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Seductive Atmospheres

Using Tools to Effectuate Spaces for Leadership Development

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Spaces for Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

This study applies an affordance lens to understand the use of management tools and how atmospheres for change and development are created and exploited. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a consultant-facilitated change intervention among a group of research leaders at a Danish Public Hospital, this study investigates how a business game is used as a tool to effectuate episodic spaces for leadership development. The study reveals three tool affordances and discusses how they enable and constrain episodic spaces for development and further develops the notion of seductive atmospheres as an important mechanism. The article suggests that a broader understanding of the use of tools and the role of atmospheres is essential for understanding how episodic spaces for development come to work in relation to organizational change and development.

KEYWORDS: Leadership development, consulting, affordances, atmospheres, tools, business games

Introduction

Studies of organizational change and development have advanced the understanding of professional attempts to effectuate and manage change (Thomas, Sargent and Hardy, 2011; Todnem By, 2005; Howard-Greenville et al., 2011; Whittle, Suhomlinova and Mueller, 2010). Existing literature has highlighted how change and development initiatives often take form through bracketed episodic spaces for development such as workshops (Thomas et al., 2011), training sessions (Whittle et al., 2010), or formalized leadership development programmes (Smolovich, Grint and Cammock, 2015) that are facilitated by consultants. Research often describes episodic spaces for development as 'cultural islands' (Lewin, 1946) or 'liminal spaces' (Howard-Greenville et al., 2011), which work by bracketing change recipients from

everyday practice. Although widely recognized, episodic spaces for development often remain as background phenomena, left without further interrogation (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Recent practice-based studies of strategy making and organizational change (Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015; Sambrook and Willmott, 2013; Sturdy, 2011; Schein, 1999), and micro-studies of how consultants act discursively as change agents (Whittle and Mueller, 2011) show the importance of opening up how 'tools' and spatial arrangements or 'material conditions' matter to spaces for development (Oswick, 2013). However, the micro-level analysis of the enactment of tools and the mechanisms by which they work remains relatively undertheorized (Henriksen, 2016; Smolovic Jones et al., 2015).

Addressing this gap, the article sets out to explore the mechanisms and tools by which attempts to craft episodic spaces for development come to work in practice (Retna, 2016; Sturdy, 2012; Whittle and Mueller, 2011). We are interested in how episodic spaces for development are shaped and managed, and how they affect the participants involved. In order to do so, we revitalize the work of Lewin on atmospheres (1939; 1943) and use an affordance lens on tools (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). We focus on Lewin's (1939) early theories on the role of (organizational) atmospheres in development attempts (Michels and Steyaert, 2017; Borch, 2010) in combination with the recent emerging interest in organizational affordances (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). Lewin argued that practitioners (consultants, facilitators or teachers) depend on the creation of appropriate 'atmospheres' in order to accomplish their work. Whereas Lewin used the term 'atmospheres' to stress the social climate and group dynamics, he did not elaborate further on how the material furnishing mattered. The notion of affordance allows us to understand the reciprocal relationship between atmospheres and 'opportunities for action' (Gibson, 1986). Based on this, the following research question motivates our inquiry: 'How do tools enable and constrain consultant-facilitated spaces for development? And how do atmospheres matter to spaces for development?'

The article is based on an ethnographic account of a consultant-led leadership development initiative at a Danish public university hospital. Our study focuses on a three-day event with a group of research leaders from a research department. The case shows how consultants engage in material practices by using a business game and complementary exercises and artefacts as tools to help participants effectuate change. By disclosing how the research leaders play a business board game, we reveal the shaping of an atmosphere that leads the participants away from their everyday practice, creating opportunities for action and effectuation of change. Introducing the notion of *seductive atmospheres*, we argue that a central mechanism of workshops and transitory processes is to afford a flexible but configurative space in which current realities can be simulated and provoked. We find that the power of atmospheres to evoke opportunities for change comes at a risk. If not carefully managed, they may lead astray, which may jeopardize the journey back to reality and everyday practices.

By providing new insights into the role of atmospheres in development processes, our study contributes to three theoretical discussions. Firstly, our study contributes to work on the role of episodic spaces for development in organizations (Johnson et al., 2010; Howard Greenville et al., 2011). Secondly, by disclosing the micro-practices and use of a change management game as a tool we contribute to recent calls for studies on tools and materiality in organizational change (Gorli et al., 2015; Oswick, 2013). Thirdly, by bringing in a focus on atmospheres we add to the recent revitalization of Kurt Lewin's work in organizational change (Burnes and Bargal, 2017; Rogers, Vardaman, Allen, Muslin & Baskin, 2017; Vardaman, Gondo and Allen, 2014) and make connections to the literature on the role of atmospheres in organization studies (Michels and Steyaert, 2017; Borch, 2010). Finally, our study provides important practical insights to consultants and practitioners.

Tools at work in spaces for development

The tools and techniques for shaping the right atmosphere in spaces for development has been a focus since the work of Lewin and colleagues (Lewin, 1951; Lippitt, 1943). Lewin considered the 'workshop' as a 'tool' for improvement (Lewin, 1946: 209) and considered theories and concepts as tools for thinking and experimentation – most famously illustrated through his dictum 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951: 169; Lewin, 1936). In recent years, the specific notion of *tools* has been deployed to describe the technologies of intentional organizational change and development, including the *'concepts, models, and methods'* used to craft spaces for development (Paroutis, Franco and Papadopoulos, 2015: 48; Whittle and Mueller, 2011; Worren et al., 2002; Hansen and Clausen, 2017). Research has shown how consultants and leaders, in their joint work, deploy PowerPoint slides (Bourgoin and Muniesa, 2016), strategy maps (Paroutis et al., 2015), reflection journals (Gorli, Nicolini and Scaratti, 2015), videos and visualizations (Thomas et al., 2011), and business games or simulations (Faria, Hutchinson, Wellington and Gold, 2009). The latter has in recent years become popular, sparking a 'gamification' trend within management (Reeves and Wittenburg, 2015; Kark, 2011; Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009). While acknowledging the large body of prescriptive literature, which mainly focus on *how to* use tools for organizational change and development (Reeves and Wittenberg, 2015; Cameron and Green, 2015; Hughes, 2007) we focus on the literature exploring how tools *work in* use. In reviewing this latter literature, we see two dominant perspectives that address tools in change and development respectively a conversational perspective and a material perspective.

Conversational perspective. There has been a particular focus on the discursive and communicative manoeuvres in spaces for development (Thomas et al., 2011; Whittle and Mueller, 2011; Smolovich Jones et al., 2015; Whittle, Suhomlinova and Mueller, 2010; Carroll and Nicholson, 2014). For instance, Thomas et al., (2011) show in a study of a workshop during

a cultural change programme how communicative manoeuvres are important in the negotiation of meaning. They identified how communicative practices such as an '*inviting* practice' encouraged other actors to take part in the negotiation of meaning, and how a '*building* practice' was deployed to elaborate on statements and relate to meanings proposed by other actors. Language also constitutes an important tool for translating and constructing management knowledge. Whittle and Mueller (2011: 188) take a conversational focus on 'language-based tools that are employed as part of interactional business' between the consultants and the participants during a training session targeted at an organizational change initiative. In their study, they underscore the importance of looking into how consultants use pronouns such as 'us', 'them' or 'we' to create an 'affiliative atmosphere' with their clients (Whittle and Mueller, 2011: 193; Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). They detect various tools or 'discursive devices' such as empathy, categorization and spontaneity to enable the translation of the change initiative. They argue that it is the skilled use of such devices that makes the change recipients sensitive to the management ideas (Whittle and Mueller, 2011: 188-204).

Moreover, within the conversational perspective we also find literature that emphasize the experimental nature of tools to facilitate reflection. Reflection may be reached by means of reflexive dialogues (Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2015; Cunliffe, 2004), role play (Lippitt, 1943), reflective journals (Gray, 2007) or particular interview methods (Gorli, Nicolini and Scaratti, 2015). Tools may be considered in relation to questioning techniques or dialogic processes facilitated by consultants (Schein, 1999). Gray (2007) describes reflexive tools such as making participants articulate problems through 'storytelling' or making dialogic exercises, which he terms 'reflexive conversations'. Studies within this perspective typically find inspiration in social psychological or therapeutic literature (Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2015). The nature of the tools varies from more-or-less immaterial tools to more concrete, hands-on tools. Representing an immaterial focus, Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015: 730) argue that the facilitator's 'reflexivity is

perhaps the single most important tool' in creating a safe space for development. Likewise, Cunliffe (2002) describes 'reflexive dialogical practice', which she considers as a way to 'question our ways of understanding, being and acting in the world', pointing towards the aspect of learning (p. 18-19). Considered as a dialogical process, the tools create spaces for development that make actors more self-conscious about their own authorship and open up a way to construct reality. This part of the literature provides important insights into how tools take on the form of dialogic processes and writing exercises and highlight matters of identity and the transformation of human conduct. Tools are here considered as kinds of 'human technologies' that brings therapeutic practices and the hope of self-realization into management (Rose, 1998; Haudan and MacLean, 2001; Lezaun and Muniesa, 2017). In sum, contributions provide important insights into how atmospheres for development contain the construction of a safe and permissive atmosphere as well (Lewin, 1946; Lippitt, 1943; Glover and Hower, 1956: 14, cited in Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2015: 728).

Material perspective. An emerging interest, evolving around the material practices and spatial arrangement of development spaces, points to issues beyond the conversational perspective (Oswick, 2013; Lezaun and Calvillo, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015; Gorli et al., 2015; Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002). According to Oswick (2013), recent research on change and spaces for development has mainly focused on the 'discursive content' of change at the 'expense of a meaningful consideration of material conditions'. In contrast to the conversational perspective, Gorli et al., (2015: 22) consider tools more literally and materialistically by providing a description of the use of different tools. They show how the material practice of writing, in combination with other tools such as action plans and different seminars, affords an opportunity for collective reflexivity and a vehicle for reconstructing managerial practice. Accordingly, the tools invited the participants to bring 'into focus practices, feelings, appreciations and tensions that all workers experience on a daily basis' (p.

10). As in the Cunliffe (2004) study, the tools provide an opportunity for questioning and reflecting on the current ways of constructing and authoring the organization. However, unlike Cunliffe (2004), Gorli et al. (2015) emphasizes how material arrangements also matter to reconstructing managerial practice.

The importance of tools as material artefacts furnishing spaces for development is also indicated in different studies of strategy workshops and meetings (Coorren et al., 2006; Paroutis et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). In the study of an episode in a facilitation process, Cooren et al. (2006) show how a group of managers were tasked to use post-its to explicate their hopes and fears concerning a change process. Objectifying these feelings in a post-it creates a safe distance between the feelings of the participants and the involved facilitators, helping the process. This literature focuses on the agency of artefacts and tools in use, pointing towards appropriation, opportunities and the shaping of interactions. Another example is the Kaizen board within LEAN, a visual tool for mapping continuous improvement used in the car industry and later dispersed to a variety of sectors including hospitals (Martinus, 2017). Such tools have plasticity by design, making them work as boundary objects that can be targeted at diverse sets of problems across different practices (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009). The current 'gamification' trend illustrates this, too. Henriksen and Børgesen (2016) trace the use of games for developing leadership back to the US army in the 1950s, since when games have proliferated as tools for working with all kinds of business problems (Faria et al., 2009).

In order to deal with the discursive, embodied and material aspects of tools in constructing spaces for development, we suggest using the theory of affordances and recent developments in the theorization of atmospheres to unpack how the board game offers certain possibilities for shaping an atmosphere for change effectuation.

Affordances and seductive atmospheres

The concept of affordances is a contested concept (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013), but in recent years its main idea has attracted interest from various research communities. Catalysed by studies of socio-materiality and the impact of information systems on organization practices, the affordance lens has become influential in management and organization studies (Zammuto, Griffith and Majchrzak, 2007; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) and has been indicated as a promising way to illustrate how consultants mobilize the environment to shape 'opportunities for action' (Hicks, Wilderom and Nair, 2009) and recently also to explore the role of strategy tools (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Developed by Gibson (1986), affordances refer to the possibilities and constraints of the environment relative to any observer. Affordances are unique and relational in the sense of being tied simultaneously to the situated use of multiple purposes (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). Our environment is therefore not value free, waiting to be 'bestowed by a need of the observer' (Gibson, 1986: 138), but rather it holds an array of values and meanings that point both to the observer and the observed. Many affordances are perceived by direct observation, but they may also be discovered indirectly when they are situated, distributed, and social (Scarantino, 2003). This point can be related to tools, where Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015: 539) argue that, '*tools have affordances that shape the way actors frame problems*'. However, as the framing assists the advancement of our understanding of the problem at hand, it also changes how we use the tool, shaping new framings in a continuous loop (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). In other words, cognitive and social processes are thus important aspects of affordances (Dale, 2005), which also becomes central when analysing the affordances of the dominating tool of our case: a business board game. Game affordances may vary depending on whether studied among developers of the game, a consultant who deploys the game for facilitation or a manager who plays the game to envision

everyday practice with all its mundane and idiosyncratic issues (Nandhakumar, Panourgias and Scarbrough, 2013).

The affordance lens nuances the inextricability between practitioners and the tools and artefacts surrounding them, which in the end contribute to make up an atmosphere. Lewin described social atmospheres as 'something intangible' and argued that 'it is a property of the social situation as a whole' (Lewin, 1939: 74). Although Lewin did not elaborate on how the material furnishings and spatial arrangement of a room affect atmospheres, it was indeed an important part (Lezaun and Calvillo, 2013). As illustrated by Lezaun and Calvillo (2013), atmospheres are an effect of the material furnishings, discourse, bodies and physical configuration of the intervention. It is how the situation as a whole is tuned: for instance, it can be a cosy, friendly or tense atmosphere. Atmospheres are always at play, and is not something easily managed; it is more of a background and 'any group atmosphere can be conceived of as a pattern of role playing' (Lewin, 1943: 40). Thus, atmospheres delegate roles and create norms for the situation, which is why the shaping of certain atmospheres becomes political (Borch, 2010). In relation to spaces for development, we may consider atmospheres to affect a norm that is to lead change recipients away from everyday practice. Leading people away from everyday routines - crafting a liminal space or cultural island - is a well-known purpose of workshops and meetings during change processes (Howard-Greenville et al., 2009). Inspired by Calas and Smircich (1991; Sinclair, 2009) we may consider this as a process of seduction. The notion of seduction is appropriate, since it corresponds etymologically to *lead* (ducere) *away* (se) but also takes the meaning of leading *astray* (Calas and Smircich, 1991). This double-edged aspect of seduction is important, since it underscores the affective connection and subtle power relation involved in animating the social energy that feeds consultant-led development practices (Cotter and Cullen, 2012).

The affordance lens allows an analytical sensitivity towards the role of the board game in gathering and facilitating interaction between consultants and participants, which contributes to composing a certain atmosphere (Michels and Steyaert, 2017; Borch, 2010; Lezaun and Calvillo, 2013). In sum, we aim to use the focus on atmospheres in combination with the sensitivity towards how tools and materials afford opportunities or constraints for action. In this way, we seek to advance the understanding of spaces for development and argue that the ability to create an atmospheric composition that leads away is a central mechanism in making spaces for development work.

Method

Research site

Our study is based on fieldwork at a Danish public university hospital where we set out to explore consultancy work in health care settings and the entwinement of managerial and specialized knowledge. In 2009, the University Hospital (UH) set out on a large-scale initiative consisting of a series of interventions to improve clinical leadership. The goal was to foster 'managerial reflection' and 'to mobilize leadership resources among professionals in order to improve work environment and accommodate current organizational changes at UH. Departments at the hospital were enrolled in the project through a series of planned leadership development interventions led by internal organization development consultants, assisted by external counterparts – all mostly acting in a process-consultant role (Schein, 1999). For this research project, we followed the process closely at two departments, a research department and a medical department, over a period of 18 months. Throughout the process, the consultants used various tools: reflection journals (logbooks), dialogic exercises, visual presentations (e.g. PowerPoint and flipchart), psychological tests, team-building exercises and learning games. One of the tools, a board game for change simulation, turned out to be particularly influential

and interesting. It circulated widely among the organizational consultants at UH, and they used the tool at a series of leadership development workshops to foster reflection on current and forthcoming changes. Developed by an outside consultancy, the board game was widely promoted in other large organizations as well. The consultancy having developed the board game argued that the strength of the tool was its ability to 'simulate organizational change, leaders' and professionals' reality and everyday work'. The role of the tool as a simulation game for reflection and preparation for change projects triggered our curiosity. The game seemed to provide interesting ground for advancing our understanding of the kinds of organizational realities tools afford in spaces for development and the reflection and modes of development they foster. Hence, we turned our focus towards the use of this particular tool, 'cutting' our empirical material to a three-day session at a conference facility involving a group of clinical research leaders. The clinical research department has approximately 100 employees, mostly with an educational background in medicine, statistics or mathematics. A director and a group of five research leaders, who all participated in the development process, manage the department. The total process involved eight full intervention days divided into three sessions. During the first session, the participants mapped current issues at the department. In the next session, which we focus on in this paper, they discussed leadership in times of change, and the topic of the final session was oriented towards next steps and self-management. During the first session, the leaders described how two informal cultures of medical researchers and statisticians caused controversy between the two occupations, which was detrimental to the department. The aim requested by the research department director was to develop their leadership abilities as a group; thus, they were tasked with improving their collaboration with a view to a smoother cross-occupational collaboration.

Research approach

The object of our analysis was the board game as a tool for simulating change, which also involved supporting props and artefacts such as post-its and logbooks. Pursuing this aim, we designed our research approach to follow the actual work of the consultants and how tools are involved in their work (Gherardi, 2012). In line with previous studies on consultant-client relations in action (Sturdy, Handley, Clark and Fincham, 2009), our design was informed by participant observation studies (Spradley, 1980) and the production of an ethnographic account (Van Maanen, 2006). We were interested in finding out how 'things work' in consultant-facilitated spaces for development (Watson, 2011). The first author engaged in an observer-as-participant role (Spradley, 1979), whereas the two co-authors were participating on the side, discussing and qualifying the empirical material throughout the research process. We employed a qualitative and explorative research approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and through our discussions we selected the case purposefully as an illustrative example of how tools work in spaces for development led by consultants. Along with other case study researchers, we argue that the situated descriptions of singular cases can reveal aspects of general and useful importance, which makes singular cases able to contribute to broader theoretical discussions (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data collection and analysis

We gathered the data through a three-step strategy of semi-structured interviews, observational methods and document studies. The data for this article is part of a larger ethnographic material from the UH case study containing approximately 200 hours of observation, 37 interviews (14 with consultants, 23 with participants) and document studies (approximately 500 pages), which in total affords a dense background for the present study of a three-day intervention session that

took place during the overall study. Access to observations was negotiated through the HRD manager; further access was negotiated with each client at the hospital.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants prior to, during and after the process; we also interviewed all research leaders and consultants. The average duration of interviews was one hour, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The in vivo observations took place primarily on site of the intervention. However, observations also took place 'off site' in terms of observing meetings related to the process both among the consultants as well as in the client organization. During these observations, the participation level varied from observing to participating in conversations (Spradley, 1980). Focus was on how the relationship between the consultant and the participants unfolded and how participants and consultants used the tool. After each day of observation, the first author rewrote and reworked field notes into coherent text resulting in more than 300 pages of field notes. Additionally, the consultancy that designed the tool provided further material for analysis. The collected documents consisted of PowerPoints, email streams, referred literature, concepts and models produced by the consultants and finally various internal documents at the hospital. We used the material to refine the interview questions and guide the observations.

The empirical material provided an analysis of what the participants were actually doing, with what aim and through which means (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). Inspiration was also drawn from practice-based studies and how 'material objects' mediate the process (Langley and Abdallah, 2011, p. 125). We collectively reflected on the transcripts from the observations and interviews. The material made us consider how artefacts, objects and tools played an important role. The analysis followed an abductive approach, which meant that the analysis was theoretically informed but open (Brinkmann, 2014; Timmermanns and Tavory, 2012). Through the process we went through a recursive process of consulting the literature on atmospheres,

and particularly affordance theory, and revisiting our empirical material and coding scheme (Gioia et al., 2012). Through NVivo software, we ordered the empirical material and performed a thematic coding. Inspired by the Gioia-method (Langley and Abdallah, 2011) and Strauss (1987), we firstly read the empirical material in order to create a series of open first-order themes. Secondly, we did a selective coding, which allowed us to infer second-order themes (see table 1). Drawing on Gibson (1986) and Paroutis et al. (2015), our selection criteria were theoretically informed by affordance theory, which made us look for interaction patterns in the use of the game with a focus on the actions *offered* or *constrained* by the game. The affordances derived from the second-order themes clustered around three episodes where the game appeared to work as a test or a trial and got a significant role (Lezaun and Muniesa, 2017, Boltanski, 2011). (1) In preparing the participants for the game, the background of the game was used to frame and problematize change and *test* the participants' current way of picturing themselves and the concept of change. (2) Playing the game *tested* if the participants had the ability to *do* change and it offered a way to assemble practical concerns and imagined change. Finally, (3) we observe how the process ends with a *test* where the leaders prepare for going home. Here the consultant makes the tool turn back on itself and afford an opportunity for committing the leaders to the new insights derived from working with the game. The analysis ends with a short epilogue, which retrospectively elaborate on the change intervention.

--- Insert table 1. Here ---

In our presentation of our data, we were inspired by practice-based approaches and the idea of 'writing around detailed vignettes to reveal underlying dynamics' (Langley and Abdallah, 2011, p. 123). Our study is micro oriented in nature, and paraphrasing Rouleau (2005) we may argue, that 'Just as using a microscope helps understanding of the whole through its tiny parts' spaces

for development may 'offer an interesting insight to examine' and unfold the mechanisms of organizational change (p. 1419). Although overlapping, the three patterns presented in the table and elaborated below demonstrate different aspects of how atmospheres for change are shaped by working with a tool and how these further enable or constrain the consultant and leaders in different ways.

Empirical analysis

The following analysis takes place in a meeting room at a conference facility and is structured around three episodes, which illustrate how the board game mobilizes the consultant and participants in ways that compose an atmosphere for development and change.

Episode 1: Framing and problematizing.

The conference facility is located in a rural area close to the sea; you can smell coffee and cooking from the kitchen when you arrive at the entrance. The smell follows you as you walk further into the area of the conference rooms and enter the meeting room where the process is about to take place. The spatial arrangement of the room is minimalistic but functional, with a flipchart, a whiteboard and a PowerPoint projector. The five participating leaders (Mary (M), Simon (S), Vito (V), Ragner (R) and Carl (C) and a researcher (first author) sit at a U-shaped table arrangement, and a large board game lies on the floor. The consultant (Karen) is standing in rather casual attire, there is silence and the leaders appear to be waiting. This is where we enter the process.

The consultant, Karen[1], moves around the board and speaks energetically, explaining the purpose of involving the game as a tool for the session: 'when you leave this seminar, my aim is that you get really good at managing change; you must be able to handle current difficulties concerning the changes that go on', she says. With reference to research within change management, Karen says that "approximately 70% of all change projects fail; thus, we need to become better at managing change'. The game was developed by a group of psychologists to make managers better at leading change. The ambition was to allow managers to simulate everyday managerial practice and to reflect on current difficulties concerning change management, Karen explains. She continues by saying that the game builds on year-long research on change and, among others, the work of two management theoreticians, John Kotter and Daniel Goleman.

The game takes the form of a round board representing a 'cycle of change' with different phases (see figure 1). Referencing management consultancy work on change and resistance (Maurer, 1996), the game suggests change to happen through accumulative phases of 1) random incidents, 2), recognition, 3) incipient actions, 4) implementation, 5) integration, 6) decreasing activities. Moreover, the game stipulates that people react through three different levels of resistance during change (rational, emotional or personal resistance). In addition, the game builds on John Kotter's (1996) eight-step change model as well as on different leadership styles by Daniel Goleman (democratic, commanding, visionary, affiliative, pacesetting, coaching leadership). Karen argues that all the theories gathered in the game suggest a form of guidance for how to intervene and lead in change situations. The game contains various artefacts and symbols: 'counters' (representing stakeholders), a 'boat' (representing current projects) and

cards with questions and suggested considerations in relation to 'leadership style' and employee 'levels of resistance'. At this point, the consultant begins to circle the board, placing artefacts on the board while explaining the 'rules of the game'.

--- Insert Figure 1 here ---

The process continues, and with reference to the theories and models behind the game the consultant emphasizes that they need to understand change from various perspectives if they are to operate in dynamic organizational conditions. The participants have to learn a new discipline, which is not about learning 'facts', but concerns 'leading identity and human transition'. In this way the consultant begins to problematize the leaders' current background, arguing:

> 'We expect so much from our managers at the hospital since they are highly educated within medical sciences; however, what we need to grasp here is another paradigm – it has to do with psychology.'

The leaders, however, have a hard time considering themselves as change leaders and engaging in a new discipline. They respond to the consultant with agreement but also explain how the topics covered may be of importance to 'the management' but not to them. This led the consultant (K) to question how the leaders (L1 and L2) regarded their role as managers of change processes:

> K: Okay, who is 'the management' when you speak about change?
> L1: That is the top management.

K: It puzzles me when you say management - it sounds like you think it is someone else, because you are actually the management; you just seem to have a different task in management.

L1: But …

K: You are not top management, but you fill certain tasks.

L2: We probably identify ourselves as researchers and then you suddenly have to become a leader as well.

The consultant continues, saying that fundamentally the process requires them to become aware of their own role in managing organizational change, which is also an important aspect of the game. They express a concern with the many concepts at the expense of practical matters, but although the participants appear hesitant to adopt the theoretical concepts, they are willing to reflect by means of the framing of the board game. On the PowerPoint screen, Karen continues by showing a distinction between 'above or below the line'. This distinction resembles the artefact, values and basic assumption distinction in Schein's (2010) iceberg model of organizational culture. Above the line are images and words of controlling, planning and numbers. In contrast, the images and words below the line are emotions, a heart, passions, identity and culture. The 'psychological matters' below the line are of importance when we want to change our 'mental map' during change, the consultant explains. To underpin the psychological matters, she refers to psychodynamic theory and places cards on the board game representing the three different levels of resistance, Karen explains:

'It [the tool] divides resistance into three levels: the first level exemplifies resistance resulting from lack of understanding; […] the second level is resistance as an emotional reaction, whereas the third level is resistance as a lack of trust in the leader. We lack the

ability to address level two […]. This is a new way to engage with resistance without making the person abnormal. Maurer tells us that resistance is good, so focusing on resistance is important.'

During her talk, Karen gives small examples of how new understandings of change have emerged in her consultancy with the hospital management and how she has experienced change in her work life. What Karen particularly emphasizes is how being aware of psychological matters during change processes provides many opportunities for better change processes. The participants listen carefully, and some write notes on paper. Discussing other aspects of change seemed to interest the leaders, who were enthusiastic about the ability to work with change in a different way. Carl responds and says, 'we may have to adopt another mindset in relation to change'. The rest of the participants nod in agreement and soon start to mimic the vocabulary of the consultant while starting to debate how being aware of things 'below the line' may provide a lot of potential for change. One of the participants (Ragnar) says:

> 'Maybe it's easier for us to be above the line; it's more intellectually graspable. Below the line is much more difficult – this is about gut feeling and emotions, which are things you cannot learn from a book.'

Karen nods and explains that it is important to examine 'below-the-line' issues that they normally keep to themselves. 'Unspoken matters of concern are hard to change', she says. To Karen and the participating leaders, playing the board game affords a key to opening up and addressing matters of change. The first step for the participants is to accept their own role in all of this, and the board game afforded this by framing change in a certain way and by problematizing the participants' current way of picturing themselves.

Episode 2: Assembling practical concerns and imagined change

During a break, the consultant rearranges the room and the leaders continue to talk about current change projects at home. Karen removes the large game board, groups the tables into one and places a smaller version of the board game on the table. A flipchart and a whiteboard are set up to make a demarcation of a 'room' within the room. Post-its, papers and pencils are at the table as materials for ordering and supporting the activity. The careful spatial rearrangement contributes to a change towards a more playful atmosphere, in which the leaders not only have to listen, but will 'practice change' by turning their everyday practice into an object of change simulation. Karen continues, saying:

> 'What is essential is to understand human change, the cycle of change and the levels of resistance to be able to initiate the right activities. This tool offers you a conceptual repertoire through which you can orient yourself.'

The consultant tasks the research leaders to play the game by relating current departmental issues to the 'cycle of change', 'leadership styles' and 'resistance' levels. What is of great importance, according to the consultant, is to 'test how the theories can help the leaders in their current change projects through the game'. By settling on a project that can fuel the game, the consultant underscores the importance of making the concepts come to work, to allow the leaders to practise and experiment. The leaders focus on a new large research programme regarding clinical quality that spans statisticians and medical researchers, in which changes concerning direction and staffing were central. To give the participants the opportunity to discuss current organizational matters, the consultant withdraws to a listening position at the table behind the whiteboard. The leaders start to discuss the new research programme by placing counters on the board. They discuss the positioning of each counter in the change

process, which turns into an exercise of imagination: the leaders discuss how various stakeholders (top management, employees, external collaborators) might experience the research programme as well as the current status in the cycle of change, and how come they might resist changes in the programme. The conversation is vivid and when pauses occur, silence is quickly taken over by another generative perspective or idea on the issue discussed. Soon several artefacts are in use. Although not using the complete conceptual and theoretical vocabulary of the game, the leaders use the game as visualization and mapping of stakeholders related to the change project. The debate is vivid. Christian argues for the need to change the employees' perception of the project, and Mary says that 'indeed the project is moving way too slow'. During this part of the session, the consultant enters the room a few times but otherwise she leaves the leaders purposefully on their own to play the game, letting the imagining and discussion roam freely. The atmosphere is positive, and the leaders joke at times; however, they seem to struggle to connect the conceptual vocabulary of the game to their everyday practice. At times, when the participants appear to be too occupied with practical concerns and project details, Karen intervenes and guides them towards the framework of the game. It appears that when the consultant is present the participants' attention is guided towards the theoretical script of the game. When the consultant withdraws, the focus changes and the use of concepts and theories during the conversation becomes less intense, while attention is reoriented towards more idiosyncratic and practical concerns at the department. As the consultant reappears, the focus changes again. For instance, the consultant often redirects attention towards the phases of change and conceptual vocabulary, as illustrated below when she steps in to join the game:

K: How about it?

V: The boat [symbolizing the change project] is probably approximately there [points to incipient actions].

K: But it is not in a fixed position? It can turn back to random incidents? So, there
        are incipient actions, or? [Random incidents and incipient actions are respectively
        phases one and three in the cycle of change.]

V: It failed to deliver what we wanted, so the project turned back a little.

S: The problem is probably that the strategy draws on different trajectories.

K: Have you started to consider the leadership styles needed?

V: Not yet.

K: We have the visionary leadership style, this is about looking ahead and setting
        direction, this may be important to connect the different trajectories.

With the help of the consultant, it gradually becomes clear to the participants that to place the
project in the 'cycle of change' is contestable. Carl takes a marker, starts to note down on post-
its the stakeholders involved in the programme: he lists eight key stakeholders, and places them
on a flipchart. The leaders subsequently reach a conclusion: the project is in the implementation
phase and may require a more explicated vision for the programme. After the reminder and
some redirecting questions, the consultant leaves the room again. The conversation proceeds
but, after a while, it drifts again. Mary tries to get the concepts from the game back into the
conversation; she takes up a question card and says, 'Maurer speaks of levels of resistance; I
suppose we already discussed that. And Kotter is about these steps in the change processes'.
Ragner starts to laugh, and he mimics Mary's statement saying: 'Maurer, Kotter etc. - now we
are really adopting the consultant's language' [they all laugh].
It appears to be hard for the participants to make use of the theories supporting the game, thus
they turn towards matters that are closer to daily practices. The appropriation of the game
seemed to happen through a partial suspension of concepts like 'leadership styles', 'resistance
levels' and 'phases of change' in their conversations. This marks a subtle, almost theatrical,

play where the leaders seem to accept the consultant authority while appropriating it. Whereas the tool scripted reality in a conceptual way that appeared as mostly important to the consultant, the tool had a more pragmatic value to the leaders. While the physical objects such as the boat and the counters seemed to facilitate a visual scaffold on everyday matters, the absence of the consultant at specific points in time made the conversation go in new directions. Each time the consultant returns, her bodily presence re-appropriates the participants' work, and they acknowledge her authority and expertise in adapting to the conceptual parts of the game.

The consultant also seemed to be aware of the risk of concepts taking over, explaining that it was a deliberate choice by her to leave the room during the process: 'to allow the participants to work with the tool in their own way'. Her ambition, she says, 'is to allow the participants to experiment with the tool while stepping in and guiding the process at key moments'. This ambiguous role of the tool exposes an important aspect of it. The general management knowledge inscribed into the materiality of the tool allowed the consultant to stay with a more universal applicable management language when addressing the research programme. Thus, the conceptual script of the tool was important, as it envisioned the consultant as a legitimate expert to the leaders. Through the conceptual script, the consultant is able to turn idiosyncratic and mundane aspects of the change project into more conceptual matters, thereby constantly balancing practical concerns with imagined change. This creates an atmosphere that turns practical concerns and mundane issues addressed by the leaders into serious problems and possibilities for better change work. The theories built in the board game legitimize the consultant's authority as illustrated by one of the participants:

'[…] the theories and conceptual vocabulary make the consultants different from us due to their knowledge […] I doubt they [the consultants] would be that confident if they did not have their theories. And then, they would not be convincing to us [or] equipped for carrying out their role'. (Mary, interview)

However, by being appropriated differently by the consultant and the leaders, the tool produces performative tensions between the involved parties, which both enable and constrain the objective of playing the game – to become better change leaders.

Episode 3: Committing the leaders

We are almost at the end of the seminar, and the consultant explains that she has one more thing to do before wrapping up. She continues: 'One of the things highlighted in the game is the ability to perform a visionary leadership style'. The leaders discussed the role of visions while playing the game. Karen continues by saying that the ability to imagine and materialize why we are doing change is an important aspect of the game – to make change meaningful to those involved. 'This is what you will have to practise through a small exercise - how do you communicate *why* your employees have to do this change when you get home'. Karen goes on to say that 'being able to tell a new story is an important part of leading change. The leaders are grouped into pairs of two and asked to come up with a storyline that tells why the research programme (the change project they had used for the game) is important. The leaders present their stories to each other, and as peers they give and receive feedback. During the presentations, the feedback questions force the listeners as well as the presenter to commit to the attempt and to look for the positive ambition of the story. Although the whole attempt of explicating 'the why' seems a bit enforced, the leaders acknowledge Karen's argument. As Mary remarks, 'being able to tell why we are doing this is really something we need to be aware of'. The performance commits, so to speak, the leaders to go about using their new insights in their everyday practice.

Three days of 'playing' the board game have now almost passed. For the final session, the room is again rearranged. The participants are seated with the consultant standing in front of them – there is a feeling of anticipation as a long process is drawing to a close. The consultant is standing at the large game board ready to wrap up the work; she underscores the importance

of making a transition and 'translating their work with the game to their everyday practice at home'. On a flipchart, Karen writes the questions: '*What did I particularly take note of?*' and '*What do I know now that I did not know before?*'. She encourages them all to use the terminology of the game and to relate to new insights. The participants must note their reflections on paper or in their logbooks to explicate the learning outcome afterwards. The situation creates a subtle expectation, where the leaders are positioned as supporters of the tool - expected to be able to explicate new insights. The participants accept the need to list their reflections and to visualize them on the flipchart. After some time of deliberation, they all start to jot down notes on paper. Some minutes of silence later, the consultant asks them to share their thoughts. Vito begins: 'First, I thought this is banal, everything in life can be put into the theories of the game, however then I started to reconsider'. He continues, 'Working with the game seems to me like a matter of becoming aware of how you cannot assume that we all have the same experience of change'. A bit conservative, Mary supplements by saying, 'I notice the phases of change: if you do not know that people are in different places and may need certain things in particular situations, it becomes difficult'. Ragnar adds to that by suggesting that this may also require a change in behaviour from their side at the department, 'not least concerning ability to communicate our visions'.

Throughout the process the consultant attempts to visualize learning and reflection on a flipchart and in logbooks. When Karen solicits the leaders' learnings from the game and asks them to relate to their everyday practice, she sanctions or confirms her own mission – which is to provide new insights. The effect of the whole seminar is to some extent realized in this act of making the leaders value the outcome of the seminar. As the consultant explains afterwards: 'I always start by putting up a goal for my work with a client that I can return to in the end to show what we have achieved during our collaboration'. As such, creating moments where the

participants acknowledge and see their new insights is important for committing the leaders to the process and for creating a certain atmosphere of collective progression.

Epilogue: Struggling to connect to everyday practice

Whereas the atmosphere was enthusiastic and playful at the seminar, the journey home to an everyday practice dominated by many practical operations may prove difficult. Returning home from the awayday, the participants stressed ambiguous effects of the seminar. While they all seemed to enjoy being together and foregrounded the opportunity to discuss new issues playing the board game, the participants had trouble relating the game to their everyday practice. Illustrative excerpts from the interviews below point towards this ambiguity:

'It made sense that we had to talk about change, the different phases, and it became more relevant while working with it. However, it also began to turn into something a bit like play-acting. The question was whether we did it because we knew that this was the way to do it or because we actually believed we could do so. I think it showed a tendency toward play-acting […] (Interview, Mary).

'I think being together at the seminar was good […] we really got into each other […] However, it is hard to get our work at the seminar into performance at home. Something is missing. […] We quickly fall back into old patterns […]' (Interview, Simon).

Models seem complex […] To me, models are good when they can be grasped intuitively and when there is a case that I can connect it to. The consultant is very interested in getting into the theories. For me, there must be something specific to link it to.' (Interview, Ragner)

From the accounts, the struggles to make a transition between the simulated game and everyday practice become evident. While the conceptual vocabulary supporting the board game seemed too far away from their everyday practice, the process did provide a new connectedness by being taken away to a bracketed space for development. While the participants played along and started to adopt the language and mindset of the game and consultant during the awaydays, the potential and playful atmosphere began to dissolve as they returned to their everyday practices. We may consider the consultant's focus on using a certain terminology (abstract-talk) as a problematic tension that led both the consultant and the participants astray. However, at the same time, the tension between the consultant's emphasis on imagining change and the participants' more practical everyday concerns feeds the process making the game performative. Without tension and different imaginaries of practice there would be no difference between the parts, which is what animates the process and enables a space for development. Through the difference, the consultant utilizes the game to shape an atmosphere where the participants are led away and reality appears as amenable to change. However, it comes at a risk, and the quotes from the epilogue indicate how the leaders and consultants might be led astray by the game, which may have jeopardized the journey back to everyday practice.

Discussion

The careful empirically description of how the game shape interactions between consultants and a group of leaders provides important insights into the machinery of consultancy work and episodic spaces for leadership development. Our account illustrates how the game affords a way to imagine and prepare for change. It is exactly because the game allows the participants to experiment and assert local tactics in their appropriation of the tool that it becomes performable (Quattrone, 2009). However, the game does not shape the process by itself, it requires an on-going effort from not only the consultant running the game but equally from the participants playing the game. As Paroutis et al. (2015) show in their study of strategy tools in

workshops, we find that tangible and visual dimensions shape interactions by connecting the participants to a joint object. Concerning the first part of our research question on how tools enable and constrain consulting-facilitated spaces for development, we empirically point out three affordances of the board game, which enable and constrain different actions (see table 2).

--- Insert table 2 here ---

First, the game offers a visual scaffold of change work that affects and frames the attention of the participants while allowing the consultant to perform as an authority. The game consists of theories making up a 'rulebook', which allows the consultant to speak on its behalf and legitimise certain types of knowledge. The theoretically informed elements of the game visually bracket change into 'cycles', 'levels of resistance', and 'leadership styles', enabling a demarcation of how change unfolds. By discussing and agreeing on the various elements, identity and organizational issues are framed and problematized leaving the participants prone to effectuate change. Second, the very act of playing the game enables a collaborative assembling of practical concerns and imagined change. Adhering to the rules of the game, participants are balancing the subtle relation between real practical concerns and imagined change in a safe and shielded atmosphere. The playfulness of the set up evokes a positive atmosphere of potential, promises and enthusiasm that position the participating leaders in a collaborative mode. While the atmosphere offers the possibility to address practical concerns, it also, due to the simulated nature of the game, suspends everyday practice leading them towards imagined change. Third, the game constrains participants when they subsequently try to uphold commitment to the proposed change. The primary role of the board game is to assist the consultant in helping change recipients to effectuate change. As mentioned above, the game

affords both framing and assembling through the collaborative playing but having returned home, the effectuation of change seems to be losing power in the absence of the game.

Concerning our second part of our research question on how atmospheres matter to spaces for development, we find that different tool affordances are important to the development and management of atmospheres for change. The spatial arrangement, the bodily actions and discursive interventions of the consultant and the suggestive mood of the participants contribute to the composition of the atmosphere. What becomes visible is how the session provides an atmosphere leading away by 'design', however, when Mary notes, after the intervention, that the process showed 'a tendency towards play-acting' the case illustrates how atmospheres also create effects that lead away by 'accident' (Michels and Stayeart, 2017). Our analysis show how the atmosphere and the space for development are both partially managed by- and partially outside the control of the consultant. We argue that atmospheres matter by disciplining the whole process and suggest the notion of seductive atmospheres as a way to understand the mechanisms of spaces for development. The game enables a seductive atmosphere, which lead *away* by design through highlighting potentials and opportunities for change. However, the soft play with appearances and simulation through the game risks leading *astray* by accident (Smircich and Calas, 1991; Baudrillard, 1990). This aspect adds to another point concerning how atmospheres matter. As argued by Lezaun and Calvillo (2014) and Borch (2010), the politics of atmospheres are concerned with shaping the material space to encourage certain actions and identities and evoke particular impressions. Indeed our account illustrates, how the process is designed to make the leaders consider how they conceive change and picture themselves as change leaders.

Contributions

Through our study, we have shown how the affordances of a game shape the space for development and how atmospheres matter in this attempt. Three different contributions emanate from our analysis. First, we advance the research on spaces for development within organizational change and development (Howard-Greenville et al., 2011: Johnson et al., 2010: Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015). Whether approached as 'liminal space' or 'cultural island', these spaces are considered important but rarely studied, as Greenly and Carnall (2010) argue. In this literature, the space and actual material practices deployed often remain 'as a mere background' (Jarzabkoswki et al., 2015, p. 26). By interrogating the spatial arrangement, tools and atmospheres, we advance and nuance the machinery of these practices. We suggest the notion of seductive atmospheres to describe the attempts to detach participants from everyday reality and shape episodic spaces for development. Drawing on Smircich and Calas (1991), we further suggest that seduction be an underlying mechanism of such spaces, where different tools such as a change management game animate framing, assembling and commitment. This seductive mechanism both creates an energy that animates organizational change (Cotter and Cullen, 2012) but also highlight the tension between leading away while not leading astray.

Second, our study responds to calls for exploring the role of tools for reflection, more specifically games and simulations in organizational change (Gorli et al., 2015; Lyons, Jordan, Faas and Swindler, 2011). The assembling of real practical problems and imagined change, supports Lezaun and Muniesa (2017), who argue that an important mechanism of experiential reflection tools lies in the balancing of the 'real' and the 'subreal'. In addition, we respond to the call of Oswick (2013) and Gorli et al. (2015) to consider a materialist view on change work and the role of tools for reflection. In continuation, we have illustrated how the spatial arrangement and tangible nature of the game turns the consultant into a knowledgeable and legitimate authority able to guide the process in a certain direction. Our focus on atmospheres and tool affordances brings material and bodily resources to the fore, thus nuancing existing

micro-sociological studies of organizational change, which have mainly addressed the discursive aspects of spaces for development (Whittle et al., 2010; Whittle and Mueller, 2011).

Finally, by using Lewin's focus on atmospheres to organizational change we add to current interest in revitalizing Lewin's old work on organization (Burnes and Bargal, 2017; Rogers et al. 2017; Vardaman et al., 2014, Lehmann, 2017), while connecting to the emerging interest in atmospheres in organization studies (Michels and Steyaert, 2017; Borch, 2010). In the writings of Lewin (1939), the tangible dimensions were downplayed and even criticized for being *'mentalistically fashioned'* (Dewey and Bentley, 1960, p. 141). Our study add empirical evidence to the argument of Lezaun and Calvillo (2013, p. 20), who note that Lewin's atmospheres were made-up by the physical surroundings and material furnishing, thus turning consultants into 'engineers of atmospheres and architects of interiors'. The theory of affordances in combination with the sensitivity to atmospheres have helped us recognize that atmospheres consist of both tangible and intangible dimensions. Moreover, we elaborate on Michels and Steyaert's (2017) argument that atmospheres might be crafted intentionally but they cannot be controlled.

Concluding remarks and practical implications

This paper has shown how tool affordances and atmospheres matter to spaces for development. To capture this we have developed the notion of seductive atmospheres as an important mechanism to capture the episodic nature of spaces for development and revitalized Lewin's early awareness of the role of atmospheres to organization development and change. By bridging the work of Lewin on atmospheres with the emerging interest in atmospheres in organization studies, we hope to open up new venues for cross-fertilization. Indeed, there is a need to explore and elaborate further on how atmospheres matter to organizational change (Michels and Steyaert, 2017; Borch, 2010). Some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. We zoom in on a situation in time and space and do a fine-grained analysis of

the micro-ordering activities taking place at the site. In this regards, we attempted 'theory elaboration rather than theory development' (Langley and Abdallah, 2011, s. 116). Future research may add to our findings by e.g. zooming out on the wider context and compare different spaces for development.

The study also has a number of implications for consultants, managers and practitioners alike. Across various organisations and consultancies managers deploy games as a tool for intervention (Reeves and Wittenburg, 2015; Kark, 2011). Through its theoretical foundation, the game enacts a simplified version of organisational reality that is envisioned as amenable for change. This simplification of organisational reality is both the game's weakness and strength. Weakness because reality overflows the simulation of the game and strength as simplification makes it possible to order, visualise and envision managerial realities that can be critically and experimentally examined. The practical implications that emerge point to whether the enacted simplified organisational reality of the game is reasonable and helpful as an appropriate tool for organising change. According to Brown (2012), making an 'experiment' like the board game work is a matter of making it 'functionally equivalent' to the practice it simulates. Thus, the dissonance that the leaders in our study experience between the bracketed reality and everyday practice may be explained as a lack of ´functional equivalence' (Brown, 2012). The playful purpose of the game might risk ending up as just *playing* the game or playing-along (see also Statler et al., 2009). In that sense, the game risk leading astray. Our study highlights the critical balance of allowing the participants to appropriate the game while making the game configure the process and lead the participants enough away to reconsider practical matters.

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