ORIGINAL RESEARCH

'…These Workshops are like Sunday´s Church Visit – but then, it's Monday Again…'—using Understanding to Bridge Ambitious Talk and Action

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Abstract

Organisational renewal and change often include the experience of a dichotomy between talk and action, leading to increasing skepticism about organisational change initiatives. Our action research is based on a single case study and explores how the divide between talk and action can be overcome to manage change. The study reveals an often-neglected aspect of organisational communication; in addition to utterance and information, successful communication requires understanding to find the missing link between talk and action, as well as creating impact in change processes. The article shows how an intervention can be built on communicative understanding, putting the Luhmannian approach into practice: introducing regular organisation-wide feedback on a change initiative through reflection workshops helped foster understanding of change initiatives and supported bridging the gap between talk and action.

Keywords Talk · Action · Communication · Change · Self renewal · Systemic action research

Introduction

'These workshops are like Sunday's church visit – but, then it's Monday again…'; a participating manager's statement during our research project workshop summarised the challenges of the ongoing change process. He expressed what the management team later called the talk and action gap – the gap between words, announcements, communication and discussion on one side and doing, practice and acting on the other side. Every time, after having talked and discussed in meetings or workshops what the organisation needed

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to do to become more competitive, daily life reasserted itself and the identified 'to-dos' remained hopeful resolutions with no subsequent action.

One of the well-known key challenges in change management is putting talk into action. Literature documents interest in this challenge for a better understanding of change processes and change management (e.g., Edmondson et al. 2001; Hayes 2008; Schwarz et al. 2011; Vardaman et al. 2012). Much has been written about how organisations try to accomplish what they set out to do: identify difficulties in closing the talk and action gap and manage this challenge (e.g., Boje et al. 2016; Bryant and Higgins 2010; Nutt 1998; Zajac and Westphal 1995). Studies on change endeavours, e.g. in CSR literature, critically discuss organisations that announce ideals and intentions, leading to a decoupling from empirical evidence (Boiral 2007; Khan et al. 2007). However, aspirational talk does have the potential to produce real change (Christensen et al. 2013).

Action reseach exploring the relationship between communication and action has long been pointing to the lack of linkage between top management´s communication and the work organization and its value creation process (Ennals annnd Gustavsen 1999). Moreover, the underlying assumption of a Tayloristic top-down management approach is critizised as insufficient to deal with the complex nature of change (Gustavsen 1996). Thus action reseachers argue for participation, engagement and particularly dialogue as ways to collaborating in complex contexts and understanding differences as a valuable resource for collaborative learning (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999).

Research on the talk and action gap focuses primarily on utterance of information, recommending more precise language to bridge the gap between talk and action, assuming that talking leads more clearly to the right actions (e.g., Chreim 2002; Hardy et al. 2000; Lewis 2006). McClellan criticises this position, (2011 467) arguing that 'the relationship between communication and change is often oversimplified' in this approach and that communication, 'from this perspective, is typically seen as a tool to convey ideas from one person, or group, to another, persuade others that change is necessary for the organisation, or manage the task of implementing change'. He stresses that 'alternative perspectives of communication are necessary to better understand why change fails and encourage more successful change practices' (McClellan 2011 468). Recent articles move away from viewing communication as a tool, talk as means and action as end (e.g., Barrett et al. 1995; Bisel and Barge 2011; Hendry and Seidl 2002; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Llewellyn and Harrison 2006; Deetz and McClellan 2009). Moreover, some literature analyses not just the utterance of information in change processes, but the understanding of that information (Cornelissen et al. 2011; Gioia et al. 1994; Hardy et al. 2000; Heracleous and Barrett 2001). But even this stream of literature focuses on the strategic impact of utterance as the active part in the communication process, framing understanding as a passive part of the change process.

Following McClellan's call for different perspectives and a deeper comprehension of the talk and action gap in change processes, we present our action research that works to bridge the gap in an engineering company's change process. The approach is inspired by Luhmann´s understanding of communication and driven by the idea of refocusing change efforts systematically, defining understanding as a central part of change-communication and a pivotal point around which to adjust the change process. Luhmann (2006 47) argues that communication only 'happens when information that has been uttered is understood'. Inspired by this perspective, the first author co-designed the implementation of an action research approach refocusing on understanding in the company's change process. This approach often helped talk to lead to action; we do not argue in this article that our action research approach always guarantees closing the talk and action gap in change processes. However, refocusing systematically on understanding information can contribute to closing

the gap. Therefore, our research question is: *how does understanding relate to the talk and action gap in a change process?*

To answer the research question, we next highlight our theoretical lens by introducing Luhmann's (1995, 2011) perspective on communication and action. As a next step, we present our method: empirical context and action research. After that, we describe our action research process and findings with the engineering company. We close with discussion and conclusion, reflecting critically on our research – including its limitations.

Theoretical Lens: Talk, Decision, and Action from a Luhmannian Perspective

From our perspective, communication not only plays an important role in organisations, it is constitutive of organisation. Weick Karl (1979) already portrays organisations as dynamic processes of communication. Recently, scholars who define organisations as constituted by communication have suggested various theories, all depicting the communicative constitution of organisation (CCO). The Luhmannian perspective is, along with the Montreal School of Organisational Communication and McPhee's Four Flows Model, one of the three main CCO perspective schools that analyse the constitutive role of communication through a process lens (e.g., Bencherki and Cooren 2011; Cooren et al. 2008; McPhee 2015; Schoeneborn et al. 2014; Vásquez et al. 2016). Until now, we have seen few empirical studies on the talk and action gap from a CCO perspective. However, there are increasing calls for studies inspired by Luhmann´s theory, to empirically 'demonstrate the benefits of using this systems approach to gain insight into the communicative constitution of organisations' (Brummans et al. 2014, p. 186).

Most literature on the talk and action gap in change processes analyses the utterance of information to explain why organisations fail to do what they state. Even literature analysing both utterance and understanding information defines utterance as the active part and pivotal point in the communication process to enhance understanding and manage the change process (e.g., Cornelissen et al. 2011; Gioia et al. 1994; Hardy et al. 2000). One reason for the focus on utterance seems to be that literature on the talk and action gap in change processes usually, explicitly or implicitly, defines communication as speech, or the act of uttering information affecting other actions and speech acts (Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Hardy et al. 2000; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Schwarz et al. 2011; Steyaert et al. 1996; Zajac and Westphal 1995). Understanding is not included in the theoretical concept.

Luhmann's (1995) social systems theory (SST) offers a different concept of communication, integrating understanding as a necessary component of communication. SST also defines utterance not as action, as speech-act theory does, but action as utterance – as something that talks to us and needs to be understood. From a Luhmannian perspective, understanding is the pivotal point for understanding the talk and action gap.

In SST and its organisation theory, social systems like society, organisations and interactions are communication systems (1995, 2011). They produce and reproduce themselves in ongoing processes where communications connect to each other. The connection of one communication to another is only successful when the communication is understood. For instance, if a manager presents a new corporate strategy and no one understands (for any reason at all), the presentation is not communication, but more self-talk. It does not really matter, for the ongoing process of communication, if the communication is understood in the 'right' or ' 'wrong' way, or how much is understood. The important point is that

somebody or something has to understand something so that communication can continue. This is why Luhmann (1995, 2006) defines communication as the understanding of stated information. He argues that communication 'only happens when information that has been uttered is understood' (Luhmann 2006 47). If we speak and nobody understands, at least a little bit, hears, or sees that we are speaking, it is as if we speak to ourselves, but do not communicate in a strict (i.e. social) sense. But if, and only if, someone understands something, regardless of what he or she understands, communication is accomplished. Thus, understanding plays a key role and an active part in communication processes determining whether or not communication can continue. From this perspective, communication is not only constitutive for organisations (Schoeneborn et al. 2014), but uttering – and especially understanding – information can determine how the organisation develops.

But Luhmann is even more specific on organisational communication; like March and Simon (1958), he defines organisation as constituted from decisions. But, seeing social systems, like organisations, as communication systems, Luhmann (2011) understands decisions as a particular form of communication that he calls 'decision communication': the communication of a selection from several alternative possibilities. Uttered information does not necessarily become a decision, unless it is taken as a premise for a follow decision leading to an organisational impact. For instance, the decision to hire a new employee only becomes a decision if subsequent steps, like putting together a job profile, posting a job offer and inviting candidates, follow the initial decision.

Thus, the constitution of decision communications is a paradox. The uttered information – intended to be a decision – only becomes one when a subsequent decision takes the former as a premise. Hence, the following decision determines whether the initial uttered information remains just 'noise', or whether it becomes a 'real' decision. From a Luhmannian perspective, decision communications are central to organisations' existence and their potential to change. As self-referential systems, organisations are made up of decision communication ensuring continuance and growth, as well as stability and change.

Like talk, decisions only achieve social impact if someone understands something; from a Luhmannian perspective, someone must understand the action (unless it lacks social impact) (Luhmann 1995). If we act, but no one sees and understands the action or its result, neither will have social impact. Moreover, only if someone attributes the action in communication processes to us, do we become 'responsible' for that action and get sanctions or rewards. The social impact of our action depends on how others understand it. In this way, action is utterance and a part of communication processes, as soon as it produces social impact and someone understands the action.

From this perspective, talk, decision and action will not have any organisational impact unless they are understood and become part of a communication processes. Assuming that understanding plays a central role in organisational constitution and change processes, the following action research project focuses on improving understanding to close the talk and action gap in the change process.

Empirical Context and Method

The following section describes the engineering company research context, its change project and action research at the company.

Trans Co and the Company Context

Trans Co is part of a big multinational corporation. It has about 1400 people working in different parts of Europe, providing electrical equipment for the transport industry. Although known for good engineering quality of its products and services, the company sees itself increasingly confronted with a dynamic and uncertain market environment. Higher requirements in tender processes, more competition and increasing internationalisation, as well as other developments, are creating a more unstable financial situation. Thus, Trans Co's holding entity has set a target to increase the financial result by 30% within the next three years. The company also has a second strategic objective: strengthening innovation to catch up to the competition and to become more creative again.

To foster organisational renewal, Trans Co has attempted numerous initiatives in the past (among others, a culture analysis with a consulting company, various change projects, a process optimization initiative, interface workshops between different departments) to strengthen perceived weak points in the company. However, these measures – according to the management team – have not led to improved cooperation between departments, the anticipated improvement, or organisational renewal.

Method

To address the challenges of bringing talk and action together, we employed an action research approach to study the effect of organisational understanding, feedback and reflection on the talk and action gap and give our research practical relevance (Lewin 1946; Reason and Bradbury 2008; Touboulic and Walker 2016). Unlike other methods, action research does not try to reduce the observer's perspective; on the contrary, it puts it in the middle of all action (Argyris and Schön 1989; Burns 2007; Elden and Chisholm 1993; Greenwood et al. 1993; Whyte et al. 1991), making it ideally suited to the Theory of Social Systems (Luhmann 1995). Moreover, in action research, the researcher is an active player in two forms of practice: research practice and management practice. This, in turn, enables reflexion in two specific ways.

First, the researcher observes the researched system, actions of the system and actions in the system as reflection. As part of the system, he or she reflects on the system – and his or her interactions as practitioner in the system – leading to a better understanding of practice (Palshaugen 2009). This perspective is based on the philosophy of understanding things through acting, the basis of action learning (Revans 1977). We must be aware of action research's pros and cons, as well as its challenges (Cassell and Johnson 2006; Cooke 2006; Eden and Huxham 1996); the reflection of own practice gives us a better understanding of all practice.

Second, the researcher can reflect the system: his or her practical action and reflections, or scientific practice, in communication with practitioners. Practical solutions and theoretical work are thus co-creations of a team of professional practitioners and scientists. That makes action research a collective process of bringing important issues to the surface and testing ideas, concepts and practices, guaranteeing the inter-subjectivity of science and practice (Eden and Huxham 1996; Greenwood and Levin 2008).

Action research usually provides excellent access to research areas, enabling observation of daily life events in the field; these can have an important impact on organisational practices (Argyris 1993). There are many good reasons to choose action research for our context and our research question; this approach gave us detailed insights into the process of organisational

renewal. The data collection is culled from discussions, reflections and daily project work, resulting in numerous documents and concepts, which include the course of action and solutions.

Almost two years of action research started in April Year 1, after the HR director of Trans Co and the corporate university head contacted the first author, seeking support for a change agenda called 'competitiveness program'; our research ended in February Year 3. The process entailed typical action research phases, in an iterative and very overlapping way: planning, executing, and reflecting (Lewin 1946). As we know from our practical work as well as literature, this fluent, overlapping, and cyclical method can be typical (Kocher et al. 2011). Table 1 gives an overview of our action research project phases.

Action Research at Trans Co

The following section describes the empirical context and describes our action research at Trans Co in detail.

Table 1 Project phases of action research

Time	Action Research	Phase
Spring Year 1	1. Focus Group	reflection
Summer Year 1	2. Workshop with the top management	reflection & planning
Fall Year 1	3. 2. Workshop with the top management	reflection & planning
Fall Year 1	4. Training & preparation –workshop with the project leaders	reflection & executing
Winter Year 1	5. 3. Workshop with the top management	reflection & planning
Winter Year 1	6. Large group event	reflection & executing
Spring Year 2	7. Resonance monitor 1	reflection
Spring Year 2	8. Pit-stops round 1 (14 workshops)	reflection/ planning
Spring Year 2	9. Reflection between the actions researcher and the consultants	reflection
Spring Year 2	10. Workshop with the top management	reflection & planning
Spring Year 2	11. Actions taken by the projects	executing
Summer Year 2	12. Resonance monitor 2	reflection
Summer Year 2	13. Pit-stops round 2 (14 workshops)	reflection/ planning
Summer Year 2	14. Reflection between the actions researcher and the consultants	reflection
Summer Year 2	15. Workshop with the top management	planning/ reflection
Summer Year 2	16. Actions taken by the projects	executing
Fall Year 2	17. Resonance monitor 3	reflection
Fall Year 2	18. Pit-stops round 3 (14 Workshops)	reflection/ planning
Fall Year 2	19. Reflection between the actions researcher and the consultants	reflection
Fall Year 2	20. Workshop with the top management	planning/ reflection
Fall Year 2	21. Actions taken by the projects	executing
Winter Year 2	22. Final large group event	reflection & planning
Spring Year 3	23. Reflection with the internal consultants of Trans Co	reflection
Fall Year 3	24. After action review with student group	reflection & planning

Situation Year 1

Trans Co is positioned in an increasingly dynamic market, where competition is intensifying; internationalisation makes it more challenging for organisations to execute projects. In the past, Trans Co's projects were developed, sold and delivered in a relatively stable environment. The company held a competitive position in a market where quality gradually improved, products had a long life cycle and financial yields were quite stable. Trans Co's organisation was structured functionally (sales, engineering, service) and led hierarchically.

Trans Co had also concentrated strongly on tailor-made product development that increased the number of different products in the so-called 'installed base', which required service; they focused less on the optimisation of their processes and the standardisation of their products. By the time of the action research project, top management was – due to the radically changed strategic environment—focusing strongly on industrialising the business and trying to reduce customer-specific product developments in favour of standardised processes.

Before Year 1, management had recognised that Trans Co suffered from lack of cooperation between the different projects and departments. Projects were not managed in an integrated way, from initial customer contact up to product installation and service. Each functional department pursued its own individual strategy and optimisation. The organisation had developed a culture of finger-pointing, leading to a 'passing the buck' attitude and hide-and-seek games between the different departments, effectively hindering cooperation. To counteract this development, different change projects had already been attempted before our action research (e.g. a culture analysis, top management workshops and process optimisation projects). An organisational analysis produced various reasons for the problems and indicated that Trans Co put obstacles in its own way in many areas, preventing full cooperation.

However, many of those change projects, which had been initiated in the past (e. g. an initiative to improve cooperation through interface workshops between departments) showed only limited success. Employees described the pattern of cooperation self-critically as: 'fire fighting', symptom fighting instead 'eliminating the problem causes', lack of willingness to change, a paralyzing layer of middle managers and 'silo thinking'. Cohesion between department heads was described as 'limited' and divisional directors were not seen as acting in an integrated way, like a top management team. Instead, people observed strongly departmentally-oriented thinking and acting (a pattern the lower hierarchical levels mimicked in their interactions). Overall, management lacked shared strategic decision and action (despite a communicated strategic direction), but engaged strongly in fighting the day-to-day operational problems of current project delivery.

In addition to a lack of feedback and conflict culture, many experts ducked promotions, since they preferred to remain 'experts, instead of taking over management tasks. Many management positions remained vacant and the organisation was highly dependent on a few experts and their knowledge. In day-to-day and project business, 'fire-fighting' was a normal phenomenon and, due to operational pressure, top management often postponed work on the company's long term strategic orientation.

How Trans Co Dealt with Renewal

In response to increasing external pressure, the dynamic market environment and growing competition threats, Trans Co decided to adapt its organisation by instituting more efficient processes, more flexible and lateral communication and cooperation and more standardisation of products and services. To achieve these objectives, many organisational changes were deemed necessary.

To kick-start this process, the management of Trans Co initiated 40 projects, under the umbrella of a 'Competitiveness Program'. The projects revolved not only around technical development and financial objectives, but were intended primarily to sustainably improve the company's cooperation and change competences; improvement of communication and cooperation within the organisation were main goals of the competitiveness program. Management was convinced that improved lateral communication and cooperation was necessary to achieve objectives set by the holding entity, as well as the organisational renewal. They claimed that the traditional, centrally led, functional organisation had to improve lateral communication between departments, without using hierarchical structures.

Why Things did not Develop as Intended

By Year 1, Trans Co had already undertaken several initiatives, projects, workshops and large group events in response to the lack of competitiveness and efficiency, with only limited success; the organisation saw no lasting change. If any concrete measures to improve efficiency or the competitiveness of the organisation emerged from these initiatives, they were usually rejected shortly after the ideas came up, or were announced by the management. Often the departments were – for different reasons – unable to put them into action.

A Metaphor for the Failure to Bring Together Talk and Action

The interviews and focus groups in the beginning of the action research process, as well as discussions in the later stages of the project, revealed a consistently described pattern of interaction in the organisation: a gap between talk and action. One of the managers used the metaphor of 'these workshops are like Sunday´s church visit – but then it's Monday again…' to describe the phenomenon of decisions announced by a group of managers (often the top management team) and never put into practice.

Scrutinising the organisation's history indicated that this pattern seemed to make sense; for many years, the company's ownership had changed hands repeatedly. Several of these owners (including top management they appointed) were unfamiliar with Trans Co's industry and business. During these times, the gap between talk (i.e. top management decisions) and organisational action had sometimes functioned to fulfil new owner's expectations (talk), but also to prevent damage to the business (action). During feedback sessions, we thus reframed the stressful phenomenon as a long-developed company-specific 'competence' that neatly divided talk and action. Previously, this might have made sense and, even today, might perhaps be a way to handle different expectations.

To encourage a fresh start, the 'Competitiveness Program' was announced, focusing on improving company competitiveness and safeguarding its survival in an increasingly difficult market environment. Since Trans Co's product prices were now a more important factor in their bids, top management asserted that only more cost efficiency and competitiveness could secure jobs and the organisation's future existence. Management referred to increasing competition by stressing recent mergers and take-overs in their industry and competitors´ aggressive pricing policy, explaining that the only possible answer to this development was to optimise organisational workflows, bring innovative products to the market and improve order processing efficiency. Management was determined that deeds should follow words and pledged to increase competitiveness over the long term. In Year 1, they announced Competitiveness Program goals: to achieve a minimum of 30% efficiency gains by 2015 and strongly support the organisation in consistent efficiency improvements.

Start of the Cooperation

Our action research with Trans Co started in Year 1, with an initial focus group of 6 managers and subsequent individual interviews that did reveal problems; but, encouragingly, employees strongly identified with the company; it was, certainly a wellspring of expertise, with many well-qualified specialists possessing unique functional knowledge in the industry. A high order intake and some very successful recent bids characterised the overall situation and cooperation worked very well within the departments. Ironically, these positive aspects seemed to reduce appetite for change in the company and made it even more challenging to achieve the intended organisational renewal.

During a first workshop in the summer of Year 1, the top management team was presented (following the action researcher and the internal consultants' suggestion) with an idea to support the competitiveness program through an unconventional communication approach. The rationale behind the approach was Luhmann's comprehension of communication comprising understanding (in addition to information and utterance) as central for the realisation of successful communication. To put Luhmann into practice and trigger feedback and reflection, the project team recommended a dual intervention strategy: an online platform ('resonance monitor') should provide project information and consistently invite organisational members to give feedback. Then, regular reflection workshops on the projects with important project stakeholder ('pit stops') would offer opportunities to reflect on organisational feedback, improve cross-functional understanding of the projects and set up concrete next steps to make progress.

Top management finally agreed on the transparent online presentation of 14 most important competitiveness program projects to the whole Trans Co organisation, asking for direct feedback on perceived importance for the company's competitiveness.

This communicative approach was an effort to involve employees in the change process, as well as fostering understanding by entering into a process of mutual feedback about the 'hows and whys' of the different competitiveness program projects; the feedback idea aimed at illustrating different understanding of the projects within the organisation. Projects were thus given maximum organisational exposure, the opportunity for very open and direct feedback (resonance monitor) and occasions were provided to reflect on organisational feedback and decide on concrete action (pit stops). The concrete actions, in turn, should 'talk' to the whole organisation, communicating

that management—and project management—are taking understanding of the projects seriously.

Discussion of how to present competitiveness program projects and ask the whole organisation for direct feedback led to an intense dialogue in the top management team. Some members criticised, that, this way, leadership would be turned upside down, since the whole workforce would ultimately decide which projects should be carried out and which not. Others stated that they would need coaching to handle organisational feedback adequately. Nevertheless, the team finally decided to take on the challenge and become much more transparent about projects to understand how the organisation perceived the progress of the projects and whether they made sense.

The Communicative Approach: Resonance Monitor and Pit Stops to Close theTalk and Action Gap

To support competitiveness program objectives, the top management team chose 14 projects, presented a couple of weeks later on the online resonance monitor, to the overall organisation. Top management started the program by handing over responsibility to a senior manager, as head of the competitiveness program and managers from the different departments responsible for functional and cross-functional projects. Some projects were already in an advanced stage and had produced first small successes; others were just beginning. A common element of all competitiveness program projects was their lack of a direct specific customer link; instead, they focused on technical, logistical, or organisational requirements. By establishing, e.g., a universal data model or an improving small project handling through two of the 14 projects, improved cooperation and performance could be demonstrated. The 14 selected projects were displayed on a resonance monitor – an online platform displaying current and easy-to-understand information about the projects – and frequent pit stops – reflection workshops on the projects with important project stakeholders – were held to reflect and put the reflections into action. Both resonance monitor and pit stops are presented in the next section.

Overall Program Structure

The overall program included three phases of evaluation with the resonance monitor and concluding pit stops for each project. Before, during and after these interventions, various meetings and conversations with the top management took place focusing on reflections about the competitiveness program, i.e., resonance monitor feedback from the 14 projects, as well as the role that the management had played within the identified organisational patterns. These patterns were derived from resonance monitor organisational feedback, as well as pit stops for the 14 projects. In various meetings and talks with competitiveness team members, internal consultants and the first author were able to identify particular patterns influencing organisational decision-making and the talk and action gap. This enabled, in turn, initiation of new decision-making patterns inspired by organisational feedback, reflection and awareness of decision-making paradoxes. Figure 1 presents the overall program structure.

Resonance Monitor: A central element supporting the projects (both putting them into practice and changing organisational communication) was the resonance monitor. This instrument presented 14 competitiveness project projects online on Trans Co's intranet platform, provided a clear description and invited employees to give feedback on the projects.
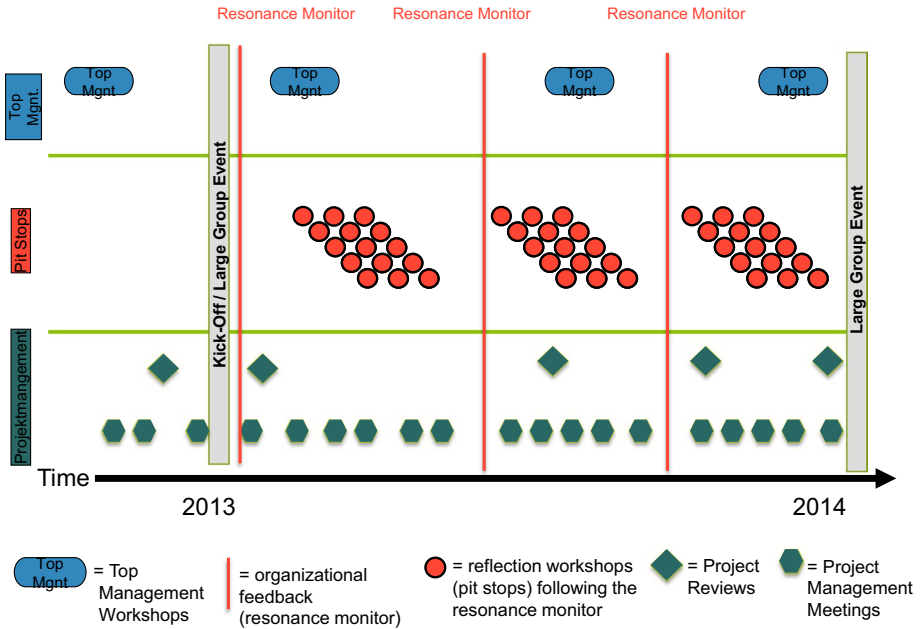
Fig. 1 Overall Program Structure

This way, work force members were able to familiarise themselves with the projects and program managers learned about how the organisation understood the different projects. They could invite comments, start discussions and evaluate improvement. Thus, the platform not only showed what projects were in place and what changes were going on to increase competitiveness, but management also received feedback about the organisation´s understanding and assumptions of projects and their progress.

From January Year 2 on, participants had the opportunity to get information about the projects, comment on them, give consistent feedback and exchange comments. They also contacted the members of the competitiveness program directly and fed in ideas and the CEO made himself available for feedbacks. Following an initial one-month phase of 'getting to know the projects', a first evaluation started in February Year 2. Members of the organisation were invited by top management to evaluate the 14 projects through three questions (which remained the same during the whole process): 1) Does the project support our competitiveness lastingly? 2) Will the project help to design work more efficiently? 3) How do you see the progress of the individual projects? The results of this survey were then published on the platform.

Top Management Makes Itself Vulnerable

Project leaders revealed during an introduction training on the resonance monitor that they felt almost left alone by top management, because the resonance monitor presented the project leaders as being solely responsible for competitiveness program projects. They felt that the top management was shifting all risk of criticism for the projects and the competitiveness program to the project leaders. During a top management meeting before the start

of the resonance monitor, this issue came up and the Trans Co CEO decided that the top management team would also present and publicly take responsibility for one of the competitiveness projects on the resonance monitor. In a private discussion with the first author, he expressed his hope that they would actually be heavily and openly criticised for their project on the resonance monitor, so that the team would get a clear negative signal from the organisation for their lack of performance as a team.

Pit Stops: At the same time, project managers of the 14 projects received support through regular pit stops – one-day meetings facilitated by internal or external consultants, including the second author, held with participants able to support the project. After each of the three rounds of the organisation-wide feedback on the 14 projects, project leaders gathered with some of their colleagues to reflect on the feedback on their projects. A facilitator supported each of these 36 pit stops (the action researcher and/or an internal or external consultant). Each pit stop followed the same agenda: 1) a short review on project status quo from the project leader, 2) presentation of the resonance monitor feedback results, 3) interpretation and evaluation of results, 4) an action learning set about a particular project issue or problem, 5) planning of communication and next steps. Table 2 presents the substructure of the action learning set (point 4).

Action learning sets on difficult issues from organisational feedback was especially helpful in finding new ways to make the projects more effective.

Creating Upward Understanding: Cclosing the Talk-Action Gap Bottom-Up

One of the 14 projects tried to develop a general data model to be implemented into the products, tools and systems to achieve substantial synergies and avoid additional engineering and programming expenditures. Although this project was already initiated before

Table 2 Sub structure of the action learning set

1. Presentation of the problem/situation in the competitiveness project
(10 ' presentation of the situation by the practitioner, group is listening)
• What is the general situation? Who is involved? What is the role of the presenting manager?
• What is the open question?
• What were possible previous solutions?
• Urgency: A solution is important (for the presenting practitioner) because…
• Measure of success: The exercise has been successful when…
2. Interview by the group to increase understanding of the situation (15 ')
• Investigate background, realise interdependencies, relationship between different elements presented
• Practitioner gives information
• Objective: Gain an extensive view on the situation, parties involved, influencing factors
3. Development of reflective feedback in the group (15 ' group; practitioner is listening)
• Development of reflective feedback of what reason for the problem is
• Exchange about the situation
• Emotional reactions while listening to the case
4. Reflection on the case and the reflective feedback expressed by the group (10 ' practitioner; group is just listening)
• What is comprehensible for me? What isn't?
• Which aspects in the reflective feedback shed a new light on the situation of the practitioner?
• No discussion on who is right or wrong!!
5. Development of alternative solutions (20 ' group; practitioner is listening)

the competitiveness program, it had made little progress. The central problem (which was being worked out during the first pit stop), involved top management´s priorities and a specific project relevance, which were not coordinated with provision of the necessary resources. When the project began, management had promised the project manager that his other projects would be handed over to colleagues; this, in fact, did not happen Moreover the project had been granted three additional team members, which the program leader did not receive.

During the pit stop – after one of the resonance monitor feedbacks – the group decided to bring the topic up to the CEO, to close the talk and action gap. The project leader wrote a dramatic letter to the CEO, stating that resources promised/granted for the project were still not there, making the project objectives impossible to achieve. To his delight, the project leader received an answer two days later and the necessary manpower arrived shortly afterward.

Obviously the letter had touched a nerve and illuminated the gap between perceived relevance and priority of the project (talk) and actual provision of resources, like additional project members (action). Only the notification action produced immediate action from the top management, enabling the recruiting of additional project members.

The top management team (as a group), also conducted pit stops on its project. Their project was actually quite low on the priority list and they struggled to improve the perception of the project´s competitiveness contribution to the organisation. In fact, they were using pit stops not only for the reflection on their project, but also for reflection and direction of the overall competitiveness program. In the course of this reflection, top management also touched on topics revolving around their own effectiveness, the role they played in the organisational renewal and, particularly, their own decision-making processes.

Understanding: Making a Decision Become a Decision

Starting with initial interviews, the talk and action gap was usually referred to as a lack of implementation of top management´s decisions by members of the organisation. Members of top management, as well as others in the organisation described how matters often thought to be 'decided' in the presence of other managers and colleagues did not find their way into organisational practice. Often 'decisions' were not communicated at all to the next level, or were questioned by the next level, interpreted in a different way, or simply ignored.

During one of the reflection meetings of the CEO and his assistant with the first author, the topic of discrepancies between what is 'decided' in the management team and what is actually done came up again. The discussion extended then to Luhmann's concept of the 'paradox of decision-making'. According to this process-oriented concept, a decision only becomes a decision, if a statement, which might be intended to be a decision, is followed by a decision. In other words: a decision only becomes a decision if it is 'elevated' to being a decision by a follow-up action or decision, when they serve as presuppositions for further decision. In other words: unless a decision is followed by subsequent decision, they are simply 'noise' for the organisation with no further consequences (Luhmann 2011).

The CEO and the assistants were both intrigued by the idea that what they 'decided' in their meetings and the matters they had 'decided on' were not decisions at all, unless they were picked up and, ex-post, 'appointed' to be a decision by a subsequent decision. The top management team discussed the paradox of decision-making and the different

understanding of decision-making the next day during their reflection on the Competitiveness program.

As a result of this discussion, different measures were set in place, like sending protocols, responsible decision reporting to each top manager's team and follow-up on the decisions in the top management meeting. These measures were designed to increase the likelihood that what the top management regarded as a decision—and had 'decided' in their meetings would be understood by the rest of the organisation – had a chance to 'become' a decision through subsequent actions by their teams. Thus, anticipating subsequent processes when making a decision is probably essential. Team discussion clearly redirected top management focus to ensure that participants not only received information, but also understood the decision.

After this top management meeting, a manager, who visited one of the pit stops the following week, was asked by one of the pit stop participants about what top management was currently discussing. He said that, according to the first author's strict standards, most of the 'decisions' that the top management thought they were making, were not decisions at all, since they were not followed by concrete actions or decisions in the organisation. Thus, they were currently working on ways to improve understanding with the rest of the organisation, about what they felt were important decisions for the company.

Discussion and Conclusion

We presented a communication perspective on the gap between talk (on one side) and decision and action on the other and explored how organisational feedback and reflection can foster renewal and change. For our action research project, the communicative approach, including the resonance monitor and pit stops as central elements helped foster understanding in the change communication.

The 'intervention rationale' behind this action research project was built on Luhmann's definition of communication as comprised of information, utterance and understanding. The practical centerpieces of the action research were the resonance monitor and pit stops, providing a context for an improved understanding that encouraged the cross-functional and inter-subjective connectivity of communication. The *resonance monitor* provided a mouthpiece and enabled an organisation-wide exchange of different competitive program and project understandings. The *pit stops* were important to reflect on the different conclusions, triggered through the resonance monitor.

Our action research contributes first to the debate about the challenge of putting talk into action in the context of organisational renewal and change (e.g., Hardy et al. 2000; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; McClellan 2011). Our stance reflects the non-linear perspective and the complexity in organisational change processes and incorporates both the possible fragility and impact of communication. Central to our argument is the inclusion of understanding as an element (beside information and utterance) in the communication concept and the definition of decision as a particular form of organisational communication (Luhmann 1995, 2011). From this perspective, we observe organisations as recursive constitutions of organisational communication that build a network, including decisions, actions, and observations – but always by uttering and understanding information. If we embrace a non-linear, even ambivalent, relationship of talk and action, it enables openness to the empirical phenomenon. As Brunsson (2003 202) argues:

'In traditional decision theory, a decision is taken to be indicative of a corresponding action that will occur in the future, or at least the decision is assumed to increase the probability of such an action. In practice, there are not always strong connections among talk, decision, and actions: people talk, decide, and act on separate occasions and in different contexts (...). It is possible to act without making a decision or talking about it and it is possible to talk and decide without actually acting on it. So there is reason to suspect that there will often be discrepancies among what is said, what is decided, and what is done.'

Second our research contributes to AR revolving around socio-technical systems design that looks back to studies in mining and textile industries showing how social and technical subsystem can be developed alternatively to tayloristic assumptions in an intergrative manner (Trist and Bamforth 1951) to tap the technical and social potential in a 'joint optimization of technical and social system' (Cherns 1987, p. 155). The Trans Co project shows parallels to Norwegian (Gustavsen 1996) and Dutch (De Sitter et al. 1997) sociotechnical systems design approaches in that it systematically integrated elements like resonance monitor and action learning sets fostering the lateral and cross-departmental communication and triggering dialogue amongst different subsystems and hierarchical layers about the organizational design and development. In fact such elements eventually lead to non-linear, cyclical and reflexive processes design as recent studies on the socio-technical design approach show (Imanghaliyeva et al. 2019; Winby and Mohrman 2018). It seems more than obvious that such organizational development processes become increasingly important in the digital era (Pasmore et al. 2019). Thus our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of talk, decision and action particularly in the context of socio-technical organizational change and showing the requirements that it takes to accomplish organizational impact. Moreover, we illustrate possible avenues to advance understanding by bridging talk and action using action research.

Third, our research might contribute to a different ('post-heroic') perspective on management and leadership in research and practice of organisational renewal. Models like the garbage can model (Cohen et al. 1972), Lindblom's approach of the 'Muddling thorough' (1959), Weick's 'loosely coupled systems' (1976) or Brunsson's 'organisation of hypocrisy' (Brunsson 1989) define the limitations of a linear talk-action link and coherent decision-making and question assumptions of choice, intentionality and rationality. Our findings and observations ('…these workshops are like church – but then it's Monday again…') support the doubts and limitations expressed about highly individualised concepts of leadership and reflect practitioners' reservations when experiencing the gap between decisions and actions.

Fourth, we provide additional evidence on the source and process of leadership and leadership legitimacy (Tourish 2014), viewing leadership as a co-creation process. As presented in our action research, top management was surprised about the paradox that decisions only become decision if they become premises for further decisions (Luhmann 2011). This highlights an important aspect of leadership and its legitimacy: only if decisions succeed in being connected premises for further decisions can leadership, its legitimacy, and those who are led, emerge. From this perspective, leadership legitimacy is the ability of leadership to influence organisational decision premises that permanently have to create and re-create themselves through practice.

Fifth, the concept of the resonance monitor – in combination with pit stops – suggests interesting insights about the relationship of face-to-face interaction to organisational

communication in decision making (Kieserling 1999; Luhmann 2011). On one hand, face-to-face-interaction fosters reflection, since the co-presence of inter-actors comprises verbal and non-verbal communication and enables quick questioning and understanding (Kieserling 1999 360). That was the reason to conceptualise the pit stops as face-to-face interaction. This enhanced understanding enables the connectivity of decisions and a bridge between talk and action. The findings might help connect different schools of understanding 'communication constituting organisations' CCO perspective (Schoeneborn et al. 2014). Our communicative approach of action research is, inter alia, driven by propositions about face-to-face interaction and organisational communication based on the Montreal school (Cooren 2010; Cooren et al. 2013) and a system-theoretical view on face-to-face interaction (Kieserling 1999). But mainly, it is influenced by the idea common to all three schools; communication constitutes organisation.

We do not argue that this presented communication approach is a general solution to put talk into action, nor that it was *the* solution in the Trans Co case. Yet, inspired by the Luhmannian understanding of communication in the analysis as well as in development of the intervention, we were able to put Luhmann into practice specifically by including the element of understanding (beside the elements of information and utterance) in our action research. In the case of Trans Co, the introduction of understanding (particularly by the resonance monitor and pit stops) in the organisational 'talk' enabled organisational 'action' leading to an improvement in organisational self-understanding. In other words: inclusion of understanding closed the gap between talk and action. The communicative approach fostered an understanding of and a sensibility for the fragility of the communicative circumstances and helped to create preconditions for a better communication and cooperation.

Beyond the limitations we share with other action research approaches (Eden and Huxham 1996), we would like to underline two more parameters: the generalisability and – in connection – practical impact. From our point of view, our action research had substantial practical impact, since we were able to support Trans Co in managing their challenges in the process of their organisational renewal. Our focus on the practical impact and the fact that we worked with a particular organisation impose limits for the generalisability of our research results, which we are more than happy to accept.

Declarations

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