Chapter 6

MANAGING OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE CONFIGURATIONS
IN A MULTIPLE CONTEXT

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1. Basic starting points

In this chapter a method for managing organizing processes is presented (section 2) and subsequently illustrated in the framework of a case history (section 3). This presentation is preceded by a description of the main starting points, the paradigms of the method (section 1). For a more extensive description of the subject the reader is referred to the author's dissertation 'Managing in a multiple context' (Voogt, 1990).

The basis of our view to organizing and the organizing process is the process approach in organization theory, in particular the theory of social integration. The relevant starting points of this approach are:

1. Knowledge or 'the' reality are created and changed in social processes or interaction. Each individual provides his own definitions and viewpoints for studying situations. Certain aspects of an observed phenomenon are placed in the foreground of perception, while others are relegated to the background. A choice of 'seeing' encompasses a choice of 'not seeing'. In social interaction people exchange outlooks, their individual realities, and attempt to arrive at a common reality which then serves as a basis for further actions. This construction and augmentation of knowledge is referred to by us as 'organizing' in this paper. It is a social dynamic and constitutes the essence of what people 'do' in organizations.

2. Variety in opinions and interpretations and variety on the ideological level constitutes the 'engine' for change. If people cause and interpret occurrences in different ways, then it would seem logical to assume that people in organizations have different motivations and objectives. This variety is the sole source of progress. That variety must not be suppressed. On the other hand, agreement on 'what one sees and has to do' is a necessity as otherwise there will be no 'results'.

3. Social structure and knowledge are interdependent. In interaction, a distinction can be made between a social and a knowledge component. A social relationship, the 'Who' side, is in first instance the constituting factor which determines whether people are prepared to agree on common knowledge. The latter 'What' is a product of the process. The social and the knowledge structure are interdependent, intertwined, as it were, in a double helix.
4. **Ongoing interaction is a condition for constructing and reconstructing reality.** Ongoing interaction is required for the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. When in an interaction the social couplings become stronger, the possibility for ongoing development of knowledge becomes greater. On the other hand, as the overlap of knowledge becomes greater, the social relation strengthens and thereby the ongoing interacting. Individuals do not know in advance what knowledge will be produced. Therefore interaction cannot be managed on the basis of a knowledge criterion.

5. **People are multiply included.** People participate simultaneously in various social contexts. The knowledge structure in each of these contexts is often different. Each individual is multiply included and "the" reality of one social context is not necessarily 'the' reality of another. In any given interaction individuals try to agree on common knowledge, whereby negotiation about realities or contents plays an important role ('negotiated order'). The multiple inclusions, also called 'thirds', constitute the environment of a given interaction and openness to the environment is necessary for change. These thirds, which cannot be defined in advance, are to be considered as encompassing both knowledge or realities and persons or parties.

Below a number of statements on management will be given that have been formulated on the basis of the outlook mentioned above.

1. The managing of processes whereby the product knowledge is made and changed should be the focus of attention.
2. Managing involves safeguarding/maintaining variety in order to both guarantee change and achieve agreed upon knowledge.
3. Steering of an organizing process must focus on both the social and the knowledge component of interaction.
4. As a content yardstick is lacking (for example, an objective), management aimed at the support and stimulation of ongoing interaction would appear to be the correct policy.
5. Managing interaction should encompass a protection of the openness for thirds in order to safeguard change.

The aforementioned starting points are the basis of a new management method which has been developed. Before dealing with this method, however, some attention will be given to the organizing process from a systemic perspective.

2. **System in organizing**

Organizing is the process of ongoing interaction whereby both a construction and reconstruction of knowledge takes place. Interaction is the essential dynamic by which development and change of knowledge take place.

Below are some definitions which are relevant to 'our' system of organizing:

- **Interacting system:** an ongoing interaction whereby participants develop a social-cognitive structure which shall be denoted as a social cognitive configuration;
- **Organizing system:** the Interacting system that is being considered and within which organizing takes place;
- **Context systems:** all other Interacting systems within which the participants of the Organizing system are included or will be included.