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ANTONIE VAN NISTELROOIJ
EVA VAN DER FLUIT . ROB DE WILDE

The Paradox of Programmed Dialogue in Large Group Interventions

A Social Constructionist Perspective

Abstract

The aim of this article is to reflect on our work as practitioners of Large Group Interventions (LGIs) from some fundamental social constructionist assumptions. In doing so, we hope to contribute new insights in the ongoing debate in which social constructionist theory is introduced as a relatively new perspective on organizational change. We compare these assumptions with some of the principles of Organization Development that originally were pointed out by Kurt Lewin c.s. This leads to a social constructionist bedrock for Large Group Interventions. From this theoretical bedrock and our own experiences, we formulate a number of practical challenges, specifically concerning four paradoxes in ‘programming’ dialogue in large group processes and the management role in planned change processes using dialogue as main vehicle for organizational change.

I. Introduction

One of the major contributions of applied social studies, such as group dynamics and Organization Development to the development of society is believed to be the increase of individual and collective degree of freedom by an enlightened (self-)consciousness (Lesjak, 2012, pp. 17–18). Departing from the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann ‘The social construction of reality’ (1967), devel-

opment predominantly is a matter of changing people's individual perceptual frames through interaction to arrive at new and more widely shared insights or common ground that could initiate new or more adapted behavior (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010). This premise can also be found in the work of Kurt Lewin, one of the main originators behind the Organization Development (OD) approach. Lewin gathered from his experiments on the effect of group pressure on individual group member memory "*that what exists as reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality*" (Lewin & Grabbe, 1948, p. 57). Human behavior is thought to depend on social perception of what is accepted within the group and with the position "in which we perceive ourselves and others within the social setting" (Lewin & Grabbe, 1948, p. 61). Based on these observations, both authors also formulated the principle that "social action no less than physical action is steered by social perception", by which they claim that behavioral change is not so much caused by new knowledge but rather by alterations in the individual perceptual frame of the total social setting of the persons concerned. Lewin's principles acknowledge the importance of the way people actively construct their own reality during interaction with relevant others and the role that social perception plays by doing so. This resemblance between what's been called 'a social constructionist' perspective and Lewin's perspective on individual and organizational development intrigued and motivated us to go a step further in looking at our own experiences with Large Group Interventions, one of the more prominent contemporary OD-intervention methods.

As a field as well as a profession Organization Development (OD) has spawned diverse approaches and methods (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). A relative new group of typical OD interventions is the Large Scale Intervention (LSI). LSI is a participative approach for change, comprising one or more Large Group Interventions (LGIs), being meetings with (a representation of) the whole system of stakeholders in one room. The number of participants in an LGI varies from 15 to over 2000. LGIs are believed to be built on principles of socio-

technical systems, self-organization, high involvement, participation and dialogue (Holman & Devane, 2007). According to Worley, Mohrman, & Nevitt (2011, p. 405) Large Group Interventions are “one of the fastest growing and most popular organization development interventions” and are believed to be excellently suited to organize interactive and collective learning capabilities (Van der Zouwen, 2012, p. 122). Moreover, Large Group Intervention methods like Strategic Scenario Planning, Future Search, Open Space and Appreciative Inquiry express that OD has expanded beyond individual and small group dynamics. Furthermore, LGIs seem to become more and more “whole systems” approaches to organizational change and community building (Bunker & Alban, 1997; 2006; Holman et al., 2007; Bartunek, Balogun & Do, 2011).

Despite their increasing popularity and the large volume of descriptive and normative literature, there are two major challenges to Large Group Interventions. First, as Bartunek, et al. (2011) put it, LGIs do not appear to be informed by contemporary developments in organizational theorizing. Secondly, despite some most promising empirical findings especially with Appreciative Inquiry (Coopers & Whitney, 2005; Jones, et al., 2006), according to Worley et al. (2011) there seems to be a dearth of empirical findings and reflections on large group processes and outcomes. In this article we aim to reflect on our work as practitioners of Large Group Interventions (LGIs), guided by some basic social constructionist assumptions.

2. A Social Constructionist Perspective: Some Basic Assumptions

There are many (social) constructionisms and constructivisms, but in essence they are all based on a fuzzy set of insights, which are difficult to define (Gergen, 1985). However, they share a number of basic assumptions like: [1] objective reality is elusive for people, and, to the extent a reality exists, it is a social construction; [2] knowledge is historically and culturally specific, and therefore contextual; [3] knowledge arises from human interaction (Burr, 1995, pp. 3–5; Watzlawick, 1990, pp.103–106). The first assumption tells us that people

construct meaning for themselves from day-to-day interaction to understand the organization surrounding them. This daily practice is not an objective reality “out there” but an inter-subjective one: it is what we make of it for ourselves. As a consequence, change in the daily routine is something that can only be realized through direct participation and full involvement of the participants themselves. The second assumption implies that change does not only concern content (the aspect of the organization that has to change) and process (the trajectory, phases and sequence of interventions), but is mainly about context (the total social setting or social system). Context from a constructionist point of view has two meanings. The first being the total social setting in a more physical sense, in which you interact and are part of. Second, in a more psychological sense, the whole of meanings arise from the composition of this social setting, the ‘construction’ of the context. This construction has a major influence on the social perception of the participants. The consequence of the third assumption is that quality of knowledge is related to the quality of the interaction. From this assumption the concept of dialogue action learning and role taking, which we will discuss in the next section, was developed (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010).

From these basic assumptions we study communication patterns and dependency relations between individuals and groups of people who have a certain stake in the upcoming change process (i.e. stakeholders). Through direct interaction, people become aware of their social position and their dependency on others to perform a good job. With this awareness they develop as a group in interaction a new shared meaning about their surroundings. And this new shared meaning becomes the new ‘reality’ they have to face up to. This kind of change is happening when enough people are convinced that this new meaning reflects the new ‘reality’ as the real deal. In fact, such a shared construction of reality produces the idea that the world actually is like this image, and that with this image absolute certainty has been achieved for the moment (Watzlawick, 1990). This image of ‘reality’, which we construct, is strongly connected to the context

or social system wherein the interactions take place. Although people in the same situation are inclined to construct their own version of reality, these constructions seem to converge into a shared perceptual frame due to day-to-day interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). To put it short, people who cooperate closely in a specific social-cultural context, develop a reality that mainly exists for them and not for people from outside that context.

3. Dialogue as Vehicle for Organizational Change

Organizational change can be seen as a context-dependent, unpredictable, non-linear process, in which intended strategies often lead to unintended outcomes. Research on sensemaking, inter-subjective construction processes and change more explicitly focuses on shared meanings as an aspect of structure (Balogun & Johnson, 2005, Bartunek, Lacey & Wood, 1992 and Isabella, 1990). The premise here is that to achieve change, it is necessary for a change to occur in individual perceptions. Therefore we have to be aware that recipients' interpretations of change plans are mediated by their existing context of action, ways of thinking, and interactions with others. These interpretations are likely to form the key for change.

Benne (1976), reflecting on Lewin's principles of change, states that typical OD methods used in the seventies like Training Groups, Process Consultation and Third-Party Intervention aim to stimulate people to perceive themselves and their surroundings in another way, and to open themselves up for new knowledge and skills¹. Next, he presupposes that somebody's social perception or individual frame changes as different ways of seeing of the same events are exchanged in a group. This change is a consequence of the projecting of oneself in and the trying out of alternative perceptions of oneself and of ones surroundings: *"He may try to perceive and feel the world as others in his group perceive and feel it. In the process, our own perceptual frames may be modified or at least recognized as belonging to us and operat-*

¹ The change principles of Lewin and Grabbe were originally published in 1945 in the Journal of Social Issues. Benne first reflected on their work during a lecture conducted in the summer of 1946.

ing as one among many other constructions of social reality.” (Benne, 1976, p. 321) We believe that Large Group Interventions put a similar exchange process of individual frames and assumptions center-stage.

In a well-organized conversation, space is allowed for multiple exchanges of individual frames. This can be an effective intervention to realize organizational change. Dialogue can be compared with a collective consciousness-raising process during which change gradually occurs in human speech.

“Understanding change is understanding alterations in discourse patterns that may suggest different ways of constituting action. These suggestions in turn, are capable of generating new action possibilities. Change, then, occurs when a new way of talking replaces the old way of talking.” (Barrett et al., 1995, p. 366)

The realization of a growing collective consciousness that one’s own ‘reality’ is only one among many realities is one of the main purposes of organizing a dialogue. In essence, it is the ability to comprehend and voice how the situation appears from another’s point of view (Schein, 1996). When one voices the perspective of somebody else, comparable with what has been called ‘role taking’, the other is inclined to disclose information more fully (Johnson, 1975). The additional information and the fuller comprehension of an alternative perspective both work to increase the development of new knowledge, especially in complex and social ambiguous situations which continuously emerge in change processes (Dixon, 1998).

4. Dialogue in Large Group Interventions

After discussing the theory on dialogue and meaning making, we want to focus on how this works out in the practice of Large Group Interventions (LGIs). The main denominators in all Large Group Interventions are: [1] the collective gathering in one room of stakeholders which share a stake in a change issue; [2] as defined before hand by management or a specially formed design group; [3] the stakeholders gathered in the room represent the social system, and

by this the context in which [4] a continuous dialogue is going on, stimulating exchange and interaction between the different stakeholders.

In order to establish a valid theme and purpose of the LGI, it is highly needed to do the preparation and design of the LGI with a so called ‘preparation group’ or ‘design group’. This group is formed as a cross section of all relevant stakeholders. A consultant facilitates the group to determine focus and purpose of the process, which leads to a design relevant for the social system. During the LGI itself, the members of the design group are part of the large group and have the same role as the other participants.

In order to work productively with large groups, with the ‘whole system in the room’, a whole family of Large Group Intervention methods has been developed (Van der Zouwen, 2011). Each method has its own specific program, purpose and arrangements for stimulating dialogue. The format of these methods varies from strictly fixed to very flexible, the process ranges from very structured to very open. For instance, in a typical “Open Space” (Owen, 1992) people are mainly seated in one or more large circles and can freely participate in flexible small groups. In a World Café people travel along several small tables². In our practice we often use formats in which participants interact with each other sitting in small table groups of 7 á 8 people. We focus here on an arrangement based on a fixed number of tables. The composition of the table group can be heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of all stakeholder groups as they form all together the ‘whole social system’, or homogeneous with people form the same stakeholder group sitting together. The main line of interaction in these table groups follows a procedure as visualized in figure 1.

Most of our LGI programs have several rounds of working in small table groups, which by their sequence are building a common ground for one or more change issues at hand. Figure 1 illustrates

² For more information about the variety of Large Group Interventions methods see Bunker and Alban (2006), Holman and Devane (2007), Van der Zouwen (2011).

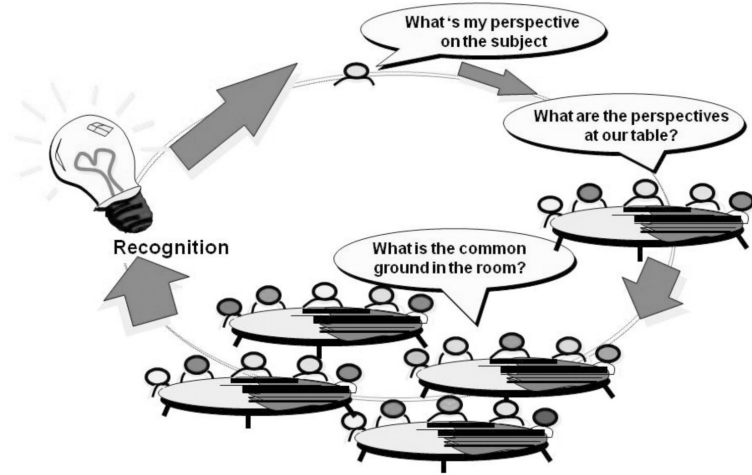


Figure 1: Communication process in a Large Group meeting focused on developing common ground.

the main steps in this process. This process can be iterated several times. Our LGI meetings usually start with an introduction by the top-leader, explaining the aims of the meeting, its place in the larger change process and how action planning will be done during or after the meeting. We as facilitators explain the way of working and the rules of the game, directly followed by a question to all the people in the room to define first one's own perspective on the central issue at stake. In the first round, the participants share their own individual frame at their own table, and compare their own perspective with the perspectives of other stakeholders at their table. By doing so they create a shared perspective on a meso level. When the first round is done, each table group shares their findings in plenary with all the stakeholders in the room. Each participant in the room gets a vivid impression of what is going on in the organization.

The process in figure 1 shows the alternation of individual contribution, dialogue and workout in small table groups, and collectively gathering conclusions for next steps with the whole group. When this cycle is completed several times, a combination of looking for common ground and action planning develops. As can be seen in

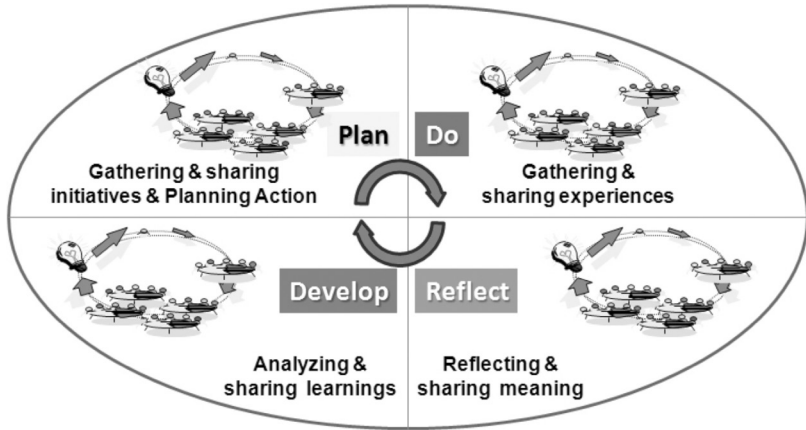


Figure 2: LGI Program showing a combination of building common ground for action and action learning for planning next steps.

figure 2 the action cycle starts with sharing individual experiences with the change issue at hand, followed by a round of reflection by asking for the meaning of the experiences they have just shared with each other, subsequently asking the participants for analyzing what can be learned for the organization by looking at the whole, which ends with a round for gathering initiatives and planning for action. Each round ends with an in real time established shared impression of respectively all the experiences, meanings, learnings and action initiatives of all the participants in the room. To sum up, at the end of the program all participants have built up a common ground not only for the planned action but also for the reasons and motivations behind this action.

5. Reflections on Experienced Paradoxes and Dilemmas

So far we presented theory and LGI design. How do Large Group Interventions work out in practice? We have experienced that LGIs can be very effective for organizational change, but we also know that there are some serious challenges. The typical communication processes we described are part of a delicate larger process, prepara-

tion of the LGI (or more LGIs), building up trust with the members of the design group, a right fit with the organizational culture, commitment of the central management on the subject of ‘participation’, and the direct involvement of large groups of people; each step has to be handled with care. ‘Programming’ an open dialogue, in which people construct a new, more shared and valid perspective on relevant organization issues can be in itself a paradoxical activity.

“Many people assume that the creation, as part of the re-educative process, of an atmosphere of informality and freedom of choice cannot possibly mean anything else but that the re-educator must be clever enough in manipulating the subjects to have them think that they are running the show.”
(Lewin & Grabbe, 1948, p. 65)

Because of the planned character of the change process, people can get the feeling that they are manipulated by the open character of the dialogue. This feeling can also be caused when a participative approach is combined with an authoritarian leadership style, or by the paradox of the large scale of the collaborative gatherings and the intimate character of the dialogue. In the next section we will elaborate on four major challenges we encounter in our practice.

On Empowerment and Management – a Wicked Combination?

“When a rhinoceros is out of his cage, you’ll never get him back to it unless you’ll drug him.” (Dannemiller, in a personal conversation)

A LGI affects the feeling of empowerment in the system. This might lead people to challenging of or even abandon traditional ways of management. We think that it is very important that leaders and decision makers are aware of the implications for their own leadership attitude and of the fact that when a critical mass of the organization develops a certain wisdom, leaders are seldom wiser than the wisdom of the crowd. Although leaders may have a helicopter view, they seldom see the whole picture. So they need to broaden their view in exchange with employees and other stakeholders who have

deeper knowledge of the daily operations. The sooner in a change process these perspectives merge, the more feasible the action plans become. Also the level of participation needs to be discussed with top managers and leaders. What is open for feedback and ideas and what is not? It is necessary for leaders to be clear about the ‘not open’ issues in front of the group. If participants have enough space for bringing in their own private perspective, if they feel safe in doing so and experience some kind of feedback in the process, then they can develop a bigger picture as a group and can be as or even more intelligent or wiser than their leadership. In one of our cases concerning cost cutting, the large group had better cost saving ideas than the economy department and CEO. Moreover, as a result, implementing these ideas met a greater level of acceptance by the employees.

On the Individual and the Large Group – a Counterintuitive Connection?

Getting enough individual space during an LGI appears to be difficult to reconcile with the collective and system-wide nature of the dialogue. Large-scale change in large groups is counterintuitive, since size and participation tend to be negatively related (Weick and Quinn, 1999). For us, this seems to be true in *unstructured* crowds. Although LGIs can work with very large groups, the layout is structured and can best be compared with that of a café or restaurant. For example, for a group of 300 persons about 40 table groups are working at the same time. A table group forms a micro-cosmos of the whole. As in a café, discussions can be interesting and personal, no matter how many other people are present in the room. The café lay-out permits many people to talk simultaneously about the same question. As suggested in figure 1 and 2, their insights are converged by short presentations of the tables. In this way, micro-, meso- and macro perspectives are constructed and alternated and together constitute the system-wide dialogue.

On Freedom of Choice for Participants – a Logical Prerequisite for Change?

“There seems to be a paradox implied in the insistence on freedom of acceptance, [...] since re-education aims to change the system of values and beliefs of an individual or group, to change it so as to bring it in line with reality, it seems illogical to expect that this change will be made by the subjects themselves.” Lewin and Grabbe (1948, p. 65)

According to Lewin and Grabbe (1948), freedom of choice is a prerequisite for change of social perception to be happening at all. Because of its amplitude and scope, the main strategy behind an organizational change process is mostly still a planned and programmed one, and therefore an intentional one. When freedom of choice is a prerequisite for voluntary, conscious and intrinsically motivated change, then we suspect at least an incongruence or something of a paradox. However, this paradox can be circumvented when the process of change offers enough measures of freedom for the participants to be able to exchange perspectives in an equal and mutual manner, to experiment independently and to make choices. By listening to others, how they experience the change issues, challenges and operational problems, participants seem to realize that there is more to it than they can see and in fact need each other to handle the problems. Those insights and feelings enable that participants leave differently from how they came; more aligned with each other and their realities. This alignment happens for all the participants, including management as it gets insights in the actual practice of the people running the organization on a daily basis. The alignment to reality is partly conscious as participants often express their new insights and appreciation of their feelings of connection. But part of the alignment is probably unconscious and happens without a deliberate choice.

On Consensus and Conformity – a Polluted Process?

Salomon Asch, famous for his experiments on judgment and perception stated once, that *“Life in society requires consensus as an indispensable condition. But consensus, to be productive, requires that each indi-*

vidual contributes independently out of his experience and insight. When consensus comes under the dominance of conformity, the social process is polluted and the individual at the same time surrenders to the powers on which his functioning as a feeling and thinking being depends.”
(Asch, 1955, p. 34)

During an LGI there is always a danger that one dominant perspective quickly leads to the development of a one-dimensional organizational reality that insufficiently fits the practical facts and therefore does not adequately solve the change problems at hand. Moreover, if one realizes that an unstructured large group of people possesses a typical -mostly dysfunctional- form of dynamics, like dilemma of voice, contagion of affect and de-individuation (Gilmore & Barnett 1992), then this implies that attention is needed to introduce not only some structure but also some simple rules of engagement related to the mutual and equal character of a dialogue. One of the main simple rules which is explained by the start of an LGI is that ‘everybody’s truth is true’ and that the gathering is not about getting consensus or having a discussion on who is right, but in fact is an exchange process aiming at developing a shared enriched picture of what is going on in the organization. These simple rules are under ‘normal’ circumstances picked up very quick by the participants and seem to work very well as interaction guide-lines. But under more ‘conflictuous’ circumstances the quality of the process is hugely dependent on the quality of the preparation by the design group. Their interpretations of these circumstances, their interpretation of the daily dynamics seems to be the determined factor for success.

6. Conclusions

A social constructionist way of looking at change brings closer attention to the individual, relational, cyclic and interactive character of organizational change itself, and to the field of Organization Development and Change management. As we see it, it enriches our understanding of the driving human principles behind change and developmental processes. Although management mostly takes the

initiative for organizational change, management does not possess the monopoly on creating a new organizational reality and forcing this on the organization. The management point of view is one among many perspectives that are part of the social system and that needs to be brought forward in the exchange process alongside all the other perspectives. This means for management to adopt the role of a participant during dialogue, in the course of which they need to acknowledge the reality construction margins of the other stakeholders who have to implement the change. You can say that a change strategy with LGIs has social constructionist assumptions, taking distance from the traditional management role as portrayed in the literature on 'change management'. This can appear confusing and even lead to tensions within the higher echelons, especially if this role contradicts existing cultural norms. This is why we strongly advise not only to work with a design group to make sure that all productive and contra productive processes are uncovered, but also to spend time on leadership and management alignment before engaging in a change process based on system wide dialogue with one or more Large Group Interventions.

When multiple viewing is restricted, or when specific stakeholders have the opportunity to unilaterally impose their perspective on the situation, dialogue becomes a façade. In this manner a breeding ground emerges for unsupported accusations and palavering, which eventually results in a polarized and stagnating us-and-them image. Dialogue, in the real sense of the word, means 'flowing through', a free stream of conversations amongst people. Not trying to convince, but simply to understand. Or as David Bohm (1998, p.118) describes it "The spirit of dialogue is not competition, but it means that if we find something new, everybody wins".

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