



Organizational Responsiveness Through Dialogue

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Abstract

Conceiving of strategy as a response to challenges put to the organisation through communicative acts by its stakeholders, we propose that organisational responsiveness provides a conceptual lens at the macro level to reflect on strategy and organisation development. At the micro-level of responsive practices, we further suggest that dialogue as a reflective form of conversation allows for processes through which such responses can be collaboratively developed – literally in the process of answering. In reviewing strategy and organisational learning literature, we identified a behaviorist stimulus-response model being inherent to most concepts. In an interpretive case study through which we investigated the characteristics of a more active notion of responsiveness, we found that responsiveness as a macro phenomenon is grounded in the communicative acts that drive and shape the individual's perception of the organisation. Our typology captures these differences in responsiveness in a prototypical way, we conclude by reflecting on the challenges of organisational 'answerability'.

KEYWORDS: dialogue, interpretive case study, organisation development, organisational learning, responsiveness, strategy

Organisational Responsiveness through Dialogue – Toward a Theory of Responsive Practice

*“One gives something, the one does not have yet,
but that one invents in the process of giving the answer.”
Bernhard Waldenfels (1991)*

Introduction

For most organisations, the major strategic challenge seems to consist in their ability and capacity to respond to challenges put to them by the environment, i.e. through communicative acts of their stakeholders (e.g. Dill, 1976). However, most analytical concepts that attempt to describe this phenomenon in the management literature seem to remain at an abstract, macro-oriented level. In order to further develop these concepts and to shed light on some of their conceptual opportunities, we propose that such a socially constructed adaptive capacity requires the consideration of conversational practices at the micro level. Furthermore, we suggest that organisational responsiveness could serve as a conceptual lens in the development of an integrative concept of organisational adaptation in terms of macro level as well as micro level considerations.

Our propositions are derived from and rooted in our analysis and reflections on an organisation development (OD) project that was conducted from May 2001 to June 2002. It was within this project that participants explicitly referred to the notion of *responsiveness* as a capacity that they attributed to both the local unit as well as the overall organisation. Within the project, the participants – primary stakeholders of the organisation – identified three areas related to the notion of responsiveness: the need to feel being listened to, the experience of being understood, and the experience of some sort of satisfying response from the organisation. A structured analysis of the case led us to conclude that responsiveness as a macro-phenomenon emerges from and is embedded in the communicative practices at the micro level.

We will present our argument in four steps. Firstly, we review literature from strategy and organisational learning to discern ‘responsive aspects’ inherent to these concepts. This review

shows that most of these concepts rely on a reactive, behaviorist stimulus-response model of responsiveness. Not surprisingly, fundamental communicative implications of such a responsiveness are not being addressed. Therefore, most analysis seems to remain at the macro level without considering what responsive practices at the micro level could consist of.

Secondly, we will briefly outline the conceptual frame, goals, process as well as findings from the OD project that lead to our conclusions. The project aimed at engaging different primary stakeholder groups of the organisation into a reflective mode of conversation in the context of a wider strategy development process.

Thirdly, this project allowed us to conclude an enhanced understanding of responsiveness – both at the conceptual (macro) as well as practical (micro) level. Conceptually, we propose that responsiveness as a socially constructed attribute refers to the perceptual, reflective and adaptive dimension of an organisation. We propose a typology of responsiveness with which organisational responses and the practices that lead to them can be characterised – ranging from ‘autistic reflex’ to a ‘vigilant answer’. At the practical level, we propose that responsiveness refers to the ability of an organisation to increase the chances for reflective conversation. The project process and findings suggest that reflective dialogue renders visible differences, allows for reflection and hence, holds promise to develop more informed answers to stakeholder claims.

Finally, we suggest that such an active notion of responsiveness allows a more fine-grained reflection on organisational process of listening, understanding and answering at a conceptual level. Developing the conditions for the possibility of reflective dialogue is the first step toward a responsive practice at the micro level. We will discuss the implications of our propositions for research and practice in our concluding section.

1 Theory: Discerning Responsive Aspects in the Literature

Strategy

Within the vast body of *strategy* literature, we will investigate three normative schools of strategy formation that have been most influential in the strategy debate over the last decades. The design school of strategy formation (e.g. Andrews, 1987; Chandler, 1962; Christensen, 1987; Power, 1986) proposes strategy as a process of conception that aims at attaining a fit between internal capabilities of the organisation and external opportunities in its environment. The stimulus, i.e. the environment, is assumed to be stable and delineable. Then, it is considered the CEOs' task of developing a response in form of a strategy that is based on their educated, entrepreneurial judgment. Hence, responsiveness consists in a strategy formation as entrepreneurial response to match internal ability and environmental opportunities.

In contrast to the design school of strategy formation, the planning school (e.g. Ansoff, 1984; Ansoff, Declerck, & Hayes, 1976) proposes a highly formalised planning process of strategy. It is assumed that planning as a strategic process can be decomposed in distinct analytical and hierarchical steps and broken down into objectives, budgets and programs. In contrast to the design school, the task of strategic planning is suggested to be carried out by strategic planners rather than the CEOs. Still, strategy is assumed to be derived from an analytical 'reading' of external stimuli, that are responded to by a corporate strategy. The fact that the development of the response lies more with a formal process facilitated by strategic planners rather than the entrepreneurial spirit of CEOs is a gradual but not a categorical difference in terms of responsiveness.

Similarly, the positioning school (Porter, 1996, 1998a, b) proposes strategy formation as an analytical, systematic and deliberate process using a predetermined framework of environmental descriptors, i.e. the five forces, in order to then base the strategic choice on such an analysis. The choice itself is limited to three generic strategic options. This approach assumes that the stimulus can be sufficiently described through the five forces' 'vocabulary' which then –

quasi automatically – leads to a response that is drawn from a given response repertoire, namely three generic strategic choices.

In terms of responsive aspects in strategy, we suggest to conclude that these three normative schools of strategy formation highlight the relevance of responsiveness as an organisation's capacity to respond to external challenges at the macro level. It seems that none of the presented concepts considers the micro level implications, i.e. the organisational practices that enable, foster and hinder the macro-phenomenon to materialize. Moreover, the underlying concept of responsiveness relies on a reactive, behaviorist stimulus-response model, and agency seems thereby to be reduced to a conditioned reflex.

Organisational Learning

Organisational adaptation in general has also been a main concern of most organisational learning literature. A variety of attempts have been made to define *organisational learning* (e.g. Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988; Shrivastava, 1983), but the most relevant for our investigation are Sitkin, Sutcliffe & Weick (1998) who suggest to conceive of organisational learning as “a change in an organisation's response repertoire”. In line with this argument, Cyert & March (1992) conceptualize organisational learning as reactive adaptation in line with stimulus-response learning principles. In contrast, March & Olsen (1975) suggest that organisational learning results from experiential learning cycle based on cognition and preferences of the organisational actors. This approach represents a more developed stimulus-response model by incorporating and acknowledging social psychological factors as well as cognitive structures. Building on these arguments, the cognition and knowledge perspective on organisational learning posits cognition as the basis for all deliberate action. Organisational members as interpreters of reality according to their cognitive systems become conscious actors in individual and collective learning processes (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Similarly, the corporate epistemology approach focuses on interpretation processes and cognitive construction of reality in terms of learning (e.g. Daft & Weick, 1984; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). In this view, environment is not an objective, external

reality; “the human creates the environment to which the system then adapts. The human actor does not react to an environment, he enacts it.” (Weick, 1969: 64).

The cultural perspective on learning focuses more on the collective level. This school of thought assumes that members of organisations create sets of intersubjective meanings, that are represented and evaluated by artifacts (such as symbols, metaphors, rituals) and tied together by values, beliefs and emotions. Organisational learning is considered as a development of a learning mode and routines (Argyris & Schön, 1996). In this view, culture is considered both context and outcome of learning processes as joint interpretation and meaning creation processes of organisational members (Schein, 1992; Smircich, 1983).

As for our investigation, we suggest to conclude that the reviewed organisational learning literature acknowledges the relevance of responsiveness as the organisation's ability to learn. As for the underlying concept of responsiveness, both the adaptation as well as the cognition school ground their argument in a behaviorist stimulus-response model. The cognitive differs from the behaviorist view only insofar, as it incorporates and allows for certain rules and routines that bring stimulus and response together (Waldenfels, 1994). In our view, this is in terms of responsiveness a gradual, but not categorical difference. It is the culture school of organisational learning that acknowledges the relevance of shared, dialogic practices that make for a responsive organisation. However, neither the two former nor the latter school of thought seems to have explored the micro level of responsive practice in sufficient detail.

Conclusion

In summary, the strategy as well as the organisational learning literature acknowledge and highlight the relevance of responsiveness. However, the reviewed concepts seem to focus on the functional aspects of responsiveness only. It is mainly at the macro level that responsiveness is relevant in an organisation's ability to respond or adapt to external challenges. Furthermore, the underlying notion of responsiveness is grounded in a reactive, behaviorist stimulus-response model. The unintended consequence of such conceptual foundation is that it puts significant limits

to think about agency. Consequently, implications at the micro level in terms of practices and activities are hardly being discussed. Therefore, two questions remain. At the macro level, we should enhance our understanding toward a more active notion of responsiveness. At the micro level, we should explore practices and activities that allow for such responsiveness to be developed.

2 Practice: Dialoguing with Stakeholders

Methodological Considerations

The characteristics of the phenomenon in question, i.e. the exploration of responsiveness and its related practices call for a method that allows to study the phenomenon in a real-life context, to gather rich data, to actively involve participants and researcher, to sense how people place meanings on events and how they connect them to the social world (e.g. Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). While an interpretive case study framework (Stake, 1995; Stake, 2000) meets most of the above requirements, we chose to complement it with a participatory mode of inquiry which insured a high researcher involvement as it is through participatory, dialogic forms of inquiry that new perspective or practices might be realised (e.g. Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Schein, 1993).

Action research is a family of approaches that allows the researcher to work in an organisational context with its on a matter of concern to them in order to take action (Eden & Huxham, 1996: 527). Action research is conceptualised as being future oriented, collaborative, implying system development, generating theory grounded in action as well as being diagnostic and situational (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan & Brannick, 2001; Kappler, 1980). In that regard, the value of action research can be seen as reemphasising the relevance and impact of practical knowledge by developing theory from practice, and thereby holding promise to bridge the gap between macro phenomenon and the micro level of practices.

The “Learning through Listening” Project: Goal and Conceptual Frame

In our case, we engaged in a 12-month OD project with the Omega foundation, a residential care provider, providing residential care in 13 centres for people with physical and sensory disabilities in a European country. It holds currently about 300 places in its centres with a total number of staff of around 400. The focus of the service provision consists of long-term supported accommodation service which was until recently based on a traditional residential care model. According to its mission statement, the foundation aims at “becoming a modern, responsive service-providing organisation capable of delivering service which meet the needs of individual service users” and “Our mission is to become a service provider which listens to people with disabilities and responds to their wishes and needs in ways that respect individuality and maximise opportunities for choice.” In the light of these aspirations, two directions for change were identified. On the one hand, the overall governance structure was to be reviewed in the light of a change in the governmental funding policy that required a shift from local autonomy to a more central accountability and governance. On the other hand, the political climate as well as the needs of service users resulted in the conclusion that the current care model should be shift from a benevolent, paternalistic care model to a modern professional residential care service provider. Internally, this resulted in changes in governance structure, in policies and procedures, employment and funding operations. A major internal force for change was identified in the service users’ changing needs and expectations with regard to the service provided by Omega. Externally, a government report by the national department of health explicated the future policy for people with physical and sensory disabilities and set out the expectations and requirements for service providers in that sector.

In order to address these internal and external forces for change, the foundation engaged in a strategy and organisation development process that – according to the project outline – “should contribute to developing the capacity for change through creating a shared learning experience for participants which would be grounded in Omega values and mission enabling it to

develop capabilities and processes for continued organisational learning and change". The scope of the project was an organization wide effort, i.e. it should involve all primary stakeholders, i.e. service users, staff, local management, local advisory boards, national head office and national advisory board.

The project was planned by the CEO, the second author (in his capacity as senior researcher) and the first author (in his capacity of facilitator and process consultant) as an organisation development (OD) project in line with Coghlan and Mc Auliffe's (2003) characteristics of an OD project. They suggest that OD is a process for building healthy, high performance organisations and improving and realising the full potential and self-renewing capabilities of organisations, groups and individuals. It seeks to instill values and build cultures that bring out the best in organisations and people and to encourage open, straightforward, helpful, ethical and increasingly self-directing behaviour. It is a facilitative process that helps others discover and find solutions to their own issues. It relies on a systems perspective of organisations that considers all aspects of an organisation and its interrelated parts i.e. focuses on the 'big picture'. It is a data-driven, action research oriented approach that includes assessing reality and involving key stakeholders in evaluating results, exploring what is possible and planning further action. It is collaborative top-down, bottom-up process that recognises the importance of building the commitment and leadership of top level decision makers and involving all stakeholders in the change process. It is committed to the transfer of knowledge and skills and to creating learning organisations where organisations and their members are continuously learning, sharing knowledge and improving the organisation. OD emphasises the importance of planned, lasting and sustained change, rather than the 'quick fix', while at the same time developing the organisation's ability to adapt to changing times. Accordingly, organisation change is fundamentally about conversation, where change happens because people are talking with each other about what is important and that conversations ultimately lead to psychological, behavioral and operational outcomes in the organisation. Hence the facilitation of conversation is a central dynamic of the work of organisation change.

Conceptually, the project design and process was mainly informed by two key concepts, namely that of dialogue (e.g. Scharmer, 2001; Schein, 1993, 1996) and that of appreciative inquiry (e.g. Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). We agreed to use dialogue as one key concept, as the contribution of dialogue to an OD process consists in its potential for people to acknowledge differences and to critically review privately held assumptions: “The most basic mechanisms of acquiring new information that leads to cognitive restructuring is to discover in a conversational process that the interpretation that someone else puts on a concept is different from one’s own.” (Schein, 1996: 31). Similarly, Scharmer suggests that reflective dialogue denotes conversation in which participants “shift from advocating their own opinions to inquiring into the assumptions that underlie them” (Scharmer, 2001: 12). In addition to dialogue, we based our project design on appreciative inquiry, a concept that aims at providing a theoretical frame and method for organising and changing social systems (Cooperrider, 1990; Watkins & Mohr, 2001)]. Assuming that language as social action matters in processes of social construction (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996) as well as acknowledging that sense is made through words (Weick, 1995), proponents of appreciative inquiry argue that the wording of questions and the perspective implied in these words are critical to the success of an OD intervention. The ‘unconditional positive question’ is considered key in the beginning of any appreciative process. Informed by these concepts, the workshop format, included three generic questions as to structure the conversations. (1) *What do you really like about (your life, your work) in this centre?* – As most people in the centres had not been familiar with any type of group work, it would allow them to participate in a conversation that would start of in a positive, friendly mode. (2) *What could be done even better?* – Based on the confidence build in the conversation around question 1., it was expected that participants would then speak up more freely with regard to opportunities for change. (3) *How do we get there?* – Finally, concrete suggestions in terms of goals and action steps to be taken would follow from the discussion of question 3.

The “Learning through Listening” Project: Process and Findings

At the time, the Omega foundation provided its services in 13 centres. All centres were invited to participate in the project. However, some did not participate for various reasons (e.g. avoid confusion with a total quality management project; change of management). The seven centres that were included in the case study are large residential care centres with 25+ residents each and are therefore comparable in size and service provision. It was planned, that each of the local centres would engage in three individual days of the OD process. On the first day, members of the local centre would work together on (i) identifying contextual areas of change, (ii) articulating a desired future for the centre, and (iii) agreeing on plans for action. Due to the specific dynamics in each of the centres and its constituencies, the actual process deviated from that initial plan. For most centres, it was an achievement to reach agreement on certain action steps on the third day. While the interventions described above were designed to take place at local level, national and regional level issues should also be addressed. A national conference was planned to be held, where representatives from all the centres should gather to reflect on the learning's and findings of the local workshops as well as to work on the strategic future for the Omega foundation. Due to changing priorities in the head office, the national conference was not held in the context –but, according to participants, in the spirit – of this project, in a subsequent strategy development process.

The major outcomes of the project were threefold. Firstly, the primary stakeholder groups, i.e. service users, staff and managers, all engaged in conversations within and between their different constituencies, a practice that was new for most centres and their constituencies. Service users were able to express their dependency and the resulting dilemma of not being able to give open feedback due to their fear of repercussion: “You don’t rock the boat with the people that you rely on”. Staff were able to outline their concerns with empowered service users on the one hand and more powerful managers due to the changes in the governance structure: “Do we have rights, too?”. Finally, local service managers explored their discomfort of being responsible on the one hand, but not able to make decisions because of the – perceived – lack of transparenance in terms of expectations from head office. The fact that these issues could be

voiced, discussed and responded to can be considered a 'proof of concept'. Moreover, at the level of head office, three organisational artifacts resulted from the project. One, the foundation made the project title the new strap line for the entire organisation. Two, in the recent strategy document, listening was collaboratively agreed to become a core value of the organisation as well as a strategic results area. Three, the recently opened new centre was deliberately and explicitly built and organised around the Learning through Listening project findings and its implications to service provision.

3 Analysis: Toward a Theory of Responsive Practice

Based on the systematic and iterative process of analysing (i) field notes and member-validated flipchart transcripts from 84 workshop sessions and informal conversations; (ii) semi-structured focus group interviews with cross-constitutional stakeholder groups, and (iii) semi-structured individual interviews with key informants from each stakeholder group respectively (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we identified three properties of responsiveness. Presented in prototypical 'in vivo' codes, this reads as follows. "This organisation does not listen!", which reflects the perceptive dimension, "This organisation does not understand!", which reflects the reflective dimension, and "This organisation does not cater our needs!", which reflects the adaptive dimension. A more careful and more structured analysis leads us to propose that perceptivity refers to the ability of an organisation to identify signals or stimuli of relevance. In the case, it was experienced in organisational practices by stakeholders as opportunities to voice issues, interests and claims as well as to listen to others issues, interests and claims is based on the curiosity, willingness and necessity to take others' views into account. Reflectivity refers to the ability to make sense of these signals or stimuli in the light of the theories-in-use of the organisational actors. In the case, it was experienced in organisational practices by stakeholders as opportunities to render own and other views, assumptions and mental models visible and thereby accessible for discursive scrutiny allows for surprises, critique and review of taken-for-granted positions. At its best, it might enhance understanding for others' viewpoints. Adaptivity refers to the ability of an organisation to respond to these enacted signals

appropriately. In the case, it was experienced in organisational practices by stakeholders as opportunities to take action based on reflection and understanding refers to the perceived ability of an organisation to respond to needs, interests and claims made by its stakeholders. These three dimensions can be identified in speech acts within organisational communicative episodes whereby speech acts differ in terms of focus, orientation, complexity handling, dominant speech acts (Ford & Ford, 1995), relevance of statements, as well as variety and equality of voices with regard to these three dimensions, as illustrated in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

When applying these generic categories to case episodes, we get an even better view on responsiveness in practice. The following – prototypical – episodes are case examples to illustrate how perceptivity, reflectivity and adaptivity in the practices of the members of the organisation were carried out and/or experienced.

Episode 1: “Autistic reflex”

In one of the centres, the default assumption that was rendered visible in one of the sessions was a regular change in the color of the rooms, without consulting the residents. As both the level of perceptivity as well as reflectivity are low, stimuli or changes in stimuli cannot be identified. “Rooms are supposed to be yellow. Period.”

Episode 2: “Myopic inquiry”

In another centre, the discussion with residents revolved around the menu. Even when asked and invited to critically reflect on their claims, hardly any actionable suggestion could be identified. When reflecting on outdated data without adding new information or signals from the past, combined with the lack of taking action, both the goal and the quality of such an inquiry is to be questioned.

Episode 3: "Myopic response"

One resident with severe speech impairment reported, that years back he had made his preferences known that he prefers raspberry yogurt after lunch. Ever since, he gets raspberry yogurt. Without identifying stimuli or changes in stimuli, any reflection has to be based on perceptual assumptions that might be refined but will only result in a response that is based on known insights.

Episode 4: "Phlegmatic observation"

In one centre, the manager was known that she would listen to everyone. After the first six months, people reported that apart from the actual listening, no visible action seemed to result from individual or group conversations. To identify and perceive stimuli without any reflective or adaptive consequences can be conceived of as passive, disinterested observation.

Episode 5: "Conditioned response"

Transportation was a 'burning' issue in most centres. In one particular centre, when management had bought a new bus, they realised that the centre did not have enough licensed drivers to use it. This episode describes best the behaviorist view on responsiveness. Changes in stimuli might be identified, but as they are not reflected upon the response is very likely to come be derived from a given response repertoire.

Episode 6: "Attentive inquiry"

In one particular centre, staff appreciated the initiative of the manager to set up sub-committee whenever a problem occurred. However, when people experienced the lack of action being taken based on their voiced concerns and reflections, they stopped attending. While changes in stimuli are being identified, and reflection occurs, it does not result in any form of action.

Episode 7: “Vigilant answer”

Due to the feeling of not being listened to, in one centre the residents set up an advocacy group that met once a week to discuss and address issues of relevance to them. They would invite staff and/or management if appropriate. This episode describes an active view on responsiveness best. Not only are changes in stimuli identified, and made sense of. Action is based on a high degree of perception and reflection and hence, a response will result in an appropriate answer that is based on a sufficient understanding of the state of affairs.

When we integrate our findings in terms of the three dimensions with the findings of the prototypical episode, we identify different types of responsiveness. Hence, at a more conceptual, abstract level, this provides us with a typology of responsiveness, ranging from “autistic reflex” to “vigilant answer”, as illustrated in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion

Based on the case analysis, we would suggest to conceive of responsiveness as a process quality experienced by stakeholders in encounters ‘with the organisation’. Even though we would assume that the final assessment of the quality of a response is in the eye of the beholder, it is plausible to distinguish responses with regard to their relative innovativeness – responses drawn from a given response repertoire can be referred to as *reproductive responses*, whereas responses that allow for inventing responses in the process of answering can be referred to as *productive responses* (Waldenfels, 1994). So, in summary, we propose the following.

At the macro level, responsiveness can be conceived of as a social construct that is attributed to the organisation in terms of its perceptive, reflective and adaptive capacity as experienced by members and stakeholders.

As for the micro level, i.e. the practices and activities, we propose that reflective dialogue provides such responsive practice. Creating the conditions for the possibility of reflective dialogue in the form of conversational arenas that allow for – but do not guarantee – reflective conversations, contributes to enhancing organisational responsiveness. If such reflective conversations in the form of dialogue takes place, it seems more likely that more ‘productive answers’ will be found.

4 Discussion: Implications for Theory and Practice

Our initial diagnosis showed that the reviewed literature on strategy and organisational learning seems focus on functional aspects of responsiveness. A behaviorist stimulus-response model is employed to describe and analyse organisational dynamics – only at the macro level. Communicative aspects, or more precisely, responsive practices at the micro level are therefore not conceptualised. Based on our case analysis, we propose a more fine-grained understanding of active responsiveness at the macro level and reflective dialogue as a responsive practice at the micro level. In this section, we will discuss theoretical and practical implications of our propositions.

As for strategy, strategy formation approaches that can be summarised as strategic programming (conception, planning, positioning) correspond to a level of responsiveness that we would refer to as conditioned response. In contrast, the notion of strategic thinking draws our attention to strategy as producing a vigilant answer as its purpose is “to discover novel, imaginative strategies which can re-write the rules of the competitive game; and to envision potential futures significantly different from the present” (Heracleous, 1998: 485). The claim of strategic thinking to provide novel, imaginative strategies – in our terms: productive, vigilant answers – requires conversational arenas that allow for multiple perspectives to be voiced, differences to be acknowledged and mutual understanding to be reached on a certain state of affairs. Moreover, the answer that is being invented in the process of answering might extend the perceptual, reflective and adaptive repertoires of the organisation.

As for organisational learning, an active notion of responsiveness could contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of processes of organisational learning (e.g. Huber, 1991). Knowledge generation and transfer strategies imply the question of perceptual, evaluative and reflective capacity of an organisation. How current and new organisational members make sense of their experiences as well as deliberate search- and scan-strategies rely on cognitive frameworks and mental models through which relevance and quality of knowledge are constructed. Such evaluation processes are more likely to provide useful insights if they are based on a shared experience or even a shared understanding of the state of affairs. Hence, active responsiveness as a perceptive, reflective and adaptive capacity enables and facilitates such processes of knowledge acquisition. Acknowledging blind spots by allowing for equivocality is an inherent quality of such responsiveness. Moreover, we suggest that in line with (March, 1991), with regard to learning as exploration, active responsiveness can contribute to avoid perceptive, reflective and adaptive myopia.

The attribute of a 'responsive capacity of an organisation', we would suggest, results from the quality, and not necessarily from the frequency of responsive processes only, that different stakeholders experience and that inform and develop their evaluative sense making in that regard. Consequently, we suggest that only the necessary condition for active responsiveness, i.e. the creation of conversational arenas for reflective conversation, could be directly managed. The sufficient condition is subject to the participants' communicative skills, abilities and orientation at reaching understanding. These skills can be developed through formal training, but even better through involvement that might lead to participation. It is more likely, that a – subjectively experienced and collectively enacted – responsive organisational culture will influence the orientation and willingness for a reflective conversation. In this sense, we suggest to conclude that *active responsiveness refers to creating the conditions for the possibility of dialogue.*

Two important groups in creating such conditions are managers and OD consultants. As for the necessary condition, managers – and in most cases OD consultants – are in a very prominent and powerful position to influence the 'order of discourse' (Foucault, 1991), i.e. the

contextual features of conversational arenas that usually are non-discursively determined. The first of these features consists in the ability for managers to call or cancel meetings, i.e. to allow for conversations in a specific setting. Another key dimension is the question of participants. Who is invited, i.e. whose viewpoints will at least have a chance to be voiced and heard in a conversation? The agenda setting and the definition of the purpose of meetings are more likely to be defined by managers than other stakeholder groups. The physical setting, ground rules and record of meeting minutes are other relevant contextual features to be taken into account in that regard. In summary, managers have the power to define who talks about what and when. The 'how' of the conversation, however, is not directly manageable, given that reflective conversations rely on the participants' willingness and ability to engage in such conversations. By reflecting on the above conversational features as well as our experience of the project, we would suggest the following aspects as relevant contextual features for a reflective conversation: Participation should be made on the basis of affectedness, competence and responsibility for the subject in question. Ownership and agenda setting should be with participants rather than with management only. The physical setting should allow that every participant could see and hear the other. Usually, organising the seating in the shape of a circle provides for this. Ground rules should be simple and allow for any voice to be heard. All these aspects are no guarantee but proved useful in the context of the project. Our propositions might also guide managers in evaluating existing conversational arenas and their processes. Moreover, the typology can help diagnosing from which archetype of responsiveness certain activities draw from. As for the sufficient condition, i.e. individual skills and capabilities, brief considerations of the barriers for managers to engage in responsive interactions might be useful. The economies of scale of management result from rules and routines, that are non-responsive per se, as they draw from an abstract, decontextualised response repertoire. Moreover, their attribute role as well as their own understanding of their role seems to imply that the myth of an omni-potent manager still persists in most organisations. As the dominant mode for coordination in organisations consists in strategic action and therefore implies an orientation to success, communicative action as orientation to understanding is likely to be neglected. In that regard, the skilful orchestration of

responsiveness could become one of the key capabilities of a 'post-heroic' manager (Baecker, 1993).

Conclusion

Finally, we would like to conclude with an outlook on responsiveness in more philosophical terms. As most life worlds and languages are different, distant and foreign to our own, the inaccessibility and exclusion of the foreign from the realm of the own results in a systematic asymmetry (Waldenfels, 1991, 1994, 1997). For organisations, this is of high relevance as organisational cultures and subcultures develop their specific life worlds and language games. If neglect of foreignness is not an option, encountering the foreign is an inevitable occurrence in organisations. These encounters however can be facilitated in a twofold way: (1) by creating an open, non-hierarchical mode of conversation that allows for multiple voices to be heard; and (2) by providing conversational settings in the form of discursive arenas in which these encounters can take place. Understanding then is not about converging to one perspective, but to acknowledge differences and distances by reflecting on each other's position. Responsiveness in that regard is a prerequisite of such encounters with the foreign within organisations.

Response conceived of as a reaction to an external stimulus does not reflect what responding is about. The process of answering does not simply address the content of a question. Moreover, an answer is an attempt to respond to implicit claims and demands inherent to a question. As these claims and demands can never be responded to exhaustively, it is through dialogic interaction that these demands are rendered more visible and thereby intelligible. In that sense, organisational products, performances and outcomes can be conceived of as responses. If organisational members were able to not only 'read' the explicit content of a question but to understand and adhere to the implicit claims and demands, then we would suggest conceiving of these outcomes as an – always somewhat insufficient – answer that will trigger new questions in dialogical interaction.

Acknowledging Waldenfels' (1994) approach to conceive of conversation as starting from the answer rather than the question, a responsive rationality would suggest reflecting on the ability of organisations to provide answer. Or, in short: How can organisations be conceived of as 'answerable'? As such an 'answerability' goes beyond intentional or communicative action, relational qualities will become more prominent, not only in service encounters. An answer makes only sense as a response to a question that we understand. Being open to the other is a prerequisite in that regard. Acknowledging the foreignness and attentively listening to it allows for an in-between of own and foreign. Understanding is not about bridging the gap between inclusion and exclusion, it is about answering from the in-between (Waldenfels, 1998: 53). Entering the area between own and foreign is what dialogue might be all about: We can give something, that we do not have yet, but the process of answering provided a common response between participants.

In organisations, encountering the foreign by its very nature cannot be responded to using a standardised, reproductive answer. Such answers are made for the own, the known and the ordinary. Foreign clients, foreign products, foreign markets, foreign cultures, foreign departments, foreign languages and life worlds within and outside organisations put questions to us that we have to respond to by a productive answer. Answers from these encounters have to be invented in the process and act of giving the answer (Waldenfels, 1991). Encountering the foreign, entering the in-between of own and foreign as to jointly develop productive answers are challenges to individuals as well as organisations. Responsiveness then translated into a new challenge, the challenge of organisational "answerability".

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Figures and Tables

Table 1: Properties of Perceptivity, Reflectivity and Adaptivity

	<i>Perceptivity</i>	<i>Reflectivity</i>	<i>Adaptivity</i>
Focus	Identifying, reading signals	Acknowledging, understanding differences	Reducing variety of interpretations as to take action
Orientation	Orientation to understanding: Attentive listening	Orientation to understanding: Interested investigation	Orientation to action : Concluding response options
Complexity handling mode	Openness	Openness	Closure
Dominant speech acts	Suspension, assertives, requests, expressives, declarations	Mutual questions, expressives, mutual confirmations	Assertives, commissives, directives
Relevance of statements	Voicing various interpretations	Equal relevance of statements	Prioritising relevance of statements
Nature of vocality	Multivocality	Equivocality	Univocality

Table 2: Typology of Responsiveness

<i>Field</i>	<i>Perceptivity</i>	<i>Reflectivity</i>	<i>Adaptivity</i>	<i>Type of responsiveness</i>
1	O	O	X	Autistic reflex
2	O	X	O	Myopic inquiry
3	O	X	X	Myopic response
4	X	O	O	"Phlegmatic" observation
5	X	O	X	Conditioned response
6	X	X	O	Attentive inquiry
7	X	X	X	Vigilant answer