

# Strategising through organising

*The significance of everyday relational sensemaking*

A thesis by

**Mette Vinther Larsen**

## **Strategising through organising**

*The significance of relational sensemaking*

© 2011, Mette Vinther Larsen

Printed by Vester Kopi,  
Aalborg, Denmark 2011

### **This thesis is published by:**

Department of Business Studies  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstræde 4  
9220 Aalborg Øst  
Denmark

# Foreword

---

This thesis is about strategy.

It is about what happens after the strategy leaves the drawing board and actors try to make sense of it and figure out how to act.

There are many perspectives on strategy.

This is another one.

A perspective that tries to work with strategy from an everyday, relational and sensemaking point of view.

It argues that actors' strategising is closely connected to their organising.

Maybe strategising and organising co-constitute each other?

It is a perspective that looks at strategy as emergent wayfinding more than planned navigating.

In the attempts to make sense of and operationalise a strategy, maybe actors do not follow a pre-defined map, but instead figure out the way as they go?

Maybe actors go in ways that they relationally believe are the 'right ones' and in ways that make sense to them?

There are, however, many actors in an organisation and, therefore, also many ways to make sense of a strategy.

This means that strategising can go in many and sometimes opposing, but equally meaningful ways.

In this case, they did.

This thesis aims to present, in just ways, the different and opposing ways actors make sense and strategise every day.

Maybe this is what strategy is about?



# Acknowledgement

---

My deepest gratitude and admiration goes out to all the inspiring and wonderful people,  
who have been beside me and taken part in this marvellous journey.

Like shining stars you sparkle and light up the sky  
showing infinite ways to go.

Especially, I would like to thank  
my inspirational advisor and friend Professor Jørgen Gulddahl Rasmussen &  
my skilled co-advisor Associate Professor Hanne Dauer Keller.

# Table of content

---

Participating actors .....	1
<b>Chapter 1.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Welcome to the Company.....	3
<i>Welcome to the headquarters</i> .....	3
<i>The annual meeting year one</i> .....	5
<i>Structure and meshwork</i> .....	7
<i>The strategy</i> .....	11
<i>What is interesting here?</i> .....	18
<b>Chapter 2 .....</b>	<b>27</b>
A way to study strategising.....	27
<i>I look for a way in</i> .....	27
<i>I knock on the door and enter</i> .....	33
<i>How does it look on the inside?</i> .....	38
<i>On my way out the door</i> .....	48
<i>Opening the door for you</i> .....	51
<b>Chapter 3 .....</b>	<b>53</b>
Four stories about four service managers' everyday organising .....	53
<i>Jane</i> .....	53
<i>Laura</i> .....	63
<i>Nina</i> .....	70
<i>Annie</i> .....	78
<b>Chapter 4 .....</b>	<b>85</b>
Organising as continual sensemaking.....	85
<i>How can organising be understood?</i> .....	85
<i>Organising in the Company</i> .....	89
<i>Sensemaking as organising</i> .....	94
<i>Is all organising about change?</i> .....	100
<b>Chapter 5 .....</b>	<b>105</b>
Two stories about two middle managers' everyday organising.....	105
<i>Mike</i> .....	105

<i>Tony</i> .....	118
<b>Chapter 6</b> .....	<b>129</b>
Strategising through organising .....	129
<i>How can strategising be understood?</i> .....	129
<i>Operationalising the strategy</i> .....	136
<i>Strategising through sensemaking</i> .....	146
<b>Chapter 7</b> .....	<b>153</b>
One story about one HR manager’s everyday organising.....	153
<i>Maria</i> .....	153
<b>Chapter 8</b> .....	<b>163</b>
Sensemaking co-constituting action.....	163
<i>How do actors construct meaning?</i> .....	163
<i>Two modules of the four module based Management Education Programme</i> .....	176
<i>Meaning intended and meaning heard during the Management Education Programme</i> .....	187
<i>Is meaning intended also meaning heard in the Company?</i> .....	190
<b>Chapter 9</b> .....	<b>199</b>
One story about one CEO’s everyday organising.....	199
<i>John</i> .....	199
<b>Chapter 10</b> .....	<b>207</b>
Organising co-constituting strategising through relational sensemaking .....	207
<i>When do we answer the phone?</i> .....	208
<i>The significance of everyday relational sensemaking</i> .....	212
<i>Does it make sense?</i> .....	215
Appendix.....	225
Abstract .....	227
Resume .....	231
References.....	235



# Participating actors

---

Annie	Service Manager
Bob	CFO
Brian	Service Manager
Christian	Regional Manager <i>from another region</i>
Cliff	Regional Manager from November year two of my study
Debbie	HR Assistant
Emily	John and Jenny's dog
Frederic	District Manager <i>from another region</i>
Harry	District Manager
Jacob	CEO from May year two of my study
Jane	Service Manager
Jenny	John's wife, helps out in the administration
John	Founder and owner of the Company, CEO until May year two of my study
Gina	Service Manager until August year one of my study
Laura	Service Manager
Lisa	Site Planer
Lucy	Quality Manager until July of the first year of my study
Maggie	Quality Manager from August year one of my study
Maria	HR Manager until May year two of my study
Mike	Regional Manager until September of the second year of my study
Nancy	Jane's right hand woman at the concrete factory
Nina	Service Manager until July year two of my study
Robert	Service Manager
Steve	HR Manager from August year two of my study
Tina	Service manager
Tommy	District Manager <i>from another region</i>
Tony	District Manager



# Chapter 1

---

## Welcome to the Company

*This chapter is an invitation inside the doors of a cleaning company (the Company) as I have experienced it during the 1½ years I followed their strategy. Simultaneously, it is a presentation of the chosen perspective for the thesis, the research question and the intention of the thesis. In this opening chapter, I will begin the introduction with scenes from how the Company is organized on a day-to-day basis as well as present my theoretical and methodological inspiration and perspective. The relation between the everyday practice in the Company and my attempts to understand and conceptualise what goes on in the Company is a continual interplay that will characterise the overall structure of the thesis. This approach underlines that theory and practice co-constitute each other, and each must be grasped in order to understand the other. I will open the chapter by introducing the Company through four stories that say something significant about the Company and show different sides of the organisation. After these four stories and perspectives have been presented and discussed, I will introduce the intention of this thesis. I will present my research question and argue why focussing on this is both relevant and interesting. This part of the chapter frames and contextualises the thesis and positions my contribution within the very active debate about how strategy can be understood and researched. By presenting and combining concepts such as relations, sensemaking, organising, becoming, meshwork and strategising, my aim is to present the perspective I have used to generate knowledge and understanding about the Company. Hopefully I will trigger your curiosity and make you interested in reading the pages before you.*

## Welcome to the headquarters

The first story describes how you are welcomed at the Company's headquarters as you enter the door. The Company has customers all over the country and has offices in different cities, but the top management and the cleaning department (the Department) where I have generated data are both situated at the headquarters. In many ways, the headquarters represents something unique because it is in the city where the Company was founded. The first to greet you and welcome you when you enter the headquarters of the Company is Emily, John and Jenny's small white terrier. Emily has her basket in

John's office, but you can just as easily find her walking around further back on the ground floor in the region's canteen department or lying on a carpet on the first floor among the region's service managers, district and department manager or in the HR manager's office. She does, however, spend most of her time in the reception and administration just inside the door, where she is ready to come out and welcome you when you open the door. It is almost impossible to get past her without giving her a good cuddle. Before Emily, John and Jenny had another white terrier named Tracy. For as long as many of the employees can remember, Emily, Tracy or the dog before her has always been a natural part of the Company.

Jenny often helps out in the reception and she spends time most days to walk around the headquarters and talk with everyone. She has bought most of the paintings and sculptures in the headquarters, and she decorates the building every Christmas. In the former headquarters she also made sure that they celebrated each other's birthdays, but after they moved to the new headquarters, each department has made their own birthday rituals.

John's office is just on the right of the front door, and next to Emily's basket, and behind his desk, John has a large painting of Jenny, Nicole, their daughter, Emily and him. Halfway hidden behind a wall John has a sofa, where he once in while takes a nap during the day. Next to his conference desk John has a small refrigerator hidden behind a cupboard door, where he has cold soft drinks and beers, and next to the refrigerator he has a bottle of whiskey, so he always has something to offer guests. Opposite John's office and just to the left of the front door lies CFO Bob's office. John and Bob spend time together most days discussing both personal and business matters.

The reception and administration is on the left side placed after John's office. After the administration and reception there is a hall with a conference room on the one side and the IT Department on the other side. This leads down to a stairway to the first floor. The Department is situated on the first floor above the building's kitchen and lunch room, and the region's canteen department. The stairway leads up to the middle of the room and straight out a bit to the left is the Region manager, Mike's office. Next to Mike's office on the right is HR manager Maria's office. To the left Site planner Lisa has her office and next to her is District manager Tony's office. Next to Maria's office on the right is Quality manager Lucy's/Maggie's office and further down in the corner is HR assistant Debbie's office. In the middle is an open space, where the Department's eight service managers have their desks and computers.

## **The annual meeting year one**

The second story presents some chosen scenes from one of the first events I participated in; the Company's annual meeting in the first year of my research period. John starts the annual meeting in year one by handing a bouquet of flowers to one of the service managers in the Company who has just completed her 10 year anniversary in the Company and stands on the threshold of her retirement. John announces that the headquarter is hosting a reception for her the following Tuesday. The service manager is evidently moved by John's gesture.

The fulcrum of the annual meeting is value-based management, and about 150 managers and administrative staff are spending a Saturday together. During the 24 years the Company has existed, the total number of employees has reached approximately 1500. The majority of employees are cleaners or food preparers at different sites [assistants] and 40% have a foreign background. It is only the managers and administrative staff who participate in the annual meeting. Maria has put a lot of effort into preparing the day. She has even made John's presentation and practised it with him, so she is very excited to see how he will do. John begins his presentation by thanking everyone for their great effort in the past year, and he looks at the agenda on the monitor and announces that now he is supposed to tell them something about the values. He then goes on to mention their new ERP and tells them that he and Bob have agreed to have the system ready for pilot testing soon. Afterwards John addresses a current hot topic which the Danish press has made a big deal about. The biggest company in the industry in Denmark is systematically breaking conventions and refraining from paying overtime to their workers. John tells the participants that it is very important that they follow the rules, he knows mistakes happen, but they are not allowed to happen consciously or systematically.

John watches the monitor and discusses the values and the project<sup>1</sup>. The external consultants, together with Maria, have the rest of the year to implement the values. John starts reading aloud from the power point Maria has made for him. Once in a while John interrupts his presentation to talk about other issues like their social responsibility and that the assistants are no allowed to bring their spouse to work. John also mentions that if anyone has a good idea they should tell their closest manager about it. A few times John makes a joke and everybody laughs. At the end of John's presentation, he admits that change is not easy for him and that he believes the Company has always been managed according to the values. John explains how the new strategy and the implementation of value-based management should

---

<sup>1</sup> In the thesis I will refer to the Company's strategy as being both a project and a process in order to underline the different understandings of the impact the strategy ought to have on the organising in the Company.

systemise the already existing management style in the Company. This will make everyone, especially the younger managers, more familiar with the right management style.

After John's presentation, Bob enters the scene and presents the total accounts and a figure of 15% growth, something that they can all be proud of. Bob mentions that he believes it is an interesting company to work for and that everybody should be proud of themselves. He concludes his presentation by announcing that two of his employees will spend the following six months getting the new ERP system up and running.

### ***Walk the talk?***

At the break, Maria comes up to me and tells me she is not happy with John's presentation of the values. He should not have read them aloud the way he did, and he should have remained on subject. After the lunch break, Maria has invited an external consultant to give a presentation about value-based management. Maria does not feel that the process gets the attention that it deserves from some of the managers, and they have to work with the values if they are to be properly implemented. The consultant has already held some courses for the managers at various levels and he starts his presentation by announcing how important it is that the management "walk the talk" when an organisation wants to implement value-based management. Based on experiences from another value-implementation process, the consultant explains how an organisation with formal tools alone can not operationalise this process. All the managers have to live and breathe the values. After the consultant's presentation some of the managers tell the consultant how they have spent a lot of time on the values, and even incorporated them in their employee development interviews. Following, they argue that only parts of the Company's managers are supportive of the process. These managers believe that the strategy process is necessary to turn around if the Company wants to survive. In their opinion, the best way to internalise the values is to incorporate them into the daily running procedures and not differentiate between value-based management and everyday practice. To those managers the strategic initiatives are not a one-year-project. It is, on the contrary, the beginning of a longer lasting professionalization process. Another group of the managers in the Company are, however, less supportive of the idea of a complete turn around of the Company. They do not disagree with the values as such, but they believe that the values are already implemented and characterize a large part of the daily running procedures. In their opinion, the strategic initiatives are a project aimed specifically at the young and new managers. These younger managers are the ones who need to learn how to manage

according to the fundamental values of the Company. This group of managers agree that improvements in some areas would be beneficial, but they do not believe there is a need for a complete company turn around.

### *Let's go play*

At the coffee break after this discussion, Maria tells me that it was good that the differing opinions about the process had been discussed when everyone was there, and the discussion was a great starting point for the day's last session where Maria had invited two consultants to facilitate a session where all the managers would work in groups to illustrate the Company's values with LEGO® bricks. Maria was quite anxious about the session because both John and Bob had told her that the idea was ridiculous and in no way useful. However, when the session was initiated, all the managers quickly started building. Some of them, like John, made their own constructions, but most of them built the values together. The groups managed to build the values relatively fast and after a brief presentation of the constructions, they were asked to decide which of the constructions Maria should take home with her and exhibit at the headquarters and at the other offices.

After this last session of the formal part of the annual meeting, Maria thanked everyone for their participation and announced that there would be a tour of the newly opened headquarters shortly after the meeting for those who were interested. The annual meeting would continue in a more informal way at 7pm in front of the dinner room where they were to meet Maria. However, no one was allowed to enter the dining hall before Maria came because she had arranged a surprise. Before I left, Maria told me that they had decorated the whole dinner room as a saloon and everyone would be given a set of pistols and a cowboy hat and John would be appointed sheriff.

### **Structure and meshwork**

The third story will illustrate a diagram that depicts how the formal structure between the managers was presented to me by those I talked to and spent time with. The other part of the illustration shows what I understood relatively quickly, which was that the actors I talked to and spent time with all related to each other in their everyday practice. The official structure between the four service managers, the district manager, the department manager, the HR manager and the CEO is quite straightforward. The formal structure illustrates a well-arranged overview of who officially is related to whom, and who

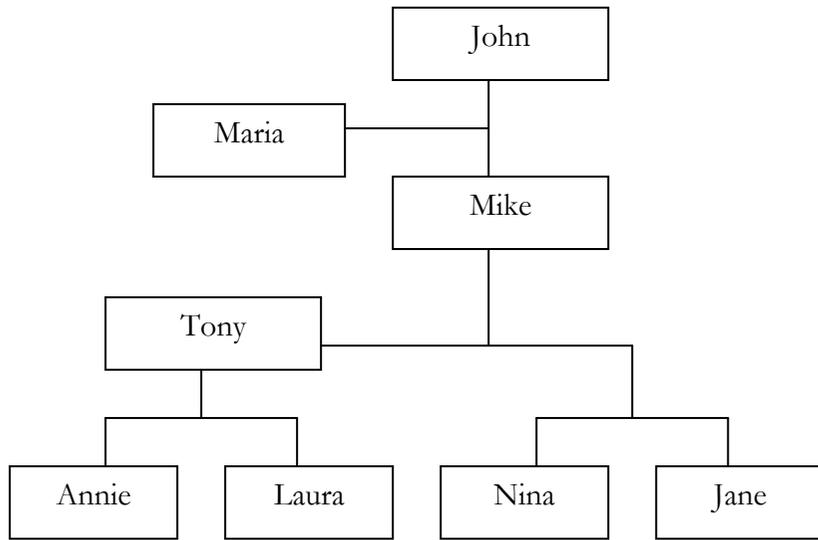
should communicate with whom. However, I had not been generating data for long before it became obvious to me that the actors all relate to each other and they all communicate with each other and take part in each other's understanding and daily practice. It soon became clear that the right side of model 1 illustrated the relations among the managers more realistically. The diagram on the right turned out to be quite significant in relation to how the strategy was being operationalised in the Company. It illustrates the relations among the actors as a meshwork.

*“Life is lived, I reasoned, along paths, not just in places,  
and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too,  
that people grow into a knowledge of the world around them,  
and describe this world in the stories they tell.”* (Ingold, 2008: 2)

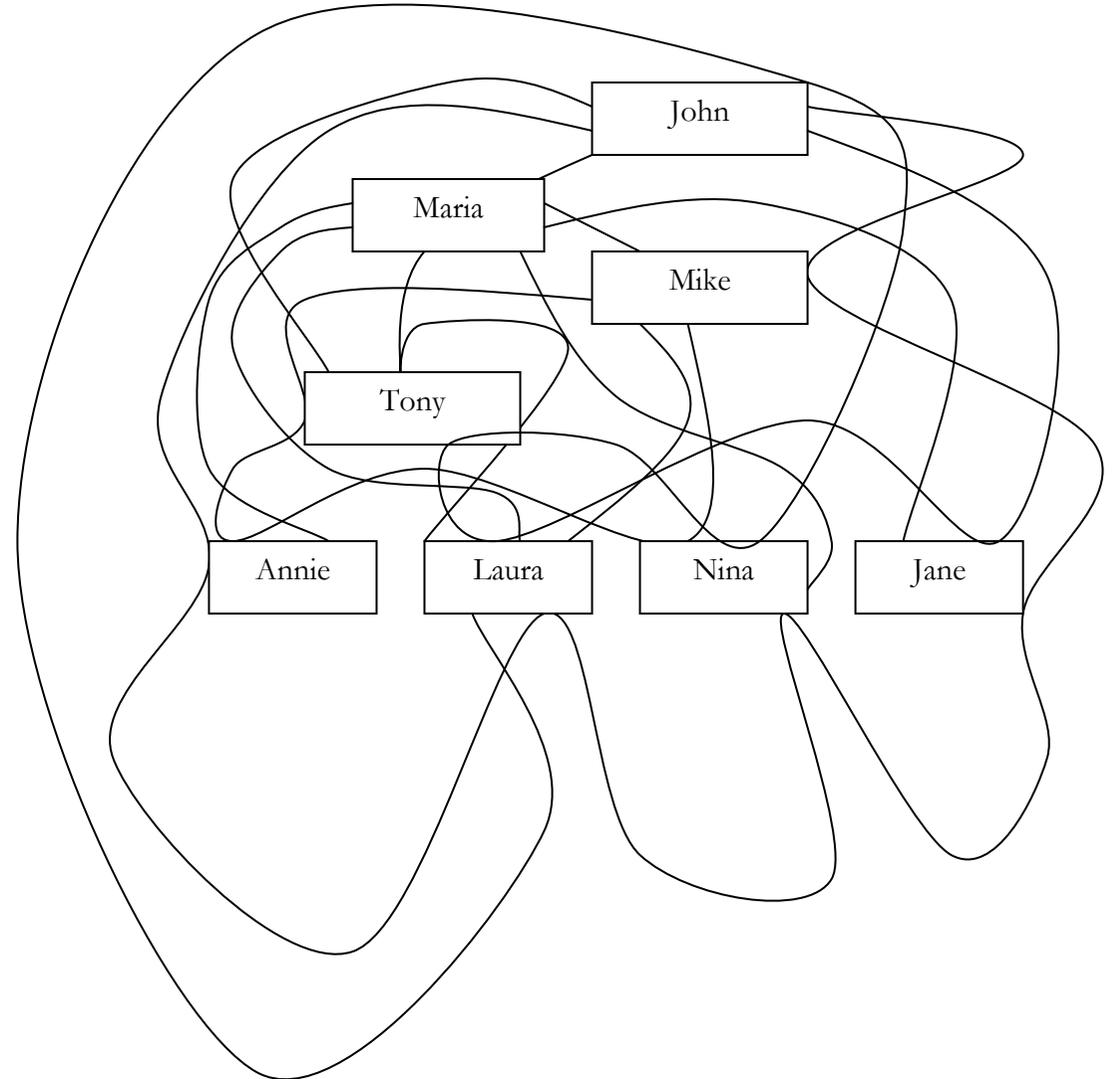
Meshwork is an ever emergent illustration of how actors live their lives (Ingold, 2008: 80-81). As actors live their lives, they do not follow a steady structure or communicate according to pre-defined structures, they make sense of the situations they are in while they are in them (Ingold, 2008: 81). Living a life is like wayfaring. Actors do not follow an already sketched out route, they try to understand the situations they are in, and in the process of understanding the situations, the actors are, simultaneously, constructing them (Ingold, 2008: 15-16). Knowledge about a situation is not something that pre-exists. It is, rather, something that occurs in the relations among actions and actors within the situation (Ingold, 2008: 90). Knowledge is created through the actors' stories (Ingold, 2009: 206). As actors tell stories they relate past with present, and actors with events, while simultaneously constructing the lines that represent how they live their lives. These lines are entangled and interwoven in each other and they form the meshwork that illustrates how different actors' lives continually criss-cross and emerge through their attempts to understand themselves, other actors and the world.

*Model 1*

**Structure**



**Meshwork**



The meshwork illustration of the everyday relations is more complex and at the same time more dynamic than the structural outline. This perspective offers me a possibility to follow how the lines between the actors in the Company are continually being created and developed through their actions and attempts to construct meaning. The lines between the actors do not represent steady relations or routes to be followed to gain knowledge about a situation. On the contrary, the lines represent wayfaring (Ingold, 2008a: 77, 2008b: 203). The meshwork perspective argues that actors construct the map as they go (Ingold, 2008b: 199). This means that actors enact the situations they try to understand. The reason is, following Weick, that actors think by acting (Weick, 1988: 305).

Enactment is a term that Weick especially works with in his understanding of the interplay between sensemaking and action. Action is the raw material for sensemaking because action is always a little further ahead than understanding (Weick, 1988: 306, 308). Nevertheless, the actual actions, simultaneously, impact the events. This means that the events that actors retrospectively make sense of are actually parts of their own making (Weick, 1988: 306). This again means that when actors act, they; "... bring events and structures into existence and set them into motion... structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there before they took action." (Weick, 1988: 306) Wayfaring and enactment have similar features as both terms underline how actions and sensemaking generate each other and are parts of what characterises how actors live their lives.

By following the lines the actors in the Company relationally make, I can generate knowledge about the paths they have chosen, how they understand the situation they are in and how they choose to act. By looking at the actors' concrete and daily actions, I can learn more about how they relationally make sense and understand the world around them. This knowledge is both interesting and significant because I am interested in understanding how the Company's strategy is being brought to life. According to Benson (1977) actors are continually constructing the world around them through their relations and their everyday actions. The meanings which the actors construct guide their actions (Benson, 1977: 3). This means that the meshwork among the actors and how they intersubjectively make sense are processes that are quite significant in relation to understanding how the Company's strategy is enacted.

## **The strategy**

The last story depicts a rather structured way of how the strategy developed over a two year period. It asks what the initial intentions of the strategy were and how the strategy was transformed and formally operationalised through the period. Some plans and actions changed over the two year period, others were further developed, and still others were abandoned as the strategy was implemented. The Company had not worked on their strategy for more than ten years, but due to a steady growth in size and an increased employee group, the top management decided that it was time to look at their strategy and systemise the standard operating procedures and the management in the Company.

A consultancy firm, a steering committee and the management group in the Company worked on ideas about how to operationalise the strategy. As this work was set in motion, different plans were formulated and actions initiated. At that point of time, the Company had grown rapidly during the last five years and had mainly reached its current size and geographical spread through John's analytic work and knowledge about the industry, which had enabled him to make strategic buy-ups at the right time. On top of that, he had successfully beted on attaining certifications. At the time the Company attained certification it was almost unheard of in the industry, and today it is conceived as a blueprint for quality. Therefore, it still gives the Company a competitive advantage compared to many of their competitors which lack these certifications.

John had always been engaged in the daily operations of the Company and it was natural for everybody that he made decisions when he believed it was necessary. This means that up until these strategic initiatives the Company had been managed in a very informal way. The management style had been very pragmatic and natural; when a problem surfaced it was handled by John and the responsible manager. The Company had, however, especially within the last five years, reached an average turnover increase of 10% p.a. and had nearly 1500 employees. Therefore, it was difficult to maintain the informal management style, keep up with the fast growth and still offer the same service. As a result the management group found it necessary to do something. Lucy discovered an EU social fund programme that allowed the Company to apply for funds to hire a consultant to facilitate a strategy project. The only condition was that the Company would be willing to invest some money in the project as well. As John found this to be a relatively cost free opportunity to formalise the management style in the Company, the strategy project was initiated.

*Spring - summer year zero:*

- A consultancy firm was hired to conduct a SWOT analysis and participate in making action plans. A steering committee consisting of John, Bob, Lucy and three consultants were in charge of most of the work. The management group in the Company took part in some meetings and group work activities, but not all, as the steering committee handled most of the work.
  
- During the summer, a SWOT analysis was conducted by the management group indicating what the Company could strengthen, and the Company chose to focus on:
  - A need to build stronger and longer lasting relations with existing customers.
  - Difficulties in attracting and maintaining qualified assistants.
  - A need to improve the competences of the managers.
  - A need to improve internal communication.
  - Clearer statements about goals, strategy, mission and vision.
  - Define, announce and market the Company values.
  - Increased focus on developing new products and service solutions and making them accessible online.
  - A shift from focussing primarily on the daily operating procedures to focussing on development initiatives, like sales.
  
- The management group worked out an action plan indicating what the Company would initiate:
  - Producing a value handbook before the annual meeting in October year zero
  - Hiring a HR manager before the annual meeting in October year zero. The HR manager would report to Lucy. The EU social fund partially pays the HR manager's salary until the end of year one.
  - The HR manager should, together with Lucy, take the responsibility for establishing an internal academy that would offer: a module-based management education program, technical courses for the assistants in the cleaning department, and courses on environmental and psychological working environmental and health conditions. Besides the academy, the HR manager should construct and develop new projects, conduct an analysis of what it takes to become the best workplace, establish a measurement concerning the softer management areas and implement lean principles. The

development projects should be ready between the end of year zero and the first half of year one.

- Hiring a facility manager before the annual meeting in October year zero who would have the job to fully develop the facility concept<sup>2</sup> and locate potential collaborators. These developing projects should be ready by the middle of year one. A head hunter company had the job of finding the right candidate; someone with experience within the field and someone with good contacts. John had the overall responsibility for finding collaborators for the first facility solutions.
- Present the strategy for the employees at the annual meeting in October year zero.
- Fully develop the Company's own cleaning concept before the end of year zero.
- Fully develop the future canteen concept before the end of year zero.
- Strengthen the internal communication within the first half of year one.
- Strengthen the marketing effort within the first half of year one.
- Develop a new strategy within four years

All of the areas the Company chose to focus on in the SWOT analysis were put into statements about concrete actions that should be taken within a year. In most cases one of the members of the steering committee had the overall responsibility for the tasks. What is interesting to note here is that all the initiatives were to be carried through before the summer of year one. This is interesting because it draws attention to the fact that the strategy was at this moment perceived more as a one-year project than a turn-around process.

***Fall year zero– spring year one:***

- The Company received some further funds to continue the strategic initiatives.
- Maria is hired as the new HR manager. Lucy and Maria start working on value implementation. They plan various courses and develop the value handbook, which is based on seven values, four existing and three prospective.

---

<sup>2</sup> Facility is a concept within the industry that refers to solutions, where the Company perform multiple services at one site like for example both cleaning, canteen service, watering of flowers and polishing windows.

- Lucy and Maria begin to establish courses focusing on: management and culture, personal development and communication and technical qualifications. They divide the courses into three categories: mandatory courses, requested courses that employees were advised to participate in and optional courses for those interested in continuing their career in the Company. The values serve as the starting point for all the courses, hence the courses are founded and based on value-based management, and the presentations and assignments at the courses were made to focus on how to manage and handle culture, communication, personal development and technical qualifications based on the Company's seven values.
- Facility manager is hired who starts fully developing the facility concept.

The idea behind both the academy and the facility solutions is, based on the values, to strengthen the existing relationships with customers and make the Company a more interesting partner for future customers as well. If the customer not only has the Company clean for them, but also has them polish their windows, water the flowers, wash their door mats and make food for them, then it is going to be difficult for the customer to replace them. Another part of the idea is, also based on the values, to make the Company a more attractive workplace for existing and future assistants. If the assistants can develop their competences and also have a workday with varying tasks so they not only clean, but also water the plants, prepare meetings etc. then the job would be more interesting for them. Another idea with the academy is, together with the local municipalities, to establish an integration programme that would offer the assistants language courses along side the technical courses. The project could remedy the recruiting difficulties the Company experienced and could be a springboard to further education for the participants.

***Spring year one:***

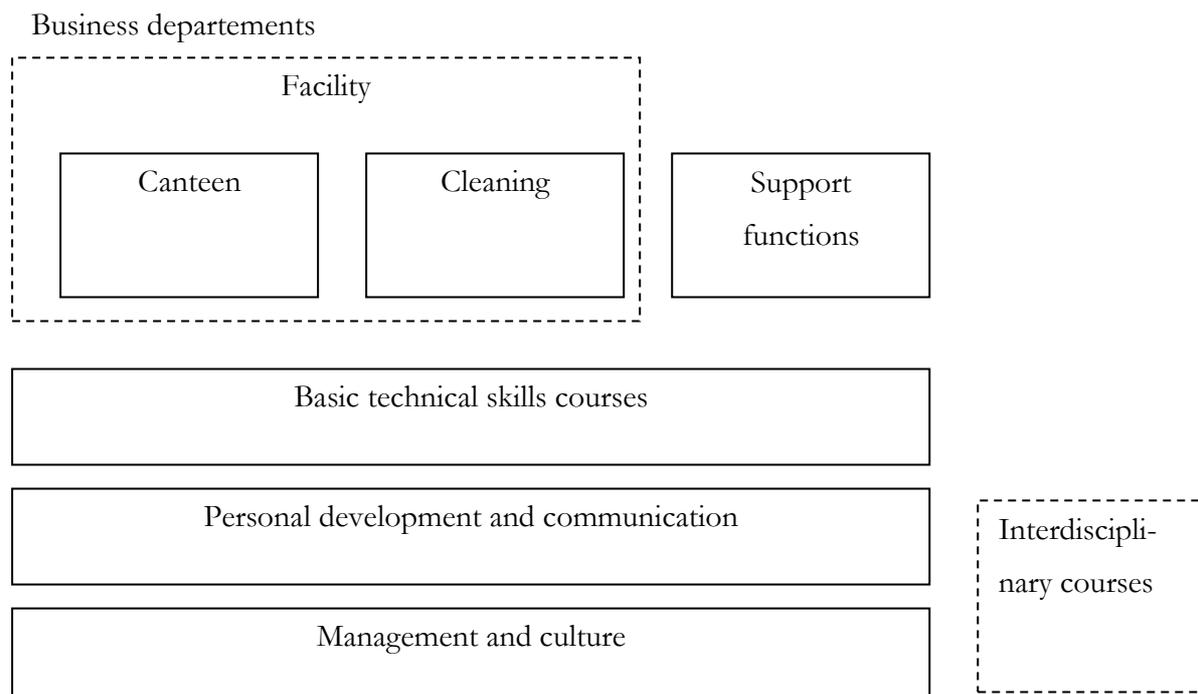
- The education program offered by the academy is fully developed and offers courses on: cleaning, food preparation, service, facility, support functions, basic technical skills, personal development and communication and management and culture. An idea introduced here is that the managers, employees and Maria should also facilitate some courses to enhance communication and learning horizontally in the Company. Each of the three business

departments in the Company should have their own competence council consisting of five people who will identify which courses would be interesting and necessary for their department to participate in.

A change from the action plans in year zero is that the canteen service should also attend the various courses and the module-based management education programme. Initially, the canteen manager had announced that the canteen department would under no circumstances participate in the strategy, but somehow after Maria was hired and started working on the process, the managers and the assistants in canteen department were included in the academy's educational programme.

- The various courses and the first module-based management education programme are initiated based on the ideas in figure 1. Each business unit has its own technical courses and the courses on personal development and communication and management and culture are interdisciplinary.

*Figure 1*



- Lucy resigns and leaves the work with the academy and the values to Maria. A new quality manager is to be hired and will report to Maria instead of to John.

An interesting shift here is that Maria was hired by Lucy and acted under her because the HR Department was originally a part of the Quality Department. Nevertheless, somewhere between Lucy's resignation and hiring of a new Quality Department manager, the formal structure between the HR Department and the Quality Department was changed, and the Quality Department became a part of the HR Department. During conversations with Maria and John, they agreed that the new Quality manager was going to act under Maria. This meant that Maria started reporting directly to John.

***Summer – winter year one:***

- Maria continues the work with values and the academy alone. She focuses on implementing the first annual employee satisfaction analysis and developing material for the first annual employee development interviews.
- Department Manager, Mike, and District Manager, Tony, begin working in close collaboration with Maria to operationalise the values.
- The annual meeting year one has value-based management as its fulcrum. John states that the value-based management project should be implemented within the year.
- Maria applies for extra funds but the application is rejected.

***Spring - winter year two:***

- The first employee satisfaction analysis is conducted focussing on how well the managers perform value-based management in the beginning of year two.
- Maria receives her academy budget from John estimating £4.000 for year two.
- Maria resigns in spring of year two.

It is interesting here to note a shift in focus. Keeping in mind the courses and education taking place within the academy ambit in year one, the budget for academy activities for year two estimating £4.000 seems small. It would be very difficult to offer the same variety of courses and education with that budget, no matter how much the Company's own managers took on teaching activities. On the other hand, if one keeps in mind John's statement about the values being fully implemented within the year at the annual meeting, the academy budget for year two is maybe not so small and insufficient after all. Almost all the managers have completed three of the four module-based education programmes (and the fourth module was never scheduled). Besides, many of the managers have participated in the interdisciplinary courses, so the need for these courses in year two is perhaps smaller. The technical courses are not as cost-intensive since many of the internal managers or HR assistant Debbie functioned as the teachers. The idea with discussing this is not to argue that Maria's resignation is directly related to the smaller HR budget. The idea is to indicate that there are different opinions related to how the strategy should be operationalised and the impact the strategic initiatives should have on the organising of the Company. Are we talking about a one-year project or a turn-around process?

- New CEO Jacob is hired from competing company in spring year two and John becomes the Vice President of the board.
- Service manager Nina resigns early in the summer of year two.
- Mike, the Regional Manager, resigns late in the summer of year two.
- New HR Manager Steve is hired in autumn of year two.
- The annual meeting in year two has recruiting, cultural diversity, motivation and retention as its fulcrums.
- Jacob initiates a countrywide tour together with Steve, where they present the Company's new strategy that jump-starts in year three.
- The Facility Manager resigns at the end of year two.

What is worth noting is how the whole facility concept almost disappears during the work with operationalising the strategy. Looking back in the documents from year zero and early year, it is obvious that the Facility Manager was meant to play a central role in strengthening the Company's profile as a company focussing on offering facility solutions. For a period, the word facility was expressed in the Company's vision to clearly indicate the dedication to the concept, but it later

disappeared again. The Facility Manager held a session at the annual meeting in year one, where he talked about all the possibilities the concept could offer and he honoured a service manager who had successfully cleared the way for cleaning at a site, where they prepared food. There were also stories circulating at the headquarters about a few other successful projects but all on a small scale and of minor importance. The Facility Manager gradually received other tasks less related to facility solutions. He was now given the responsibility of updating the Company's website, making new visiting cards and being in charge of some outreach sales activities and internal sales training activities in the different regions. It seemed as if he never really came to realise and incorporate the facility concept, and at the end of year two he resigned, and the Company did not re-advertise his post.

By following how some of the initiatives from the SWOT analysis and the action plan were accepted, rejected, morphed or further developed during the two years my data covers, it becomes obvious that the actors' sensemaking processes are significant in relation to which elements of the strategic initiatives get operationalised and in which ways (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 28, 33, 38f). Having this timely and emergent development of the strategy in the back of my head along with the knowledge of the actors' everyday practices, it enables me to follow the co-constituting relationship between organising and strategising.

### **What is interesting here?**

This thesis is about how strategising happens through relational and everyday attempts to construct meaning. It tells about different ways actors together with other actors make sense of an initiated strategy and operationalise it through their daily organising. The thesis draws attention to the significance of relationships and to the significance of actors' everyday organising as they make sense of and realise a strategy through their actions.

In this thesis practice evolves around what actors do (Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008: 91). According to Benson (1977) the doings of actors within an organisational setting evolves mostly around the reconstruction of social arrangements (Benson, 1977: 5). These doings are congruent with how actors within an organisation act and construct meaning with each other on an everyday basis. Following Whittington (2006) the concept practice can be divided into three integrated concepts: strategy praxis, practices and practitioners (Whittington, 2006: 619). Strategy praxis refers to the actual activities, practices refer to the shared routines of behaviour, norms, and procedures for thinking and

acting and practitioners refer to the strategist who both perform praxis and carry its practices (Whittington, 2006: 619). Whittington (2006) argues that it is important to work with all three concepts and combine a micro- and macro-perspective if one wants to understand the practice of strategising. Carter, Clegg & Kornberger (2008) argue, on the other hand, that one should forget the word strategy, at least for a moment, and instead look at the practices that constitute strategy, which are: routines, language games, actions, artefacts and symbols. The practices become strategic through retrospective sensemaking (Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008: 92-93).

Orlikowski (2010) works with three different perspectives on practice: a phenomenon, a perspective and a philosophy. Her understanding of practice as a perspective is in line with Benson's understanding. Within this perspective, practice is perceived as: "...a central lens through which to understand organizations, examining the recurrent doings and saying of actors and how these are both shaped by and shape structural conditions and consequences..." (Orlikowski, 2010: 29). In this study, I perceive practice much like Benson and Orlikowski's second perspective, where practice evolves around the everyday relational sensemaking attempts and actions that constitute the emergent organising of the actors within the Company.

*The people we study appropriate the concepts we develop and, in so doing, change the reality that we have studied." (Orlikowski, 2010: 29)*

I cannot understand the Company and how the actors operationalise the strategic initiatives properly without a methodological and theoretical perspective. Simultaneously, I cannot develop a usable methodological and theoretical perspective without generating an understanding of the actors' everyday relational sensemaking practices in the Company. This is an understanding which is embedded in the Company. Simultaneously, I study the Company from a certain perspective which has an effect on the understanding I generate (Benson, 1977: 6). This means that the stories about the Company presented here have been constructed hand-in-hand with the chosen perspective (Benson, 1977: 17). In a way, they are enacted stories based on my theoretical and methodological perspective as well as the actors and events in the Company.

Before I start my story, I would like you to take a minute and think about whom you turn to at work when you have something you want to discuss, something you are unsure about how to handle or when you are stuck in the middle of something and need advice on before you can proceed. Then try to think

about why you turn to them and how they help you? What impact do their comments have and how do they shape your subsequent actions and the way you understand the situation?

The intention with this thesis is, through the study of strategy in practice in a company, to demonstrate that whom actors turn to in their everyday practice at work and how they do that is both interesting and important when strategic processes are initiated. The premise for stating this is that relations between actors are significant. Actors construct meaning together about the world, others and themselves. At the same time, actors also make sense of concrete situations through their gestures<sup>3</sup> and their actions (Mead, 1974: 75-76). The meaning actors construct is generated by the understanding I have about my job, the company I work for, my surroundings, my colleagues, customers and myself. It is an understanding that I have constructed with other actors through retrospective sensemaking about previously conducted actions. Simultaneously, the relational sensemaking constitutes my further actions (Gergen, 2009: XV, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 410-411). This means that the actors that I turn to in my everyday practice take part in how I understand a situation, the meaning I construct about it and the way I act.

The advocated perspective draws attention to the co-constituting relationship between construction of meaning and the everyday actions that represent the organising in the Company. Following Benson's line of reasoning (1977), institutional events like the Company are undertaking are constructed by relational and everyday mundane actions that lead to social structures within an organisation that actors subsequently relate to (Benson, 1977: 3). Expanding upon this perspective, organising within an organisation as the Company does can be understood as the actors' everyday actions which originates in concepts like norms, routines, values, meaning structures and moral orders. Actors organise themselves in ways that make sense to them at a present moment and simultaneously realise the constructed meaning through their actions (Vološinov, 1973: 19-23). Everyday organising and relationally constructed sensemaking are so closely connected within this perspective that it is only by grasping organising that sensemaking can be understood and vice versa (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 11). Everyday and relationally constructed practices, actions and understandings, therefore, become pivotal in the attempt to understand how a company is organised and how it is continually changed and developed through actors' small, emergent and daily shifts in routines, values, norms, meaning structures and moral orders (Chia & Holt, 2009, Alvesson & Svingsson, 2008).

---

<sup>3</sup> The reason why the concept gesture is used here is to underline the significance of Mead and his understanding about how actors construct meaning relationally with each other through their gestures (Mead, 1974).

The meaning actors relationally construct is embodied in norms, values, routines, meaning structures (Schütz, 1964) and moral orders (Davies & Harré, 1991), which they share with the colleagues and actors whom they turn to in their everyday work practice. As Berger & Luckmann write, most of the actors' organising, thus, evolves around routines that have been institutionalised over time otherwise actors could not comprehend the small and continual everyday changes (1996: 51-53). What is exceptionally interesting in my case is what happens with these norms, values, routines, meaning structures and moral orders when something new happens or is initiated. How does the everyday organising constitute the strategising and how does the strategising constitute the everyday organising?

From time to time, the CEO or the top management of companies decide that their organisation needs to change in a more profound and systematic way. By the actors, such changes are often characterised as a new strategy. The next questions are: What happens then? How is the daily organising affected by such a process? How is the strategy met, and how do the actors in the organisation make sense of the strategy and operationalise it after it has left the drawing board?

Within the extensive strategy literature there are many answers to these questions (Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2008, Lynch, 2003, Ahlstrand et al. 1998, Mintzberg 1994). While I generated data I was also looking at how the daily organising in the Company was affected and how the actors made sense of the strategic initiatives in the Company. This draws attention to a more process-oriented approach to strategy as scholars like Pettigrew and Mintzberg have argued for many years. They propose that a more process-oriented approach to strategy as an emergent phenomenon where the implementation of a strategy is not conceived as a straight-forward implementation process (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 258-260, Pettigrew, 1992: 5f). Later, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel (1998) presented at least ten different ways to work with and understand strategy, depending on one's perception of the world. Subsequently, I found the works of Balogun and Alvesson who state that how strategic changes are operationalised depend to a large degree on local interpretations and especially middle managers' sensemaking (Balogun, 2006: 43, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 28, 33). Balogun is one of the founders of the very active community; Strategy-as Practice (Whittington, 2006, Johnson, 2007 Jarzabkowski, 2007 & Seidl, 2007), which gives primacy to practice and actors in the attempt to understand strategy and strategists.

Both Balogun and Alvesson are inspired by more general phenomenological, critical and psychological work by Schütz and Berger & Luckmann, Mead, Weick and Gergen. In the wake of these important

scholars, this thesis, to me, is not only a story about operationalising a strategy in a Danish medium-sized cleaning company. It is an attempt to discuss how such theories and the methodological perspective used here enable us to approach and understand strategy and strategic processes in all its peculiarities. Based on a chapter Balogun wrote together with Johnson and Beech in 2010 in the Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice, they encourage more scholars to enrich the Strategy-as-Practice field by being more close-with practice and spending time trying to understand the practitioners and how they strategise (Johnson, Balogun, Beech, 2010: 254). My aim with this thesis is to take part in this knowledge producing debate by working on strategy from an everyday, relational and sensemaking perspective.

This thesis is about what happens when a company initiates a strategy. By looking at how managers at various levels in the Company over a period of time welcome and operationalise such a new strategy, I will be able to discuss and illustrate how the managers' daily attempts to construct meaning with one another about the strategic initiatives play a central role in how the strategy was operationalised and which processes were initiated. It is a thesis that looks at how managers at various levels juggle the requests from customers, colleagues, employees and managers at higher levels and try to make sense of it all. The managers attempt to combine daily organising with the new strategic initiatives in a meaningful way in order to meet the demands and requests they are faced with daily from both actors within as well as outside the Company. The research question I immerse myself in is:

*How does strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking?*

Enhancing this, I analyse important parts of the interplay between organising and strategising as the managers enact the strategy through relational sensemaking and actions. This strategising takes place in many, sometimes opposing ways, as the managers in the Company turn to different colleagues and other actors to make sense of the strategy.

The research question will be addressed through stories about how eight managers at various management levels within the Company constructed meaning about the strategy with one another over a 1½ year period and how they operationalised it in their daily practice. As the stories, examples and discussions in the thesis will illuminate, there is not one common and shared understanding about how the strategy is to be operationalised, but many. The eight managers turn to different customers, colleagues, managers and other actors in their attempts to make sense of the strategic initiatives and

vitalise them. The outcome is that there are several sometimes opposing strategising processes going on simultaneously in the Company. This leads to much frustration within the Company and among the managers in their daily practices. This internal frustration does not affect how the Company is perceived by its customers and surroundings, since it is rather successful and still makes a decent profit.

By using eight individual work-life stories about how the managers perceive their jobs, as well as selected scenes from courses, annual meetings, monthly regional meetings and everyday organising, I am able to illustrate how the eight managers use each other relationally to construct meaning about the strategy and operationalise it on a daily basis. Although the eight work-life stories at first appear rather idiosyncratic, it quickly becomes obvious that the way each of the managers perceive the Company, each other and themselves are relationally constructed and are being upheld and modified through continual and relational reaffirmation. This reaffirmation takes place as the eight managers attempt to construct meaning with each other about how to operationalise the strategy.

These daily sensemaking attempts deals with how the strategy is to be operationalised throughout the Company on a more abstract level, but in practice the sensemaking attempts deal with daily practicalities, routine questions and small challenges like: How do we divide up the customers in a sensible way? How often do we conduct quality reports at the sites? How do we run management meetings at the different management levels? I have approached the Company with a direct focus on everyday practice and sensemaking and an indirect focus on strategising with the assumption that it is the managers' everyday organising and sensemaking that constitutes to how the strategy is operationalised. The idea has not been to assign primacy to organising, but to draw attention to a significant assumption in this thesis, namely that organising emerges as much through strategising as strategising emerges through organising, and that one must be grasped in order to understand the other. It is important to understand the managers' everyday organising to be able to understand how they make sense of the strategic initiatives. Simultaneously, it is only through such an understanding that I am capable of seeing how the strategic initiatives alter and modify the managers' everyday organising.

It is the eight managers' debates at monthly meetings, and discussions at the courses and the stories they told me during the interview-conversations that, together with written material from the Company, constitute the empirical data that I have used to understand the practical and concrete interplay between organising and strategising. I have observed how ideas to operationalise a strategy in very

concrete and practical actions have been presented, made sense of, modified and in the end either routinised or rejected. I have seen how some managers changed their organising while the strategy was operationalised, while other managers refused to change. And I have seen, during the period, how some managers chose to leave the Company and others chose to join it.

I draw attention to practice and strategists by looking at how the managers construct meaning relationally and which stories they tell in their attempts to find a meaningful way to strategise. Methodologically, this means that I have organised the thesis as a mixture of personal stories, theoretical inputs, scenes from meetings or courses and discussions. All together, this illustrate the interplay between the managers' relationally sensemaking and actions and the interplay between the various forms of organising and strategising that continually take place in the Company as the actors do their best to operationalise the strategy

The first four stories I present in chapter 3 evolve around how the operative Service Managers Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie organise their workday around routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders and how they attempt to operationalise the strategic initiatives. Chapter 4 gives a perspective on organisations in an emergent perspective. This is followed in chapter 5 by two stories that illustrate how the Regional Manager, Mike, and the District Manager, Tony, attempt to operationalise the strategy in concrete and practical actions that the service managers should use in their daily organising and how this is welcomed by the service managers. These stories lead to my perspective on strategic initiatives as being about strategy in practice and strategy as practice more than strategy formulation. This perspective is presented in chapter 6. This is followed in chapter 7 by a story about HR Manager Maria's attempt to work with internalising value-based management throughout the Company, and the challenges she experiences as she tries to alter and change the way the managers have organised their everyday work. To theorise this, in chapter 8 I present how actors relationally construct meaning. Behind all these processes is CEO John who has initiated the strategic process. As his story in chapter 9 will illustrate, he does the best he can to influence the way it is being operationalised. To conclude the thesis, the last chapter will, based on everyday examples, emphasise how strategising and organising are closely connected and co-constitute each other.

As already stated, the process studied is in no way a straight forward implementation process where the ideas stemming from the top management gradually sink in to the managers and employees. It is much more a meshed process of sensemaking that runs in many different and sometimes opposing directions.

Some initiatives are locked into place, some are turned upside down, some are carried out as intended and some come to nothing, all in the managers' attempt to make sense of it all and 'set things right'.

I have done the best I could to illustrate this meshwork of meaning construction taking place on an everyday basis as the managers attempt to make sense of the strategic initiatives, in a just way. This means that I have not tried to organise stories and events to make them fit together. I have not categorised the content of what the managers have talked about during the interview-observations, meetings or courses to organise their conversations around certain topics, and I have not attempted to figure out how concrete words are connected to concrete actions. I have chosen this approach because I believe that the interplay between relational sensemaking and action, between organising and strategising, is so complex and intertwined that it is close to impossible to comprehend the complete a meshwork going on in organisations as strategies are set in motion. That does not, however, make strategic processes any less interesting to study.

The perspective chosen in this thesis will to some readers, who are more used to interpreting strategy as a more formal phenomenon where the management analyses the situation, assesses alternative solutions and makes strategic decisions, perhaps seem as a bit strange and even 'un-strategic'. While I recognise this, I argue that there are different ways to analyse and understand strategic processes. The perspective presented here is not an attempt to argue for a more accurate way to study strategising, but is thought as a supplement to the existing literature on strategy. I will, through this thesis, try to demonstrate that looking at strategy from an everyday sensemaking and relational perspective adds new understanding to the existing field of knowledge about strategy and strategic processes.



# Chapter 2

---

## **A way to study strategising<sup>4</sup>**

*This chapter will introduce my methodological sources of inspiration and the concrete methods I have used during the study to generate data and later work with these data. The chapter presents how I came in contact with the Company, made an agreement with them, when and how I spent 1½ years in the Company generating data and afterwards how I worked with my data. These practical presentations will be accompanied by theoretical inputs that frame the study and explain why I have chosen the methods I have. This chapter will also illustrate that there is a co-constituting interplay between the methods I have chosen and the data I work with. The actors in the Company and the situations I have observed and taken part in have helped frame my methodology, while simultaneously the data I have generated has been influenced by my theoretical guidance. Data, theory and method have emerged hand-in-hand during the study and have in that sense constructed each other.*

### **I look for a way in**

Much like the Stranger in a Schützian understanding (Schütz II, 1964: 91ff) I came to the Company through an invitation to study the strategic initiatives. I was curious about what it was like to work there, and I soon began questioning much of what was taken for granted among the actors in the Company (Schütz II, 1964: 96). I was well aware that my purpose with being in the Company was not to become a part of the Company. I came as a researcher and my area of interest evolved around what happens after a strategic process was initiated, how it was welcomed and operationalised and how it affected the actors within a company as well as the actual company. Nevertheless, I entered the Company with the curiosity, humility and openness of a stranger coming to a foreign land. I had no knowledge about the Company and what it was like to work there; and for that reason, I did not know how a process like this, on a concrete level, would evolve. To generate such knowledge I was interested

---

<sup>4</sup> This chapter is written in past tense and is an attempt to make sense of the methods I used during the 1½ years I spent in the Company and to present my theoretical sources of inspirations and guidance.

in finding out how the actors understood and interpreted the world around them and how they acted on an everyday basis.

I wanted, with time, to be familiar with their cultural patterns, learn what recipes the actors used as precepts for their actions and to understand their social world. However, I wanted more than a mere passive understanding of their language. I wanted to be able to see the different shades of their perceptions, hence I wanted to learn the main elements of the jargon, technical terms, dialects, group specific connotations and fringes the actors used (Schütz II, 1964: 95, 100f). I wanted to know the common-sense knowledge and schemata the actors used to guide their actions and interpretations of stimulus (Schütz I, 1967: 93-95). This approach stems from a subjective tradition that perceives the world as a social construction where the world-as-meaning is the point of origin for understanding and knowledge (Clark & Fast, 2008:79).

*“... the cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter  
but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable  
topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic  
situations but a problematic situation itself.”*

(Schütz II, 1964: 104)

If I, with time, could comprehend the emergent cultural patterns among the actors, I could learn more about the way they organised their everyday world. This would help me understand how the actors welcomed and understood the strategic initiatives and how they worked with operationalising them on an everyday basis. I was also interested in understanding how the strategic initiatives influenced the actors' organising within the Company. Inspired by Johnson et al. (2007: 3), I was interested in studying what actors do when they engage in strategic processes, how do they interpret and make sense of the situation and what it leads to. I was interested in the on-going constructions and reconstructions of meaning that the actors in the Company generated about what was happening during the strategy. I had the guiding assumption that these sensemaking processes were locally constructed among the actors in the Company through their everyday conversations, stories and actions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 28, 33).

### ***Knowledge as generated***

Following Schütz, one might argue that as a researcher, I came more as a disinterested scientific onlooker of the social world, than a stranger. One argument could be that I was not, like a stranger, interested in being socialised into the community, hence I did not group the Company around me as the centre. Likewise, another argument could be that I did not have any practical interest in the situations or the outcome of them (Schütz I, 1967: 36f, Schütz II, 1964: 92f). But a central difference in being a stranger and a scientific onlooker evolves around how knowledge about the cultural patterns and common sense in this 'new world' is generated. The phenomenological scientist, according to Schütz (I, 1967: 37), ideally should act as an onlooker and detached himself from his biographical situation in the world. The phenomenologist should put the world in brackets and suspend his/her belief in the reality of the world (Schütz I, 1967: 104, 229).

The stranger can not and does not try to detach himself from his biographical situation. An actor, like the stranger, does not in his everyday life bracket his belief in the reality of the world. Instead, he brackets his doubt in the reality of the world (Schütz I, 1967: 229). Only by experiencing a 'shock' that compels an actor to change his beliefs in the reality of the world does he revise what he takes for granted (Schütz I, 1967: 231). As the stranger comes to a new world he, time and time again, experiences that what he takes for granted is of no use in the new world. Time and time again, he experiences a 'shock' that compels him to revise what he can take for granted. To understand and become a part of the new world, the stranger goes through a continual process of inquiry into what is taken for granted in the new world (Schütz II, 1964: 105). This inquiry process continues until the field of adventure becomes a shelter and the questionable topic of investigation becomes a matter of course. By then, the stranger is no longer a stranger. In this inquiry process the stranger plays an active part because the only way to generate knowledge about the new world is to take part in it.

Looking back at how I generated knowledge about the common-sense knowledge that the actors in the Company shared, my approach was more like that of a stranger than that of a disinterested scientific onlooker. While I generated knowledge, I engaged actively in relationships with the actors and made an impact on the actors and the social situation I took part in, just as they did on me. My language and my actions are, like anyone else's, expressions of that which is taken for granted and the common sense I carry with me. The way I move, the questions I ask and how I ask them cannot help but represent the jargon, technical terms, dialects, group specific connotations and fringes that I take for granted and that

I use to make sense of the world. If I did not have them, I would not know how to act or how to express myself.

So instead of attempting to detach myself from my biographical (and relationally constructed) situation, I came as a curious stranger interested in figuring out how the actors made sense of their everyday work and the new strategic initiatives. My intention was not to be socialised into their organisational and social world, but I came with the premise that if I would be able to understand what the actors in the Company thought as they strategised, then I would have to take an active part in their sensemaking attempts. This meant that socialising and relational partaking in each others sensemaking activities inevitable occurred. It was, however, a different form of socialisation than a stranger experience, because her/his purpose would be to be socialised into the social world and mine were not. My purpose was to understand how the actors made sense of the world, and in that process, I perceived it as my role to assist them in telling stories about this world the best way I could. Nevertheless, it would, like Robson writes, be difficult not to “go native” during the prolonged involvement in their social worlds (Robson, 2002: 174). This would not, however, devalue the research, lower my curiosity or make the generated data any less interesting or relevant.

Inspired by Johnson, Balogun & Beech (2010), I approached the Company with a ‘close-to’ or ‘close-with’ methodology where a degree of closeness with the participating actors is advocated (p. 250). These scholars argue for a close and trust-based research relationship with the participating actors. This can be achieved through longitudinal studies, the use of different data generating methods and repeated one-to-one meetings with the participating actors where the researcher engages actively in the production of data. Johnson, Balogun & Beech (2010) advocate that the researcher take a more active and close part in the construction of data if he/she wants to learn how the participating actors act and understand the world around them (Johnson, Balogun & Beech , 2010: 252, 254).

Another reason why, I believe, I came more as a stranger has to do with the assumption that a disinterested scientist can detach himself from his biographical (and relationally constructed) situation and focus solely on digging out the actor’s unique and individual feelings and thoughts about a given phenomenon. This assumption presupposes that the actor’s feelings and thoughts are present beforehand, and are given to me (if I succeed in asking the right questions, being a good listener and grasping the important issues). Within this perspective I play a very small, if any, part in the

construction of meaning. It gives primacy to the actor as independent and unique selves, relations stem from and are being created by selves coming together to share their feelings and thought.

If however, this assumption changed and primacy is given to relations then the construction of meaning, the origin of feelings and thoughts occur relationally instead of individually. Gergen emphasizes the importance of relations: "... we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step outside relationship; even in our most private moment we are never alone." (Gergen, 2009: XV). This means that the feelings and thoughts the actor expresses are not unique and independent, but co-constituted (Gergen, 2009: 38ff, 74). Whenever actors come together they are dependent on each other to construct meaning; neither of the actors in the relationship solely constructs meaning. If you tell me that you are stressed, my reply will help construct meaning. Do I reply by saying:

- 1) That's just typical, you always complain. No matter how little you have to do, you're never satisfied.
- 2) Oh I'm so sorry to hear that, I had no idea, how can I help you?
- 3) Well if you'd only stop working so hard and spend more time at home, maybe you wouldn't feel that way.

My gesture to your uttering will depend on our shared history, the context we are in, the intention of my gesture, my sense of what response you are interested in and how I understand you, myself and the world around us. Your gesture to me will be constructed in a similar way. As a researcher, this means that I can not approach the Company and the actors with the assumption that I can dig out and mirror the right and true description of the Company and the actors. I take an active part in making the stories about the Company and the actors.

### ***Knowledge as relational***

In this thesis I underline the significance of relations. In relation to this, Schütz has a phenomenological approach and emphasizes the individual and his biographically determined position as the sediment and basis for individual and unique meaning structures and stock of knowledge (Schütz I, 1967: 35).

Following Gergen, I am inspired by a social constructionist approach emphasizing the relations as the sediment and basis for routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders. In Schütz' writing, there is no doubt that we live in an intersubjective world. Where he argues that the world is

constructed by individual actors coming together and influencing each other, Gergen argues that out of emerging relations individual actors and the world are constructed (Gergen, 2009: XV, Schütz I, 1967: 5).

Besides the inspiration from phenomenology and social constructivism, social constructionism also finds its inspiration in post modernism. I am inspired by Czarniawska who argues that she understands post modernism and pragmatism as a kind of social reflection that is characterised by refusing the correspondence theory of truth where a world can be compared to words. It is impossible to represent something with something else because through the process of communication you do not mirror anything; you take part in constructing it (Czarniawska, 2004: 12). As I write stories about the Company and the actors I take part in constructing them. It is through actors' daily activities that the social world is shaped and practical knowledge is created, which enable the actors to understand and make sense of the situations they are in. Kvale argues that within this perspective socially constructed local and multiple interpretations both constitute and construct the social world. The knowledge and understanding we have and use is not validated through a comparison with a real objective world, it is validated on pragmatic terms: does it function, is it believable and does it make sense. This is what constitutes the world (Kvale, 2000: 52ff, 67).

I do not conceive my method as being solely phenomenological, post modern or pragmatist. I place myself in between and combine the methods and mindsets stemming from various social constructionist perspectives and scholars to describe how, in my view, the knowledge I have generated is a result of relational sensemaking processes.

### ***Knowledge as stories***

In the perspective I have chosen, life is not lived ordered and coherent, nor does it unfold following a predefined and straight route to reach a certain goal. Life is as lived along lines where we move around and figure out the way as we go (Ingold, 2008: 2). While we move, we make lines and these lines form a tangled meshwork. This meshwork represent the chosen paths where life has been lived and knowledge has been generated (Ingold, 2009: 206). I, therefore, wish to present the Company as I experienced it; as a wayfinding, sensemaking and relationally constructed meshwork brought to life everyday through stories and actions.

The perspective I have chosen has influenced how I present my research. I present my data as stories and these stories do not present an objective truth or mirror of what ‘really’ took place during the strategic process in the Company. The stories I present are of constructive and relational character, and they have been constructed by the actors together with other actors and me. Following Kvale, meaning does not exist beforehand; meaning is constructed by the actors taking part in the meaning generating process (Kvale, 2000: 24, 220). Within this perspective, actors use stories to organise and understand their and other’s actions as well as the world (Boje, 2008: 4, Czarniawska, 2004: 11). This means that as the stories are told, these stories, simultaneously, generate the world that the stories evolve around. There are three interesting aspects about the stories actors tell because the stories function as: “... a form of social life, a form of knowledge, and a form of communication.” (Czarniawska, 2004: 13)

You might ask, why and how are the stories about strategising in the Company of interest to anyone else other than the people in the Company and myself? Maybe the concrete persons, the concrete activities and the concrete outcomes of the strategic initiatives are only relevant to the Company, but they may still have some relevant and interesting aspects of strategising. I ask you to read what you have in front you before you answer that question.

### **I knock on the door and enter<sup>5</sup>**

It was not more than a week or two after I began my PhD that my advisor suggested the Company as a possibility for conducting a study about what happens when a strategy is initiated, from a micro and everyday perspective. My advisor knew the Company from a research study<sup>6</sup> he and some colleagues had just ended and knew that they had recently formulated a new strategy and would most likely find it relevant to have me follow the implementation.

After some brief correspondence with my advisor, I held a meeting at the end of spring in year one with Maria and Lucy where we discussed different possibilities for studying the implementation of the strategy. Already at the first meeting Maria and Lucy talked about how they perceived the well-being of the employees as the key to success and how they for some time had not been able to focus enough on the employees’ well-being because of the daily-running procedures and the fast growth that continually

---

<sup>5</sup> To get a general view of the activities I participated in, the interviews I held and when during the 1½ years I generated data in the Company, please go to appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> The research programme, StraCon, was conducted by members of the FIRM research group at Aalborg University where they focussed on the interplay between strategy and everyday actions.

pressured their work. They did not think the Company's middle managers had the necessary competences to support and manage their operative managers sufficiently. Both Lucy and Maria expressed the belief that the strategy process would require a complete cultural turn-around of the Company. They believed the strategy process was a possibility to shake up the too deeply rooted conceptions about management that existed in the Company.

They knew that the management group, and especially John, were very amenable to the process. They did, however, doubt that [someone like] John had realised the full impact that the process initiated by him would have on the whole Company. After the summer holiday in year one of my study, my advisor and I held another meeting with Maria. Lucy should have also participated, but Maria told us that Lucy had resigned just before they had gone on vacation, so now the whole process was handed over to her. We spent some time to talk in more detail about the possible ways I could study the strategy process, and we agreed that I should follow how the strategy was being operationalised in one of the Company's three cleaning departments. The Department<sup>7</sup> consisted of eight operative service managers, their assistants, a planner, a district manager and a regional manager who all are situated in the Company's headquarters together with John, Bob, the Administration and Finance Departments, the managers of one of the Company's three Canteen Departments, the IT Support Department and the HR Department. I made an agreement with Maria that I would focus on how 3-5 of the operative service managers along with the district and the regional managers made sense of and operationalised the strategic initiatives over a period of 1-2 years. During this period, I agreed to interview the managers several times, observe monthly meetings, other departmental events, various initiatives concerning the strategic process such as courses and other educative activities.

Besides that, I would participate in the Company's annual meeting, talk regularly with Maria, and if possible, also talk with John once or twice. The reason why these talks with John were uncertain at this point was that he originally had doubts about the study I would carry out, as he thought it was too soon to conduct such a study and it would be better to wait a few years before looking at the results. However, since the study would be a longitudinal one, we agreed that the study could meet both John's and my wishes and be able to both evaluate the strategic initiatives as they unfolded as well as the impact of the strategy after a few years. At the second meeting with Maria, she told us that she was

---

<sup>7</sup> The whole department also included an additional three operative service managers and an additional district manager, but they were situated in a distant part of the region and functioned to a large degree as an independent department with their own budget. The operative service managers only spent time with the others a few times a year and the district manager in the separate department handled the customer and assistant contact independently.

unsure how many of the managers, and especially the older managers, really supported the value process. She had experienced that some of the managers ran the process down at management meetings when she was not there and had experienced a resistance towards the process from the older managers.

The design of the study was strongly flexible and inspired by Robson's perception about flexible study designs, where neither the research question or the exact method of approach is determined beforehand, and where the sampling of who, what and where should not to be decided in advance (Robson, 2002: 164f). I had a rather clear idea about what I wanted to study, which was: what happens when strategies are set in motion, how are they communicated and what actions do they lead to within an organisation (Phd-plan, Oct. 2007). I had also made some initial decisions about methodology and theory that would give me a place to start, but as part of the study the design would be created during the period I was generating data. I knew I wanted to talk with managers at various levels, and I wanted to talk with three to five managers over a longer period to follow how they made sense of the situations they were in through that period. The reason I wanted to talk with more than one or two was not to compare their sensemaking, but to learn more about how they used each other relationally in the process and if they operationalised the strategy in different ways. But decisions about how long I would be in contact with the Company, how many interview-conversations I would have and with who, which courses and meetings I would sit in on and when was decided as the study was running.

This means that the study had some snowball characteristics. It was the actors within the Company who gave me ideas to which additional actors I should spend time with. My doorway to the Company was Maria, who pointed out Mike, who pointed out the service managers. This is not to say that I did not take part in the selection process. I was in contact with other actors as well and made agreements with John and Jacob on my own, but I did not question any of the actors that Maria or Mike picked out. This method asks the question, whether I could have chosen differently and whether the actors I spent time with represent the plurality of understanding of the strategy within the Company. To answer this question I need to look at what the object of my study is. I am interested in understanding the everyday relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising in one department of the Company. I am not trying to understand this interplay across the whole organisation or the interplay in the various departments, I am interested in doing a dense micro-study. Therefore, the everyday relational co-constituting interplay among the actors in the Department is the object of study. The rest of the Company functions as an organisational chorus and surrounds my study. Maybe I could

have spent time with other actors and told different stories than I have. I do, however, doubt it would have enabled me to tell better or more interesting stories than the ones I am telling. The actors I spent time with have made it possible for me to study the everyday relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising, which is what I set out to do.

Six weeks after the second meeting, Maria and I held a meeting with Mike where I presented my ideas. Initially, Mike had some reservations about the idea. At this point in time, he thought the study was supposed to measure to what degree he had managed to successfully implement the strategy and values and whether he had succeeded in constructing a strong culture in his department. I reassured him that I was interested in learning more about how they operationalised the strategy and not in measuring whether what they did was right or wrong or successful or not. He agreed to participate in the study although I sensed it still was with some reservations.

During the meeting, Maria and Mike said that they both believed that there was a sort of division in the Company where some of the managers were supportive of the strategy process and some actually worked against it. This idea is something that will be expressed throughout the thesis; there is not one common, shared and maybe right story about the purpose of the strategy and how it should be operationalised among the actors in the Company. There are, like Boje refers to, a 'plurality of multi-voicedness' (Boje, 2008: 63) in the Company where there are different opinions about what the purpose of the strategy is and how the initiatives should be operationalised and none of them take primacy (Boje, 2008: 63, 82). Maria and Mike told me how seven values were too many, and not even John could remember them all.

Maria had originally wanted all employees including the assistants to complete value-based courses. However, due to the high turn-over of their assistants and that 40% have a foreign background, she had given up on the idea since it would be too complicated. The resources would be better spent educating the service managers to be skilful value-based managers. Maria also told me how the value handbook she and Lucy had made, unfortunately, had not been thoroughly incorporated. They ought to use it more and maybe send it out to their customers when they made offers or participated in procurements. Maria was sure that it would be of great importance for the customers to know that the Company valued its employees.

We concluded the meeting by agreeing that Mike would locate four to five service managers that I could talk with. It was also agreed that I would participate in the Department's next monthly meeting where I would introduce the study and meet the service managers. I asked Maria and Mike whether they from time to time would set aside an hour to talk with me, and they told me that they would gladly spend time talking with me. I was also invited to sit in on the next course: "Communication in a Value-based Company" that an external consultant would facilitate in two weeks. Some of the service managers from the Department at the headquarters would participate in this course, so it might be interesting for me to observe.

To a large degree, Maria and Mike gave me permission to enter and leave the headquarters as I wished and participate in almost all the activities that took place. The only activity the Maria could not allow me to participate in was the Company's management meetings because she feared that it might make John terminate the study. During the period I generated data, two unscheduled (extraordinary) meetings were held in the Department. Mike did not inform me about the meetings until after they had taken place. It would have been interesting to be present during the extraordinary meetings, and it would have added extra perspectives to my stories. Nevertheless, it would have been impossible for me to take part in all of the Company's activities. Mike, Maria and some of the other actors, during the interview-conversations, told me about their feelings and thought regarding the two extraordinary meetings. It has given me an understanding of how the actors perceived the meetings, which I have used in my stories.

The design for the study that we began to construct was a field study that had many similarities with how you conduct case studies: "Case-study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence." (Robson, 2002: 178). A single case study of the relational interplay between strategising and organising within the Department as my research strategy would give me the possibility of studying how the strategy enfolded during the 1½ years I would spend time in the Company. Where Eisenhardt designs case studies in advance and uses multiple case studies to generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), and Yin conceives the researcher as a detective gathering evidence throughout the process to build a strong conclusion and solve the mystery (Yin, 1981), my approach is more flexible and inspired by Robson (2002). Following him, the idea behind using a case study as a research strategy is that by combining different methods and by studying a phenomenon contextually, I will be able to study the strategy in its own right (Robson, 2002: 179). By using different qualitative methods like

interview-conversations, observations and document studies in a flexible design and allowing the structure of the design to follow the developments and changes that take place, I am able to generate an understanding of the Company's strategy enactment.

The agreement I worked out in cooperation with the primary actors in the Company gave me the possibility to study the strategy as it evolved over a long period of time, follow how it unfolded and how it was vitalised in micro steps and through everyday actions. This approach offers an alternative understanding than that of studying the strategy as snapshots indicating the perception of the strategy before it was and after a certain period. Furthermore, working with a smaller number of employees in the same department and region also gave me the possibility to follow the local and relational sensemaking processes they constructed. It enabled me to study in what ways their sensemaking processes developed, mutated, broke down and were reinforced over a period of time. The study is not an evaluation of whether or not the strategy was successfully implemented or not. It focuses on what sensemaking processes the strategy initiated and how the actors operationalised the strategy in their everyday actions after it left the drawing board.

### **How does it look on the inside?**

Two weeks after the meeting with Maria and Mike, I sat in on the first of six courses: "Communication in a Value-based Company". The course was facilitated by an external consultant and 15 service managers from all three regions of the Company participated. The consultant also facilitated another course, the second module entitled, "The Personal Leadership", one of four courses in the Module-Based Management Education Programme. I also sat in on a two day interdisciplinary course for the managers and the administration called "Personal Planning and Efficiency". The course was facilitated by another external consultant who presented a number of tools that the actors could use to plan and organise their everyday practice. They discussed how they could prioritise their tasks and what they could do if all the plans they had made were impossible to follow due to illness notifications or too many extra assignments. The fourth course I sat in on was a Culture Seminar for the service managers in the Department, and it was facilitated by two other external consultants. The consultants presented various aspects of how the service managers could manage people coming from diverse cultures without offending anyone and still being able to set the ground rules. The course was aimed at the service managers in the Department as a test to determine whether it should be presented to the other regions as well.

The fifth course I sat in on was an, “Introduction Course” for salaried employees of the Company facilitated by HR Assistant Debbie. At the course, Debbie and two other employees introduced various aspects of the Company. The last course I sat in on was the third module of the four Module-Based Management Education Programme called, “The Manager as Coach”. The two day course was facilitated by a fifth external consultant who introduced coaching as a management tool and let the managers practice their skills through various exercises. During the courses I took a lot of notes and, from time to time, the participants willingly explained certain subjects to me to give me a better understanding of their everyday practice. This gave me further inspiration and allowed me to follow their stories.

To observe the courses was a great opportunity for me to observe and follow how the Company worked with implementing the strategy in a formal way. This is something Alvesson and Sveningsson refer to as handing over the baton (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 112). The courses represented a relatively institutionalised understanding of what to do when you want to implement a new strategy; you hire a consultant to facilitate various competence-developing activities like presentations and workshops. What is interesting here is to see how the baton is handed over and what sort of sensemaking processes the courses initiated. Alvesson and Sveningsson’s 2008 study shows how a change programme that was too disconnected from the daily practice in the company was perceived as managerial hypocrisy and as being an ideal too far away from reality and nothing more than a paper product. The outcome was that instead of changing certain meanings, ideas and expectations in the company, contrarily, such notions were reinforced as a result of the change process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 92, 96). My case study is different from theirs, but I am inspired by their approach and find their result interesting. It will be interesting to keep their experiences in mind when I try to understand the strategic initiatives in the Company.

What sitting in on the courses also allowed me to observe the relational situation and positioning among the managers in the Company, something that was impossible during the individual interview-conversations. During the interview-conversations, I had heard stories about how the managers perceived each other and what role they played for each other; hence it was quite interesting to see how it all played out at the courses and how it affected their understanding of each other and the strategy. My role at the courses was different than the participating actors because I had no personal interest in the actual content of the courses or the outcome of them. I was there to see what was taught and how, how it was received and how the meta-conversation between participants took place.

### *The monthly meetings and the two annual meetings*

A week after I sat in on the first course, I participated in the first of fifteen monthly department meetings. The meetings were a forum for the eight service managers as well as Mike and Tony to discuss general issues, present new initiatives and announce management decisions. The service managers were under an obligation to attend, and each meeting lasted for a few hours. At the first meeting I presented the study and myself, but at the following meetings I only observed and took notes. Besides the monthly meetings, I also participated in an extraordinary department meeting that the Department held to follow up on an Employee Satisfaction Analysis.

Attending the monthly meetings and the extraordinary department meeting was a great opportunity for me to see how Mike and Tony worked locally with operationalising the strategy and especially the values. During the meetings I could observe how they expressed their understandings of the strategic initiatives. I also observed how they formally tried to enact a process where their understandings of the strategic initiatives became a part of the service managers' everyday organising. Mike and Tony attempted this by changing some of the working conditions of the service managers.

Looking at Mike and Tony's strategising draws attention to the significant role that middle managers like Mike and Tony have concerning how a strategy is operationalised (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 8, Balogun, 2006: 43f). Observing these meetings also offered me the possibility to see the relationships among the service managers and between the service managers and Mike and Tony. It enabled me to observe how they positioned each other, which contributed to further multi-facet my understanding of the actors, the relationships among them and the enactment of the strategy.

A few weeks after I participated in the first monthly department meeting, I observed the first of the two annual meetings that took place while I generated data in the Company. At the first annual meeting John was still the Company's CEO, while Jacob was the CEO at the second annual meeting. Both annual meetings were a mixture of presentations and workshops, and I observed the presentations and attended the various workshops while taking notes at both meetings. It was, as presented in one of the opening stories, quite interesting to observe how John acted in front of all the managers and the administrative staff and hear how he presented the values.

### *The interview-conversations*

A month after the first annual meeting, I held my first round of interview-conversations with the four service managers; Annie, Laura, Nina and Jane, as well as Mike and Tony. A few weeks after I attended the first monthly meeting, Mike sent me the names and phone numbers of the four service managers I could talk with. I arranged interview-conversations with them individually and we arranged them when they could find an extra hour and were at the headquarters. This meant that the interview-conversations were not held on the same day or even in the same month.

I use Kvale's term interview-conversation as a description of what took place when I talked with the actors in the Company (Kvale, 2000: 24ff). The term is chosen because I want to highlight that there was possibly an unusual but symmetrical relationship between me and the actors (Czarniawska, 2004: 48). I set the stage and defined what main themes we should talk about (Kvale, 2000: 19, 34). Nevertheless, it was the actors who were the professionals regarding the topic of the conversation; their everyday practice (Czarniawska, 2004: 48). I had no knowledge about their routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders, so even though I came as a researcher with knowledge in my field, I came without any specific knowledge about what it was like to be a service manager, a regional manager, a district manager, the HR manager or the CEO in the Company. I used the knowledge I had about qualitative methods and how to generate knowledge while I arranged and conducted the interview-conversations. For example, this meant that I had no written questions in front of me during the interview-conversations. We talked about the dilemmas, challenges and joys that the actors brought up during the interview-conversations, and I took part in constructing their stories. Inspired by Kvale, Czarniawska and Alvesson, I perceived the interview-conversations as loosely structured interactions that were open to what the actors believed was relevant and important to talk about when we focussed on their everyday organising. The outcome of the interview-conversations was based on how the dialogue unfolded between us (Alvesson, 2003: 13, Czarniawska, 2004: 48, Kvale, 2000: 45).

The purpose of the interview-conversations was: "... to understand themes in the daily life-world from the interlocutor's point of view." (Kvale, 2000: 38 – my interpretation), and in that process I was not the one to judge what was important and relevant in their life-world. This means that my approach was quite indirect. I tried to follow their stories and participated in unfolding them during the interview-conversations. This meant that I sometimes in my own or together in 'one voice' with the actors finished their sentences or attempted to put the thoughts they could not quite place into words and sentences. In that process, I indirectly but actively took part in making their stories meaningful, but I

refrained from determining whether or not the phenomenon or situation we talked about was important and relevant. I did so because the stories, work-related or not, helped me to understand how they perceived themselves, other actors, the world around their work and what they took for granted.

The stories they told made me capable of understanding their everyday practice in the Company. I also tried to accommodate the situation the best I could by using their vocabulary whenever I could, trying to pursue and support their train of thought the best I could, and adjusting my linguistic activity to the actor in front of me. This meant that during some of the interview-conversations I asked a number of questions and participated actively in putting their thoughts into words and during other I hardly said anything.

The flexible structure of the study gave me the opportunity to come to the Company more often and bump into other actors. Sometimes it was just for a quick hello, but other times the actors told me about how a story they told during an interview-conversation had unfolded or we arranged another meeting with each other. I encouraged these chance meetings by always making my way up to the first floor before or after an interview-conversation or a monthly meeting. I came just to say hello and I made sure that I never had to run out the door after a meeting, so I had the time to talk briefly or longer. I perceived this as an important premise for understanding and contextualising what we talked about during the interview-conversations. If I like Schütz' stranger wanted to understand the local language and jargon and be familiar with their practice and routines, I would also have to spend time at the Company (Kvale, 2000: 103, Orr, 1996: 11, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 8).

*"I cannot understand a cultural object without referring it to the human activity from which it originates." (Schütz I, 1967: 10)*

I felt that each time I entered the door, nodded hello to John and said hello to the employees in administration my appearance seemed more and more natural, and I became less and less like a stranger. Initially, they welcomed me very officially and I was asked to wait in the reception to be picked up by whoever I had an appointment with. After a while, I was no longer asked to wait in the reception but told that I knew my way around, so I could just go and locate the person I had an appointment with.

During the 1½ years I generated data, I held three interview-conversations with Jane, Laura, Nina, Annie and Tony and four with Mike. There were approximately 3-6 months between the interview-conversations, but if for some reason an interview-conversation was needed before that amount of time, then an appointment was made. This happened when Nina resigned only 1½ months after we last spoke with each other. We agreed to meet, when she had the time, because I wanted to talk with her before she left.

With time, my nodding hello to John was replaced first with a spoken hello, later with brief small talk, and eventually we talked about whether he would be interested in spending an hour or so to tell me about his company. This eventually led to two interview-conversations; one while he was still the CEO and one half-a-year after Jacob became the new CEO. I also held a short meeting with Jacob a few months after he started as the CEO to discuss the future of the study and to hear his thoughts about the Company. Jacob expressed that he had no objections to my study and asked whether there was anything he could do. I told him that I would like to talk with him a few times, and he said he was willing to do so. Nevertheless, as the conversation continued and I started asking him how his everyday work was, he gave very short answers. After about ten minutes, he asked me whether I had anymore questions, and it became quite clear to me that he, at least at that moment, had no interest in participating in the study.

A few times, while I was talking with someone in the corridors Mike came up to me and asked whether I had a minute to talk. For instance, between my second and third interview-conversations with Mike, he knew I had an interview-conversation with Jane a specific day. After my interview-conversation with Jane, Mike came up to me and said he had something he would like to talk with me about if I had a minute to talk. We walked up to his office where he told me that he had decided to resign at the end of the week.

Many times I went upstairs just to say hello, Maria stuck her head out of her office to ask whether I had a minute. Subsequently, we would spend between ten and sixty minutes talking about an issue or her frustrations with John or something else. This was actually how most of my meetings with Maria took place. I guess we agreed to meet approximately seven times, but every one of the arrangements, except the last one, ended up getting cancelled. All of a sudden, Maria had to rush to another region to solve a problem or she had just received a request from John for something she had to finish. I doubt I would

have been able to talk with Maria as many times as I did during the period if I had not been around from time to time and had a minute when she asked for it.

The interview-conversations, planned and unplanned, lasted between 10 and 105 minutes. I held the interview-conversations either in a small conference room or in the actor's office at the headquarters. Most of the interview-conversations were recorded and later fully or partially transcribed. Some were not recorded, and in those situations, I spent time directly after writing down the themes of the interview-conversation and how I had perceived them. In such a process an interpretation has taken place where it, to a large degree, has been my selective perception and not the actor's exact words that has guided me. Nevertheless, I regard and use these data in the same way as other types of data such as, written documents, observations and interview transcripts.

Inspired by Czarniawska, I am aware that the actors communicate on my conditions. This does not, however, mean that anything goes, and I can make the field say whatever is convenient for my argument (Czarniawska, 2004: 62). I perceive each of the interview-conversations with the actors in the Company as: "... a conversation where the data arise in an interpersonal relationship co-authored and co-produced by the interviewer..." (Kvale, 1992: 11). This means that I have aimed at obtaining nuanced and rich descriptions (Kvale, 1992: 19) about the object of my study, namely, the everyday relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising in the Department. In the process I have been in continual communication with my material to make the stories I present as relationally constructed as I possible. Colleagues from my research groups and scholars from other universities have followed how the stories have gone from recordings over transcripts to the version presented here. During this process they have read the different versions of stories and gone back to the transcripts and recordings to check their credibility and novelty. They have also taken part in choosing among different versions, with varying degrees of citations and length, of the stories to figure out which version I should present in the thesis. I have chosen this to enhance my possibility to present the actors in a just way. This does not change the fact that the stories presented here are produced by me. The purpose of the stories has not, however, been to quote the actors literally, but to recontextualise in an interesting, novel, credible and respectful way (Czarniawska, 2004: 62).

*"...we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation a positioning takes place (Davies and Harré, 1991) which is accepted, rejected, or improved upon by the partners in the conversation."*

(Czarniawska, 2004: 5)

During the interview-conversations I did not ask the actors how they conceived the strategy. For instance, I did not ask, how have you operationalised the values or what role do the values play in your daily practice? I did not want to put them in a situation where they had to consider what would be the tactical or politically correct answers, on the contrary I wanted to create a space where it was obvious that there were no tactical right or wrong story to tell. Nevertheless, Czarniawska's and Alvesson's arguments about research interviews stayed in the back of my mind. Alvesson views the research interview as an arena where eight different metaphors are expressed. The interviewees can use the interview as a moral, political storytelling and promotional activity for accomplishing something and what is being expressed is often nothing but cultural scripts (Alvesson, 2003: 21ff). For that reason, I did not ask the actors questions that directly or deliberately called for promotional activity like how they operationalised the strategy on a daily basis or what one of the values meant to them. I wanted to limit stories that express what Czarniawska calls, the logic of representation and a dressing up for visitors (Czarniawska, 2004: 53). This does not mean that promotional activity did not take place.

I perceive the interview-conversations as a creative, flexible, context-dependent and intersubjective search to understand my object of study better (Kvale, 1992: 5, 21). In that process, I refrained from standardising my methods, and instead, I let the relationship between the actor and me as well as the context define the method (Kvale, 1992: 5). This means that the actors during the interview-conversations have 'used' me in different ways. I have been very 'close-with' (Johnson, Balogun & Beech, 2010: 250) some of the actors and been involved in their thoughts, frustrations and decisions about the Company. With other actors I was not so 'close-with' and the interview-conversations have functioned more as insights into their everyday organising. I conceive this as a natural part of qualitative studies.

I conducted the interview-conversations with the assumption that what most likely would take place during the interview-conversations is what takes place every time people communicate; they make sense together and adjust their gestures and replies to each other relationally. Inspired by Kvale, I conceived myself not as a mushroom picker but as an active participant in the construction of meaning (Kvale, 2000: 182). The questions I asked participated in constructing meaning about certain aspects of the actors' world. This means that it was not sensemaking in general that was constructed. Instead, sensemaking about certain aspects, namely the actors' everyday practice, was what the actors and I

constructed (Kvale, 2000: 182). This sensemaking continually developed with time. From time to time, the actors understood their experiences differently and what might have been very important, confusing or frustrating during one interview-conversation might have been forgotten or made sense of before we met each other again.

This means that a story is told differently every time it is being told because in each relation there is a difference between what is conceived as relevant, interesting and important and thus differences in what is being perceived. The story is also told differently every time because the Company is in an ever evolving state of becoming (Benson, 1977: 3, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 570). Through the actors' actions and sensemaking attempts, they are continually constructing and changing the world (Benson, 1977: 3). In that process, the actors' come to understand themselves, each other and the world in new ways. The new understanding generates different actions and ways to make sense which is realised through new stories. This indicates that, within this perspective, there is no real or true story. The story is constantly being developed, each time it is being told new lines are, like Ingold writes, being made. This does not mean that the story is constructed from scratch each time it is told. It has its history with it. Boje (1991) writes that with each new performance a story is altered.

New data and new understandings continually take place and become parts of an ever unfolding and never complete story (Boje, 1991: 106). There are elements, perspectives and understandings in the stories that are reproduced, but there is also something that gets morphed, changed or replaced. By emphasising stories about the everyday practice and not the strategic initiatives, one could argue that what I have are stories about the everyday and not the strategic initiatives. I partially agree, but would also argue that it is through these stories that I learn how the actors have worked with the strategy and made sense of the initiatives. I have to understand the actors' everyday practice to be able to make sense about how the Company's strategic initiatives shape and are being shaped by the actors' organising; in other words how they strategise (Johnson et al., 2007: 7). It is not before the models and ideas are set in motion and are worked with on an everyday basis that you get an idea about how people react to, make sense of and feel about initiatives of change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 28-34).

One may wonder why I call them stories and not narratives and what configures a story here. Czarniawska argues that a narrative is a spoken or written text that gives some sort of connection to an account of an event, an action or a set of actions, whereas a story is organised around a plot (Czarniawska, 2004: 17). Gabriel divides the line between stories and narratives much like Czarniawska

where a story is organised around a beginning, a middle and an end, and a narrative contains facts, reports and proto-stories (Gabriel, 2000: 25ff). Both Czarniawska and Gabriel maintain the distinction between narratives and stories because many of their studies evolve around following how narratives are turned into stories. Gabriel searches primarily for true stories with a beginning, middle and an end when he wants to understand an organisation. Gabriel distances himself from post modern thinking that considers everything as stories. According to him, this has blurred the boundaries between stories and other types of narratives (Gabriel, 2000: 19).

Boje, on the other hand, argues that actors rarely tell full blown stories from beginning, middle to end because they rarely take place (Boje, 2008: 240f). Actors more likely tell fragmented stories in bits and pieces and reflectively construct a beginning, middle and an end that make sense to them at the present moment (Boje, 2008: 240, 260, Czarniawska, 2004: 38). Boje describes narratives as an act of retrospective sensemaking where past events are coherently connected to achieve believability, and stories as dispersing events in the present or events anticipated to be achievable in the future (Boje, 2008: 4).

*“Representation does not reflect, it creates...”* (Czarniawska, 2004: 118)

I have chosen to only use the term stories instead of both stories and narratives for three reasons. Like Czarniawska, I conceive the fragmented, incoherent and bits and pieces telling just as important end relevant as the retrospectively coherent beginning, middle and end stories when I want to understand the everyday practice of the actors. For that reason, I do not believe there is any reason in distinguishing between stories and narratives in this study. Secondly, my study does not primarily evolve around how narratives are turned into stories, instead I primarily study the interplay between sensemaking and action in the Company’s strategic initiatives and how this is realised through stories. For that reason the need to distinguish between the concepts is unnecessary. The third reason I have chosen the term stories instead of narratives is because I want to emphasize the generativity of language. Language does not mirror the world, it orders and constructs it (Czarniawska, 2004: 118). Inspired by Boje, I believe that stories disperse events, which means that the stories that are told during the interview-conversations are both sensemaking constructions and generativity constructions; they make sense about the world of cleaning while at the same time creating it. This understanding of the co-constituting interplay between actions and storied sensemaking has similarities with Orr’s (1996)

study of copy machine repairers. In this study, Orr does not differentiate between sensemaking and action, as they both are parts of the same practice.

This is not an attempt to claim there is no difference between the physical action and the story, but it is an attempt to raise the question, would there be any sensible actions without stories? The term story, as I use it, represent both the bits and pieces telling and the beginning, middle and end telling, and it represent both retrospective telling which they have already made sense of and prospective forward looking telling. The point here is not to argue that a specific story causes a specific act and that stories in this way function as self-fulfilling prophecies, but rather to argue that sensemaking and actions are parts of the same practice and are enacted in stories. They stem from, shape and generate each other.

### **On my way out the door**

The interview-conversations, planned as well as unplanned, gave me the possibility to participate in constructing stories about how the actors understood and made sense of the strategy in the Company. These stories are interesting because they are detailed and rich descriptions about the everyday and relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising among the actors in the Department. The interesting aspect about these stories is how they take part in developing theoretical and methodological concepts within the existing field of strategy. Kvale (1992) argues that single case studies make it possible to investigate in detail a specific object of study within its context, which is necessary in order to develop theoretical concepts and practical guidelines (Kvale, 1992: 19-21). The stories may be written by my hands, but they are a product of the living interactions I have had with competent actors in the Company, skilled lecturers, qualified colleagues and inspiring scholars (cf. Vološinov, 1973: 41). The stories about the actors and the Company are interesting and relevant because they intend to contribute to discussions within the existing field of strategy research.

Based on the interview-conversations I held and the activities I observed, I generated an interesting amount of data that I have used in various ways. First of all, I have used the material to construct eight idiosyncratic work-based stories that, each in different ways, tell a story about how the actors and I relationally made sense of their everyday practice and organising. These stories appear in the thesis as stories about how the actors organise themselves through their relations in various ways and make sense of themselves, others and the world. Thus, they illustrate the dynamic interplay among the actors and how the different sensemaking processes support or are in conflict with each other; hence bringing

the strategy to life. Besides the idiosyncratic work-based stories, I have constructed stories about chosen scenes that took place at the various courses and meetings to illustrate how the actors operationalised the strategy and attempted to construct meaning with each other.

Czarniawska differentiates between treating stories as a special kind of text or interpreting them and making new stories out of them (Czarniawska, 2004: 55). Working with making new stories is an interpretative construction where the purpose is to tell a believable story and not represent or mirror what “really” took place (Kvale, 2000: 18, 166, Czarniawska, 2004: 67f). My stories represent eight multiple ways to make sense of and understand the Company. These stories are dynamic and continually developing and changing; hence illustrating that the organisation is in a constant state of becoming (Chia & Tsoukas, 2002: 569). The Company is not a stable entity once made, but a dynamic phenomenon always in the making. It is the relational understanding and sensemaking processes constructed by the actors of how they perceive the Company, themselves and other actors that puts the Company in a continual state of becoming.

The stories, except John and Maria’s stories, consist of a mixture of text and citations put together to present how I perceived their understanding and sensemaking. The interview-conversations were held in Danish which means that the citations have been translated by me. In that process an interpretation has taken place. Simultaneously some of the jargon and connotations have been lost. There are inconsistencies and contradictions among each individual story and the eight stories. I have not tried to avoid or enhance this, but they appear in the stories because they appeared during the interview-conversations and the activities I observed. The inconsistencies and the contradictions represent the meshwork and bits and pieces telling I experienced during my data generation in the Company. The understanding and sensemaking I experienced and participated in constructing were not coherent, nicely put together or consistent. On the contrary, it was compound, intertwined, dynamic and complex. The actors all took part in different relations; hence making sense and understanding the Company, themselves and other actors in multiple and sometimes contradicting ways.

I think of the stories I have made as new stories. They are attempts to make sense of the everyday relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising among the actors in the Department. They are based on the interview-conversations and my observations as well as my theoretical and methodological perspective. They are the outcome of relational sensemaking and actions that have taken place in the last few years. The stories do not mirror what took place during the

interview-conversations, the meetings or courses. Neither do they report what I have read in textbooks or articles. They are my attempt to, through rich, detailed and context-bound stories, contribute to further developing the field of strategy.

The stories differ in length, style and vocabulary because I attempt to tell each of the stories on its own terms and in a credible way that I believe is congruent to how the actors would have told their story if he or she had been sitting in front of me or next to me helping me try and construct one story out of the material I had. The structures of the eight stories are also different. In some stories, like John's, the time perspective constitutes the structure, whereas in Jane's story the time perspective is almost absent. John's stories evolved around a chronological sensemaking structure. Jane, on the other hand, is a stationary manager at a site that every third year is in procurement. This means that Jane lives in a world that every third year is her destiny unknown and is defined by whether or not the Company will win the next procurement, which will allow her to stay at the site.

During the writing of the stories I have, like previous mentioned, listened to the interview-conversations, returned to the transcripts and my notes several times to write stories that present the actors in a just way. As a result, the stories prioritise different things and neglect others due to how the actors made sense and understood the Company, themselves and other actors. I made no attempts during the interview-conversations to introduce issues or problems that some of the others had talked about or prioritised. I did not introduce these issues or problems because I, instead, wanted to participate in constructing the stories that was of importance to the person in front of me. I did not want to put the actors in a situation where he or she would feel like he or she had left out or neglected something important and perhaps start working out tactically correct answers.

During the interview-conversations inconsistencies between the stories have appeared. I have made no attempt to trying to sort out if someone misunderstood, forgot or overemphasized something because it is the actors' sensemaking and understanding that is of interest to me. Like Alvesson and Sveningsson, I am interested in what people do when they are engage in change work and what this seems to lead to in an organisation. I am not interested in assessing whether the constructions the actors make are true or false (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 7). How the actors in the Company conceive the Company, themselves and other actors are expressed through their attempts to operationalise the strategy in their everyday tasks. For that reason there is no point in investigating whether one claim or another is more correct or genuine than another.

Besides the personal stories, the data I have generated will be used to exemplify how the managers in the Company try to make sense of and understand the strategy and incorporate the proposed initiatives, such as the values, in their everyday practice. This process leads them to participate in strategising. I will present and discuss chosen scenes where the managers work with operationalising the strategy. As the chosen scenes will illustrate, then this is not a straight forward or coherent work of implementation, but a meshed and complex work of strategising where the relational perceptions of the strategy is central.

## **Opening the door for you**

The following pages contain presentations and discussions that will tell a story about how a Company worked to operationalise strategic initiatives and make them a part of their everyday organising. The strategising brought with it joy and frustration and compliance and disagreement. Some actors chose to stay on, others left and new ones joined during the 1½ years I studied the Company.

This thesis represents a study of the relationships, organising and strategising among actors in a department in a medium-sized Danish cleaning company over a period of time. The method employed has been very flexible. Not everything was planned ahead and not everything was recorded, and I have played an active part in the data generating process. It would, therefore, be impossible for anyone else to tell the same stories I tell and draw the same conclusions as I do, even if a person would approach the Company the same way I did. This is in a way both the advantage and the alleged failure of these types of studies because it means that the constructed meaning is constructed at a certain time and by certain actors.

This may make one wonder whether this study is scientific or valid. Whether the study is scientific will depend on the understanding of science. If science, like Kvale (1992) suggests, is the creative search to make a community understand an object of study better, more fully and more deeply then science deals with choosing the best suited methods to create this new understanding (Kvale, 1992: 4-6). Science becomes a question of better understanding, and in the process, the researcher should use the methods that are in line with the research question and the object of study. In my case my research question is: How does strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking? My object of study was: the everyday relational co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising among actors in the Department. To answer my research question I have used qualitative methods because it enabled me to study in detail how eight managers in one department of a medium-

sized cleaning company did this. This micro- and longitudinal study is scientific in the way that it aims at contributing to the development of theoretical concepts and methodological ideas within the existing field of strategy research.

The concepts of relations, sensemaking, action, organising, strategising and actors take their point of origin within a phenomenological and social constructionist perspective. The understanding and use of these concepts, therefore, stem from a perception of knowledge, life-world, truth, reality and science within this perspective. Kvale writes (1992) that all concepts are relative to a specific perspective and are contextually constructed by actors within the specific perspective (Kvale, 1992: 4 ff). The chosen perspective affects how the understanding and knowledge generated through different studies are evaluated. Within this perspective, scientific arguments are those that convince a chosen community that a new understanding is better (Czarniawska, 2004: 67, Kvale, 1992: 24).

This makes the validation of a study deal with the craftsmanship of the researcher and not the truth or accuracy of one's findings (Kvale, 1992: 24). Does the chosen method explain what the researcher set out to explain? Does the method offer sounder and better interpretations? Does the method offer a credible, trustworthy and transferable understanding? Is the method transparent enough and is the researcher continually checking, questioning and theoretically interpreting the material (Kvale, 1992: 23-25). These questions become pivotal regarding the validity of a qualitative study like mine. I have done the best I could to live up to these demands, The beauty of it all is, nevertheless, that it is the community I address who decides whether I live up to the demands (Czarniawska, 2004: 68, Kvale, 1992: 5, 24).

Maybe the impatient reader has already made his way to one of the personal stories, but for you who has been so patient, let me conclude this methodological chapter by citing Czarniawska; "... suspend disbelief, as I intend to please you, but also activate disbelief, as I intend to instruct you." (Czarniawska, 2004: 136)

# Chapter 3

---

## Four stories about four service managers' everyday organising

*In this chapter the first four work-based stories are presented. It is a presentation of Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie, who are four of the central actors I got to know and spent time with during interview-conversations, meetings and courses over the 1½ years I studied the Company. The stories evolve around how these four service managers perceive their jobs, themselves, other actors in the Company and the Company. They also take into account their joys and frustrations, what triggers their curiosity and what they do not give much thought to as well as what makes them get up in the morning and come to work, what makes them uncomfortable and, eventually, what makes one of them resign. These are stories about how what on paper appears to be four similar jobs, in practice each job is carried out in four distinct ways.*

### Jane

As I meet up with the service manager Jane to have our first interview-conversation, she has just come out of a meeting with Mike and Tony about redistributing the Department's customers. This initiative only has limited influence on Jane since she is a stationary service manager and is only responsible for one site, a large concrete factory. She has 16 service assistants and has been at this site as service manager for the last seven years. Jane starts her day at 5 or 6 am and she often does not leave until 2 or 3 pm. Going on 58, she knows that she has been in the industry for long and she repeats during our three talks that she knows she cannot keep working so many hours in the long run. She has been working since she was 11 years old and has a hard time picturing herself without a job. Although she has long and challenging days, it is in many aspects also what motivates her.

M: And then when you have a busy workday, where you have to work a lot of hours?

J: Well then I can feel like, you can all go screw yourselves.

M: And then you still leave for work.

J: Yes.

M: Why is that then?

J: Well, because that's how I was raised. Just calling in sick and staying home from work, it doesn't work like that. I would feel shit bad if that was the case. I'm not cut out for that.

M: I think it maybe also has something to do with the fact that you somehow appreciate your job?

J: Yes in a way, I guess, and those girls. Those I couldn't do without.

### ***You can tell by the way they enter the door how they feel***

Jane has a close connection to the assistants who have been with her since she started as the service managers at the concrete factory; she believes they are good girls who she can rely on. They know each other and are often quite involved in each other's lives, sometimes too involved, according to Jane. She argues with herself not to get too involved, but she can't help feeling responsible for them. She often feels that she is a sort of spare mum for the young girls, and she helps them with all sorts of issues. She has a right-hand woman, Nancy who works hard and is her support during stressful periods. Jane knows Nancy will always help her out when the other assistants call in sick. During one of our interview-conversations, Jane tells me that she doubts she would still be working there if she did not have Nancy.

Many of the assistants have not worked at the site very long. Many quickly resign or are away on prolonged sick leave. This causes a lot of challenges for Jane, as she spends much of her time on hiring and training new assistants and trying to find replacements when the assistants call in sick. During all the three interview-conversations Jane tells me about her lack of qualified assistants. Sometimes, she does get a competent assistant who does a good job. Jane really appreciates these periods, but unfortunately, most of the assistants are out the door almost before they have entered it.

M: How many [assistants] have you had in here in the last couple of months?

J: Ugh don't ask me that question, I don't have the number and I don't dare to count. That number I don't have in my head, but it's way too many!

M: Well what happens?

J: They are off sick, they call in to say they are not coming in anymore, some just don't show up...

People just really lack polish at that point... The young people, they can get a job anywhere and when they realise that cleaning is tough, it's hard work they disappear. You can tell them it's going to be hard,

I don't romanticise the job, they say 'oh that's no problem', but then [after a short while] they say, ugh this is really hard work.

A part of Jane's job is to scold the assistants if they do not clean properly or if their absence is suspicious. This is a part of the job that Jane does not appreciate. During our second interview-conversation, she expresses her unhappiness with going to bed in the evening and knowing that the next morning she has to scold one of her girls. Jane conceives the scolding to be a natural part of her job and she has made up her own system: the first two times she has to tell the assistant the same thing or respond to a complaint concerning the same issue she does it nicely and composedly. The third time, however, she gets upset and gives the assistant a stern telling-off so he/she gets the picture. Sometimes it helps and the assistant improves for a few weeks, and other times nothing happens and Jane has to fire the assistant.

Jane knows that the social aspect of the job is quite important because the job is hard and lonely and many of the assistants often work alone. Jane used to arrange at least two social events a year, but in the last few years, it has not really happened. Jane explains that they [her and the assistants] have not succeeded in finding a date where everybody could participate. However, another and also central reason is that lately Jane has not had the energy to plan the social events.

### ***If two assistants call in sick, God damn it hurts***

During the period that I talk with Jane her daily challenges remain pretty much the same. Compared to her colleagues, she is the only stationary service manager, and in many aspects, her tasks are not so different from her colleagues': she handles customer complaints, notifications of illness and other management duties. Jane is, from time to time, more or less frustrated about it and deals with the frustration in various ways. Sometimes she tries just to take it one day at a time. If it is necessary for her to clean for 7 hours, then so be it. At other times, in spite of a bad conscious, she experiments with stopping work early on Fridays and letting her answering machine respond to her calls, and only calling back if it was very necessary.

A few years ago Jane had a stroke due to stress and feared that she would die. She has since recovered and knows that she does not want to end up in that situation again. But the lack of qualified assistants is continually on her mind, tiring her out and making it hard for her to make the necessary changes in

her management style. The continual time pressure makes Jane and the assistant continually behind schedule and not able to perform all their tasks. At the end of year one of my study, Jane calculated that the percentage of absenteeism due to illness on her site was on 29,7%, and she had calculated that her assistants had been away sick for 3288 hours from January to September. This gives her a bad conscious, but what frustrates her most, is the awareness that it is herself and Nancy who work extra to make sure the site is cleaned. All the extra hours spent on cleaning leaves her no room to manage. Jane has tried to have telephone hours and not answer the phone when she is at home, but it does not really work for her. It is easier to just answer the phone when it rings and nip the problems in the bud. Jane has in a way accepted the situation and just deals with it the best way she can. At the same time, she refers to how different the situation was just 4-5 years ago and how she hopes everything will be better in the future.

***If you've been there a month, you're stuck***

Jane could not imagine herself being anywhere else than at the concrete factory. She has been there for 11 years. Before she became the service manager there, she was the right-hand woman to the former service manager. This was when another company handled the cleaning at the concrete factory. After a few years, the Company won the procurement and asked her to undertake the position as service manager and Jane accepted without hesitation.

J: I couldn't imagine not being at the concrete factory. There is something about that factory; it get's underneath your skin. There's something special about being out there. I'm not able to put my finger on it.

M: You have concrete running in your veins?

J: Well, as long as they have not become cemented (laughs).

M: What is it that you like so much about it?

J: Well I don't know, it is those contact persons. They just get's under your skin. You don't have to, if you get a complaint, to put on a face. They know who Jane is and what I represent, I don't have to explain where I stand and blab blab blab.

M: You have a good feeling about each other?

J: Yes and it is actually like that with all my contact persons, but there is something about that factory.

Jane knows that some of the assistants feel the same as she does, and she has her own saying: If the assistants stay more than a month, they get stuck. One time Jane had a girl working there who originally only should have been there for a few months, but she stayed for four years. Eventually, Jane told her that she had to pull herself together and find out what she wanted to do with her life now; otherwise she would still be cleaning there when she was 55. It was a loss for Jane because she was good at her job, but Jane knew the assistant wanted an education and Jane felt she had to do something about it.

### *I take it one day at a time*

Jane has, over the years at the concrete factory, had a lot of interesting experiences. During one of our interview-conversations she tells me how her everyday job has evolved during her years there:

J: We [the site] had a CEO, Richard. He was a real CEO. Between his phone and his desk pad there was just enough space for his briefcase... Then one day we accidentally moved the phone, and then his secretary called us and told us to come and move the phone back because there wasn't enough space for his briefcase. This is what I'm talking about; you don't want to end up like that. June, our service manager there, she, damn it, went up there and moved the phone. Couldn't his secretary have done that herself?

M: Could not he have done it himself?

J: I'm just saying, I said to myself HELLO, no no! Back then, we also laid with our arses out the door and vacuumed on our knees because the hair on his carpet had to be combed in the same direction... He had that type of Oriental rug under his desk. There we were, with a com, combing the edges so they all went one way and there were no knots in them.

M: He sounds awful.

J: Yes and it is no lie... after Richard we got Sam... In the place where the white collars sit [in the canteen], there's a carpet at one end and it has to be vacuumed around noon. And then it had to be emphasized that a new CEO had arrived. So they [the employees at the concrete factory] were all wound up because there was chalk on this carpet. Not all of the white collars have clean shoes because some of them are out in the field too. Then all of a sudden we had to do extra cleaning and vacuuming.

M & J: during the morning.

J: Then Sam went in and said when I can sit here with chalk on the carpet, so can the rest of you... This is what I mean, shit runs downwards, it always does, and it always ends up in the cleaning department. I'm telling you Mette, you should really have experienced it.

M: Yes it is really something else.

J: Why damn, it was crazy. Many years ago when we had to do the annual extra cleaning at his [Richard's] office, drawers and closets had to be emptied. His weren't allowed to be emptied, but we had to clean them anyways. Then when we cleaned the drawers and closets, the HR Manager was behind our backs the whole weekend because imagine that we accidently read some of the papers. As if we had the time for that...

Times have changed and Jane now has a contact person at the concrete factory named Nick who she trusts. She tells me that they have always been honest with each other. She meets with him once a month just to update each other. At these meetings they don't talk much about complaints or the Company as such, but share personal stories over a piece of cake and a cup of coffee. Jane has experienced a few falling outs at the site, mostly twice a year when there are wage negotiations and special work committee meetings at the site that cause the employees to fear losing their jobs. This causes a bad atmosphere and the employees at the concrete factory complain about the cleaning, which rubs off on the assistants. It is the secretaries at the site with "high hair and red nails" that complain, often because they do not know what services the site has bought. Jane and Nick mostly laugh about their complaints because they know it is just hot air and mere trifle.

J: There was a complaint that went back 14 days and I know it is just hot air because it was Nancy and yours truly who had handled the cleaning for a week. It was about a toilet in the ladies' room, mind you, where there was shit all over. I didn't even comment on it... but there was crap under the edges. Then I said that it made no sense to me because it had been yours truly and my right-hand woman who had handled the cleaning. When they [the secretaries at the site] heard that they backed down, but then all of a sudden, it was something else. Then I told them to their faces, do you know what, a complaint that goes back 14 days back is of no use.... you get my cell-phone number and then you call me right away, whenever there is anything. Cause I can do nothing, when you call me at a quarter to four to tell me that the toilet looks like shit. Of course it does, there are many assholes over there and they start at 7.00-7.30. I can do nothing. Then they say, oh, yes, they had not thought about it like that. Then they say, what about our desks? If they are tidied then of course they're cleaned.

Jane is worried about the future because she is not sure whether they will win the procurement next time in year three. From one interview-conversation to the next she is more or less confident that they will win it. Although she and Nick are on the same page, he does not decide whether they would be

allowed to stay. Jane is content with the quality of the cleaning she and her assistants provide, and she knows that they respond to complaints when there is reason to. So in that regard, she is not anxious. But you just never know whether a new manager will test the waters before he decides who wins the next procurement.

***I haven't seen him so relaxed for a long time***

Jane has worked for the Company for seven years. She only knew a little about the Company before she accepted the job. She, on the other hand, knew a lot about the concrete factory and knew she wanted to stay there, so she did not have any difficulties accepting the position that the Company offered her because it gave her the possibility to stay at the concrete factory. Of all the service managers, Jane is the one who has been with the Company the longest time. She knows John and Jenny well and has seen first hand how the Company has grown rapidly during the last six years. She has also taken part in moving the Company from a small villa to a larger domicile. There is no doubt that Jane found the time in the villa more cosy, warm and closer at heart, and she tells me about how Christmas was celebrated differently back then in the villa at Royal Avenue.

J: ... you haven't been at Royal Avenue?

M: No

J: It was a completely different house, it was really cosy and Jenny was just fantastic with everything. She made it cosy for everyone and decorated the whole house. It cannot be the same in such a big domicile as this; it's not as cosy here as it was at Royal Avenue.

M: No, it is also bigger here, and there are some other facilities.

J: Exactly just the fact that there are no carpets.

M: Yes it's a lot of things.

J: And then such a big hall. How do you decorate that?

At the same time, Jane has found that John has not been happy and himself the last couple of years. She points out that he keeps mentioning the same things like the necessity of responding to customers complaints. Jane has the impression that John has not been relaxed the last few years. Jane believes that the CEO change is good for the Company and she feels that it has done John good to relinquish the reins and let Jacob take over the management of the Company. She knows that John is still very involved in the board and still has the overall responsibility of the Company. During the third

interview-conversation Jane tells me how John is much more relaxed now. Especially at the annual meeting in year two of my study, she found that John was much more relaxed than she had seen him in years. He really enjoyed himself and was more like he was in the old days. Jane respects John, and their cooperation throughout the years has been good. John has supported Jane when she has been in difficult situations at the concrete factory and when she has asked for his support. John has let Jane handle the daily management of the concrete factory. One time, John even changed his mind about a decision he had made concerning the concrete factory because Jane advised him to.

Jane knows Jacob and thinks of him as a good guy. Jacob is younger than John and has another view on management, which, according to Jane, is needed. For some time, there have been some problems in the administration. John has not dealt with these problems, which Jane believes is a mistake. Jane is convinced that Jacob will deal with the problems in a more active way.

***It's a whole other way to think, and I'm not used to that***

Although Jane expresses her confidence in Mike and Tony, it is difficult for her to adjust to some of the changes that Mike and Tony are introducing as a part of their work with the new strategy. Jane and the other service managers are sent on courses in such things as personal planning and efficiency, value-based management and communication in a value-based organisation. Jane finds it difficult to adjust to the new way of thinking and she often feels like a fool. She believes the changes are for the best, has confidence in Mike and knows he supports her. Jane appreciates his initiatives and in general appreciates that Mike and Tony include her and the other service managers in decisions about how their workday could be better adjusted to their needs. However, she is not 22 anymore and believes it is difficult that she is expected to suddenly reflect and comment on things that she has taken-for-granted for many years. One example is that they want input on how the pay schedule can be improved and developed. Although she jokes about it, she likes that it forces her to think about the way she does her work and why. What she especially appreciates about Mike and Tony's management style is that they treat the service managers individually and get involved in the questions and concerns that the service managers come to them with.

J: ... Tony and Mike help with the decisions you aren't capable of making yourself. I hope you know where I'm going; we talk about how we can sort them out. You didn't do that earlier on, you were just

told to solve it. They participate... they take the person into consideration, there has to be space for us to breathe and live....

M: How is that all of a sudden?

J: Well that's it, I have mostly followed my own course. Sometimes I needed help and earlier I was just told to sort it out myself, and now I have two others who get involved and say we'll figure it out together... You have to get used to it if I can put it like that. Now there is someone who gets involved, where you really feel that they involve themselves, and take things into their hands. Do you know what I mean?

M: They relate to what you say and feel.

J: Yes exactly.

Mike and Tony are not involved in her daily practice, but Jane knows that Mike takes it serious whenever she comes to him with a complaint or an assistant situation that she does not know how to handle. Mike, always, helps her find the right solution or a new approach to the situation. Jane knows that Mike does not like that she spends so much time cleaning. He tells her to hire replacements, but his appeals do not change Jane's behaviour.

Jane is sorry when Mike resigns, but she accepts his decision because she knows he has been stressed for a long period. What wears on her about Mike's decision is that she once again has to learn and adjust to a new management style. She hopes and is sure that her new manager will have some experiences from the cleaning business because it makes the communication run so much smoother if the manager knows a thing or two about cleaning. Jane knows that Tony is good with numbers, but she has a hard time respecting his decisions because he has no cleaning experience. He is not very good at calculating how much time the assistants will need to spend cleaning a site when he makes an offer. After Mike resigned, Tony had to take part in a meeting at the concrete factory and Jane tells me that she is quite anxious about how Tony is going to behave.

J: Now I'm anxious... I'm attending my first monthly meeting with my contact person and Tony tomorrow. I'm quite anxious about how Tony will handle it. But as Nick [contact person at the concrete factory] said back then about Mike, he [the new manager] can most likely be educated (laughs). It is nice to have a good contact person. He can be educated. Maybe he will say the same about Tony (laughs).

M: Have you said anything to Tony?

J: No... But let's see Mette. Nick has a subtle way. He's very diplomatic and at the same time he gets his message through. But I am anxious to see how Tony will react.

M: Well you have to act in a certain way out there.

J: There's a specific atmosphere. I wouldn't say that you have to speak in a certain way, but there's something out there that is truly special.

## **Laura**

Laura is in her early twenties, and the first time I talk with her she has only been a service manager for 2½ months. She has about 25-30 sites, but is not sure of the exact number. Before she was a service manager she worked as an assistant for four years. Gradually, she began taking on more and more responsibility until she became a service manager. Laura likes to be busy and knows it is a natural part of the business. When Mike and Tony asked her just one month after she became a service manager to cover an extra district for a few months, she accepted without hesitation.

L: The day Gina was fired, I was sent for and they said: Laura what do we do about it? I didn't know. [Then Mike and Tony said] well, here's what we're going to do, but this does not mean that you have to work 40-50 hours a week. And I felt like, I can see you [Mike and Tony] had to do this, so we all pitch in and work hard. I am one of those who want to save the world. I want to be both Mother Theresa and whatever else... I've always been like that.

Although Laura expresses that she is used to working under pressure, it is sometimes a bit too much, and she almost threw in the towel after a few months covering the extra district. During our first interview-conversation, Laura expressed the belief that Mike, Tony and her colleagues would support and help her if she asked them to. However, looking back at the experience during our second interview-conversation, she expresses that she felt very much alone because no one offered their help even though it was obvious that she was under a lot of pressure. Laura knows solitude and self-dependence is a part of the job, but she also knows that it makes the start-up as a service manager tough, and from time to time it makes some break down and give up. She tries to be a good colleague to new service managers. For example, when Annie has to cover another district for a period, Laura knows exactly what Annie is going through and tries to support her as best she can.

L: I know it all too well, all too well. In some ways, the experience I had the last time was that no one comes and asks you. Hell, people can see you're all wounded up, you ooze of it, you forget the small things. The sense I had last time was that people didn't dare to ask because, uh oh, what if she breaks down.

### ***If only you take a little interest in them***

Who Laura is as a private person is important for her. We spend a considerable part of the time we have together talking about her stepson, her Turkish fiancé/husband, her wedding, pregnancy, and family and friends. It is important for Laura that people around her know who she is. This is also important in her management style. She does not want to be just a formal service manager to her assistants; she wants them to know her as Laura someone, who besides being their service manager, also has a life, a stepson and a husband. This means that out side of work if she does not answer the phone immediately, then it is probably because she is with her family. She knows her assistants respect and understand this behaviour because they can relate it to their own life. Laura is also very interested in who her assistants are and what their private lives look like. She spends time together with them listening to their stories, asking them about their religions and feasts, families, friends and hobbies. She is convinced this strengthens their connection to the Company and makes them more motivated. She also shows this interest because she wants to be sure they know that she is there for them if they ever should feel stressed, bullied or threatened.

During our second interview-conversation Laura tells me how she has defended an assistant to a customer who complained that the assistant who cleaned there could not speak Danish. Laura explained to the customer that it took time to learn and he had to be patient. She used the Turkish she had learned from her Turkish family-in-law to make the assistant understand what needed to be cleaned and how, since she knows that the assistant and the customer could not communicate and that it could potentially cause problems. Nevertheless the customer showed patience and within three months the assistant could understand some Danish and even say a few sentences and communicate with the customer. An outcome like this is of big importance for Laura and makes the job worth while.

### ***I would really like to work more with foreigners and culture***

Laura is also very interested in learning more about foreign cultures and habits and tries to give her assistants with a foreign background an understanding of Danish culture. Although it sometimes causes a lot of problems, it also builds bridges between different cultures and enhances the understanding between them. During our second interview-conversation, Laura tells me that they recently had to suspend a Somalian assistant because he was accused of sexual assaulting a young Danish assistant at one of the sites. He had patted the Danish assistant's behind three times, and he could not understand why he was suspended because it was just for fun. Laura was sorry that she had to lose him because he

was a good assistant and she knew he was not aware that his behaviour was a transgression. On the other hand, she had no doubt that he had to be suspended. It was not until Laura explained to him that in Denmark it was considered to be just as offensive as if someone had patted his wife's behind that he understood the graveness of the matter.

It is a natural part of Laura's management style to be interested in her assistants, and she is surprised how little it takes and how much it repays. She tells me how she, a few times, has met former assistants who told her how big an impact she has made on their lives. This means a lot to Laura. It takes time to nurse the assistants and make sure that they have the things they need. She is well aware of this, and she spends a large part of her time driving from one site to the next. Training new assistants is especially time consuming, and Laura often spend three or four days at the site with the assistant to make sure she/he is well adjusted at the site, knows where to clean and what the right amount of cleanser is. Experience has taught her that if you do not take one thing at a time and complete it, then it will keep haunting you. She often drives an assistant from one site to the next if she/he has to be a replacement, or she drops them off at home if they get off at the same time. By driving them, Laura shows that she is there for them and that they are of importance to her. Laura is very honest towards the assistants. If she has forgotten an appointment or something she has promised them, she does not try to cover it up; she comes clean, apologizes and corrects the mistake. It is not the assistants who should be affected because she has to keep too many balls in the air and sometimes drops a few. According to Laura, the assistants are the Company's ambassadors and if they were not there, she would not have a job. Laura can easily be replaced, but they can not.

***If they only paid attention to those values once in a while***

Laura tries not to work long hours, but sometimes it is hard not to because there is always something to do. She knows Mike and Tony do not expect her to work more than 37 hours a week. At the same time, she also knows that if she does not say when to stop, then no one will and she will end up working around the clock. She believes she can achieve a lot if she works efficiently, and she does not mind pitching in when someone is busy because she knows that less busy periods come from time to time. Her husband only works every other week, so she tries to take some long days when he is away at work and then leave earlier, if possible, the weeks he does not work. At one point, she tried to have telephone hours and not answer the phone at home, but it was difficult because then something happened at a site, like an assistant accidently braking a window, and she could not be reached. On top

of that she received complaints from her colleagues or people in the administration because she did not always pick up her phone during the telephone hours. As a result, she gave up the telephone hours because it caused her too many problems. Not working too many hours is difficult for Laura, and she finds herself dead beat after work without the energy to go to the gym or finish the continuing education course she has started. During our second interview-conversation, Laura tells me that this setup only is possible as long as she and her husband do not have kids. Laura likes having a finger in every pie, and has a hard time handing over responsibility because she then feels that she loses knowledge about the sites and her assistants.

The Company values play an important role for Laura in her understanding of being a competent manager, and it really frustrates her when a colleague like Tina does not respect or use them in their management style. Most of the time, Laura leaves her phone in the car when she visits the sites and talks with the assistants. If she does take her phone with her, it is on silent. Laura disagrees with some of the other service managers about what it means to manage value-based. According to Laura, value-based management means that you do not talk badly about the assistants, ignore them or scold them. Laura treats the assistants with respect and if there is a problem, she always tries to solve it in a decent fashion while taking the assistant's perspective into consideration. Hence, it frustrates her when colleagues talk badly about their assistants or refer to a situation where they scolded them.

Laura also tries to give a positive image of the Company when she talks with her customers or assistants. If some of her assistants or customers are unsatisfied and about to resign or terminate their contract, Laura tries to change their minds and make them stay with the Company. This is not the same with all of her colleagues, and Laura sometimes gets the impression that they do not care whether the customer or assistant stays or leaves. In her opinion, some of the other service managers do not take the values serious. They laugh at the Company's value handbook and do not even try to treat the assistants or customers properly. They goof around too much and complain a lot about the Company, customers and assistants. What makes it even worse is that Tony does not do anything about it.

L: I asked him [Tony] at our staff development interview if he could put his foot down. I don't mind having fun, but could he do his role as boss? And apparently others had asked him the same question. It's all good we have fun, but there should be no doubt at all who the boss is when someone comes up the stairs. When they sit there and pity themselves, can you believe it? They think they are the CEO and they should get £3.000 a month, but they have no education, all we have is our training and experience.

### ***You have to find your feet in the beginning***

When Laura started as a service manager, it took some time for her to find out how she wanted to be a manager. Looking back, Laura thinks she also spent too much time having fun in the beginning instead of focussing on her work. As a result, Nina and Jane talked with Laura at different times. They told her that they hoped she could tell good management from bad, that they had confidence in her as a manager, and that they hoped she would not start thinking of herself as irreplaceable or talk negatively about the Company and jump on what Nina, Jane and Laura refer to as “the other bandwagon”. The description applies to the other service managers, who, according to Laura, spend too much time hanging around the office, talking badly about their assistants, customers and the top management, and who fool around and do not do their work. Especially during our last interview-conversation, Laura expresses confidence in herself as a manager. She knows that what she is doing works and tells me about her capacity to turn troubled sites into successes.

L: It is just one success after another out there. When I took over out there [at a site after Tina] it was really going badly, so I really made an effort. I like picking up messy things and turn them around; actually, I love it. It takes so little to get things on the right track, and now it's really running well. When I took over, Mike told me that he did not know how much effort we should spend out there because it was really a mess, and he didn't know whether we should just throw in the towel. I told him no, no, no, let's give it a shot, and I've turned it around. The assistants all leave before 6 pm, so we don't have to pay night supplement. It isn't a very good customer, and we don't make a lot of money down there, so I've made a little profit, and that's really awesome.

M: It's a good feeling.

L: Exactly, that's what makes it extremely awesome to come to work.

### ***We just have some different values***

During the period I talk with Laura she finds out that she likes things organised and that it is best for her to stay away from the office when there is too much tomfoolery. Nevertheless, it still nags her to know that some of her colleagues, and especially Tina, the unofficial leader of “the other bandwagon” does not take the job seriously and talk badly about the values and the assistants. It is very important that there is concordance between saying and doing, and Laura has a hard time accepting when this concordance is not upheld. In the beginning, she did not give it much thought, but as time passes, the different understandings of what it means to be a value-based manager becomes more and more

difficult for Laura to understand and accept. Hence, mulling over these different management perspectives absorbs a lot of her time. She feels that the unspoken disagreements about management style between the service managers creates a lot of bad mouthing and creates an atmosphere where people are indifferent to each other. The belief that colleagues will help each other out and act as a team (which Laura expressed at the beginning) is gradually being replaced with disbelief and a feeling of solitude. And in our last interview-conversation, Laura expresses that she feels that the service managers do not care for each other and lack empathy; they just say and do what they want. The service managers do not consider that what they do or say might hurt somebody's feelings. Nevertheless, Laura believes that the Company is on the right track, and with time, it will all be better. She is confident that Jacob will be able to turn the Company around and encourage values-based management because he is a different type of manager than John.

L: I find Jacob has got real presence. He's only here twice a week, but it seems as if he's here the whole time. Now, here last week, when we had a meeting, he started off going around shaking everybody's hand – wow, and you could tell this is actually our CEO. Maybe there was someone he didn't say hello to, but, wow, everybody is equal. It really doesn't matter who you are. And I've really thought about going down there and being completely honest and telling him how frustrating this is. Everything stands still, things happen too slowly. We drop things on the floor; there are a lot of balls in the air, but we only manage to catch two of them... but no, now Mike is resigning and things need to settle down, but he's really, I'm extremely impressed by him [Jacob], and I believe it will only be better. With John, I like John, but it is probably more his authority and the respect for what he has achieved. That's really of huge importance, but John as a person here lately, it's really been difficult.

M: Has he changed a lot here lately?

L: I believe so. All of a sudden John only handles the strenuous matters, like when a customer has made a complaint and gotten a hold on John. Then he comes up the stairs bellowing, now what's that about. There isn't much value based about that at all, where as Jacob, he mentions the values constantly. With John, I think it was a bit forced; it's modern, something had to happen, you have to do something with your company. But complying with them [the values] himself, I don't think he was so good at that.

### *Tony is more flighty*

Although Laura has confidence in the future of the Company, she is, during our last interview-conversation, frustrated over her present situation because she does not know who she can turn to since the colleagues and managers she has normally confided in have left the Company. Nina, Maria and Mike all resigned and Jane, in a way, has distanced herself after Nina and Mike's resignation and has also talked about resigning. Nina changed her opinion about the Company just before she resigned and started sympathising with Tina and "the other bandwagon", which was very difficult for Laura to understand and accept. Maria's resignation came as a shock to Laura and really made her doubt whether it was all worth fighting for. Laura was really sad when Mike resigned and cried a lot because she did not know who would be able to fill his shoes. Actually Tony is the person who Laura should refer to, but she has used Mike a lot because he has been an outstanding manager for her. Mike has always been there for Laura and he has always been very considerate of her needs.

L: Mike is just the best, and says no, no, no, you have to take care of yourself. Mike is good at putting the brakes on and is always asking, 'are you sure'... I fear that a bit, Tony is not so good at putting the brakes on. He's got more the attitude of; can't you be on the phone while you're driving? But sometimes you just need peace and quiet. So I fear a bit what will happen. Mike is so good at reading cues, and Tony stands there stating clearly: don't expect me to read cues because I don't, speak up!

Another reason why Laura has used Mike more than Tony is because Tony talks a lot with Tina, and Laura does not know how he would respond if she came to talk with him about her frustrations regarding Tina. Laura fears that he would not support or understand her because she does not know whether Tony sympathises with Tina's management style or with hers.

The time around our last interview-conversation, Laura has her maternity leave just around the corner and she is afraid that the new regional manager will not get to know her before she begins her maternity leave. It would make it difficult for her to come back because she would not know who she comes back to. The question would be: has the perspective on management coming from "the other bandwagon" gained acceptance? If so, what should she do then without Mike, Nina, Maria and maybe also Jane being there? If they have all thrown in the towel, then what is there left to fight for? This is a frustrating conclusion for Laura because she really likes her job and wants to stay in the Company, but she just does not know what the conditions will be and whether she can come to terms with them.

## **Nina**

N: If you treat people properly and act as a good leader. If you deliver the things they need at the right time, show up at the appointed time and basically keep your part of the bargain and once in a while turn a blind eye on something, and if you let them decide for themselves and give them privileges because you know that one good deed is the other worth, then it repays.

Nina is in her late fifties and has been a service manager for the Company for the last seven years. She covers a large geographical area in the region and has a customer portfolio that, during the period where I am talking with her, increases from 40 to 50 customers. She has about 50 assistants working for her and many of them clean on two or more of Nina's sites. Nina has sites where her assistants start cleaning at 4.30 am and sites where they start at 11 pm. This means that Nina often finds herself working 10-14 hours a day. She spends a lot of her working time in her car driving from one site to the next, delivering keys, materials or dropping off assistants. A pivotal part of Nina's job is this continual attempt to keep several balls in the air. This is what motivates her most of the time, but sometimes it makes her run out of steam.

N: When I am driving it's focussed..., you don't give it much thought. When you're in the car you have to scrawl something down or you have to make a call. Then there are four missed calls, and you have to listen to your voice mail. There are a lot of things you have to take care of while you're driving. You know it isn't safe, but you have to finish these things because you know you have to be somewhere at an appointed time, and you are often a bit behind schedule. Then you're at the next site and on your way again and suddenly you're parked in front of your own door, and you drag yourself over the doorstep, and you haven't had anything to eat. All your basic human needs have been completely...

M: Disregarded in the attempt to fulfil those of others?

N: Yes. It is an efficient use of time, but somehow I like it. I really like it. Then at other times I feel like hell, I want another job, why should I bother?

Nina enjoys the versatility and the freedom in her work, and she could not imagine herself doing anything else. She has tried a nine-to-five job where she was told what to do and when to do it, but she did not care for it. She thrives when she is the one managing her day and deciding when to visit which customers, which sites and which assistants. She appreciates the variety and unpredictability of her job

where she never knows what kind of challenges she is going to meet. Through the years she has made it her speciality to go to problematic sites and turn them into successes.

N: I've taken over the Bread Factory. This site that originally belonged to another region and it has demanded a lot of attention. The psychological working environment was terrible, and one [assistant] was away on sick notice. When Mike and I came down there someone was in the bathroom crying. I couldn't see what the fuss was about, what the big problem was... so I started clearing up everything and started it up as a new customer. I thought it went rather smoothly. They demanded my attention and wanted the things they asked for. If something broke, I was there and that was all it took. A little history about the Company.... They [the assistants] received instructions and a Company manual on the site, and their cleaning carts were provided with maps of the factory so they knew where to clean. That was it. They got some decent clothes, all in all attention, and I went down there a few times a month with bread rolls and took the time to sit down and talk with them. Now it really functions.

***I think it's important that the assistants we have are service-minded***

In Nina's opinion, cleaning is a craftsmanship and for a long time she considered the Company a firm that offered something special compared to the competitors. Many of their competitors are just budget-oriented cleaning factories, and she could never imagine herself working there. Nina considers many of the initiatives like: value-based management, certifications, quality reports, environmental and working environmental policy as solid tools in maintaining the quality of the work. Nina spends a large amount of time informing her assistants about their products, ergonomics, pH-value, the right amount of cleanser, the values and the Company. She does not do it only because it is a part of the Company's certifications and environmental and working environmental policy. She does it because she believes it is important for the assistants; the more well-informed they are, the more involved and satisfied they are in with their job. Nina is well aware that the procedures take a lot of time, and she doubts whether the initiatives play any role in happy customers. She believes, however, that they play a role in running the Company, and she is proud of being a part of a company that values these areas. She has always based her management on the Company's values, even before they were put on paper because she believes that the values are important for the assistants.

N: When I am out there and saying these things [talking about the values] I can see they [the assistants] change their position. I simply believe that too many of our assistants out on the sites don't know

anything else besides they are there to clean, and that cannot be the purpose with how they spend their day. But, if you try to explain to them the importance of their work and what big a difference a service-minded attitude on their part plays in how the Company is regarded, then, I believe, it will make them more motivated in their work... Instead of just pulling that damn cart around behind closed curtains as fast as possible so they can get off and do their shopping, I can see people smiling, regaining their energy and other positive things.

Nina upholds her relationships to her assistants, and it is important for her that her assistants do not just think of their job as a source of income. She tries to show them that they are important to her, and if they were not there, she would not have a job and the Company would not exist. She shows this by spending time with them when she visits the sites. She leaves her phone in the car and takes the time to sit down and talk with them over a cup of coffee or walk around with them while they clean. They do not just talk about the site. Nina also knows a lot about the assistants' family situations. When one of them is away on maternity leave she goes to see the baby. If they have birthday and they want her to come by, she takes the time to come to the site and celebrate with the assistant. Each year she organises a Christmas party where all of her assistants are invited. This gives the assistants an opportunity to meet each other and spend some time together. Nina arranges various activities each year like inviting a home clothing party or arranging for a nail specialist to come. Each year, Nina receives more and more special wishes on what candy or cookies to buy, and the party always turns out to be a success. She puts a lot of effort in trying to remembering to buy all the right stuff and making sure that the Company's Christmas present is there.

It is important for Nina that the assistant and the customer have a good relationship, because she knows that customers do not give the assistants much slack and quickly scolds them if they find out that a waste paper bin has not been emptied or that the assistant forgot to remove a cobweb from the ceiling. Nina urges the assistants to try to look at themselves from the customers' perspective and understand which position the Company has.

N: I've always said we're the best. We're here to offer a service. We're an external company the customer hires, and it might be that the clients don't tidy up, but you are not allowed to tell them off because we're here for them... What's the use of us telling them that if you don't tidy your desk by tomorrow then I'm fucking not cleaning it any more... You have to remember constantly to tell them [the assistants] to know your place because an assistant can easily feel a part of the [customer's]

company. They quickly adopt that free and easy way of talking, and I tell them, remember who we are. We are the Company and they can axe us anytime.

### *They sell the sites completely wrong*

There are, however, aspects of the work with the values, certifications and the environment and working environment policy that frustrates Nina. She has a hard time finding the time to introduce her assistants properly to the sites and the Company. Her number of sites increases incrementally, and she experiences a high staff turnover and constantly has to hire and train new assistants. On top of that, she deals with assistants calling in sick daily, and she spends a lot of time moving people around from one site to another in order to solve the puzzle and have every site covered. The lack of time forces her to cut corners and she does not have enough time to give the assistants the proper introduction to the site, the values or the environment and working environment policy that they are entitled to. She knows that she has to cut these corners, otherwise, she would be working around the clock, but it rankles her because the Company can lose its certifications and it makes it hard for Nina to hang on to her belief that cleaning is considered a craftsmanship at the Company. She feels incapable of doing anything about it because the sites are sold completely wrong. John never says no to anything, not even if it is a back staircase in some apartment block that only takes two hours to clean. John does not know how much time Nina uses to introduce the assistant to the site or that she constantly has to find replacements because no one wants to stay at such a site for long.

Tony has never done any cleaning himself and does not know how long it takes, so Nina feels that he too often promises something that the service managers cannot keep. But once the contract is made, it is up to the service managers to sort it out. However, Nina does not know how to sort it out because she does not feel that she can justify telling her assistants to clean the site within the agreed-upon time, when she is not even able to do it herself. It frustrates Nina that John, Mike and Tony are so eager to grow that they do not pause for a moment to think. She feels that the service managers constantly push forward and work more and more, but no one appreciates it. The only thing that matters to Mike, Tony and John is to increase profits no matter the human costs.

N: Last time the concrete factory went in procurement, it's online today, they underbid each other by less than £5 because they knew the procurement ends at 12.00, and they know that price is the decisive factor. It's completely crazy. How we will be able to clean the site given the time that's at disposal for

the price they've paid is something we deal with later. But that problem ends up on us. We have to keep the engine running and it is the same problem again: work your way out of the problems and there's more and more of this. This also goes for the customers. Can't you also clean these two refrigerators, just once a month? Yes sure we can, and as Mike says we can't put a price on that. It's an important customer, but the assistant doing the cleaning who already pushes herself, she has to stay behind and two refrigerators can't be cleaned in 15 minutes, it takes a minimum of half an hour and she has to stay there for the extra half hour to do it. Nobody works for free, and that's easy for me to understand.

Nina's frustration increases each time I talk with her and she finds herself having a harder and harder time agreeing with Company's development. It is difficult to hang on to the identification she used to feel with the Company. The picture she has of the Company as a close family where everyone knew each other and cared about each other is falling apart. She does not know the names of half of the assistants in the administration, and when someone comes up the stairs and asks for Mike or Tony she does not know if it is someone working for the Company or a guest. She feels that no one truly cares for each other anymore, and this lack of interest in each other has destroyed a pivotal characteristic of the Company.

N: In the old days when we were all at the Royal Avenue, when there weren't that many of us, we talked a lot about it and we all knew what it was when the Company's spirit was mentioned. People still talk as if it still exists, but it doesn't.

M: What is the Company's spirit?

N: It's that part about us being a big family, we know each other, look after each other and we know what all of us are up to... that was the Company's spirit... It is actually somehow something you have to cherish in a whole other way than you would imagine... Basically, I think it is something that has to be cherished from the top management... and here I really mean John and Bob, who are being characterised as the top. Given that they have their offices just as you come in, they cannot possibly indicate it more clearly... And I mean that by him who is in there [pointing at John's office]. You lose respect for him. I could not give a horse's ass how I speak to him because he is so inconsiderate when you think about what all of us do for him.

***Customers are also different... and you have to handle them differently***

Nina enjoys various projects where she really has to be creative and work out a solution that is functional for the customer, the assistants and the Company, and she is good at it. She believes that this has a lot to do with her good relations to her customers. She spends time with her customers and gets to know them. Often they do not talk about cleaning, but personal issues when she comes to visit them. She has a good feel of how to interact with her clients, and she can sense who is interested in getting feedback on the quality reports and who does not want to be bothered with that sort of information. Some of the customers have been with her for many years and have joined the Company because Nina started working there. The good relationship is extremely important for the working relations because Nina is sure that the customers talk with her if they need help to work out a troubled situation.

N: At Johnson Elementary I have this cute story.... Jacob who is the headmaster there contacted me and said I really have a problem. I won't be able to pay for December... I will pay, of course, but in the long term it's really going to be a problem for me because the budget can only pay for 11 months, and I really have to work out a solution. I then also have another problem, I have two janitors... and the lawn-mowing has been outsourced... so now I have to cut down on their janitor hours. So he said to me, can we work something out so that you hand over some of the cleaning [to the janitors]? That way I can save some money and retain both of my janitors.... Then I really started thinking creatively... What we took away [from the assistants] was the large walking areas, the gym and such... We had calculated that it would take 1½ hours a day, and that was what he had to save because 1½ hour a day adds up to a month's fee on a yearly basis... We were really eager to see how it would work out cooperatively... It's just awesome what they [the janitors] have done. They put flashing lights on the cart, and on the first day, he [one of the janitors] had put on a pinafore, a scarf and he was wearing pink cleaning gloves. They had been visiting the headmaster singing 'here we come with our brush and bucket'... They've really taken it in a good way."

Most of the time, Nina succeeds with her projects and manages to move the assistants or the tasks around in a way that pleases everybody. However, once in a while she runs out of ideas and turns to Mike or Tony for help. What then too often happens is that Mike and Tony terminate the contract with the customer instead of figuring out a solution and that frustrates Nina. Nina knows and has accepted the fact that she is very independent in her job and she seldom asks for assistance or help. But when she does, once in a while, she does not feel that Mike or Tony understand her or her job. They hardly

ever spend time driving around with her to visit her sites or getting to know the contact person on the sites. In her opinion, this induces an inadequate understanding of her job and is a vital part of why they repeatedly make promises to customers that they cannot keep. The regional manager before Mike took the time to visit the sites, and she knew who the contact person was there and she was always present when they started up a new site. Nina knows that not many people can handle what the former region manager could and Nina would gladly settle for just a bit of the same commitment from Mike and Tony. But, Nina does not feel they really show much commitment in her and the other service managers' work.

N: So many works so hard that you worry if they remember to put their foot down. I've been there when things are moving so fast, and you know it's going too fast, but you can't stop it. There isn't the time to stop and think, there simply isn't, and then you move on. And then you're caught in that vicious circle. And I've been there a few times where you are parked on the side of a road with tears running down your cheeks, and you can't even drive home because you can't pull yourself together. You sit there looking at your things trying to pull yourself together; you simply have to get an overview. Just taking the time for that, makes you feel better when you drive off. And then the next one [assistant] calls and asks me to find a replacement. All the time you have to be careful, we [the service managers] don't have the same margin of error as him [John]. If you step on their [the assistants'] toes, then they just stay home for another four days, they do not care. If you step on their toes, they'll punish you for it the first chance they get.

### ***I had flashed all the red lights I could***

Nina has several times, during regional meetings, insinuated that she cannot keep up anymore; she needs to reduce her work pace and working hours. Although she has told Mike and Tony this, she keeps receiving responsibility for more sites. At the same time, Mike tells her that there is not room in the budget to hire a new service manager and that she has to organise her way out of the situation; but there are limits to how much organising you can do. This eventually makes Nina see no other way out than to accept a job offer with one of the competitors who has had their eyes on her for a long time, and she hands in her notice.

This notification is not received with understanding and support. Mike, Jacob and John all try to convince her to nullify the new contract and they promise her better working conditions. Nevertheless,

Nina has made her decision. John cannot understand why Nina did not come to him and tell him about her frustrations, but Nina respects Mike as her manager and would not break the line of command. Besides, Nina knows that Mike and John have a strained relationship, and she would not risk receiving counter orders from John that could further strain Mike and John's relationship. Nina feels that it should have been Mike who had gone down to John and said: if we do not relieve Nina from some of her tasks she will hand in her resignation. However, Mike did not do this. Mike has told her that with the benefit of hindsight he would have acted differently if only he had known better. As a result of his hindsight, Mike has hired three service managers to cover Nina's district. This has made Nina feel like a fool, and she cannot understand why it had to come to this before they discovered that action needed to be taken. Nina knows that maybe she could have acted differently, but she was so worked into the ground that she could not see any other way out.

N: As I said when I was talking with John, when I do something like this and make this decision, then it's because I've reached a point where I don't give a damn if I have to work at a hot dog stand. I'm just not doing this anymore. Then I will think it through when I get there... When your thoughts are like that and you act completely irrational just to move on, then you do what I did, you write a letter of resignation and hand it in...

## **Annie**

The first time I talk with Annie, who is in her early fifties, she has only been with the Company for six weeks. Before she joined the Company, she was a cleaning manager at a hospital for 11 years. The working conditions at the hospital were very different from the ones in the Company, and Annie is very happy that she made the change.

A: At the hospital, it's very politically and financially governed. If you need a new cleaning cart for an assistant, then you had fill out an application that then needed to be approved by the hospital's board of directors. They decided whether it was in the budget and if not, the approval had to be handed in the following year in the new budget, where it would be granted. So it was very laborious, where as here in the Company if you need a cleaning cart, well then you just buy one, right. At the hospital the assistants were eventually worn out because no replacements ever came, since there wasn't money for replacements. It's just another world here because it just has to work. So I can't get my arms down, they're still flapping around up here... and it's positive.

Many of the tasks are the same, only a few of them are different. In the Company, Annie has to handle the purchasing of supplies herself, and there is more quality control than she is used to. It is not that it is difficult for Annie to carry out the tasks. She just has to change her mindset because she is not used to juggling between the assistants', the customers' and the Company's perspectives. But she has no doubts that she will learn the job because it offers some great advantages. The closer contact with the assistants is what Annie especially appreciates. In her former job, she did not talk with the assistants more than once a week and it was often because someone had made a complaint that Annie had to speak with the assistants. Now Annie spends a lot of her time with the assistants just checking up on how they are and asking whether they need anything.

A: I start my day at 3.45 am where I get up. My telephone hours start at 4.00... Then I'm here at 5.00, in case anything should happen. If the phone doesn't ring and no one calls in sick, then I usually visit the sites and say hallo to the assistants there. Just say hallo, how are you, do you need anything? If the phone doesn't ring, I can get around to many sites. Some need to talk more than others, of course. That's the great thing about it, getting out and having this contact with the assistants. Of course we also have to check that the sites are nice and clean, but it's just as much the social aspect that's fascinating. And if you have a good talk with them, you can also quickly throw a quick glance over the skirting

boards and see whether it's time to wipe them again, and ask them if they're scheduled to be wiped off next week?

Annie does not experience a high turn-over in her staff. The assistants are reliable, and during the 1½ years we talk together, she only replaces two or three assistants. Two thirds of her assistants have a foreign background, a situation that is quite different from what Annie was used to at the hospital where all the assistants were female and of Danish origin. Annie knows it takes a bit longer to train the assistants with a foreign background; she has to keep the instructions to a minimum and not use long sentences. She often shows them how to clean properly because she knows that she cannot explain it to them over the phone. Even though they demand more attention, Annie believes that they are competent and sometimes even more reliable than her other assistants. They are not on holiday very often and they hardly ever call in sick, and if they are sick, then they often have found a replacement themselves. Annie believes it is important that her assistants are well because she is convinced that if they thrive, everything around them including the sites will look good. It takes time to get to know the assistants well and she spends time small-talking with them in the beginning and lets the relationship gradually develop at a natural pace. On the one hand, Annie believes she is lucky that she has such good assistants, and on the other hand, she knows it has something to do with her management skills.

A: It is some really competent assistants that I have, that's for sure... it's really great. It gives you calm and stability. I don't have to wonder who I can use as a replacement at that site, it's very stable and they actually almost never call in sick, which is a great relief, so I feel very privileged...

It also has a lot to do with our attitude towards and approach to the assistants... I bring ten years of experience with me, whereas Laura she's quite green at this. She has to gain her footing. I believe it's of great importance how you talk to the assistants. Are you standing in front of someone from Somalia or someone from Denmark? We should not address them the same way, and I don't think someone like Laura is so good at that. Where you could argue that's maybe easier to call in sick if you're spoken to in a harsh manner, so I believe it's quite important... You have to address them like you want to be addressed.

That you have to nurse your assistant and spend time with them is obvious and natural to Annie, and most of the time Annie does it without any problems. However, for a few months she and Tina had to cover another district for some months, while Mike and Tony were looking for a new service manager, and during this period Annie felt she neglected her own assistants, and it frustrated her. She tried to

prioritise the tasks and be on the cutting edge, but everything took longer than she was used to and there were a lot of non-productive time because everything was just a mess. She was not familiar with the sites and she spent a lot of time looking for the right keys, locating the cleaning room and helping the assistants the best she could. In that period, she felt that the trust she has gained with her assistants slowly disappeared. Annie knew she could not blame them, because she normally prioritises them and spends a lot of time with. Afterwards it puzzled her how she could spend so much time on not really getting anything done. Normally she has no problems organising her day and keeping up with her plans.

***We have to remember to rely on and bounce off ideas with each other if we want to survive in this job***

When Annie and Tina covered the extra district, they began confiding in and bouncing off ideas with each other, and they formed a relationship where they began discussing both daily management challenges and more general development initiatives in the Company. Annie feels that they are very much alike and yet very different. Nevertheless, they have grown on each other, and they continue to confide in each other even after the new service manager took over the district. Annie feels that the service managers, in general, are comfortable with each other and she enjoys it when they meet every Friday and spend an hour or so together discussing family and business matters in an informal way and compete to see which of them can bring the most gross piece of pastry. Despite this, Annie does not feel that the service managers really know each other. It was a huge blow when, during Spring, year two of my study, a service manager is fired because none of the other service managers had any idea that things were not running smoothly. In Annie's perspective this has something to do with the fact that they as a team are not very good at helping or confiding in each other. Most of the time, they follow their own course and forget that they are all a part of the same team. Annie thinks this is a shame because they could benefit a lot from being more team oriented.

Some of the service managers like Jane and Nina are not in the office very often and it is difficult to get to know them. As time passes and because many of the service managers are new, Annie finds the job a bit solitary. She thinks that the new service managers are really nice, but many of them, like Laura, lack experience in general or knowledge about the Company; therefore everything takes longer, no one knows who to ask and many mistakes are made. Annie finds it confusing that she, after only a year in the Company, is already considered an old hand and is appointed as a mentor for one of the new

service managers, because what can Annie teach a new service manager, when she has only been a service manager for a year? She knows that Tina shares her point of views and they turn to each other whenever it gets too much. Having someone like Tina is important for Annie because she knows that they have to rely on and use each other to survive in the job.

***I feel it all the way into my heart and my stomach that I'm happy and that it's good for me***

Apart from the period where Annie covered the extra district, she organises her days much alike. She works from 4.00 am to 12.30 am and then drives home, where she turns her phone on silent and sleeps for a few hours. When she gets up she checks her phone to see if there are any important calls she has to return, and then checks it again at about 8.00 pm before she goes to bed to get an idea about how the following day will unfold. It only happens rarely that Annie has to reorganise a lot. Most of the time things run smoothly and Annie can get to what she has planned. She knows it takes time to instruct new assistants, but when she tells me about the procedures. It becomes very clear that she does not worry about the time spent. She considers it as a natural part of the job and she is convinced that it helps sustain the assistants.

A: Well if we, as now, hire someone to clean at the university, then the assistant and I meet at the site and talk 'bout codes and alarms or whatever [security installation] there might be in order to enter the site. Then we go inside and take a look at the area and see what needs to be done. We have a manager file which contains everything including a form with start-up of a new assistant. There is a long list that helps us remember to inform them about work schedules, safety, hygiene, where to put the trash - a long list that we go through. When we're done, then we go and have a look at the cleaning cart, talk about adjustable handles and carts, how you wring out the cloth, how much water you use, and how much cleanser you use. When we sense that she's got it under control, we help her get started; what should she clean first and that she should finish by washing the floor. When we sense that she knows what to do... we actually leave them and come back later depending on how much time they spend at the site. We then come back and arrange to meet the following day and go through the site together, but this time she lets us in [turns off the alarm]. So we have close contact for at least the first week. Then we follow up on trash removal, the amount of cleanser used, the Company's environmental policy and check to see if she remembers to turn off the lights and such issues. So we spend some time together with them initially, but after that the visits decrease.

M: It's a lot of work?

A: Yes that's for sure, but I believe it's worthwhile because I believe we sustain them better... I believe we treat our assistants better than other cleaning companies... we try to treat our assistants decently. If we have a close relation with them, then I believe we have happier assistants.

Annie regards the Company's environmental and working environmental policy, the quality controls and the certifications as solid management tools. She doubts, however, whether they play any role, at the time customers have to choose between them and their competitors. But the initiatives help her remember how to start up a new site or an assistant, and they are helpful in creating a constructive dialogue with the assistants and customers. It is easier to talk about the quality of the cleaning or potential disagreements when they have a concrete quality control as a starting point and if they have a good relationship. Annie experiences that the customers are positive about the initiative and they are often surprised how thorough she is. The assistants sometimes defend themselves if there are any complaints about the cleaning, but after Annie has talked with the individual assistant about it, they quickly figure out a solution. Annie highly prioritises the quality controls. She has them organised and always makes time for them. Even when she covered the extra district and things were more hectic than normal she managed to carry them out. Annie knows the Company is implementing value-based management, but she does not give it much thought on a daily basis.

A: We have come round to that value-based management, but I don't think it's something the assistants give much thought to. When I'm out with an assistant, then I'm not asking her whether she's working according to the innovative values, I'm not...I found the Company to have some good values already when I was hired, so I had no problems coming to terms with them. I think I live by them nevertheless. It goes for every aspect of life. It's the way we should behave as human beings...

M: But do you give them much thought on a daily basis?

A: No... when is it that I'm innovative or something else? No I don't think that I do [give them much thought]. If I come across this little value book or anything else that has the seven values on it, I pause for a moment and think oh yeah, that's true, and where am I according to that. And then I can come up with an example, something I've experienced, and then I think, well that's fine, so at one level I guess I use them, but not on a daily basis.

***Whenever we get really stressed then Tony takes away some of our customers, and when we then regain energy, he gives them back to us.***

A bit more stability is becoming increasingly important for Annie the longer she has been with the Company. An explanation of this development is that during the 1½ years I talk with Annie, her customer portfolio increased from 40 to 60 customers. During our last interview-conversation, Annie tells me that Tony knows not to hand over any more customers to her at the moment. As a help, one of Annie's assistants is now responsible for 20 of the sites, mainly the staircases and back stairs. This helps Annie, but she still has the overall responsibility for the sites.

Annie feels that Mike and Tony are very competent managers; they give her all the support, praise and trust she can ask for and she knows they will help her out the best they can if she asks for help. She confides in Tony when she, for example, has problems with another service manager, and they work out a solution together. She is aware that Tony has a very direct and forward management style, and that he sometimes does not think before he speaks. This sometimes hurts some of the, especially younger, service managers' feelings, but Annie has no problems with his approach and likes that she always knows where she stands with him. She is also very fond of Mike and knows she is going to miss him when he leaves the Company, because he is a pleasant and competent manager. On the other hand, she respects his decision and believes it is the right one for him because all the time she has been with the Company her experience has been that he has been stressed and frustrated, so she looks forward to seeing who their next district manager will be. Even though Annie believes Mike and Tony are competent managers, there are, nevertheless, parts of their management style that Annie finds adverse.

A: There are a lot of things... that with time has been a matter of course, for example, when we acquire new customers the papers just get thrown on our desk. Here you are, that's your customer. Okay but where do we start?... Tony has no idea who our customers are at all and I think that's a misjudgement because the customers don't know who Tony is either. It's understandable that Tony can't come with us every time, but I believe it's important that he, once in a while, comes with us and puts in an appearance. As a leader, it's also a bit easier to talk with us if there's any problem... It means a lot that you've met them just once... I think many of us in here miss that.

Annie is curious about what happens after Jacob begins, and she believes it is an advantage that he has some cleaning experience. She is uncertain what impact it will have on them because he is managing on another and higher level than the service managers. She is, however, convinced that the impact he will

have will be for the better because the Company needs to change. At the same time Annie feels they have to lower the pace in order not to run out of breath. She knows that both Mike and Tony have talked with Jacob and asked him to give them some time and space before he initiates new processes and it reassures her that it appears as if he respects what Mike and Tony said.

***I believe it's a real solid and good company***

In defence of the sometimes hectic working conditions, Annie really likes her job and is proud of working for the Company. She has no problems getting up at 4.00 am because, compared to her former job, she is convinced that the job is significant for her, and it makes her feel good. Even her husband tells her how content she has become after she started working there. She feels very privileged, but she also deals with the fact that a lot has happened since she started working there.

A: A lot, really a lot has happened in the last six months, and the pace is really high... It's a good job, where at least us service managers have a good relationship, and it's a company where you pretty much can get things how you want them and that's a luxury ...And it's great having managers who trust you and let you do what you think is best, and I've never had that before, so it's a God's gift... It's really nice, but so much has happened... So once in a while you say to yourself, we have to keep up. With the pace there is in the organisation, you can't just call a halt, but we have to be able to keep up because we're the ones out there with the customers.

She knows she will not continue as a service manager in the Company until her retirement. After she has been working for the Company approximately a year, she is offered a job from an education school as a cleaning instructor. Annie feels very honoured because she has never had that happen before. Despite that, she turns the offer down because her main focus at the moment is the Company.

# Chapter 4

---

## Organising as continual sensemaking

*Based on how scholars from an emergent, becoming and post modern perspective perceive organisations, I will in this chapter present how organisations are understood in this thesis. The chosen perspective takes its point of departure in how I perceived the everyday organising in the Company while I generated data. It is going to be the four service managers, Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie's, everyday organising that will be discussed throughout the chapter in order to illustrate how their practice has shaped my understanding of organising. Simultaneously, I will discuss how my perspective on organising has also shaped how I approached the Company and tried to understand the actors' organising. This means that the everyday organising in the Company and the methods I have used to understand the organising are parts of the same practice.*

### How can organising be understood?

There have been many attempts at figuring out what an organisation is. There are at least two rather distinct, prevailing and contradicting perspectives. Either an organisation is perceived as a more or less stable entity that can be explored, described and explained in a systematic way, or it is perceived as a dynamic entity consisting of continual emerging and complex micro-processes. These two styles of thinking are often described as modern and post modern conceptions, where the former ascribes ontological primacy to organisations as being and the latter to organisations as becoming (Weick & Quinn, 1999: 362, Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 228, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 570).

*“... we need to abandon the traditional idea of organizational research/theorizing as a process involving the ‘discovering’, ‘describing’, and ‘explaining’ of the stabilized features perceived in organizational configurations. Instead, what is needed is a refocusing of attention on to the complex and heterogeneous micro-organizational processes involved in the ongoing enactment of social reality including any forms of organized complexity.” (Chia, 1996: 50)*

Looking back at what I experienced in the Company, as exemplified through the four stories above, it seems as if more was emergent than stability and more complex than uniform in the actors' way of organising. Understanding the organisation in a becoming and organising perspective has some implications that challenge some of the fundamental assumptions that modern organisation science is based on. Gergen & Thatchenkery point at three important presumptions within the organisation and being perspective that the organising and becoming perspective challenges: The rational agent, empirical knowledge and language as representation (2004: 229). Instead they propose focussing on: rationality as communal, empirical knowledge as social construction and language as social action (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 234 – 237).

As presented earlier, relations are assigned primacy in this thesis. This means that how actors understand the world around them is; "...in fact is not located anywhere within (in the "souls" of communicating subjects) but entirely and completely without – in the word, the gesture, the act. There is nothing left unexpressed in it, nothing "inner" about it – it is wholly on the outside, wholly brought out in exchanges, wholly taken up in material, above all in the material of the word." (Vološinov<sup>8</sup>, 1973: 19) This means that saying an actor acts rational is equivalent to saying that he follows the conventions or that he 'plays by the rules' favoured within a particular part of the world (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 235, Gergen, 2009: 242).

*"What makes a word a word is its meaning.*

*What makes an experience an experience is also its meaning."*

(Vološinov, 1973: 26)

The way phenomena are organised, how they are distinguished from each other and the symmetric relations that have been assigned to them are social constructed patterns that are used to create order out of a complex and dynamic world in attempts to make sense of and understand social actions (Chia, 1995: 51, Chia, 1996: 597-599). However, the meaning structures that are used to order the world are only valid for a given time and place. Meaning is forever in motion and what makes sense today can and will most likely change depending on how the actors make sense of new information (Czarniawska, 2004: 12, Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 240). The retrospective sense actors make is continuously

---

<sup>8</sup> Vološinov centres his argumentation about the interplay between sensemaking and word on how it is being expressed through ideological signs. For anything to possess meaning it has to be a sign (Vološinov, 1973: 9). In my presentation of Vološinov's thoughts, I focus more on the reciprocal relationship between meaning and word than on the ideological signs. I fully acknowledge that this reciprocal relationship is manifested in signs.

being adjusted. This enables actors to change their minds about phenomena, events and actors depending on the changing and fluctuating contextual settings and depending on which actors communicate with each other (James, 1909: 262, Vološinov, 1973: 19-23). In this perspective, meaning cannot be understood as something static or assigned beforehand. Meaning is negotiated relationally by the actors. What the actors perceive as meaningful and the actions they carry out cannot be predicted by any of the actors. What is meaningful and how actors act evolves and stems from the actors' relational interplay as they attempt to construct meaning together (Czarniawska, 2004: 13). This does not, however, mean that everything is unpredictable because actors have norms, routines, values and meaning structures that they take for granted. It just means that nothing is certain.

Actors organise the world relationally through routine procedures and everyday tasks. These actions are, with time, institutionalised and subsequently they constrain possible actions (Benson, 1977: 3). This constraint is expressed through preconceptions that guide perception and actions (Weick, 1988: 307). Through sensemaking and actions, portions of the field of experience are bracketed and singled out for closer perception (Weick, 1988: 307). Based on actors' understandings of the world they produce plausible maps that contain their expectations for future actions (Weick, 1988: 307). These maps, however, also generate future actions: "At the heart of enactment is the idea that cognition lies in the path of the action. Action precedes cognition and focuses cognition." (Weick, 1988: 307) This does not, however, mean that the world, actions and sensemaking remain the same. As Benson (1977) writes, organisations are continual going through a thoroughgoing social reconstruction that stems from actors contextual and relational constructions (Benson, 1977: 19). The goals actors have and live with are continually being reformulated because wherever the actors might be at a particular moment in their life, they are always already on their way somewhere else constructing new meaning. It is through this journey that the actors create the goals they follow (Czarniawska, 2004: 13, Ingold, 2009: 204).

To understand empirical knowledge as a social construction twists the mainstream idea about empirical knowledge from the modern perspective. This view suggests that social reality is understood as: "...comprising discrete, static and hence describable phenomena. It assumes a 'logic of insulation' in which 'the world is organized in terms of clear, separate fields which must not be allowed to' 'infect each other.'" (Cooper and Burrell, 1989: 1 IN Chia, 1995: 586) When empirical knowledge is socially constructed, the methods and the field co-constitute each other; the understanding of a phenomenon is theory laden and the selection of theories are phenomenon deduced (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 235). Czarniawska argues that the field does not speak for itself but communicates on the researcher's

conditions (Czarniawska, 2004: 62). This means that in generating and working with data, something is given voice and something is silenced. This is not understood as a calculated attempt to leave out parts of the social world. This is more an acknowledgement that there are many different and alternative ways to ‘set the social world right’, and in that process method and data go hand in hand and are guided by perception (Czarniawska, 2003: 137, Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 236).

*“A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is  
a product of the living interaction of social forces.” (Vološinov, 1973: 41)*

And through ‘setting the social world right’ the world is simultaneously being constructed. The world is not organised in a neutral or objective way but in a generative and sensemaking way (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 236). “... it is in words and language that things first come into Being and are.” (Heidegger, 1971:134 IN Chia, 1996: 37) Through language, a meaningful social world is being constructed from existing knowledge about it (Czarniawska, 2003: 129). Language is not a ready-made stable, immutable, objective system, nor is it an individual constructive process, which has little to do with linguistic or the language as such because; “...we never say or hear words, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. Words are always filled with content and meaning ...” (Vološinov, 1973: 41-63, 70)

Having accepted the above implications, trying to understand what an organisation is and how to understand it within the becoming and organising perspective privileges action, movement, process and emergence. (Chia, 1995: 597) The essence of life, to quote James is: ‘its continuously changing character’, where “... change never starts because it never stops.” (James, 1909: 253, Weick & Quinn, 1999: 381) This means that trying to understand organisation is more about trying to understand the continual organising and reorganising that takes place among the actors. Organisations are not ready-made social products moving around with the capability of being analysed from different perspectives. They are continual emerging organising efforts, where it is the processes of actions, interactions and recursive patterning of relationships that are important when one wants to understand the organisation (Chia, 1995: 592, 595, Chia, 1996: 51, 53).

One also has to acknowledge that in the process of trying to understand the actions, interactions and orchestrations of relationships in, for my case, the Company, I participate in generating meaning: “To understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find a proper place

for it in the corresponding context... Any true understanding is dialogic in nature... In essence meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener ...” (Vološinov, 1973: 102) One might then argue that in my process of ‘setting the Company right’. I engage more in story telling than in truth telling (Chia, 1996: 51), and I agree. I doubt whether anything else can be done because within this perspective there is no truth to tell. Simultaneously, it is only by ‘diving into the flux’ (James, 1909: 252) and spending time in the Company, making sense of things together with the actors that I can obtain knowledge about the organisation (Ingold, 2008: 87).

## **Organising in the Company**

By looking at how Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie organise their actions and interactions and orchestrate their relationships as service managers in the Company, it is obvious that they are operating in very different ways even though they are four women who have identical job descriptions. They are all responsible for a number of sites and assistants; and must make sure that the sites are cleaned at the right time, ensure the assistants are assigned and show up with the proper skills and with the materials they need to clean the sites. Beside this, the service managers have to ensure that the Company’s certifications, environmental and working environmental policies are being met, carry out monthly quality controls and make sure the assistants get the right pay. What is interesting, however, is that Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie organise the daily processes and management tasks in different ways, and in relation to this, they make sense of their work in different ways. Their perceptions about the job as a service manager are different, and as a result, it can seem as if they have four different jobs.

### ***Organising for Jane***

Jane is a toiler who spends most of her day trying to find replacements for the assistants who have called in sick, scolding those who are late or do not clean properly and trying to keep her own cleaning to a minimum. Her management style comes naturally to her, and in her perception, the only difference between her and her colleagues is that she is a stationary manager and only has the responsibility for the concrete factory. According to Jane, a stationary manager has a closer relationship with their assistants. Even though she knows that she can come off a bit coarsely when she talks about her assistants, she cares very much about many of them and believes it is her responsibility to make sure that they are all

right. She tells me how some of the assistants refer to her as their spare mom and how she has helped some of them through difficult periods of their life or helped them start an education. In telling me these stories it seems as if she at some level she is reassuring herself that her management style is the right one.

Although Jane often feels that the work she does at the concrete factory is not sufficiently appreciated in the Company, she could not imagine working anywhere else besides the concrete factory. In some ways her connection to the concrete factory is closer than her connection to the Company, and it has left me wondering several times who Jane actually conceives as her employer. She makes it no secret that she accepted the job in the Company in order to stay at the concrete factory. At the same time, it has been very clear to me during our talks that she has strong feelings about the Company. She knows that John has not been happy for a long time and that frustrates her; and she is pleased to see that he is laughing and enjoying himself at the annual meeting in year two of my study when he has relinquished the reins of the Company.

Although Jane mentions that neither Mike nor Tony knows much, if anything, about her work at the concrete factory, she feels no need to get them involved, maybe rather the contrary. It can seem as if what goes on in the Company is very loosely, if at all, coupled to what goes on at the concrete factory and when the two worlds for some reason have to be connected, Jane is very anxious about the outcome. Jane's relationship with Nick, the contact person at the concrete factory, is very strong and she knows he shares her opinion about the concrete factory and that they defend each other if under attack. It seems as if the trust they have in each other and the way they relationally make sense of the everyday work at the concrete factory has much to do with how Jane conceives the concrete factory.

Organising for Jane has much to do with monitoring and caring for the assistants and sustaining a good relationship with Nick. What goes on in the Company is of importance for Jane, but it is not relevant or connected to her daily practice at the concrete factory. The Company and the concrete factory appear more as two separate worlds.

### ***Organising for Laura***

Close and personal relationships where you make a difference are very important Laura, and she spends much time establishing and retaining them. In relation to her assistants, it is of huge importance that

she can make a difference to them on a very personal level, and she refers to herself as a social worker, a psychologist and Mother Theresa several times during the interview-conversations. It can, therefore, be difficult to figure out whether she is trying to manage the assistants or help them develop themselves on a more personal level. She tells me several stories about how she has made an impact on an assistant's life, and how this makes her job worthwhile. It seems as if telling stories about how she has helped turn an assistant's life around somehow reassures her that her management style is the right one.

Something that also reassures Laura of her management style is the way she distances herself from some of the other service managers who scold the assistants, talk badly about them and the customers and ridicule working with the values. Laura does not understand their approach and believes that the Company would be a much better place if only they would live up to the values. However, what the values means for Laura and how she uses them is somewhat vaguely defined. It seems as if they function more as a form of reassurance that the future of the Company will be promising, that Jacob as the new CEO will practice value-based management on an everyday basis and turn the Company around, than a concrete management tool for her to use in her daily practice.

Laura's inability to build strong and close relationships with some of her colleagues frustrates her. It seems as if this inability makes her spend more time mulling about the differences among the service managers, who said what to whom and how someone's feelings got hurt in the process, than she wants to. Organising for Laura has a lot to do with building and retaining strong and close relationships with her colleagues, managers, customers and assistants and making a difference in their lives. In this process, the values are, unintentionally, used to justify her management style and belittle some of the others'.

### ***Organising for Nina***

Nina works for the Company because it enables her to treat cleaning as a craftsmanship. It is important for Nina to maintain the quality of the craftsmanship and acknowledge the efforts that are used to uphold it. Nina puts much effort in making her assistants understand the importance of their job; they are not just assistants who clean, they are ambassadors for a company offering competent service solutions and Nina encourages them to act as such. In that process Nina uses the values and the other Company initiatives as concrete tools that describe and exemplify how the assistants should carry

themselves at the sites. The values also address how important it is that the assistants reflect upon their appearance as they clean because it leaves an impression on the customers, and it determines whether they are asked to come back.

Nina takes pride in working out creative solutions for troublesome sites in a way that pleases both the customers and the assistants. She tells me stories about how she has managed to turn a problematic site, with frustrated assistants, into a success where the assistants began smiling and joking with each other. She also tells how some of her customers have been with her for many years even when she was working for another company. It seems as if this has something to do with why she does not mind working so many hours.

Although Nina never says it directly, she indicates several times that she seeks the same acknowledgement that she gives her assistants for their work from her managers, but she does not receive it that way. She does get acknowledgement from Mike, Tony and John in a way; they hand over the responsibility for more and more sites to her because they know she can handle it and is a skilled manager. What they fail to realise, however, is that the more sites she gets responsibility for the more corners she has to cut; hence making it more and more difficult for her to uphold cleaning as a craftsmanship because the assistants are not properly trained, the quality controls are not conducted and the certifications are not upheld. When Nina asks for help, Mike and Tony do not understand her or listen to her and they keep pouring more work on her. It seems as if Nina interprets Mike and Tony's actions as a lack of acknowledging her 'right way' to do things which gradually reassures Nina in her burgeoning fear that cleaning is no longer conceived as a craftsmanship in the Company. It is interesting that Mike and Tony's lack of acknowledging Nina the way she wants to be acknowledged contributes to the fact that Nina's sensemaking processes changes, and it suddenly makes sense for her to resign.

Organising for Nina is about her ability to retain cleaning as a craftsmanship. In the process, Nina uses the value initiatives from the Company as solid tools for retaining the quality of the work. It is important for her that both the assistants as well as her managers acknowledge that cleaning is not just about sweeping floors but a craftsmanship.

### *Organising for Annie*

Having the possibility to spend time with the assistants just checking to see if everything is alright and that they have all the materials they need is a privilege to Annie. In her former job, she did not have the opportunity to organise her day or the freedom to buy the needed materials for the assistants. It can sometimes seem as if cleaning is secondary to Annie compared to the close contact she establishes with the assistants. Annie knows she is a competent manager, and since teaching the assistants how to clean is not rocket science, making sure that the assistants thrive is more motivating for Annie.

The routines and the predictability in her job are very important for Annie, and most days she follows a similar pattern. She gets up and goes to work at the same time each day, and most of the time she can stick to the plans she has made for the day. This makes it possible for her to come home at the same time every day. It was obvious during the period where Annie covered the extra district that she had difficulties with planning ahead, and she did not like it. Annie uses the quality controls, certifications and environmental and working environmental policies as tools in her everyday practice; she knows they are time consuming, but it seems as if it that is not important to her.

Comparatively to Jane, Laura and Nina, Annie believes that Tony is a competent manager and does not mind his direct approach. She does, however, believe it is a mistake that he and Mike do not know anything about the customers and have handed over all the responsibility of the sites to the service managers. Organising for Annie is about planning ahead, sticking to her plans, and spending time with the assistants making sure they thrive and have the materials they need. In that process Annie considers many of the concrete initiatives as solid tools that support her in her management style.

## Sensemaking as organising

*“To focus on sensemaking is to portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, ‘what’s the story?’”*

(Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 410)

What the stories about Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie show is how four hardworking service managers organise their everyday practice. What the stories also illustrate is that their different perceptions are as important in the job as being a service manager. They perform their job differently, and they all experience success and defeat each in their own way. This is not something that the service managers or their managers perceive as a mistake or unfortunate for the Company. It is considered to be a natural part of the job as a service manager that the service managers handle their district as small and relatively independent business units.

During the interview-conversations, Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie told me stories about how their assistants, customers, colleagues and managers support them and acknowledge their management style. They also tell stories about how their initiatives have had unexpected and problematic outcomes. All of these stories function as ongoing retrospective developments of plausible understandings that can explain and rationalise their actions (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 409). These sensemaking stories are, however, not just stories about past events; they are generative and serve as ‘springboards to action’ (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 409). As argued in the above discussions about the service managers’ organising, there is an act of reassurance about their actions and practice in their sensemaking, which does not only affirm them, but also guides their future actions; thereby, situations are, like Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld write ‘talked into being’ (2005: 409).

### ***Four ways to use the values***

By looking at how Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie talk about and use the values in their daily practice, it becomes clear that there is not one common understanding about the values. It also becomes clear that there are differences in what they perceive as important to the job as service manager. During the three

interview-conversations with Jane, she does not mention or refer to the values or value-based management. I do not believe that this absence indicates that she does not take the values seriously or does not want to take part in the implementation of the values. I believe it represents the loose coupling there is, in Jane's perception, between what goes on in the Company and what goes on in Jane's everyday practice at the concrete factory. Jane struggles to find competent assistants, replacements and not clean too much herself. In that process, she tries from time to time to reorganise herself and leave early or adopt telephone hours like Mike and Tony encourage her to do. One could then argue that both leaving early and adopting telephone hours, from Mike and Tony's perspective, are initiatives which stem from value-based management. I do, however, doubt that these initiatives are perceived as have much to do with value-based management from Jane's perspective. If I should attempt to follow Jane's perspective, she believes they are attempts to prevent another stroke or deal with her the severe pain in her legs, which she experiences from time to time.

Laura, on the other hand, refers to the values many times both during our interview-conversations and at the regional meetings. Trying to understand the meaning the values have for Laura makes my thoughts go in a different direction. Contrary to Jane, Laura is a young and new service manager, and she does not have the same confidence in herself as Jane. Laura refers to the values in a very abstract way to reassure herself that she can do her job and she is a competent manager. In this process, she divides a line between the service managers that are value-based managers and those who are not. From Laura's perspective, a value-based manager addresses the customers and assistants in a nice way, takes them seriously and follows up on complaints and requests. By looking at how the other service managers in the Department communicate with assistants and customers, Laura constructs two images of management; an ideal and a bugbear. Laura tries to live up to the ideal and justify her management style by referring to how her actions are in accordance with the values and different from what the service managers from 'the other bandwagon' do.

Nina has, like Jane, a lot of management experience. Contrary to Jane, Nina refers to the values several times during the interview-conversations, and she mentions how she uses the values in her daily contact with the assistants. Seen from Nina's perspective, cleaning is a craftsmanship and in order to maintain it as such, Nina uses the values along with many of the other initiatives such as quality reports etc. from the Company to uphold this belief. The values are, together with the other Company initiatives, important elements in what motivates Nina and what gives her the energy to work so many hours. Compared to Laura, Nina is very concrete in her descriptions about what the values represent. To her,

the values describe how the assistants should communicate with the customers. The assistants need to look at cleaning from the customers' perspective and this means that they should act as ambassadors of the Company. When they clean a toilet it is not just a question about throwing water on the floor, they need to sit down on the toilet, close the door behind them and see what the customers see. They should ask, is the door handle dirty, are there any cobwebs etc.

In Nina's perception, value-based management is a tool that she can use to retain cleaning as a craftsmanship in the Company. The service managers are not the only ones who should act according to the values, Mike, Tony and John also should. This is, however, breeding ground for frustration because Nina does not believe that Mike, Tony and John use the values as a tool to keep cleaning a craftsmanship. Instead, they use the values to justify their ambitions to earn more money and get more customers.

Annie has, like Jane and Nina, experience with being a service manager. Contrary to Nina, Annie does not use the values in her daily management. Seen from Annie's perspective, the values are more a philosophy of life than they are a management style. Annie thinks about them once in while, when she comes across them, but it is more the daily and close contact with assistants that motivates Annie. She does not give the ambassador role of the assistants much thought, nor does the lack of involvement from Mike or Tony frustrate Annie much. It is important for Annie that she can spend time with the assistants and make sure that they thrive and have the materials they need. Besides, it is important that Annie's everyday work is rather scheduled and she can relax when she is at home with her family. In pursuing this, the values are not pivotal to Annie.

Trying to make sense of how Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie understand and use the values in their everyday practice draws attention to some interesting aspects. It becomes quite clear how they all manage in diverse ways and prioritise different things. Jane prioritises that the concrete factory is cleaned everyday, no matter the costs; Laura prioritises identifying the right management style, Nina prioritises the quest to keep cleaning a craftsmanship and Annie prioritises the well-being of her assistants and the reliability of her everyday work. It is through their relational sensemaking attempts with colleagues, managers, assistants, customers and other actors that they have constructed their beliefs about the right way to manage and what to prioritise. There is, from the outset, not one right understanding of what it means to be a competent service manager. The 'right' understanding is constructed among the actors through their actions and attempts to construct meaning. What also is

quite interesting here is how they all use or do not use the values in their attempts to realise these ambitions. The values serve in this process both as a way to justify their actions and as a way to reassure them in how they 'set the world right'. This can make one wonder whether or not the ambitions and priorities stem from the strategy or the attempts to implement value-based management.

### ***Nina's resignation***

The most radical example of a situation which is 'talked into being' is probably Nina's resignation. The sense she makes based on Mike and Tony's actions leaves her with no other sense-full alternative than to resign. Following her story about how the process evolves, it is clear that she had no interest in resigning. She makes the decision very reluctantly, after trying every way she could think of flashing the red lights and signals to Mike and Tony that the working conditions they put her under were too strenuous. Nevertheless, they just kept giving her new customers and did not read the warning signs. During the interview-conversations Nina told me several times that her workload was too big, and she regretted that Mike did not prioritise visiting the sites with her, which she perceived as important. In addition, at monthly meetings I observed how several time Nina, in general terms and speaking for all the service managers, expressed that the work load was too big and the work pace too high. Seen from Nina's point of view of this is a meaningful way to indicate to Mike and Tony that they have to do something about the working conditions. They did react, and they did try to work out solutions, but not in a way that led to the action that, I guess, Nina, Mike and Tony had hoped for, which was that Nina could stay with the Company. Nina made sense of Tony and Mike's action, or maybe from her perspective lack of 'necessary' actions, in a way that assured her that her workload was too big and the work pace too fast. This happened because Mike and Tony kept giving her more and more clients. Their actions, therefore, took part in guiding her actions towards what, at that point of time, was the only sense-full thing for Nina to do; to resign.

The challenge here is that Nina, in Mike and Tony's perspective, is a competent manager who is motivated by responsibility and the freedom to work out creative solutions at troublesome sites. On top of that, the Department does not earn very much money. Therefore, Mike and Tony, in their opinion, have to cut costs, and they are convinced that there is not enough money in the budget to hire a new service manager to handle the new customers. This means that Mike and Tony keep giving Nina more, challenging sites in order to keep her motivated and lower their costs. Besides, Mike and Tony do not challenge Nina's judgement. When she tells them that she can not work out a creative solution

at a troublesome site, Mike and Tony denounce the contract. However, looking at this from Nina's perspective, Mike and Tony's initiatives are not motivating, they are just the opposite. Nina conceives cleaning as a craftsmanship and the ability to retain it as such is what motivates her. This means that when she receives more sites, she has to train more assistants, come up with more creative solutions and handle the contact with more customers. In principle there is nothing wrong with this. What is wrong is that she does not have enough time to visit all the sites and give the assistants the proper introduction and training, nor does she have time to get to know the customers well enough to be able to work out the right creative solutions. The outcome is that Nina continually has to cut corners, and cutting corners is not what retains cleaning as a craftsmanship. On the contrary, this attitude turns the Company in to a cleaning factory and money making machine that Nina desperately tries to distance her from.

Enhancing this problem, when Nina asks for help, she is told to organise her way out of the problems or Mike and Tony terminate a contract. Such proposals, from Nina's perspective, have nothing to do with preserving cleaning as a craftsmanship. The paradox is that Nina, Mike and Tony try to operationalise the values in an expedient way, but they end up perceiving each other's initiatives as being anything but value-based.

What the example here also makes obvious is that Nina's decision to resign is not hers alone; it is relationally constructed. Sensemaking occurs while people communicate with each other and try to understand the world around them (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 413). This means that how Mike and Tony act and what they say take part in the sense Nina makes of the situation and the way she eventually acts.

### ***'The other bandwagon'***

Another example that not only illustrates how sensemaking and action construct each other, but also shows that both are a relational process is Laura's story about 'the other bandwagon'. Laura told me, during several of the interview-conversations, about 'the other bandwagon'. She told me stories about how someone from 'the other bandwagon' had scolded an assistant. Laura also referred to 'the other bandwagon' in very abstract ways through stories about how these managers do not live up to the values. She talks about the 'the other bandwagon' in a very natural way as if it were a physical entity standing in front of me and her. According to Laura, there is a shared understanding between her, Nina

and Jane about which of the service managers make up ‘the other bandwagon’ and how they behave. They have named and conceptualised the phenomenon and use it in their communal communication as a way to differentiate themselves, and their management style, from those on ‘the other bandwagon’. This differentiation reassures Laura in her understanding of what the right management style is. By categorising actions and understandings as being parts of practice on ‘the other bandwagon’, they have constructed a mental model that Laura, in her stories, uses to reassure herself in her beliefs about her management style. By not wanting to be like someone from ‘the other bandwagon’, this relationally constructed mental model has a generative function as it guides Laura to do something different (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 411).

*“... you can no more dip up the substance of reality... than you can dip up water with a net,  
however finely meshed. When we conceptualize, we cut out and fix,  
and exclude everything but what we have fixed.  
A concept means a that-and-no-other.” (James, 1909: 253)*

### ***Trying to figure out what the story is***

Both Laura’s story about ‘the other bandwagon’ and Nina’s resignation exemplify how sensemaking is a process where fleeting sense-impressions are noticed, bracketed and labelled retrospectively in order to understand, simplify and order the world (Chia, 1995: 51, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 411-412). These sensemaking processes are, like Czarniawska (2004: 12) and Gergen & Thatchenkery (2004: 240) write, socially constructed and ever emerging, and therefore what makes sense at a given moment can become contradictory later, giving many answers to the question; ‘what’s the story?’ Sensemaking is about retrospective connects to fleeting sense impressions of past experiences and presumptions about the future. This means that an action, from the outset, is not right or wrong, but is made right or wrong depending on how the actors relationally and retrospectively make sense of it (James, 1909: 262, Vološinov, 1973: 19-23, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 413). When Nina’s resignation becomes the ‘right’ decision, it is not because it was the ‘right’ one from the outset or because it was only solution she had. It becomes the ‘right’ one because it, through interactions with Mike and Tony and other actors, has connected fleeting sense impressions to her past experiences, helping her to make presumptions about the future, which make sense for her at the moment. Therefore, her resignation becomes her way of ‘setting the world right’ (Czarniawska, 2004: 137).

*“Sensemaking is not about truth or getting it right. Instead,  
it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story...”*

(Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 415)

## **Is all organising about change?**

One might wonder whether everything is in constant change and nothing stays the same within this perspective. Looking at my experiences in the Company, I have difficulties finding much that was static. Even the most practiced procedures like routines, norms and values bear the impression of change. Feldman and Pentland’s studies the organizational routines in a student housing department of a large American University and illustrate that routines are not synonymous with inertia and stability, but that routines, on the contrary, provide a breeding ground for flexibility and change in actions and practices (Feldman & Pentland, 2003: 94ff). Routines embody both an ostensive and a performative aspect. The ostensive aspect is the generalized abstract and schematized form of the routine that actors rely on when they act. The performative aspect is the specific action that enacts the routine (Feldman & Pentland, 2003: 101). The routine is a resource that helps the actor to act in certain ways, but it does not fully determine the action; the actor interprets the routine and acts in a way that both differs and is congruent with the ostensive aspect of the routine. The enactment of the performative aspect, therefore, alters the ostensive aspect and continually changes the routine. Enactment of a routine is similar to what it means to ‘play by the rules’ (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 235) and make sense. How a routine is realised through actions is decided through a process of active responsive understanding between the actors, and not solely by the individual actor (Vološinov, 1973: 102).

By looking at what routine procedures and what the norms are for carrying them out for the service managers, it becomes obvious that they change incrementally all the time. To start up a new site is a routine procedure and there is a document in the Company that the service managers rely on. Nevertheless, by looking at the way Nina almost every time works out individual and creative solutions for the sites, it makes obvious that flexibility and change are better words for describing the routine than stability.

The way Annie and Laura say they introduce assistants to new sites and train them exemplify that although they have a document that guides them in this routine and a norm-based procedure, no introduction or training session is the same. It varies from situation to situation how the session

evolves: how much time they have, how much Danish the assistant understand, how long the assistant has been working for the Company and whether or not the assistant has any cleaning experience etc. These are all factors that influence how this routine and norm-based procedure is practiced. The practice here is the result of the interaction between the service managers and the assistants (cf. Vološinov, 1973: 102). Likewise Jane's continual routine-based work with finding replacements and figuring out who should clean where at the concrete factory indicate that she does not have three or four alternatives to choose from. Every time she has to find a replacement, she is put in a situation where she has to work out a new solution and be creative. This does not mean that Jane has no knowledge, routines or preconceptions to rely on, because she does. However, the ostensive part of the routine and the preconceptions do not determine the actions. The knowledge occurs through Jane and other actors' actions and relational sensemaking.

Another interesting aspect of the introduction and training of new assistants is to look at how differently Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie perform and perceive the routine. Jane constantly introduces and trains new assistants. She does not, however, refer to the start-up form, hygiene, ergonomics, environmental policies etc. or explain to me how she uses them. Laura spends a lot of time aiding the assistants when they start up. She puts in an effort to get to know them, follow them closely and encourages them to believe in themselves. In that process, Laura uses the start-up form, hygiene, ergonomics, and environmental policies etc. to make sure the assistants have been properly introduced to the sites. Laura believes the procedure takes time, but that it is time well spent. Nina perceives the start-up form, hygiene, ergonomics, and environmental policies etc. as solid tools to retain cleaning a craftsmanship. She does, however, complain that the procedure takes too long. Annie also uses the start-up form, hygiene, ergonomics, and environmental policies etc. as solid tools. She does not, like Nina, complain about the time she spends on the procedure. This does not indicate that Annie is a better service manager or more supportive of the procedure than Nina. What it indicates, to me, is that the relational interplay is quite significant in relation to how actors make sense of the situations they are in. During the period I talked with Nina and Annie, the number of new sites and new assistants increased at a higher rate in Nina's district than in Annie's. This means that Nina has more new assistants to introduce and train and, simultaneously, she has less time to do it, than Annie. Keeping in mind Nina's efforts to maintain cleaning as a craftsmanship and the necessity she has to cut corners, it seems rather obvious to me why Nina complains about the procedure. She complains, not because she disagrees with it, but because she does not have enough time to carry it out.

Looking at how values are understood and practised by the four service managers shows that the values are understood in different ways. It also shows that the understandings are continually being morphed and developed. The understanding of the values is at no time static. Looking at ‘the other bandwagon’ example illustrates how Laura continually adds new perspectives to the Company’s values depending on how the service managers from ‘the other bandwagon’ and Nina, Jane or herself act.

One might argue that the situations I am referring to in the Company are characterised more by small variations, incremental changes and daily improvisations that the service managers rely on their practice knowledge and past experiences to figure out relatively quickly how to solve what can be conceived as a rather routine- and norm-based problem. I would agree. March writes: “Most change in organizations results neither from extraordinarily organizational processes or forces, nor from uncommon imagination, persistence or skill, but from relatively stable, routine processes that relate organizations to their environments.” (March, 1981: 564) The point is not to argue that only huge changes are taking place all the time and that there are no such things as routines to rely on. The point is that routines are continually changing and being reorganised. Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that change is not a property of organisation; organisation is better understood as an emergent property of change (James, 1909: 237, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 570). Change here is understood as a relational sensemaking processes, where actors talk and act the world into being (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 236).

Look at how Jane, during the period I talk with her, continually changes her mind and actions regarding whether or not she should clean when her assistants call in sick. In some periods, she refuses to clean because she hangs on to the belief that she is the manager and not an assistant. In other periods, she cleans as often as she has to in order to keep the site clean. During these periods she sometimes complains about it, and in other period, she perceives it as a part of her job. The answer to the question, whether or not she should clean, is continually being reformulated, meaning there is an ongoing reorganising process takes place all the time. Another interesting aspect here is how her sensemaking and actions are influenced by the actors around her. In the periods that Jane refuses to clean, she reaffirms her practice by telling me stories about how Mike and Tony encourage her to manage and not clean, how much her legs ache and how she enjoys herself Friday afternoons with her husband. In the periods where she cleans, she tells me stories about how unreliable the assistants are, how the site would not be cleaned if she and Nancy were not there and how she fears that the Company will not win the next procurement.

This is not a process of going back and forth, it is an ongoing reorganising process that Jane, together with different other actors act, uses to make sense of the actions through stories which take part in generating the way the concrete factory is organised. These processes take place all the time for Jane, Laura, Nina, Annie and other actors, and it puts the Company in a continual state of becoming.

Organisational becoming is the concept that Chia and Tsoukas introduce as a possibility to conceptualise and work with the process- and change-oriented perspective of an organisation. It is a way to understand the dynamic, ever-changing, emerging and pragmatic micro-processes that *is* the organisation. Becoming is, however, more than an understanding of the organisation and a conceptualisation. Becoming is generative, meaning it constitutes the social world and every action one takes and every relationship one is a part of. Everything is influenced by how the world is conceived. With every move, the world is altered; hence the world is continually in a state of becoming; "... the past is immanent in the present and this fact implies that each outcome, each situation or state, always necessarily incorporates and absorbs the event of its past." (Chia, 1999: 220) This means that Jane, Laura, Nina and Annie's everyday practice and sensemaking about their past, present and future hopes, all participate in illustrating how they organise themselves and through these processes 'set the world right'.



# Chapter 5

---

## **Two stories about two middle managers' everyday organising**

*In this chapter the second round of work-based stories are presented. It is a presentation of Regional Manger Mike and District Manager Tony's everyday organising. Their daily practice evolves around how they operationalise the strategic initiatives in a meaningful way in the Department. Through the stories it will be expressed how they each perceive their job, themselves, other actors in the Company and the Company. Like the previous stories, I present their joys and frustrations, what triggers their curiosity and what they do not give much thought, what makes them come to work in the morning and what makes them feel uncomfortable, and what, in the end, makes one of them resign. These are stories that illustrate the important role of middle managers' everyday and what role relational sensemaking plays in relation to how a strategy is operationalised.*

### **Mike**

Mike is in his mid forties, is one of the Company's three region managers and has been working for the Company for a few years the first time I meet him. He worked his way up at the Company's biggest competitor, where he started as an assistant and gradually gained more skills and qualifications. His last job at the competing company was at a lower management level than the one he has now in the Company. One of the major reasons Mike wanted to change job was because he wanted to get away from the daily running operations and focus more on organising, strategic planning and managing.

### ***Right now the pace is intense***

A few days before my first interview-conversation with Mike, he and Tony had fired a service manager because she did not uphold the Company's working environment and environmental policies, certifications or values. The outcome was that Laura had to cover the extra district until Mike and Tony

hired a new service manager. Mike knows that this decision adds to the already existing work load and pressure there is on the service managers. He does, however, not doubt his decision, because he could not support the management style the service manager practiced. Nevertheless he asks himself during the first interview-conversation whether some of the changes that he and Tony have initiated have gone too fast. He does not think it has gone too fast, but he knows that some of the initiatives have challenged the service managers' beliefs about their role and responsibilities. They have been urged to speak their minds and to participate in management decisions concerning the district, sites, assistants and customers, something that is very different from what they have been used to.

Mi: The things Tony and I have initiated, they've [the service managers have] gone from a culture where everything was controlled and governed from the regional and department managers, where they're the ones who had the last saying, who had all the influence, who...

Me: made all the decisions?

Mi: Exactly. They [the service managers] were just people making sure everything was running smoothly on the sites, and then they [the region and department managers] took care of the rest, all the fun things. Here we have another position; we run it differently.

It has taken some time for the service managers to get comfortable with sharing their opinions. Initially, they said nothing if Mike tried to involve them in a decisions or asked them what they thought, especially if they disagreed with Mike and Tony. Little by little, the service managers have, however, seen that they are allowed to speak their mind, even if they disagree. What Mike and Tony subsequently experienced was that the service managers began expressing their disagreement and started putting up demands. Mike can relate to and understand the service managers' frustrations; he knows that their job is demanding and that they continually have to adapt to new situations and quickly work out solutions. Shortly before we have our first interview-conversation, he has given Nina 5 new sites within 1½ month. Mike knows Nina has a solid training background from her former employer, but he is still aware that his actions have not made her work day any easier.

Mi: She [Nina] is short on assistants and covers a large geographic area. She's running everywhere, and she has morning and afternoon sites. I've been out driving with her, and it's really shocking... It's harder than most people think and you have to experience it, and witness all the complex situations they're facing, and all the things they have to make up their mind about, and see how many balls they have to juggle at the same time.

One of the first things Mike initiated after he hired Tony was to redistribute the sites in a more suitable way, so that the service managers either had morning or afternoon sites that were situated within the same geographical area. The redistribution was not possible for all of the service managers, like for instance Nina, because she covers an area that is not large enough for two service managers, so she continued to cover both morning and afternoon sites. Another process, Mike and Tony have initiated was to clarify who the service managers should report to, and the outcome was that besides Nina and Jane and a few larger sites, everyone else reports to Tony. During our first interview-conversation Mike expressed that he hoped these initiatives would bring more clarity to the division of responsibility between Mike and Tony; hence making the working conditions more transparent.

***Their [the service managers'] world is very practical and you have to keep that in mind***

Mike encourages the service managers to plan their week ahead and prioritise their task. They do not have to be available all the time or respond to complaints immediately. The service managers do not, however, feel they can plan ahead because they never know what the day brings, who and how many assistants will call in sick, which assistants are short on supply and where and when an accident will occur. From Mike's point of view, the service managers lack the understanding that if everything planned falls apart on Wednesday then, of course, they will probably not get around to everything planned on that Wednesday. However, they would still have managed to do what they planned on Monday and Tuesday, and they would still have Thursday and Friday to possibly do what they had planned.

Mike does not understand why the service managers do not have telephone hours and he encourages them to adopt them. He knows it is difficult for them because there is an unhealthy dependency relationship between the service managers and assistants. The assistants have grown accustomed to the fact that they can call the service managers at every hour of the day and expect them to pick up if they are short on products, materials or even if they just want to chat. At the same time, the service managers feel that by showing the assistants this interest and being available for them, then the service managers can ask the assistants to help them out if they need a replacement at a site.

What frustrates Mike is that when he confronts the service managers and asks them about the necessity of answering the phone when they are off work, the service managers agree that 95% of the time the calls could have waited to the following day. Mike cannot understand that a service manager who works

from 5.00 am to 3.00 pm wants to spend her/his evenings on the phone with assistants. It is no wonder for Mike that they never get to recharge their batteries, and that they feel they are constantly at work. This could easily be avoided if only the service managers would begin to plan their day, think long range and put things into perspective. The problem is that the service managers mostly take their starting point from the particular assistant or site and only discuss concrete problems with each other. They do not, however, reflect on their own management style, which Mike would really like them to do. Mike would really like to include the service managers in discussions about value-based management, but it is impossible because the service managers pay too much attention to the daily running procedures.

As a result, Mike and Tony have to operationalise the value-based processes by transforming them into concrete actions where the service managers are told to perform differently and take on new tasks. For example, Mike and Tony introduce routine quality controls at all the sites, hand over almost all the contact with the customers to the service managers and train the service managers in selling soap, paper towel, toilet paper and dispensers. Mike believes that most of the service managers welcome the initiatives. At the same time, he does not feel that they really understand that he has initiated these processes to add value to their job and not just to make them handle more tasks.

### ***There are too many practicalities in my working day***

Mike feels that his job, like the service managers', is too practical. He spends a lot of time with the service managers discussing how they can handle difficulties with assistants, recruitment and customers. They talk about what products the service managers should use on a certain types of floors or desk, and he spends time talking with unions when there are problems with the staff. Besides, he writes reprimands and makes or adjusts offers to current or potential customers. It frustrates Mike that he has to spend so much time on these issues because a central reason why he wanted to change job was to focus more on organising and strategic planning, and not so much on the daily running procedures. During our second interview-conversation, Mike tells me that the clearer division of management responsibilities between him and Tony and the hand over of the customer contact to the service managers has not relieved him of enough practicalities. Mike finds himself involved in too many concrete and daily practicalities and problems that take up all his time. He has a hard time remembering all the details, and the piles of unresolved issues on his desk keep growing. The worst of it is, however, that it leaves no room for fun and visionary thoughts. To challenge himself on these areas, Mike is

taking courses in project management, which he feels that challenges himself in a better way. Here he can be immersed in some theoretical discussions and put managing into a larger perspective. This is something Mike really enjoys, but unfortunately he does not feel that he can translate it into practice in the Company because there are only a few of his colleagues on the top management level that he can bounce off ideas with.

### ***We have fun on the first floor***

Mike experiences that there are huge differences in how the managers in the Company understand and practice value-based management. It frustrates Mike that some of the top managers are allowed to do almost anything, without it having any consequences for them, as long as they make money. He does not understand why John does not show some backbone and chart a course for the Company. If the rest of the managers do not follow this course, then it ought to have serious consequences for them. But it never does. Mike knows he does not have to agree with John all the time. The problem is that Mike does not even know what John thinks or wants because John does not follow any set of rules or guidelines, he just decides as he goes. As a result, Mike feels that he constantly moves in strange waters, never knowing where the line is before he has stepped over it. John's management style causes huge confusion among the top managers, and they all have hidden agendas and spend too much time tripping each other up instead of focusing on the well-being of the Company.

Mike tells me that the top managers on the ground floor and the first floor of the headquarters represent different ways of value-based managing. John and Bob are situated on the ground floor and do not, at all, practice value-based management. Bob, especially, treats the administrative staff very badly; Bob leaves the employees in the administration no room for making their own decision, he scolds them if they have made a mistake and overrules their decision if he disagrees with them. The worst part is that he gets away with it even though John witnesses it on a daily basis. Mike and his team are with Maria and her assistants on the first floor, where they try to practice value-based management. For Mike and Tony, this means that they include the service managers in the decision processes, respect the service managers' boundaries and assign them responsibility. John, however, does not acknowledge or support Mike and Tony's management style, and once in a while, he comes roaring up the stairs if a customer had made a complaint or if someone, (Mike, Tony or a service manager) has not answered their phone. The disagreement among the top managers is very obvious to the service managers, which

makes it difficult for Mike to maintain the belief among the service managers that the Company prioritise and believe in value-based management.

Mi: We all have different agendas and views on it because we are allowed to. If we make money, then we're allowed to do a lot, and if we make a lot of money, then we're given free rein. It's no secret, ask anyone. What's most shocking is that when we had to attend that value-based [Communication in a Value-based Company] course, then many of the service managers came up to me and asked me what's the point? Many of the top managers don't meet it [the requirements], and they never will. They [the service managers] didn't want to go, but I have to state clearly that I wanted them to go. I'm the liaison between them [John and Bob] and you [the service managers], so what I represent should be based on it [value-based management]... but it's a drag that you spend your energy convincing them [the service managers] instead of focusing on the many possibilities it brings...

Mike tries to be the buffer between the disagreements and the different approaches in the management, but he knows that the service managers are affected by the management style and the working conditions on the ground floor. It affects them and takes away some of the pleasure in their work. Mike knows that many of the people in the administrative department would, without hesitation, like to come and join his Department if they had the option. In one way, it makes him happy because it reassures him that he is a good manager, but on the other hand he knows it is a sign of illness that so many employees feel so bad, and it is not possible for him to do anything about it.

***Most likely, I prioritise wrong, but there has to be time for the employees***

Mike spends a lot of time making sure that the service managers thrive. It is important for him that they are well, and if one of them is having a hard time, it is a first priority for Mike to get them back on track.

Mi: I've got Jane, who almost went under due to stress... I consider it as a manager and as a private person a failure if they go down... because it's my fundamental task. If just one more of them came to us, then it's really critical because I don't think neither Tony nor I could take it. It's okay if they want to leave, but not because they went under.

Even though Mike prioritises the well-being of the service managers, he knows he does not give them the attention they need. He knows Jane still cleans and that she does not hire an extra assistant even

though he has approved it, but he just cannot manage to find the time to do anything about it. The same goes for Annie. He knows she was not able to keep her spirit up while she covered the extra district, but Mike just did not manage to follow up on it. And when Nina resigns, Mike knows it is probably the worst thing that could have happened. Nina was one of the most competent service managers he had, and she was the only one capable of putting the value-based initiatives into a larger perspective. Mike knew that she, for a long time, had indicated that the work load was too large, and he needed to act. Despite that, he kept on signing contracts with new customers in her district and handing them over to her. Mike knew Nina had sent warning bells for along time, but he had just not felt capable of doing anything about it nor did he believe inactivity would have such consequences. Nina was very negative in the end, and during our second interview-conversation Mike tells me that he fears her resignation will have an impact on the rest of the service managers because he knows they all respected her.

***The management meetings, by God, they make you stupid more than anything else***

The disagreement between the top managers also influences the quarterly management meetings of the top managers in the Company. These meetings could have been an opportunity for Mike and the other top managers to discuss strategy, mission, vision, organising and such issues, but instead the opposing views on value-based management create an atmosphere in which Mike does not feel he can trust the other top managers. He is afraid of the consequences if he speaks up, and he does not know if there is room for what he has to say. He has found that some of the other top managers, including John, after a management meeting have come back to the office and talked openly about confidential matters with people who should never have heard them. He knows that the lack of trust in each other is widespread and therefore they spend most of the management meetings discussing completely irrelevant issues.

Mi: The trouble is that you either opt completely out or wait for the day to come to an end or else you join in, and then little by little you become a part of it, and that's where we're almost at. Because you sit there and then hell, you don't want to put up with it anymore, and then we fight about completely ridiculous and utterly stupid things. It's appalling given the positions we hold and the salaries we receive, it's shocking.

### *It was the breathing space here*

The only one in the top management group that Mike has a close connection with and who he can bounce off ideas with is Maria. They have offices next to each other, and they have very similar ideas about the impact the value-based management could have on the Company. If only the top managers would cooperate, it could be a complete turn-around for the Company. It could be a work place that the employees thrived in and develop their skills and that the top management would have relevant discussions and continual development of their value-based management ideas. However, what Mike and Maria also agree on is that this vision and idea is going to be difficult to realise.

Mike often discusses management issues with Maria. Especially how he and Tony can operationalise the values is something that Maria and Mike often discuss. Maria is Mike's firm supporter whenever he has problems or disagreements with John or Bob. The trust and support between them is mutual, and he also spends some time listening to her concerns about the Company. They also talk about personal things. Especially the possibility to talk about the problems and disagreements that the Company has with someone who also knows it from inside is of great importance for Mike, because he knows that neither his wife nor Maria's husband can imagine their working conditions.

From Mike's perspective, Maria has put in a huge effort in operationalising the values, but unfortunately has in no way been appreciated. All her work on finishing and distributing the value handbook to all the managers in the Company, the value-based assignments, the value-based features in the annual Company meetings and the range of interesting and relevant courses for the whole management group, have regrettably not led to anything other than complaints from many of the other top managers. Mike does not understand this at all.

Mi: There were too many courses, and Maria closed down his [Christian's] region with all those courses. And that's grist to John's mill, because he doesn't want to pay for anything. And what it all comes down to is the fact that he [Christian] can't cope with anything... so what he wanted was a course calendar, so now we have a course calendar. But it was a direct attack, right! Then the course brochure was handed out, and the first thing Bob does is to point out an error, nothing about, wow this is really a great piece of work, no the only copy with an error, and it's just typical that he gets it... and straight away he has to point it out.

When Maria resigns, Mike is very sad because he loses not only a good and close colleague, but also his anchor point and support in the Company. During our third interview-conversation Mike tells me that he supports Maria's decision because her competences and efforts are not being acknowledged in the Company, and she is not allowed to realise many of her visions and ideas. At the same time, Mike knows that it is a great loss to the Company, and he knows that when Maria is no longer there, then it is going to be more difficult for him to realise and carry out his ideas about value-based management.

### *It's his city*

Mike finds it challenging to be the regional manager in the region where John founded the Company. He believes he has to put up with more than the other regional managers because he works in the same building as John and because John has a personal relationship with many of the customers. John has a reputation he wants to keep intact, and this means that there is no customer too small or too far out in the region that they do not service. All customers, no matter their size, are equally important, and John expects them all to get special treatment; Mike should offer them favourable prices, attend their social events, always answer the phone and respond to their complaints immediately. This attitude irritates Mike because he does not believe John is aware of how time and expense consuming the small customers are. It takes just as long to calculate the costs of the job and the service managers have to spend just as much time introducing the site to the assistants. Furthermore, it is difficult to get assistants to clean at sites that are either in remote areas or are cleaned in a short time.

Mike has tried several times to tell John that they cannot run a company based on small customers and that they have to focus on the larger customers. However, John maintains that they should never turn down a customer. The only way Mike can get through to John is if he argues from the stand point of a concrete customer, then maybe John will change his mind concerning a particular customer.

During the period I talk with Mike, he tells me how in various ways he tries to reach his goals about how the region should be run. He tries to adjust the prices for cleaning so that it is profitable, to say no to customers who are in remote places or he tries to give the service managers a break and prevent the adding of new customers. But every time the result is the same; John overrules his decision, and Mike has a hard time figuring out why John hired him in the first place if Mike is not allowed to make any decisions on his own and his judgement is always questioned.

Mike has tried for more than a year to get John to understand that it is perfectly acceptable to not always answer the phone and to ask customers to leave messages. Mike believes it is very unprofessional and disrespectful to answer the phone when he is in a meeting, and although he has made this clear to people in the administration that he feels this way, he is time and time again asked to answer the phone during meetings.

Mi: ...it is completely out of control. It's Jenny his wife, she believes everything is urgent, we're like the emergency service... the patient dies if he doesn't get his bin emptied or make an appointment about something in three weeks. The sentence, he's in a meeting, can I take a message, that's a sentence you can hardly ever utter, it is actually not legal... We have made it clear at an internal house meeting, where Tony, as the security manager, said it, and he did a hell of a job... but every time we are imputed, that we don't answer the phone, that we're not there for the customers, and it's bullocks. He [John] has no idea what's going on. He takes all these examples and they can easily have taken place several months ago, and he usually gets them from Bob. It's the easiest way, and he [Bob] knows it... because John emphasises it a lot, but I don't think it's professional that you leave a meeting to answer the phone.

### ***We think very much alike***

Mike collaborates very well with Tony. They have very similar opinions about value-based management and spar a great deal with each other. Tony contributes with new perspectives and has the energy to follow through on things.

Mi: Tony is a hell of an example. I'm too set in my ways to think too much of new ways. Then he introduces something new, and I might have tried it before or seen others try it, but you can't stop him once he's started and he manages to pull things through in one way or the other. It also illustrates the importance of getting fresh and new perspectives and ideas that aren't ingrained in ancient understandings... That is about the best thing I've ever done to hire someone like him.

There is an agreement between Tony and Mike that when they are away on holiday they do not contact each other. They make sure they have instructions about what will and could happen and how such possibilities should be handled. Should something come up that one of them does not know how to take care of, then they are advised to work out the best possible solution they can think of without

contacting the other. This solution is not welcomed by everyone in the Company since the norm is that you always answer your phone, even when you are on vacation. Nevertheless, Mike feels that this is unnecessary if you are well informed because you will be able to figure out a solution.

Tony is very good at making fast decisions and he never has a pile of unfinished projects on his desk. He is very interested in and dedicated to developing himself as a leader, which Mike respects and admires. Mike knows the disagreements and fights in the Company affect Tony. During our third interview-conversation, Mike tells that he has offered Tony a management course on coaching to show Tony that he acknowledges him as a leader and that he wants to contribute to strengthen Tony's competences further.

Mike knows some of the service managers do not trust or feel as comfortable with Tony as they do with him, but Mike believes Tony is one of the most honest people in the Company. Tony believes in the values, and his heart is in the right place. Another thing Mike really appreciates about Tony is the way Tony takes care of him. Mike often stays long hours and works in the evenings, and Tony is aware of this. Tony knows Mike will not take time off on his own, so from time to time, Tony makes Mike take some time off or Tony just sends him home.

### ***I can't continue like this very much longer***

Each time I talk with Mike, his frustrations about the huge work load, the long evenings and weekends spent working at home increase. On top of that the disagreement at the top management level and the lack of support and understanding from John affect Mike more and more. He has a hard time sleeping at night, he snaps at the service managers and he does not feel he has enough time for his family. Mike keeps telling himself and me that this will only continue for a short time, and then he will find time for more interesting things. But it just keeps getting worse. The accounts are unreliable and impossible to figure out, he spends a lot of time trying to understand them, but ends up even more confused. Even though Mike often transfers the calls to his private phone and he also spends his nights working, he does not seem to get anything done and the piles on his desk get taller. In the end, he loses his perception, and he has a hard time convincing himself that he should stay with the Company.

During our third interview-conversation he tells me that the value-based processes he and Tony have initiated do not have the effect he had hoped for. Mike had hoped that the service managers would

thrive more and be more pleased with their jobs, but they still complain, are still discontent and they still resign. Mike wants to get away from daily running procedures, and he wants to join a company where his perspectives on management are acknowledged and respected. He begins looking and applying for other jobs and looks forward to the day that he can go down to John in the corner office and hand in his resignation. Mike just hopes that he can manage to do it before John fires him because the tension between them has increased.

### *He's a really great guy*

In August of year two, after an interview-conversation with Jane, Mike asks me if I have a few minutes to talk, and we go to his office. He tells me that he has decided to resign at a meeting he has scheduled with the new CEO Jacob later that week. Mike has worked for Jacob previously, so he knows things are going to change, and for the better, after Jacob takes over the management of the Company. Nonetheless, Mike just cannot take anymore; he has just got to get away.

Mi: I know Jacob and he's really a great guy... His view on human nature is right, and I would receive proper feedback. Once in a while I'd get a pat on the shoulder, which I've never experienced before. Things would of course change, but it does not change the fact that I'm tired. It has absolutely nothing to do with the CEO change, it might have saved me a year ago, but now it's too late. He's [John] destroyed too much... [Jacob is a] great manager, really, really competent, professionally very clever, and as a person, very pleasant. He can also be strict, but he has to be otherwise he wouldn't have gotten to where he is. But he has the values in the right place... it just comes a year too late.

As Mike told me later, when he resigned, Jacob asks him whether he would be interested in another position. When Mike turns the offer down, Jacob quickly starts talking about Mike's actual phase out. They agree that Mike should leave as soon as possible to limit the confusion among the service assistants. Mike fears how Tony and the service managers will react. When Mike tells the others he has resigned, they are shocked - then again, maybe they are not. He tells them that he will be with the Company for a short period, and if they want to come and talk with him about his decision, they are welcome to. But things very soon go back to normal for the service managers and none of them take him up on his offer to discuss his decision with him.

The last time I talk with Mike he tells me that he does not regret his decision because he feels so much better and he enjoys being able to spend time with his family. Many of the other top managers have called Mike and told him that they are sorry to hear that he has resigned, but neither John nor Bob have commented on his decision, which only confirms to Mike that he has made the right decision.

## Tony

When I have my first interview-conversation with Tony he has only been the district manager for 7 months. He is in his late thirties, and he has never been employed in the cleaning industry before. He was trained in a large Danish supermarket chain, where he got some management experience, and he worked as a salesman for another company for a few years before he joined the Company. Besides his training, he has taken various courses on management, marketing, financial and commercial issues. Tony did not know the Company or the cleaning industry before he applied for the job. He accepted the job offer because he wanted more management responsibility and less emphasis on sales activities.

### *Had the values not been in place, I would probably have done the same thing anyway*

When Tony started as the district manager, he and Mike decided to turn over a lot of the responsibility to the service managers and include them in the decision making processes. The former district manager was very controlling and the service managers needed the district manager's approval before they could make any decisions about the customers, assistants or sites. In Tony's opinion, the changes he and Mike have made have been good. Tony is sure that none of the service managers chose their job, because they wanted to clean or deliver mops and goods and not have any decision-making rights of their own. The service managers chose their jobs because they allowed them to build strong relationships with their customers and assistants.

Tony feels that the Company's values describe what it means to be a competent manager and the values are a helpful tool for him when he works with operationalising the values. Tony knows that the restructurings have led to huge cultural changes for the service managers and that it is going to take some time for the service managers to get used to the new management approach. Nevertheless, Tony tells me that there is no alternative; the service managers are under so much pressure they can barely keep it together.

T: We had an extra meeting here the other day because we could tell just by looking at the way they came in, the way they spoke to each other and the way they acted that something was wrong. They were under too much pressure, so we scheduled a meeting. We had two options: we could close our eyes and wait for them to fall apart or we could act according to our values, and we're happy we did act... I would really feel bad if one of my service managers went under or gave up because I hadn't done my

job... I'd feel like a failure. I'd rather keep the ones I have at the moment, and I'll do the best I can to give them a good workday.

### ***I'm Maria's little project***

Tony sees his lack of experience in the cleaning business as an advantage because it makes it natural and much easier for him to include the service managers in the decision-making processes. The service managers have a lot of experience and knowledge about cleaning that in many ways make them more competent than him in, for example, estimating how much time they need to use to clean a site. He knows Maria hired him because of his management skills and ideas and not because of his cleaning experience. Nevertheless, it has been challenging for him, Mike and the service managers because his approach to management and his mindset are very different.

T: I was the only applicant who didn't have cleaning experience. Typically you hire someone from the cleaning industry, so it's been an experience for all of us... I was a shock, and I have had a huge task to learn everything and so have they because I am extremely good at asking questions and I continue to do so. I have nothing to hide and no habits like many of the others. I say, explain to me why that's a good idea. They respond that it's just how it is usually done. And I say, well, that's just not good enough and I have them explain to me why their idea is better than mine.

Tony thinks of himself as a guy in the corner who once in a while, when it is needed, wears the manager hat, but otherwise he is there to make the service managers' working day funnier and easier. This has led to various initiatives, such as Mike and him hiring a guy to deliver goods and clean mops at each site once a week. At the larger sites Tony has installed washing machines and dryers so the assistants always have clean mops. Besides that, Mike and he have hired a part-time office clerk to type in the assistants' salary, write warnings to the assistants, and to handle the terms of employment and other assistant issues. The reasons behind these initiatives was to exempt the service managers from many of the practicalities that take up much of their time, so that they would have more time to focus on the tasks they have been hired to carry out: managing the assistants and servicing the customers.

### ***We toss some water on the floor and then we're out of there again***

It frustrates Tony that some of the customers and sometimes also the assistants hardly know who the service manager on the site is. This has made him and Mike initiate some processes that would allow

the service managers to manage the assistants and service the customers better. Mike and Tony have put in a claim for the service managers to routinely conduct quality controls at all the sites, and it is the service managers who together with the contact person at the sites decide how often the quality controls should be conducted. Tony and Mike have initiated this, because a quality control guarantees that the quality on the site is high. Simultaneously, it is also a helpful management tool for the service managers.

T: The quality controls open doors, they are a dialogue tool that can be used with both the customers and the assistants. The service managers initially talk it through with the customer and ask them what they think. Well this is what we [the customer] prioritise, and the customer is happy, and then they [service managers] head on down to the assistant and say: here's the site folder and a copy of the quality control. You should relax the other places, but the customer prioritises x y and z at the moment, so focus on that.

During the first interview-conversations, Tony tells me that he knows that if the service managers would spend more time on the sites together with the assistants, it would reduce the number of sick notifications because the assistants would feel more appreciated. This in turn would encourage them to stay longer with the Company. Besides, it would make the Company a more attractive workplace. Moreover, the customers would know when which rooms were cleaned, and the contact person at each site would have a closer and more frequent dialogue with the service manager; both of which would strengthen their relationship to the Company.

Besides the initiative of the quality controls, Tony arranged to have a salesman from a company that sells toilet paper, soap, paper handtowels and dispensers give a sales course to the service managers. The idea was to make the service managers capable of selling these products to their existing and future customers. Tony knows there are many small and local cleaning companies that offer cleaning at a lower price than the Company does, and therefore the Company should not compete with the local companies on price; instead the service managers should inform the customers about all the other services the Company can also offer.

T: A lot of places we only clean, we come in and toss some water on the floor and then we're out of there. It isn't nuclear physics. If we were allowed to sell in some extra services to the customer like cleaning windows, providing towels and mats, taking care of their plants, supplying them with goods,

selling them toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, even selling them coffee, offering them canteen service. Basically getting them anything they want. Maybe it's a tad more expensive to buy it from us, but they can free an employee from these tasks... if we only tell the customer that we can these things... and if we tell them this, then we've got a hold of the customer because then the little man with the bucket who can toss some water on the floor is not more than that. It's harder to take the customer away from us because others don't clean the mats or the windows or water the flowers or provide the package of goods that we can. Then we've got the customer.

### ***Little by little we prepare them***

During my second interview-conversation with Tony, he tells me that some of the processes Mike and he initiated, sadly, turned out to be counterproductive. This had nothing to do with the content; it had something to do with the fact that they initiated too many things at the same time, which made the service managers lose perspective. Tony has now learned to take it more slowly and not initiate too much at once, and he has realised that it varies from service manager to service manager how much they can handle at once. A few times he has found that when he asked the service managers at their monthly region meeting why Mike and he had initiated a certain process like hiring the mop-guy to bring out clean mops and goods, their response was that they did not know why. He now knows that he has to treat the service managers differently and take various things into consideration with a new process. Sometimes he goes into detail with one of the service managers, but at the same time, he has to make sure that the different treatment of the service managers is not too obvious. As a result, Tony assists the service managers for a period when he and Mike initiate new processes instead of handing over the full responsibility to them right away.

T: I'm out paying the first visit to a customer and I sometimes bring a service manager for two reasons. First of all because they know much more about cleaning than I do, but also to train them in handling the customers, making the offers and asking the right questions... And they indicate, in their own way, that it's a good idea. They can see the interest in presenting an offer, selling an extra task or making an expansion of the area they clean for the customers instead of racing around with mops and goods all day.

### *They've started smiling*

During our third interview-conversation, Tony tells me that he knows that the new initiatives have led to a cultural turn-around for the service managers. Even though they probably initiated too much at once, he feels that they have managed to make the service managers' day more fun and easy. More importantly is that it shows. He knows that there is disagreement among the service managers once in a while, and that they still have a long way to go, but they are more open and honest than before and they act more mature and professional. He can tell by looking at their appearance that they are thriving.

T: The biggest implication is that they've started smiling... they help each other out, there is good communication, and earlier on there wasn't. They only looked out for themselves. [Now] they come in more and ask questions... they're getting the hang of it. Tony, I think we should do this and this, what do you think? Why if you think so, then let's do it. We learn from it. We can make all the mistakes we want to as long as we don't make the same mistake twice... and I'm lucky because I have no cleaning experience, so what would you have done if I wasn't here? Well then, I would have done x. Great, give it a go and tell me how it works out. So it's something completely different for them, and they just have to get the hang of it. But just the tone of voice out there, many of the old hands, they can hear that it has changed. I take that as a good sign... and as you could hear at the meeting [one of the monthly regional meetings]... things are running now. The plan we have, we follow it, and as you know, we've learned from bitter experience to wait with new initiatives until the others have taken root. They're involved, they're finding it interesting, they're selling more to the customers, and they're very much involved.

Tony believes that a reason why the service managers have accepted the new initiatives so well has to do with the way Mike and he have operationalised the values. Tony knows that what Mike and he have initiated differentiates from what many of the other middle managers have done, and sometimes Mike and Tony have not asked John for permission when they have made decisions. Mike and Tony had believed that, although their formal position gave them the power to make the decision, John would not allow them to, making their decision to change things risky. Nevertheless, Tony feels good about the changes they have brought about because he knows the service managers thrive much more now than before.

***The issues they [the service managers] pointed out, I struggle with them too***

Although Tony knows that what he and Mike have done is right, he tells me during our second interview-conversation that it frustrates him that there are so different interpretations about value-based management in the building. It is difficult for him to maintain a belief among the service managers that they should follow and live up to the values. He sometimes wishes that the Department had a huge iron gate so they could enclose themselves on the first floor and not have anything to do with the people downstairs because they are so negative and uncooperative. There are no synergies between the different departments. Tony knows he feels this way mostly due to the powerlessness he experiences in his work with those who are located downstairs. It is very obvious for everyone that John and Bob manage in a very different way than Mike and Tony do, and that John and Bob do not reflect upon their management style.

T: I don't think any of them [John and Bob] come to work to do wrong. John he still believes, in a good way that he has a one-man firm out in Smalltown with only 7 square metres. He hasn't really grasped that we now have 1500 employees, and that other issues make themselves felt. He's an entrepreneur and there are really many many good aspects of that, but there are also some bad ones. And I'm not saying that what Mike and I are doing is the eternal truth, but if you're not prepared to acknowledge that what you do might not be good enough and you don't want to develop yourself then it's dangerous. And I'm completely convinced that I still have a lot to learn, no doubt about that... if you think you've learnt all there is to learn then you have not learned anything at all, and then the game is over for you.

M: Maybe that's how Bob feels; that he has learned all there is to learn.

T: I think Bob thinks of himself as a walking oracle, and that you can suck out knowledge about how to be the best leader. In that sense, there's nothing wrong with that, if only it were true.

***It has escalated over the last six months***

Especially during our second interview-conversation Tony expresses his frustrations about the many different opinions about value-based management and the lack of consequences it has for the people that do not act according to the values.

T: As the service managers have pointed out, it's incomprehensibly and frustrating that we expect them to follow and act according to the values...yet it's accepted and known throughout the Company that

in some places of the Company the values aren't followed without any consequences. All the education we've been through, and all the money that's been spent on it, is grotesque. It's sickening that there isn't more attention paid to the fact that not everyone follows it. Publicly the saying is that we are a company in growth and prosperity, but that's a lot of bull shit and a load of crap. There's no prosperity, everything is out of control, and it's just a mess. They've made some posters and they've made a pretty value handbook and everything, and when we're asked, we all say that we practice value-based management, but we don't. It's just a facade, and it's disgusting to witness... you have a hidden agenda... and if a striking change doesn't occur within the Company, then I'm sure that the staff-getaway we've witnessed so far is nothing.

Tony does not understand why John has initiated the implementation of value-based management and then knowingly allows so many of the top managers to not develop these management competences and skills. For Tony, the lack of development in a company is the same as shutting the company down. From Tony's point of view, it would have been better not to initiate the process in the first place if it was not expected that they all act upon it. If you initiate a process like this, you indicate to your employees that something needs to improve. If you then do not follow up on it, you have all these unfulfilled expectations, which make it backfire. Tony does not know what to do. He feels that the progress in the Department is very fulfilling, but at the same time there is so much trench warfare going on within the top management group in the firm that he cannot do anything about. There is so much unspoken, so many gesticulations and so many hunches expressed by all the managers that he and Mike know are there and they know what they mean, but they cannot provide evidence for it. It causes bad working conditions, and it makes Tony unsure about whether he wants to stay with the Company or not.

T: I wouldn't change [my job] if it wasn't for the better. I wouldn't want to leave all this with the development we're in, but still, I would prioritise myself higher than that because being in the middle of a culture-change in the Company doesn't pay the bills and it doesn't make me feel better about myself on the weekends... so personally, I could feel better if I wasn't here, I guess, but still, I fell like fuck, it would be great to complete properly what we've started, and there are still things we can get down to and improve and optimise... but whether I'm employed with the Company, a telephone operator or somewhere else... that's unimportant. The only criteria for me concerning where I want to be, and then I already answer my question, is that I can vouch for what I'm doing."

***Had I told him [Mike] to just take his time, then he'd still be sitting in there***

In the last interview-conversation I had with Tony he tells me about Mike's behaviour the last weeks before he left the Company. Tony found that Mike was not feeling well and walked around as if in a vacuum, spending a lot of time on nothing. Finally, he asked Mike to clean up his desk, sort his piles and hand them over to him and then head on home and not come back until Friday, when Tony knew the service managers had planned something for Mike. When Tony took over the contact with the sites that were Mike's, he took over where Mike left off.

T: I hadn't expected that Mike knew what was on his desk. There were issues all the way back to March that the customer had not received an answer for yet. It takes time because I have to work my way into the matter and figure out a clarification instead of it just being handled right away. After so much time, it ends up taking three or four times longer. There's been quite a lot of that. And then all the big customers Mike had, I had to visit them, and be introduced, and you always end up bringing something home with you that you have follow up on.

After Mike resigned, Tony experiences for the first time that he had to take some work home with him in order to keep up to date on things. Tony does not mind it as long as it is only for a short period. Tony knew Mike always brought his documents with him home so he could work, but Tony would never do that because life is too short for that. On top of the many customer requests, Tony also has to draw up a completely new budget for the region's customers. Although the regional manager before Mike comes in and helps Tony draw it up, it still occupies a lot of Tony's time, and he finds that he has almost no time for managing or spending time with the service manager.

***If you're a manager should you handle customers?***

During the months where Tony handles all the management tasks in the region before Cliff, the new regional manager takes over, Tony is surprised how much time he spends handling customer requests and how one request quickly leads to the next. He begins to understand why the piles on Mike's desk just kept increasing, and why he lost touch of what was important.

T: Mike didn't focus as much on the financial circumstances as was needed. Mike has wrongly focused too much on daily operating procedures and customers, and we shouldn't make that mistake again because they take up a lot of your time, those customers, I've experienced that now. Because if Cliff has

to manage, then he has Harry [the region's other district manager], me [to manage] and all the financial circumstances to deal with, he has to visit customers and attend management meetings all of which takes a lot of time... If then on top of that he has to reply to emails from customers regarding the cleaning and all that... that was how Mike spent all his time... I just think he couldn't see his way out of it.

The experiences Tony had after Mike resigned made him wonder whether he and Cliff should organise themselves in another way and prioritise differently. They could maybe promote one of the service managers to a sort of super-service manager who would handle all the customer contacts and fill out forms so he and Cliff only had to sign them. Tony feels that there is too much administrative work that ties him to his office, making it difficult for him to spend time with the service managers and be a good leader for them.

T: I hope that when Cliff is properly acquainted with everything, I'll have more time to manage the in a good way; to come out with them and find the time for them because, right now, I just don't have the time. I find time for them if they come in here and tell me: Tony, stop working and listen to me. And I've told them to do that. Don't wait for me to find out, especially how things are right now, you have to tell me to sit down, shut up and listen to what I have to say, which they have gotten good at it. It's this transition period because... going for a ride with them and talking with them, being a bit more empathic, I miss that...

### ***I can't put my finger on what exactly he's done***

Although the workload is big and Tony, for a shorter period, has a hard time finding the time to manage the way he wants to, he is positive about the future. Tony has a good impression of Jacob, and he feels that Jacob has handled Mike's resignation in a good way. The first months after Jacob started he was running around all the time, but he has begun to put up demands and stick to his demands. What Tony appreciates most about Jacob's arrival is the fact that there is a different atmosphere in the building.

T: [Last] spring the atmosphere in the building was affected a lot, and it has improved since Jacob has started. There were some people who thought they had a lot of say and were very important before Jacob started, but who have found out that they weren't such big shots as they thought.

M: They've been put in their place?

T: Yes and you can tell that there isn't the trench warfare there was earlier... That's a place I don't want to be... life's too short for that.

M: What has changed?

T: His attitude is so apparent... and I have told him that, but I can't put my finger on what exactly he's done. If it's his presence alone or because John is gone, I don't know.



# Chapter 6

---

## Strategising through organising

*This chapter presents the prevailing perspective on strategy in this thesis. Based on an ongoing and active debate about what strategy is and how it can be understood, I present and frame how strategising is understood as everyday relational attempts to operationalise a strategy in a meaningful way. The chosen perspective stems from how, I perceived, strategising was enacted in the Company during the period I generated data. After introducing my theoretical perspective, I will present how Mike and Tony during fifteen monthly regional meetings and one extraordinary did the best they could to operationalise the ideas about value-based management. They did this in a way that they believed would make the working conditions for the service managers more motivating and exciting.*

### How can strategising be understood?

Within the extensive strategy literature, there is no simple and straightforward answer to what a strategy is or who the strategists are. There are, on the contrary, many ideas on the subject (Ahlstrand, Lampel & Mintzberg 1998: 9). In the seventies Mintzberg introduced the distinction between deliberate and emergent change as a way to understand strategy (Mintzberg, 1978). Some years later he wrote an article together with Waters exploring the degree of deliberateness and emergence in strategic processes. In this article, they argue that it is very unlikely to find any perfectly deliberate or any completely emergent strategies when looking at organisations (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). What is more common is a mixture between the intended and the emergent, where the complexity of the environment in combination with the organisational actors shapes the strategy. They both state, however, that it is not the degree of deliberateness that determines the success of a strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 260). In this article, they encourage scholars to look at the interplay between the deliberate and the emergent in strategic initiatives (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 258).

Simultaneously, Pettigrew encouraged research focussing more on strategy as a process and not just planning and content (Pettigrew, 1985, Pettigrew 1992). For a long time, the modern assumption about

strategy as a managerial rational planning tool had dominated the research agenda and left many researchers puzzled about the gap between formulation and implementation. Based on this, Pettigrew argued that there was a growing need to understand strategy from a becoming and not a being perspective (Pettigrew, 1992: 5f). Pettigrew claimed that if strategy was perceived as a more dynamic process that occurs within a context at a specific time, then maybe researchers would be able to know more about what happens, why it happens and how it happens (Pettigrew, 1992: 8).

Since then, strategy has gained further momentum as a central element in understanding management and organisations as well as their relationship to their environment (Clegg, Carter & Kornberger, 2004: 21). In process making strategy “must rank as one of the most prominent, influential and costly stories told in organizations” (Barry & Elmes, 1997: 430). Concurrently, many researchers have dedicated time exploring strategy both as process or/and content and as a deliberate or/and emergent process. This has further developed the various ways strategy can be perceived. Even though the dispute about whether strategy is about content or process is still very much alive and active, strategy research has, especially within the last ten years, taken a more fundamental practice turn (Chia, 2004: 29), where micro processes and organisational practice are being researched in the attempt to figure out how to understand strategy (Chia, 2004: 29).

*“... what is being called for is nothing short of substitution of a means-ends logic with a practical logic of accommodation and adaptability that begins and ends with the primacy of action.”* (Chia, 2004: 30)

### ***From strategic planning to Strategy as/in Practice***

Clegg, Carter & Kornberger are some of the researchers who distance themselves from the idea that strategy primarily is about planning, structuring and implementing, and argue for a practice turn in strategy, which focuses on emergence and unpredictability (Clegg, Carter & Kornberger, 2004: 23f). They describe and explore what they conceive as seven fallacies of strategic planning, arguing instead that the practice of strategy is a process full of twists and turns, in which the unintended and unplanned emerge and shape the process. The world is, as Chia & Holt write, not nicely ordered; it is complex (Chia & Holt, 2009: 21) and how the environment acts and evolves cannot be predicted (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 269). This means that strategy is about being in uncharted territory and trying to make sense of it as one goes. In this process, social structuring, routines, norms, values, meaning structures

and moral orders affect the possible ways actors can move and how they can make sense about the situations they find themselves in.

*“...strategy, instead of being something explicitly and boldly stated upfront,  
emerges organically, takes shape and infuses itself  
into the everyday actions of individuals and institutions...  
strategy is not so much about the act of navigation as it is a process of wayfinding.  
We only know as we go.”* (Chia & Holt, 2009: xi)

For researchers within this perspective, understanding how the organisational actors move about in unknown territory and try to make sense of it all is what strategy is about. Hence strategy becomes something actors do and not something they have (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007: 6). This approach to understand strategy has been the underlying basis for the community of Strategy as Practice that was founded mainly by British researchers like Julia Balogun, Richard Whittington, Gerry Johnson and Paula Jarzabkowski. These scholars argue that much strategy literature and research have lost sight of human beings; hence there is a need to re-focus on the actions and interactions of the strategy practitioners (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007: 6).

Scholars within this community are interested in studying what actors do when they say they strategise and how this affects their actions and the organisation the actors are a part of (Johnson et al., 2007: 7). Compared to other process-oriented strategy scholars, Strategy as Practice in general presupposes that a strategy is there and that certain actions are strategic. At a broader level, the community is interested in understanding what a strategy is, who the strategists are and what they do on a micro-level through longitudinal empirical research (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007: 7). By researching how strategising is being conducted at a micro-level through a plurality of actors, the ambition is to generate knowledge on what a strategy is, who the strategists are and what they do on a macro-level. The ambition is that micro-studies function as springboards also to develop the field of strategy research on a macro-level (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007: 6, Whittington et al., 2007: 17).

The Strategy as Practice community has been critiqued from other process-oriented researchers like Clegg, Carter & Kornberger (2008) and Chia & Holt (2009) for remaining within the traditional mainstream functional research that the Strategy as Practice community argue that they wish to distance themselves from. The critique especially concerns Strategy as Practice's aim to connect and combine

the micro and macro levels. Opponents argue that this community has a hard time refraining from connecting behaviour and outcome and means from ends as well as reaching accurate descriptions of the real world (Clegg, Carter & Kornberger, 2008: 88, Chia & Holt, 2009: 122-125).

According to Chia & Holt (2009) and Chia & Rasche (2009) strategy in their perspective is more about practice and actual actions than the retrospective sensemaking processes, which, they argue the Strategy as Practice community prioritises too much. They suggest, instead, that it is more relevant to look at strategy **in** practice than strategy **as** practice (Chia, 2004: 29, Chia & Holt, 2009: 113). Following these scholars, one can not presuppose what is and what is not strategic. All one can study is concrete action; whether or not they are strategic depend on actors' retrospective sensemaking. Actions should be studied in its context by the use of longitudinal ethnographic studies in which one refrains from the aspiration to conceptualise, order, fix and classify (Chia & Holt, 2009: 122, 153, Chia & Rasche, 2009: 714-716, 725). For example, by getting closer to actions understood as practice, meaning practitioners' habitus and agency, researchers can learn more about the 'hidden realities that shape strategy practices' (Chia & Rasche, 2009: 726).

Despite the critique, the Strategy as Practice community has, never the less, provided a forum for many scholars from various backgrounds to discuss and understand strategy from a more process-oriented perspective. They emphasise, for example, that a strategy is a linguistic practice which takes place everyday (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), that the organisational strategists are not only at the centre of a company but also in the periphery (Regnér, 2003), and that strategic practitioners are engaged in sensemaking activities as they on a daily basis interpret and sell the strategic change initiatives (Rouleau, 2005).

*“Organizational change is a context-dependent, unpredictable, non-linear process in which intended strategies often lead to unintended outcomes.” (Balogun & Johnson, 2005: 1573)*

### ***From Strategy as Practice through Strategy in Practice to strategy through organising***

With an interest in sensemaking, relations, organising, language and everyday practice, the way strategy is perceived in this thesis draws inspiration from scholars belonging to the Strategy as Practice community, its' critics and other scholars like Alvesson & Sveningsson, Gergen, Czarniawska and

Orlikowski. Inspired by Alvesson & Sveningsson, I am interested in "... what people do when they engage in change work and what this seems to lead to in an organization." (2008: 7). In this thesis the word 'do' is understood both as actions and as retrospective sensemaking. This means that I am inspired by scholars who have a Strategy **as** Practice as well as a Strategy **in** Practice approach to strategic processes. Encouraged by Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, I perceive sensemaking as the interplay between action and interpretation, in which action and interpretation constitute each other to bring out an understandable world (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 409f). This means that neither action nor interpretation is assigned primacy. From my perspective, action and interpretation constitute and shape each other on an everyday basis as actors within the Company attempt to make sense of the strategy. This means that I need to understand the actors' everyday actions and relational attempts to make sense, when I want to understand the strategising that goes on in the Company. This takes place while strategic initiatives are set in motion, but I do not presuppose that the way the actors act or attempt to make sense have their point of origin in the strategic initiatives.

The approach I have chosen does not mean that the stories I tell make me capable of saying more about strategising processes on a macro level or are able to reveal more about the 'hidden realities of strategising' than the stories presented by scholars who have a Strategy-as-practice or Strategy-in-practice approach. The stories about strategising I have included are the results of the relational sensemaking that I, together with the actors in the Company, have constructed to represent how they welcomed and made the strategic initiatives a part of their daily organising (Czarniawska, 2004: 118).

The stories are constructed by the actors and I in an attempt to 'set the world right' and answer the question 'what's the story here'. They are the result of relational retrospective sensemaking about the experiences the actors and I have had together. This means that the stories represent how various actors within the Company, in interaction with me, understood the strategy at a certain point in time and how these understandings were realised through strategising activities.

*"We need to move away from reifying change as something done to and placed on individuals, and instead acknowledge the role that change recipients play in creating and shaping change outcomes."*

(Balogun, 2006: 43)

The Utilco study conducted by Balogun at a privatised utility company (Balogun & Johnson, 2005, Balogun & Johnson, 2006, Balogun and 2007, Balogun) as well as Alvesson & Sveningsson's study of a cultural change process in a private business (2008) indicate that change processes are more dynamic-local interpretations and sensemaking activities conducted especially by middle managers, than an implementation project. Within organisations actors interpret various initiatives differently because they hold various positions, work in different departments, and hence they emphasise, prioritise and make sense in multiple ways (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 38f). The consequence of this is that as soon as a strategy is set in motion, local interpretations and multiple forms of sensemaking processes are set in motion simultaneously. This generates a multitude of actions, and thereby makes it very difficult for the top management to control or predict the outcomes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 28, 33).

The point argued here is not that top managers have no influence over the strategising processes; they indeed play a central role, even a more complex role than presented within the strategic planning perspective. The point here is that it cannot be assumed that organisational actors make sense in a way that is congruent with the ideas of the top management (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 46, 50, Balogun, 2006: 45). Of the strategists, middle managers play a central role in change processes as they function as both recipients and deployers of strategic initiatives (Balogun & Johnson, 2005: 1574). As the middle managers work with operationalising the top management's strategic initiatives, they discuss their experiences with their employees' actions and behaviours with other middle managers in the organisation and not with the top management. This means that the middle managers' relational sensemaking attempts are quite important when looking at how the strategic initiatives are realised in organisations (Balogun, 2007: 84). Balogun's studies (2005, Balogun & Johnson, 2006, Balogun, 2007, Balogun) illustrate that the discussions, talks and jokes about what the new initiatives mean for the middle managers take place on an everyday basis as the middle managers practice their everyday work (Balogun & Johnson, 2005: 1595, Balogun, 2007: 82). These studies also show that how middle managers make sense of the strategic initiatives influence how rituals, norms, systems, assumptions and beliefs are perceived and operationalised in the organisation (Balogun & Johnson, 2005: 1575).

*“... change may not always be as planned, inevitable, or discontinuous as we imagine. Rather, it is often realized through the ongoing variations with emerge frequently, even imperceptibly, in the slippages and improvisations of everyday activity.”*  
(Orlikowski, 1996: 88f)

Orlikowski's study on how organisational actors incorporated a new technology system showed that local interpretations and sensemaking attempts shaped how a new technology system was accepted and put into practice (Orlikowski, 1996: 89). It was not the planned implementation of the technological system in itself that led to changes but the daily practice and organising activities as the organisational actors began using the new system, leading them to improvise, experiment, make mistakes and experience break-downs (Orlikowski, 1996: 63, 89). In such a process the technical system was not the only one to change and develop. As the actors experimented and improvised they also changed and developed the norms, routines, daily practice and organising of the company (Orlikowski, 1996: 89).

The above mentioned studies illustrate that the emergent, the processual, the flexible and the uncertain are natural parts of change and strategic processes (Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997: 3, Balogun & Johnson, 2005: 1594). Orlikowski & Hofman advocate that the way change processes take place within organisation resembles the 'Trukese'<sup>9</sup> navigator more than the European navigator. Where as the European navigates according to a predefined plan, the Trukese sets off towards an objective, and he responds to the environment and the conditions as they arise (Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997: 1).

Ingold makes a similar distinction as he describes the difference between navigating and wayfaring (Ingold, 2008: 15). The navigator is a traveller following a fixed route, in which he pays no attention to the sight, sounds and feelings that he meets along the way; he keeps his eyes on the map and lets the map guide him (Ingold, 2008: 78-80). For the navigator any type of break, straying from the trail or detouring, is a moment of tension that keeps the navigator from reaching his goal. The wayfarer, on the other hand, does not follow a map. He does not pursue a predefined goal because the goal is constantly being reformulated as there always is somewhere further he can go (Ingold, 2008: 77). For the wayfarer the breaks, straying and detouring, are a natural part of the process as they take part in deciding where to go. This means that, where as the navigator follows a line sketched out before his journey, the wayfarer draws the line as he goes (Ingold, 2008: 74). Once the navigator reaches his goal, he has no where further to go. The wayfarer, contrary to the navigator, never reaches his goal. He is constantly on the move, telling stories and drawing lines as he goes. He lives his life along the lines he makes and through the stories he tells (Ingold, 2008: 76f, 2009: 200).

*“Knowing unfolds in the field of practice through our*

---

<sup>9</sup> The Trukese population is situated on one of the small Islands of the Western Pacific Ocean in Micronesia.

*being in the world, it has no end or beginning, it is  
a constant processing through our lifeworld...  
knowledge appears as we travel from place to place.”*

(Ingold, 2009: 198f)

Chia and Holt (2008, 2009) are scholars who have worked on integrating Ingold's thoughts into understanding strategy. They argue that strategising is about wayfinding, which means that researchers and practitioners need to move away from a perspective on strategy as a detached activity that is based on following fixed maps and strategic models. It is, instead, the actors' wayfinding; their daily practical activities and their everyday attempts to make sense of the strategic initiatives what is interesting and what shapes strategy because this is where the actors construct an understanding of the strategy (Chia & Holt, 2008: 18, 2009: 168).

Based on the thoughts on strategising I have presented here, strategy in this thesis is about understanding, following and participating in the continual and daily sensemaking attempts that the actors within the Company are in the midst of, as they vitalise the strategic initiatives in a way that makes sense to them and help them in their attempts to 'set the world right'. Within this perspective, it means that strategising takes place through organising, as the actors try to incorporate the new initiatives into their practice.

## **Operationalising the strategy**

The stories about Mike and Tony's organising show that Mike and Tony in various ways try to organise their own and the service managers' everyday practice in a way that is more inspiring, motivating and suitable for the job they have to do. They try to operationalise the strategic initiatives and act as value-based managers the best way they can. In the process Mike and Tony try on a daily basis to figure out how they can develop and change their own and the service managers' organising in a way that makes sense in order to live up to the values.

During the interview-conversations Mike and Tony told me about how they worked strategically by initiating various projects and how they experienced the service managers' reactions to them. Mike and Tony have primarily used the monthly regional meetings as a forum to introduce the new initiatives and

follow up on them. During the 1½ years I generated knowledge about the Company, I observed fifteen of these meetings and one extraordinary. The following pages will evolve around how Mike and Tony introduced strategic initiatives at these meeting and how the service managers welcomed these initiatives. The idea is to illustrate how the relational interplay between sensemaking and action constitute how Mike and Tony operationalised the strategy.

### ***The first three monthly meetings***

The monthly meetings are usually held the first Tuesday of the month. They last approximately two hours and usually finish by ordering lunch. The monthly meetings are used to exchange general and common information between the service managers, Mike and Tony and introduce and discuss strategically connected projects. Attendance is compulsory and if someone forgets to turn off their phone and it rings during the meeting, the guilty party has to buy cake for everyone. The tone of the meetings is rough and caring. Mike, Tony and the service managers joke a lot during the meetings.

Even at the first monthly meeting (September of year one of my study) I am introduced to some of the actions Mike and Tony have initiated based on the strategy process. Mike and Tony have hired a guy to pick up, wash and return the used mops and deliver cleaning products at almost all of the sites once a week to relieve the service managers of this duty. Before this was initiated, the service managers picked up the used mops at the sites and washed them in the Company's laundry room, and afterwards returned the clean mops to the sites. Besides this, Mike and Tony have bought extra washing machines and dryers for the larger sites so the assistants can wash the mops on their own.

At this meeting, Mike and Tony tell the service managers they have to arrange meetings with their contact persons at all the sites and schedule one meeting a month for the rest of the year. At these meetings the service managers and the contact persons at the sites should to go through the quality report that the service managers have conducted prior to the meeting and arrange the next meeting. Tony explains how the Company can better live up to the values if the service managers spend more time together with the contact persons at the sites and conduct the quality reports routinely. Mike and Tony tell me after the meeting that they have initiated this because the service managers are not very good at planning and organising their days, weeks or months. Some of the service managers barely talk with the contact persons at the sites and may not get around to doing all the quality reports they have to in order to make the Company live up to and maintain their certifications. In Mike and Tony's

opinion the service managers should spend much more time with the contact persons and the assistants than they do.

The service managers are quite active during the first monthly meeting. They complain about a malfunctioning measuring-cap on one of the products. They do not believe the quality report template functions very well, and they ask whether the new salary system (that the Company is in the middle of implementing) will allow them to see how much profit they generate. Jane also asks if any clarification has been stated about when they are allowed to use their Company car<sup>10</sup>. Some of the service managers also express that they are under a lot of time pressure, and Laura mentions that telephone operating hours was a solution that she was introduced at a course she just attended. Mike follows up on this and says that they do not have to be available 24/7, and they need to change this attitude.

At the following monthly meeting, I learn that an extraordinary meeting has taken place between the last and this monthly meeting concerning the earlier mentioned redistribution of the service managers' sites in order to divide the sites between morning-, afternoon- and evening- cleaning as well as geographically in the region. At the second monthly meeting, Mike and Tony inform the service managers that they have hired an office clerk to handle all the administrative tasks of the service managers concerning the assistants and the sites. That way the service managers will have more time to focus on customer care and the well-being of the assistants, as well as conduct the quality reports and sell more services to new and existing customers.

On the third monthly meeting Tony introduces a value-based vision plan that includes initiatives for the following six months. The vision plan indicates how they, through previously initiated and continual reorganising, will be able to live up to the Company's seven values. This vision plan appears at the following five monthly meetings in which Mike and Tony refer to the vision and the action plans to make sure they are on the right track. The vision plan also explains to the service managers why Mike and Tony have initiated various processes. The vision plan states that after hiring the guy who delivers mops, the office clerk and redistributing the sites in a more sensible way, the service managers should have more time to aid their contact persons at the sites, sell extra services and routinely conduct

---

<sup>10</sup> In Denmark there is the possibility to have a business car where the tax and VAT is lower and paid by the employer. In these kinds of arrangements there are various possibilities that include State defined restrictions about whether you are allowed to use your business car to pick up kids or buy lunch etc. Hence the Company has to find out which solution suits them best.

the quality reports, and thereby make the Company able to live up to the certifications and build stronger connections to the existing customers by the end of April in year two of my study.

### ***The fourth monthly meeting and what took place just before it***

At the fourth monthly meeting, I learn that there had been an extraordinary meeting that both John and Maria were present not long after the last monthly meeting. The service managers had told Mike that they were under an extreme time constraint, and that they just could not handle it any more. Many of them were close to handing in their resignations. Mike did not know how to react but asked whether it would help if he made sure that they would not receive any new customers for the rest of the year. The service managers all agreed and Mike went down to John to tell him about the decision. Initially, John got very upset, but eventually, he agreed with the decision.

A few days later, Mike went to London with his wife and children for the weekend only to find out when he returned that Tony had gotten a telling-off from John about the decision. Apparently, John had changed his mind and wanted them to take on new customers after all. Mike then, a bit paralysed, called the extraordinary meeting where he wanted John to hear how stressed the service managers were. The service managers had not been informed prior to the extraordinary meeting that John and Maria would be present. The service managers were, therefore, quite shocked to find John and Maria there when they arrived. During the meeting, John asked the service managers what the problem was and whether they were stressed. The service managers replied by stating that they had some recruitment problems, and it was going to be time consuming to gather the new portfolios for all the sites. This made John suggest that they put some stickers on the cars and run some radio spots in which they encouraged qualified applicants to contact the Company. Besides, he was sure that the HR department would gladly gather all the new portfolios for them.

Mike was very frustrated after the extraordinary meeting. He felt he had put himself and his judgement on the line for the service managers and they had not at all supported him when John was there. During the fourth monthly meeting, Mike explained to the service managers how difficult it is going to be now for him to protect them from John.

Mike: John left with the feeling that it was only petty problems and it's going to be very difficult for me now...

Tony: We trust you blindly. Maybe we're stupid, but if you complain we respond to it...

Mike: John clearly stated afterwards that if the managers [Mike and Tony] cannot do the job, he'll have to find someone else to do it...

Nina: We have to be able to just blow off steam. We didn't know they [Maria and John] would be here. If you had only told us, but no, you wouldn't...

Tony: We don't blame you for complaining. You don't get your heads cut off when you open your mouths.

Laura: Well we did this time... If we'd only known that he [John] was going to be here.

Mike: I know what he's [John] like; I quarrel with him every day...

Laura: I'm keeping my mouth shut from now on if I'm under too much pressure. I don't want to put anyone's job on the line.

Nina: We have to be allowed to open our mouths and talk, but I would like to know what you pass along to John. We have to be able to trust in you... I've been a service manager for many years, there are good and bad days... it's funny with the values, we have to be honest and talk together. Once you put it into words, it isn't that bad anymore.

Tony concludes the discussion by indicating that he and Mike should listen more and not jump into solutions immediately. Tony guarantees that both he and Mike had gotten John's approval that Mike and Tony would not lose their jobs in the morning and agreed that none of them were resigning. At the end of the meeting, Tony hands out a piece of homework that the service managers should do before the next monthly meeting. The service managers have to think about why their customers have chosen the Company to take care of their cleaning.

### ***The following four monthly meetings***

At the fifth meeting, only Annie has done the homework. As a result, they do the exercise together at the meeting. Before the sixth meeting, Tony calls me to tell me that he and Mike have invited a salesman from one of their suppliers to the meeting. The salesman will train the service managers in selling their products to existing and new customers. Tony tells me that the service managers have asked for more challenges and more responsibility, and that this is one way he and Mike have thought of to meet their requests. In addition, Mike and Tony conceive this sales technique as a clever way for the service managers to make some extra money and strengthen the relationship with the customers,

since it is going to be more difficult for the customer to terminate the contract if the Company is offering more services than just cleaning.

During the salesman's presentation the service managers look a bit puzzled. I find out later that they did not know he was invited or why he was there. Twice during the salesman's presentation Tony is called out of the meeting to answer two important calls. Two of the service managers are also asked to take phone calls. After the salesman leaves, Tony tells the service managers that they had invited him to realise the vision of the Department and make the service managers feel more comfortable selling more services to their customers. Tony asks them what they think of the initiative and most of the service managers agree that it is a good idea.

Laura expresses her dissatisfaction with the fact that Mike has moved one of her assistants to one of the other service manager's sites. Mike explains to Laura that the assistant had requested more hours, and he knew the other service manager could use an extra assistant. Therefore, he moved the assistant. Mike apologises for how he went about it because it had not been his intention to overrule Laura. He knows the event affects working conditions and team spirit. Tony asks if anyone has done their home work on how they can help each other out when they are off or on vacation. None of the service managers' will meet his eyes, and Tony pushes the topic to the next monthly meeting.

The sixth meeting starts with the service managers complaining about the fact that the salesman, who had attended the last monthly meeting, did not have the agreed upon time to assist them in their sales meetings at the sites. Tony promises that he will contact the salesman later that day because the agreement was that he should assist the service managers when they needed it. They laugh about how Nina arranged a sales meeting at a site where the sales man had spent years trying to set up an appointment, and Nina had only called her contact person once.

Tony mentions that they need to put stickers on more of the service managers' cars indicating that they are looking for assistants. Laura replies by saying that she received 50 calls from interested applicants due to her sticker and she did not need any, so maybe it is not necessary.

Tony asks the service managers if he is correct in assuming that the redistribution process has been completed and everyone assure Tony that it finally has. They discuss the home work and set up some guidelines about which type of information should be available at all the sites so they can take over for

each other when they are off or on vacation. Tony asks why some of them have stopped using the office clerk. Laura says that she organises the assistants' payroll process herself because either the office clerk makes too many mistakes, or the office clerk does not have the time because she is busy helping Mike or Tony with something. Tony explains that he and Mike have begun handing tasks over to the office clerk because the service managers did not hand over theirs, and then the office clerk had nothing to do.

Laura expresses how she can not understand why Bob and John do not live up to the values and treat their staff so poorly. Mike and Tony reply by saying that they agree, but it is out of their hands and they can not do anything about it. Mike and Tony know that many of the employees in the administration are jealous of the good team spirit there is in the Department and hope that the atmosphere in the administration will improve after Jacob starts as the new CEO. Tina asks Mike to arrange that the washing machine socket in the laundry room is attached to the wall, and Jane asks whether Mike knows anything more about when they are allowed to use their Company car.

At the monthly meeting in April of year two of my study, Tony calls attention to the fact that some of the service managers still do not routinely conduct the quality controls. They discuss how the guy who delivers mops does not return the same number of mops that he picked up at the sites, and as a result the assistants do not have enough mops. This makes some of the service managers come up with new suggestions for picking up and delivering mops. The service managers also complain that the mop guy does not visit many of the sites, and it is impossible to make him change his route. Tony promises that he will talk with the mop guy and figure out a solution.

### ***The extraordinary meeting***

As a part of the strategic aim to strengthen the competences of the management level, Maria initiated an employee satisfaction analysis in January of year two of my study, which focuses on how well the managers performed value-based management. The analysis was an online questionnaire consisting of 54 questions each with 4-7 options to choose between. The results of the analysis came out in April of year two. In light of the new information Mike, Tony and Harry held an extraordinary meeting to discuss the outcome of the analysis with the service managers.

Mike and Tony had an idea, based on the processes they had initiated and their daily practice, that they were quite competent value-based managers. When the result of the analysis came out, however, it became obvious to Mike and Tony that in some aspects of value-based management the service managers did not agree with how Mike and Tony perceived value-based management. The purpose of the extraordinary meeting was to work out action plans and solutions together with the service managers on how Mike and Tony could manage more value-based.

Mike and Tony start the meeting by stating that they are here to learn more about how to become good value-based managers, and the service managers have to be honest and help them. As the discussions about the analysis evolve, some of the service managers express that if they had an updated version of their job description, then it would be easier for them to differentiate between which tasks were theirs, and which tasks belonged to Mike and Tony, the office clerk, the administration or the assistants. If the service managers had an updated version of their job description, it would be easier for them to improve the connection between tasks and working hours.

After that, the service managers express that they do not feel Mike and Tony take care of the important issues like:

- There still is no clarification about when they are allowed to use their Company car.
- The redistribution of sites does not work and many of them still work at all hours of the day.
- Mike and Tony do not pay attention to the fact that the service managers are busy and stressed, they have to constantly cut corners, and lie and come up with strange solutions to make it through the day. They feel that the only feed back they get when they ask Mike and Tony for help is that they have to organise their way out of the problems.
- They are asked to perform extra services like selling products to their customers.
- The information about new initiatives or changes in procedures reaches some customers but not all of them. The service managers feel they spend too much time making sure all the customers have gotten the new business card or the new assistants have gotten a “Welcome to the Company” envelope.

On the other hand, Tony and Mike are puzzled about the desire from several or perhaps the majority of the service managers for an updated version of a job description. In their opinion, much of the above complaints could be handled if the service managers began planning their day/week and organising their tasks. Mike and Tony agree that they have to be better at communicating, and Tony

asks the service managers if they can be more specific about the sort of information they need. The service managers reply by stating that they need an updated version of their job description. Tony and Mike can not understand how a job description will make any difference. The service managers express that they do not know what their work tasks are and even though they attend courses that teach them how to organise their day and prioritise their tasks, the course is far removed from daily practice. The service managers all feel they work 10-14 hours a day and, in light of that, they believe it is wrong to hand over a task to a colleague who is just as busy and stressed as they are. Mike says that it is no easy task to revise their job description because it has to be decided by the other top managers in the Company. A revision would take a long time since all the managers disagree. They conclude the day by agreeing that Mike will work out some action plans based on their input.

After the meeting Mike and Tony express their frustrations about the whole process to me, and they question whether all their hard work has paid off in any way. Maybe they should just go back to the old management style. They cannot understand why the service managers focus so much on the daily practicalities, don't see things from a larger perspective and why they don't discuss how the values can be operationalised instead of just asking for an updated version of their job description.

### ***The last six monthly meetings***

At the following monthly meeting, the two new service managers who will take over Nina's district are introduced. Tony informs the service managers that there still is no news regarding when they can use their Company car, but Bob is discussing various solutions with a car leasing company at the moment. Tony asks the service managers to show a bit more patience. Mike follows up on the extraordinary meeting about the employee satisfaction analysis and informs them about the situation.

Mike: I haven't made the action plans yet. There has been a lot to do with the new service managers. But you have to be frank with me; I can do a lot of guessing but it won't do any of us any good.

Annie: Maybe you should focus on retaining those of us who are here.

Robert: We're under extreme pressure, we're working 50 hours a week and are paid for 37, and it's no good.

Tina: You have to look at the pay check.

Nina: I've been contacted by competitors many times and all of a sudden the salary we get becomes important. We're pressured and then don't even get a decent salary. It's no good to use the benefit of hindsight as an excuse every time.

Mike: So, what it all comes down to is your salary?

The meeting is concluded by discussing how they can improve at getting the keys to the sites back from prior assistants, and how the guy delivering mops and materials still does not return the same amount of mops as he received.

At the tenth monthly meeting in July of year two, Tony informs the service managers about a new project he has initiated. He has arranged for two cars, each with two assistants, to clean during the summer to relieve the pressure on the service managers during the summer when they cover each other's districts. Afterwards, Mike introduces the action plans from the employee satisfaction analysis, in which the focus is on redistributing the customers in a more expedient way, working out a new job description and standardising the internal channels of communicating in the Department. Mike expresses that he appreciates their honesty and explains, for example, how the selling products initiative was done with the best intentions. He asks the service managers to use the summer to go through the action plans, and then they can talk more about it on the following monthly meeting.

Tony tells the service managers about a management education programme he has begun and how he plans to work on being a coaching manager to them. He hopes that they will help him. He explains that some of the motivations for wanting to be a coaching manager have to do with the fact that he assumes too much and jumps to conclusions too fast. Instead, he wants to include the service managers more in the decision-making processes and make them take part in confirming or denying his assumptions. The service managers do not say much, but assure Tony that they will support him. Tony concludes the meeting by referring to the fact that it is forbidden to park right outside the employee entrance and that they have to remember to fill out the workplace evaluation and hand them in before the end of the month.

A few days before the monthly meeting in September of year two of my study, Mike held an extraordinary meeting for the service managers to tell them about his resignation. At the monthly meeting, Tony tells the service managers that he will be handling all of Mike's customers until a new regional manager is hired. The former regional manager will assist Tony during the transition period.

Mike tells the service managers that he is going to respect Jacob's wishes and finish his work by the end of the week, use the rest of his vacation and then turn up at his official farewell reception.

At the fourteenth monthly meeting, Tony tells the service managers that he has for a short time hired a performance manager who is going to service the smaller sites that the service managers often do not find time to visit. Tony often receives complaints from the smaller sites, and he is sure it has to do with the lack of attention the service managers pay to these smaller sites. In order to give the service managers the possibility to focus mainly on servicing the bigger sites, the new performance manager will handle the smaller sites. Tony also informs the service managers about the Company's new salary system that will ensure that the mistakes that took place while Mike was the regional manager do not happen again. Tony appeals to the service managers to let the office clerk handle the payment of the assistants' wages and asks what he can do so the service managers will let the office clerk handle the tasks she was hired to do instead of the service managers handling the tasks themselves.

At the last monthly meeting I partake in, Bob gives information about the new car leasing plan and the various possibilities the service managers can choose between. After his presentation, the new regional manager, Cliff, introduces himself and the ambitions he has as the new regional manager. He prioritises a positive attitude, motivation and commitment. Afterwards, Tony asks the service managers about their experiences with the new performance manager and Jane and Annie explain, ironically, how they have now learned how to wash a floor. They discuss how the service managers can lower the number of triggered alarms that cost the Company a lot of money and who is covering Laura's position while she is on maternity leave. The service managers conclude the meeting by complaining about the guy who delivers mops, because he still does not return with the same amount of mops as he took with him.

### **Strategising through sensemaking**

The stories about Mike and Tony's actions and strategic initiatives during the regular and extraordinary meetings exemplify many things. First of all, the meetings illustrate that the organising of the Department is in a continual state of becoming, where emergent processes and incrementally changes in routines, norms and values shape the everyday organising. Sometimes more radical changes were tried, as when Tony and Mike invited the sales person to one of the monthly meetings to train the service managers in selling products. This was a radical shift in the service managers' everyday

organising because they had not been previously engaged in active selling activities. This task, therefore, called for new competences and different ways of communicating with customers. It asked the service managers, in a more radical way, to change their everyday practice. Most of the changes were, however, of a more incremental and emergent character. Hiring the office clerk and having her help the service managers or introducing a new wage system are both initiatives of a more incremental character that change the service managers' organising and everyday practice to a lesser extent.

The meetings also exemplify something else. Mike and Tony have chosen some tools and methods to operationalise the strategy process in a way they believe will make the organising of their own and the service managers' everyday tasks more desirable. Mike and Tony could have chosen many other initiatives such as conducting a SWOT analysis or a force field analysis and made actions plans for the Department based on the outcome of these analyses. Mike and Tony could have chosen to monitor the service managers' daily activities and calculate which focus areas the service managers should prioritise. The interesting part here is not the actual initiatives that Mike and Tony chose, but that those were the initiatives that made sense to Mike and Tony. This constitutes Mike and Tony's relational sensemaking attempts and the strategising process of the Department. The way Mike and Tony operationalise the strategy is the outcome of their relational (together with other actors) constructed sense full understanding of how one works with value-based management as a strategic management tool. This exemplifies the co-constituting relationship between action and sensemaking, in which Mike and Tony's perspectives on strategising was enacted. The challenge here is, however, that the service managers do not agree with Mike and Tony. The service managers' sensemaking is not congruent with Mike and Tony's.

Mike and Tony have together developed some specific ideas about what it means to be a value-based manager. Their idea evolves around making sure that your assistants thrive, spending time out with the customers, building stronger relations with them and making sure they are satisfied with the services the Company offers. To Mike and Tony this means that the service managers should conduct quality reports routinely and spend time together with their contact person and their assistants. With the contact persons at the sites, they should discuss the outcomes of the quality reports to strengthen their dialogue and relationship. Furthermore, the service managers should sell products to the customers and introduce their assistants to the Company's values. These initiatives have a generative aspect, in which Mike and Tony's attempt to 'set the Department right' simultaneously affects how the Department is organised (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 236, Czarniawska, 2003: 137). Mike and Tony enact the

strategising that goes on in the Department. They do, however, not solely affect the subsequent actions or sensemaking. As the stories about the monthly meeting indicate, the service managers have other ideas about what value-based management is.

Mike and Tony have set goals with the projects they initiate. The initiated projects lead, however, to intended and emergent outcomes and organising processes that influence and shape the strategising process. Mike and Tony highlight the importance of the quality reports and emphasize the need to conduct them. They also ask the service managers to make agreements with their contact persons at the sites about how often they should be conducted. They attempt to construct a world where quality controls are a part of the way the service managers organise themselves in order to be value-based managers (cf. Chia, 1996: 37, Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 236). When, for example, Annie routinely conducts these quality reports and discusses them with both her assistants and her contact persons at the sites, she then partakes in this way to 'set the world right'. She conducts quality reports and, thereby, makes the quality reports a sense full way to act as a value-based manager. This illustrates how organising emerges through sensemaking, and how sensemaking is produced by organising (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005: 410).

Interestingly, not all the service managers conduct the quality reports routinely and their actions and sensemaking also take part in 'setting the world right'. Why is it then that some of the service managers conduct the quality reports and others do not? Looking at the quality reports from Annie's perspective, and keeping her perception of the job as a service manager in mind, it makes sense why she conducts them. Organising for Annie evolves around aiding the assistants and being able to plan her day and sticking to her plans. To make the conduct of the quality reports a routine it is a tool for her to realise this. By scheduling when each site has to be controlled, she can plan her days. Simultaneously, the quality reports make it possible for her to spend time with the assistants and make sure that they thrive. The motivation for her is, despite this, not identical with Mike and Tony's ideas. Seen from their perspective, the quality reports were also thought to be used as a dialogical tool to engage in and build stronger relations with the contact persons at the sites. This aspect is of minor importance to Annie, as she is interested in something else. There are many ways to 'set the world right' and maybe the different ways is what puts the Company in a continual and thoroughgoing reorganising process.

Mike and Tony try to establish motivating and reasonable working conditions for the service managers and themselves while simultaneously operationalising their relational interpretation and understanding

of the strategic initiatives. Mike and Tony initiate many projects and reorganising processes to realise this. They hire an office clerk, a guy who delivers mops and a performance manager. They invite a salesman to train the service managers, redistribute the sites in a better way, ask the service managers to conduct quality controls routinely and introduce visions for the Department. They gather the service managers to discuss the outcome of the employee satisfaction analysis. All these processes are initiated with the best of intentions, but all of these processes do not have the effect that Mike and Tony had hoped for.

The processes are not just implemented in a straight-forward way, they are, on the contrary, made sense of and operationalised by the service managers in ways that are meaningful to them. Just like Mike and Tony's sensemaking processes are not identical to John's, the service managers' processes are not identical to Mike and Tony's. Sensemaking is relationally constructed, and each person attempts to 'set the world right' as best they can. The outcome is, however, a bit meshed. Since Mike and Tony and the service managers have different understandings about what value-based management consists of and they all try to practice it, the outcome is that there are many meaningful ways to 'set the world right'. This was expressed even at the first meeting I observed. Tony started talking about the importance of close and regular contact with the contact persons at the sites, and Jane followed up on that by asking if any agreements had been made about when they were allowed to use their Company car. The car subject kept reappearing at many of the meetings I observed.

Looking at the projects Mike and Tony initiate from the service managers' perspective, the outcome is often that they can not make sense of it. Often the service managers do not understand the purpose of Mike and Tony's decisions or conceive Mike and Tony's initiatives as extra work for them. For example, the service managers complain that the guy who delivers mops is unreliable, and they begin to pick up and deliver the mops themselves again. Furthermore, the office clerk makes too many mistakes, and therefore they stop using her and start doing the assistants' wages again themselves. The redistribution of sites is hopeless, and therefore they continue to work at all hours of the day. The quality controls are too time-consuming, and therefore not all of the service managers conduct them.

On top of that, Mike and Tony also lack support for their initiatives from the CEO John. This illustrates that Mike and Tony do not make sense of the situation solely; the service managers and the CEO also partake strongly in making sense of the initiatives. Since their understanding of and experiences with Mike and Tony's initiatives are different from Mike and Tony's, they often make sense

in other ways, which, from Mike and Tony's perspective, generate unintended outcomes of the processes. An example of this is the extraordinary meeting, and Mike and Tony arranged to follow up on the employee satisfaction analysis. The purpose of the extraordinary meeting was to bring the different perspectives on the practice of value-based management closer to each other. Mike and Tony came with the ambition of making the service managers understand that value-based management is about competence development, long-range planning, servicing the customers, caring for the assistants and having a challenging and motivating day.

The service managers, however, had another agenda. They did not prioritize competence development or more responsibilities. They wanted to work less and be less stressed. They wanted to know when they could use their Company car and tools that functioned. To make all that happen, they asked for an updated version of their job description, so they knew what tasks were theirs and what tasks were Mike and Tony's or the assistants'. The service managers did not perceive Mike and Tony's initiatives as value-based management but as extra work for them. This was frustrating feedback for Mike and Tony to receive and, initially, they did not know how to react. Later and in the effort to meet the service managers' requests, Mike and Tony worked out an action plan and some new processes that were initiated after the summer break in year two of my study. They were, however, never initiated because Mike chose to resign. One can also wonder whether new initiatives and more action plans were what the service managers had asked for.

The service managers, Mike and Tony all had the best intentions to strengthen the Department. They tried the best they could to make each other understand what made sense to them and what they need from each other. In spite of that, it appears as though the processes in some way went wrong, and they become erroneous solutions to the problems they were set out to solve. Tony and Mike focus on strengthening the organising in the Department through competence development and delegation of management responsibility while the service managers focus on strengthening the organising in the Department through solving everyday practicalities and concrete challenges. The outcome of these sensemaking attempts makes the communication between Mike and Tony and the service managers sometimes run astray and in different directions. The result is continual discussions about the necessity of an updated version of the service managers' job description. In these discussions Mike and Tony emphasize self-management and empowerment and the service managers emphasize boundaries and clear division of tasks.

Paradoxically, every time one of the projects or processes Mike and Tony have initiated to make the service managers' everyday better and more motivating does not have the effect they hoped for, they just initiate something new. Similarly, each time Mike and Tony initiate a new project or process the service managers do not perceive it as an attempt to make their everyday better or more motivating. They perceive the initiatives as extra tasks and expressions of disinterest in their work. Despite the goodwill among all of them, it seems as if they often make sense in completely different ways and the result is that it is difficult for the service managers and Mike and Tony to understand each other.

A reason for these paradoxical outcomes has to do with the fact that Mike and Tony, in their attempts to make sense of events, bracket the parts of the events that are in line with their preconceptions. Their bracketing and selective perception makes them understand the events in ways that are congruent with their understanding of themselves, other actors and the world. In that process, Mike and Tony take certain aspects for granted and leave out others. As mentioned earlier, cognition comes after action, but simultaneously guides action (cf. Weick, 1988: 307). The same process goes for the service managers. The outcome is, for example, expressed during the fifth monthly meeting, in which Mike and Tony have asked a sales man to come and train the service managers in selling products to the sites. Mike and Tony took it for granted that the reason he was there was to strengthen the service managers' selling competences. The paradox is, however, that they had not told the service managers the reason why he is there. So instead, the service managers took for granted that the sales man was there to introduce new products, because that is why sales men usually take part in their monthly meetings. The service managers are, therefore, perplexed throughout the whole meeting because they have no idea what is going on. The differences between what the service managers and Mike and Tony take for granted can also partly explain why Mike and Tony emphasise and encourage long-range planning, enhanced competencies, the ability to attract and retain qualified assistants and good customers, whereas the service managers emphasise and encourage being able to operate the different alarms, guidelines for when they can use their Company car, the right amount of mops at the right sites and lids that actually can close.

Enhancing this, it is interesting to look at the extraordinary meeting Mike arranged after he had asked John to stop the customer intake in the Department for the rest of year one of my study. Mike summoned the meeting to make John realise the extreme pressure the service managers were under. He had hoped that the service managers would support Mike and Tony's value-based management style. The service managers, however, reacted differently. I am well aware that they were shocked to find

John in the meeting room and that this probably had an affect on them and what they said. It is, nevertheless, interesting to look at the service managers' replies to John's question; "what's the problem?" The service managers put up with quite concrete requests. They lacked competent assistants, and they wanted help gathering the new site-portfolios. The concreteness in their replies resembles the concreteness I observed the service managers expressed at all the meetings. The replies John offers are as concrete as the service managers' requests; he will arrange stickers on the back of their cars and have the HR department gather the new site-portfolios. Maybe what John takes for granted is more congruent with what the service managers take for granted?

In one way, it seems as if Mike and Tony and the service managers live in different worlds and have to respond to different demands and requests. They sometimes appear as strangers to each other with different norms, routines, values, meaning structures and moral orders, which makes it difficult for them to construct meaning with each other. The strategic processes and projects Mike and Tony initiate, therefore, sometimes are experienced as coming completely out of the blue. The projects and processes somehow miss the target and to the service managers they appear as relatively decoupled from the everyday organising they experience and, therefore, it is rather difficult for them to relate to. A rather outspoken example on this is when Tony tells the service managers about his management education programme and asks the service managers to assist him. The service managers looked quite puzzled both during Tony's presentation and as he asked them to assist him.

Interestingly, the result of it all is that the service managers, Mike, Tony and the Department as such still succeed in their everyday practice. The sites are cleaned, concrete challenges are taken care of, problems are solved, the assistants get paid, the values are operationalised and the strategic initiatives are operationalised. In spite of the different ways to make sense and the sometime unintended outcome of Mike and Tony's initiatives, they all show up for work, do their job in a sensible way and partake in making the Company go round.

# Chapter 7

---

## **One story about one HR manager's everyday organising**

*In this chapter I present the seventh work-based story that introduces the HR manager Maria and her daily organising. She is the first HR manager in the Company. Her everyday organising revolves around operationalising the strategy process through value-based management. This is, however, no easy task as there are different and opposing ideas about the meaning of the values. Just like the previous six stories, this story will present Maria's joys and frustrations, what triggers her curiosity and what she does not give much thought to, what makes her get up in the morning and come to work, what makes her feel uncomfortable and what, eventually, makes her leave the Company. It is a story that draws attention to the significance of relationships as actors attempt to make sense of what goes on around them.*

### **Maria**

Maria is the HR manager in the Company. The first time I meet her she has been the HR manager for approximately a year. She is in her early forties and she has never worked in the cleaning industry before. To her, the work here is different from her previous work with higher-educated employees. She applied for the job because it gave her the possibility to build a HR department from the bottom up and work with implementing value-based management.

### ***The jumping-off point is the values***

The idea with establishing a HR department in the Company stemmed from the Company's strategic initiative to focus on lowering the huge turnover in employees, establishing closer and lasting relations with customers and implementing value-based management. Maria was hired to deal with these issues and implement the values throughout the Company. In one of our first talks, Maria tells me that only a few weeks after she was hired, she was asked to give a presentation at the Company's annual meeting about how the value implementation process would be handled by the HR department. Maria found this to be a rather abrupt start and a lot to ask of her since she had only been there for a few weeks. She managed to pull a presentation together and afterwards thought it went fine. After this 'baptism by fire'

Maria spent some time figuring out how she would organise the HR department, and at our first meeting she told me about the processes she had already initiated and her ideas for the future.

Maria agrees with the thoughts behind the strategic process. She shares the impression that the Company has difficulties attracting and maintaining competent assistants and that many of the top, middle and service managers in the Company lack sufficient management qualifications. Usually, they have worked their way up in the industry and have not received any formal managerial education. In addition, she is aware that it is difficult for the Company to establish long-term and loyal relationships with the customers, and Maria believes that value-based management can help solve these problems. By increasing qualifications and applying a value-based approach to management, Maria is convinced that the Company will be a more competent and professional partner and more competitive than their rival companies. By practicing value-based management, the Company will, compared to their competitors, be a company that prioritises the well-being of their employees and gives them the possibility to develop their competences.

A pivotal reason why the Company has a hard time attracting and maintaining qualified assistants has much to do with the fact that the assistants are not offered the possibility of developing their competences within the Company. Another reason is that the service managers do not have the proper skills for managing, hence they lack competence. In light of this, Maria, together with Lucy, established the internal academy (educational programme) founded on the value-based approach to management. At the academy, managers at all levels and assistants are offered value-based competence-development courses selected and designed by Maria. Some of the courses are aimed at assistants in the various disciplines (cleaning, food preparation or pest control), and others are more discipline-specific courses such as techniques on how an assistant should clean or how various types of floors should be handled. Other courses address common challenges for all three disciplines, like how to handle stress, perform first aid and improve the working environment. The academy also offers value-based courses for the service managers and courses on communication, efficiency and planning and culture. In addition, Maria has put together a management-education program for the middle and top managers consisting of four modules each focussing on various aspects of what it means to be a competent value-based manager.

Maria has stressed on several occasions that if the assistants had the possibility of developing their skills, then the Company would be a more attractive workplace. The continual development of

competences would make the assistants thrive more, hence making them stay longer with the Company. If the service managers acquired more qualifications, then they would manage the assistants and handle the customers more competently and value-based. This would make the Company an even more attractive workplace for the assistants, and make the Company a more competent and attractive partner to existing and future customers. The prerequisite for achieving this would be that the top and middle managers would internalise the values and be capable of managing accordingly. This is important to Maria because she believes that the managers' actions express the desired and accepted management style in the Company. Therefore, the managers and their actions must be the basis for turning the management style of the Company around.

### ***The courses are just not enough***

Maria knows that it is not enough to give courses if you want to implement values. The employees have to understand the values and work with them on a daily basis, and she has therefore initiated various processes over the year I talked with her. She has distributed posters representing the values to all the sites and offices, made the background on the computer screens illustrate the values, made and distributed a value handbook to all the service, middle and top managers. In addition, Maria has regularly sent out value-based assignments to the service, middle and top managers and the administrative staff. The last initiative has had an especially positive influence on the employees. In one assignment the managers and the administrative staff received an envelope containing two pieces of chocolate. They were asked to hand over one of the pieces of chocolate to a colleague whose actions represented one of the values. Maria received a lot of positive feedback from employees who were deeply moved by receiving a piece of chocolate from a colleague. These reactions have made Maria think that perhaps initiatives like these that are more linked to everyday practice are more important than the value-based courses in the process of implementing values.

During our second interview-conversation, Maria tells me that she has asked John's permission to conduct an employee satisfaction analysis focussing on the use of value-based management in the Company. The reason is that Maria believes that such an analysis is important in order to keep abreast of how the values are being operationalised in the various departments and to follow how the managers' competences are developing through the process. Another reason is that Maria senses that not everyone is working actively or the right way with the values. Maria told me during the meeting that John was not fond of the employee satisfaction analysis because it was going to be too expensive, and it

was, therefore, hard for her to convince John of the need for such an analysis. However, Maria kept arguing, and in the end she got her way. Maria tells me that she has high expectations concerning the outcome of the analysis.

Maria later explains that shortly after the analysis in the form of an online questionnaire was initiated, she received a lot of phone calls from employees asking her whether she could guarantee them that the analysis was going to be confidential. They also told her that it was not possible to report that their manager did not manage according to any of the values. In a way, these reactions worried Maria because they made her think twice about what sort of company the Company was if the employees asked such questions and made such comments. On the other hand, she was not surprised because she had suggested that something was wrong in some of the departments, and the enquiries just confirmed some of her worst assumptions.

### ***There is only partial support***

From the first time I met Maria, she told me that there was a lot of disagreement at the top and middle management levels concerning the values and the impact they should have on the management of the Company. It is primarily the new and the old managers in the Company who disagree about how the values should be operationalised. Some of the managers, like Bob, think the whole process is a waste of time. Maria tells me several times how Bob mocks her indirectly, ridicules the value-based initiatives and it is against his will that his employees sign up for courses.

Mike on the other hand is a manager who welcomes and appreciates the initiative, and Maria feels that Mike perceives the strategy process in the right way: as a complete and much needed turn-around of the Company. Maria thinks that Bob's lack of participation in the value process will be expressed negatively in the employee satisfaction analysis; she expects that there will be a gap between how Bob's and Mike's staff assess their managers' ability to manage value-based. When the result of the first analysis came out, it was obvious that her assumptions were right. The employees in the administration made a lot of complaints about Bob's management style. This made Maria fear that if she and John did not react to this, it might cause a staff flight in the administration. Maria told me that even before the result of the analysis came, Bob was aware that the situation in his department was not very good. He explained it away by stating openly that Maria must have done something completely wrong since she had managed to create such a tense atmosphere in the administration. His reaction and comments

made Maria both angry and sad several times. At the same time, it reassures her to know that there is not going to be room for him and his point of views when Jacob becomes the new CEO.

***I cannot figure out what he [John] thinks***

What frustrates Maria about the disagreements concerning the value process is the fact that John does not do anything about it. Maria has a hard time figuring out where John stands on all of this. When John talks with Bob, he complies with his points of view and when John talks with her, he complies with her points of view. Maria really likes John and respects him for what he has achieved, but she feels that he does not understand what it means to run a large company like the Company in a professional way. As a result, she spends much time talking with John and trying to make him understand that he has to change his management style and prioritise differently to make the Company more professional and competitive. She explains to me how she has discussed with John what the values represent and how they should be operationalised several times. For example, the value attentive for Maria means that you pay attention to the person you are talking with, and therefore you do not pick up your phone when it rings because it is lack of respect to the person in front of you. Nevertheless, she experiences again and again that John answers his phone when they are in a meeting together, when they interview a possible candidate for a job, or when he occasionally turns up at one of the management courses. It frustrates Maria.

The frustration does not only revolve around the fact that he answers the phone but also around the fact that John does it in front of the rest of the managers, even after she has so clearly tried to make John and the other managers understand that it is disrespectful to do so when you are in a meeting or attending a course. In addition, it frustrates Maria that John does not back her up and participates in the management courses. Often he just shows up to welcome everybody and maybe he stays for half an hour or comes back for lunch, but he is quickly on his way again.

Maria tells me how she often helps John by making his power points and notes when he has to present the values and explain how they are being operationalised in the Company. One of her biggest challenges is getting John to accept that he has to invest financially in the strategy process. The Company received financial support from an EU growth fund in order to initiate the strategy process. The support has financed her salary and the costs of courses and materials during the first year of the process. What Maria, however, realises as the year comes to an end is that John is not very interested in

investing much more in the process. In John's opinion, the process should be terminated after one year because by then the values would have been implemented and the Company should be able to go back to normal. Therefore, Maria experiences that she is being told not to expect any wage increase the coming year, and she barely gets John's permission to finish the last two modules of the first round of the management-education programme. Furthermore, it is completely out of the question that the service managers go through the education program although earlier it was the idea that they also should acquire the competences. In addition, John gets very upset when he found out that she has spent estimating £1.600 on printing 1000 course catalogues without his permission, and she fears that the result might be that none of the courses are allowed to take place.

What she worries most about is the fact that by March of year two John has not yet approved her budget for year two, and therefore she has no idea how much money she is allowed to spend. What makes the situation even worse is that Maria knows that Jacob has been hired to increase the turnover and lower the costs, and in light of that she will probably have even less to spend on developing the employees' competences. Maria has tried to ask the growth fund for further financial support, but they rejected to further finance the process.

Approximately a year after Maria joined the Company one of the service managers became her assistant. Maria had high expectations about their co-operation. The HR assistant was assigned to visit the sites and tell the assistants about the values and the impact they could have on their daily organising, help Maria work out the course catalogue, formulate job descriptions and write press releases. However, each time I talk with Maria the partnership with Debbie becomes an increasing disaster. The HR assistant cannot do any of her assignments in an acceptable way, she keeps making major grammatical mistakes and Maria has to spend time correcting them. The HR assistant forgets to make or makes the wrong room reservations, and even worse she manages to cause more confusion than clarity when she is out on the sites telling the assistants about the values. Some of the service managers have told Maria that they do not want her HR assistant to introduce the value-process on any more of their sites. Maria feels that the student she has hired as an assistant is more competent and reliable.

### *Am I just the assistant?*

The longer Maria stays with the Company the more unsure she becomes about whether the workplace is right for her. She feels the educational and knowledge levels is too low, and she has a hard time accepting the view on human nature there is in a large part of the Company in which the assistants are referred to as apes or nothing more than arms, legs and a pulse. She also is concerned about the fact that you get fired if you get too stressed carrying out your tasks. The disagreement in the top management group takes up a lot of her time, and she feels she spends too much time discussing issues with the managers, who do not support the value-based process. Therefore, Maria constantly has to rectify the importance of the process and the need for competence development at the management and assistant level. At the same time, she knows she cannot avoid these discussions, because if she cannot convince the managers about the importance of the development of competencies, then they will not let any of their service managers or assistants participate in the courses. In the first quarter of year two of my study, she experiences something that confirms her fear; no one signs up for any of the upcoming courses although she distributed the new course catalogue to the managers months ahead.

When she distributed the course catalogue she was not even sure whether John would allow anyone to participate, and when John finally informs her about the budget for year two of my study, she only receives estimating £4.000 to play around with. In light of that, it makes no difference how many would sign up for the courses because there is not money enough to hold any of them. At that moment, Maria does not understand why she was hired in the first place if she is not allowed to do anything besides sit in her office and make presentations for John, handle problems with the staff and fire an occasional employee John does not want to maintain. She knows the situation she is in has a lot to do with the fact that it is a one man firm and money spent on competence development and educational courses comes directly out of John's pockets. Nevertheless, she knows that if the Company wants to implement value-based management, then it takes more than a year, and it demands financial investments.

Maria told me several times that she often feels unsure whether or not she should leave the Company. Several times when I talk with her, she tells me that her former employer has called her and asked her to come back or a head-hunter agency has offered her a job in another company. Although she sometimes has been tempted to accept one of the offers, she has a hard time leaving because she feels responsible for the whole value-implementation process and knows that if she leaves, it all will capsize. This is an outcome she would feel terrible about because not only would the process be drawn to a close, but a lot of competent employees would also be left behind with unfulfilled expectations.

Especially Mike, he does a lot to make the working conditions good for the service managers, and he makes sure that they are not too overburdened with work. Mike is also her closest ally in the process, and they often discuss how they can handle the disagreement in the management and the tense atmosphere there is in the building since they both oppose the management style that John and Bob practice. Mike is Maria's necessary breathing space. If he were not there, she does not think she could stand being at the Company. Often it is easier for her to talk with Mike than her husband about the unsaid, the implied, the dismissive body postures or gesticulations because Mike knows all about it from his own first-hand experience.

Nevertheless, Maria knows that John and Bob are not fond of Mike and the processes he and Tony have initiated and believe that what Mike and Tony are doing have nothing to do with running a business. Maria is convinced that if she had not protected and defended them, then they would have been fired a long time ago. The last time I talk with Maria, she tells me that she is unsure how long Tony is going to stay with the Company, because he came by a few days ago and asked her to go through his CV. Maria also tells me that she hopes Mike will leave the Company and the cleaning industry in general before he goes under. Maria knows that he often spends his nights working in order to manage everything, but the result is that the Department still does not make enough money. She thinks that Mike knows how John feels about him and that Mike knows he could be fired any day. She hopes that Mike will be able to leave before John fires him, and that Mike will find a job where there is another view on human nature, he is allowed to work with strengthening his employee's competences and he can focus more on development than on daily running procedures.

### ***There is no other way out***

Even though Maria feels she has a big responsibility for implementing the values and taking care of the employees, the lack of support and appreciation from John especially taxes her energy, and she slowly loses the belief that it is going to change when Jacob joins the Company. John, she believes, will still be too influential. One episode in which Maria is asked by John to fire a manager who is away on sick leave due to stress, makes Maria feel especially terrible. She can not accept John's decision when the Company states that they manage value-based. The incident causes Maria to have a hard time sleeping and she eventually sees no other way out than resigning. When she tells John about her decision, he gets very angry with her and he tries to convince her to stay by offering her a higher wage. But Maria has made up her mind, and not even a two hour long telephone conversation with Jacob can make her

change it. She has two contracts of employment at home, and she just has to decide which one of them to sign.



# Chapter 8

---

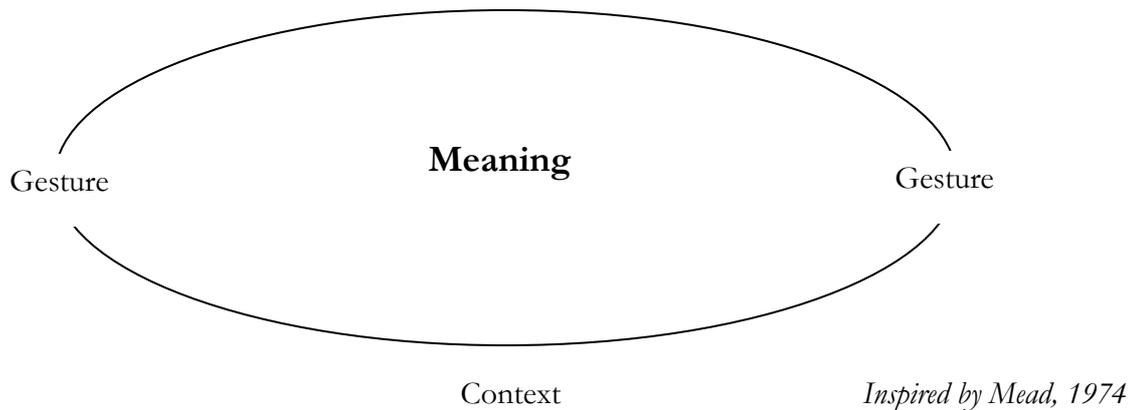
## **Sensemaking co-constituting action**

*In this thesis, to make sense and construct meaning has been interpreted as a relational process co-constituting actions and vitalising strategic initiatives. Up to now, it has been analysed without much emphasis on how meaning among actors is constructed and with whom actors construct meaning. In this chapter I will look upon how actors, through positioning and pursuing story lines, relationally use each other to make sense and vitalise the strategic initiatives. The chapter will be initiated by presenting my theoretical understanding of this interplay, which is highly inspired by Mead, Berger & Luckmann and Davies & Harré. Subsequently, I will present how Maria used the management education programme to help the actors in the Company construct meaning about how to practice value-based management in the Company. Afterwards, I will exemplify how the managers at all the management levels, with varying degrees of success, have tried to construct meaning together.*

### **How do actors construct meaning?**

In the attempt to understand how sensemaking takes place among actors, I have been inspired by social behaviourist Mead (1974), who among many other things, worked with understanding how meaning is generated. He conceives meaning as something that; "... arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture." (Mead, 1974: 75f) Meaning, therefore, is not something that each of the actors either possesses or can control, it is, on the contrary, something that they relationally construct through their responses (Mead, 1974: 76). This perspective builds on and specifies the thoughts of Vološinov and Schütz that I presented in the first two chapters. The following model is based on Mead's ideas, and it illustrates how meaning is contextually constructed among actors through their gestures.

## *Model 2*



Through actors' gestures they not only generate meaning, but also construct the same situation as they are trying to construct meaning about. As stated earlier, the actors talk and act the situation into being through their gestures (Mead, 1974: 78, Weick, 1988: 307). Imagine the following situation, we are sitting in front of each other filling out a questionnaire and I ask you: "Can I borrow a pen? And you respond by handing me a pen and saying: "Of course". In this example we have constructed meaning through our gestures, and simultaneously we have generated a filling-out-a-questionnaire-with-your-pen-situation.

The meaning we have constructed as I ask for a pen and you hand it to me is not a meaning that has never been constructed before. On the contrary, this type of situation is taken for granted because in our community it is quite typical to ask someone for a pen if you have forgotten one. To ask you to loan me a pen is a routinised action that I do not give much thought to. The decision about how to go about such an act has long ago been institutionalised and habitualised in our world, (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 52f) and it is upheld by our gestures. Should you break the routine once and not hand me a pen, it would not mean that the routine was broken. What it means is that meaning is not given in advance; the meaning that is constructed in the concrete situation is a result of how the actors (you and I) partaking in the concrete situation relate to each other and gesture (Mead, 1974: 76). So even though I to a large degree can rely on my experiences such as routinised and habitualised knowledge of the social world, there is always the possibility that a meaning which none of us could have anticipated will be constructed (Davies & Harré, 1990: 52f).

*"However carefully we plan the future it always is different from that which we can foresee."*

(Mead, 1974: 203)

### *The 'generalised other' and significant others*

However, how is it possible that in such a situation we can construct meaning together? Mead uses the concept 'the generalised other' (1974: 154) to capture and signify the social process where actors share similar meaning structures, norms, routines and values and are thus able to construct meaning relatively smoothly together. By being part of the same community and being able to take the attitudes of the whole community conceptualised in 'the generalised other', the actor can relationally and co-operatively together with other actors construct a self, which makes him capable of anticipating how actors within this community will react in a given situation (Mead, 1974: 155, 175-177). In this process the actors shape the attitudes of the 'generalised other' as much as the attitudes embodied in the 'generalised other' shape the actors.

In the process of becoming part of a community or an organisation, an actor's 'significant others' play a central part in this process (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 150). When an actor is born he is surrounded by significant others who through their practice, norms, values and routines socialise him into a social world that the actor takes on as his world (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 131-133). This socialising process is dualistic as the actor also socialise his significant others. The actor learns how to engage in relationships, to learn the social language with all its fringes and to learn how to act in the world. Simultaneously, he affects the accepted way one engages in relations, shapes the social language, constructs new linguistic fringes and ultimately alters the world he and other actors live in. In this dual socialising process, the actor learns how to abstract attitudes stemming from his significant others and identify how they represent attitudes stemming from the whole organised community. These attitudes are embodied in 'the generalised other' (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 137, Mead, 1974: 154). When an actor masters this skill, his primary socialisation terminates. His socialisation, however, is never complete. Throughout the actor's life he engages in relations with significant others primarily for two reasons: significant self-confirmation and significant reality-confirmation (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 137,149f).

*"Words themselves do not carry meaning."*

(Davies & Harré, 1990: 57)

When I ask you if I can borrow a pen, I have based my experience on an idea about how you will respond. I assume that we are part of the same community and that we share to a large extent the same meaning structures, norms, routines and values. Subsequently, I anticipate that you will reach out your

arm and hand me the pen that is lying in front of you. Since you have a similar idea about how to react, you hand me the pen in front of you and say, “of course”, making the social action become meaningful. Inspired by Davies & Harré (1990, 2001) this social construction of meaning can be perceived as a process in which there is compliance between the ‘intended meaning’ that is expressed in my gesture and the ‘hearable meaning’ that is expressed in your gesture (Davies & Harré, 2001:270). The understanding of the attitudes of ‘the generalised other’ is continually being constructed, developed and sustained through social actions, gestures and experiences, just as concrete actions, gestures and attitudes conducted by concrete actors are abstracted into social and communal norms, values and routines. It is this process that makes it possible for the actors to act and take part in the world (Mead, 1974: 154, Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 132f).

Construction of meaning can also be understood as a socialisation process in which the actors communicate with each other and use each other as significant others in an attempt to understand and make sense of the world. Through this process they simultaneously create the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 132). This never ending socialising process is a communicative process in which significant others relationally construct and maintain an understanding about how the world is understood, what is important and relevant or uninteresting and irrelevant. This means that the actors’ significant others have a central position in each other’s lives. They take part in ‘setting the world right’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 137, 139, 149). But not every actor is each other’s significant other. It is the actors who take part in a concrete actor’s self- and reality-confirmation that are perceived as significant others.

*“... the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed  
in the individual’s interaction with others.”*

(Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 149)

### ***Positioning and story lines***

As the actors try to make sense relationally, they do not only try to make sense of the situation, but they also indirectly make sense of themselves and each other. Through their interaction with each other, the actors reaffirm their understanding about the world, who they and who the other actors are (Mead, 1974: 162ff, Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 149f). Davies and Harré conceptualise this social and

conversational phenomenon as an act of ‘positioning’ each other and one self (Davies and Harré ,1990: 48).

As actors communicate, they relationally produce story lines. Through stories actors relate actions and events in intelligent ways in which their actions appear to be sensible and meaningful ways to act and live one’s life. This sensemaking endeavour makes one’s life not seem like random actions and events that follow each other (Gergen, 2001: 248, Davies & Harré, 1990: 48). A story line is a sort of meaningful categorisation of the situation that the actors jointly construct in which they organise their understanding of the situation around various poles such as characters (often cultural stereotypes) and moral dilemmas (Davies & Harré, 1990: 49). The story lines that actors jointly construct are not always complementary. Actors may gesture and understand each other’s gestures based on different and sometimes opposing story lines (Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). The story line is not only a way to categorise a situation, it is also the way actors engage in a situation. The way actors engage in situations shape the story line. The story line is, therefore, both something actors pursue and construct as they generate meaning (Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). The story lines (often implicitly) influence how actors position each other. In the process of positioning each other, the actors invite each other to take part in pursuing their story lines. Depending on whether the story lines the actors are pursuing are complementary or different from each other, the actors then each accept or refuse the invitation (Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). Regardless whether the actors accept or refuse the invitation, they influence each others’ story lines.

As the actors gesture to construct meaning there are two types of positioning taking place: positioning of themselves (reflexive positioning) and positioning of each other (interactive positioning) (Davies & Harré, 1990: 48, 2001: 264). The intersubjective positioning offered by an actor is an invitation to another actor to participate in pursuing the story line that the first actor believes categorises the situation. If the other actor accepts the offered positioning, he intersubjectively positions the first actor in a complementary way as the first actor reflexively positions himself. Simultaneously, he takes part in pursuing the first actor’s story line and makes the first actor’s story line intertwine with his own. This means that to take part in pursuing another’s story line is to make that story line become a part of your own.

In these processes, the actors especially rely on their significant others to confirm their understanding of the world, themselves and each other. Because these are the ones that the actor trusts. The actor is

capable of anticipating how the significant others will most likely react. This happens if the actors accept the intersubjective positioning that they are offered based on each others' story lines (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 150f, Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). The construction of meaning is then not only a matter of understanding the situation the actors find themselves in, but it is also an attempt to produce meaningful story lines and affirm their beliefs about the world, themselves and each other. This reaffirmation is vital for the actors.

When I ask if I can borrow a pen, and you hand it to me and say, 'of course', we both position ourselves and each other in complementary ways and we uphold an existing routine. In my gesture lies both an intersubjective positioning of you and a reflexive positioning of myself. I am, however, dependent on you to affirm the positioning. As you gesture and hand me the pen, you accept my invitation and affirm the offered positioning. As you accept, you also take part in pursuing my story line. In this process you also make an offer to me to take part in pursuing your story line as you position both me and yourself with your gesture.

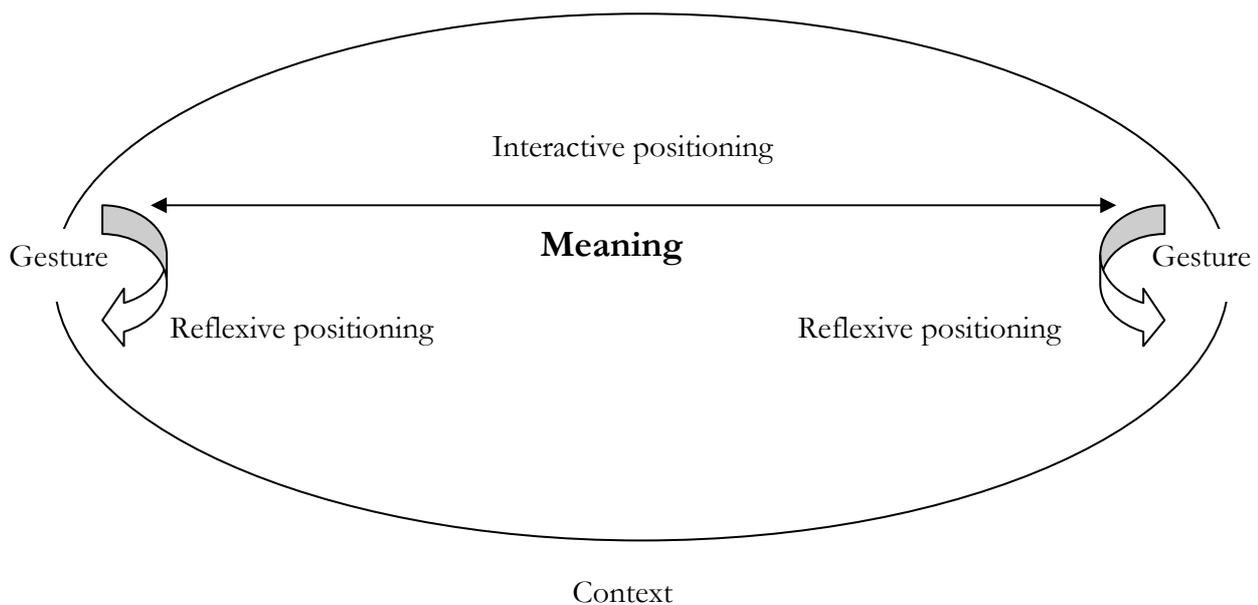
As we construct meaning about a social situation through our gestures, we also participate in each other's story line and reaffirm each other in our assumptions about how we are. As both our gestures are in accordance with a shared 'generalised other', we are able to anticipate each other's gestures and understand the meaning each of us intends with our gestures. But it is only as you accept the intersubjective positioning that I offer and vice versa that we can partake in constructing a joint story line that makes sense to both of us that we can generate meaning. This does, however, not mean that the story lines are openly stated or identical to the actors. The story lines actors pursue are most likely different, and the ways actors position themselves and each other are also most likely different. Positioning and story lines do not have to be identical for actors to construct meaning. As long as they are congruent and the actors accept each others' intersubjective positioning, they can construct meaning together.

How we perceive and position each other and ourselves are then very central in relation to how we understand each other's gestures and construct meaning. Thus, the words we use do not alone construct meaning; "One's beliefs about the sort of persons, including one self, who are engaged in a conversation are central to how one understands what has been said." (Davies & Harré, 2001: 269). A gesture can be understood in very different ways if the actors pursue different, or maybe opposing, story lines that position each other intersubjectively in non-concordant ways.

The following model illustrates the former and indicates how meaning is created among actors who pursue the same story line and therefore position each other intersubjectively in complementary ways. In light of that, they create a situation in which there is compliance between the meaning intended by the first actor and the meaning heard by the second actor. The compliance between meaning intended and meaning heard does not mean that the meaning heard is identical to the meaning intended. This is, however, neither the purpose nor the ideal. The compliance discussed here means that meaning heard lies within the same context as meaning intended. As long as the actors can make sense of each others' gestures in a way that makes them capable of acting and understanding themselves, each other and the world, then that is sufficient.

**Model 3**

**Meaning intended is meaning heard**



*Inspired by Mead (1974), Berger & Luckmann (1996), Davies & Harré (1990, 2001)*

Construction of meaning and positioning of each other and one self like as highlighted in the pen example takes place all the time as actors interact with each other and often without the actors paying much attention to these processes. And as in the above pen example then, these processes mostly run relatively smoothly as long as the actors pursue congruent story lines and communicate with actors who

gesture based on attitudes from a similar 'generalised other'. In this way, they can position each other concordantly and construct meaning while they simultaneously reaffirm their understanding of the world, themselves and each other.

### ***Meaning heard and meaning intended***

Often, however, actors find it difficult constructing meaning either because they feel misunderstood or because they do not understand the other actor's gestures. The meaning that one of the actors intended with his gestures is not in accordance with the meaning the other actor heard. This means that the actors follow different and maybe also opposing story lines and, therefore, they position each other intersubjectively in non-concordant ways. Like the construction of meaning, positioning is a relational process dependent on the actors who participate. What makes sense for and seems obvious from one position is not necessarily the same that seems obvious or makes sense from another position (Davies & Harré, 2001: 269). This has to do with the fact that actors engage in social situations based on experience and history that is represented in a pre-existing understandings of who they are. These understandings have been relationally constructed prior to the concrete social situation and these understandings influence what the actors intend with their gestures and how they take part in generating meaning (Davies & Harré, 1990: 56).

Davies & Harré argue that the different understandings are expressed through different moral orders in which the moral orders take part both in determining the meaning the actors intend with their gestures and also the meaning they hear based on the other actor's gesture. This is expressed through reflexive and intersubjective propositioning of themselves and each other (Davies & Harré, 1990: 55-57). The moral orders the actors have are pivotal in how they engage in social situations and how they understand the world around them. Simultaneously, they take part in how the actors construct their story lines (Davies & Harré, 1990: 47). The moral orders or the moral system, as Davies & Harré also call it, provides a sense of belonging in a discursive practice for the actor, so he can understand himself as being an accepted actor within a given community (Davies & Harré, 1990: 48).

But the actors are dependent on each other in maintaining their understanding about themselves, others and the world. Through meaning construction one actor invites another actor to contribute to the first actor's story line by conforming to how he understands himself and the social world (Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). The actors need to position each other in concordant ways to construct meaning

(Davies & Harré, 1990: 50). If the second actor for some reason does not conform to the first actor's story line, the meaning intended by the first actor is not the meaning heard by the second actor and they end up positioning each other intersubjectively in non-concordant ways. Simultaneously, they question the way the actors reflexively position themselves, which means that they question each others moral orders and story lines, the way the actors understand themselves and the social world around them. This can become an unpleasant situation for the actors. It resembles the experiencing of a 'shock' that I described in chapter 2. Such a 'shock' can be refused or ignored, but it can also lead to new understanding of oneself, others and the world.

The effect of actors positioning each other and themselves non-concordantly can be that both of the actors or one of them refuses to accept the way they have been positioned by the other actor because it conflicts with their moral order and story line (Davies & Harré, 1991: 56). Nevertheless, how the actors position each other intersubjectively can affect how they reflexively position and understand themselves. In that process, the actor's significant others play a central role and less significant others function like sort of chorus. A solid negative identification from the less significant others can, however, affect how an actor understands and positions himself (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 150f). By not accepting the intersubjective positioning that the actors gesture but hanging on to their own reflexive positioning, the actors risk creating a situation where they, in a way, are trapped in their own moral orders and story lines, reducing their possibility to understand each others' gestures and construct meaning together. The outcome can be that the actors alienate themselves from each other, instead of coming closer to each other.

Take the pen example. If instead of handing me a pen and saying 'of course' you had gotten up and left the room by slamming the door behind you, then the situation would have been much different and it would have been another kind of meaning we would had generated. But how could a situation like this take place? A way to understand this is to look at how each positions oneself and the other and which story lines we pursue. Imagine that you are a visiting professor at Aalborg University from a university where it is customary that PhD students address professors by their title and surname. Due to this norm you consider it very offense that I have not addressed you by your name or excused myself for interrupting you. I on the other hand, being a Danish PhD student, am used to more equality among scholars, including professors, and do not mean to be offensive in any way by asking to borrow a pen from you. I, therefore, find your reaction a bit eccentric.

Through my gesture, I position you and me in a way that I believe is appropriate. Nevertheless, you refuse the positioning I offered as you leave the room, slamming the door behind you. Thus, carrying out a relatively routinised action suddenly makes no sense. By refusing the intersubjective positioning I offered you, my reflexive positioning can not be affirmed and, simultaneously, your gesture makes me change my intersubjective positioning of you. Because we come from different processes of socialisation and different contextual settings, our attitudes stem from a different 'generalised other' and makes our positioning non-concordant. The meaning intended turns out not to be the meaning heard. The challenge here is that I can not make sense of the situation without you or someone else and vice versa.

*"It is only after we have said the word we are saying that we recognize ourselves as the person that said it...  
it is only after we have done the thing that we are going to do that we are aware of what we are doing."*

(Mead, 1974: 203)

### ***Construction of meaning and construction of the world***

In the above example, my invitation is refused and we end up positioning each other in non-concordant ways. Looking at what is at stake when actors construct meaning together can help shed some light on how the situation developed as it did. As argued above, the concrete situation in which actors attempt to construct meaning does not only revolve around the concrete situation, but also about significant reality-confirmation and the construction of believable selves and story lines that make the actors confident in their beliefs about who they are, who others are and what the world is (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 150f). By constructing meaning together with significant others, the actors are capable of organising the world and getting to a 'generalised other' that make them able to organise themselves around shared routines, norms and values. This ongoing confirmation of reality and selves is important for the actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 150). This, therefore, makes the concrete situation where meaning is constructed deal with much more than just the concrete situation. The pen example is then not only a question of whether or not I am allowed to use a pen. It deals with much more. It deals with your and my beliefs about the world, us and other actors.

*"No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and  
the selves of others,  
since our own selves exist and enter as such into experience*

*only in so far as the selves of other  
exist and enter as such into our experience also.”*

(Mead, 1974: 163)

The meaning intended with my gesture is not the meaning heard as expressed through your gesture. How do we then construct meaning? I could run after you and ask you about your reaction to my gesture or you could come back and ask me why I addressed you in such a way. If that were the case, we would be able to, given time and further interaction, understand each other's gestures and be socialised into the attitudes of each others' 'generalised other'. This would position each other more intersubjectively in concordance with each other and turn the meaning intended with our gestures into the meaning heard. For this to happen, we would have to grow older together as fellow-men and accept that there is no easy way to reach shared understanding (Davies & Harré, 1990: 50, Schütz, 1964: 23f).

### ***Construction of meaning and construction of strangers***

If I, however, did not run after you and you did not come back, how could meaning then be constructed? Through actual or imaginative conversations with our respective significant others we would both try to make sense of the situation that took place and therefore construct a meaning that would be in accordance with the attitudes of each of our 'generalised other'. I would use my significant others to position myself and you in the concrete situation in a way that would be complementary to the story line I was pursuing and my moral orders. You would do the same in relation with your significant others. These sensemaking attempts could take place as actual or imaginary conversations where our actions and understanding stemmed from our 'generalised other'; thus we would construct meaning that would reaffirm our beliefs about ourselves, others and the world. In this process, our cognition and preconceptions would guide the meaning we would/could make with our significant others. The meaning we each constructed would reaffirm our beliefs about the world and who we are in relation to the story line each of us were pursuing and in relation to our norms, values and routines embodied in our 'generalised other'.

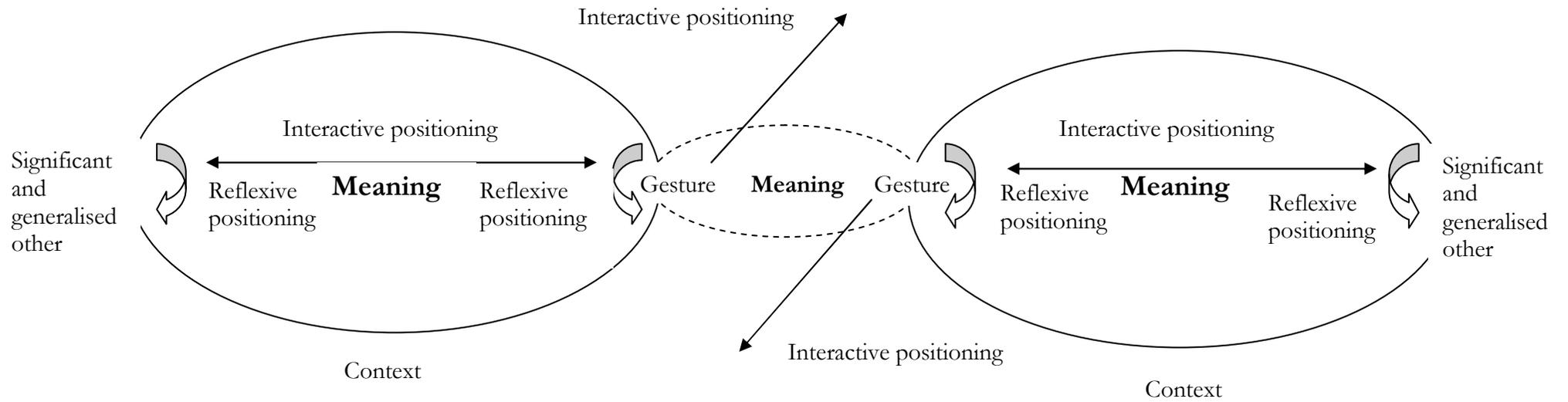
It would, however, probably not make us more capable of understanding the meaning each of us intended to express through our gestures in the concrete situation or make our intersubjective positioning more complementary. The outcome could, on the contrary, be that we were left as strangers (in a Schützian understanding) to each others' gestures and to the meaning each of us heard.

If we use our significant others and not each other to try to construct meaning about the situation, we risk enhancing the gap between our intersubjective positioning and the meaning we construct of the situation. This could be the outcome even if we both have the best of intentions and act in good faith try to understand each others' gestures. Furthermore, as we encounter each other again, our intersubjective positioning and experience with each other will influence how we understand each other (Davies & Harré, 1990: 58), and we risk further enhancing the already existing gap between our intersubjective positioning.

The following model exemplifies how the construction of meaning can take place when the actors position each other intersubjectively and non-concordantly. In this situation the meaning intended by one actor is not the meaning heard by the other actor. The meaning construction should ideally take place 'in the middle' between the two actors taking part in the concrete situation (in the pen example you and I). However, since the actors come from different social communities, they do not share moral order or attitudes from the same 'generalised other', they have various significant others, they pursue different story lines and they position each other non-concordantly. As a result, the meaning the actors (you and I) construct is constructed independently of each other; instead it is constructed with each of the actors' (yours and mine) significant others. This makes the actors (you and me), during the process, appear as strangers to each other even though the actors' (our) intentions may have been the best and they (we) may have acted in good faith.

*Model 4*

**Meaning intended is not meaning heard**



*Inspired by Mead (1974), Berger & Luckmann (1996), Davies & Harré (1990, 2001)*

## **Two modules of the four module based Management Education Programme**

In what follows, I will present some chosen scenes from two modules out of a four module-based management programme that I observed. These scenes will illustrate some of the different understandings there are among the managers in the Company, and how they tried to construct meaning and reach some shared understandings about how to understand and operationalise value-based management. This will be done by looking at how the actors position each other and invite other actors in the pursuit of the different story lines. Sometimes they construct meaning relatively smoothly with each other, and there is concordance between meaning intended and meaning heard. Other times the meaning intended is not the meaning heard and the actors position each other in non-concordant ways and, therefore, have a hard time constructing meaning with each other.

The four module-based management programme was initiated by Maria as a method for the top managers (20 to 25 managers<sup>11</sup>) to internalise the approach to value-based management that she, based on her education and experience, advocates and believes is the right one for the Company. Since the education programme was approved by John and he had originally hired Maria to implement the values, among other things, Maria was initially sure that she and John would agree that the purpose of the education programme was to generate a shared understanding about how value-based management is perceived and practised within the Company. The education programme was an attempt to bring the different understandings about value-based management closer to each other.

### ***Scenes from the second module of the Management-Education Programme***

The first of the two modules of the Management-Education Programme that I observed took place in October of year one of my study. 23 managers participated. The external consultant who facilitated this module also facilitated the first module of the Management-Education Programme that took place before I began my study. The consultant also facilitated the Communication in a Value-based Company course for the service managers, and he gave a presentation about value-based management at the annual meeting in year one of my study. This two day plus one follow-up day module started with Bob being five and John being ten minutes late. The module was constructed in a relatively standard format with a mixture of consultant presentations, individual or group exercises and discussions. During the

---

<sup>11</sup> The number differs over time due to changes in structure in the various departments and according to the amount of contracts that the Company has.

first exercise Maria tells me that she has started sending out value-based assignments to the managers and the administration; when John received his first assignment, he reacted by asking her what the hell she was up to. Even though Maria had received positive feedback from many of the other managers and the administrative staff, she was unsure whether John understood what she was doing at all. Maria, however, had no intention of not sending out the assignments, and she already knew that following week she would send out pieces of a puzzle to various employees located in the same office. The challenge would be that they had to cooperate and help each other put the puzzle together.

During one of the first discussions about the challenges that the Company is facing they start discussing the difficulties in maintaining and attracting qualified service managers:<sup>12</sup>

Mike: We are trying to challenge the service managers by delegating the full responsibility for the customers to them.

Tommy: We could offer them [the service managers] coaching?

John: Now you have to stop with all these expenses!

...

Tommy: We have to live up to the values. There has to be congruence between words and actions

John: Watch out that you don't delegate too much. If there is a complaint [from a customer], you have to be attentive, careful and responsive. It's no good to just send an errand boy.

Christian: We cannot recruit service managers only from within because many of them [the assistant] do not speak Danish and that's a challenge... Could we have an assistant [instead of a service manager] managing a group with a foreign ethnic background?

John: That is one of the values, that's innovation.

Bob: It's important that we maintain focus on service and quality; we have to hang on to the daily running procedures.

This scene exemplifies the different story lines that the managers in the Company pursue. On the one side there is John, Bob and Christian who perceive the strategy as a one-year project, where the purpose is to focus on the daily running procedures, assign primacy to the customer and solve the concrete problems. On the other hand, there is Mike and Tommy who perceive the strategy process as a turn-around of the Company, where the purpose is to work with coaching, empowerment and competence development. None of them can, however, construct meaning on their own; they need

---

<sup>12</sup> The following communication examples have not been recorded, and therefore, they are not direct citations, but words based on my notes.

other actors to take part as well. In their attempts to construct meaning, they gesture and invite each other to partake in pursuing each of the story lines through their intersubjective positioning. As Mike gestures that he and Tony try to challenge the service managers by delegating the full responsibility for the customers to them, he invites the other managers to contribute to assign meaning to this initiative. Tommy accepts the invitation as he gestures back that maybe the service managers could also be coached as an initiative to further empower them. Through Tommy's gesture, he reaffirms Mike's reflexive positioning and takes part in constructing meaning, a meaning in which there is concordance between meaning heard and meaning intended.

Nevertheless, the construction of meaning does not stop here due to the fact that John expresses that the values should not require any more expenses. In this way, John refuses the invitation because he does not want to take part in pursuing a story line in which value-based management is about competence development, coaching or empowerment. As he refuses the invitation he also makes it impossible for Tommy and Mike to reaffirm their reflexive positioning. The discussion about what meaning to construct is still open. John's gesture then becomes an invitation to Tommy and Mike to partake in pursuing John's story line. Tommy, however, refuses John's invitation as he replies by saying that the values state otherwise and there has to be congruence between what one says and does. Tommy's refusal makes it impossible for John to reaffirm his reflexive positioning and the construction of meaning is still open. John then refuses the invitation that Tommy's gesture contains as he says that it is no good to send an errand boy when a customer complains and refers to two of the values.

Christian accepts the invitation that John offers and takes part in pursuing a story line in which value-based management is about focusing on the daily running procedures as he suggests that maybe a multi-lingual assistant could help solve some of the very present linguistic challenges. Christian's gesture reaffirms John's reflexive positioning making it possible for them to construct meaning together. Afterwards, John reaffirms Christian's reflexive positioning as he praises Christian's suggestion and argues how it is in line with one of the Company's values. Bob joins in and partakes in pursuing the story line that advocates lowering costs and solving actual problems as he says that they have to focus on the quality and service, which to him means that they should attend to the daily running procedures. Bob accepts the invitation that is embedded in Christian and John's gestures and, simultaneously, reaffirms both Christian and John's reflexive positioning. The meaning they each hear is congruent, however not identical, to the meaning they each intended. The understanding is sufficient enough for them to act and understand themselves, other actors and the world. This mutual

reaffirmation and concordant positioning makes it possible for Christian, Bob and John to construct meaning together.

An interesting aspect here is the way all five of the actors use the values as a means to legitimise both their understandings and their actions. They understand and practice value-based management in a certain way because they live up to the values. There seems to be a concordant understanding among Christian, John and Bob about how the values should be operationalised, and as the example illustrates, they can agree about it in a relatively smooth manner. There is, however, another understanding of how the values should be operationalised; namely the one Tommy and Mike have. Mike and Tommy can also agree relatively smoothly on what the values mean but only with each other. Together, the five managers can not reach a shared understanding of what the values represent and how they should be operationalised despite the fact that they all legitimise their actions and understandings through the values.

In the next exercise in the management course some of the managers have to discuss how the top management is perceived by the service managers. John, Mike, Maria and Bob are in this group together along with some other managers. They have not been talking for long before they begin to discuss the strategic initiatives and what value-based management is about.

Christian: I think many cannot see the benefit of this type of competence development.

John: Having the operational managers away for two days is no good. Two days in a row means there's no one to answer the phone and talk with the customers. It's no good. It's bad planning, but now we're all here, and we can't do anything about it.

...

Consultant: [To the group] Good management for you is the same as good daily running procedures. Otherwise you end up too far away from what John wants.

Bob: [Which is] quality and service.

Tommy: Now you've completely lost me.

Mike: It is not obvious enough or known in the whole organisation what John wants, and then we interpret things differently... we all have the same basic values as John.

Bob: The interpretations are different!

...

Bob: Could we have a code of practice for good management in the Company?

Mike: We could use storytelling to show how a situation defines the use of the values.

Bob: The values define behaviour.

...

Mike: If we had the same starting point, the same jumping off point...

Bob: We cannot issue clear guidelines for honesty.

Mike: We have put a lot of effort into convincing the service managers, and then some of the top managers do not even believe in them.

John: We decided on the values at the beginning of the strategy project. We have always lived according to them, now they've just been made public. Today there are too many employees who are not thorough enough. I've just paid two bills estimating £10.000 because someone threw away a key, and that's God damn it not thorough.

Maria: No matter how many brochures and codex we make, the bottom line is that we have to live according to them [the values], otherwise it's no good.

Bob: It's not just the top management [who disagree], but everyone...

Mike: Where are the disagreements? The disagreement is among the top managers, right here!

John: We cannot agree on everything.

Mike: We have to agree on this; wouldn't you say that it's important that the top managers agree John?  
(silence)

The above scene illustrates another attempt by the managers to reach a shared understanding of what value-based management is, how it should be operationalised and what impact the strategic initiatives should have on the Company. Like the previous scene, the managers within the opposing camps can relatively smooth construct meaning together. The challenges arise when the managers from the two camps attempt to sensemake with each other. The dispute here is about whether or not the values represent something new or not.

Christian, John and Bob follow the same story line as described above and, therefore, the values do not represent a turn-around or something new to them. This is clearly expressed in Christian's opening remark when he says that he can not see the benefit of these courses. John accepts this invitation to construct meaning as he expresses that he thinks it is a bad idea to take away all the managers from the daily running procedures two days in a row. With this gesture, John reaffirms Christian's reflexive positioning and, simultaneously, invites others to take part in this sensemaking attempt. The consultant accepts the invitation as he sums up that good management according to this view is to focus on the daily running procedures. His gesture reaffirms both John and Christian's reflexive positioning and Bob

joins in the reaffirmation as he conceptualises value-based management to be about service and quality. Since these three managers are part of the same camp and pare each others' significant others, they easily construct meaning.

The constructed meaning is, however, questioned as Tommy states that they have completely lost him. Tommy's gesture is a refusal to take part in pursuing Christian, John and Bob's story line. Mike accepts Tommy's invitation to pursue another story line and states that he believes they all have the same values as John. Mike just does not know how John interprets the values. Then something interesting takes place. Bob's statement can in a way be seen as an acceptance to Mike's invitation because he agrees with Mike that they interpret the values differently. However, Bob's acceptance is not an initiative to partake in pursuing the story line that Mike is pursuing. It is more a cementing of the fact that there are different interpretations among the managers.

Subsequently, Bob makes a suggestion that maybe they could formulate a code of practice for good management. Mike accepts this invitation and suggests storytelling as a method. As Mike accepts Bob's invitation, he reaffirms Bob's reflexive positioning and takes part in pursuing this new story line, where a concrete initiative might make them capable of constructing meaning together. Bob, however, refuses the invitation Mike's gesture offers as Bob believes that values define behaviour and not the other way around, as Mike suggested. It then seems as if Mike does not accept Bob's refusal and makes another gesture to invite Bob to take part in constructing meaning. Bob, however, refuses Mike's invitation as he says that it is not possible to issue guidelines for the values, like honesty, and Bob does not reaffirm Mike's reflexive positioning.

Mike then refuses the invitation Bob's gesture offers because Mike does not perceive the gesture as an invitation but apparently as a threat to his management style. Keeping in mind the projects and processes Mike and Tony have initiated and how they have coupled them to the values, Mike perceives Bob's statements about the impossibility to issue guidelines based on the values as a direct attack on his and Tony's management style. Mike, therefore, gestures back not as an invitation to Bob to partake in pursuing Mike's story line, but more as an attempt to defend his understanding, actions and indicate that many of the top managers do not live up the values.

John refuses to take part in pursuing this story line by saying that there is nothing new about the values, but that many of the managers do not uphold them. He exemplifies this by referring to the value of

thoroughness and expresses how they are not thorough enough when they throw away a key, and he has to pay estimating £10.000 for a new one. Maria refuses to take part in pursuing this story line and suggests pursuing a new one by stating that they have to live up to the values otherwise they are no good. Her gesture is an invitation to partake in constructing a shared understanding among the managers that they need to live by the values and they need to agree. Bob refuses this invitation and the pursuit of this story line as he argues that the disagreement is widespread throughout the Company.

Mike's following statement is both an acceptance to partake in pursuing Maria's story line and a reaffirmation of her reflexive positioning. At the same time, it is also a refusal to partake in pursuing Bob's story line and an invitation to make the other managers partake in following Maria's story line. John, however, refuses to partake in this pursuit, and he reaffirms Bob's reflexive positioning as he states that they can not agree on everything. Mike, however, refuses to accept the positioning John offers him and Maria and tries again to make John follow Maria's story line by asking him directly whether he believes it is important that the top managers agree. Compared to many of the other invitations that were more aimed at all of the managers, this is a direct invitation to John to partake in the pursuit of a shared understanding of value-based management. John, however, refuses this acceptance by not replying.

An interesting aspect of the scene presented here is that it is obvious how dependent they are on each other for constructing meaning, and they keep inviting each other to partake in pursuing the different story lines. Despite these initiatives, they all have a hard time accepting the positioning they are offered. Accepting would necessitate that they would have to make the other camp's story line become a part of their own. It would also mean that they would have to change their understanding about what value-based management is and how it should be operationalised. Subsequently, it would change their understandings about themselves, others and the world.

During the following group discussion John looks at his watch, sighs and plays with his name tag. In the following break, John complains to Mike about cobwebs being in one of the ceiling lamps (one of Mike's service managers are in charge of the cleaning the hotel where they are at). Mike is still furious about this exchange when he tells me about the incident at one of the breaks. Mike pursues a story line in which competence development, empowerment and coaching are the methods to turn the Company around, and here they are attending an education programme that allows them to explore this and John is complaining about a cobweb in a ceiling lamp. John, on the other hand, pursue a story line in which

the daily running procedures, solving concrete problems and assigning primacy to the customer is the right way to run the Company. To attend the education programme is, therefore, close to a time waster. John, therefore, also spends time making sure the site is properly cleaned and the customer is happy. He is, therefore, not pleased to find cobwebs in the ceiling lamps and wants the cobwebs removed before the customer finds out. Mike does not perceive John's gesture as an invitation to construct meaning, but rather as a clear indication that John does not know what value-based management is about and vice versa. When John talks about solving everyday problems, Mike talks about long-range competence development.

After lunch, the consultant explains how the lack of congruence between working tasks and expectations can lead to disillusioned employees. During this presentation Mike and Tony make eye contact and start laughing. Mike and Tony's non-verbal gesture illustrates how they are each others' significant others and how through eye contact and laughter they accept the invitations they both offer to pursue a certain story line and, simultaneously, they reaffirm each others' reflexive positioning. They construct meaning in a split second and it functions as significant self- and reality-confirmation.

The following day John is not present, one of the managers is admitted to a hospital due to heart problems and two other have to leave for various reasons. On the follow-up day in March of year two, John is late and while the manager who was hospitalised on the second day of the module is telling her story to the other managers, John's phone rings and he answers it. John does not say much during the follow-up day. A few times he makes a comment or answers a question, but shortly after lunch he has to leave because he has to buy a new kitchen for his daughter's new apartment with Jenny.

### ***Scenes from the third module of the Management Education Programme***

In April year of 2 of my study, the first and second day of the third module of the Management Education Programme<sup>13</sup> is held and 18 managers participate. This module is facilitated by an external consultant who has not worked with the Company before. Maria, who at this point has already left the Company, hired her to facilitate the module because she had heard that the consultant was good at motivating the participants. John, who has less than a month remaining as the CEO, welcomes the participants.

---

<sup>13</sup> The fourth module never took place.

John: “Welcome everyone. I’ll drop in once in a while, and you can be sure I’ll be here for lunch and dinner.”

After John’s introduction, the third module that focuses on the manager as a coach begins by the consultant asking if anyone has been coached. Even though most of the managers had gone through one or more coaching sessions with the consultant who facilitated the first two modules and with John present, no one says yes. During a discussion on day two in which they talk about the benefits of and possibilities for being a coaching manager, the following dialogue takes place:

Christian: There is an assumption in this company that the manager has all the answers... we have to manage less and coach more. The value handbook is nice, but the everyday is just different.

Tony: We have to change behaviour; if we don’t do it, forget about it, it all falls apart.

Harry: We have to trust the employees we have hired

Frederic: Management is not about having all the answers

...

(Christian scratches his hair and rubs his eyes)

Bob: Change behaviour? If all my employees had to go through such a session there wouldn’t be much time left to work! Maybe we need to lower the ambitions and start little by little.

This scene illustrates another attempt by the managers make to reach some sort of shared understanding about what value-based management is and how it should be practiced. Like the previous two scenes, the managers gesture and position each other in ways that are either refused or accepted. Tony, Harry and Frederic pursue a story line that focuses on competence development and argue for a turn around in the management style whereas Christian and Bob pursue a story line that focuses on the daily running procedures and argue for lowering the ambition level. Tony argues that they all have to change behaviour otherwise the whole process falls apart. Harry accepts this invitation and argues for more empowerment. Frederic joins in the pursuit of this story line and reaffirms both Tony and Harry’s reflexive positioning. Christian argues that the competence developing initiatives are too decoupled from their everyday practice. This is an invitation that Bob accepts and they pursue their story line.

An interesting development here is to notice how these attempts to construct meaning among the managers from the two opposing camps at this point almost seem like pseudo-attempts. The managers within each of the camps have no problems reaching a shared understanding and constructing meaning

with each other in which they reaffirm the understandings they have about themselves, others and the world. On the contrary, the attempts to construct meaning with managers from the other camp continue in along the same lines and, eventually, appear a bit routinised. Thus, an interesting question is why do they continue when it seems as if the attempts are a bit half-hearted? It seems as if each of the two camps, over time has developed a peculiar routine. A routine where the managers from the opposing camps intersubjectively position each other as managers who have misunderstood the purpose of the strategic initiatives or as managers who pursue a story line that is completely off the mark. This non-concordant intersubjective positioning makes them in some peculiar way capable of reaffirming their own positioning. By distancing their own actions and sensemaking it seems as if they become more confident in the pursuit of their own story line. By doing and meaning the opposite of each other they strengthen their own understanding of themselves, others and the world.

The construction of meaning gradually begins to go in two different directions or follow two different trails. The paradoxical part about it is, however, that it does not seem as if the two trails are decoupled; they are very much coupled. It seems as the managers from one of the camps, in some way, let the non-concordant positioning and pursuit of opposing story lines become part of their significant self- and world-reaffirmations. When the managers from one of the camps are not able to construct meaning with the managers from the opposing camp, it somehow further strengthens the sensemaking that takes place among the managers within their own camp.

After the next discussion, the consultant suggests that they should organise some network groups where they can continue some of the discussions they have started. Some of the managers think a network group is a good idea and the consultant starts to write down which of the managers want to be in a network group with each other. Mike, Harry and Tony join one network group. Bob says that he will probably form a network group with some of his employees and maybe John or Jacob. The second day concludes with coaching sessions in the newly formed network groups. It is quite striking how the managers from the two opposing camps team-up independently and choose members within their own camp to join network groups. This strengthens the internal sensemaking among the managers within each of the camps and simultaneously reaffirms their beliefs about themselves, others and the world. It does, however, further complicate the possibilities of constructing meaning across the camps.

On the follow-up day in May of year two of my study, there are only nine participants. Neither Bob or John are present which affects the debates that are characterised by agreement more than disagreement.

They begin the day by talking about what occupies their thoughts at the present moment. After lunch the consultant talks about how terrible one feels if one's personal values are incongruent with the Company's values and how such a failure to thrive can make one feel so badly about oneself that one eventually sees no other alternative than to leave the Company. During this presentation Mike looks at me and fumbles around on his chair. Tony sighs and Mike clears his throat.

Following this, the managers talk about the lack of a shared and common understanding of the values among the managers

Mike: We don't have a shared image of what the values represent.

Tommy: I look at them, but it is difficult to differentiate between them, and there is no help to get anywhere.

Tony: I have memorised them, but then what? There are no consequences if I don't manage by them.

...

Frederic: If we manage by them, we live up to our mission and vision

Mike: That way we can create a shared identity and a common way to manage from Copenhagen to the far North.

...

Christian: It's been a complete waste of money, and they haven't been properly anchored in the Company. The values represent something completely different for Jacob than they do for John, who hasn't been so good at implementing them. Maybe now we have someone who can implement them, but I'm convinced that the values will represent something completely different in a year.

During this debate, the different story lines the actors from the two camps pursue becomes very outspoken. Mike, Tommy, Tony and Frederic can construct meaning relatively easily through their gestures and positioning. They pursue a story line that advocates competence development and empowerment. Christian, on the other hand, refuses to take part in this pursuit and clearly states that the whole process has been a complete waste of money, and everything is going to look completely different within a year. He pursues another story line and positions the other managers in a way that is non-concordant with their own reflexive positioning. The story line Christian follows is, however, a story line in which the values still need to be implemented properly.

A similar discussion like the previous one concludes the follow-up day. Many of the managers express their positive expectations for Jacob, and the hope that he will succeed in anchoring the right approach to value-based management throughout the Company.

## **Meaning intended and meaning heard during the Management Education Programme**

Maria and John's idea with the Management-Education Programme was to bring the different understandings about the values and value-based management in the Company closer to each other. What, however, becomes more and more apparent as the education programme is set in motion (both in the modules and in the daily practice in the Company) is that Maria and John might agree on the fact that there is a need for a shared understanding, but they do not agree on the content of the shared understanding.

Maria, supported by some of the managers like Mike and Tony, does not agree with John and some of the other managers, like Bob, on what the values represent and how they should be operationalised. Their disagreement was not new to any of them prior to the education programme. What, however, became new for both Maria and John was that none of them intended to change their minds or behaviours. Maria thought all along that John would learn more about how to practice value-based management in a professional company during the process and as a result change his mind and behaviour. What Maria, nevertheless, comes to realise is that John does not intend to change either his mind or his behaviour.

As a result, the different understandings of the values that existed in the Company at the beginning of the education programme and which the education programme was initiated to reduce, instead end up increasing them. These differences increased during the 1½ years and eventually resulted in two opposing camps that, especially around the time the second module was held, both intensely tried to legitimise their understanding of value-based management. This was expressed both in the daily practice and also during the debates in the various modules of the education programme. This outcome resembles what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) discovered during their study of a cultural change process. The change process was initiated to make the actors change their existing beliefs about the Company, but instead of changing the beliefs, the change processes reinforced the existing beliefs (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008: 92, 96).

### *How the attempt to construct meaning can be counterproductive*

At the time the third module was held, the differences among the two opposing camps had not decreased, but the ability to define what value-based management was about and how it should be practiced had primarily ended up with one of the camps, Bob and John's. Maria, who was a central figure in one of the opposing camps, had chosen to leave the Company and it was quite well known that Bob and John did not support the management style that Mike and Tony practiced, a style that was very much inspired by Maria's approach to value-based management. The outcome of this was especially apparent at the third module where the debates among the managers were much less intense than on the second module. It seemed as if the managers from the two opposing camps had given up on the ambition to try and construct meaning together. This was clearly shown through the exercises in which the managers from the two opposing camps did not mix with each other but stayed in their own camps where they had their significant others. In addition, they hardly discussed anything during the third module. The managers might have vented their different understandings, but the different understandings were left hanging in the air.

The above scenes from the two modules have illustrated the different understandings and the managers' attempts to get managers from what turned out to be two opposing camps to understand what they each believed was important in relation to practicing value-based management. Managers from the opposing camps tried to construct meaning together, but as they pursued different story lines, had different moral orders and gestured according to attitudes from different 'generalised others'. The meaning some of the managers intended to express with their gestures was not congruent with the meaning heard by some of the other managers. For example, Mike during module two tried to construct meaning together and reach a shared understanding with John about whether or not the top management should agree on how the values should be operationalised. There was a lack of congruence between the meaning intended by Mike and the meaning heard by John, which made it difficult for them to construct meaning together. Mike and John pursued differing story lines. They did not accept the invitations they offered each other to partake in pursuing a congruent story line and make sense together. As they both rejected the invitation they offered each other, they kept positioning each other intersubjectively in non-concordant ways and kept pursuing differing and possibly opposing story lines.

### *The need for significant others to construct meaning*

The outcome was frustrating for both Mike and John. Both turned from each other towards their significant other managers who gladly accepted the intersubjective positioning Mike or John offered. Mike turned to Maria and Tony who reaffirmed Mike's beliefs about the world, others and himself, and John turned to Bob who reaffirmed John's beliefs about the world, others and himself. Mike and John constructed meaning with their significant others and not with each other, which meant that their intersubjective positioning remained non-concordant, and they continued to pursue different story lines. This made it difficult and challenging for them to construct meaning together. What made these meaning construction attempts increasingly difficult for Mike and John was that for each failed attempt to construct meaning together, Mike and John ended up understanding the world, each other and themselves in more and more different and opposing ways.

An attempt to understand this can be by looking at the need to be reaffirmed. As Mike and John fail to create concordance between the meaning intended and the meaning heard with their gestures, they not only fail to construct meaning about a concrete situation together but they also end up questioning each other's understandings about the world, other actors and themselves. The way Mike and John position each other intersubjectively is not perceived as an invitation to pursue a congruent story line, but as a threat to each of their moral orders, norms, values, routines and meaning structures. Mike and John attempt to reaffirm their own understandings of the world, others and themselves through their relational meaning construction attempts, but they fail. The outcome is that the only possible way Mike and John can keep reaffirming themselves in their understandings is by distancing themselves from each other. Mike and John end up in a situation where the only way they can reflexively position themselves as being a competent value-based manager is by positioning each other intersubjectively as doing the complete opposite of what it means to practice value-based management. The right way to practice value-based management is, apparently, to do the opposite of each other.

The difficulties and challenges that Mike and John experience as they attempt to construct meaning together will for each failed attempt, therefore become increasingly difficult and challenging. Their experience tells Mike and John that they cannot manage to construct meaning together. Mike and John do not understand each other, and eventually they see no point in trying to construct meaning together because what makes sense to each of them about practicing value-based management is the opposite of each other.

## **Is meaning intended also meaning heard in the Company?**

Following the presentation and discussion of chosen scenes from the Management-Education Programme, I will now elaborate further on the attempts to construction meaning within the Company at various management levels. I will present three different examples of the attempt to construct meaning among the actors that in various ways exemplify the importance of interplay between story line, positioning and significant others when meaning is constructed. The first example takes place at the middle-management level and illustrates how Maria, Mike and Tony use each other as significant others. By pursuing congruent story lines and positioning each other intersubjectively in a concordant way, they can construct meaning together rather smoothly. The second example unfolds among Mike, Tony and the service managers, and it illustrates how difficult it can be, even with the best intentions, to construct meaning when differences in moral order, routines, norms, values and meaning structures are too big between the actors involved. The last example takes place at the operative-management level among the service managers, and it exemplifies how Laura distances herself from the managers from 'the other bandwagon' through describing how these managers fail to practice value-based management. Simultaneously, and implicitly, she reaffirms the understanding of the world, others and herself that Laura shares with her significant others.

### ***John barges in***

The first example illustrates how Maria, Mike and Tony use each other as significant others to understand and construct meaning about John's sometimes peculiar behaviour. The example will initially focus on how Maria and Mike are each other's significant others and how they use each other to construct meaning. Later in the example, Tony's participation will be described.

As both Maria and Mike's stories illustrate, Maria and Mike respect and sympathise with each other. Maria believes that Mike is a competent value-based manager who, contrary to John and Bob, has understood how the values should be operationalised in the right way to turn the Company around and be more professional. Mike is also the person that Maria confides in, and she thinks of him as her closest ally. Their offices are just next to each others', and they often discuss the disagreement and tension within the top management group together. They try to figure out how to handle it together, and she protects him when he is under attack from John. Mike thinks that Maria is a very competent HR manager who has put a lot of effort into operationalising the values in the right way. Unfortunately, she has not gotten the acknowledgement which she deserves, especially from John and Bob. Mike

knows Maria supports his ideas the same way he supports hers, and once in a while, they use each other to take the discussions to a higher level, where the daily running procedures are not at the centre of the discussion.

The first time I talk with Maria and Mike together they express their shared opinions on the strategy process and tell me about the division in the Company, how some managers work against the process and how John can not remember all the values. These same opinions and understandings are repeated throughout the interview-conversations I later have with them. Using the above theoretical discussion, Maria and Mike have become each other's significant others. They share similar meaning structures, norms, values and moral orders and, therefore, they can construct meaning together relatively smoothly since their gestures originate from attitudes from a similar 'generalised other'. Maria and Mike use each other as they try to make sense of what goes on in the Company, when for example, they believe that John reacts in an unanticipated or incomprehensible manner. An example is that John often barges into their offices in the middle of a meeting although both Maria and Mike have repeatedly asked him not to.

In an attempt to construct meaning, Maria and Mike pursue complementary story lines in which the invitation Maria and Mike offer each other, through their intersubjective positioning, is accepted by both of them. Thus each of them contributes to the story lines they each pursue, and their story lines become intertwined. Adding to the above example, both Maria and Mike pursue a story line in which a competent manager does not barge in to an office with its door close, but one knocks before he enters. When Maria and Mike discuss why John keeps barging in, they invite each other to pursue similar story line as they intersubjectively position each other as competent managers who would not act in such a way. Therefore, Maria and Mike implicitly position John as someone who has more to learn to become a competent manager. In that way, the meaning intended with Maria's gestures is also the meaning heard by Mike and the other way around.

This relational meaning generation is important for several reasons because for once the construction of meaning is not only a matter of understanding the concrete situation, but a matter of understanding themselves, each other and the world around them. Maria and Mike position each other in an intersubjectively complementary way as they participate in pursuing each other's story lines. In so doing, they simultaneously reaffirm each other's reflexive positioning and function as each other's significant self-confirmation and reality-confirmation. Maria and Mike's shared understandings of how

value-based management is to be practiced is both talked and acted into being through Maria and Mike's gestures. Their shared ideas about how the Company should be turned around and professionalised through value-based management is not just talk, it is world constructing. It is in this way that Mike's Department is in a steady process of becoming where the processes that Mike (together with Tony and with support from Maria) initiates are attempt to 'set the world right' and develop the Company in a meaningful and sensible way.

In this process, Tony is also Mike's significant other since Mike and Tony are the ones operationalising the strategy process in the Department by changing their own and the service managers' organising. Through Mike and Tony's gestures, intersubjective positioning and pursuit of congruent story lines, they construct a shared understanding about a meaningful way to operationalise the strategy process. Since their routines, norms, meaning structures, values and moral orders are similar, they reach an understanding relatively smoothly; Mike and Tony hand over the responsibility for the customers to the service managers, hire a guy to deliver and pick up mops and materials, hire an office clerk, standardise customer and assistant contact through quality reports and other initiatives, therefore vitalising the strategy in the best possible way.

Maria, Mike and Tony use each other as significant others, to varying degrees, to figure out how to make sense of the strategy process and how to operationalise it. Simultaneously, they create a world where their understanding of the strategy process is operationalised. As they share meaning structures, routines, norms, values and moral orders they can relatively accurately anticipate how each of them will react in various situations and, therefore, they can 'set the world right' without paying to much attention. The construction of meaning among these significant others is rather harmonious.

What also takes place among Maria, Mike and Tony is positioning of others. Among these others are John and Bob. During the process, Maria, Mike and Tony reach a shared understanding of John and Bob as managers who have an obsolete understanding about how to run a professional company and how to practice value-based management. By intersubjectively positioning John and Bob in this way, Maria, Mike and Tony, simultaneously, reflexively position themselves as managers who act in a different way, and thereby, reaffirm their own beliefs about themselves, others and the world. The way Maria, Mike and Tony position Bob and John is quite important because it influences how they engage and communicate with them.

In accordance with the above theoretical discussion, the meaning heard is not necessarily concordant with the meaning intended, therefore making the meaning an actor hears deal with much more than the words stated. If experience has taught Maria, Mike and Tony that it is difficult to construct meaning together with John and Bob because their 'generalised others', their moral orders, their values, routines, norms and meaning structures are non-concordant, then they might stop trying to construct meaning with them. This can be explained in the following way. When Maria, Mike and Tony gesture to John and Bob in an attempt to construct meaning, then they invite John and Bob to partake in pursuing Maria, Mike and Tony's story line through the intersubjective positioning Maria, Mike and Tony offer. Bob and John (who pursue another story line based on other moral orders, values, norms and meaning structures) reject the positioning, because they do not hear the invitation as an invitation. They hear it as a threat or they do not hear it at all and, therefore, they reject it. Maria, Mike and Tony then perceive their rejection as a threat to their story lines, moral orders, values, norms and meaning structures. Paradoxically, they all end up questioning and challenging each others' beliefs about themselves, others and the world.

This is an unpleasant experience for all of them because, as above stated, actors depend on the relational reality- and self-confirmation that they reach through everyday attempts at meaning construction. What happens is that Maria, Mike and Tony turn to each other to get the significant self- and reality-confirmation, just as John and Bob do. The strange and tragicomedy outcome is that in Maria, Mike, Tony, John and Bob's attempts to construct meaning together, they end up in a situation in which their moral orders, routines, meaning structures, norms and values are pushed even further away from each other than they originally were. Even though it is not their intentions, they end up being more distanced from each other than before they tried to construct meaning together.

### ***Positioning between the service managers and Mike and Tony***

The second example of an attempt to construct meaning is shown by how difficult it is for Mike and Tony to construct meaning together with the service managers about what value-based management means and how it should be practiced because they have different values, norms, routines, moral orders and meaning structures.

Looking at how Mike and Tony attempt to construct meaning about their strategic initiatives with the service managers illustrate how difficult it can sometimes be to construct meaning together even if the

actors have the best of intentions. Even though the service managers do not always understand what Mike and Tony are up to and Mike and Tony do not believe that the service managers take advantage of the opportunities at their disposal, there is, in my belief, no doubt that they all try to respect each other and conceive each other as competent managers. Despite this, time and time again they find it difficult constructing meaning with each other at the monthly meetings and the extraordinary meeting and they end up quite frustrated.

Between Mike and Tony and with the support of Maria, they have constructed a meaningful way to operationalise the values in which the service managers are relieved from the daily practicalities such as delivering materials, clothes, mops etc. to the sites and doing all the paper work concerning warnings, pay and conditions of employment. Instead, the service managers are handed the full responsibility of the customers. By conducting quality reports routinely, communication with the customers and the assistants regularly and increasing the focus on sales activities, Mike and Tony are convinced that the service managers will thrive more, develop their competences and simultaneously strengthen the connections with the customers and the assistants. The Department will, therefore, be more capable of sustaining the assistants and the customers. This means that Mike and Tony pursue a story line where competence development, empowerment etc. is what constitutes a competent value-based manager. As they try to construct meaning with the service managers at the monthly meetings and the extraordinary meeting, Mike and Tony invite the service managers to participate in pursuing this story line through their intersubjective positioning of the service managers.

The service managers on the other hand pursue another story line. The service managers do not have one common idea about what the values represent and how they are to be operationalised as their stories have shown. Despite that, there is some sort of shared understanding among the service managers about what a competent manager is. A competent service manager is a manager who by the end of the day has made sure that all the sites have been cleaned and potential complaints have been dealt with. The trick to that process is that the assistants have the materials they need at the right sites, the service managers find the right amount of replacements for the assistants who have called in sick, the Department and district manager make an appearance at the sites to indicate the importance of the customer once in a while, and on top of that the service managers have followed up on the complaints they have received during the day. This means that the service managers pursue a story line in which they are capable of realising their perception about competent management, and in this process they,

through their intersubjective positioning of Mike and Tony, invite Mike and Tony to participate in pursuing their story line.

The outcome is that their intersubjective positioning of each other is non-concordant because without recognising it they each pursue different story lines and have different moral orders, values, norms, routines and meaning structures. When Mike and Tony gesture to operationalise the strategy through, for example, asking a sales person to teach the service managers how to sell paper products, soap dispensers etc. it is an attempt to strengthen the connection to customers and make the working conditions for the service managers more inspiring and motivating. The service managers gesture that they conceive it as an extra work load. The service managers pursue a story line where management development is not a part of how they understand their job or themselves. Therefore, they have difficulties understanding how adding extra work to their already quite busy day is in anyway synonymous with value-based management.

It is not because the service managers do not believe the initiatives are not a good idea; they just do not have time for them. What the service managers need is to have the guy delivering mops and materials to be flexible, the office clerk to be available when they need her, the assistants' pay checks to be accurate and a clarification about when they are allowed to use their Company car. In Mike and Tony's perception, the service managers' continual focus on practical problems and current challenges that they express at the monthly meetings and at the extraordinary meeting blur the purpose of the strategy process. Simultaneously, the service managers perceive many of Mike and Tony's initiatives as missing the target. They do not need sales courses or an office clerk making mistakes; what they need from Mike and Tony is that they involve themselves in the service managers' work, visit the sites, make realistic estimates and take part in the service managers' everyday challenges. In short, they need Mike and Tony to help them solve their problems.

The outcome of these attempts to construct meaning is frustrating for Mike, Tony and the service managers. A way to clarify why they all experience difficulties in constructing meaning with each other is maybe related to the assumption that they are not each others' significant others. Independent of the service managers, Mike and Tony use each other to make sense and construct meaning, just as independently of Mike and Tony the service managers use each other to make sense and construct meaning. In that process Mike and Tony also reaffirm each others' beliefs about the world, others and themselves, and the same process goes on among the service managers. Therefore, what seems to be an

obvious and meaningful way to operationalise the values from Mike and Tony's perspective is not synonymous with what is an obvious and meaningful operationalising from the service managers' perspective. As Balogun writes, actors put plans into actions in ways that make sense to them (Balogun, 2006: 43). Likewise, Weick (1988) writes that what makes sense to actors is guided by their own cognition and preconceptions (Weick, 1988: 307).

Even though Mike and Tony and the service managers really try to understand each other and construct meaning together as seen at the monthly meeting after the extraordinary meeting, they somehow seem to go wrong with each other. The meaning that Mike and Tony intend with their gestures is not the meaning the service managers hear and vice versa. Even though they try to become each others' significant other, they do not succeed but still remain non-significant to each other. At the last monthly meeting with Mike as the regional manager he and Tony introduce a very concrete action plan stemming from the result of the employee satisfaction analysis. However, actions from the plan are never effectuated as Mike decides to resign shortly after the action plans are introduced, and Tony does not proceed with the action plan after Mike leaves the Company.

### ***Positioning and 'the other bandwagon'***

The third example of an attempt to construct meaning is shown how it is possible to reaffirm one's understanding about the world, others and one self through descriptions about opposing understandings. Service manager Laura describes how managers from 'the other bandwagon' practice value-based management in a wrong way and how her significant others support her understanding. In this way, she indirectly positions herself as a competent value-based manager.

As introduced earlier in the thesis and mentioned in the above example, all the service managers do not share one common understanding about the values or how to practice value-based management. This is clearly stated in Laura's story about 'the other bandwagon' which is the term she, Nina and Jane use to describe the service managers in the Department who scold the assistants, talk badly about the assistants, customers and other managers and who ridicule the value handbook and the courses.

What is interesting here is how Laura describes the managers from 'the other bandwagon' to me. As she tells me about how mistaken the actions and understandings of the managers from 'the other bandwagon' are, she indirectly reflexively positions herself as being a competent manager who does the

opposite. Laura takes the values and courses seriously, and she does not scold the assistants or talk badly about them, the customers or the other managers in the Company who advocate a value-based approach to management, such as Maria and Mike. While Laura tells me these stories, she indirectly reaffirms her beliefs about the values and how a competent manager acts. As she indirectly reflexively position herself as being a competent value-based manager, she refers to how her relations and significant others share her concerns. Through stories about how Nina and Jane have both warned her about being like those from 'the other bandwagon', referring to the support she knows she has from Maria and Mike and telling me stories about how some of her assistants have expressed gratitude for what she has done for them, she takes part in constructing a 'generalised other'. Through Laura's stories about how actors around her and her significant others support her understandings about competent value-based management, these actors indirectly take part in constructing their 'generalised other'. This positions her as a competent value-based manager, and it reaffirms Laura's understandings about the world, others and herself.

When Nina, Maria and Mike resign, Laura loses an important share of her significant others, and therefore, it becomes more difficult for her to reaffirm her beliefs about the world, others and herself through the use of stories about how they support her understandings in order to intersubjectively position herself as a competent value-based manager in an indirect way. Laura becomes frustrated and unsure of the future because she finds herself on the verge of a maternity leave without any real significant others within the Company to reaffirm her beliefs about the world, others or herself. Therefore she is unsure about whether or not she at all has a future in the Company.

The above examples, together with the excepted scenes from the management-education programme, have in various ways illustrated concrete attempts of constructing meaning during the strategy work. The examples have also shown the significance of congruent intersubjective positioning among the actors, pursuit of concordant story lines by the actors and need for compliance between the actors' significant others when meaning is to be created. These micro examples illustrate how the strategy is brought to life through actors' everyday sensemaking attempts and how their actions keep reorganising the Company. With the support of Maria, Mike and Tony initiate various strategising processes to make the strategic initiatives become part of their own and the service managers' everyday organising. The processes they initiate are made sense of and operationalised by the service managers in a way that makes them capable of pursuing the story line they believe will 'set the Company right'. In the process of operationalising the strategy, the actors' everyday organising is shaped by the processes that are

initiated while the strategy, simultaneously, is shaped by how the actors understand themselves, others and the world. As the actors on an everyday level try to construct meaning about the strategy, they gesture and invite each other to partake in realising the strategy in a way that makes them capable of pursuing their story line. In this process the routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders that the actors share shape their understanding of the strategy. Simultaneously, these same routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders are shaped by the strategy. This is what, within this perspective, breathes life into the strategy and makes it part of the everyday organising.

# Chapter 9

---

## One story about one CEO's everyday organising

*In this chapter I present the eighth and last work-based story which is about John, the Company's founder, owner and up until May of year two of my study, also the CEO. John started the Company in his and Jenny's basement more than twenty years ago. Through the years he has in a very informal but active way participated in most of the management decisions that have been made at all management levels in the Company. As the previous seven stories, this story will present what joys and frustrates John, what triggers his curiosity and what he does not give much thought to. It is a story that shows another perspective of the strategy project, and a story that offers another understanding about how value-based management should be operationalised. It is a story that turns the understanding of the strategy project upside down and shows how relational sensemaking can go in many meaningful ways.*

### John

The first interview-conversation I have with John takes place after I have been in contact with the Company for a little over half a year. We have said hello to each other, attended the same courses and talked briefly with each other before. Nevertheless, I chose to wait to ask John if he would talk with me because I knew he initially had doubts about letting me into the Company. Therefore, I wanted to wait until the opportunity presented itself, and on one of the management courses it did.

As I came into his office to talk with him the first time, he seemed a bit cautious. He started the conversation by commenting on the fact that I had not expressed interest in talking with him earlier on, and that maybe I should tell him about the Company and not the other way around. I answered that I had not known he wanted to talk with me, and that I know he was a busy man, but I would really like him to tell me about his company. He asked me whether I had read the recent article about him in the local newspaper that had been published in connection with his sixtieth birthday. I told him that of course I had read the article and mentioned some of the details in the article. After this exchange, he started to relax and to tell me about the Company.

### ***I didn't know whether I should continue***

Shortly after John got his degree as an engineer more than twenty five years ago, he and a fellow student decided to start a cleaning company. The cooperation between them quickly dissolved because they had different opinions about running the Company. In light of this event, John did not know whether he wanted to continue on his own. After spending 1½ afternoons calling customers, he found out that he could raise a customer base estimating £80.000 a year, and he decided to continue. The first few years he ran the Company from his private home. The employees who worked there were himself and a service manager, who in addition to her job as a manager, cleaned three hours a day, took care of daily contact with customers and assistants, calculated estimates, paid salaries and kept the accounts. After five years, John's wife Jenny joined the Company. They had just had their daughter and, therefore, it seemed natural to both of them that Jenny worked for the Company instead of another employer.

John unfortunately had to terminate the cooperation with his first service manager after 12 years because she refused to go to the bank and deposit the daily payment from one of the sites. Even after the site had been burgled three times, the service manager still refused to go to the bank and deposit the daily payments, so John had no other alternative than to let her go. He is, however, very grateful for all the support she gave him through the years, and he would have enjoyed it if she could have been with him at the Company's nearby anniversary.

The year after John established the Company, he opened an office in Copenhagen. At the beginning he travelled back and forth, but after a while, he hired a service manager to take care of the contact with the customers and assistants. However, John could never get a hold of him when he called him. Eventually, John went over to talk with him, and they had a serious talk about what John expected of him. John informed him that he would receive a letter describing what needed to be remedied. What happened was that the service manager called in sick only two days after their conversation, and when John contacted some of the customers and the assistants, he found out that the service manager had made some enquiries about insurance. John investigated this a bit further and found out that the service manager had sold insurance on the side, and John had to let him go.

Since then the Company has grown much, and John does not travel around as much as he used. A reason is that he has a hard time remembering people, and he is afraid that he will end in a situation where he introduces himself to someone he already has met before.

***We cannot do it without the service managers***

In John's opinion, the service managers play a very central role for the Company, and much depends on them. The service managers have to react quickly and appropriately when the customers complain because otherwise the customers will just turn to one of the competing companies. On top of that, the service managers have to deal with many different types of assistants and make sure that, by the end of the day, everything comes together. John thinks the job of a service manager is a lifestyle that he really admires, but under no circumstances would he swap place with the service managers because he could not do the job. He does not think that all of the service managers in the Department are the brightest of the bunch. Nevertheless, there are some of the service managers that he truly appreciates. He thinks Jane is doing a good job at the concrete factory and Nina is just a ray of sunshine. During our first interview-conversation, John tells me how sad he was when Nina told him that she had resigned, and what a managerial mistake it was that Mike had lost such a competent service managers. He is, therefore, very pleased when at our second interview-conversation he can tell me that Nina is coming back to the Company. After half-a-year at a competing company, Nina asked him if she could come back, and of course she could. So they created a new managing position for Nina in which she would be the liaison between the customers and the service managers.

Sadly, John does not know very many of the service managers anymore, and he has lost his feel for their situation. Earlier, he had a good feel about how much he could ask of them, and when he could ask them to take over an extra site or work some extra hours. Last time he tried to convince one of the regional managers to continue to clean at a site, where they had decided to terminate the contract, the regional manager complained that she had no service manager to cover it John pushed her to continue the cleaning at the site, but he had no idea how the regional manager would react. Luckily, she called back the following day and told John that she had worked out a solution. Earlier on John would have been able to predict the outcome, but in this case he had absolutely no idea about the outcome, and that gets to him.

### *The road we have taken*

Previously, John spent a lot of time calculating estimates, but since the Company has gotten so large, the task has been handed over to the different regional and district managers. John always enjoyed that part of the job, and he tells me about the last calculation he made. It was when the concrete factory was last in procurement. He spent two weeks at their summer cottage measuring, calculating and sketching all day long. After he had handed in the offer he found out that he had made an arithmetical error estimating £20,000. When John was asked to present his offer at the concrete factory, John told them about the arithmetical error. They asked him what he had planned to do about it and he replied: nothing, because the arithmetical error was his own mistake, and they should not pay for it. Anything else would have been dishonest. The Company won the procurement, and since then the offer has gradually been adjusted. John hopes that they will also win the next time the concrete factory is in procurement and, simultaneously, clear the way for the canteen service there as well.

John believes that the Company has reached its size and success by making the right decisions at the right time. He has chosen not to bank on risky business and instead he has bought up competitors when the time was right and focused on acquiring different certifications that the competing companies did not have. Even though John did not know much about the certifications back then, he had a hunch that it might be worth while to bet on them. In the Company's early days, the customers often asked John why they should choose him and not a competitor. With the Company's psychological working environment and working environment certifications, John believes that the certifications are a stamp of approval, which signals that the Company cares about the well-being of its employees. This, according to John, is important for many customers.

Besides the certifications the Company spirit is also something special about the Company. The Company spirit represents a sense of commitment and a joined will to live according to the values. John tells me about a competing company that was much like the Company; a one man firm with approximately the same number of employees. The manager was on the threshold of his retirement and got an offer from the biggest competitor in the business to buy the company. The manager accepted, and received a lot of money, but the spirit in the company disappeared and the manager, who still came there every day, cried for over a year. John would never expose his employees to that because he knows many of them are proud of working in the Company.

### ***It is important that we follow the values***

John considers himself an honest and open man although he is sure that not everybody in the Company considers openness a value. Nevertheless, he believes it is much simpler to tell things like they are instead of evading them. Besides, that way he does not have to keep track of what he has said to whom. The values in the Company are very important to John, and the core values of the Company are that they all are attentive, honest and meticulous towards the customers and make sure the employees thrive. If there are no customers, then there is no foundation for the Company. During the first interview-conversation, John tells me about an incident in which he acted according to the values. A few weeks before the interview-conversation, John received a call from a customer who was not satisfied with the cleaning. John immediately called the service manager and asked her to meet him at the site. When they arrived at the site, they made a list describing what needed to be rectified together with the contact person at the site. The following day, the service manager and the assistant went out there and made the rectifications. The day after that, John called the contact person to make sure everything was done correctly, and the contact person was satisfied. The following week John called the contact person at the site to follow up on the situation and to make sure that everything was still on the right track. During the conversation, the contact person expressed discontentment with the assistant; she did not understand Danish and could not clean properly. John called the service manager and asked her to find another assistant for the site. John also planned to call the contact person after he returned from his 14 days in Singapore just to make sure that everything was alright.

### ***There are different interpretations***

John knows that there are different interpretations of the values, and that Maria expressed her doubts about the lack of internal support and faith in the value implementation project. John could not understand her worries because when he had stated that he wanted value-based management that was what would be realised and implemented. John does, however, feel that in some of the departments they have misunderstood the purpose of the values; Mike and Tony, especially, are off their rockers and are not at all attentive or meticulous toward the customers. For example, they hardly ever answer their phones. Whereas the former regional and district managers picked up their phone 90% of the time, it is the other way around with Mike and Tony, and John feels they are destroying everything. John tells me during our first interview-conversation that he has thought about firing Mike, but with such a short time until Jacob becomes the new CEO, he does not want to do anything because maybe Mike can cooperate better with Jacob than with him. John just does not understand why Mike cannot understand

what value-based management means. Mike has the right education and has been in the cleaning industry for a long time, but he just refuses to pick up the phone. And it is no good to have your machine take a message, when the foundation for the Company is that you prioritise the customers and respond to their complaints.

During the first interview-conversation, John tells me about an incident in which a very agitated customer has tried to get a hold of Mike several times and he did not answer. Then the phone call was redirected to Jenny who after a few calls started looking for Mike to tell him that a customer was on the line. She found Mike standing outside the hallway talking with one of the other managers, and Jenny could not get Mike to come to the phone even though she asked him several times and told him that the customer was very agitated. Mike kept saying that he was in a meeting and he would call the customer back when he was done. Such an attitude is just incomprehensible to John. John tells me that after Mike had left, they found that he had unpaid invoices estimating £3.350 lying around. These incidents prove that Mike was just not good enough for the job. Mike focussed too much on development, and not enough on selling and the daily running procedures, which is a misjudgement in this industry. On top of that, John feels that the atmosphere has improved since Mike has left the Company.

Another initiative that also has helped to improve the atmosphere in the Company is that the manager of the canteen division has chosen to leave the Company. John thought he was an innovative and competent manager who prioritised the right things; he focused on the daily running procedures and each quarter he made a profit that, by far, exceeded what they did in the cleaning division. The problem with the former manager of the canteen division was that he only did what he thought was best, and it was impossible to try to tell him what to do or make him change his mind. Not even John could convince him to take part in the value-implementation project, and when he was under pressure, he scolded anyone near him, including John. What John respected about the former manager of the canteen division compared to Mike was that he succeeded in combining a focus on both sales and the daily running procedures. Unfortunately, the former manager of the canteen division's stubbornness led to some troublesome situations and disputes between the former manager of the canteen division and some of the other employees, and some of the employees chose to leave the Company due to this behaviour. John knows that the employees left due to the former manager of the canteen division, and John knows that he was the one who should have acted and done something about it and not the employees. Despite this, John had a hard time figuring out how to solve the situation because the

former manager of the canteen division was a very competent manager, yet at the same time he was a very unpleasant person.

During our second interview-conversation, John tells me what he thinks about Maria's resignation. John believes Maria did a good job with implementing the values; she focussed 120% on the project and had some great ideas. However, John considers Maria's resignation unprofessional because of the responsibility she had at her management level. In his opinion, she should have stayed until the end of the year until the values had been properly implemented. John cannot help feeling a bit disappointed in her. Maria lacked focus on the daily running procedures and did not provide the necessary tools for the service managers to deal with the lack of qualified assistants. Steve (the new HR manager) is more of a practical turn. He has presented some functional solutions to help ease the daily running procedures for the service managers. On top of that, John feels that Maria spent too much time badmouthing Bob and conducted smear campaigns against him. John could not understand this. Given Maria's position, she should have done her best to protect the good atmosphere in the Company and not take part in creating a bad atmosphere.

### ***I'm proud of what we have achieved***

John has great confidence in Jacob and believes he will keep working with the values and strengthen the positive development of the Company. Jacob is good at engaging himself in many of the situations that John never engaged himself in, like spending time each month going over the accounts. John knows that the employees have wanted John to engage himself in situations like these for a long time, but he had always thought that the managers should be able to go over the accounts themselves. However, it is obvious that Jacob's engagement prevents a lot of gossip and creates a better atmosphere. John feels, however, that Jacob should manner them better. Jacob has begun to put up some demands and asked the managers to explain the various fluctuations in the accounts. John tells me how he, Bob and Jacob followed the local football team to UK to see an away match and did not come back until 4 am. Jacob had a strategy meeting at 8 am, and John could not understand why he had not just cancelled the meeting.

During our last interview-conversation, John tells me about a countrywide tour that Jacob and Steve have initiated in which they will visit all the offices in the country and many of the larger sites to tell them about the mission, vision, and values while establishing working groups to work with some of the

strategic challenges. Jacob and Steve have prepared a whole power point show based on the metaphor that they are all players on the same football team. Initially Jacob would have used a metaphor about ripples in a pond, but John found it too far fetched, so Jacob changed it. John is impressed with their work because he could never have pulled something like that off.

At the end of our second interview-conversation, John tells me that although Jacob is the new CEO, John will still be in the building every day to check his emails and sort his post. Jenny is not working in the Company anymore, and John tells me that he no longer wants to be involved in the daily running procedures because then he knows he cannot help becoming too engaged in the matters. John, however, reassures me that he will still be there to make sure they follow the values and answer their phones. John is very proud of what he has achieved and where the Company is today. John knows that the last year or so as the CEO, he did not do a very good job; he spent too much time abroad and not enough time in the office and he ought to have been more engaged in the problems. In many ways John is content with not being the CEO any more. What also has made John's decision easier than it would have been ten years ago is connected to the fact that John does not know many of the new employees, and he has a hard time remembering all their names.

John will, however, still take part in the future of the Company, and during our last interview-conversation, Steve knocks on John's door to say hello. While Steve is in the office, John hands over an article describing the benefits of lean management and suggests that Steve take a look at it because lean is the future of the Company.

# Chapter 10

---

## Organising co-constituting strategising through relational sensemaking

*This last chapter will discuss how strategising co-constitutes organising as the actors in the Company attempt to construct meaning relationally with each other. Based on the previous stories, examples and discussions in the thesis, this chapter will attempt to illustrate how actors relationally and through micro changes in everyday actions make sense of themselves, other actors and the world. In this process the actors vitalise and operationalise the strategic initiatives and make them a part of their everyday organising. This argumentation will take its point of departure in a very concrete and everyday discussion about when to answer the phone in the Company. This ongoing dispute is company-wide and plays out among managers from various management levels both in their everyday practice, during meetings and when they attend courses and seminars. The disagreement evolves around how the value of attentiveness affects the standard operating procedures for answering the phone. The dispute is especially heated among the managers from the two opposing camps. As the example will show, there are at least two ways to be attentive and they are both meaningful.*

*The opening example is micro oriented and focuses on an everyday organising dispute in the Company. It might make one wonder whether the example in any way is strategic or connected to the strategy in the Company. The second part of the chapter will, on a more general level, discuss how the everyday relational sensemaking attempts can be used to understand what strategy is about. By looking at the everyday organising, it becomes possible to understand how the strategic initiatives through relational sensemaking attempts are turned in to part of the actors' everyday organising, and how this shapes the continual and continual process of becoming that most organisations seems to be in. This reveals how the relational sensemaking perspective used in this thesis to create additional ways to understand strategic as well as other kinds of organisational change.*

## **When do we answer the phone?**

Even at the first course I observe, the uncertainty about when to answer the phone is being discussed. And as I attend my first monthly meeting, the service managers discuss the time constraints they feel they are under, and Lisa tells the other service managers that she was encouraged to adopt telephone hours by a consultant at a course she had just attended. Mike and Tony support this view and emphasise that the service managers do not have to be available 24/7. This perspective is elaborated upon during my first interview-conversation with Mike, in which he tells me about the dispute in the Company about when they answer the phone.

Mi: It's taken me over a year now to try to convince John that you shouldn't have your mobile turned on during meetings. It's been my standpoint since my first day here. But John, you can be in the middle of a job interview... and then his mobile rings and he'll take a personal phone call. It's just too much, it's totally unprofessional. The bottom line is that it's an insult to the person in front of you... That's one side of it, the other side is that I have to convince the service managers... to adopt telephone hours. They're sitting there and whining... because they feel that they're working all the time. Great! Then take matters into your own hands and inform your assistants that they can call you at these hours, or the matter will have to wait for tomorrow. We have to keep in mind what business we're in; it isn't an emergency room we're running here...

Me: Why do you think they don't adopt them [telephone hours]?

Mi: They've been raised differently... that's a part of it, and then they have this stubborn conviction that it's easier this way...

At the monthly meeting Mike and Tony encourage the service managers several times to adopt telephone hours and make the service managers fill out schedules in the attempt to figure out how the service managers can have a colleague answer their phone when they are on vacation. What makes Mike and Tony's efforts hard is that their point of view on the matter is not supported throughout the Company; on the contrary, it is opposed. Laura finds this opposition out for herself when she tried having telephone hours for a short time:

L: I've terminated my telephone hours. I was scolded for having said that I would only answer my phone between 11 and 14. If I visited a site and left my mobile in the car, then there would be the meanest messages on my voice mail, so I've given it up. I talked with Tina about it, and she agreed with them [employees in the administration who have left messages on Laura's answering machine]. If I had

telephone hours then I should also pick up the phone [when it rang]... Then I thought fine, then I'll be available all the time again. But during the weekends, and I have assistants calling me in the weekends, they have to text me because my mobile is on silence during the weekends. I leave it on the kitchen table and then I take a look at it when I pass it. But if we're visiting my parents, then I don't have it with me.

### ***What is the dispute about?***

One of the challenges with advocating telephone hours has a lot to do with the informal routine about answering calls that has been prevalent in the Company. Up until the strategy was initiated, or even maybe up until Mike, Maria and Tony joined the Company, the routine that was tacitly taken for granted was that incoming calls from customers had first priority and that managers at every level always answered their phones, without considering where they were or what they were in the middle of. This meant that when the managers, for example, visited sites, took part in courses or attended meetings, it was customary and expected that they would answer their mobile because incoming calls were perceived as very important. If the managers forgot their mobile during an in-house event or a break, someone from the administration would come and tell the relevant manager that a customer was on the phone. Some of the managers, like John and Bob, also answer their mobile when they were on vacation. That way, employees from the Company or customers can always get a hold of them.

From John's perspective, one of the most valuable and fundamental things about the Company is that the customer and his request always is and always has been assigned primacy. John, therefore, naturally always answers his mobile during meetings, job interviews, attending courses or on vacations. During the interview-conversations I had with him, he answered his phone three or four times to answer questions regarding the design of an invitation, a golf arrangement with a customer or a similar matter. After the phone conversation, John explained to me what the call was about, and we would continue our conversation. His wife Jenny, who in this period helps out in the administration, agrees with John about the assumption that you have to be attentive to the customers. Therefore, Jenny always puts incoming calls through, and if the relevant manager does not pick up, Jenny finds him and informs him that there is an important call.

When the strategy is initiated and the value-based approach to management is set in motion, some of the managers like Maria, Mike and Tony conceive it as a golden opportunity to break with the habit of

always answering the phone. From Maria, Mike and Tony's perspective answering the phone all the time conflicts with the value-based approach to management and with the much needed professionalization of the Company. In Maria, Mike and Tony's perception attentiveness means that you pay attention to the situation you are in and the person(s) in front of you. If you are in a meeting or attending a course, you therefore transfer your calls to the administration or to your answering machine so the customer calling can leave a message that you can later respond to. All three of them never answer their phone, unless they are forced to, when they are in a meeting or attending a course, and they refuse to take calls if Jenny or someone else interrupts a meeting to inform them that there is an important call for them.

Both Mike and Maria have tried to discuss the matter with John without any results, and Tony has as safety representative for the Company held an in-house meeting addressing the matter. He stated clearly that it was legitimate to have the answering machine or someone in the administration take a message if they were in a meeting, attending a course or otherwise occupied. Maria hired consultants who advocated telephone hours and encouraged the service managers to construct a better work-life balance to facilitate various courses. In addition, to state their perspective clearly, Mike and Tony also adopted the rule during the regional monthly meetings that if someone did not put their phone on silent and their phone rang, then they had to buy cake for everyone. These initiatives can all be perceived as attempts to pursue a story line in which the future of the Company evolves around competence development and empowerment. Their gestures and positioning, therefore, function as invitations to the other managers to partake in pursuing this story line and turning the Company around.

These initiatives, however, seem completely incomprehensible to John, Bob and Jenny because by acting this way, Maria, Mike and Tony are directly countering one of the most fundamental aspects of the Company. They, therefore, immediately refuse the invitations to partake in pursuing this story line and refuse everything that resembles telephone hours or answering machines. They pursue a story line in which customers are assigned primacy and focus is put on daily running procedures. When Maria, Mike and Tony introduce a new story line and some of the service managers partake in pursuing it, John, Bob and Jenny perceive it as a 'shock' (cf. Schütz I, 1967: 231) and a threat to their story line. The communication with customers and other stakeholders has been assigned primacy for long that the one camp believes the customers and other stakeholders now take it for granted and expect that they are assigned primacy when they call. When the customers and stakeholders are told to leave a message or

call back later, it is a deviation of the routine. Customers and stakeholders then react in a normal way and turn to John and ask him what is going on and why they can not get a hold of Mike, Tony or a service manager.

Seen from John's perspective, the story line Maria, Mike and Tony pursue is not only wrong or misunderstood, but it is a violation of one of the most fundamental aspects of the Company. It is a threat to how a solid business is run, and how one communicates with customers and other stakeholders. The story line Maria, Mike and Tony advocate is perceived as an attack on the way John, Bob and Jenny perceive themselves, others and the world.

### ***The tragicomic outcome of the dispute***

The result of the continual dispute about when to answer the phone unfolds in various ways. John keeps answering his phone and demands that others do the same despite Maria, Mike and Tony's attempts to make him understand that it is unprofessional. Some of the service managers attempt, at various times and for various lengths of time, to adopt telephone hours but end up abandoning the idea and keeping their phones turned on 24/7. John, once in a while, scolds Mike, Tony or a service manager if he learns, through Bob or someone else, that they have not answered their phone. Mike and Tony try persistently to avoid answering calls when they are occupied elsewhere. It is, however, difficult for them to uphold this decision, and once in a while, they have to answer a call. This, for example, happened during the fifth regional monthly meeting I observed. In the middle of a presentation at the meeting, an employee from the administration knocks on the door and asks Tony to come to the phone because there is a customer on the line. Tony refuses to come and asks the employee to take a message. A few minutes later, Jenny knocks on the door and informs Tony that the call is very important, and the customer is quite upset and asks him to come to the phone. Tony leaves the meeting to answer the phone and returns shortly after looking quite irritated. About ten minutes later Jenny knocks on the door again and asks Tina to come to the phone because there is a customer on the line. Tina leaves the meeting and returns a few minutes later. After about twenty minutes, Jenny knocks again and asks Brian to come to the phone, and Brian leaves the meeting and returns a few minutes later.

This example illustrates the continual struggle between the two opposing story lines in which the actors with different means gesture and position each other in ways that make as many of the other actors as

possible accept their invitations to pursue their story line and construct meaning. In some situations, one of the actors has the authority (formal/informal) to dictate a certain type of action, like in the above example, where Jenny makes Tony, Tina and Brian come to the phone. Where does this leave the service managers? They are left as a kind of piggy-in-the-middle; no matter which story line they pursue, they are told it is the wrong one.

The lack of a common and shared routine and understanding about how to handle calls leads to a quite peculiar and even tragicomic situation for the service managers because who should they listen to: Mike and Tony or John, Bob and Jenny? Should they take their mobiles with them when they visit the sites or should they leave them in the car? Should they answer calls when they are off and maybe on vacation, or should they let the answering machine take a message and return the call the following day or when they return from their holiday? No matter which solution the service managers choose, they have to defend themselves either to Mike and Tony or John, Bob and Jenny. The outcome is also quite frustrating for the employees in the administration who answers the transferred calls. Every time a call gets transferred the employee has to take many aspects into consideration before acting. For example they must determine: who is the customer calling and does the customer calling have a personal relation to John or Bob? Is Jenny at work today or is Bob or John around? Who is the call for and does he/she want to be disturbed, or is it better that I take a message?

### **The significance of everyday relational sensemaking**

Looking at the above dispute about when to answer the phone might make some ponder how or even whether this is connected to the strategy that the Company is in the midst of pursuing. This everyday example is, however, of strategic importance because the choice about when we answer the phone or not leads to at least two different ways of organising. The Company has a history of assigning primacy to incoming calls from customers and other stakeholders. Regardless of the reason of the call, it was taken seriously and transferred. This means that the customers have grown attached to this way of communicating and take it for granted that their calls are answered instantaneously. When suddenly a part of the managers begin to act in another way and let their answering machine or someone from the administration take a message or asks the customer or stakeholder to call back, the routine is altered and the customers and the stakeholders are positioned in another way by these managers.

The outcome could be that some customers in time would accept this; whereas others would terminate their contract and find another company to handle their cleaning. Simultaneously, some of the actors within the Company like John, Bob and Jenny, would have to alter and change their relational constructed understanding of themselves, others and the world. Their construction of meaning and understanding of themselves, others and the world does not only take place together with actors inside the Company but also with customers and stakeholders outside the Company. The decision not to answer the phone when in a meeting etc. would lead to new ways of communicating with customers and stakeholders. Simultaneously, it would lead to new understandings about oneself, others and the world of the actors, customers and stakeholders. This means that the practical difficulty of agreeing on the question of when to answer the phone in the Company is of strategic importance because the answer leads to different ways of organising and communicating with customers and stakeholders.

The perspective on strategising and organising used in this thesis makes these everyday relational sensemaking attempts rather significant, when one wants to understand strategic initiatives. Most of a company's organising takes place at an everyday level in which qualified actors solve their tasks through communication with colleagues, customers, suppliers or stakeholders. How tasks are solved are embedded in routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders that the actors use to make sense of themselves, other actors and the world. This means that if the strategic initiatives are to have any impact on the actors in a company or the relations that company has with its customers, suppliers or stakeholders, then the strategic initiatives need to influence and change the everyday organising in that company and affect how the actors solve their tasks. The dispute about when to answer the phone in the Company has a direct influence on the communication with the Company's customers and stakeholders since the way calls are answered affects the impression the customers, suppliers and stakeholders have of the Company. Depending on the answer, the customers and stakeholders are positioned in different ways. Simultaneously, the dispute influences the way the actors in the Company organise themselves, how they prioritise their tasks, how they relate to each other and how they position themselves.

The purpose of the thesis' focus on the everyday organising is not to argue that competence building courses, away-days or strategic documents do not have any importance or do not influence how the strategy unfolds. All these initiatives play important roles since they indicate direction, focus and generate actions. There was, however, nothing in the Company's strategy documents addressing the question when to answer the phone. This question, nevertheless, turned out to be crucial when the

actors tried to make sense of and operationalise the strategy. They discussed this at the monthly regional meetings, and there were many disputes about it daily in the Company as the actors tried in various ways to make each other understand their different points of view. Through gestures and positioning, they invited each other to partake in pursuing the different story lines that they believed represented what value-based management was and how it should be operationalised.

These everyday relational attempts to construct meaning are significant because they illustrate how strategic initiatives influence the everyday practice in the Company and vice versa. Is the purpose of the strategy to reorganise many of the existing routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders in the Company or to refocus on the daily running procedures and reassign primacy to the customers?

### ***Strategising as relational sensemaking***

Amazingly, even though John stated quite clearly on many occasions that the strategy project would last one year after which the Company would go back to 'normal', that was not the meaning Maria, Mike, Tony and some of the other managers heard. Maria, Mike and Tony might have heard what John said, but, maybe, they believed that John would change his mind once he saw the positive impact the competence development initiatives and the empowerment processes would have on the assistants, the service managers and the customers.

As the eight work-based stories and the chosen scenes from meetings and courses have illustrated, there are different understandings about what value-based management is and how it should be operationalised. What the stories, hopefully, have also illustrated is that the managers are not out to get each other. The managers try to make each other see the situation from their perspective and construct meaning together. This is, however, not easy because there is more at stake than just answering the rather simple question of, "when do we answer the phone?"

What also is at stake in the dispute about when to answer the phone is the relational constructed understanding of what it means to be and act as a value-based manager in the Company. As actors attempt to construct meaning about how to handle activities, they simultaneously invite each other to participate in pursuing their story lines and in reaffirming each others' understandings about themselves, other actors and the world. This reaffirmation process runs relatively smoothly when Maria

discusses the issue with Mike or Tony, and it runs relatively smoothly when John discusses the issues with Bob or Jenny. It does not, however, run relatively smoothly when, for example, Mike discusses the issue with John. They do not share the same routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders, they are not each others' significant others and they can not anticipate each others' reactions because their attitudes do not stem from the same 'generalised other'. The outcome is that even though Mike and John attempt to make sense together and invite each other to partake in constructing a shared meaning, they do not succeed. They pursue not only different but also opposing story lines. Therefore, Mike perceives the invitation he receives from John as a threat and vice versa.

The attempt to operationalise the strategy and implement value-based management resulted in some disputes like the one analysed above. These disputes took place at all management levels, and there is no doubt that the disputes were frustrating for many of the managers. Maria, Nina and Mike also left the Company during the strategising. One can wonder whether the disputes were actually coupled to the strategy, or whether they also would have taken place if the strategy had not been initiated.

What took place while I generated data is embedded in a meshwork that goes far back in the relational history of the Company and meshes with the future ideas and relations depending on the story lines that the actors pursue. Simultaneously, it is a meshwork that goes far beyond the boundaries of the Company. What is relevant and interesting in the thesis' perspective is the relational meaning construction takes place every day as the actors try to make sense of the situations they find themselves in and figure out how to act in meaningful ways. This is interesting and relevant because it is what co-constitutes the organising and strategising processes going on in the Company. Therefore, it affects how the actors within the Company interact with customers and stakeholders and how these customers and stakeholders perceive the Company.

### **Does it make sense?**

Where does this thesis leave one? Is this an example of reversed resistance in which the CEO resists the strategic initiatives he, himself, has initiated? Maria, Mike and Tony perceive the strategy process to be a turn-around of the Company and believe the purpose is to focus on competence development, empowerment, coaching etc. and focus less on the daily running procedures. They pursue this story line and invite other actors to partake in the pursuit through their intersubjective positioning. Previously in this thesis I have illustrated how Maria, Mike and Tony can relatively smoothly construct meaning with

each other. Because they have become each other's significant others, they accept each others' invitations and, simultaneously, reaffirm each others' reflexive positioning. This means that they initiate various actions and processes to realise the story line they pursue. Thus, they relationally understand and make sense of the actions and processes, and their sensemaking generates new actions and initiatives.

John, however, does not approve of these initiatives and processes. He does not want to partake in pursuing their story line, and he refuses to accept the invitations Maria, Mike and Tony offer through their gestures and positioning. John keeps counter-ordering the decisions Mike and Tony have made, and John does not support the actions Maria initiates to implement the values in the Company. John does not want to spend money on the value assignments or course catalogue. His appearance at the management-education programme decreases. At the second module, he is late and leaves early, and at the third module he only comes to welcome everyone. John's refusal to partake in pursuing the story line Maria, Mike and Tony pursue is expressed through John's gestures. John's gestures are invitations to other actors to partake in pursuing the story line that he advocates, and the one he believes is the best way to 'set the Company right'. As John gestures, he intersubjectively positions Maria, Mike and Tony as managers who do not practice value-based management.

The non-concordant intersubjective positioning makes them incapable of reaffirming each others' reflexive positioning and of constructing meaning together. Maria, Mike and Tony, therefore, do not perceive John's gestures as invitations, but as a refusal of their way to practice value-based management. John's actions do not make sense to them, and even though they time and time again invite John to partake in pursuing the story line that they believe 'set the Company right', he refuses. They feel as if John does not hear the meaning they intend. This makes them question why they were hired in the first place if they are not allowed to practice value-based. Seen from this perspective, John's actions can resemble an example of reversed resistance.

Likewise John together with Bob, Jenny and Christian, for example, perceive the strategy as a one-year project, and the sense one can make out of this conception is quite different. They believe the purpose is to focus on the daily running procedures and assign primacy to the customers. This is what value-based management is about. The reason behind the one-year project is to train some of the younger managers like Mike and Tony in this management approach. John, Bob, Jenny and Christian pursue this story line and invite other actors to partake in the pursuit through their gestures. As previous discussed,

John, Bob, Jenny and Christian are each others' significant others, and they can construct meaning with each other relatively smoothly; they accept each others' invitations and, simultaneously, reaffirm each others' reflexive positioning. They also initiate various actions and projects to realise the story line they pursue and the sense they, subsequently, make. One of the actions they initiate is to hire Maria to handle the value-implementation project. She has to organise various courses for the managers, make a value handbook and introduce the assistants to the values during the year the project is running. When the project is fully implemented, John had planned that Maria would help the service managers with their recruitment challenges and train the assistants' practical competences.

Maria, however, does not want to partake in pursuing this story line and refuses John's invitation. She does not accept that implementation of the values as a project. She keeps arguing that it is a long range turn-around process for the Company, and she advocates continuing competence development courses for all the managers at all levels. Finally, she prints course catalogues for next year without running the idea by John first. She spends money on sending out value-based assignments that the managers have to solve during their workdays, and she talks critically about some of the other managers like Bob. What makes it even worse is that some of the younger managers like Mike, who was already heading in a wrong direction management-wise, agree with her. Even though John, Bob, Jenny and Christian try to talk with Maria and tell her that she is heading in the wrong direction and invite her to partake in pursuing their story line, she refuses to listen. The meaning they intend is not the meaning Maria hears.

Maria pursues another story line and, therefore, her intersubjective positioning of John, Bob, Jenny and Christian is not concordant with their own reflexive positioning. They can not construct meaning with each other and John, Bob, Jenny and Christian can not make sense out of Maria's actions or the projects she initiates. Initially, they try again and again to invite her to partake in pursuing their story line and 'set the Company right', but she refuses. John is left unable to figure out what went wrong, maybe they did not hand over the baton properly? Seen in this perspective, John is not expressing reversed resistance, but the contrary. He is doing the best he can to make the one-year project a success. It is Maria, Mike and Tony, who express resistance to the project. They are the ones who refuse to attend to the daily running procedures or assign primacy to the customers.

### ***What to make of it all***

This thesis leaves me with some interesting stories about how eight special actors within the Company tried to make sense of and operationalise a strategy during 1½ years. The stories illustrate that sensemaking is continually taking place and that it can take many different directions depending on which actors attempt to construct meaning with whom. Meaning construction is, within this perspective, a relational process in which the meaning constructed in a situation is the outcome of the actors' gestures. In this process, it is easier to construct meaning with actors whose attitudes stem from the same 'generalised other' and maybe also with those who are each others' significant others. These actors pursue congruent story lines, the meaning they intend to gesture is also the meaning heard and their intersubjective positioning of each other is concordant. This concordance makes them capable of reaffirming each others' reflexive positioning and each others' understanding of themselves, others and the world.

However, meaning construction with actors whose attitudes stem from different 'generalised other' and actors who are not each others' significant others are difficult. These actors pursue different story lines, the meaning one actor intends to gesture is not the meaning heard by the other actor and their intersubjective positioning of each other is non-concordant. This non-concordance makes it difficult for the actors to reaffirm each others' reflexive positioning and each others' understanding of themselves, others and the world. The outcome can be that one actor's invitation to another's to partake in pursuing the first actor's story line is perceived not as an invitation, but as a threat because the non-concordant intersubjective positioning makes it impossible for the actor to get his reflexive positioning reaffirmed. Therefore, the actor lacks the significant self- and world-confirmation that is essential for him to live his life and be a part of the community.

I perceive the stories and scenes in this thesis as clues about how strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking. Ideally, these clues should lead to an understanding of the interplay between strategising and organising, which supplements important approaches and perspectives on strategy, primarily in relation to the intersection point between strategists and their strategising (Johnson, Balogun & Beech, 2010: 244). It is a supplementary understanding that argues that organising happens as much to strategising as strategising happens through organising. And in this co-constituting interplay, at least within this perspective, actions and sensemaking cannot be planned as it occurs relationally.

Within this process, actors rely on social constructed routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders both in relation to the meaning they construct and how they act. This does not, however, mean that these processes just go around and around as self-fulfilling prophecy. The Company is in a steady becoming process, which in this thesis is understood as a continual thoroughgoing reorganising process. In this process, modified actions continually take place, leading to morphed sensemaking, changed actions, and then to new and more broadly accepted understandings, etc. Small changes take place all the time as time goes by, coincidences occur, stakeholders change their area of interest, customers put up new requests, assistants raise other demands, new actors join the Company, old actors leave or a new strategy is set in motion. In these processes, actors immediately attempt to construct meaning with each other to make sense of the situation they find themselves in and figure out how to act.

Although actors make sense and act in a way that make them capable of pursuing a certain story line that they believe will 'set the Company right', they do not pursue their story line like a navigator following a predefined map. They make sense as they go. In the attempt to pursue a story line, the actors act in a way that, only subsequently, can they construct meaning about. This means that, in some sense, they move into unknown territory and figure out the right way as they go. Simultaneously, the way the actors act affects the situation they later try to construct meaning about. To exemplify this, think back to how Mike and Tony operationalised the strategy by encouraging the service managers to conduct routine quality reports. Mike and Tony pursued a story line that emphasized competence development and empowerment. They acted by encouraging routine quality reports. As, for example, Annie conducted the quality reports routinely, the situation in which conducting routine quality reports as a way to strategise was realised. Mike and Tony, subsequently, made sense of Annie's actions and the way customers and assistants reacted. The sense they made led to new actions and meaning construction on all sides.

One may argue that the above example only illustrates how cognition guides action and action guides cognition, whereas strategising is about following a map that leads to the realisation of a certain story line. I hope, nevertheless, that the stories told here show something else. As actors pursue a story line, their actions may be guided by cognition, which guides the sense these actors make retrospectively, but this is only one side of the story.

Another side of the story is the impact relations have on the meaning that is being constructed. To begin with, Mike or Tony could not have operationalised this initiative on their own. They decided to operationalise value-based management by, for example, conducting routine quality reports through their gestures. As they pursued congruent story lines, they accepted each others' invitations to partake in pursuing these story lines and, thereby, they reaffirmed each others' reflexive positioning and understandings about themselves, other and the world. Their attitudes stem from the same 'generalised other' and they are each others' significant others. Therefore, they can construct meaning with each other relatively smoothly and enact the situation in which the service managers are encouraged to conduct routine quality reports. Subsequently, the enacted situation can be made sense of in many ways. Mike and Tony's encouragement is an invitation to the service managers to partake in pursuing Mike and Tony's story lines. Annie accepts the invitation and conducts the quality reports routinely. Her gesture reaffirms Mike and Tony's reflexive positioning, it partakes in pursuing their story lines and it brings this way of strategising to life.

The construction of meaning is, however, not completed here. Some of the other service managers react in another way. Some, like Laura, try to conduct the quality reports, but have a hard time conducting all of them routinely. Some, like Jane, complain about the schedule they have, and others, like Tina, refuse to conduct them. Besides, John believes that it is the wrong decision that the service managers conduct the quality reports; it ought to be Mike and Tony who conducted them. Most likely, Bob and Christian also have their opinions on the matter as do customers, stakeholders and most of the other actors in the Company. All of these different understandings are gestured in invitations to partake in pursuing a particular story line. These invitations are accepted or refused, and actions and attempts to make sense of the actual initiative take place all the time. The same goes for debates about whether quality reports have anything at all to do with practicing value-based management and operationalising the strategy.

This leads to a continual meshwork of lines of actions and attempts to construct meaning. Sometimes the lines meet in complex knot of strands. Sometimes, they are interwoven, and sometimes they go in different directions. The fascinating aspect of this is that this meaning construction is never complete. There is always new meaning to be constructed about the routinely conduct of quality reports, when to answer the phone etc., just as there is always meaning to be constructed about whether these initiative have anything to do with value-based management and operationalising the strategy at all. There are always new places to go, new stories to tell and life to be lived.

*I believe it makes sense –in other settings also*

Within an organising, becoming, wayfinding and strategising perspective, I have combined concepts of relations, sensemaking, actions, ‘generalised other’, significant others, meaning construction, gestures, positioning and story line to be able to understand the many ways meaning has been constructed about operationalising the strategy and practicing value-based management. I have chosen to work with these concepts and within this perspective because they offered me the possibility to study strategy in a dynamic way and from an everyday perspective. I have set out to study how strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking, and my object of study was the everyday relational co-constituting interplay among actors in the Department. By combining organising, becoming, wayfinding and strategising, I have been able to perceive the organisation as the outcome of the actors’ ongoing and continual reorganising processes.

The concepts of sensemaking and actions made it possible for me to understand how sensemaking is based on actions. Actors need to act to make sense of their actions. At the same time, the way actors act stem from the sense they make. This means that actors’ actions shape and are shaped by these actors’ sensemaking. By looking at the concepts of meaning construction, gestures and relations, I was able to understand how actors’ sense making stems from their gestures as they attempt to construct meaning with each other. Within this perspective, meaning construction is a relational and generative process because the sense actors make and the way they act is embodied in routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders.

By trying to understand the routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders among the actors, I was able to construct meaning about how ‘my’ actors organised their everyday life at work. I was able to see how they initiated various projects and processes to make the strategy become a part of their everyday organising. In this process, their organising shaped their strategising and their strategising shaped their organising. What the above concepts, however, do not enabled me to explain is why two opposing camps formed and why the sense the actors made went in opposite directions.

To construct meaning about why this took place I have used the concepts ‘generalised other’, significant others, positioning and story line. These concepts have helped me understand why some actors can construct meaning with each other relatively smoothly, and others experience great difficulties in their attempts to construct meaning together. These four concepts have also made it possible for me to understand why the actors had such a hard time agreeing on everyday issues like

when to answer the phone. When actors in an attempt to construct meaning together about an every day activity cannot get their reflexive positioning reaffirmed, there is more at stake than solving this specific problem. A refusal to reaffirm an actor's reflexive positioning is often perceived as a threat to that actor's understanding about himself, others and the world. Actors are dependent on continual self- and world-confirmation. However, this makes meaning construction about how to operationalise a strategy more and more impossible between people with different understandings, and the actors might end up further distancing themselves from each other despite the original attempt to construct meaning with each other.

The perspective I have chosen and the concepts I have used have also not enabled me to explain why or when the actors became each others' significant others. The concepts have neither enabled me to illustrate how some of the actors went from significant others to non-significant others nor vice versa. Nevertheless, I believe the perspective I have chosen and the concepts I have combined have enabled me to understand parts of how strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking among actors.

The methodological and theoretical understanding I have generated could not have been done without studying the practice of sensemaking and action that the actors undertook. The methodological and theoretical understanding has been constructed as the strategy was operationalised. Method and theory have gone hand in hand with the actors' sensemaking and actions to co-constitute the understanding that strategising and organising co-constitute each other, as have been presented here.

My aim with this thesis has been to contribute to and supplement existing literature on strategy and strategic processes through presenting a method that, hopefully, follows up on the invitation to look more closely at the relation between strategist and their strategising. This invitation was made by scholars within the strategic, the organisation and the organisational change fields and many skilled scholars have made inspiring studies. I will only mention a few here. Balogun's Utilco study paved the way for the importance of middle managers' sensemaking during change processes (Balogun & Johnson, 2005, Balogun, 2006, 2007). For many years Weick has studied how sensemaking and action generate each other especially during crisis situations, and the role improvisation plays in these extreme situations (Weick, 1988, Weick & Roberts, 1993, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Alvesson and Sveningsson in 2008 studied how the actors in an organisation made sense of and operationalised a

cultural change programme by interviewing the actors and observing the implementation courses (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008).

I have been inspired by the above studies and many other skilled scholars both theoretically and methodologically. Based on that, I decided to work in a slightly different way. Inspired by Balogun's results about the important role middle managers' sensemaking plays, I have attempted to look at how the sensemaking at various management levels takes place, and how it shapes strategising with an additional inspiration from Weick. My aim has been to present different interrelated stories and to choose a number of scenes about how organising and strategising co-constitute each other relationally through the actors' attempt to construct meaning with each other, other actors and me.

Alvesson and Sveningsson's cultural change study (2008) underlines the importance of relational sensemaking among the various departments and management levels when change programmes are initiated. But where they focus on evaluating the success of the cultural change program, I focus on presenting the many different perspectives on the strategic initiatives. My aim has been to illustrate the different ways 'my' actors have made sense of and operationalised the strategy. From this perspective and among these actors, there can be many bets on the success or failure of the strategy. My hope is I have succeeded in presenting all sides in a just way.

By presenting stories and scenes that illustrate how the actors attempted to construct meaning and acted in a sensible ways to operationalise the strategy at a micro and everyday perspective, I have aimed to illustrate that strategising takes place everyday among actors at various levels of an organisation as they attempt to make the strategy become a part of their organising. I have also aimed to illustrate that sensemaking can go in many different directions and still be meaningful. In that process, the actors' are being shaped and their organising is being shaped by their strategising and vice versa in a continual co-constituting interplay.

My findings add to the observation that strategising, to a large extent, comes from common everyday activities, which repeat themselves time after time. One must recognise that these processes are very important for the continual organising activities that realise and also form a strategy in such details that impact daily routines in important ways.

I also believe that strategising and organising are human activities that can not be understood by using strategy literature alone. The work of a Russian linguist, Austrian and German philosophers, an American anthropologist, Polish and Swedish organisational scientists, a Norwegian expert in method, American psychologists, British and Australian researchers into Strategy as/in Practice, and a Scottish wayfarer. Strategy and strategic management in my thesis are shown gain from being studied from other, perhaps unorthodox, perspectives. Especially Chia's work (Chia, 2004, Chia & Holt, 2009, 2009) in which he, alone and accompanied by Holt, look for alternative ways to understanding strategic processes has inspired me to go beyond the methods and theories often used within the strategy field. Chia's work has among many things enabled me to use stories about everyday organising as a way to illustrate the continual, emergent and dynamic co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising.

As the intention of this thesis stated, a relational and social constructionist perspective has led me through this study of strategy in practice. I have aimed to demonstrate that actors turn to their significant other human beings in their everyday work practice and that how they turn and who they turn to is both interesting and relevant in relation to how a strategy is operationalised. Through every practical activity, and through everyday relational sensemaking, actors construct meaning together about themselves, others, and the world. They do not always succeed in making sense of the concrete situations they are in through their gestures and their actions, but most of the time they are capable of running an organisation together in the flux and meshwork in which stories and life goes on. I hope that my thesis has inspired some of my readers to follow that trail and find new ways.

*“There is no point at which the story ends  
and life begins.” (Ingold, 2008: 90)*

# Appendix

## Appendix 1

General overview of the activities I participated in, which and when interview-conversations were held during the 1½ years I generated data:

Spring – summer year 1	Autumn - winter year 1	Spring – summer year 2	Autumn– winter year 2
<p><b>June – August:</b> 3 initial meetings with Maria, Lucy and Mike</p> <p><b>August:</b> Course: Communication in a Value-based Company</p>	<p><b>September:</b> The company’s annual meeting 1. Regional monthly meeting</p> <p><b>October:</b> Course: Personal Planning and Efficiency 2nd Regional monthly meeting 1st iw-conv. with Nina, Laura, Annie, Jane, Mike and Tony 3rd meeting/iw-conv. with Maria Course: The Personal Leadership (2nd Module of the Management-Education Programme)</p> <p><b>November - December:</b> 3rd and 4th Regional monthly meetings 2nd and 3rd meetings with Mike</p> <p><b>January - February:</b> 5. Regional monthly meeting Course: Culture Seminar 4th and 5th meeting/ iw-conv. with Maria 2. iw-conv. with Mike and Jane 6. Regional monthly meeting</p>	<p><b>March:</b> 2. iw-conv. with Tony, Annie, Laura and Nina 7. Regional monthly meeting</p> <p><b>April:</b> 8. Regional monthly meeting Course: Introduction Course for new employees Course: The Manager as Coach (3rd. Module of the Management-Education Programme) 1. iw-conv. with John</p> <p><b>May:</b> Extraordinary Regional meeting</p> <p><b>June:</b> 9. Regional monthly meeting 3. iw-conv. with Nina</p> <p><b>July:</b> 10. Regional monthly meeting Meeting with Jacob</p> <p><b>August:</b> 11. Regional monthly meeting 4. Meeting with Mike</p>	<p><b>September:</b> 12. Regional monthly meeting 5th meeting with Mike The Company’s annual meeting 3. iw-conv. with Annie and Laura</p> <p><b>October:</b> 13. Regional monthly meeting 3. iw-conv. with Jane</p> <p><b>November:</b> 14. Regional monthly meeting 3. iw-conv. with Tony</p> <p><b>December:</b> 15. Regional monthly meeting 2. iw-conv. with John</p>



## Abstract

---

This is a thesis that sets out to study and understand how strategising and organising co-constitute each other through relational sensemaking. The object of the study is the relational interplay among eight managers in a medium-sized Danish cleaning company (the Company). The guiding assumption is that actors within an organisation construct meaning with each other on an everyday basis about the work situations they find themselves in and try to figure out how to act in sensible ways. The sense actors make and the ways they act have a generative aspect in that it takes part in constructing the world these actors live in. In an organisational perspective, this means that how actors construct meaning and the ways they act takes part in shaping the organising process of the Company.

In the theoretical concept used here, actors organise themselves around routines, norms, values, meaning structures and moral orders that guide both their actions and the sense they relationally make. Actors continually engage in changing situations and with various actors and, therefore, actors continually make sense and act in slightly different ways. This puts the organisation in a continual becoming and ongoing reorganising process. Most of these changes are incremental, but once in a while, someone, often in the top management, believes it is time to make the changes more radical. Therefore, they try to initiate some sort of change by formulating a new strategy. This thesis contributes to the discussion about what happens when a more radical change is proposed by analysing who the strategists are, how they make sense of the strategy, what projects/processes they initiate and how the daily organising and the strategising influence and shape each other.

Using a social constructionist and relational perspective, I have made a case study in the Company in which I studied how eight actors at various management levels worked to operationalise the strategy, primarily through value-based management, for 1½ years. During this period, I visited the Company regularly and conducted 30 interview-conversations/meetings with the actors, observed 24 meetings/courses and studied different material that came from or was written about the Company. Based on this material as well as narrative and phenomenological research methods, I have written eight work-based stories that illustrate how the actors in the Company, in different ways, worked to operationalise the strategy and attempted to make it part of their daily organising. The stories illustrate that there are different understandings about what value-based management means and how it should be operationalised.

The different understandings about value-based management are further illustrated in the thesis by analysing selected scenes from the courses/meetings. These scenes show how the actors position each other and relationally attempt to construct meaning with each other. These processes start with a rather general conception about strategy, but subsequently concentrate on what value-based management is and how it should be operationalised within the Company. The analysed scenes also illustrate how some actors succeed in constructing meaning with each other relatively smoothly whereas others experience great difficulties constructing meaning with each other. Such sensemaking attempts take place every day and they often revolve around everyday challenges and disputes. Such challenges and disputes can not be traced back to the strategic documents, but nevertheless, they turn out to be of strategic importance in the every day attempts to realise the strategy. The analysis shows that these issues are important because they influence the organising of the Company, the way the actors perceive themselves, others and the world as well as the way the Company communicates with customers and other stakeholders.

The thesis contributes to the very active discussion within different research communities about what strategy is about. It especially contributes to the relational interplay between strategists and their strategising, which is characterised by a more process-oriented approach to strategy like the Strategy-as-Practice community advocates. By working with and combining concepts like: relations, sensemaking, action, 'generalised other', significant others, meaning construction, gestures, positioning and story line within an organising, becoming, wayfinding and strategising perspective, I present a dynamic method and theoretical framework for understanding the co-constituting interplay between strategising and organising. Hopefully this method and theoretical framework will add new understanding to the field of strategy and strategic processes and inspire others to follow this path.

The thesis starts by presenting the Company through four everyday situations. Thereafter the main research question is defined within strategising and organising. This is the main theme that steers the direction of research and analyses throughout the thesis. The thesis is structured by setting the methodological and theoretical framework as well as a step-by-step integration of the theory and empirical analysis.

The main subjects are as follows: How four operational managers (service managers) relationally work to organise and make sense of their work as continually analysed through stories about their daily activities at work. The next main theme is how two middle managers organise their everyday work and

strategise to change their own, the service managers' and their staff's everyday organising. This is followed by an analysis of how the HR manager tries to operationalise the strategy and make the Company values a more integral part of the every day organising in the Company. This is, however, not an easy task as there are several ideas about what the values represent and how they should be operationalised. The theme for the final part of the analysis takes its point of origin in the everyday organising of the CEO. This is followed by a perspective on how organising co-constitutes strategising through relational sensemaking. This is the background for presenting the final and concluding part of the thesis which deals with the significance of everyday relational sensemaking during the operationalising of a strategy.



## Resume

---

Denne afhandling har til formål at undersøge, hvordan strategisering og organisering konstituerer hinanden gennem relationelle forsøg på at skabe mening. Genstandsfeltet for dette studie er de relationelle samspil mellem otte ledere i en mellemstor dansk rengøringsvirksomhed (Virksomheden). Afhandlingens grundlæggende antagelse er, at aktører relationelt skaber mening med hinanden hver dag for at forstå den arbejdsituation, de befinder sig i, og for at finde ud af, hvordan de kan handle på en meningsfuld måde. Den mening, aktører skaber, og den måde, de handler, har desuden et generativt aspekt, idet det medvirker til at konstruere den verden, aktørerne lever i.

I det teoretiske koncept, der anvendes her, organiserer aktører sig omkring rutiner, normer, værdier, meningsstrukturer og moralsk orden. Elementer, der både guider aktørers handlinger og den mening, de relationelt konstruerer. Aktører indgår kontinuerligt i forandrede situationer og med forskellige andre aktører, hvorved aktører kontinuerligt skaber mening og handler på inkrementel ny vis. Dette medfører, at organisationen hele tiden er i gang med at blive konstrueret og reorganiseret. Langt de fleste af disse forandringer er inkrementelle, men sommetider er der en af aktørerne, som oftest den adm. direktør, der beslutter sig for at gøre forandringerne mere radikale og formulerer en ny strategi. Denne afhandling tager del i diskussionen om, hvad der så efterfølgende sker, ved at analysere, hvem strategierne er, hvordan de skaber mening med strategien, hvilke projekter/processer de iværksætter, og hvordan den daglige organisering og strategisering influerer på og skaber hinanden.

Med et socialkonstruktionistisk og relationelt perspektiv har jeg foretaget et casestudie i Virksomheden, hvor jeg gennem 1½ år har studeret, hvordan otte ledere på forskellige ledelsesniveauer har arbejdet med at operationalisere strategien primært gennem værdibaseret ledelse. I den periode har jeg besøgt Virksomheden regelmæssigt, jeg har afholdt 30 interview-samtaler, observeret 24 møder/kurser og studeret forskellige former for materiale kommende fra og omhandlende Virksomheden. Baseret på det materiale har jeg, med solid støtte fra narrativ og fænomenologisk forskningsmetodik, skrevet otte arbejdslivshistorier. Disse historier illustrerer, hvordan de otte aktører på forskellig vis har arbejdet med at operationalisere strategien og gøre den til en del af deres daglige organisering. Historierne viser, at der er forskellige opfattelser af, hvad værdibaseret ledelse handler om, og hvordan det skal praktiseres i Virksomheden.

De forskellige opfattelser af værdibaseret ledelse bliver yderligere illustreret i afhandlingen gennem analyser af udvalgte scener fra kurser/møder. Disse scener viser, hvordan aktørerne positionerer hinanden og relationelt forsøger at skabe mening med hinanden. Disse forsøg på at skabe mening omhandler indledningsvis mere generelle forståelser af strategi, senere hen koncentrerer forsøgene sig mere konkret om, hvordan værdibaseret ledelse skal praktiseres i Virksomheden. De analyserede scener illustrerer også, hvordan det relativt enkelt lykkedes for nogle aktører at skabe mening med hinanden, hvorimod andre aktører oplever store vanskeligheder, når de forsøger at skabe mening med hinanden.

Disse forsøg på at skabe mening sammen finder sted hver dag og omhandler ofte daglige udfordringer og uenigheder. Udfordringer og uenigheder, der ikke kan føres tilbage til de strategiske dokumenter, men ikke desto mindre viser sig at være af strategisk betydning, når strategien skal omsættes til praksis i dagligdagen. Analyserne viser, at de er vigtige, fordi de påvirker, hvordan Virksomheden er organiseret, hvordan aktørerne opfatter sig selv, andre aktører og verden og dermed også, hvordan Virksomheden kommunikerer med kunder og andre interessenter.

Intentionen med denne afhandling er at bidrage til den meget aktive debat, der er i gang mellem forskellige forskningsgrupper. Debatten omhandler diskussioner om, hvad strategi handler om og, for mit tilfælde, i særdeleshed i relation til samspillet mellem strategier og deres strategisering. Dette spørgsmål bliver i særdeleshed taget op inden for mere procesorienterede tilgange til strategi, herunder i høj grad af forskere indenfor Strategy-as-Practice gruppen. Ved at arbejde med og kombinere begreber som: relationer, sensemaking, handling, 'generaliserede andre', signifikante andre, meningsgenerering, gestus, positionering og story line indenfor et organiserings-, becoming-, wayfinding og strategiseringsperspektiv, når jeg frem til en dynamisk metode og en teoretisk ramme, der gør det muligt at forstå det konstituerende samspil mellem strategisering og organisering. Forhåbentlig vil denne metodiske og teoretiske ramme tilføre ny forståelse til strategifeltet og inspirere andre til at følge samme vej.

Afhandlingen starter med at præsentere Virksomheden gennem fire historier, der præsenterer forskellige perspektiver på Virksomheden. Derefter bliver afhandlingens forskningsspørgsmål defineret til at omhandle samspillet mellem strategisering og organisering. Dette gennemgående samspil er styrende for studierne og analyserne gennem afhandlingen. Den metodiske og teoretiske ramme opbygges gennem en gradvis integration af empiriske analyser og teori, der omhandler de begreber og problemstillinger, der udgør afhandlingen.

De primære begreber og problemstillinger omhandler: hvordan fire operative ledere relationelt arbejder med deres organisering gennem kontinuerlige forsøg på at skabe mening. Dette sker gennem fire arbejdslivshistorier, der omhandler deres organisering i form af deres daglige aktiviteter på deres arbejde. De næste primære problemstillinger, der tages op, er, hvordan to mellemledere forsøger at organisere deres hverdag og strategiserer for at gøre deres egen, de operative ledes og assistenternes dagligdag mere inspirerende og udfordrende. Dette sker også i form af arbejdslivshistorier, der analyseres og kombineres med analyser af udvalgte scener. Dette bliver efterfulgt af en analyse af, hvordan HR chefen forsøger at operationalisere strategien og gøre Virksomhedens værdier til en integreret del af den daglige organisering i Virksomheden. Analysen sker på baggrund af HR chefens arbejdslivshistorie og scener fra forskellige kurser. Analysen viser, at det er en vanskelig opgave, da der er flere og også modstridende opfattelser af, hvad værdierne repræsenterer, og hvordan de skal operationaliseres.

Omdrejningspunktet for de sidste analyser tager sit udgangspunkt i den administrerende direktørs daglige organisering. På baggrund af den administrerende direktørs arbejdslivshistorie præsenteres et perspektiv på, hvordan strategisering og organisering konstituerer hinanden gennem relationel meningsgenerering. Dette er udgangspunktet for at præsentere den sidste og afsluttende del af afhandlingen, der omhandler betydningen af hverdagens relationelle forsøg på at skabe mening, når en strategi skal operationaliseres.



## References

---

Ahlstrand, B., J. Lampel & H. Mintzberg (1998) *Strategy Safari. A Guided Tour through the Wilds of Strategic Management*, Prentice Hall Europe, Hemel Hempstead

Alvesson, Mats (2003) Beyond Neopositivists, Romantics, and Localists: A reflexive Approach to Interviews in organizational Research”, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 13 - 33

Alvesson, M. (2007) *Understanding Organizational Culture*, SAGE Publications, London

Alvesson M. & S. Sveningsson (2008) *Changing Organizational Culture Cultural change work in progress*, Routledge, London and New York

Balogun, J. (2006) Managing Change: Steering a Course between Intended Strategies and Unanticipated Outcomes, *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 30, pp. 26 - 49

Balogun, J. (2007) The Practice of Organizational Restructuring: From Design to Reality, *European Management Journal*, Vol. 25, Issue: 2, pp. 81 - 91

Balogun, J. & G. Johnson (2004) Organizational Restructuring and Middle Manager Sensemaking, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 523 - 549

Balogun, J. & G. Johnson (2005) From Intended Strategies to Unintended Outcomes: The Impact of Change Recipient Sensemaking, *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26, no. 11, pp. 1573 – 1601

Barry, D. & M. Elmes (1997) Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of strategic Discourse, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 429 - 452

Berger, P. & T. Luckmann (1996) *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books, Garden City

Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (2000) *Den samfundsskabte virkelighed*, Lindhardt og Ringhof, Denmark

- Benson, J. K. (1977) Organizations: A Dialectical View, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 22, pp. 1 - 21
- Boje, D. (1991) The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 36, pp.106 - 126
- Boje, D. (2002) *Narrative Methods for Organizational & Communication Research*, SAGE Publication, London
- Boje, D. (2008) *Storytelling Organizations*, SAGE Publications, London
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA
- Carter, C., S.R. Clegg and M. Kornberger (2008). Strategy as practice? *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 6. Pp. 83 - 99
- Chia, R. (2004) Strategy-as-practice: reflections on the research agenda, *European Management Review*, Vol. 1, pp. 29 – 34
- Chia, R. (1995) From Modern to Postmodern Organizational Analysis, *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 579 - 604
- Chia, R. (1996) The Problem of Reflexivity in Organizational Research: Towards a Postmodern Science of Organization, *Organization*, Vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 31 - 59
- Chia, R. (1999) A 'Rhizomic' Model of Organizational Change and transformation: Perspective from a Metaphysics of Change, *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 10, Iss. 3, pp. 209 - 227
- Chia, R. & R. Holt (2008) *Strategy as wayfinding*, Paper for the 24<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium, Amsterdam, June 2008
- Chia, R. & R. Holt (2009) *Strategy Without Design. The Silent Efficacy of Indirect Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Christensen, J. B. & P. Darmer (2004) *What is Organizational Culture Becoming?*, LOK Working Paper, No. 1

Clark, W. W. & M. Fast (2008) *Qualitative Economics. Toward a science of Economics*, Coxmore Publishing Company, Oxford

Clegg, S. C. Hardy & W.R. Nord (1996). *Handbook of Organization Studies*. SAGE, London

Clegg, S., C. Carter & M. Kornberger (2004) 'Get up, I feel like being a strategy machine', *European Management Review*, Vol 1, pp. 21 - 28

Clegg, S. R., M. Kornberger & C Rhodes (2005) Learning/Becoming/Organizing, *Organization*, Vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 147 - 167

Czarniawska, B. (2003) Social Constructionism and Organization Studies, IN Westwood, R. & S. Clegg (2003) *Debating Organizations: point-counterpoint in organization studies*, Wiley-Blackwell, USA

Czarniawska, B. (2004) *Narratives in Social Science Research*, SAGE Publications, London, California, New Delhi

Czarniawska, B. (2007) *Shadowing and Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies*, Liber, Copenhagen Business School Press, Universitetsforlaget, Ljubljana

Davies, B. & R. Harré (1990) Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, pp. 43 - 63

Davies, B. & R. Harré (2001) Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves, IN Wetherell, M., S. Taylor & S. J. Yates (2001) *Discourse Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London

Eisenhardt, K. (1989) Building Theories from Case Study Research, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 532 - 550

Feldman, M. S. & B. T. Pentland (2003) Reconceptualizing Organizational Routines as a Source of

- Flexibility and Change, *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Vol. 48, pp. 94 - 118
- Feldman, M. S. & A. Rafaeli (2002) Organizational Routines as Sources of Connections and Understandings, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 309 – 331
- Gabriel (2000) *Storytelling in Organizations. Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Geertz, C. (1993) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Fontana Press, London
- Gergen, K. (2001) *Social Construction in Context*, SAGE Publication, London.
- Gergen, K. (2001) Self-Narration in Social Life, IN Wetherell, M., S. Taylor & S. J. Yates (2001) *Discourse Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London
- Gergen, K. (2009) *Relational Being Beyond Self and Community*, Oxford University Press Inc. New York
- Gergen K. & T. Thatchenkery (2004) Organization Science as Social Construction Postmodern Potentials, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 228 - 249
- Gioia, D. A. & K. Chittipeddi (1991) Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation, *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 12, no. 6, pp. 433 - 448
- Ingold 2008 *Lines. A Brief Story*, Routledge, Oxon
- Ingold, T. (2009) Stories against Classification. Transport, Wayfaring and the Integration of Knowledge IN Baumford S. & J. Leach (2009) *Kinship and Beyond. The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, UK
- James, W. (1909) *A Pluralistic Universe*, Longmans, Green and Co, New York
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2005) *Strategy as Practice – an activity-based approach*, SAGE Publications, London

- Jarzabkowski, P., J. Balogun & D. Seidl (2007) Strategizing: The challenge of a practice perspective, *Human Relations*, Vol 60 no. 5, pp. 5 - 27
- Johnson, G., A. Langley, L. Melin & R. Whittington (2007) *Strategy as Practice. Research Directions and Resources*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Johnson, G, K. Scholes & R. Whittington (2008) *Exploring Corporate Strategy*, FT Prentice Hall, Harlow, 8<sup>th</sup> ed.
- Johnson, P., J. Balogun & N. Beech (2010) Researching strategists and their identity in practice: building 'close-with', IN Golsorkhi D. et al (2010) *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Kvale, S. (1992) *Ten Standard Responses to Qualitative Research*, Institute of Psychology, Aarhus University, Denmark
- Kvale, S. (2000) *Interview En introduction til det kvalitative forskningsinterview*, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København
- Lynch, R. (2003). *Corporate Strategy*. Harlow: FT Prentice Hall, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.
- March, J. G. (1981) Footnotes to Organizational Change, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 563 - 577
- Martin, J., M. S. Feldman, M. J. Hatch & S. B. Sitkin (1983) The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 28, pp. 438 - 453
- Mead, G. H. (1974) *Mind, Self & Society From the standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Nineteenth Impression. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
- Mintzberg, H. (1978) Patterns in Strategy Formation, *Management Science*, Vol. 24, no. 9, pp. 934 - 948
- Mintzberg, H. (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, FT Prentice Hall, Harlow

- Mintzberg, H., B. Ahlstrand & J. Lampel (1998) *Strategy Safari A guided Tour through the Wilds of Strategic Management*, Prentice Hall Europe, UK
- Mintzberg, H. & J. Lampel (2001) Strategiprocesen under overvejelse, *Ledelse i dag*, Årgang 11, nr. 5. pp. 448 - 464
- Mintzberg, H. & J. A. Waters (1985) Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent, *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 6, pp. 257 - 272
- Orlikowski, W. J. (1996) Improvising Organizational Transformation Over Time: A Situated Change Perspective, *Information System Research*, Vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 63 - 92
- Orlikowski, W. J. & J. D. Hofman (1997) An Improvisational Model of Change Management: The Case of Groupware Technologies, to appear in: *Sloan Management Review*, Winter 1997
- Orlikowski, W. J. (2010) Practice in research: phenomenon, perspective and philosophy, IN Golsorkhi D. et al (2010) *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Orr, J. (1996) *Talking about Machines. An Ethnography of a Modern Job*, Cornell University Press, London
- Pettigrew, A. (1985) *The awakening Giant: Continuity and change in imperial Chemical Industries*, Blackwell, Oxford Oxfordshire, New York, NY
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1992) The Character and Significance of Strategy Process Research, *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 13, pp. 5 - 16
- Pettigrew, A. M., R.W. Woodman & K. S. Cameron (2001) Studying Organizational Change and Development: Challenges for Future Research, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 697 - 713
- Rasche, A. and R. Chia (2009) Researching Strategy Practice: A Genealogical Social Theory Perspective, *Organizational Studies*, Vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 713 - 734

Regner, P. (2003) Strategy Creation in the Periphery: Inductive Versus Deductive Strategy Making, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 40, pp. 57 - 82

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research Second Edition*, Blackwell Publishing, UK

Rouleau, L. (2005) Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol 42, pp.1413 - 1441

Rorty, R. (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey

Samra-Fredericks, D. (2003) Strategizing as Lived Experience and Strategists' Everyday Efforts to Shape Strategic Direction, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 1, pp.141 - 174

Schütz, A. (1967) *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague

Schütz, A. (1964) *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague

Schütz, A. (1966) *Collected Papers III. Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague

Schütz, A. (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press,

Scott, W. R. & G. F. Davis (2007) *Organizations and Organizing. Rational, Natural, and Open System Perspectives*, Pearson Education International, Upper Saddle River NJ

Silverman, D. & B. Torode (1980) *The Material Word. Some theories of language and its limits*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

Tsoukas, H. & Chia, R. (2002) On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change, *Organization Science*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct.), pp. 567 - 582

Vološinov, V. (1973) *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, Seminar Press, USA

Weick, K. (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organising*, McGraw-Hill, USA

Weick, K. (1988) Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 305 - 317

Weick, K. & R. E. Quinn (1999) Organizational Change and Development, *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 50, pp. 361 - 386

Weick, K. & K. H. Roberts (1993) Collective Minds in Organizations: Heedful Interrelating on Flight Decks, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 38, pp. 357 - 381

Weick, K., K. Sutcliffe & D. Obstfeld (2005) Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking, *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 409 - 421

Whittington, R., P. Jarzabkowski, M. Mayer, E. Mounoud, J. Nahapiet & L. Roleau (2003) Taking Strategy seriously. Responsibility and Reform for an Important Social Practice, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 12, pp. 396 - 409

Whittington, R., E. Molloy, M. Mayer & A. Smith (2006) Practice of Strategising/Organising. Broadening Strategic Work and Skills, *Long Range Planning*, No. 39, pp. 615 - 629

Whittington, R. (2006) Completing the Practice Turn in Strategy Research, *Organization Studies*, Vol. 27, pp. 613 – 634

Yin, R. (1981) The Case Study Crisis: Some Answers, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 58 - 65