

**STRATEGY-MAKING IN A SENIOR
LEADERSHIP TEAM IN THE PUBLIC
SECTOR IN DENMARK:**

**Taking experience seriously as co-creation
conflict and paradox**

Pernille Thorup

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Abstract

Much current literature on management and strategy still describes strategy work as a linear, top-down, management-based, rational, logical, structured and planned change activity with clear and predictable goals. It is described as an activity in which individual managers are addressing key questions and implementing an important, management-based plan. By using the right tools and techniques, skilled managers can transform plans into reality through good leadership and systematic rollout. This way of thinking about leadership is based on an understanding of leaders as rather powerful, knowing, heroic individuals who can stand outside of their organization to plan an ideal future, and who are equipped to make employees follow their instructions in order to reach desired goals.

In this thesis I research into my experiences of what is happening in an organization, taking seriously the experience of developing a new strategy. It is an organization working in the public sector in Denmark which is right now trying to find a strategy and its way through a series of ‘wicked problems’ not easily handled. Through the use of autobiographical narrative-based inquiry and a focus on everyday local interactions between people working together, I research into what is ‘really’ going on in strategy work. Drawing on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating and reflexivity, I describe and analyse the interactions in our leadership team’s efforts to change the organization’s strategy. In doing so themes of power, power games and power differentials, politicking and some of the paradoxes in management – such as inclusion/exclusion, local interaction and global patterning, unpredictable predictability, and conflict and cooperation – are investigated.

The complex responsive process perspective views organizations as patterns of interaction and conversations between people working together. By analogy from complex adaptive systems models, sociology, psychology and philosophy, it argues that generalizable population-wide patterns emerge in unpredictable ways through exactly these local complex interaction and interplays of peoples’ intentions, thoughts and actions. This leads me to propose generalizable new contributions to knowledge about strategy work.

Examining my own experience, I problematize the ‘heroic’, individualistic, view of what leaders do when working with strategy, preferring to see strategy as a co-

created activity that emerges in complex and paradoxical interactions between people in the organization, in the leadership team, in daily cooperation with employees, and through the interface with customers. The understanding of co-creation here being that together we co-create our social life and our social life is co-creating us, our selves, our personalities at the same time. This inseparable paradox of the individual and the group, of the one and the many is investigated. Finally, I suggest that strategy work is inseparable from the everyday messy conflictual power games of organizational life, and that leaders – through actively engaging in ongoing conversations and co-creating meaning – participate in developing new understandings of identity and culture. In talking with one another about what it is we are doing, in influencing and being influenced, and reflecting on this, we are already changing what is going on; this itself is strategy work.

The narratives show that to work with strategy effectively, we need to negotiate our intentions in convincing ways through forming strong power alliances. Taking experience seriously also demonstrates a close connection between power, ethics and action, and that it is impossible to decide the ‘good’ thing to do before acting. Developing reflexivity, both as an individual and in collaborative work, is a prerequisite for working in an ethical way, aware of our mutual interdependence.

Finally, the thesis describes some of the consequences of taking experience seriously as a strategy. It has changed the way our staff understand what they are doing, and is beginning to change the kind of assignments we take on, and how we deal with them. One spin-off has been producing two books (with more to come). We also have new and more reflexive contacts in business and knowledge-creating environments, such as universities and business schools. The thesis shows a number of results from working with strategy in this way.

This indicates that the act of taking your experience seriously in itself implies a kind of transforming causality, and hereby a strategy of change.

Key words: Power, Conflict, Politics, Strategy, Systems theory, Social constructionism, New Public Management, Paradox, Phronesis, Organizational change, Leadership, Reflexivity, Complex responsive processes, Ethics.

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Introduction

I have worked with public management for 13 years. I encounter deeply engaged, dedicated, hardworking local politicians and public servants. Getting to know them and their dedication to sustain and develop Danish welfare has been a privilege. Today I work in an organization owned by the Danish municipalities. We meet both top managers and frontline workers trying to find their way between the central government reform perspective and the local interest in welfare service. Denmark, with a population of only 5.5 million people, has a disproportionately intense preoccupation with professionalizing management; this has intrigued me over the years. We are no larger than a medium-sized American city. The city of London has 1½ times as many inhabitants as my country. How hard can it be to manage this? Over the last almost 10 years we have had public funding for leadership development and education, building on a realization of the growing need for leaders to know more about what they are doing leading public welfare development. The change from a state focusing on welfare to a state focusing on possessing competitive power towards other states concerning financing, productivity and employment in order to attract growth and workplaces has changed the demands on leadership from managing quite linearly on simple terms to being able to understand and manoeuvre in complex situations with paradoxical demands for reform implementation and strategic overview.

Our organization has struggled to stay in touch with the new and changing demands for leadership training and organizational development from the municipalities stemming from the above and this thesis investigates the task of finding a new strategy and a way of working that fits with these current trends and demands for change in welfare development.

For many local reasons – perhaps because we are such a small country, we lost a big part of our country to the Germans in 1864 and were occupied by them during World War II – we have a strong national identity, a culture and a public transcript of preferring to compromise, keeping conflict under wraps: ‘small village’ manners prevail, whereby no one openly fights their case or talks things through. Entering Danish management discourse, together with New Public Management (NPM), has been a wave of systems theory thinking. NPM takes a more linear view, with time and context as rather irrelevant: leaders stand ‘outside’ the organization, making and

implementing plans. Systems theory sees organizations as systems of communication, with strategy explained in circular terms: leaders are powerful players who can select, develop and enact the ‘right’ interaction/communication between leaders and employees.

Generally speaking, NPM has primarily been adopted in the central administration, and systemic management at a more local level. This means that two rather different philosophical traditions coexist; centrally, it can be tricky to understand what is going on at a local level, and vice versa. NPM’s central goal is to market-orient public service; it considers the public sector too big, costly, bureaucratic and inefficient. NPM has driven most of the reforms in the public sector in Denmark over the last 20 years, in the hope of making cost-effective solutions in welfare. The systemic leadership approach sees leadership as a democratic and collegial activity that creates cohesion, based on every employee being a part of the organization as a whole. Both management approaches share the notion of the rational, purposeful manager. Seemingly these quite control-oriented answers to the challenges are not targeting the simultaneous demand for being able to relate to other people including being able to take their position, understand the core and the content of the welfare tasks and the needed professionalism to work with welfare and finally be able to support cooperation and direction in trying to reach the core goals of any public organization (Kaspersen and Nørgaard 2015, p. 171).

This thesis explores another understanding of strategy and management that acknowledges the more complex, paradoxical and messy interplay of intentions within organizations, which are researched as complex local communicative interactions, power relations, politics and conflict between people working together. I sought to determine whether this concept of organizational life, with its understanding of strategy as the evolving narrative pattern of organizational identity (Stacey 2012, p. 468) in which we are paradoxically influencing and being influenced by each other at the same time, adequately captures the interplay of emerging local intentions and interactions and the following more nation-wide patterning that I observe.

Besides raising my four sons, working with public management is probably the most challenging and rewarding work I have ever done. The passionate feeling of being alive, the sense of urgency and the joy and messiness of sharing one’s life with

colleagues, as we muddle our way through, is closely related to love. We must endure and improvise, accepting the paradox of being both individual and socially intertwined. This thesis examines how we accomplish strategy work through the emerging processes of complex interactions in a leadership team doing exactly this. It describes what taking experience seriously, working with reflexive narratives, participating in the paradoxical interplay of local interaction and global patterning means, and describes what happens in praxis when one applies insights from chaos/complexity sciences to management. Management is so often analysed with grids and diagrams, bullet points and planning sheets, and one can get so caught up in reifying one's own organization as a system and 'refilling the leadership toolkit' as though something needs fixing, that it's easy to forget that it's all about people living and working together.

I research my personal history of 'managing'; paradoxes and conflicts of inclusion/exclusion in my life; and my own leadership generally in relation to employees, colleagues and boss, influencing the development of a new strategy in our organization.

Key questions arise concerning complex and paradoxical gesture/response in social life (Mead 1934), an investigation of power and conflict (Elias 1978; Mead 1934) and an interest in emergent strategy (Mintzberg 2007) strategy as action (Mintzberg 2009, 2010) and sense-making in change processes (Stacey 2011; Weick 2001, 2009). In Project 1, I review my thinking by writing narratives on my experiences as a leader, my research question then being: 'Transparency, hiding and taking risks working with being excluded or included in organizations'. The background for this was a growing dissatisfaction with basing my management understanding on social constructionism, with strategy and change understood as communicative constructions (Cunliffe 2009; Gergen 2009; Hatch and Cunliffe 2006; Hornstrup et al 2013; McNamee et al 1998; Shotter 2006), along with a conscious decision not to address questions of power (Storch 2011).

Project 2 describes a narrative of power games in a group of leaders fighting for influence, and the inclusion/exclusion processes of having to fire a number of employees. I research into the concept of power and how it is negotiated while people work together to solve tough questions. I also research into the concepts of inclusion/exclusion as paradoxically present in relations, and describe how this is used

to both enable and constrain one another. Recognizing the dichotomy of my thinking then invited further investigations into paradox.

Project 3 is an investigation into the role of conflict, seeking to understand what was happening in interactions on the leadership team in a situation where one of the colleagues was trying to advance his position. I reviewed various understandings of conflict – from a traditional organizational theory-based conflict management perspective (Lægaard and Vest 2005; Rahim 2001), through a social constructionist view of conflict as dissolvable through appreciative and collaborative relational and communicative actions (Gergen 2009; Haslebo 2012, 2014), to a more radical notion of conflict whereby local interaction, ongoing conversations and power games invite critical reflection on what we are doing together (Lukes 1974, Stacey 2012, p. 76).

In Project 4 I inquire further into strategy work (Burgelman 1983; Chandler 1962; Gergen 2011; Hatch and Cunliffe 2006; Klausen 2008, 2014; Lægaard 2014; Stacey 2011), ethics of change and the connection between action and ethics (Arendt 1958; Griffin 2000), my narratives describing the process of developing a new strategy in my organization. Researching into ethics and practical judgment (*phronesis* – Eikeland 2008; Flyvbjerg 2001, 2012), I describe the movement from thinking that it is possible to decide what is good and bad before engaging in interactions to understanding the paradoxes of engagement with the messiness of organizational reality as a socially emergent phenomenon (Griffin 2000; Mowles 2015; Stacey 2011).

The synopsis brings the four projects together, tracing my movement and development of thought like a continuous thread. Besides developing my findings on what strategy might be in the perspective of complex responsive processes of interaction, the synopsis describes taking experience seriously by adopting an auto ethnographical research methodology. Using detailed reflexive narratives on specific events from my own work situation as research material is a qualitative method, connected to the tradition of reflexive methodology, autoethnography and ethnomethodology (Adler and Adler 1987; Alvesson and Skjöldberg 2009; Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2010; Creswell 2013).

The synopsis summarizes my conclusions on strategy work connected to taking experience seriously. It draws on my projects and notices the movement of my thinking during my time on the doctorate. I have not gone back and corrected or rewritten my

projects, but leave them there deliberately as a research record of the development of my thinking over time. Today I see strategy as emerging continuing patterns of interactions, and strategy work as processes of identity formation. Through the use of reflexive narratives, I have shown how strategy is negotiations of intentions through participating in patterns of interaction – filled with conflict, power games, politics and messiness – and demonstrated how everyone engaged in this is mutually influencing and being influenced. Given that we cannot avoid this paradox of inclusion/exclusion, I also describe the connection between ethics and action in leadership.

My synopsis indicates that it may be possible to connect the two dominant understandings of management in Denmark through working with chaos, complexity and paradox. This approach is already unfolding: I notice a growing interest in the Danish public sector in bringing complexity into the discussions, and a more nuanced understanding of what strategy and management might be. Ralph Stacey is a very frequent guest at conferences and meetings, and my company has been asked to participate in developing compulsory training for top managers in the Danish municipalities, based on an understanding of complexity in management, just to give a few examples.

What is described in this thesis is the emerging understanding of what is going on, seen from my point of view. As the reader will understand, no doubt totally different narratives and perspectives would have been in focus and unfolded had any one of the other participants described their experiences. I take my colleagues' participation and trust in me taking them seriously as the biggest gift over the last three years.

Thanks

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the faculty at the DMan. Each in their own very diverse way, they have participated in creating the wonderfully supportive and challenging environment that has framed my development of thoughts and actions over the past three years. Of course Chris Mowles, who has been my first supervisor, has had the hardest job with me, and for taking this on I would especially like to say thank you.

I want to thank my fellow students on the DMan program as well. The intense participation, the curious questioning, the support and dedicated commenting as my work evolved has helped me stay on track and made it possible for me to go challenging my preconceived thought patterns and prejudices on what I was experiencing.

I also want to thank the leadership team. My boss who believed in giving me the freedom to pursue my wish to learn more and who supported my attempts to share what I was beginning to realize, who challenged me to go on when I felt disheartened and let himself be challenged in his understanding of strategy by my findings, and who has improvised and muddled his way through being my boss over the years. Also my two colleagues on the leadership team bravely took on being part of an inquiry into our relations and experiences on the team. Having the patience and bearing to participate in my attempts to understand the nature of conflict and live with being exposed and looked upon through my inquiry was not an easy task – thank you both for that.

Last but not least a huge thanks to my four sons Rasmus, Mikkel, Morten and Anders. Had they not first filled my life and then moved out – this would never have been possible!

Project 1: Reflections on my professional life: how I came to be who I am (April 2013)

Introduction

For 11 years, I have worked in management: 6 years of executive management, then 4 years of training leaders, and for the last year as an executive manager again. Over this time I have been thinking about power games between people, about exclusion and inclusion in organizations, and about intentions being transparent and hidden in management.

I have read and heard a lot about strategy and top-down planning activities, on taking people in or letting people go to secure forward movement in organizations; but the experience I have, both as a leader and as a co-worker, is that it is usually messy, confusing, surprising, brave and chaotic emerging interaction – rather than structured and organized top-down processes – that brings about transformation.

I am a trained psychologist, currently working as a leader in COK, a Danish public organization with about 65 employees, owned by the Danish municipal organization KL. I have just finished the merger of two departments into one. In this process, new patterns of communication and interaction emerge as departmental power games and structures change. Every day I work with trying to see, understand and recognize what I and my colleagues working in COK are doing.

Denmark has had almost a tsunami of appreciative, systemic and social constructionist ideas and theory on organizational change and practices sweeping across the country during the last 15 years, primarily inspired by people like David Cooperrider, Kenneth Gergen, Peter Lang and Humberto Maturana (Cooperrider et al 2008; Gergen 2009; Lang et al 1990; Maturana 2008; Hornstrup et al 2012). Working as a manager and as a consultant, I have found myself wondering why so many of these strategy and process plans fail to produce the desired outcome. The systemic way of looking at an organization – the ‘second-order’ perspective – doesn’t fit with my own experience of messy involvement, interaction, and emergence of identity as the day-to-day reality of organizational development. I have also noticed that this appreciative systemic frame leaves no space for ‘negative’ emotions such as anger, anxiety,

competitiveness, sorrow or the feeling of being excluded. In many ways, this reminds me of the religious ideologies I have encountered throughout my life, where there is something that is good and something that is evil, with one force being more important than the other. Could it be that management, as we understand it in daily life, is just another worldview we adopted long ago, without thinking about and evaluating the ‘truth value’ of concepts like leader, follower, strategy, plans, organizations, and so on?

With this background, I have some questions relating to management that I would like to address: What if any, is the difference between influencing and manipulating as a leader? How does manipulation and power relate to being transparent? How transparent can I be working in power relations, without losing recognition as a leader? How do reflexivity and attachment relate – the one demanding detachment, the other interconnectedness? Where does all the negative, destructive energy in organizations go if it is not faced or talked about openly, and what role does gossip play here? And finally, how can I work with concepts like inclusion and exclusion in a transparent way?

It is my movement into this area of questions that has brought me to study at the University of Hertfordshire, since these questions relate to many of the central concepts in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating where concepts of chaos, the ‘I’ and the ‘we’, emergence, power and resistance, inclusion/exclusion processes, detached participation, transparent and hidden transcripts, power, conflicts, and gesture/response are central elements.

Family and childhood

I am 54 years old. I have been married for over 30 years and am the mother of four boys. I am the second child of five. My parents moved our family around a lot, both in Denmark and abroad, most importantly moving to London in 1965 and to Tanzania in 1966.

My mum always told me she and I were very much alike, describing me as ‘the one who I am sure will manage’. Her own mother had left her husband; abandoning three children aged 2, 5 and 7 years, my mum being the oldest. My grandad immediately eliminated all trace of his wife, including pictures, and forbade the children ever to mention her again. My mum simply had to manage her loss and grief, since her

dad offered no help in trying to understand what had happened. I think she taught herself to put aside troublesome things that she could not figure out. Being able to 'manage' has been important in my mother's life; and since she thought we were so alike, I have always tried to manage too!

The 6 months in England I remember as quite an awful time for me. I was 7 years old and went to a large London school, where I had to wear a uniform and didn't understand a thing. It was a strong experience of being an outsider, of being foreign. I didn't understand the language, didn't know the food, couldn't play the games in the schoolyard, and so on. For some reason, I didn't experience much help from my parents. Life was a struggle; I had to 'manage' – which at that time meant coping with a strong feeling of not fitting in, of being excluded. This was the template of experience that shaped all my later school changes; even now, when I start up something new, for quite a while I still have this feeling of being a complete stranger.

I lived in Tanzania for 4 years after living in London. I learned to speak Swedish, German and English and had friends from many countries. Moving back to Denmark, this experience formed my interest in international politics, freedom movements, questions on cultural identity and social awareness. I somehow learned to adapt by picking up the language, the culture, the cult values; but in this process did not learn how to show who I am and what I stand for – how to openly say what I am thinking.

Returning to Denmark in 1969 was quite a shocking experience for me. I moved from a school of 30 international students in Africa to a big town school with more than 1200 Danes. I didn't know the social codes or the girls' games, didn't seem to fit in anywhere, and felt like a stranger, as a 'white African'. Fights, groundings, penalties and the headmaster's office were part of my everyday life. Nobody could recognize or relate to anything of what I felt, knew or thought, and I felt all out of it. I chose the only role I could see possible: the one as the struggling impossible kid, strongly resisting the social code.

In 1971 we moved to another town, where I got a new English teacher who recognized the unhappy me and helped me by letting me teach the class in English about Africa for 2 weeks. After this, my school life and feeling of identity changed. I relaxed and slowly moved back into a feeling of being myself. Making sense of this

today, I think that this is the point at which I learned about resistance and identity and the importance of getting recognition from others in order to feel yourself. In many ways, I think this laid the ground for my later interest in therapy and the liberating powers of being recognized in a relationship.

In my teens, I became interested in liberation movements. I had a black American boyfriend. I experimented with meditation and the freeing of the mind. Trying to find the source, the place of origin where the mind is not attached to things and structures but is pure consciousness. Living in a big family, and being quite sociable and attached to other people, although I enjoyed being 'inside' my mind and 'outside' the complications of my social life, I felt that this solitary experience of detachment provided no answers to my questions on how to deal with those around me.

After high school I moved to Minneapolis, an interesting change. My identity and understanding of what 'being Danish' meant shifted: Minneapolis is filled with Scandinavian emigrants. My background suddenly wasn't African, but Scandinavian! And with 1970s European culture as a background, all of a sudden I was viewed as more left-wing, liberated sexually and open-minded than I had ever felt in Denmark. From the mellow Danish Lutheran framework, I moved into a whole new context of living among people who actively practised religion: they openly talked about going to church, praying, beliefs, and so on – an absolute 'no go' in Denmark. Where the Danish culture is closed and always stabilizing, trying to make people fit in, here I met people who took chances, made things work; people who gave several chances and opportunities to explain and try to understand! Joel, the father in the family I lived in, was a family therapist, and talked about systemic therapy in a way that made me consider it worth pursuing. I went home, enrolled at the University of Copenhagen... and had my next surprise: here, psychology was nothing like I imagined.

Making sense of this experience now, I think I learned about context and what this means for one's own understanding of identity. These rapid shifts, in who I was, depending on where I was, gave me an understanding of the plasticity of identity, and of the possibilities for changing the feeling of who you are. I can see how many of the themes that interest me today concern moving on physically or in understanding, and being included in or excluded from groups, families, cultures, etc.

Student years

The '68 liberation movement in Denmark had started with the psychology faculty at the University of Copenhagen; it was a highly political and theoretically critical department. This didn't quite fit with my intentions. My main academic interest was 'madness' and therapy, and I had a 1-year internship at a psychiatric hospital. I learned to do long-term therapy with people diagnosed with schizophrenia. I was influenced by R.D. Laing and David Cooper (Laing 1960, 1961, 1970, 1971; Cooper 1971) and the antipsychiatry movement, which insisted that it is families that make people sick, that psychiatric illness is often a kind of exclusion and that being hospitalized is not the cure for these 'illnesses'. David Cooper's book *Death of the Family* (1971) made me see how family life shapes our psyche, and how much discipline and restraint families exercise upon their members. Cooper called this 'family indoctrination', stating that all social institutions – families, schools, hospitals and other authorities – suppress unwelcome behaviour. I connected this to family systems therapy, where symptoms are looked upon as resulting from positions that family members hold in the family system to maintain equilibrium.

In my studies, we discussed Michel Foucault (1967, 1977) and his view of madness as a form of socially created exclusion. I was occupied with the thought of the powerful part of society disciplining and excluding the powerless part of the population in order to define themselves as included and normal. I see many similarities between this way of disciplining and excluding through indoctrination in psychiatry and indoctrination processes in organizational life. I think one can look upon the whole dichotomy and notion of leaders and workers as a manifestation of such indoctrination: as a power game where the owners of production – or their substitutes, the 'leaders' – are trying to suppress unwanted action through making plans, defining the goals, putting up the strategies, and creating the organizational language.

I met my husband Peter, who was studying theology, in my first year at the university. Falling in love with and marrying a theologian was unacceptable in the radical circles of that time, religion being considered 'opium for the people'. (We would meet in women's groups and political groups of all kinds, working with freedom from oppression; yet these groups demanded total compliance!) Peter was 5 years ahead of me in his studies, and had already signed up to go to Greenland to work as a priest, so I

left for Greenland to live with him. Marrying a priest made me *persona non grata* in the very Marxist environment at the University of Copenhagen, while being Danish living in Greenland made us representatives of the old colonial culture and not particularly welcome there either. Again I felt like a foreigner, an outsider, at the edge of the system; once again, exclusion/inclusion was a theme in my life. Questions on influence and being influenced, and of freedom, resistance and power came to mind.

Making sense of it now, I can see that the feeling of not fitting in, sometimes being an insider and sometimes an outsider, gives a certain freedom and sense of control in these transitional situations. Developing an identity as a rebel allowed me to stand on the edge, questioning what was going on. I can also discern the strong power games in exclusion processes, and what this constrains and enables in a person's life. At the time I didn't think much about these matters, being busy trying to understand my next new culture; but looking back, I can see how much time I have spent feeling excluded, and the role this plays in a person's identity-forming processes.

Attachment and attunement

Working as a therapist, I focused on early childhood attachment patterns and the development of later psychiatric illness and was doing therapy with people who had been physically or mentally abused, and who had difficulty attaching to their caregivers. John Bowlby's work (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1982) on attachment in traumatized children has been very interesting for me. Bowlby found that the way a small child attaches to its caretaker, and the capacity for empathy and attunement from the caregivers, create certain templates in the child's psyche that determine the quality and character of their later attachment to other people. Bowlby introduced four patterns of attachment in infants: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment and later disorganized attachment (Bowlby 1969). The theory tries to show how the way these patterns are established to some extent determines the way an individual goes on to conduct their relational life.

For a short period lately, I was teaching doing therapy to people working with sexually abused and abusing clients with highly disorganized attachment patterns. I became interested in interpersonal neurobiology (Bromberg, 2012; Cozolino 2004, 2006) and how it is possible to understand one person's reaction to another in terms of

previous experiences, and the influence of these experiences on the ‘wiring’, the neural structure, of the brain. Reading about empathy and mirror neurons, I learned that it is possible in therapy to reconstruct more positive patterns later on in people’s lives; it seems that empathy and attunement from the therapist is key to these change processes.

Daniel Siegel, an American psychiatrist who is investigating the brain and the mind, intrigued me by his notion of the brain as a socially organized and developing organ that develops through attachment and attunement (Siegel 2007, 2010). He sees what is going on between two people, and what might happen ‘inside’ one person in touch with himself, as parallel processes. Siegel describes the possibility of the relating, the responsiveness, being central – whether relating to other people or with oneself (Siegel 2007).

I think I started reading Siegel because I felt a need to somehow find a theoretical basis for my experience of interrelatedness and connectedness between people, and between bodies and minds, and another notion on causality than either the traditional linear of cause and effect, or the systemic view of parts and whole. It has been interesting for me to read the biological description of these matters that I felt so intuitively when doing therapy.

Thinking back, I was trying to find a way of understanding what is going on when we are neither ‘inside’ nor ‘outside’, but *in contact*: I wanted to understand what conversations are about. I really loved doing therapy, and in my practice I think I was trying to investigate ways of relating and seeking to understand what is at work in this process. I was also exploring how power is brought into play, in symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. I have been reflecting on how the movement of thought for me has been first trying to understand by myself; trying to handle the feeling of being excluded by finding some personal explanation; and finally, trying to minimize vulnerability by locating the explanation of what was going on paradoxically both in myself and in the relational context of ‘we’.

I have come to wonder now if ‘responsive process’ thinking, with its foundation in Elias and his notion of the social being a consequence of the interweaving, the interplay of the intentions and actions of many, many people (Elias 1991), is actually describing what I was experiencing. It certainly seems that this body of theory is the closest description to what I have experienced in my own patterns of relating.

In his book *Strategic Management and Organizational Dynamics* (2011), Stacey describes the paradoxical perspective in which individual minds are simultaneously forming and being formed as ‘transformative causality’ (p. 300). Mead (1934) has also attracted my curiosity, with his reflections upon the human capacity to reflect and how this contributes to the idea of mind and the sense of self and the paradoxical interaction with other selves in local interactions that create population-wide patterns.

Working as a young psychologist

Having completed my university studies, I taught psychology at a vocational school, before working as leader of a shelter for battered women – both in Greenland. It was tough teaching developmental psychology in a foreign country not knowing the social patterns well, and hard working in Danish doing therapy with traumatized Greenlandic women. Moving back to Denmark after 5 years in Greenland, I started my own business as a therapist, and became interested in what is going on in conversations/therapy. I found myself intrigued by what kind of conversations change people’s lives, and how it is possible, through spending time together talking, to underscore the clients’ ability to free themselves from unwanted symptoms and destructive patterns. What is it in these conversations that make new patterns emerge?

Sometimes I even thought that the client first changed me, in order for me to be able to do what was needed to help her change her life patterns!

During my years as therapist, I became increasingly interested in the notion of developing flexibility or resilience towards misuse of power, and describing paradoxes and reframing the questions my clients brought along. My interest in power and the misuse of it stems from working with abused clients, from working for years in these relationships with an asymmetrical power configuration; and from the inside knowledge of being in a powerful position as a therapist, seducing and manipulating to get things to change.

This got me interested in the processes of exercising power and authority. Norbert Elias’ understanding of the concept of power is interesting here:

The word ‘power’ again is usually used as if it referred to an isolated object in a state of rest. Instead we have shown that power denotes a relationship between two or more people, or perhaps even between people and natural objects, that power is

an attribute of relationships, and that the word is best used in conjunction with a reminder about more or less fluctuating changes in power. (Elias 1970, p. 116)

Elias here describes how power is a part of all relationships and of everyday life, and denotes the fluctuations and what is occurring in the everyday politics of working together. This made sense to me, and I went back to my University reading of Michel Foucault (1977) to try to unfold my understanding of what was going on. Foucault defines power as something that is neither positive nor negative, but always active in all interpersonal relationships. Far from being purely negative and suppressing, he comes to understand it also as productive:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces, it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (Foucault 1977, p. 194)

Seeing power as productive and as unfolding in relationships turned my focus on everyday life in organizations with discussions, negotiations, revelations and disguised elements and so on. I now began to think about the connection between the subject and the object, between the 'I' and the 'me' and his concept of taking on the attitude of the other (Mead 1934), and the relationship between being socially created and being an individual born person with certain inherited characteristics. I now became very conscious of the way both my understanding of the world might form just another restraint in my clients' lives, of the asymmetrical power relationship in therapy, and of how they influenced my world view as well.

A continued interest in systemic therapy helped me begin to find a way of understanding some of the interconnectedness among people in therapy and the relationship with the therapist, and to see the patterns we live by, as mutually created. One of these systemic therapists was the Italian family therapist Gianfranco Cecchin from Milano (Cecchin et al 1992). He was working with how for the therapist to stay out of the patterning of the family treated, and defines a new position of being irreverent that enables the therapist to stay clear of the power games in a family:

The irreverent therapist constantly undermines the patterns and stories constraining the family, promoting uncertainty, and thus allowing the client's system an opportunity to evolve new beliefs and meanings and less restrictive patterns. (Cecchin et al 1992, p. 9)

He suggested that one way of staying open and sharp towards paradoxes in relationships, and remain alert to power games, was to stay irreverent to one's own obvious questions, and actually suggests never to ask the same question twice. Acknowledging that we are mostly trained to recognize and describe stability, he proposes that we may be missing opportunities to evoke change during chaotic states, and that this might happen by using irreverent intervention as a deliberate method.

Working with the intervention method in therapy, however, I found that it digressed from my instinctive understanding that the changes that take place do not necessarily result from anything I might do as a therapist, but somehow emerge from the continual interplay between the client and myself; I sought more complex explanations for what was happening here.

Working as a CEO

In 2002, I got a new job as chief executive of education and culture in a municipality. I thought that this was just another routine change; but getting this job turned out to be a very big step for me. I had never worked as a manager in a big organization before, having been a private practicing psychologist for 14 years, with just myself as an employee.

I got the job in a quite surprising way. The municipality had a very flat structure, with no administrative layer between the executive board and the 37 leaders of different institutions and departments. The CEO's way of working was characterized by an agile and decentralized focus, taking sudden leaps from idea to action, compared with most public administrations in the area.

I was the head of the board at our local school, when the local politicians came back from a strategy seminar to announce a decision to close down 'my' school. I was furious, especially as there had been no warning of such a development. The very politicians who had all been talking about influence and local democracy were now

doing the exact opposite: executing top-down management and keeping the board members out of influence!

I began reading up on local government, on new public management and on developing local democracy through committees and boards. After considerable research, I contacted the CEO of the municipality, inviting her to help answer some of my questions. We had a very pleasant meeting, in which she explained that the executive who had developed the strategy plan with the politicians had been urged to find another job. It had become clear that he had not cooperated with his leaders in developing his plans. Since the CEO realized that I knew quite a lot about children, schooling and development, she suggested that I apply for the job as executive for children and culture. I went home with my head filled with questions, had a long chat with my husband, and applied for the job. My family and friends laughed at my application, since I had no leadership experience and had been protesting against the politicians' plans quite loudly by arranging discussion meetings, writing in the local paper, and so on. But I got the job.

Based on my work with empathy, attunement and attachment theory, I developed my own view on the kind of relationships a leader should engage in: namely, to meet and mirror every employee as respectfully as possible concerning their particular way of attaching. I saw the leader–employee relationship as an asymmetrical power configuration, and was interested in developing new ways of communicating within these organizational contexts. I had an idea that it must be possible for me, from the 'inside' of the system, to connect and relate in a more respectful and open way than I myself had so far experienced from the 'outside'.

I was fairly confident that working in organizational processes couldn't differ much from doing therapy; it just involved bigger groups, greater energy expenditure, and more intense public focus on what was going on. I can now see how naïve I was. By taking on this job, I changed position and role socially. I was no longer a board member and part of the group, but an outsider – someone the boards had to meet with. From the politicians' perspective, I was no longer the irritating chairwoman of an external board, but an included person who designed the agenda for political meetings, wrote the résumés, and so on. From being an outsider and fighting to gain power, I was now an insider trying to use power to change the game.

In short, I was in quite a messy situation filled with mistrust, power and ambition. In an attempt to facilitate the transition from a suspicion-driven to a trust-driven process, I made a point of being very transparent on my actions and motives for doing what I wanted to do, so that those involved in the development process could understand the ethics of my decisions. To my disappointment, this made no difference: their mistrust remained. I began to question whether it is possible to make changes with groups that don't want the change you propose; could it be that change occurs only when your ideas are not presented in advance, but emerge spontaneously as possible new patterns mutually negotiated along the way?

When I started reading Ralph Stacey in 2006, the municipality was in the middle of a very complex merger process. I had become the CEO of the municipality that year, and with only 4 years of managerial training I was in deep need of a further theoretical framework for what I was involved in. In Stacey's writings (Stacey 2000, 2007), I found a way of thinking about organizations that described and met some of the challenges I was involved in. He presented me with a way of thinking and reflecting on power, identity, paradoxes, complex responsive processes and organizational dynamics that gave me some new openings in my thought process. This much more complex way of understanding organizations gave me more concepts and more tools for understanding what I was involved in, and to a large extent offered a coherent explanation of the situation. I was moving away from the more 'individualistic', detached, external position to an involved, messy position of mutual interaction. But the accelerated merger process left me little time to integrate these ideas into my understanding of what was going on.

My new role as CEO of the municipality was quite unintentional: as chief executive, I had been one of three on the board of directors. The merger of seven municipalities was announced soon after I got the job, and in the years before the merger the other two executive directors moved on; so, suddenly in the early spring of 2006, I found myself appointed CEO – a single woman in charge of 1200 employees.

At that same time, the top jobs in the upcoming merged municipality were advertised and as it turned out I was one of just two of the top executives from the seven municipalities merging who didn't get the job they applied for – and this for several reasons. The mayor from my municipality was elected new mayor in the merged

municipality, and as his CEO this closed down my possibilities since politicians from all seven municipalities had to agree on who to appoint. Besides this, my brief experience and the political power games amongst the officials made it impossible for me to get what I wanted.

I was offered the vice executive position in the children's and education department. 'Lene'¹ who got the job as chief executive (that I had applied for) and I didn't get along well. I experienced her as a very ambitious, meticulous and rule-driven person, where I was motivated by relations, creativity and values (to sketch a general picture). Also, she was very suspicious of me, since it was 'my' mayor who had won the race to become the new mayor. He was a very strong power player in the merger game; as she was thinking in terms of power and influence, she could not imagine that I wasn't trying to overtake her, and I was too inexperienced to see what was happening.

Shortly after the appointment, we started hiring people for our staff. Her old manager of all the schools applied for this new job opening. Having cooperated with him in the past, I knew his top down style of working and told Lene that I thought he would be a poor choice. We discussed this at a morning meeting; she did not agree.

That same week, I had a meeting with 'Brian', a headmaster from one of the schools in her district, on another matter. Opening the meeting, he changed the agenda: the new topic was who should be appointed leader of the schools. He showed me a collection of mails from 21 out of 23 school headmasters in the merging area, in various ways stating that they were against the proposed appointment. I urged him to discuss this with Lene. I had an appointment meeting with Lene immediately after our meeting, and I hurried to her office to 'warn her' of what was to come – but too late. On my arrival, Brian also turned up at her office, wanting to talk to her. I told her I had something to talk to her about first, but at her prompting he told her what he had to say. I kept quiet, not wishing to complicate things. Lene got very angry, scolded him and yelled at him; I was both shocked and embarrassed to be part of her staff. Their meeting came to an abrupt close and he left the office, upon which she aggressively attacked me, accusing me of conspiring against her. She told me that she now had lost all trust in me, that I was disloyal. From then on our collaboration was very poor.

¹ Names have been anonymised throughout the thesis.

During the summer and fall of 2006 I tried several times to talk to the new CEO of the coming merged municipality, 'Henrik', about this. He ordered an external consultant to talk to us, but Lene kept mistrusting me in everything I did or did not do, and I couldn't see any way to gain her confidence. I felt very powerless and vulnerable. I was appalled to notice how I began thinking of ways to hurt her, and how I had to restrain myself from following these impulses; in my heart, I knew this was not good for me. Finally, by the end of 2006, 3 days before the merged municipality became a reality, Henrik agreed to move me to a job I designed for myself in the HR department – as chief of Corporate Social Responsibility.

Looking back, Henrik obviously didn't know how to resolve the conflict, and I suspect he was hoping that I would quit. Through this process I learned a lot about power games, bad management, lack of communication; what not to do (there are areas of behaviour I do not want to move into, no matter what the cost); and also about stress and pressure, and how strong and resilient I actually am. It was a very strange power situation – me being a CEO at the same level as Henrik, but soon becoming his employee; him and I having almost the same relationship to the same mayor in two different municipalities (the old and the merged); and being at a higher power level in the hierarchy in my old municipality than Lene was as chief executive in her old municipality, but becoming her employee. What a mess! Henrik was afraid to act, not knowing what the mayor would say or do; their relationship was not good at all, but he was too afraid to ask me to leave. He himself left within the next 6 months, due to his bad relationship with the mayor.

Taking charge and taking power

In the fall of 2009 I had moved on and was working in a small consultancy department named S&S, in a big Danish consultancy company. The global crisis was at its height, and the mother firm was in economic trouble. S&S was actually doing fine, but the board decided that all departments had to downsize and let go of staff, so our leaders had to let one employee go too. S&S had been a privately owned high-profile growing company, and the two founders' recent selling process to the big company had left some of their former co-workers and employees disappointed. They had been under the impression that they would get a part of the revenue from the sale – which didn't

happen. A number of employees had left the firm in anger, some in disappointment; and now, a year later, the situation was still somewhat fragile. The leadership group consisted of the director, 'John' (one of the two original founders), and four leaders who had only been in charge for a year. All four were former colleagues in the firm – two of them in Århus together with the director, the other two in the Copenhagen department. Most of the staff who quit had been working in Copenhagen, that department being the 'emotional little sister' in the family. As an employee it was obvious that our leadership group was fairly dysfunctional – unable to agree on leadership, how to align the firm, or how to find a balance between consultancy and leadership work.

As it turned out, it was a consultant from Copenhagen that was fired. This was the first time S&S had ever needed to let anybody go, and the leaders did this without any prior warning to the consultants group. It came as a shock. It seemed stupid to let one person go from the part of the mother firm that actually made money; but the greatest concern was the way the leadership group failed to communicate about what was happening.

Being rather outspoken and one of the older consultants, I had become the informal spokeswoman for the consultants group, and I had many talks with colleagues who felt uneasy and afraid. Having this role, I decided to call for a consultants meeting. I wanted to create a new situation where we could meet physically and talk openly together as a group, rather than just discussing it in isolated corners of the organization. It was obvious at the meeting that our colleagues from Copenhagen felt more uneasy than the rest; they were more emotional, more upset and angry. I took it on to write a summary of the meeting for those who couldn't attend. Trying to do this, it became clear that I could not write about emotions and feeling and relationships and thoughts as an ordinary synopsis. Instead, I wrote more of an essay. I named it 'Voices in the Night' after an American late-night radio show, and signed it 'Night Hawk' after the reporter in the show. I sent it off late that night to everybody in S&S, thinking it would be important that this was not a secret, nor something that split employees and leaders. I wanted to convey the sense of open, slow and intimate conversation that the radio show was known for.

To my surprise, the response was immediate: 10 minutes later, I had a response from John. He was surprised, he wrote, and couldn't recognize me. He wrote that he

knew me as an open humorous person, and that I now ‘had let the cat out of the bag’. He ended the mail stating that he knew me through my warm laughter in the hallways of the department, and that this mail was something completely different. Immediately, I wondered about the cat! All kinds of questions crowded my anxious mind: What kind of cat had got out? Why would it be better to have a cat in a bag than outside? What will a cat out of a bag do that being in the bag prevents it from? ... I decided it was best to go to bed and talk to him in person the next morning.

Opening my mailbox the next morning, there was several mails from colleagues who were moved and touched, and thanked me. They felt recognized; ‘Voices in the Night’ expressed what was going on in the firm, and in themselves. Arriving at the office, a couple of colleagues told me that it was a brave thing I had done! I was a bit stunned: I didn’t feel brave, and hadn’t thought of it an act of courage but as a necessary step.

Coming into John’s office, it was obvious that something in our relationship had changed. I was truly sorry that I had hurt him unintentionally, and found him very guarded. I began by explaining that I had no bad intentions. For his part, he tried to stay curious as to what I was trying to convey and what was going on in ‘his firm’. We spoke with one another several times that day, both aware of the importance of the situation and of staying in close contact.

People were watching us, wanting to know what we were talking about. During the day two colleagues contacted me to tell me they did not agree with my view on the situation: they didn’t mind the dismissal. I explained that it was not my personal view, but the résumé of a meeting. It was a very interesting shift: now all of a sudden the topic was openly discussed, and we were all able to talk in more depth about how the situation could have been handled.

The next day the leadership group had a meeting, and apparently appointed John as the only one who should talk to me about what was going on – I presume in an attempt to control the ‘damage’ or the cat being out. I began to have a feeling of being too powerful, of unintentionally having positioned myself in a way where I was more powerful than I wanted or wished for, and a strong feeling of responsibility for what might happen next. It was as though I had accidentally become the leader, and somehow I needed to find a way to give back the power.

For the next couple of months, everybody was in a state of recovery – as if we had been sick, and were getting better. As time went on, I noticed something had changed: gradually, it became clear that we had a leadership group and a group of employees – that there is a difference between leaders and employees.

Reflections

My leadership experiences are narratives where it becomes obvious to me that leadership is about communication on topics like inclusion and exclusion, who is to go and who is to stay on an assignment, in a group, in the organization. It is about transparent or hidden conversations or gossip about what is going on, power relations, control and negotiations on who is to decide what.

In 2005 I had been a leader for only 3 years, and was trying to grasp what to do to help my organization accomplish the merger as smoothly as possible; but lacking any training in organizational thinking, power and action, I had no idea how to play safe or take care. I tried to communicate, but it felt like participating in a war; looking back, I can see how ‘weak’ I was, how little I knew of playing power games and of communicating. By 2009, I had become a better player. My position was much clearer and I had a better feeling about what was going on, and who to try to influence to change the game.

Today, I am intrigued by the paradoxes of power and interdependency. Power can be used to open up conversations in organizations, making it possible to share the uncertainty and anxiety of the unknown with one another (as I was attempting to do); or it can be used to disguise and manipulate, or to fight and openly participate in games to change the way power is distributed, but they are inevitable and paradoxically intertwined. With regard to organizational power configurations and interdependency I find Stacey’s definition of what an organization is and his comments on autonomy very clear:

...an organization is groupings of people engaged in joint activity having some purpose. The dominant discourse assumes that those people are independent, autonomous individuals. The argument of this part departs immediately from this position by claiming that such independence and autonomy is a fiction because

human persons are always fundamentally and inescapably interdependent. (Stacey 2011, p. 292)

It is this paradox of power and interdependency I am getting more and more interested in, since it seems to describe my experience of what is going on in management very well. On starting the DMan program, I thought I might look into the interplay of leadership and followership – perhaps to develop a new language for these two positions in organizational conversations. The course, however, has shifted the focus of my interest by turning it around: If I think developing leadership and followership is the answer, then what are then my real questions? I am interested to explore, for example, questions such as: What is power, and how do we understand this concept? How can one work as a leader, combining transformation and continuity at the same time? How to move about, stay in contact and communicate in situations where inclusion and exclusion is at stake without losing my own sense of identity?

The incident with ‘Voices in the Night’ made me think about organizational conversations and gossip, and made me wonder if it is possible to understand what is going on in organizations at the same time as participating in daily organizational life with its messy entanglement of interrelatedness, identity development, culture and language. What role does leadership play in these conversations?

The theory of complex responsive processes offers some answers to this focus on interrelatedness and on new ways of speaking and thinking. One of the theorists this tradition builds upon is Norbert Elias. In his book *What is Sociology?* (1970), he investigates how we can reformulate concepts so that they express constant movement or constant change in ways that acknowledge the interrelatedness of the parts in this movement (Elias 1970, p. 113). Another theorist in this tradition is the sociologist G.H. Mead (Mead 1934), who uses the concept of ‘conversations of gestures’ to describe social responsive processes as fluid and time bound, with arbitrary beginnings and ends. Mead connects this to the forming of identity and to his understanding of the self as a socially co-created entity (Mead 1934).

This has made me ask questions like: What forms of relating block spontaneous communication, keeping people locked in strong repetitive conversational patterns? In what ways is it possible to converse in a more fluid way in organizations? And how do these conversations relate to strategizing processes of diminishing anxiety (Mowles

2011)? My investigation into the Hertfordshire tradition gives me an opportunity to experience, reflect and try to understand what is going on in organizations and in leadership. This to me new, strong and open conversational setting for developing thoughts and actions in an integrated way allows me to see leadership evolve – in the group, in myself – and has brought new questions to mind on co-creation, cooperation, leading by invitation and mutual responsibility.

In my investigations into the concept of leadership I found the article *Critical leadership studies – the case for critical performativity* by the Swedish professor of management Mats Alvesson and the English scholar André Spicer interesting. They describe how leadership has evolved over time, and bring forth the concept of critical performative leadership to describe the present need for a more collective stance on leadership, and for leadership to be based on an understanding of collective processes in organizations:

Deliberated leadership highlights the need to engage in collective processes of deliberation about whether leadership might be needed, when, by whom, and why ... what deliberative leadership points to is the need for a collective deliberation about authority. (Alvesson and Spicer 2012, p. 384)

The complexity discourse goes further in its understanding of leadership than this collective deliberation and holds the view that in all contexts where more than one person is present, we form and are formed by one another. These forming processes are seen as a kind of conversation that constricts or sets us free in our relationships to one another, and these socially constructed conversations are what complexity theory refers to as weaving into power relations:

Our relations are creative engagements in which we make our identities as we strive to influence the conditions for going on together. 'I' cannot go on being the same 'me' without continuing to relate to 'you' in a certain way, and if that way shifts we are both a little different. (Shaw 2002, p. 73)

These are the patterns of dependency from which we cannot free ourselves or to be solely individual; complexity theory draws upon Norbert Elias' definition of power as a structural characteristic of all human relations (Elias 1991). Control, on the other hand,

is often used to denote a tool that leaders use to initiate effective forward movement in an organization; it is maintained by conscious formal and legitimate decisions based on predictions about the future (Stacey 2007).

Update

In my present job I am a part of a leadership group working to achieve a turnaround in our organization. In this group of four, I find myself confronted with many questions on leadership and on my work as a leader: What role do power games play in leadership groups competing and cooperating to negotiate what direction to take, and who is to decide such changes in the course of the organization? How if possible can we be transparent, and what are our hidden transcripts? What is influence, and how does the location of power and control shift? How is authority connected to power, and in what ways does this relate to empathy and attunement? How can we work with authority in a way that is productive, yet at the same time respect resistance to problematic forms of domination, recognizing it as a freeing response in the group? How and when can we take up these questions productively in our group, and in our organization? If strategic processes are basically conversational forms that continuously change power relating, then how can we best intentionally and skilfully share our intentions and choices in gestures/responses in local interactions so as to create new population-wide patterning in our organization? In what ways can we work on freeing ourselves from old patterns, and help one another to live in unpredictability and novelty yet get things done at the same time? When we want novelty, want to change the organization and be changed in the leadership group; how then do we develop trust and find stability and feel recognized at the same time?

Such questions all help to shape my research into transparency, hiding and taking risks in organizations, working with inclusion and exclusion on a daily basis. I want to explore what takes place and how to make sense of what is going on in the processes of forming and being formed in my organization, when I as a leader am participating in including or excluding someone in my organization. I want to investigate into the role of transparent action and hidden transcripts in these forming processes, and how these processes affect the gesture and response of letting go or letting in, in organizational life. This also means looking into aspects of what is going

on when an organization changes the way it is structured – such as group reorganizing or merger processes of different kinds.

Project 2: Power and politics (November 2013)

Introduction

This Project 2 has come about as a result of my experiences in my work with relational patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Elias and Scotson 1994), and with power relations and politics in my first year as member of a leadership group. Patterns of relations that have made me seek to better understand these concepts, prompting me to investigate the understanding of relations as ongoing complex responsive processes (Griffin and Stacey 2005). At the same time, I have become increasingly interested in understanding the connections between power and influence. This has brought to my attention Scott's concepts of hidden and public transcripts (Scott 1992), as concepts that can be used to understand and express the dynamics of power relations.

My interest in these matters in my professional life has grown from two former positions I have held: as a CEO in a municipality, and as a chief consultant in a systemically based consultancy firm. In my private life, it stems from an ongoing inquiry and struggle to understand what is going on around me socially. It is a common notion that there is a difference between the private and the social life, and that different things happen in each. During my work with this paper, I have come to question this, and am presently seeing more similarities than differences in the way patterns of power and politics, and of inclusion and exclusion, interact in different areas of my life. As it is, I now wonder whether the use of terms like 'areas of life' might represent an overall (mis)understanding of life as spatial rather than timely, and as such a power manifestation in itself reifying human interaction. The prevailing use of spatial metaphors I suspect is a culturally powerful attempt to keep an understanding of life as individual and separable, as a 'thing' that can be 'placed' in different 'areas'. Understanding life as an ongoing interpersonal interaction where the self is both connected and independent, coherent and dissipated, and seeing tension and conflict as a vital structural feature of all development (Elias 1970), private or social, opens a whole other range of paradoxical and powerful understandings of the importance of looking into what is happening on a micro level when we are relating to one another, and trying to understand the complexity between local interaction and global patterning (Stacey 2011).

Being Danish, and the cultural identity associated with this, also forms a theme in this paper – not overtly, but rather as an underlying resonance. Conflict and tension are not part of the cultural canon in my country, and opening my eyes to this aspect of organizational life has not been easy. Denmark is a small country in a big world: as a nation, we have lost vast areas of land over the past few centuries. We have a political culture of talking rather than fighting, which makes live streaming from the British Parliament – with people shouting at each other and openly being aggressive – seem like a report from a distant planet in the galaxy. We don't easily show that we are annoyed or angry, and hostility is not an accepted state of mind.

Denmark has been flooded with systemic, appreciative inquiry and positive psychology-based organizational understanding for the last 15 years. As effective as it can be, it also allows for a lot of suppression, aggression, manipulative power games and exclusion processes to go on in more covert ways. Being as involved in appreciative inquiry-based organizational understanding as we are in Denmark, perhaps we are living in a kind of 'bewitched sleep': we run the risk of idealizing consensus and overlooking the power of mistrust – the power of closing down rather than opening up, the power of the energy in aggression and in conflicts. Being naïvely preoccupied with 'the good' may leave 'the bad' to live a life of its own. We unreflectively view 'growth' as the way forward, not realizing that sometimes endings, closing down, stopping, conflict and tension can be equally fruitful.

Background

COK, the organization that I work in, is more than 40 years old. After many years of stability, it has recently undergone considerable upheaval. COK was founded when Denmark went through a merger process in 1970, where we went from having a parish municipality structure of 1021 parishes (originally agreed in 1841, with a parish council each) to a structure of 279 municipalities each with its own Town Council. Every municipality contained a number of parishes and a town, an inner structure that has been common for many years (for instance, local politicians are often still elected by the voters in their home parish). In 2004 a new merger was announced, and by 1 January 2007 the 279 Danish municipalities were merged into 98.

From the very start, those with foresight realized there would be a need for public competence development, and founded the organization 'Den Kommunale Højskole'. Based on a Danish public folk school tradition, it is closely connected to the democratic discourse in Denmark, and itself results from a merger of various organizations working within the municipal area; the folk school idea was dropped in 2003, when the name was changed to COK. It is this organization that I am working in. The recent merger in the organization of two local offices into one, which I have been heading, resulted in leaving the folk school's physical premises as well. Today we are a modern consultancy and learning-based organization, having democracy development, public reform work, leadership training and professional competence development at the centre of our services.

In this transition we have been struggling with big changes in our funding structure. Back when the municipalities paid for our running/operation, we were a kind of 'family business', but for the past two years we have been operating totally on market premises. This is very challenging, both in itself and for some of our employees who are struggling with understanding what's happening, and why things have to operate in new ways.

On top of this, my organization has not done as well as we had hoped, so we have had to let go of a number of employees – a process that has obviously not been easy. The following narrative describes this process of firing a group of employees, and the associated politicking and power games – both in the executive group that I am a member of, and in the organization as a whole.

Thinking of this now, I realize that when we are trying to change our organization and the way people work, this clearly has to include changing the leadership group – myself included. Change and social development obviously have to do with changes in human interdependence and with changes in ourselves (Elias 1970, p. 172). In wanting to change COK we must also deal with changing the leadership group, paying attention to what is emerging and to what is declining, what positions arise and which are reduced or fall away. In this process old positions will have to change and new ones will have to develop, and in this movement we are struggling in the group to negotiate power opportunities and positions, functions and relations to one another.

The leadership group

This was the second big round of dismissals in the two years our CEO ‘Niels’, situated in Copenhagen, has been in charge. He has a reputation from his previous job as CEO in a big Danish union organization of being very successful, tough, business-like, very goal-, growth- and development-oriented; and he has been working with excellence programs as his OD method in this private organization. Through his earlier work as a CEO in the municipalities he has strong and extensive networks, and he is deeply preoccupied with changing COK into a more business-driven organization. Niels is a talkative, open-minded person, and I am confident that he and I are very well connected, respecting one another for our different competences.

‘Knud’, my colleague from our quite small Copenhagen office, has been in COK for just a month shorter than Niels. He has a background in different Danish ministries and in union work as well; he has a very good sense of structure, of loyalty, and of when to ‘make a move’. Knud I think is somewhat of a ‘lone rider’ liking to do the work himself, who likes to be very well prepared and to be warned of what is going to happen. He knows how to act in governmental hierarchical organizations, understands power games and how to be tactical from his training in the foreign ministry. Knud is strongly occupied with our collaboration with the formal educational system in Denmark.

‘Svend’ is my colleague from our Odense department; he comes from a job running a big department at a business school. He has been in COK the longest: 10 years this January. He is a very kind man and interested in education, educational planning, sales, and customers, and knows all the employees very well. He is a very good chief of sales and a hard worker, but is working so hard selling our products in the Danish municipalities that he has limited contact with Knud and me in production – something that perhaps he misses.

And then there is myself, the newest on board, who come from working as a psychologist, a chief executive in a municipality and as a consultant in a systemic appreciative inquiry-based consultancy firm. Working for local democracy, and through this working in locally and politically governed municipalities, has been my interest and work for years, having mostly been occupied with merger processes, developing competence programs, organizational development, leadership training, strategizing

conversations, and here in COK with helping to make teamwork make sense for our employees. I have the responsibility of our head office in Århus, and have merged two departments as my first assignment on board.

In presenting this description, I am aware of the fact that this is my own personal view and assessment of the group. If Niels were to write his description, or Knud or Svend their view of things, it might be very different descriptions they gave. In choosing to describe us I am trying to convey a feeling of who we are, and a sense of how we are connected to the general picture in the organization. I am also trying to clear up where some of the differences between us are situated. Maybe I am also politicizing the reader, trying to get you on 'my side' of what is going on.

Noticing this, I realize that I am trying to figure out how to move in the field of nothing being objectively definable. That it is impossible to convey these impressions without mostly saying something about myself and about what I notice in our relating to one another. In their book from 1992 named *The Tree of Knowledge* Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco Varela noted that 'all doing is knowing and all knowing is doing and everything said is said by someone' (Maturana and Varela 1992 p. 26). This I understand as a way of describing the epistemological question of what reality is, what knowledge is, and the ethical dilemma of how you both describe something and at the same time cannot describe anything objectively, since you are always somebody describing something.

I am also conscious at this point that because I will show this paper to my leadership group once it is finished, I try to convey things in a way that the rest of the group will accept as 'fair' and recognizable. I am anxious about having decided to write about our differences – partly because we don't do this easily in Denmark, partly because I don't do it easily being who I am, and partly because I perceive it as something that might cause more conflicts and tensions in our group. At the same time, I am aware that bringing this into the conscious control and direction of the group may be a way of helping ourselves to change, both within our group and more widely in our organization, as a way of strategizing.

I think my consideration about politicizing the reader is my attempt to even question if I am putting forth as whole and as 'true' a story about what is going on as I could, since I also have an interest in appearing as a 'good' person. In considering this I

end up in Plato's doctrine of ideas, which centred on philosophical questions about where the true, the good and the beautiful are located. I also find myself preoccupied with Kant's concept of the 'categorical imperative', which he formulates as follows: 'act only on that maxim which I can at the same time will as a universal law' (Scruton 2001, p. 85). This maxim is understood as a kind of regulative rather than constitutive idea: each individual should be acting to find out what good actions are, and by doing this – by investigating into insecure areas of conduct, formulating hypotheses about nature, testing them out – finding out what ways of acting could become universal laws.

In trying to get a grip on how to understand more about acting I began reading the Norwegian philosopher Eikeland and his book *The Way of Aristotle. Aristotelian Phronesis, Aristotelian Philosophy of Dialogue, and Action Research* (Eikeland 2008). Eikeland is especially interested in the connection between action research and *phronesis*, and by reading this book I got more and more interested in Aristotle and his notion of ethical and intellectual virtues and of *phronesis* as an example of this. According to Eikeland, Aristotle defines *phronesis* as a special kind of reasoning power that cannot stand alone, but comes into action when other ethical virtues are in play. In order to achieve excellence, you have to practise; and this practice itself requires three qualities:

- (1) You have to act with knowledge of what you are doing.
- (2) The action has to be based on a deliberate choice and the acts must be chosen for their own sake.
- (3) The actions must spring from a firm and unchanging character.

(Eikeland 2008, p. 63)

According to Aristotle, *phronesis* is one of the intellectual virtues or 'excellences of the mind' as he puts it (Eikeland 2008, p. 53). At the same time, *phronesis* is also an ethical virtue – 'virtue' here meaning what makes any thing or activity work at its best; the ultimate form of whatever thing or activity. Ethical virtues Aristoteles says are fundamentally relational (p. 55) and Eikeland defines ethical or intellectual virtues in human beings as a *habitus* – which here means an acquired skill, ability or incorporated disposition, producing a certain inclination to act in certain ways. A habitus can be

either good or bad, and every intellectual and ethical virtue is the result of a process of perfection from within a certain virtue, and are understood as socially formed.

Aristotle describes three intellectual virtues: *episteme*, *techné* and *phronesis*; *episteme* is the virtue, the excellence, or the standard of measurement of analysed, theoretical knowledge (Eikeland 2008, p. 66); *techné* is the linguistically articulated virtue of craft/skill/arts; and *phronesis* is practical common sense and ethics (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 56). These intellectual virtues, and the connections among them and to ethics, can be understood in different ways. Eikeland sees them as highly connected and integrated with one another, *phronesis* being the fundamental reasoning power for the others. In the field of power and politics, Eikeland would therefore argue that the exercise of power is a phronetic question, and one that is highly ethical, while Flyvbjerg would see the intellectual virtues as separate. My questions will explore what power is (an epistemic question), how to exercise power (a technical question), and how to make good decisions on what to do (*phronesis*).

Narrative 1: The Aalborg meeting

By the end of the first quarter of 2013, it was clear that our company wasn't meeting the budget. Since this was the second year in a row that the turnover was lower than expected, we had already been talking about what to do if this happened again; we had agreed upon scaling down the organization, maybe changing the organizational structure and focusing our portfolio at the same time.

At our first leadership meeting after realizing the bad results, we were therefore anticipating a change in the organizational structure, and preparing to dismiss some of the employees. This first meeting had a difficult flow and we were obviously not getting where we had hoped to go. The agenda that Knud had prepared for us hadn't been followed; Knud's and Niels's differences in approach were apparent and during a break Niels asked me to take over as chair, since the two of them seemed to clash with leading the meeting. Niels got disheartened, since his ambition to set the frame for what we had to enter into was misinterpreted, Knud was upset that an agenda agreed upon only a few days earlier wasn't followed, I was trying to keep everybody happy and doing 'good', and Svend quietly tried to find his place and role in this rather vocal and dramatic power play.

As the meeting went on, we managed to agree upon bringing two of our eight teams together: the one that Svend had already (sales and marketing) and the one Niels had been in charge of, the internal resources team. I thought Svend was quite pleased about this. He was moving to be in charge of the very central team that works with our economy, he was being recognized and appreciated, would have an even more important role to play in the organization, was acknowledged for his competences, and was brought more into the organization. In his own shy manner, he seemed to like our friendly naming him as our new ‘chief of economics’. This made things move a little better up to lunch, but we didn’t finish how to organize the remaining six teams in a more focused structure.

After lunch Knud had to attend an important meeting with the chair of our board, who also chairs the group in KL – our owner – that is planning the competence frame for school leaders in a huge reform of Danish schools that is ongoing right now. I found that Knud’s absence made it much easier to decide things, and we were making good progress with putting together the future team structure. When Knud returned, we briefed him on our results; he listened carefully and made a few comments on the proposed structure. We all decided to let it rest for now and postpone any final decisions to our next meeting, coming up soon in Copenhagen. Niels left for the evening, and the three of us had a beer in the bar and talked the day through. Knud tried to fit together the final pieces of the team puzzle, but I resisted being manipulated into something in a bar. Besides, I was pleased with the outcome of our discussions and the way this might focus our organization. I told him jokingly that I wasn’t going to agree anything over drinks, but there was some feeling of sincerity to it. Meeting with Niels the next morning we teased him about this late-night meeting, saying we had revised our decisions on everything and that we had ‘traded off’ how to go on.

As we joked together, I had a strong feeling that we were negotiating on a lot of different levels: Power – who had ‘won’ the day before? Were the decisions we had reached yesterday still valid? Would it be possible to re-decide things when Niels was not present, just as we had agreed them in Knud’s absence? Our banter helped to release some of the tension from the day before, trying to reassure ourselves that everything was OK. Niels was very easy-going, saying that if we three had agreed upon something then he would go along with that, making it impossible for us to keep up the suspense.

Reflexive afterthoughts on Narrative 1

Looking back on this part of the meeting, I register how our joking way of talking about what was going on was a way of handling the tension, without having to articulate it. In this way it balances between being a public and a hidden conversation, in that we talk about deciding without someone present, but we do not talk about how we specifically in our group decide when one of us is not there. This also raises the issue of humour and its use as a way of holding two possibilities open at the same time. In Denmark we use sarcasm and humour quite a lot, and in doing so I think we handle the tension of power configurations without really bringing things out in the open, and without having to be honest about power games and power relations and conflicts being played out in our group. This is something foreigners comment on working in Denmark: that the sarcasm is hard to understand, and that Danes make a lot of self-deprecating jokes – which is very different from, say, people from the east or the south.

I notice how I do not openly go into the conflictual areas that are there between Knud and me. In some ways I got it ‘my way’; and by getting it my way when he was not there, but with Niels present, I can see how I participate in a power game on who is to decide. I am considering now whether I was manipulating the situation – trying to get something decided without having to discuss it with Knud, who had other ideas on how to organize the company. Was I trying to get things agreed quickly before he came back, or was it just coincidence that it was all decided without Knud being present? Did I choose to manipulate rather than face an open conflict? If I did, I think this has to do with my understanding of Knud being better at arguing his points, so that I will sometimes give in to him because his arguments appear more logically constructed. But if I go with this conclusion I also make Niels and Svend puppets in a game that is managed by me, and this I know is not true: we had a lengthy discussion on these different models of organizing COK. This in turn makes me wonder: am I perversely trying to blame myself for the conflicts and the tensions in our group as a means to avoid having to bring it out in the open? It may be that manipulation is a way of moving in the more emotional and personal field of understanding who we are and how we come into being, where I am sure I am ‘safe’. Not safe in being able to control my feelings, but in listening to and recognizing nuances in what is going on emotionally, and maintaining self-reflexivity. There may also be a gender issue in play: perhaps men,

generally speaking, prefer to take the fight in the open, while women prefer to disguise antagonism?

Public and hidden transcripts

In J.C. Scott's book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992), he describes public transcripts as

a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate. The public transcript ... is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. (Scott 1992, p. 2)

This is often connected to subordinates' survival skill of impression management – keeping up a good appearance and at the same time disguising what is going on beneath this mask of subordination. Most studies of power relations examine the interplay between the public transcripts of the dominant and those of their subordinates. Scott studies the 'hidden transcripts' that the subordinates expose through different forms of resistance. Here I wonder if what is going on in the micro world of my leadership group – with its constant fluctuations of who is in charge and holds power, and who is included in or excluded from decisions – can be helpfully described through these concepts. This understanding of hidden transcripts as a never-ending and ever-changing dance of power can help me to grasp how it is possible to do good and at the same time fight for my values, thus playing a part in the leadership power games of being enabled and constrained.

Scott underlines three characteristics of the hidden transcript:

- (1) It is specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors, and so elaborated among a restricted public.
- (2) It contains not just speech acts, but a whole range of practices. These practices contravene the public transcript of the party in question and are, if at all possible, kept 'offstage' and unavowed.
- (3) The frontier between the public and the hidden transcript is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall. The capacity of a

dominant group or person to prevail in defining and constituting what counts as the public transcript is a measure of their power. (Scott 1992, p. 14)

In looking into the public and hidden transcripts in my leadership group I am moving into a sphere of power struggles, executing power, or being powerfully overruled in trying to talk about and open up conflicts, and sometimes even in trying to determine where the border lies between 'public' and 'hidden'. It is not common practice to use these concepts in a leadership group. Scott applies them to asymmetrical relationships, such as between leaders and workers or slave owners and slaves. Here I am trying to put it to use in describing the interactions of a group of peers, to express that there are more layers of power games and configurations at stake than would appear to us in the group, and certainly to the rest of the organization. It comes to mind here because I feel insecure in several ways playing power games. I am a 'burnt child' in playing these games, since I participated in the merger 'war' (see Project 1) and lost the battle. I also feel rather vulnerable as a psychologist and a woman in this very male-oriented group, who share more traditional understandings of strategy thinking and leadership; they are all experienced in scientific management, excellence thinking, and so on. In this reflection I also need to consider inclusion and exclusion, since power differences are closely connected to establishing groups in which some people are 'included' and others 'excluded'. Of course this also is connected to being established and being an outsider. The person holding my position before I was taken on was a very competitive male leader who ended up leaving because he positioned himself in the wrong way, creating conflicts in the group, in relationship to the board and so on. Niels, Knud and Svend have often commented that our way of connecting on the team is very different now. However, I notice how these comments also constrain my possibility for claiming my position in conflictual matters in some ways, because I don't want to open up old conflicts and wounds in the leadership group.

As a university student I read quite a lot of Habermas, whose ideas are similar to Kant's with his imperative way of working with ideal and fixed goals of achieving more rationality and more democracy (Habermas 1981). I also read Foucault at the time (Foucault 1967), and coming back to him now I can see how Foucault's way of understanding himself working on the strategic project of human liberty being contextual, and therefore always connected to a specific situation, is much closer to the

experiences and understanding of power, freedom and politics that I have today, and much closer to the Hertfordshire tradition. Bent Flyvbjerg, a Danish professor and social scientist working at Oxford University, writes about Foucault and his way of connecting *phronesis*, power and freedom to gender:

Foucault's emphasis on marginality and domination makes his thinking sensitive to difference, diversity, and the politics of identity, something which today is crucial for understanding power and affecting social and political change. Historically the very idea of democracy contains a gender bias. Feminists have found that overall Foucault is more helpful than Habermas in rooting out this bias, and progress has been slow in developing the theory of communicative rationality in ways that would be sensitive to gender. (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 104)

Narrative 2: The Herlev meeting

The next executive meeting was arranged by Niels. He wanted us to take action before an upcoming board meeting in May, for us to appear proactive rather than reactive coming to the meeting. Through Knud, he asked us to come in for a Monday morning meeting in Herlev/Copenhagen, at very short notice; his sincerity and sense of urgency was very apparent. Niels had asked us to prepare just by thinking about the situation over the weekend. There was no fixed agenda; we all knew the situation was serious, having talked this through at the executive meeting in Aalborg a week earlier. After that meeting, we had distributed a précis of our discussions on the economy throughout the organization, so everyone knew it was serious business we were handling. The tension in the organization was almost palpable as people went around not saying anything openly (at least, not with me there) but obviously concerned about the situation. Several employees took me aside to ask if their jobs were in danger, and I had to answer that the situation was serious but that I could not say anything regarding specific jobs or employees.

Based on our economic forecast, it was clear that we had to close down some of our activities, and dismiss a group of 8–10 people. We spent part of the meeting considering how best to do this: Should the people that we fired be those working in these areas? If not, who to pick? Some of the choices seemed obvious, yet we could find pros and cons to every employee.

In our public conversation I was considering and debating, trying to be clear on each employee's strengths and their importance to the company, their team,

their value as a professional and as a person; at the same time, ‘in the dark’ as it were, we were ‘negotiating power’ within the management team. Almost like children trading Pokémon cards or a deck of motorbike cards. I had the sense of a silent conversation going on: ‘If you say yes to *this* person, then I will say yes to *that* person being fired’, ‘This person is more valuable to you, so this means you’ll have to give me something extra if I let you keep them on ‘your’ staff’, and so on. I found myself wondering if these inner voices mirrored real stances, or if they were just my way of trying to cope with participation in very powerful actions.

At some point in an earlier meeting, I had described the hiring of one of the consultants on one of my three teams as a mistake, a ‘wrong casting’. Now, when I suggested this person should go, Knud immediately supported me. Niels had considerable respect for this consultant’s business-like attitude, which to him signalled professionalism and business orientation. When Knud and I agreed on dismissing this consultant, I felt it was almost an alliance between us ‘against’ Niels; but I was quite sure about my choice, and I could sense how strongly Knud agreed. I thought this was a way that Knud and I could re-establish the mutual support that may have been compromised by the last meeting, where we had made decisions in his absence. We finished the list and again decided to ‘sleep on it’, this being very serious business.

A few days later Niels came to Aarhus, my ‘home base’. I had some misgivings about the list we had agreed; before he hurried off for a meeting with our union representatives I mentioned that I had had second thoughts on one of the people we had picked out, and wanted to share my ideas with him before he closed the door and told them who was to be fired. I had tried to stick to our decision, but it kept coming back to me that this was not right. I told him I thought this one consultant was socially important for the group, also having a very good attitude and a flexibility that I relied on in my daily work. He listened carefully to my arguments, and decided to follow me on this, or at least to take this particular name off the list in his talks with the union. After his meeting I asked if I should call Knud and Svend to discuss it with them, but Niels said he would do it on his way back to Copenhagen, a 3-hour drive.

Reflexive afterthoughts on Narrative 2

My thoughts about this incident are that in talking with Niels I allowed myself to follow both the doubt and my strong bodily feeling of unease about the former decision. Of

course I knew that changing the decision at that stage was unorthodox, but I felt that things would be much worse if we went on with something that was not right. I can see how my talking to Niels can be understood from different perspectives. One is my own, trying to ensure that the office I am in charge of is not handicapped by a bad decision. Another perspective is Knud's: later, at our leadership training, he suggested that it could be seen as me trying to take advantage of Niels's solitary presence to persuade him to reverse the mutual decision. Niels's perspective could be trying to stay in tune with the bigger picture and to make a decision on how much we had to cut to get to the point we want to get to, where our organization is in a better balance and things work more smoothly. The situation here mirrors what Knud was trying to do with me in the bar earlier – trying to review our decision on the organizational structure – perhaps to compensate for feeling excluded from part of the negotiation. Here, it was me trying to 'manage' what was going on in the organization in a situation where I was alone with Niels.

This brings me to think about the connections between power and freedom, between power and decision-making, in what ways power is executed, and how it moves both openly and discreetly. I notice how I keep in close touch with Niels as the most powerful, and how I ensure to discuss my thoughts with him and keep him oriented on what I am planning as a way of acting strategically 'safe'.

I see how this inclusion of Niels in my considerations tends to exclude the two others; or rather, I choose to include Niels first and foremost, keeping him posted on my thoughts and/or moves. By being open and inclusive with Niels, I recognize that I exclude the rest of the team, and that I by doing so let Niels decide how to bring Knud and Svend in. I also notice that I am playing out my own hidden transcript of wanting to secure balance in the office I am in charge of, and choose not to act as a member of the leadership team – perhaps drawing on my earlier experience of politicizing and collaborating closely with a mayor, who taught me always to keep him closely informed of my actions so that nothing would come as a surprise for him.

I now also realize that in my use of 'letting go' as a euphemism for dismissing employees I am suppressing the knowledge of my own power in this situation. I am trying to lighten up the action of dismissing, which is quite an aggressive action and a very powerful signal to send, trying to manage conflicting material, or material

concealing power configurative tension in this project by reformulating it into something as apparently nice as ‘letting go’. James C. Scott, writing about managers dismissing workers, describes the use of exactly this euphemism:

When employers dismiss workers, they are likely to euphemize their action by saying something like, ‘We had to let them go’. In one short phrase they manage to deny their own agency as employers, implying that they had no choice in the matter, and to convey the impression that the workers in question were mercifully released, rather like dogs straining their leashes. (Scott 1992 p. 53)

Today I am curious as to how the paradoxes of power and control can be used to open up conversations in organizations and make it possible to share with each other the uncertainty and anxiety of the unknown, to gain a mutual awareness of the situations where we hide, and in between to disguise and manipulate or to fight and openly participate in power games of reorganizing power; but I was unaware of all this at the time.

Narrative 3: The leadership training

At the Herlev meeting I was asked to draft a paper and plan a meeting for our organization about the different organizational models under consideration. I had called in some of our employees to help me on this, and at this preparation meeting I realized that our plan of showing three organizational models was mainly a way for us in the leadership team to avoid the conflict of deciding who was to become leader of which teams/areas of our organization. Realizing this, I wrote the paper for the employees including only one organizational plan, and sent it to Niels to be sure he wouldn’t mind this change before I sent it to my colleagues.

Later that day Niels called me and we talked about his future role in the team, maybe helping more with strategic sales and to get his many competences more actively involved in the development of our company. After this talk I sent the paper off for my colleagues to comment. In the e-mail I commented on the possibility of changing who was to be in charge of which area – such as proposing that Niels took the team Svend had been given 2 weeks ago, that I took the team Knud usually leads, and Knud taking on my team – to stir things up and make us reconsider things afresh in order to give it all serious thought before we made our

final decision and announced it to our employees on Monday morning. From Sunday to Tuesday, our leadership group was going for a 2-day trip to an island off the north coast of Denmark with two organizational consultants, to draw the new picture of our organization and discuss how to proceed; I suggested we talk things over on the ferry crossing.

Boarding the boat, Niels showed me the binoculars he had brought along in anticipation of enjoying the boat trip. I had prepared a model of the proposal I had put in the paper, with yellow post-it notes enabling the four of us to experiment with moving production areas, resources and people around, keeping things open and fluid to avoid them feeling manipulated. We quickly got into a discussion on both the model and the upcoming meeting with our employees, and I hoped for a quick decision. Knud felt this was not the right way; he wasn't prepared to take these decisions now. He insisted that he needed more time, and would prefer us to spend more time in discussion to ensure that we did things properly. Niels tried to explain why he had agreed to me taking this route; Svend was disappointed that I had tried to take away his newly appointed area of responsibility, and everything stalled. I was both surprised and irritated that they didn't get my point about our conflict avoidance patterns and failed to appreciate my solution of describing just one model in the paper. We arrived at the island quite unbalanced, were welcomed by our two consultants, had supper, went to an evening event and returned to our hotel. We soon resumed the unresolved discussion from the boat. The consultants stayed with us and tried to make us see that we could leave decisions for later, but we had a long and intense discussion weaving back and forth on how to go on, and about my motives. We decided to have an early-morning meeting on the issue; then we decided not to; then we decided we would. Finally we agreed to leave the paper as it was, adding an introductory paragraph stating that this was just a discussion paper and only one proposal for how things might look in the future.

The next evening, I was to give a lecture on the concept of emergence. I decided to talk about my Project 1, and the emergent process of creating this, describing some of the effort I have put into the paper and using this process as an example of emergence. I hoped this might open up some kind of mutual understanding of how processes can change, develop, be filled with 'unpredictable predictability'; a deeper appreciation of local interaction and global patterning, conflicts and power games. They were moved by my narrative on my first six months at the University of Hertfordshire; I think they sensed the seriousness of it

all, and after this 'lecture' we had a new and very open talk about what had happened in our group over the last 2 weeks.

Reflexive afterthoughts on Narrative 3

My thoughts on this now are that showing, and opening up to, some of the vulnerability that I experience when in process actually made it possible for us to move from the rather locked positions we were in to some more flexible and open positions. Through this, we actually begin to connect and recognize that we are in an emerging understanding of one another. From this rather unpredictable situation in our local interaction grows the beginning of a global pattern of trust in one another. These two days have had a big impact on the way we go about working with one another. It is a point to which we can return and from which we can gain confidence in one another, faith in our mutual understanding of why we are here and what we are doing, and a source of energy to keep us moving forward through this rough patch our organization finds itself in right now.

Stacey (2011, p. 244) describes how local self-organizing interaction produces emergent population-wide patterns for which there is no blueprint or plan, and how this movement makes it possible for order or complexity to emerge from, or be maintained within, a state that is less ordered or complex:

Contrary to some of our most deep-seated beliefs, disorder is the material from which life and creativity are built, and it seems that they are built, not according to some overall prior design, but through a process of spontaneous self-organisation that produces emergent outcomes. If there is a design, it is the basic design principles of the system itself: namely a network of agents driven by iterative nonlinear interaction. (Stacey 2011, p. 246)

From this local interaction and the iterative nature of this more global patterning can arise. Emerging global patterning interests Stacey because it is simultaneously both ordered and disordered and arises unpredictably; he describes complex adaptive systems as systems that display the capacity to change and produce new forms only when they operate in a paradoxical dynamic of concurrent stability and instability. Stacey also

states that new forms can emerge only if the agents involved differ sufficiently from each other.

I understand the incident that evening as conversations where we were in control of ourselves while at the same time able to ‘take the role of the other’, and through this could let go of our own idiosyncrasies. In many ways our differences were out in the open, and so we saw ourselves more clearly. It was as though we had somehow found a way to play the power game so slowly that we could practice and learn. Thinking back to what I wrote on *phronesis* and practice earlier, I can see how we are here beginning to fulfil at least the first of the three qualities needed for practising: to act with knowledge of what we are doing! I now understand what happened at this event as a situation where I presented a way of thinking that was ‘new’ to our group – with no blueprint, in Stacey’s terms; and because of this, and because of the way I introduced it (connected to my personal narratives), and the way the others reacted to my narrative, this in a way created a ‘disorder’: something novel happened, where we were able to connect in new ways, seeing a global pattern emerge.

Narrative 4: Karmic laws hitting back!

Something very interesting happened last week in our organization. Following the restructure and the firing of our employees, we have been busy in the leadership group preparing for a strategy meeting with our chair and vice chair of the board. We want to discuss how KL can be of more help to us, and how we can be of more help to them, thereby strengthening our organization. In this we try to develop an understanding of COK as the implementation unit of KL, KL here understood as a policymaking organization. Over the summer we have been busy preparing for this through our own efforts to focus the overall strategy of COK more, and to make it clear what our teams have as their primary focus. Niels has been preparing through repeated talks with our chair on how to develop COK. We have also been preparing an organizational development process for the whole company, with the two organizational consultants who have been helping us in the leadership group. This OD project, named ‘COKreation’, is meant to be an opportunity for organizational mutual learning – allowing the teams to get to know one another better while also preparing COK for future changes in our portfolio. We believe that our customers in the future will ask for co-creational developmental work in their cooperation with COK – moving from delivering courses that others have

planned and are teaching to a co-creational reality where we increasingly collaborate with the municipalities and develop educational programs with input from our customers.

Late one night last week, we got an e-mail from ‘Emma’, an employee from one of our smaller destinations. The subject line was ‘HELP’; it had been sent to the leadership group and to the four members of our works committee, as well as to the two employee-elected members of the board. Her e-mail contained a bulleted list summarizing a series of concerns about our organization, about how people are doing, about how we are getting along and are doing as leaders. The e-mail concluded that the biggest problem was at the office in Aarhus, and she gave us some advice as to how we as the leadership group could move on!

Talk about karma! – I couldn’t help thinking this must be an action from my past coming right back to me, since it reminded me of my own ‘voices in the night’ e-mail to my CEO when I was working in S&S. Niels did exactly as my old boss did: he answered right away, but did something different in saying thank you and assuring the writer that he had read her e-mail carefully, understood the message and took it seriously, and that she would hear from us soon. (My old boss had shamed me, saying he was disappointed and hadn’t expected such an action from me). By coincidence, the next day we had a leadership meeting in Copenhagen, so we were able to discuss what was in the e-mail and how best to respond. We had our employee representatives from Aarhus on the phone several times during our meeting, uneasily trying to work our way through the situation. The broad distribution of the e-mail made the gesture very open and hard to control, and the elected employee representatives felt embarrassed by not having heard about the problems prior to receiving the e-mail; indeed, to their dismay, they had been completely unaware of the general uproar. They felt an erosion of the trust that being elected by your peers symbolizes.² As we went through the complainant’s bullet points at the meeting it became clear that not all was as bad as it seemed, but it was still alarming. We decided on what to do: Knud (her boss) would call her, Niels and I would meet with the representatives as soon as possible, and I would have a meeting at the Aarhus office to explore some of the points relating to the

² In an odd way, one might argue that showing your mistrust to somebody is also a kind of trust.

I certainly saw it as progress that this kind of opposition came into the open, rather than being a shadow theme (Larsen & Larsen, 2013) not coming to our attention.

climate at the office and people not thriving. Finally, Niels would take up these matters at an upcoming meeting he and Knud would attend with our collaboration board, where employees and leaders meet two to four times a year.

Niels and I had a very intense meeting with the employee representatives. Niels talked about the economic situation in COK, the firing of colleagues and the complication that some of them were still with us, serving out long notice periods. The employee representatives expressed anxiety about what was happening in our organization, and the way people react when they are afraid of being the next in line to be fired. They talked about people being overloaded with work, and concerns about stress. They pointed out some of the criticisms of the OD project and the dissatisfaction with us leaders having decided this in a top-down way.

My next meeting with all the employees at the Aarhus office went fairly well. I had a lot to say, and a lot of questions to ask, and people in general were very open and alert as to what was going on. In some ways I felt very much in charge of the situation; in other ways, very vulnerable and dependent on how they would react. We had some issues we could close right away, others that were opened up and gave a good start for new ways of talking to one another, and I left the meeting with a feeling of the office having connected to me and me to them, maybe for the first time since the merger. With my sense that we had somehow established our relations at a deeper and more emotionally connected level came an awareness that it was my responsibility to make this work together with all of them; I had a feeling of a new beginning, a kind of 'fresh air'. I explained the background for the OD decisions, and how we in the leadership team think it is crucial that people can work together in new ways, in order for COK to be alert to what is going on in the municipalities right now. I also talked about my thoughts on leadership, and how I think we can move on, and this made everybody listen very carefully. After this meeting several people told me they were glad to hear what I had to say, some telling me that from now on they would come to me and talk about what they did not understand or what they thought should be different, instead of talking in the corners, gossiping. Elias and Scotson (1994, p. 93) note that gossiping can have two 'directions', praise-gossip and blame-gossip; I am fairly sure what they were saying was that they would try to stop blame-gossiping about me or the rest of the leaders. I interpret it not as a promise that there would be no further gossip, but rather as a signal of trust indicating a wish for more openness; or as a gesture of solidarity, perhaps even concern for me.

By voicing her concern, however off-focus it may have been, Emma gave voice to the hidden transcript in the group of employees. In doing so she forced the leadership group to get in closer contact with the themes in the organization of trust and mistrust, power and politics, inclusion and exclusion that are not being openly voiced in all this transition. The hidden transcript here is insecurity, mistrust and anger because we are spending money on organizational development at the same time as we are not doing well economically. Will this plan mean that more people will be fired? Will it mean that we are doing even worse? Will it mean that everybody has to work even harder than they do now, in order to save our organization? Does it mean that the wishes people in COK have on different courses that they think will strengthen their position will be impossible to be granted? ... and so on. Although it is not telling the whole story about power relations in our organization, it certainly tells us in the leadership team about something being suppressed, and about unvoiced themes at work in our organization, and what resistance to all the changes looks like right now. It fits Scott's definition of hidden transcripts in being specific, but not kept off stage. Emma didn't send it to everybody but to a good deal of people, and it certainly prompted us leaders to talk about what decisions to involve the employees in, and which to keep to ourselves.

Reflexive afterthoughts on Narrative 4

I can see how my perspective and my understanding of how to move about in organizations have changed, starting on the DMan program. My perspective is getting a lot messier, and I see it full of paradoxes! When I started out as a CEO 10 years ago I wanted to investigate into organizational development as something taking place in parallel to developmental processes at an individual level – similar to what happens in therapy: an almost constructionist stance, focusing on what is going on inside each person as influencing what can happen in cooperation between people.

Working as a consultant at S&S I moved on to understand organizations rather systemically, and in a social constructionist frame, as something that is created in the relationship between people, something that can be looked upon from the outside, and as something one can do something to. At S&S focus was on systemic and appreciative inquiry-based processes, with a strong focus on positive psychology and on inquiring into resources; we rarely mentioned conflicts or tensions. Expressions like 'creating

better social worlds’, taken from the American psychologist and social constructionist W. Barnett Pearce’s theory of coordinated management of meaning (Pearce 2007), was at the heart of this approach. Pearce was an ordained episcopal priest who built on American pragmatism, drawing on Wittgenstein’s philosophy, to develop a theory of communication as the means to create better social worlds. ‘Don’t get involved in partial problems, but always take a flight to where there is a free view over the whole single great problem’, Ludwig Wittgenstein points out in a diary note (Wittgenstein 1998). This at S&S is used to underline the necessity of reflexivity, but also as a means to see things from the outside; as a result, I would say that S&S consultants value reflexivity higher than experience. I sometimes wondered if it was at all possible to air the ‘hidden transcript’, as the very existence of such a concept seemed inadmissible in this environment.

In social constructionism and its focus on communication, this dichotomy is dealt with by focusing on the relation between two as the smallest unit, on communication and on the creation of meaning in organizational life. This creates a strong belief that it is possible to influence what is going to happen, if only you can view it in the right way – an almost evangelical belief in moving towards some end state where everything will be right and good. What I am starting to get a feeling of now is that this includes ways of not getting to the central point of what power is and of how we can act when power is both enabling and constraining at the same time.

In my research proposal, I tried to express some of this by stating that I want to explore what takes place and how to make sense of what is going on for leaders leaving and joining organizations, linking my inquiry to themes of inclusion/exclusion, identity, politics and public/hidden transcripts. I now realize that the very notions of ‘leaving’ and ‘joining’ are more complex than mere physical presence – we must also consider what you do to become included in the organization as a full member; or, as a leader, how you connect and relate to all the other members of the organization. I realize that what I am exploring is how it is possible to ‘do good’ when operating in this muddle of power and politics.

Power

Elias (1991) argues that power is not a thing that someone possesses, but a structural characteristic of all human relationships, reflecting that we depend on each other and so enable and constrain each other all the time. Depending on who needs who the most, the power balance can shift, and is also influenced by the degree of recognition of this need among the parties involved:

And what we call 'power' is really nothing other than a somewhat rigid and undifferentiated expression for the special extent of the individual scope for action associated with certain social positions, an expression for an especially large social opportunity to influence the self-regulation and the fate of other people. (Elias 1991, p. 52)

In this way Elias states that because of their interdependence, people form figurations while at the same time figurations form them, in patterns of influencing one another, and that the one with the highest social position has better opportunities to act powerfully. Foucault, who also writes about power, has investigated what constitutes the specificity of power relations:

Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures. This also means that power is not a matter of consent. [...] The relationship of power may be an effect of a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of consensus. (Foucault 1994, p. 340)

This explains power configurations and power relationships as a game in which power fluctuates between the players, and where there is a constant enabling and constraining taking place, but there are not equal opportunities to manifest your views. Foucault goes on to say that the exercise of power is a conduct of conducts, that power is a question of government, rather than a confrontation or a mutual engagement between two adversaries – 'governing' here meaning 'to structure the possible field of action of others' (Foucault 1994, p. 341). Foucault goes on to argue that the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others is meaningless unless one takes freedom

into account: power can only be exercised over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'. Understanding power in this way establishes freedom as a precondition for the exercise of power; otherwise it is violence.

At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an 'agonism' – of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation. (Foucault 1994, p. 342)

Understanding power in this way means that power relations are not a supplementary structure that is somehow imposed from above onto society, but rather a mode of actions on actions, a view of our mutual lives as a way that some can act on the actions of others. Thinking back, I see this as a very different way of understanding organizational development than the social constructionist appreciative approach taken at S&S. There is no other way than engaging, getting right in there and working your way through what is going on together. And the focus is on exactly this: opening to a more democratic way of understanding ways of development as the way to develop. COK in many ways have a more traditional understanding of organizational structure and development, with elected employee representatives and so on; but the organization is also very open in its recognition of the need to change.

Foucault sees power relations as exercised from innumerable points, and as emerging at a given place and time. One of the scholars of Foucault and Aristotle is the Danish Social scientist Bent Flyvbjerg, who has been preoccupied with power and *phronesis* for years. In his book *Making Social Science Matter* (2001, p. 121), Flyvbjerg summarizes four propositions that Foucault sets forth on power:

1. *Power relations do not stand in an external relationship to other forms of relations. They are inherent in other forms of relations like economic, sexual or other divisions, and are the immediate effect of and preconditions for these differentiations. Power relations both limit and play a productive role in these other relations.*

2. *Power comes from below.* There is no general ordering principle for power, so both the dominant and the dominated enter into relations of power.
3. *Power cannot be acquired', 'taken', or 'shared', nor can it be 'retained' or allowed to 'slip away'.* It is exercised in an interaction from innumerable points between unequal and mobile relations.
4. *Where there is power there is resistance.* Resistance never stands in an external relationship to power; resistance is a part of power. If there were no possibility of resistance, there would be no relations of power.

Flyvbjerg here underscores Foucault's perspective on power, and his focus that questions around power are more about *how* than who, what and where. This brought about questions like: how does the exercise of power affect the future possibilities concerning the enabling and restraining of relations in my leadership team, and from this local interaction how is the global pattern in our organization developing? Another way of trying to understand this is that it is about influencing direction. Power games and politicking are ways of including and excluding, of gaining and losing influence, and of enabling and constraining certain ways of moving forward to come into the foreground. It is in this paradoxical area of power and reflexivity Flyvbjerg brings in *phronesis* understood as prudence or practical wisdom, as a concept or a way of acting that might be able to reduce some of the splitting of natural science and social science in leadership understanding, and in bringing forth the importance of reflexive analysis and discussions of values and interests

Returning to the question of leadership and followership in working my way through what is going on; it becomes increasingly clear that my previous understanding of positioning leaders and employees through leadership and followership is not necessarily fruitful for developing my understanding. I have described some of the situations in which I find myself involved in inclusion/exclusion activity in organizational life. I get a very strong sense that strategy is all about this – taking charge, influencing and being influenced, being included and excluded – and about how to get the maximum possibility to move and create change out of what is going on. It is about participating in the game, and hereby getting as much influence on what is going on as possible, and in this process I now find myself slowing down my thinking and

acting. I become aware of my own role as a colleague in the leadership team, as a leader to my employees, and it makes me aware of the inner bodily feeling that is connected to acting and to the use of power or of power being used over me, and also aware that I am opening to a bigger range of possible actions in each situation. This is certainly confusing, and I don't always find it easy to act from a different perspective than to avoid conflicts. In this context, I find myself uncertain how to establish what is 'good' or 'bad' to do. Who sets the direction – the one with the strongest arguments, or the one with the strongest stamina? And how can we possibly coordinate our activities, if power games are going on all the time, changing the game all the time? How static is the situation once decided, and how then do you find the point at which you seal things with a decision? In philosophical terms, this is about what *phronesis* is, and about how we unfold practical judgment in my leadership team, given that every one of us has different experience. In other words: how is it possible to develop a common ethos?

Local interaction creating global patterning

What becomes my question now is: How can we interact in our leadership group to allow for differences, and for staying in the area of not knowing and not agreeing right away, in order to establish and develop our habitus in a mutual process, hereby coordinating our understanding of what will be good or right to do?

Here I am drawing upon Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as 'structured structures' – as a system of durable, transposable dispositions, predisposed to function as structuring structures. The habitus, he says, is a product of history and produces collective and individual practices in accordance with the schemes generated by history (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). I also relate the notion to Aristotle's concept that 'there exists a virtuous *habitus* in every performing 'entity' as a condition that makes this 'entity' able to perform that function in the best possible way' (cited in Eikeland 2008, p. 54).

Connecting this to the above understanding of power, the question for my next project could be: How can our leadership team focus on practising power games in order to become excellent players, unfolding our habitus in the best possible way? How can we stay in the ambiguity for a longer period of time, occupying ourselves with some of the themes that might not be easy ones to talk about: power, inclusion, exclusion, what to do, where to go, why to do what we plan to do... and so on?

I am hereby investigating into the concepts of local interaction creating global patterning in organizations as a strategizing activity. Stacey (2011, p. 352) describes strategy as meaning:

generalised articulations of the ongoing *pattern of activity* that people in an organization are engaged in. [...] Furthermore the ongoing pattern of activity of people in an organization clearly also includes what intentions they are forming, how they are forming them and what *thinking* they are *doing* as they desire and intend. In other words, the distinctions between thought and action, planning and implementation, doing and thinking, all dissolve.

It is this messiness of it all, and in staying in several iterations reflecting on what emerges, new insights on change and hereby on strategy might show up. Chris Mowles further defines and describes different views on strategy in *Rethinking Management* (2011). Here he explores and defines strategy in the Hertfordshire Complexity and Management Group tradition as a managerial practice of dealing with uncertainty. He argues that leadership is a social and improvisational activity that arises in groups of people whose identities are continuously formed in acts of mutual recognition. From this also follows that performance must be understood as a social and group activity. This approach sees 'the organization' not as an entity, but more as a constantly fluctuating patterning and re-patterning of themes of organizing. This patterning comes about in the moment-by-moment paradoxical interaction between people, patterns of behaviour that repeat but also have the potential to change.

Strategy emerges in the interplay of intentions, in an interaction that Mead named 'gesture' and 'response'. Mead is very interested in this cooperation and/or interaction. He insists that the kind of communication specific to humans has to do with controlling oneself, being able to take on the role of the other, as a part of cooperating:

The immediate effect of such role-taking lies in the control which the individual is able to exercise over his own response. The control of the action of the individual in a co-operative process can take place in the conduct of the individual himself if he can take the role of the other. It is this control of the response of the individual himself through taking the role of the other that leads to the value of this type of communication from the point of view of the organization or the conduct of the

group. It carries the process of co-operative activity farther than it can be carried in the herd as such, or in the insect society. (Mead 1934, p. 255)

Mead talks about this as a ‘conversation of gestures’; gestures and responses that call out mental and bodily new gestures and responses in the other person, while defined gestures are familiar symbols that answer to a meaning in the experience of another individual:

The gesture is that phase of the individual act to which adjustment takes place on the part of other individuals in the social process of behavior. The vocal gesture becomes a significant symbol... when it has the same effect on the individual to whom it is addressed or who explicitly responds to it, and thus involves a reference to the self of the individual making it. (Mead 1934, p. 46)

Concluding thoughts

To work as a leader can be described in many different ways. From a systemic perspective, which is what I have been very much involved in earlier in my work life, leaders are understood as autonomous individuals who formulate visions and values to be applied to the organization as a system. This is also the background for much of the new public management stance to leadership and strategy. Following this, leaders are formulating visions and values that are to be followed because they are for the good of the organization, as some kind of universal code of conduct. Again, in this view, employees are categorized as either good/compassionate followers or bad/selfish individuals, depending on whether they follow the leader or not. This perspective assumes an ethos that requires individuals to participate in the larger whole or for the greater good – a situation where people not complying, acting as autonomous individuals, resisting, discussing what is going on, posing questions and so on, are not highly valued.

These questions on how to go on together in organizations and how power is at work in organizations poses further questions on the relationship between individual and societal identity and power. In detailing my reflections on what is going on in my organization, I conclude that it is not possible to see leadership as something connected solely to me as an individual leader, but as something equally connected to my

leadership group and our mutual actions and decisions, and to other self-organizing emergent processes in the organization. Moving into this area of understanding it is necessary to understand the nature of conflict, freedom, power, politicking, spontaneity, motivation, diversity and the connections and patterning that take place in the midst of all this.

My former understanding of myself as an individual rational leader driven by an ethically based wish/decision to do good, to make deliberate and wise decisions and to implement these in my organization, is no longer a realistic notion to me. Rather, I see leadership as having to do with participating in emerging spontaneous patterning on the basis of identity themes from earlier on and until now in each individual's life, influenced by whatever stories and themes the other participants bring into the negotiation. Being reflexive and taking my reflections on myself as example, I see participating in power games and politicizing and influencing in my leadership group as a move from a more unconscious notion of seeking to impose my personal worldview to a more conscious and reflective position of negotiating with everybody there and understanding what is going on in our mutual reality as constraining and enabling and at the same time, a process in which we are constantly including and excluding in our relating to one another. My next project will take this as the starting-point and investigate into whether, and how, it is possible to 'do good' under these circumstances.

Project 3: Conflict, power and politics in daily life (October 2014)

Introduction

Project 3 has conflict at its centre. Project 2 was about power and politics and the way power plays out in a management team. I investigated into how both open and more hidden power games are going on constantly. This is a game of inclusion and exclusion, and I notice how all participants in the game are trying to enable or constrain one another and themselves, and how power differentials are hereby being constantly negotiated.

This view on power as a structural reality negotiated between the participants in the mess of social interactions is different from the more traditional understanding of power as something somebody holds or loses, as a ‘thing’ I had held until then. I began noticing how negotiations are ongoing, and noticed my own understanding of conflict and the importance of one’s own understanding for what one sees in a conflictual situation. Until then I had held the view that I could decide what would be ‘good’ actions and then follow these through, but I now saw that in ‘reality’ things were rather different. A more complex understanding – of how ‘good’ emerges, and how one decides what to do – is now evolving, changing my view on action and ethics in leadership. This paper considers this argument by investigating into my own experience and the change in ways of thinking about what we are doing in the leadership team, while also seeking to develop an explanation for what I observe.

Narrative 5: Feeling angry (October 2013)

Tension and disagreements on what to do had been growing in our leadership team. My colleague Knud and I had been especially conflicted about our roles and responsibilities as team leaders in COK, but actually all four of us on the leadership team had had difficulty defining roles and responsibilities. Our CEO, Niels, now insisted that we spend time together trying to sort things out. He invited me, as head of our leadership team training, together with our consultants ‘Ida’ and ‘Trine’, to plan a discussion on the theme of competition – competition in the

market, competition on the leadership team and competition between leaders concerning consultants.

Being responsible for planning the next team trip for us, I was conscious of the powerful role and position this had given me for designing the process with the consultants. In order not to be accused of manipulation or foul play, I was keen to ensure that everyone was kept fully informed of the trip and felt comfortable with it. I took great care to notify my team colleagues of the evolving plans, which paradoxically made clear the importance of my position and my ability to influence the program.

Arriving at our seminar, working with the theme, we each got an assignment: find the three most important behaviour traits the other three members of the leadership team have that contribute to the strength of the team, and one behaviour trait that undermines it. Focusing on the assignment, the atmosphere changed from alertness towards one another into thoughtful concentration. Taking rounds afterwards, we each got a longer list of our positive contributions to the team, and a shorter list of our more undermining behaviours. All three colleagues gave me the same critique on my undermining behaviour: the way I give up if things don't go my way, the way I let the others do their thing and stay out of the game, and the way I define disagreement as negative. Knud got the critique that he operates too much by himself and in his own way, and that he starts things without asking the rest of us for support hereby going his own way. Svend was asked to stay more in character as a leader of his team – and we were advising him not to take on his employees' work and perspectives so much; to stick with what he thinks himself, since his opinions usually are very well considered; and not to get so hurt and apologetic, but to stay focused, when conflict arises. Niels was asked to stay more focused when he talks, keeping it short; not to be so emotional when the rest of us think differently from him; and to 'take up a little less space'! Following this, we each made a commitment by giving words to what we wanted to change. I formulated my 'working point' as staying in the game longer, and to fight more for what I believe in. We then talked through different episodes where competition and conflict had been at the centre – one of which included a consultant, 'Laura', from my team. The consultants then asked us to leave it for now. They wanted us to practise letting things lie, not always to dig in deep; and so we moved on.

A month later I had arranged for the leadership team to meet up with my two consultants, Laura and 'John', who are working with innovation, in order to clarify

the scope for our business area in 2014. I have been economically in charge of innovation since I started in the company 2 years ago. Having a matrix organization, both Knud and I have employees working in this specific area, and for a while shared responsibility for developing it. Knud thinks of this business area as his own invention, and I have had a hard time defending this area of responsibility as mine since he kept interfering in a messy way. At this specific meeting to agree on who was to do what next year, Laura revealed that Knud had assigned her 30 days of work without involving me. Though Knud claimed that the contract was not yet agreed upon by the client, and that he had not put these extra days in her calendar, Laura's colleague 'Benny' had already done so (Benny works with innovation on one of Knud's teams, but was not present at this meeting).

I tried to figure out what was going on, but felt I had to let it go, in order not to denounce Knud publicly. Instead, I tried to clear things up by calling both Laura and Benny immediately after the meeting. Not getting hold of either of them, I ended up sending them both an e-mail urging them to contact me before making this kind of commitment. Laura answered that same evening, thanking me for trying to help her avoid being flooded with work. The next morning, though, she called to tell me Benny was upset by my e-mail: he felt misunderstood, and sensed he was being pulled into some game he didn't think was his. As it turned out, when I called Benny to clear up whatever misunderstandings there might be, he told me he had been following Knud's instructions in marking up Laura's calendar!

Since my promise to myself and to the team was to stay in the game, I wanted to clear up what might have been behind Knud's way of acting, so I took the opportunity to bring this situation into focus at the next leadership team meeting. Incidentally, Ida and Trine were there too. I was angry. The situation had made me and my actions look clumsy; I had endangered my relationship with Benny, and I felt like a mouse on a treadmill – getting nowhere, at great effort. I stated clearly that it was impossible for me to act as a credible leader in our organization if I could not be sure that we act respectfully according to our decisions in the leadership team about the way we have organized our employees; this kind of action from Knud was jeopardizing the trust between me and my employees, as well as diminishing my status in the organization. This didn't exactly make the atmosphere relaxed, but I was moved by necessity: if we were to develop our leadership in a more constructive direction, and if I was to keep my authority in the group, then it was important that I spoke up.

Reflections

Reading the narrative, I notice myself doing something that definitely doesn't fit with the notion of 'doing good'. In the past, I believed ethics concerned working out what would be good to do in advance and applying a fixed, predefined set of rules. I also believed conflict and power games were to be avoided if possible. Drawing on my insights from the above narrative and reflection, however, issues of power and conflict stand out as something important in connection to the ethics of interaction. I now see myself fighting, arguing and confronting Knud. I notice a variety of feelings and reflections in the narrative:

- Anger at being outplayed by a colleague, who made me look foolish. The loss of authority among my employees and my colleagues, and a strong feeling of being manipulated.
- How our relationship becomes more openly conflictual, and how I simultaneously view my conflicting behaviour as a necessary action in order for me and our team to be able to change our way of acting.
- How the triangle of Knud, Laura and myself is in danger of getting out of control, since it is impossible for me to distinguish who is telling the truth in this matter.
- The rather subdued way I manage to say 'stop' to Knud, and how I need the presence of the consultants and my colleagues to support me in expressing my opinion.

I wonder now how openly and clearly I actually managed to state at the meeting how much Knud's interfering in my management annoys me. Maybe it was more thought than action, more something that I felt rather than something that I said; whenever he interfered, I tended not to disclose how angry I was. Staying in the conflict, as I was trying to do in this meeting, was definitely not making our relationship more stable in the moment; but I hoped the conflict might help open our eyes to some of the festering chaos and unbalances in our work situation. I found myself following a strong instinct that it wasn't stability that was needed here, but instability, if things were ever to change.

I began to sense and articulate that not all that Knud was doing was for our mutual good, maybe supported by the exercise we had been doing together at the seminar, and realized that I might have to be more openly aggressive in defending my own interests and setting clear limits for his level of interference. Reflecting upon the meeting now, I see how I created a situation where I couldn't easily be manipulated by Knud, by having others present – thus creating a very powerful situation for myself in calling his actions into the open. In the situation I argue that I am trying to be loyal to our team and our team development, but I am not sure he saw it quite the same way. And today I can see how I used the power that Niels had delegated to me by putting me in charge of our training and the position this gives me, to create a situation where Knud can escape neither the confrontation nor being the one doing something 'not good'. Since Knud seemingly didn't want to explain what he was doing, this gave me the advantage of being able to act and speak out openly.

What I make of this now is that conflict plays a much more important role in leadership interactions than I have considered prior to writing this narrative, and also that ethics is something that is constantly negotiated. One can have 'good' intentions at the same time as 'not good' actions; ethics, or ethical behaviour, can only be judged in the situation.

I see my own actions as creating imbalances and stress in our leadership team, and see how I use the position and power given to me by Niels to get into the game. At the same time I see how through my actions I am trying to get us to talk about what we are doing, hereby creating a possibility for us to move on together. The intentions behind actions are a part of what is negotiated, and whether they are beneficial or conducive have to be part of the interaction and set some kind of standard for what we are doing. In my view, Knud has been acting disruptively to our leadership team, undermining our collaborative effort to connect our consultants to the leader assigned by our team structure. My own calling it out in the open I see as an attempt to act ethically, at the same time knowing that it will hurt him and disrupt our relationship. I am torn between calling out what is happening in order to protect Laura from too heavy a workload, and my loyalty towards the leadership team and the possibility for us to stand up for one another. I believe there is a difference between disrupting Knud's position by bringing things out into the open, as I do here, and Knud's more covert way

of disrupting my position. My actions give us a chance to find our way together and develop reflexivity; his way here, minimizes any opportunity to shape a mutual understanding.

At the same time, I am not blind to the fact that he might have intended to make things work and that I might be trying to get things my way as well. No doubt these patterns of intention will only be disclosed if we can talk together about what we are doing, and even then it might not happen.

Conflict and integration

In the following I will inquire into how to understand conflict more in depth, by looking into Mead's understanding of how we both cooperate and compete, and hereby into how conflict might be understood in other ways than something that has to 'go away', I do this because I want to see if it is possible to develop an understanding of conflict that might better be used in an understanding of organizations as groups of people working together, and of diversity and differences as a given thing, also not something to get rid of. In his book *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), George H. Mead writes about conflict and integration as two impulses or behavioural tendencies in the social realm, common to all individuals who are participating in organized societies. He describes how these tendencies are leading people collectively to enter or to form themselves into social communities, and how they lead either to cooperation, giving rise to friendly attitudes and relations, or to social antagonism, giving rise to hostile attitudes and relations (Mead 1934, p. 304). He goes on to describe how both attitudes actually can be described as 'social' in a broad sense of this word (since they are socially formed), but also how only the former in a narrower sense can be named 'pro-social', leading to cooperative conduct and bearing an ethical connotation. According to Mead, conflicting behaviour that takes no account of the social is 'asocial' or destructive to the social, since individuals are trying to put themselves into a situation of superiority over others. He sees conflict as a necessary and basic behavioural tendency that plays a significant role in social organization:

Human individuals realize or become aware of themselves as such, almost more easily and readily in terms of the social attitudes connected or associated with these two 'hostile' impulses (or in terms of these two impulses as expressed in these

attitudes) than they do in terms of any other social attitudes or behavior tendencies as expressed by those attitudes. (Mead 1934, p. 305)

I understand this as a description of how both friendliness and hostility are given and needed; it may even be through conflict that we acquire a sharper sense of ourselves in a social setting, in a sense defining our identity more clearly. When we participate in communities, Mead insists, continuous integration and resistance are inevitably ongoing processes in social life. Developing awareness of the adversarial aspects of the power game, seeing what is going on and knowing what to do, gives me an opportunity to see both sides more clearly, thereby actually turning me into a better player. I communicate and respond more openly, and see how meaning emerges from our interactions.

In observing how the meaning of my actions in the narrative is determined by what reaction I get, I am closer to G.H. Mead's notion of communication as conversations of gestures, or of gesture and response, as the pattern in which human interaction plays itself out. This is an understanding of communicational patterns where you cannot tell what comes first or what causes what. Rather, you can only decide the meaning of your actions through seeing the response from the other parties involved in the interaction:

...the relation of the gesture of one organism to the adjustive response made to it by another organism, in its indicative capacity as pointing to the completion or resultant of the act it initiates (the meaning of the gesture being thus the response of the second organism to it as such, or as a gesture). (Mead 1934, p. 145)

Taken into the context of the above narrative Mead states that this conversation of gestures is a cooperative activity, where it is not possible to say what begins and what answers to what. The beginning of the act of one is a stimulus to the other to respond, but taking this seriously must mean that there was some other stimulus before the beginning of the act of the first person; thus it becomes clear that individuals and their interactions are intertwined, and cannot be separated into linear chains of cause and effect in the moment. I see myself having trouble understanding, accepting and acting into the paradoxical nature of conflictual situations, trying to resolve this difficulty by holding on to the more linear notion of myself 'doing good', or not reacting as a means

to keep the level of conflict down, hereby maybe actually giving energy to my internal anger. At the end of the day this might give a considerable bigger conflict so reacting to the annoyance might be the only way to find out what might be the 'good' thing to do.

The understanding of communication as gesture and response to me now means that it is not possible to decide to 'do good' as a predetermined, one-sided action. One must jump into the interaction, into the conversations, and explore what is possible to negotiate in the mutual enabling and constraining of one another trying to figure what we are doing together. What 'doing good' in a certain situation might be must therefore be decided by the participants in joint conversations and actions as chains of gesture and responses influencing and being influenced by one another.

Reflection and reflexivity

Moving on to investigating how to acquire the ability to move into the messiness as a team participating in never-ending gestures and responses, I find it helpful to consider Chris Mowles' discussions of the difference between being reflective as a first-order level activity, and reflexivity as a second-order activity:

The question arises, then as to how people in organisations acquire these abilities to reflect together, to become reflexive and make judgments. And the answer can only be that they do so through practice, through experimenting together and by taking risks in uncovering some of the assumptions that they are making in undertaking the work. (Mowles 2015, p. 71)

Mowles emphasizes the movement away from being preoccupied as a leader with planning and strategizing ('doing good') to focus on what we are doing right now, participating together in forming and being formed in our organizational life. Leaders have to explore thoughtfully their involvement with each other in organizational life, and in doing so they have to negotiate a number of paradoxes. In my narrative I see paradoxes of safety versus danger, knowing versus not knowing, good versus bad, power versus powerlessness, among many others. If we had attempted to uncover this and share a mutual exploration of what is going on between us, working with reflexivity in the leadership team, then we should also have acknowledged that we are always continuously negotiating a situation that is filled with paradoxes. This would involve

negotiating trust, evolving knowledge of conflicts and paradoxes, commitment, accountability and attention to mutual goals, none of which would be easy; it might also have resulted in conflict, though perhaps of different kinds.

To act into a conflictual situation like this I see as an action of ethics filled with paradoxes of stability and change, and of order and destruction. Ethical theory is concerned with the structures required to sustain identity, related to the stability and continuity of a person while at the same time being changeable. This understanding of identity simultaneously acknowledges the fluidity of roles and shifting of appearances on the one hand, while also taking account of substance and foundation on the other. Griffin's understanding of ethics as action builds a bridge from much scientific management leadership literature, which understands leaders as 'external' observers of experience and hereby leaders as outside and stable, to Mead's notion of leaders as participants in everyday social interaction and experience (Griffin 2002, p. 179).

Acting as such is a way of participating in the power game, and of stating one's own humanness and seeing the humanness of the other as well. Connecting Griffin's understanding of ethics to Mead's notion of gesture and response, it becomes clear that ethical action is a mutual and social act.

The German philosopher Hannah Arendt writes about action in her book *The Human Condition* (1958). Action is a sign of humanness, closely related to speech since all action in some way answers the question 'Who are you?' (Arendt 1958, p. 178). As you disclose who you are in action and words, the 'who' might appear more distinct and unmistakable to others than it does to you yourself. Thus talking to one another about what is going on and what we are doing is a way of getting close to who we are and what we are doing ourselves as human beings, and power games and power relations is a part of this conversation between people. Power is closely connected to the possibility of resistance and thereby to conflict. Power builds on freedom in relations as well, and we always have a choice whether to act or not. If not, it is not power that is at work – it is violence.

Power and freedom

I would like to go further into the concept of power since I have found that power and power games does indeed play a role in the interactions in the management team, and I

will here go further into Foucault's understanding of power. Foucault writes about the connection between power and freedom and about seeing freedom as necessary in human relationships in order for there to be power:

One must observe also that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. [...] That means that in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance – of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation – there would be no relationships of power. [...] If there are relations of power throughout every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere. (Foucault 1994, p. 12)

Foucault here describes the simultaneous interrelatedness and freedom in social life, and how he understands power as an immanent part of all relationships and as something that, while demonstrating existing power differentials, also signifies our freedom to resist and try to change them. I see two different ways of participating in the power game: one where you position yourself without disclosing what is going on and one where you try to open up and share your impressions with one another. In both cases, power is at stake. Foucault's understanding of what power is describes this very well:

Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of space available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures. (Foucault 1994, p. 340)

Foucault sees power as productive for creating society and at the same time constituting subjectivity, but also sees power as a question of 'government' (Ibid., p 341) – defining this as modes of action destined to structure the actions and conduct of others. He goes on to describe freedom and power as interrelated:

In this game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exercise power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination). (Foucault 1994, p. 342)

Viewing power as connected to freedom raises the possibility of protest, hereby describing the connection between conflict and power. This in many ways is opposed to the prevalent understanding of power in political thinking where power is seen as negative, and as something that can be kept in order by administrative and legal rules and regulations. One of the most known thinkers in this area is the German philosopher and social scientist Jürgen Habermas, who had a yearlong discussion and dispute with Foucault on power. In Denmark Bent Flyvbjerg has been the one taking up this discussion, and bringing it into contemporary social science. In his book *Making Social Science Matter* (2001) Bent Flyvbjerg writes about their dispute and about the significance of conflicts and power to social science:

...there is mounting evidence, however, that social conflicts themselves produce the valuable ties that hold modern democratic societies together and provide them with the strength and cohesion they need; that social conflicts are the true pillars of democratic society. (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 108)

Flyvbjerg here describes that there is a paradoxical tie between power games and conflicts on the one hand and freedom, resistance and democracy on the other, and that seeing human interplay in this light opens new possibilities for interaction. To understand human diversity as a way of describing differences and hereby conflict as an inevitable part of being human opens to the realization that it is only through local human interaction and through the local conversations being as complicated and conflictual as they may, that we truly recognize one another as individuals. Here Flyvbjerg takes sides with Foucault in his understanding of nothing being stable or fundamental, and that there are no universals. He states that Foucault would say that we as humans have either the possibility to oppose or to promote social arrangements that create problems or oppression. So here Foucault's thinking builds upon the practical question of what is good or bad for humans which is exactly what Aristotle and his notion of *phronesis* is all about (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 101).

In the narrative it was hard for me to interfere since I didn't understand why Knud did what he did, given the understanding of conflict I had at the time, and given the fact that I stuck to my notion of 'doing good'. I saw him as a skilled diplomat always on the lookout for compromises and peace, and thought that from his training in

the foreign office he would be aware of the importance of not interfering in a destructive or conflicting way. Thinking about it now, his training there might have prepared him for precisely this kind of conflict, trying to manoeuvre his way through by playing power games to exercise authority over Laura's schedule. I found myself once again confronted with the discrepancy between my ideals about planning to 'do good' and the reality of having to participate in power games, and the ensuing processes of exclusion and politicizing.

Say yes to the mess

This I think is what is meant by the 'messiness of it all', and the necessity of having to muddle through as Lindblom puts it as a way of describing incremental developmental processes (Lindblom 1959, p. 87). Mead describes the complications, the conflicts and paradoxes of human interrelatedness when taking into account all the different interests that each member of a group has. It is easy to conform to collective behaviour or standards if you belong mainly to the one group in which you are presently acting, but it gets harder when you belong to two or more:

A highly developed and organized human society is one in which the individual members are interrelated in a multiplicity of different intricate and complicated ways whereby they all share a number of common social interests, – interests in, or for the betterment of, the society – and yet, on the other hand, are more or less in conflict relative to numerous other interests which they possess only individually, or else share with one another in small and limited groups. (Mead 1934, p. 307)

Mead here describes how it is almost impossible as a member of a group not at the same time to be part of several other groupings, hereby impossible not to participate with conflicting interests. Taking this into our management team and our conflicts there, this is a description of how being a member of different groups create conflicts for us even within the us as individuals, making it necessary to review which group belonging(s) may be the most important in any given social situation. My feeling of duty in the narrative was stronger towards the leadership team than towards my consultants. The weaker feeling of having to do something to disrupt what was going on had to do with my sense of responsibility for protecting the interests of my team of consultants – as

well as my own sense of right and wrong, which I felt Knud very much treading on. Taking this at face value, one could argue that only the eventual outcome of participating in conflict can indicate what is conducive to the organization, and thus what is right to do. Here, we may recall Mead's notion of how the 'generalized other' comes to life – not as a fixed, predefined entity for every individual in a given society to internalize, but as a living statement of what is the dominant understanding of good conduct at a given time. Indeed, it is only by taking conflict into the open and discussing possible consequences that we can collectively agree on a way forward. This underpins the complex responsive processes stance to how organizations change; and of course, even if we do collaboratively decide what might be the best thing to do, we can't be sure that things will ever turn out as we intended.

Narrative 6: Speaking and acting (December 2013)

Just before Christmas, I realized there were too many different people telling me the same story for me to ignore that something was going on. I had several people telling me that Knud was trying to improve his position to become a higher-ranking leader in the organization than Svend and myself. This message came from all over: from my own team members, from associate consultants telling my consultants (who then told me), and from a member of Svend's team telling both of us. Last but not least, I myself had several episodes where my decisions were not followed through in assignments that included some of Knud's employees.

At my next coaching session with Ida and Trine, I realized how angry I was that Knud was interfering in my decisions, questioning my management in a way that made my employees insecure. I was angry that our leadership team was so dysfunctional that such double-binding episodes could happen regularly, and angry that something was going on in our organization that would unsettle our employees to the extent that they risked turning to me to tell me what they saw.

I decided to take this up the next day at our leadership team meeting and discuss what might be going on. My heading was: 'This must come to an end!' I thought it best not to spring this on Niels without warning, so I e-mailed him that I would have something important to say before the meeting got underway. Niels therefore redesigned the agenda to allow for me to open the meeting with an announcement. I was quite aware that my speech would be a strong testimonial to our poor teamwork, and that Knud would not like it. I referred the remarks I had

received, and framed it as our mutual task as a team to find a way to handle this. Knud started out asking for specifics, insisting there was no substance in my allegations. I answered that as far as I was concerned, these were not allegations for us to confirm or falsify, but feedback that we as a group had to deal with. Knud tried to minimize what I brought to our attention, once again denying it all, by stating there was no proven factual basis to what I said. Niels stopped him, pointing out that the reality was that this was what I had heard, and that in some ways it supported what he was sometimes presented with from the organization.

This was hard for us to deal with. Svend commented that although the accounts certainly fitted with what he had also heard, he felt it would have been fairer for me to talk to Knud about all of this first. He added that he felt it necessary for us as a team to deal with the differences that keep occurring between Knud and myself. I insisted that this conversation belonged to our group as a mutual point of interest, and something for us to handle together; in my view, it was not just a disagreement between the two of us, but raised issues that related to our whole team's management style and leadership philosophy. This made Knud even angrier; he accused me of blowing things out of proportion. Niels tried to create a balanced discussion by acknowledging that we have very different views on leadership in our team, suggesting that perhaps we could spend some more time talking about this at a later meeting. Adopting Ida's and Trine's approach of moving on rather than digging ourselves into a deep hole, he asked if we were happy to leave the subject for now. I answered yes, but Knud was still very angry about what had happened; he felt I had accused him of disloyalty. I replied that I was simply sharing what feedback people had given me, feedback which I saw as given to me as a form of loyalty from our employees to us as a team, and essential in helping us as a team to handle what people were apparently thinking, experiencing and discussing. Given that we had an organizational meeting planned with everyone just after Christmas, surely we had to find a way to move on from this.

Knud left our meeting early for another meeting, so didn't participate in our debriefing at the meeting close. I tried to call him later, but he didn't answer. The following morning, the last day before Christmas vacation, I wrote him an e-mail telling him that I would like to talk to him before the Christmas holidays and suggesting a time for a phone call; but he didn't answer that either.

That same day, I had a talk with Niels about my role in connection to our strategic goals. Niels expressed his appreciation of my value to the organization, seeing me as the chief strategist for the development of the organization. He was worried I might leave if I didn't feel good about being there.

I went on talking about the meeting two days earlier. After listening for a while Niels interrupted me, stating that I hadn't understood the depth of what was going on. Knud earlier actually had expressed an interest in being appointed vice director, but Niels refused, because the company simply isn't big enough to justify a three-tier leadership structure; besides, we in the leadership team had all agreed on our structure less than a year ago. He had also warned Knud that any aspirations to become his successor were unrealistic, since the board were unlikely to approve taking on an internal candidate when Niels's contract finishes. I was already aware of Niels's position on his succession, as we had talked about it earlier when Knud had developed such close ties with our owner, KL, that we had been concerned not to either weaken Niels or put Knud in a vulnerable position. At that point Niels had noted that when he retired, our chair had made it clear that he would never consider an internal candidate for the vacancy. At that time I was confronted with my own aspirations, and could sense how I had a similar wish to advance, but also knowledge enough about organizational structures not to engage so closely with our owner as Knud had done. Being part of the leadership team, standing behind Niels, was just fine for me for now.

Reflections

I was curious to find a fuller explanation or description of Knud's stance. I was wondering if perhaps he was trying to act for the good and the right in the best way he could, just as I felt I was doing myself. I haven't yet today talked to him about what he thought then, but it might be that he simply felt my approach was totally misguided, but recognized my strong connection to Niels and was afraid of an open dialogue on this difference. It could also be that he was nurturing his own career, which was built on very different understandings and values than mine.

I went on to wonder: maybe he saw me as a strong player, and was afraid or even envious of my role in developing our organization. My strategizing activities build on a psychological knowledge of processes and relations that he doesn't have; seeing how Niels increasingly recognizes and values – perhaps sometimes even admires – the

competences that I bring into our team might motivate him to undermine me. He might not share such high regard for my competences, and may even feel excluded, not quite knowing what I am trying to achieve. Or could he be angry at being challenged by a woman?

My position in this second narrative was somewhat different from the first in that this time, I had prepared for a confrontation: I had even written down what I wanted to say. Being angry that Knud had made it necessary for me to confront all of this made me step into the insecurity of the confrontation. I find it appropriate that I reacted angrily, but in the moment it wasn't easy. I felt protected by the team situation: having everyone there meant that it would not be possible for Knud to get really angry. I felt a lot of tension and anxiety, but I also had an inner feeling of shame about disrupting our relations and the stability on the team. What might be unveiled were how angry and betrayed I felt, how aggressive an act I felt I had executed by 'calling his bluff' somehow, and how these feelings threatened my identity and feeling of being included on the team. In exposing Knud's manipulative actions and destructive attempts to undermine my position in the organization, I myself was being destructive and undermining him in turn, in order to position myself more strongly in the leadership team. At the same time I was quite content to take the matter up in a calm and measured manner, using the support from Niels to position myself strongly.

Ralph Stacey writes about shame, panic and anxiety as deep-rooted fears to do with inclusion/exclusion and with the potential for being humiliated and being seen as weak and/or immature:

The point about the emotional aspects of power relations and inclusion-exclusion dynamics and the role that gossip plays in them are highly relevant to the local interaction of strategising. These processes are ubiquitous and are rarely paid much attention but they feature in all processes of decision-making. (Stacey 2011, p. 394)

Building on Elias, Stacey sees shame and anxiety as produced by any kind of transgression against the rules of society that others can or might 'see', hereby making oneself vulnerable to exclusion. When we consider infringing norms, the threat of exposure and exclusion are very strong behaviour modifiers, as I felt very clearly in the above narrative. The anxiety is closely connected to the threat of being excluded from

the team, at the same time signalling that you are participating in bringing repetitive themes, defined as anxiety creating into the conversations once again, searching for new meaning. Stacey points to the importance of paying attention to the nature of the anxiety, asking oneself questions about what makes it possible to live with the anxiety in a way that it is experienced as the excitement required to enable us to continue to struggle with the search for new meaning in an ethical way. Central to this is sufficient trust between those engaged in difficult conversations about change (Stacey 2011, p. 446).

Ethics of thinking and acting

Mead describes ethical behaviour as that which is beneficial to the group:

...ethical and unethical behavior can be defined essentially in social terms: the former as behavior which is socially beneficial or conducive to the well-being of society, the latter as behavior which is socially harmful or conducive to the disruption of society. (Mead 1934, p. 320)

This description taken into praxis means that an action's ethical status is measured by the influence it has on society, which cannot be determined in advance and so this is a completely different understanding of ethics than the traditional Kantian approach of universal ethical standards. You simply have to participate in unpredictable conversations about differences and diversity, and so participate in the social life you are a part of, in order to find out what can be classed as socially beneficial participation, or as Mead states: 'the moral interpretation of our experience must be found within the experience itself' (Mead, 1934). This is what I try, in taking lead on the meeting in the last narrative, and I understand my intention and the ensuing behaviour as necessary in order for us to move on as a team rather than collapsing into personal conflicts or feelings of mutual disdain. At the same time, any social benefit cannot be demonstrated until our ongoing conversations show that we are actually building up trust. In this view on ethics Griffin describes a both...and stance where there is both an ethic for the individual and for the whole, best described by the notion of the radical social self. Here the ethical perspective is participative and local, only discovered in action (Griffin 2002, p. 122).

At the later meeting with Niels I was flabbergasted, yet somehow elated, by what I heard. It immediately changed my feeling of guilt, shame and of having done something wrong into an astonished feeling of not really knowing Knud at all. I felt naïve in thinking that we were in this game together and foolish to have believed that we shared hopes for the future of the organization. I could also immediately see how strong he might have considered my role in the leadership team given the process we had taken on where I led the planning. At times, I have felt uncertain whether he gave a full ‘yes’; but since he never said ‘no’, I always tried to stick to our mutually decided plan. It is interesting how our organization immediately picked up his ambition; maybe because of his actions, or perhaps because thinking is also a form of action.

Certainly an understanding of thinking and acting as two sides of the same coin fits well with the theory of complex responsive processes’ more integrated view on the classical European dichotomized understanding of action and thinking, body and spirit. In his book *Tools and Techniques*, Stacey writes the following about reflexivity: ‘Reflexivity is the activity of noticing and thinking about the nature of our involvement in our participation with each other as we do something together’ (Stacey 2012, p. 112). The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz uses the American pragmatist John Dewey as source, when he describes the connection between speaking and acting and how they are both social acts in his book *Available Light*:

When I try to sum up what, above all else, I have learned from grappling with the sprawling prolixities of John Dewey’s work, what I come up with is the succinct and chilling doctrine that thought is conduct and is to be morally judged as such. It is not the notion that thinking is a serious matter that seems to be distinctive of this last of the New England philosophers; all intellectuals regard mental productions with some esteem. It is the argument that the reason thinking is serious is that it is a social act, and that the one is therefore responsible for it as for any other social act. Perhaps even more so, for in the long run, it is the most consequential of social acts. (Geertz 2000, p. 21)

Geertz here argues for seeing thinking as a social act, with consequences that can be morally judged. It also is an argument for understanding reflexivity and action as social activities, not individually. Stacey goes on to write specifically about this in his book *Tools and Techniques*:

So, I am using a notion of reflexivity which can only be social. Since we are interdependent individuals, reflexivity must involve thinking about how we and others involved with us are interacting, and this will involve noticing and thinking about our history together and more widely about the history of the wider communities we are part of. ... When we take a reflexive stance we are asking how we have come to think as we do and this will involve becoming more aware of the history of the traditions of thought in our communities which we are reflecting in our interactions. (Stacey 2012, p. 112)

Reading this about reflexivity as social I become aware of my own lack of reaction to what had been going on in the final months of the year and how my picking up little signals hadn't made me react openly towards Knud. Seemingly we both have a pattern of concealing what we are thinking and doing. In some little way, by not thinking, and not acting I dehumanize myself, or maybe even both of us, by excluding us from thinking and talking about what we are doing (Arendt 1971). Also I play a part in what is going on by not reacting.

Talking to Niels opened new options and closed others. It forced me to begin to see what was going on in our interplay. I realized that I had known but not acted before. Maybe I was stuck in my notion of 'doing good', trying to establish a productive systemic coordination of what we are doing as a team, trying to stay in the relationship – seeing it as a positive and giving team, with a positive flow of energy.

Obviously, I am no longer quite so naïve. I now see how the ability to take up and remain in conflicting fields of interests and changing power differentials is a better way of going about changing matters than my former strategy of trying to control what is going on. In doing the latter I get stuck, unable to disclose what is really going on, what I know and see and what power games are actually being played.

Ethics and conflict

In the course of events over the last months, I have been caught up in a new area of collaboration and competition. Collaborating on finding my way through conflictual areas where we have no mutual experiences or rules to go by in our team, and competing with everybody trying to be successful working and thinking in diverse ways, at the same time trying to agree on how to make our company prosper.

Writing this project I find myself thinking about communication, conflicts, collaboration, politics, inclusion and exclusion and connecting this to ethics, action and power. Focusing on conflict through the project I increasingly noticed what we say and what we don't say in the leadership team, and how these conversations of openness and concealing are influencing what is possible. In Project 2 I cited Patricia Shaw (2002), who finds conversations to be at the centre of developmental processes, and I certainly see possibilities for development in our organization through becoming more reflexive in the conversations we have in our leadership team. Entering conflicts, arguing and negotiating our way through differences and difficulties, enabling and constraining one another I understand as the only way to act ethically in the local and emerging patterns of interactions in organizational life; perhaps this is even what strategizing is all about.

I have found myself investigating what ethics might be in a conflict situation. We hadn't had any former experience in conflicting with one another, but as Mead says, people do not come into an interaction as a new born baby with no experience, but are born into already existing socially evolved patterns of activity. He notes that we engage in conversations of gestures by our ability to take on the attitude of the 'generalized other':

The meaning of a gesture by one organism, to repeat, is found in the response of another organism to what would be the completion of the act of the first organism which that gesture initiates and indicates. (Mead 1934, p. 146)

Mead here points to the interconnectedness of what we are doing, and how we can only establish meaning through connecting with one another. In the leadership team we are tacitly trying to establish rules, taking into account our different ways of understanding leadership, managing conflict and understanding strategy. Through writing about this, I have begun to understand that these conflicting aspects of collaborative action are themselves crucial to our collaboration: it is precisely by taking our antagonism into the open and examining our individual and collective responses that we can acquire important information about our emotional response for the group process and hereby get a better feeling for the game. Taking this into a global pattern, the anger that Knud felt about my open anger was paralleled by the anger I felt about his hidden actions. It may not be possible to explore all this in our team meetings, but we should reflect upon

such discord since it is a key part of our struggle for identity, recognition and status as we are negotiating power differences and finding our strengths in the hierarchy.

In his book *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management*, Ralph Stacey writes that

...there is no polarity of intention and emergence because patterns are emerging in the interplay of many intentions reflecting all kinds of emotions and ethical or unethical actions. (Stacey, 2012, p. 21)

Stacey here tries to describe the connection between the many different stories and accounts for any certain one episode relating to feelings, ethics and power, and how patterns are always emerging as interplay of many and differing stories. I am aware of how the other participants in my narratives for sure would tell another story, that I am describing a factual version of a non-linear team reality, and hereby describing the fundamental uncertainty and un-linearity that the complexity sciences reveal. The narrative shows everyday ordinary experiences at the centre, with unpredictable predictability, and how the local interaction helps global patterning to evolve.

Managing conflicts

In traditional management literature conflicts have played a role as ‘something’ that needs to be ‘handled’ to go away; ideally, it should never arise in the first place (Taylor 1919; Fayol 1949; Rahim 2001). In his book *Managing Conflicts in Organizations*, M. Afzalur Rahim has made a thorough survey of conflict management theory, estimating that managers spend over 20% of their time in conflict management (Rahim 2001, p. 195). He quotes several traditional writers on conflict – theorists like Taylor, Fayol and Weber who all implicitly assume that conflicts are hurtful for organizational effectiveness and should be minimized as much as possible (p. 8). Weber for instance took up bureaucratic organization as a way of avoiding conflicts, and developed six fundamental principles to be followed, hereby securing organizational effectiveness. Principles like a system of procedures for dealing with work situations or impersonality in interpersonal relationships stem from his understanding of effective organizations (Weber 1929/1947). The title of Rahim’s book alone suggests that conflict is important to organizational life but must be kept within boundaries set by the leader. Rahim’s

book is a survey of ways to understand conflicts – he identifies 10 classifications of conflict: affective conflict, substantive conflict, conflict of interest and conflict of values, goal conflict, realistic versus non-realistic conflict, institutionalized versus non-institutionalized conflict, retributive conflict, misattributed conflict, and displaced conflict). He classifies conflicts according to the levels of its origin (intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup) and describes five ways or styles of dealing with interpersonal conflicts: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (p. 33). Rahim goes on to develop different tools for tackling conflicts, and takes a rather linear and sequential approach to effective conflict management. He makes a clear distinction between substantive and affective conflict, arguing that affective conflicts are dysfunctional whereas substantive conflicts should be seen as a part of keeping an organization generative and effective. Rahim refers to March and Simon (1958), who consider conflict as a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision-making, so that an individual or group has trouble selecting an alternative (Rahim 2001, p. 17), and contrasts this with a more modern view that it is not necessarily dysfunctional for organizations to experience friction. Here a moderate amount of conflict, managed in a constructive fashion, is seen as necessary for attaining an optimal level of effectiveness in an organization:

Conflict management does not necessarily imply avoidance, reduction, or termination of conflict. It involves designing effective strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing of an organization. (Rahim 2001, p. 76)

In this light, Knud's attempt to pinpoint exactly how many episodes I was referring to, and how serious or trivial each allegation was, might be seen as an attempt to establish objective facts and to divide the conflict into 'bite-sized chunks'. In this understanding my own actions would be seen as a lack of ability to control myself, creating this overload of tension in our group; and Niels's task here would be to design a strategy that could control anxiety levels and bring order back to this mess. Rahim's understanding enables leaders somehow to stand 'outside' a conflict, managing what is going on; it fails to capture what I experience as the complexity and paradoxes of conflictual situations, just as it takes no account of the power games and differentials being negotiated through conflicts.

Relational being: Conflict as social construction

An understanding of conflict that I became familiar with while working at S&S is the social constructive view, closely connected to the Taos Institute and to the American psychologist and professor Kenneth Gergen. Gergen understands conflict as something destructive that should be avoided, and the means to do this is through ‘productive coordination’ (Gergen 2009, p. 193). Gergen uses terms like ‘hostility’, ‘antagonism’, ‘visions of the evil other’ and ‘mutual annihilation’ to describe what he sees as a threat to civilization and to ‘relational flow’ as he puts it (p. 192). The point in his theory is to create a mutual consciousness in which the individual, bounded being is transformed into a state where ‘boundaries are obscured, mutuality is revealed, and multi being is restored and a consciousness of relational being encouraged’ (p. 193). In this view there is hardly any space for individual interest as something positive, or for both the individual and social self to be paradoxically present, let alone for conflict or power games to function as even a slightly productive force in social life. Gergen states that conflicts mostly stem from what he defines as ‘counter-logics’, which create degenerative relations (p. 163). To me, this is a restrictive view of what it means to be social; it loses the paradoxical nuances of individual/social as described by Mead and Elias and as presented by the Hertfordshire tradition. Elias talks about ‘figurations’ of many separate people as a way of grasping the paradox of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ being present at the same time:

Contemporary usage would lead us to believe that the two distinct concepts, the ‘individual’ and ‘society’, denote two independently existing objects, whereas they really refer to two different but inseparable levels of the human world. (...) It makes it possible to resist the socially conditioned pressure to split and polarize our concept of mankind, which has repeatedly prevented us from thinking of people as individuals at the same time as thinking of them as societies (Elias 1970, p.129)

Gergen’s stance seems to assume the slightly evangelical view that people must take up their social responsibility, understanding their private needs as almost ‘evil’ and the social contact as ‘good’. Looking at the narrative in this way, I would have to look for the good intentions of all the participants in the meeting. From this angle, my attempt to address the conflict at the start of the meeting could be seen as a desire to

resolve it quickly and agree the way forward together, in a fair and democratic way. It would also appear to make sense of Svend's effort to restore harmony, proposing that we return to a balanced/neutral contact in accepting that I ought to have told Knud first what I was seeing, in order not to put him in an uncomfortable situation; and I would see and describe Niels's understanding of the situation as a phase, and notice his attempt to restore our feeling of connectedness and balancing the relationship between Knud and me. However, what wouldn't fit in would be my own mixed motives. My desire to get the situation under control, my wish to be a strong power game player, or my way of holding Knud at gunpoint by exposing his actions to the rest of the group, would in this understanding be seen as signs of a frivolous self-interest that simply has no place within Gergen's social constructionist understanding of a co-constructed sociality.

Explorative conflict

Examining and theorizing about what I am actually doing in this situation, and thus bringing attention to how much conflict there is within our team, as well as focusing on how Knud's way of acting influences my own actions and vice versa, and what is happening more widely in our organization, is new to me. I begin to notice the local interactions as they emerge, and to notice how this might help us to change our way of acting from being unreflected to another level of reflexivity by generalizing from this type of observation. Stacey describes this process:

The first requirement for understanding the ordinary, everyday interaction between people, therefore, is to understand the nature of this communication. In communicating with each other human beings inevitable co-construct patterns of power relations and in the inevitable inequality and difference these power relations generate conflict. (Stacey 2012, p. 23)

Taking experience seriously and writing narratives is the first part of getting closer to understanding these everyday interactions and the nature of our communication, and by doing so to realize that conflicts are inevitable – something that we just have to live and deal with, in power relations that are always being negotiated, always unequal, always paradoxical. In looking upon conflict in this way as part of the paradoxical nature of participating in a team, I now see it more as an important part of everyday internal

group processes concerning power and politics, influencing and being influenced, and that it has to do with everyday inclusion and exclusion processes. And I see conflict as one of the forces at work where people meet. Stacey puts it this way:

In communicating with each other, human beings inevitably co-construct patterns of power relations and in the inevitable inequality and difference these power relations generate conflict. It is the conflict arising in difference that is essential to ongoing organizational and social evolution. (Stacey 2012, p. 22)

Stacey here describes how conflict is an essential part of social evolution and as such something to participate in. By doing so there is an evolutionary possibility in understanding conflict as a place for particularization and generalization at the same time. In conflicts and power relations mental and social activity is intertwined; the individual action is connected to the part of conflict that is common, but is responded to in a particular way for each participant. Looking at my narratives in this light makes it clear that conflict is not a temporary phase to be resolved, but an inevitable and ongoing aspect of being together in this organization as we try to develop and find our way forward, figuring out what we are doing. At the same time these conflicts are not automatic, but are closely connected to our individual intentions, choices of action, gestures and responses. It becomes clear that we are capable of taking this up in our individual and mutual reflections on what is happening – thus perhaps changing the way we deal with each other, or perhaps not. This doesn't mean that conflicts and power games will stop appearing, but that we might get a better idea of what we are doing in them when they do occur – perhaps allowing us to make smarter choices if we wish to, with the potential to develop our working life together. By doing so, we bring together the past (gestures) and the future (responses) in the living present, co-creating meaning as we interact with each other.

Paradoxes of group life

The above made me want to investigate more into group life and some of the emotional elements of this. Smith and Berg's book *Paradoxes of Group Life* (1987) describe individual ambivalences in group members participating in a group, and how some of those reactions contribute to the experience of contradiction and conflict in the group as

a whole. Building on acknowledging existential anxiety based in infant ambivalence, desiring to be separate and connected, coupled with the fear that only abandonment or fusion is possible, they suggest three important points in this connection:

- (1) A group needs people who are different in order to provide unity as well as preserving differences. This difference makes it possible for the group to be effective, at the same time as they threaten the group's ability to function as a group.
- (2) There is a tendency to polarization, especially along three bipolar dimensions: dominant/submissive, friendly/unfriendly and instrumentally controlled/emotionally expressive. This means that group life is filled with oppositional forces, which again means that individuals in groups and groups as a whole will always have to manage differences even while seeking a certain level of homogeneity.
- (3) The ambivalence of group members towards group-as-a-whole and the playing out of intrapsychic conflicts in interpersonal ways. This has to do with a simultaneous desire for inclusion and fear of being absorbed and as such to disappear as an individual, stemming from early childhood experiences. (Smith and Berg 1987, pp. 65–66)

In analysing paradoxical group dynamics, Smith and Berg describe the collective approach to paradoxes and conflict as follows:

Attempts to resolve conflicts produce only temporary relief. The conflict seems either to reappear at another time or to shift to another important dimension – typically, to the context in which the group is located or the individual members who make up the group. (Smith and Berg 1987, p. 9)

They go on to frame group life as inherently paradoxical, seeking to change the predominant notion of conflict – from something that must be treated, or a phase a group must go through, into something that we should all learn to live with.

Taking on this paradoxical understanding back to the narrative, I can see how on the one hand I try to control and take responsibility for what is happening in our leadership team, blaming myself and reluctant to share what I see is going on with the

team; and how on the other hand, by confronting us all with the critique received from employees and others, I am trying to make my colleagues share the responsibility for making sense of things and working out the best way forward. I notice how Knud doesn't share what he is up to with the team, and how I initially keep it to myself and don't openly express any of my concerns about the power games going on in the leadership team.

It seems that joining a group activates all our earlier experiences of being excluded and included, all our experiences of having power and being powerless, and of participating in power games and of politicizing. It puzzles me how deeply ingrained the notion of not conflicting is in my way of thinking and acting, and I can feel the anxiety of being excluded as a very strong force in these patterns. At the same time, I realize how strong being able to take up conflicts makes me.

In the same book, Smith and Berg write about 'splitting' as a way of solving this insecurity and paradox of belonging and feeling expelled. They borrow the term from the British psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who writes about splitting as a means to end some of the unbearable paradoxes of living in a family. Laing defines the term as the partitioning of a set into to subsets (Laing 1969, p. 54). Splitting in groups has the effect that a way of acting, or a feeling that is hard to own, is projected onto another in such a way that the other carries this as their own feeling. In thinking about groups in this way, Knud and I are the carriers of these group projections of unbearable actions and feelings, and by bringing them back to the group I can see how I am trying to get rid of this sense of insecurity, feeling weak, being excluded, and that my point at this meeting was an attempt to redistribute these attributes in another way in the group.

I think this paradox is what Mead talks about when he talks about the 'I' and the 'me', the generalized other and the social self and about gesture and response as two interrelated parts. He writes about the 'I' and the 'me' as a distinction where

[t]he 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. (Mead 1934, p. 175)

Mead here describes how we are entangled in the social as individuals, and how in turn we also influence the social by our own attitudes. Mead writes about the generalized

other as the internalization of the attitude of the other, a human capacity enabling us to provisionally understand what we are doing by enacting expectations of possible responses of others. It is not possible to define a starting-point in a gesture/response loop: they are so interrelated that the one is unthinkable without the other. I see how my lack of action in some ways almost invites Knud to act, or how I create a space for him to manoeuvre into, through my typical approach of not keeping the gate or fighting for my turf. I enable him to restrain me, so to speak!

I also understand this from a gender perspective, as an example of a hidden transcript (Scott 1992). Scott describes it as a common phenomenon for outsiders to keep things to themselves when trying to balance tacit conflicts, and I see myself as a kind of outsider on the team – not only the newest member, but also a woman. Another side of the gender issue in connection to power games is described by Emma Crewe in her article ‘Ethnographic Research in Gendered Organisations’, in which she describes how men appear to enjoy open battle in the open in the parliamentary Chamber, whereas women tend to prefer the calmer, more deliberative debates in their constituencies (Crewe 2014). She goes on to describe how women tend to be active in contexts that have intensely emotional conversations with people ‘defending their territory with the ferocity of a mother protecting her offspring’ (Crewe 2014, p. 10). I recognize how I am actively battling in team meetings with my employees, but do it very seldom in leadership team meetings. I also see how I take on the attitude of the generalized other towards women in our society – not being too aggressive, not reacting right away to provocation. In the situation with Knud, I thought about how he would react before I decided to speak up. I am quite sure he didn’t think long about how I might react when he aggressively responded to my gestures.

Particularizing strategy

Quite to my surprise, I find that the general ability to take up conflicts in our organization has grown through this period of being occupied with what conflicts are. I have noticed how the employees take up more conflicts and how conflicts change from being an underlying current to an open confrontation – or at least, intended openness, and also how it is possible today to talk about conflicts that either are active or has been in a more open way. Recently, after having a huge confrontation with an overworked

staff member on her working too much, deciding to send her home for 6 weeks to get back in shape, and then having to tackle another staff member about his drinking problem and sending him off for treatment, we actually had a reflexive moment in the team all together where we considered and discussed why nobody had ever talked to me about these matters before they got out of hand, since everyone seemed to have known for some time that things were not right. I take this as the first small sign of a global pattern emerging of being able to confront conflictual material together.

Generalizing from what I have been describing here, what is going on locally and the ‘global’ organizational impact this has is pointing to what we are doing on the leadership team as a kind of strategy development. Stacey writes about the connection between the local interaction and the global patterning and how the generalizations and the knowledge of what to do next develop:

The strategies of an organisation are those generalisations and the strategies therefore, evolve in the ordinary, everyday process in which people interpret and negotiate with each other what the strategies as generalisations mean in specific contingent situations and what implications these meanings have for what to do next. (Stacey 2011, p. 357)

Strategy, understood as Stacey describes it here, is connected to (though completely different from) what I was interested in when I started the DMan. I was interested in the ethics of leadership–followership relationships and in the interconnectedness of these two positions for both leaders and followers. Today, this rather black-and-white notion of two separate and distinct positions seems naïve. I am now reflecting on human connectedness and interrelatedness as much more complex and chaotic, and the two parties – leaders and followers – as commonly human rather than objectively different; we are all inevitably enabling and constraining one another in the continuous game of power and influence, moving forward or backward together. It is this immersion in what is going on that is what we must do, and do well, as a leader:

Instead of assuming managers can adopt an objective position, deciding what type of conflict they have on their hands and so which tool or technique they might choose to resolve it for the optimum working of the organisation, I am assuming instead that there is no objective position to be found. Rather, what managers might

do instead is to immerse themselves as fully as possible in the complex responsive processes of relating which takes place in all social life, noticing their own reactions to and perspectives on the situation as important data in deciding what to do about it. [...] A good manager is not someone who disdains politics, or is naïve about it, but who is politically savvy. It means being more honest with oneself about what stake one has in the game. This is part and parcel of developing a robust approach to dealing with uncertainty and assuming that it is the negating paradoxical pole of certainty, and cannot be separated from it. (Mowles 2015, p. 139)

This robust approach to dealing with uncertainty, which we might call *expertise*, or practical judgement and reflexivity, the forming and being formed by complex social relationships, is what I want to look into in Project 4. I want to look into the concept of practical judgment, *phronesis*, and the connection between conflict, power and politics, action and ethics in leadership.

Summary and next steps

I began this project trying to describe and understand the role of conflict in my organizational life in relation to power games and management. I had a notion of conflicts being something that should be avoided, and had a hard time understanding how friction kept arising on the leadership team through what appeared to be endless negotiations of inclusion/exclusion. I was wondering why conflict occurred in the leadership group that I am a part of, why conflicts were so hard to handle, what role conflict played; and was curious as to how I might be able to handle conflict in a constructive way.

During my research I increasingly realized how conflict is a part of organizational life that doesn't have to be 'handled' as such, but might more constructively be seen as a key aspect of everyday strategizing, and also examined my own part in the occurring conflicts on the team. I investigated into different theories of conflict and connected these understandings to the reflective narratives from my own leadership team. Generalizing here, I found that by paying close attention to what was actually happening, I began to understand conflict as a useful and natural part of organizational life and finally recognized that getting immersed in this, taking the

messiness of organizational life seriously, is a way of noticing and reflecting on what is going on in order best to decide what to do next.

From this, I became interested in the role of action and the part this plays in organizational politics and conflict. I am keen to explore the connection between politicizing and being able to act into uncertainty and conflict as an important part of what leadership is all about. This in turn raises the question of how we define ethics and expertise in such a context.

In our organizational work I have looked into the connection between the particular and the general, between the local interaction and the influence this might have on global patterning. Right now we are working with developing a new strategy. Here I am researching into what we are doing as a leadership team, and what parts of this help the organization develop a new strategy. Is it possible to make an organization move in a new direction through local conversations about what we are doing and why we are doing it? Is it possible to change the way we develop and perform by working with conflict and politics? What role do uncertainty, vulnerability and conflicts play in all this?

My Project 4 will be about this strategy process and how the particular conflicts, processes and interdependencies emerging in the social action within my leadership team can be connected to the general strategy process in our company. I am curious to explore questions such as: If the future of our organization is not actually shaped by planning, then what are we really doing as leaders? How can the uncertainty, vulnerability, unpredictability and complexity that I experience in my own leadership life be conveyed in other domains, to develop practical judgment and help organizations that are our customers understand what they are doing? Can it be the base for global patterning in a theory of action? And finally: In what ways can the particular experiences from my organization be taken into other organizations? Is it possible in an ethical way to generalize from my own experience to human relations and interactions in general?

Project 4: Doing strategy work (April 2015)

Introduction

In most organizations, strategy planning is seen as an important part of the work leaders are engaged in and as a plan that helps organizations move forward coherently. Yet in many organizations, things do not go to plan – not because of poor management, nor because of resistance from the members of the organization, but because of the complexity of the interactions. Strategy and change is a much more complex activity than is generally suggested by the literature on the subject.

Part of what we were asked to do on joining as the management team in COK was to predict whether we felt the company was likely to survive. For some years it had been in an almost bewitched sleep, living on grants and subsidies, and letting obvious business chances pass by. Other consultancy firms had taken over obvious areas of business for COK and the staff hadn't developed the necessary skills for interacting with modern business-driven municipalities (the subsidiary business model came to an end only by the end of 2011). Given the task by Niels to plan the development for our employees, I realized that change had to happen quite fast, and that it had to be something new, if we should stand a chance of regaining our turf. I knew the systemic social constructionist theory and its influence on business development from my time at S&S and I was aware that it had some interest in COK, but also that it had its shortcomings in being recognized as a theory for strategy thinking and development in the municipalities. Besides this obvious weakness, I estimated that the market for systemic consultancy and competence development courses might either be saturated or 'taken' by other and better-known companies. My growing understanding of chaos and complexity theory and the Hertfordshire group and their work on this ground opened my eyes to potential new business in the public area that is our field of operation. Concepts like politics, power, inclusion and exclusion, co-creation, conflict and paradox are central to working in the public area; and since nobody else's attention seemed to be focused on this, I realized we might have a chance of building new business here.

As I slowly came to understand some of the key concepts as they began to unfold over time, I also realized that in order to take seriously what this body of knowledge was all about, we had to start by taking experience seriously ourselves. We

had to start looking into the local interaction in COK, and especially in the leadership team, in order to gain knowledge and experience enough to be able to develop into a strong and focused management team for our business on strategy development, top management courses and coaching etc. We had to ‘walk the talk’ and begin to reflect alone and together on our experience with doing strategy work together, if we were to become a reflexive and strong player in this field, wanting to help out municipalities management teams on their strategy work as well. My sharing narratives and reflections with the team was the beginning of this movement and work, trying to show and share how, through reflecting on my experiences, I was beginning to understand strategy work on the team as something totally different from linear top-down, management-based, structured and planned change activity.

Moving this way was full of dangers for our company, since this understanding of what strategy work might be is quite different from the mainstream understanding. Being a company in quite a tough situation, one might even say that this choice of development was a daring step. Being so closely connected to KL, and with KL so closely connected to the government through annual negotiations on the economy of the municipalities, not to mention all the other continuous negotiations at top state and government level, the complexity angle has been a critical and vulnerable path to choose. It has been a high-risk strategy to choose to take this perspective on strategic management and organizational dynamics, which in many ways questions both NPM and the systemic take on management in relationship to this highly controlled and controlling partner and environment.

In the municipalities right now, though, there is quite a strong voice for needing to do something different. It is obvious in Denmark that there is a need for more innovative ways of moving forward. Innovation has been the ‘new black’ for some years now, just recently getting competition from concepts like active citizenship and co-creation. The welfare economy is under pressure, and there is a wide range of ‘wicked’ problems (the demographic challenge, growing demands for public sector service, increasing complexity in politics and society in general, mistrust of politicians, growing demands from politicians towards the administrations) – problems of efficiency and of how to expand democratic involvement that cannot be solved by using the strategic tools and techniques that have been taken for granted for so many years in

management. It is no longer possible to cling to the notion of ‘the top’ planning and staying in control, and ‘the bottom’ of the organization following order. Everyday life in organizations is much more complex than this; and this is what I wanted for us to inquire and investigate into. I wanted us to be able to come up with some framework for our work with municipalities and their board of directors, the idea being that this group would be our gateway to bigger and new areas of business. Our new strategy in this way is supposed to create change at three levels: a strategy for changing the internal level of competence in COK, a strategy towards another way of understanding and working with our customers (both their employees and at top level), and finally a new professional partnering connection to our owner.

Taking seriously the theory of complex responsive processes in this process of strategy development, I realized that we could use the concept of co-creation to frame our work. For obvious reasons, since our name COK is the first three letters in the word in Danish (COKreation); but on a theoretical ground, as well. Co-creation I here understand in the complex responsive processes way as a realization of how we can only co-create our social life through influencing and being influenced by one another, and similarly as a company we can only co-create our next/new way of relating in close cooperation with our customers and partners. Connected to our owner, KL, the co-creative understanding of a new strategy would be to enter into more and deeper conversations on why they have the company COK in the first place, about what we are thinking about welfare development, how to move on, and what is/should be the differences between COK and KL.

In COK we are therefore trying to describe and define what it is we are doing in order to create this new strategy for our company right now; and this is what this Project 4 is about. With my research question, ‘Transparency, hiding and taking risks: working with being excluded or included in organizations’, I explore power games as transparent/hidden; the paradox of stable instability; how the paradox of inclusion/exclusion unfolds and influences what it is possible to do/not to do; and how working with these themes raises questions about ethics in relationships. I do it primarily by working with narratives describing our interactions on our leadership team, but the experience and reflections I get access to here most certainly would apply for the

interactions we have with municipalities as well and for our developing partnering relationship to KL as well.

Defining ‘strategy’

A classic definition of ‘strategy’ might be Alfred D. Chandler’s: ‘the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals’ (1962, p. 13). Here, leaders are expected to calculate strategic plans to meet goals and objectives, and follow through by ensuring the necessary resources are available. Some theorists take a different view, such as Robert Burgelman (1983, p. 66): ‘Strategy is a theory about the reasons for past and current success and failure’. Moving on from this, Professor of Management Studies, Henry Mintzberg, from McGill University in Montreal, has for years worked with strategy as patterns of action that emerge in processes of ongoing learning. He sees strategy as a combination of deliberate design and ongoing learning in unpredictable turbulent environments, where trial, error and experience are key elements of the strategy process. Mintzberg has worked with understanding strategy for a lifetime, has made a classification of strategy schools and has developed an understanding of strategy consisting of five ‘definitions’ named the ‘five Ps’: plan, position, perspective, pattern and ploy. His view on strategy is that strategy can be vital to organizations by its absence as well as by its presence. He says strategy has four ‘roles’ to fulfil, roles that all have their advantages and disadvantages: strategy sets direction, strategy focuses effort, it defines the organization and provides consistency. In all cases there are pros and cons. Let’s take setting directions as an example: the main role of strategy is to chart the course of an organization in order for it to sail cohesively through its environment, which is seen as an advantage. The disadvantage could be that it also can serve as a set of blinders that might hide potential dangers. If the strategy gets too predetermined, chances are that you might not see upcoming problems. Mintzberg goes on to describe some areas of agreement concerning the nature of strategy: Strategy concerns both organization and environment, the substance of strategy is complex and strategy affects overall welfare of the organization. Strategy involves issues of both content and process, is not purely deliberate, exists on different levels and involves various thought processes (Mintzberg 2009, p. 17).

Strategy literature has continued to polarize between strategy as deliberate realization of intention and strategy as patterns of action emerging in learning in rather messy processes of individual actions. Mintzberg, who is one of the spokesmen for emergent strategizing, describes this:

The interesting question, much like that concerning whether decision must lie behind action, is whether plan must lie behind pattern: because there is pattern, must there necessarily have been a plan? In other words, must strategy always be *deliberate*? Or can they *emerge*: that is, can pattern just form out of individual actions? (Mintzberg 2007, p. 4)

Mintzberg here defines emergence as pattern just forming with no intention or deliberate plan, and connected to the individual person's action. He finds emergent strategy is a learning process in which strategy often forms without people realizing it, action by action, decision by decision. I will go further in detail with Mintzberg's understanding of strategy after the narratives below.

Ralph Stacey describes yet another way of understanding how new order emerges. Where a traditional understanding of strategy sees human interaction – especially the actions of leaders – as linear, Stacey describes change as never-ending iterations of human interactions in rather repetitive patterns of experience that are never reproduced exactly, but are social through and through. Strategy emerges in the interplay of many intentions so to speak. He goes on to describe this as 'transformative causality' – a concept he bases on human interaction constructing the future as the known-unknown, which again describes a simultaneous continuity and potential transformation (Stacey 2011, p. 468). In this understanding of strategy, there are no polar opposites between intention and emergence: it is a social process, and strategies always emerge through many iterations, but never just form randomly.

Through my inquiry into understanding strategy, I have become increasingly aware of my changing understanding of ethics. When I began the DMan, I considered ethics to be my own firm values defining what is 'good/bad' to do in any given situation – a set of rules and norms. This is openly seen in some of my first projects where I try to figure out how to 'be good'. Moving into my research, it has become increasingly clear that it is not possible for me to decide what is good or bad before engaging in the

interactions and paradoxes of the living moment. Understanding ethics in this more processual way can be confusing and demanding, since it replaces order and plans with an understanding of the ‘messiness’ of it all. Only when we are fully engaged – focused on and perhaps having conversations about what is going on – can we begin to explain our interactions from within, reflecting both an individual and a group level of human relating. This is what the theory of complex responsive processes describes as the local interaction creating global patterning, and this is what I want to inquire into as perhaps a new way of doing strategy work.

Narrative 7: August 2014 – inviting guests into the leadership team

The leadership team was on a 3-day team seminar with our consultants, Ida and Trine. We were working on our new strategy and on how we could become both more aware of complexity and of co-creative aspects of our contact with customers and get to work in this new frame of understanding. The first day, Niels talked about our company developing and what he saw us becoming. While Knud and Svend seemed to share his optimistic confidence, I expressed concerns about lack of staffing and how we could possibly cope if our hoped-for projects actually eventuated. Niels immediately and forcefully expressed his disappointment at my change of position, asking what has happened, since usually I am the optimist.

Listening to his frustrations made me remember other occasions where I had expressed my concerns, eliciting similar strong emotional reactions from him. I wondered why my candor in expressing insecurity so clearly exasperates him. I felt excluded, and prepared myself to expose these reflections about being dissociated from the team. Niels began reflecting on how our roles change: it seems we take turns to play the stable role. This observation reconnected me with what was going on in the room: it was a nice feeling to reflect together, rather than feeling upset in isolation. Soon we were back working with our strategy of co-creation and new ways of customer interaction.

We had invited two top managers/customers from the municipality in which we were having our seminar to visit us. The ‘educational’ purpose was for us to practise working strategically with core customers in a co-creative, more connected and levelled way. We wanted to get to know them better by listening to their

concerns as managers of a medium-sized municipality, and to explain to them some of our own challenges.

When we planned the seminar 2 weeks earlier and came up with the idea of inviting these guests, Niels, Svend and Knud were worried about wasting our customers' valuable time by meeting them unprepared. Knud had agreed with Niels's plan to prepare a slide show for the occasion, but I advised against it. I later contacted Ida and Trine, seeking some kind of reassurance from them on the learning experience of 'staying in the open' in the final program for the seminar; I felt it important for the team to experience what this kind of attentive listening and dialogue with customers might bring about in our understanding of co-creation, and hoped for an experience of open conversation and mutual reflexivity on strategy and change.

Framing the meeting, I started by talking about co-creation and I openly reflected on how skilled we were becoming in working in an agile way, letting go of the need to plan in detail. I tried to bring our attention to this new skill, reminding everyone how in previous experiences with a short timeframe we had been all wound up, wanting to plan in detail. Nevertheless, we shared a certain anxiety that we might fail to give a good impression, testing the patience of our guests. On greeting us in the lobby, our guests told Niels they could only stay for an hour: so much for planning!

Much to our surprise, our guests expressed gratitude for being invited, noting that as we are part of the municipal 'family' they felt a certain obligation to help us in our experiment, recognizing the similarity of themes and structural challenges in our two organizations. The executive chief ended up staying for 1½ hours, and the CEO for 2½ hours; he told Niels that this is the most interesting conversation he had participated in for a long time. Our initial unease and feeling of disturbing them before their arrival changed into an experience of mutual challenges and situations, and into quite a strong feeling of attachment with them.

I had a strong feeling that this meeting had helped us act our way into new ways of thinking strategy. We had watched a YouTube video (www.youtube.meettheboss) earlier with the CEO from Lego, Jørgen V. Knudstorp, expressing his views on change, and I wrote down some of his remarks. One in particular made an impression on me: 'You think you *think* your way into new action; actually, you *act* your way into a new way of thinking'. The impression from the meeting was that they were more guests than customers, and

that this change in perspective made a huge difference in their understanding of the visit with us as well.

Today, I recognize this meeting as the point where we actually began to act differently and to develop a new understanding of what it is we are doing as a leadership team. I had a very strong feeling of connectedness, that we understood what we were doing and actually acted in unison – as a team. It was no longer just me who set the scene and who wanted us to take our experiences seriously instead of acting on what we thought should be happening or what we were taught being with customers is about. I could see how we were improvising, we were alert and sensing what was emerging and responded to this in the moment rather than to some pre-set image of what we presumed was happening.

The next morning, things changed: Niels, who was about to meet with our chair, ‘Jens’ (also a member of the board of directors at KL), demanded to know if he could rely on us to back him up in his work with the board and with getting into a closer partnering position with KL. We all said yes; Niels commented that he liked this unequivocal response from me, as opposed to my reservations the day before. I wondered if our success from the day before had attuned me to our connectedness as a team.

The consultants asked us to role-play Niels’s meeting. With Niels taking the role of Jens, the rest of us talked to him about what we really wanted to happen, and what we wanted him to do in the new and emerging partnering relationship between COK and KL. Niels left the room for us to prepare. Jens is a strongly focused person, and usually dominates the conversation, leaving only small gaps for anyone else to articulate anything. I suggested that we use the roleplay to imitate the dialogue situation from the day before, letting Jens listen to our concerns about our company and its future position. With little time to plan and prepare, Svend and Knud hesitantly concurred. Once Niels returned to role-play, it became obvious that Jens was annoyed with being positioned as a listener; in the role of Jens, Niels tried to listen but was impatient and unsettled. I sensed the negative impact of this on my concentration, and began to understand why people, including Niels, get so nervous around Jens: as the roleplay ended, Jens was almost angry with us.

Reflecting afterwards, Niels had had an intense experience of how much Jens actually wants us to succeed, and how grateful he is for us staying on board as a team. Niels went on from this to acknowledge his feeling of letting us down,

being our CEO and ‘dragging us through this hardship’. I replied that he wasn’t dragging me anywhere: I participate in this on a voluntary basis, I am being paid and paid well, and am actually having great fun most of the time! Both Knud and Svend similarly resisted his interpretation. Realizing Niels’s concern and care was actually very nice. I reflected on the intertwining of bravery and weakness. I could feel how unsettling it was for me to have played this role of trying to get Jens to listen to us, and felt as if I had flunked a test, insisting with Knud and Svend that we should try to tell Jens about our wishes for the future. It became obvious that allocating a listening position to Jens was not an option Niels could see himself choosing. I wondered for a moment if I am too naïve in believing that people actually want to listen and acquire the information needed to make qualified decisions. I also reflected upon how Knud and Svend in the situation actually listened to my suggestion, and that I should have listened more to them. At the same time, I could feel the power of bravery in having said what I believed was the right thing to do, and the right way to move forward with our chair.

Reflections on the narrative

It is clear to me that trust and conflict, bravery and disagreement play an important role in the movements in this narrative; and through this that recognizing conflict, taking experiences of differences seriously, acting and reflecting on this is an important activity in strategy work. It also becomes clear that the disagreements between us are part of what makes us change our understanding of one another and of what it is we are doing and hereby change our actions. Taking this into our strategic work, I wonder if the anger from Niels on my weakness and my own feeling of being excluded is what might happen in a board of managers in a municipality or in KL when confronted with a more complex understanding of change, and the often following feeling of incompetence and lack of control.

I usually believe that the right employees will emerge when needed, and that our staff are able to grow with the challenges quite well, but trying to stay in the game and express myself more clearly made me say what I did in the first narrative. This openness again made it clear that Niels was worried, and through this we managed to talk to one another about how we could help him meet the chair in a new way. Niels’s reaction to my change of position makes it clear that feelings of predictability and cooperation are

important to him, and at the same time that unpredictability is a part of strategy making. It also becomes clear how important having one another's back and loyalty is. The paradox of moving forward, of changing, through stability and disorder becomes very apparent.

My wish for us to experience meeting our guests in a new way has to do with my understanding of the importance of experience and action to learning. I felt that we simply needed to try meeting customers in new ways in action – to particularize and act rather than to generalize and talk about the new, thus staying in the idealized understanding of what we want to do. Reading the narrative, I can see how I politicize and work with power differentials, bringing in our consultants to help me hold on to this notion. I try to engage their help in my desire for us to work discuss cooperate and conflict our way into action-based understandings of emergence, instability, unpredictability, change etc. I see how I use their presence to open up new ways of working, to gain credibility for and confidence in the complexity perspective and an understanding of strategy as process.

I was conscious of having worked with conflict in my reflections on what was going on in the team for almost a year. Privately, I had been thinking that our tolerance for openly disagreeing, and thus maybe our ability to understand emergent themes in our work, were increasing; this was certainly happening for me. Niels is not usually so sensitive to differences in opinions, but perhaps was anxious about his upcoming strategically important meeting with our chair. For my part, I was trying to stay in the tension and the power game of our conflicts. I was beginning to understand how the intense interactive experiences of forming and being formed in the group both are self-forming and self-transcending, and how negotiation of conflict is both the structure and the process of this.

Further into conflict

Seeing how conflict and differences play out in the leadership team, I want to look further into how conflict can be understood in relation to strategy and action. In most traditional literature on leadership, conflict is seen as something to be avoided or to be dealt with and fixed. In Project 3 I referred to an alternative view: in *Conflict and The Web of Group Affiliations*, George Simmel understands conflict as a form of

socialization. He describes how groups at war cannot afford individual deviation from the unity of the group, which can be lost when the group no longer has an opponent (Simmel 1955, p. 97). Simmel also proposes that groups require disharmony as well as harmony, and that conflict within groups is not entirely disruptive.

The German sociologist Lewis Coser, who was inspired by Simmel, explicitly states that if conflict is settled in an open way, this can be an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life (Coser 1956, p. 31). He also describes how conflict can be a sign of stable bonds and involvement in a group. Regarding our leadership team, this might describe what is happening: perhaps we are forming a stronger group, and our ability to reflect and be reflexive grows as conflict slowly emerges from the shadows to become a more overt aspect of our social life. Coser focuses especially on the basic propositions on the functions of social conflict as a kind of socialization:

No group can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association; and conflicts within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. Group formation is the result of both types of processes. The belief that one process tears down what the other builds up, so that what finally remains is the result of subtracting the one from the other, is based on a misconception. On the contrary, both 'positive' and 'negative' factors build group relations. Conflict as well as cooperation has social functions. Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life. (Coser 1956, p. 31)

Relating Coser's findings to my earlier investigations into exclusion/inclusion and the role this plays in social life, it underpins working life as a socially based, dynamic and complex activity in which it is not possible to define or decide what is good and what is bad as a general rule, but where practical judgment in the specific situation helps us decide what to do. This relates to the question of ethics and 'good/bad', to which I will return later. It also demonstrates that enabling and constraining each other through conflict and negotiating intentions, concerning norms, values and identity is both ongoing and central to what strategy work is all about. I think what has happened in COK over the years is that there have been no big changes, no conflicts or troubling

enabling and constraining and negotiations of intentions finding place between the company and our customers. COK has been more of a ‘competence courses factory’ than a strategic partner for the municipalities in developing their employees and hereby the local welfare. In connection to KL, there has been little preoccupation with what COK was doing from their side. Niels has mentioned that many board members didn’t even show up for the board meetings when he initially became our CEO. Having had no relating in depth to one another also has meant no clear differences in goals or opinions and intentions. This said, I think this indifference has made the identity and the culture of COK crumble, so that COK has become of no special interest for the municipalities. Taking up these new conflicting understandings of development, strategy and change, and through this new ways of acting, could form a new way of being recognized relating – and of recognizing and relating – to our owner and customers in new ways, as well. By being alert to what this does to our understanding of ourselves and the other, it becomes possible to ‘take the attitude of the generalized other’ as Mead puts it, hereby recognizing and staying in contact with municipalities and KL in new ways in order to become a recognized partner ourselves – someone to be trusted in doing the job necessary in developing local welfare. At the same time, there is a possibility of this not happening, of the discrepancies being too conflictual to the known picture of COK and hereby of excluding the possibility of new partnerships evolving. To be able to participate in this complex and conflictual field of change and new relating and positioning and politicking demands that we have practised this in our local relating with one another.

Coser describes the functions, rather than the dysfunctions, of conflict. I am curious to explore this attitude towards conflict as something that not only tears apart, but can also help sustain, group boundaries and prevent withdrawal from groups; I see something like this happening in the leadership team in the above narrative.

Coser focuses his interest in social conflict into a number of propositions and organizes these into some main areas. One area of interest focuses on in-group conflict and group structure. He describes how conflict intensity is dependent on how close a relationship is: closer relationships involve more intense conflict, with higher stakes. He goes on to describe how conflict can be used to remove dissociating elements in a relationship in order to re-establish unity and reintegrate components of the relationship.

He states that by taking up conflict we can get closer, by minimizing the danger of divergences concerning core values. Noting that absence of conflict is by no means a sign of stability, Coser proposes that conflict is actually more likely to arise in relationships that are stable. Looking at our relationships in the leadership team, perhaps it signals our closeness and stability that we can actually have these conflicts, besides being part of our ongoing power struggle.

Coser's proposition on how conflicts with out-groups can lead to increased cohesion in a group is interesting. He describes how groups at war tolerate only limited departure from the group unity (Coser 1956, p. 103). I think our work at the seminar made the leadership team more coherent, while also highlighting the differences in our various understandings of what it is we are doing. We are not exactly at war; but in some ways our organization, and us as its leaders, are under considerable pressure and feel a need to stick together to get through the difficulties of formulating a new strategy that we are facing. This pressure might lead to certain alertness towards dissidents and a strong urge to stay attuned to one another that pulls the opposite way from conflict.

An alternative reflection and understanding connected to Coser's writings is that conflicting and differences makes reflexivity easier, and may even be essential if we are to realize who we are: I am forced to see who I really am when I am not who my colleagues thought I was, and maybe not who I had expressed myself as earlier. Here, conflict connects to identity and recognition as themes being active in such situations. This understanding of conflict, and by extension what is going on in the leadership team, is also close to George Herbert Mead's thinking. Mead's understanding of conflict is at the very core of his theory of ethics (Mead 1908). Conflict he writes is the means through which people continuously recreate their world and become themselves; and as such conflict is closely associated and connected to identity and to culture, to recognizing who one is.

In the narrative, for instance, I see this happening in Niels's reaction to my change of stance. Constant disagreement on where to go or how to understand what we are doing would be detrimental to our survival, but our differences are important to our understanding of each other and who we are, and for getting closer as well. This is important for us to be able to act together in doing something new: reflexivity on our differences, and the way we take it into our conversations, makes us more agile and

spontaneous when working with unpredictability and uncertainty in the meeting with our customers. Since starting this research, I have changed my understanding of conflict – from seeing it as a ‘thing’, something that had to be dealt with and dissolved, to recognizing the process and difference as precisely what makes it possible for us to see who we are and what we are doing – enabling us to move from a fixed understanding of what we want to be, to a lived experience of who we are. This of course also means that we are at risk of finding ourselves too different to be able to move on together.

In his book *Social Theory* the German sociologist, social theorist and pragmatist Hans Joas describes the social sciences as revolving around three specific questions: ‘What is action?’, ‘What is social order?’, and ‘What determines social change?’ (Joas 2009, p. 18). These questions are connected; stability and change are entwined. Order develops and only appears through action, and change comes about through disagreement and debate as well as through compliance and cooperation.

The narrative underlines the interdependency of action, conflict and change. Action inevitably involves conflict, since no one will have an identical view of what they are doing, how to cooperate and what needs doing to achieve change. In the narrative, where Niels draws the bigger picture of it all I do not say what he expects me to say, nor do I think the same as the rest of the group; and this unexpected reaction expresses/creates a difference, a tension or a conflict in the group. This leads us to reflect on roles and positions: our emotions and disorder, feelings of anger and insecurity, are crucial to understanding what we are doing and thus perhaps how we can change and move on.

Ralf Dahrendorf, a German-British sociologist and political theorist, described this process in terms of an equilibrium theory, building on a notion of universal consensus (Dahrendorf 1958, p. 116) and concluding that conflict-theoretical understandings would transform our view of sociological problems. He insists that conflict has an important role to play in change:

Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problems for the explanation of which the conflict model is required. There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other. My own feeling is, however, that, in the face of recent developments in our discipline and the critical considerations offered earlier

in this paper, we may well be advised to concentrate in the future not only on concrete problems but on such problems as involve explanations in terms of constraint, conflict and change. (Dahrendorf 1958, p. 127)

Dahrendorf here is pointing at the fact that a society focused on maintaining its equilibrium leaves no room for freedom of speech, and tends to be isolated from other societies in order to preserve the status quo. In the narrative I see our conflicts and emotions as signs of relatedness and importance to one another, and also see our conflicts as vital to change. Dahrendorf writes about the creative force and the necessity of conflict for social life:

The great creative force that carries along change in the model I am trying to describe and that is equally ubiquitous is social conflict. The notion that wherever there is social life there is conflict may be unpleasant and disturbing. [...] Not the presence but the absence of conflict is surprising and abnormal, and we have good reason to be suspicious if we find a society or social organization that displays no evidence of conflict. (Dahrendorf 1958, p. 126)

Dahrendorf describes an open society and the forces at play here: nobody stands 'outside', planning or deciding what the rest of the organization should do; everyone is engaged in the enabling/constraining of actively doing politics. Living in a world of uncertainty there is always conflict, change and development, and constraint is essential to preserve overall coherence. Because we don't know all the answers, there will be continuous conflict over values and politics.

The narrative shows that when we work with planning and preparing for new ways of working, we don't know the answers, so conflicts inevitably emerge over values and politics and power differentials. The classical, more utopian, way of understanding organizational development as a linear and objective science and as an activity built on rational techniques and tools (Ansoff 1979, Porter 1980) that move the organization towards equilibrium do not explain what is described in my narrative. There are no tools or techniques brought to use, and what is going on is certainly not 'scientific' in any traditional sense. Rather, I narrate interaction full of emotions, conflicts, hopes and anger; each of us moved, and wanting it our own way; insecurity, and unending reflections on what to do and how to move on. These are unpredictable

movements and emerging understandings, not the planned outcomes of management decisions. Yet the narrative also shows how this way of acting into the unknown does in fact move and change the customers invited to the meeting, and does make us think in different ways – which was the whole point of changing our way of working!

I find this description of functions of conflict, and focusing on predictable unpredictability, helpful in understanding what is going on in the leadership team. What function might it serve in our team to be able to conflict more openly? The value of messiness and unexpectedness should not be overlooked, however; without acknowledging these aspects of conflict, we might be tempted to view conflicts as to some extent neat and reliable. Yet conflict is usually experienced as messy, chaotic, hurtful, confusing, misdirecting – perhaps because it is so closely linked to the values that are deeply connected to one’s experience of the ‘enlarged self’. This is the social self, constituted by the organization of particular individual attitudes together with the social attitudes of the ‘generalized other’ or the social group as a whole to which one belongs (Mead 1934, p. 158). Understanding conflict as involving two subjects brings conflict into the realm of self, and of gesture/response as two selves communicating both to themselves and to each other (Ibid., p. 145). This is why conflict must be understood as ‘messy’: it cannot be controlled, planned, or aligned in the usual understanding of these terms. Conversations of gestures as conflict, in this understanding, is a cooperative and paradoxical activity that gets its meaning only by simultaneously cooperating and conflicting, and Meads go on to describe this:

...the relation of the gesture of one organism to the adjusted response made to it by another organism in its indicative capacity as pointing at the completion or resultant of the act it initiates (the meaning of the gesture being thus the response of the second organism to it as such, or as a gesture). (Mead 1934, p. 145)

Mead here describes how it is the response of the other organism, taken together with the gesture that decides what the meaning of a certain gesture is. In the instances described in the narrative, I did not anticipate the responses I got to my gestures repeatedly; the responses changed my understanding of what was going on, and where I reacted openly to this my responses might also have changed the understanding of the rest of the team on what is at stake, and so new patterning might emerge. One could say

that what is going on in these situations is the enabling and constraining of one another, which decides what the meaning of the conversations of gestures is.

Narrative 8: Taking our experience seriously

The following narrative I wrote to my colleagues as part of preparing for a strategy seminar where I was to talk about strategy from a complexity-theoretical viewpoint. In preparing for the seminar, I invited all four of us to write a reflexive narrative on 2 days we just had spent together: the first day a regular leadership team, meeting taking care of usual business, and the second day planning this trip and the next iterations on our strategy work at COK.

Again, we plan going away for a leadership team seminar. We will visit the southern part of Denmark, where Knud grew up. Niels is not there for the start of the first day: his mother-in-law has died, and he is taking his wife to the pastor's office. We start without him, and to our surprise find ourselves getting through the agenda points at a nice pace. When Niels arrives he wants us to jump to discussing the recently closed accounts for year-end 2014. Again, to our surprise, we have finished the year with a surplus of almost DKR 4 million. I open the discussion by proposing that we take a minute to feel how gratifying this is, but Niels is not in the mood for this. He is preoccupied with trying to understand how we can miss the target so much: at the beginning of December, we actually thought we would be lucky if we ended in balance. I agree that this is worthwhile consideration, but I would also like us just for a moment to let ourselves feel what it is like to end in surplus after 3 years of hard work with deficit, firing of employees, all kinds of old shitty cases to take care of ('bonfires in the garden' and 'skeletons in the closet', as we call it!) – if we could let ourselves feel the relaxation of moving into safer waters.

We misunderstand one another. Niels is obviously irritated and annoyed that I/we do not understand the strategic importance of hitting our economic target, and insists that we analyse the deviation. It is hard for me to think and talk openly in this atmosphere of tension. I wonder if he is tired from the family wake. I certainly feel tired and vulnerable myself. Tired from introducing new staff, insecure from having a confrontation with an employee (with Niels present) the week before, uncertain because I insisted on having this first day for 'business' and tomorrow for reflecting on what we are doing, despite Knud's wish to merge the

two days into one – I feel the threat of exclusion once again. I have been working hard on my PhD project and my husband has been away travelling for a month. It is a tiresome discussion we are having. At a certain point, Niels quite angrily tries to give me the board marker and asks me if I want to lead the discussion, since I am obviously dissatisfied with his way of doing things? I refuse, not wanting to escalate the conflict, and once again I unsuccessfully try to create space to recover our breath and get back in touch with one another.

The next item on the agenda is payment of bonuses. Again, we misunderstand one another – Niels thinking I want to problematize bonuses in general and me trying to connect what bonus people get to how we might foresee their degree of cooperation on upcoming assignments. Finishing the meeting is hard work; it succeeds only because of Svend and Knud's calm and helpful interventions.

Meeting with the consultants the next day, they open by reflecting on how the leadership team apparently gets disturbed again and again, in our strategic work connected to co-creation and complexity. A conference on co-creation that we had planned for January had been cancelled due to changing circumstances. Going into planning our strategy seminar, they invited us to reflect on this – not the first time we have reversed decisions concerning agreed activities on co-creation. Niels, however, wants us to start out by reflecting on the previous day's meeting. Having considered it carefully the night before, again I take the lead, reflecting on how I see us acting in new ways: we started the meeting despite Niels's absence, we managed to get through all the items on the agenda, I didn't get as emotional as I have before, and we did get things done, in spite of the tense energy in the room.

Next is Niels. He opens with a biting remark that he has been reflecting, and concludes that there is inadequate strategic capacity in our group (this might not be entirely fair, given how experienced we actually are). He goes on to reflect on a chapter I have shared with them from my co-authored upcoming book, in which I describe what happened in the leadership team 2 years ago when we fired a group of people. Niels had read the chapter immediately, commenting on his own role and the specific circumstances; now, he asks what reflections I received from the other two. When I respond that I haven't heard from them at all, the atmosphere changes immediately: Svend defensively answers that he needed time to reflect on what I wrote and was looking for the right time to talk to me about it; yet he and I had spent 2 hours together in the car the day before, just chatting, without him

offering any observations on my chapter. Knud says it's in his briefcase; he hasn't got around to it yet. Niels gets really annoyed, saying this is the most important document we have received in our 3 years together.

The atmosphere deteriorates; I really don't know what to do. Though glad that I'm not in the hot seat, I'm also painfully aware that my colleagues are under stress. Yet I share Niels's surprise at their lack of response; I'd imagined that perhaps they didn't like what I had written, and weren't sure what to say about it. Niels's immediate response had reassured me about the chapter; he had signed his e-mail using the name I had assigned to him in the book, which I took to mean that he was OK with it. It had also occurred to me that Svend and Knud might disagree with my views on strategy and organizational development, and that my work on conflict, power and politics specifically in our group might be perceived as difficult: the paradox of inclusion/exclusion is not a comfortable theme!

I feel my own exhaustion, and how draining it has been – as well as an exciting privilege – to head this important work in our company. Taking experience seriously is new, and tiring! I am not sure that we actually agree on moving in this direction; nor am I sure that the rest of the group sees their experiences as emerging, unpredictably, through negotiated intentions, power games and politics. I have a strong sense of them having a more linear understanding of organizational predictability and control; a view of development as something to be prepared, predicted and framed, after which it will unfold as planned.

I reflect on the importance of us having a conversation on what we mean by strategy, and what consequences our different understandings of strategy have for our work. If we cannot open this conversation positively, then I am afraid that as a team we might create more disturbance than progress; we risk leading the organization on an erratic course from many different paradigms. Can we keep the employees 'together' enough to move forward as an organization (whatever that is)?

All these musings make me quiet. I have a feeling of sitting 'outside' looking into the meeting, and sense that I should obscure my thoughts rather than alienate the rest of the group. There is enough resistance already!

My thoughts are interrupted by Ida and Trine, who insist that I clearly express my understanding of strategy and what it is we are doing as a leadership team. Sensing that they are right, I let go of my worries and agree to make a

presentation on strategy and change from a complexity-theoretical perspective. I immediately start planning in my head how I can present the different consequences of different views on strategy and how Stacey's concept of transformative causality can be used to present unpredictability and emergence. I hold myself back because I know that the rest of the team find what I am bringing in to be much too theoretical (curious, given that they also talk about the need for research-based inquiry!). I suggest that we all write reflexive narratives as part of our preparation for the seminar. This is a method that I can share with them, so that they will be familiar with it before we ask the employees to do the same; it will also give us material to work with to explore our different experiences of what is going on, with an almost bodily understanding of difference/unpredictability and how we paradoxically are formed by and form one another, both individually and socially. Luckily, everyone agrees to this.

On arriving at the strategy seminar, we are asked to reflect on what it has been like to do this assignment. Knud was the first to hand in his narrative, then myself, followed by Niels and finally Svend. It has been very interesting not only to read the content, but also to see the different 'styles' of writing and analysis revealed through our narratives. Knud opens by saying, rather cheekily, that he was keen to send his in first since he has realized that there is power connected to writing. He looks at me, and we all smile and laugh at ourselves remembering the situation with the chapter from my book at our last meeting. As the conversation around our narratives unfolds, it becomes obvious that something new has happened between us: the atmosphere seems more open, more thoughtful, more accepting of differences and challenges in cooperating, and more curious in relating to one another.

As the days unfold we get closer to one another and to a mutual understanding of how to grasp what it is we are doing in our company, and how working with complex responsive interactions can support our way of working. It is as if something new has happened; as though all our work, cooperation and conflict, power games and politicking over the past 2 years have been negotiating what it is that we are doing together, and we have now reached some kind of temporary consensus or shared perspective. My position is changing. They are asking for me to explain how things can be understood in complexity-theoretical ways, and I sense that they no longer feel threatened by me in this role. Unfolding our thoughts about the strategy for the coming years, it is now possible for us to

begin to see the strategy work as an emerging process, to relate our work to a growing understanding of what ‘taking experience seriously’ means, and to assimilate that predictable unpredictability and local interaction are two key concepts in our understanding of what it is we are doing on our leadership team, and what it is we are doing together with our customers.

As we end the seminar taking turns pretending to give an elevator pitch to our employees on what we think it is we are doing, I feel proud and calm listening to my colleagues. I can truly say that any one of the speeches would have my full vote as to explaining what we are doing and what we are intending to unfold in our work.

Reflections on the narrative

The narrative makes me aware of a different and new feeling of being a ‘whole’. New values are emerging from somewhere new – not from myself or from any one of the team, but from the iterations we have participated in together concerning what it is we are doing, and through our narration of the patterns showing up. It is in this emergence of themes in the narrative patterning of everyday ordinary conversation that the key to joint action lies. Stacey notes that human agents have the capability to reflect upon these population-wide patterns, and to think about them and make sense of them and so to conceptualize them as ‘wholes’ that might be used to form intentions about how to act to get wherever one’s strategy is intended to go. This is a totally different feeling than the one of being excluded. Stacey describes this ‘whole’ in the following way:

From the responsive process view, ‘whole’ does not refer to a system of any kind but to a felt experience of unity in interaction with others in a society. The whole is thus not a creation or co-creation of some *thing*, some third, but a feeling arising in a human body in relating to other human bodies in joint activity. The unity of experience only exists in the iteration of interaction, not as a thing outside it.

(Stacey 2011, p. 380)

This feeling of being a whole is important for members of a team to participate in iterations of joint action, and hereby to participate in creating change. Change in this understanding only can take place in the speed in which the ordinary everyday pattern of conversation and interaction change, which includes changing the patterns of power

relations and ideology. The themes can take any number of forms, from fantasies and myths about what is going on or is wanted to happen, rumours, discussions, models etc. Several themes connected to this understanding of strategy are apparent in the narrative. There is a theme of paradoxically conflicting and struggling with each other, while also sticking together and trying to understand what we are doing. The understanding of conflict as interaction begins to show itself to me, as a means to handle diversity, to get things out into the open and allow differences in opinion and position to be negotiated through our participation in the many paradoxical interactions of cooperation and conflict – such as me challenging Niels with my unexpected reactions; the conflicts on the team; their lack of comment on my book chapter; insecurity about the whole idea of working with taking experience seriously and with complexity; all of us getting to write narratives, and reading one another's thoughts and reflections on what we think is going on.

Another theme is about listening/not listening, or about recognition, and through this comes the question of identity. Though we listen to Niels and his concerns and thoughts on our economy, he probably doesn't experience that we hear what he has to say or that we recognize his concern. In the first narrative, we are listening to the guests on the team and their concerns; and they are listening to us – we are listening to one another in the narratives we write and read. In listening, we are taking each other's experience seriously – recognizing one another, and thus changing our identity and values, in both an individual and a social sense of the word (by which I mean identity as created in the interplay between people).

There is also a visible theme of action – of actually taking a step towards showing one another what it is we are doing and how we perceive one another. The idea of writing narratives on what we are experiencing together springs out of an experience we had in our PhD group when we were going through a rough patch, excluding a new member of the group. In writing narratives we showed one another more of who we are, and recognized one another as different, thereby letting the diversity be seen and paradoxically getting closer to one another. I see our mutual action in doing this as an emerging understanding of what it is we are doing, and an emerging particularization and understanding of the paradoxical transformative causality of forming and being formed by one another at the same time. Stacey puts it in this way:

The communicative interaction in which self is formed is more than a means to coordinating action; it opens human beings up to each other, making possible the experience in which values and commitments to them arise. Shared experiences overcome self-centeredness producing altruism, which is radical readiness to be shaken by the other in order to realize oneself in and through others, (Stacey 2011, p. 380)

Stacey here describes the ability to take the perspective of the other person, and the urge to participate and to connect. I take Knud's remark on being the first to send in his narrative as expressing his readiness to participate in the game in a new way. Paradoxically, he is simultaneously expressing his individuality and difference while also indicating his willingness to participate in our mutual investigation into what is going on. At some point, Knud and Niels talked about coming from an earlier environment where it was crucial not to reveal what was going on within oneself to others on your team, and where you could risk your career if you actually did show what was going on for you. Again, in doing so they paradoxically showed their diversity and connectedness to the team at the same time. I understand strategy in this context as having to do with getting to know the game, and growing confidence in not being decapitated if you actually do show what you are preoccupied with.

In both narratives I find myself in a better situation participating in the conflicts. It is as though my feeling of identity, my own understanding of who I am and others' recognition of me, is getting stronger. I don't necessarily get my own way, but I do find it easier to present a convincing argument, giving me a good enough position on the team for me to interact and try to influence the others. I have a suspicion that this strength is gradually emerging for us all, but only time will tell.

Strategy and action

The narrative makes me curious about understanding what role action has connected to change processes. I have a personal history and narrative of being a survivor and with a strategy of 'managing'. One of my strongest ways of managing has been not to act, but to analyse; to be a spectator, rather than actively participating in the power games. In Project 3 I described how about a year ago in our work in the leadership team I got feedback from my colleagues, and how all three of them independently gave me the

same feedback: I give up if things don't go my way, I stay out of the game and let the others do their thing, and I define disagreement as negative. I now see that some of the conflict in the narratives derives from my attempts to change position on the team.

In the narrative I notice how we change minute by minute in our negotiation of conflict, and through this our growing understanding of each other through our actions. The narrative to me describes our growing understanding of the distinct differences between the four of us, thus paradoxically bringing us closer together. I have earlier looked into action, based on Hannah Arendt's distinctions between labour, work and action. She defines action, in its most general sense, as taking initiative, beginning something, setting something into motion; and connects this to the Greek word for 'to lead' or 'to rule' (Arendt 1958, p. 177). She goes on to explain how the very nature of beginning something is that something new is started which creates the unexpected (Ibid., p. 178). I take her understanding of beginnings as connected to an awareness of 'distinctness'. Distinctness as something that only mankind can express, and so understand what happens when conflict occurs as distinctness showing in action, and as new beginnings. It is through these distinct expressions in the local interactions among the four of us, starting something new together, that it is possible for population-wide patterning to emerge, and new 'wholes' to become active.

In my projects, I have been writing about a myriad of conflicts in my leadership team; only few are included here. Looking at these conflicts now, I see them as many, many local interactions in which, from iteration to iteration, we experience the same patterns of conflict and yet also notice little changes emerging. Each time, in our handling of the present iteration we are engaging in the process of particularizing the themes, values and norms that we have each experienced as important, and must engage in trying to better understand the new mutual values that emerge.

Stacey writes about self-organization as local interaction between agents acting with intention (2011, p. 319). He goes on to describe how agent diversity and conflict is the ground for understanding the spontaneous capacity for the generation of novelty, and thus change and strategy emerge through unpredictable, diverse and conflicting dynamics. Novelty emerges as iterative re-patterning of conversational themes in predictable/unpredictable human interaction, as seen in my narrative. Taking this understanding of how novelty and change come about brings us closer to understanding

why action is such an important concept connected to strategy, and how exploring questions like ‘What are we doing?’ and ‘Who are we?’ can trigger novelty and change, and thus form the fundamental basis of strategy.

Mintzberg’s perspective on strategic management

In the following chapter I will look further into Henry Mintzberg and his view on strategic management. Mintzberg has been one of the more influential thinkers in this area, and has influenced strategic thinking in many ways. I will both borrow from his overview on strategic schools and give an account of his understanding of strategy through action and his approach to patterning of action. His understanding of patterning of action in some ways tries to grasp the same more emergent and processual understanding of strategy that the theory of complex responsive processes of relating describes; but there are differences too, as I have briefly pointed out in the Introduction to Project 4 and will go further into below.

Mintzberg sets up a historical overview and classification of 10 different schools of strategy. He describes the development from predict and planning approaches with the prescriptive schools in the 1950/60s to planning schools in the 1970s, followed by the positioning schools in the 1980s; and from the 1990s, a more eclectic school of strategic management with a more process and action-oriented focus. Here, I will examine three of these.

The prescriptive-based school

The prescriptive-based schools (positioning, planning and design oriented) typically have a notion of the leader as standing ‘outside’ the organization observing it, forming visions for its development and strategies that consist of meticulous change planning and management. These schools build on systems thinking, economics, military history and so on (Mintzberg 2009, p. 368). A typical example of the planning school understanding is the Danish associate professor Jørgen Lægaard, who defines strategy as ‘the road to the goal through a pattern of actions that create competitive power and increased value’ (Lægaard 2014, p. 19). Implicit here is an understanding of strategy as something that leaders develop and apply to the organization. This understanding of strategy connects more or less closely to systems thinking with a parts/whole

understanding of how people and organizations work. Nevertheless, his thinking shows movement towards a greater focus on processes rather than content and goals, moving towards drawing a mind map rather than a typical strategy model mapping the best way through a cause-and-effect process. The prescriptive-based model of strategy tends to view the relationship between leaders and employees based on a notion of the leaders as those with all the answers, and the employees as following their leader's instructions and being taught. Behind this I see a dichotomy, an understanding of people in organizations being two kinds: one with free will (the leader) and one without (the employees). I don't recognize this in my narratives; rather, I see how employees demonstrate considerable free will and act as self-organized agents just as much as the members of the leadership team. I think this is the understanding I somehow came from, trying to figure out how leadership and followership might work together and form a nicely organized strategy development.

The learning school

Lægaard also describes the learning school with concepts like Charles Lindblom's 'muddling through' (Lindblom 1959), a concept which is also taken up by Burgelman (1983), Weick (1995, 2001) and Senge (1990). Far from sharing the view of a neat and orderly controlled process (as taken, for instance, by the prescriptive school) Lindblom sees policymaking as a messy, complicated and irrational process. Burgelman is among the first to describe how strategy also develops in a bottom-up process, with strategic initiatives developing deep in the hierarchy given impetus and authorization through middle and senior executives. According to Burgelman strategy formation is both emergent (acknowledging the organization's capacity to experiment, both as individuals and as small groups of employees and leaders) and deliberate (focusing on control). This understanding posits a difference between emergence and control. (Another way of understanding this is that emergence simply means local interaction as in the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. So there is always emergence and the quality of that emergence will depend on how we interact together, by saying that we are planning tightly or to say that we are not). In the learning-school, sense-making is acknowledged as an important part of this understanding by outstanding theorists such as the organizational theorist Karl E. Weick (1995) and Peter Senge (1990), both renowned systems thinkers preoccupied with organizational learning. Weick states that:

‘If you get people moving, thinking clearly, and watching closely, events often become more meaningful, and that meaning lies in the path of action’ (2001, p. 346). He compares strategic plans to maps:

They animate people and they orient people. Once people begin to act, they generate tangible outcomes in some context, and this helps them discover what is occurring, what needs to be explained, and what should be done next. Managers keep forgetting that it is what they do, not what they plan that explains their success. They keep giving credit to the wrong – namely, the plan – and having made this error, they then spend more time planning and less time acting. They are astonished when more planning improves nothing. (Weick 2001, p. 346)

Weick is here framing the leader as the main sense-maker, and goes on to explore gaps, discontinuities, uncertainties and emphasizes improvisation as strategy. He writes about how underspecified order is a part of strategy, and uses jazz or improvisational theatre as an example, where there is a theme or a situation as a starting point, and where a general direction and guideline is sufficient for people to move on (Weick 2001, p. 351). Weick maintains a strong sense of the leader’s role in creating and initiating this guideline or basic order though and again, and stresses the leader’s action very much. I don’t find this to be entirely true in my narratives, where sense-making and change seem to come about through interactions and reflections on what it is we are doing when we work together as well.

Peter Senge (1990, pp. 16–21) outlines five technologies essential to a learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, team learning, building shared visions, and systems thinking. These technologies are expressed in wording such as: people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire; collective aspiration is set free; new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured; people are continually learning how to learn together. I see this school as inspired largely by systems theory and positive psychology – focusing on positive, sense-making elements while neglecting more tricky issues in organizations such as power, politics and conflict. This creates a somewhat evangelical framework for organizational development, in which those who are constrained in what they want to do, or disagree with what is going on, are rendered almost invisible or tacitly subjected to a strong disciplinary power.

The power school

Finally, I want to describe the power school, which places power and influence at the core of strategy (Mintzberg 2009, p. 242). In the power school, organizations develop through the use of power and negotiations; and since the theory of complex responsive interaction examines precisely these two elements (power and negotiation or politics), I will explore the power school's ideas in more depth. Mintzberg defines two branches of this school: the micro power branch, which deals with the play of politics inside an organization unfolded as legitimate and illegitimate power; and the macro power branch, which concerns itself with the use of power by the organization towards the outside world. The micro power branch of the school tries to bring the political process that managers participate in back in focus, and emphasizes that individuals in organizations – managers included – have dreams, hopes, jealousies, interests and fears (Mintzberg 2009, p. 244). Mintzberg notes three legitimate systems at work whose power is officially acknowledged: formal authority, established culture and certified expertise. These means, though, are used in between to pursue illegitimate ends; and it is here that politics comes in, according to Mintzberg.

Mintzberg goes on from here to define four legitimate and beneficial ways of using politics: as a system of influence that can act to ensure that the strongest members of an organization are brought into positions of leadership; as a means to ensure that all sides of an issue are fully debated, whereas the other systems of influence may promote only one; as a means to stimulate necessary change that may be blocked by more legitimate systems of influence; and finally, as a way of easing the path for the execution of change. Basically, this understanding of strategy is based on systemic thinking about organizations and on individual-focused psychological schools like the cognitivist, the constructivist and the humanistic, where focus is more on the individual leader in the organization-making strategy, rather than focusing on the social aspects and the interdependency of members of organizations as well.

The macro power branch is organizational strategies defined by processes of acting upon, or negotiating with – rather than reacting to – the external environment. The object here is to attain status of being closed to most external influence. In this area of macro power we would find tools like stakeholder analysis, strategic manoeuvring trying to signal to competitors that it might be wise rather to negotiate mutually

beneficial arrangements than to fight, thereby actually playing or feinting one's competitors. I presume most managers would recognize this in, for instance, the tendency to overestimate the number of employees or the size of assignments when meeting with colleagues from competitive organizations. Finally, he mentions cooperative strategy making and collaborative strategic alliances as part of the power school (Mintzberg 2009, p. 268). I think this in some ways is what is in focus strategically, when the public sector in Denmark is so preoccupied with co-creation: that it seems to offer the possibility for forming joint ventures between the public sector, the citizens and more private enterprises. One of the differences in this from my findings is the tendency to understand micro and macro branches as lower and higher levels of organization. In my research I have rather found that local interaction and global patterning are paradoxically present at the same time, and as such interrelated and interdependent, influencing and being influenced by one another in countless iterations.

Mintzberg draws in the American writer Lee Bolman and Professor Terrence Deal and their 'political frame' which is a part of a four-frame model on perspectives on organizations (the four frames being the *structural* frame with organizing and structuring organizations, groups and teams to get results; the *human resource* frame, focusing on people and how to satisfy human needs and improve HR management; the *political* frame, focusing on political dynamics in organizations; and the *symbolic* frame, taking meaning and culture into focus) to develop his understanding of the power school further. In their book *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (2013) describe five key propositions to the 'political frame', a frame which they describe as focusing on the political dynamics in organizations and as examining how managers and leaders in organizations can understand power and conflict, build coalitions, hone political skills and deal with internal and external politics:

- Organizations are coalitions of different individuals and interest groups.
- Coalition members have enduring differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality.
- Most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources – deciding who gets what.
- Scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the centre of day-to day dynamics and make power the most important asset.

- Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing stakeholders jockeying for their own interest.

(Bolman and Deal 2013, pp. 188–189)

Bolman and Deal argue that wise leaders understand their own strengths, works to expand them and build diverse teams that offer leadership in all four frames to the organization (Bolman and Deal 2013, pp. 355–369). They take conflict as something that is understood differently in the four different frames of leadership, and state that because managers must recognize and manage conflict, which can be both productive and debilitating, they need negotiation skills to develop alliances and cement deals that enable their group to move forward (Ibid., pp. 201–202). This view still considers the leader as the ‘right person’ in a privileged position to develop strategy, although they do allow for the contribution of subordinate groups in the process of determining/distorting strategies. Organizations here become what they become because of the learning processes they are in, and the strategy is obtained because of the learning processes. Hence the leader has the role to inspire and design effective learning processes. I haven’t found much evidence for this. Rather than the leader being head of a learning organization I have found the leadership team immersed in complex conversations influencing and being influenced by the employees in COK. I have found us participating in negotiating power and influence together with the rest of the employees in our company, and our influence on what was going on dependent on how well we managed to work together and participate in or create strong coalitions.

Mintzberg’s five Ps for strategy

As mentioned above Mintzberg himself developed a model for strategy work consisting of five definitions of strategy (Mintzberg 1987): plan, ploy, pattern, position and perspective. He describes the five definitions as:

- *Strategy as Plan*: Most people understand strategy as a plan, understood as a conscious and intentional action or guidance on how certain situations are to be handled. Strategy understood in this way means that the plan is constructed beforehand. This means that the plan is formed before the actions described are

taken. Such plans are deliberately constructed and with a certain purpose. These plans can be both general and specific.

- *Strategy as Ploy*: Here strategy is understood as a ploy in situations where a company uses a ‘trick’ to cheat a competitor, like saying a big breakthrough or a sale is near.
- *Strategy as Pattern*: Strategy can also be defined as a pattern, when a number of the organizations actions are creating a consistent pattern. This definition has to do with the parts of strategy that are not necessarily planned and intentional. Strategy as a plan might show up not to be realized, whereas strategy as a pattern might emerge without any prepared or planned action. This is what is described above as the paradox of planning and emergence. Mintzberg describes this patterning as actions taken, one by one, converging over time to some sort of consistency or pattern, and as looking at past behaviour (as opposed to strategy as plan which looks ahead).
- *Strategy as Position*: Defined as position strategy describes the actions an organization takes to get an advantageous position in relationship to the environment. Here the strategy focuses on adapting the organization to the surroundings.
- *Strategy as Perspective*: Here, focus is turned inwards towards the identity of the organization, as opposed to strategy as a position with its focus directed outwards. When strategy is defined as perspective, the organizational purpose is to influence the conception that the surroundings have of it. In this definition strategy is abstract and intangible, existing only in the minds of the people involved (Mintzberg 2009, p.111) .

Mintzberg stresses that you have to see these five aspects as intertwined and take your own stance or make your own mixture of the five according to the situation in which your organization is in. Connected to the challenges for COK, which I have described in this thesis, his understanding of pattern in strategy is the one I think relates the most to what we are doing in working with writing reflexive narratives and taking experience seriously. Of course, we as a management team try to control what is going on to a certain degree – in order to keep our budget and make it possible for the employees to get their salary, for instance; but at the same time, we are controlled by our employees

and their attempts to control what is going to happen, and a lot of unintended episodes happen along the road as well. Mintzberg puts it in this way:

Strategies, in other words, have to form as well as be formulated. An umbrella strategy, for example, means that the broad outlines are deliberate (...) while the details are allowed to emerge en route (...). Thus emergent strategies are not necessarily bad and deliberate strategies good; effective strategies mix these in ways that reflect the conditions at hand, notably the ability to predict as well as the need to react to unexpected events. (Mintzberg 2009, p. 12)

I find this view on strategy a stepping-stone towards the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, although there are a series of differences as well. Mintzberg's description is overall an abstract account of what management is about, even in the description of the micro power school, and Mintzberg is still splitting planning/deliberation and emergence. The concepts of power and politics are to quite a high degree seen by him as external processes as opposed to management, and as something one actually should avoid. Another difference is the understanding of emergence, where Mintzberg sees the process of emergence as being one over which managers can exert some degree of control.

As mentioned earlier, Mintzberg is interested in trying to understand how management can use politics to get strategies accepted, and he writes the following about politics:

New intended strategies are not just guides to action; they are also signals of shifts in power relationships. The more significant the strategy and the more decentralized the organization, the more likely are these to be accompanied by political manoeuvring. Indeed, such manoeuvres can make it difficult for an organization to arrive at strategies at all – whether deliberate or emergent. (Mintzberg 2009, p. 251)

Since coalition processes exist in organizations, performing a necessary function, and since they influence decision outcomes, general management must recognize them, understand them, and learn to manage them. For Mintzberg, although politics does show up in his descriptions of strategy, the understanding of politics is that

it in many ways is illegitimate in organizations and is mostly present in emergent processes where the result is not intended and not expected. This is followed by an understanding of the most efficient strategy as a deliberate and intended process where politics is seen as an intrusion in the strategy process of sharing an integrated perspective, or a single shared vision. This brings me to the third point of difference, where Mintzberg and the power school to a larger degree focus on managers and their ability to be on top of things (Mintzberg 2009, p. 342), rather than seeing everybody in the organization as intertwined. At the same time, he is quite aware of the oxymoronic quality of talking about change management, since change should not be managed or forced. He suggests that the best way for change to be 'managed' is to allow for it to happen by setting up the conditions whereby people will follow their natural tendency to experiment and transform their behaviours. Bolman and Deal have some interesting notions on power, conflict and coalition here. They state that politics and political processes are universal and cannot and will not go away, and in fact use the same citation from Foucault that I used earlier in the chapter on power that it produces.

Mintzberg goes on to describe different change methods, and maps this on a horizontal scale from micro change to macro change, and a vertical scale from planned to evolved organic change. In describing how this grid is to be used, Mintzberg underlines that the very meaning of emergent evolving strategy and change is that micro changes can have macro consequences; that single actions can lead to significant patterns of action and change. Also in his view on programs of comprehensive change Mintzberg is quite open on taking the concrete micro level serious in this, stating that there is no consensus on what works the best, and that there are no magical formulas:

The trick is to balance change with continuity: to achieve change when and where necessary while maintaining order. Embracing the new while sweeping out the old may be the very modern thing to do, but it is generally a lot more effective – as well as difficult – to find ways to integrate the best of the new with the most useful of the old. (Mintzberg 2009, p. 350)

Mintzberg here talks about some of the paradoxes of organizational life, that change and continuity are related, and that one needs to balance this. In his book *Ledelse (Managing)*, he describes and discusses 13 riddles in managing that managers

have to understand better in order for them to create reconciliation rather than solutions, and connects this to Charles Handy and his book *The Age of Paradox* where Handy states that paradoxes can only be lead and administered, meaning to be handled. Earlier on managing always meant to handle, until we kidnapped the word and made it mean planning and control (Mintzberg 2010, p. 221). In this way Mintzberg tries to both describe and organize these riddles and be aware of their unsolvable nature, and maybe this is what managing is all about (Mintzberg 2009, p. 266).

Mintzberg has a lot of strategy models and tools for managers to use and apply in his books, such as the model of managing described in his book *Ledelse* (Mintzberg 2010). The model describes managing as an activity that finds place on three levels: an informational level, a human level and an action level. At all three levels there are structuring and planning assignments for the manager to take care of. Working with this model, Mintzberg describes how action is to be understood concerning management; since most managers are defined precisely by not being the ones acting directly in the production of whatever it is the organization is producing. There are two roles to play out at each level. At the level of information, one has to communicate all the way around and to control internally. At the human level, it is about managing internally and creating connections externally. Finally, at the action level, they act internally and make deals externally. He states that the essence in managing is not to make decisions, to plan and to motivate subordinates, but rather endless negotiations, trades and deals. Managing in this understanding is about participation in action, and acting in order to make things happen. It is not a passive activity, not about sitting in an office giving orders, not about judging or rating other people's actions. Nor is it about forming strategies, structures and systems that steer other people. This is all control. In the role of action, the manager is personally and practically involved in the activities going on, a part of the action and the forming of the activities that change the output of the organization (Mintzberg 2010, p. 121). Being involved is one of the best ways of getting to know what is going on, and he goes on to write:

Strategies do not emerge by Immaculate Conception in distant offices, but is learned to a much higher degree by concrete experience. Or to put it in another way: Projects don't just execute strategies – they participate in forming them. (Mintzberg 2010, p. 124)

To be able to participate in a number of the projects that are at any given time active in an organization, and hereby to be able to manage in this complexity, is what Mintzberg tries to describe through the development of the model for managing that I have here described in brief.

Conclusion

Mintzberg in many ways is trying to describe some of the same elements of management that the theory of complex responsive processes of relating does taking in the complexity sciences, and Mintzberg's many models are attempts to give managers tools for understanding what it is they are doing as managers, and to learn and improve. Mintzberg and the school of power and his descriptions of patterning, emergence, action and politics do have some similarities and is in some ways parts of the same tradition that Stacey and the other researchers at the University of Hertfordshire are inquiring into, but there is the one central difference in where one has positioned oneself as researcher and/or manager. Mintzberg's reflections are predicated on action – first how to understand and how to learn, then how to do and how to act from a somewhat detached position of being outside and detached to the object looked upon. In opposition to this, Stacey, Griffin and Mowles work with the concept of taking experience seriously and *phronesis*, and are all trying to help the leader act into the moment and think about the way he thinks about what he is doing as a manager, as an observing participant – which is a totally different interrelated and connected place to be. They insist on an interconnected conversational and a politically based interaction as the basis for reflexivity. Their focus is to develop reflexivity on how one thinks and how this way of thinking influences what one does, and vice versa how one's actions influence how one thinks. In this way the theory of complex responsive processes of relating is closely connected to the interrelatedness of people working together, to the radical social self and hereby closely connected to ethics.

Taken from here the theory of complex responsive processes of relating has quite a different view on emergent action, interaction and interrelatedness – another view on organizations and on politics than Mintzberg and the power school. Mintzberg splits processes of organizational change out into levels, and to a certain degree separates planning from emergence and has an idea of managers allowing or even encouraging emergence to happen. In separating planning from emergence, he is here

separating thinking from acting. Local interaction, in this understanding, is the process of implementation: Mintzberg describes a lot of different ways of working with strategy, and has described how organizations are able to learn their way into the future by processes of learning as an emergent strategy. Yet this is still based on an idea of global patterns being identified and changed at certain levels through a learning process where mental models are changed, often through team work with a focus on global and long-term changes (Mintzberg 1998). The theory of complex responsive processes of relating understands thinking, action and emergence in quite another way. Leaning on Mead's theories of the emergence of self-consciousness through the iterations of gesture and response in communicative activity, this theory finds that meaning of communication between people relating to one another as we do in organizations emerges in never-ending iterations of gestures and responses (Shaw and Stacey 2006, p. 11). Gesture and response are not understood as levels or a sequence where the one comes after the other and brings the interaction to a higher level through learning processes. Both gesture and response are required to create meaning; and because responses are being evoked even as the gesture is under way, meaning emerges during the act, not as an effect of the act. In this perspective, long-term outcomes/patterns are always unpredictable.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating

I want to compare all these understandings of strategic management against the theory of complex responsive processes of relating as it has been unfolded by Ralph Stacey and his group of researchers at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire.

One of his close associates has been professor Patricia Shaw, who has been preoccupied with changing conversations in organizations as a means to participate in the processes of evolving patterns. Shaw writes about the messiness in interactions, about only being able to be interrelated and participating, and relates her understanding of practical knowledge and skill to the everyday art of 'going on together':

People had a sense of what I meant because of our mutual ongoing experience of the disorderly way order arises and dissolves and reconfigures in human affairs, a process we are never on top of or ahead of despite our inescapable attempt to be so. (Shaw 2002, p. 5)

I connect this to Griffin's definition of strategy. Douglas Griffin writes about leadership based on a complexity- and action-based theory, which I find supported by my narratives. Writing about order and disorder paradoxically being present simultaneously in organizations, he notes that in human relating there is no simple possibility of knowing how to judge the outcomes of action before acting, since the future is constructed in the interaction between people as gestures and responses, and since the self-organization of those participating in the organization, with all its inherent order and disorder, forms the basis of identity and change. Griffin defines participative self-organization as a process that has no imputed purpose, but has its own cause or purpose – namely, the process of constructing the as yet unknown future (Griffin 2002, p. 14). He then goes on to emphasize the conflictual present in which we all are negotiating our aims and goals (Ibid., p. 19). The ethical consequences of acting are inextricably linked to a different thinking about leadership as paradoxically participating and observing at the same time.

I take both Shaw and Griffin to mean that it is impossible to decide in advance of acting what the outcome will be, or what is the 'right' thing to do. This puts focus on the living present as the moment where we co-create the future through our experience of conflict and messiness and interactions with one another, which is the very essence of action. It also underlines the sustaining and potential transformation of identity that finds place in human interaction as the basis for change, seeing change as small discontinuities that influence the identity of the participants.

Griffin writes about participative self-organization as a way of thinking about organizational life:

...when the intention arises in the action, as it does in participative self-organization, and when the outcome of the action cannot be known in advance of acting, then a different view of ethics is required. In other words, a different way of thinking about how we morally account to each other for our actions is called for, one that takes account of the paradox of 'at the same time'. Time is then no longer simply the linear predictability of before and after. Rather, time is circular in the sense that the emerging future is constructed, as is the understanding of the past, in the self-organizing processes of interaction in the living present. (Griffin 2002, p. 15)

Thinking in this way about ethics and explaining our actions from within our participation in them changes the way we must think about experience, interaction and leadership. Leaders can no longer be seen as individuals using tools and techniques to control what is going on and standing outside the organization observing, explaining and forming it; nor is it possible to categorize the response to any given gesture. In this understanding leaders are paradoxically participants and observers at the same time in the endless participatory construction of the future. All the messiness, emotion, conflict, politicking and power configuration work going on in leadership groups are all part of this organizational reality. Strategy here is simply experiencing the emergent movements, and participating in negotiating the construction of the future.

Conclusion

On starting the DMan, I was interested in leadership and followership, building on a notion that becoming more aware of these two positions could lead to fewer conflicts and more homogenous and efficient work in organizations. Yet my narratives point away from a view of strategy as employees conforming to a universal value decided by an idealized group called the leaders. Leaders can no longer be idealized as having values to which the rest of the members of the organization must conform if they wish to retain their membership: my research indicates that this is not what is happening. Rather, leaders are fighting and conflicting their way through, trying to define what it is they are doing, where to go and how to get there. To me this indicates that organizations are not systems, not wholes that can be moved by especially powerful parts named leaders; rather than being changed and developed by these leaders, organizations are everyday contingencies of ordinary life filled with cooperation and conflict, anger and happiness, confusion and direction, people cooperating and competing and trying to protect their own interests. Leaders participate in this and, if they can create powerful alliances and are good negotiators, can help groups of employees to connect and thus perhaps for a while move their work in a more coordinated direction.

When I look into my narratives I see a lot of tension, conflict and cooperation at the same time. When I started my research, I wanted to determine how one can be sure of the right thing to do in strategy. I wanted to see if working with the dichotomy of leadership/followership and their patterns of interaction could help me define how

strategy work can develop. I have come to realize that human interaction is an ongoing process of gesture/response, and that there is a paradoxical interplay between inclusion/exclusion in organizational life. This moved my focus into investigating human conflict, where I recognized the importance of concealment/transparency in the power games of groups. This shifted my attention back to a renewed interest in seeking to understand what ethics might mean in such a context.

Immanuel Kant and his philosophy of the categorical imperative has been a key foundation of the European ethical tradition. He saw ethics as ‘fixed realities’ connected to the use of pure reason, connected to human autonomy, separate from and existing before heteronomous actions deriving from desire, emotion or self-interest (Scruton 2001, p. 80). Based on the concept of free will, Kant thought it possible to judge the ethics of human conduct, which implies that the meaning of any action could be reasoned in advance; here, one might decide to avoid conflict in order to do the ethically ‘right’ thing. Perhaps this concept of ethics was what I unknowingly built upon at the start of my research, based on my religious background and on a social-constructionist belief in the possibility of doing ‘good’ by focusing on relational responsibility, whereby we mutually support the co-creation of meaning in a mutual exchange and understanding (Gergen 2009).

Griffin bases his ethos on Mead’s understanding of the self and the role this plays in interaction, identity and change. Mead (1908) states that the moral interpretation of our experience is contained within the experience itself; it can therefore only be discerned in the simultaneously competitive and cooperative interactions that we participate in. For Mead, difference and conflict form the very core of ethics, since it is through interactions of conflict and distinctiveness that we continuously recreate our world and our selves emerge – where we feel, understand and maybe recognize our identities:

If we were willing to recognize that the environment which surrounds the moral self is but the statement for the conditions under which his different conflicting impulses may get their expression, we would perceive that the recognition must come from a new point of view which comes to consciousness through the conflict. The environment must change *pari passu* with the consciousness. Moral advance consists not in adapting individual natures to the fixed realities of a moral universe,

but in constantly reconstructing and recreating the world as individuals evolve.
(Mead 1908, p. 319)

I take Mead to mean that conflict is a part of what is expressed in human interaction, and that ethics is no more and no less than the emerging consciousness that arises through the conflicts of living human beings as we struggle to create our future together. Relating this to my own narratives, I take it to mean that we live in the moment within the act, becoming aware of the continuous reconstruction and re-creation of the world as we evolve as individuals. This understanding of what I am/you are is the basis of expanding consciousness, and the basis for the changes that take place in the perpetual construction of the future, sustaining and potentially transforming the identities of all participants.

My view on strategy and how to understand this has also changed. I have inquired into the literature of strategy and have investigated different schools of understanding this. I see a strong and fairly coherent new strategy develop in the narratives, not as a premeditated plan, but as a reflexive and emerging understanding of what it is that we, as self-organizing agents, are doing together, emerging in the messiness of the paradox of planning and emerging. It is a growing recognition of one another's intentions, connected to an understanding of how this might connect to what our employees are doing working together with us, and to the overall wish to bring our company in a better position to help the municipalities develop their welfare. Being able to stay in the game – feeling all the anxiety, conflict, different understandings and struggles for power and influence – is what strategic leadership is all about.

By writing reflective narratives for one another, as we did in the last narrative, I think we are working with the co-creation of our mutual future through bravely including the movements of the past in our construction of the future. The experiences of working together, and all the differences and conflicts we have shared on the leadership team, and the ability to again and again to bring in new areas of difference in focus are part of our mutual process of influencing and being influenced forward. We do need to think about who we are and what it is we are doing; we do need to find some common ground on what we want to achieve. Taking experience seriously here means holding ourselves responsible for seeing what it is that we are actually doing: conflicting, arguing, negotiating, being scared, playing power games and trying to

muddle along to some degree in the direction we hope to move. Patricia Shaw suggests working iteratively with strategy through questions like the following:

- Who are we realizing we are as we gather here?
- What kind of sense are we making together?
- What are we coming to talk about as we converse?
- How are we shifting our understanding of what we are engaged in?
- What kind of enterprise are we shaping?

(Shaw 2002, p. 172)

In taking in questions like these, it becomes clear that there is no 'I' or unified 'we' when it comes to groups of people working together. By taking the experience seriously in my leadership team, I see how this change in my thinking about myself and my values also influences my own identity in these narratives, and see how it changes my colleagues' way of acting and thinking as well. I am no longer as obsessed with followership/leadership or with doing good/bad, but instead find myself preoccupied with understanding how to stay in touch and engaged with my leadership team as we conflict, cooperate and compromise our way to new ways of working together. As Chris Mowles puts it:

If there are emancipatory intentions, then these revolve around the ways in which 'we' can continue to stay engaged in discussions together. Staying in conversation, with all the conflict, co-operation and compromise that this involves (perhaps what we might term this the three 'Cs'), and taking into account the otherness of others, involves an identity shift in oneself. We are obliged to adapt to those with whom we try to stay in engaged conversation. This describes a particular quality of reflexivity which is not just concerned to reflect in a detached way about how one might be thinking about others, but pays attention to the shifts in one's own identity that arise in the necessary interaction with other engaged enquirers. The question of identity arises not just for 'them' but for us as we engage in a dialectical back and forth between self and others. (Mowles 2011, p. 262)

What leaders do is act. Since ethical values emerge in interaction, the local everyday social interactions of leaders are important to organizations and to the ethical values that

they demonstrate. This means that ethics can be seen as an interpretation of action that is to be found within the action itself (Griffin 2002, p. 216). Seeing that conflict is such an important part of leadership interaction makes it important to explore the functions and meaning of conflict in this everyday social life in organizations, so that we may better participate and act into this ongoing awareness of the meanings of conflicting actions, recognizing its importance for all participants – acknowledging that conflict continues to shape, recognize and renegotiate our ongoing identity. And it makes it important to try to stay alert, avoiding an oversimplified splitting of an individual or social understanding of how self and ethics come into being – recognizing instead that mutual enabling/constraining is what really goes on in emerging change and transformational processes.

Synopsis

Introduction: We are writing a book

Everyone in the organization is assembled for a 2-day seminar of working together reflecting on our experiences of understanding what co-creation is and trying to learn from that. The leadership team has been working with complexity for almost 3 years now, and for 1½ years we have involved our employees in taking experience seriously and focusing on aspects of co-creation. This has been hard work for everyone.

Individuals have been interviewed about what they do and what their personal work challenges are; together, they have tried to develop their challenges of working on a team; and we have been working with our customers in new ways. We have used the concepts of co-creation and ‘circular economy’ to describe our complexity-based understanding of our mutual interrelatedness with our customers, rather than an order–execute–receive model (in Danish, a BUM model). We have been experimenting with inviting public customers to participate in the development of our new understandings and identity, reflecting with them on what it is we are doing, separately and together; and everyone in the company has written reflexive narratives on their experiences with all this. We have now planned a creative writing workshop for everyone in the company, with the purpose of writing and producing a book on taking experience seriously working with co-creation.

Right now at the seminar we are working together trying to grasp the interplay of the individual and the social, and reflecting on this simultaneously as we write chapters for our book. I have been trying to point to and openly reflect upon how interactions bring both parties into a situation where they give and take, are influencing and are being influenced by one another, exemplified through these writing processes. Two snapshots:

- (1) ‘Sofie’ (aged 55) is a quiet and reserved administrator. In her work with co-creation her personal focus has been on listening, since she realized that her identity as a good listener was only partly true: she listens carefully to customers in order to clarify what she can offer in return. She has been very diligent in experimenting with listening, and has chosen to participate in a writing session

on ‘reflection and reflexivity’. As she reads out her group’s reflections on the subject, I am touched and amazed: she talks about the distinction between reflection and reflexivity as if she has worked with this for years. Niels, our CEO, is immediately excited by her reflections and responds that he sees things differently. I wince, anxious to see this new side of her being challenged by the most powerful person in the room. Yet Sofie stands her ground, insisting that what Niels says is not how they see it. Their view on the matter is... I am flabbergasted! This is so different from the person I met when I started in the company 3 years ago.

- (2) Closing up the second round of the creative writing seminar, one of our youngest consultants, ‘Lucas’, asks us to supply a clear definition of co-creation to help employees who may be struggling with the concept. For years, I have deliberately avoided giving a definitive explanation, wanting employees to reflect on it themselves rather than accepting my version; after all, letting the leadership team work it out for themselves has been an important way of reaching new understandings of themselves and our mutual interdependency. Especially at the Copenhagen office, I have overheard hidden discussions in the corridors on what co-creation is – this new way of working, where we reflect and talk with one another about what it is we are doing, rather than defining what we must do and then getting it done. I sense Lucas’s earnestness and wonder if he has been ‘framed’ by some of the older employees to pose this question. His team (sales and marketing) has had trouble finding their new position in working with customers. I wonder if I have been too vague – if my preference for avoiding prescriptive definitions, and my own questions of inclusion/exclusion, are over-influencing me. Niels begins to answer; he talks about the insecurity of not knowing what is going on, frustrations and improvising, courage and the ability to take experiences seriously, and the need to draw upon your own experiences rather than taking someone else’s definition as your own. He talks about the journey he has been on trying to understand what this complexity theory has to say about mistakes and conflict, and about the joy of being alive and the importance of movement. He ends by stating that as long as he is the CEO of our company there will be no standard definition of

co-creation, and that he will do his very best to secure the possibility for us to go on working with taking our experiences seriously without prescriptions and definitions to help us out. How differently he is handling this challenge, compared with 3 years ago! I make a note of how important it is that we do not silence this questioning of what we are doing, that we manage to let conflict and disagreement be a part of our talks about what is going on; but also I am alert to seeing my personal part of the processes and the power games we participate in as a leader and as a team.

These brief narratives show how taking experience seriously is taken up in my organization after 3 years of working with this as a part of a turnaround process. It has been a movement from one way of thinking to another, and the four projects in this thesis show some of the situations I have been curious about, contrasting my thoughts with those of scholars in the field to investigate what these experiences and reflections might say something about, both specifically in context and more generally. I hope to present my movement of thought and changed views on co-creation – and on the connection between theory and practice – for the reader to reflect on what has been going on, and how this matters in my daily work as a leader and for leaders in general working with organizational strategy and change.

Project 1

Introduction

Project 1 was a reflective narrative on the influences, experiences and ways of thinking that informed my work in organizations before I started on the DMan. I entered the program hoping to ascertain how managers' strategy work in organizations could be supported by a clearer understanding of leadership/followership (Kelley 1988; Riggio 2008; Chaleff 2009). Coming from a strongly systemic and social constructionist background (Boscolo et al 1991; Cecchin 1992; Gergen 1991, 1994, 1999; Lang et al 1990; Maturana 2008; Senge 2003 ; Shotter 1993a, 1993b, 2006, 2008), and having worked as a consultant in a big Danish consultancy firm (Rambøll/S&S), I now found myself working with organizational development from an appreciative inquiry-based

approach (Cooperrider 2005; Hornstrup 2012, 2013; McNamee et al 1998; Storch 2011).

Through the first year on the program, I realized that my focus on leadership/followership had its background in the specific philosophy of systems theory (Haslebo and Lyndgaard 2007; Haslebo and Haslebo 2012; Molly-Søholm 2012), and that my preoccupation with it in management created both a certain order/power structure and a schism in my thinking that resulted from questions I had not yet asked. I therefore began an inquiry into what really intrigued me about leadership/followership, soon realizing that I had a life full of experiences of what ‘to manage’ means; to understand it more fully, I would need to explore my many questions on attachment, inclusion/exclusion, culture and identity, resistance and change, transparent/hidden transcripts.

Writing Project 1 and reflecting on 13 years of working as a manager, I began noticing repetitive themes of power games and cooperation/competition. I had interpreted some of my patterns of experience as me being victimized in my efforts to do ‘good’, but new understandings emerged through writing reflective narratives. I saw how I was participating in power struggles, how I was outsmarted, and how I tried to manipulate and muddle my way through life as a manager. I noticed that the traditional management literature didn’t mention, much less explain, much about the messiness of management (Digmann and Dall 2003; Hamel 2008; Thyssen 2007), which made me curious to explore management activity by investigating more chaos and complexity-based understandings of organizations and of organizations as complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey 2011; Shaw 2002; Mowles 2011).

The radically social self

The first theme coming out of Project 1 was connected to understanding the self as emerging in the paradox between individuality and the social, inspired by Mead (1967) and his concept of the self as radically social, arising in social interactions with other selves enabling and constraining one another (Stacey 2011; Mowles 2011). Having worked as a therapist, my understanding of the self was primarily based on humanistic psychology, which sees the self as ‘a tendency for growth’ (Rogers 1986); later adding a social-constructionist point of view, seeing the self as socially and communicatively

constructed (Gergen 2009). I now began noticing how identity is in flux – influenced by circumstances, while we also influence those around us; in short, noticing the connection between identity and culture.

Understanding the individual self as fundamentally social, simultaneously forming and formed by social interaction, changed my notion of what leaders can do and what leadership is about. Classic leadership is preoccupied with how leaders can shape movements in the organization (Lægaard 2014) by influencing others, but reflecting on the ‘radically social’ self (Mead 1967) made me recognize that leaders are equally formed by the actions/responses of others. Besides the bare practical implications for my understanding of leadership, this notion of the radically social self also raised ethical questions about leader–employee interaction by challenging the more traditional view of leaders as heroic figures with a transcendent gift for rational, objective analysis.

I have been working with concepts of the self throughout my career – from the psychoanalytical notion of a personal self as something one ‘has’ (Bowlby 1969; Cullberg 1986; Kernberg 1975; Kohut 1977), in general formed through stable and ordered individual development, to the social-constructionist understanding of the self as constructed through communication with others (Cunliffe 2009; Gergen 1994, 1999, 2009; Hatch and Cunliffe 2006; Hornstrup et al 2013; McNamee et al 1998; Shotter 2006, 2008; Storch 2011) – a self that is socially constructed in the moment, formed by disorderly, fragmented and heterogeneous circumstances. Reflecting on different understandings of the self, I conclude that neither of these two models – taking an individual or a social perspective – adequately describes the complexity and paradoxes at play. I have therefore chosen to investigate further into the notion of the radically social self, applying this to my narratives.

Power as an attribute of relationships

Next emerged the theme of power, and how it seems more a characteristic of relations than something someone ‘has’. This developed from my growing understanding of the role I myself played in the ongoing power games on the leadership team. Here, I was inspired by Elias and his notion of power as an attribute of relationships (Elias 1970, p. 74). Elias describes power not as an individual attribute, but as the activity of

enabling/constraining each other – a structural characteristic of all relationships, reflecting our mutual interdependency. Another inspiration came from Foucault (1977), who defines power as something neither negative nor positive but always active in all interpersonal relationships as structural and productive, producing reality, domains of objects and rituals of truth. These perspectives on power connected very well with the understanding of the social self and of seeing leaders as continuously renegotiating their intentions – touching on themes of power, identity and culture.

The dynamic of inclusion and exclusion

A third theme arising from Project 1 was the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion; I sought to understand the paradox involved in their being inseparable (Scott 1992, 1998; Stacey 2011). This became a general theme in most of my narratives, and is also closely related to ethics. This more reflexive experience of and interest in inclusion/exclusion led into questions on what role negotiation plays at work and into seeing organizations as people working together influencing and being influenced by each other's intentions and always interdependent, as described by Stacey and his co-researchers (Griffin and Stacey 2005; Mowles 2012, 2015; Shaw 2002; Stacey 2011, p. 292). Clearly, we are accountable for what we do at work: we cannot maintain relationships by doing whatever we want. Being in relationships both enables and imposes constraints. This enabling/constraining, which Elias (1991) defines as power, takes place in processes of inclusion/exclusion, which became very apparent from my narratives. Power ratios shift depending on who is in a stronger negotiating position, and we must rely on the enabling cooperation of others in order to carry on participating. Power differentials establish groups where some are 'included' and others 'excluded', and power relations decide what/who is 'in/out' in organizations.

Strategy

The last theme in Project 1 is connected to understanding the purpose of strategy processes in organizations. I had understood these as necessary, planned and planning processes of change, implemented into the organization to fulfil its purpose. Now I began to see strategy planning as an activity to diminish anxiety in leadership groups, to help them cope with all the unpredictability of leading organizations (Mowles, 2011). I

began to take an interest in how one can work with paradoxes like transformation/continuity, spontaneity/planning, stability/change and interrelatedness in leadership work. I also began inquiring into concepts like co-creation, cooperation and co-production, leading by invitation and mutual responsibility, and to think about how these concepts can play out given the above understandings of what is going on in organizational life.

Project 2

Introduction

I got a new job as part of a management team in between applying for and attending the DMan program. Project 2 came to be about power games and doing politics in this leadership team. Our company was going through tough economic times, fighting to make a profit, and we had to fire several people. My narrative described the process of finding our way through this as a team. We were fighting and negotiating for influence, and the inclusion/exclusion processes involved in the redundancies were distinct. I researched further into the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion as paradoxically present in relations and how this is used to both enable and constrain one another, connected to ethical behaviour in social relationships and organizations. Realizing the dichotomy of my perspective opened an inquiry into paradoxical thinking.

I researched further into different understandings of power and found us all involved in trying to influence, both openly and covertly. In one situation I made our CEO retract one person from the agreed list of people to be fired, and this – combined with a series of meetings where hard negotiations and power games of who was to decide were played out – made me aware of how much power games are connected to including/excluding people (Elias 1978; Mead 1934), enabling/constraining one another, and so on. It became obvious that agreements are never static, but consists of a chain of small decisions that are endlessly renegotiated or reconfirmed – a process in which we were also negotiating our relations to one another and the power ratios among us.

Ethics

The first theme to emerge from Project 2 was a continuing interest in ethics. From the beginning, I had an understanding of ethics as connected to the golden rule of ‘doing to others what you would want others to do to you’ (Scruton 2001). This was based both on my Christian religious background and on an appreciative inquiry-based social-constructionist belief in the possibility of creating a ‘good’ version of life by focusing on relational responsibility, supporting the co-creation of meaning in a mutual exchange and understanding (Gergen 2009). I took note of Douglas Griffin’s thoughts on ethics (Griffin 2002): his understanding is based on Mead’s notion of the role the social self plays in interaction, identity and change processes. The moral interpretation of our experience must be found within the experience itself, requiring us to understand how we participate with other selves in simultaneously competitive and cooperative social interactions (Mead 1908). For Mead, difference and conflict between the environment and the moral self is at the very core of ethics. It is through interactions, through conflict and difference between environment and consciousness, that we continuously re-create our world and that our selves emerge. It is through this negotiation we feel and maybe recognize our identities (Mead, 1908: 319). Mead here states that ethics is negotiation of conflicting ends and needs, and thus a central part of what is expressed in human interaction, and that ethics is this very process of acting on consciousness, negotiation, reconstruction and re-creation of identity that emerges through the conflicts of living human beings as we co-create our future. Conflicts are a part of human interaction, and we live in the moment within the act, aware of constant reconstruction and re-creation of the world as we evolve as individuals.

My understanding of ethics changed from seeing ethics as universal law – or ethical universals of practical reason, as Kant puts it (Scruton 2001, p. 77) – to something more like Mead’s view, that the ethical interpretation of action is to be found in the action itself (Mead 1908; Griffin 2002). The theme of ethics has been taken up by all the researchers in the Hertfordshire group, and the following quote explains how they see ethics as interplay in action:

One can think of ethics as an interpretation of action found in the action itself, in the ongoing recognition of the meaning of action that could not have been known

in advance. Motives then do not arise from antecedently given ends but in the recognition of the ends as it arises in action. (Stacey and Griffin 2005, p. 182)

The American pragmatist, John Dewey, puts it in the following way in an article from the first edition of *International Journal of Ethics*:

I must repeat that a man's duty is never to obey certain rules; his duty is always to respond to the nature of the actual demands which he finds made upon him – demands which do not proceed from abstract rules, nor from ideals, however awe-inspiring and exalted, but from the concrete relations to men and things in which he finds himself. (Dewey 1891, p. 199)

I take this as describing how it is the person in everyday life contexts who interprets and applies ethics through their actions, with the capacity to determine how to act well in everyday reality – or the development of *phronesis*, which I will describe further below.

Hidden and transparent transcripts

Reflecting on our interactions negotiating who to fire underpinned my investigation into how we were conflicting over power, each trying to impose our will; how transparent and hidden transcripts unfolded, and how we treated one another along the way. I found Scott's concept of hidden and public transcripts useful here: in writing about how power struggles take place in the everyday arena, he notes how subordinates have hidden transcripts that they discuss among themselves when the dominant group is not there, while the dominant groups also have hidden transcripts and the power to define and constitute what counts as the public transcript (Scott 1990, p. 14). On a practical level, this connected to our everyday negotiations in the leadership team on how to move on; I began to notice power games more clearly. This, together with my experience of the self as thoroughly social, made me abandon the notion of 'doing good' as something that one can plan ahead. I noticed how the management team was playing power games with open and hidden intentions; this heightened my awareness of conflict, negotiation, and enabling/constraining one another. It became important to understand the role of openness and reticence in leader–employee interaction.

It was interesting to compare my narratives about what I had experienced earlier as an employee having a colleague fired and my experience in this management job as the one firing people. At Rambøll/S&S, the management group, as former colleagues of the employees being fired, had difficulty taking responsibility for their actions when the employees took this into the public realm. Since the company was based on the concepts of appreciative inquiry, the leaders had a notion of power and conflict as something that come into being only if they are allowed expression. I tried to communicate what was going on, talking with employees about what was happening and revealing potential solutions, stressing that we needed time to make careful decisions. This was talked about both openly and in private. I was not ‘doing good’ in the classical definition, but I was trying to act ‘good enough’ by attempting to explain as much as I could about what we were doing. I use the phrase ‘good enough’ here meaning taking the general situation into account and deciding that in this specific situation, with these specific people, this is what is possible to say or do (Bettelheim 1987).

I was especially challenged by employees from Svend’s and Knud’s teams wanting me to give straightforward answers about the future. In Rambøll/S&S I had played an important role representing the employees, bringing their hidden transcript into the open in the aftermath of a consultant’s dismissal; now I was on the other side, firing 10 people. The interplay of public/hidden transcripts surfaced in my narrative as a description of the interaction between people participating in power games. I reflected on how I used the term ‘letting go’ as a euphemism for the very powerful action of firing people: by falsely suggesting compliance with the employee’s preference, it underplays the role of our own choices and the configurations, relationships and fluctuations of power (Scott 1990) and conceals the implicit conflicts of who is to be fired. It was both amusing and unnerving to see how an employee almost replayed the role I had taken at Rambøll. In my narrative I reflected upon the value of improvisation rather than following a predetermined plan or rule: my strategy here was to act as consciously and carefully as I could in the emerging situations.

Action, ethics and phronesis

The next theme emerging in Project 2, developing from those already described, was the connection between action and ethics. It became obvious that to act ethically, one had to develop practical judgement rather than strictly follow rules, the latter not being possible in the messiness of organizational life. Through reading the Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland, I inquired into Aristotle and his description of *phronesis* (practical judgment). He sees *phronesis* as the most important intellectual virtue needed for the management of human affairs, including the virtues of *episteme* and *techne*, which cannot manage themselves (Flyvbjerg 2001; Eikeland 2008). Aristotle understands *phronesis* as both an intellectual and ethical virtue, and defines it as having and using one's knowledge in the specific social field (*praxis*) – taking the changeable, concrete, local perspective. Aristotle differentiates *phronesis* from the virtues of *episteme* (universal truth or knowledge of the unchangeable), and *techne* (technical know-how, or knowledge of the technical artistic field) (Flyvbjerg 2001; Eikeland 2008). Looking into the concept of *phronesis* as practical wisdom about what is within or beyond our influence (Eikeland 2008, p. 79) illuminated and transformed my understanding of ethics, from a focus on ethical behaviour to seeing ethics as knowledge about the right thing to do, acquired through dialogue and practice (Eikeland 2008, p. 272). I now saw ethics and action as inseparable, and saw how ethical behaviour has to be developed by carefully participating in the action of cooperation/competition, not by attempting to decide beforehand what to do. In my narratives, this manifests in my efforts to participate more openly in discussions about what to do.

Phronetic excellence takes practice, and Aristotle says that practice itself requires three qualities (Eikeland 2008, p. 63):

- (1) You must act with knowledge of what you are doing.
- (3) The action must be based on deliberate choice, and the acts must be chosen for their own sake.
- (4) Action must spring from a firm and unchanging character.

However, participating in specific social action cannot always be done with knowledge of what is going on. As Ralph Stacey notes (Stacey 2011, p. 467), there is always uncertainty and surprise in human interaction since everyone has different intentions

and is trying to reach their own goals. I certainly didn't always know what I was doing; I didn't always base my actions on deliberate choices, nor did I show a firm and unchanging character. The narrative pointed at all the negotiations and power games going on and highlighted that working out what to do isn't as easy as it sounds. It showed how much courage one needs as a manager to move forward, how I acted in a manipulative way, and the important role of conflict in cooperation/competition, as well as the value of intuitive actions and improvisation in leadership. So working with the concept of *phronesis* gave me further insight into terms like 'good enough' (Bettelheim 1987), 'for the most part' (Eikeland 2008, p. 74) and 'dispositions', culture or 'habitus', an Aristotelian concept developed in depth by Bourdieu in his phrase 'having a feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 80) to describe how we act into generalized patterns – or 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53) – and not into a void. I began to understand that ethics cannot be pinpointed; I can only aim for greater awareness of the subjective situations I am part of (Gadamer 2013, p. 312) – perhaps acquiring enough of a picture to allow us to reflect, decide and act upon with those I am involved with at work, finding our way through the decisions we are negotiating. The 'expertise' lies in accepting this paradox of individual/social and specific/general, and knowing how to play the game of influencing organizational life powerfully. Aristotle's framing of *phronesis* idealizes it rather more than I have experienced it in the messy everyday life of having to take responsibility and make decisions in uncertainty.

Power

Beginning to grasp the concept of habitus reignited my previous interest in power, and this became the next theme in Project 2. Developing my interest further, I reviewed a range of theories on power, from the traditional reified understanding of power as something that somebody holds (Buchanan and Huczynski 2004, p. 828) to Steven Lukes's radical view of power as the ability to shape others' preferences and perceptions without them noticing (Lukes 1974). My conclusion at this stage was that power is a structural characteristic of all human relationships, given that we depend on (and so enable/constrain) each other all the time. Because we are interdependent we form figurations, and figurations form us, in patterns of influencing one another; this opens possibilities to act powerfully. This understanding changed my perspective and

my reflexivity of life in organizations: my former dichotomies of black/white, good/evil, leadership/followership no longer satisfyingly described what I was inquiring into. I began taking a new interest in understanding paradoxical thinking.

Paradoxes of organizational life

Researching how to understand paradox further, I noticed paradoxes like predictable unpredictability/unpredictable predictability showing up in everyday activities in the organization, in the cooperation/competition on the management team; I also recognized the paradoxical connection between local interaction and global patterning in my narratives.

Where I had once believed that change in organizations happens through managers implementing their plans, I began noticing that change in our organization came about just as much through the leadership team interacting, negotiating and changing our understanding of ourselves and what we were doing. We became increasingly able to stay longer in difficult discussions, to see the world from each other's perspective; through this, my reflexivity on what it was we were doing grew. I understood that we were not achieving universal consensus (Dahrendorf 1958, p. 116) or utopia, but engaged in an emergent awareness and differentiation of our interactions and interdependency, developing insights to illuminate these situations (Gadamer 2013, p. 312).

It is especially important to dwell on the relationship between local interaction and global patterning here, since I connect this to the link between theory and practice and to how identity, culture change and strategy can be understood. Chris Mowles describes practice as 'an internally regulated, self-replicating process which is self-consistent' (Mowles 2015, p. 83), and sees theory and practice as unfolding in particular contexts, paradoxically informing each other. Through joint action (an expression Stacey takes from Shotter [1993a] to mean the key feature of all complex responsive processes of interaction), it is possible for people to contribute to producing emergent, coherent and meaningful patterns of interaction both locally and globally. It is this paradoxical interplay between spontaneous local self-organizing actions responding to centrally determined rules of conduct that creates possibilities for change, through the rather repetitive patterns of experience that can amplify small differences caused by

spontaneity and conflict in the ongoing iterations into major qualitative changes in population-wide patterns of relating (Stacey 2011, p. 466). An example of this interplay is Niels working with reflexive narratives with customers; this arose not from a management plan, but as a spontaneous idea when a mayor asked Niels to help him work with his directors and politicians in exploring how to move on in his municipality. I saw this as a new way to understand strategy, and began carefully considering this paradoxical interplay between local interaction and population-wide patterning. I saw how themes in my work life on the leadership team emerged in countless iterations – showing up repeatedly in organizational life, slightly differently each time. I also noticed how at the same time established general patterns shaped what was possible to do in my local context.

Hegel is the pre-eminent philosopher to have investigated paradox (Mowles 2015); from a psychological perspective, the theme is explored by Bateson (1972, p. 271) and Smith and Berg (1987), who all see individual and group experience as different and separate. In the organizational literature, Robert E. Quinn (1988) deals with paradox as something that can be mastered and turned into use in optimizing organizational performance. I research paradox in opposition to this instrumental understanding, drawing on Ralph Stacey's definition:

...the word paradox means the presence together, at the same time, of self-contradictory, essential conflicting ideas, none of which can be eliminated or resolved. (Stacey 2011, p. 36)

This shifted my thinking about organizational life from a rather dichotomized to a more paradoxical and complex understanding (Mowles 2015). Realizing our interdependency and therefore noticing possibilities for participating in more skilful/resourceful actions made me inquire further into connections between power and politics, noticing how messy and negotiated everyday life in organizations is when we take our experiences of it seriously. I began to understand the ramifications of taking this view, rather than the systems theory-based framework I once used when planning to maximize performance or achieve excellence: if organizational life is not linear and predictable – if it is not just a global patterning that shapes the organization, but complex, paradoxically

predictable/unpredictable, and locally negotiated – then is it possible to implement any strategy plan at all?

Project 3

Introduction

My previous work with power and the paradoxes of inclusion/exclusion processes led me to focus on conflict as a theme in Project 3. I began noticing how both open and covert power games and conflicts are emerging constantly. I started Project 3 describing conflict in the leadership team, looking at power games in management. Conflict arose and intensified constantly; I tried to understand why it's so hard to handle and what role it might play, and (building on my social-constructionist background) wondered how it might be handled in a more honest and realistic way.

This wasn't easy. I began to see conflict as a never-ending power game of inclusion/exclusion, noticing how all participants were enabling and constraining one another and themselves, and how power differentials were constantly renegotiated. In the leadership team I felt my authority constantly challenged (especially by one colleague); I worked hard to become more assertive and confrontational, which challenged my sense of identity and ethics. As the role of conflict in teams moved into focus, I began to also recognize my own part in our recurring conflicts. Contrasting various theories on conflict with the reflective narratives from my own leadership team, I found that the closest explanation to what I was experiencing might be seeing conflict as a natural part of power games in organizational life and that getting immersed in this, taking the messiness of organizational life seriously and participating in the ongoing negotiations, can be a way of noticing what is going on in order best to decide what to do next. This was a considerable departure from my former appreciative inquiry-based understanding of conflict, which saw it as something to be avoided and dissolved by locating resources and building upon elements of cooperation.

Reflecting, I began to understand conflict as a central part of organizational life that doesn't require 'handling' and can't be dissolved, but might instead be seen as a part of the messiness of everyday strategizing and politicking; indeed, that 'handling'

such conflicts might simply mean responding, participating, negotiating and playing the game rather than attempting to control its outcome.

Paradoxes around conflict

Combining my research into paradox and conflict, I deepened my interest in the connection between the particular and the general, the interplay of the local interaction and the influence this might have on global patterning, as well as vice versa. We began working with developing a new strategy in my company, inspired by Sinek's thoughts on motivation and leadership, which see strategy developing from thinking through why we are here, then how we do what we do, and finally what to do next (Sinek 2009). We were working simultaneously with our 'why are we here?' and with taking our experiences seriously on what we were doing as a leadership team. I began to consider what parts of our leadership work might help the organization develop a new strategy, and what 'strategy' might be. I wondered if it is actually possible for groups of people to move in a new direction through focusing on local conversations about what they are doing and why they are doing this – not as a plan or a goal to reach, but as a consequence of conversations? Is it possible to change the way of developing and performing through locally based interactions, working with conflicts and politics, and by taking seriously our own experiences of what we are doing? What role do uncertainty, vulnerability and conflict play in this? And how can we develop practical expertise in acting into the uncertain, unpredictable, unstable and conflictual field of everyday politicking in our organization?

The notion of power as a structural reality negotiated between participants in the mess of social interactions, and of conflict as inevitable, is different from my earlier, more traditional, understanding of power as 'something' held or lost, and conflicts as something to be avoided or dissolved. Needing to develop a new understanding of how to influence groups of people, I sought explanations of how to do a 'good enough' job as a leader, to unfold and negotiate the leadership team's intentions throughout the organization.

Paying closer attention, I came to realize that negotiations are ongoing and endless, and how my habitual understanding of conflict was changing in my daily work life. A more complex understanding – both of how 'good' (or rather, 'good enough')

emerges through negotiations of differences, and how one decides what to do next – was now evolving, consolidating my newfound view on the connection between action and ethics in leadership.

So Project 3 turned out to be about this argument, investigating into different understandings of conflict in management: my own experience with conflict and cooperation, a shift in thinking about what we are doing in the leadership team, and an attempt to develop an explanation for what I saw – trying to act my way into new ways of thinking, while also trying to create a format for the new strategy. This is demonstrated, for example, in the meeting where I confronted a colleague with my suspicion that he was undermining my authority. I felt compelled to follow through on this so that we could go on together as a team in an upcoming meeting with all our employees.

Habitus and identity

I had already begun to explore concepts like *habitus* – structured/structuring structures (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53) – which were helpful in understanding how stability and change played itself out in working with strategy. Given my new understanding of identity and culture as inseparable, I concluded that culture and identity emerge in the paradoxical interplay of local and global interaction. I was now researching into questions of how change occurs in organizational culture and identity formation. Reflecting on what strategy is in my narratives from this period led me to gather together the concepts emerging from my research that made most sense: improvisation, power games, interplay of intentions, etc. – all of which describe strategy as something far from the neat and orderly plans suggested by organizational literature. I shared these notions with the leadership team, and slowly we developed a growing reflexivity in our group. We took our experiences seriously by writing about what we experienced in meetings, reflecting on each other's thoughts. We began to improvise tricky situations such as visits with customers and meetings with our employees, and in doing so we changed their understanding of what it was we were doing – acquiring the courage to tolerate this new insecurity, even paradoxically embracing the security of being insecure.

The radically social self

In Project 3, I once again explored philosophical differences in understandings of conflict, in the relationship between the particular and the general and in the concept of the self. Gergen's understanding of social constructionism (2009), which I had worked with at S&S, defines the self as a self-conception that is relationally centred and constructed through communication. I now realized that Gergen differentiates between the social and the individual and states the primacy of the relationship, thus defining human connection to replace separation as the fundamental reality of life. In doing so he takes sides in a dichotomy, privileging the notion that we can create the social world of our own choosing. This is in opposition to Mead's perspective of the self as emerging in the paradox of the 'I'/'we' that is both individual and social, and responsive to the social world while simultaneously creating it. Holding on to my experiences from my reflective narratives and my experiences in the leadership team in applying these different understandings of reality to what was going on, I concluded that organizational life is not ordered and planned, but filled with conflict, power, politics, ethics and paradoxes in which the social self is continuously forming and being formed.

Project 4

Introduction

Project 4 was based on reflective narratives about social interaction in the leadership team as we worked with an emerging new strategy. If the future of our organization does not result from our planning, then what is our role as leaders? Is it possible to extrapolate from our local interaction and experience to human relations and interactions generally?

In most organizations, strategy planning is seen as an important part of the work leaders are engaged in and an activity that is thought to help organizations 'move forward'; yet strategies rarely go to plan – not because of poor management or local resistance, but because strategy is a much more complex activity than classic organizational theory acknowledges (Ansoff 1979; Lægaard 2014). A lot of these theories develop different forms of tools and techniques to help managers develop their organizations strategically; 'Balanced Scorecards' (Kaplan and Norton 1996), '7 Great

Habits' (Covey 1989) and the EFQM Excellence Model (Lynch and Cross 1991) are all examples of tools developed to help implement strategic plans.

At this point in the leadership team we were trying to develop a new strategy for COK, and worked with this and reflected upon our experiences of working together by writing our own and reading each other's reflexive narratives. We were trying to describe and define what it was we were doing creating this new strategy, while noticing the complexity of our work in creating a new strategy for our company – a form of reflexivity development in 'taking experience seriously'. Based on movements in the daily life on the team, my research now focused on 'Transparency, hiding and taking risks: working with being excluded or included in organizations'. I examined power games in the group, the paradox of stable instability, and how the interplay of inclusion/exclusion unfolded and influenced what was possible to do/not do. Working with these themes required further research into the connection between action and ethics in relations, and into different understandings of strategy

Strategy

I reviewed the classic definition of strategy: 'the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals' (Chandler 1962, p. 13), where leaders are expected to work out strategy plans and then follow through by allocating or developing resources for their implementation. I looked into other definitions, such as 'Strategy is a theory about the reasons for past and current success and failure' (Burgelman 1983, p. 66), and I made a bigger account of Mintzberg and his understanding of strategy through action. Mintzberg in many ways has worked with strategy and complexity and emergence, and this I both described and discussed. I found Mintzberg to be in some ways taking the same area of interest that I do, but also there are differences like in how Mintzberg looks upon the position of the manager in relationship to the rest of the organization. There is no focus on the interconnectedness in praxis, no focus on the radical social self, although he does have focus on the paradoxes of organizational life, in his wording named riddles. Finally, I considered Stacey's definition of strategy. He describes yet another way of understanding how new order emerges. Where a traditional understanding of strategy sees human interaction

(and especially the actions of leaders) as linear activities, Stacey describes change as never-ending iterations of human interactions in rather repetitive patterns of experience that are never reproduced exactly. Where Mintzberg talks about strategy being deliberately emergent in that senior managers deliberately control the process and leaves the content to others, Stacey talks about iterative change and goes on to describe this as ‘transformative causality’ – a concept he bases on human interaction constructing the future as the known-unknown; continuity that paradoxically always carries the potential for transformation (Stacey 2011, p. 468). Here there is no division between process and content and it is not possible for the manager to control the process, it is emerging in the interplay of intentions from all participants in the process.

My view on what strategy might be changed in my daily work in the leadership team. I saw a fairly coherent new strategy emerge, not as something pre-planned, but as a growing knowledge and appreciation of one another’s intentions and a growing sense of how this might influence what our employees are doing working together with us. I now saw that being able to stay in the game – to recognize all the anxiety, conflict, different intentions and struggles for power and influence – was an innate part of daily life in our group; and through this emerged a more experience-based understanding of what strategic leadership is about. I now took strategy to be more closely connected to social science than to rational/natural science-based notions of linear causality. I understand strategy as connected to how people interact, with all the uncertainty, paradoxes, negotiations of power and politics, and dynamics of inclusion/and exclusion, as the very centre of people engaged in cooperative competition (Mowles 2011, p. 196) in any organization trying to figure out what they are actually doing.

Taking experience seriously

Taking experience seriously here meant holding ourselves and each other reflexively responsible for seeing what it is we are actually doing – conflicting, arguing, negotiating, being scared, playing power games and trying to muddle along together. Here I observe a shift in my thinking about myself in the group that also changed my understanding of my own identity and ethics/action. I was no longer so concerned with followership/leadership or with doing good/bad, but with understanding how to stay in

touch and engaged with my leadership team in our messy everyday interactions, and how to act in order to cooperate/compete, or to help myself/the organization/both.

I realized that what leaders and everyone else in organizations do is act, and that thinking and speaking (or not thinking or speaking) are also actions. Following this, I find that ethical values emerge in everyday interactions; and since I found that leaders' ways of going about negotiating intentions are important to organizations because they are powerful alliances with powerful intentions to negotiate, I would say that their ethical values show in their interactions. Griffin's description of ethics as the interpretation of action to be found in the action itself (Griffin 2002, p. 216), now made sense, connecting ethics directly to action rather than thought. Thus taking conflict seriously is an important part of leadership, making it possible for leaders to investigate into the functions and meaning of conflict as a manifestation of the identity of the participants and the culture they are part of, recognizing the ongoing negotiations on identity involved. Taking conflict seriously is a way of recognizing each individual's personal identity and the interplay between the individual and the social. Conflicts may be considered constructive (creating new possibilities) or destructive (destroying dysfunctional or outdated forms of cooperation and production); of course, there is a limit to how destructive an individual can act in relation to the social if s/he wants to stay included. It is important to avoid splitting the understanding into either an individual or a social understanding of how self and ethics come into being, instead recognizing the self as paradoxically formed/being formed by the social:

...mind, self and society all arise through communicative interaction with others. In a continuous, co-created process both consciousness and self-consciousness arise. No one, no matter how powerful, can impose meaning on others. Instead meaning emerges from the continuous iteration of gesture and response between engaged people. (Mowles 2011, p. 130)

This understanding of the social self and the importance of gesture and response to create meaning and change emphasizes that interaction produces social patterning that is both regular and fluid at the same time; and indeed, I find that my narratives confirm that this is actually going on in our strategizing for change and emergent transformational processes.

An account of the movement of my thought and practice from the first to fourth projects

In what follows, I will examine what I have learned during the process of writing this thesis.

When I started on the program, I was interested in leadership/followership, understood from a rather systems theoretical point of view and building on a notion that a thorough understanding of these two distinct positions could lead to fewer conflicts and more homogenous, efficient work in organizations. Yet my narratives pointed away from this view of strategy as employees conforming to a universal value decided by an idealized group called the leaders, in order not to be judged selfish or not good enough to continue to be members of the organization. Rather, my research indicates that leaders are participating, cooperating and competing, fighting and conflicting their way through, trying to define what it is they are doing, where to go and how to get there. This indicates that organizations are not systems – not wholes that can be moved, changed or developed by especially powerful outside parts named leaders.

Organizations are simply everyday contingencies of ordinary life filled with cooperation and conflict, anger and happiness, confusion and direction, people cooperating and competing and trying to defend the possibility of their intentions to be unfolded.

Leaders participate in this and, if they create powerful alliances and are good negotiators, can help groups of employees to connect and perhaps even for a while make better sense of what they are doing. I see the way the leadership group agrees upon what to do after having worked with reflexive narratives in Project 4 as an example of this: through finding our way as a team, we acquire more influence as a group on what is going on in the organization as a whole.

Thinking, interacting and learning

Working with reflexive narratives and focusing on local interaction has moved my patterns of thinking and acting, from a lot of unconscious assumptions to a more critical reflexivity. I began the DMan at a time when I had just been hired and my boss asked me to head a process of change in our company. In the course of this I have encountered my own thinking, and my lack of thinking about what I was thinking, as the first obstacle to being able to pay attention to what was going on. I have been working with

my own reflexivity on organizational life – moving from understanding what was going on as a series of dualisms (such as followers/leaders, cooperation/competition) to seeing organizational life as complex responsive interactions between people working together. All along, I have shared as much as I could, or dared, of my thoughts and findings with my colleagues on the leadership team. I know they have felt scrutinized; but I also know that they have been curious, have participated in the power game, have felt excluded and have tried to both include and exclude me, have taken things up in the open, and have had hidden conversations on what was happening with them, with me, and with us as a team. My boss has changed his way of working and his understanding of his role – from trying to force his way through and being quite emotional about what is going on, to a more detached but actually more involved form of leadership, sharing thoughts and reflections with us, staying in contact and negotiating what to do more extensively. For instance, he insists on us being more responsible in our interaction with one another by staying in the game, stating more clearly what our positions are, and negotiating our way into mutually accountable positions with the organization's best interests in mind. This movement has changed our interactions, and we are now in more regular contact with one another, sharing thoughts and so on. Lately, he has instigated monthly bilateral conversations with each of us on the team to discuss what is going on.

My colleagues have also changed their views on leadership and organizational life, although I am not sure they completely agree with what I think I have found. Nevertheless, we continue to progress from having a rather fearful relationship between employees and leaders in the organization to a process of more open conversations and investigations into what we are doing. When things get rough, we have found ourselves writing and sharing reflective narratives on the situations. Svend, my colleague on the senior management team, put it in these words when asked to reflect on the process we have been going through:

So in my case there has emerged a growing consciousness of the importance for us to focus more on participating in more informal and often implicit social interactions and expressions with the organization – also in order to unveil and bring in profitable perspectives from the line.

Our way of working on the leadership team has changed: I myself have certainly changed my way of interacting. Going from a more reactive way of interacting, I am now more prepared to risk saying out loud what I think is going on; I am less inclined to hold back on my own estimates or assessments of what we are doing; and in speaking up, I notice that I can think and act at the same time, and see this as a growing reflexivity. I observe myself participating in the power games, seeing the inclusion/exclusion more clearly; and this makes our meetings more vivid, unpredictable, confronting, filled with awareness of differences and conflicts, more interesting and relevant. I confront the employees more openly on questions where I disagree, and I share more of what has been discussed on the leadership team meetings with them, attempting to convey my changing understanding of what organizational life is.

These changes I see in our relationship to the municipalities and our owner as well. We think about these partnerships in other ways, use other words, and act in new ways as well. We have had several encounters with top CEOs wanting us to help them out working with their board of directors in new ways, and our area of influence in KL is growing. It has given us new possibilities but also new conflicts with our own staff, having to participate in several discussions on what it is we are turning into, and how to understand ourselves with these new ways of interacting. Especially the employees who are working with our more traditional courses and products are concerned about the danger of letting go of good business in favour of insecure new developments. All very relevant and giving the management team the opportunity for opening new conversations and connecting with our employees in new ways, more clearly seeing our interrelatedness in our company.

Management and reflexivity

The course of the DMan research process is organized into four projects and a synopsis, and reflections/reflexivity forms a key part of all the projects and the conversations that take place around them. The lectures on residential weekends, the learning set conversations and the ongoing reflections and comments on one's own research from colleagues on the program offer a unique possibility for reflecting on what you do and

think, and exemplify the exercise of one's ability to grasp the paradox of the radically social self with individuality and sociality paradoxically understood together. This is very different from my social constructionist background which builds on cybernetics and feedback loops, and privileges the relationship (Gergen 2009; Pearce 2007), whereas my findings now have led me to privilege the paradox of individual/social aspects of self.

Today I pay much more careful attention to the detail of what is going on. I try to stay alert, denaturalizing our day-to-day comings and goings at the same time as being involved; and I share my observations with my colleagues. I try to use my thinking and my possibilities for playing power games more consciously. I see this quite clearly in how our new strategy is evolving, and how I try to position myself and our company in this. The complexity perspective gives room for understanding leading organizations not as balances of opposites, but as a dynamic of unstable stability, regular irregularity, predictable unpredictability, and knowing that these paradoxical dynamics of uncertainty can escalate tiny differences into very different outcomes (Stacey 2012, p. 12).

My understanding of what being a leader means and what organizational life is has changed – from seeing organizations from the outside as a unified whole that I as a manager can influence in a certain direction, to seeing organizations as patterns of interaction, and myself as a participant in the messiness of everyday working together, with a possibility of having more influence than the rest if I manage to negotiate wisely and play the power games ongoing.

I agree with Stacey when he argues that an organization can be understood as analogous to a complex adaptive system where a large population of agents interacts with some of the other agents and where no individual agent can determine the local interaction principles of others:

Whole complex systems do not obey simple, fixed laws. Instead, individual agents respond to their own particular local contexts and even though there is no explicit coordination of their interaction, it never the less leads to the emergence of collective order. (Stacey 2012, p. 14)

This has consequences for the understanding of interdependence and for working with strategy in organizations. You cannot simply do whatever you like: human agents are always constraining/enabling one another, and acting irresponsibly or unacceptably will tend to lead to being socially excluded. Someone was actually fired from our organization because his leader didn't feel he was in any way recognizing the social aspects and consequences of what he was doing, apparently motivated by his personal preferences and totally different understanding of what COK is all about. After repeated discussions, his leader decided it was too destructive for the team and the company for him to stay on board. This is what power games are; and these patterns of power are what constitute social control and order. We now talk more about ways of bringing our considerations about where to go into the conversations with our employees, and involving them more deliberately. Earlier, there was a prevailing notion on the leadership team that some of the employees resisted 'management'. This dichotomized way of understanding has moved into seeing the possibilities for emerging change in taking our interdependency seriously; I understand this as a consequence of our reflexivity in the leadership team changing, perhaps even enabling the employees to change too.

Ethics and action

My understanding of ethics on entering the program was largely based on religious and cultural notions of doing 'good' and creating order by following rules (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 23) – a view in which 'bad guys' introduce unwanted conflict by not following the rules; a notion of action based on thinking, derived from positive psychology and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider 2008). Today I am preoccupied with playing into the unpredictable messiness of things; trying to apply a more *phronetically* based ethical view of what is happening. It is both easier and harder work, and more fun – usually. I feel better connected to the people in the organization, while at the same time more obliged to manage in a reflexive manner. Taking the concept of *phronesis* from Aristotle, a person practising *phronesis* (practical wisdom) knows how to behave in each particular circumstance and is what Aristotle names an expert, knowing what choices are involved for acting in the specific concrete circumstances (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 57). I don't quite feel like an expert yet, but can both see and feel the interdependency

in our leadership team. In the situation described in Project 4, where Niels was late for our management team meeting and we were unable to resolve our differences upon his arrival, it was Knud who brought in some order and calmness, making it possible for us to finish the meeting without ending in a huge disagreement. And it has been Svend who has sometimes flagged up that disagreement between Knud and myself are unproductive for the team.

Conflict and power

Today I understand conflict and power as one of the fundamental concepts of social life in organizations, and play a central role in both social and political change (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 88). Going back to Foucault and his definition and understanding of situational ethics where norms are contextually grounded, I see how contextualization is a way to avoid the dualism between relativism and foundationalism by going from the concrete to the general, and I see the use of reflexive narratives on the program as a praxis closely connected to Foucault's use of 'history' (1977) as a method for analysis of, for instance, the phenomenon of power. This is played out in the way I work with our strategy development, in working at a company level with taking everybody's experience seriously, having everyone write reflexive narratives, and having conversations about this with one another and with our customers. We are working with exactly this movement from the concrete to the general, and I begin to see the general results of this influencing back into interactions in our organization and in our strategy work with customers. Lately, our chair has asked us to prepare a memorandum for the board of directors at KL and has proposed a strategy in which he would like them to discuss the different areas of work in COK one at a time over a period of several months – an unusual proposal that perhaps demonstrates some of the influence this new way of understanding our interconnectedness in working together has had on the environment in which we are situated. He wants KL to take more responsibility for us as a 'daughter' company, connecting more closely while also giving us space to be separate.

I also have a new understanding of how experience and intuition are the basis of practical judgment with its requirement of consideration, judgment and choice; and also see traces of this in our business life. Customer organizations and politicians in the municipalities talk about what is going on, consultants from other firms contact me

seeking opportunities to work with us, and lately I was contacted by a university who wanted to design the format of a class on their Master of Public Governance program to fit with what we are doing. I know that conversations on disagreements with the course the leadership team has chosen to follow, and disagreements with my theoretical findings, are discussed and shared in a number of hidden conversations by our employees. I work with and reflect upon the balance between taking lead and giving space for diverse opinions in an ongoing way without moving on so slowly that no change happens. Conflicts are inevitable: since what I do actually matters to me, I will probably run into other people feeling the same – forcing me to take risks, and to be more open while also keeping some things to myself. This has been a movement away from a feeling of capability, of being able to make plans and to follow them through at a certain speed, to a situation where it is only possible to move on by having ongoing conversations about what we do and where we want to go; a much slower movement.

Emergence and planning

Previously I thought it possible to make a plan and to ‘roll out’ this strategy, as the management literature refers to it (Lægaard and Vest 2005). Today I think of strategy more as the evolving and negotiated process of meaning co-created by the people involved in the organization – a view that is closer to the hermeneutic tradition of interpretations and finding meaning, and to philosophical pragmatism. Of course, we still make plans and budgets; we still schedule meetings, and set goals; but my understanding of planning and strategy has moved – from seeing them as objective activities that await discovery, where following the discovery can align the whole organization, to seeing a leader more as an agent participating in conversations about how we think about emerging themes.

I see change in our company coming from the leadership team as we try to figure out how we think and find ourselves talking about this with all the employees (Mowles 2011, p. 131). In other words, a change from prescriptions about how to do things – where the appeal to morality might as well be an appeal to obedience (Ibid., p. 132) – to an exploratory focus of attention on thinking about and reflecting on aspects of what we are already doing together that until now have been invisible to us. I still give prescriptive instructions when needed, but am doing this in a slightly different way,

with greater awareness of what I am doing and what is happening. Today I see strategy more as conversation and organizational change as change in conversation, and better understand Ralph Stacey's speculations that managers engage in strategic planning because they want to reduce anxiety about working in uncertainty and unpredictability in managerial life (Stacey 2007). Stacey suggests that planning and designing might be a waste of time, as something that if taken seriously can get in the way of more improvisational and spontaneous behaviour; but if understood as gestures of ongoing processes of local interaction, it may generate further provocative or even inspirational conversations (Stacey 2011, p. 441).

The method I have used in carrying out my research – taking experience seriously

Reflexive narratives

The research method of reflexive auto ethnographic narratives as used here is qualitative, and embedded in the interpretive tradition of ethnomethodology (Joas 2009). Rather than hiding from or assuming that these matters don't exist, autoethnography is an approach that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the influence of the researcher on research. It is an approach to research that takes as its point of departure the description and analysis of personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis 2004).

Reflexivity has a long tradition, connected to the pragmatist understanding of reflective thought. In *How We Think*, Dewey proposes that 'Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought' (Dewey 1910/2012, p. 6). Doing research in this way opens to seeing research as a conscious political and social act, and the research is understood as both product and process at the same time. In his book *Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Life*, the Danish professor Svend Brinkmann describes this as based on the idea that knowing isn't simply happening: it is an activity in itself (Brinkmann 2012, p. 32). Following this comes an understanding that knowing is situated – it is something we do, as part of our

lives; it is local, embodied, relative, intersubjective, relational, discursive, gendered, and as such connected to everyday life.

Autobiographical everyday material

In my research I have used autobiographical narratives from my daily life in my leadership team to reflect on what I was thinking and doing, and on what I think the team in particular, and leaders in general, are doing when working with strategy. In doing so, I take the pragmatist view of research as action/thinking and the individual/social as intertwined, rather than a more traditional Cartesian research understanding of thinking as separate from action, which takes individual cognition as the starting-point for philosophy and scientific analysis (Joas 2009, p. 125). I have reflected on the narratives and investigated into what might best describe the paradoxical emergence of novelty and continuity in our work in the leadership team. This way of working with narratives, first introduced in 1979 as analytic autoethnography by David Hayano (Hayano 1979), has three characteristics: the researcher is (1) a full member of the research setting, (2) visible as such in published research, and (3) on the basis of broader social phenomena, is committed to develop theoretical understandings. This approach has proved very useful in developing practical knowledge for me and for my colleagues on the team.

The method inscribes itself as part of the phenomenological tradition (Joas 2009, p. 156) and further back into the Aristotelian tradition of *phronesis* (Alvesson and Willmott 2001; Eikeland 2008; Flyvbjerg 2001), praxis and ethics, or practical judgment as the basis of knowledge production in the social field of action. My findings and our sharing of thoughts in the management team as we try to make sense of what it is we are doing confirms what Dewey concludes about communication: that genuine communication involves contagion, producing a community of thought and purpose (Dewey 1910/2012, p. 224). On my request to reflect upon what it has been like to be a part of my research, one of my colleagues replied that he didn't see himself as part of a PhD research project, but rather sees that we have engaged in mutual cooperation to set a new course for COK, and that through my research I have inspired and challenged everybody into a new frame of understanding (e-mail from Svend, 10 July 2015). I think this to me has been one of the strongest gestures from my colleagues, that he doesn't

feel reified as an object for research, but sees himself as a participant in our mutual investigation.

Thinking about method is closely connected to epistemology, to theory of knowledge and to questions about what knowledge is, about validity and how knowledge is produced. More traditional epistemological questions are posed from a positivist assumption that we are standing 'outside' the world as isolated knowers trying to represent the world correctly, not taking the position of the knower into account (Nagel 1986). Reflexive narratives as worked with at Hertfordshire are based on episodes or situations from one's own work life, and are based on the idea of knowing as an activity. Dewey used the name 'situation' as the name given to instabilities in our dealings with the world that make it difficult for us to proceed as usual (Dewey 1938). When this type of instable situation arises we need to inquire, to develop and test different understandings to see what might be helpful, and in this way life and science are inextricably intertwined. Svend Brinkmann cites the American sociologist Norman K. Denzin to say that one 'learns about methods by thinking about how one makes sense of one's own life' (Denzin 2004, in Brinkmann 2012, p. 37).

My inquiry into method started out as confusion around what meaning I could make of my personal narratives in relationship to researching life in organizations in general. I was quite sceptical, although it was immediately helpful for me to investigate into how I think and how I came to think as I did. Realizing how I was thinking made it possible for me to think about how I think, and by doing so I noticed how I was already thinking differently from before I started noticing how I thought. Building on Dewey's pragmatic theory of inquiry, ideas are not passive representations of how the world is in the mind of the spectator. Ideas are tools we can use to transform, engage and cope with the world in going about living our lives (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2010). Science in this sense is a focused form of the activity of coping with the world, a condensed form of human knowing about the world in which we are engaged; and data might be looked upon as something that is actively taken rather than given.

Local experience and generalizable knowledge

I have been amazed by the way global patterning and generalizable knowledge emerges when I reflected on and dealt with particular and local experiences I had been engaged

in, as described in my reflexive narratives. It has been a realization of the movement from experiencing something to becoming experienced, that I hadn't thought of before. The shift in my understanding of how one becomes experienced from thinking placed new emphasis on being 'well-experienced' rather than 'well-read'; I felt embarrassed by my naivety as the term 'taking experience seriously' began to unfold and gave strong meaning to how knowing develops. And as I became more familiar with the method of taking experiences seriously, I began to notice how this was a two-way movement: global patterns also influenced the way I made sense of what was happening on a more personal or local level. I have repeatedly experienced how sharing and reflecting on my narratives with my learning set and my supervisor gave them an extra reflexive turn that opened to seeing more details, and for local interaction emerging into global patterning. This has given new insight into what it is I am doing, doing what it is I am doing as a leader, and opening for the leadership team to deal in a more focused and more creative ways with the material from our organizational life. Every once in a while we realize that we understand better what is going on sharing the experiences, and this has even made us begin to act differently into the organizational world.

In an interview, Foucault once said that thought is the ability to think differently in order to act differently (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 127). The qualitative method of using reflexive narratives I have experienced has a strong potential for changing both thought and action. The method opens to important methodological and ethical questions: is this kind of situated practical and contextual knowledge just as valuable as more general theoretically based and context-independent knowledge? Is it at all possible to use the conclusions from subjective and situated experiences from a single case study as generalizable 'truths' elsewhere? The Swedish professor Alvesson has studied lived realities for years, especially researching the organization one is a member of. He differentiates between methods of interviewing and autoethnography and at-home ethnography. He describes the 'observing participant' as opposed to the 'participating observer' (Alvesson 2009) as another way of researching into one's own organization using ethnographic methods rather than interview techniques. In being embedded in our own organizations, as most of us participating on the DMan are, a double socialization takes place. The researcher is simultaneously being socialized to the research community and within the organization being studied. The focus for the researcher is

thus to ‘break out’ from the taken-for-granted-ness of the familiar organization to gain reflexivity – rather than ‘breaking in’, trying to ‘go native’ as ethnographers typically do. Alvesson describes two different ways of creating empirical material: a planned-systematic kind of data collection, and an emergent-spontaneous approach (Alvesson 2009, p. 164). I have used emergent-spontaneous studies, narrating when something revealing happened at work, working hard to ‘break out’ from the situations and the attached thinking, hereby developing sensitivity to seeing what was going on from multiple perspectives, to make accounts of the mix of familiar and surprising events happening, and acting into the situations described in the material I faced. For this work of ‘breaking out’, Alvesson states that you must reserve plenty of time to consider what your findings mean – not least to have access to a broad set of resources, theories (which also challenge the traditional understanding of the research object), new vocabularies (Rorty writes about this in detail: see Voparil 2010), and experiences (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011). This I find very true to my experience and something that is embedded in the structure of the DMan program.

Building on Mead (1934), Elias (2001) and Scott (1998) and their work on the inseparability of the individual/social aspects of oneself, Stacey and colleagues (2000) emphasize that your reflections, and your thinking about your thinking, must be interpreted in close connection to the experienced contingent local situation of everyday life in organizations, since these are inextricable. Reflexive narratives are seen as a temporal process in which we judge our experience in relationship to both specific and generalized others, and as an ongoing conversation. Stacey and colleagues depart from traditional rationalist teleology in their understanding of human action, being more connected to social psychologists who think of the individual mind as a process of social relating in which the self has silent and private conversations while simultaneously participating in vocal and social public conversations (Stacey et al 2000, p. 172).

The use of reflexive narratives on this program is a way of staying close to the contextual local interaction, describing emergent experiences, articulating reflections on what is going on and then being reflexive on what one thinks about the way one thinks about what is happening. It aims to explore the experience of whatever one is inquiring into as far as possible from within the experience itself. Doing this in relationship to

one's colleagues, as I have done, and in relationship to one's learning set and supervisor and other program participants, does exactly this: it focuses one's attention and reflections on this cooperative interaction of mind and action.

The validity of working with everyday material

Brinkmann confronts the validity of working with everyday life and describes how everyday life analysis is valid when they enable us to understand and act (Brinkmann 2012, p. 47). He states how we should think of validity in much more active terms, our analyses proving themselves valid if they enable us to do certain things. Using reflexive narratives builds on a deeply rooted experience of the importance of staying in conversations with all the conflict, cooperation and compromise at the centre, while also making sense of and taking seriously what is going on, informing action. It is not just trying to describe how one might think about others in a detached way, but takes into account how one's own identity and those of others are interrelated (Mead 1934) and how a change in one identity might influence everyone else's through action, shifting back and forth between self and others in games of power, influence, enabling and constraining (Mowles 2011, p. 262).

The DMan emphasizes this in that although each student has their own research, we constantly read and reflect on each other's material, integrating it into our reflexive processes. In my work life, this has played out simultaneously through writing reflexive narratives on the interactions of our leadership team. In the organization, I have researched everyday life through inquiries into what people were doing in their work life, and what was important to them. All employees have been working with writing reflexive narratives. Inquiries into similarities and differences between the experiences people had in trying to understand concepts like co-creation, emergence and change have been reflected upon, written about in groups of three, and distributed throughout the organization. Emerging themes were then taken up in yet another iteration of creative writing seminars where people formed new groups and reflected, discussed and wrote narratives on what they now thought about the themes. We just released this in form of a book on co-creation, complexity and on the concept of taking experience seriously as strategy. This is a book that we will distribute to our customers. Finally, we have already started to work with reflexive narratives in our consultancy work with

politicians and management groups in Danish municipalities. This work is closely related to the pragmatist concept of ideas as ideas about ideas – that is, ideas are to be seen as tools that can be used to cope with the world:

Ideas are not representations or copies of how the world is, but are tools, with which we transform, engage, and cope with the world as we go about living our lives. (Brinkmann 2012, p. 38)

Brinkmann here draws on John Dewey (1929), who writes about how reflecting on experience creates objects that in turn become objects of further reflection. I recognize this as a description of the process I have been involved in.

To be immersed as method

Ethnomethodology is defined as beginning ‘with a set of obstinate, unavoidable troubles to the interpretive process – what in Yiddish is called *tsoris* – that do not go away’ (Adler and Adler 1987, p. 26). This builds on Harold Garfinkel’s understanding of the cognitive problem of how people ascribe meaning and make sense out of and create social structure of the world in their everyday lives through a process of continual negotiation and interpretation (Garfinkel 1967). It has two important markers: indexicality and reflexivity. Indexicality and the problematics of the outsider’s interpretation suggest that researchers must participate in their settings to the fullest degree in order to gain a valid sense of the contextual meaning attached to the events. Indexicality is here referring to the contextual or ‘occasioned’ nature of objects and events without which interpretation opens to multiple or ambiguous meanings, and researchers must have a close sense of how the history affects the present and how they anticipate that the future will influence their retrospective interpretations (Garfinkel 1967).

The use of field research and reflexivity as method asserts that all accounts are reflexive accounts and that the only way to avoid constituting the social world differently from the way members of a society do is to abandon the social-scientific belief in objectivity: we are always reflexive, drawing on a multitude of experiences. Ethno methodologists argue that fieldwork methods constitute the world they study, so the only way one can avoid constituting the social world differently from the way

members do is to attain ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973) by entering the social setting as a member (Adler and Adler 1987, p. 27). DMan students base their research on their own everyday work situation, thus as full members of the organizations under research they can deliver thick descriptions (Geertz 2000, p. 17) of the world being studied while simultaneously influencing and being influenced by it. This surely applies both to leaders with long-term relationships with the organizations studied, and to consultants who move in and out of different organizations.

The method has three basic characteristics: careful narrations, careful interpretation and careful reflection – drawing attention to thinking about one’s own thinking. I notice themes gradually becoming apparent through my careful narration of different situations I have been involved in, and how, through numerous iterations involving my supervisor and fellow researchers, these become generalizable themes. This method allows me to exercise my ability to interpret and reflect, and has changed my thinking process – from one of starting with a notion and looking for supporting evidence, to trying to describe what I actually experience and then looking for generalizable patterns and emerging hypotheses. Alvesson describes this as ‘the *interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretations of empirical material (including its construction)’ (Alvesson and Skjöldberg 2009, p. 9). It is also a clear example of how the radically social self is played out; it is not possible for me today, reading my projects and looking back, to state what parts of the reflections and the findings are uniquely mine, and what may have evolved either from talking about my material in the learning set or from sharing what was going on in my research with my colleagues at work.

Redescribing the world

The fact that any series of events can be told as a story in a plurality of ways has given rise to criticism of narrative methodology, some seeing it as connected more to literature than to science (Denzin 2014); but today I understand it as the most appropriate research method for describing the paradoxes of local interaction and global patterning. Narratives in organizational studies can be connected to five principal areas of research: sense-making, communication, learning/change, politics/power, and identity/identification (Rhodes and Brown 2005, p. 170), and narrating itself seen as a

‘creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold’ (Ibid., p. 167). Today I think that we can only be immersed precisely because we can only tell stories that are centred on the paradox of individual/social, the radically social self.

The Danish consultant Jacob Storch wrote his thesis about the pragmatist Richard Rorty and his notion of the ironic philosopher redescribing or redefining the game, creating ‘new vocabularies’ (Rorty in Voparil and Bernstein 2009, pp. 279–297). Storch argues that it is possible on systemic grounds to avoid taking elements like power, leadership, politics and conflict into whatever context one works in, simply by not using these words (Storch 2011, p. 8). Entering into the Hertfordshire tradition and working with reflexive narratives made me take these concepts fully into consideration when reflecting on my narratives, and demonstrated how my immersion in the narratives enabled me to reflect and learn from what was going on in the local interactions, and extrapolate more global/generalizable ideas from them. I have developed a new vocabulary – not in the sense of redescribing reality by removing experiences from the context of power games in order to privilege something else, but through noticing, identifying and naming experiences that were formerly either unacceptable, unrecognizable or simply unconscious. I feel that Storch’s interpretation places too much emphasis on the autonomy of the interpreter, failing to acknowledge the influence of the community of inquirers who are trying to deal with what Charles Sanders Peirce referred to as the ‘brute or cruel reality of facts’ (Peirce 1998). My ‘new vocabulary’ is a new way of understanding and nuancing my experience of what is going on, and a new way of talking about interactions, having fully experienced the interconnectedness at the centre of my understanding of the self.

Reflecting together

Besides working with reflexive narratives, the DMan work is organized into group meetings in the mandatory four 4-day residential. Besides giving students the opportunity to engage with the professors and supervisors, based on principles derived from the Institute of Group Analysis (Foulkes 1984, these meetings also allow us to share and to reflect upon our experiences of being an individual within a group. One meeting a day has no agenda but is open for anything to happen; as participants reflect

in the moment on whatever emerges. We develop reflexivity, reflecting upon experience and create new patterns of understanding in reviewing our assumptions (or ‘final vocabularies’ (Rorty 2010, p. 280) about what is going on; and this opens new possibilities for action. This is a situated/emergent way of researching, rather than the elite/a priori approach, which privileges theory over practice (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Alvesson and Kärreman describe having an open attitude as crucial for research, citing Deetz’s description of this as a local/emergent research orientation providing a participatory ethnographical rearticulation of the multiple voices of a native culture (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, p. 36); I would say this is what we are working with.

In between the residentials, narratives and reflections are sent to all members of one’s learning set, who then comment and reflect on what patterns they see emerge. As local interaction from our workplaces becomes generalized, a number of alternative interpretations/understandings of what is happening surface. The way we have worked with reflexive narratives in different groupings in my organization is closely inspired by this way of working.

Faculty participation in the residentials is a strong confrontation with the radically social self and one’s own notions of power differentials, of inclusion/exclusion, public/hidden transcripts, of what constrains us from sharing knowledge or from being or feeling included. Watching faculty interact with the group and with one another, and having to present one’s own findings to them, is a strong practice in participatory qualitative research, and in developing reflexivity as an intellectual virtue, in exactly the circumstances where themes of power, individual/social, inclusion/exclusion are played out. This has inspired me to work with more openness around the leadership team in my own organization as I have tried to create possibilities for employees to participate in the movements of thought. We have been as open as possible about how we have been struggling with finding our way and with understanding what it is we are doing as a team, and right now we are beginning to let employees participate in more of our meetings, sharing their areas of responsibility and their thoughts about our strategy with us.

Practical knowledge unfolding becoming an expert

The above answers most of the questions I posed about how practical knowledge can unfold in human learning and support becoming an expert. Moving from a more orthodox (Ansoff 1979; Hamel 2008; Lægaard 2014) rule-governed to a radical context-dependent understanding (Alvesson 2009; Elias 1970; Stacey 2011) of how knowledge is produced is a move from being a novice to being an expert – someone who immediately recognizes thousands of cases directly, holistically and intuitively and immediately responds to the situation from a deep situational understanding based on their experience (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, pp. 30–36).

Narratives are generalizable through the potential for making sense to other members of academia. By exploring typical examples and the relevance of the narratives it connects with the body of knowledge that the examples describe, thus contributing to further inquiry into what people are doing. Through reflecting on this and being confronted with one's own prejudices about what is going on, it is possible to generate new hypotheses – hypotheses that become clear as we realize the discrepancies between reality and prejudice. This method uses exploration of rich detail to test hypotheses and build theory; it allows the narrative to unfold a more nuanced view of what has happened, and thus we develop expertise.

The possibility of having one's preconceived understanding of what might be going on challenged and redefined is greater in this kind of study than in more epistemic theory-building, such as in the natural sciences. An example of this is my changing understanding of what power is, and of the role I play in the power games in my organization as expressed in Projects 2 and 3, where reflections on the narratives enable me to understand how identity is evolving in the interplay of inseparable 'I'/'we' identities, as I notice more aspects of what power and power games are. The dominant approach to method is based on the science of certainty, drawing on systems as wholes consisting of parts (Stacey 2011, p. 50), where the researcher stands 'outside' the objects researched. The researcher here seeks to understand and formulate general and universal laws that are applicable at all times and places for the singular situation. Based on my experience, my readings, findings and reflections, I share Stacey's view of transformative causality (Ibid., p. 468), based on findings of dynamic human interaction being unpredictable and complex – where forming/being formed, and emerging iterative

processes, co-construct both present and future in the dynamic interaction in the moment.

This also answers the question of whether the case-study method risks bias towards verification/confirmation of a preconceived idea. Flyvbjerg notes that the probability is bigger for falsification than verification, since research is a kind of learning process and engaging in this moves from more simple to more complex understandings as you find your way from being a beginner to becoming an expert (Flyvbjerg 2006b, p. 480). My preconceived ideas, concepts and hypotheses have mostly been wrong, and I have been left with new insights, surprising findings, and a revised thesis on any number of matters. I have been utterly surprised by the findings of my fieldwork, and have been forced to revisit notions that I previously considered proven facts. It seems to me that the closer I have been to the matter described, the more surprising the findings. Developing skills as practitioner, paying attention to the complexity in local micro interactions I'm involved in, is precisely how knowing what it is that I am doing emerges (Stacey 2011, p. 488) and it becomes possible to observe wider organizational patterns emerging.

Limitations to the method

There are, of course, some limitations to this method that has showed up in our organization. Firstly the power differentials, and thus the ethics, of being the manager wanting the employees to do something that reveals thoughts and feelings in a way that isn't usual, and questions of whether it is possible to say no arises. I feel this should be a point of concern in all auto-ethnographic organizational studies concerning participants' privacy; but the methodology of reflexive narratives was clearly explained to participants here – when invited to write a narrative, they were told in advance that it would be taken into the public realm. Nevertheless, some rumours came to my attention that some employees felt tricked, not realizing their private writing would be shared. Also, the slowing down of classical sales activity in favour of focusing on building up relationships with customers in order to support the possibilities for focusing on co-creation has its price: this takes time, and we don't actually have excess money to spend on this development. We have taken a decision, backed by our board, to see this as an investment; but it is indeed moving into uncertainty, and it takes a lot of courage,

patience, faith in one another and trust in the process to keep on moving this way. We must also consider which areas of our business are appropriate for such a focus on co-creation, which may not be relevant to all areas of our business.

This is a method most suitable for social science, like studying the detailed and rich experience of managing and leading. It is not possible to research general, serial phenomena from a distance, since the method is unsystematic in its selection of episodes and observations are subjective. Statistical interpretation is impossible; one must rely on the results being generalizable from feeling ‘informed, intrigued, inspired and incited’ (Brinkman and Tanggaard 2010, p. 425). The choice of method is connected to ethics, since working this way includes both private and subjective aspects of the people involved, while also allowing usually marginalized people/views to come into focus and/or become public. I have tried to accommodate this sensitivity by sharing my findings in the process of my doctorate with my colleagues on the leadership team (see Appendix 1 and 2).

My contribution to knowledge, and implications for practice

Through the use of reflexive narratives, in my research, in my leadership team, with customers and in the organization as a whole, I have investigated different understandings of how strategy, as continuing patterns of interactions, emerges.

Through working with the practice of taking experience seriously I have proposed an understanding of what strategy might be, namely co-created emerging patterns of interaction with a collective impact on what it is we are doing as a leadership team. This has led me to think through what strategic leadership is about, and how identity and culture in an organization can change. Today I would say that strategy is continuous processes of identity formation, of finding out who we are as a leadership team and what our culture is as a wider organization.

Through the 3 years of research into elements of strategy work, it has become increasingly clear to me that the traditional understanding of strategy as something managers roll out and implement as a rational and planned process in their organization doesn’t account for everyday experiences of strategy as described in my reflexive narratives. Rationality here is understood as directly perceiving the facts of what is going on, and as a method of deciding where to go involving gathering facts, setting

clear objectives, generating options, and choosing the option that best matches the objective – the classical understanding of management as thought before action. My narratives and research, however, indicate all the messiness, power games, inclusions/exclusions, and interconnectedness that manifest in the process of leaders making decisions, and the paradoxes of forming/being formed that are played out in working with strategy:

[B]eing more reflexive, and able to relate flexible to plans and strategies, gives us as management a bigger surplus to navigate into in this growing complexity and hereby to better enabling ourselves – and our organization – to engage in a dialogue-oriented approach to ourselves and our surroundings. So here you have started a pronounced process of realization and movement. (Svend Hansen, reflections on process [Appendix 1])

I also think I have contributed to emphasizing conflict as a natural part of power games in organizations. I have shown how conflict, power and politics is actually the ‘energy’ that comes from people being different, having different intentions and goals, and that dealing with this as both enabling and constraining the relations is part of the complex interactions of relating that organizations consist of. This is not totally new knowledge in organizational theory, but in most management literature conflict is looked upon as something that has to be avoided or ‘managed’ to go away, or even harnessed for the good; whereas my analyses have shown conflict to be a never-ending part of the everyday messiness of organizational life. My unique contribution has been to combine these elements (conflictual muddling through, emergence of identity) from the perspective of a scholar-practitioner involved in the day-to-day practice of strategy.

Through the use of reflexive narratives, research into my own thought patterns, and sharing and discussing possible meanings in my learning set, my thought patterns have changed, just as I have influenced and perhaps changed others as well. This has had a profound influence on how I understand leadership and organizations – with repercussions from my research process to the leadership team in COK, to the organization itself and even to some of our customers. In the book we have published, Niels acknowledges these changes under the headline ‘Courage’:

Today I see the role as leader of a management team as the one who makes sure and focuses on making experiences and knowledge to a room for reflexivity for one's own and one's colleagues' development and movement. And today I see courage and persistence as decisive. Now we hold on for us to let go, we slow down to speed up, we are persistent and give room for new experience to fasten. We don't talk about co-creation – we do it! (Thorup et al 2015, p. 102)

The possibility of taking my research into the organization to such an extraordinary degree has had its background in certain specific conditions. I was fairly new in the job entering into the research program – I wasn't enmeshed in the company culture. Niels's career is drawing to a close, this being his last job. Obviously he wants to end his work life with a success, so he has been keen to bring my research into focus in our development, once he grasped what it was about. At the same time, and for the same reason, he has nothing to lose and may therefore be prepared to take more risks. The company needed to change, being threatened in the market and economically. Also my role on the leadership team has had its importance. As the only woman, and a psychologist, it may have been more socially acceptable for me to bring emotional material (conflicts, motifs of competition, feelings of being excluded, etc.) into focus than it might have been for my colleagues or a male researcher.³ At one point Niels and Knud remarked on the strangeness of our process on the team, this being the first time they found themselves in a work situation where disclosing emotional material and inner thoughts was considered appropriate; in the past, their primary concern had been to keep these things hidden. I also think the status of a doctoral program has been important: although this doesn't necessarily qualify me for leading our process, I do think it has lent credibility to the whole approach.

I have also been working hard to preserve my feeling of being included on the team. As an insider, it has been important for me to stay in the game and on the team, so facilitating our mutual awareness of what was going on in the team hasn't always been easy: given my former experience of being unskilled at playing power games, this was both very important and very confronting for me personally. Finally, I think there is a

³ The gender issue has been prevalent and could have formed a thesis of its own, but I have chosen not to pursue it in this thesis.

growing understanding in Denmark around the importance of co-creation to welfare development that has helped me as well. The Danish word for co-creation – *samskabelse* – was the overall theme for the annual political rally, *Folkemødet*, in May this year. Several of our customers were there talking about projects and welfare development processes that we have been helping them with. As Niels reflects:

It took a while from this feeling of madness – the insecurity in relation to this new understanding – to a sense of ‘Wow, this is really moving forward’. We had consecutive and prolonged reflections on the management team. [...] We had conversations about the concept of customers. Given my basic conviction that the customer is king, it is hard to adopt an understanding of customers where the very concept of ‘customer’ is almost abolished. Via the *Folkemøde*⁴ at Bornholm where the word ‘co-creation’ was on everybody’s lips, I had new energy and confidence in what we were engaged in. Maybe we were actually on the way to locating something that hits the bull’s-eye in relation to the needs of the municipalities. (Thorup 2015, p. 102)

I quote this as evidence of the difference this way of working has made to me and my team, as well as to the customers we have worked with along the way.

Through my narratives on everyday life in my organization, I have come to see that it is absolutely crucial for leadership to be attentive to organizations as enabling/constraining dynamic patterns of relationships – everyday ordinary conversations, in local interaction, in which everyone forms their intentions to act. Understanding the activities of strategizing in organizations as arising in the social conversations of gesture/response between members of an organization gives room for an understanding of communication as complex responsive processes of conversations, both personal and social, through which improvement/deterioration of organizational life emerges in an ongoing unpredictable creative/destructive evolution.

Taking experience seriously trying to figure out what it is we are doing has pointed to how paradoxically unpredictable, complex and chaotic, yet also predictable,

⁴ *Folkemødet* is an annual political festival on the island of Bornholm, where politicians and citizens and NGOs meet and discuss, present and let themselves be inspired. This year it was attended by 90,000 people over 4 days.

this activity is. It has shown how working with taking experience seriously as a method for developing reflexivity has provided the leadership team, and through them the organization, with a way of acting and thinking that doesn't prescribe what we should do in some new or more successful form of organization, but rather is concerned with how we might think about what we already do in a more useful and satisfying way. Thus a new way of knowing emerges among us – namely, understanding that when we think differently, we inevitably act differently. This has changed the way we understand what we are doing – sometimes as an improvement, sometimes not. My colleague Knud, who started out focusing on efficiency, now wants his consultants to go together to meet with customers, in order to strengthen resilience and the ability to reflect upon what is going on in the moment. Perhaps one of my contributions is this: to show how changing our way of thinking changes our thought patterns, and by extension our patterns of action/interaction. As such I would say that my research shows how identity formation is a thoroughly social process, and that it is impossible to remain static when entering into conversations with colleagues on what it is we are doing.

My contribution to practice

Working in practice, or 'working live' as Patricia Shaw would put it has shown to be quite an effective way of doing strategy work. Taking the experience of the 'messiness' and the 'ambiguity' of leadership activities seriously (Shaw and Stacey 2006, p. 95), and working with taking experience seriously as a theme, has paradoxically focused our strategic work, and stressed how unpredictability and paradox and the following need for a more improvisational approach in strategy work is quite effective. Strategy work moves from making strategy plans and timetables in the boardroom to participatory inquiries into intentions, conflict and power games, and into 'leading in the moment' – also when working with preparation and planning of the work involving employees. This is what I have been inquiring into and what I have been working with together with my colleagues, and it has been quite astonishing to see how much my DMan work has already impacted practice around our company. We planned to have a new strategy by the end of the year, but we were already working in new ways by mid-summer. By adopting auto-ethnographic work methods internally we have become more aware of what we are doing and how we think, and this changes the company and our identity as

a company in a number of ways. I particularly see it in myself. I am holding steadily on to doing things in new ways, to improvising and being more confronting – yet not getting too angry, scared or sorry, but staying in touch with my own opinion and how the situation is developing.

I have just published a book in Danish on leadership in complexity together with one of my Danish colleagues on the program, and we have had four book release events, the last two with 100 participants and people on the waiting list every time. Our publisher has signed a contract with us for three more books, one on strategy and complexity, one on politics and power and the last one on reflexivity and reflexive narratives, since this turns out to be the closest to a ‘method’ we get in our work with this strategy. I have been interviewed on national radio on the connection between complexity and co-creation; the leadership team and our employees have been writing about co-creation and the new forms our products take; and our co-authored book describes co-creation and taking experience seriously, the use of reflexive narratives and a more complex understanding of what organizations are.

When I shared our book with Professor Kurt Klaudi Klausen, one of the foremost researchers in Denmark on organizational development on strategy and public management (who is on our board), he wrote the following recommendation for the back cover of the book:

The mindset is decisive for collaboration. This book on co-creation is a brave book on other and more than co-creation, although one most certainly gets a lot wiser on the subject en route through the many concrete examples, models and the theoretical understanding. It is a brave move to profess so clearly to a theory on complexity, and it is brave to expose so much about one self as an organization. It clearly is a book written by employees who believe in the project they are creating in common. The book encourages letting uncertainty loose, offers an opportunity for reflection and takes experience seriously. We get an insight into how the employees at COK work as consultants in the municipalities, a glimpse behind the curtains in relationship to how COK understands itself, and into the history of how the organization overcame its own challenges. Finally the employees take the medicine they recommend in so far they have been together in writing this book. The book is written with insight in and with love for the Danish Municipalities for whom COK exists. (Thorup 2015)

The book came out a year ago, and at our latest board meeting Kurt recommended our strategy, admitting that he didn't believe in it at first. Now he could see how, by taking such a big and brave leap into new understandings of what strategy might be understood to be, we had managed to differentiate ourselves from other consultancy businesses in the market, and actually have managed to move our business from one that was stuck in the past to an organization that contemplates the future in the present in recognition of the past, an organization that makes customers curious and wanting to know more. He stated how we had taken the strategy challenges of our own organization, and through working with our internal development have developed a new way of working live in the Danish Municipalities as well. I see this as probably the best recommendation of my work I could get. The Danish Municipalities are under a lot of stress these days, having to face new challenges in so many ways: economically, politically, environmentally, and demographically, and so on. The pressure from the central government and the EU to develop and deliver better and cheaper welfare is growing, and the necessity of being able to work strategically smart under these circumstances is a competence that quickly moves into focus. The way I have shaken up my team in new ways of understanding and working as a team, how we cooperate with our owner KL and with our Board, how we through the use of reflexive narratives have focused on developing the organization and on working live with strategy development has been on a background of necessity as well.

Today we work with boards of CEOs in the municipalities in the same way, we work with politicians in city councils as a whole, we have seminars where politicians and their CEOs from the administration participate as a pair in developing their ways of cooperating and developing their area of responsibility in the municipalities, etc. We ask customers to spend more time reflecting with us on their experiences at work starting up working together, and let them write reflexive narratives on episodes from their organizational life. What happens is that people get anxious about writing at first, but soon find themselves involved in quite deep reflections with themselves and their colleagues about what they are experiencing and talking about how different their narratives are on the same episodes. They begin to see the big local differences, and how patterns show up at the same time, and often go on writing narratives after we have finished the work. This has been worked with and tried out in groups of CEOs,

politicians in town councils, leadership groups in municipalities and smaller groups of leaders who want to understand and act differently in their complex work life.

We have changed the basis of our education for process consultants in the municipalities from a systemic into a more complex and co-creative base and process; leadership courses are developed centred around paradoxical thinking, complexity and predictable unpredictability; our homepage has more reflexive articles and more theoretical material in it. We hosted a conference on complexity and co-creation last September where we invited 100 customers to come as our guest, only paying for stay and food. The conference was planned focusing on framing conversations, reflexivity, improvisation and so on, and a lot of the participants have returned with requests for our consultants to come help them with assignments in their organizations – and we are hosting the next conference in the fall of this year.

In our everyday organizational life, we see changes in the general way we work together across organizational borders of teams or professional backgrounds, and understand our organization more as people working together rather than as a system consisting of parts. There is a theme of conflicts showing up, which I think might be the next area of experience we could write narratives about. This week I gave a lecture on an away day for the department of social work and health in Copenhagen with 450 leaders present. Here they wanted to work with changing their understanding of what it is they are doing from seeing it as a lot of workplaces to understanding it as work collectives that change according to who is working together at any certain time, in an attempt to focusing on interaction and complexity. I was asked to give a lecture on CBS together with my co-author on the book on the subject of complexity and management, and new customers are asking us to help them as consultants in their work with welfare development. Just recently, we were asked to participate in developing a complexity-based course for all top executives in all Danish municipalities on leadership, politics and working as a team; and one of our universities contacted me to check that their new Master's in Public Management course was aligned with the thoughts we have on leadership in COK. I cannot attribute all these exciting new developments to our new strategy, but there are clearly elements of the complexity and the paradoxical interplay of local interaction and global patterning emerging here.

To exemplify how we work in new ways, I will give a couple of examples. As a central point in the theoretical framework of complex responsive processes of relating is exactly to focus on the local interaction and experience as a ground for reflexivity and change; it is not possible to develop a traditional managerial ‘toolkit’ based on the notion that tools and techniques will enable leaders and managers to choose an improved future for their organization, and as such to control organizational movements towards such a future. As I have described and discussed above, this linear causality is building on the assumption that if you apply tool A, then you will get result B. Since the understanding of organizations here is one of organizations as people working together on a common assignment, and this is inevitably an uncertain and ambiguous process, such efficient causality in my understanding is not possible. Any effect of attempting to apply a tool will be characterized by considerable uncertainty (for further discussion of tools and techniques and linear and complex transformative causality, see Stacey 2012). This said, let me describe two actual customer cases in order to exemplify and give an impression of how it is possible to work with this theoretical framework in praxis.

A municipality wanted to buy a process consultant education. Earlier, this would be maybe six 2-day sessions with approximately 20 internal consultants from the municipality as participants. Working with co-creation and complexity, and wanting to show the participants what taking experience seriously could mean, we changed the format by inviting the consultants’ ‘customers’ to participate during the course. This meant, for instance, that some of the teachers from the club for teenagers came along to work with and help the consultant who was working with developing offers for youth in the municipality. This again resulted in the teachers bringing along some of the teenagers the next time. Soon the original consultant was deeply involved in developing the youth area in a totally different way, through having her work qualified by both teachers and teens. The way this chain of involvement developed could not have been planned in detail, since the consultant couldn’t know from the beginning who might be interested, and in what direction the project might develop. The format of the education changed, since it was not possible to hold on to classroom education here. Instead, it turned into ‘camps’ involving many employees from the municipality, along with a lot of citizens as well (this example only describes one of the many projects this education came to support). The focus on the complexity and the conversational nature of process

consultancy moved into focus in a whole new way, giving priority to improvisation and working live, and to participate and reflect on the complex responsive processes of conversation as local interaction creating global patterning. This way of working emergent with process consultants has turned into our preferred way, and we are at present working live like this in six municipalities, here giving their organizational consultants a possibility for changing their position from a more classical systemic and detached position to one of involvement and detachment paradoxically there at the same time, and showing them how we understand co-creation as an inevitable part of organizations and people working together, by co-creating the education with them and their collaborators.

In another municipality the CEO asked us to facilitate 2 days with his top management team and his leadership group on co-creation. He wanted them to start reflecting on complexity in leadership and to relate to one another better, both horizontally and vertically. His second incentive was for them to begin to reflect and work with ways of supporting the citizens in the municipality in participating in the welfare development in better ways (there has been a number of studies in Denmark that indicate that the public servants are actually offering too much and the wrong help in relationship to what the citizens would want when asked following rules and regulations, and that involving citizens in welfare development hereby might show to make better-targeted help or even keep costs down). Having worked with reflexive narratives in different top teams, we suggested this as our ‘method’ and after a meeting where I described the way we would work with this he agreed for us to do this. Under the headline ‘Taking experience seriously’, we gave a short description of the background for this way of focusing on experience and an instruction to writing reflexive narratives, and consequently his board of directors were asked to prepare themselves for this seminar by writing a reflexive narrative. We asked them to pick ‘a situation’ as Dewey would have put it, from their daily life as managers – situations where they thought that either co-creation was in focus or it might have been of help had it been taken into account. We also asked them to start by writing about an episode, and then also put in their thoughts and feelings from the situation and afterwards. We asked for them to ‘record’ some of their inner dialogue in the situation, if this was possible. Finally, we asked them to share some of their reflections on what they thought

was going on in the situation. Often receiving the instruction for this other way of preparing oneself opens to anxiety in different forms with the participants; in anticipation of this, we prepare the CEO so that he can help his team to hold on – advising him to get in touch if certain anxieties that can manifest become overwhelming. Some participants get nervous about whether they write well enough; others worry that what they write might be taken up badly; others feel silly writing about everyday experience when what they have to work with is the overall strategy... but usually we manage to hold on to this idea, reassuring everyone that they will not be ridiculed or examined, but will find out something about their own experience as a manager connected to the rest of the team, and about everyday life and organizational patterning.

At this specific seminar, the participants were divided into groups of three and instructed to read their narratives to one another. They shouldn't give one another advice, but should listen and questions asked should derive from a wish to understand the narrative better. The whole atmosphere changed within minutes. Everybody was either reading or listening very carefully to the narratives. There was a kind of gentleness in the room, and a new concentration. We could see from the body postures that there was openness and a focus that was unusual. We let all three of them finish and then asked them to share what possibilities for change this way of working might give them. This discussion was interesting. There was no criticism at all. Quite a few participants reflected on their initial anxiety and on how sharing their narratives had changed this. It was now obvious to them that they had a lot of common experience, and that the feeling of sitting with your challenges all by yourself was not true. They might keep their experiences private, but actually this felt ridiculous, since there was so much in common for them to learn from. They also had realized how much gain there was in sharing and so getting to know one another better. Obviously, there were parts of their experience that others had had before, and by sharing their experiences they could see how this way of working might strengthen them as a collective.

This way of working is only in its beginning, and it is too early to say what implications it might have in the long run. I do think it is safe to say, though, that the connection between local communicative interaction and population-wide patterns is showing quite clearly here – just as I find that these examples illustrate the notion of the

radical social self, with its shift in assumption from autonomy to interdependence and a move away from the individual-centred theories to a view of the individual self as thoroughly social, formed by social interaction and forming social interaction at the same time. This I find interesting since it makes it possible for leaders to work with strategy and change by focusing on the local interactions as a means for change to emerge.

We are positioning ourselves differently in our relationship to our owner, KL. From a company that planned and administered courses and conferences performed by consultants from KL, we are increasingly positioned in the middle, working together with KL on one side and the municipalities on the other. The CEO of KL has indicated that he would like us to unfold reforms when enrolment is needed in the municipalities, but also wants us to bring back information on what is going on in the decentralized municipalities all over Denmark. This has taken the form of a new ‘owners strategy’ decided on by the political board of KL. Here 17 mayors from different municipalities has decided for KL and COK to connect more closely, and to work together on four dimensions: that COK is the preferred partner for KL in implementation and competence development in the municipalities, that KL will ensure that COK is a central provider to the municipalities concerning competence courses, that there is a distinct and clear model of management and cooperation, and finally that there is an arm’s length principle in order for COK to be able to manoeuvre on its own. This decision has produced a number of new agreements. We are moving into a closer cooperation on a specific number of areas where both parties think it might be beneficial for both parties. Among other things, this means that the top-level managers in KL, in cooperation with the management team from COK, internally have framed the cooperation between our two companies in a more defined way, which in the future we hope will support the changes we have been working on in COK concerning what we are recognized as capable of professionally in this relation. In time it will be a huge change in position, since through this agreement we should be taking a more prevalent position in organizational development, leadership education and professional courses. We are currently negotiating a new agreement that will align our relationship economically as well; until now, it has been different deals for different areas of cooperation between us. This will support the professionalization of our relation and

will make it more clearly for both parties that we have a defined and decided strategy to go by.

Recent political events show why this is important. In March 2015, KL and the Danish regions (the next level of government, just below the parliament) suggested a merger of the municipalities and regions. This proposal was put forward at the yearly summit attended by 1500 local politicians; the head proposing it anticipated little resistance to the idea. On the day of voting, however, the delegates refused even to vote in support of KL and Danske Regioner investigating feasibility; it seemed they were protesting against the two organizations, not even visiting with some of the municipalities beforehand to discuss whether they agreed with the concept. The background for this wish for a merger is a growing understanding for the need for the two levels of local government in Denmark to professionalize their welfare development and the administrative and political leadership, in order to counter the growing demands on local politics and administration. The movement right now in the Scandinavian welfare societies is a movement that puts pressure on the understanding of the relationship between the individual person and the state, and thus between what the local governments in the municipalities and the state are responsible for. Today there is a much more complex relationship between the state, the market and the individual person, with a much more diffuse boundary between the public and the private. Through working with the theory of complex responsive processes of relating I have found that the key concepts of taking experience seriously in working with power, local interaction and global patterning, conflict, politics and strategy, paradox and practical judgement, ethics, action and reflexivity are central elements for basing this development on a democratic and ethical foundation, where the locally participating politicians, managers and employees can find a frame for understanding, reflecting and acting into these complex realities of today's welfare development. If we are to play the decided central role in this complex development in Danish local welfare society, it is high time for us to change our strategy and way of working.

I believe that the central change in our business is the process of our work. By spending time inquiring into what and how we do together, rather than jumping to conclusions and action, our understanding of what we are doing has grown, and as a consequence we found ourselves working in new ways before actually having finished

the inquiry into what our new strategy should contain. This may be what my central contribution to practice is: namely, to suggest a change in the way we understand and do strategy work to a more integrated understanding of the interrelatedness of thinking and acting. Today we start up assignments in the municipalities in a more 'slow' way, often spending more time in prolonged conversations with our customers. We are not as focused on selling anything we have 'on the shelves', but on understanding what challenges the customer is facing. By spending time inquiring into this, we find ourselves at the crossroads of 'client care' and 'sales pitch', trying to figure out and design what might be helpful. In doing so we are focused on listening, inquiring and opening up more possible explanations, bringing in more perspectives, involving more people earlier and sharing more of our thoughts, questions and doubts. In many ways, one could say the work has become slower; but I do think it will ultimately yield better results and in the end create a 'faster' way of working, if faster is taken to mean better solutions with higher and more lasting quality.

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Appendix 1: Svend's reflections, July 2015

Thank you for your invitation to reflect on our mutual leadership development and on being a part of your research project. First of all I want to say, that I do not experience being a part of a PhD project – rather that we have found together in a mutual cooperation to shape a new course for COK, and that you through your research project have inspired and challenged us into a new frame of understanding.

I would like to accentuate three punctuations, where I think you especially have left a mark on our joint (and new) management praxis and through this has instigated a new discourse. Through your introduction to Ralph Stacey's understandings of the complexity sciences I have been introduced to a new emerging strategy thinking, which in my opinion makes very good sense in relationship to the changing and complex surrounding world and market that COK is subject to. I don't think I am through understanding and relating myself to the frame of theory or to its implementation to practice – but I have become more conscious about the dilemma and the challenge of on the one hand to be flexible (enough) in relation to the changing need of our organization and on the other hand as management, to be able to set a firm course or an intentional strategy for the organization. We as management have become much better at taking part in the dialogue with our organization and external partners with reference to getting them engaged in giving ongoing input on problem solving or in uncovering different possibilities that might be important in relation to any given decision process. I experience (very well supported by your way of working) that being more reflexive and able to relate flexible to plans and strategies – gives us as management a bigger surplus to navigate into in this growing complexity and hereby to better enabling ourselves – and our organization – to engage in a dialog oriented approach to ourselves and our surroundings. So here you have started a pronounced process of realization and movement.

It also has changed our way of noticing and understanding management. This is the second fact I want to accentuate. Springing out of the complexity sciences I to a higher degree realize that good management is about being able to guide movements and to act in a framing, facilitating and possibility creating way with our organization and with our customers. To be present or clear hereby become a more central keyword or starting point for our future practice of management. In this new paradigm I to a

bigger extend realize the need for exercising management by being present in the moment, interacting, exploring, communicating, giving feedback and hereby influencing the everyday life. So an even higher degree of focus on helping in creating a feeling of inclusion and identity through close reinterpretations and new interpretations of our central mission and of the conditions of our organization and in a direction, so it is possible for the employees to connect.

So in my case there has emerged a growing consciousness of the importance for us to focus more on participating in more informal and often implicit social interactions and expressions with the organization – also in order to unveil and bring in profitable perspectives from the line (an expression I don't know how to translate?). So here you also have participated to a growing realization with me that mastering management in a relationally created organization is more about being able to participate and getting involved in processes, to be able to communicate clearly, to act and participate in co-creating and coordinating what is emerging in the relation.

The third fact I would like to credit you, is your critical role in connection to us being able to reflect together as a group. To reach that point does not happen by itself. Here you have played a crucial role. To stimulate curiosity and mutual investigation – also in a collective like a management group – demands will, ability and courage and a high amount of confidence and trust. Confidence in that one can say things openly, and that it will be treated in a sober and respectful way. On the road in our own development process we have become more aware of 'letting our guards down' and make use our differences related to professional knowledge, competences, personal style, or of pulling in the experiences each of us bring along as managers. We have accomplished to make differences into strength and turn it into a creative process when we have been in situations where we had to pin down vital questions or find solutions to complex organizational challenges. Often the solutions have been discussed and then put on standby in order for us jointly to take them up later and model it into a better solution. Also the ability to not immediate decide on a solution but to park taking a decision in order to have time for reflection and afterthought is something we are better at now. I also think this is due to you. I also experience that the management team has become a more natural pivotal point for professional and managerial coaching and feedback and

in this process we have developed an approach where we listen and learn from each other and are able to receive both critique and challenges.

It has become clear for us as a management team that we have a common goal and ambition concerning COK which reaches beyond each of us. This also means that we put the interest of the whole over our private. 'Being ambitious' isn't just something one has to be, but something special one really want to realize on behalf of the organization. The 'why' of our organization has become the lighthouse we all take bearing of if we are in doubt concerning the direction – or if we disagree us in between.

Appendix 2: Niels's reflections, July 2015

Keep moving under pressure!

On the basis of our new strategy and our understanding of who we are, I have been wondering what it is that we have done to create cohesion and drive, once the leadership team in all its differences was set.

In many ways the experience for me of being on this team has been quite different from earlier teams I have been directing. This may be because the challenge in the concrete reality was so tangible – the burning platform so real. But maybe also because we managed in time to set a new frame and understanding of the connection of theory and practice, and through this of how we simultaneously can work and reflect upon what we are doing. This has happened in the midst of the rawness and cynicism, that grows as a Teflon layer on all managers who consequently and over longer periods of time has to match tough realities. Maybe this was because we discovered and worked with taking our experiences seriously, and because we by doing this discovered that we through that could find a direction in which to move.

By choosing the complexity theoretical frame of understanding, with the ideas of co-creation and emergence and with 'taking experience seriously' as way of working we have obtained a new understanding of what it is we are actually doing. An understanding, which has participated in vitalizing the organization, giving everybody from management to employees hope and contact to a bigger cause – something worth working for: the municipal communities.

It has given a strong focus on the team 'taking everyday experiences seriously', 'learning to stand firm in the middle of the uncertain and emerging', 'to keep moving under pressure'. We have agreed on the necessity of working with each our development, parallel to the development of the organization. Through continuously working with reflection and training on the management team, we have created an understanding, a room and an obligation for the singular person that he can and shall develop and hereby move. A mobility which to begin with was experienced as scary, as chaos, lack of course, lack of plan or grasp of the situation, but which we today will say is about being alive, being in contact and moving ourselves and together.

I know it from myself and from other leadership teams. There is an inherent tendency to stiffen – to ensure control, but also adhering the personal integrity under pressure. There is a risk that the individual develops a routine which repeats the behavioral patterns and roles that one knows works from experience, and therefore by the person is experienced as helpful. A lot of leaders internalize the expectations coming from the outside and transform these demands from the surroundings to leadership into strong internalized demands to oneself – to demands for being your own biggest employer. The leader hereby puts him self under pressure to deliver, to be smart, to set up cutting edge targets and to facilitate these; in short a pressure to personally keep goal bigger than yourself.

Taking your own experience and your own history seriously

Taking experience seriously is amongst other things also about being awake and attentive to one's own immobility. Because of this it is an absolutely decisive part of working with moving management that you as a leader dare to let your self be moved. And because of this it is central point reflexively to understand what actually creates movement which touches the individual member and the team.

To me co-creation started in my former job amongst Danish engineers. Just like all new ideas and theories about innovation for years was associated with the world of technology, co-creation was something I connected to new technology products like for instance Apple, who so creatively developed some of the best user interfaces together with their customers. Customers became members of a community; yes they almost changed positions from customers to fans. In the beginning I stood there with my technology approach to innovation as market- or technology driven, and was skeptical towards the strong focus on user- and employee driven innovation. I absorbed myself in an understanding of innovation strongly driven by relations. At the same time Pernille Thorup arrived with her preoccupation with complexity theory and co-creation through her PhD study and we listened, read and talked our way into new concepts of co-creation and emergence.

In the beginning I curiously thought that this might participate in giving COK new inner values, that could replace the old ‘Højskole’⁵ DNA, and which at the same time might give perspective to strategic and innovative models in a whole new way. In the middle of the tremendous adjustments going on in COK it was important I thought – yes almost decisive – to figure out whether ‘Co-creation, emergence (Stacey and the whole encounter with the more classical strategy thinking that Pernille carried in)’ might be the new idea base. But when it then turned into concrete action, with our two consultants who brought in plans for us to train the management team with horses on the distant island of Læsø, I doubted if this was such good an idea – and maybe also got a bit insecure as to what the surroundings, not least our board and our owners, would think about us going to Læsø to play with horses, in the middle of firing employees and making a turnaround.

It took a while from this feeling of madness – the insecurity in relation to this new understanding – to a sense of ‘Wow – this is really moving forward’.

We had consecutive and prolonged reflections on the management team. One among many absorbed conversations was metaphorical: ‘Is this just a new spoon and fork in the drawer filled with consultancy- and learning theories, or is it a new kitchen, or maybe a whole new way of cooking?’

We had conversations about the concept of customers. With my basic conviction that customer is king, it is hard with an understanding of customers where the concept ‘customer’ is almost abolished. Via the ‘Folkemøde’⁶ at Bornholm where the word co-

⁵ COK originally was started in 1970 as a Højskole for politicians and employees from the municipalities. ‘Højskole’ is a traditional Danish rurally developed general education system. The first school opened in 1844, and has schooling for male farmer hands in the wintertime, and the girls in the summertime. The idea was originally developed by N.F.S.Grundtvig with the purpose of educating citizens. It started out as a rural nonacademic oppositional culture, but has over the years developed into main culture and is today a whole line of ‘free schooling’ (*de frie skoler*) from kindergarten, schools, junior high-schools (*Efterskole*), and high-schools (*Højskole*).

⁶ ‘Folkemøde’ is a yearly political festival at the island of Bornholm, where politicians and citizens and NGO’s meet and discuss, present and let themselves be inspired. This year it was attended by 90,000 people for 4 days.

creation was on everybody's lips I had new energy and confidence in what we were engaged in. Maybe we were actually on the way to finding into something that hits bull's eye in relation to the needs of the municipalities.

The courage

At a personal level I have learned more the last couple of years than in all the many previous leader development programs. I have learned something about the courage to dare to stand in the insecure. I have become aware of the value in waiting and being able to improvise. And it has become a new foundation for our work as a management team. I look back on my own development, as the experienced old trotter, who in so many ways have tried everything, and discover that I have to work with:

- The courage to pull back and let things happen
- Dare to be a bit patient – without getting bored
- Live with realizing the world is paradoxical and not just fixable
- To be happy and content with what I can do
- Officially to be learning and hereby also in movement myself
- To be insistent – dare to confront uncertainty – also when important stakeholders and customers don't get it.

Today I see the role as leader of a management team as the one who makes sure and focuses on making experiences and knowledge to a room for reflexivity for one's own and ones colleagues development and movement. And today I see courage and persistence as decisive. Now we hold on for us to let go, we slow down to speed up, we are persistent and give room for new experience to fasten. We don't talk about co-creation – we do it!