside the everyday work situation of participants. The consultant takes the role of facilitating the interaction, being the expert in making the invisible visible and the unconscious conscious for all participants. This stance assumes that doing all this will create an efficient and effective change process and achieve the planned future result. I would summarise this stance on the role of a consultant as *intervening*, in its original sense: coming from the outside into a group of people through chosen actions to direct their interacting.

The question is whether and how the premises on change and on the involvement of a consultant from mainstream thinking are applicable in engagements that are not constructed through designed interventions. To address this question, I will begin to call upon authors who base their ideas on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating and focus on change emerging in local interaction, understood specifically as self-organisation in the sense of the complexity sciences, as well as on the involvement of a consultant.

Change in engagements without pre-designed interventions

Theatre as invitation to spontaneity

Larsen (2005) has elaborated on a specific setting – interaction in theatre – where he searches 'for ways to encourage people to spontaneously participate in the emerging conversation' (ibid.: 19). He works at Dacapo, a Danish consulting firm that frequently uses theatre in organisational change processes with their clients.

Larsen argues that one could take up theatre as a planned intervention where people – through taking up a role in a play – explore and react to what is going on onstage. In thus using theatre as an intervention, 'theatre is seen as a tool, a "thing" that can be implemented in practice, perhaps demonstrating a desired outcome by following a script' (ibid.: 35). The element of fiction and the distance that it creates enables, according to Larsen, 'an opportunity to play with the situation' (ibid.: 45). Theatre, then, is an intervention that might facilitate change processes. This resonates with the ideas of Wierdsma, Levin and Schein as well as with Boonstra and de Caluwe's (2006) inventory of interventions to enable reflection and sense-making. Larsen states that in this view on theatre (ibid.: 120-121),

> Theatre enables the individual to split experience into the usual, familiar reality, and the theatrical reality as it appears on stage. This means that the individual becomes able to observe the habitual reality from an unfamiliar angle, a duplication that puts the familiar new into perspective and thereby makes it reflective. Observed through the lens of the theatre experience, the familiar reality becomes contingent. It becomes obvious that it could be different, and that the alternative view is possible at least in principle; therefore views that were previously taken for granted become unfrozen.

Larsen stresses that organisations in this view are seen as reifications, change as a process of freezing, unfreezing and freezing (Lewin 1941) to install new order in a system.

An important conclusion Larsen makes, based on the above, is that theatrical intervention is seen to come from outside the organisation, and so in itself is assumed to be unable to effect change. In seeing theatre as this kind of laboratory, there is for Larsen an unfruitful split between fiction and reality, which he does not recognise in his practice as consultant. Therefore, he has examined various aspects of theatre while taking organisations to be processes of human interaction. In taking this stance, theatre is seen as a part of conversation, understood as the interactions going on between people in an organisation. One of the aspects he examines is spontaneity. I will focus on the aspect of spontaneity, since I consider this to be an essential element in the undesigned, unplanned engagements I explore, and since it contrasts sharply with the ideas of mainstream thinking on change with its assumptions of predictability, designability, controllability. I will examine closely what is understood by spontaneity and how it is seen in the light of local interaction, change as movement in time, and the role of a consultant.

Spontaneity

Local interaction

Larsen's definition of spontaneity is 'acting without being in control of one's own acting in the social process of relating' (2005: 186). Spontaneity here is not seen as an individual skill, as for example Schein (2005) does in seeing a consultant improvise to get a process back on track if it proceeds differently than designed and planned. Spontaneity for Larsen 'is essentially relational, social and processual' (ibid.: 186) in the process of co-creating meaning. He states (ibid.: 3) that 'spontaneity can be recognised as liveliness: one finds oneself in spontaneous activity when one becomes unsure of the response the other will take to one's gesture'. Here, he builds on the ideas of Mead (1934): that people communicate through gesturing and responding. In conversation, according to Mead's ideas,

gesturing cannot be separated from responding; it is one social act. Meaning emerges in this act as gesturing and responding, which calls forth other responses to become gestures. This implies that meaning does not already exist in the mind of a sender (for example, a trainer or coach) as pre-defined meaning that is to be discovered and transferred towards a receiver; meaning emerges in the social, in conversation. This can be either the creative or the destructive emergence of meaning.

In gesturing and responding we are, according to Mead, taking the attitude – the tendency to act – of the other. This is not so much a singular other, but a generalised other, a group or society. He calls this attitude the 'me'; the 'me' is one's own perception of the configuration of the gestures and responses of the other to one as a subject, or an 'I'. In what Mead calls the 'I'–'me' dialectic, we have processes in which the generalising of the 'me' is made particular in the responses of the 'I' for a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular place. Larsen (2005: 147), in taking up Mead's ideas, sees that relating spontaneously – such as in the setting of a theatrical interaction – goes on in the interaction where one takes the attitude of the other, and this in turn shapes and transforms the 'me', one's view of oneself.

As we are responding to others, we are also responding to ourselves – namely, the attitude we have taken of the other. Mead (1934) calls the continuously ongoing internal conversation 'self'. Shaw (2002), and Shaw and Stacey (2006), also attest to the importance of human interaction, when focusing on conversation. In conversation, which Shaw sees as organising, people make sense of what they are doing together and construct the future together. Not in the sense of designing pictures of this future in combination with plans and interventions to realise the future as stated, but in taking up the conversation step by step, as gesturing and responding and forming and being formed.

In taking up the narrative more reflexively, I recognise the 'I'–'me' dialectic in my acting: I entered the conversation with the AMSO and the team managers with the assumption of them expecting me to professionally arrange a coach for the team managers, who would facilitate them to become skilled in an appreciative leadership style. This made their request feel like a typical routine assignment to

me. I assumed – in taking the attitude of the other – that I was being asked as the professional in doing the assignment (the 'me'); I had the intention to act accordingly (the 'I') by making an adequate match between the team managers and the coach or coaches.

In the second phase of the conversation, where the conductors joined us, the expectations that I assumed the (generalised) others (taken as representatives of the organisation) would have of my role (my added value, one could say) changed profoundly. I struggled with the change that I thought I had to (and wanted to) make in my acting. My internal struggle was whether I would be accepted in taking a different role ('me'), as well as what this other role would imply (my response as 'I'). I can easily recall my internal conversation and the anxiety it provoked in retrospect; at the time of the conversation, I acted spontaneously, not taking or having (much) time to consider my thoughts thoroughly and then deciding rationally what would be best to do. Reflexively, I take the 'me' in the second part of the conversation change into 'help us out of this harsh conversation' based on the way the others were looking at me, and my own felt need to take the emerging emotions of all participants seriously. This resulted in my internal, in the moment, question on how to respond (the 'I'). Moreover, I experienced what Mead would call a change in 'self', the emergent dialectical movement between 'me' and 'I'. For me this was a change in role, from acting in a well-prepared way, feeling in control of the situation, to acting spontaneously from within the conversation without having any prepared interventions ready. Here, I relied wholly on my own experience and competences.

The direct interaction between individuals – where through gestures calling forth responses, which in turn call forth other gestures and responses, patterns of relating emerge – is called local interaction. Change is taken to emerge in self-organising (while there is no outsider determining the interaction) processes of patterning within this local interaction through (small) changes in the acts of gesturing and responding. Through changes in local interaction, global patterns change too. How do changes in the act of gesturing–responding emerge?

Mead proposes that the responses of the 'I' to the 'me' are not givens but are always potentially unpredictable; there is no predetermined way in which the 'I' might respond to the 'me'. This is due, according to Mead, to humans' capacity to act spontaneously. And this is due to the fact that humans are reflexive, in that their actions are formed by their own histories. Stacey (2007: 315) states that 'spontaneity generates variety in responses, often as small difference that have the potential for being amplified in interaction', which he considers makes spontaneity 'closely associated with the possibility of transformation and novelty in human interaction'.

For Larsen, spontaneity is 'finding oneself reacting in an unforeseen way, not carefully planned but still against the background of an awareness of the other and others in a particular social context' (2006: 52). In the narrated situation, I did not respond 'out of the blue' (impulsively). Moreover, my response was grounded in the experience in the first part of the engagement, as well as in the way I perceived relations between myself (as the consultant) and my colleagues – not only those with the request, but also my colleagues more generally within the organisation. My acting was formed by the background of my social context, as well as by my past experience in similar engagements.

Change as a circular movement in time

Friis (2006), who also works at Dacapo Theatre in Denmark, elaborates on the paradox of being skilled and experienced in what one is doing, which is based on 'knowing' and acting spontaneously ('not-knowing') at the same time. He argues (ibid.: 86) that acting based on knowing will lead to repetitive actions, where not-knowing will lead to spontaneous actions that enable novelty and transformation. I experience that a consultant acts within this paradox. A professional change consultant has considerable experience of human processes and change, as well as in dealing with processes of change. Within mainstream thinking (such as that of Wierdsma, Levin, Boonstra and Schein), this experience is taken to be about knowing what will be needed and what will be the outcome of interventions (predictability, controllability and plannability). Here, successes in the past seem to

be taken as guarantees or significant hints for successes in the future, often called 'best practice' or required behaviour (competences). Wierdsma takes the collective competence of dealing with variety as known to be relevant for a successful future; the directors take being an appreciative organisation, with managers leading appreciatively, as being relevant to their organisation, as though they can forecast its positive impact on the business.

Basic to these assumptions is the 'knowing' of the past and present in its relevance for the future, as well as the experience of the consultant where former successes of interventions are taken as models that can be applied to realise similar successes in the future. Stacey (2003: 67) argues that time here is seen in a linear way through 'thinking of iteration or reproduction of one period to the next in which the patterns of interaction in the present depend upon the history of interactions in the past and expectations of the future'.

In taking up the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, he suggests that '[t]hese expectations of the future cannot be from the viewpoint of the future, only from that of the present' and that 'we can only understand the past in terms of our present viewpoint' (ibid.: 67). In taking this stance, Stacey does not state that what we have done or said in the past can be redone or unsaid in the present: 'We can only go forward in time and elaborate on what we have said or done'. He continues, 'what we have said and done precludes all alternative ways of interacting and that what happens next will be different to what might have been if we had interacted in [one of these] alternative ways' (ibid.: 67), emphasising that

> It is only the present viewpoint that is relevant to action because action is always in the present and the arrow of time means that we can never go back from the present viewpoint to a past one. We can only understand the past in terms of our present viewpoint. As soon as one understands human interaction as iterative, one understands that the past is being reproduced in the present. … Human action is always in the present but it also is always explicitly or implicitly taken on the basis of expectations about the future.

This presents a profoundly different view on time from mainstream thinking as described earlier in this project, where change is taken as a linear movement in time: here, the present is thought of as not being influenced by either the past or expectations about the future. Developing the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, as Stacey does, time is taken as self-referential – as circular, in a sense; looping back on itself. This is based on the ability of the human central nervous system to be an object to itself. Human action in the present is, at the same time, forming and being formed by the past and by expectations about the future. In this, Larsen (2005) and Friis (2006) find their argument for using theatre as an invitation to spontaneity – spontaneity being acting in the present, while forming and being formed by experiences in the past and expectations about the future, without knowing what will happen. I will enquire further into what acting in the present entails.

Liveliness

According to Mead, Stacey, Larsen and Friis, change takes place, emerges, in the interaction of people. Here it is not, as they argue, a predetermined change, but the change is created within the interaction as (small) changes in people's responses to gestures.

I recognise this in my own narrative. In response to my question about mutual responsibilities ('What can you do to enable yourself and your colleagues to perform well?'), one of the reactions was that this was a new and unfamiliar approach to take. Moreover, it immediately triggered all participants to take up the issue. It brought attention to the difference between demanding certain supportive behaviour of others ('You ought to inform me') and taking up one's own responsibility for the business process. Here, my gesture was a spontaneous remark and thus an unexpected response, a question, that emerged through my emotion of exasperation: it is too easy to blame others and have them be accountable for one's own performance.

Stacey (2007: 315) states that '[s]pontaneity makes it possible for people to deal with the unique contingencies of the situations they always face'. The way I acted

towards the participants in the narrated conversation, I can see in retrospect, was grounded in my own experiences with earlier engagements in my organisation, where I had experienced a similar blaming strategy (the past), as well as in my feeling that this blaming mode would not help us to resolve the current situation (the future). This spontaneous response was my way of dealing with my irritation in the situation; it was the way I dealt with my feeling of 'Come on guys, this is the limit!'

Both Larsen (2005) and Friis (2006) emphasise the importance of acting and being 'in the moment'. Larsen (2005: 3) calls this liveliness, where Friis (2006: 90) talks of being present. But to them it is not only a matter of timing; they describe the relational nature of presence. Friis states (ibid.: 90), 'You are present in relation to someone or something. Acting is not about acting but about re-acting – it is not about listening but about being changed by what you hear'. In the narrated engagement, I recall being 'shocked' by the answers to my initial question on acting appreciatively, in that the participants could only take it up in the sense of what the others should do. Again, since this instantly recalled similar blaming modes in earlier engagements, I could not do other than to take up this observation and find myself in an exposed role as full participant in the conversation, and not as the more detached, objective consultant. My natural behaviour of being in control was lost in my need to take up what I encountered. I experienced this as losing control but remaining 'in charge'.

In reflecting on this event, I experience myself changing my way of being a consultant. This change can be characterised as from being/feeling in control, trying to plan and control responses (the conventional role of a consultant) towards inviting the others as well as myself to loosen control, sharing the risk of acting spontaneously into the unknown. It resonates for me with Shaw (2002: 32) proposing that consultants should reduce the level of prior specification (design) of interactions because this 'increases the experience of diversity and multiplicity, disturbing routinised responses and increasing the potential of novelty'.

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Summary

In the conventional perspective on change, change is seen as a linear movement in time; as predictable, plannable and controllable. The consultant's focus is on facilitating the process of change. He participates in the process, but is not seen as being part of the (change) process; the change is not seen as affecting the consultant, who is assumed to be a detached outsider. The consultant's role is to design, monitor and facilitate interventions that – it is anticipated – will cause the desired change. The authors I have taken up stress the importance of the patterning of interaction between participants, which can be observed. To be able to do this, the consultant will design and facilitate interventions that will make patterns of interaction visible and create opportunities to reflect on these patterns to analyse their adequacy for the desired future, as well as co-creating new patterns of organising with new meaning.

Mead, and the authors who take the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, take change to emerge in local interaction; there is no outsider determining the process. Local interaction is characterised by its non-predictability, non-plannable nature, by the social acts of gestures and responses where people form and are being formed by each other in the absence of global plans or designs. These local interactions are highly improvisational in nature, where spontaneous acting leads to changes in the way people gesture and respond and thus engage in a novel way. It cannot be guaranteed beforehand (as assumed in the conventional view on change processes) that this change will be towards an intended, constructive outcome (here, a more or less uniform style of appreciativeness); the novel, emerging in local interaction, can even be destructive. It also cannot be guaranteed that the local interaction will ultimately result in the intended change throughout the whole organisation.

Here, the consultant is seen as a participant in the interaction, taking part in the sense of being involved in the conversation; a fellow participant, as Shaw calls the consultant. As fellow participant, it is the role of a consultant, according to Shaw, to

'try to shift people's perspective to see that organisational change *is* this process rather than an end product of it' (2002: 33).

Where does this lead me in my investigation into the involvement of a consultant in local interaction? I will consider this question in reaching conclusions on what I see as the role of a consultant, based on the ideas of the authors whose theories I have explored in this project.

Conclusions on the involvement of a consultant in change in processes of local interaction

The assumptions of both perspectives on change – systems theory, and complex responsive processes – and their effect on the involvement of a consultant are, as I have come to conclude, very different.

Within the perspective of organisations being systems, where the way people engage in the system is very important for the way the system works and will be changed, there is a focus on formal interventions, as I have described. If, while thinking within this perspective, a consultant has to deal with unplanned/undesigned engagements of local interaction, for whatever reason, he/she will base the activities on the assumptions that are essential to this perspective. This will, as I recognise myself doing in parts of the narrated situation, lead to an attempt to focus on patterns and their predictability, and an effort to control the process of interaction through reflection and brainstorming to agree on the desirable features of the future. One could say that the consultant will try to improvise, as Schein says, interventions on the spot, while retaining the assumption that predictability, plannability and controllability are important features of organising.

Taking the view of organisations as processes of human interaction leads to a profoundly different involvement for the consultant, who in this context cannot design or predetermine the process of interaction. The consultant is participant in the conversation, acting spontaneously in the present, as for example Shaw and

colleagues (2006) describe. To illustrate this I will relate to Friis' (2006: 88) idea of spontaneity:

> [Spontaneity is] an immediate reaction based on intuitive reflections, where immediate means that time is important, reaction means that it is relational, a response to a gesture, and intuitive reflection means that the reaction is rooted in the social experience of the person, yet not as a 'whole' fully present in consciousness prior to the moment of acting.

I feel that the professionalism of a consultant – especially regarding 'the intuitive reflection rooted in the social experience' – distinguishes their own role within the interaction from the contributions of the other participants. Although I can agree with those authors (such as Boonstra 1996) who emphasise that the professionalism of consultants is based in their studies of social sciences, I have come to see, taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, that there is much more – or rather, different – expertise that is relevant, besides planning, designing, monitoring, predicting. This expertise is in acting spontaneously in the present, facilitating to keep exploration and conversation open by dealing with the existing anxiety and improvising towards the unknown. Moreover, in taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, the organisational change is taken to be an ongoing process into the unknown rather than a defined end state that is different from a prior state, as in mainstream thinking. This, I conclude, gives a profoundly different focus for a consultant, with change being the ongoing process in conversation.

In this project I have explored the elements of spontaneity and liveliness, which contain acting into the unknown within the moment of interaction, within the present. Here I am informed by Mead's ideas on responses to gestures becoming gestures themselves: I argue that a consultant must be able to let their own gesture be a response to the gesture of participants. Since the gesture of the other participant is a (spontaneous) response to a former gesture, the consultant can never plan their own gestures in advance or how to respond to other's gestures. Designing gestures (interventions) to control others' responses therefore does not fit with this perspective on change, where spontaneity and liveliness are required. Shaw (2002)

calls this the consultant taking the role of fellow participant; who forms and is being formed in the interaction, just as the other participants are; who is involved and detached, paradoxically at the same time. I have come to see the involvement of a consultant to the interaction to be their professionalism in being reflexive in a disciplined way, as well as using former experiences to intensify the interaction and take the risk of acting into the unknown by responding spontaneously to unpredictable gestures.

For me, this contrasts sharply with my previous assumptions about being in control and having things 'figured out in advance' to ensure successful change. Any consultant – including myself – must take their experience of the present moment seriously through disciplined reflexivity in the conversation, and must be ready to intensify the conversation in acting spontaneously; this has come to resonate with my experience as a consultant. It means loosening control, responding naturally to the gestures of the other participants as they do to mine. I also take it to be the role of a consultant to invite other participants to risk being similarly reflexive and spontaneous. It feels comforting that Larsen (2005: 57) in this regard states that 'in contrast to spontaneity itself, invitations to spontaneity can be partly planned'. This, to me, links my conventional view of my role as consultant within my organisation, to my enquiry into the involvement of a consultant participating in contingency of everyday work life within the organisation.

Project 4

Working as a consultant on culture change

Introduction

In my work as an internal consultant, I am asked to facilitate leadership development and culture change. In this project I will enquire into what I experience we do to change the culture of the organisation, and into my involvement as a consultant in this regard. I will explore the taken-for-granted assumptions that influence our actions by taking up theories on culture, culture change and consulting.

Background

Recently, 11 regional working technical professionals were united into one centralised staff department. The main argument for this restructuring was the growing complexity of the work assignments due to complex work regulations as well as changes in the business. In recent months, these professionals have tended to work quite separately, and some major errors have been made that had significant financial consequences. An evaluation shows that, had they worked better together to share their expertise when formulating their advice to management, these errors could potentially have been avoided.

The staff members feel very responsible for the errors and have invited me to help them find ways to change their ways of working. Their own attempts to improve their cooperation have so far failed. At least on the surface, their intentions seem to have been frustrated by the urgent nature of the work they must get done. In a telephone conversation with one of the staff members (Jenny), I learned that staff take up assignments individually, do not share experiences or expertise, and have not taken the opportunity to learn from each other. 'We all work in our own way,

each of us with the best intentions'. There is, according to Jenny, no open rivalry in the department, but each of them thinks he/she knows best how to do the job. We plan a meeting together with the manager of the department, Leo, to explore what we could do to change the situation. I do not know Leo from earlier encounters.

'Let's decide how to do the work'

Leo strikes me as a very demanding man, evidenced by his immediate request to see an action plan for the work we will do together. I notice disappointment in his face when I tell him that I have been asked by the team to work with them to explore how they might work together differently. I suggest that I expect the team to discover what to do next on the basis of our discussions together. 'Step by step we will construct ways to work together, deciding what seems necessary and relevant at the time'. Jenny immediately confirms that this way of working is why she and her colleagues have asked me to facilitate the process.

Leo asks again whether 'there is then no plan or structure at all that will be guiding the change?' and 'How do we know whether and when we will obtain the desired outcome?' I understand that he wants some guarantees that the process will produce specific results. I suggest to him that I cannot guarantee either of those, and clarify what I mean by explaining that I would like to explore with the team of staff members what they see as professional cooperation and how they enact this in their work. We conclude the conversation by setting a date for our first meeting with the whole department. I feel very conscious of the need to take into account the differences of opinion that might occur on how change should be realised and what it should lead to.

At the first meeting of the whole group, everyone seems anxious to start. Pierre initiates the discussion by describing a dilemma he encountered in one of his projects. He explains to us what the dilemma is. Others recognise his situation, and the group begins to offer some suggestions. One of the participants suggests that Pierre needs to 'just make a decision and inform the managers'. This leads to a lively discussion, but the group does not arrive at consensus about this strategy. The

discussion goes on for some time, and after a while I ask why it is so difficult to deal with Pierre's case. There is further discussion around feeling there is probably not one best solution, and that decisions need to be made in and for specific contexts. We try to understand what contextual elements might come into play. As the list of possibilities grows, people begin to see that there are many factors and that the discussion is useful.

Two weeks later we all receive a mail from John, expressing concern about an assignment he has. He feels he may not have the expertise required to manage this assignment and asks whether this challenge could be discussed at the next meeting.

Our next meeting is the following week, in the same room as our first meeting, but I notice that this time there is a projector and screen, which were not there the last time. I am told that Leo has arranged this, because he wants to present his ideas to us. Leo starts the meeting by saying that John's email has inspired him to present some ideas about how we should all work together. It becomes very quiet in the room for a moment, and I sense some tension and frustration. I try to bring attention to this by sharing that I feel quite uncomfortable about what is happening. I see some people nod; others look to the floor in front of them. John breaks the silence by saying: 'I have not sent you all an email just to listen to a presentation about what we are supposed to do. I want us to discuss this. I think if the solution were simple, Leo, I could have thought of it myself, don't you think?' Leo is taken by surprise and returns to his seat without giving the presentation he had planned.

Others then take up a similar theme, commenting that they too want to work through these decisions together. Some challenge Leo directly, commenting that he is repeating old patterns by deciding himself how they work together. They are calling attention to a pattern in Leo's behaviour. I invite the participants to be more explicit about why they want to decide themselves how they will work together. Leo listens carefully and then agrees that he will not present his ideas if they do not want him to, or to perhaps 'do it at the end of this meeting'. This does not happen, because all the time is used to discuss John's specific case, and ideas about how to act in similar situations.

Taking up the narrative more reflexively

Although all involved seem to have the same intent – that is, to perform in a professional way as department – there are individual variations in what this will imply and how this ambition can be realised. From the standpoint that no one has the right or the wrong perspective and assumptions, I take it to be important to be aware of the different views and their origins.

It is Leo's intent to improve the way in which the staff members work, and specifically, to move away from individual effort to a more cooperative and appreciative style. Leo expects me to facilitate a planned, predictable and controllable process towards a stated objective in the future. He understands that the current problems are largely due to non-cooperation, and assumes that this needs to be solved as a matter of urgency. I notice that in my bilateral conversations with Leo, he often uses the word 'culture' to describe the issue that we have to deal with. This is not exceptional in my organisation, where 'performance management culture', 'appreciative organisation', 'result-oriented culture', and 'customer-oriented culture' have been buzz-words for some time. The way Leo prefers to realise the desired culture is dominant in my organisation. I myself have been working for many years in this taken-for-granted manner; this helps me to recognise and understand Leo's thinking.

For the staff members, it is not yet clear what professional cooperation entails, how to define it, or how to achieve it. They ask me to facilitate their search to define these issues. For them it is a search they want to do together, in interaction. They believe this will lead to better ways of working as professionals. I see the staff members participate in a change process, while not knowing where this will lead and when, if ever, it will be 'enough'. The way of change chosen by the staff members is also familiar in the organisation: a participative change process with those involved, and often based on positive experiences from the past. This, as I see it, is rooted in the view of organisational development and, more specifically, appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987). Here a team constructs a

desired future, their dream, together by extrapolating former successes into the future.

In the meetings, I experience the effect of different views on culture. Leo sees culture as an element of an organisation that can be deliberately changed. In this idea of culture, my work as a consultant implies facilitating sessions in which we come to a shared definition of the desired situation and action plans on how to work together as professionals. We focus on an inventory of behaviour, do's and don'ts, and probably a value statement for the whole department. We change 'it'.

The staff team, as I see it, is not explicit in what culture is to them. They do not actually use the word 'culture' in our meetings: we talk about what their work entails and how it can be done, both collectively and individually. As a consultant I facilitate their search by asking questions, sharing my observations and by being a participant in the search rather than guiding their enquiry. In doing this, I emphasise what I experience we are doing while cooperating as professionals in the meeting itself, and relate this to their ambition of working professionally. In the conversation, various themes emerge and are taken up.

Key discourses taking up the themes of the narrative

In my working with Leo and his staff, it becomes clear that different taken-for-granted assumptions on culture and change lead to different expectations and actions. This causes misunderstanding, incomprehension, and tension in work relations. Central to this project will be the way our intentions and actions are influenced by the perspective one takes. I will investigate how it is that different theories on culture and culture change result in different theories on consulting.

Theories of culture as metaphor, entity and patterns of conduct

Organisational culture is a frequently researched topic, resulting in many publications (e.g. Hofstede 1990, 1991; Schein 1985; Morgan 1986). In the publications on organisational culture, many definitions are given, each reflecting a very different understanding of what culture is.

Morgan (1986) introduced the notion of metaphors for understanding organisations: 'Metaphors are ways of seeing and a way of thinking' (ibid.: 12). Alvesson and Spicer (2011: 31) argue that 'we never relate to objective reality "as such" but always do so through forming metaphors or images of the phenomenon we address'. Which metaphor fits best for describing organisations is subject to change over time. Various contemporary authors use the metaphor of organisations being cultures. For example, Alvesson (2002: 16) states that 'through seeing organizations as cultures we can get a "better" or at least richer view of what goes on in organizations, of the thoughts, feelings, values and actions of people in every day organizational life and in decision-making situations'. According to this position, 'culture is […] an intellectual device which helps us to comprehend organizations in term of specific vocabulary (such as norms, beliefs, values, symbols)' (Brown 1998: 10). From this perspective, every aspect (e.g. leadership, strategy, technology) of an organisation is part of its culture. I see the metaphor of 'culture' originating in the domain of anthropological science, where Tylor (1871) introduced the term. Here (national) society's culture is taken up as a metaphor of organisations being cultures.

Brown (1998) considers the dominant view on culture to be a perception of culture as an objective entity. Culture is taken to be something an organisation has, being a set of behavioural and cognitive characteristics, often created in a process in which certain ways of surviving proved adequate. Patterns of behaviour become meaningful to people because they are regarded as important to deal with changing (external) circumstances. In the theory on culture as objective entity, culture is seen

as constituted of relatively static values, norms and beliefs of individuals in a group, which influence the thinking and acting of people. Their behaviour is a manifestation of the 'culture' of the organisation.

Many authors take up culture as patterned conduct. For example Schein (2000), who distinguishes three interrelated levels in culture, determined by their visibility: assumptions as taken-for-granted beliefs about the nature of reality that are treated as non-negotiable, values and norms that describe how things should be done, and artifacts as concrete expressions for the governing assumption – such as in verbal manifestations. He emphasises the importance of comprehending all three levels of culture to understand how culture is passed on within groups. 'Only then discrepancies between espoused values and visible artifacts can be understood from the assumptions' (ibid.: 82).

For Schein, organisational culture refers to the patterns of beliefs, values, and learned ways of coping with experiences that have developed during the course of an organisation's history, and which tend to be manifested in its material arrangements and in the behaviour of its members. Boonstra (2010: 25) refers to this as 'culture as learning process', where culture originates in ways of surviving as organisations: successful proven behaviour.

Changing cultures

Many authors (e.g. Lorsch and Gordon, in Kilmann et al. 1985) say that to comprehend an organisation, its culture can be examined, analysed and understood more or less in isolation of the rest of the organisation. This has led to the development of various models to capture and measure organisational culture. Based on the research of the cultures of many organisations, scholars concluded on positive and negative cultures, weak and strong cultures, and other dimensions to analyse cultures, for example the relationship between culture and strategy. Peters and Waterman (1982) did major research in this area and concluded that favourable cultures create successful organisations. Sanders and Nuijen (1987) also researched the relationship between types of cultures and organisational performance, as did

Kotter and Heskett (1992) by measuring the relationship between cultural values and the organisational adaptation to the environment. These authors agree on a causal relationship between organisational culture and the performance of an organisation. Also, in *the Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate* (Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson 2011) it is concluded that positive work cultures and climates are beneficial for employees' performance.

The relationship is critiqued by various authors: Alvesson (2002: 54) states that 'empirical support is lacking', while Brown (1998: 226) critiques research that concludes positively on the relationship between culture and performance:

> Indeed, most of the evidence which suggests a link between organisational culture and organisational performance consists of stories and anecdotes. Very few studies start by outlining a theory of culture and then 'test' it by applying it to successful and unsuccessful organisations to see if it is in fact applicable.

In the staff department, I experience a taken-for-granted relation between the performance of the group (the 'unforced errors' by working individually) and the department's culture, appreciative and cooperative working, resulting in a better performance ('no errors'). However, there is no empirical evidence to confirm this assumed causality.

In the perspective on culture as an entity, change of behaviour and thus culture is mostly focused on people's mindset and behaviour. Schein (1961) claims that any change of culture must involve coercive persuasion, brainwashing, since people will naturally resist suggestions that they change fundamental aspects (their basic assumptions, values and beliefs) of how they think. For Schein, leaders are those who take up their primary role of manipulation of culture by organising coercive persuasion to change people's values and beliefs (Schein 2004). Stacey (personal communication) points to the fact that leaders taking this stance are 'assumed to be unconstrained in making their choices for the future of a whole organisation and it is assumed that coercive persuasion can overcome the resistances people practice to thwart such domination'. He argues (ibid.), based on the research of Khurana

(2007) on leadership development, that 'what is actually happening is that leaders are bringers of order and continuity', as they are trained in the kind of conformity required to sustain order and continuity. It is exactly this conformity that I also observe in organisation-wide planned change and learning programmes to initiate and change the thinking and acting of individuals in groups. In Project 1, I described 'Destination Customer' as an example of such a programme.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) critique such 'grand technocratic projects' for culture change; and I agree with them on this, because in these projects 'agency is ascribed to top and senior management levels, and reactivity to oneself (as a lower-level organizational member)' (ibid.: 137). The authors (ibid.: 46) also critique the idea that managers can in fact – for example, through those planned change programmes – impose their values on the organisation, as if the organisational culture is clear, consistent and unambiguous. They advocate for change of 'culture as reframing of everyday life' (ibid.: 46), or at least for a combination of change methods to enlarge commitment and 'a better connectedness' (ibid.: 47). The authors take changing culture through reframing everyday life to be a more targeted approach, acknowledging the local character of meaning and interpretation and sense-making. This change approach is presented as emergent and grounded in local initiatives, but I take it in its essence to be a systemic, deliberate intervention, taking change to mean the realisation of a known future. Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007: 4) are critical about efforts in organisations, initiated by leaders, to realise conformity in the way employees think, feel and act, illustrating it with the example of teamwork as a cultural value.

In a large body of mainstream research, teamwork is presented as a means by which managers can more effectively mobilise employees to improve business performance. By reorganising work so as better to accommodate task interdependencies, and by leaving team members a margin of autonomy in deciding how to handle these interdependencies, teamwork is often presented as a 'win–win' policy, making work simultaneously more satisfying for employees and more effective for the business.

Adler, Forbes and Willmott continue (ibid.):

> Critical research has shown how teamwork, when indeed management
> corrals it towards business goals, can result in the oppressive internalization
> of business values and goals by team members, who then begin exploiting
> themselves and disciplining team peers in the name of business performance
> and being 'responsible' team players.

I personally do not experience this oppressive effect in my organisation; but then, I am a member of the organisation myself – with the consequence that parts of the culture are not (or no longer) consciously identifiable for me, since I have adjusted to the organisational culture in order to avoid be[com]ing an outsider. However, reflexively I recognise how my choices of action and my accounts of consulting are influenced by what one is allowed to do within the current culture. I also observe – as in the example of teamwork that is the theme of the staff members – how they openly and covertly struggle with conforming themselves individually and as a group to being team players. I will not explore this further in the scope of this project. What is important for me here is the possibly oppressive and constraining feature of culture and culture change processes as mentioned by Willmott (1993, 2003) as culturism, and Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007), due to the fact that culture can be used by those who design it to impose conformity upon employees in an organisation. I will take this up when enquiring managerialism. The stance of top-down culture change, striving for conformity, can cause many people to be (Stacey, personal communication):

> …only superficially subservient and talk the dominant discourse to be able
> to go on with the minimum discomfort; their conformity is a pose which
> they will drop as soon as they can.

'Let me decide how they do their work'

I am taken by surprise when I receive another email from Leo within two weeks. He states that he appreciates the involvement of his colleagues so far, but wants to

speed up the process whereby his staff will enact the ideas of the board of directors by 'acting appreciatively'. In this email, he describes his own idea of engaging appreciatively, which includes informing each other about all projects on the intranet site of the department, and working in pairs on assignments to optimise the use of expertise. He proposes to achieve this through learning activities around teamwork and developing specific procedures to support working collaboratively (and with appreciation). I feel distressed by this email, as it seems contrary to what we are all trying to achieve, and set up a meeting to talk with him that same day. I inform the others about this meeting, but first prefer to talk with Leo on my own in order to understand why he is asserting leadership in this way.

When we meet, I start the conversation with Leo by expressing my surprise that he has suddenly taken the lead for this project and the way he has done it. He informs me that since all staff members know the vision and strategy of the department, and his intention to implement an appreciative way of engaging, he wants concrete results quickly. He explains that he thinks the most effective and efficient way to do this is to tell his colleagues how to cooperate and engage. I can see his struggle as a manager, and decide to explore with him where his assumptions on change originate from.

I tentatively invite him to discuss his career as a manager, what he likes most about being a manager, and what his ambitions in management are. It becomes clear to both of us that his assumptions about change are closely linked to his definition of being a manager, as a leader taking the lead, showing the way and setting the boundaries for the employees. He has learned, through experience and in leadership development programmes, to take up (technical) change in a planned, structured and controllable manner, including setting the goals to achieve as a group and following a blueprint path to achieve this goal. He says that he believes change of culture can be done the same way. We discuss these ideas together: 'Would it not be marvellous if we could know what the best way is to work together and design strategies so that staff members will achieve that ideal world! But, can we? Can we impose our ideas in general terms, or in specific procedures, on to the group?' I point out that the staff members will need to find ways to deal with every

assignment they do, being able to 'feel their way forward' through the projects in more flexible, emergent ways, while attending to some general principles, such as cooperation. I indicate that I feel it is important that together, staff agree on how to do their work as a team and individually; and this will be a continuous process, because the situations they deal with continuously evolve. It is clear that Leo finds this difficult and risky: he reiterates his need to be in control. In his formulation of leadership and change, I recognise aspects of how I myself have been working for many years – taking for granted the idea of being in control. I share these thoughts with him, and am glad that Leo listens and reacts with interest, saying he has never thought of it this way.

I ask him whether he is willing to continue the process that we started: taking time for conversation about how to engage as a team, how to learn from assignments together and from each other. He agrees to continue the meetings, but also confirms that he wants a new culture in his department in which everyone cooperates in a uniformly appreciative way. I decide to shift the discussion to our ongoing work with the group and suggest that we take up further discussion of appreciativeness as an element to discuss how things are done in the department with the group. This is acceptable to Leo, and he indicates that he will send out an email to the participants about continuing our meetings.

Reflecting on the narrative

Leo is convinced that a change in the way people engage, a change of culture, can be managed. He is very explicit about this, stating for example that 'it cannot be just going with the flow'. In his role as a manager, he sees it as his responsibility to instil the right values in his employees. He expects me to (be able to) design an effective and efficient, controlled and predictable change process. Here, he touches on a point that, based on former assignments, has become a struggle for me in my consulting practice. Like Leo, I have thought it possible to design and implement change processes. But, also due to my participation in the DMan, I have become reflexively aware of the limitations I experience in this 'engineering' way of working. I have come to question many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about

'designed change' in consulting, including the way it is often applied in cultural change projects.

This causes tension in the work relation between Leo and myself which I find I need to discuss with him. In our conversation, the opportunity to take the risk of exploring our different stances, causing tension in our work relation, socially emerges. We carefully explore where his need for managing change comes from, and how I see my role as a consultant. Having Leo think about this other way of consulting, where neither processes nor outcomes are completely pre-defined, makes my argument difficult, because it is exactly this style of working that makes him nervous about whether he can meet his own responsibilities.

Instead of trying to convince him of a different view, I concentrate on building a relationship with Leo, in which he experiences in my way of consulting 'evidence' that will build his confidence in the process we are undertaking together. This tension makes me further explore where assumptions on managing culture change originate from.

Managerialism

Culture is often treated as a critical variable 'contributing to the systemic balance and effectiveness of an organization' (Alvesson 2002: 24). Here the focus is on 'how to mold and shape internal culture in particular ways and how to change culture, consistent with managerial purposes' (Smircich 1983: 348). In this way of thinking, culture is seen as a tool of management – like a 'building block for managers in culture engineering' (Alvesson 2002: 48). With this, Alvesson refers to the assumed possibility that (change) managers can deliberately manipulate the thinking and acting of members of an organisation in such a way that the performance of the organisation will improve as intended by management.

This thinking expresses the ideology of 'managerialism'. Edwards (1998: 4) describes four components of managerialism: economic efficiency, faith in the (use of) tools and techniques of management science, a class consciousness that serves as a unifying force among managers, and the manager as moral agent. In the way

culture change is taken up in my organisation, I recognise all four components of managerialism. I would define it as controllability of both the outcome and process of change – allowing a manager, and myself as a consultant, to stay in control.

In the ideology of managerialism, including the notion of culture as an entity that can be analysed and changed deliberately, it is also assumed that an autonomous individual is able to objectively observe the organisation and its culture from the outside. Moreover, it is assumed that this person (a manager or a consultant) can make rational choices about the right culture, to be achieved through a designed and controlled process. Willmott (2003: 75) calls this culturism 'a systematic approach to creating and strengthening core organizational values in a way that excludes all other values'. Many authors (e.g. Gordon 1985; Conger 2000; Schein 2004) suggest that leaders have a major impact on organisational culture by imposing their own values and assumptions on a group. For Schein (2004), it is the primary role of a leader to manipulate culture. Watson (2001: 35-36) refers to the role of managers central in traditional management education, with the mnemonic POSDCORB 'for remembering the words planning, organising, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting'. For me, again, it illustrates the assumption of managers being in the lead, in control of what employees think and do – a view that I have come to question.

In the managerial discourse, managers are assumed to be the most influential members of an organisation's culture, because of their high visibility to other organisational members and because power structures favour giving them attention. Organisational members are thought to model their own behaviour on that of powerful managers. 'This opportunity to influence, however, does not necessarily guarantee that the expression and actions of top executives will be understood as intended or that they will have the desired effects on other members of the culture' (Hatch 2006: 207). Moreover, I see it as important to recognise that managers are themselves part of their cultures and are influenced by cultural 'scripts' at the same time that they are influencing and trying to manage culture. Lorsch (1985: 90) states that this can cause strategic myopia: 'Because managers hold a set of beliefs, they see events through this prism'. And, he continues (ibid.), 'they respond to changing

events in terms of their culture. Because their beliefs have been effective guides in the past, their natural response is to stick with them'.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008: 54) point to what they see as one of the fallacies in change work: 'a domination of managerialism, i.e. the belief that management is the central and superior actor and its intentions and acts will drive outcomes' (ibid.: 162). They recognise this managerialism specifically in the grand technocratic planned change projects, where the change of culture is like a parcel cascading down the hierarchical level (ibid.: 20):

> Culture is like a parcel, and the supposed cultural change experts appear mainly like post office workers, seeing to it that the parcels reach those to whom they are addressed.

The authors argue that there is no parcel, no baton to pass, because in the passing of 'the baton' its interpretation can change. I see that my organisation also takes it for granted that managers can determine organisation's culture and its change. How does this affect the role of a consultant?

The role of a consultant in changing culture through a controlled process

I see as central in the above view of culture and culture change the issue of control. Streatfield (2001) argues that control takes three forms in the dominant thinking: control of the outcome of a change process (the predictable desired future state of the organisation); control of the process of change, which is thought to be if–then causally linked actions; and control of culture itself by imposing the way people within an organisation are supposed to behave. In this third aspect of control, a manager is thought to be able to control the performance of the organisation based on conformity and consensus about set rules and values – in other words, the culture.

In the dominant discourse, a consultant is seen as helping a manager to realise controlled change, which Block (1981) describes as the consultant being in a

cooperative relationship to a leader. Palmer and MacLean (2009) present an overview of various roles in consulting. In each of these roles, there is the assumption that a consultant from an objective external position can facilitate and control change – by giving help or as catalyst – in a designed way, focusing on a predictable 'end state' of the organisation.

With Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008), I see a tendency to overemphasise planning and design in consulting, originating in the ideology of managerialism described above. Also, in my role as a consultant I experience this tendency: emphasis on what ought to happen and ought to be, focusing on the future performance of an organisation, and the planned movement towards it. Block, like Palmer and MacLean, views managers (and consultants assisting them) as being capable of engineering organisational culture by such means as imposing values. I suggest that many of the cultural change activities in fact reproduce and strengthen existing organisational culture such as ideologies on leadership, hierarchical structures, and power relations. This I see as a reason why cultural change activities continue to be initiated. This is not to say that culture change initiatives do not cause any effect; but predicted, strongly idealised situations (such as an appreciative organisation) are not realised.

I would like now to further develop the notion of control by taking up another perspective on culture, based on anthropological research, to see how this leads to a theory on culture and culture change informing the role of a consultant.

An anthropological perspective: culture as webs of significance

Clifford Geertz has developed a theory of culture within the scientific field of anthropology. In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), he opposes seeing culture as 'a self-contained "super-organic" reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it' (ibid.: 11). He argues against the claim 'that culture consists of the brute pattern of behavioural events we observe in fact to occur in some

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identifiable community or other; that is, to reduce it' (ibid.). Geertz is also critical of the school of thought which holds 'that culture is composed of psychological structure by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behaviour': culture located in the hearts and minds of men. In these perspectives, culture is variously an external force, patterned conduct, or a frame of mind.

He emphasises that culture is symbolic, public, visible/audible, stating that 'culture is public because meaning is' (in Inglis 2000: 113). Culture, to Geertz, is 'those webs of significance' that humans spin for themselves; human behaviour is symbolic action (ibid.: 10). To understand culture is not, according to Geertz, a matter of searching for laws, but an interpretive search for meaning. The central question, when taking human behaviour as symbolic action, is: What is being articulated in behaviour among people? Meaning, as I understand Geertz's view, is context dependent, where the context – the significant webs – constructs meaning of actions and, at the same time, the meaning determines the context. To illustrate this, he gives (ibid.: 6) the example of a person contracting one eyelid. This can be an involuntary twitch, or a conspiratorial signal, a wink, to a friend. In the latter, where there exists a public code that gives communicative meaning to contracting one's eyelid – winking as a conspiratorial signal – Geertz states (ibid.: 6): 'That's all there is to it: a speck of behaviour, a fleck of culture, and – voilà! – a gesture'.

To understand such gestures, and even be able to generalise them into concepts for humankind (cultural universals), anthropologists tend to take a '*consensus gentium* approach' (ibid.: 38): 'the notion that there are some things that all men will be found to agree upon as right, real, just, or attractive and that these things are, therefore, in fact right, real, just or attractive' (ibid.: 38-39). I see this correspond with Schein's (2004: 19) idea of taken-for-granted assumptions – the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are patterned and from which behaviour is derivative. Schein, however, focuses on individuals and learning of individuals within a group, whereas Geertz as an anthropologist is more interested in larger societies and the process of evolution of society.

Geertz states that the many forms that gestures and concepts take are simply products of the particular historical experience of the societies that manifest them.

Culture, then, is a system of inherited concepts, expressed in symbols by which humans communicate, confirm and develop their knowledge and attitude regarding life. Its function is to give meaning to the world and make it comprehensible. He advocates taking a synthetic conception of the relation between the various aspects of human existence: 'that is, one in which biological, psychological, sociological, and cultural factors can be treated as variables within unitary systems of analysis' (ibid.: 44). This analysis, through observation of local interaction, will lead to a more exact image of man.

Geertz proposes seeing culture as a set of control mechanisms. He claims that man is most desperately dependent upon such control mechanisms for ordering his behaviour (ibid.: 46):

> Undirected by culture patterns – organised systems of significant symbols – man's behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity – an essential condition for it.

Taking Geertz's idea of control mechanisms, I understand these to be intentions inducing significance. In his control mechanism view, Geertz follows Mead (1934) in two ways. First, in the use of significant symbols (words, gestures, natural objects) that an individual finds in the community when he is born and which enable him 'to put a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within the ongoing course of experienced things' (ibid.: 45). Taking culture to be a set of control mechanisms, of symbolic devices, Geertz states (1973: 50) that '[o]ur ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products – products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless'. He takes as an approach to culture the set of significant symbols that an individual experiences from birth onwards and that enables an individual to order his life. These sets, culture, provide 'the link between what men are intrinsically

capable of becoming and what they actually one by one, in fact become' (ibid.: 52).
He continues (ibid.):

> Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under
> the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in
> terms of which we give form, order, point, and directions to our lives. And
> the cultural patterns involved are not general but specific. […] Man is to be
> defined neither by his innate capacities alone.., nor by his actual behaviors
> alone, … but rather by the link between them, by the way in which the first
> is transformed into the second, his generic potentialities focused into his
> specific performances.

Secondly, I see Geertz following Mead when he states that in forming cultural
patterns – idealisations – people constitute a collective. Mead describes such
idealisations of a 'whole' as cult values that emerge in the evolution of a society, for
example the cult value of professional cooperation as colleagues.

The change of culture in the development of humankind and in individual articulation

Change of organisational culture is not an issue upon which Geertz elaborates. His
interest is in understanding mankind by analysis of culture, to elucidate the
complexities of symbol systems within human society. From his anthropological
point of view, his emphasis is on control mechanisms that are developed during the
history of mankind, on their change during this lengthy period. He distinguishes two
sources for cultural change: physical transformation (e.g. neurological
development) and cultural development, which overlap in a kind of positive
feedback relationship 'in which each shaped the progress of the other' (ibid.: 48). In
this process, Geertz sees people as 'incomplete or unfinished animals who complete
or finish ourselves through culture – and not through culture in general but through
highly particular forms of it' (ibid.: 49).

These cultural patterns, as symbol systems that serve as the extrinsic source of information (providing – like genes – a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to individuals can be given a definite form), 'lie outside the boundaries of the individual organisms as such in that intersubjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born' (ibid.: 92). Geertz argues that a symbol system is a model *of* reality through which individuals conceive and apprehend the world. But the symbolic system is also a model *for* reality, allowing individuals to actively shape and reshape their own physical, psychological, social, and cultural existence. He states (ibid.: 17) that

> [b]ehavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior – or, more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation.

Thus, he is also interested in the way in which control mechanisms and the complexes of symbol systems are made particular in the context of specific individuals.

Although Geertz does not refer to Elias, I see a connection between their ideas. Both studied the relationship between society and individuals. Elias, as a process sociologist, elaborates on the process of civilisation, the development in the relationship between individual and society. In this he focuses on the interaction between interdependent people.

Elias (1970) explored the ordinary patterns of relating between people in their local situation (the direct experience of interaction between people), showing how global patterns emerge in these local interactions and how, at the same time, these global patterns are structuring the identities of local interacting people: 'It involves a partly self-regulating change in a partly self-organising and self-reproducing figuration of interdependent people, whole processes tending in a certain direction' (ibid.: 147). He calls this the transformation of identity, which takes place over a long period of time. Elias argues that the changes cannot be planned or deliberately executed by humankind because they are self-organising, too complicated, and take place over too long a span of time. 'It is in the order of interweaving human impulses and

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strivings, the social order [which] determines the course of historical change' (1939: 366).

To comprehend these changes, Elias presents the idea of the triad of basic controls (1970: 156), taking the synthetic stance that Geertz advocates. This triad helps to ascertain the stage of development attained by a society. The three types of control –control over non-human events, control over interpersonal relationships, and control that humans have over themselves as individuals – are interdependent both in their development (technological development, development of social organisation, and the civilising process) and in their functioning at any given stage of development, according to Elias.

Change – as development of the control over oneself and over interpersonal relationships – takes place gradually, while humans take a more detached view of natural forces and gain more control over them. In the course of this change, people have tended to become more and more interdependent, which increases the sense of insecurity that stems from people's awareness of their dependence on each other. Feelings of fear and insecurity, caused by involvement, will prevent people from approaching events of social dependence with detachment (a greater than usual ability in self-distancing). This leads to a double bind, which can obstruct the growth of knowledge of social development (Elias 1956: 231).

Both Geertz and Elias emphasise the – historically developed – context in which humans act: society, which gives meaning to and guides their behaviour. Although humans cannot deliberately change the context, they make the symbolic systems of meaning particular, through their specific behaviour.

To summarise this view on culture: culture is both historically and socially created, but made particular in controlling the individual's behaviour. Culture is the complexity of synthetic factors that are significant for individuals in ordering their lives, as control mechanisms that constitute a context and public meaning: one cannot do anything with intention without knowing its public meaning. These control mechanisms change over time, but not by individuals through planned change by humans. For Elias and Geertz, change of culture is an ongoing process of

emergent small changes in the way that individuals articulate cultural forms in their behaviour. Individuals are seen to be influenced in their acting by their intentions, as well as by their personal history and the context of public webs of significance that lend meaning to and influence behaviour. This view on culture, with its focus on emergence of meaning as a self-organising process within a context, resonates strongly with my experience as a consultant. Therefore, I will enquire what this view implies for the role of a consultant.

Implications for the involvement of the consultant

Above, I have described theories on culture and culture change leading to different implications for the involvement of a consultant. In the dominant view, a consultant is seen as an objective observer outside the system, designing and implementing change processes for organisations as a whole. Geertz, Elias and Mead focus on the self-organising evolutionary process of culture, on the construction of culture as social process in the way utterances are given meaning and the function of control mechanisms, which I would call intentions, in ordering these utterances.

In my work I focus on how meaning emerges in utterance in their social context, by focusing on the social process of articulating, of particularising symbolic systems in local interaction. I do this not by observing as an outsider or designing as an expert on change, but by participating in conversation. I will take up the ideas of Elias on involvement and detachment, because this might help to inform our understanding of the role of consultant as a participant in conversation.

Detachment and involvement

Elias' ideas (1987) on involvement and detachment can be seen as a reaction to the detached, outsider's position in systems thinking. By 'involvement', he meant a highly emotional, rather unaware participation. By 'detachment', he meant a less emotional, more aware, more reflexive participation. Participation in conversation, in his view, always involves the paradox of being detached and involved at the same time. Applying Elias' concepts to my involvement as consultant, I am

detached because I am not a formal member of the staff department, and as such an outsider, which enables me to be more reflexive than the others. Furthermore, being more experienced than the others in these processes of interaction enables me to evaluate what happens in a more detached way, allowing me to see patterns and changes in the interaction while being less – or differently – immersed in the direct experience of it. I have come to see that a consultant cannot be completely detached: one takes part in interaction, in which one is formed by the interaction as well, as Palmer and MacLean (2009) argue.

In the narrative, there is the dimension of me being a staff member myself, dealing with the same issue as these staff members. This similarity leads to the (internal) question characteristic of involvement – What does it mean for me...? I am involved in the sense that I am affected by the process we are in together, arousing feelings of anxiety and frustration, of commitment and recognition, while I conclude that my role as consultant is changing. As a professional I also have my own ideas, norms and assumptions about what it means to work professionally as a team, and thus the theme of the conversation is also my theme.

The added value of a consultant, then, is one of professional detachment, enacted reflexively, which at the same time can only be accomplished by a measure of involvement that enables connection. Reflexivity means the capacity to recognise how my social position of being a consultant in the meetings influences my consulting, and vice versa.

Elias (in Mennell 1992: 164) emphasises that for learning, and for being able to determine what works, people need to have a measure of detachment from their direct experience. As a consultant, I can encourage staff to maintain this kind of detachment, by demonstrating it myself. I am more – or should I say differently – aware than most of them of what is going on in our conversation and, most of all, aware of changes in the conversation. By taking this up in my contribution to the conversation as intentions, I enable them to become aware of their own intentions and at the same time to become more detached from their direct experience: we can learn and change.

'I will decide with whom I work'

In one of our next meetings, a new theme comes up: Jenny invites Pierre to work together on a new assignment that she has begun. He immediately agrees and they instantly become a pair that excludes others. To avoid a quick decision process – 'a deal' – I ask Jenny to share with us why she wants a co-advisor and why she invited Pierre. It becomes clear that she likes Pierre's perfectionist style, calling herself 'a bit chaotic'. I ask the group for a reaction. Suzan brings in that she finds expertise more important than style. It seems also a sensible criterion; I sense though that its application would not have matched Pierre to Jenny. Jenny becomes irritated by Suzan's remark: 'I am quite capable of choosing my co-advisor, don't you agree?' Suzan backs off and the atmosphere becomes unpleasant. I bring this to the fore by asking the group how they are experiencing the interaction. Paul comments that 'we should talk about why it feels unpleasant at the moment; it feels really awkward'. Jenny explains her reaction based on wanting to choose who she will work with herself. Suzan seems to accept this explanation.

In the past, I would have facilitated a process of coming to an agreement around which 'objective' criteria would be used to best match colleagues in a way that would avoid personal, more subjective, issues getting in the way. While this decision-making strategy often seemed comfortable and reduced the potential anxiety of a more organic process, the partnerships selected using these 'objective' criteria often did not work out very well. So now, I decide not to try for consensus, but to see where differences might bring us: 'What will happen when each of you uses their own criteria?' I am surprised by the rapid agreement that 'this will lead to favouritism'. It seems to me that this indicates a potentially interesting value about co-advising, namely that everyone must be equally favoured. Because I find this worth checking, I ask what this implies. We talk about fair chances, variety in couples, opportunities for all to learn, and so on. The anxiety of being excluded in the coupling of Jenny and Pierre, and Suzan feeling rejected, seems now to be decreased.

Then Pierre states: 'But then, I do have personal preferences about who I will work with'. Most agree that at first sight, it seems an unworkable criterion to favour some people over others. However, in exploring it further we see that the preferences are scattered among the group: no one prefers just one other colleague, which would lead to fixed couples. We do not discuss any further the fairness of the preference criterion, but agree that it might work for their team.

There follows a lively discussion about how each person would like to approach the issue of partnering with someone else to complete assignments. It leads us back to the fear of exclusion. Suzan voices the feeling that this fear almost led to rules for matching, as they usually do, but that she is happy that there is much more nuance possible, also based on personal preferences. I invite the group to take up Jenny's case once more. John admits that at first he had 'felt frustrated not being the one asked by Jenny. It almost made me plea for formal, objective procedures for matching, but the discussion has given the insight that we will have to decide how to match each time anew, considering what is good per assignment'. This is a new way of working together: discussing various opinions, exploring different stances, without immediately constructing a procedure. They decide to experiment, over the coming period, with how it works out in practice to negotiate per assignment.

Taking up the narrative more reflexively

In the meeting I experience tension between 'objective' procedures that feel fair, but have no room for individual preferences, and the sense that personal preferences are important even though they might cause subjective variety and perhaps even unfairness. In my experience, even objective procedures do not always result in behaviour that conforms to the standard. People do not necessarily follow procedures; even if they do, they often interpret them differently in their enactment.

In my organisation – as in mainstream thinking – consensus, conformity and uniformity are highly valued; differences are often avoided or ignored. However, I find it helpful to explore different stances, ideas and preferences as themes in conversation, since it is through noticing differences that people start to think about

what they are doing and why. I will explore the theme of dealing with differences next, to enquire how it affects culture change and my involvement as a consultant.

Further reflection on the narrative

Working with differences

When taking the dominant perspective as basis of my thinking and acting as a consultant, my focus is on a shared defined future state, on consensus and conformity to the defined new cultural features, on participation and commitment of all participants. Billing (2009) argues that from the dominant perspective, a consultant interested in culture change is likely to focus on producing shared deliverables. In cultural change processes, these products are reifications of the consensus of a group on what the culture ought to become. Culture is viewed as a stage that an organisation is in, which needs to be changed into a 'better' situation/stage. Taking culture to be a critical variable that an organisation has, a consultant facilitates the construction of a better system, a more aligned variable leading to a better organisation. In this perspective, differences are thought to be counterproductive and should be eliminated. Ideally, there is consensus on the cultural characteristics, consensus on the planned way to get there.

Brown (1998: 89) writes that 'the most significant functions of culture have been said to include: conflict reduction, co-ordination and control, the reduction of uncertainty, motivation and competitive advantage'. The actions of a consultant within the dominant discourse may try to enhance these functions of culture by focusing on conformity of the outcome, a controlled change process (e.g. no resistance), and assumed improvement as result of the change process. However, I have come to see the importance of focusing on difference as a consultant: it is from acknowledging difference that themes arise for negotiating and for keeping conversation open. In exploring why taking up differences is important, the ideas on complex adaptive systems can be informative.

Olson and Eoyang (2001) base their ideas on consulting on the theory of complex adaptive systems, which they directly apply to human interaction. In research with computer-assisted modelling of large numbers of interactions of many agents, it became apparent that patterns in the interaction emerge in a self-organising way, and that it is only when the interacting agents are different from each other that new patterns can emerge out of the myriad possibilities. If the agents are not diverse, the same patterns repeat themselves and no change happens (Allen 1998). However, it is crucial to note that the virtual agents in the computer modelling in complex adaptive systems lack the human characteristics of creativity, spontaneity and intention, which are decisive features in human organisations and differences between agents. Nevertheless, we can be reminded by this modelling that difference is important for change to happen. This is, as stated above, in contrast to what we are used to focusing on in the dominant discourse and in my organisation, where conformity and consensus are important values in our desire for control.

To summarise, I understand myself as participating in a paradoxically detached and involved way in the interaction, by focusing on differences in participants' ideas, in patterns of interaction, and in the themes of discussion. Culture, then, is not an entity to implement, but socially created between people in their continuous interaction. In the following I will further enquire into these issues, taking up the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating that might give me another view on culture and on what it is we are doing in culture change, as well as on my role as a consultant.

Culture as continually emerging patterns of interaction

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating starts from the position that humans are fundamentally social beings, meaning that they get done whatever they need or wish to get done interdependently through communicative interaction. The theory draws on concepts I have taken up above in looking at the work of Geertz and Elias, focusing on Mead (1934) regarding the conversation of gesture and response as one social act. In communicating, according to Mead, people take not only the attitude of the other but also always the attitude of the generalised other

(group, society) and of the 'me' (one's own perception of the configuration of the gestures and responses of the other to one as a subject; see also Project 3). In so doing, individuals form and are being formed by each other.

In the evolution of society, many attitudes of generalised others emerge that are functionalised in people's interactions, in social acts. A social act defines the object of the act: a social object, as Mead (ibid.) calls this, by which an individual can know how others are likely to act. Stacey and Griffin (2008: 10) state:

> Social objects are common plans or patterns of action related to the existent future of the act. The social object is a generalisation which is taken up, or particularised, by all in a group/society in their actions. Social objects have evolved in the history of the society of selves and each individual is born into such a world of social objects. The conduct of individuals marks out and defines the socials objects which make up their environment, in which the nature of the social object and the sensitivity of individuals answer to each other. In other words, individuals are forming social objects while being formed by them in an evolutionary process.

Here, I see a connection with the ideas of Geertz on the evolution of society: both theories link culture to control. Geertz talks about control mechanisms in society, which I see as intentions, helping individuals to order their lives. Stacey and Griffin state (ibid.: 10):

> Social control is the bringing of the act of the individual into relation with the social object, and the contours of the object determine the organisation of the act. The social act is distributed amongst many but the whole social object appears in the experience of all of them. Social control depends upon the degree to which the individual takes the attitude of the others, that is, takes the attitude which is the social object. All institutions are social objects and serve to control individuals who find them in their experience.

The meaning of such generalising, according to the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, is only to be found in the experience of its being

functionalised in everyday interactions between group members. In their communicative interaction, people act with intention while continually negotiating the evaluation of their actions. Stacey states (2007: 347) that

> [t]he criteria for evaluation are at the same time both obligatory restrictions, taking the form of what they ought and ought not to do (norms), and voluntary compulsions, taking the form of what they are judging is good to do (values).

In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, values and human identity – that is, human meaning – are seen as continually arising in social interaction. They are not stable; nor are they prescribed or deliberately chosen by anyone. Although values – in the narrative, for example, professional cooperation – and identity have general and durable qualities, their impact must be negotiated afresh in each enacted context.

The way in which functionalising of values takes place differs. Moreover, humans have the capacity in their acting for choice and spontaneity. This means that the functionalising of general values in everyday conversation inevitably leads to difference and causes some form of conflict (Stacey and Griffin 2008). Also, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008: 167) point to the possibility of conflict, stating:

> Values are normally framed in such ways that they sound good (occasionally bad) and it is too easy to agree with the good things (and disagree with the bad). The problem is that it is the conflictual relationship between various good things that needs to be sorted out – priorities need to be set – and with the focus on a specific value this is easily lost from sight.

I see the authors defining conflictual situations differently. Stacey and Griffin (2008) talk about conflict in the way a general value becomes functionalised in everyday interaction; Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) focus on the conflict between general values, in how much priority each of them gets – for example, more consumer-oriented or more profitable.

In the narrative, both situations can be identified. I see conflict around the value being the right one, as well as what a value implies in its enactment. In our meetings we continually negotiate values as the enacting of functionalising them.

Elias explored the ordinary patterns of relating between people in local interaction, showing how global (widespread) patterns emerge from the myriad of local interactions, and how, at the same time, these global patterns are structuring the identities of local interacting people. 'It involves a partly self-regulating change in a partly self-organising and self-reproducing figuration of interdependent people, whole processes tending in a certain direction' (1970: 147). This resonates with Geertz's idea of individuals articulating symbol systems in their daily acting. In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, organisations are seen as ongoing patterning of interaction that produce further patterns of interaction, both locally and globally, at the same time. These patterns are understood as themes, symbol systems, organising the experience of being together. Culture, then, is this patterning.

What does this theory on culture as emerging in everyday interaction imply for the view on change of culture?

Cultural change from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating

I conclude from the above that culture in this perspective is seen as continually emerging in the everyday local interaction. In their interaction, humans continually form intentions and make choices. Novelty, change (by analogy to the ideas of complex adaptive systems), is caused by differences that occur in local interaction due to – for example – people's creativity and their diverse intentions in interaction. In this interaction, Stacey states (2005: 12), '[t]he most powerful can choose their own gestures but will be unable to choose the responses of others so that the outcome of their gestures will frequently produce surprising outcomes'. This is profoundly different from the dominant view on power and on leadership as the

fixed privilege of a particular hierarchical position leading to the assumption that leaders can impose culture/values onto employees (managerialism or culturism) and different from the view of consulting as the expert designing and implementing change processes.

From the local interaction emerges widespread coherence (global patterns). This can be called organisational culture: patterns that are the processes of organising in all 'parts' of any organisation. Stacey (2005, 2007), and also Billing (2007) argue that it is not possible, taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, to directly change these global patterns, the organisational culture as such; it can only change in local interaction.

In this perspective, culture is what an organisation continuously becomes in interaction, the patterning in human relating. Therefore, I argue that it is not so much change of culture that is the issue, but continuous emergence of culture, in both repetitive and transformed ways, in an ongoing process of negotiating values in conversation. What does the view of culture emerging in conversation imply for a theory on consulting? I will take this up next.

Theory on consulting within the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating

I will turn again to Elias' concepts of involvement and detachment to further explore the role of the consultant as a participant in conversation: what is so specific in the role of a consultant facilitating culture change while participating in conversation?

Elias (1987) argues that for individuals, the form of participation in conversation can vary from less emotional, more aware, more reflective participation (detachment) to highly emotional, rather unaware participation (involvement). He points to two things: neither type of participation is ever encountered in its purest sense, and conversational participation is always a paradox of involved detachment

or detached involvement where the emphasis may shift from more to less detachment or involvement, but never polarise to one or the other exclusively.

Elias describes a situation of brothers drowning in a maelstrom, based on a story by Edgar Allen Poe (1841), illustrating that for humans to gain knowledge and change, it is important to be able to 'observe the relations of relevant elements in the process with a measure of detachment, to find a possible solution to the problem they face, unimpeded by emotional fantasies, by forming an integrating symbolic representation (a 'theory'), and to change their situation based on this theory' (ibid.: 110). He argues (ibid.: 11) that

> The stronger the hold of involved forms of thinking, and thus of the inability to distance oneself from traditional attitudes, the stronger the danger inherent in the situation created by people's traditional attitudes towards each other and towards themselves. The greater the danger, the more difficult it is for people to look at themselves, at each other and at the whole situation with a measure of detachment.

Although I would not characterise the narrated situation as 'dangerous', the experience of interdependency as staff members certainly raised levels of anxiety while feeling the potential loss of autonomy. To cooperate professionally it is important that the staff members cooperate, which requires detachment as well as involvement at the same time.

Above, I described that in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating it is assumed that emergence of patterns in interaction is self-organising. Elias (ibid.: 77) adds to this that 'no one can regulate the movements of the whole unless a great part of them are able to understand – to see as it were, from outside – the whole patterns they form together'. I take it to be the role of a consultant to facilitate the group of participants in interaction to come to this understanding. Otherwise, '[t]hey can only look at whatever happens to them from their narrow location within the system. They are too deeply involved to look at themselves from without' (ibid.: 77).

To be able to do this, a consultant him/herself needs a measure of detachment, besides involvement, to engage with the participants. Elias' description of painters (ibid.: 52) is helpful as a comparison of the capabilities of a consultant required to facilitate in this mode. From the fifteenth century onwards, he suggests, painters obtained a 'high capacity for distancing oneself from one's objects as well as from oneself; and then again, secondarily, for involving oneself personally with all one's strength in one's painting'. They had a capacity for detached observation 'for portraying people unaffected by their momentary relationship with the painter' (ibid.: 53). Even more applicable to consultants, I see a painter's capacity to recognise that what we know of things is not necessarily identical to what we see in a specific situation, but we recognise patterns on which we can build a theory.

Elias (ibid.: 89) takes it even further by arguing that '[i]t is the objective of scientists, one might say, to develop a steadily expanding body of theories or models and an equally expanding body of observations about specific events by means of a continuous, critical confrontation leading to greater and greater congruity with each other'. I take this to be equally valid for consultants: building on and taking up experience of former assignments in a reflexive way to contribute in current assignments. Hirschman (1970: 342) states that 'The architect of social change can never have a reliable blueprint [...] [Therefore] what can be most usefully conveyed by the builders of one house is an understanding of the experience that made it all possible to build under these trying circumstances'.

I consider consulting, in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, as contributing professionally in intensifying intentions of participants by eliciting responses, while being detached and involved at the same time. Billing (2009) argues that detached thinking enables a consultant to make explanations of what is going on in a group that are more congruent with reality. 'The facilitator's capacity for detachment from the group, at the same time as being involved in what is going on in the group, is a significant and helpful aspect of facilitation' (ibid.: 39).

This way of consulting enables participants to take up the question of 'What does it mean for me, for us?' within their concrete experience. This is a profoundly different question than 'What is it?', or 'What are connections between events?',

which lead to impersonal types of explanations and general abstractions instead of concrete experience. Shaw (1997, 2002) emphasises the importance of concrete experience: the daily conversation of people, their work. I find myself doing this in paying attention to professional cooperation – the staff's theme – within the concrete experience of the meetings. The focus is on 'What does it mean for us to work as cooperating professionals, and as individual staff members?' and on how this is enacted in the meetings. Patterns of interaction emerge, ordinary patterns that we normally tend not to notice: who talks to whom about what, who is silenced, what is attended to? Common patterns are repeated; patterns of interaction also change, caused for example by responding differently than usual; by taking up autonomy and difference as themes, and in taking them up differently than usual – for example, not per definition striving for conformity. In our ongoing conversation, patterns of professional engagement emerge; and they keep being repeated and transformed.

Bringing the above together, I experience that traditionally, change assignments (in my organisation) focus on planned change of culture through generally stated values (such as appreciative organisation), cascaded down into the organisation. In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, change is taken to emerge in local interaction; it is within this local interaction that a consultant participates while being detached and involved at the same time. From this local interaction (Stacey 2005), global patterns emerge. Billing (2007: 3) states: 'The key for consultants intending to contribute to organisational change on a grand scale lies in the consideration of and attention to the detail of the interaction they are involved in'.

Summary and conclusions

The influence of perspectives

In this project, I concentrate on how intentions and actions are influenced by the perspectives that people take – for example, the assumptions they make about what culture is and how it changes.

Culture, in mainstream thinking, is viewed as something one can be outside of, and that can be deliberately changed through a manageable process. A better culture, assumed to cause improved organisational performance, is often seen as engineered by autonomous leaders (and consultants supporting them), imposing their rational choices onto the members of an organisation who will align their thinking and behaviour. This perspective resonates with the taken-for-granted assumptions that are dominant in my organisation and results in repetitive patterns in taking up change of culture as an entity of the organisation as a whole.

As the assumptions influence the accounts on consulting, I am expected to facilitate an efficient and effective change into a known and predictable future, while being in control of both process and conformity in outcome. A consultant's focus is on avoidance of deviances from what ought to happen. This results in interventions for change of thinking and behaving of people, designed organisation-wide learning activities, prescribed competences: reliable blueprints to affect all in the same way. Culture, then, is a phenomenon centred around conformity and consensus between organisational members.

However, this perspective does not sufficiently resonate with my current work as a consultant, where I experience that the present is not the intended outcome of past actions, but a result of both intended and evoked gestures and responses. This has made me take up authors with other views on culture and change, focusing on the evolution of culture within society and, at the same time, particularised by individuals in their day-to-day life. I have come to understand that it is in the setting of local interaction that people continuously negotiate their ways of working,

moving forward into the unknown, with culture as patterns of interaction continually emerging in self-organising processes. I conclude that taking the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating leads to a profoundly different theory on consulting, which resonates with my experience.

A different theory of consulting

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, with its focus on local interaction, self-organising patterning and responsiveness in conversation, articulates our experience of what it is we are doing in the processes of organising regarding culture change. Taking my experience as a consultant seriously, reflecting on what it is that I find myself doing as a consultant in recent culture change assignments, results in a different view of consulting.

I take consulting to be reflexively taking up my experience of former interaction and bringing this into current assignments without having preconceived ideas (interventions, responses) in mind. In doing so, I find myself consulting differently than in mainstream thinking. I have come to see consulting as intensifying participants' intentions and eliciting responses through focused involvement in local interaction. This involvement enables me to see (emerging) themes as the enactment of culture. Being also paradoxically detached influences my intentions by seeing repetitiveness and differences in patterns of engaging.

Also, I see a shift from seeing the consultant (or a leader) as responsible for determining what happens. Rather, in my acting as a consultant I am enabled and constrained by others while enabling and constraining them: we form and are being formed by each other. We all act with intention; but, since patterning is self-organising, I am not in control of what happens. I participate in responsive processes, acting into the unknown.

In facilitating, I focus on working with differences (not seeing them as something to simply be tolerated), experiencing change to emerge due to differences in patterns of interaction. This differs profoundly from the view on culture as creating

conformity in employees' ways of thinking and acting, which often results in consulting through interventions that create conformity as described above.

Consequences of consulting differently

I have come to challenge the dominant way of thinking about culture, and of controlled change processes, through the premise that organisations are ongoing patterns of relating from which further, potentially different, patterns of relating occur that we call culture. This has consequences for my involvement as a consultant: from the detached expert in change interventions to a facilitating participant in conversations experienced as a paradox of involvement and detachment in which the culture remains stable and changes at the same time. In doing so, I paradoxically form and are being formed in social interaction in the way change of culture is treated.

Taking up my role as a consultant through participative facilitation raises a new discourse in my assignments, since it differs profoundly from the dominant expectations and taken-for-granted assumptions of those I work with, such as Leo, specifically on a consultant being in control of processes of culture change.

However, I conclude from the above project that a consultant is paradoxically in control and not in control at the same time. A consultant acts with intention while not knowing and not being in control of what happens. I intend to take up the paradoxes of forming and being formed, as well as (not) being in control, in the synopsis, as these paradoxes appear to be essential in my research on the involvement of a consultant in culture change processes.

Synopsis

Purpose

In this synopsis, I attempt to construct a more coherent theoretical representation of my research as a whole, bringing together more or less unconnected constituent parts, described in four projects, to develop and defend my argument. In another cycle of reflexivity, I intend to articulate how my thought has moved. I consider the synopsis to be an invitation to my peers to begin to reappraise the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of culture change by critically enquiring into perspectives on organisations, culture change and control, taking a different view than the dominant, conventional approach.

Introduction

In my thesis I research the effect on consulting when thinking of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating; where patterns in engagement are thought of as self-organising, emerging in both predictable and unpredictable ways through processes of local interaction. I take up the theory of complex responsive processes of relating as a different way of thinking about what we find ourselves doing in organisations. This theory enables me to enquire into a perspective that takes seriously unpredictability and uncertainty, based on insights from the complexity sciences. In presenting narrative accounts of my work as an internal consultant on leadership development and culture change, I am arguing that the conventional way of thinking about organisations, culture and consulting, reinforces a taken-for-granted belief that managers and consultants have the capability to manoeuvre an organisation into a known future in a planned and controlled way. This dominant ideology of managerialism tends to entrench the existing culture; instead of changing the way people engage, it treats culture as a system to control people's conduct. I enquire into other concepts of culture and control: culture as

continuously emerging in social interaction, and control as social control enabling people to order and give meaning to their lives.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating on organisations, culture and change underpins an argument that reappraises the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of culture change. I will argue that this is different from the conventional view on the involvement of an internal consultant, which emphasises being in control of processes as the expert who knows more about culture change processes and their predictable outcomes.

Reflection on the four projects

Project 1: Coming to question the dominant way of thinking about organisations and consulting

In writing Project 1, I came to see how I had started my work as a consultant by articulating my role through intended, model-based, designed and planned interventions, focused on bridging analysed gaps. The models I used appeared to offer me frameworks, tools, and rule-like prescriptions to assure effectiveness and success. I took it as my responsibility to be leading learning and change processes, propelling the organisation and its employees towards a desired new state. Being successful, then, was synonymous with keeping the well-prepared, designed process on track 'as planned'. I considered myself to be working objectively, making rational choices. This led to organisation-wide change programmes, for example on leadership development and on improving customer satisfaction, where predesigned interventions were implemented in a top-down manner. Working this way made me feel in control of the intended outcome and the change process, by preparing myself well. It offered me explicit structures, as well as providing a common language for me and my colleagues.

In this conventional way of working, organisations are thought of as objective, pre-determined realities that can be modelled, designed and controlled by managers as though they were systems. The managers, aided by consultants, search for causal

links and instruments for predicting and manipulating the behaviour of the system (an organisation, or parts of it) while taking the position of autonomous, objective observers external to the system itself. From this perspective, usually referred to as systems thinking, 'an organization becomes what it is, and will become what it becomes, because of the systems its managers design, the actions people in organizations choose to carry out, and how they deal with risk' (Stacey et al. 2000: 7). I came to think, in a taken-for-granted way, that these models and instruments have general applicability. Or, as Mowles (2011: 20) states:

> The conceptual premise of many contemporary management methods is that the practice of management is a science, and that it is possible to identify generalisable rules for managers to apply in all circumstances with predictable results with an if-then causality.

Over the years, I started to pay more attention to the messiness and fluctuations in human engagement, taking it to be a characteristic of human interaction. I now see that these instruments and models ignore the messiness of our day-to-day experience where we interact together. Indeed, they distract attention from this messiness – considering it to be, for example, a matter of resistance to change. Deviations or distractions are seen as disturbing the planned process and the assumed if-then causality of actions and predictable effects; they should be avoided or smoothed away.

Furthermore, it became apparent to me while reflecting on my career, that as a professional, as a teacher, manager and consultant, I had always put emphasis on people's day-to-day situation, taking it to be a powerful learning environment – for example, by organising development activities in the workplace. Parallel in time to my career, many authors started to emphasise the importance of people's work situation, for example Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) with their method of appreciative inquiry. Although this method – with its focus on the causality of successes in the past predicting successes in the future – has been adopted in my organisation, I have become critical of this notion and its assumption that processes can be predicted and designed since this is not my experience in my daily practice. And as I now see it, the method of 'appreciative inquiry' also ignores the present

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experience of participants of making sense together of their experience in the moment.

At that time, I too encouraged conversations on work issues, while designing interventions 'from the outside', assuming (or hoping) that change processes could be planned and were predictable in outcome. Group sessions of colleagues, and away days for teams, became favoured formats, as I recall my agenda of these years. I took it to be a consultant's unique job to interpret the process of interaction and change from the viewpoint of an objective, rational professional. This is the essence of what Schein (1999) refers to as process consulting. His influential thoughts encouraged consultants to become process consultants: process in the sense of a step-by-step, linear transformation of the organisation from one situation into another; in systems terms, from one stable situation into another stable situation. In following Schein, I came to think that a consultant is objective and taken to be on top of the change process, keeping it on track. Key words, then, were efficiency and effectiveness, also endorsed by, for example, the quality systems (ISO, TQM) schools of thought that were popular at that time, which emphasise repetitive processes leading to incremental change.

I came to see that, in taking the perspective of systems thinking in my work, I separated thinking and acting as two sequential phases in time; I thought in terms of formative causality (Stacey et al. 2000), taking an enfolded, known and predicted future to be unfolded in the present. I characterise my interventions at that time as discussing work issues during a meeting, and facilitating implementation of the findings afterwards in work, leading to the intended future or improvement. Change thus remained a matter of linear movement in time (with clearly defined phases, such as think–act–think–act); consulting was facilitation of this linear movement.

Meanwhile, I frequently encountered situations where humans did not act according to plans or follow predetermined designs; yet things still got done anyway. No matter how thorough the designed interventions were, the process and outcome often deviated from what was expected, defined and predicted. These situations increased my curiosity about the messiness and dynamics of human interaction, and my research question started to emerge. I wanted to improve my way of consulting

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through taking up an alternative, better way of consulting so that I could deal with deviating processes and outcomes. However, at the same time, I was struck by Stacey's statement (2010: xi), that

> We need to take seriously our inability to predict what is happening and the inability of any small group of people, no matter how powerful, to be in control of what happens while at the same time they exert a significant impact on what happens.

During the course of writing all four projects, my aim to master a better way of consulting lost its dominance: I came to reappraise what I was already doing, focusing less on efforts to change my work as a consultant. At first, my attempts to come to an understanding of what it is I found myself doing in interaction were characterised by a highly critical view of the dominant perspective (systems thinking), yet being uncertain what 'better' approach might take its place that would more adequately reflect my day-to-day reality. Although this was an uncomfortable phase, in retrospect it was inevitable: instead of being driven by a straightforward ambition to act differently, I first had to become more conscious of the dominant taken-for-granted assumptions that steered my thinking and acting.

This synopsis is a further reflection on the process of coming to understand the taken-for-granted assumptions about organisations and change. Comparing the perspective of thinking of organisations as though they are systems, versus the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, has enabled me to critique the assumptions that underpinned systems thinking in the context of my work as a consultant and helped me to overcome the binary splitting into 'right' and 'wrong' practice. I came to realise that over the years, I had already changed my way of consulting: from designed interventions towards conversations, which I initially regarded as by-products of my work.

Making a clear distinction in my thesis between the perspective of systems thinking and complex responsive processes of relating may give the impression that I make no distinction between different forms of systems thinking, find them all inferior. On the contrary, I acknowledge the importance of the theory of systems thinking.

But at the same time I came to see that, to understand processes of human relating, systems thinking is limited due to its assumptions of certainty and predictability, while ignoring the human characteristics of spontaneity and creativity in interaction.

Project 2: Enquiring into perspectives and into ways of intervening

Reflecting further on the narrative descriptions of my work in Project 2, I see how I was entrenching myself within the perspective of systems thinking while participating in a project team with two directors. We aimed to formulate the value and characteristics of an 'appreciative' organisation, where managers have an appreciative leadership style. The assumptions of this perspective led to certain expectations (on the part of others and myself) about the involvement of a consultant (as objective designer, and facilitator being on top of the process); about the role of culture in managing an organisation; and about culture change processes, with great emphasis on alignment, consensus and agreement to realise an idealised future. It became clear how we have become used to seeing culture in organisations – conventionally viewing it as the enacted shared values of employees, based on how people feel and think (their hearts and minds). Schein's concept of 'shared values' (2004) is helpful here; it focuses on how to align employees' conduct, for example through coercive persuasion, to enable a controlled movement of the organisation into the future. Change of culture, then, is thought of as bringing the culture more into alignment with an idealised future.

Managers, encouraged by the dominant management discourse, expect themselves to have a crucial role in this movement. For example, in the project team with the directors, we aimed to define which culture – and thus conduct – would help to improve the organisation's performance. It was assumed that we, as a project team, could define the organisational culture; moreover, we encouraged the shared value of 'appreciative' leadership with the ambition of becoming an 'appreciative' organisation. Within this dominant perspective it is also assumed that values should

be shared; having a diversity of values is seen as causing confusion and eventually disrupting organisational processes.

I recall that my efforts in questioning these assumptions were not very successful, probably because I did not use the right arguments. I felt a need to discuss, for example, the assumed relationship between an appealing cultural concept ('appreciativeness') and compliance with the concept – as well as the assumed relationship between an organisation's culture and its performance, as described by many researchers such as Peters and Waterman (1982); note, however, that other authors, such as Alvesson (2002), find little evidence to support such causality.

When such assumptions are so readily taken for granted that they are not questioned or discussed, managers may find themselves repeating their efforts to influence culture change, often without achieving the desired results: the organisational culture often does not really change, at least not to the degree that was intended and not in the efficient way planned. Stacey (2010: 65) points out that 'there is no scientific evidence that planned culture change produces changing culture'. Later (in Project 4), I came to conclude that the way we tend to take up 'change of culture' as a management tool can have the paradoxical effect of further entrenching the existing culture, instead of changing the way people engage. However, at that point I was still unable to propose a more helpful way of interpreting what it is that we actually find ourselves doing together. Along with my fellow participants in the DMan programme, I recognised that I had yet to develop my own 'voice' to reappraise the issue in my work.

Since I was unable to openly discuss the taken-for-granted assumptions that so dominantly impacted upon our work as a project team, I suggested involving others by including all the district managers. This suggestion, as I see it now, was an attempt to bring the abstract idea of 'appreciativeness' – formulated on one page – into the organisation, with the aim of avoiding a process characterised by imposing the general concept onto the organisation by 'sending' it as a 'message'. I remember being (perhaps naïvely) surprised that the district managers took the concept and change of culture for granted; questioning the content of the one-page definition of an 'appreciative organisation' did not seem an option, as I sensed at the time. I was

drawn to the ideas of Elias (1939) on inclusion and exclusion: I wondered if the district managers' reactions might be caused by fear of exclusion from the group, anxious not to set themselves apart by being critical about the proposed change of culture. The district managers seemed to align readily with the directors' ambition to change the organisational culture, committing to achieve this within their own districts. I did see many serious attempts at district level to move the organisation from not being appreciative to being appreciative – a characteristic of systems thinking: striving to realise stability and eliminate unpredictability and the unknown aspect of the future. I take it to be an attempt to create a new equilibrium, or a new phase in organisational development.

I diagnose our culture change activities as defining global values for the organisation as a whole at top level, and then 'sending' them into the organisation for implementation. In this process, I recorded (unintentionally) variations in the way the 'message' was received and incorporated in people's conduct. I took up Mead (1934) and his emphasis on the theory that what actually happens in social interaction is continuous negotiation of differences as we make sense of our reality. He argues that this is also the case in functionalising general values: it is through enactment that change of culture (ways of engaging) can happen – thus the relatively futility of ambitious large-scale programmes that intend to change global patterns. The importance of Mead's ideas for my enquiry is reflected in my narrative of a meeting with two team managers on my way home from work. They had been trying to manage 'appreciatively', but found themselves disagreeing about what this entailed. Moreover, the conversation with the team managers drew my attention to an alternative perspective on organisational culture change and consulting: that of emerging patterns in local interaction.

Considering conversation in contingent engagements as by-products of my work

Reflecting on my narratives, I came to see that the undesigned engagements that I had been having for years already – where I spontaneously participated in conversation with others about ways of working and interacting – had largely felt as

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by-products of work, not really work itself. I had always regarded these engagements as spontaneous, since they were unplanned and undesigned, happening by accident rather than being part of the more or less prepared activity that I viewed as 'consulting'.

While writing Project 2, this attitude shifted profoundly, partly as a result of my intense encounter with the two team managers, who struggled with enacting the concept of appreciativeness in their daily work. At first, in line with the traditional culture of seeking consensus on the best solution, they wanted me to judge the best 'application' of appreciative leadership. Conventionally, without giving it serious attention, I would have defined this encounter as just another by-product of my 'real' work, taking myself to be a chance participant. By reflexively reappraising this meeting, however, I have come to see it as spontaneous and contingent in the sense of an unplanned process – which meant that there was the possibility of taking different courses. Change happened in the present, in the conversation itself, because we explored the meaning of appreciativeness, stirred up by the conflict around it, while 'applying' appreciativeness.

Being an *internal* consultant, I was trusted as one who knows 'what is going on': a participant in the same culture. My embedded location also enabled me to start impromptu conversations – such as the encounter with the team managers on my way home from work – as an involved colleague.

The reflection on the narratives further opened up to me the complexity of the work of a consultant, which sharpened my overall question of enquiry: to come to a better understanding of how perspectives influence the thinking and acting of a consultant in culture change, such as in the engagement with the team managers. I became aware of what it is I found myself doing: acting in the moment and participating in both content and process at the same time, contrary to what Schein (1999) advocates in process consulting. I became aware of change happening – without knowing the outcome beforehand – *within* the conversation, rather than resulting from it. In my interaction with the team managers, the anxieties of their conflict prompted the conversation in which I invited them to focus on their differences, instead of striving for consensus. This is in stark contrast to the way organisations

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are conventionally seen, where consensus, shared values and compliance are central. Focusing on differences – as I did in exploring what was going on in our engagement – is what Grant (2005) calls an explorative conflict. I further took up differences and their importance for the emergence of change as put forward in theories of complex systems (Stacey 2010: 69).

Over the course of Project 2, my convictions about consulting through planned and designed interventions for effective and efficient change processes began to shift, overtly and consciously. Looking back, I consider this encounter with the team managers as a breakthrough in my thinking on the internal consultant's involvement in change processes: I started to understand this involvement, by considering all of it – including unplanned interactions – to be valid aspects of my work.

Consulting in processes of local interaction

As a consequence of my new insights, the main aspect of my research became the involvement of a consultant when taking a perspective other than the dominant one on organisations, culture change and consulting. I closely examined the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of local interaction, coming to understand and value both formally organised (e.g. leadership development programmes or team meetings) as well as unplanned engagements as processes of local interaction. I found myself proposing that within these engagements, patterns of interaction (ways of working together) emerge and potentially change in an unpredictable way. Most importantly, I understood this interaction as organising – where we are simultaneously forming, and being formed by, each other. In the case of the internal consultant, this is inevitably more intense than with an external consultant: the internal consultant participates in many interactions, not just acting as the expert within the organisation for one dedicated change assignment. Through this variety of engagements the internal consultant is perpetually forming and being formed, which impacts his involvement – his way of working as a consultant.

To come to a further understanding, I enquired into interventions that seem to focus on interaction in work engagements: Wierdsma's (1999) tailor-made conversational platforms for co-creation; Levin (2004), with his participative arenas for collective

reflection; and Schein's (2005) ideas on dialogues. These authors highly recommend learning and change interventions related to the work of participants. They advise managers to organise facilitated team meetings in which participants discuss, through various interventions, the potential improvements in their work. I came to consider that the ideas of these authors still support the role of a consultant as the designer of interventions from the position of an objective and detached outsider – implying their ability to control an efficient process and effective outcome, and splitting change process into two phases: first, defining and discussing it, and afterwards implementing the outcome of the discussion. These meetings as interventions, as I see it now, are in fact design activities, rather than change itself.

The ideas of these particular writers did not suggest new directions for my exploration of local interaction processes. Once again, it was clear that I needed to fully reappraise my taken-for-granted assumptions and let go of convictions that originated in systems thinking – such as splitting thinking (designing) from acting (implementing), and believing that an objective outsider could intervene according to notions of predictability and control. I enquired further into the concept of local interaction and the role of consulting. Helpful here were the ideas of Shaw (2002) and Billing (2007, 2009). I follow Shaw in her critique of Schein's view on process consulting. She takes a consultant to be actively taking part in conversation, not merely a person who can design and attempt to implement change interventions. This alternative view on the role of a consultant remained a central theme in my projects.

Project 3: Exploring the involvement of a consultant in processes of local interaction

At the time of writing Project 3, I had become more acquainted with the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al. 2000) through reading and through my participation in the DMan. This theory offers me an alternative perspective for enquiring into the involvement of a consultant in processes of

culture change. In the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, organisations are taken to be processes of human interaction where patterning in conversation leads to global patterning, and global patterning enables and constrains local interaction, without there being an agent outside of the interaction who determines what will happen in the interaction: processes of local interaction are self-organising. I examined this theory more fully in Project 3, realising that the theory had already influenced my thinking in Project 2, in understanding culture as enacting general values (here of appreciativeness) by functionalising them in interaction in one's daily work. This builds on the ideas of Mead (1934). In Project 2 I did not yet, however, question so much the involvement of a consultant, other than seeing the limited effect of organisation-wide designed change programmes. In Project 3, my thoughts on the involvement of a consultant in processes of culture change began to move from regarding this as detached expertise in designing and facilitating interventions, towards participation in processes of local interaction.

Project 3 raises the question of whether there is any role for a consultant in processes of local interaction other than participating in conversation. The narrative of Project 3 leads to considering the involvement of an internal consultant differently. I do perceive that I have added value in conversation; and this is confirmed by others through remarks such as 'you trigger my thinking', 'we tend not to discuss this without your invitation and support', and 'you really help our exploration of differences instead of striving for instant consensus'. From the reflection on my narratives I enquired what it is that a consultant brings into engagements, exploring the idea of spontaneity.

Spontaneity

Reflecting on Project 3 clarified what it is that I find myself doing in interaction with a group of managers and their frustrated employees. An acute situation of conflict between the managers and two of their conductors requires acting in the present, improvising next steps while being uncertain about the responses of the others to my gestures, especially when I – to their surprise – invite them for a conversation about the anxiety-provoking conflict in which we all find ourselves.

This is a conversation they would not have initiated themselves. As a consultant, I am involved in co-creating the conversation with the others, while acting into the unknown, instead of being in the lead and controlling a planned process of interaction. I find myself acting spontaneously.

To come to a further understanding of the implications of acting spontaneously, the ideas of Shaw (2002), Larsen (2005), and Friis (2006) were helpful in developing my thinking. They originate their ideas in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, and articulate the importance of a consultant as fellow participant acting spontaneously. Spontaneity, in the Dutch language, is commonly seen as acting in a freeform manner, guided by how one feels at a specific moment. In the past I have not regarded myself as a spontaneous person in this sense; I even regarded this stance of spontaneity as potentially negative, because it seemed to suggest an impulsive way of acting without considering other people.

These authors, however, take spontaneity as 'acting without being in control of one's own acting in the social process of relating' (Larsen 2005: 186) and thus 'finding oneself reacting in an unforeseen way, not carefully planned but still against the background of an awareness of the other and others in a particular social context' (ibid.: 52). This corresponds strongly with my experience; Project 3 narrates an example of me acting spontaneously in this sense. I begin to understand my acting as re-acting and responding to gestures of others, in the moment. I recognise how I help to keep conversation open to enable exploration, without following a pre-defined 'track', and invite discussion of conflicts and themes that we usually tend not to discuss; I participate in making sense together of the situation we all find ourselves in. I feel comfortable in this role, even though no one – including myself – can predict the course that the conversation will take.

Exploring Larsen's ideas on the use of theatre in consulting further enlarges my understanding of the way one can view interventions. He illustrates his ideas while articulating the difference from seeing theatre as a laboratory, in which work situations are acted out in a pre-defined role play. Larsen argues that one then uses theatre as a planned intervention; 'theatre is seen as a tool, a "thing" that can be implemented in practice, perhaps demonstrating a desired outcome by following a

script' (ibid.: 35). I am very familiar with this type of intervention and its use. This stance on theatre resembles the interventions described, for example, by Wierdsma (1999); and also by Levin (2004), as mentioned earlier.

In Larsen's take on theatre, it is seen as part of conversation, understood as the interaction going on between people in an organisation. Here, theatre has the quality of meaning emerging in the social interaction, in a self-organising and unpredictable way. In becoming familiar with this understanding of theatre and its use in change processes, I came to more fully understand the limitations of designed interventions that are literally meant to *intervene* (in the sense of the word's Latin origin: *inter-* + *venire*, to come) from the outside into the system that has to be changed. Indeed, I came to understand these designed interventions as abstract substitutes for participants' day-to-day work, presented as similar to the work itself.

The difference between the notion of consulting in the dominant discourse, compared with Larsen's ideas on consulting (in the moment, acting spontaneously), became very apparent to me when focusing on control. In the dominant discourse, one tries to control people's conduct (for example, through conformity and alignment), as well as processes and outcomes; beforehand – through pre-defined plans that are implemented with the expectation of compliance. In theatre, Larsen argues, one can only be in control of a potential next step; thus we are forced to improvise, based on our own and others' gestures and responses. In this improvisational process, we find ourselves changing too. I came to enquire in more depth into these alternative insights on culture and control in Project 4.

Project 4: Coming to another understanding of culture and control

In Project 4, I specifically examined how different perspectives on culture and change, which manifested themselves while working with a staff team and their manager, led to different expectations about the involvement of a consultant in facilitating culture change. These different expectations caused misunderstanding, tension and anxiety.

In my conversation with the newly formed group of staff members, we explored ways of working together – using the narratives of the staff group – while at the same time, I was given notice by their manager that I was supposed to design a controlled culture change process leading to an appreciative way of engaging. The manager saw culture as a system of values and norms (Schein 2004) that individuals internalise and to which they conform. Our different stances on culture could have led to a competition around the best way to see culture and change; this I consider potentially destructive, as we could fixate on issues of 'right' and 'wrong'. For me, the manager personified the conventional way of thinking and acting, which I argue is rooted in the ideology of managerialism – where organisations are taken to be systems for which managers construct control systems to move the organisation in the required direction. Culture can be seen as one of these control systems.

Streatfield (2001: 7-8) argues that:

> We, as individuals, have a fundamental need to feel 'in control' of situations in which we find ourselves. This need for control is connected to the experience of anxiety, in that the individual need for some sense of control is a way of dealing with the anxiety of not knowing.

Although I recognise that the desire to feel in control might be considered a fundamental human psychological need, I have chosen not to elaborate on this as a separate theme within the scope of the thesis. Rather, I focus on control in relation to culture – as culture is often (both explicitly and implicitly) the repetitive theme in my assignments, either indicated as culture, ways of engagement, or leadership.

Culture as social control

We conventionally think of culture as consisting of values that are highly individualised, guiding individual behaviour, as described by Kilmann et al. (1985) and Brown (1998): a manager intends to align individuals with the shared values of the organisation. These shared values are seen as influencing individual conduct in such a way that the organisation can adapt to its new environment. In conventional management literature, with the dominance of the ideology of managerialism (see

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for example Bennis 1989; Conger 2000; Schein 2004), it is proposed that managers are capable of manipulating individual values into good, positive shared values to enable the movement of the organisation into the future. The shared values (culture) are a means of controlling the behaviour of individuals as required.

As stated above, I argue that culture, taking this perspective, is a control system, which Barley and Kunda (1992) call a normative control mechanism. Proponents of this view envision cohesion and loyalty as the ultimate source of productivity; employees are said 'to perform more diligently when they were committed to a collective whose ideas they valued. Control therefore rested on shaping workers' identities, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs' (ibid.: 384). I see that it is not only the staff team's manager, Leo, who takes this stance, but that it is a much more broadly supported view on culture and control in my organisation. Indeed, at the time of writing this synopsis, a process is being prepared to analyse and improve the degree of people's engagement.

Elsewhere in my organisation, I see an emphasis on authenticity and autonomy. People – especially managers in corporate leadership development programmes – are encouraged to discover what drives and motivates them personally in their work. Of significance to me in this context are the ideas of Fleming and Sturdy (2009: 570) who, several years after Barley and Kunda (1992), present culture as a neo-normative control mechanism in which 'employees are encouraged to *be themselves* rather than normatively conform to an externally engineered, homogeneous and organisationally based identity' (italics in original). At first sight, it might seem that Fleming and Sturdy's view of culture focuses on individual autonomy, assuming that every employee chooses their own values and everyone is encouraged to 'be themselves'. However, such a notion of culture can also be considered a collective perspective: the fact that everyone is expected to 'be themselves' becomes a shared value and common purpose in itself.

I find it interesting to reflect on the way that Leo and myself, both together and individually, struggle with the different views, causing mutual misunderstanding. I find myself recognising Leo's way of thinking in a reflexive way, because it has been familiar to me for a long time; yet my view on culture and change is quite

alien to him. We come to a constructive relationship in which we explore ideas about our roles ('Can we as a manager and a consultant determine the culture for the team?'), on culture ('Is there a gap to bridge between the current and an idealised culture?'), and on change ('Can we plan interventions that will guarantee a predicted success?'). I experience these conversations as anxiety-provoking, because of the risk of questioning his authority.

In exploring the perspective of systems thinking, as well as the ideas regarding complex responsive processes of relating, I came to further examine the idea of control. It fascinated me that we so firmly consider ourselves to be in control, as elaborated by Streatfield (2001); we search for ways to control the behaviour of employees in a way that is assumed to support the movement of the organisation into the future. At the same time, we experience otherwise: outcomes, behaviour and change processes are far less controllable than we claim them to be.

This led me to enquire into alternative concepts on culture and its relation to control, investigating the ideas of Mead (1934) and Geertz (1973). In earlier projects, I had already taken up Mead's ideas on values and human interaction. Now I wanted to come to a deeper understanding of how Mead sees the emergence of culture. Geertz, as an anthropologist, made culture a main theme in his research. I argue that linking Mead's and Geertz's ideas contributes to the further development of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. Both authors emphasise culture as emergent and social, a continuous process of giving order and meaning to one's life. Mead sees culture as being both individual and social, emerging in social interaction, and continuously created in an interplay of the individual in relation with his direct environment – conduct being guided by the attitudes of generalised others. Mead's concepts of the 'me', the 'I' and the self enable me to understand how social control is the expression of the 'me' over against the expression of the 'I', and that (1925: 274):

> [t]he human individual is a self only in so far as he takes the attitude of another towards himself … In taking this or these attitudes he is defining the object of the group, that which defines and controls the response.

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Because the self is seen as socially constructed, an individual can affect the social community he is part of. Mead argues that by their individual reactions people change community, since each individual self has its own peculiar individuality, and people act within the social process from their own particular standpoint within that process. Thus, society shapes the self, while the self affects society. In following Mead, I see the developing of selves as a way of becoming more competent in taking the attitude of the generalised other in one's acts. I note that Mead gives considerable importance to the response of the individual in creating social control, in stating (ibid.: 274) that 'social control, then, will depend upon the degree to which the individual does assume the attitude of those in the group who are involved with him in his social activities'. I have come to view control as 'being formed' by society in social interaction, while at the same time forming that society.

The idea of development of selves, and control being social control, is for me a major reason to encourage participants in change – such as the staff members in Project 4 – to shape their ideas together, while negotiating what they (individually and collectively) regard as important in cooperation. This enables them both individually and collectively to define, as well as immediately enact, their own interpretation of appreciativeness – as well as of other values that are regarded as useful, such as co-advising. Our meetings consisted of negotiating the differences in interpretation and enactment.

This links to Mead's emphasis on the interaction of individuals – their social act in their concrete community – within the context of the attitudes of generalised others. It transforms our understanding of social control: rather than planning and imposing global, organisation-wide external values, control now emerges in the interplay of the direct interaction of the 'I' and the 'me' constructing the future in which selves emerge. Mead's ideas underpin my own experience – such as with the team managers – that values cannot be imposed as an outside force; and control becomes the continual fine-tuning by individuals, in what Mead calls the 'I'–'me' dialectic, of their mutual conduct. Culture, then, is something one cannot be outside of.

I also took up Geertz (1973), who follows Mead in assuming that human thought and conduct is basically social – forming and being formed in interaction with one's

environment, making use of significant symbols. Geertz sees the significant symbols largely given in society as webs of significance; these are added to or subtly altered by each individual, who uses them 'to put a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within the ongoing course of experienced things' (ibid.: 45). Webs of significance are prerequisites of human existence, for ordering human life. They provide the structures for our worldviews; they are socially established structures of meaning. Geertz takes up control as finding a way for understanding one's life and context via the webs of significance constituting culture. I argue for this idea of control as a way by which each of us attempts to order and structure our life, taking account of the context in which we are situated. We use such webs of significance to interpret our experience and to understand social utterances within their context. Geertz insists that culture is both social and something one cannot be outside of. This, as I see it, implies that a consultant, contrary to the dominant perspective, cannot be outside of the culture, and is also forming and being formed by it at the same time. And if control is seen as a way to order one's life within one's environment, then social control becomes an activity that is shared by all individuals; there can be no autonomous manager who controls the conduct of others.

In reappraising Project 4, taking up culture and control this way generates for me a profoundly different view on culture change than the feasibility of implementing defined, shared values. Mead's and Geertz's theories enable a better understanding of why it is difficult – not to say impossible – to realise a required culture through, for example, culture change programmes. Culture is socially created and cannot be imposed from the outside through aiming to manipulate individual assumptions and conduct. Culture emerges as the development of selves, formed in and by social acts. Whatever becomes culture becomes so as webs of significance, at a given moment in a given circumstance.

This is contrary to the conventional view that individual conduct is dominantly formed by individual values; that culture is the compliance of individuals with shared values, and thus represents the sum of all individuals' values. This perspective assumes the necessity of aligning individual values, finding equilibrium

through consensus: any diversity of values would make the movement of the organisation into the future uncontrollable, if not impossible. This is in line with the desire for control in the sense of avoiding deviant values and conduct; it is dominant in the work of a consultant in his efforts to align participants and form shared values as shared deliverables of meetings, such as flipchart pages stating shared results of meetings.

I conclude that Geertz's and Mead's ideas lead to a view on culture that resonates with my own work experience: as emerging in the interaction of individuals, as the way patterns continuously emerge as we engage with each other interdependently. Thus, culture is thought of as bringing the social acts of individuals into relation with the patterns of our actions, which are our culture.

Reappraising the involvement of a consultant in culture change

The method of consulting: enquiring into experience

To better understand what an internal consultant does in processes of local interaction, I have reflected further on the four projects, noting that my method of consulting (for example, my engagement with the staff members in Project 4 on their work as a team) has the following characteristics:

- Reflecting in a disciplined way on experience (in reflective narratives: 'what are we doing?').
- Becoming consciously aware of conditions, connections and consequences in this experience (such as the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning ideas on teamwork).
- Critically reappraising these in order to recognise opportunities to make the consequences of actions more satisfying (for example, in conversations with team members).

- Considering the probable consequences of any projected step by acknowledging the consequences in action (sometimes formulated by participants: 'imagine that we discussed our work more often in this way').
- Reconstructing the experience based on the critical enquiry.

I see how my method of consulting resonates with the ideas of Dewey (1929), in its objective to better understand experience. Dewey refers to this as 'to intellectualize practice': developing intelligible connections present in one's experience, to deliberately transform experience for satisfying some felt need. Dewey (1916, 1929) emphasises the importance of experience – the transaction between organisms and their environment – becoming intelligible. He regards thoughtful people – intelligent people who make informed choices – as seeing connections between causes and consequences in experience, and selecting the conditions that have the potential to lead to desired, more satisfying outcomes. In this way he did not take the desired outcomes (future) to be already enfolded or determined, but as open-ended and unpredictable. Eldridge (1998: 24), who studied Dewey's work, states, following Dewey, that:

> The intelligent person is the one who deliberately reconstructs experience. All of us change. Such is the nature of existence. But the intelligent person is the one who increasingly transforms his or her mostly unwitting behavior into more thoughtful action, into directed action. Such a person is able to use the naturally occurring interactions to bring about those that he or she wants, thus acting artfully. But these artful interventions are reflexive. One does not simply operate on things: in interacting with aspects of one's environment one not only changes things, but is changed in the process.

To enable the above, Dewey presents the method of critical enquiry of transactions by which humans deliberately reconstruct experience. This reconstruction does not limit itself to experience on the level of action. One of the insights of Dewey's ideas is the concept of reflexive reconstruction of experience by the use of symbols such as language. In doing so, people gain a measure of detachment from the direct experience through reflexivity, which enables them to think through and see

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relations between possible actions and possible consequences of the actions at a symbolic level. Through the combination of conceptual (thinking) and existential (acting) operations, a blind trial-and-error mode of acting can be transformed into intelligent action.

I see how the influence of Dewey's ideas is apparent in my mode of working as a consultant; for example in Project 3, where I describe inviting the conductors to re-enter the room to continue the conversation with their manager, rather than avoid taking their experience seriously. I start with participants' experience, inviting them to stay within this experience and reflect critically on it, and we end with (reconstructed) experience, going through a process of critical enquiry together. This pattern occurs in many of my narratives. I invite participants – including myself – to vocalise what they see, feel and think is going on in our interaction; we share our narratives and interpretations, by which – through reflection – we become more conscious, more aware of what we are caught up in together. It is striking how individuals interpret their experience differently and how surprised they are when this becomes apparent in the conversation – for example: things go wrong 'because you do not inform us' versus 'because you do not ask for information'. This mismatch of perspectives triggers discussion of what had seemed 'shared' but turns out not to be shared as a group, which leads to anxiety, anger and frustration. As a consultant, I facilitate discussing these 'non-shared issues' in situations where the participants would tend not to do that themselves.

In the next section, I will elaborate further on the method of consulting in my attempt to begin to reappraise the involvement of a consultant in processes of local interaction.

Consulting: Focus on present experience

As described above, I see the impact of consulting in the consultant's engagement with others in their day-to-day working together. I take it to be, following Mead, in the detail of their engagements that people negotiate and evaluate their interacting together. It is in the complexity of these engagements that people decide how they

continue to participate, while being involved, and often immersed, in the engagement itself. I understand – through my work as a consultant and based on the ideas of authors such as Elias, Dewey and Stacey – that being more aware of our way of thinking about what we are doing is a prerequisite for thinking and acting differently. Being more conscious of what is happening might enable us to contribute to the interaction more skilfully; through reflecting on potentially different courses of action and its consequences, we become more aware of our experience and its consequences. In another cycle of reflection, I will enquire further into what is thought to be significant in the involvement of a consultant when focusing on experience in processes of local interaction.

Dewey (1938), in his work on education, states that it is not the pupil, who is at the centre of attention (as in 'child-centred education'), but experience. Further, he argues that the teacher is not the holder of knowledge or the prescriber of the method of learning; the teacher can only facilitate experience. I would argue that this is equally true of a consultant. This resonates with my ambition to become a teacher, as I described in Project 1: as a teacher, I wanted to facilitate the pupils' enquiry into their own experience (their dealing with the world around them), while at the same time developing a method to acquire knowledge to reconstruct their experience – that is: to learn.

Also in my work as a consultant, my focus is on people's actual experience: reflecting on how we interact together while interacting, in order to better understand it and develop ways to affect what is happening within our interaction to potentially make it more satisfying. In doing so, we stay within our concrete experience, while both enacting and undergoing it. In the narratives described in my projects, I see that participants, including myself, struggle with making sense of our experience; there is disagreement, misunderstanding, anxiety. I observe that we repeatedly try to avoid these feelings; we tend to discuss the subject-matter – such as objective criteria to evaluate our choices – without discussing the evoked emotion or the confusion. My involvement becomes explicit through inviting participants to give words to their experience in narratives; examples of this

facilitation are intensifying differences, coping with conflicting ideas, or reflecting on anxiety-provoking discussions.

I enquired further into narrative, understanding people organising experience in narrative form as reflective accounts of our experience (Bruner 1991). These 'thick' descriptions of our situation together (Ryle 1971) help us to become more aware of what we are experiencing because our expectations, evoked emotions and confusion become more explicit. Our views of the context and our intentions are included as well. I see consulting as facilitating distillation from the narratives of those themes that are worth considering further. It is from these narratives and themes, according to Dewey (1929), that one detects connections in experience and constructs potential alternatives, both conceptually and in the doing.

Often the themes that a consultant encounters can entail conflict (an unsatisfying situation) about the way participants work together; there may be conflicting opinions or differences in enactment of values, as exemplified by the two team managers in Project 2 who enacted 'appreciative leadership' differently. I have concluded in my projects that the tendency in organisations is to strive for consensus and conformity, to avoid conflict; whereas, following the insights of the complexity sciences, I take it to be in the awareness of and working with differences that change and novelty emerge. I therefore regard it as the work of a consultant to draw attention to what is going on in the present, to pay attention to differences that exist, even when there is the possibility of producing (further) conflict that may cause anxiety. It is then that a consultant can facilitate, Shaw (2002) argues, conversations that the participants otherwise would not have had.

When experience becomes intelligible experience, by our awareness of conditions, connections and consequences in the process of our transactions with groups we interact with, we tend to notice in a more conscious way what we are all – individually and collectively – caught up in. Following Mead, it is the very ability to take ourselves and our involvement with others as objects to ourselves, and our consciousness of how we form and are formed in the interaction with others, that enables us to choose the potential next step – where our gesture is a response to the gesture of others. Habitual patterns of engagement – such as those historically

formed and/or taken for granted – might then become objects of negotiation concerning what to do next and how to go on together in our day-to-day engaging. This, as intention, can be considered control, taking control to be social control, as I argued in Project 4. To be able to recognise habitual patterns of engaging, participants need to seriously take up their experience together and reflect on it, to come to an understanding of what they are doing together. I have come to regard reflexivity as a key professional contribution of a consultant.

Reflexivity

Authors taking up the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating – such as Stacey and colleagues (2000, 2008) – emphasise the importance of disciplined reflexivity, in which participants in a critically aware manner appraise their actual experience, as well as their interpretations of it, in order to come to an understanding of their experience. In the narratives in my projects it became apparent how important, as well as difficult, reflection on experience is: we tend to avoid it, to concentrate on creating consensus, and to focus on the future instead of the present. When, however, we do reflect on our experience in a disciplined way (for example by making use of thickly described narratives), we come to a better understanding of our experience and, moreover, of our interpretation of our experience.

I argue, following Shaw (2002), that reflexivity is a social process: in interaction with others experience is interpreted, meaning is constructed and there is a potential for the emergence of new patterns of interaction. For me this emphasises the importance of conversation where individual interpretations become objects of reflection and negotiation.

Dewey (1916, 1925) emphasises reflexivity: thinking through experience, which is a human capacity in contrast to non-human activity. He argues that for knowledge to develop, one should not limit oneself to conceptual operations (reflexivity) but also test ideas in existential operations, to see (experience) the value of one's

thinking. In the above, I have described how both doing and being subjected to this are characteristics of my method of consulting.

Reflexivity, Geertz (1973) argues, enables the interpretation of a situation, and the evaluation of one's interpretation of the interpretation, to better understand what happens and how one is giving meaning to situations. He describes how individuals make sense of experience: they interpret the utterances they experience by making use of webs of significance. He emphasises that utterances (e.g. language and body language) can only be sensibly interpreted within their context; the meaning of utterances emerges in context where the webs of significance help to order one's experience within the specificity of the context of utterances. In Project 4, I described the example Geertz uses to illustrate this: one can only interpret the winking of an eyelid within a specific context, since different contexts make meaning (interpretation) differ. Geertz argues that the webs of significance also inform how to respond; a response should 'fit' with a gesture, in context.

In my projects, it is in the specific context that appreciative leadership and appreciative engagement can be interpreted; differences in modes of interpretation – using other webs of significance – cause confusion, 'misinterpretation'. In Project 2, for example, we see one team manager who felt obliged to conform to the web of significance that is our procedural way of working within the organisation, while the other team manager considered it his responsibility to interpret the rules depending on the specific situation. A consultant might invite participants in conversation to take up these differences while facilitating reflections on their different ways of interpreting experience, their process of making sense of experience. How might a consultant do this?

As a consultant, I frequently find myself making routine (unreflected) patterns more explicit; for example, by raising questions and encouraging reflexivity – mainly by facilitating critical enquiry of issues (such as webs of significance) that are taken for granted and cannot easily be discussed. An example would be the conductors in Project 3 who expected managers to inform them and to support them in a one-way manner, without considering mutual cooperation as an essential element for performing well. Reflecting on these taken-for-granted assumptions enables

familiar things to be seen anew. It is, moreover, within the same engagement that we enact what comes up in conversation (for example, our ideas on what appreciative leadership means and how we enact it ourselves during the meeting) and thus evaluate the reconstructed experience. We construct our method, our way of engaging.

I have so far elaborated on what I understand the involvement of an internal consultant to entail when thinking of organisations as processes of human interaction in which culture continuously emerges in patterns of interaction, while people act into the unknown and try to cope with the anxiety of the future being unpredictable and uncertain. The aim of the consultant's involvement is enabling participants to become more reflexively aware of their experience of engaging and of the way they interpret, make sense of and work with their experience. These insights, I have argued, allow participants to contribute more skilfully to the engagement, since they can more consciously and clearly formulate intentions as choosing next steps in interaction.

I regard a consultant as someone who is competent in facilitating the process of interpreting and making sense of experience. This is done by inviting participants to take their experience seriously, even when participants tend not to do so by themselves – perhaps because this would evoke (more) anxiety or cause conflict. I have emphasised that the consultant's reflexivity, working with differences and spontaneity in the present, is a crucial element of his involvement in processes of local interaction. What can be considered specific to this involvement? What is thought to distinguish a consultant from other participants?

Temporary leadership

Shaw describes in *Changing Conversations in Organizations* (2002: 5):

> It would seem that we want to think of ourselves anywhere other than where we are, in the flow of our live engagement, sustaining and transforming the patterning that simultaneously enables and constrains our movement into the

future. Because we don't seem to have a way to think and talk about what we are doing in this reciprocal engagement, we have become accustomed to a particular kind of systemic practice that is meant to help us do this.

Shaw's observation, that we are not accustomed to focusing on what we find ourselves doing in our live interaction, is recognizable in my organisation. We tend to focus on ways to realise an idealised future, and in the process we ignore what we are actually caught up in. I repeatedly experienced this when working in the project team with the directors to define the characteristics of an appreciative organisation; working with the staff team's manager to realise an appreciative culture, and so on. I see a consultant's involvement in engagements as paying attention to participants' experience in conversation and facilitating exploration of the experience. As Stacey (2007: 286) describes:

The purpose of this attention is not to control the conversation or somehow produce efficient forms of it but to understand it so as to participate more effectively. The dynamics of more fluid, spontaneous conversation rely on enough trust and ability to live with anxiety, as well as power relations that are both co-operative and competitive at the same time and rhetorical conversational practices that do not block exploration.

Both Shaw and Stacey emphasise the ability to cope with anxiety, while enabling others to cope with the anxiety too – specifically, anxiety caused by the fact that one is not in control of what will happen or the outcome; the situation is unpredictable and uncertain. I came to understand the difference between a consultant and the other participants to be the consultant's professional ability to deal more readily with the unknown, sustaining attention and reflecting on experience without being immersed in it to the extent of losing reflexivity.

Mead (1934: 257) suggests a relationship between making sense of experience and the emergence of a leader when he identifies the leader as a person with the ability 'to enter into the attitudes of the group and to mediate between them by making his own experience universal, so that others can enter into this form of communication through him'. A consultant contributes to the conversation by articulating the

feelings and thoughts of others by calling them up in himself as he speaks them. By taking the attitude of the others – what Mead refers to as a general tendency to act – the process of making sense evolves, because then the gesture can evoke a similar response from the maker of the gesture and those to whom it is made.

It is exactly this that I find myself doing, for example in my engagement with the managers and conductors in Project 3. In our conversation, we begin to understand what to expect from one's manager and vice versa; that by definition there will be differing views, but it is through collaboration that expectations become potentially realised. I have come to see that in conversations, I challenge the participants to critically consider their individual ideas and to discuss them together, which I doubt they would have done easily without my facilitation.

Enquiring further into the involvement of a consultant as a participant in the process of making sense of experience, I follow Mowles (2009: 291), who states:

> The difference … a consultant can bring is to exercise a temporary form of leadership by taking part in, and encouraging negotiation as way of helping permanent members of staff to see each other anew.

I find it important to remark that Mowles does not refer here to the conventional idea of leadership – that of managerialism, which assumes a designated leadership role in organisations. In the conventional idea of leadership, a leader gets others to act so as to attain the desired outcomes. A leader is responsible for, and in control of, realising pre-defined objectives; if these are not met, this is seen as an indication of leadership inadequacy. An effective leader, then, plans and acts based on knowledge of the future. He can be considered the expert: the one who knows where to go and how to get there.

Mowles (2009, 2011) follows Griffin (2002: 25), who describes in his book *The Emergence of Leadership*:

> The role of leader emerges in the interaction and those participating are continuously creating and recreating the meaning of the leadership themes in the local interaction in which they are involved.

Here, leadership is not an attribute of a designated individual or position in the hierarchy, but a social phenomenon emerging in human interaction. This led me to enquire, again, further into the ideas of Mead on human interaction, where people (and thus also consultants) are forming and being formed in the interaction with others. I was drawn to his ideas because they offer a way to see and understand how I 'have an influence' as a consultant – through temporary leadership, rather than by being an expert who can predict the future. Mead (1934: 256) takes up leadership as emerging in the present by stating:

> Occasionally a person arises who is able to take in more than others of an act in process, who can put himself into relation with whole groups in the community whose attitudes have not entered into the lives of the others in the community. He becomes a leader.

Griffin (2002: 25) continues, in line with the ideas of Mead:

> Groups tend to recognize the leader role in those who have acquired a greater spontaneity, a greater ability to deal with the unknown as it emerges from the known context.

Taking up temporary leadership in this way makes leadership a social phenomenon that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed in interaction; it has no meaning outside the process of people in interaction. As such, it can be that over the course of a conversation, different participants – not just the consultant – enact leadership. I regard, however, the consultant as a professional who is more competent in a temporary leadership role than can be expected from other participants. Leadership in this view, enacted by a consultant as temporary participant in engagements, does imply that the consultant's involvement emerges socially in the process of interaction with participants; it is not a pre-defined, static role.

I conclude that taking the above stance on the involvement of a consultant represents a profoundly different view on consulting than the conventional stance, which I would describe as detached, objective consulting by a designated expert. I

have come to see consulting as a social, reflexive and responsive process of intensifying experience, where a consultant has an influence on what is going on around him through what I have come to regard as temporary leadership: a consultant enables participants to have the conversations they by themselves tend not to have, which in turn allows 'thick' –more conscious and reflexive – interpretation of experience. This social reflexive process, as I will elaborate in the next section, is also a characteristic of my method of research.

Method of research

In the DMan, the suggested research focus on organisations is one in which they are understood as complex responsive processes of relating, rather than systems that one can research from an objective, 'external' position. Seeking a better understanding of organisations, and the experience of people within them, raises the question: If there is no 'thing', no 'system' to study, what then should one study to gain a better understanding? And what method should one use?

Considering organisations as complex responsive processes of relating requires studying processes of human relating – and, moreover, to do so from within, while participating in these processes, since one cannot be outside of processes of interaction. This participative position leads to researching the micro details of one's own experience of interaction with others. I see, following Dewey (1916), experience as denoting the broad context of the human organism's interrelationship with its environment. I have chosen to work with my personal experience as raw material, seeking to offer insights into organisational life, as well as into my way of taking up the role of consultant.

Developing my method of research

Reflexively, I see that my initial stance on research, when first engaging in the DMan, was based in the natural sciences of certainty. In the natural sciences, there are three assumptions of causality, all three of which I was taking for granted. First, linear causality (if/then), enabling efficiency, which made me search for ways to

improve my way of consulting. Second, rational causality, where an autonomous individual is thought to choose rational objectives (e.g. effective consulting). Third, formative causality, emerging from evolutionary theory, where the future state is already enfolded in the past and present, and research provides ways to bridge the gap between the current and a defined, desired situation.

The DMan draws on the sciences of uncertainty, with complexity sciences as an analogy. Here, paradoxically, people are at the same time forming and being formed in interaction, as Mead (1934) states, which can cause predictable as well as unpredictable effects. Congruent to the theory of complex responsive processes of interaction, where these social processes are thought to be emergent, I experience this emergent and social nature in my research; over the course of the programme, my research questions emerged and evolved, based on the social and reflexive way of enquiring into my experience; taking up questions opened up more questions.

Where I initially aimed to improve my way of consulting, this changed into doing research to increase my understanding of my experience, through trying to reappraise situations and relationships as they play out repeatedly in my work as a consultant. This is what Tsoukas and Hatch (2001) call taking an interpretive mode of thought. I argue that my research aims to further develop the competence of paying attention to the complexity of interactions in which consultants are engaged. Stacey (2001: 8-9) emphasises that:

> What 'you' [as a consultant] can do, including the most powerful, is become more skillful in participating in the relationships you already participate in, in generating the knowledge you already generate with others, by paying attention in a different way.

Researching experience, as I view it, does not lend itself to a quantitative research methodology (Bryman and Bell 2007), where the focus is on data from controlled empirical studies, with de-contextualised subject-matter, from which hypotheses are proved and general conclusions are derived. By contrast, I understand experience as context-sensitive, where each process of human interaction, and each consulting assignment, is unique. I give narrative accounts of my experience situated in

context. In doing so, I do not strive to formulate best practices, or rules, based on a particular experience with assumed wider applicability. Moreover, I take best practices to be methods that are already known, based on experiences in the past and 'foreign' contexts, assuming a predictable future. My research focuses on new insights, potentially giving live experience new meaning.

In reflexive accounts (narratives) I document ways that I, as both researcher and practitioner, interpret experience. Through writing reflexive narratives and in conversation with members of my cohort, colleagues and peers, I make sense of experience with others, locating it in a wider context by taking up authors who might throw a new light on the narrative themes.

Locating my method of research within qualitative research

My method of research is a form of qualitative research with its roots in anthropology and sociology. It distinguishes itself from most qualitative methods, as these often view their objects of research (for example tribes, societies, families or organisations) as systems that can be objectively observed without affecting it as researcher. I research my experience of participating as an internal consultant in processes of human interaction, where I regard the assumption of an objective observer as not applicable. I will enquire, however, how my method of research is related to other qualitative methods, taking up three widely known qualitative research methods.

One of the qualitative methods that resonates with my method of research is ethnography (Brewer 2000), with its objective of understanding the social meanings and activities of people in a given setting. Its research involves the study of real-life situations, where the ethnographic researcher observes people in the setting in which they live, and participates in their day-to-day activities. My method of research is distinct from ethnography, in that I research my own experience. In doing so, I do not observe myself, but reflect on and interpret my experience of interacting with others. Researching my own work makes me as a researcher

involved in and affected by the research activity, where ethnographic researchers view themselves as objective observers, observing the day-to-day lives of others.

Another qualitative research method with similarities to the method I use is action research (Reason & Bradbury 2001). Both methods are concerned with emerging social phenomena, focus on participation and relationship, seek to avoid splitting theory and practice, and explore the everyday and narrative aspects of experience. The methods differ in that action research is about improving practice rather than improving knowledge (Elliot 1991), which makes it very close to the conventional, common understanding of consulting. A consultant is supposed to analyse (research) and improve a situation in a desired direction. I recognise this stance in my initial take on my research: the search for ways to improve my way of consulting.

The assumptions underpinning action research – such as in 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) – are those common to managerialism, with its idea of rational choice on intervening and controlling interaction processes and human behaviour. This is different from my method of research, where I focus on gaining a better understanding of human interaction processes from within, without assuming that it will inevitably lead to improvements in my practice.

A third method of research – ethnomethodology – also has some similarities with, as well as differences from, the research method I use. Ethnomethodology, as developed by Garfinkel (1967),

> refers to the study of a particular subject matter: the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves. (Heritage 1984: 4)

At the centre of the ethnomethodological analysis of social organisation is the question (ibid.: 67): 'how do social actors come to know, and know in common, what they are doing and the circumstances in which they are doing it?' This has

much to do with making sense of experience, and is a common research method to study (for example) cultures.

Ten Have (2004: 14) states that:

> 'Ethnomethodology' is a special kind of social inquiry, dedicated to explicating the ways in which collectivity members create and maintain a sense of order and intelligibility in social life (sic).

Both ethnomethodology and the research method I use take an interest in the study of human practices and the way people make sense of their life. Both methods use concepts that are not part of a logical, causal explanation of events and action; they are interpretive methods. Thus, unlike many other forms of research, which aim to solve problems or achieve improvements, their function is not to add anything to the social life they study. Of the ethnomethodological researcher, Garfinkel (1967: viii) explains: 'They do not formulate a remedy for practical actions' – to which ten Have (2004: 146) adds: '[Ethnomethodology] just brings to light what is already available for all to see'.

In ethnomethodology – unlike my own approach to research – the spatial metaphor of 'inside' and 'outside' is used (similar to systems thinking), positioning the researcher outside the research arena. I understand that in most anthropological studies on culture the researcher participates in societies, but is seen as conducting research from a detached, external position – taking a participant-observer's role, and exerting minimal influence on the object of research.

From the perspective on research that I take, the researcher is thought to be forming and being formed in interaction at the same time, thus influencing the object and context of study continuously. Moreover, I take the researcher (myself) not only to participate in the field of study (my experience), but also to be involved, with the possibility of being personally transformed through the research.

Researching experience through communicating reflective narratives

In my method of research I make use of narrative accounts of my experience: detailed descriptions of my engagements with others that form the raw material from which themes emerge for further reflection and research through reflexive intensification of experience. These descriptions are not illustrations of situations, but 'texts through which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and from which somebody is trying to extract a meaning' (Bruner 1991: 7). Bruner (ibid.: 4) proposes that 'we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative', an account of events occurring over time. Narratives are about particular happenings, which in turn are typical of broader types: they are reflections on situations that are taken up for further reflection – narrative themes will open up sense-making and enable more questions to emerge. I follow Stacey and Griffin, who state (2005: 9) that:

> One can only really understand an organization from within the *local interaction* in which global tendencies to act are taken up. This means that the insights/findings of the research must arise in the researcher's *reflection* on the micro detail of his or her own *experience* of interaction with others.

The narrative accounts of my own experience of interaction with others revealed their relevance through the significance of the patterns of relating that often repeat themselves in my engagements. The fact of repetitiveness, however, became evident during the course of the research, while reflecting on the narrative themes.

From the narrative descriptions, I take up themes that emerge in the narrative accounts of my experience, and bring them into a wider context of thinking by taking up the ideas of other authors on these themes. What I am trying to draw attention to in my research is what I consider to be general, recognizable themes in organisations that are worth noticing.

In interpreting and making sense of my experience, and coming to a better understanding of what we find ourselves doing together, I use conversations with peers, members of my cohort, and colleagues. Engaging with the narratives and ordering my experience through narrative themes, in interaction with others, makes my research a social process; doing enquiry this way my research becomes a self-organising and emergent process, which I can only describe in retrospect by reflecting on how I went about the research process.

Following Dewey (1929), who states that it is the connection between causes and consequences that is most relevant in making experience intelligible, leads to the notion that narratives need to offer data that invite the reader to enquire into the experience and the connections, to examine their findings and intensify the interpretation. I intend my narrative texts to bring my readers into the experience of the movement of the events as they unfold – in the hope that they will recognise connections and bring potential consequences, as they see them, alive.

To understand what this requires of a narrative description, I examined the ideas of Ryle and Geertz. Ryle (1971), and with him Geertz (1973), distinguishes between 'thin' and 'thick' forms of description in the examination and recording of micro-practices. Both authors advocate the use of 'thick' description, which they take to mean one that involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behaviour described. It also involves ascribing present and future intentionality to the behaviour. Thick description gives readers a sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions, as well as the intentions, of those involved. In using 'thickly' described narratives I focus on the specific, the micro and the contextual, as reflection on my practice as a consultant. This resonates with Geertz's theory that people can only interpret, make sense of, experience in context. They do so by making use of the webs of significance that are present within that context. I have illustrated this in a previous section with Geertz's example of winking an eyelid, which derives meaning from its particular context. Thick descriptions offer contextual information that enables the reader to interpret experience.

None of this is meant to imply that I consider what I have written, and my interpretations of the narratives, to be the truth in the sense of an objective

interpretation of a reality out there; my understanding of experience is that it will inevitably be selective and include a subjective perspective. The DMan residential meetings and the learning set discussions offered opportunities to reflect on the themes of my narratives. These conversations often opened up further research work by encouraging me to explore differences in our reflections and constructions of meaning. I agree with Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009: 302), who, in following Deetz (1992), write that:

> [t]he point of communication as a social act is to overcome one's fixed subjectivity, one's conceptions, one's strategies to be opened to the indeterminacy of people and the external environment.

Reflexivity

Stacey and Griffin (2005: 23) write that

> the narrative as research method is … importantly reflexive in a social sense. Social reflexivity requires the narrator to explicitly locate his or her way of thinking about the story being told in the traditions of thought of his or her society, differentiating between these traditions in a critically aware manner.

Authors like Bruner (1991) and Dewey (1916, 1925) also emphasise reflexivity as an important element in the use of narrative as a research method: paying serious attention 'to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written' (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009: 9). Bourdieu's method – or device, as he also calls it – of participant objectivation is informative here (2003: 282):

> [P]articipant objectivation undertakes to explore not the 'lived experience' of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself.

In describing participant objectivation, Bourdieu emphasises that scientists must turn their analysis not only towards their subject of research, but also upon themselves, as a way of objectifying the social conditions of themselves as researchers: they should be conscious of, for example, their relative social position in the professional universe, and the presuppositions and prejudices associated with a particular point of view. These factors have a considerable impact on the way scientists interpret their own data (experience). The fact that I research perspectives on organisations, culture and change from within my position as an internal consultant will inevitably influence my research – in the way I choose, write and reflect on my narratives; in distilling the themes that I consider relevant; and through my involvement in the narrated situations, as a colleague of the participants I write about. I realise that being an internal consultant will, for example, make it difficult for me to view the context as researchers outside my organisation might. On the other hand, my internal situation does enable me to consider my experience in a broader context than external consultants could grasp. This paradoxically results, as I see it, in opportunities and limitations at the same time, for myself, as both researcher and consultant. I want to emphasise the importance of being aware of these circumstances and taking them into account in my research; conversations with peers and members of my cohort were useful in enabling me to reflect on my experience.

Bourdieu and Wacquant state that working with and reflecting on one's experience is not simply a matter of noticing utterances. It involves the construction of 'the space of objective relations *(structure)* of which the communicative exchanges we directly observe *(interaction)* are but the expression' (1992: 256; italics in original). I relate this to the ideas of Geertz (1973), who argues that for interpretation of utterances (Bourdieu's communicative exchanges, interaction) the use of webs of significance that are forming and being formed in a context (Bourdieu's structure) are crucial. One can only make sense of utterances in their context, as I argued earlier.

Another important prerequisite of reflexivity is to be paradoxically involved and detached at the same time. In this mode of research, I take the researcher to be

involved in the interaction – in the sense that Elias (1987) describes and illustrates with the example of two brothers in a maelstrom – to the extent that his own identity might potentially be changed through the experience. At the same time, he must distance himself from any immediate affective reactions to the situation in which he finds himself. Elias argues that through a measure of detachment, researchers are better able to notice what they are caught up in. This paradox, I argue, is an important characteristic of both research and consulting, as elaborated in this synopsis; in my work as a consultant, I am involved through participating in conversation in which I am forming and being formed and in which I change as a consultant, while through a measure of detachment I am able to better interpret, reflect on and understand what is going on.

I characterise my research method as what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009: 284) refer to as insight-driven research, 'where the work of interpretation is central, and the empirical material – texts in various forms – is the subject of attempts to assess meanings and develop revealing insights'. The authors argue that reflection in the context of empirical research can be defined as the critical self-exploration of one's own interpretation of the interpretation of the empirical material, including its construction. Challenging my own reflections with the ideas of various authors, as well as the observations of members of my cohort, heightened my awareness of the ways in which I interpret and make sense of my narratives; I began to see familiar things as novel, making sense anew of situations in context. For me, this emphasises the profoundly social aspect of this mode of research.

The authors advocate what they call (ibid.: 287) 'second-level hermeneutics': interpretations of preliminary interpretations. This could be done, as Czarniawska describes (2004: 61), through the hermeneutic triad of Herdani (1987): explication ('what does this text say?'), through explanation ('why does this text say what it does?') or through exploration ('what do I, the reader, think of all this?'). I see all three ways of reading narrative texts to be present simultaneously, intertwined, throughout my mode of research.

Validity and generalisability

Following Ellis et al. (2011), I see that when terms such as 'validity' and 'generalisability' are applied to the research method I use, the context, meaning and utility of these terms are altered. Here, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude, examining the experience described in a way that is lifelike, believable, and possible. Since I take the research method as a subjective reflection and interpretation of personal experience, I have invited colleagues, peers and the members of my cohort over the course of my research to critically examine whether my narratives are arbitrary. In conversation with colleagues directly involved in the narratives, they sometimes gave different interpretations (from mine and each others'), which offered me the opportunity to refine my reflection and the emerging themes. In discussions with colleagues I have chosen, for ethical reasons, to discuss my research material in a generic way, using pseudonyms to protect the identities of those involved.

In the method of research that I have used, the focus of generalisability moves from respondents to readers, and is always being tested by readers as they determine whether a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. This leads to the question of whether narrative research can be considered generalisable. I understand that from my research, the individual, personal experience of the researcher cannot readily be generalised – that is, de-contextualised and considered to be generally applicable. It is in the patterning of the themes, and through reflection on these, that readers can discern any general relevance – for example, as recognisable trends in organisations. In my research, I took up the conventional perspective on organisations, culture and change and its consequences for the assumptions regarding the involvement of an internal consultant. I enquired what it entails to take an alternative perspective and what this means for the involvement of a consultant in processes of local interaction. From the reactions of colleagues, peers and the members of my cohort, I conclude that the patterns and themes that I describe, based on personal accounts of my experience,

are recognisable for them in their work. This, as I see it, confirms a generalisability of my findings for a larger audience.

I expect my readers, regarding validity and the ability of generalising the insights from my research, to join me in my enquiry by asking themselves what my research texts mean for them: what are the implications of my narratives for their own work? I am suggesting that the meaningfulness of my writing is in the response from my readers.

Contribution to knowledge and practice

> We need to move from fantasizing about what organizations should be like and seriously explore the reality of organizational life in our experience and the way we might think about what we already do … given that we do not know with any certainty what is happening, we can certainly know about what we are doing to enable us to live in uncertainty. (Stacey 2010: 2)

In this thesis, I have taken up Stacey's recommendation: I am offering an alternative to the conventional way of understanding organisations, culture and control and the implications for the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of culture change. I advocate an alternative perspective on organisations, culture and control in which organisations are thought of as self-organising patterns of human interaction, as complex responsive processes of relating, where people are forming and being formed in local interaction. I assert that local interaction and emergence are key to understanding the paradoxes we experience, and lead to reappraising the involvement of a consultant in culture change processes.

Following Mead (1923, 1934), Geertz (1973) and Elias (1939), I understand changes in culture as constructed by the paradoxical and simultaneous emergence of individuals and of the social in ongoing conversation. Here, people are at the same time forming and being formed in local interaction where – emerging from differences between people – the local rules of engaging are able to evolve, in both predictable and unpredictable ways, as stability and change. According to these

authors, people make use of webs of significance – apparent in society and individual history – and general tendencies to understand their experience of engaging with others. These webs and general tendencies paradoxically form and are being formed in those engagements; this leads me to understand culture as social control.

Emergence of culture happens in self-organising processes while people, interdependently, contribute to the emergence of both local meaning and generalisation of themes (Stacey 2005), while being and not being in control at the same time. I have shown that a consultant facilitates participants in coping with the paradox of being and not being in control, as Streatfield (2001) describes, while acting into the unknown as they continually construct the future together. I take it to be the consultant's role to facilitate the movement of this paradox, not letting it collapse into either extreme.

I have demonstrated that a consultant should focus on the self-organising processes – local interaction – in which participants act out general values (Mead's cult values). In acting spontaneously – their gestures being a response to the gesture of others – and through disciplined reflexivity, a consultant will be paradoxically involved and detached, enabling him to draw attention to what is actually going on, while as a temporary participant being affectively immersed in the interaction in a way that is both similar to (involved as a participant) and different from (maintaining a professional measure of detachment) the others.

I have been paying particular attention to the fact that it is simultaneously as a fellow participant (Shaw 2002) and through enacting temporary leadership (Mowles 2009) that a consultant facilitates participants to take responsibility for the way they influence what the organisation becomes. I see a consultant as the person recognised as leader, and as having stronger influence than others on the people who so recognise him. The acceptance of a consultant's leadership emerges in social interaction, while being recognised as being both similar to and different from those who are being led. This enables a consultant to invite participants (including himself) to participate in conversations, to work with diversity and multiplicity, disturbing routinised responses. By facilitating new or different

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conversations, he contributes to the ability to realise the potential for novelty; he enables participants to have the conversations they otherwise tend not to have, as they prefer to avoid the anxiety of not being in control.

The consultant's leadership enables participants to work with the narratives of their experience of engaging, to articulate themes that are worth taking up to make experience intelligible (Dewey 1916, 1938) by seeing connections, conditions and consequences, and potentially reconstructing experience. In conversations, intentions about directions and ambitions emerge, allowing everyone – through reflexive understanding of their experience – to be responsible in a more critically aware manner for the ways they influence the next steps in engaging together.

Thus, I am offering an alternative stance on consulting: a social process in which the involvement of the internal consultant emerges socially, in interaction with participants, as temporary leadership.

Conclusions

As I began my thesis, I aimed to explore methods to improve my way of working as an internal consultant on leadership and culture change. This ambition was grounded in the assumptions underpinning the dominant ideology of managerialism, which I had taken for granted even though it did not sufficiently resonate with my experience. I came to critique the dominant perspective in which managers and consultants focus on realising the movement of an organisation as a whole from the past into the future, from a stable situation into another stable, idealised situation. In doing so, they search for general rules and methods to be in control, and to avoid anxiety caused by the unpredictability and uncertainty of change processes. This leads to repetitive attempts to change organisational culture through organisation-wide designed change initiatives that focus on controlling human interaction and causing predictable outcomes; these initiatives have shown limited results.

My enquiry has led to alternative concepts of culture and control: as emerging social phenomena in the interaction of people where they make sense of their experience together, with an outcome that is both predictable and unpredictable. This alternative perspective resonates with my own experience, taking seriously the messiness of organisational life, unpredictability and uncertainty, of paradoxically being and not being in control at the same time. I encounter this in my assignments as an internal consultant on leadership and culture change.

A reappraisal of the involvement of an internal consultant

Researching the implications of the perspective taken on a consultant's involvement, by reflecting on narrative accounts of my work, led me to reappraise the involvement – concluding that a consultant facilitates processes of local interaction, with emphasis on the present experience of participants. It is within their actual engagement that people interdependently create culture, while it continually emerges as they negotiate values and meaning in any particular situation; culture emerges as social control. It is in this engaging that compromises

as well as conflicts arise due to differences, potentially causing anxiety. We tend to ignore these differences, thus avoiding the anxiety, regarding conformity and consensus as necessary for change. I argue that the way we conventionally regard culture reinforces this conformity and consensus, focusing on shared ways of thinking and acting – culture as a control system. However, for novelty and change to occur, differences are essential. I advocate working with existing differences, addressing feelings of anxiety and not being in control. A consultant takes up temporary leadership in order to enable participants to cope with and work through differences, anxiety and uncertainty. I would suggest that this leadership is characterised by the competence to deal better, and for longer, with the anxiety than (most) other participants.

Given such leadership qualities, I see it as essential in the involvement of an internal consultant that participants be invited to work with their experience: exploring experience – as 'thick' narratives – to enable interpretation and understanding in context, using webs of significance that are present in individuals' history and in society. This involvement will help participants see and understand their assumptions, ways of making sense of engaging, with the potential to enlarge their capability to continue or change it in a more self-aware manner. Working this way, a consultant participates in the continuous process of change of local patterns of interaction – of culture – from which further self-organising and global patterns might emerge in a way that is both predictable and unpredictable.

Affecting my practice

The alternative perspective described is not commonly held in my organisation. Moreover, its focus on the paradoxes of being and not being in control, of predictability and unpredictability, of stability and emerging change, make the anxiety and uncertainty explicit, potentially causing resistance. I argue, however, that when we continue to take the dominant view of a 'good leader' as someone who is in control of (designed) culture change processes and its results (defined shared values, an organisational culture), then managers and consultants will persist in striving for more designed, prescriptive methods in an effort to guarantee control.

This, as I see it, will have the reverse effect of obstructing the intended culture change processes by distracting attention from culture as emerging and evolving in interaction.

So far, the assignments that I carry out have remained grounded in the dominant perspective of systems thinking: I am supposed to contribute to 'being in control' of culture change processes, and developing managers to be in control. I do not regard it as sensible, possible or even realistic to aim to change this perspective – at any rate, certainly not in a planned, designed and predictable way.

In my assignments, however, I take the opportunity to fulfil my involvement in a different way: I invite colleagues to take the risk of acting into the unknown, and to have the conversations we tend to avoid; I facilitate constructing and reconstructing our experience of working together, vocalising and spontaneously working with what I encounter in the present. I notice that I am successful in this, in the sense that people take up the invitation – I assume because I set the example in conversations. The success of the results can be less immediately apparent, since we do not define the outcome beforehand: we walk the road step by step while constructing it, keeping steady focus on the present and potential next steps.

In this thesis I concentrated on the involvement of an internal consultant in processes of culture change. However, as a consultant on leadership development and culture change, this research will inevitably affect my work through the way it has affected my understanding of the role of managers (leaders) in processes of culture change. It will certainly impact upon my involvement in the development of leaders – since I no longer regard them as being in control, on top and in charge, but as leaders who can deal with the paradoxes of predictability and unpredictability, of being and not being in control, of having an influence while forming and being formed in interaction. This is an area that I intend to explore further in the near future.

I thus see the movement of my thinking, as described in this thesis, influencing my way of working and in turn influencing those I work with in processes of culture change in local interaction. As already mentioned, I do not consider this thesis to

present new frameworks or models to improve my way of consulting – my original ambitions when starting my research – but rather, a different way of understanding how people engage and culture evolves. As an internal consultant, I make a unique contribution to this – by having an influence through temporary leadership.

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