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Larsen, Mette Vinther; Madsen, Charlotte Øland; Svane, Marita; Rasmussen, Jørgen Gulddahl

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Sub-theme 51: Practice-Based Approaches to the Study of Management and Managerial Work

Paper for the 2013 EGOS Colloquia *Bridging Continents, Cultures and Worldviews*

A relational method for studying management and managerial work in small firms

Abstract:

This paper sketches a research method for studying management and managerial work in small firms that we would like to explore, discuss and improve in collaboration with colleagues. The method stands on a platform of relational social constructionism and uses Action Learning as a practical way to study managerial practices. A method that is currently being used to study how managers work on strategic challenges in relation to active development projects within five small firms. The purpose of the paper is to present the method and to highlight some benefits and pitfalls we would like to learn more about when it comes to studying, observing and analyzing managerial work practices. The paper is divided into three sections. The first introduces some of the ontological and, epistemological settings as well as the empirical study. The next section focusses on developing an action learning model in a relational way that can be used to study managerial work, and the last section addresses some of the possible challenges when it comes to studying, observing and analyzing managerial work practices with this method.

Keywords: managerial work, social constructionism, relational method, sensemaking, action learning and discourse,

Assistant Professor Mette Vinther Larsen¹ (mvl@business.aau.dk)

Assistant Professor Charlotte Øland Madsen (chma@business.aau.dk)

Associate Professor Marita Svane (msvane@business.aau.dk) &

Professor Jørgen Gulddahl Rasmussen (jgr@business.aau.dk)

Aalborg University

Department of Business and Management, Fibigerstræde 4, 9220 Aalborg Øst, Denmark

¹ Corresponding author

A glance into

the ontological and epistemological settings

A reason for writing this paper is to grasp the possibility to participate in discussions about how management and managerial work can be understood from a relation, micro and everyday practice where the aim is to know more about the everyday practices of managers. As addressed in the call for papers in the sub-theme for this year's EGOS colloquia: "*One of the most notable characteristics of the contemporary study of management and managerial work is the absence of work itself.*" Much time has been dedicated to structured observations of managerial actions and writing about the nature of management in abstract and general terms that bear much resemblance to Mintzberg's landmark study (Tengblad, 2006: 1437). Nevertheless, as Tengblad (2006: 1455) writes, managerial work is a much more dynamic, paradoxical and complex phenomenon than often presented and there is a need to build stronger links between theory development and empirical investigation.

Constructions of the manager as a heroic figure setting a course for the whole organization and making sure that everybody understands and makes sense of the strategy, mission and vision in a homogeneous fashion, is highly scanty. It is argued in this paper that studying managerial work in a grounded Action Learning perspective can reveal other and much more complicated and pluralistic practices. The aim is to take management down from its pedestal and into the nitty-gritty and meshed challenges of solving everyday problems together with other actors within and outside the organization. It is to study management as a process of interaction with others in order to understand, make sense of, and act on the challenges they face.

Within the social constructionist perspective, this focus is not on the individual manager. It becomes more important to study management as a relational practice taking place between actors. Management becomes a way of being-in-relation-to-others, as Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011: 1430) put it. Here it becomes interesting to learn more about how managers together with other actors bracket, understand and make sense of challenges and dangers, and how they do act upon these in what they believe to be meaningful ways.

In order to generate knowledge about managerial work as a way of being-in-relation-to-others emphasizes the need to scrutinize workplace activities and practices more closely (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000: 790). We are here, as Easterby-Smith et al. (2000: 791) write: "*... left with the exciting and challenging task of making sense of, and describing the work necessary for sustaining the pro-*

cess of collaboration.” A part of studying this within a social constructionist perspective is also to acknowledge and integrate the many pluralistic and at times contradicting understandings that exist in the various local-cultural-relational realities that exist within organizations and that these managers face every day (Hosking, 2010: 6).

The aim is to get deeper into understanding about management and managerial work, as ways of being-in-relation-to-others from a micro and everyday stance by, as in our investigation, spending time together with managers from five different firms and have them select concrete, actual and important tasks they each believe are necessary and beneficial to work with at the current moment in their firm. This way attention is centered on the complex challenges they face in their daily work and make this the starting point of joined construction processes about how their challenges can be understood and handled.

Our understanding is that the knowledge needed for solving practical tasks, knowledge on development processes, and learning go hand-in-hand. Knowledge is, as Easterby-Smith et al. (2000: 790) write: “... *always enacted and situated, and learning at work should always be conceived as learning-in-working...*” Following, this knowledge is generated as actors are on their way trying to grasp what goes on among them and figure out how to act in a sensible way (Ingold, 2008), and this knowing is constructed through living conversations in the moment (Cunliffe, 2011: 665).

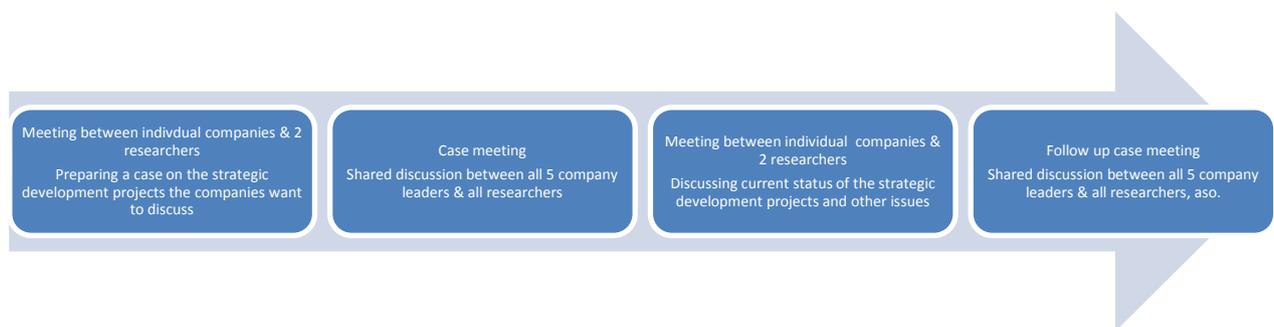
Creating a learning process for both managers and researchers, learning is defined as a “...*constellation of interconnected practices that can be described as a brokering activity situated in a discursive practice which relates situated bodies of knowledge to the minimum extent necessary to “perform” the discursive community*” (Gheradi et. al., 2002: 434). So if we want to know something about how managers handle challenges on their way we, as researchers, have to talk with these managers as they are on their way and be an integral part of the sense making process in the moment (Cunliffe, 2011: 664).

Enhancing the number of actors that take part in these relational sense making processes we bring together managers from different small firms, who all come with their local-cultural-relation knowledge and world view and who all practice management as being-in-relation-to-others in different ways. Interesting here is it what happens when these different views on the world meet each other, how do they handle the: “... *complex, back and forth, unfolding process of attempts of mutual construction, one full of tensions and taken-for-grantedness.*” (Cunliffe, 2001: 353) What happens

with their local-cultural-relational realities and their managerial practices? Do they change and influence each other's being-in-relation-to others? Do they grasp each other and try to develop shared discursive constructions or...?

An introduction to the empirical study

Since 2005 we, together with other colleagues, have gradually developed and used a methodological practice for following how local-cultural-relational knowledge about managerial work is being developed and altered through communication between a manager, other managers and researchers:



This approach is strongly inspired by Action Learning, where a guiding assumption is: *"The Kingdom of Heaves, as we read in St. Luke, is to be found within ourselves, and it is the other searchers for it, rather than men with the packages, who will tell us when they think we are getting warm."* (Revans, 1983: 44) This quote emphasizes that there is no single and real reality independent of the local-cultural-relational reality (Hosking, 2010: 6).

We have applied the method as a process where we start by visiting the individual firms. At the meetings with the individual companies the researchers and managers talk about the current status of the strategic research projects, and perhaps other issues that are not shared with the other companies on the joined meetings. The joined meetings are scheduled to take place four times a year and meetings in the individual firm are placed in between each of these meetings. The project runs in this manner for app. 1 ½ - 2 years.

The current project, which was started late fall 2012, is set to run in this way, with managers from five small Danish firms, with interest in projects and products on renewable energy. They participate in the research project together with us as researchers with our interest in management practic-

es, innovation, organizational development, competence development, learning and relational communication.

The development of Action Learning in a relational way

A version of Action Learning (Revans 1992, Pedler et al. 2006) is, as mentioned, our methodological framework for producing knowledge together with the five firms on development and learning. The aim of AL research methods is to bring together different local-cultural-relational realities and based upon this open up horizons for discussion, and to create time/space for collective reflection that again leads to actions. Boje argues that; “...*organizational life is more indeterminate, more differentiated, more chaotic, than it is simple, systematic, monological, and hierarchical*” (Boje, 1995, p. 1001), which corresponds with some of the fundamental assumptions within the Action Learning method, we use, where different world views, multiple voices, norms and values are favored. In short our perspective on organizations and management is;

- Organizations continuously become shaped by actors’ new learning and their attempts to maintain the current organizing through routines and simultaneously trying to develop it in meaningful ways
- Communication are discursive processes that both interpret and construct local-cultural-relational realities
- Meaning made, sensible actions, and possible understandings are local, temporal, relational and always in the making
- Organizations are meshworks of multiple voices, norms and values
- Workable managerial solutions are constructed locally, culturally and relationally through language and actions

In order to work within these different worldviews, multiple voices, norms and values from a social constructionist perspective one needs to accept that all knowledge is socially constructed (Gergen, 2011). The search for one transcending truth is abandoned and instead the ongoing social construction of local-cultural-relational truths becomes the focal point of the research. A direct way to access these processes are through the study of how language is being used as a way to create the local world. When these philosophical ideas are applied in the study of the Action Learning process-

es, with both managers and researchers, one focal point becomes on studying special vocabularies, language repertoires and polyphonic expressions (Boje 1995, Potter & Wetherell, 1986).

Organization become *"phenomena in and of language"* and are best studied as *"collaborative and contending discourses"* (Boje 2004 p.571). Or as Chia (2000) describes it: discourse is organization. Seen in an Action Learning perspective construction of self and others becomes a discursive action, created in the ongoing relationship with others (Gergen 2011). To study these processes is to study language and communication, focus upon the words applied, the narratives constructed, and the application of interpretative repertoires and construction of discourse: *"Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships"* (Gergen, 2011: 109).

Social constructionist research applies Wittgenstein's (1953) argumentation that the ongoing language construction process is socially constrained. In other words it is socially constructed through a community, and thereby it constrains what it is possible to say: *"As constructionists also suggests, playing by the rules of a given community is enormously important to sustaining these relationships"* (Gergen 2011: 101) In the study here presented and the method chosen with bringing managers together from different local-cultural-relational realities, we also bring together different discursive rules. It hence becomes interesting to see how the managers understand and handle their own and each others' rules and how they might influence the way they enact the rules through their being-in-relation-to-others.

The researchers participate in this process and we also bring with us our rules, our roles are however different as we do not bring any concrete organizational challenges with us, we want to discuss. The research forum can therefor also be perceived as a shared time and space opportunity, with the purpose of exploring the reified constructions of managers and researchers. In an action learning process these socially constructed discourses must be taken into consideration. It is important for the researcher to analyze his/her own socially constructed truths and to question these in the research process. It is important to see the action learning as a shared construction process in the group as a whole.

The aim of this paper is to explore the learning potential of studying the every-day work practices of the managers in five small firms and talk with them about the topics they have selected as important in their development process, has shown how different the central topics can be. Seen in a social constructionist perspective these topics are:

- Communication are discursive processes that both interpret and construct local-cultural-relational realities
- Meaning made, sensible actions, and possible understandings are local, temporal, relational and always in the making
- Organizations are meshworks of multiple voices, norms and values
- Workable managerial solutions are constructed locally, culturally and relationally through language and actions.

Using the method for shedding light on the intricacies managerial work

To us a crucial question is what will come out of this method on the complicated matters of daily managerial work. How managers and researchers through mutual conversations in the individual firm and at the seminars with all managers and researchers participating produce knowledge on these phenomena. Some of the examples will be taken from the present AL project that started in the fall of 2012, but we will also draw upon our previous studies that have used the same method because the present project has only been active for a short period. The intention behind presenting examples is to shed light on what we see as some key point in management activities, and how they are part of the conversations in the individual firm and at the seminars.

Example One: The complicated and pluralistic nature of management tasks

One of the themes revealing an important perspective on management is the complicated and pluralistic nature it often reveals. The example is taken from a discussion on information from one of the five firms participating in this project. The situation in the small software firm was discussed between the managers and researchers after it was presented by one of its managers. The firm was, according to its managers, not expanding sale enough, and one of the reasons for this was that the

management felt they were driven in different directions by itself and by its most important customers.

The customers would at the same time interact with the firm as a developer of new software solutions and as a consulting company, while the management itself wanted to develop more standardized software solutions. To the management this was not something that could be solved by a one-time decision. To them it was complicated because each possibility produced a different picture of the firm, and in the daily work the management had to try to live up to all these different pictures of the firm in order to survive.

It was at the same time pluralistic because of the different ways the firm had to develop was not part of the same technological, commercial and managerial concept. These different ways were difficult, perhaps impossible, for the three managers to integrate. They knew they existed as expectations among the customers, but they also knew that keeping such a pluralistic view of the firm would make it very difficult to create the expansion the software firm needed.

To understand this complicated but not unusual managerial situation it is important to follow the ongoing construction process of a new strategy for the firm, handling the paradoxical back and forth processes and tensions between taken-for-granted customer demands versus the strategic vision of the managers. By discursively constructing a close-knit relationship, between the survival of the company and giving the customers what they ask for, makes the strategic wayfinding process rather complex for the managers.

Example Two: Being in relations to others

Another firm in the study produces electronics in small series tailor-made for use in different industrial products. To expand sale the management in the firm sees this as a task that involves not only personnel in sale, but also demands that specific managers are able to take the position of sale and join a technician in visiting an important customer. For the management these tasks are becoming increasingly important and contain the fact that important customers wants to have an offer that includes more than the product to a certain price. The idea of coupling more intensely to customers includes a form for being in relation to customers not only institutionally, but also to some extent through living persons.

This increases the need, also in commercial situations, to be in relation. The change this firm is organizing has been input to a discussion of how to leave the previous division of work with rather explicit borders not only between customer and firm, and between sales people and buyers, it also changes the relations between the different functions and people within the firm. The managers have to integrate more closely with both sellers and technicians, and they have to change the nature of both job and relations. Such changes can be seen as part of making the traditional organizational model of the industrial model obsolete and replacing rather firm structures with a much more flexible and process-oriented model.

By studying how the managers construct the handling of these closer-knit relationships with old and new customers, represents an opportunity to study the transition process from a traditional organization model and into a more loosely coupled network organization. Interesting is to study over time the development in both language use and actions that might result in this transformation.

Learning by working together

The five firms were selected from the same regional network of firms and according to their management they chose to participate in the project to get the chance to learn something new. Both the arguments for participating in networks and especially to participate in collaboration with managers from other firms and with researchers in the research project are explained with the possibility together with all other participants to develop new knowledge on different aspects of business administration in an unusual form, and with the possibility in this way with its many different inputs to learn.

What seems important here is not only the coming together of these managers at seminars exchanging ideas, challenges, and solutions. It is much more the view of the managers that this exchange is more than exchange. It is a chance to learn within their individual firm by at the same time learning outside the firm. The idea is not only to learn from the discussion of challenges presented for the group of managers and researchers. The most important process that they have to handle is how the discussions at the seminars between the individual managers are taken back into the firm. This is in its infant stage in this research project, but previous projects have shown how management has been inspired to alter course within their firm from reflections made after such seminar discussions.

One could argue that by creating an opportunity for managers to explore their different strategic issues with other managers and researchers with differing worldviews gives them the opportunity to mirror their locally-cultural realities, offering new perspectives on their day to day activities.

Knowledge is constructed through living conversation

Turning back to the small soft-ware firm the learning perspective gets a more detailed and specific content. From the start the three managers in the soft-ware company saw at the beginning the visits by researchers in their firm as a rather traditional exchange between specific and practical knowledge from the firm and a general more theoretical knowledge delivered by the researchers. But after a couple of meetings in the firm and after the first seminar, the three managers and the two researchers gradually developed this exchange process into a mutual and integrated analysis combining theory and specific practice. This process is defining the subjects for discussion through an increasingly open and development oriented trying to define strategic ways for the firm to move.

This perspective on the AL method as it is developed in this research project shows the need to establish a rather informal and close relationship between managers and researchers to facilitate living conversation. The immediate way to understand this relates to the need to establish trust and a mutual openness to get into the more informal ways things are done within the firm. This is important. But perhaps more important is how this trust have to be reciprocal, because both managers and researchers are giving input to a process that trough open – and living – discussion have the intention to create new knowledge. Knowledge based on substantial inputs from both researchers and managers.

Active co-construction

The idea guiding our method was from the start new and unknown for the participating managers. They of course knew about class room learning, work-based learning, and exchange of knowledge between managers at seminars. But the combination of these forms was something new that can be compared with cross boarder collaboration in inter-firm value chains. This is a process engaging managers from relatively small firms, which were in a process of interacting more closely with other firms and active in different kinds of networks.

The five firms in the present study are small, and the largest firm we have been cooperating with in a previous study had four hundred employees. When managers from small and medium sized firm have responded positively on our call for participating they are at the same time characterized by having a broad range of managerial tasks and a rather informal relation to subordinate managers and employees in their firms. The rather intimate knowledge of these managers on daily challenges and tasks within their firm created not only a visible scene for co-construction between them and the employees, but also a rather easy way to introduce the research and the researchers.

Resourceful Conversations for Understanding and for Actions

Learning by working together, constructing knowledge through living conversation and active co-construction all have in common that they involve conversation. The act of exchanging ideas, discussing issues, events, challenges, and suggesting solutions can be viewed as a conversation among the managers. In this conversation the managers are telling stories based upon their experiences in order to share perspectives and learn from each other's experiences. However, telling a story about events or activities from their everyday life experience as a manager may not be an easy task, recognizing that activities are embedded in a social, relational realm of "*dialogically constituted, intricately structured, joint activity*" (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003: 33). The story told may to some extent over-ride the complexity of the experience, not grasping the fragmentations and uncertainties that may be at stake when people are involved. To be resourceful conversational partners, managers need thus to be good conversationalists, both as responsive listeners and responsive speakers, and engage in dialogue to explore actions (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003: 32-34).

In one of our relational AL groups the participating managers recognized that they have gradually changed their way of participating in the conversations. In the beginning they listened to the story and directly started to discuss solutions as they are typically trained to do in their everyday managerial work practices. After several meetings in the AL group they had developed their conversational practices in the sense of asking more explorative questions, digging deeper into the story revealing more of its complexity, encouraging the manager's self-reflections of own managerial practices, and in some cases even in the sense of making the more unconsciously hidden structures more conscious to the manager.

Being a resourceful conversationalist is thus more than being a knowing subject who exchanges experiences and perspectives and share knowledge. It is a way of relating and “... *a work towards more linguistically expressible and reflexive accounts, from within the experience itself, so that we may act as critical practitioners and influence events from inside.*” (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003: 32). The relational AL process creates the opportunity for training the participant managers’ conversational practices to become even more resourceful conversationalists for understanding and for actions and hereby support learning by working together, social construction of knowledge, and active co-construction.

To practice Action Learning with managers in a social constructionist way

It is an interesting challenge to combine relational social constructionism and AL to generate knowledge about management and managerial work. This challenge can be seen as part of the more general management study challenges presented in the call for papers in this sub-theme, but the method applied in our study reveals some gains:

- Who learns in this relational AL research process? Taken from the ongoing project and two already finished studies the managers learn. This can be seen from changes in ways they handle specific themes and projects at their home organization where the way they behave is different from what they originally intended to do. The discussions with other managers and researchers seem in some cases to be important. But also the researchers learn. This happens not only in the form where their actual knowledge about firm practices is increased. It is also possible to get more deeply into how specific tasks are solved.
- What do they learn? The managers not only get ideas for solving specific tasks they gradually get the feeling that this combination of themes from their own firm, managers from other firms, researchers, seminars and researchers visiting their own firm have the possibility to create new valuable knowledge for themselves. They get new perspectives on their local-cultural-relational realities and their managerial practices when they start discussing their challenges with other managers. They get the chance of helping other managers on interesting managerial problems. And through the method used in the study they are urged to use

this new knowledge to look into and eventual inspire to change their own local-cultural-relational realities.

- How do we keep the knowledge producing process alive? Managers are busy individuals but they are also trained in prioritizing. A previous study on four firms lasted two years and resulted in new knowledge on how the managers of these firms cope with strategic tasks during the most intense phase of the financial crisis. Both managers and researchers gain from discussions on two levels: the AL process where everybody meet and study, and the meetings in the individual firm between the local management and the two researchers responsible for the specific intra firm study. This double process demands time allocated from both managers and researchers, but it in the same process creates mutual knowledge, trust, engagement and relation.
- How to get theory and practice to interact? To use AL as inspiration for studying development themes is to prioritize actual, concrete and mundane activities. This touches upon difficulties in coupling to theory in a traditional way, and might it difficult to engage other researchers in discussions. On the other hand it is difficult to study practice without getting close to the concrete and mundane. What we aim at is to use get theory and practice to interact through principles taken from problem based learning (Fink & Krogh, 2004). The method is together with management in the individual firm gradually to formulate a development theme to present in the AL setting and in the firm to detail the theme and look for solutions
- In what ways is it possible to use different themes from different firms to enlarge the knowledge on firm development? Both the relational constructionism, AL, and problem based learning are focusing on the specific themes not using concrete theories to measure up against, but using a more epistemological stance valuing difference, not average. Management practice and development themes cannot be understood through one unified concept, but have to be seen together with their individual contexts.

These and other questions concerning the relational social constructionist way to study management practice together with managers are important for us to discuss and to have assessed from colleagues not only to improve the findings of the specific study, but also to be able to continue the development of our method.

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Paper for sub-theme 51: Practice-Based Approaches to the Study of Management and Managerial Work
Charlotte Øland Madsen, Marita Svane, Mette Vinther Larsen (mvl@business.aau.dk) and Jørgen Gulddahl Rasmussen,
Department of Business and Management, Aalborg University, Denmark

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