

COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

Communicating strategy in a town hall setting. Is dialog possible?

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Abstract

This article focuses on strategy communication in an administrative housing association. It investigates top management's attempts to facilitate dialog with employees in a town hall meeting. The purpose is to provide insights into the communicative methods employed, thereby contributing to understanding what can be considered as 'true' dialog, why dialog is important, and whether dialog is possible in this specific organizational context.

Within the theoretical frame of change communication and strategy-as-practice, a case study of a specific town hall meeting is conducted. Based on ethnomethodological conversation analysis three key sequences from a specific town hall meeting are analyzed, and the participants' actions are described as here-and-now moments for facilitating or hindering dialog.

The study points to several communicative techniques employed by management that discourage dialog, instead of facilitating it. Moreover, the meeting is designed and performed as managers' one-way communication of information, which limits their access to valuable information from the operational employees. In this case, the micro practices investigated are considered an impediment to organizational change and a move towards organizational silence (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Keywords

Communicating strategy, dialog, town hall meeting, organizational change

1 Introduction

This article describes a research project initiated in 2015 involving change communication in a large, administrative housing association dealing with public housing. The association is nonprofit, and the Board of directors are democratically elected, but the administration is run as a commercial company. The changes that were integrated into the overall strategy of the organization concern the digitization and optimization of work processes aimed at new groups of digital service customers. Our data stems from the beginning of the change process, 6-8 months after the new strategy was announced, and during that period many new technologies and work procedures were introduced. The new strategy has made a significant impact on the employees' everyday work and, in some cases, on their future within the company. Despite the fact that the employees acknowledge the need to digitalize operations as a competitive measure, they experience the disadvantages of these changes on a daily basis, manifested, for example, in technical challenges or in problems related to extending the business to new customer groups. The employees view these changes as a reduction of services for 'old' customers and experience them as causing drastic changes in their internal work environment (see Kjaerbeck & Lundholt, 2018).

In the research project we conducted interviews with the participating top managers and employees concerning the new strategy and their experiences with the communication of the strategy. On the basis of these insights involving diverging perspectives (Kjaerbeck & Lundholt, 2018), we became interested in looking into a key communicative event in the change process, namely the town hall meeting. Thus, the current study provides a detailed examination of a series of interactions that took place in 2016 at a town hall meeting in which top management, in this case the CEO and the financial director, presented the 2016 business plan to employees at different levels and with different functions.

In organizations today, the town hall meeting has become a well-known setting, widely used by top managers in large organizations to communicate strategic messages across levels and departments (Bell & Cohn, 2008; Hubbart, 2003; Adenle, 2017). However, in our case study, the purpose of the meeting, according to the managers' statements in the interviews, was not only to inform employees, but also to become better acquainted with their employees' considerations and reflections regarding the strategy. Questions such as: "Do the employees understand the strategy?", "Do they agree?", and "Will they contribute with their experiences and views?" were at the forefront of management's thinking (from interviews with top management). However, our interviews also show that the employees did not recognize these dialogic intentions, thus creating a conflict between management's intentions and the employees' experience and expectations.

The aim of the current study is therefore to understand the concept of dialog in the context of a town hall meeting involving a situation of change. From a microsociological perspective (Heritage, 1984; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999; Sacks, 1992), all interaction sequences from the meeting were analyzed in order to determine whether these exchanges can be said to qualify as dialog and to understand the premise for dialog within this context. Our question was whether dialog would be possible at such a meeting, or whether the town hall meeting in itself was inherently designed and conducted as a transmission of information. In order to understand the potential and limitations of the town hall meeting, we will first introduce it as a more general concept. Thereafter we present relevant definitions and understandings of dialog (e.g. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Crane & Livesey 2003; Deetz & Simpson, 2004). As a theoretical frame of understanding we turn to change communication (e.g. Zorn et al., 1999; Lewis, 2011; Shiplee et al., 2014; Gergen et al., 2004) and the strategy-as-practice perspective (Jazabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). Finally, three interactional sequences are then analyzed in order to shed light on the potential and limitations for dialog of the town hall meeting.

2 The Town Hall Meeting

The origins of the 'town hall meeting' can be traced back to the colonial era of the United States (Bryan, 2010; Zimmerman, 1999). The concept emerges from a political context and refers even today to a forum where local and national politicians meet with their constituents. However, the idea of the town hall meeting has also been adopted in large organizations in which a town hall meeting is often scheduled quarterly or biannually, thus providing a channel for communicating business results to employees in the organization.

The primary aim of a town hall meeting within an organizational context is, according to Bell and Cohn (2008), to create a forum for top management - or a manager with much to report - to provide information concerning business objectives, updates or to deliver other relevant messages (Bell and Cohn, 2008). According to Hubbart (2003), town hall meetings can help employees feel "in the know," which can lead to a higher level of satisfaction in the workplace. At the same time, Hubbart calls attention to another way management can utilize these meetings, stating that "The key is this: use the meeting as a way to become aware of employee concerns and then be certain to respond to issues raised in the meeting". Thus, by gathering all the employees together at one event, everyone receives the same message at the same time, and employees can, in theory, be given a chance to discuss important strategic issues and concerns with top

management. In general, the town hall meeting has been recognized for its effectiveness, seen from a managerial perspective. Adenle (2017) claims, for example, that a town hall presentation is the second most effective communication channel for communicating change, surpassed only by face-to-face communication.

Turning to our case study, the above-mentioned qualities associated with the town hall meeting are in line with what top management of the administrative housing association intended their town hall meeting to achieve, namely to “Tell the story and see whether it makes sense to the employees”, “listen to their suggestions” and “have a dialog with the employees” (from interviews with top management).

However, despite the considerable positive attitudes to town hall meetings in the literature and among top management in our case, researchers have observed a number of pitfalls. Bell and Cohn refer to a problematic dilemma, suggesting that “town halls have become ‘produced events’ that often fail to answer the tough questions on the minds of the employees [...]” as “too many CEOs see the company’s formal communication channels as conduits for distributing “their” information” (Bell and Cohn, 2008, p. 31). Such limitations are also pointed out by Larkin and Larkin (2006), who observe that the use of the town hall meeting as a communication channel forces executives into using a “careful legalistic language that employees hear as evasive management double talk” (Larkin & Larkin, 2006, p. 30) due to the formality of the channel. Larkin and Larkin refer to a study by Glover (2001), who even observes a suspicion among employees that managers give “politicians’ answers” when responding to questions at such formal meetings.

Such potential weaknesses are clearly manifested in our interviews. Several employees explain that the managers are so well prepared at the town hall meetings that it becomes difficult to match their high level, which thus discourages them from asking questions. Another employee states that “You must be thoroughly prepared if you are going to ask questions. It is not possible to play it by ear. You get knocked down immediately” (from interviews with employees). Thus, there is a clear incongruence between management’s intentions and the employees’ expectations. On this background, we find it interesting to investigate what actually happened in the interactions of a particular town hall meeting.

3 Dialog

Within the field of public relations and stakeholder theory we have evidenced a dialogic turn. Instead of understanding stakeholders as being managed by companies, there is much more emphasis on interaction and engagement with stakeholders (Andriof & Waddock, 2002; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Holmström (2005) speaks of a paradigm shift in which organizational legitimization becomes a top priority and “which can also be identified through semantic shifts, for example, from “persuasion” to “shared responsibility, negotiations” and from “managing” relationships to “building” or “engaging in” relationships” (2005, p. 501).

As early as 1984, Grunig and Hunt presented in their seminal work on public relations' four models for stakeholder communication: Press Agency/Publicity, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetric, and Two-Way Symmetric. Especially the two-way models offer relevant distinctions in relation to dialog: Whereas the two-way asymmetric model is characterized by monologic discourse, possibly with feedback, and attempts to change attitudes and behavior of the publics, the two-way symmetric model is more dialogical and builds on the idea that organizations and publics persuade and influence each other (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 23). In the symmetric model, not only persuasion but also mutual understanding is considered a valuable outcome.

Along the same line, and building on the insights of Grunig and Hunt (1984), Crane and Livesey distinguish between “dialogue as a two-way communication designed for asymmetrical persuasive and instrumental purposes (compliance gaining)” and a “‘true’ two-way symmetric practice [...] geared towards mutual education, joint problem-solving and relationship-building” (Crane & Livesey, 2003, p. 47). See also Morsing and Schultz (2006) for a similar distinction between the so called ‘stakeholder response strategy’ and the ‘stakeholder involvement strategy’.

Jabri et al. (2008) present a similar distinction between ‘real’ dialog and exchanges that do not qualify as such. When, as mentioned previously, the employees mention the restrictions imposed on their questioning, they convey what Jabri et al. refer to as “monologic dialog”, which serves the purpose of achieving consensus by using persuasive rhetoric in order to arrive at one logic and one common ground for all, as opposed to a polyphonic dialog that embraces multiple logics (Jabri, 2008, p. 678-679). When top management facilitates a monologic rather than polyphonic dialog, they exclude perspectives and experiences other than their own.

Finally, we will mention the critical approach to organizational communication found in Deetz et al (Deetz & Brown, 2004; Deetz & Simpson, 2004). They suggest that “Dialogue requires both forums – places for occurrence – and voice – the capacity to freely develop and express one’s own interests” (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 2). These authors propose that communication practices, within and outside organizations, often follow liberal humanist conceptions, and therefore “some expression and sharing of understanding may occur, but voice does not” (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 2). They point to the necessity of exploring and negotiating difference in dialogic communication, and not only focusing on communication as a consensus-oriented means to overcome difference. Deetz and Simpson consider power relationships and systems of domination as precluding “the genuine conversation” (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 5),

basing themselves on Habermas' (1987) ideal conditions for free and open participation, i.e. a symmetrical distribution to talk and the ability of interactants to openly express "their own authentic interests, needs, and feelings" (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 6). Consequently, they perceive most institutional meetings, town hall meetings included, as low engagement sites where already dominant understandings are privileged.

In our investigation we are inspired by the above-mentioned organizational understandings of dialog, which suggest that dialog involves exploring problems and other people's points of view in order to resolve problems or approximate diverging perspectives (see also Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, 2004; Philips, 2011; Englund & Sandström, 2016). This normative understanding of dialog will allow us to decide whether the interaction that occurs at the town hall meeting can be considered as dialog. Many forms of interactions or exchanges do not qualify as 'dialog', e.g. sequences in which employees give a minimal response to management's questions about whether they have understood something, or sequences in which an attempted exploration of actions or perspectives is ignored by the other party. In our approach, dialog can only take place if the participants exchange opinions and experiences and thereby contribute to developing new perspectives and understandings.

4 Change communication and dialog

Zorn et al. describe change as "any alteration or modification of organizational structures or processes" (1999, p. 10). Lewis observes that "organizing activity is made up of processes and as such is always in motion and always changing" (2011, p. 26). She considers organizational change as planned attempts by managers and implementers to substitute what is considered normal and routine with something else (2011, p. 26). Thus, in a situation of organizational change, communication from management is vital with regard to reducing uncertainty and to employees' sense of control (Nelissen & van Selm, 2008).

As noted by Shiplee, Suar & Singh (2014), the way in which managers communicate with their employees has shifted. Where previously their aim was to reduce red tape, their communication has more recently become more motivational and inclusive, with the aim of building relationships between employees and organizations. At the same time, as the role of management communication has changed, there has been a shift away from the transmission paradigm towards more interactive and engaging communication practices.

This perspective of engagement can also be identified within change communication. As early as 1995, Ford & Ford observed that "Resistance to change has been treated as an attribute or characteristic that must be overcome, but it may, instead, be a conversation that can be altered in dialogue" (Ford & Ford, 1995, p. 19). And in the same line, they claimed that resistance should be properly understood as feedback. These observations imply that dialog is integral to successful change implementation. Many researchers within the field of change communication support this insight, considering dialog as a means of obtaining an understanding of and support for change (Rogers, 1971; Anderson et al., 2004; Petersen, 2000; Gergen et al., 2004; Larkin & Larkin, 2006; Simoes & Esposito, 2014). However, the communication researchers Deetz and Simpson (2004) and Deetz and Brown (2004) point, in their critical approach, to the necessity of not only persuading resistant stakeholders, but also letting them participate in open, productive encounters "where all reach and commit to a decision together" (see the paragraph Dialog).

In spite of their differences, the above-mentioned approaches allow for more involvement-oriented forms in the strategy-making processes. The continuous practices and processes through which strategy is conceived, maintained, renewed and executed are encompassed in the term 'strategizing' (Paroutis et al. 2016, p. 4).

In the following section, we will focus on the strategy-as-practice perspective in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of strategy-making processes at the town hall meeting.

5 Strategy-as-practice

Strategizing concerns the interplay between thinking and acting strategically (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2004, p. 15). As such, the town hall meeting provides a forum for strategizing communication with the purpose of achieving a specific strategic goal, in this case to communicate the strategy to the employees and obtain feedback or engage in dialog with the employees.

The concept of 'strategy as practice' was first introduced by Whittington (1996), who, in his article 'Strategy as Practice', identifies an emerging perspective in the field. The focus on the practice of strategy can be traced further back to the study of managerial work by scholars such as Stewart (1967) and Mintzberg (1973) and has furthermore been shaped by the practice turn within social theory (Schatzki, 2005).

More recent scholars identify weaknesses within the strategy-of-practice literature, e.g. the lack of attention to moral human agency (Ericson, 2018) or ethics (Tsoukas, 2018). Both of these scholars draw upon the so-called 3P framework, which was introduced by Whittington (2006) in order to analyze strategy as practice:



(Whittington, 2006; Paroutis, Heracleous & Angwin, 2016, p. 9).

The 3P framework aims to illustrate the interconnectedness between micro-practices and macrophenomena – through actions performed by practitioners (Whittington, 2006, p. 615; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016, p. 148). The three elements are intrinsically connected in the sense that it is not plausible to study one element without drawing on some aspects of the others. Praxis refers to what people actually do in practice, i.e. activities required to create and execute strategies in situations such as board meetings, informal talks, meetings, consulting, writing and communicating. The study of praxis implies an activity-based view of strategy as an organizational activity.

Practices refer to three ways of carrying out strategy work: rational administrative practices (i.e. budgets, forecasts and key performance indicators), discursive practices (i.e. linguistic, cognitive and resources) and episodic practices (i.e. meetings and workshops). In our case study, we analyze discursive practices within a specific event, namely a town hall meeting involving two practitioners, top management and the participating employees.

In this case, the main practitioners are the strategizing actors, i.e. top management, middle managers, consultants and analysts. Focus is on “how practitioners act, what work they do, with whom they interact, and what practical reasoning they apply in their own localized experience of strategy” (Jarzabkowski 2005, p. 20). In this sense, the town hall meetings are examples of praxis performed by practitioners like top management, using practices such as PowerPoint presentations and specific types of discourse. As the model reveals, the strategy-as-practice approach favors managerial agency, like the strategizers who are also key to this case study. However, as our analysis shows, our investigation also recognizes the need to consider employees as important practitioners who play a vital strategic role when entering into a dialog with management as strategizing actors (see also Balogun & Johnson, 2004 and 2005; Regner, 2003).

The strategy-as-practice approach allows us to examine how strategizing practices shape strategy as an organizational activity (Jarzabkowski, 2008). Strategy is thus perceived not as something an organization has, but as something people in organizations do (Jarzabkowski 2004, p. 529). In line with this approach, we focus on the town hall meeting as a strategizing event and on the forms of action and interaction that take place between top management and employees at this meeting.

6 Method

As mentioned in the introduction, we conducted interviews with top managers and employees concerning the changes, the new strategy and methods of communicating strategy. The interviews revealed diverging perspectives. While the managers saw themselves as change architects and change agents, the employees were focused on the challenges of implementing the new software and services and on the experienced deterioration of their work environment (Kjaerbeck & Lundholt, 2018). Furthermore, we draw on the interview material in pointing to the incongruence between management’s intentions with the town hall meetings and the employees’ experiences. The first insight is used as contextual information for the meeting in focus, while the latter point on incongruence is used to motivate our research questions, which are revisited and held up against our analytical findings. However, in this work, we want to concentrate on a key communicative event in the change process, namely the town hall meeting, and to describe the interactions that actually took place, referring only to a limited extent to the participants' interpretations and accounts of what happened.

We conducted a case study of two town hall meetings in which the CEO and the Financial Director presented the organization's strategy to various groups of employees. The empirical material consists of recordings of these two town hall meetings. These meetings, also called 'road shows' by top management, were held in different locations belonging to the housing association, which suggests that top management travelled to these locations. The oral presentation was supported by a PowerPoint presentation to which we also had access.

Below, we will examine one of these town hall meetings. The analysis will focus on the three interactional sequences of the meeting, presented as 1. *manager-requested feedback as hindrances to dialog*, 2. *unexplored critique and communicative indirectness reflecting the asymmetry of the situation* and 3. *clash of perspectives, employees' concerns rejected*. These sequences of talk are considered as highly relevant places to look for dialog, due to their interactional character. On the basis of the theoretical framework of the study, we analyze these excerpts of communication in order to investigate what is being accomplished and to determine whether or not the interactions can be considered as examples of 'true' dialog. In line with our normative approach to dialog, the analysis focuses on the participants' possible exploration of the perspectives of others and the potential development of new understandings and alignment of perspectives.

The method of analysis is mainly based on ethnomethodological conversation analysis. This microsociological approach focuses on social members' communicative methods for producing and interpreting meaning in interaction, in institutional talk as well as in everyday conversation (see Heritage 1984; Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998; ten Have 1999; Sacks 1992). It is a context sensitive method used for describing actions in local sequences of actions. A central analytic question is 'why that now' which refers to what the turn at talk is accomplishing in relation to the previous turn, and how it lays the ground for the next. In that sense, every contribution is seen as 'doubly contextual' (Heritage 1984, p. 242). In brief, ethnomethodological conversation analysis is useful for examining the action value and linguistic design of turns at talk in local and institutional contexts. This approach allows us to describe what is said, how it is said, and in which local context it is said. And the practical use of these communicative resources has relational consequences.

While the conversation analytic descriptions of talk provide understanding of the participants' actions in a local, conversational context, the public relations based definitions of dialog pave the way for an assessment of the interchanges in a more macro-oriented stakeholder context.

In other words, we conducted a single case study of a real-life situation, namely a Town Hall meeting, and studied the interactions as they unfolded in practice. The aim was here to provide insights into the communicative methods employed, thereby contributing to a clarification of the notion of dialog in strategic contexts.

The knowledge generated cannot be formally generalized. However, it can enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in the communicative field it addresses (Flyvbjerg, 2006). And it is likely that similar communicative procedures can be found in other Town Hall meetings and interactions between top management and employees in similar contexts.

In case studies, confirmation of validity can be done by using multiple sources of data (Yin, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2011). In the present study, our findings are supported by previously analyzed interview data with groups of employees from the same organization who also pointed to the missing dialog and different perspectives between top management and employees (Kjaerbeck & Lundholt, 2018). And, as we have seen, other studies of the Town Hall meetings draw the conclusion that dialog is difficult to obtain in this environment (Bell and Cohn, 2008; Larkin & Larkin, 2006).

The transcription conventions used are the following:

| | |
|---|------------|
| Brief pause (up to 0.2 seconds): | (.) |
| Pause measured in seconds, example: | (1.4) |
| Square brackets mark overlapping talk | [yes] |
| Anonymized name | XX |
| Laughter is shown in parenthesis, not transcribed | (laughter) |

7 Analysis

Before presenting our findings, it is relevant to call attention to a positioning phenomenon (Harré 2012; Day & Kjaerbeck, 2013) that is characteristic of the entire meeting, including the interactional sequences. The meeting is characterized by a strict positioning of the relationship between top management and employees, even though this strictness is frequently mitigated by humor and informal speech. This clear positioning occurs, for example, when the financial director speaks of "lifting the veil" and letting the employees see what happens in the "laboratory", referring to the strategy work of top management. This metaphoric framing implies that employees are positioned outside the

“laboratory” and are thus reduced to the role of bystanders who have not been welcomed as actual participants in the process of strategy development. Top management’s conception of strategy as a task performed exclusively by themselves is a powerful resource for constructing the dominant one-way communication that occurs at the event. As will be shown below, this is characteristic of all three of the interactional excerpts we investigated.

The analysis follows a three part structure: Firstly, an analytical overview of the excerpt is presented, then the relevant data is shown, and ultimately, under the heading ‘Further analysis’ a more detailed analysis is provided.

7.1 Manager-requested feedback as hindrances to dialog

The presenting manager addresses the employees and asks for their opinion, as a technique for involving the recipients. However, the resulting exchanges are limited, as we shall see in the detailed analysis below, and they cannot be characterized as dialog, but rather as actions merely performed to establish or maintain contact (Jakobson, 1958).

Extract 1:

1 CEO: We see these principles as important, what do you think

2 (3.3)

3 CEO: One at a time. Who wants to say something

4 (1.0)

5 Does it make sense

6 (laughter)

7 Employee (woman): Yes

8 (.)

9 Employee (man): Yes

10 (.)

11 Employee (woman): Yes it does

12 (1.7)

13 CEO: That’s good, then we’ll continue

14 (laughter)

15 Employee (woman): That was it

16 CEO: Anything else

17 (9.1)

18 CEO: Is it time to move on to the next part now

19 (he changes the subject)

Further analysis

Immediately before this extract, the CEO presented and explained a long list of company values and strategic principles, and he emphasized the importance of engaging other parties and the value of collaboration, finishing this section of his presentation with the assessment: “We see these principles as important” (line 1). This context makes the apparently ‘open’ question less open. In fact, this assessment, referring as it does to the perspective of top management, calls for an aligning assessment (Pomerantz, 1984). The question is initially met with silence from the employees. Consequently, in line 3, the CEO reacts with irony: “One at a time” and changes his question to “Does it make sense?”, thus formulating a yes/no-question that addresses the employees’ understanding instead of their opinion and for which a brief response from the employees will suffice. As one might expect, the preferred answer “yes” is given by two employees. These affirmative answers are minimal and not elaborated on (line 7-11). The CEO asks a final question: “Anything else?” (line 16). As nobody answers, he suggests that they continue the presentation. In this extract, the CEO is trying to elicit a response from the employees regarding their perspective and understanding. However, this attempt is not reinforced, but replaced by another question in which the way is paved for affirmative responses. It would be difficult for the employees to express disagreement at this point, and as we see, they act evasively, either not responding at all or with minimal responses. The exchange quickly develops into an example of what Jakobson calls ‘the phatic function’, i.e. utterances that primarily serve “to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works” (Jakobson, 1958: 72). Extract 1 is an example of communicative techniques which effectively function as hindrances to dialog, and they are seemingly quite powerful in this context of asymmetry.

7.2 Unexplored critique, and communicative indirectness reflecting the asymmetry of the situation

In the following, we shall see an example of employee-initiated indirect critique and proposals that could have developed into dialog: An employee calls attention to the problem of introducing new software when operational colleagues don't even know how to use the existing programs. The employee emphasizes that staff training is needed. The points made by the employee are acknowledged, but not explored further, and the exchange is rapidly silenced. The employee’s point of concern contrasts with top management’s fascination with future digital innovations.

Extract 2:

In the following extract, the abbreviation ‘Dir.’ refers to the financial director.

1 Employee (woman): is it very different from what we use now

2 (.)

3 I’m thinking, I’m thinking Excel and Word because out in the field they already have problems running these programs

4 Dir.: But it (.) someone

5 Employee (woman): training training training

6 Dir.: Yes (.) there there are of course some functions that have been improved I haven’t looked into the details myself I’ve tried (.) but not looked into the details

7 Employee (woman): Could it be a good idea to start thinking about whether training is needed

8 Dir.: I think it could I think there’s no getting around it (.) um: (.) training

9 Employee (woman): They already have problems with (.)

10 Dir.: Oh they who are they

11 Employee (woman): It’s in the XX center

12 (.)

13 Dir.: Yes

14 (.)

15 Employee (woman): It's the XX office (.) the customers managers also maybe (.) and the supervisor as well

16 Dir.: I think that it is very important when we talk about them and them and so on [that we are relatively precise about]

17 Employee (woman): [It is our employees in XX service]

18 Dir.: where problems have arisen right

19 Employee (woman): yeh

20 Dir.: Well (.) um good point

21 Employee (woman): mm

22 (he changes the subject)

Further analysis

In line 1, the employee asks an initial question: "Is it very different from what we use now" and she accounts for her question: "because out in the field they already have problems running the programs" (line 3), thereby revealing the key point of her question. Based on this, she draws and emphasizes the conclusion that training is needed (line 5 and 7). The director focuses his answer on the question: "Yes (.) there there are of course some functions that have been improved" (line 6), thereby disregarding the employee's point, namely the need for training in a situation in which the employees have not even mastered the current software. This disalignment makes the employee ask another question that focuses on training: "Could it be a good idea to start thinking about whether training is needed?" (line 7). The indirectness and mitigated format of this question is clear. The employee is extremely cautious when asking her key question. In fact, the format of the question can be understood as a downgrading format that contains the speech act of accusing management of being too optimistic about what can be achieved with digitization. In line 8, the director agrees with the employee: "I think it could I think there's no getting around it (.) um (.) training". Again, the employee cautiously says: "They already have problems with" (line 9). At this point in their exchange, the director explores her position by asking which people she is referencing, and the employee provides the requested information: "It's in the XX center" (line 11) and "It's the XX office (.) the customers manager also maybe (.) and the supervisor as well" (line 15). The Director acknowledges the employee's point, and is even explicitly positive in his assessment that it is a "good point" (line 20). However, this comment also allows the Director to terminate the exchange at this point and return to his presentation.

It is interesting to see how the employee frames her response. She reveals a spatial link to "out in the field" (line 3) and identifies herself as messenger or communicator between those who have problems out in the field and management, thereby constructing three different positions. This maneuver also allows her not to be positioned as one of those who has problems with the software.

With regard to dialog, this example shows that the employee succeeds in getting her point across, despite many mitigation maneuvers. Mitigations and indirectness reflect and construct the asymmetry of the situation and the authoritative status of the presented strategy. The top manager listens to the employee's suggestion and begins exploring her point, but very quickly, as soon as information about the relevant identities is given, he closes the subject and resumes his presentation. As a result, nobody knows whether the employee's issue of concern will be taken into consideration after the meeting.

7.3 Clash of perspectives – and employee's concerns rejected

The last interactional example shows employee-initiated critique resulting in a clash of perspectives: an employee objects to a certain program, pointing to current problems with accessing the program. Confronted with this objection, the presenting manager moves to the meta-level of the talk – drawing on a high jump metaphor, he states that "we set the bar according to the highest common denominator, and not according to the lowest common denominator". This is a way of expressing and justifying top management's perspective and, at the same time, disqualifying the employee's perspective.

Extract 3:

1 Employee: Not all our employees currently have access to Yammer

2 Dir.: No (.) but
3 Employee: You need to have a XX e-mail or a XX e-mail (.)
4 not all our employees have that
5 Dir.: That's right (.) um (.) but it's necessary to make some choices in this
6 digitalization (.) say hi to the mayor in Kolding and
7 Employee: I will
8 (laughter)
9 Dir.: You'll get credit if you come back with a building project.
10 (laughter)
11 CEO: No (.) he means an honorarium
12 (laughter)
13 Dir.: Yes (.) it's the honorarium that I'm particularly interested in
14 (laughter)
15 Dir.: Umm (0.6) (laughter) (0.6) some of that is important I hear what you say (.) XX (name of
16 employee) (.) but some of what you say is important (.) when we talk about digitalization and
17 tomorrow's workplace (.) and it is also important to say that we want to set the bar according to
18 the highest common denominator rather than the lowest (.) if we assume that everyone should be
19 involved and use everything (0.4) then we won't accomplish our ambition of becoming a high
20 jumper (1.2) a high jumper (0.4) can only be successful when he or she sets the bar higher (0.4)
21 each time (0.4) and (.) and even though I recognize that there are some who are not in a position
22 to do that (0.2) we must find a solution for that (.) how do we support those employees who do
23 not have access to Yammer (0.3) That's that's a different problem (1.7) Does this give you (0.7)
24 enough knowledge and overview (0.5) of erm: what it is that we are doing as far as digitalization
25 is concerned

Further analysis

The Director briefly acknowledges the critique, but continues with the counter view that: "it's necessary to make some choices in this digitization" (line 5-6). He refutes the objections about problems of access to Yammer and argues for the ambitious management perspective expressed in the strategy: "If we assume that everyone should be involved and use everything (0.4) then we won't accomplish our ambition of becoming high jumper (1.2) a high jumper (0.4) can only be successful when he or she sets the bar higher (0.4) each time" (Dir.'s comment, line 18-21). This can be interpreted as a way of treating the employee's perspective as irrelevant and, consequently, as terminating operations-based questions. This is achieved through the use of positioning in the form of two contrastive scenarios, one unsuccessful in which "everyone should be involved and use everything" and one successful in the metaphoric form of being a "high jumper who 'sets the bar higher each time'".

Although the Director acknowledges the employee's point on limited access as correct and says "and even though I recognize that there are some who are not in a position to do that (0.2) we must find a solution for that" (line

21-22), he expresses and justifies top management's perspective and disqualifies the operational employee's perspective. Such critique is treated as irrelevant.

8 Conclusion and implications

The analysis reveals a series of dialog-rejecting communicative techniques employed by management. In the first example, the presenting manager asks the employees about their opinion, an open question and an apparently positive approach designed to facilitate dialog. However, when there is no immediate response, he responds with a question leaving little room for disagreement, and therefore the employees act evasively, with no responses and minimal responses. What initially appeared as actions facilitating dialog, actually functioned as hindrances to dialog. In the second example, an employee brings up problems "in the field". The manager listens and begins exploring the problems, but he terminates the exchange very quickly, leaving the issue unresolved. Furthermore, the analysis emphasized the employee's indirect and mitigated language use as a sign of asymmetry in the communication. In the third example, an employee objects to a certain program, pointing to problems with accessing it. The manager responds by referencing the ambitious management strategy of becoming a 'high jumper', thereby framing the employee's perspective as unambitious and irrelevant. In this way, the critique is effectively silenced. The conclusion here is that instead of facilitating dialog and exploring employees' preoccupations and concerns, the communicative behavior of the management serves to stifle potentially productive exchanges. This practice contrasts sharply with top management's originally declared intentions regarding the purpose of the meeting. And it provides an insight into why the employees, according to statements in our interviews, expected asking questions to be a difficult task requiring much preparation, and being at the risk of getting "knocked down".

Despite the limited number of participants (approximately 30 people), and despite management's declared intention to "meet employees at eye level", including attempts to use informal language, e.g. irony and humor, in the course of their presentation, the active participation of the employees was clearly very limited. Furthermore, as we have seen, the preoccupations and opinions of the employees were only expressed indirectly. This reveals the existing hierarchic structures at the town hall meeting as well as the difficulties, or even impossibility of expressing opinions and experiences that will lead to new understandings. In the interaction sequences analyzed, dialog did not take place. In Deetz and Simpson's words, voice – the capacity to freely develop and express one's own interests – certainly did not take place either (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). On the contrary, it is quite clear that management's already dominant understandings were privileged. Although this is a single case study, the results point to the probability of similar findings in town hall meetings with similar power relations and the objective of informing and persuading employees. Furthermore, seen from a constructionist position, the event establishes and even reinforces the asymmetric relationship between top management and the participating employees. According to e.g. the Communication Constitutive of Organization approach, communication is considered the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained (Cooren 2011, p. 2)

The results suggest that the 'town hall meeting' studied here primarily provided information from the strategic perspective of top management, and, in other words, for the most part involved one-way communication. Even the three interactional sequences can be fully covered by Grunig & Hunt's (1984) two-way asymmetric model, which favors the organization and which, in their functional terminology, is characterized by monologic discourse with feedback, and attempts to change the recipients' attitudes and behavior. A substantial part of the meeting's information was composed of argumentation, explanations and examples aiming to increase the employees' understanding and to acquire their acceptance. However, the argumentation used is clearly introduced to legitimize top management's actions and decisions. In this sense, the town hall meeting can be considered to be an example of strategic sense-giving in a one-way communicative genre, and as a monologic dialog (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Crane & Livesey, 2003; Jabri et al., 2008). Other practical circumstances in the town hall meeting studied might also have played a role in restricting employee participation, e.g. the use of a PowerPoint presentation loaded with management terminology and argumentation (see e.g. Gabriel, 2008, on forced linearity of argumentation that limits digression and inventiveness) and the tight timeframe. In this context, top management was not prepared to discuss the perspective of the operational employees, and this made it difficult for the employees to talk about their experiences and elaborate on their problems.

Our investigation reveals a considerable gap between top management's enthusiasm and employees' concerns and critical attitude. And a communicative event filled with one-way information and persuasive actions is not likely to convince the employees or align positions. Our findings support the insights from Tourish & Robson, 2006; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; and Vakola & Bouradas, 2006, that managers' behavior often discourages critical upward communication with the consequence that employees withhold information about potential problems or issues or choose to articulate dissent very indirectly. This kind of organizational silence is a problem that arises when managers limit their own access to valuable information. (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Kjaerbeck & Lundholt, 2018).

Especially in the context of organizational change, and in an early phase of implementation, it seems important for management to explore and be aware of the operational know-how of the employees as well as their difficulties, if

they are to find solutions. And it is important for the employees, as implementers of the change, to know how to handle the daily challenges and understand the strategic decisions that lay the foundation for operations. It seems that the Town Hall meeting is not a forum for dialog, it is not a setting where the participants can exchange opinions and experiences and thereby contribute to developing new perspectives and understanding. In order to give voice to the employees, the participants in the lower end of the existing power relations, it would seem more beneficial to work with e.g. stories from the different departments in a workshop setting. This type of setting could be more constructive and better allow participatory encounters with management to take place (see e.g. Hughes, 2016, for an involving process in which employees are not marginalized as “resistant bystanders”, even though the interaction would still occur in a setting limited by the existing hierarchical structures in which language and communication are used strategically. In the case of an administrative housing association with democratic roots, creating more dialogic and involving processes could potentially have valuable legitimizing effects on the organization.

The town hall meeting studied here can be considered as an example of organizational praxis and a window onto the micropractices of the organization (Jarzabkowski, 2005). The analysis revealed communicative practices that reflect and constitute the management perspective and function as barriers to the development of dialog. It also showed managerial agency as completely dominant and privileged and points to the importance of finding new ways of engaging employees as actors in the strategizing process.

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