Ambiguous perception
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Background

Where management generally can be classified as a matter of coordinating and controlling the information-processing process of the organization, the specific task of the management can be seen as a matter of designing the organizational information-processing capabilities to meet the requirements of the information environment (Galbraith, 1973). This task can be seen as a matter of designing the organization to meet the requirements of being both effective and efficient, where the specific organizational task is a matter of reducing the information uncertainty and equivocality (Daft and Lengel, 1986). However, where we have developed tools for uncertainty reduction, there seems to be a lack of description concerning managerial and organizational tools for reducing equivocality. This paper will therefore, with background in a case study of an applied method, discuss communication of ambiguous and complex information in organizations in order to reduce equivocality.

The literature on teamwork and group dynamics has been explored intensively (see e.g. Nonaka, 1991, 1994), but even if we are beginning to understand equivocality reduction in teams and groups in terms of exploiting the complementary skills of individuals, we seem to lack in the understanding of equivocality reduction methods on an individual and organizational level. Methods such as team-building exercises and communication technologies such as the Open Space technology have been developed in the organizational behavior literature, but the theoretical understanding and justification, however, seems to lack. Where we have developed tools and methods for reducing uncertainty in organizations, the problem is that we still have difficulty in describing how complex equivocal ethical and political information should be communicated in the organization. Consequently, with background in the information processing perceptive (Arrow (1974), Galbraith (1973), Tushman and Nadler (1978)) this paper will describe and analyze the methods applied by the Danish Dacapo Theater, where the question is “can we enhance theory and practice by incorporating and applying ambidextrous communication tools?”

Method

The paper will present an explorative qualitative study of methods for handling ambiguous information in order to facilitate adaptation and change through the reduction of equivocality and the creation of new knowledge. The choice of method is reasoned in the fact, that
quantitative studies of communication processes only to a certain extent can capture the value of the communication. The study of the consulting firm “the Dacapo Theater” was conducted by interviewing the CEO (Lone Thellesen) and by observing actual consulting services conducted in front of an audience consisting of caretakers from various caretaking departments in Odense.

The Dacapo Theater

The Dacapo Theater, located in Odense (Denmark), was formed in 1995 as a result of years of experience on doing theater concerning work related problems. The inspiration for forming the theater came partly from a local theater group that had played a number of forum plays concerning work environment, and partly from a Swedish experience of doing role plays on work situations. By applying the complexity theory suggested by Stacey, Griffian and Shaw (2000), the Dacapo Theater has focused its services on communicating complex ambiguous information to customers by the use of theatrical plays combined with discussion forums. By suggesting that change is induced through observed action and realization, the theater has written and conducted a variety of plays and discussions incorporating complex social relationships.

Instead of doing organizational consulting by applying traditional methods such as scanning and reporting, the idea in Dacapo is that organizational and human resource development can be achieved more successfully by applying a media with a high richness (see Daft and Lengel, 1986). With background in a quote by the philosopher Kon Fu Tze:

“I hear it and I forget it
I see it and I remember it
I do it and I understand it”,

Dacapo tries to bridge between reality and fiction by applying the tools of theater to communicate organizational and individual problems and relationships related to work situations (humor, anger, sorrow etc.). By observing and discussing a theatrical play, the audience is expected to interpret and review existing patterns of behavior, facilitating a potential change in behavior. Instead of communicating and striving for consensus, Dacapo has written the plays in order to facilitate discussions and ambiguity in the interpretation process. Clients can therefore experience that a play from Dacapo can result in feelings of confusion and disagreement instead of a common understanding and agreement on central
aspects of the play. This idea is parallel to the ambiguity approach of Martin and Meyerson (1987), and Dacapo deliberately tries to challenge existing routines and cultures of the workplace.

**Theoretical challenge**

As described by Daft and Lengel (1986), organizations process information in order to reduce uncertainty and equivocality. Even if the methods and tools for reducing uncertainty in organizations have been, and are being extensively, developed through computerized organizational expert systems, data mining systems, simulation tools, etc., the development of tools for reducing equivocality in organizations is lacking. For efficiency improvements in organizations it is sufficient to have “know how” and “know what”, but if the organizational goal is to create effectiveness improvements, “know why” has to be added to the organizational information-processing process. Acquiring and developing “know why” is a matter of communicating and absorbing knowledge rather than communicating information, which induces that the information-processing process is more complex than traditional information exchange and learning frameworks as e.g. seen in Huber (1991).

As described by Galbraith (1973), the organizational and managerial challenge is a matter of obtaining a fit between the ability to process information and the need for information, which implies that higher degrees of task complexity, increase the need for information processing. However, the complexity of the task is merely one side of the story. As described by Daft and Wiginton (1979), Daft and Huber (1987) and Daft and Lengel (1986), the media itself determines, which type of information that can be processed, and how complex the information can be. As seen in Figure 1, the language applied to communicate can range from low variety precise analytical mathematics to high variety ambiguous art such as theater. Daft and Wiginton (1979, p. 179) further suggest that the natural language may be more powerful than mathematical language for understanding and describing many organizational processes. Consequently, communication can be described as a continuum of languages for describing organizational reality, where language is a system of spoken or written symbols that can communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences (Daft and Wiginton, 1979, pp. 180-181).

Many different forms of language appear in cultures with varying ability to transmit information. If a language e.g. has a large pool of symbols that can communicate a wide range
of ideas, emotions, and experiences, then the language would have a high variety and would be considered ambiguous. If a language, on the other hand, is narrow in scope with few symbols to communicate ideas, then the language would be low in variety and precise.

Figure 1  Continuum of language for describing organizational reality (from Daft and Wiginton, 1979)

It is therefore apparent that precise communication such as e.g. sales volume will not require a high variety media for communication within the organization since it will be overkill. Complex information such as e.g. ethical considerations, on the other hand, requires that the individuals forming the organization will have to consider and interpret the information before adapting to changes. By e.g. communicating a policy regarding sexual behavior in organizations, the proposition is therefore that such a policy is better adopted if the individuals are exposed to a high variety language. By applying theater, the individuals in the organization can be presented with fictive situations where the implication of various behaviors can be outlined for further interpretation and communication. Using a complex communication channel therefore enables communication of feelings, whereas memos and rules only communicate a preferred behavior and not e.g. the psychological implications of misbehavior. By focusing on the three principles outlined by Daft and Wiginton (1979), the
use of language and organizational phenomenon is dependent on: The principle of incompatibility, the law of requisite variety and the Bremermann Limit.

The principle of incompatibility states that, as system complexity increases, the ability to make precise predictions concerning behavior diminishes. The law of requisite variety states that only variety neutralizes variety, the control mechanism which is employed to control a complex system must have at least as much variety as the system it is intended to control (Daft and Wiginton, 1979, p. 182). The third principle, the Bremermann Limit, states that there is a limit to the rate at which individuals can transmit and process information. As a practical matter, it is difficult to determine when this limit is reached, but since the information required to describe any complex system completely might well exceed the Bremermann Limit, comprehensive, complete descriptions of the real world would then be impossible (Daft and Wiginton, 1979, p. 182).

This implies that simple systems and phenomena can be described and communicated by simple, precise, and unequivocal significant statements. When a phenomenon, on the other hand, is complex, significant statements will have to be correspondingly complex, and so will the mechanisms of communication.

**Figure 2** Language description and phenomena (Adopted and revised from Daft and Wiginton, 1979)
In Figure 2, situation 2 and 3 represent a fit between the language applied and the organizational phenomena, whereas situation 1 and 4 represent a misfit between the language applied and the organizational phenomena. In situation 1, the use of a high-variety language to describe a trivial phenomenon results in information “overkill”, where as the use of a low-variety language to describe a complex phenomenon in situation 4 results in an information lack since the phenomenon is oversimplified due to the low variety of the language applied. Therefore, in order to reach a fit between the organizational phenomena and the language applied to communicate, the manager will have to classify the complexity of the phenomena and then communicate the solution according to Figure 1, as a choice (or a mix) between special-purpose language, natural language and nonverbal language.

Where the design and strategies of special-purpose language is well described and prescribed, the conceptualization and description of natural language and nonverbal high-variety and ambiguous language is lacking. How to e.g. communicate ethical information to the members of the organization is unclear and the proposition of this case is that complex phenomena can only successfully be communicated by the use of a high-variety language such as Forum Theater, thereby applying ambidextrous communication.

**Background and precedence of Forum Theater**

The idea of Forum Theater was developed by the Brazilian Augusto Boal in the 1950ies as a technique of combining theater and discussion forums. Instead of playing theater the usual way and leaving the audience to their own interpretation, the very idea behind the concept is that the “real action” starts, when the play (or an introduction to the play) has been presented. Dacapo uses the method by combining the actors in the play with a joker (a person in control of the discussion with the audience as well as the development of the play). After having played a scene, the joker can e.g. stop the play and start asking the audience about their interpretation of the play or characters in the play. This discussion can result in an actual change in the play where the actors are encouraged to repeat a part of the scene by applying suggestions and solutions to problems from the audience. The scene can even be played where a person from the audience is put into the play as one of the characters. When the scene then has been played again, the joker and the audience discuss the implications of behavioral and/or changes in the settings of the play. By applying this method, the audience is directly (through the joker) influencing the setting and the action of the play, and this process
combines the interpretation process with the potential behavioral changes and the aspirations of behavior from the audience.

The concept is founded on the idea that there is no right or wrong solution to a problem. By playing different versions of the scene, the audience is exposed to a variety of behaviors and implications of behavior. The concept of Forum Theater can therefore be seen as a behavioral scenario planning, where the audience through the construction of a variety of scenarios can experience the implications of different settings and behaviors. The play itself does not have a pre-designed conclusion. Instead a variety of possible sub-conclusions are developed through the play and the method is therefore useful at combining problem identification with problem solving. The audience is not left with a best way of handling a specific situation, but instead with a range of possible ways of handling the situation. The method can therefore work as both a trouble-shooting catalyst concerning specific problems as well as a learning experience and awareness of potential problems concerning problems and situations.

The language and questions applied in Forum Theater

In Forum Theater, Dacapo provides the frame of the discussion by means of the play and the uses of the joker. By letting the audience interpret, discuss, and respond (in terms of suggestions), this method enables multiple and emerging interpretations to engage in the discussion. Even themes that have not been touched upon in the play emerge, but they emerge, because the audience relates their own experiences to the situations illustrated in the play.

By playing fictive scenes, the method creates both awareness and recognition of behavioral patterns. The use of fictive names creates an extended awareness among the audience concerning the problems in the play. Instead of generalizing describing client type x, characters are given personal characteristics and behavioral patterns, which enhances the understanding among the audience concerning the situation. By discussing these patterns in a forum with colleagues, both the breath and the depth of the discussion are facilitated, controlled by the joker as a “realizer”. Seen from the psychological cognitive perspective of activity theory (see e.g. Engelsted, 1989), this method enables communication between subjects concerning multiple objects, but the communication is in charge by an external observer, who can realize and change the path of the discussion.
The discussion is initiated by exemplifications of behavior followed by one or several questions facilitating breath and/or depth in the discussion. When the joker perceives having facilitated and creating sufficient information for problem identification and possible solving, the theme is shifted towards a “behavioral” scenario planning (see e.g. Schoemaker, 1995) of initiatives that can be made in order to adapt towards the theme suggested by the audience. Issues that seem complex, problematic, and equivocal for the audience are therefore outlined, discussed, and potentially solved by the audience during the session. What is striking with the method is that the audience (not having any significant education in organizational theory, psychology or sociology) can recognize and describe organizational problems and solutions intuitively. By letting the language be natural in the discussion (see Figure 1) and not use the special purpose language that an organizational consultant or scientist would use, the audience can describe and relate the issues by the use of their own words.

For communicating specific special purpose language to lower skilled subordinates or communicating lateral, the combination of the nonverbal and natural language applied in the play enables the audience to understand the nature of the problem intuitively. This language use therefore seems more appropriate than traditional communication of organizational problems when communicating downstream in the organization. The method is therefore not only good at describing a complex phenomenon such as ethical concerns, but it also seems good at exemplifying and using high-variety ambiguous language to communicate special-purpose language.

Theoretical perspectives on the use of Forum Theater

When looking at the consulting service of Dacapo, the method for facilitating ambiguity in the individual and organizational task, interpretation can be seen as a tool for facilitating a change processes. When defining 1st order learning as:

“A routine, incremental, conservative process that serves to maintain stable relations and sustaining existing rules” (March, 1981),

and 2nd order learning as:

“The search for and exploration of alternative routines, rules, technologies, goals, and purposes, rather than merely learning how to perform current routines more efficiently”

(Lant and Mezias, 1992),
the shift from efficiency improvements of 1st order learning to 2nd order learning of effectiveness improvements includes a revolutionary period of punctuated equilibrium (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985). This period can emerge either a result of performing below the level of aspiration (March, 1988), or by designing the organization to explore frequently as e.g. suggested with the “garbage-can” approach (Cohen et al, 1972).

However, as showed by Lant and Mezias (1992), the “garbage-can” approach is not a preferred strategy in times of stability, which induces that low complex work environments such as e.g. health care taking needs other tools to “shock” the organization and force a revolutionary period to enter. By applying Forum Theater, the organizational members are forced to rethink what they are doing in their job into how they are doing their job and why they behave as they do (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
*Dynamic implications of the high variety language use of forum theater*

By playing scenes where the consequences of particular behaviors are presented, the audience is forced to look at and review the behavior of their own organization. The audience is forced to create scenarios and possible solutions to the organizational problems, but the problem-solving exercise is only potential. This process can from a psychological view be seen as a process of converting tacit implicit routine knowledge into explicit problem-solving knowledge (see e.g. Anderson, 2000) thereby increasing the potential behavioral patterns of the audience. According to Huber (1991) this process itself can be classified as organizational
learning, but the step that is missing in the consulting service of the Dacapo, is the converting of the potential behavioral patterns into new actual behavioral changes. The audience leaves the Forum Theater play with an enhanced understanding of the processes and politics of their organization, but the limitation of the Forum Theater technique is that the actual climate and culture of the organization still has to be changed and anchored.

The method is therefore first of all applicable for challenging and rethinking existing 1st order routines of the organization in a controlled environment. The Forum Theater technique therefore enables an element of a fictive “revolutionary period” where organizational adaptive responses can be discussed before the actual performance gets below the level of aspiration. The method is further applicable as a “behavioral” scenario play, and can therefore further be applied by the management as a behavioral “trouble shooting tool” if engaging in a revolutionary period of instability.

Generally, the method can be seen according to Nonaka’s dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation to be an applicable tool for externalizing knowledge (Nonaka, 1991, 1994). Where the strength of the tool is that it creates an awareness of problems and increases the potential behavioral patterns of the organizational members, the limitation of the tool applied by Dacapo is, however, that Dacapo does not offer a tool for reestablishing new 1st order learning routines based on the enhanced knowledge acquired in the process of the consulting service.

**Limitations and conclusions**

Forum Theater enables communication of a highly equivocal and ambiguous phenomenon. To a high extent the method is dependent on the joker and the performance of the joker, but the high variety method of theater combined with discussions of natural language enables the communication and problem-solving of equivocal matters. Combining the services of the Dacapo Theater with traditional consulting services, organizations might be better at facilitating adaptation and change concerning social relationships. Forum Theater can be applied in situations where the management would like to communicate about concerns of ethical and cultural matters. The method is not applicable in low-variety, low-equivocal situations since the language use will oversimplify the phenomenon as described by Daft and Wiginton (1979). However, the method of using Forum Theater might be one of the future
tools for reducing equivocality and enhance organizational reasoning on routines. Concerning the question “can we enhance theory and practice by incorporating and applying ambidextrous communication tools?”, the methods applied by the Dacapo be reasoned in the information-processing perspective (Arrow (1974), Galbraith (1973), Tushman and Nadler (1978)). The high variety language applied by Dacapo and the use of complex language use, as e.g. theater can be argued to be applicable in situations where the phenomena is complex. It seems possible to enhance both theory and practice by incorporating Forum Theater as a possible communication method for communicating a complex phenomena. However, more research concerning the method will have to be conducted in order to describe the individual psychological implications of such communication methods for ultimately prescribing when, how, and why communication through theater plays should be applied.
References


