Involvement as a dilemma: between dialogue and discussion in team based organizations

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Involvement as a Dilemma. Between Dialogue and Discussion in Team Based Organizations

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This article describes an ongoing action research project in a public administration department working towards a more flat structure characterized by value-based management, team organization, and involvement.

The article presents involvement as a multidimensional dilemma and describes how employees experience and cope with traditional and modern dilemmas, and how the borderline between them seems to be blurred. It also includes the AR-dilemma unfolding in the relation between the participants and us as actions researchers.

The dilemmas are discussed in relation to Human Resource Management. The history of involvement is reflected as a historical transformation of participative democracy into participative management characterized by strategic communication.

Key words: Action research, involvement, dialogue, dilemma, team-based organization

1. Purpose: Dilemmas for them and us

This article is based on an ongoing action research project in a public administration department with 60 employees: academic, office, and service employees, divided into seven teams, one manager, and one senior manager. The department is part of a faculty at a university.

For some time, they have worked towards a more flat structure characterized by value-based management, team organization, and involvement. As the senior manager says:

> There is a constant change in our tasks and working conditions … there is little standard production and repetition. Employees have to cope with highly differentiated, knowledge-based tasks using new methods. We have a team organization in order to increase employee responsibility because we are unable to structure our work in ways used in a more traditional hierarchy. We need employees who can practice self-management in teams based on our values.

During the process, it dawned upon us that involvement in itself represents a dilemma. An employee from the project phrases the dilemma in this way:

> Very often, we also see what is positive in all the new initiatives and we think that it could be very exciting to participate in these tasks, but it is a coin with two sides. It is so exciting and it is so much fun in many situations, because all of a sudden you get the opportunity to go in this or that direction and to try your competencies against some new tasks, but it is also very frustrating, because day-to-day tasks simply have to be accomplished simultaneously. Then you fly off at this tangent and physically you cannot cope with that, but this is also what makes it so much fun to work here. Even though, many things are very exciting, you also have to take care of yourself.

From one perspective, involvement is experienced as a constructive challenge, from another as a possible self-misuse of engaged employees.

On one hand, employees experience themselves to be in control with increased work satisfaction. An employee tells:

> All of us are very, very happy about the ways we are allowed to run our own projects, because management does not interfere at all. We are very fond of that.

On the other hand, what does it mean to be self-managing? Is it, e.g., possible for a team to say 'no' to new tasks? When does a team experience restrictions on their self-management? This seems to be a constant process of balancing expectations between management and employees. When can a team make its

own decisions and when is it supposed to ask management? As another team member puts it:

> Management says we are self-managing. But when it comes down to basics, we are not, eh? "You will have to find ways to solve the work load problem in the team", they say. If the team says: "No, we cannot", then the answer is: "You will have to!" … It's difficult to say no as we would like to … It seems to be an endless screw.

On one hand, involvement is apparently about democracy and self-management. On the other hand, a dialogue about previously made managerial decisions is not considered an option. In team-based organizations, decision processes do not seem to be as clear and well defined as in traditional organizations. Peters (2001: 149) writes in his analysis of this new management tendency:

> In my view, this is a program, which, though it may sound paradoxical, aims to increase the pressure on employees by reducing the coercion they face.

The dilemma of involvement and self-management also expresses itself between team members within the teams. There is, e.g., a tension between being a caring colleague and a very busy one, being forced to abstain from helping colleagues due to a big workload. One of the employees expresses the dilemma in this way:

> Evidently, it is a team dilemma, if you say: "I am unable to keep my deadlines today. Can anyone help me?" – It is very difficult to ask for help, because everybody else is buried in his or her own work overload … Then, you get a bad conscience … and you still have this knot in your stomach.

A structural issue about work overload is here experienced as a psychological dilemma between consideration for one self and for one's colleagues, i.e., between I and we.

This article focuses on dilemmas about decision processes in this flat, team-based organization. The article has two integrated purposes:

Firstly, we will show how employees and managers experience traditional and modern dilemmas of involvement, and how the borderline between these dilemmas seems to be blurred.

Traditional dilemmas are associated with the external relation between management and teams.[1] They deal with the tension of traditional hierarchy between management power and employee wishes or demands of involvement. This tension was already known in the 1960's when attempts of establishing self-managing groups were introduced. Then and today, the critical issue is the span of control of the team. As mentioned above: "Management says we are self-managing. But when it comes down to basics, we are not, eh?"

Modern dilemmas have to do with the internalization of management by teams and employees. Since the 1990's, when value based management was introduced, modern, involved employees seem to have been transformed from traditional wage earners into self-employed entrepreneurs (Peters 2001) and teams into small businesses. The modern dilemma unfolds accordingly between teams and individual employees, between team colleagues ("Can anyone help me?"), and within the individual employee ("Even though many things are very exciting, you also have to take care of yourself.").

Secondly, we will demonstrate how the dilemma unfolds itself in the relation between the participants and us as action researchers in the change process. We call this third kind the AR-dilemma. This can be understood as a confirmation of Lewin's (1948) old dictum that you get to know an organization when trying to change it. The dilemma is not only "out there" between teams and management and within the teams. It is also present between them and us, because we become part of the dilemma. How do we, e.g., "cope" with a self-managing team who does not consider "our" action research process as their cup of tea due to**,** e.g., lack of time? How do we position ourselves in the field of tension between management and employees?

There are many pitfalls when managers, employees, and action researchers try to cope with these dilemmas. Here we list a few examples:

– You go for the right and unambiguous solution.

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[1] The distinction between traditional and modern dilemmas as well as the following term "AR–dilemma" we thankfully owe to Werner Fricke, with whom we have had an inspiring e-mail dialogue while writing this article.

- You think either managers or action researchers ought to tell you what to do as an employee.

- You understand teams as just the sum of individuals.[2]

- You solve the dilemma between developmental projects and your daily work by thinking either-or, i.e., tertium non datur.

Our "answer" to the question of how to cope with the dilemma of involvement introduces new dilemmas. The first deals with the relationship between dialogue and discussion. On one hand, it is a basic assumption in this article that coping is an ongoing balancing of the scope of involvement, between the area of dialogue (shared decisions) and the area of discussion (managerial decisions).[3] On the other hand, dialogues are not sufficient answers to involvement as a dilemma, because they are always already embedded in the organizational hierarchy.

Thus, some of these dialogues are in fact pseudo-dialogues. They might be expressions of "democraship". Linguistically, this is a cross breed between democracy and dictatorship. It denotes dialogue as an espoused value and discussion as a simultaneous theory-in-use.[4] It is a managerial style saying: You can have it my way (discussion), I am very open to that (dialogue). Pseudo-dialogues might also be expressions of what Peters (2001: 147-148) calls dictated autonomy:

> … the 'dictated' autonomy conceals its own heteronomous determination: the subordinates … internalize the power of command, and can thus develop a feeling of independence.

Some are genuine dialogues where shared inquiry and decision processes are practiced (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005).

Involvement, self-management, openness, dialogue, etc., is presented as positive, constructive thinking within Human Resource Management (HRM)

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[2] We define a team as a group of collaborating colleagues with a shared goal, as well as a part of a larger organizational system (Alderfer 1986; Hohn 2000).

[3] The distinction between dialogue and discussion is described in Bohm (1996).

[4] The distinction between espoused values and theories-in-use is presented in Argyris/ Schön (1996).

(Brewster/Larsen 2000). It is fun, as one of the employees told us. It would in a way be meaningless to protest against it. On the other hand, being in the eye of this norm (Barker 1999) implies potentially unclear definitions of the length of a workday, the division between work and spare time, norms of taking time off in lieu, flex and holidays. In practice, this means that a workday often becomes longer than the hours you are paid for, that work invades your spare time as phone calls and e-mails, that taking time off in lieu often is accompanied by a bad conscience. We call this hybrid for constructive misuse, i.e., misuse in the service of constructive thinking. Above, we have mentioned psychological aspects (fun, exciting, bad conscience) and structural, economic aspects (unpaid working hours) of constructive misuse.

2. Background: 5 programme versions

In the spring of 2005, an employee from the project management group in the department contacted us. They wanted collaboration with consultants who were not merely "traditional management consultants". Initially, the task was about planning and running a seminar for the whole department. They were in the middle of a radical change project towards involvement, self-managing teams, etc.

The administration department supports and services the president, the faculty, the dean, the departments, and the researchers. Internally, they work with funding of research projects, with administration of exams, doctoral defences, with finance, patents, etc. Externally, they work with networking, PR, contracts with partners at the other faculties and outside the university, etc. Some of the employees have a university degree and work with specialized knowledge work such as patents, contracts, PR etc. Others are trained as office employees and work with administrative tasks, a small group as service workers.

Earlier, the department was structured as traditional offices where the manager gave the tasks directly to the individual employee. Instead, they introduced a team organization where the manager gave the tasks to the teams who were responsible for organizing the division of labour within the teams and for solving the tasks. This change took place while the number of em-

ployees increased, especially among the knowledge workers. A project management group had been established with representatives from the teams and management to be in charge of this change process.

It was very important for the project management group that we did not come with a prefabricated program for the seminar. It was important for us, too. We were to develop the program as a co-operative effort, respecting their specific process and their work towards involvement. Accordingly, we chose, among other things, to do preparatory interviews with management as well as with the employees. They seemed to be well informed, with challenging tasks, and responsible jobs with respect for diversity. The department engages employees with different ethnic and other background as part of a social responsibility policy. The seminar on "daily self-management" was to focus on possible improvements rather than on actual problems. The project management group wanted to concentrate on the relation between being a self-managed and a co-managed team, on team relations, and on stress management. We co-produced not less than five versions of the program before we managed to match their expectations.

A couple of months after the seminar, the project management decided that the department should continue with an action research process in collaboration with us. This process was funded by a grant from a national board, which financed the change project, too. We agreed on a price for the action research part. No formal contract was made.

Inspired by our proposal, the action research process was to have the following purposes:

– To develop competencies in order to cope with dilemmas of their team-organization

– To professionalize their team-organization

– To hopefully increase their work satisfaction.

As a point of departure, the project management suggested that the teams might concentrate on the following dilemmas, which we had observed in their department, e.g.:

– To say "Yes" vs. to say "No" to new tasks

- To wish to help colleagues vs. to be burned out

- To ask for help vs. to have a bad conscience

- To make shared decisions (dialogue) vs. to think that management or others already had decided in advance (discussion)

- To have positive stress (work satisfaction, engagement, professional pride) vs. negative stress (work overload, absent-mindedness, fatigue).

Shortly afterwards, we met with the teams to inquire into the dilemmas they wanted to focus on, and to create a training process in tune with their expectations.

The empirical material of this article is based on interviews with the seven teams and with the two managers; on closer analyses of interviews with two teams where the employees are specialized knowledge workers; as well as on an analysis of a combined meeting and feedback session with one of the two teams and their senior manager. In this session, the participants have a conversation about how to cope with the dilemma of self-management and diffuse decision processes. Simultaneously, we gave them feedback in dialogical competencies (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005).

The structure of the article moves from analyses of micro-relations between the teams, the senior manager, and us as action researchers (sections 4 and 5) towards framing the analyses of involvement as a dilemma within an HRM-tendency and a larger historical perspective on participative democracy (sections 6 and 7). Inspired by what George Brandes said in the 1870´s about Shakespeare's plays, we think the infinite big can be seen in the infinite small and vice versa. We call this principle for "the generality of the specific" (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 1997).

3. Approach: Emergent, mutual involvement

As consultants and action researchers, we did not bring a ready-made theory to the work. Prior to this process, we did not know theoretically that dilemmas was a central issue in teams and that involvement in itself can be understood as a dilemma. These insights emerged during the process through our collaboration with the participants.

We call our approach "emergent, mutual involvement"(Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). It is based on previous action research projects and on consultancy processes. This approach implies that we work with problems and challenges emerging in the process in dialogue with the participants. We learn by listening to them and to ourselves during the process and we try to become wiser by not knowing ahead. Basically, our approach is about giving up the privilege of the power of knowing and an idea that we are informed enough to educate or change the participants. It is our experience that participants are competent practitioners on their own work, and they help us understand their situation and the organization.

This dialogic, emerging approach differs from an instrumental approach to action research. Here you already know which theories and/or methods you are going to apply before embarking on the process. This instrumental approach is often combined with aims of changing or educating the participants.

We also follow the below-mentioned meta-guidelines for developing dialogically cultural and organizational processes:

– Realistic problems or challenges:
  the participants work with actual cases from their daily work and not with constructed cases

– Integration:
  the participants work with these cases and are simultaneously trained in dialogical competences

– Dialogue:
  the process is planned and changed in an ongoing dialogue between the participants and us in answer to emerging problems and challenges

– Involvement:
  the participants are involved in the integrated design and carrying through of the process

– Follow up:
  the participants and we follow up on decisions and processes regularly in order to adjust direction, etc.

Until this project, it has been one of our theoretical assumptions that dilemmas might be coped with in dialogues in order to balance expectations on, e.g., borderlines between the spoken and the unspoken, between the area of managerial decisions and of shared decisions, etc. (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2000). Dialogue is here defined as a collaborative inquiry characterized by sharing, daring, and caring. In dialogues you share knowledge, you dare talk about what is unspoken, and you care to be each other's support (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005).

Dialogues do not take place in an organizational vacuum. As mentioned above, they are always already embedded in larger organizational systems and hierarchies. For this reason, we made it clear to the project management that some organizational barriers had to be handled in the process. Because of the growth of the department, the overall managerial structure was in a transition. It was not quite clear to us which teams referred to which manager. The department did not have an actual personnel management function, employee appraisal interviews were rare, and the team coordinator function did not work in some of the teams.

We wanted to involve the teams, the project management, and the managers in the continued process. From previous projects we knew that if the aim of the project was involvement, the participants had to be involved in the process. Anything else would not only have been a dilemma, but also a contradiction. In retrospect, we did not know then the scope of the learning journey we had started on.

4. Meeting the dilemma of involvement

We interviewed all the teams when preparing for the seminar in September 2005. One of them presented themselves as well functioning with a very large scope of control. They appreciated this freedom as mentioned in the introduction:

> All of us are very, very happy about the ways we are allowed to run our own projects, because management does not interfere at all. We are very fond of that.

They wanted to inquire into whether they were a self-managing or a co-managing team. They described their dilemma by means of this question: "Is it fair to say, we are self-managing, when we cannot say no to new tasks?"

In the spring of 2006, we interviewed the team again. In the meantime, we had reached an agreement with the project management group about cooperating with the teams who were going to define their individual needs on working with their dilemmas as a team. A member from the team had participated in this process. The new interview demonstrated how the dilemma of involvement did not only unfold in the relation between the teams and management, but also as an AR-dilemma.

Initially, we asked them, if all of them were familiar with the project management's response to our proposal about dilemmas in teams. They answered:

> Eva: The final decision about the project we are about to start here was made without us being involved. In the beginning, we were invited to a dialogue about it, and we said: "No, we think it is a bad idea". A little later, we got a message saying: "When will a meeting suit you?" So, just to let you know, the decision process has been rather interesting. We were worried to take on the burden of one more project.

> Tom: Actually, we asked the management: "You asked, but are we allowed to say no?" They did not come up with an answer. It was not up for a dialogue. It was a pseudo-debate … it is democraship, as you called it on the seminar. They pretend there is openness, that we have an influence on decisions, and that we can say no, but we cannot. That is basically the problem.

They wanted to back off due to lack of time. From their perspective, the question of participating in the project ought to be within their span of control. Moreover, they had tested the possibility of refusing to participate ("You asked, but are we allowed to say no?"). They think the situation is as an example of a "pseudo-debate". The decision about participating in the project is apparently up for a dialogue with the self-managing teams, but only apparently according to the team. Afterwards, they get a message saying: "When will a meeting suit you?" The team uses the distinction between dialogue and discussion that we presented on the seminar 6 months earlier.

We understand their response as an example of a traditional dilemma of who is going to decide: management or the team? Their response can be interpreted as an example of a modern dilemma, too. As a self-managing team, they think it irresponsible to take on a new project, because this could influence their ongoing tasks negatively.

From our perspective, the red stoplight was on. We thought then it was crucial that they themselves made their own decision about participating:

> Jørgen: So what is the appropriate step now? Do we stop here, because it is a waste of time?

> Marianne: It's downright decisive for us that you do not say "OK" you went to this meeting to please us [Marianne/Jørgen]. Then we will be practicing democraship and if that is the case, then it means stop. It is very important you have a choice. We do not want you to do to this for our sake.

Jørgen answers by raising a question where the decision on whether to stop or not is left in the hands of the team. By means of upgraders ("downright decisive", "very important"), Marianne underlines the importance of the team making its own choice. As far as we can see, two fundamental issues are at stake here for us:

Firstly, our answers show the dilemma of involvement. Both of them presuppose the team has a choice, i.e., they are allowed to say no to the project without negative consequences. Is this an option?

Secondly, even though we were fairly conscious of our answers then, we were unable to predict how the meeting would end and what consequences our answers might have for the team afterwards. We also took the risk of loosing this project.

The team made some reservations:

> Frank: We do not have many problems internally in the team, but there is a problem in relation to management. How do we communicate with them, how do we dialogue with them, and how are decisions made as to whether we are a self-managing or a co-managing team? We are to a certain degree, but when it really matters then we are only so so …

> Catherine: I just think we would like to decide ourselves. We will not let them decide that we have to find a problem in the team to work with in

this process, when we enjoy working together. I hope you believe every-body here agree with me, otherwise I encourage them to speak up if they think we have an internal problem.

The team does not understand their dilemma as internal team-problems. Their dilemmas unfold themselves in relation to management and are about "how decisions are made". Thus, they are about a traditional dilemma. Is the team self-managing "when it really matters"? They think "only so so". The distinction between self-managing and co-managing deals with the possibility of saying no and making critical decisions. Both of these aspects are at stake in relation to us as action researchers here and now.

Above, the dilemma of involvement presents itself once again in Catharine's statement. Dare team members say if they disagree with their colleague? We did not address this modern dilemma directly, but only meta-communicated about it below by a change in perspectives:

> Jørgen: Our point of view on dilemmas in teams does not imply that there ae or have to be problems in the teams internally. There might be. We do not know. What we are heading for is all the dilemmas you are confronted with when working as a team. This might be in relation to management. We do not expect you to encapsulate some mayor problems and to invent others to work on. On the other hand, seen from our perspective, some teams might obtain internal coherence by focusing on an external scape-goat. We do not know if you do so by pointing at management and saying: "Everything works fine in our team". In principle, this is a danger.

Hypothetically, the expressed team agreement might cover up an internal dis-agreement ("On the other hand …"). A modern dilemma may be presented as a traditional one. Shortly afterwards, a different aspect of the dilemma was brought up:

> George: … We might have conversations with management, but, of course, there is a limit to our complaints and criticism. We also know what will happen even when you [Marianne/Jørgen] are present. They have heard our criticism if we tell what we have told you. It may seem se-cure, because the two of you [Marianne/Jørgen] are present. Afterwards, they are still our bosses when you have left.

Elsewhere, we have argued that, as action researchers, one of our most important functions is to contribute to creating a caring container for the participants' dialogues (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). In the organizational context, it is a container embedded in dilemmas. If a team decides to present a criticism for management, what will the consequences be when we are no longer present? Some of the employees work on short-term contracts. Will their contract be prolonged, if they decide to bring up a burning issue about, for example, limits of self-management? Could the caring container become an apparently safe dialogical space in which employees express points of view or feelings they might afterwards regret? We hope training in dialogical competencies may enable them to reestablish the container when we have left. However, part of the AR-dilemma is that the container might become only a temporary shelter dissolving when we have left the organization.

We have learned there are no unambiguous solutions to this AR-dilemma of involvement. It unfolds here and now in relation to us as action researchers. We are embedded in the dilemma. Is it an option for the team not to participate in the project? Are we practicing democraship or do we have a dialogue in which the team can make a free and informed choice? One of the team-members tells us: "We were worried to take on the burden of one more project". At the same time, they participate in a long meeting with us. We underscore the importance of involvement, but by doing so, do we then inadvertently contribute to a constructive misuse of the team? By constructive misuse, we do not refer to our personal intentions, but to the structural circumstance that their workload increases relatively because they participate in the action research project. The unanswered question about the possibility of refusing to participate in the project is part of the misuse, too.

It still needs to be answered if dialogue and dialogical competences can contribute to moving the borderline between what is spoken and what is unspoken as ongoing ways to balance expectations. We will pursue this question in the following paragraph. We will start with an interview with a different team followed by a dialogue meeting with the team and the senior manager. Here we continue focusing on self-management and decision processes.

5. Are we self-managing?

> Carl: We love our job. It's a perfect place to be … the tasks are extremely exciting … we are really having fun. We feel comfortable with each other. It's a pleasure to meet with these colleagues in the morning. The good things by far surpass what we feel bad about.

> Stephanie: We are very lucky to be on the same wavelength … we are a very open team.

Two academic knowledge workers producing legal contracts make these statements about their job. Their team has recently become part of the above-mentioned department. In the following, they talk about a committee where representatives from the research environment as well as the senior manager and members of the team meet to decide procedures for contracts between researchers and private companies, etc.:

> Jørgen: The project management and we have highlighted some dilemmas. Are they relevant for you? Or do you want to focus on different topics because they would be more interesting to you?

> Stephanie: By and large, we have been a self-managing team for some time … The dilemmas we experience in our daily work have to do with our relation to management, because sometimes we are supposed to be self-managing, and sometimes not at all.

> Marianne: So this is what you have decided to focus on?

> Bill: Yes.

> Marianne: Could you give a few examples?

> Stephanie: Well, let's take the case about who was going to make the final decisions about certain contracts. Originally, this was part of our authorisation. That was in tune with our thinking of being self-managing. We were in control about how to organize our work with an optimum output. But all of a sudden, we were told that the authorisation was to be transferred to the committee.

> Thomas: We were not involved in these negotiations. When it comes to important, political decisions, decisions that matter and which are not

about where to place a comma, then we only have a right to make statements, but no guarantee for being listened to.

Thomas: Our participation in the meetings of the committee could be another example. In the team, we have decided that when a case is on the agenda, then the employee who knows about the case will participate in the meeting. This is not always the case. Sometimes, we feel that some decisions are made over our heads based on what is politically opportune. Then everybody is heading in that direction. Sometimes it disturbs our confidence … decisions are made in such a way that you do not feel being listened to.

The examples presented by Stephanie and Thomas circle around a traditional dilemma. According to their understanding, there is a limit to self-management when it comes to important political issues such as procedures for research contracts between the university and private business. Here they are allowed "to make statements" and they "feel that some decisions are made over our heads". They "do not feel being listened to" and this "disturbs our confidence".

We end the conversation by checking what is on the agenda at a future dialogue meeting with management:

Jørgen: Looking ahead, it seems to be important to balance expectations on what it really means to be self-managing. Is that right?

Bill: Yes.

Whose agenda?

We mail a draft for an agenda for the upcoming dialogue meeting between the team, the senior manager, and us. We want the team to set the agenda in tune with the idea of involvement:

Involvement – meeting with management
  – balancing expectations on involvement
  – a dialogue on 3 to 5 cases chosen by the team in order to secure suitable involvement in the future
  – where is the team self-managed
  – decisions
  – bystander and time out

– (a few words on dialogue and constructive feedback on the conversa-
tion between the team and the senior manager)

Two days before the meeting, the team mailed an agenda with these items:
… Becoming part of a different organizational and managerial structure has
raised some questions. Topics that will be discussed are among others:

– What does management expect from us?
– What can we expect from management?
– How will these expectations be communicated, etc.?

We were confused when we received this agenda. We had expected the team
to choose some specific cases for a dialogue with their senior manager. Lin-
guistically, we observe, too, how the team describes itself not as a subject,
but as an object of management expectations: "What does management ex-
pect from us?", "What can we expect from management?" This seems to be
contrary to the idea of involvement. We wonder if the team itself contributes
to not being self-managing?

Two days later, we met with the team and the senior manager. At the be-
ginning of the meeting, we presented our reflections on their agenda:

> Marianne: We had expected a meeting with a different agenda. We had
> imagined you would bring some specific cases in order to attune expecta-
> tions with the purpose of learning: what can you improve in your future
> relations to John (the senior manager) and vice versa? Apparently, you
> have chosen otherwise? We had expected you to be in control because the
> meeting is about involvement?
>
> Elisabeth: There was no secret thought.
>
> Marianne: You wrote: "What can we expect from management?" You
> could also have written: "We have the following expectations vis-à-vis
> management."
>
> Elisabeth: Didn't I write that?
>
> Jørgen: The sentences: "What does management expect from us?" and
> "What can we expect from management?" are written in the passive tense.
>
> Elisabeth: What does this tell about me? [laughter]
>
> Jørgen: I did not say that [laughter]

Everybody: [laughter]

Jørgen: If I were John, I would think what is your contribution as a team?

Elisabeth: Maybe, this is something unconscious. Let us return to that later.

Stephanie: Well then, I suggest John takes the initiative and tells us what he expects from us.

Everybody: [laughter]

In this sequence, we are confronted with the dilemma of involvement in a new, but well-known version, which we meet when the organizational hierarchy is present. We found ourselves to be in a scrape. We doubted if, and if so how, we could express our points of view without the team being exposed when their senior manager was present. This was perhaps merely a linguistic difference between the team and us about expressing ownership verbally and not a difference in points of view on involvement? Earlier, we had come across the use of the passive tense in this academic department.[5] Elisabeth and Stephanie helped us with their humorous comments: "What does this tell about me?" and "Well then, I suggest John takes the initiative and tells us what he expects from us". We interpret they contributed to creating a caring container where apparently no one was loosing face. Unfortunately, we did not manage to get a shared picture of the agenda.

Two minutes later, we meet the dilemma in a parallel version: The senior manager tells he must leave in an hour, even though the meeting was scheduled to last for two hours. We have had similar experiences in the department: often meetings start later than agreed upon, sometimes someone has to leave earlier, some meetings last longer than scheduled etc. We were in doubt about how to deal with this dilemma without the senior manager experiencing us making an alliance with the team. We did not respond in accordance with our value of openness by taking our own medicine, i.e., by checking our ideas: Was the meeting cut short, because the team had not explained the importance of the agenda to the senior manager? Did the senior manager him-

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[5]   The transcribed text reveals a methodical problem, too. It is based on oral tapes. This means that, e.g., smiles and eye contact are left out in the transcript, so that the written situation presents itself as more ´strict´ than we remember the situation.

self have a work overload? Was this an example of a double bind situation where the senior manager paid lip service to the project and to involvement, but did not actually make it a priority? By not asking this last, critical question, we reacted contrary to our value of involvement. We remember feeling embarrassed and reacted by being too polite vis-à-vis the senior manager. We do not have an ideal of neutrality. We try to practice our espoused values of dialogue, openness, and involvement as our theory-in-use. This ideal was violated here.

We only address the dilemma indirectly by meta-communicating about the length of the meeting in a humorous way:

> Marianne: So, the agenda deals with John's expectations to you as a self-managing team and with what you might bring up in relation to John in order to attune expectations. Then there is the issue about shortening the meeting. Is this an item, too?
>
> Everybody: [laughter]

We agree with the team and the senior manager to let our feedback on their communication become part of the agenda. We will make regular time-outs sharing our reflections with them. We ask them to make use of three dialogical competencies. The overall purpose is to enhance their ability to listen to each other (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). We call them tracking, i.e., questioning key expressions in the statements of each other; scanning, i.e., checking one's ideas about the other's points of view; and meta-communication, i.e., talking from a helicopter perspective about the communication that takes place, if you do not think you are on track. Our choice of these dialogical competences was based on earlier interviews and on the assumption that perspective reflection would be critical if they were to attune expectations.

The same agenda?

John, the senior manager, opens the conversation:

> John: So you are interested in the framework we use when we try to run this office in a different way compared to a traditional organization. Is that where you are?

Stephanie: Yes, and we would like to focus on concrete examples. You tend to talk about the big picture.

Everybody: [laughter]

John: I'm not sure …

Everybody: [laughter]

John. All of you contribute to defining the agenda … each one of you is responsible for your daily work …

Stephanie: We would like to have office meetings with you on a regular basis … because some issues get onto us as a team or as individuals, and we might need to sit down and discuss these issues thoroughly with you.

John: I, too, would like to do this with your team as I do with other teams in the office. So, I think we simply have to get started.

Elisabeth: Then, you would also be able to get a grasp on our specific cases …

John: I thought you said you had too many meetings ... but I'm in favour of such meetings. If you need them, or if I do, then let us deal with it in a systematic way.

John starts by presupposing that the team and he have a shared understanding of the framework of the office. He does so by using an including "we" ("… in the framework we use when we try to run this office"). He checks his understanding: "Is that, where you are?" The team proposes office meetings on a regular basis. They act as a subject expressing their expectations: "We would like to …". John replies in a confirming way: "I, too, would like …".

We did not address the meaning of their repeated laughter. We heard everybody laugh when Stephanie expressed a difference between their focus on concrete cases and John's on the big picture. We assume this is a well-known difference to all of them and we interpret their laughter as a caring way to tease the senior manager. We are left, however, with this question: do the senior manager and the team have the same agenda for the meetings as John presupposes and checks? The laughter might indicate a difference in perspectives between a focus on concrete cases vs. on the big picture. So do the remarks made by Stephanie ("some issues get onto us …") and by Elisabeth ("Then you would also be able to …"). Apparently, they talk about their dif-

ficulties with certain cases, which they want John to get a grasp on and not about the general framework of the office. Based on this analysis, it seems that a traditional dilemma is expressed as different interests in what is the agenda.

Openness as a dilemma?

The team presented the following case when we interviewed them alone. Contrary to what we feared when starting this meeting, it now becomes part of the conversation with their boss. The case focuses on their degree of self-management in a concrete situation:

> Stephanie: Then, there was the process about whether the committee should have the authorization instead of us. All of a sudden, it was taken away from us and given to the committee. You [John] and I had heavy discussions in the corridor. I went to my colleagues, tore my hair, told you what was going on, then back into the corridor talking to you, John, and then back again. Finally, we called a meeting with you and gave you a 13 pages long résumé containing all our arguments and points of view. Afterwards, you told us you had not even read it.

> John: No, I did not read it thoroughly. That is right. I told you so.

> Stephanie: Yes, we cannot complain about you not being open.

> Everybody: [laughter]

> Stephanie: Our next case is about the present, ongoing process in the department. I'm extremely happy you put it on the agenda last Friday. You made a statement about the new reorganization plan at an earlier meeting with the team coordinators. I know you expect team coordinators to treat some of your information as secrets, but then we have this openness in our team, so I immediately told my colleagues …

> John: Well, the only thing …

> Stephanie: … if you will let me finish my sentence, please. In the team, we believe if we have a discussion about these things right away, then our daily work will become more secure. If I am being secretive, then not until – all of a sudden – when everything is going to be changed, my colleagues will know. They would be completely paralyzed … you may think I am stupid, because I told them? I don't know if that's what you think?

> John: First of all, openness is one of our values… So I think we should stretch it as far as we possibly can in situations like these … I think I invite you to a dialogue. Actually, in this situation, I got the picture by talking about it.

The department has openness as an espoused value. According to our immediate interpretation, they also practice it as their theory-in-use in this sequence. Let us have a closer look at the conversation.

Stephanie, the team coordinator, comments on the fact that John did not read their paper advocating the team to keep the authorization. She meta-communicates about their openness, about John's interruption, and about the fact that she did not keep his information as a secret as she was expected to as a team coordinator. She continues, expressing her feelings ("I'm extremely happy") and checking her ideas ("I don't know if that's what you think?"). By doing so, Stephanie practices openness as her theory-in-use across the organizational hierarchy in relation to John and within the team.

Apparently, John answers with a similar openness confirming he did not read their paper "thoroughly". Taking into consideration that he is a senior manager, we assume the team might experience his answer in at least two ways: as a verbal indication of openness and as a practical rejection of their résumé. Moreover, John intends to stretch the value of openness as far as possible. Does this mean that he accepts Stephanie told the secret to the team? By the use of an including "we", it seems as if he presupposes that the value of openness means the same for the team and for him ("openness is one of our values … we should stretch it … as we possibly can"). Do John and Stephanie share the same understanding of openness?

The whole sequence might be understood as a dialogue where the team coordinator and the senior manager meet on an equal basis across the organizational hierarchy. To us, openness is a process in which the team and the senior manager continuously move the borderline of what it is safe to address in a dialogue with the other partner.

However, we are left with two unanswered questions.

The first question is why everybody laughed when Stephanie said: "Yes, we can't complain about you not being open"? We think her answer can be interpreted in two ways. It can be understood as recognition of John, but also

as a quick rejection of his admission. The latter might be based on the above-mentioned difference between John's verbal openness and his actual rejection. Does laughter become an indirect way of coping with criticism across organizational hierarchy? Did we do the same when we meta-communicated in a humorous way about the length of the meeting? We did not ask the senior manager or the team. We think this laughter works in an including way as opposed to laughter accompanied by nonverbal alliances by means of selective eye contact. The latter kind of laughter seems to exclude some members within an organization (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen, in press**)**.

The second question we are left with is: Did Stephanie get an answer to her question whether she was "stupid, because I told them? I don't know if that's what you think?" Generally speaking, she did, but in concrete terms, we do not think so.

Earlier, we wrote that this sequence might be interpreted as openness practiced as theory-in-use. However, a closer analysis has shown that openness seems to be understood and practiced differently according to your hierarchical status. To John the value of openness seems to be shared by everybody in the department. Besides, he does not give a concrete answer to Stephanie's question. To Stephanie, the team coordinator, the value of openness becomes a practical dilemma. She becomes divided between her loyalty to the senior manager and to her team colleagues. She has chosen to be loyal to her team and to bring this up into the open by asking wether John thinks she is "stupid because I told them?" Thus, the value of openness is not unambiguous. It is influenced by your position in the organization and by your interests.

We understand the question of authorization as an example of a traditional dilemma. Who is to decide about the authorization? The team or the ones in charge in the committee: "All of a sudden, it was taken away from us and given to the committee"? Stephanie's dilemma can be understood as an example of a modern dilemma. It relates to the internal relations between her as a team-coordinator and her colleagues. Stephanie and the team practice self-management in the ways they handle the value of openness. They interpret and practice it according to their own norms and interests. By doing so, they become part of a traditional dilemma where, by speaking in general terms,

John, as a manager, defines how the value of openness is a shared value in the department without being specific. Thus, the modern dilemma seems to be part of a traditional dilemma embedded in organizational hierarchy.

Value based management is apparently not a neutral, managerial tool. In practice, the understanding of values seems to reflect your organizational position and interest.

Confidence?

> Jørgen: Let's have a break here. I suggest we enter the helicopter. Is this meeting valuable for you? … Is this what you wanted?
>
> Thomas: … Yes, I think so.
>
> Stephanie: Right now, what worries us most is the control function we have had for the last couple of years ... Elisabeth has been able to put NN [a researcher in the committee] on his place by saying: "You might think so, NN, but I am in charge here. I decide how the contract is framed and elaborated". Perhaps, this is our biggest insecurity of moving to this department. Do we still have this authority?
>
> John: I agree completely. This is how it is and how it should be. It is extremely important that everything is fixed particularly within these areas about contracts … I have much confidence in the work you do. I think we have the best office in the country in this area.

Although, we initially agreed upon regular time-outs, it became a challenge in practice. When we suggested a trip in the helicopter reflecting on their process and communication, the team as well as the senior manager continued talking about their concrete cases, which, by the way, we had urged them to do.

This happens in this situation, too, when talking about another aspect of the traditional dilemma. Stephanie is attuning her expectations with John about the extent of self-management as to contracts ("do we still have this authority?"). John confirms her point of view ("I agree completely."), and he expresses unconditional appreciation of their work ("I have much confidence in the work, you do. I think we have the best office in the country in this area."). It is our interpretation that here they seem to reach a shared perspec-

tive on self-management. The team is to be in control. The question of confidence is addressed in the following sequence, too:

> Jørgen: Have you checked your understanding of John's points of view?

> Stephanie: I think you have said a few things we can hold you responsible for in the future.

> John: I think it is a problem if you mistrust me. I do not think that is the case, but one could read what you say in this way … Can you give me some concrete examples?

> Elisabeth: Several times, I think there is a breakdown in our communication. So it is a good idea to have office meetings on a regular basis.

> Stephanie: A good example is the situation when criticism rained down on us during a meeting in the committee. Allegedly, our work on the contracts was too slow and not up to standards. We talked about this with you prior to the meeting, and we thought you agreed with us. As was the case in the last committee meeting, someone expressed doubt about whether it was appropriate to delegate such important matters to "stray, legal professionals". We asked Thomas [a colleague present at the meeting]: "Yes, but what did John say in reply?" "Well, he did not say anything, really". Then our hearts fell down into our stomachs. One thinks: "My God, didn't he stand by us?" Why did he not tell the members of the committee: "I am fully confident that my employees know how to handle this task? Besides, we have a tight follow up on this project".

> Thomas: He said so.

> Stephanie: Oh, he did. OK.

> Elisabeth: There was a similar case when someone made a complaint about us. That was tough. We are trying to do our best and we prefer to confront complaints directly, if we cause trouble.

> John: But it was made quite clear that you did not do anything wrong. All you did was to follow the rules.

> Jørgen: What do you expect John does differently?

> Stephanie: We only expect you to protect us, so we will not be thrown to the lions at these meetings.

> Elisabeth: So you will check what the problem is and give us the feedback.

> John: Sometimes, Elisabeth, I also think it is my obligation to say: "We do not want to continue reeling about this. Let us forget about the case". On the other hand, of course, we have to handle heavy matters, which influence you deeply.

> Elisabeth: Well, I think a complaint is an example of that.

> Stephanie: We became very sad about that.

> John: So, couldn't we close the case by saying that we let one of you, professional advisors, attend these meetings and make a report, too? If important issues are raised, I as well as the professional advisor will be responsible for introducing these issues at our office meetings.

> Elisabeth: Yes, that would be fine.

In our initial interview with the team, Stephanie and Thomas had told us that the team's confidence was disturbed when their authorization was changed over their heads. They did not experience "being listened to". Having expressed his unconditional appreciation and confidence in the team, John turns to the question about their confidence in him. He "reads" Stephanie's statement: "I think you have said a few things we can hold you responsible for in the future" as a possible expression of mistrust. He checks his understanding and asks for examples.

The team answers by presenting two examples that have influenced them emotionally on a deep level ("…our hearts fell down into our stomachs", "That was tough", "We became very sad about that"). The first example falls to the ground when Thomas, a team member, corrects the co-ordinator's understanding of the senior manager not supporting them at the meeting ("He said so".) After our intervention, the next case makes the team express their expectations of the senior manager: "We expect you to protect us, so we will not be thrown to the lions at these meetings", "So you will check what the problem is and give us feedback."). Unlike their initial agenda, the team acts as subjects here. However, we are still in doubt about what kind of behavior they expect from their senior manager.

John distinguishes between cases he and the team ("us") ought to forget and cases that are "heavy matters which influence you deeply". The last category is to be dealt with at future office meetings. We interpret his expression: " … heavy matters which influence you deeply" as an indication that he has heard

the team. Finally, he defines and suggests by means of an including we that some cases ought to be forgotten. By doing so, he closes the conversation.

Once again, the dilemma of involvement has become a question of who is defining the agenda. Is this conversation a dialogue in which the team and the senior manager do this jointly? Or is it a case of democraship where the senior manager has the final, defining power of closing the conversation?

In our interpretation, the dilemma also unfolds itself as constructive misuse. The team expresses feelings of being misused when presented with unfair complaints, which perhaps are not called to order. It is our hypothesis that self-managing teams are influenced emotionally in severe ways, because as entrepreneurs they work more and with greater enthusiasm than one could expect from traditional wage earners and then suddenly, they are treated like them. Thus, we understand the dilemma between enthusiasm and severe emotional reactions ("… our hearts fell down into our stomachs", "That was tough", "We became very sad about that") as an example of a modern dilemma.

It is our hypothesis that traditional dilemmas become particularly explosive today, because often they interfere with modern dilemmas. In our project, employees seem to have internalized the values of the organization in which they work as norms. Employees work longer hours, they accept to be contacted in their spare-time, they flex, etc., because there are self-managing, and because they think their work is fun. When management decides, as part of a traditional dilemma, employees are no longer self-managing, then employees react emotionally in ways to be compared with sorrow and loss of trust. Thus, modern dilemmas might hurt like love.

Nevertheless, in our understanding the limits of the unspoken have been moved towards what can be addressed between the team and the senior manager. The team does not only talk about these cases within their own circles or with us. They bring them to the table and discuss them with the senior manager, apparently balancing expectations.

Tracking and bystander

When the senior manager had left the meeting, we gave the following feedback to the team:

Jørgen: It seems to me you do a lot of scanning, i.e., checking your ideas by asking questions. Maybe, you could do that even more? On the other hand, there isn't much tracking where you inquire into the perspectives of the other.

Marianne: That's where you ask into the core of the subject matter, into hot spots. I observe you are heading in that direction, but what was the conclusion? What was the decision? Did you get an answer to your questions?

Stephanie: Yes, the agreement was that John and one of us should bring up relevant issues from the meetings in the committee at our office meetings.

Marianne: Are you sure you reached a shared understanding?

Jørgen: I got the impression that John has a broader understanding of which cases are to be forgotten compared with your understanding.

Stephanie: We will bring that question up on the first meeting.

Jørgen: That would probably be a good idea, but at the moment I am thinking on the long view, too.

Elisabeth: Yes, I think we could improve by asking: "Yes, but what do you mean when saying …?"

Marianne: That would enable you to ask: "What we have decided so far is … what do you think of that, John?" Then, you would be able to check whether you have reached a shared understanding.

Elisabeth: This means, at future office meetings, it would be an idea to let one of us write down and sum up before we close an item: "So, do we agree that …?"

Jørgen: Precisely, because what I see as the strength of this team is your enormous engagement. That is a pleasure. The reverse side of the coin might be you do not close an item before jumping into the next.

During our cooperation with the team, we have observed a marked tendency of taking up concrete cases and discussing points of view. Almost nobody seems to enter the helicopter and reflect on the team process and on his or her communication. Are questions answered? Do they check their understanding? Do they sum up and conclude what they have decided so far, etc.? There

seems to be more movers than bystanders in this team (DIA*logos 1997). Elisabeth advocates that one of them might function as a bystander at their office meetings. This person is to sum up and check if they have a shared understanding, before they continue with the next item on the agenda.

As action researchers it became clear to us that it was not only the team who did not conclude or inquire into the core of a given subject matter. Nor did we. Maybe we suffered from an illusion of their conversation being a dialogue, because we were impressed by the open ways the senior manager and the team talked about their problems? Our subsequent analysis has indicated that even in a seemingly open conversation between a team and a manager, the organizational hierarchy is always present, although in an apparently more democratic form. Besides, values like openness, confidence, self-management, and involvement are not unambiguous constructions in team-based organizations.

6. Between dialogue and discussion

As to the first purpose of the article, the analysis has shown how the dilemma of self-management and decision processes is embedded in an organizational hierarchy. The dilemma unfolds as traditional dilemmas between self-management and managerial power as repeated questions about who is going to decide on important issues or to define the agenda; as different perspectives on the value of openness; as indirect nonverbal ways of coping with criticism. The dilemma unfolds as modern dilemmas, too, between taking on a new project and acting irresponsibly as a team, between enthusiasm and work satisfaction on one hand and increased workload and hurt feelings on the other. The analysis has shown, too, that traditional dilemmas seem to interfere with modern dilemmas because employees have internalized management in ways that make them vulnerable. This means they are acting as entrepreneurs and treated like wage earners.

As to the second purpose, the analysis has demonstrated how the dilemma of involvement presents itself in the relation between them and us, and how we become part of the dilemma. Are we practicing dialogue or democraship when we invite them to decide whether to participate in the action research

project, or when we take their answers at face value? Is this action research project a constructive misuse of them, because, among other things, their workload is relatively increased by their participation in the project? Do we become part of a new management tendency? And/or do we influence the organization in a more democratic and dialogical direction? As action researchers, we have learned that hierarchy and power in team-based organizations are much more sophisticated and complex to see through compared with the more traditional organizations we have collaborated with.

We assume the dilemma of involvement can be understood as part of a new management tendency, HRM, characterized by strategic communication. Eisenberg/Goodall (1997: 28) give the following definition:

> Strategic ambiguity gains control because it (1) promotes unified diversity, (2) preserves privileged positions, (3) is deniable, and (4) facilitates organizational control.

It is our assumption that the new HRM-tendency tries to cope with these dilemmas communicatively by means of ambiguity or strategic communication. This implies a paradox. On one hand, values, like, e.g., openness, are very difficult if not impossible to disagree with. On the other hand, they cover up a multitude of different interpretations and interests.

The administration department we collaborate with is part of a large ongoing transition. There seems to be a general movement away from a more hierarchical and rule directed tendency towards a more involving or participatory and value based one within organizational thinking. A large number of organizational development projects are launched aiming at empowerment, involvement, self-managing teams etc. (Hildebrandt/Brandi 2006; Bloch-Poulsen 2006).

Many private and public organizations are thus characterized by a tension between hierarchy and involvement. On one hand, involvement is presented as a positive element, e.g., in Deetz, Tracy, and Simpson (2000: 94-95):

> Greater employee participation in all aspects of running organizations seems to be ensured in the future. No single quality of management practice is more highly correlated with success … Product quality, productivity, reduced absenteeism, and satisfaction have consistently correlated with high levels of participation.

On the other, Waring (1991) emphasizes the following aspect of involvement:

> Corporatists developed new theories about business government consistent with their conception of human nature and the good life. They envisioned the capitalist firm as a social institution, an industrial clan, whose managers had responsibilities beyond the bottom line and whose members had goals beyond the paycheck. Managers and members shared goals because improving productivity and raising profits depended on personnel fulfillment … corporatists … wanted managers to act less like scientist-dictators and more like democratic leaders, orchestra conductors, samurai masters, parents, teachers, and therapists … Participation in management was the central corporatist departure from Taylorism (Waring 1991: 193) [and] They wanted participative management rather than participatory democracy. (Waring 1991: 201)

The modern dilemma is based on the internalization of management by engaged employees. As mentioned, this means that a division between work and private life tends to disintegrate; a norm of always being available seems to spread – causing an increase in stress and stress-related absenteeism. An employee from the project tells:

> I have often experienced when working on a very big task, which I would like help to from my colleagues that everybody else is very busy, too, and that, secondly, it would take quite some time to hand it over to somebody else. Well, then, I decide to work until 9 p.m. tonight and tomorrow, too, because then it is done with … I do not think we can survive with this as a team, because we'll break down. We have too many peaks and too much stress.

As action researchers, we do not only experience the dilemma of involvement in daily work situations, but also when an organization is to be developed. As shown, the scope of employee influence is not clear. What is up for a dialogue, i.e. for joint inquiry and decision between management and employees? What is up for a discussion, i.e. what decisions has management already made to be discussed later with employees in the sense of being sold to them? This is perhaps one of the reasons why 70% of launched organizational development projects do not yield the expected results (Hildebrandt/Brandi 2006).

Part of the dilemma is a difference in perspective due to organizational position. What management experiences as involving employees, some of them consider as management renouncing their responsibility. As one of the employees told us:

> I have a feeling that management so to say invented all this about team-work. Then they have a place for the work to be done without being responsible themselves. They delegate the responsibility. Everybody thinks that's great. Everybody is happy to have a responsibility. But when you say: "I can't cope with more tasks" or "You have to help me prioritize", they answer: "But, that's your own decision". It's like: You fix that in the teams. Then it's done with. I mean, the renunciation of responsibility inherent in team organization becomes total. We don't hear things like: Oh, I see your point. You have a work overload. It's just: Here is some more work, even when you say no.

On the other hand, the senior manager talks about process, indistinctness and rules:

> Many employees would like to have some rules. Then they would know how things should be as in the old days. To me the process is important. I don't want to define what it means to be self-managing or co-managing. That would be contrary to the idea of self-management … To work in a team is not and cannot be a planned process. You can't always have an answer. You will have to try and learn yourself.

It seems to be exactly this dilemma, which makes it exciting and straining for employees to work within this new HRM-trend.

7. From participative democracy to participative management

The dilemma of involvement reflects a historical development in Europe. In the beginning of the last century, the concept of autonomy was part of the Socialist idea of workers' council. The workers' council was to be the basic production unit in the Socialist society to come. Tendencies in that direction were seen in some European countries around the end of World War I. Management was understood as a practical remedy. You were elected directly among your colleagues as a manager, and they could withdraw your authority, if you did not act in alignment with their demands.

This line of thinking had a renascence in a Social Democratic version around the end of World War II. In the original version, the workers' councils were in charge of production and distribution. In the new version, they were reduced to consultative councils working with information and cooperation (Knudsen/Bloch-Poulsen 1979).

In a way, these councils can be seen as the embryos of the movement of industrial democracy in the 1960's and onwards. Many action researchers became part of this movement of inquiring into and improving working conditions, e.g., in Scandinavia (Thorsrud 1976) and in Germany (Fricke, 1983). As underlined by Greenwood/Lewin (1998: 16), it is important to be aware of potentially repressive tolerance:

> This very widespread diffusion of ideas developed through AR is a success story about the dissemination of AR, but also a story about the way fairly radical ideas for social change can end up being appropriated as management tools aimed at producing more efficient, rather than more fair, organizations … The challenge for the AR community is not to retain its "purity" but to figure out strategically how to open up new ground for democratic work organization.

Today, co-managing or self-managing teams seem to be the state of art in organizations. This is not only the case in the assembly line industries, where it was intended to be a way of humanizing work life in the 1960's and onwards. It goes for many private and public organizations, too, including unskilled as well as highly educated employees. Today, direct, participative democracy has been transformed into a participative management tool aiming at an increase in work satisfaction, efficiency and profits.

Consequently, from a historical point of view, the concept of self-management must be considered misuse of the original term. We think the concept of co-managing is more appropriate to pinpoint the dilemma of involvement, because it refers to certain delimited areas. As Barker (1999: 137) sums it up in his study of culture and norms in team-based organizations:

> They [the employees] were controlled, but in control.

For managers, employees, as well as for action researchers, the challenging question is still: In control of what? What does management decide? What is the span of control for the employees? What can action researchers influ-

ence? What do they and we decide together? We have learned that dialogue is a way of coping with the dilemma of involvement, if and when we remember that doing so is a dilemma, because dialogues are embedded in the organizational hierarchy.

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