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A Systemic Community

Collaborative leadership, redescription and evolutionary ways of becoming

Jacob Storch

A Taos Institute Publication

En Systemisk Organisation

Kollaborativ lederskab, genbeskrivelse og evolutionære måder at blive til på

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Endorsements

Storch boldly proposes an innovative *philosophy of leadership* that gives leaders and members of organizations a dramatically fresh framework for rethinking and redoing leadership. His philosophy opens up possibilities for increasing the opportunity for what all leaders want: innovation, transformation and growth for their organization and its members.

He unequivocally challenges that this requires giving up ideas of leadership as personal characteristics and best practices, and the comfortableness of certainty. Alternatively, he advocates leadership as an ongoing *relational process* in which a leader responds distinctively to each circumstance and the people involved in it. Central to this process is the importance of creating and facilitating the conditions for a *conversational culture* in which imagination, experimentation and inventiveness become the standards.

Storch's thought-provoking and resourceful new language for leadership provides a new springboard for leaders who want to be more effective, and collaborative in so being.

Harlene Anderson, PhD

This is a rare and enriching opportunity to enter the private world of a change-making leader. Insights from the scholarly world are brought together with years of practical experience, with challenging and illuminating outcomes. Jacob Storch offers no fixed formulas for effective leadership; as he eloquently argues, leadership is an ever-emerging result of relational processes.

Kenneth J. Gergen, President, The Taos Institute

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Finally, my thoughts are with late W. Peter Lang who was my long-time mentor and friend. Peter's amazing ability to twist and turn perspectives, his playfulness and imagination was unique and a source of formative inspiration for how I got to see myself as a systemic practitioner.

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FOREWORD

by John Shotter

We live in a complicated world. The time of thinking it could be simplified by finding a set of very basic elements, rules, laws, or principles – already existing 'out there' – by which they could be combined, is long gone; a relic of a bygone age. This is why what Jacob Storch writes here is important. Like his Danish countryman, the quantum physicist, Niels Bohr (1885-1962) – who declared '*we are simultaneously actors as well as spectators on the great stage of life*' – he too focuses on our 'relational engagements' with, and in, our surroundings. And like Bohr, he is also concerned with how *what we can sense* as occurring within such engagements can ultimately be given intelligible linguistic expression in ordinary everyday terms. For we cannot just step out of our everyday involvements as we please – linguistic or otherwise – to gain an extraordinary view 'from the outside.' Influenced by John Dewey (1925) we live, says Storch, within '*a continuous flow of happenings*,' and these happenings have '*a particular unique quality, a felt experience of things coming together forming a transformational wholeness*,' that is, we experience these happenings as providing us with an '*orientational awareness,*' he says, of 'where' we are as well as what our 'next steps' might be.

But he is not writing here as an academic *about* such experiences, and how they might be of use in building and sustaining over the years a successful consultancy company. Although he is no slouch when it comes to academic matters – for he has certainly put in time and effort over the years in making sense of great swathes of academic writing – he is writing *from within* his own experience of having done just that. For along with a friend, Thorkil Molly Søholm, in 2000 he founded a now leading Danish systemic management consultancy, *Attractor*. He is thus writing as

the CEO of a currently operating consultancy company which, from 2002 to 2006, was recognised as Denmark's eighth quickest growing company by the business daily, Børsen, and which now has more than doubled size since that recognition with consultants in four countries.

What makes Jacob Storch's writing here special, is that he is not offering yet another new *model* for what a successful organisation should look like, nor about how to go about *planning*, *designing* or operating within such organisations by the use of *explanatory concepts*, nor a set of sure-fire principles for what constitutes effective *leadership*[1]. Quite the opposite in fact. This is the difference between (1) trying to talk, to think, and to act *systemically* in the moment, and (2) talking and thinking *about* systems – and attempting to put the results of our *thinking*, in terms of theories, models, or explanatory concepts, 'into practice' later on. In other words, it is the difference between our *living in* and *acting out of* the 'one size fits all' generalities of abstract schematisms, and our living and acting *within* an actual, unique, concrete situation – and using our models, etc., in a *descriptive* fashion, as aids in drawing our attention to particularly crucial details in that situation that we might not otherwise have noticed.

Although he does not explicitly mention it as a Wittgensteinian method – preferring instead to draw on Richard Rorty's (1989) arguments to do with the importance of *redescription* in this connection – Storch's use of the ideas, notions, concepts, etc., that he gleans from his extensive reading, can be expressed precisely in that way. Wittgenstein (1953) describes his introduction, and use of what he calls 'language games,' as being set up '*as objects of* comparison *which meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way of not only similarities, but also of*

[1] If we look on the Encyclopedia of Business Management Methods and Models page of *12Manage*: http://www.12manage.com/index_expert.html – an executive business interest group network of management methods, models and concepts – we will find literally thousands of them already in existence and there is, clearly, no shortage of yet further new models and methods. Novice leaders are in danger of drowning in an ocean of recommendations.

dissimilarities' (no.130). And what can happen when we use a model or a verbally expressed concept in this manner – '*as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond*' (no. 131) – is that it can help us to look over a current circumstance in an *organised* fashion, with an *expectation* of having seen *one* aspect of it as similar to something previously experienced, there is just a *possibility* of seeing another.

Thus, as Storch makes very clear, thinking and acting systemically is not a matter of our seeing repeatable, objective patterns *out in the world*, as in thinking *about* systems. Instead, it involves something much more basic. It is a matter of our *sensing within ourselves*, when faced with bewildering situations, similarities to, and differences from, familiar experiences to which we *can* give words.

In doing this, we shift from living *in* to living *alongside* our theories and models, and to relating ourselves to them, as he points out, in a *dialogical* rather than a *monological* manner. Thus Storch quotes Rorty (1989) as noting that inquiries of this kind do 'not work piece by piece... testing thesis after thesis. Rather... it says things like "try thinking of it in this way" – or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possible interesting questions"' (p. 9). It is as if every time we enter into a new situation, we had a number of friends alongside us directing our attention by saying: 'Look at that,' 'Listen, that's important,' 'How does this compare with that?;' with our being able to answer to them: 'No, that doesn't seem important to me at the moment, but I will look further into what you suggested earlier,' and so on. Thus, rather than allowing ourselves to be 'ruled' by our theories – as if like the voice of *authorities* in our lives they were telling us what reality *must* correspond to – in our inner dialogues we can relate ourselves to them as articulating possibilities rather than actualities.

This is, of course, to reiterate Plato's claim from long ago, that '*thinking and spoken discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound*' (in *Theaetetus*). Consequently, we come to know of our world, not only through our talk of it, but crucially, as Storch says, by '*our* acting into *the world*.' By our going out towards our surroundings with the suggestions of our theoretical friends ringing in our ears, we orient towards them with a whole set of expectations as to what, *possibly*, we might see or hear or otherwise experience as we survey what is before us. And it is this that allows us to pick up bits and pieces, here and there, and to *organise* them *in relation to* whatever our particular end in view, in that situation, happens to be. In other words, and this is revolutionary, we come to deal here with *relational*, rather than with objective things – as to repeat, we are also actors as well as spectators on the great stage of life.

Thus what do systemic things – including systemic organisations or communities – look like, we might ask. There is nothing they are like, Storch answers. But that does not mean that we cannot *allude* to them or otherwise express their nature metaphorically or in other similar terms, as well as *portraying* or *exhibiting* them in our *ways* of acting, *in* how we conduct our practices. '*Being systemic*,' says Storch, is expressed in '*a certain way-of-being-in-the-world*,' it is '*a performative act, a social construction in motion, where the very wording and acting both form the social world in which we live and simultaneously shape the speaker in an ongoing recursive process*.'

Here, we meet another revolutionary thought: the distinction between *performative* and objective understandings. While we might seek to implement a new objective (general) understanding in our practices, in an effort to *innovate* new and better ways of achieving one's

ends, as Storch views it, '*rather than seeing innovation and other conceptual ideas as a special activity*,' it is perhaps better to view them '*as ways of re-relating [themselves] to the challenges... and thereby in practice demonstrating the very meaning of words like innovation from within a systemic attitude*' (my emphasis). In other words, by re-describing an otherwise bewildering situation, by the use of new metaphors, new images, or simply new words, in the course of our acting in it, we can open up for ourselves new *ways* of *making sense* of it, new ways of noticing connections and relations between facets of it not previously noticed, that might open up for us new ways of acting within it. In functioning like this, we do not first seek to innovate a new practice by reflecting upon it; we come to an understanding of how to do it in the course of our performances of it, in our efforts and in our conduct of it.

Among the many consequences of this revolutionary shift from objective to *performative* understandings, are two that I want to mention before ending this Foreword: One is to do with the working of these systemic, dialogically organised ways of consulting in organisations; the other is to do with the special kind of *imperfect* or 'good enough' leadership to which working in this way gives rise.

Consultants work in *Attractor* not just as advisors or coaches, or simply as consultants – as experts able to give specialist advise on particular topics – but as *performers*. '*It is of great significance that the ideas and thoughts that we are working with are coherent and do not produce internal tensions*,' Storch quotes one of his consultants as saying about her successful work in a particular project. '*It is not the case that other ways of working wouldn't be effective, but the value that there is an internal coherence and logic in what assures that there can be communicated much more trustworthy around decisions and processes, in that these in themselves are*

communicated in a way that are examples of how we aspire to work *as a result of the general project*' (my emphasis).

Indeed, as the consultant remarks, it is not that *she* brought the project leader to see the unresolved conflict that the organisation was unsuccessfully trying to deal with. What she did – to use another important systemic notion that Storch introduces – was to continuously create the contexts, circumstances, or occasions within which such realisations could happen naturally and spontaneously. All attempts to *cause* innovation to occur, deliberately, are bound to fail – because all that can happen in a pre-planned action is the implementation of something already well-understood. *Occasioning* or *circumstancing* a situation within which 'responsive dialogical activities' can happen is something that can lie within the skill and expertise of a consultant – or better, what can lie within their skill, is a grasp of which activities will stand in the way of such happenings. Thus suggestions from the consultant that guard against the resort to authoritative statements, yet again, as to what *must* be the case, can help to prevent this.

And this is perhaps in line with Storch's reference to Gianfranco Cecchin's: *I will act deliberately never to do it again!*, in his introductory paragraph to this book – 'it' being a repetition of simply what was successful in the past. For, if we are to keep the dialogue between theory and practice alive, we must treat each new situation we encounter as unique, as if we enter into it *for the very first time* – because in fact that is what we are doing.

This leads me to my second and final comment on the importance of what Storch writes here: He introduces the idea of *imperfect* or 'good enough' leadership. By this he means not at all what is usually meant by leadership. Perfect leaders, we might surmise, would embody and express in their actions every very general *ideal* ever stated – they would all have integrity, be

decisive, good listeners, great communicators, in touch, empathic, and so on. But no one can be all these things all the time. This is not to say – as the consultant said above – that we cannot *aspire to certain ways of working* in how we act, and as such lead others towards a way of acting without explicitly instructing or directing them in acting so. But the good enough or imperfect leader, strange to say, is not centrally guided by any of the special ideals stated above. The un-ideal leader recognises, Storch says, '*that there is something fundamentally unfinished and therefore imperfect about the task of leading*;' rather than trying to compensate for the fact that we live in a complicated, fluid reality, by adopting '"*big" models for leadership or "principles" for successful leadership, a systemic leader seeks collaboration with as many people as possible*.' It means accepting that any 'truth' about good leadership is merely '*an expression of a contemporary mindset subject to continuous change, revision and eventual replacement*.'

Storch could have added another profound remark of his famous physicist countryman here, Niels Bohr: while '*the opposite of a fact is falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth*.' For once one accepts that the reality within which we live is a multi-stranded, fluid, complicated reality, open to many different local articulations, then it is somewhat difficult to accept any proposed 'truth' as the utterance of a final word.

But none of this is not to say that the continual exemplifying a certain vision of what is possible in one's actions is not of the utmost importance. Quite the opposite. I remember during my early time in the United States, George H. W. Bush, 'W's' father, who was then president, saying: 'I have trouble with "the vision thing,"' and this oft-cited quote became a shorthand for the charge that he continually failed to articulate his positions on particular issues in a compelling and unified manner. This is not the case here with Jacob Storch's account of what is involved in

creating, sustaining and being a systemic organisation. The vision that Storch articulates here – of a community of relationally responsive, dialogically oriented practitioners – both in his words, and in his accounts of how he performs his practices, are both unified and compelling.

What I have not explored sufficiently well in this already lengthy *Foreword*, are the relations within Storch's own development of his way-of-being-in-the-world, between his taking up of Cecchin's notion of *irreverence* in family therapy, and his later relating of it to Rorty's notions of *irony* and *redescription,* in the consulting practices of his organisation. But I will leave readers to explore that in Storch's own capable words.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2002 I joined a supervision group[2] led by one of the founding fathers of the Milan School, Gianfranco Cecchin. Here I encountered a particular attitude in his practice and use of theories that for me has become an important voice in my own development. In one of his presentations he said: *'When I discover something that works with a family, I will try it on a different family to see if it fits here as well. If it works here too, I will act deliberately never to do it again!'*

As paradoxical as this may seem, it highlighted for me in practice something that I had read about but never so vividly experienced – the attitude of an irreverent practitioner; a determination always to question one's own taken-for-granted ideas, prejudices and pre-judgements. Depending on how one reads the systemic literature, one will find that this attitude goes right through the majority of the writers in this field. Indeed it has caused the breaking up of communities. Bateson (1972, 1979) whom I consider as the founding pioneer of the systemic tradition that I associate myself with, departed from the Palo Alto group because he felt that the group was taking an essentially 'strategic' stance to therapy – as if they were getting stuck in a particular epistemology. Bateson, who believed in a 'systemic wisdom' as a holistic evolutionary attitude (cited in Sluzki & Ransom, p. 106), comments: *'...Haley slides too lightly over very real epistemological differences between himself and me. As I saw it, he believed in the validity of the metaphors of "power" in human relations. I believed then – and today even more strongly – that the myth of power always corrupts because it proposes such a false (though conventional) epistemology. I believe that all such metaphors... are... a groping in a wrong direction, and the*

[2] Stolpegaarden, Copenhagen.

direction is not less wrong or less pathogenic because the associated mythology is in part self-validating among those who believe it and act upon it.'

The very same attitude, the commitment to curiosity over inference and the desire to question metaphors and what they conceal, led the Milan Group to challenge established practices to therapy by replacing the notion of therapy with that of consultation, in order to denote the conversational nature of that practice, as opposed to the more diagnostic traditions. They replaced neutrality with curiosity and hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987; Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980), later to introduce the notion of *irreverence* (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992).

This attitude, the concern with open endings and with imagination over certainty, is in my view one of the most important characteristics of the systemic practitioners and theorists. One will find that throughout the literature, ideas develop and influences from across disciplines are used in order to bring forth a sense of novelty and experimentalism. One will see that the tradition has evolved from the early application of cybernetic ideas to communication studies of human and living systems, and then on to cybernetics of cybernetics as a particular concern with the position of the observer and the observed. In latter years the influence from philosophy of language has reiterated central ideas in new ways with a shift from the study of systems of behaviour into the study of systems of meaning (Keeney, 1983). Today we see an emerging concern with re-relating the body with language use and conversational practices, which will take a central part in this book. This book, as it is written, intends to contribute to this ongoing evolving debate on systemic practices and ideas. It is *not* a textbook, rather it is a reply and an account. It is a reply to a question often asked in learning sessions: 'What does a systemic organisation or community look like?' My reply to that question is fundamentally difficult since I don't know the answer to it! But

what I can do is to portray both a community of systemic practitioners, and how we have come to relate to this question in a day-to-day practice – by giving an account of that community.

Giving an account is not simply telling stories offering examples. It is also seriously relating to the challenge of expressing with what kind of language and metaphors such an account must be articulated; that is to recognise that any account is always also an expression of certain desires and purposes of the person offering such a description. It is therefore central to this book to offer an attempt at expressing a way of seeing, reading and talking about what is important when discussing what systemic means to people in practice; it is to express what systemic has come to mean to me as consultant, researcher, manager and writer. It is therefore from within this double focus that this book will inquire into the lived practices of a systemic community. In order to do so I have had to invent a distinct language, rather than copy other peoples' vocabularies, through which such an account would make sense. In order to make such combination happen I have formulated three hypotheses that have guided me in making visible what counts as systemic in my expression of the word, and subsequently what counts as relevant examples in this portrait. The three hypotheses are:

1) It is the **primary** *practical* hypothesis that the irreverent, open-ended attitude is a key characteristic of the development and growth of a systemic community.
2) Furthermore it is a **primary** *theoretical* hypothesis that extending the notion of irreverence from being a situated responsive practice in the context of consultation to revitalising it with Rorty's notions of *irony* and *redescription,* will allow us to pay attention to the background against which we act with the urge to be irreverent about our hypothesising.

3) It is a **third** hypothesis that the above combination will allow us to inquire into how such a community can live from within these ideas with a natural experimental attitude towards the challenge of organising. Hence, it will provide a meaningful way of portraying and dealing with the background, the implicit stories, the contingencies of the characteristics of such a community that not only acts with an irreverent attitude towards consultations but also towards its own organisational practices and its leadership.

The book succeeds in doing so by serving as a contribution to the development of possible next steps for further elaboration of the systemic leadership and ways of building communities. For this purpose this book is written with the systemic practitioner in mind, whether leaders or employees who seek new inspiration or consultants who work with systemic ideas in their practice. It is also my hope that the book can take part in the academic debate as a practice-based case of how a community make sense of themselves as systemic by re-describing lots of dimensions in their everyday life and in so doing offer a practical application of neo-pragmatic philosophy.

1.1 A systemic view on the processes of organising

Understanding myself as a systemic practitioner is a commitment to keeping alive the process of the evolving creation of theory and practice, to keep invigorating relationships between people, words and stories. It is so much more than a technique, it is an attitude that celebrates novelty, artistic expressions, the exploration of the possible – rather than that of certainty and inference. In this respect being systemic means acting out a double project; that is being concerned with how the recursive relationship between theories and practices is kept alive. In this book this is acted out, in that I do not only want to inquire into the living practices of a systemic community and how irreverence, curiosity and irony are performed in a living responsive

community of practitioners. It is importantly also an exploration on a theoretical dimension, the same very ambitions of exerting irreverent, redescriptive irony, that are concerned with whether my current vocabulary is the right one, or if there is a better one, to do the job. In that sense the theoretical project intends to be an exemplification of the very focus of the practice portrayed.

Two theoretical projects, in particular, intend to bring forth novel expressions of systemic ideas. The first is extending the notion of irreverence, which was originally developed as a response to the impossibility of therapeutic neutrality (Cecchin, 1987; Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992; Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980) into a much broader conceptual framework by linking it with Rorty's notion of redescription and irony (1989), which in his use is the necessary step one needs to consider when accepting an anti-representational attitude. That is, an attitude that keeps open the interpretation and imagination of what is possible to us as human beings, and it is also an attitude which adopts a Darwinian approach to language – seeing it as a set of tools for relating, re-relating and coping with objects in the world as opposed to representing objects (Rorty, 1999, p. 65). Making this link and extending irreverence with irony we also liberate this notion from its consultational context and place it within a broader context of innovative attitudes towards practice development.

In Rorty's arguments (1980, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1999) I find the attitude that re-describing ourselves is one of the most important things we can do, and doing so invigorates the Nietzchian idea of self-creation. Nietzche: *'saw self-knowledge as self-creation. The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language – that is, of thinking up some new metaphors'* (1989, p. 27). Rorty aims at making apparent the need for continuous development of new vocabularies and

deliberately breaking free from stereotypes and fixed ideas about who we are and can be, hence you *'cannot aim at being at the end of inquiry... That would be like aiming at being at the end of biological evolution – at being not merely the latest heir of all the ages but the creature in which all the ages were destined to culminate*' (Rorty, 1999, p. 83).

From this anti-representational attitude he warns against the dominating positions of philosophy, research and sciences that argue in favour of a privileged practice enabling us to see behind appearance, as the way to separate right from wrong, true from untrue, rational from irrational etc. Instead he advocates for revolutionary sciences as well as philosophies (1989, p. 9) and in doing so aligns himself with important writers such as Kuhn (1962), Hanson (1958) and Feyerabend (1975, 1987). Rorty (1989, p. 9) says that *'…the "method" of… revolutionary science (as opposed to… normal science)… is to re-describe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it... This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like "try thinking of it in this way" – or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possible interesting questions."'* Inquiry is indeed the way in which we come to know our world, not only through our language and discussion about the world but also through our *acting into* the world, hence there is an integral relationship between doing and knowing (Dewey, 1925).

1.2 Systemic ways of relating

Adopting a systemic way of relating is also to suggest that just one single theory and practice representational of all systemic communities doesn't exist. Rather, it is a view that

favours variety and originality over certainty and standardisation. I see the quality in keeping alive as much variety in organisational practices as possible, and that this variety is necessary in order to keep alive the living responsive processes of relating in-flow in organisation. In this respect systemic ideas offer an anti-story to the dominating mainstream literature and thinking that has evolved from the Industrial Revolution and is now perverting many organisations. Yet paradoxically they 'design' their 'systems' to excel a kind of command and control that increasingly calls for innovation and creativity, while offering less and less space for innovative and creative behaviour to happen. These mainstream ideas hold the implicit assumption that the purpose of organising is to stabilise and control the operations in such a way that predicting development in both the market and internally is the highest purpose of good leadership. Hence change is seen and talked about as a transitional activity as going from A to B, each representing stable platforms. Important writers such as Morgan (1997, p. 6) highlight the difficulty of making such a change in attitude away from command and control, arguing that *'one of the most basic problems of modern management is that the mechanical way of thinking* (and speaking) *is so ingrained in our everyday conceptions of organisation that it is often very difficult to organise in any other way'* which consequently leads managers who *'think of organisations as machines... (to) manage and design them as machines made up of interlocking parts that each play a clearly defined role in the functioning of the whole.'* Systemically I oppose this dominant view of organisations and leadership. Thus I see communities as made up of living relational engagement – people in conversations – as they try to make sense of what goes on inside, around and in between them, as they perform responses to the purposes of organising; that is getting the job done.

What Morgan does, and with Rorty's appreciation I would guess, is to track the different contingencies of the major influences of organisational theories and thereby establish a view from

outside, an *aboutness,* which changes the ways one relates to one's organisation. It enables a hermeneutical tapping back and forth between episodes and practices, as well as being able to relate and re-relate to the contingencies of that practice and the specific language use. In doing so Rorty goes from inference to imagination. Doing so is indeed an irreverent act, and it produces a living experience of liberation which is constitutive of a redescriptive capacity – the emerging ironic attitude – that we are not bound to a specific vocabulary; rather we have the capacity to make up our own.

Inquiring into the process of organising through this perspective will help us in creating a nuanced understanding of what guides a systemic community into keeping alive its processes of continuous becoming, description and redescription as it deals with the challenges of strategis*ing,* lead*ing* and organis*ing.* It is the argument that prominent ideas such as organisational novelty and innovation lived through these ideas in practice become an ordinary everyday occurrence, rather than a special achievement. In order to appreciate the richness of this account we need to extend the reading of Rorty, as a primary conversational partner, and combine his ideas with those of Shotter (1993, 2006, 2007). Where Rorty offers a more general discussion of the importance of novelty as a form of life giving enterprise – as a way of expanding the domain of the social to become ever more responsive to people's need – Shotter invites us into the detailed description of living embodied responsive conversations between people. Importantly, Shotter (2007), drawing on Bakhtin (1986, 1993), argues that novel expressions are out of our control; they just happen to us spontaneously as we engage ourselves *dialogically* with a variety of otherness within and around us. Linking the two produces a novel vocabulary, which opens up new possibilities for describing and re-describing innovative practices in relation to the processes of organising. Linking these two thinkers we obtain a persuasive account of the self-creating and sustaining process as

essentially a spontaneously occurring dialogical process. Hence we can only provide the conditions; the circumstances, for the occurrence of such happenings, such as the specific language use, and the particular dialogically responsive attitude through which we prepare ourselves for the happening of change, of being moved and becoming anew.

1.3 A commitment to keeping alive the dialogue between theory and practice

Throughout this book I will show that the systemic traditions, in particular, have succeeded in attempting to establish alternative stories about the challenge of organising, managing and consulting to organisations from *within* the lived consequences of the metaphors of flux and emerging meanings, and that these stories have increased in numbers and literary strength as this tradition has grown in community members. The systemic traditions have, more than any other of these new literary traditions, managed to establish an ongoing spiralling between practice and theory, creating a rich web of significant practices upholding justification due to the embodied inquiry of professionals actively tapping back and forth between theories and practices in an expansive recursive fashion, thus it has been named a *practical theory* (Cronen, 2000; Shotter, 1984). The justification, in a literal sense, of these new vocabularies, is from within this tradition regarded currently as state-of-the-art descriptions of the world and consequently simply as descriptions that will pass away with time, and they are thought of as descriptions that are meaningful only because of the way they relate to the rest of language and language use, not because of the way they relate to the world. As systemic practitioners we regard any attempt to find universal conditions governing our invention of new vocabularies for describing and re-describing the world as ultimately an attempt to: *'make the sense of the world consist in the objective truth about some previously unnoticed portion or feature of the world'* (Rorty 1980, p.

387). This means in practice that I will reject the project of producing any definitive account of being systemic, and instead provide a number of illustrative accounts of the day-to-day practice in a community of systemic consultants – and in doing so make visible the choice of language through which these observations are created. This allows others to make different observations and conclusions as expressions of other interests and desires.

Becoming a systemic professional or a systemically based consultancy is pervasively described, in Rorty's (1989) terms, as being an *ironist* and an *ironic community of practice.* The ambition not 'to fall in love with one's own hypothesis' is a key to understanding an inherent irreverent position towards any attempt to conceptualise or universalise a vocabulary or practice; it is a way of giving life to a curiosity as we engage in the unfolding of new metaphors and practices in the world. Just as the last thing an ironist wants is a theory of ironism, so the systemic practitioner rejects any attempt to *define* what is meant by systemic. Instead we attempt to engage in conversations about which circumstances these ideas and practices thrive in, recognising that, in doing so, we provide for ourselves the conditions for such practices to thrive. The goal for ironist theory, which also counts for systemic practices, *'is to understand the metaphysical urge, the urge to theorise, so well that one becomes entirely free of it. Ironist theory is thus a ladder which is to be thrown away as soon as one has figured out what it was that drove one's predecessors to theorise'* (Rorty 1989, pp. 96-97). The purpose for doing this is recognised, with the notion of redescription, as a way of getting out from under inherited contingencies in order to make up our own. This becomes important because we realise that things are not found, but always in their making, and according to James (1909/1996, pp. 263-264), this helps you, in his words, to *'put yourself in the making by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming into your possession, you are no longer troubled*

with the question which of them is the more absolutely true. Reality falls in passing into conceptual analysis.'

With this book I will go that extra step beyond the redescriptive ambitions of contemporary writers, and inquire into the practice of an organisation that on a day-to-day basis operates under ironic contingencies exploring the nature of lived redescriptions expressed: as leadership practices; working with clients; developing a professional community and environment for consultants.

1.4 The making of the book

The original manuscript for this book originates from my doctorate in systemic practice and further elaborated as new ideas and perspectives have emerged in dialogue with colleagues post-submission; also, everyday activities have brought about new experiences of insight and learning. Much of the practice portrayed is collected over a period of two years making use of several sources and ways of observing and participating. Obviously my observations are biased from a classical research position, since I have been a researcher, participant consultant and founding director of the organisation. In order to deal with this challenge I have had extraordinary transparency about the material and my position. All participants have had several opportunities to approve their contribution and written consent is given by all participants. Therefore names have been changed in this book in order to keep in mind that the focus is on the characteristics of a systemic community and not an evaluation or presentation of Attractor as an organisation.

The material will be presented through following four main chapters. In Chapter Two, I will go into more detail about organisational becoming as an ongoing activity. I will explore in much more detail the notion of redescription, and show how it is useful as a way to articulate certain

episodes of ongoing strategising in the organisation – as a way of bringing the theory to life. I will explore some of the conditions governing such a community both in theory and practice. I will start by presenting what I regard as one of the most important differences between a systemic practicing community and other communities of consultants. I will explore the notions of irreverence and irony as central to how we come to know ourselves as individual selves and as selves in a community. The systemic practices governing irreverence will be related with Rorty's (1989) idea of *irony,* and the usefulness of that metaphor will extend the current meaning ascribed to irreverence. Examples from people's experience of living from *within* such ideas will highlight both individual and organisational consequences. We will see that the ideas of irreverence and irony lead to a continuous process of self-creation, or redescription, at all levels of – and in – the organisation. This entails a change in vocabulary and conversation in the organisation, which importantly breaks free from some inherited ideas of the purpose of organising as being able to produce stability and replace it with an idea of ever-mutating practices, and that the purpose of organising is to continuously create the circumstances for such practices to happen naturally.

The third chapter will focus on the performance of professional consulting practices. In particular novelty and innovation is emphasised as ways of becoming, both as a community of practice, and also in relationships to client-oriented work. Where innovation is often regarded as a special activity in an organisation I will argue that in a systemic community continuous innovation is an outgrowth of the process of becoming, it is not an activity in its own respect but something that happens in spontaneously responsive processes. It will be argued that systemic ways of practicing and organising are a particularly fruitful way of achieving continuous creation of novelty in an organisation.

This will lead to Chapter Four, which will offer a portrait of what I call the *imperfect leadership*. It is the kind of leadership that recognises that there is something fundamentally unfinished and therefore imperfect about the task of leading. Rather than trying to compensate from the fact that life goes on, and ideas and practices of leaders are constantly evolving, by making 'big' models for leadership or 'principles' for successful leadership, a systemic leader seeks collaboration with as many people as possible. He or she does so, because they recognise that all human activity is fundamentally a matter of engagement in conversational activities. It is through responsive dialogical activities we come to realise, that what counts as 'perfect' is fundamentally a joint activity, a momentary experience that will pass away. It is a leadership that gives space for others to excel and succeed by leaving behind the ideas of control, stability and power as helpful metaphors for the task of leading systemically and replacing them with metaphors of collaboration, flow and dialogue. It is a leadership that is more concerned with keeping alive the processes of novel creation than with repetition. It is a leadership that sees the making of selves as a primary task of succeeding as a community; that is the same as saying that: '*coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language – that is, of thinking up some new metaphors'* (Rorty,1989, p. 27).

Finally, I will explore an example of how the ideas presented throughout shape and form a way of relating the leadership challenge of having to involve a whole organisation of 500 people in five countries, in developing a novel understanding of their own future learning practices. The case reflects an unfinished project and is therefore made up of thoughts and practices in progress.

CHAPTER 2: A COMMUNITY CONTINUALLY IN ITS MAKING

Among the many ways one can read the systemic tradition, I have always attuned myself with the rebellious stories setting out new directions for research, practice and philosophy. But just as this is a personal preference, I also recognise the tendency to 'be on the edge' has been a thread passing through the great thinkers within our field. While any practice tradition produces methods and action guiding ideas, the systemic tradition also suggests that keeping the conversation about the relevance of these ideas and implicit metaphors going is vital in order not 'to fall in love with one's own hypothesis' (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990, p. 40) because 'falling in love' introduces an inference, an end of inquiry. Campbell and Draper (in Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992, p. vii) describe this urge in their Foreword to the important book *Irreverence – A Strategy for Therapists' Survival*: *'...systemic therapists must always be on the edge, open to new ways of seeing things and new ways of intervening; they must always be prepared to say, "Yes, but there is another way to see this." This ability lies at the heart of systemic practice.'*

This chapter will offer a more in-depth description of the redescriptive, ironic attitude as it is envisioned by Rorty (1989, 1991a) followed by a case of strategizing in the organisation. It serves to demonstrate the ongoing coordination that constitutes the distinct systemic attitude of privileging curiosity over certainty, novelty over repetition and imagination over assimilation. Doing so offers a ‘down on the ground’ account of the life and doings of a systemic community as opposed to ‘up in the air’ talk.

2.1 Becoming a community as being

Being systemic denotes an ontological presence, a certain 'way of being in the world', but *being systemic* is more a matter of 'what you do' than it is with 'who you are.' So one's way of being becomes a performative act, a social construction in motion, where the very wording and acting both form the social world in which we live and simultaneously shape the speaker in an ongoing recursive process. The view held by systemic theory-practitioners is that of emerging identifications of self, of selves in the making. The key characteristics of these writers are their abilities to move positions or change attitudes towards ways of relating, create new and enriched languages rather than sticking to pejorative language habits, and to live systemically in facing this challenge with joy, rather than with despair or doubt. This connects us with some of the contemporary pioneers within organisational theorising who all share this urge to re-describe and question the established stories of good leadership and the dominant stories about the challenge of organising, though many would not recognise themselves as systemic. Some of these are: Morgan (1993, 1997), Stacey (1997), Cooperrider and Shrivastva (1987), Weick (1979, 1995), von Krogh and Roos (1995), Barrett (1998), Argyris (1990), Gergen (1982), Senge (1990), Nonaka and Tacheuchi (1986), Tsoukas and Chia (2002), Shotter (2006) and Drucker (2007). Through their writing we are invited into an understanding of organisations, which is characterised by making the emerging processes of change constitutive of reality, and thereby making reality a position within the web of significance. Though it would be too crude a generalisation to re-describe organisational theories and practices of these different writers using one voice to govern all voices, the following description – clearly inspired by Rorty – offered by Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 570) would, I guess, respectfully account on the behalf of this literary community: *'we argue that change is reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences*

obtained through interactions. Insofar as this is an ongoing process, that is, to the extent actors try to make sense of and act coherently in the world, change is inherent in the human action. Organization is an attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it towards certain ends, to give it a particular shape, through generalizing and institutionalizing particular meanings and rules. At the same time, organization is a pattern that is constituted, shaped, emerging from change. Viewed this way, organization is a secondary accomplishment, in a double sense: First, it is a socially defined (yet tacit and embodied, my emphasis) set of rules aiming at stabilizing an ever-mutating reality by making human behaviour more predictable. Second, organization is an outcome, a pattern, emerging from the reflective application of the very same rules in local contexts over time. While organization aims at stemming change, it is also the outcome of change.' Following this definition we recognise that there is a close relationship with this understanding of the process of coming to identify an organisation and that of coming to understand a self. Selves are not stable, but continually in the process of their own making, and organisations form part of the making of selves, since they produce temporary continuity by providing operative distinctions through which selves can create a sense of orientation and a sense of purpose.

A classical systemic example governing the relation to understanding of self is found in Bateson's (1972, pp. 288-289) article 'Cybernetics of Self.' *'[C]onsider a blind man with a stick… Where does the blind man's self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? These questions are nonsense, because the stick is a difference along which differences are transmitted under transformation, so that to draw a delimiting line across this pathway is to cut off a part of the systemic circuit which determines the blind man's locomotion.'* Where one draws the distinction about what to include and what not to tells more about the position from where this distinction is made, than it denotes a truth about observing.

Following this line of thinking, we immediately recognise that to study organisations, we must direct a great deal of attention to the processes of becoming, since we here engage ourselves in the living dynamics of organising the fluctuating nature of the living, that is to take seriously the process of self-creation.

Living through the aspiration of responding continuously in new ways makes a clear link between this later organisational theorising and the apparent systemic and pragmatic traditions, since both traditions share the view that our world gets created through our processes of inquiry within, and in relation to it. Maturana and Varela's (1987, p. 247) most famous quote is a vivid illustration of this link: *'Every human act takes place in language. Every act in language brings forth a world created with others in the act of coexistence which gives rise to what is human. Thus every human act has an ethical meaning because it is an act of constitution of the human world.'* This means abandoning the traditional scientific question, 'Am I describing things as they really are?' and replacing it with the one earlier suggested by Rorty (1999, p. 72) saying that the pragmatists *'...substitute for this traditional question the practical question, "Are our ways of describing things, of relating them to other things so as to make them fulfil our needs more adequately, as good as possible? Or can we do better? Can our future be made better than our present?"'* This *irreverence* towards inference as the aim of inquiry is considered a moral commitment of a systemic professional (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990, p. 39) linked with the systemic notion of *neutrality*.

The term neutrality (Cecchin, 1987, p. 405) was *'originally used to express the idea of actively avoiding the acceptance of any one position as more correct than another*.' Later Cecchin (1987, p. 406) further elaborated the idea proposing '*that we describe neutrality as the creation of a state of mind of the therapist* (leader and consultant, *my emphasis*). *Curiosity leads to*

exploration and invention of alternative views and moves, and different moves and views breed curiosity. In this recursive fashion, neutrality and curiosity contextualize one another in a commitment to evolving differences, with a concomitant nonattachment to any particular position.' This leads to the pragmatic position, Cecchin (1987, p. 406) argues, that '*we are usually more interested in how useful our explanations of behaviour are than in their value as truth*.'

Where irreverence is associated with professional practices within therapy and consultation I find in Rorty a much broader significance attributed to this ambition. Rorty isn't limiting it to a professional practice, but to the very challenge originally articulated by Nietzche, of self-creation. This must in his view be one of the primal tasks of living in an anti-representational world view, a view which in so many ways corresponds with that found in systemic writings. Through his writings one will easily recognise this challenge as the urge to invent new vocabularies as a primary task of philosophy, where he calls for an edifying philosopher, who *'…aims to keep reinvigorating the conversation by finding new descriptions capable of making the world seem fresh all over again; they want to elicit a "sense of wonder that there is something new under the sun"'* (1980, p. 370). In later writings he put his focus on literature and artistic expressions of living. There he replaces the notion of edification with that of redescription and *irony.* With his notion of irony as a practice he offers an enriching view of the living of a person operating under systemic, pragmatic, anti-representational ideas.

2.2 Systemic without a final theory

An ironist is understood fulfilling three conditions (Rorty, 1989, p. 73):

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;

(2) she realises that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;

(3) insofar as she philosophises about his or her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.'

Paradoxically the last thing an ironist wants is a 'theory of ironism' just as a systemic practitioner is reluctant to create a theory about being systemic. An example of such reluctance is found in Jones and Asen (2000, p. 13) responding to the challenge of accounting for the methods guiding their practice as part of a comparative study of therapy and depression. They say*: 'We found the writing of such protocol difficult partly because of our distaste for pinning down our practice in what seemed a rigid and prescriptive format – psychotherapy is, after all, an art as well as a set of techniques...'* and further comments that: *'each therapist is likely to use most of these techniques during the course of therapy...'.* One will easily in recognise systemic communities this reluctance towards final vocabularies, and we often use the phrase: 'Well it depends on how you choose to look at it!'

But where Rorty talks of an ironic stance as an individual private movement and aspiration (of a poet or philosopher), I would suggest that one could find equal aspirations in a community living in the realm of this ambition. In doing so I follow Bacon's (2007, pp. 89-96) treatment of the critique of Rorty's private irony, suggesting that it is too narrow a reading of Rorty's intention.

Hence the individual is not alone, but a functional distinction that arises through the process of engagement with others through time. But what he highlights with private irony is the importance of letting everybody find their own private salvation, and not through some text book or religious doctrine (Vattimo & Rorty, 2005). We have to decide for ourselves, we have to take up that challenge in order not to be set by the length of other people's salvation. This point I believe to be important, since management theory and management consultants have a long tradition of telling people what is good for them, rather than facilitating a process where people make these decisions themselves. It is also important to recognise that we alone must face the consequences of our self-description as we impose differences on other people's lives through our conduct of that story in the social domain. Dewey (1922/30, pp. 216-217) highlights that in the development of self is *'the thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is not a difference in quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making, what kind of a world is in the making.'* The development of self provides changes in the world and it cannot take place outside of it, hence change is a moral matter to the extent that morality is seen as being within the process of the living, not outside. Dewey further highlights the importance of the surrounding conditioning of the development of self, since we can only alter our self by altering our habits and the best way to alter our habits is to change the social conditions constituting the formation of habits, hence *'we must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of men'* (Dewey, 1922/30, p. 22).

Just as the poet isn't able to perform poetically all the time and alone (understood as separate from any social surrounding governing their conduct as humans), the same can be said about a community. But what a community as with the poet equally can do is become increasingly responsive to the circumstances that allow for such practices to happen. Also, it is important to

recognise making this jump from individual to community that *'the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary, rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary*' (Rorty, 1989, p. 7). And using a vocabulary is taking place *within* the realm of the social, e.g. within communities.

It is within the realm of this world view, or background, that systemic practitioners commit themselves as actors of a profession. It is this way that Rorty (1989, 1999) imagines that we must take up the challenge formulated by the Enlightenment of setting ourselves free from oppressions of final vocabularies, not through the Kantian vision of rational imperatives, neither through the Romantics belief in the indefinite opportunities to create our own new story and life direction freed from our pasts. To Rorty (1989, p. 88) the ironic practitioner realises their contingencies, as does Dewey with his notions of habits, yet realising the opportunity for imagining new and better futures, since *'an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself.'*

Where the professional practices such as therapy and consultancy are well explored, less attention has been offered to how professional organisational communities organise themselves and how they operate in order to provide the necessary conditions for such ironic practices to come naturally. Reasons for this can be many, but most important is the fact that very few organisations name themselves as systemic. Rather than just wanting to offer a description *about* such a community I will illustrate in different ways how such a community sees itself from within its practices; it reflects the difference between *what* we are doing and *how* it is experienced from within the participation of that doing. I will do so by offering different views of the life and practice of the day-to-day operation and peoples' reports of what becoming part of such a community does to their sense of self, for example their self-creation or redescription. Rorty (1989, p. 84)

emphasises the importance of self-creation as central to the purpose of organising; he argues*: '...the point of social organisation is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities... create their private self-images, reweave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter.'* For systemic practitioners this comes naturally as something distinctive of human life itself, since we argue *'that a distinctively human life is one that holds open the possibility of creative elaborations of our "lived experiences"* (Dewey, 1934) and the radical reconstruction both of our "stories lived" and of our "stories told" (Pearce, 1989)' (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990).

2.3 Inquiring into episodes of redescription

Common to all of the above thinkers and practitioners is the view that all living forms taken together create an irreducible pragmatic unity, pragmatic because the experience of unity is a felt dimension from within the movement of the process of the living, hence there cannot be an external criteria for such unity; '*no sky hook*' (Rorty, 1980). As we move jointly, as we speak more, move more, create more, build more, write more, we orient our being in the world, not by rational means (since rational is an explanatory principle as opposed to a practical one), but by relating to happenings in the otherness around us, by anticipating the next move as a way of relating to the utterances of others. Indeed, as they relate to our presence they identify themselves to us as being within the conversation. In this continuous flow of happenings particular moments are referred to as moments with a particular unique quality, a felt experience of things coming together forming a transformational wholeness.

Dewey (1925) refers to these moments as *consummatory* dimensions of experience meaning, in Cronen's (2000) terms, '*the creation of moments that have the feeling of finality, or a*

moment of elegant "fit" embracing form and feeling in a unifying moment.' (p. 6). Not only do these moments change the qualitative experience of the episode, they also produce within us, in our way of being able to relate to the otherness around us, a different orientational knowing, a different sensibility that enables us to anticipate the 'moves' of others in the social interplay; or, to put it in Wittgensteinian (1953) terms, how to draw on different 'grammatical abilities' denoting our knowing how to go on in particular contexts and in this case into the 'not yet actualised.' With respect to the theme of this chapter these moments play an important role, since they are privileged as providing perhaps superior descriptions of innovative happenings to other ideas, and it is significant in understanding these moments to deploy a responsive relational description of living interactions. Inquiring into these episodes also importantly implies inquiring into the constituting circumstances that provide the necessary background for calling out in us these spontaneous responses.

In the following examples I inquire into different experiences. First I shall discuss the meaning people ascribe to becoming part of the organisation, that is, being employed. This is followed by examples of how we work continually with our strategies as an ongoing activity of keeping alive the processes of becoming. This is done to provide an example of some of the organisational practices that take place in order to serve as a background for a series of examples of how people in the organisation experience significant moments in their organisational life as connected to the process of redescription.

2.4 Strategy work as poetry, redescription and co-ordinations in action

Crafting strategies and executing them are some of the big ideas governing managing organisations. But where the general idea implies specific instrumentalities and a narrow

vocabulary, such as; 'Eight steps to successful strategies' as envisioned by Kotter (1996), systemic approaches emphasise the evolutionary coordination taking place through conversations between people in the organisation, with clients and networks. We emphasise that the process through which we talk about strategies forms the strategies we live and perceive as real in the organisation. This view links with Dewey's notion of *Inquiry* by which he understood: '*Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituents, distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole'* (Dewey 1938b, pp. 104-105). The indeterminant situation is in this case the elaboration of where to go next as an organisation, so that people can organise their activities in relation to this direction, or end-goal. The reason for doing so is our concern that in order for people to act according to the strategy they must come to embody a set of orientational skills so that they can make practical judgements on a day-to-day basis as they act out who they are becoming.

The case extends over a period of a year and starts in the spring of 2009. In the year following the global economic recession in 2008, consultancy businesses were threatened by a market in free-fall, since most HR departments had to close down activities in order to save financially. We saw at that time the first signals of the decline since our competitors were letting people go; some even closed down during the spring. We didn't experience the same decline, partly because we operate mostly in the public sector and partly because our activities have a long time span and our order book was pretty good at that time. But we had to relate to the situation and find our own way forward in a market under change. This became the process of creating a new strategic sensibility which isn't brought to a conclusion yet but surely has created a series of new activities – which has resulted in a continuous growth in size and economy, and by 2012 we

have grown more than 40 per cent during that period, in a declining market.

To start at the end of the process a consultant came into my office and he said that it was funny to think about it, but it was as if the whole process over the past year had made us more systemic than we were before. I asked him if he could explain in more detail what he meant by this, and he replied with the following essay (here abbreviated):

'"Attractor is a more systemic organisation than ever before".

These were my words in a conversation that took place some time ago with Jacob. It was expressed in relation to reflections about the way we work with our customers, but also the way we act internally in the organization. It is the latter I am addressing in this "essay".

So what does this statement imply regarding being a member of Attractor as an organization? To get some kind of understanding or notion about it, I would have to quote one of the key inspirations in our work with systemic consultation, "The Tree of Knowledge" by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987, pp. 145-146):

"If we know that our world is necessarily the world we bring forth with others, every time we are in conflict with another human being with whom we want to remain in coexistence, we cannot affirm what for us is certain (an absolute truth) because that would negate the other person. If we want to coexist with the other person, we must see that his certainty – however undesirable it may seem to us – is as legitimate and valid as our own... Hence, the only possibility for coexistence is to opt for a broader perspective, a domain of existence in

which both parties fit in the bringing forth of a common world."

To me the quote captures the very essence of what we are focused on in our work as systemic practitioners. If we believe in this basic assumption about the nature of the individual and the relation between individuals, it is imperative to strive for the establishment of a common ground for exchange and coordination of perspectives with the purpose of being able to make organisationally sustainable solutions or decisions.

This is not to say that conflicts do not arise in Attractor. As in any other organization, there are a multiverse of different perspectives on a lot of issues. But what starts as a conflict or difference of opinion on a given topic will always be transformed into multiple dialogues about how to move on. It does not mean that everybody has to agree on everything. In a systemic perspective this would be an impossible mission and we would not really understand what Maturana and Varela said about human interaction. What happens in these situations is that there will be a meta-perspective on the conflict or the organizational issue being addressed. This meta-consciousness is shared by both leaders and consultants and is a common platform that is essential in being capable of practicing systemic dialogues within an organisation.

In my view this has been evolving over the last few years and could be said to illustrate a process of internalisation of systemic thinking in our 'everyday life' as members of an organisation. It is something we are aware of as being part of the foundation on which we interact with our customers. There must be coherence between our 'inner dialogue' and the way we practice systemic consultation. I will name this the emergence of a collective moral obligation regarding

the individual responsibility to help oneself and the organisation to sustain and develop the capacity to coordinate meaning into coordinated action.

This approach has in my view been strengthened in a period of recession where we had to be ‘exemplary’ in the sense that we as an organisation faced serious challenges. It has meant that we as employees can address and raise issues on equal terms with the management. This is possible because of the shared sense of moral obligation described above. An essential part of this is that the management recognises the importance of mutual trust in the leader-employee relationship, in the sense that every member of the organisation is responsible to help coordinate meaning in the organisational multi-verse.

2.5 Systemic dialogues

Essential to these reflections is the notion of *systemic dialogues,* dialogues that are sensitive and relationally responsive to the many different perspectives and voices that form our collective and shared organisational space; as something unique reflecting a meta-consciousness, the ability to both engage in a dialogue, yet be able to hold open a view for the 'whole'; an active tapping back and forth between the episode and its conditioning contextual landscape in the process of the conversation. Not only do these practices produce 'in him' a lived embodied sense of coherence between stories told and lived in the organisation, they enable him to relate to his work as consultant and to our practices as a community. Also, this ability to keep a variety of voices alive in the organisation produces a situation of trust in the relationship between leaders and employees he connects with a social moral imperative, which in Shotter's (2007, pp. 588-590) words, means becoming increasingly responsive to the otherness of the otherness around us. But this also relates to what Rorty (1999, p. 79) sees as the only moral commitment – if any is needed

after all – a free liberal society can make; *'moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves.'* In this sense his reflections portray very well the very ambitions that drive and motivate the practices of conversing in the organisation.

2.6 Creating strategic awareness as an ongoing expressive act of becoming

This story focuses on three episodes exemplifying how we talk strategy and how the work emerges creatively. The start of the story builds on a turbulent period over the previous year following the merger with the Rambøll Management Consulting organisation. We had hired more than 20 new consultants and in the same period lost around ten consultants, so we had a lot of new faces in the organisation that hadn't been part of much strategy talk since focus had been on keeping the organisation going and maintaining client experiences of quality. So in some sense it was also the beginning of a new process post-merger building a new purpose for our being as an organisation. The strategy process is now much more developed. In 2010 and 2011 we experimented with developing a 'silent' strategy, meaning we focused on the embodiment of a shared purpose as a community, following Shotter's idea of increasing orientational skills as a primary task – meaning knowing how to go on in the unfolding happening of change – and now in the fall of 2012 a more intensive dialogue on future purposes and identity stories has taken place in a joint process.

2.6.1 From recession to re-session

> *'The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.'* Marcel Proust

Due to the general economic downturn in 2008-09, I was invited to give my account of the market outlook at a staff meeting. My immediate concern at the time was with how media and politicians queued up with a defining vocabulary under the title ‘recession’, and with it all the numbers to confirm it. This vocabulary left little room for other voices and I was missing a voice saying something about what it takes to move beyond recession. So rather than talking about recession, I renamed it ‘re-session’, arguing that we needed to session ourselves to new market conditions. The kind of 'session' we needed to engage ourselves in was not one that could be located through rational thinking since it was a request to engage in the not yet actualised. In presenting this I made use of Shotter's (2006) point, that some problems are difficulties of orientation rather than difficulties of the intellect. I stressed my point by saying that the challenge was not so much figuring out what was right to do, but instead to become increasingly responsive to the voices that invited different and new stories about making use of consultants relevant so that we could orient and prepare ourselves to the markets not yet realised. So the skills I requested for were those of orientation. After my brief introduction I made people engage in conversations relating to two questions: ‘What voices does the idea of re-session ourselves call forth in us?’ and ‘What kind of conversations and with whom do we need to invite ourselves into in order to increase our responsiveness to our being in the market?’ Finally we did a round where each group highlighted the most important messages from their peer work. The event produced spontaneous responses from all sides in the organisation offering their support to making such moves possible. A consultant, Hanne, reflected on the event: *'A central episode in the process was to see a budget and results presented by a director who seemed undaunted by the dark clouds of the market outlook. One who presented (dull and ordinary) financial figures with words such as relationships, to do what you are best at doing, to build on our competences and to deconstruct*

the word "recession" and instead inquire into "re-session" through brief encounters that opened up chances of talking about our best practices. It was an episode that was groundbreaking. Never have I experienced anything like it. I was hit by a very strong gratitude that it was even possible.'

I find this event interesting since it is quite characteristic of how we as members of our community play with language ourselves, seeking better ways of expressing ourselves in relation to our circumstances. Also the event summarises key theoretical ideas from Wittgenstein through Rorty and the whole post-modern tradition, arguing the belief that words make things rather than represent the thing denoted. Hence, words have in themselves no preferred way of being given meaning so the meaning of words is entirely up to our use of them in particular situations, and the use in such happenings always happens under some description or another (Rorty, 1980). Indeed, it can be a powerful move to create space for a curious inquiry into the assumptions governing the organisational practices. For our part as an organisation, having these conversations, talking theory and assumption, making inquiries into different ideas about doing consultancies is quite natural and it is not uncommon to find colleagues engaged in conversations about interpretations of Wittgenstein or Bateson, or some new idea one has come upon. We regularly invite different researchers and philosophers into our academy days and internal training, simply to get new inspiration and take a different view on things, which is a treasured practice. Also, his or her embodied responsive attitude produces 'in' him/her an experience of things coming uniquely together, a moment of consummation opening up for a 'groundbreaking' outlook at our opportunities in the market.

Karen, a colleague with eight years in the organisation, reports about such activities and their role in the organisation: *'In a period I think that we were falling in love with our own five*

favourite lenses, acting as if we were champions of the world. But with the 'shipyard[3]' project we gave ourselves new horizons to look at. When for example we engage in new methods, or when Peter[4] brought narrative ideas into the organisation, it was done in a way with openness towards the new and different so that what resonated with our general ideas of self as an organisation gets included. I also see this in the way new colleagues bring philosophy, for example, into the house in a different way, with a different language. Over time it enters the little cracks, but all the time with a filter. We can't take in everything just because there are many truths out in the world. In these situations we have certain perspectives and a filter determining what we let in.'

What is interesting about what is said about our organisation is that it is open to discuss new ideas, try out experiments and what appears to resonate is being taken into the language of the organisation. But there is not 'a somebody' who makes these choices, they sort of happen as a result of the strong stories about who we are, like Karen earlier in the interview describes; *'If you haven't got a project for being here, there wouldn't be any idea in staying.'* And this felt experience that we have something important that reaches beyond, is very much alive in the organisation; *'we have lived our own ideas and they have proven themselves.'* Central to this is the definition of relationships between people in the organisation, since people's sense of self provides an important condition for such participatory experimentation with re-describing our practices. Below this will be explored further, but first I have some further comments on the process of re-describing our strategy.

3 Shipyard – An organisational project re-describing different aspects of our practices. The projects were chosen through a collective process in the organisation. The metaphor of taking a ship out of service in order to upgrade it in a shipyard.

4 A former leader in the organisation.

2.6.2 Keeping the conversations going, follow up activities

In the period following this event we had several organisational days, where we continued the conversations about our ways of relating to our challenges in the market. During the summer we had an organisational day on which we played with poetry, challenging our way of expressing strategic language through poetic writing. The day was prepared and led by one of our managers. Her thoughts for choosing the particular poetic focus was: *'To me strategic processes are conversations about movements and important signposts for the members of the organisation. It is about what it is that makes us come together in professional communities and working with clients in ways that for us are important. From a systemic platform and a strong connection to action learning it was my idea to take the poetic principle*[5] *in our social constructionist practice seriously. My intention was to move, involve and collaborate on a common writing process. That we together created a poem that could evoke a feeling of unity in relation to the strategic talks that we were going to have and in relation to the engagement that needs to be the driver in our work with clients.'* Essentially strategic change is not a matter of having the right arguments but with, to quote Rorty (1989, p. 7): *'...a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change.'*

Example of a piece of poetry:

'The best is when words like ambitious, professional, quality is given life in the conversations we share with each other and when meaning arises from continually insisting on meetings between colleagues and clients.

The worst is when words are frozen into truths that someone holds exclusivity to and stops all conversations with reference to inference, that there is no more to talk about.'

A motivation was to experience what employees felt was important for them to discuss in relation

[5] The poetic principle which is found in literature on Appreciative Inquiry, e.g. Molly-Søholm, T., Storch, J. et al. 2006.

to strategic themes, but also to create an arena for talking, that wasn't defined by management but by colleagues. One of the consultants, Yvonne, reflects on her thoughts about being given this task:

'I had my thoughts about this being such a good idea... But on the other side I thought that maybe the word "strategy" would be received more welcoming if my colleagues knew that this was being arranged by employees/colleagues.

In one way or another "strategy days" are not particularly sexy. It is as if you are bored to death even before you show up on the day. It was my impression that most of my colleagues shared this view. "Why shouldn't we make something fun instead of having a strategy day?", "It is the management's need to have one, why can't they do their work themselves."

'Smile... Maybe it is because the word strategy sounds dry and "non-involving". Something that management deals with, so that some figures look right and reasonable. And maybe it's also because strategy has to do with something so far out into the future that it doesn't really concern our everyday here and now activities. You know, like savings for pension, it is so far into the future that it becomes difficult to relate to. Who knows where we are at that time.

How we see a pig depends on our purpose and point of view of the pig. We can see it as an object of art or food.

'So I tried to "walk around the pig!" (You know, looking at it from a multi-verse of perspectives.)

'Imagine if we could create a strategy day that would become relevant and meaningful to our work here and now! Imagine if it could become fun! Imagine if we could see the management perform on a "slack rope" and interview them about the strategy day. Imagine if we could be completely transparent about our relationship to the word strategy and what it means, both as managers and employees. Imagine if we as employees could see the trust and influence of what is offered to us by the management and to put our own future on the agenda. Imagine if we could all sense the uniqueness and that we could all have a direct influence on our organisation's strategy. Imagine that my colleague and I are going to design the day. Imagine if all go home afterwards with their hands in the air and with dreams of making such a strategy day for our customers. Imagine if...'

It is worth paying attention to the change that takes place during her description, going from an indeterminate stance to a determinate, from closed to open, of how she approached the challenge. She moves from prejudices about management and strategy into imagination. I think of it as a brief example of how the ability to embody systemic ideas in practice helps create moves away from undesired attitudes and into something much more alive. She describes this movement herself saying: *'I had the feeling that our attitude went from thinking that perhaps management eased their burden on us, into thinking that management was so up front and brave in letting us as employees run the day, with all the different prejudices we have in relation to what appeared as a boring strategy.'* It is a central systemic point to organisational changes to involve people in the meaning making processes, since our ability to act collectively in relation to, for example, a strategy is depending on the degree of embodied knowing; internalised languaging. This does not intend to bring forth rational criteria for knowing how to go on, rather the emphasis is on increased orientation skills as people act and make situated judgements, for example closing the

phronetic gap (Taylor, 1993, p. 57) meaning filling in the improvisational space that arises between rules, purpose and the practical situated flux of interactions.

2.7 Giving voice to difference

Different situations during the day supported the happening of these moves. I will limit it to two examples, one illustrating how active positions allow for different voices to become possible, the other an example of the importance of being able to share and laugh together.

Early in the day the management group (exclusive of me) was interviewed by a consultant about their thoughts about the role of strategies and the decision of letting consultants take a lead on the day. Yvonne describes her experience of that situation: *'I think it made a difference interviewing our leaders about their relation to strategies. Realising that the leaders also struggle with strategies and hearing their considerations about leaving the planning of the day in our hands. It made several of us look at each other nodding; "you know they are doing a pretty good job, our leaders." I think that people realised what a unique workplace Attractor is, where we are involved on levels that not many people experience – if any.*

'And I think it is an eternal balancing we are trying to perform together, leaders and employees (There aren't really a lot of books written on this kind of doing!). Sometimes we shouldn't have as much influence as are offered by the management and at other times it has been very crucial for our collaboration and wellbeing. This day I experienced as one of the very important ones.'

Interviewing an organisation's management in front of their employees is a practice we do with our clients from time to time, and therefore a natural choice to make. It offers a different arena of relating, since the speaker responds to the interviewer, and the listeners, rather being

spoken to, have the opportunity to reflect and select what appears to be significant. This practice is often known as 'reflexive positioning' (Oliver, 2002) and originates from the pioneering work of Andersen's (1994) elaboration of the reflecting team practice found as early as in Bateson's (1972) work with Schizophrenia and further developed by the Milan Group (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980).

2.8 On becoming a systemic community

What this chapter has attempted to illustrate is some of the ongoing organisational activities that form and shape the background against which day-to-day practice occurs. In the part on strategy, drawing attention to words such as ‘recession’ and what they do to us is used to create a re-labelling, a redescription of it into re-sessioning ourselves, and from this initiate a dialogical process of involvement in creating new directions and sensibilities. I saw how a strategy day was turned into poetic writing, which prepared the organisation to engage in developing a strategic awareness that we could further elaborate later on. This elaboration was accounted for by a consultant who orchestrated the following strategy day a few months later. Here I saw how she moved herself from prejudice into a creative and collaborative attitude which contained a great deal of fun.

Extending the notion of irreverence from being a situated responsive practice in the context of consultation and revitalising it with Rorty's notions of *irony* and *redescription,* allows us to pay attention to the background against which we act with the urge to be irreverent about our hypothesising. If we argue that irreverence as such is a professional attitude developed and associated with systemic consultations, we can raise the question of 'what kind of attitude gives rise to an attitude of irreverence?' We can ask: what kind of general cultural practice repeatedly produces situations of playfulness; of reframing ideas and words; of collaborative open-ended

processes; of participatory responsive engagement in other people's perspectives and understanding, etc.?

The kind of culture presented is one I associate with Rorty's notion of ironic or redescriptive practice. To Rorty this attitude is closely related to living from within the conditioning of a liberal community that is concerned with being ever more inclusive of and responsive to people's needs and desires. But in order to keep a community going and not getting stuck in a self-contained attitude it needs an ironic attitude, a redescriptive practice towards the continuous unfolding and emerging reality. It needs to keep refreshing its words, ideas and expressive acts in order to keep the wonder alive, the wonder that there is something new under the sun, something yet to be unfolded, lived and experimented with, and it is under such conditions that irreverence is lived out as a situated activity producing the kind of intended movements that originally motivated Cecchin and his associates to advocate so strongly for this attitude in practice. Can Rorty's ideas be put in dialogue with systemic ideas, and perhaps more importantly, in what way do they extend or challenge current systemic vocabularies? As already discussed above, the notion of an irreverent attitude can meaningfully be combined with Rorty's notions of irony and redescription, and this enables the systemic practitioner to re-relate to the notion of irreverence from within a much broader context of ideas and ideology. What that extension also does is to challenge the systemic community to put greater emphasis on the contextual nature of its preferred ways of speaking. This also positions the systemic community within the current debate in management literature in the ongoing debate on the relationship between theory and practice. Here Ramsey (2011, p. 4) argues for an attempt to '*locate academic theory as an unfinalized, perhaps tentative contribution to such interplay inviting or provoking a*

response that is transitory and generative, not so much an application of the theory but as a rejoinder that carries a conversation onwards.'

Indeed this challenges the systemic community as I have come to know it. In recent years I have seen a very limited use of the literature in our community. As a consequence I have come to see much more reproductive than original work coming out.

This manifests a new tendency that places a focus on a growing need to re-describe what once was an 'on the edge' practice and way of speaking as something that can now be done mechanically, in methodical terms. If we are to prevent ourselves from becoming the instrumental, repetitive type of practitioners that we so strongly argue against, we must seek to retain the critical edge, the irreverent attitude that was characteristic of systemic pioneering practitioners, not seek merely to implement a particular language game. Furthermore the process of – what I called above – 'confronting one's contingencies', involves going beyond any mechanistic or instrumental tendencies. It means relating to differences between systemic and non-systemic ways of speaking as differences in complexity (horizontal extend) rather than oppositions in ontology, of kind (vertical distance) (Rorty, 1999, p. 83). Indeed this challenges a lot of what is implicit in our everyday speech where oppositions such as: linear vs circular; expert vs process thinking; appreciative vs deficit language, are pervasive and often taken for granted. Not only does this imply intellectually the need for edifications (Rorty, 1980), but for more articulation and detailed expansion of our descriptions within the community at large. That is to argue for a '*provocative relationship with theory… in wanting to focus our attention more on our use of ideas and theory rather than on the process of understanding*' (Ramsey, 2011, p. 5).

Eventually this leads to the recognition that systemic thinking is better seen as a speech genre (Bahktin, 1984), a language game with a rich and nuanced tradition for living from within a reflexive relationship between theory and practice, rather than thinking that systemic language is the best, more 'true' language. What we need to keep alive is the question of 'whether our current description serves our purposes or if we are better off replacing our speech habits with some new words and styles of talk that can do the job better.'

In the next chapter, I will look at some of the consequences of such organisational practices in the context of continued creation of movement – in the professional practices in the community, and in relation to surroundings.

CHAPTER 3: ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND THE CONTINUOUS CREATION OF NOVELTY

In management literature the notion *innovation* represents 'the vintage wines' of concepts that good organisations must address in order to be truly competitive. But rarely discussed is what is meant by innovation, and far too often it is seen that organisations 'solve' the 'innovation gap.' For example, the difference between what we ought to be doing or selling and what we currently do and sell, by creating a department, an *innovation lab,* in the hope that this will do. Reviewing literature one will find notions such as incremental versus radical innovation (Fonseca, 2002), and social and user-driven innovation (Mulgan, 2007). All of these conceptions arise from the domain of classical management practices where change is seen as the standout from stability, and innovation the kind of methodology that bridges the gap between needs and desires and the current state of affairs. I believe that there are yet more ways to see innovative practices. I find much inspiration from artistic expressions such as those descriptions found in art and jazz music, brilliantly described by Barrett (1998) and my favourite composer and musician Keith Jarrett (2010):

'Music is an amazing thing. It doesn't exist as a stationary object. It moves in real time and can be uplifting both to the player and the listener. The melting, trans-figurative moment, that feeling of everything being there, just for an instant, that surrender that overcomes us as players (if we're good enough) and leads us on to the next pregnant second, patient in the knowledge that there always is, waiting in the wings, the next chance to feel this fullness and celebrate it (as it is only in the nature of art to produce it this way); to this we dedicate our lives. But it is not for us alone; it is also made for you, the listener, to feel these same feelings along with us, to participate and to also be uplifted by it.'

In this chapter I will explore a different orientation to innovative, novel practices. They are the kind of practices which invite the metaphor of flux and continuous change as the primary conception in organisations, making stability dynamic. Similarly, when a swirl in a river remains stable by constantly moving – or to be more precise – the swirl is a secondary accomplishment, the outgrowth of change as water passes through. In much the same way I see an organisation as remaining a stable appearance by people continually engaging in ways that produces an experience of stability; but what is stable is the moving coordination of people, not the organisation. Besides, when offering a general discussion of organisational change and continuous creation of novelty, different examples from both consulting and leading are offered to ground it in the domain of the 'real' and then further develop the ideas, by suggesting a merger of Rorty's linguistic preference with Shotter's relational responsive embodied dialogical practices. In so doing, a new language for engaging with continuous change is offered, a view that is more associated with artistic and poetic ways of expressing than with classical management thinking.

3.1 Embodying a language not yet spoken

During the course of the past ten years we have, as an organisation, not only grown in size – we have also managed to keep inventing new styles of practice, and celebrate the feeling of coming to experience the fullness of consulting practices as a systemic community. We have managed to expand the practice arenas that we operate in, from the very simple brief workshops and consultations, into huge programs some of which stretch over four years. Also we have gone from doing brief courses to having two year courses. This is a huge achievement in many ways – but what really fascinates me is that we hardly ever talk about the need for innovation, that is, inventing new activities or entering new markets – yet it happens all the time! In this way we

represent a counter-story to the dominant discourse on innovation. It is my hypothesis that a key characteristic of our organisation, making it distinctively different from other consultancies, is that we have created an organisational practice that performs collective innovation as self-renewal. This means that I will advocate for a very special take on innovation – since I use the word without categories and without a specific *productness* in mind but a narrative one – the ability to keep the stories going with a sense of freshness and novelty in them. In that sense I regard our practices as forms of art, an art in bringing to people's attention richer and fuller ways of living in organisations.

In the previous chapter I argued that living from within systemic languaging, that is, relating in relationally responsive ways, produces a particular attitude towards an open-ended inquiry which continually creates new courses of action or re-creates old language use producing new kinds of relational opportunities. I argued that this attitude could be described through Rorty's (1989) ideas of irony and redescription on a cultural or community level. Using these ways of relating would offer a better and extended understanding of the systemic practice of irreverence (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992), under which circumstances these ideas come to a full expression. It is my hypothesis that innovative practices viewed from within an ironic redescriptive and irreverent practice produce a continuous flow of novelty, since the attitude of the systemic practitioner makes him relate uniquely to the opportunities of creating unique moments of consummation. That is, for an organisation, to be continuously concerned with ways of reinventing selves in the making into the processes of the organising, whether this be in relation to clients, partners or internally. This has led Vernon Cronen (2000, p. 14) to portray systemic ideas of living as practical theories which he defines as: *'A Practical Theory informs a grammar of practice that facilitates joining with the grammars of others to explore their unique patterns of*

situated action. The proximal reason for joining is the co-creation of new affordances and constraints for creative participation in the instrumental and consummatory dimensions of experience. Practical theory itself is importantly informed by data created in the process of engagement with others.'

The instrumentalities that inform grammars are for a systemic practitioner not randomly drawn, rather they '*invoke commensurable understandings of the situation-in-view*' (Cronen, 2000, p. 14). These understandings are felt bodily knowing, rather than an outgrowth of logical reasoning; they happen spontaneously in a continuous responsive way of relating. A grammar importantly informs an orientational awareness of how to go on, but also an awareness of where to go next.

In recognising that life is full of experiences of novelty and that we have to invent our way forward into the not yet realised, I choose to use the word innovation to announce a particular phenomenon. From the point-of-view of an ironist, community innovation is not a special achievement but the very nature of how we constantly challenge ourselves, test out ideas, apply new metaphors and create new forms of consultational practices in a continuous emerging flow and expansion of not only what we do but also who we are. Also I look at innovation from a temporal perspective, which is different from how it is conceived in the dominant literature on the topic, arguing that what becomes significant to a novel practice is not the novelty as such, since every moment is novel *per se*, but what it creates and moves forward into – in our case both in our organisation, and in the client's organisation over time. What I will describe are innovative projects that have created new forms of concepts and ideas about practices long after the original project finished and in that way formed and shaped our self-storying as a distinct systemic community. In other words I will focus on practice portraying two central dimensions of an

organisational capacity to perform 'continuous creation of novelty' as its way of identifying selves in movements. Shotter (2006, p. 2) describes the conditions for such practices, and thereby characterises a central constituting practice of an ironic community, as *'1) the pre-reflective volition, (or) the wilful efforts we put into organizing expressive acts in the world, and 2)… our expressive acts in their temporal contouring… can exert an influence on the others around us, thus to shape not only their actions but their very way of being in the world.'* I recognise that over time we have performed a recursive *way of being* with clients, employees and networks, a kind of tapping back and forth in a co-evolutionary pattern – meaning a conjoint development, where the change in one becomes the constituting conditioning for the change in the other, gradually adapting to greater and greater complexity as we wilfully, as opposed to logically, developed systemic practices by re-contextualising the organisational challenges of our clients. Thus we realise that this renewed contextual landscape re-contextualised our own ways of being systemic. This leads me back to my point of self-renewal, hence it is in such relationally responsive circumstances I realise the innovative capacity of our organisation, the willingness to be carried away from the temptation of concepts into a creative emergence of ideas, in a flow between everyone in the organisation, and in a relationship with the client's organisation – performing a collective act of practical organisational and intellectual significance, reaching beyond the episodes themselves.

I will trace these perspectives through a case by listening to the people involved in the project. The example is a project that we made on a dialogical leadership appraisal process for a client, which in itself was unique, but importantly produced a whole series of other projects on dialogical process evaluation, making a whole new market for ourselves. The case is described briefly and is more fully accounted for in Molly-Søholm, Storch, Juhl and Dahl (2006).

3.2 Innovation as Redescriptive Practice

Within the management literature one will quickly realise that there is an extensive publication list on innovation. The more interesting part of this is found in Japanese management literature called knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1991), which to a great extent is forgotten today as a primary source of inspiration. Perhaps what holds it back is the instrumental practices, the background against which these ideas were developed, were probably never fully conceived. Yet it is my reading that the holistic process view, that is offered here, is perhaps one of the best accounts of how businesses can make use of process thinking and practice in organisations. Though the focus of innovative processes described in this literature is on product innovation like machines and technology, the basic positions that are offered here relate to those of systemic practitioners. Nonaka (1991, p. 2) argues that *'the essence of innovation is to re-create the world according to a particular vision or ideal. To create new knowledge means quite literally to re-create the company and everyone in it in a non-stop process of personal and organizational self-renewal. In the knowledge-creating company, inventing new knowledge is not a specialized activity – the province of the R&D department or marketing or strategic planning. It is a way of behaving, indeed a way of being, in which everyone is a knowledge worker – that is to say, an entrepreneur.'* Even though these ideas have been available for the last two decades it seems that the majority of organisations misread the key messages and instead aim at relating to the instrumental practices offered such as Lean Manufacturing and Total Quality Management without realising the anticipated effects and without making the cultural shifts in their conceptions of who they are as necessary to understand these practices from within.

So what is meant by re-create? And what kind of knowledge is being referred to, when talking about personal and organisational self-renewal as a way of behaving rather than something

possessive in the organisation? It is my belief that these need close attention since the reading of these on practical levels anticipates different kind of practices.

In the systemic and pragmatic literature I find extensive accounts illuminating these questions. Both Rorty (1991a, p. 94) and Shotter (2006, p. 2) argue that all contexts can be divided into two kinds: the first sees inquiry as developing a new set of attitudes towards something already known in one's repertoire, which for Shotter, is associated with *assimilating* something to an already existing and known category. He warns that doing this often makes us ignore the unique characteristics of a situation and *important deviations* that may advance new practice and knowledge.

The other kinds of contexts, Rorty argues, are the ones where one develops a new set of practices '*toward which one had previously no* attitudes*.'* Doing so becomes a process of imagination and language-learning as opposed to inference. These attitudes are not developed '*at an intellectual level, as something one can talk about to others'*, rather they are aspects of an orientational difficulty in which 'knowing how to go on' becomes a felt dimension of the dynamic process of living relationships and a matter of '*being responsive to the unique details of a situation by one's actions within it*' (Shotter, 2006, p. 2). Rorty further argues that (1989, p. 27) '*to create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind*.'

If one sees knowledge as something that can be captured or brought to a conclusion, one is inclined to assimilate to pre-existing ideas. Hence, to re-create is to expand, and it is in the process of acting, that knowledge is lived as practical judgements we create not only for who we are, but also to reiterate our knowledge about who we can become – and what kind of world this

becoming is taking place in. Innovation is not only about developing things, it is about developing who we are in the world we create as we try to figure out who we are becoming. Knowledge is an ongoing activity, and trying to capture, bring it to conclusions or locate it as something within people's minds will eventually fail in practice. Instead, one need step into the process of unfolding in order to make sense of the world as it expresses who we are and what kind of world we choose to live in.

On a practical level this expresses itself in very different and unique ways. A consultant, Lisa, explains her experience of how we relate to our clients as a way of co-creating affordances for participating: *'...it is very characteristic of what we do, that we think intervention from the first minute we speak with the client. It is very essential, that one doesn't think; that now we are having a telephone talk, then I must do so and so, but instead starts dancing[6] from the very first second. This I like very much because it fosters the opportunity for co-creating innovation.'* And she continues; *'I tell my participants on courses that balancing between being an expert and a process consultant in some way resembles building a house. If someone calls and says that they would like to build a house one is a bad entrepreneur if one wants to decide everything for them, but one is equally bad if one isn't consistent in telling that the foundation comes before the roofing. That you need to know something about! But do you know exactly what kind of atmosphere is wanted in the bathroom? This metaphor fits very nicely with my practice in a broad sense. And it demands quite a lot of them (the clients)… We demand a shared responsibility, which I don't hear many others are asking for. It might be that this makes us take conversations different from those being invited into* (e.g., expert positions).*'*

[6] The dance metaphor is one I use in teaching to demonstrate the relational understanding of communication that I advocate. A dancer needs to be in a relational responsive process as their movements are jointly coordinated with the moves of the other. Also it denotes the importance of orientational skills one needs a sense of direction in order to know your way about from within the dance.

Above, Lisa describes two central dimensions of our professional practice: a) dancing from the very first meeting with clients, joining grammars, trying one step out sees if the client follows, learning about the clients preferred ways of moving, adjusting to the circumstances and continuing the dance. The metaphor of dancing is often used both in teaching and in conversations about practice in our organisation, to illustrate the complex intertwining of the movement anyone holds, and the relational responsiveness (Shotter, 2006). Further, a good dancer is good at anticipating the moves of the dance partner before the actual moving, providing a manoeuvrable repertoire of how to keep the flow of dancing going; and b) the issue of expert and process consulting, which are often set up against each other. But in our practice these two professional practices simply denote different ways of relating if the situation in view invites such professional responses. The question is not if they are in opposition to each other, instead one needs to work on the question; *what kind of knowing is needed in order to know when one position appears more relevant than the other?*

Lisa gives an example of an episode where she saw this practiced. She refers to a meeting in which we ended up designing a change project that created a whole new practice in our organisation, an innovative breakthrough. I was the consultant leading the project design and the one who knew the client, a client that we have now worked with for more than five years, continuing the project in new regions with consistently positive results. Lisa describes; *'When I saw you a long time ago in the meeting with XX and YY, there I saw you dancing with them in a very special way… What I experienced right there was exactly co-creation, where one might have an idea about what kind of dance is needed here and what kind of poses one can take. So you don't enter like some kind of soft amorphous like thing, but one comes in as someone with ideas, one 'dances metaphorically' those who are in the room. I saw you put an opportunity (a project design)*

on the table after some relationship building in the shape of attuning, listening and questioning… And then you gave them space to both be satisfied and unhappy about it – they actually left the room and came back and said it wasn't fitting for them. And this you just contained and said, that's okay, how would you like it to be? And then you facilitated a process with them that made them draw up what they would like instead, what they really imagined would work for them in their situation in their departments and regions. I think this was very exemplary and the crazy thing was, something I was really impressed by, they had completed an idea that as a whole resembled what you in the first place had presented to them, just slightly modified so that they now saw it as their project. They didn't have the slightest idea about how much the two things looked alike.

…

Interviewer: Couldn't one say that this was successful manipulation?

Lisa: No, I don't at all think so. They had the total freedom to say what they wanted. They were held in the open and facilitated in such a way that it became possible for them to put into language something that they didn't have words for… It is here the consultant needed to manage the balance between keeping the process open and at the same time assure that the solutions created actually produced desired outcomes. It is here that we come close to the idea of innovation, letting people in on the ideas, have them take ownership – it is here that one lives the idea that those who hold the problems also hold the key to their solutions.

What this example shows is really the joint effort to explore the affordances and constraints that is lived in the relationship between consultant and client, in a shared pursuit of a consummatory dimension of experiences in an imagined future relationship. Consummatory dimension since the experience of practices and intentionality coming together in a unique

moment transform both the content of the episode and the possible futures that alone become possible from having such moments together. These moments are related to the artistic and aesthetic dimension of the living, life coming to a culmination (Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2002).

It also highlights the important notion about knowing from within. The client's immediate decline of the proposed process can be understood as a difficulty in relating the proposed from within the idea. But as they are offered the opportunity to *speak their way into an idea* of how a process could be carried out, they start to embody the process providing them with orientational grammars of how to go on in their organisations. This practice stands in contrast with that of many other consultants. Cathrine, a client, describes her experience:

Cathrine: It works really well when a consultant does not insist that the product is like this and this is what we are going to do – because this does not work.

Interviewer: Have you experienced consultants who want to do things in a specific way?

Cathrine: Some show up with their product or their concept. And I think: What do you want me to do with it? Today, many consultants within the organisation ask what we need. This is also a way for them to move on. But it is more about the approach. I especially noticed that when you were here you did not relate to right or wrong. In relation to the employees you have really inspired me so I have gradually learned that you cannot relate to things as if they were right or wrong.

What she highlights is that it is more than just asking the client what they need or proposing a solution. It is an *approach*, a certain way of being actively engaged in the relationship which produces often unanticipated effects, like learning about relating differently rather than from a right-wrong distinction. She further comments on the approach:

Interviewer: What does it mean to you as a client of this type of service to experience communication used in this way?

Cathrine: It makes me listen very carefully and work on what I hear. It is in itself a pleasure to hear the language being used really well. In relation to our target group I can see that our employees immediately understand you. You have cleansed the language for different management and foreign words and have processed and translated the ones you use. I really believe that this is a very important thing... This is also connected to the way you ask questions. It is appreciative questions in a certain way making you think that what I know and mean is important.

Interviewer: Which importance does this feeling have for the development of relations?

Cathrine: It has the importance that you open up and become more daring. You start up a process in a creative group, which makes people inspire one another to open up and thus enhance creativity. I remember the happiness and excitement in some of these sessions. It also influences the relation between you and me because when both the group and I experience it, it has to contain some good values. There is something we have to take care of and act upon... This gives rise to continue the work afterwards and dive further into it. I get inspired to think that if I can use it in this situation maybe I can also use it on that.

What this quote offers in its own condensed form is both some ideas about the approach, and what kind of response it creates in her and her organisational life. First she says that it is a way of communicating that makes people want to listen because the language invites a responsive dialogue rather than an expert to non-expert. This relates to Vernon's (2000) point about joining grammars in order to explore affordances and constraints and with Shotter's (2006) notion of

dialogical responsive ways of speaking. Doing so becomes an act of empowering the people with whom you are in a dialogue, meaning that you affirm their participation in such a way that they experience that their voice matters both in relation to the process and you. In her view this leads to a series of positive consequences. First, it opens up for daring different things, such as applying creative ways of working which she associates with happiness and excitement. This then feeds back on the relationship between the consultant and her, because it becomes a shared moment of consummation. This moment she associates with good values, which lead her into feeling an obligation to act upon it and further reiterate a continuation of exploration into further actions and languaging of her organisation and ways of relating to employees and situations. Her emphasis on opening up space for novel acts exemplifies the whole point about moments of consummation, since it is the quality of such moments that can change the experience and what becomes possible next. When someone gets something right that the person has thought about for a long time, suddenly the worries are gone and the relation to the end-in-view changes. These moments can, as quoted earlier; '…exert an influence on the others around us, thus to shape not only *their* actions but their very *way of being* in the world' (Shotter, 2006, p. 2).

3.3 Developing dialogical 360 leadership appraisals

A case of how the circumstances provided the necessary conditions for the development of a novel approach to performance appraisals in an organisation is illustrative of how we work in unfolding ways. The context is a publically owned service organisation that is going through an economic turnaround. The director is commissioned to carry out a five year plan made by a management consulting firm. We were commissioned to help with the implementation of the plan that mostly consisted in a general action plan with specific performance targets, among others a

reduction of staff by more than 40 per cent (about 400 people) and massive budget improvements. The director's aim was not only to carry out the plan, but also change the whole culture from a classical blue collar union based culture with its power struggles and tactics into a change and service-minded culture, where challenges were solved in dialogical fashion. We assisted on several levels with management training in dialogue, teamwork and conflict resolution as difficulties emerged. Also, the executive manage group were assisted with bi-monthly two-day meetings, where the strategic progress was discussed, and next step initiatives were developed. Part of the process was to conduct a mandatory 360 appraisal and we discussed it, since what was offered by the municipality was a classical questionnaire-based approach with feedback from external consultants. In conversations this approach was challenged and an alternative emerged from talks, which based the appraisal on a dialogical process, where strategies and day-to-day leadership practices were due for evaluation. Central to the argument of doing the process dialogically was the idea that through the many dialogues about good leadership between leaders, employees and directors, a different value to the organisation would emerge. Hence the purpose was to have as many people evaluate not only the specific leadership of the organisation, but also as part of these conversations to develop a much more detailed, nuanced and in touch with practice language about leadership. Furthermore, it was an attempt at creating a process that in its unfolding would give people a richer experience of what was meant by dialogue and what is possible to accomplish through such practices. The director offers her reflections on what the process helped make possible:

> *'The assessment form has contributed to the adoption of a collective language regarding leadership; in addition, it has become clear that leadership is also the behaviour one chooses and the relations one chooses to focus on. Through the conversations, the leaders*

and a large group of employees have considered questions regarding leadership, thereby developing a more conscious language about leadership and leader behaviour that will benefit the organisation in a wide range of situations. And there is now greater openness regarding leadership, so that everyone can learn from each other and think critically about each other's leadership; both of these things are important steps towards an open and dialogical leadership in the organisation, which will strengthen the leader network that has been established in the organisation and the administration.'

The case is complex in that it represents a political organisation under serious pressure for performance improvements. Also, it's an organisation that works under the condition of many different logics, such dialogical ambitions and continual political assessments of performance, constraints between the old way of doing things and the new desired practices. What the director is stressing is that the kind of consulting she receives helps build organisational coherence, so that what seem to be disconnected logics and practices come together as synergetic opportunities. This also goes for consulting; as Lisa said earlier, there is no dichotomy between expert and process when consulting. These are only different ways of relating, and indeed you can present people's incoherent ideas in a respectful and helpful way, helping people into making up new connections by shifting metaphors or language. It is not necessarily only what is being said, but the way in which it is being said that matters, and in the case of this client it was within the contours of a dialogical relationship. Obviously it is also about taking chances. Sometimes clients disagree with you, and you have to let go of your darlings. When and how this is done comes from experience but is importantly informed by the ability to be irreverent towards your own ideas and prejudice, in the moment, there on the spot in a split second.

When I refer to people's inconsistencies of ideas and approaches, it is not to suggest that I might have the right and enlightened idea. Rather it is to be aware that any idea and practice has its own history, its *contingencies and its context.* This is brilliantly explained in James' (1907, p. 27) old story of the squirrel: *'Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: DOES THE MAN GO ROUND THE SQUIRREL OR NOT? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go around the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you PRACTICALLY MEAN by 'going around' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go around him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you*

conceive the verb 'to go round' in one practical fashion or the other"… I tell this trivial anecdote because it is a peculiarly simple example of what I wish now to speak of as THE PRAGMATIC METHOD.'

In the case of this client it was pretty straight forward to recognise that there was a discrepancy between their desired outcome of an appraisal, which was to become even more dialogical, and the process of getting there through a non-dialogical process method. But how to do it differently is of course the challenge. How we developed the idea is a funny story. I had on a previous meeting commented on the appraisal as being in conflict with their general aspiration in their organisation. I didn't necessarily expect it to go any further than this, but she and her HR manager came back and asked for a meeting, where they wanted me to present something. On the day of the meeting, I missed a ferry to Copenhagen and couldn't get there on time since I had to drive for three hours. Instead I spoke on the phone with her for about two hours on possible ways of doing a dialogical appraisal. Upon arrival we sat down for about 30 minutes, drew up her notes from the conversation, and there it was a co-created process design, which in its unfolding would create the answers to the challenges we couldn't imagine with our present experiences and vocabulary. One of the consultants that joined in on the process, Lisa, reports her experience.

Interviewer: Is the case an example of novel consultancy?

Lisa: Yes, there is no doubt about that. In this project process consultation and evaluation are inspired by each other and something new had emerged which was different and could do something different. The way we worked with evaluation here was a very special structured way of doing process consultation... I became aware of the possibilities in our way of working with evaluation. We had created an evaluation consulting practice which makes it

possible to create development. I saw new ways of how to go on when we talk evaluation and consulting.

I think it is worth mentioning two things, one being that during the process of working we come to experience things that change us and our relationship to what we are doing. In this case, Lisa realised the potency of our project through successful group interviews with people in the organisation. This ability to be moved during the process of working is an important skill. Rather than staying with the plan it is suggested to relate to the flow of things during the course of engaging with the organisation. The other thing is how this project opens for a whole new conception of evaluation as a way of doing process consulting. It simply goes beyond current distinctions of what evaluation is all about, going from a focus on learning as a higher context for the evaluation into change and development as the higher context. This has resulted in several new initiatives such as courses and other projects on process evaluation. Developing new consulting practices and responding to client needs does not always, or even rarely, follow the text books!

3.4 Rorty, redescription and novelty

To Rorty '*redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do'* (Tartalia, 2007, p. 219) and with this ambition he sets out a moral project which at its core holds the vision of finding increasingly better ways of living together by reducing social exclusion and injustice. Hence he was aware that this was not a conclusive moral position in arguing; *'you cannot aim at moral perfection, but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account than you did previously*' (Rorty, 1999, p. 83). Though one cannot escape the contingencies of language and social practice, one can pursue emancipation by facing the challenge of '*reinvigorating the conversation by finding*

new descriptions capable of making the world seem fresh all over again' (1980, p. 370), so that we don't live by the language left behind. To refresh my earlier comment on needs, Rorty says that it is fundamental in order to understand the process of the living to recognise, like Dewey (1938a) that people intuitively try to move toward certain purposes – end-in-views, desires – as a way of responding to the indefinite characteristics of the web of significance.

One can of course live one's life through the stories told by others and thrive with a happy and successful experience, but as for communities, he insists that there is a need for a moral aspiration of better social worlds. We must not settle for the current state of affairs in the world and he cannot imagine that we are at the end of social evolution just as all would agree that we are not at the end of biological evolution (Rorty, 1999). So we must live up to the challenge of confronting our contingencies, constituting our present way of living, embodying *'a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, (as) the chief instrument for cultural change'* (Rorty, 1989, p. 7).

Speaking differently in Rorty's sense is an experimental challenge and in it there is a persistence not to urge for a sense of rigour or clarity, since this is ultimately an attempt of certainty and inference. Rather it is a process of imagination, a process of asking new questions, making use of new metaphors, a process where one should *'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possible interesting questions'* (Rorty, 1989, p. 9). Doing so engages people in a very different inquiry, an explorative inquiry in which one, through the process of re-describing selves and others, creates a position in the web of language that holds less tension than one previously experienced. Doing so is applying poetic practices, through enrichment of language and embracing of more and more possibilities, so that one becomes a constant learner, giving oneself over to curiosity. Having envisaged new possible

forms of life allows one to formulate richer and fuller ways of living jointly with others, and in the course of that living making one's life richer and fuller (Rorty, 1991a, p. 154). Doing this creates an original living unfolding story about how one can be as a person or a community, but in order to achieve such a position one has to let go of certainty and rationality about the course of action, and engage in the process with an orientational preparedness. Because, as Rorty describes (1989, pp. 12-13), a re-describing poet '*is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which itself helps to provide.'*

Listening to Rorty's account of redescription and his understanding of the importance of novelty as expansion of selves, resonates with Nonaka's learning from studying the top performing and innovating Japanese organisations. Here Nonaka (1991) observes that top Japanese managers often make use of metaphors that are deliberately paradoxical, a paradox in logic which arouses in people a need to close the phronetic gap (Taylor, 1993) – not by reaching a conclusion but by producing an enlarged context (like James did in the squirrel example) and therefore make no effort to facilitate clarity. Rather the opposite, they want to benefit from the conversational processes of creating new meanings taking place in the organisation as a way of uniquely recreating itself. He (Nonaka, 1991, p. 8) argues that *'there is a continual shift in meaning as new knowledge is diffused in an organization. The confusion created by the inevitable discrepancies in meaning that occur in any organization might seem like a problem. In fact, it can be a rich source of new knowledge – if a company knows how to manage it. The key to doing so is continuously challenging employees to re-examine what they take for granted.'* Case stories (Nonaka, 1991;

Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986) show that some of the biggest innovative breakthroughs resulted from finding a way of living out such dilemmas, not by solving them but by making them irrelevant through advancement of communication governing the organizational practices. These often originate from tapping tacit insights and intuitions of employees, clients or suppliers. Appealing as these ideas of the characteristics of innovative communities may seem, the more it needs to be stressed that this is rarely the practice that is seen in Western, including Danish, organisations. Good leadership is more often associated with clear communication and control of the organisational operations (meaning predictability) than with spontaneous adaptation to circumstances through creative and innovative manoeuvring.

On a practical level I see Rorty's ideas corresponding with different dimensions of our organisational practices. I recognise that our systemic commitments offer different vocabularies to those normally spoken by consultants. The choice of doing so goes back to our foundation, where we decided to create a consultancy that would make explicit use of academic discourses in order to give people a more coherent experience of how the ideas we were offering related to traditions of ideas inspired by philosophy, biology, anthropology, social psychology, systems theories, family therapy etc. This theme came about in the interviews with my colleague Jasper. She describes it with an example:

Interviewer: If we asked our clients about our use of language what do you think they would say?

Jasper: I think they will say that we speak rather academically or that we have a fairly straightforward walkabout with long words that are unusual to them! But because we do it naturally they buy into it. I had, for example, met a woman who couldn't join module 1 on a course… so we made a brush-up session for her and two of her colleagues. She said that; 'I

was all nervous before going in, because I simply didn't understand half of the words on the slides that were sent me as preparation. I had looked them up and I couldn't actually find them!' She hadn't experienced having to look words up before. But in our way of presenting nothing choked her, perhaps 'heliotrope' or similar words… This combination of theory and practice and a natural – and after all manageable – way of bringing the abstract concepts into play in practice is some of what I have heard again and again for many years that we are really good at.

Interviewer: Let us catch the idea about new words and the way we are going about using them. What do you think in relation to clients having to adopt new practices; are we consciously aware of our use of new words which can offer new meanings as an important part of their way of rethinking their practice? Is it part of a broader conceptual idea to offer a language that does, when one retells one's practice, transform into new ideas – and that process we take part in, facilitated by our use of a different language?

Jasper: That I can fully agree with and I am convinced that what I see happen in coaching conversations is about seeing situations from a different perspective. The way it is done bringing new words and theoretical points into play in a language that dares to be abstract, facilitates them walking out of the door changed. But it only works because we believe in it, and it is okay that I express myself like that.

The example provides a good case in illustrating the point that not only are we as consultants providing clients with ideas of change, we do so in a language unusual to most professions. New words give rise to new anticipations and new possible ways of relating, like Wittgenstein (1980, p. 2) argues: *'A new word is like a fresh seed sown on the ground of the discussion.*' In the process of

relating to the clients we offer continuous redescriptions as we respond to their challenges, either by using practices such as reframing a word or an idea or by offering new ways of expressing the-situation-in-view making use of a systemic language. As the unfolding of the relationship takes place the client redescribes herself in relation to the challenges in a way that evoke a different sense of knowing how to go on, and a sense of change in what constitutes the experience of difficulties.

3.5 Shotter, embodiment and continuous creation of novelty

Where Rorty emphasises the use of new words and vocabularies Shotter wants us to take a closer look at the details of the happening when using new words. Indeed he argues that it is the spontaneous bodily responsiveness to the *'intonational contours of a person's utterances, as well as the whole style of their talk'* that provides the necessary difference for the 'shared space' for the happening of innovative change. It is '*when everybody involved in an interaction is open to being "touched" or "moved" by the otherness of the others and otherness around them, that innovative change can happen… it is only in such moments that it can happen*' (Shotter, work notes).

So what are the characteristics of these moments? Shotter (2006, p. 1) distinguishes between two kinds of difficulties, those we can solve by the '*application of a method or process of reasoning*' and on the other side those which he calls '*difficulties of orientation* or *relational difficulties'*, situations where the challenge is knowing how to go on or how to relate to the circumstances as opposed to 'knowing the facts.' The second kind of difficulty cannot be resolved, or a conclusion arrived at, instead it becomes crucial to people organising their interactivities with each other that they are able, during the course of acting together, to rouse in each other

'transitory understandings *of "where" so far in their activities they have "got to", and* action guiding anticipations *of "where" or "how" they are likely to go on*' (Shotter, 2006, p. 4). It is only from 'within' the process of engagement that people become capable of organising these multiple voices. Doing so means attuning to the continuous unfolding of the bodily as well as expressive dimensions of experiencing, recognising that a *'word does not merely designate an object as a present-to-hand entity, but also express by its intonation my evaluative attitude toward the object, toward what is desirable or undesirable in it, and, in doing so, sets it in motion toward that which is yet to-be determined about it, turns it into a constituent moment of the living, ongoing event*' (Bakhtin, pp. 32-33, in Shotter, 2006, p. 4).

This means that words in use point beyond themselves into something 'not-yet-determined', and in order to be able to organise ourselves collectively – creating experiences of novelty – we need to learn to re-orient our attention towards the often vague tendencies that words or intonations create in us as we spontaneously respond to each other's use of them. By doing so we engage ourselves with new ways of relating to the phenomena; seeing the object with a different 'background' provides us with different attitudes towards its manifestation in our present lives, with a different orientational skill.

I will argue that we engage with such responsive presence in many different ways, though Shotter prefers a dialogical practice. Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986) offer two examples of how Japanese organisations try to work with the tacit dimensions of knowing as a way of innovating products. In one case they describe how a researcher was sent out on internship to study how the best bakers felt their way with bread. This resulted in the creation of a whole new baking machine, which previously had proved impossible to produce due to bad interpretations of the importance of kneading and how movements of the hands and a general feel for the bread related to the

finished bread. In another case a group of developers were sent to Europe to get a sense of a different way of living, so that they could refresh their conversations about possible new products in the automobile industry. Nonaka describes the general attitude in these organisations as *'tapping the tacit and often highly subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches of individual employees and making those insights available for testing and use by the company as a whole'* (1991, p. 2).

From an organisational point-of-view it is important to recognise that one cannot deliberately create such moments, one can only occasion them (Shotter, 2008). Working as a systemic consultant one is constantly oriented toward creating the better conditions for meaningful conversations to take place, since we recognise that people in organisations express and simultaneously create themselves through their ways of communicating with each other. In the following example my client describes how the relation was shaped dialogically over time creating the 'shared space' for innovative ideas to emerge and thereafter evolve as the process unfolded the many meanings in the project. The director – now a senior executive director in the municipality – from the case presented earlier explains:

Director: The relation was built up over time, where the professional interplay created a form of reliability to the ideas and solutions that the current activities had realised. In the course of this collaboration you had shown the courage to challenge our solutions and the logics we were working with, in the organisation. The fact that time was invested in conversations was important in the sense that they weren't just sales or productivity talks, but instead conversations where the necessary time needed was allowed for. In these conversations space was created to put light on the different challenges and possible solutions from

several perspectives. One of the outcomes from these conversations and the practice we created was a sense of wholeness in the initiatives that was put into the world.

Interviewer: How would you describe this wholeness?

Director: Wholeness understood on several levels, both on a more personal level maturing a more balanced use of both rational as well as emotional decision-making leadership practices. This dimension has given my leadership a series of qualities. Where I earlier more exclusively made use of my strong analytical skills in difficult situations, I am now more inclined to use my gut feeling and believe that the processes will create the desired outcome. The thing about working with the processes is now completely clear to me, that one needs to create the right involvement in the organisation around the things that one hopes to achieve otherwise you won't get far. And in our case it was the processes that created the content of the project, why we had had to feel our way more than we could calculate our way to the solution.

And commenting on the long-term effects in the organisation from applying these practices she says:

Director: Once we started the project I was absolutely certain that we would gain an organisational effect simply because both you and I knew the demands for efficiency so we could secure the direction and progress of the process if necessary. And we both had an open approach for interference – that interfering does not make it a fiasco but a natural part of the approach/process we have chosen. Based on this, we did not need a large safety net under the process and given the fact that I had seen how you continuously could assess where and when the process should be open, or experiment with the form, and when we

had to play safe and control the process, gave a sense of security all the way through the process... Afterwards, we have continued working with the experiences from the process in our management evaluation for the entire administration. We have not used the large model but have repeated the process (reiterated it) in the sense that we have developed the evaluation model through a continuous dialogue both internally as well as with the consultants... The ability and will of the employees to believe that together we can create something good is fantastic when you think of what they have been exposed to through the efficiency improvement process and subsequent dismissals and new organisation. It is convincing to see that the ways in which we have worked have created a confidence in intentions of others and a will which reaches far beyond the immediate experiences.

What I find important about this quote is that the time dimension becomes very significant. It is not just a one conversational event she is talking about; it is a conversational practice that has developed over a series of conversations including working together on projects, continuously qualifying the concepts and ideas. To both parties the outcome of the conversations wasn't planned, rather they were occasioned by experiencing a responsive presence of being involved in conversations about change in the organisation. Also, I recognise how the project and our conversations led to a different consciousness about the significance of using emotional responsiveness as a measure of good leadership, changing her story of self as a leader significantly. She describes this as bringing a different sense of wholeness into her leadership, which relates with the idea of experiencing strong orientational skills in manoeuvring and organising in the unfolding movements of the organisation. This increase in sensitivity to the bodily dimension of living responsive dialogue of the organisation was not taught, rather it is an outgrowth of lived practice in our relationship. At one point I asked her if she can recognise the

experience of us taking turns in being courageous, and she replies that she recognises this, and that she often put aside her tendency to take control, by relying on my calmness and orientational skills; whereas I see my calmness as a consequence of her capability in creating rigour and direction by her enormous overview of the organisation. Her position as director in the organisation has had major consequences for the organisational practices as a whole and we see again, as with the other client, that these ways of working exert a difference in people's life that reaches beyond the episodes themselves. It is in a way impossible to go back to old language habits once you have adopted a new and better way of relating; in this case a dialogical practice building on trust in the intention of the other.

3.6 Novelty as an everyday activity

The characteristics of the attitude through which we explore our organisational landscape in order to make sense of the world in coherent ways linking theory and practice in our day-to-day conduct is by virtue innovative. Rather than seeing innovation and other conceptual ideas as a special activity, it is perhaps better to think that the employees and clients in systemic consulting meet challenges, not as something to be innovated on, but as ways of re-relating to the challenges. In doing so they exercise an expression of an ironic redescriptive attitude, thereby in practice demonstrating the very meaning of words like innovation from within a systemic attitude. The actual exploration of innovation manifests the very theme of inquiry in practice. I have come to believe that living from within a systemic world view produces a natural practice of re-creating not only practices, but our very being in the world with clients. So rather than seeing innovation as a special happening we see it as how we live and in its doing exert an influence not only on our relationship to ourselves but also to our clients and how they subsequently relate and re-relate to employees and colleagues.

Understanding the nature of novelty, the moments where new worlds come to life, we inquired into both Rorty's and Shotter's shared, but also different, perspectives. We saw how Rorty's emphasis on language and imagination offered important descriptions on how language use with an ironic attitude provides sensitivity to redescriptions and how these are lived out in client relationships. We learned that this language focus was lived in client relationships as ways of 'joining grammars' and as ways of being irreverent to one's own ideas and preferred ways of working, and during the course of such practices form unique relationships with clients and their organisations. A focus on the importance of 'speaking one's way into something' provided an important reflection on the significance of how orientational skills get developed. As people speak 'through', with, or in relation to an idea, they 'give it life' with their own unique intonation of words or phrases. This highlighted both Rorty's point about coming to know oneself as being equal with making up one's own language, and with Shotter's emphasis about embodying words and becoming increasingly responsive to how we relate not only to ourselves but to the otherness around us, in a process in which language use is an integral part. Further we learned from Shotter that the happening of novel expressions happens in relationships which were described as dialogical, which here means becoming increasingly responsive to the otherness' of the otherness' around us. Hence corresponding with what I discussed in the previous chapter as being moral, that is being increasingly responsive, to people's needs and desires. This is equal to being responsible, meaning doing justice to the present situation by giving all the details the recognition they deserve. The nature of these dialogical ways of relating also means that innovative openings are out of our control, and they should be – they just happen to us – but what we can do is to become increasingly attentive to the different circumstances under which such happenings come more easily. Also, we saw how such ways of relating opened up new ways for the clients and employees

involved in relating to people around them, and that this could be seen even years after the initial conversations.

Furthermore, uniting Rorty and Shotter in an exploration of novelty provided a unique contribution to understanding the living consequences of irony and irreverence in a professional consultancy practice. It has offered an increased attention to how ways of relating to both language and embodiment in a systemic practice provide a natural access to the very processes in which novel acts and languages come naturally, as people from within such attitudes try to exert a professional influence on the world. It has bridged the level of attitude with the very details in conversations that need our attention in order to more fully enjoy these ironic tendencies in practice. Shotter takes over where Rorty falls short on details in the living conduct.

CHAPTER 4: IMPERFECT LEADERSHIP

Paradoxical as it may sound, I have, after more than a decade of consulting to, and training of managers – and as a senior manager myself – grown uncomfortable about saying too much about what I think about leadership in general. To me it is as if every time I close down on something I find important, some circumstance changes, and suddenly the requirements of the situation calls for a different kind of leadership. Perhaps leadership is best thought of as '*a river. Contained by its bed (the culture), it can be said to be flowing in one direction, yet, upon close examination, parts of it flow sideways, in circles, or even backwards relative to the overall direction. It is constantly changing in speed and strength, and even reshapes its own container*' (Barker, 1997, p. 352). To think of leadership as made of ongoing unfinished processes is to begin to recognise that we are, as Storch and Shotter (2013, p. 4) point out, living '*our lives from within a ceaselessly ongoing background flow of dynamically unfolding activity, and it is from within our immersion in the midst of this activity that we must conduct our inquiries – we cannot in reality divorce ourselves from participating within it*.'

So far I have portrayed different organisational practices in a systemic community of professionals. I have argued that at the heart of systemic thinking lies an ironic attitude, that is an attitude among a group of people who are '*never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves'* (Rorty, 1989 p. 74). Now such an attitude could well destroy the confidence of a leader, but to the ironist, that is exactly the necessary consequence one needs, taken as a reflection of the recognition of the power of redescription. Not being able to take oneself seriously is to adopt a profound openness

towards the otherness around us, continually seeking new ways of expressing ourselves in ways that open up for more and more agreement among an ever greater number of people. For leadership this means accepting that any 'truth' about good leadership is an expression of a contemporary mindset subject to continuous change, revision and eventual replacement. For the leader, focus therefore moves away from having the 'right' set of 'tools' and 'methods', towards an ever more relational, responsive attitude to the ongoing activities of the organisation.

Looking back on the examples portrayed in the previous chapters I see that lots of leadership is exercised in the activities. What springs to mind is that many of these examples are about leaders not having direct involvement, but instead giving space for the organisation to perform its practice, forming circumstances in certain ways, allowing members of the organisation to exercise leadership in ways meaningful to the complexity of the situation at hand. Thus, leadership is a joint activity where there is a ceaseless flow between members of a community and the task of leading; one could even argue that it is the situation that chooses leadership and calls out the requirements of the involved to respond accordingly. Sometimes the leader is called into responding and sometimes the employees. An example of such joint action was seen in how responsibility for running organisational and strategy workshops alternated between leaders and employees, so that a vivid exchange of active positioning of people and perspectives is lived. Difficulties all too often occur because some leaders get so stuck in a story that they as people in positions of certain titles are those who are always to respond to that calling, as Barker points out *'...it is not the leader who creates leadership, it is leadership that creates the leader'* (Barker, 1997, p. 354). To think of leadership as something belonging to a person is to make a

fundamental misjudgement of a leader as being independent of one's surroundings, as opposed to being a part of a bigger changing net of significance. This is also to make the move from thinking about leadership as consisting of some abstract principles, to recognising that leadership is fundamentally what goes on *inside* moment-to-moment responsive interaction among people of a community. To embrace leadership as an activity that goes on inside relationships is to redirect attention away from generalised truth candidates and towards a much more grounded, situated understanding of leadership as contingent, thus made up of our current vocabularies.

To view leadership as imperfect is to embrace the ironic redescriptive attitude, that is, to see both the leader and the task of leading as fundamentally unfinished activities, as activities with certain stories that are fundamentally limited by time and circumstance. That is to recognise that conditions under which we act and make practical judgements are incomplete and that is as good as it gets.

With this chapter I will try to show some of the movements that I see as distinctive of systemic leadership. The different themes that will be presented are a further elaboration of *Imperfect or 'good enough' leadership*. This is followed by an exploration of the co-evolutionary and joint leadership practice which is seen as a fundamental recognition of the togetherness of employeeship and leadership, and how they mutually shape and create each other. This is followed up by a perspective which is the point explored in Chapter Three on privileging novelty over certainty. This leads us to important distinctions that are unfolded as preparing over planning and occasioning over executing which help leaders identify and focus their attention towards ways of going about building a collaborative environment, where people exert the best of their

potential together. An important focus of leadership is to continually increase orientational skills in the organisation – that is to keep alive multiple responsive openings in the organisation. A theme of the redescriptive function in keeping people's self-stories at the centre of the present circumstances leads us into the final theme, which elaborates on the importance of keeping manoeuvrability among stories, positioning and words high, so as not to get stuck.

These movements are neither final nor exclusive but do express what from my perspective seem to be guiding and meaningful both to myself as participant in the leadership of our organisation, and to people I work with as a consultant in a series of organisations. I have little faith in models of leadership and find classical triangulations or the like hopelessly abstract, but what I do like is to take practice seriously, that is to pay close attention to what goes on inside and outside of episodes of leadership because that is where leadership comes into existence – and having watched so many leaders succeed I recognise that there are numerous ways of being good enough, or perfectly imperfect.

4.1 Imperfect or 'good enough'

I owe the phrase of imperfect leadership to one of our consultants. During an interview with one of our consultants she brought about the notion of 'the imperfect leadership' as way of describing the leadership practice in the organisation. She describes it as follows; *'it is not by the book... it has no manual... so one has to find one's own direction and way into it, and it then becomes the way that one really believes in. It maybe sounds a bit silly to talk about the imperfect leadership, but there is also something really down to earth about it, something very human. It doesn't become a distant leader out of reach – it*

offers you an opportunity to feel yourself instead of just following the pretty roads laid out for you.'

So what the imperfect leadership does is to provide the exact circumstance in which she experiences a tension, an invitation, a calling forth of a desire to make up a road for herself and to take an ownership over her own presence. What it offers her in return is the experience of feeling herself. And she continues: *'From my point of view it has first and foremost forced me to feel myself and figure out – loud and clear – where I stand... and I actually think that one could strive more for this condition because it is so much more human, there is something real and authentic about it which I like better than the polished. It makes it possible for me to take a different ownership and through it experience a different kind of engagement.'* It is important to recognise that the act of forcing somebody does not come from someone, it is 'within the circumstances.' These circumstances produce the conditions for people to form relationally responsive ways of embodying purpose and desires in a language free from finality, yet brought together, giving rise to the experience of making one's mind up. Besides offering the embodied experiences of taking ownership of her own self-creation she importantly highlights that it produces a sense of engagement, a feeling of energy being released. She later calls this a 'special feeling of opportunities and freedom.' I see no higher purpose for being a leader than to give people their experience of freedom. Gaining one's freedom is closely related to finding your own way, coming to feel yourself in the process of re-relating to oneself, one's colleagues, one's professionalism and clients. Freedom is neither final nor perfect, it is temporal, situated and what started off as freedom one day becomes your constraint the next. One needs a continuous redescriptive attitude towards one's current ideas and this comes with irony –

as it has been argued throughout the thesis – as one puts imagination over certainty, experimentation over inference, growth over stability, innovation over repetition, producing a continuous flow of novelty.

The ambitions of imperfection as being a more preferred metaphor for leadership than the current rhetoric available in mainstream management literature is elaborated by Storch and Shotter (2013, p. 2). It carries across Winnicott's (1988) use of the term 'good-enough mothering', from mothering to leadership, for just the same set of reasons as Winnicott's. '*It is convenient*,' said Winnicott (1988), '*to use a phrase like "good-enough mothering" to convey an* unidealized *view of the maternal function; and further, it is valuable to hold in mind the concept of absolute dependence (of baby on environment), rapidly changing to relative dependence, and always travelling towards (but never reaching) independence*' (p. 90, my emphasis). Parenting – like leadership – never gets perfect by definition, perfection is only ever a momentary expressive responsive act under certain circumstances and it is fundamentally a joint activity by a group of people. It's closely related to what was previously presented as a moment of consummation, moments of things coming together in a unifying moment, producing an experience of elegant fit or finality. In Chapter Two we saw how a redescriptive act of leadership reframing the recession into *re-session* produced in that context a unifying moment, an elegant fit between a certain style of talk, process and timing. A situation that could not have been foreseen, merely circumstanced as an attempt at producing certain orientational skills in a community.

The kind of productive doubt characteristic of imperfect thinking is similar to that of Rorty's redescriptive ironist (1989, p. 75) as he points out that *'(t)he ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the*

wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialisation which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness.' This means that we fail in creating for ourselves category names for either rightness or wrongness by reference to some external criteria. Instead we must engage ourselves in the social practice of leading, and with others make up practice-based judgements about what seems to serve our purposes best. Hence the question whether what we do is right and perfect is a question we shouldn't ask ourselves.

Fully adopting this attitude it also becomes apparent that the classical desire for control and power, as is traditionally found in organisational language and metaphors, is an inadequate idea to capture ways of relating in such a culture. As we have seen through the examples, leadership is distributed and people from all functions in the organisation shift in taking the role of leading and being managed. Consequently power is not something often talked about in the organisation. The focus on power in the organisation is really the non-obsession with power, and instead the emphasis is on adapting and being responsive to new chances and openings in and around our organisation.

4.2 Co-evolutionary joint leadership

Fully adopting an evolutionary view of language is to relate to the fact that words and sentences continually evolve in their use in particular circumstances. That is to think that words are made up by people in relational engagement as they try to figure out how to express themselves in ways that serve their purposes. It is also to think that words and sentences in themselves have no preferred meaning and that what kind of meaning we ascribe is entirely up to us and the environment we inhabit.

This means for leadership a profound recognition that the meanings in organisations are made up as people try to make sense of what goes on, rather than thinking that meaning is given and predestined and even worse, to think that leaders can pass on meaning by designing messages and communicating 'clearly.' Doing the latter not only deludes leaders into thinking that they are in power or that they are the creature through which meaning, the true and the right flows, it also shoots down the natural processes of emergence in organisational life by dispositioning employees as receivers of meaning, rather than as participants in an ongoing yet incomplete story. That needs constant re-evaluation and redescription in order to stay attuned to the opportunities of the future. The process of organising is a joint activity, it is what happens as people engage themselves in ongoing conversational activities; organisations co-evolve, hence, like the river metaphor, they are made up by the processes of engagement yet shaping and changing its conditions, the selves of people in the same ongoing ceaseless process. Bateson (1972) uses the notion of co-evolution to convey that no single entity can evolve by itself; everything is in a relationship with something else, and all change in a joint activity to produce a systemic whole. We need to recognise that we are both shapers and products of our engagement with our surroundings, and to keep in mind that keeping the ecology, the sustainability of that network of relationships alive and going, means actively engaging literally everybody in the organisation in continuous open-ended dialogues about what the current situations require of responsive activities.

In Chapter Three I discussed how clients influence and innovate our activities, which is about being open to be moved, touched by the interests and purposes of our surroundings and finding ways of responding accordingly. In the process of doing so we change ourselves, our language, our approaches. In a day-to-day practice we experience how clients meet up for training

with certain anticipations of becoming part of something which is unique to them, which evokes in us an obligation to respond accordingly, making learning, the premises, the processes recreate the experiences anticipated by clients in an ongoing recursive fashion; it all works seamlessly.

I see it as a pivotal activity of leadership to keep these processes alive. As we also saw in Chapter Two, keeping organisational dialogues about purpose and strategy open for revision and constant evolvement changes focus away from 'having a strategy' into having ongoing strategising conversations. That is to replace the classical strategy talk of 'having to execute' or 'implement' with conversations of 'what responses are needed to keep alive and thriving our evolvement' or 'what opportunities and new ways of seeing and talking about our doing will help us succeed best.' For leaders that is to have more conversations with employees about 'what do you need of me in order to get the support need for you to succeed' than 'I have decided that what is needed, and here is what I would like you to do.'

Further, I see it as a central task of leadership to pay attention to the conditions of the conversational landscape of an organisation. That is making sure that conversational space is not being closed down, producing a situation where there are topics or styles of talk that are not possible or are excluded, even though that might seem difficult at times. An example of this was at a time when we had to fire a consultant, which came as a surprise to many in the organisation, since it diverted from the dominant story of the organisation as being successful and growing. In many cases, letting people go is an ultimate act of positional power that someone – the leader – draws a new distinction by pointing at someone, saying that you are no longer part of this organisation. As in many other organisations the event produced all kinds of feelings among employees: sadness, confusion, insecurity, separateness, but also concern for the community and

acceptance of having to go an extra mile in order to increase the activities of the organisation. A consultant reflects back on the experience: *'The whole situation seemed noisy in the organisation and you could see systemic consultants who are well aware that there is no final answer to the big questions requesting answers to: How can I know that I am good enough? When and how am I a good consultant? How can I know when I deliver what is expected of me? What does it mean that we only measure on economy? People were disoriented and insecure.'* Also, people found it difficult to find a space and a circumstance to have these important conversations; could they talk to colleagues about their doubts, would it be a sign of weakness if they displayed their uncertainties to their leader? As a leader acting under difficult circumstances it is crucial to insist that conversations need to happen. Obviously one cannot dictate dialogue, but what a leader can do is to provide a setting, a time and space, for people to coordinate experiences. To insist on closing down conversational space is only more damaging to the community, even if this does mean the leader having to enter a space of discomfort, exposed to people's anger and frustration. It is essential to recognise that such situations call for redescription, since the identity of leadership is at risk of being fixated, stigmatised and associated with all sorts of negativity. Even more damaging is the risk of creating one-sided stories of leadership as something attached to the leader, since employees easily detach themselves from the joint responsibility during such circumstances and that often at a time where collective leadership, innovative talk and responsibility is needed most. In our situation an employee expressed her frustration more openly than others, which made me take up several conversations with her. When reflecting back on the episode she reports: *It was a very clear experience of not being able to share all that I experienced with the rest of the employees, since this could easily 'set things on fire', but instead it became important to report from some of the good conversations with Jacob, and not show my 'inner'*

discomfort about the whole situation. It meant a lot that Jacob kept insisting on maintaining the contact and that there was friendliness all the time, even though it was clear that I had hurt him... It was my experience that it was in those days that the managers first really understood that they, in the hierarchy that we had built in the organisation, fundamentally had shifted position from being primarily colleague and consultant into having a primary distinction of being a leader.

Besides keeping this conversation open and keep coming back to it, other talks took place. Employees got different chances at talking together with and without the leaders present. From my point-of-view it was about providing as much occasion for people to re-describe their experience enabling movement towards more productive ways of relating. A few months later the co-evolutionary change happened as we were gathered before Christmas as we do every year for two days. The opening of these days was made by a leader and consultant doing a shadow play accompanied by music from two of our interns. During that session the mood changed, we came together anew, it was as if everybody made a collective movement into a new realm, a moment of consummation, an elegant fit of things coming together. A consultant reports from her experience: '*It was ultra poetic and great fun. After this shadow play we had our Christmas days where Attractor's strategies were on the agenda, something happened physically in me. I became calm, relaxed, I could even accept that we had become part of the bigger Rambøll organisation and had the feeling that we were moving on together. When something like this is possible, it gives hope – hope that the hectic daily work and the focus on the deficits (money, orders, clients, sign-ups for course) isn't going to take up space and focus, when there is so much that could give energy by spending time on it.'* Obviously these happenings of change cannot be planned, but indeed we can prepare ourselves in ways that enable us to respond to the opportunities as they arise. I see the continuous focus and insistence of keeping conversations open and alive – even under difficult

circumstances – as central to successful co-existence. But not only this, it is also a moral progress, not of a particular moral principle, but an increase of the domain of the social facilitating of the inclusive responsive potential of people in a community. Rorty unfolds this further arguing that: *'increasing (one's) ability to respond to the concerns of ever larger groups of people – in particular, the people who carry out ever more acute observations and perform ever more refined experiments, so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people* (Rorty, 1999, p. 81).

4.3 Originality and novelty over conventionality and certainty

As I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, one of the great paradoxes of contemporary management theory is that it provides leaders with final vocabularies about how to run their businesses successfully; what it requires of management is to follow certain principles that then guide the way to the promised land. Taking up final vocabularies is to disempower a community. It is to implicitly communicate; 'you do not know the best ways to lead our community.' Obviously this is not to say that communities cannot benefit from inspiration from outside; I do believe that thriving communities are constantly in dialogue with their surroundings taking up ideas and inspirations and making them up into their own new descriptions. One immediate consequence of assimilating the community to some pre-existing vocabulary is that the disempowerment of people's voice and ideas gets ignored in ways that produces a lack of novel and innovative exchange of ideas.

A systemic leadership puts things upside down. Instead I see establishing routines and rituals as a secondary accomplishment; it is the by-product of people's engaged considerations when dealing with the challenge of how they can make up ways of organising activities that make

everyday activities easier to perform when orchestrated in repetitive ways. This is to think like Nonaka (1991) who argues that the efficiency of Japanese factories is a result of continued concern with re-evaluating processes and practices, with redescription, and therefore about not having only one way of doing things. Instead the concern of leadership should be to keep engaging the community in ways that provide the circumstances for novelty and innovation to become the norm of the day, something that becomes a distinct style of the community that continually increases its relational responsive potential. Bacon (2007, p. 82) reflects on the kind of culture that Rorty imagines possible: *'such a culture is characterized by imagination and innovation, by the attempt to make the future different from the past rather than approximate pre-existent reality, and where the aspiration to represent the world in its terms is replaced with the concern to offer new interpretations of it and thus give meaning to our lives.'*

In the previous chapters I have shown several examples of such an attitude, for example the continual engagement with strategising conversations, making use of many different styles of talk and making deliberate choices of distributing leadership among people in the organisation. Also, giving space and time for development of professional competencies through numerous settings, including summer institutes with international guest speakers, which importantly is ongoing and creates an ever increasing and expanding story of our community as a leading systemic consultancy, a story that has recently been supplemented by a research unit linked up with several international universities and professors. It is also to see our professionalism as being able to respond to the needs and desires of our clients, rather than sticking with one method or style of consulting, hence it is to recognise that our fundamental product isn't methods or tools, but our collective capacity to engage with others with enormous potential to create conversational capacity. A prerequisite to unfold such capacity is the redescriptive power of

everybody in the community, the feeling that they are in their doing invited to make use of their creative responsive poetic capacity; that is the ability to put into language suggestions that extend or supersede current vocabularies of who we are and what we are capable of doing. Creating such a practice is ongoing and will be explored further below as re-describing in practice.

4.4 Circumstancing as necessary for collaborative leadership

To the above examples there is a rather profound recognition that hasn't been fully unfolded and that is to stop thinking that leadership is about planning, executing and implementing. To think in this traditional way, is to exert a kind of leadership that operates under the condition that there exists a reality independent of the ongoing relational responsive engagement of people in and around the community. That is to think, that thinking and talking can go on outside the activity of the organisation and subsequently be something that can be brought *into* the organisation either successfully or unsuccessfully. A lot of leaders are by mainstream literature led to believe that this way of thinking is what is determining whether leadership is successful or not; it is to think that success is equal to assimilation, that there exists a reality of success that can be brought into existence through leadership. These ideas are the roots of the heroic metaphors of contemporary management literature. Systemically this way of thinking is not only misguided, detached from what actually goes on in organisations and communities, it is also damaging. Instead leaders need to recognise that talk of strategies *is the strategy*, or parts of the strategic organisational space and that the space is not separate or different from other conversations that take place in the organisation. The success of a strategy is not how well it is executed or implemented, since this is not what goes on. Instead one needs to see that the success of a strategy is inseparable with the meanings and the connections people in the

organisation make from the kind of conversations they are invited into having about the purposes of the organisation. This means that a systemic leadership fundamentally abandons the idea of planning as a metaphor for precision and certainty in organisational life. Instead I invite leaders to rethink their approach so that they start imagining what kind of conversation the ideas of the future call for. That is to imagine and anticipate the conversational requirements of the future, rather than to plan the happenings of the thing; to occasion; to circumstance; to set the scene in ways that make people in the organisation feel motivated into participating in the conversational realm of the intended strategic reality. For leaders that is to start thinking about what kind of conversations are needed in the organisation so that people can start making sense of the requirements of the future; who needs to take in what kind of conversation; how should the process flow; so that conversations emerge in ways that help build up an experience of coherence. Leaders should consider how the different conversations could be facilitated so that people feel invited into responding and engaging in ways that bring out the best possible openings for further elaboration and making of meaning. Importantly, the leader must ask the community questions, inviting them to co-author the process such as 'what kind of conversations do you need to experience the necessary level of engagement? And how can I best assist and take part in these conversations?'

To think of leadership as occasioning and circumstancing the conditions of the community to engage seriously in conversations that matter and make a difference, is to leave certainty behind and fully embrace the systemic point that providing to the best of our abilities the processes of evolution in language, thought and speech practice, simply comes more naturally. Though we can never know with certainty, we are able to bring about the possible circumstances for the happening of change, and to do so help build the conditions for the redescriptive attitude

to come naturally – that is to seek organisational expressive originality – to set innovation over conformity.

4.5 Increasing orientation and practical judgement

A few years back I was in China to do management training, and it became quite clear how much my orientational skill in moving around in the city was dependent on my ability to read signposts, to notice small yet vital cues enabling me to move around freely. I became dependent on other people to move me around, I relied on small business cards with hotel names and addresses and the address of different locations in Chinese that I could pass on to taxi drivers or use when asking people for directions. My *orientational skills* were limited and I was unable to move around making use of my ordinary *practical judgements.* This challenge increased the complexity of the situation as I also had to eat, teach classes, go to and from the airport etc. Such circumstances require an extraordinary presence and lively engagement in order to work out in productive ways.

As presented above a central task of leadership is to provide the kind of circumstances and occasions where people are able to engage in ways that bring out the best of their potential, as they try to work out with others what the best responses are to the challenges facing the organisation. Shotter and Cunliffe call such a leadership a practical authorship: *'Just as good novelists or playwriters can move others to experience a felt and actively lived sense of an (as yet) non-existent reality... good managers move those they manage toward such a shared sensing through acting jointly with them. More than just 'giving us a picture' – which lies dead on a page – the good author manager can bring us to experience a living reality, a dynamic landscape, which spontaneously offers us a set of 'action guiding advisories', a 'shaped and vectored sense' of where*

we are now and where we might go next' (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003, p. 20). Similar to my moving around in China – being directed by the limited guidance of business cards with addresses, which increased my sense of being unable to respond to the circumstances of the situation I was in, and having I had to limit my repertoire of possible actions to a simple set of guidelines – a good leadership is concerned with the shared space created with members of the organisation, offering ways of responding that are attuned to the requirements of the situation. It is a concern with increasing people's orientational skills in ways that keep open a space which calls forth people's active engagement. Increasing people's orientational skills is to invite them to respond in ways that make their contribution become part of the joint aspiration. That is for leaders to think: 'In what way is my communication inviting people to join in on the emerging conversation that leads us to good decision making?' Hence this is leaving behind the classic question: 'Is my message communicated clearly so it can't be misunderstood?' Storch and Shotter (2013, p. 11) further elaborate that *'the task of "imperfect or good enough leaders (or consultants)" is to help to create the occasions or circumstances in a company within which (and through which) employees can develop their own ways of orienting or relating themselves to the situations within which they must work. Only then will the knowledge that emerges for them in those situations be properly actionable knowledge, knowledge with detailed relevance to the context in which it must be used.'*

In the case referred to above of managing through a tough period it was shown that keeping conversations open, even the difficult ones, helped people and the organisation to move on. The persistence of not getting stuck in limited positioning of self and others (we are angry and hurt, and leaders are the offenders) was also about increasing the repertoires of people to respond in new ways, seeing new possibilities for reinventing relationships to colleagues and leaders. Subsequently it was also to re-relate to the storying of selves in the organisation. Indeed

the whole process has increased our orientational skills in dealing with difficult and personal issues as a community, making what seemed at the time as something that fragmented relationships and stories into a learning experience. It was previously argued that the Christmas days changed something; two colleagues reflect on the day arguing: *'I think that the meeting had the function of showing to ourselves that we could care for each other, to have fun and feel comfortable together, even when there are serious issues going on, heavy/difficult processes taking place. It got us balanced again... we had values such as creativity, poetry, musicality, togetherness, irreverence, innovation, courage etc., high on the agenda...'* Followed by another reflection: '*It was a really good day where we as an organisation demonstrated that we managed to care of difficult conversations ourselves... Maybe it was because we had prioritised time as a factor, time for conversations, time for reflection, time for being?*'

Increasing orientation becomes a pivotal concern of an organisational leadership, since it provides possibilities of making *practical judgements* for people as they engage in everyday activities. Indeed, practical judgements are important in the complex reality of modern organisational life. Organisations are stretched with discursive landscapes asking them to perform in ways that appear contradictory. I have previously highlighted that the deficit of innovation in many organisations, calls forth a need for more creativity and innovation, yet people have to comply with standards of executive management showing loyalty to the governance structures of the organisations, which actively work against collaborative, responsive, dialogically structured engagement, which is the prerequisite for circumstancing the happening of novelty. A central part of increasing people's skills at orienting, relating and judging in everyday activities is the way in which leadership facilitates the ongoing storying of selves in the organisation; that is to establish a fundamental experience of being open to redescription, that we are unfinished.

4.6 Description and redescription as ways of coming to know ourselves anew

Throughout the book the notion of redescription has been at the centre of the argumentative case, building for a different kind of leadership. It was even argued, following the line of thought of Rorty, that the principal reason for organising was to let everyone have a chance of redescribing themselves. Thus, it is the task of leadership to participate in the ongoing activity of re-describing self and others. Though a leader should never lay out a final vocabulary for redescription and self-creation for others, a leader can and should only provide, occasion or circumstance the conditions through which people get the best chance at describing themselves at the level of their capability. To re-describe is to hold open any story about what it means to be a person, a self, a leader, or an employee. It is the desire to embrace more and more possibilities for putting into language new possible forms of life, that is, to recognise that it is not until we manage to re-describe ourselves in our own language, making up our new metaphors for leadership, that we come to know ourselves from within the contingencies of our present lives. But it is also actively relating to the fact that knowing ourselves is only temporal and we need to be open to revision and editing as we find ourselves under different circumstances. Following the argument of Rorty (1989, p. 27) we come to think that *'to create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind.'*

To think of the task of a community as providing the circumstances for redescription is fundamentally a morally self-sustaining practice. That is to see moral development '*in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, (as) a matter of re-marking selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves*' (Rorty, 1999, p. 79).

Through the process of remarking self, we keep the self-developing and innovative process going, since this process is ultimately a process of growing as human beings. Hence any change in our self-stories is seamlessly related to change in our doing or the meaning we ascribe to it. Anyone who leaves university with a degree will recognise that there is a change in life happening as we graduate; there is a before and after – from being student to becoming a graduate – and with it a whole new repertoire of actions follow.

We humanise ourselves towards ideals of becoming ever more excellent in our practice. As this aspiration involves a greater number of people in and around the organisation the attitude and search for ways of relating comes to take part in our professional practice, and hereby exert an influence that changes not only people's thoughts and language, but their very being in the world. Growing and being innovative is not only what we do, it is our way of identifying ourselves in the world. This persistence on relating our use of language came out in an interview with a senior consultant. She refers to an event where our CEO reflected on his experiences with our community a couple of years after the merger with the bigger Rambøll Management Consulting: *'one of the things he said was that he had wondered that for Attractor people it was always a question of life or death. Initially, he had been wondering a lot. Then I thought: "He is damn right". In some way, what we do is linked to something that deals with our self-understanding. On one hand, it is one of the places where it is really, really good to be because here we touch a somewhat bottomless source. On the other hand, it is a place where we as an organisation must be very much aware since people are opening up at some levels requiring sincere respect or gentleness. Then you cannot do whatever to each other.'* It is this concern with language that is so unique in an ironic redescriptive community, since we think that the way we express ourselves, the way we engage in responsive dialogical relationships, indeed create us. So the concern with how we put our

experiences into language is fundamentally a question of what we bring to life, what we make of ourselves.

Shifting jobs is to all people a time of transition, a new beginning where we have to learn to relate to ourselves under different circumstances. In that way we are no different from other organisations, but what is different is the way we are concerned with how we empower and re-label people as we get to know them better. Viewed through the eyes of the employees this is highlighted as an important characteristic of the cultural practices forming who we are becoming. A previous colleague reports: *'One of the first times we carried out a seminar I got a task; I was to give a presentation. Just before I started my leaders looked at me and said that when I started my presentation they never doubted that the client profited from it! We have never discussed it since. But I thought that it was a very interesting and empowerment based management story. I was in between being an intern and permanent employee but I experienced an equality relation. If it had not been there I had experienced a higher demand for reproducing. It exempted to me, as an employee, what the guidelines were.'* This is a practice that has continued to live on; a recently employed colleague reports about her experience of entering the organisation: *'At the beginning I ventured into all kinds of projects where I did not know how to go about it. I just had to grab hold of myself and get going. Then at one point I met my leader in the hallway and he could see that I looked rather "cross-eyed". He put his hand on my shoulder and said: "What's up?" I jabbered that I was confused about my tasks having enough substance, that is, how much of what I was doing and paid for did actually correspond to his expectations when hiring me... Then he said: "Know what? From the moment I heard you talking, I realised that you are a true member of our community." We are talking about re-framing. It is about re-framing and the feeling of leadership supporting in doing so.*'

Indeed reframing is an important skill for the systemic professional, but it is more than that. Imagine a community where people at all levels help refresh deficit discourses about what isn't possible or what people might think that they are incapable of, into conversations about the possible and not yet imagined. It keeps people attuning to the realm of the future since we reinvigorate inferences or dead metaphors, offering new words and images that provide people with a sense of orientation. It is not orchestrated according to a particular end, but better seen as an ever-mutating living practice inside and outside of the organisation, which holds the ambition of opening space for new forms of living together. Hence these practices provide the conditions for a culture in constant movement with no intentions of bringing these movements to a halt, which I recognise as central to the systemic ambition, since we along with Rorty (1989, p. 7), see that *'…talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change.'*

Living in a community in which speaking differently is entirely natural provides particular backgrounds for a continuous creation of novelty, though for this to happen people need to take an ownership for the life and practice of the organisation. A consultant reports; *'…the really interesting and cool part of working in the organisation, is that you are offered the chance to influence and to be a co-creater of the culture. Right from the beginning the organisational culture was open, new and fresh – one couldn't avoid shaping it. This I really want to make an effort bringing on to the new, who join us today, after having been so long time in the organisation myself. Come on take your chance! Shape what you want, go for what you aspire for the most! It gives me personally a lot of energy, that I can pursue my ambitions.'*

4.7 No perfect leadership story

As we learn to recognise that there can be no such thing as a perfect leader, we lay open to ourselves the opportunity for embracing new ways of understanding what leadership is about. In this chapter I have tried to sketch out some of the important dimensions of leadership when viewed through a systemic neo-pragmatic lens. Through cases and people's portraits of lived practice I have offered an 'on the ground' description of some of the dimensions of practice that I have come to recognise as being more important to the success of creating and sustaining a community of professionals.

If one can overcome the anxieties of having an imperfect story of leadership one opens up to acknowledge the fact that we need to engage with other people in ways that make it possible to manage the challenges that we either make up ourselves, or that we are faced with as part of a bigger organisation, or by clients. Making such a move is also to start reflecting on where it is that leadership takes place and one comes to the often missed yet basic point, that leadership is what goes on in relational practices in organisations. In these relational practices we try to coordinate, make sense of and move on together in ways that under the current circumstances seem best. As we put attention to the everyday activities we realise that we find ourselves in unfinished ever-mutating stories and practices of leadership, and that all we ever manage to make of leadership is 'good enough', never perfect, because there is always more to be said and new actions to be taken.

So rather than taking up other people's stories of leadership excellence I have tried to build an argument suggesting that we must learn to make up our own language; that is to make up our own metaphors for leadership and doing so in dialogical structured relationships with people

around us – since leadership is not a person-centred activity but what arises from ongoing relational responsive engagement in organisations. A central theme for such a leadership is to keep alive the questions of whether we can come up with some better ways of expressing ourselves, so that we become increasingly skilful at reaching our desires and needs. To an extent we succeed in doing so, that is: *'if we can work together, we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming'* (Rorty, 1999, p. 9).

CHAPTER 5: ENDS AS NEW BEGINNINGS

If one can fully appreciate the view that the world is continually evolving in an ongoing, never-ending flow of events and that we are merely participants – neither masters nor possessors of that flow – we can come to appreciate that our ends are always new beginnings. To see that our inquiries are ongoing is a first step in adopting a systemic pragmatic attitude of a profound humble relationship with the world, because that is to realise that we have no way of knowing that what we know is certain, or that there cannot be any inference independent of time and circumstance. Taking up the point-of-view that the world has no preferred way of being described, and that any description is a matter of purpose and not about correspondence is to appreciate that what we know is dependent upon one description or another. Since we cannot provide criteria for ourselves for rightness or wrongness we must learn to remain in a continuous state of openness and curiosity towards other possible ways of describing ourselves and our relations with the world, which is another step towards adopting a preference for what Rorty has come to recognise as an ironic and redescriptive attitude.

To an extent this remains an individual project in that one needs to see oneself as a poet, as having the capacity to create oneself by inventing a new language for and about oneself; that is to take up some new metaphors, and in the process of inquiring, realise for the first time a description of our own purpose. But what this book has tried to portray is a community of professionals that fully appreciate the systemic vocabularies as collective ways of making sense of the world and our relationships in it. By doing so, it has portrayed how systemic ideas such as irreverence, curiosity and hypothesising unfold as being so much more than mere techniques; they become organising practices to the way we try to make sense of our purpose through continuous

negotiations and coordination of language and metaphors. This has resulted in 12 years of continuous growth, both in terms of business and in professional practice.

In the beginning I articulated three hypotheses to serve as the basis for the intellectual, as well as practical inquiries that have gone into making this book. I have shown how an open-ended, irreverent attitude is lived as a primary activity of the organisational self-renewal through strategy talks and innovative practices, offering a different orientation towards ideas of change in organisations. Further, I have offered a redescription of the current systemic vocabulary with that of Rorty's neo-pragmatic, and in doing so revitalised the significance of what was once 'state of the art ideas' by giving them new metaphors, new orientational meanings for people trying to make sense of what it means to be a living, self-sustaining systemic community.

With this final chapter I want to draw out the learning from the book in broad distinctions, not to bring it to a conclusion, but instead as a new beginning, by offering a reflection of how a project of engaging a whole organisation in developing their learning practices is related to from within these ideas. The project is in its making and therefore fundamentally open ended and unfinished, and expands the working context outside the community.

5.1 General ideas in relation to engaging in a whole organisational learning project

I would like to invite the reader into following the ideas laid out by Rorty as a way of orienting oneself into such complexities without creating too many unnecessary difficulties. As I have been articulating throughout the book, Rorty's (1991a) notion of redescription offers a whole new way of understanding the *nature of change* in an organisational context. Comparing Rorty's ideas with two of the more classical theories of change represented by Kotter (1997) and Cooperrider (1987) helps bring out the uniqueness. Kotter on his side has formulated the idea that

the most effective way of changing organisations is to articulate a deficit, a 'burning platform' that is characterising the current situation of the organisation or what things might lead to if nothing happens. Cooperrider on the other hand puts forward the argument that change is more likely to succeed if organisations build on the successes and the strengths of people. Despite their apparent disagreements about strategies for change they unite in what seems to be a common satisfaction with remaining within the current discourses, their literal horizon, their vocabulary and from there on pursue what they have come to believe as the better way.

In contrast to this it is Rorty's point that whatever we want, can understand, dream of, be concerned about and so forth is determined by the literal horizon, the vocabulary that is available to us. For this reason it is Rorty's point that any desire for change that gets formulated within any given literal horizon can only and will lead to variations over the themes that the horizon makes possible for us. Transformational change is for this reason not something that can be planned, to be inferred by reference to reason, because thought is determined by the language, the web of significance, and the contingencies of the situation. This is why the 'poet' and the poetic act becomes so important, because, as we have explored in Chapter Three, it is exactly in, and by, that unique process by which the world gets re-described that a new language gets created, a new vocabulary is born. For the same reason it remains, as with the poet, impossible to say exactly what we want with our language before language lets us understand for the first time what it is that we wanted to understand, say, think and do. Whereas conventional ideas of change management, like Kotter and Cooperrider, are oriented towards how we can grow from within a current vocabulary, Rorty takes us in the opposite direction saying that novel, transformational change requires a new language, new metaphors, a new genre that people and groups can make use of as they put into language for the first time a purpose for their own doing.

This leads us to the natural question of how one poetically re-describes one's relationship with the world. Responding to this question Rorty points out two central dimensions of the process of re-describing: irony and metaphors, where irony stands for a certain way, an attitude of relating to self and others, while the metaphor is a particular way language processes when relating ironically. Let me unfold this point further.

Irony is to Rorty an expression of a particular recognition that everything can be said differently, that the world can never be captured or inferred by a definitive vocabulary, and that one never feels quite certain that one's current descriptions are the best possible. The ironic attitude towards one's current understanding, one's linguistic preferences, sets out a view of the world that leads to one continuously having a distance to one's own understandings. Accumulating from this ironic distance liberation of language becomes possible. To process metaphorically is understood as a distinct linguistic dynamic where language liberates itself from its established and socially shaped webs of significances and instead brings about a different pragmatic whole of significance.

Obviously it is worth mentioning that it is not all metaphorical novelties that are helpful for organisations, but that doesn't change the case that what is seen as novel as it has been presented previously only becomes possible with and through the new vocabulary that the ironic attitude makes possible, and that the metaphorical processing of language makes real. What immediately follows is the question of how to 'translate', make sense of these considerations about the conditions of the novel in organisational life and in management practice where the poetic approach obviously becomes a distinct characteristic. This means in practice to leave the paths laid out by Kotter and Cooperrider, neither following the path of defining problems to be solved nor

building on existing strengths. Rather it emphasises that a process needs a poetic beginning and thereby a metaphorical process where one first initiates the creation of a new vocabulary. A new linguistic horizon must emerge before one begins to relate to the matter, because the 'matter', according to Rorty, is always an expression of the current use of a vocabulary.

5.2 Developing a new language, re-describing practices

Throughout the book we have seen several examples of how new language was pivotal for developing new orientational skills in the organisation. The case in Chapter Two of moving from recession to re-session allowed the whole organisation to engage in dialogues about ways of responding to the challenges of a market in decline. Rather than getting stuck in the old metaphor, a new one allowed for different sensitivities, languages and practices to emerge. These conversations were further followed by re-addressing the strategy, yet again starting off by imagining a new language through poetic strategy writing. Also we saw that a shift in perspective by changing roles was productive for developing the strategy – further allowing the employee voice to take the lead in making decisions about what matters to them – and eventually the whole of the community. Changing positions then becomes a way of breaking free from the conventional ideas about who speaks and who listens, and thereby offers, through practice, a different conversation in which different affordances and constraints can be explored.

These examples all belong to the past. The following example is in process and therefore offers a demonstration of how to approach organisational challenges reaching outside our immediate systemic community. In the Rambøll Management Consulting organisation as a whole, we started a focus on our learning environments a year ago. We conducted a survey on organisational learning capacity (OLC), and like so many other things it was hard to mobilise an

immediate response in the organisation from the data that was created – even though in several areas employees reported that much could be done to improve practice. Half a year later another director and I took up the learning conversations again at a director meeting. Here we facilitated a conversation about learning and how the practices were central to our ability to both deliver quality in consulting and grow our business. As basic as this might seem, this was the first conversation of this kind that we have had and it gave a whole new attention to the many things that are involved in having exciting learning practices. From these talks it was decided to move on with this as a strategic topic that we would pursue in the whole organisation across business units. I was invited to take the lead on the project.

The first step for me was to start having more bilateral conversations exploring what the different directors meant by learning in a day-to-day practice. This emerged into the first step of a process that will take several years to unfold and that probably will become much more complex than anyone has imagined.

My first concern was that we didn't have a language in relation to learning that allowed us to go in to much detail across units. We ended up talking in abstract 'up in the air' concepts and ideas. So I chose a focus on *learning practices* as opposed to concepts or models. This would allow us to go straight into talks of our everyday routines and habits, and in doing so involve all employees in processes of making up a sharable language about learning in their unit that can shape dialogues with colleagues in other units. Making practice the centre of our conversations is also a deviation from our different academic communities that has a strong focus on rigour in method, whether this is within evaluation and policy making or surveys and leadership training. Brought together it will hopefully occasion enough novel thinking so that what emerges out of the

process is the rise of whole new language about learning in a professional consulting firm, and a language grounded in real practices of professionals at all levels in the organisation.

Rather than trying to make up a big plan for how to become excellent in our learning practices, I have kept things to a minimum (by the writing of the word *excellent* it becomes clear to me that it is a metaphor associated with precision rather than participation, which invites me to change it to *exciting learning practices* since it resonates more with inclusiveness and passion*)*. Over the period of four months all leaders and employee representatives from all units will participate in three gatherings of half a day. Here they will be introduced to the kind of conversation that I would invite them to facilitate in their organisation. In between each meeting they will carry out certain tasks with a different focus, so that directors, unit leaders and employees will have their own challenges. This is then followed up on the next meeting; learning is shared and new challenges get presented. Finally each level must narrow down three learning practices that they will invest more in during the coming year, so that every unit has three activities that employees are responsible for, and three leaders are responsible for. Every activity is then linked with the current business objectives for the coming year in order make visible that learning isn't just something we do when we have the time or energy, but something we do at the core of our everyday practice. The following was sent out in the presentation material to the whole organisation:

No plug and play

Rather than taking a ready to use, plug and play, concept for building excellence in learning, we strive to take the effort of making up an approach that reflects our current contingencies and needs. We want the project, in close collaboration with other strategic initiatives, to take us into

serious reflection about how we can become a unique consultancy that dares to deviate from the mainstream discourse. We want an approach that reflects our history, our present and our future as uniquely different from that of our peers and thereby as a real alternative to our peers.

As this first phase is open-ended, what comes out of it will emerge during the process of engagement. It can therefore be seen as a process of language learning, where people engage in a kind of anthropological inquiry into their own desired practices. It will take them into the details of relationally responsive practices and in doing so increase their responsive repertoire as to what counts as important at an individual, as well as collective level. From this we can as a whole organisation move into more detail in our conversations about how we can relate to the challenges of having exciting learning practices.

5.3 Circumstancing and occasioning learning conversations

Rather than having a fixed plan of how to take the organisation through a process, or even more detailed figuring out of what a learning environment ideally looks like and then implementing it, this process pays much more attention to the quality of the emerging understandings and practices that come out of people fully engaging themselves in what really matters to them at a local situated level. To do the latter is to think in terms of occasioning and circumstancing. Moving focus away from the metaphor of precision into one of quality of the engaged people in conversations helps make it clear that one must provide the kind of organisational conditions, contexts are circumstances where such activities are likely to happen, rather than planning.

Specifically this means using the different gatherings to empower people to go back home in their organisation with open-ended questions which they – together with colleagues – can

explore their possible answers to. So, rather than using the gathering, as is done most of the time in large organisations, for giving answers to questions people did not know they had, our gatherings are designed so that people get to formulate the questions they think are most vivid and exciting to explore, in their attempt at coming closer to the challenge of formulating an ambition for themselves for having the best possible conditions for learning in a management consulting firm – one that adds to the pride of being part of the organisation and one that attracts and retains the right kind of people.

Working with the latter approach allows for an adaptive position, as things unfold and one becomes more aware of the complexities involved. Indeed changes happen and just as the projects were presented to all leaders in the organisation our group (the top level management of the whole Rambøll organisation) announced a strategy revision which altered the flow, since the proposed deadlines didn't fit into the work that had to go into this from our side. Rather than seeing this as a big issue some processes were altered, and we decided on a different opening of the process, and developed different scenarios for how this review of the strategy could benefit our work.

5.4 Differences in focus – bridging the incommensurable

Reading the book, one could get the idea that the practices presented could only work in a local community. But as the case shows this is not how it is. For the past five years we have been part of an international organization, Rambøll, with more than 10,000 employees in countries around the world. Here we work on a day-to-day basis with engineers and managements consultants. We are organised pretty much like any other big organisation. Well-articulated strategies are communicated from above, economic reviews are conducted every month and time

registration is part of our everyday activity. Yet it seems, and as shown through cases, that our own community awareness and distinct uniqueness is constantly growing, and we seem to be able to re-describe ourselves as we are challenged by incommensurable discourses.

Working under such circumstances makes visible the many differences in focus of people in different positions and one could easily end up spending a great deal of time in the many struggles that can take residence in such an organisation. But rather than focusing on the differences we tend to look at the activities, ways of understanding and responding that builds bridges between worlds. We commit ourselves to inquiring into the shared intentionality of people; this is to reframe utterances so that the purposes and desires of people becomes the foreground rather than the immediate expression. To bridge the incommensurable is to imagine the combination of metaphors merging into new ones that hold open the possibility of expressive co-existence rather than disintegrating the community from within.

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