Building trust in times of crisis
Storytelling and change communication in an airline company

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to argue for and apply a polyphonic approach to corporate storytelling and organisational change communication. A participatory action research project demonstrates how recently developed inclusive methodologies that seek to create employee participation have been applied in a case company.

Design/methodology/approach – Case study based on a constructionist approach and four methodological foundations: participatory action research, co-productive methods (such as organisational photography), appreciative inquiry and strategic change communication teams.

Findings – Results of the organisational change process in the case company show that the application of a polyphonic approach to organisational change communication and storytelling, appreciative inquiry and strategic change communication teams created involvement in and enactment of organisational change based on employees, own values and stories in the case company.

Research limitations/implications – Further research is needed that applies the methodological foundations of this study in other organisational contexts and under different circumstances.

Practical implications – The methodologies and approaches applied in this case cannot be transferred to other organisations directly, but the paper seeks to inspire practitioners with regard to inclusive and empowering approaches to change communication and storytelling.

Originality/value – Argues theoretically, presents and applies recently developed constructionist approaches and co-productive methods.

Keywords Change management, Storytelling, Corporate communications, Organizational culture, Airlines

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Here is a letter addressed to all the employees of a Scandinavian Airline Systems (SAS) department known as CP&C (Crew Planning and Control) attached to a disposable camera (Figure 1).

This letter was the start of a process of organisational development at CP&C which involved the employees from the outset. “The valuable working party” being responsible for the process of organisational change, had been set up before the letter was distributed, and consisted of employees from CP&C’s six departments. The aim of the photography exercise was to launch a process of organisational development in difficult circumstances, and to involve all the 50 employees of the department.

Prior to this, the organisation had been changed once a year for the previous four years (new managers, new working areas and new areas of responsibility on new terms). In addition, there had been two major rounds of dismissals, resulting for several departments in a 33 per cent reduction of staff as well as salary cuts.
SAS is one of the formerly state-owned European airline companies which are currently fighting to redefine their role on a deregulated market in a state of hypercompetition. These companies are undergoing a process of organisational change which is perceived by many employees as a long-term crisis owing to the number of tasks being contracted out, the number of employees being dismissed, the renegotiation of terms of employment and other factors. Within the space of a few years this process had also challenged the illustrious and proud traditions of SAS. Among other things, the SAS management, employees and other interested parties had been forced to deal with internal restructuring, new company acquisitions, and the opening/closing of new destinations and departments. SAS had been forced to give low priority to everything not related directly to its operations/product, including communication at all levels. As a result, employees had found it hard to keep up with and understand management’s decisions and all this led to insecurity and frustration. Poor communication had resulted in a divided and insecure organisation which found it difficult to cope with new challenges.

Murphy (1998) analysed a similar situation in a major American airline company and discussed hidden transcripts – interactions, stories, myths and rituals in which flight assistants company participated – to provide an avenue to identify resistance and change in the organising process. In a similar way, Appelbaum et al. (2003, p. 73) concluded in a study about communication during the downsizing of a telecommunications company that unless change processes are managed effectively, organisational crisis and change can result:

Dear …,

congratulations – here is your new camera!
The registration number of your camera is: XX
Please use it to photograph "The best thing about my place of work".
• Take as many pictures as you like (the camera holds about 27 shots).
• Please hand in your camera to Signe on the third floor of NV by 23 APRIL at 12 noon. She will have the film developed and return the photographs to you on 26 APRIL.
• Please choose the best four of your photographs depicting "The best thing about my place of work".
• List the four in order of priority, and give each one a title.
• Describe what each photo shows, and say why it is important for you (about five lines).
• Hand in the chosen four to Signe. Please send the descriptions and titles to Sign.Thorup@sas.dk by 3 MAY at 12 noon.

Your photos and descriptions will be included in a major photographic exhibition about the values of CP&C, and will be used in the task of identifying our values.
We hope you enjoy the fun, and DON´T FORGET to use the flash!

Best wishes
The valuable working party
... in lingering and negative impact on surviving employees’ behaviors and attitudes, demonstrated by decreases in productivity, motivation, emotional health, job satisfaction, and confidence in management, as well as increases in absenteeism.

SAS’ management hired external consultancies in order to support change and to define future visions and values of the company based on storytelling. Like in many other organization, change communication was based on a storytelling approach and using the visions and values of the management as the pivot of a company’s story. But this attempt only resulted in further frustration, nourished constantly by a negative focus and dramatic stories about sad human tragedies and scapegoats.

Taylor and Van Every (2000, p. 4) pinpoint that an:

... organization emerges in communication (and nowhere else). It emerges in two distinct ways: as described, and thus an objective about which people talk and have attitudes, and as realized, in its continued enactment in the interaction patterns of members’ exchanges.

The idea of applying organisational photography to launch a process aimed at improving esprit de corps and strengthening internal communication within the organisation was deliberate and aimed at opening the eyes of the employees to the culture and values that the organisation had incorporated into its everyday practice. The objective was to capture and understand organisational belief systems (Dougherty and Kunda, 1990) in order to develop a mission, a vision and a set of values created primarily by the employees themselves and born out of a process in which everyone was heard, seen and taken seriously. The aim was to create a sense of understanding and ownership of this mission, vision and set of values. The process was to involve dialogue – it was to be dynamic, giving the organisation the sense of being a community.

Asking all the members of the organisation to take photographs was a way of encouraging dialogue between members, thereby encouraging a sense of belonging. The project gave employees the opportunity to say what was at the bottom of their list of least favourite tasks at work. One of the photographs submitted simply showed someone’s bottom! Humour, self-irony and creativity were vital elements and driving forces behind the exercise, the aim of which was to allow employees to tell their own stories about the organisation instead of disciplining them by telling them a single story from above based on management’s value statements.

This paper presents a process of change in an SAS organisation which started from the grassroots. The aim of the paper is threefold to:

1. conceptualise theoretical approaches to change communication and to motivate an inclusive approach to organizational change communication,

2. present and discuss methodological implications of such an approach, and

3. apply and test both the theoretical approach and its’ methodological implications in a specific case.

The main research question of the study is: by choosing the CP&C department of SAS as a case, we seek to investigate how and by application of which recently developed approaches, concepts and methods we can ensure that organisational change can be successfully communicated and implemented?
The first two sections discuss theoretical approaches to change communication. In what follows, we present a research methodology aimed at creating involvement in and enactment of organisational change communication based on four methodological foundations: participatory action research, co-productive methods, appreciative inquiry, and strategic change communication teams. The fourth section describes the action research process in the case company and presents empirical findings that provide evidence for the successful application of this research methodology. Finally, we conclude on the experiences from this case and discuss its limitations and implications for future research.

**Storytelling used to discipline the corporate body**

During the past decade communication has become the watchword of virtually all organisations and functional areas. In line with and response to this, new concepts have emerged in the literature about corporate, organisational and marketing communications, such as (corporate) branding, integrated communication, storytelling and crisis communication. These new concepts have in common that they seek to inspire confidence by reducing risks and complexity in the internal conditions and external environment of the organisation concerned. Some of these concepts, such as crisis communication, focus on specific sub-aspects of communication within an organisation; while others, such as corporate branding and integrated (corporate) communication, seek to establish holistic frameworks for the overall communicative expressions of the organisation concerned, based on its culture and values. For many people integrated communication involves an entire organisation speaking with a single voice, while storytelling seeks to communicate a uniform impression of a company’s identity in a “super-story” addressed to interested parties both inside and outside the organisation. This reflects a concept of communication as monophony (Greek for “single sound” single-channel information which does not allow spatial sound reproduction).

The means or tools used to achieve such a monophony are often based on a structuralist approach to storytelling and branding based on structural models from the 1950s and 1960s (Heugens, 2002; Langer, 2002). Subsequent developments in narrativity and communication research arguing in favour of narrativity models that are less controlled by the sender and less schematic, have had little influence on research-based corporate storytelling discourse that is often based on managements’ version of corporate stories (Ray, 1986; Denning, 2000, 2004, 2005; Gabriel, 2000, 2004; Jensen, 1999, 2002; Kunde, 2000). Organisations are viewed from the management perspective as bodies: the management is the head, deciding how the other body parts should behave, and by monitoring and standardising internal and external communication “the values discipline the corporate body by collective seduction” (Christensen and Morsing, 2005, p. 102). Monophonic communication reflects an old dream of maintaining stability and control within the organisation during long-term processes of change. In the hope that management’s values and visions will be diffused, top-down communication is applied with the resources and competencies of the sender being the decisive factors and the aim to discipline an organisation and its employees with a view to creating uniformity.

Even though storytelling can be applied instrumentally in marketing and branding, in relation to processes of organisational change this is a reduced and misplaced way to use storytelling. Organisations cannot just “brand” their way out of painful processes
of adjustment and development (Hansen et al., 2001). Monophonic communication often leads to increased insecurity, crises of confidence and rumour mongering, and consequently major costs in the long-term (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998; Proctor and Doukakis, 2003). Up to 70 per cent of all organisational change programmes fail to live up to the desired results (Daly et al., 2003), because of internal communication problems and the failure to create and maintain employees’ confidence as a complexity-reducing mechanism (Luhmann, 1968).

Christensen and Morsing (2005) point out that this development might go directly against the grain of corporate needs to react flexibly to increasingly dynamic markets and societies, to handle differences and differentiations, to constantly reinvent themselves, and to accept diversity among their employees, who are now the most important resource of organisations. In a society characterised by cultural liberation and individualism, top-down discipline and monophonic communication denies the independence, competence and innovation potential of employees. At worst, the wish for uniformity thus prevents the sharing of knowledge, innovation, experiments and the will to take risks. Instead, it tends to lead to paralysis, dissension and resistance. Hence, we need an alternative, a polyphonic approach to communication.

**Storytelling with a polyphonic sound**

Naturally, there is a certain need for coordination and discipline in any organisation’s communication. So concepts such as branding, storytelling and integrated communication are not intrinsically “wrong”. The problem is how to use them and what kind of organisational understanding, philosophy and management perspective form the backbone of their practical implementation. In brief, the problem involves:

- sender control and the wish for standardisation;
- the wish to speak with a single voice and the idea of a uniform identity; and
- the idea that tone of voice and identity should be determined primarily or entirely by the management.

Alternatively, organisational change communication can be seen as a polyphonic orchestration of an organization’s many voices (Eisenberg, 1984; Boje, 1991; Hazen, 1993; Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994; van Riel, 2000; Christensen and Morsing, 2005). Rather than seeing an organisation as a single body with a single (management) voice telling one grand story, it should be regarded as an orchestra consisting of many different instruments and voices, each capable of performing in its own register and each with its own distinctive sound. All the different instruments and voices enable an organisation to play more than one tune. An orchestra consisting only of drums may be able to produce a certain noise, as long as everyone can be persuaded to play in the same rhythm.

In a polyphonic perspective, communication management focuses on facilitating and coordinating all the voices of the orchestra with a view to creating polyphonic harmony, allowing space for the special qualities of each voice or instrument. This presupposes that there is enough space for each individual and for individual differences – including space for solo parts or local articulation. This presupposes that each voice is heard, making it possible to identify what it is capable of and what it wishes to contribute. The conductor of the orchestra (the management) does not use his baton to decide what should be played and how. Instead, management initiates, coordinates and arranges the music provided by the various voices in the orchestra.
Hence, successful change communication is not based on standardisation and discipline, but on the creation of opportunities for each voice to express itself and contribute in a new organisational framework. This demands creative production and fruitful musical arrangement, giving the employees a sense of trust and common ownership and the opportunity for individual self-expression and development within the melody played by the orchestra.

Involving employees in organisational change has consistently been advocated in research on organisational change (French and Bell, 1995; Kotter, 1995; Carnall, 1999; Hayes, 2002) and organisational change communication (Alvesson and Deetz, 1996; Czarniawaska, 1997; Söderberg and Vaara, 2003; Cheney et al., 2004), but advocates of employee participation in change communication are often vague about the specific mechanisms and methods through which such participation could be achieved (Buchanan, 2001, p. 159). In order to compensate for this, we present in the following section a methodology applied in SAS, which might be inspiring with regard to how employee involvement, engagement and enactment can be organised and achieved.

Methodology
The ability to create successful organisational change involves building confidence, reducing insecurity and preventing rumour mongering. More than anything else, this requires recognition of the fact that change communication cannot be concluded with a clear result – instead, it is an ongoing process. It also requires a different attitude regarding the role of management, as organisations today are autonomous systems in which the employees take responsibility and can expect to be involved in the decision-making process. Consequently, change communication involves initiating and facilitating decision-making processes, accepting diversity and various attitudes, and discussing different approaches on the basis of scenarios rather than simply presenting pre-defined perspectives and decisions (Ströh and Jaatinen, 2001).

In line with this, the methodological foundation of the change process in SAS is based on novel approaches and methods developed in recent years’ organisational communication research. In what follows, we present the four methodological foundations for the change communication (research) process in SAS:

Participatory action research
“Action research is enquiry with people, rather than research on people” (Altrichter et al., 2002, p. 130). The term was coined by Lewin, who described action research as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action” which uses “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, reproduced in Lewin, 1948, p. 202-6).

This definition indicates that action research is a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups and that action research is about empowerment of these communities and groups. Building on Lewin’s work, the participatory component of action research has been developed further. Wadsworth (1998) defines participatory action research as follows:

Essentially Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical,
political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. … Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them – whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.

PAR is a well-established research methodology in organisation and communication studies (Hazan, 1993; Grønhaug and Olson, 1999; Bawden and Zuber-Skerrit, 2002; Coughlan et al., 2003; Björkman and Sundgren, 2003; Coghlan and Coughlan, 2006). Applying PAR has implications for the role of the researcher as well as for the character of the research conducted. Researchers do not study an external object, but become part of the process they study. Hence, the phenomenon studied – in this case the change process in SAS’s CP&C department – and the research on this phenomenon are overlapping. From being observers from the outside, researchers now accept to be an integrated part of the game and become co-learners with the people they meet; and from being guided by positivist validity and reliability criteria, researchers now accept and reflect their own constructionist contribution to both organisational change and the research process addressing it. Furthermore, research methods applied in PAR must invite to co-production between researchers and the people they study.

Co-productive research methods and sensemaking
Applying PAR in order to achieve employee involvement and enactment does not only have implications for the role of researchers. It also suggests the application of non-traditional change (research) methods allowing a more participatory role of the members of an organisation in both the change process and the research affiliated to it. Instead of just being an “object of study” in the construction of research data, they are participating actively in both the construction and analysis of them; they are co-productive in terms of fertile contributions. Hence, we propose the term “co-productive research methods” (CPRM) for this type of methods.

One CPRM applied in the change process in SAS is organisational photography. Photography has been applied in social sciences for almost a century under headings such as visual sociology, visual ethnography or visual anthropology, but is relatively new in research on organisational change (Buchanan, 2001) and on knowledge sharing in organisations (Petersen and Østergaard, 2005). Petersen and Østergaard (2005, p. 231) distinguish four different approaches to organisational photography depending on the role of the respondents and the status or function of photos:

- the researcher takes the photos and analyses them;
- the researcher takes the photos and analyses them with the respondents;
- the respondents take the photos, but the researcher analyses them; and
- the respondents take the photos and analyse them with the researcher.

Whereas photographs taken by the researcher represent the organisation, as the researcher sees it, are photographs both taken by and discussed with members of an organization expressing the highest degree of co-production in organisational
photography. Photos and pictures can by materialising and visualising the intangible help to improve organisational processes and facilitate organisational development.

Other CPRM’s applied in the change process in SAS include drawing, collage and pottery workshops and a postcard exercise. Like organisational photography, these co-productive methods have in common that they require active participation from the members of an organisation and facilitate “… our understanding of what preoccupies the respondent in relation to a research topic, rather than defining these themes beforehand …” (Petersen and Østergaard, 2005, p. 235).

Hence, the sensemaking processes of participants are in focus, when applying CPRM’s in participatory action research on organisational change (Bean and Eisbenberg, 2006). This reflects a strong kinship to Weick (1995, p. 6), who defined sensemaking as “placing items into frameworks, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning”.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

The third methodological foundation of our work is Appreciative Inquiry. Developed by Copperider and Srivastva (1987) in the 1980s, AI has been successfully used by corporations such as British Airways, McDonald’s, NASA, and British Petroleum (Vanstone, 2004) and is increasingly also recognised and applied in research (Bushe, 1998; Oswick, 2003). AI is a change-management process that helps organisations to describe a vision for the future based on their successes in the past. Instead of traditional problem orientation in organisational change, AI takes departure in the positive aspects and strengths in a community or organisation as a base for organisational change, innovation and growth. Hence, unlike problem-centred approaches, the rationale for AI is to determine, what is working well in organisations and to replicate it (Oswick, 2003, p. 386).

Like any other type of action research, AI-processes are cyclic. According to Copperider and Withney (2000, pp. 6-7), AI consists of four components of AI:

1. **discovery** – identifying “the best of what is” (appreciating);
2. **dream** – highlighting what might be?” (envisioning results);
3. **design** – creating “what should be” (co-constructing); and
4. **addressing “how to empower, learn and adjust/improvise?” (sustaining).**

These components reflect can be seen AI is a participatory action research approach that seeks to create empowerment based on what participants themselves regard as valuable. At the centre of the method is a voyage of discovery seeking to identify hopes and dreams about the future; laying down a vision of how to design an organisation in future, and defining what is needed and how this vision can be achieved – including a focus on the responsibilities and contributions of each individual.

AI’s kinship with participatory PAR and CPRM’s (described above) as well as with strategic communication teams (described below) becomes even more obvious, when looking at the underlying principles for AI. These are: the constructionist principle, the poetic principle, the anticipatory principle, the simultaneity principle and the positive principle (see for further details Withney, 1998). For the purpose of this paper, we emphasise the constructionist principle, which is determining all four of our methodological foundations with roots in social constructionism (Gergen, 1982) – thus reflecting our scientific theoretical position in demarcation to objectivist research.
Strategic change communication team

The fourth methodological foundation for the change process in SAS comes from Barrett (2002, 2004), who argues that change programmes should be planned with an internal base within the organisation concerned. Although external consultants may be used as advisers, some of the organisation’s own employees should function as change agents, who lead the change project by defining, planning and organising its’ phases (Saka, 2002). Consequently, change communication must be based on a multi-functional team representing a diversity of voices and interests in the organisation. In her best-practice approach to designing a change communication programme Barrett (2004, pp. 25-32) recommends the following three phases:

(1) Perform analysis and design strategy. A strategic communication team is created by selected management and employee representatives from various function areas and levels of the organisation concerned. These representatives need the trust of their colleagues and the support of their immediate managers in performing their work in the team. Communication managers in the organisation should constitute a minority of the SCT, and management representatives should function as process facilitators only. The task of the SCT members is to assess the organisation’s previous communication practice based on interviews and audits, to indicate options for improvement of employee communication, to plan and implement a change communication programme, and to function as change agents in their respective formal and informal networks, departments and environments.

(2) Cascading vision, strategy and job-redefinition workshops. The success of change communication depends on whether the organisation has a clearly formulated, understood, realistic and meaningful vision. This is not the same as a statement posted on a homepage or in a management document. Instead, it should be a clear, comprehensible, action-focused, realistic and measurable vision about what the organisation wishes to be. The management draws up this vision and the strategic goals of the organisation, after which the SCT takes over and carries out workshops involving all the employees in the organisation. The first workshop is vital in building confidence. All employees are invited to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement, and management representatives also take part and remain open to criticism and comments. The aim is to create understanding of the need for organisational change, and to translate the management’s vision into consequences for each employee. Once the vision has been adjusted, following workshops focus on this vision by discussing the practical consequences for each workplace.

(3) Result monitoring. The change programme should involve a number of interview surveys whose purpose is to identify employee knowledge of, understanding of, attitudes to and readiness for the process of change. It should also include ongoing feedback processes and job redefinition workshops until all employees are reached.

The change process in SAS: processes and results

The first step in the work on values at CP&C involved setting up “the valuable working party” an SCT consisting of representatives of all six departments. The most
active agent of change was not an external consultant, but a student working on her thesis (one of the authors of this paper), and who was employed at SAS for the purpose. Before the photography exercise and the launch of “the valuable working party” the communication environment was analysed and assessed. It was immediately apparent that it was best to ask the members of the working party to play the role of project ambassadors in their immediate environments, for instance by informing people of the purpose and intention of the whole project. Strategic recruitment to “the valuable working party” proved valuable in preparation for subsequent stages, which initially involved not only the photography exercise but also a special theme day consisting of a drawing/pottery/collage exercise and a postcard exercise.

**The photography exercise**

The exercise generated a large volume of employee produced photography as raw data with regard to which values employees appreciated in their everyday working life (AI). These photos were subsequently analysed and categorised by the change agents. For each of the 200 photographs submitted with captions, the following questions were asked:

- Who or what has been photographed?
- What value did you intend to depict?
- Does the photograph contain any hidden values?

The answers to these questions required interpretation by the change agents, and an example was subsequently presented for use in the task of analysis (Plate 1).

The table symbolises all the cosy times we have together, enjoying a shawarma, Thai food, pizza, etc. Life does not get much better than this!!

**Plate 1.**
Having a cosy time together – photography workshop
Who or what has been photographed? A round table with a flowery, waxed tablecloth stands in the centre. A kitchen roll has been placed under one of the table legs – probably to stabilise the table. A number of cables can be seen running across the floor next to the table. The Venetian blinds are down. Three black office chairs have been placed at random against the back wall, and in the background there is a framed map of the world, a homemade diploma in a frame, a cabinet containing black briefcases and a child’s hoop. Three of the four chairs, part of this “cosy set-up” stand some way from the table. The people sitting round the table seem to have got up and left it in a rush. The empty tray on the table indicates the same thing.

What value did you intend to depict? The title and caption indicate that the value intended was “having a cosy time together” adding that “life doesn’t get much better than this”.

Does the photograph contain any hidden values? The photograph does not exactly depict a cosy situation! The cables running across the floor, the office chairs standing around, and the kitchen roll under one of the table legs all indicate a temporary situation. This is what it looks like when people are in the middle of moving to a new house, or when they do not have the time for domestic chores or other practical tasks. The Venetian blinds create a sense of enclosure, particularly because the sun can be glimpsed behind them. The most noticeable feature is the cosy set-up around the waxed tablecloth, which has apparently been abandoned in a rush. The elements in the photograph combine to create a temporary ambience – the people who use this room are always on standby ready to get up and leave. If there was no title and caption, one obvious interpretation might be that the aim of the photograph was to illustrate “speed and play” (the play aspect being shown by the child’s hoop and homemade diploma – two elements which clearly add a playful, humorous tone). The fact that the intended value of cosiness is combined with the hidden values leads to the conclusion that the photographer likes the challenge of being on standby. The photographer might not share everyone’s perception of the word “cosy” although he clearly connects cosiness with food (“… shawarma, Thai food, pizza, etc.”).

The contextual knowledge of the change agents helped to understand the motifs, as the intended value in this example is not what the photograph seems to express. Is this an ironic photograph? In fact the waxed tablecloth is a symbol of the culture in the department in question – not only for the department and organisation, but also for others in the company. This became obvious when the department had to move to an area adjacent to another department from another organisation – a department with which CP&C had had an uneasy relationship in the past. The new neighbours refused to allow the waxed tablecloth into their new communal area, so the CP&C employees threatened to stick the tablecloth to the table. The new neighbours protested, claiming that the waxed tablecloth was unsightly and unsuitable for a professional environment, but they did not succeed: the tablecloth is a cultural symbol representing a value far in excess of its useful value – which is why the photographer cannot be suspected of irony in his illustration of “cosiness”.

With regard to this example and all the others which also contained hidden and contradictory significance, the values registered have been entered in value categories. In a subsequent condensation of the expressions revealed in all the photographs, 52 common
values were reduced to value categories, which functioned as sub-conclusions of the
photography exercise. These value categories are illustrated in the Table I, with the
categories listed in relation to their frequency/importance (figures in brackets):

These value categories gave the valuable working party insight into what the
employees regarded as positive aspects of their place of work, and were used as a
platform for the future work on values. In addition, the value categories generated a
discussion in the group regarding employee priorities, resulting among other things in
the assessment that the value entitled “responsibility” was insufficiently represented in
relation to the demands made by the new organisation.

**The exhibition**

In connection with a meeting, where the other author of this paper made a presentation
about organisational change processes (PAR), the organisation was presented with the
result of the photography exercise. Six photographs and descriptions had been selected
to illustrate each of the 14 values (Plate 2).

Crisps, fruit and soft drinks were served in an attempt to create an intimate, cosy
atmosphere. The interest aroused was surprisingly intense. The employees studied all
the photographs carefully, finding the results both interesting and amusing. Several of
them said they were impressed by the creative efforts of their colleagues and there was
broad agreement that the employees could recognise themselves in the photographs. In
this connection a debate on values was launched, involving discussion of all the values.
On the initiative of “the valuable working party” the value entitled “Responsibility”
was discussed in particular detail in an open forum.

After the exhibition the photographs were hung in the corridors, and people often
stopped to have a look at them – particularly employees from other departments,
which meant that CP&C employees often had to step in and explain. The exhibition
motivated people to take part in the ongoing work of defining values, as well as leading
to greater understanding of what was involved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value categories</th>
<th>Employees’ values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good colleagues (54)</td>
<td>Good colleagues, attentiveness, feedback, respect, tolerance, community, trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism (34)</td>
<td>Professional pride, experience, competence, knowledge sharing, businesslike approach, creativity, “we’re going for gold” efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest communication (27)</td>
<td>Communication, information, openness, honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork (24)</td>
<td>Teamwork, cooperation, common goals, flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges (20)</td>
<td>Challenges, speed, courage, personal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour (15)</td>
<td>Humour, job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue (14)</td>
<td>Dialogue, customer contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational management (11)</td>
<td>Visible management, recognition, social responsibility, motivation, company development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic cosines (10)</td>
<td>Cosiness, intimacy, wellbeing, security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty (8)</td>
<td>Loyalty, pride, reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary and staff benefits (5)</td>
<td>Salary, staff benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working environment (5)</td>
<td>Working environment, location, working hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility (4)</td>
<td>Responsibility, freedom with responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order and structure (2)</td>
<td>order/structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I.**

Employees’ values based on organisational photography
The drawing/collage/pottery workshops

Whereas the photography exercise was primarily an attempt to raise the awareness of the employees and to identify their values, the second stage in the organisational development programme, sought to take another step towards making the everyday life of the organisation more concrete and physical by asking the employees to (literally) get their hands dirty. Like the photography exercise, the drawing/collage/pottery workshop was based on the idea that non-verbal expressions can create an impression of life within an organisation that is both fuller and closer to reality and that knowledge about the company can be developed in an atmosphere of cooperation and community.

The drawing/collage/pottery workshop was divided strategically among the six departments to ensure that the challenges (pottery was the most demanding exercise) were adjusted to match the resource potential of the departments concerned. Two of the departments were asked to draw a really good day at work, two others were asked to produce collages depicting “CP&C today in pictures and quotations – both the good sides and the bad” and “CP&C in a year’s time in pictures and quotations”. The pottery group was asked to:
Think of buildings. An allotment shed in a Copenhagen suburb. The Leaning Tower of Pisa. The Pentagon. A chicken shed. Favellas in Rio. A posh villa by the sea. If CP&C were a building, what kind of building would it be?

The purpose of these workshops was to add detail to the results of the photography exercise, and make these results more precise with a view to getting as close to the identity of the organisation as possible. In addition, the aim of these workshops was to hear what the employees thought about the company’s future and vision. The collage exercise reveals this best (Plate 3).

The collage reflects a generally positive picture of CP&C. The largest picture in the collage depicts a group of happy Danes supporting the national football team dressed in red and white, supported by quotations like: “I hate to lose” “We’ve got the willpower” and “A record attempt”. Both the picture and the quotations are taken from the world of sport. Another noticeably positive element is that of the fairy-tale. At the centre of the collage there is a large picture of a naked woman relaxing in beautiful natural surroundings. The motif and design have fairy-tale connotations, and the picture is supported by quotations such as: “A pure fairy-tale” and “Miracle – you make it happen”. The immediate effect of these fairy-tale connotations is pleasant, but the aim may have been to announce a sense of insecurity about the future success of the organisation, because after all a fairy-tale is fiction. The quotation “Walls have
ears” indicates a certain degree of insecurity about the management. You obviously have to be careful what you say. On the other hand, the quotation “We have ALMOST stopped complaining” indicates that the employees know they have not always been easy to satisfy, and the fact that they are “Faithful to the company spirit” shows that they still support the management.

The postcard exercise
The final exercise in the process of identifying values was a postcard exercise, the purpose of which was to raise the consciousness of the employees through their own verbal stories. If we ignore all the discussions arising during the process, this activity is the only one so far in which the employees were asked to express their views verbally. It was carried out six months after the photography exercise, the aim being to give “the valuable working party” an indication of the way the values of the organisation had developed over this period. The postcard exercise showed that the employees had grown more aware both of their own values, and of which values should be given highest priority.

At a meeting all the employees of CP&C were asked to write a postcard to their best friend giving them reasons why they should apply for an (imaginary) vacant position in SAS CP&C. The task was phrased with a view to comparing the result with the result of the photography exercise: “Write a postcard to your best friend telling him/her why to apply for the vacant (and imaginary) position at CP&C!”

A comparison of the postcard exercise with the photography exercise shows that the employees had changed their attitude to the task of defining values. The postcard exercise was carried out with great seriousness and commitment. For instance, the employees had added the name and address of their best friend, and they started with the kind of greeting that is entirely normal when writing to family or close friends. One employee added “Hope you are well” for instance.

The postcard exercise also showed a change in attitude to values among the employees. The discussions inspired by the photography exhibition had clearly influenced the importance attached to values, as expressed in some of the reasons why it would be a good idea to apply for a position at CP&C:

We’re trying to change our company to suit the world around us. It’s really interesting … We want this to be an enjoyable company to work for, where we have freedom as well as responsibility, we need to be honest to each other, competent and proactive to ensure that we can be successful as a team.

I think this is the best place of work in Denmark. There are plenty of challenges … we laugh a lot – we have freedom as well as responsibility … and you’d be getting a fantastic bunch of colleagues.

Because you’d be working for a company where loyalty, a sense of responsibility and humour are important parts of the culture.

Of the postcards 30 per cent mention responsibility as an important argument, whereas responsibility only occurred in 2 per cent of the values selected in connection with the photography exercise. Seen in isolation this is a significant difference, although the differences between the tasks, forum of execution, timeframe, etc. make it difficult to compare the two, but the employees were given the opportunity to reflect on their values during the intervening period, and the result indicates that the issue of
responsibility, which was discussed on several occasions between the photography exercise and the postcard exercise, had given particular cause for reflection. All things considered, this means that the postcard exercise showed that the employees had closed ranks in defining a joint set of values. There were 52 different values in the photography exercise, but the employees were now in agreement on only ten values in the postcard exercise: cooperation, success, responsibility, humour, joint goals, good colleagues, a professional approach, challenges, honesty and loyalty.

In the practical everyday life of CP&C the process has already resulted in the respective departments defining their own strengths and weaknesses. They have suggested solutions for development, and have taken full responsibility for developing and controlling these measures. Measures which help not only to create a better place of work, but also to reinforce employee motivation and esprit de corps.

**At the time of going to press**

When this paper was written, the process in this SAS organisation was by no means over. The result has been the changes made along the way, stories are still being developed and told, and organisational change and development continue. It is not yet clear whether the employees will regain their job satisfaction, define relevant goals and implement values throughout the organisation. Success depends primarily on the extent to which SAS manages to implement the model outlined here throughout the entire organisation, but a management decision to increase the focus on internal change communication in the organisation has already been taken – a first important step.

The results achieved at CP&C in terms of regaining a sense of esprit de corps and security in a crisis already seem more promising than the results of previous internal under-communication or value-communication implanted by external consultants and determined by the formal top-down decision-making paths. Internal communication is unlikely to solve all the company’s problems – at best it can only help ensure that the management’s strategic decisions lead to success on the market. Communication cannot solve all our problems – in particular not problems which are not communication problems. On the other hand, strategic organisational changes are unlikely to be successful unless communication manages to create polyphonic harmony in the organisational orchestra.

**Conclusions and implications**

This paper argues in theoretical, methodological and practical terms for a polyphonic approach to storytelling in organisational change communication, based on co-productive methods and as an alternative to the monophonic disciplinary approach. In a polyphonic approach to change communication, open and collective planning of organisational changes is based on dialogue between the employees (and the management). The most important characteristics are a joint, well-founded information base provided as soon as possible, and agreement regarding a clear timetable for the process of change. The management facilitates dialogue in the organisation, and is responsible for drawing up and subsequently adjusting the organisation’s vision and strategic goals, which are based on work done on identity and values from within.

The main aim is to achieve a fundamental change of perspective from sender-dictated diffusion and uniform communication to employee-based polyphonic communication of great diversity. It is no longer sufficient to communicate
organisational changes and developments in a single normative story to the employees; it is now necessary to communicate with the employees about organisational changes and developments, with the management listening to employee stories and regarding them as a creative and important resource. Naturally, the management retains overall responsibility for processes of change, and based on this alternative approach the management must also allow the time and space needed for the processes involved. Ultimately, it is also the management who make final, legally binding decisions – and bear the legal responsibility for them, but at the end of the day change will only succeed if the employees gain a sense of ownership of change. As this case illustrates, this kind of ownership can be achieved from the outset by including the employees in a creative scenario and a fruitful organisation of the process of change, allowing the opportunity for individual expression and development. The case of SAS shows that organisational development is not a question of diffusing the values of the management or external consultants, but that the employees' own ideas about organisational identity and the values on which it is based should be given a central role in an organisation's storytelling.

The co-productive methods used in our case should not simply be copied and taken over schematically by other organisations. The contextual differences are too important for this, but what the photography, drawing/collage/pottery and postcard exercises have in common as methodical tools is that they create a positive basic mood and room for involvement, humour and self-irony. This is in sharp contrast to the above-mentioned characteristics of monophonic change communication. Implications for further research include, however, that normative sender-centred models to organisational change communication can be tested and challenged based on this paper. Implications for the practice of organisational change seem obvious: there is no need to spend resources on slippery consultants and shiny brochures, when talking about values. Instead, talking with instead of to employees appears to be much more promising.

The case also revealed that storytelling and change communication are not concerned with creating rapid results, but that they involve a long-term process demanding considerable resources. There are no quick technical solutions or any rocket science, but as 70 per cent of all organisational changes after acquisitions and mergers currently fail attributed to failures in change communication, investment in long-term processes makes sense after all: prevention is always better than cure.

References


Further reading

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