LEADING THE PROCESS

TOWARDS THE PROCESS CENTERED DEVELOPING OF WORK COMMUNITY
FOR ANNUKKA AND MIIKKA
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4.2.3. Learning a common language

When we talk about things and experiences connected to work and the work community we can recognize also differences in language use between community members from different organization levels or professional groups, and the misunderstandings and problems caused by them. According to each individual’s life experience, concepts have different meanings than in the work mates’ or the superiors’ language use.

If a community starts to discuss for instance the need and arrangements of common meetings, people’s varying experiences from meetings can cause strong disagreements of their usefulness, and even thwart the creation of basic requirements for development. Most of us have more than enough experience of formal inflexible meetings. If there are no other kinds of experiences, it will be hard to understand why you should have even more of such “silent treatments”, where it is the few and always the same who talk and the majority sits still. The time comes off a person’s actual working time which is scarce enough as it is. In a case like this it would be wise to start in a more unofficial way, for instance by extending the coffee breaks and by using them to discuss matters concerning the staff. Based on the gathered experiences people can then analyze and evaluate what functions well in the meetings and how they could improve the use of common time.

If you start to develop a community basically by talking about general objectives and principles, you may reach consensus, but that in turn may prove to be an illusion. Because of verbal misunderstandings and misinterpretations it is easy to end up in conflicting practices. In process centered development you don’t start out by learning a new language introduced by a consultant, but instead people learn the common language as a result of daily interaction, in common meetings and conferences.
4.2.4 Creating common social reality

In their behavior and actions people tend to take into consideration circumstantial and situational factors. However, two people may interpret the same situation in a different way. From the point of view of our behavior, the crucial thing is most often not what a situation ‘objectively’ is like, but how we interpret it in our minds, i.e. our subjective view of reality.

When we get into new kinds of situations we try by asking others to find out what is going on, what people expected from us, what our position and role in the situation are. If there is no chance for discussion, we try to determine the same things on the basis of previous experiences by interpreting non-verbal clues. Sounding out a colleague’s moods or the spouse’s feelings may sometimes take a lot of time and energy if communication does not work.

Erving Goffman (1963, 24) writes in his book on stigma about the effects of social isolation:

“If one is isolated, does not receive healthy feedback on his daily interaction with the other people, he starts to get paranoid, depressed, hostile, anxious and confused.”

Since man always tries to cope in the best possible way both in his physical and social environment, he replaces and completes lacking social reality with his imagination. Imagining and trusting one’s own fantasies may seem more secure in a work community than entering into open interaction, which is a realistic way to fix the shortcomings of common social reality. On the other hand, to build common social reality requires common time and common discussion forums that usually only the organization management is authorized to arrange. Nevertheless, there are very few organization managements that are interested in creating common social reality with their subordinates within the framework of the whole organization or the work community.

In representative democracy people that represent different interest groups create common social reality
among themselves since they are in continuous interaction with each other. The fact that representatives become estranged from their voters and the ideological differences between them become obscure, can partly be explained by their close mutual interaction. In direct decision-making situations, ministers and representatives may depend more on the views of their colleagues than those of their voters (Moring, 1989). This seems to happen also to people that have worked as shop stewards in labor unions for a long time, since they have to negotiate continuously with the employers. They have more common reality with their opponents than with the workers they represent:

“The longer they have worked as shop stewards, the more common and easier it is for them to integrate to the line organization and get the status of the superiors working there. The shop steward negotiates continuously with the management, and if their cooperation goes smoothly, identification with the superiors is very likely to happen.” (Perkka-Jortikka, 1992, 136).

The representatives of labor unions and their central organizations are in a similar situation, but the distance to the field they represent is considerably longer than on shop stewards. The management of central professional organizations has more interaction with the employer organizations and political leaders than with workers on the grass-root level. The leaders develop a common language and common social reality even though they represent different interest groups.

It is very difficult to define the concept of common social reality. There are some viewpoints in the following:

1. It is a part of reality that together with the physical reality controls the behavior of the individual and the group.
2. In some respects it is relatively stable, as concerns the community’s official and unofficial values, norm, customs, attitudes and beliefs. Berger and Luckmann (1967, 65-109) talk about objectified social reality when they refer to written laws and rules, and of
non-objectified social reality such as oral agreements, customs and habits.
3. It also includes situation bound opinions, interpretations and emotional reactions (Schutz, 1975).

From the point of view of behavior, the immediate situation is decisive, since the way we interpret that will define which aspects of social reality, for instance values, norms or customs, are valid. A thrifty person can on vacation or in the presence of certain people be very extravagant. A person that among colleagues is known very radical behaves himself conservatively in the presence of his superior, if he interprets that social reality (his views of the superior’s authority and attitudes) calls for it.

The social reality of a group or a community is created continually. Everyone contributes to it by bringing his or her views, opinions, feelings and experiences. An example of the quick change of common social reality is a ward in a big central hospital. In the morning the atmosphere and mutual relationships between the staff members are fine, work goes well and the patients’ needs can be met very well. After lunch break the head nurse arranges a briefing and tells to whom the personal bonus was awarded this time.

After the briefing the atmosphere is very tense, free discussion has dried up to taunting and carping: let those do the work who now how to and who are paid for it! The ward’s social reality has changed within an instant.

Common social reality is created with the aid of interaction. It comprises opinions and beliefs that have been formed together about the environment, other people and ourselves. Physical reality comprises the objective reality which can be seen and which exists regardless of our opinions and beliefs. It is much easier to agree on: Where is the door to this room? Where is the window, the table or the chair? Social reality is constantly recreated. It is subject to change and it is difficult to measure or define objectively. What is the atmosphere in the group or community like or what are the mutual relationships like?

In these questions the opinions of the community mem-
bers may differ from each other a great deal.

Constructing social reality is taking off masks both from ourselves and the others. They are often masks that we have not even been aware of.

Common social reality does not mean that the community members think or react in the same way to work and the work community, but that they through sharing their own views and opinions become aware of each others’ views and opinions. This promotes mutual understanding, interaction and confidence.

The importance of common social reality
Since common social reality is created in continuous interaction, it is clear that individuals and communities that have little mutual interaction also share little common social reality. Thus the highest hierarchy level in an organization has usually the smallest amount of common social reality with the basic level.

A good description of the state of common social reality in a Finnish insurance company is found in the dissertation of Katriina Perkka-Jortikka (1992, 108-109):

“Department meetings; those present were the department manager, the division manager and the clerical employees; in principle they met once a month, in practice whenever there was something to discuss; the manager was present when needed ... 

The principle of information flow was that in the unit’s management group meeting the department managers told the division managers the matters concerning them, and the division managers then told the employees the matters concerning them. Since the departments had common discussions very seldom (more seldom than once a month), and since there was no structure for the department managers and the division managers to form common views, the clerical employees received at least seven different official information versions (from two department managers and five division managers).

... ...

... in practice he (the department manager/K.M.) hardly knew very much of what was going on in his community.”
It is clear that common social reality on the department level in the described insurance company was rather weak, and hindered the profitable actions of the community in many ways.

Then again, inside the departments some divisions might have had plenty of open interaction and common social reality, but even some of them were cliquish and incapable of open communication (Perkka-Jortikka, 1992, 87-91, 102).

Setälä’s (1988) study on services showed that those working on the highest level of an organization systematically estimated the level of services better than the basic level staff who provided the services. When the estimates were compared to the customers’ estimates, it could be seen that the estimates given by the basic level staff were closer to the customers’ estimates than those given by the highest level.

Insufficient common social reality and scanty interaction between the management and the basic level staff always impede the realization of the basic task of an organization. The ill-effects only become emphasized in circumstances with scarce resources, when economic viewpoints become overemphasized in the management’s decision-making and in the reduction of operations. The staff sees and experiences the human effects without having much of a chance to interfere.

In the decision-makers’ social reality the effects can be seen as statistics and figures from which the distress and anxiety of the staff, patients, customers, students or children has been eliminated. From the basis of cooperation and common social reality between the decision-makers and the people affected by the decisions, much better and more responsible solutions could be achieved both for the organization as a whole and for the individuals.

Common social reality may also be missing between managers and their immediate subordinates, which can be seen in a study conducted by Chris Argyris (1981), a well-known American organization researcher. The supreme management characterized the atmosphere as friendly, genial, relaxed and sincere. When their subordi-
nates, the assistant managers, were asked the same question, they estimated that the managers repelled unpleasant information and were very careful in taking risks and in putting themselves at stake, that they were unable to trust and to handle conflicts openly, and that they were very inclined towards conformism.

In one of the organizations Argyris studied, the supreme management did not know that

- 71 % of the middle management could not define their relationship to their superiors. They were also unable to say how their superiors evaluated them.

- 65 % of the middle management did not know which factors affected advancing in the organization.

- 87 % felt that conflicts in the company were very seldom cleared up, and even when there was an attempt to clear them up, it was inadequate.

- 65 % of the middle management thought that the most important unsolved problems of the organization had to do with the inability of the supreme management to help them in coping with competition situations between groups, with lack of cooperation and with weak communication.

- 59 % estimated the efficiency of the supreme management as average at the most.

- 82 % of the middle management hoped for greater respect for their work, but did not have the courage to express their hopes to the supreme management.

Argyris states that at least at those meetings of the supreme management and the middle management he attended, the middle management did not bring up a single one of the above mentioned problems. Instead, the kinds of problems most often brought up were that there was too much work and that more personnel should be hired,
there should be fewer meetings and reports, and schedules should be loosened up. As we can see, no common social reality was established since they were not able to discuss the most important issues. The less there is discussion in a community, the more there are illusions, and the smaller is the domain of common social reality.

By discussing their work and work community people share their opinions, thoughts and feelings creating thus common social reality and collective experience. The chance to have influence on the community, to be able to create common reality motivates, promotes commitment to the community and creates common overall view. The overall view helps the running of things by opening up choices to the members. Knowledge of the overall situation supports the communication of each member with the environment. Like this the members get a reliable picture of the community, when one member does not say one thing and the other another thing.

In a community with little common social reality there is no basis to attain common objectives. The superior can of course conduct discussions about the objectives, but if the personnel lack a common and uniform view of their work and work community, the realization of the objectives lacks a firm basis.

A small amount of common social reality may also be due to neglecting the taking of communal responsibility as shown by the studies of Stanley Milgram, a well-known social psychologist. In the 1960’s Milgram conducted empirical research on obedience and authority dependence. His findings, according to which 60% of the average American testees were ready to give a deadly electric shock to their “pupils” at the experimenter’s command, startled researchers and the public opinion. Milgram explained that to learn the tendency to obey was necessary for the uniformity and efficiency of an organization. The one working on the lower level has to surrender power to his superior (Argyris et al., 1985, 105-117, 197-198).

According to Argyris, Harmon (1981) posed the question in a new way. Milgram had started with a situation
where the decision-makers and the executors are separated and where the decision-makers have the power, but where responsibility is very indefinitely divided between the decision-makers and the executors, which is a very common situation in larger private and public administration organizations. Harmon suggests that decision-makers and executors should not be kept apart, because then the consistency of operations and the sustenance of the feeling of personal responsibility for decisions could be guaranteed (Argyris et al., 1985, 199):

"His own invention is a consensus rule under which participants must bilaterally negotiate their different views and interests, with no one person unilaterally imposing decisions on others. Under these conditions, he hypnotized that it would be less likely for one to act without feeling both personally responsible and accountable to others."

The model presented by Harmon deviates crucially from today’s organizational decision-making structure, where the decision-makers, for example under cover of economic recession, make decisions that affect administrative sectors apart from those who carry out the decisions. The number of pupils in a class is increased at schools, fewer tests are made in health care, food costs are cut at day care centers, and personnel is reduced almost everywhere. But do the decision-makers confront those workers or their clients, who have to bear the consequences? Or will the decision-makers be brought to court for having caused damage or injury with their decisions?