Improvizing in a cybernetic way

A personal narrative from an interventionist' perspective

What makes change complex is that what people perceive seems differentiated, while the problems themselves are interconnected as one. It is, for example, challenging to intervene in a situation in which people are relatively isolated and really don't see the connection with the work of others beyond the boundaries of their in-group. In line with social constructionism, meaning is co-created and as stated by Robine "there is no other reality that that which we construct in relationship." For example, information selection happens according to the idea that people have of the world, which subsequently confirms that idea. When new insights don't match, they are not put into practice, resulting in various isolated and competing 'realities', wherein no one version is objectively correct.

Multiple realities

Naturally this implies the possibility that in an organization people perceive multiple "realities" without seeing the underlying order which all these "realities" connect. This underlying order can be related to the work processes and the way they are interconnected to produce the common goods and services upon which the organization's existence depends. However, this underlying order also has something to do with the way these in-groups and their competing realities are interconnected in the sense of social-psychological dynamics. And it is this order that we take a closer look at in this and in the coming chapters. For most of us, these different realities are taken for granted as they are associated with the given structure of an organization. All people create and construct their own world of experience through the meaningful

distinctions they make. But all of the realities so generated must be respected as equally valid, although not necessarily equally desirable. As a consequence, these realities are perceived as invariable, as something that is 'out there' or as something we can't influence and have to deal with as such. Therefore, in daily practice, sequences of interactions between these groups are repetitive and circular. They are predictable, as if everybody involved is following an unwritten script which they all seem to agree upon.

Cybernetics

Recently, cybernetics has been presented as a form of social interaction, even as an improvisational interactional performance. Rather than reciting or enacting a predetermined script, an interventionist with

a cybernetic notion joins whatever is present and then flows with it. The interventionist improvises like a jazz musician, accepting another musician's melodic (and harmonic and rhythmic) line and elaborating it in a spontaneous and natural way. Each subsequent behavior is shaped, influenced, and determined by the outcome brought about by the previous behavior. In this regard, intervening becomes just another form of a feedback process where circular-recursive interaction organizes the way things move. Even more radically, this method points to the importance of the interventionist as a punctuator and co-definer of reality, as part of the underlying dynamic order, rather than an independent objective observer. This method of cybernetic intervening goes beyond the rational, individual and aspect-focused approach of other intervention methods. Moreover, as we will explain in this chapter, it is paradoxical and focused on the underlying systemic dynamic order and on the symptoms, it is producing.

The narrative we introduce in this white paper is in fact a prepublication of an upcoming book on this subject. It describes a personal story from an interventionist's perspective. It presents a series of change interventions undertaken in a healthcare organization. For the whole story, including the reflection on the personal assumptions of the interventionist, regarding the cybernetic principles, we have to wait for the publication of the upcoming book.

The narrative

"You called it 'a structure taboo," God knows why, but as far as I am concerned, there is no taboo with regard to talking about structure here!" exclaimed the male half of the board of directors. He said this in front of a full room of some 40 branch and executive managers, all working in the same healthcare institution. "Yeah, what do I know?" flashed through my mind, "my gut feeling during the earlier sessions had been that structure was not debatable." Perhaps someone had hinted at that, after which it had been remarkably silent – something like that. I noticed that in reaction to the emotional, somewhat angry and indignant words of the leader, a sort of shiver went through the audience. And not just through the audience – his direct way of speaking clearly threw me off balance too. Moreover, it was like everyone was looking at me and thinking, "What will he say?" – or was I imaging it? The audience remained remarkably silent, everyone was waiting for what would come next.

I found it difficult to parry in public, or even to deflect the question back to the audience. "Is there someone who would like to react to this?" would normally be a good one. But I could imagine that for the people in the audience, the question was posed rather directly at me. Moreover, the man who was also my client had said it in a way that clearly did not tolerate opposition. It would also be useless to react on the content – in that case, it would remain something between us, which would make the rest of the audience (passive) spectators. And that definitely was not my intent – the opposite,

rather. In consultation with both leaders, I had invested in this session in order to enter into dialogue with them and the location managers. But while all of this flashed through my mind, the other half of the board of directors reacted, trying to save the situation, and perhaps also compensating. She suggested that the interviews I had done with those present has apparently invoked this idea. A meaningful silence followed her reaction. I directly asked those present if there was anyone who could confirm this. Thankfully, that was the case, but it was clear that there was an (allegorical) elephant in the room – which no one dared point out.

My opening talk in the meeting had elicited some reactions. The discussion in sub-groups afterwards had yielded welcome feedback for those present. However, in the following presentation about the new strategic vision of the client, this direction was not pursued. That was unfortunate because the program determined this was the moment of inspiration – connection to the "strategic goals for the medium to long-term" they called it. On the sheets presented by the client were texts like: "We want a healthy professionalism that invites discussion," "Openness and clear frames of reference lead to more safety (we will not sit and wait for a safe climate)," "We hold each other accountable with regard to deadlines. This ensures transparency between the client and all others involved (who can for example be informed via the 'management newsletter')" and "There is too much silence around subjects that are important to

everyone." These are texts that both leaders supported but they did not interest the audience. It could be seen from their uninterested faces, but primarily from the fact that no one reacted.

For the functioning of the strategic vision just presented by the director, both directors found it important that it was supported by the people in the audience. The starting point, as articulated beforehand by the directors, was that they would enter into a discussion with the branch and executive managers about "what the new challenges in the work are" and "why these challenges have not been taken up." Approximately 850 employees work at the healthcare institution, who together attend to 2500 clients divided over eight different municipalities and 25 locations. Together with both directors, the location managers formed the strategic level of the institution, which was tasked with carrying out many new tactical assignments in addition to their work as branch managers. During the interviews with the location managers and directors, the majority indicated that the existing structure did not motivate them to engage with one another. Moreover, almost every interviewee indicated that the administrative consultations with the tactical administrative layer under chairmanship of the directors – some 45 people together – did not lead to good quality meetings. Another typical statement, made during one of the interviews was that "it was all one-way traffic with only chair's points". However, it was not until the moment that the statement was made about the apparent structure taboo

that it was clear the audience members did not want to discuss their dissatisfaction publicly.

In the interviews, I had also asked about potential barriers to a good conversation. The following suggestions were provided: the frustrating board meetings, experiences that were not shared, the fatigue with regard to dealing with the same problems time and again, and the lack of connectedness in general. I had presented these suggestions, which had been brought up during individual interviews, as the result of the research. The points from the interviews were recognized. People especially confirmed the "frustrating board meetings." The subject was apparently "safe" enough to mention publicly. With that, the board meeting became a symbolic totem pole which everyone kept dancing around, and sometimes inadvertently kicked. That became evident from the audience's reaction; they resigned themselves in silence. Therefore I encouraged myself to go a step further – away from the obvious issues. As such, I asked in what way the current structure hindered them from engaging with one another. This was directly followed by the reaction of the director about the "structure taboo".

The statement that jumpstarted the conversation again was the question from a woman in the audience. She simply asked if the client could point out why he was so worried about this alleged structure taboo. Moreover, this was said by someone who had thus far not said anything. The client then told the story that years before, they had decided to clean up the administrative layer above the branch managers, and to burden the function profiles of the branch managers with tactical tasks in order to bridge the resulting vacuum in the tactical level. Moreover, it was subsequently decided that this management layer would never come back and that there would be no further changes to the existing structure. The people in the audience quickly made it clear that this was old fashioned.

A short reflection

The event in the narrative was not an unusual or especially remarkable event, but it raises questions about what was happening. There are many facets of this narrative to explore but let's do this by starting with the first of Bateson's principles, "Introducing difference." Exploring it, post hoc, what is a consultant supposed to do in such a situation? The way we see it, people in a common space should be able to exchange their own interpretation and perceptions of topics. Therefore, people should be in direct contact with each other, and through joint action, develop shared ideas and conclusions.

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