

From complication to complexity

Bridging destructive communication gaps between executives and employees

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Several of our now ongoing projects have made apparent a deep gap between the way that the CEO:s describe the interactive system on the workplace and the way the employees describe the same system. The projects cover many different parts of the working life such as the health care system, the high tech industry, or the media sector. The managers at the workplaces we have studied often look at the employees in ways that resemble the way one goes about buying external services. They deal with internal and external resources in the same way. In many cases they find it natural that these groups compete with each other.

The managers, as buyers or contractors, define the expected output and the budget, they cast the people they want to be in the project group and they then give them free hands to define and solve the task. The managers often declare that it is up to the people in the group to “deliver” before deadline. If unexpected problems come up it will be the group’s job to solve them. They can choose to work around the clock if they can not find a better solution. Those who fail to deliver on time, to perform “well” or seem to need more time than the budget allows will simply not be asked to participate in the forthcoming projects. Only those who have been able to prepare themselves well enough to be chosen for incoming projects will survive as employees. Only the best prepared and those in line with the current trends can manage to compete with a broad variety of external resources.

There are of course employees that are quite satisfied with the situation. They appreciate the autonomy, appreciate being looked upon as professional actors and appreciate the great possibility to form their own careers. Other employees, however, are quite frustrated. They expect that being employed, in itself, should make a difference. They assume that the employer has certain responsibilities. They still expect the management to guide them through what they should do and to take full responsibility for their long time-term professional development. They feel abandoned and neglected. They just sit and wait for instructions that never come.

The trend towards a working life built on this new type of agreements will continue. I can’t see any signs of change in any other direction. The trend is consistent with the process of individuation and the appearance of a global economy. The problems we address here are those that occur when the persons acting in the same social system have different and contradictory inner pictures of what they expect from each other.

The managers that assume that all the employees will act and take initiatives to solve the problems that arise will – when this assumption is not true – introduce very ineffective

strategies that will create resistance, anxiety, low motivation and ineffective operations. Those employees that still assume that there is a classic leader taking care of whatever needs to be taken care of, will live a high-risk life now and, in the long run, will probably be marginalized, made redundant, depressed and poverty-stricken. Many will develop psychological disorders. The gap will produce large societal problems and costs.

Both parties will be very confused and also feel insecure when the actions they have taken, have quite unexpected consequences. And both parts will misinterpret the other – seeing each other as “rude”, “uninformed”, “uninterested” or “lazy”. The gap will also manifest itself in terms of ignorance from both sides in dealing with the problems at hand. I have for example found that executives intervene in the total system in ways that make it harder for the employees to do their work. This counteracts the strategy to place the responsibility for the performance solely with the employees and will produce anger and resentment.

One often-used argument for structural changes and concentration of resources in the Health Care System is for example that “ Large units and hospitals are safer”. This might be true in statistical terms. It disqualifies all the units that have implemented patient-oriented and systemic procedures, however. They succeed in achieving extremely high quality through very precise, and within the group, very well spread knowledge, about every single patient. To them small is beautiful. They are, in spite of being a very small staff, able to create high quality and safety around each patient.

Confronted with arguments based upon old-fashioned, industrial thinking these employees feel that they cannot explain the organizing principles they use. They find it very problematic to defend the extremely good local operations that they have built up. They find that organizational solutions are abandoned for, as they see it, less efficient ones. They are made responsible for the result but are at the same time without a say when it comes to the design of the system they have to work in and work with.

The appearance of this problem can be understood as the appearance of a higher degree of complexity in working life. The problems are however, both at the executive and the employee level, and dealt with in a simplified manner using obsolete hierarchical models of thinking. One key factor is neglected in their thinking – namely the horizontal relations.

In order to make this factor visible, and avoid hierarchical associations, I am using the word *governance* here. Governance denotes a conceptual or theoretical representation of co-ordination in social systems; hence – executives are persons governing organisational bodies. The basic question executives involved in governance have to face is how to *get strangers to choose to cooperate* in the horizontal dimension.

One way to illustrate the concept of *governance* is to use car traffic as a metaphor. Traffic occurs on roads. Many drivers would probably like to have the roads to themselves. They will of course be disappointed. They will meet other drivers who would like to use them as well.

Their common problem is to coordinate their actions and the use of the road. The drivers are of course strangers to each other. Nevertheless they establish very subtle communication. This communication is difficult since the drivers are enclosed in a metal cage.

They then use the car for signalling. They slow down; they make slight turns; they are moving faster etc. These signs can be combined with explicit signals such as the horn, the blinkers or the headlights. In order to be able to communicate they also need some pre-understanding and experience of traffic as a system. They need to be able to foresee risks that can occur due to events they will meet in the future. They also have to be able to take into account other road users that at a given time may be invisible. They act in a very complex social environment.

Drivers do not determine their communication and movements on the road by themselves, however. They are also dependent on what can be called *traffic governance*. Traffic authorities establish the rules, city-planners design the roads; researchers propose changes, and schools educate drivers and so on. All these people belong to the traffic system. Their work consists of *talking about* traffic rather than being in it. All these people can be said to have an ambition to *govern* the traffic in different ways. They want it for example to flow well and to be safe. They want to make the roads available for as many as possible. Their task is not to “make traffic”. Their task is to *empower* the horizontal *cooperation* of the drivers.

One very much used strategy of governing is to try to influence the actors directly. In traffic one uses rules and close supervision. One uses regulatory means as for example traffic lights. One can also use physical means such as bumps that force drivers to slow down, roundabouts to create flow and special roads for cyclists and pedestrians to avoid accidents etc. I call these strategies *programmatic*. Governing can in these cases be said to be based on a kind of map (programme) representing how the governing bodies *think* that the horizontal cooperation in the traffic *should* take place. This map only includes people as actors executing a preformed programme.

Programmatic strategies can be compared to a conductor presenting a musical score for the orchestra. If everyone in the orchestra follows the instructions, the rules and the regulations to the letter they will produce the expected music. The design of the music is then only a matter of dealing with complication. This is different from dealing with the complex cooperation between the different musicians and the way they actually produce the music.¹

According to researchers who have studied traffic safety in Sweden the focus on programmatic strategies has not so far had the effect one has hoped for. This seems to be due to the fact that their interventions do not take account of the *complexity of the interactive pattern*

¹ Complicated problems may be difficult but they can be analyzed and resolved according to well-known principles. Complex problems are constantly changing and requires observation here and now. They have to be solved heuristically, that is in a step by step fashion where the understanding grows with each step. Complex problemsolving is dependent on a deeper level of understanding from which it is possible to construct and reconstruct the situation and here and now choose the appropriate action.

between the users of the roads. The presenting of rules and regulations or other measures can often make co-ordination more difficult. The best ambitions can therefore result in a *lower* traffic safety. One important reason for the failures is that too many and complicated rules and regulations make road-users put their focus on the rules, rather than using their own judgement and exploring the different options in the actual situation.

Once upon a time the programmatic strategy was functional. There were times when there were few cars on the roads. They did not travel as fast; they were not so powerful and the traffic was not so intense. The drivers were probably also more used to obeying orders and abiding by authorities. With time this governing strategy has become less and less efficient, primarily due to increasing complexity. It is still used very frequently in traffic planning and in all kinds of governing, however.

It is so popular that it seems to be the only strategy executives can, or are allowed, to use. Tradition and a lot of research and literature support it. Alternatives to the strategy are almost never mentioned either by executives or by employers. One reason for its popularity in both parties is probably that we are very familiar with dealing with complicated problems. We are not at all that familiar with dealing with complex problems and certainly not problems involving human beings.

Another reason may be the fantasy that any loosening of the directive component in the strategy will result in chaos. This is of course only a fantasy. It will not happen. Even if no conducting would take place, the drivers still would try to co-ordinate their movements on the roads and avoid accidents. The important choice in governing is therefore not between acting as a conductor or doing nothing. There is an alternative. The alternative for the governing body is to act as *partners*.

The *partnership perspective* is synonymous with the *systemic view*. It goes like this: Driving on roads by autonomous drivers can be seen as *social microsystems*. The executives can be seen as actors in other social microsystems. These systems function differently. They have different characteristics in their patterns of interaction between their members. The micro-system of drivers has similarities, however, with other microsystems of drivers and the micro-system of executives has similarities with other such systems. These characteristics – however complex – can be explored, documented and understood.

Both systems are included in the larger social system. There are complex interactions between the different microsystems. This complex interaction cannot be simplified by any acquaintance between certain members of the different systems. The coordination between the systems has to function *between strangers*. This turns the governing and co-ordinating problem into a *linguistic and cognitive issue*.

The basis of co-ordination between strangers is communication and the means for the communication is language. In other words, the members of the systems have to grasp the

symbolical meaning of the actions in the different microsystems rather than find ways to be acquainted with certain persons in them.

Now I want to summarise and go back to the topic of this paper. The rapid changes in knowledge, technology and social relations have reconstructed the western society. People aspire towards creating an *autonomous self*. It is therefore no longer possible to see the persons involved in work as simple executors of orders and plans. They cannot be expected to create cooperation only by following rules and regulations. They will take on their own responsibility. Programmatic strategies are therefore from this perspective antiquated.

In almost all contemporary institutions and enterprises furthermore, work is done in ways that break rigid organisational structures. One gathers round a patient, an issue, a project, a problem etc. One is not isolated in a single unit or department. Organisations are no longer a structure of clearly differentiated units linked together in a hierarchy. Work is boundless. The persons involved have to take their own initiatives, be creative and find new solutions to issues at hand. This makes co-operation complex. Also from this perspective programmatic strategies are antiquated.

When executives use theories of complication in order to deal with complex issues like these they will establish a destructive communication gap between themselves and their employees. The alternative strategies to use in order to deal with complexity must be discussed more deeply in another article. Here I will only point out the use of focus groups as a way to initiate the process of change.

We have been able to do focus groups both in large health care systems, with local councils, in larger companies, in public service enterprises etc. The contributors in these groups are persons with experience from the actual microsystems. We establish a partnership with them about the need to describe co-operation in the micro-system or some important aspect of it. In dialogue with the participants we then try to get a description as near to the participants' experience of the micro-system as possible. We document the dialogue in the group. The story is checked and corrected together with the participants. After their agreeing to openly stand behind it, they sign it with their names. It is this story that is the empirical material that can be used for further interpretations.

Since we look at governance as a linguistic problem we are in this case not so much interested in what *actually happens* in the system. We are more interested in how the participants choose to *construct* and *describe* their actions and cooperation in it. Their story presents us with information about what kind of behaviour the participants think *is justified*, how they *construe* different issues at hand, what they *seem to know* about them and what they find *desirable, possible and realistic*. Interpreting this we then – based on the documentation from the focus groups – can condense the dialogue into a story which in our view presents how the micro-system can be viewed from *inside*.

As with all stories, also the focus group story has a metastructure. This metastructure can be transposed into other stories in the same way that one melody can be transposed into another key. In this way we can compare governance stories and employers' stories. These two stories have to be compatible with each other if the actions of the government are to be understood and be able to support the cooperation in and between micro-systems.

If there is a difference this will be experienced as a *communication gap* between the different microsystems. It does not matter then who is right. The fact that the metastructure of the two stories – especially if we deal with the relation between the overall management and employees – is not compatible, it will produce loss of energy, inefficiency, frustration and, in many cases, alienation and depressive reactions.

We are looking at exactly the same phenomena here as the ones Jan Beskow describes in the problem of dealing with suicidality. The inner and outer stories have to be compatible. In our case it is communication *within the microsystems*, which has to be supported by the pattern of communication that governs *the cooperation between the systems*.

Jan Beskow points out that it is important for the individual to understand himself through dialogue with others and establish conviviality. We have found that it is equally important for the individual to understand himself in terms of the public world and in terms of his *interactions with strangers*.

Exactly as in cognitive therapy, this bridging of the gap is a question of social constructs and language. Individual development and understanding is produced in the same way as in cognitive therapy through dialogues. There are, however, other kinds of stories involved. The difference is that our dialogues focus on the systemic and organisational issues. The platform for these dialogues is knowledge that can be gathered from the stories from the different microsystems. Without such stories from within the microsystems the systemic (complex) issues are incomprehensible.

We have in most of our studies found severe gaps between the executive language and the micro-system language. We have for example in focus groups with occupational therapists found extraordinary differences between the official descriptions of what constitutes an unhealthy psychosocial work environment and the therapists' own descriptions. This difference has led to a revision of the way we now look at occupational hazards in the health care system.

Through focus groups in one company we have found a totally incompatible view between employees and management about the role, the responsibilities and the basic function of management. The management had adopted a totally new and more advanced way of thinking that was a logical consequence of the kind of changes we have presented above. This new

thinking was however not communicated with the employees until everyone could see the gap in the stories from the focus groups.

The opposite situation was detected in the health care system. There we could detect that employees had established a more advanced way of cooperating in the microsystems than the management could anticipate. The focus groups showed that the official governmental discourses were based upon an antiquated production-oriented way of reasoning.

It is possible to show that gaps such as the ones that we have detected have many destructive consequences. They are first of all destructive for the executives themselves. The consequence of the communicative breakdown is that the executive actions will not produce expected effects even if the actions themselves can be seen as constructive and correct. The management and their staff will therefore be occupied with meaningless actions and activities. In the long run they therefore risk losing their credibility.

The gap is also destructive for the employees. The governing structure that is established will not support their internal cooperation and their interactions with other systems. If it is *forced* upon them it will produce feelings of powerlessness. If they *have to abandon* it they will feel frustration and stress in their relations both with other members of the system and the governing structure. The gap is of course also destructive for society as a whole since work will be less efficient than it could be.

The use of focus groups will not in itself change the strategies of management. It will however put focus on the problem. The groups will help the participants – from whatever system – to formulate the linguistic platform for their cooperation. The documentation from the focus groups will make it possible for employees to explain to the governing bodies how and why their governing strategies may be inappropriate. It will make it possible for the governing bodies to explain their situation and the rationale for their actions. Thus it will help the different parties establish better communication in the larger system. The dialogues have in addition both a significant learning and a health-promoting effect since they help both participants and the readers to connect their personal lives to the larger system.