Reinventing Organization Development: How a Sensemaking Perspective Can Enrich OD Theories and Interventions

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ABSTRACT *Organization development (OD) has traditionally devoted much attention to organizational change. Recently, however, questions have emerged concerning OD's relevance to solve issues of stagnation in change processes. In this article, it is argued that traditional OD's basic assumptions about people, organization and change may cause a certain myopia with regard to problems that result from patterns of action that people have constructed in their mutual interactions and that may lead to stagnation or deadlock. The goal of this article is to study how a sensemaking approach might help OD practitioners to better understand the phenomena with which they are confronted in organizational change and enrich OD interventions by a more explicit focus on actors' habituated patterns of sensemaking and action. This article describes such a pattern in a police organization, its implications for the change process and lessons for OD assumptions, theory, and interventions.*

KEY WORDS: Organization development, sensemaking, patterns of action, cause maps, police organization

Introduction

This article explores a reorganization of the emergency response (ER) function in a police force in the context of a general reorganization. The objective of the ER reorganization was that police officers would cooperate more with colleagues from other units and work emergency response shifts in areas other than their own. Moreover, police officers from specialized services, such as the criminal

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investigation department, were supposed to contribute to emergency response, in cooperation with police officers engaged in basic police work. The changes evoked strong resistance among police personnel and implementation stagnated.

The field of organization development (OD) has traditionally devoted much attention to stagnation and resistance to change, its causes and how resistance can be overcome. OD is a system-wide process of planned change aimed at improving overall organizational effectiveness (Bradford and Burke, 2005). OD has provided valuable contributions to – among other things – the psychology of organizational behavior, group dynamics, process consultation and process facilitation (Worley and Feyerherm, 2003), but serious questions have also emerged about its relevance for organizational change, and several authors call for a reinvention of organization development (Bradford and Burke, 2004; Clegg and Walsh, 2004; Marshak and Grant, 2008).

The goal of this article is to study how a *sensemaking* approach (Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005) might help OD practitioners to better understand stagnation in change processes and enrich OD interventions. First, some of OD's assumptions and basic concepts, as well as some critical comments on them, are stated. Second, new trends in OD are discussed, some of which include the concept of sensemaking. How people create patterns of action in their interactions and thereby cause stagnation in change processes is also described. The section concludes with the research questions. Third, the contextual background for this study and the methods used are described. Fourth, the research findings are presented as an account of how the different actors involved in the changes talked about, and acted on, the change process. The article adopts a sensemaking approach to understand how, from their interpretations and actions, the actors interpreted the situation and created a pattern of (inter)action that hindered organizational change. Finally, the implications of this study for OD theory and interventions are discussed.

Assumptions of Traditional OD Approaches

Traditional OD is based on strong assumptions about organizing and changing. First, it makes some strong psychological assumptions about human beings as inherently good and full of potential. People are perceived as a source of knowledge and experience. In order to make organizations more effective, this potential needs to be addressed and developed. A second assumption is that 'aspects' such as organization structures, systems, group processes, culture, or management tend to hinder people from developing this potential and therefore need to be fundamentally changed (Boonstra, 2004; cf. Burke, 1987). Third, OD practitioners assume that change is an event that can be orchestrated and managed (Nadler and Tushman, 1989; Romanelli and Tushman, 1994; Weick and Quinn, 1999; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). OD provides a variety of different tools and methods to manage change and deal with barriers, such as team-building, reengineering, total quality management, goal-setting, and strategic change (French and Bell, 1999; Cummings and Worley, 2001; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003; Bunker *et al.*, 2004). Fourth, OD practitioners consider employee participation crucial to the creation of shared perspectives and the success of organizational change: involvement leads to commitment (Bradford and Burke, 2005). They believe effective

organizations to be less hierarchical and to involve employees in decisions that affect them (cf. Kanter, 1984). Management of change should be based on delegation and decentralization while preserving central cohesion (Beer and Nohria, 2000; Boonstra, 2004). The assumption is that resistance to change can be overcome by empowering organization members (Bruce and Wyman, 1998).

Despite the contributions that traditional OD approaches have made, these assumptions are subject to criticism. Marshak and Grant claim that traditional OD approaches pay little attention to the power relations that are reflected in people's accounts and to how those with most power create accounts that best support their ideas and interests (Marshak and Grant, 2008), although position, power, and influence play a major part in organizational change (cf. Hardy and Phillips, 2004; Buchanan and Badham, 2008). Clegg and Walsh (2004) call their mindsets 'problematic'. Hosking criticizes them for seeing employees as 'suppliers of capacity' that must be influenced and provoked to change and be stimulated to develop themselves (Hosking and Morley, 1991; Hosking, 2004). Tsoukas and Chia (2002) argue that they perceive change as an epiphenomenon, an entity, a 'something' that can be orchestrated and managed, that people may resist or in which they will (have to) participate. In addition, participation as a way to deal with resistance separates those in charge from those 'allowed' to participate. Furthermore, the expert, 'doctor–patient' model in traditional OD suggests that 'traditional' OD practitioners tend to position themselves as the outside observers. They seem to be detached from the reality of organizational life and its ongoing and communicative character, and how it deals with the matters of daily practices. They also seem to assume that change is manufactured from the outside rather than created in ongoing interactions by actors in their work relations on the inside (Taylor, 1993; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Change is then seen as episodic rather than as an ongoing process. The mismatch between such an episodic orientation and the ongoing interactions in which change is actually being created may very well be the reason why problems like resistance to change occur, or, as Tsoukas and Chia say:

> Unless we have an image of change as an ongoing process, a stream of interactions, and a flow of situated initiatives, as opposed to a set of episodic events, it will be difficult to overcome the implementation problems of change programs reported in the literature.
>
> (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 569)

Lambrechts *et al.* (2009), however, argue that the expert position may well be misunderstood by OD consultants because of its lack of proper theorizing of 'what works in ongoing interactions'. This does not mean that the concept of process consultation *in itself* ignores the dynamics of ongoing interactions, but that it needs vocabulary and conceptualization and a more relational theoretical lens (p. 41).

New Trends in OD

Several authors point out that, recently, a new set of OD practices has emerged, based on assumptions that differ from traditional OD approaches (Bartunek

et al., 1999; Marshak, 2006; Mirvis, 2006; Marshak and Grant, 2008). These new OD approaches acknowledge that organizations are characterized by multiple realities. They are aimed at creating new mindsets and constructing social meanings and agreements. These approaches recognize the existence of power and take into consideration how power is used by dominant groups to establish a truth that is most convenient to them. Their perspective on change is changing from episodic to continuous and ongoing. Examples of such new OD approaches are appreciative inquiry to shift actors' mindsets toward more positive thinking, or large group interventions aimed at creating common ground (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Some of them also incorporate the concept of sensemaking in their theories and studies (Bartunek *et al.*, 1999; Weber and Manning, 2001; Skålén, 2004). Through sensemaking, people try to construct a coherent account of a situation in order to make it plausible and to be able to decide on actions. Weick (1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005) explains it as follows: amidst an ongoing stream of events and from their previous experiences, people notice disruption, carve phenomena out of the flux, retrospectively try to create an interpretation and a label for them, while combining abstract knowledge with concrete experiences. Labeling it and talking about it with others brings the meaning of a phenomenon into existence. Intertwined with this search for answers to the question 'what's the story?', people search for possible actions. While talking, acting and interacting, they not only talk a phenomenon into existence, but also enact it back into the world and act on it. Sensemaking is 'not about truth and getting it right, but about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive' (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 415). Gioia and Chittipeddi distinguish between sensemaking and sensegiving. Sensegiving is 'the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality' (1991, p. 442). Consequently, it is an interesting concept to study power processes. To give an example, personal and organizational threats and opportunities inform a leader's sensemaking, and this then leads him to strategically convey the sense about the development that he wants others to accept (Bartunek *et al.*, 1999). Sensegiving is, however, also part of a mutual process of reality construction and therefore influences people's sensemaking.

But these new OD approaches may not go far enough in addressing position and power and integrating them in their practices (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Moreover, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) claim that they do not consistently see organization as an emergent property of change, but rather see change as a property of organization. Also, their focus on mindsets makes them strongly focused on cognition, but sensemaking is about an interplay of action, interaction and interpretation (Weick *et al.*, 2005). As Barnard (1938, pp. 10, 11) claims, 'human organisms do not function except in conjunction with other human organisms'. 'No thing, including a human body, has individual independent existence'. A thing can only be understood in terms of the surrounding physical universe, and people do not function except in conjunction with other people. This means that the way in which people perceive the world and the things that they say, for example, about each other or about their organization, are 'not an objective meaning, but a meaning that was constructed in their interactions' (Taylor and Van Every, 2010). What participants say in this process reflects their position

in the relationship: sensemaking is *grounded in identity construction* (Weick, 1995).

Identity and position are strongly context dependent: different interactions with different people in different relationships and different contexts forge different identities and positions (Taylor and Van Every, in press). As Weick (1995, p. 24) puts it: 'What the situation means to me is dictated by the identity I adopt in dealing with it.' This means that who someone is in a certain context, his or her power and position and what and who he or she represents is constructed in mutual interactions and influences that person's definition of the situation (Weick, 1995). It is difficult to change one's position because that implies reshaping the context in which it is embedded and therefore reconstructing an existing situation that people have constructed together (Taylor and Van Every, 2010). Sensemaking, in other words, constrains people's positions, interpretations and actions: one is more or less bound to the expectations that have been created in relation to one's role and position. As a result of these constraints, people tend to produce patterns of action that are reconstructed and reconfirmed in every subsequent interaction. People themselves produce or enact part of the situation that they face (Weick, 1995). OD practitioners may never notice such patterns if they strictly adhere to OD assumptions; consequently, a reconsideration of OD assumptions is needed.

This article aims to shed light on how using a sensemaking approach to interpret how people in a change process make sense and create patterns of action can contribute to a better understanding of stagnation in organizational change. The research questions to be investigated are: From a sensemaking perspective, how do the different actor groups in the police case –the top management, a project group consisting of three team leaders that has been appointed to manage the changes and the police officers – make sense of the changes? What pattern(s) of sensemaking and (inter)action can we discern and how do these cause stagnation? How can these insights be used to review and enrich OD assumptions and interventions?

Context and Methods

The changes in the current police organization must be seen in the light of a preceding nationwide six-year extensive reorganization of police organizations. In reaction to intensive discussions in the Lower Chamber and a new police law in 1993, this reorganization had the aim of abolishing the distinction between the former municipal and national police and establishing regional police forces. Before this reorganization, police organizations were highly fragmented and consisted of more than 100 different police forces. This had its consequences for police decisiveness and effectiveness. After the changes, 25 regional police forces and 1 national police force remained.

The reorganization was a troublesome process in the police force under study in this article. Financial problems resulting from growth in staff numbers, the high average age of staff, the large number of executives and the fact that employees could not be dismissed consequent to the reorganization, necessitated top management engaging in a series of follow-up reorganizations. One of these

reorganizations was an OD process aimed at improving police services. Its goals were, among others, to better adapt to societal changes, to work in a more preventive and less reactive way, to improve leadership, to stimulate individual responsibilities, innovation and creativity among police officers, and to improve communication and commitment. The reorganization of the emergency response function was one of the sub-processes in this larger reorganization.

Top management of the police force, consisting of a – relatively new – chief commissioner, the deputy chief commissioner and the senior management police officer in charge of ER (ER manager), decided on the ER reorganization. They appointed a project group consisting of three team leaders to guide and manage the process. Police personnel strongly resisted the changes, however. Two part-time postgraduate students who worked for the Public Prosecution Office applied for a research project about change in the organization of the police and were subsequently invited by top management to study the changes. The students invited the author of this article to help them. The project group informed the researchers about several planned meetings that the research group could attend to gather data. The researchers used the OD intervention of survey feedback. Survey feedback consists of data collection by means of a survey and feedback of the outcomes to participants (Cummings and Worley, 1997). It was intended to use the survey results to engage in conversations about the changes with the top management and the project group and help them, in turn, to engage in conversations with the police officers.

Data Collection

The idea was to try to make sense of how the people in the police organization make sense. Cause maps are a viable way to examine patterns of sensemaking and interacting. The goal is to discover:

> ... structural regularities in these maps. Specific aims include the study of relationships between these structural regularities and a person's values, means, goals, emotions, influence, power, expertise, inconsistencies, sense of self, and formation of double interacts leading to the creation of organizations.
>
> (Weick, 2001, p. 317)

Cause maps can be constructed from the stories that people tell about the situation and the patterns that are reflected in these stories; coding of documents representing writing or statements of the actors involved, coding of transcripts of meetings and eliciting causality beliefs through questionnaires and interviews are the most used methods (Weick, 2001). The data for the construction of cause maps in this article came from four different sources:

1. A series of 21 *information meetings* that the project group had organized about the change process allowed the research team to collect information about how police officers felt about the changes.
2. Police officers, top management and the project group filled out a questionnaire on barriers to organizational change (Werkman, 2009). Many police officers

saw this questionnaire as an opportunity to express their grievances about the changes and were therefore very willing to fill it out. Four *open questions* in this questionnaire[1] were used for the analysis of cause maps. These questions were:

   (i) What do they believe is most important to make the changes a success?
 (ii) What barriers hinder an effective realization of the change process?
(iii) Have previous change processes ever failed to generate the intended results and why?
(iv) How would they ideally see the changes worked out?

3. *Survey feedback sessions* were organized with both the project group and top management, and notes were taken of these conversations.
4. An additional *feedback meeting* organized by the chief commissioner with the team leaders was attended and observed, and notes were taken of the meeting.

The data collection focused on cause–effect expressions. Each cause may create different effects, and every variable in the cause map can have an effect on every other variable, indirectly or directly (Weick, 2001). Expressions of assumptions were explicitly sought. Assumptions reflect how identities, positions, roles, power relations, work processes and change processes have been constructed in organizations. They can be detected by searching for dualities or hierarchy in speech or text, by studying how actors deal with the work process, what actors say about other actors or groups, about the organization and the changes and what they do not say, and how they act towards other groups (Van Beinum *et al.*, 1996; Boje, 2001; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Assumptions influence actors' actions and lead them to turn events into generic causal assertions: 'They can't be motivated for anything at all, why even bother to involve them', 'They won't listen to us anyway, so why bother to participate'.

   The goal of this article is not to judge as right or wrong any decisions made, but rather to use a sensemaking approach to study how the actors involved in the case struggled to make sense. The research group was not detached from the sensemaking process, but participated in the co-construction of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, the article also reflects on the role of the research group as participants in this process and its influence on the sensemaking process.

Data Analysis

The analysis of cause–effect expressions generated a number of key causes and effects in the accounts of police officers, the project group and top management. The researchers then went back to the original texts in order to create a total account of what happened by weaving together the causes and effects (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Weick, 2001). By mutual discussions, moving back and forth between the key causes and effects, the original texts and the narrative account, a pattern was constructed that related to differences in perspectives on what the organization needed and how to hold on to created positions and identities. The research group's interpretation was that this pattern more or less forced the actors in the police organization to adhere to their perspectives and therefore caused the pattern to be preserved. A cause map was constructed to clarify and visually depict the

relationships between causes and effects and so sketch out the pattern. To ensure consistency, an external researcher cross-checked the codes used and the causal relations found. The next section describes the account that the police officers, top management and the project group created, and the researchers' sensemaking approach to those accounts.

Findings

An important argument for top management to initiate the changes was that the organization's culture was characterized by fragmentation and a lack of cooperation. The changes in emergency response entailed, among other things, police officers having to cooperate more with colleagues from other units and working ER shifts in areas other than their own. Moreover, police officers from specialized services such as the criminal investigation department were supposed to contribute to ER, whereas previously only police officers engaged in basic police work responded to an emergency.

Police Officers' Account

'These changes will compromise emergency response effectiveness'.   Police officers strongly criticized the changes in ER. They argued that the changes were imposed on them and that top management acted from financial considerations, never listened to them and did not take employee security into consideration. In so doing, they created a duality (Boje, 2001) between themselves and top management.

> What is needed is that top management for once starts listening to employees and does not reason from a financial point of view, as is the case in this organization most of the time. Security is still more important than all the rest, despite the fact that management tends to talk and act otherwise.

They subsequently expressed several lines of causal reasoning as to why the changes would not be successful. A first argumentation was that, if colleagues from another district respond to an emergency in an area that is unfamiliar to them, they will not have the necessary knowledge of the local area and the civilians living there to understand these civilians' problems. Civilians might not trust these police officers, and as a result the team might be less successful in providing emergency response. They argued that police officers have to work with colleagues on a daily basis to create a good emergency response team.

> If police officers are unfamiliar with a certain area, they have no feeling whatsoever for the specific problems in that area and, as a consequence, civilians will not trust them. Associating with civilians in a city requires an entirely different approach than associating with civilians in a rural village in the middle of nowhere, and vice versa.

A second argumentation was that police officers who are unfamiliar with the area would need longer driving times to get to an incident. This would compromise police service to citizens.

> Once again, top management of our police force wants to reinvent everything anew. In our area, which is about 150 km^2, it is already almost impossible to get to an incident within 10 minutes. This will get even harder if you work with a team that is not familiar to the area. At least, we would need faster cars and better equipment, connected systems on board.

Third, they argued that specialists were inexperienced and would need training, for which police officers said there was no money and no materials, so it would not be possible to include specialists in emergency response shifts.

Fourth, police officers engaged in basic policing claimed that specialists, who normally did not have to do ER shifts, were not motivated to do so now. Including them would probably lead to a lot of fuss, for example about work division. This made police officers reluctant to work with them. Another explanation given was that police officers themselves were reluctant to work ER shifts with unknown colleagues from specialized services. This argument was seldom mentioned, however. The researchers also expected that, in the hierarchical police organization, specialists might interpret having to respond to emergencies together with police officers as a loss of status, but such potential background arguments were not explicitly expressed. The main argumentation focused on practical and probably more accepted and 'valid' issues.

> (Important objections are) having to work shifts with unfamiliar colleagues. Also, people from specialized services do not *want* to do emergency response shifts.

The account created by police officers reflects how they value an emergency response that is fast, effective and tailored to the local situation. It also suggests that for work to be pleasant it must be done with familiar colleagues. The traditional values of the municipal police and fragmentation still exist. Certain aspects of police work, however, compel the use of a local approach. Consequently, police officers propagated local community values rather than a regional identity. From these values, they seem to have constructed an account that was plausible for them of what would happen if the changes were implemented (sensemaking; Weick, 1995), i.e. that the changes 'will compromise emergency response effectiveness'. They seem to have used this account to try to influence the sensemaking of top management and the researchers towards a definition of police work that values local knowledge (sensegiving; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

Account Top Management and Project Group

'Trivializing criticism'.   The researchers discussed the police officers' objections with the project group and top management, and proposed three possible ways of dealing with the results. These were 'proceeding as planned', 'adjusting the process' and 'adjusting the blueprint'. They did not realize that by doing so they more or less forced top management and the project group to defend themselves. In reaction to the police officers' account and the propositions of the research group, both the project group and top management trivialized the

police officers' criticism. Top management said that the police officers' account reflected the culture of negativity and fragmentation that characterized the organization. They had been experiencing difficulties in managing and changing the organization for the last six years (i.e. ever since the – forced – changes from municipal to regional police).

> There have been tensions for the last six years. This – the negative perspectives on the change process – is also an echo of the past. Everyone here is acting out of self-interest. You have to leave these processes behind if you want to create a more mature organization.

In contrast to the value placed by police officers on a community focus, top management's account seems to reflect values inherent in the idea of a regional police force and integration. They seem to have framed police officers' criticisms in light of these values and in light of the organization culture that they perceived as problematic, negative and fragmented. The changes were also intended to provide a solution for these problems.

> Most of the units in the organization, such as a district or a criminal investigation department, have kept their own sports or staff associations. To date, these associations haven't been able to reach consensus concerning the formation of one regional association, even after this has been defined as a prerequisite for subsidy by top management. The idea of a new and regional emergency response is that it will strengthen regional identity, because police officers from different units and departments will have to work together.

Financial considerations such as high overhead costs and shortage of personnel for basic police work are also likely to have influenced top management decision making, but were not mentioned, possibly because employees criticized top management especially for its focus on finance.

The project group created a somewhat different account in reaction to police officers' criticism and research group feedback. They trivialized this criticism by saying, among other things, that the safety issues raised by police officers were merely a matter of perception and that they had already solved many of the material problems that police officers worried about.

> The safety problems for example basically are a matter of perception with colleagues. That problem doesn't amount to much at the regional level.
> We already showed our commitment to that by linking units.

Moreover, they said that they had used a bottom-up approach to effectuate changes, but their explanation of a bottom-up approach resonated the assumption that giving information *is* a bottom-up approach (cf. Boje, 2001).

> We did everything bottom-up and we communicated a lot. This approach is entirely new in this organization: giving feedback, communicating.

At a given moment, you feed back so much information that people say: 'okay, just get on with it'.

'Avoiding loss of face and position'.   The project group and top management also expressed a different concern in reaction to the propositions of the research group. Their accounts expressed the fear that, if top management withdrew its plans and gave in to police officers' criticism, this might unbalance hierarchy relations and lead to loss of face and position. Interrelating in the organization seems to reflect an ongoing struggle about who is in charge and who is not, who is 'up' and who is 'down'. This probably made maintaining an 'up' position, in line with the positions and identities created in previous interactions, important. Giving in to the strong criticism would not only imply putting up for discussion the changes, but also their *identities*. Giving in and adjusting the changes or the approach seemed to make them feel that they were losing credibility and that was not an option (cf. Weick, 1995; Taylor and Van Every, 2010). As the project group said:

> If top management withdraws their plans, then they will lose face and people will become even more negative. The best option is to just proceed with the matter. We are afraid that they will cancel the process or exclude certain groups from emergency response. That might lead people to feel triumphant, 'we have won'…. That is the way it goes in this organization…. Moreover, if the changes were cancelled, then where would I be in the organization; how credible would I be?

The chief commissioner said:

> If I had to adjust the change process, then I would resign. Then you don't give evidence of being able to lead an organization such as this one. This scenario is the 'sorry-democracy'. If we proceeded as planned, the situation would get a lot worse at first, but after a while things would improve. It couldn't go any other way…. I take the chance that I have a majority of support among police officers.

Trivializing bottom-up approaches: 'coppers must be directed'.   So for both the project group and top management there was no option other than to proceed as planned. Other arguments were that adjusting the process would lead to confusion and bottom-up approaches would not work in a police organization.

> Police officers do not want us to adjust the process; that would only lead to confusion.

> Employee participation will not work in an organization such as this one. Employees are not educated for that…. I have faith in these coppers in crisis situations, but, if that is not the case, then I don't have that kind of faith…. I drove along with an emergency response shift once. These coppers are not being directed at all. They just do whatever they want…. I believe that they want someone who has an opinion and who is not reluctant to make decisions.

'Convincing each other that the situation has changed'.   The project group in turn said that the situation had changed during the last couple of weeks and that police officers had adopted a *laisser-faire* attitude. The project group had hired an intern who interviewed 20 police officers selected by the project group a short time before. These interviews confirmed that police officers felt that 'it has to be done'. Subsequently, the project group appeared convinced that the tide had turned (sensegiving; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

> We also notice that the tide is turning among police officers in specialized services: 'let's just do it'. Everything is looking good in comparison to the previous situation. It is dawning on people that there is no turning back. At first, they believed that 'it will be watered-down'. But now, the train is in motion. There is no way back. We will have to go on.

At the same time, their account also resonated doubt:

> There is uncertainty among top management about these changes. We have tried to salvage what we could. . .. Some people reported ill, and announced that 'If I have to do emergency response, then I will resign'. But this is just a small group of people.

> When top management hears about these results, they will take panic measures and then everyone will besiege our door. They are already considering excluding the specialized services from the process and reversing their decision if the changes are not working after a period of three years.

'Convincing each other that proceeding as planned is the best option'.   Having inter-preted and labeled the situation and established that adjusting the change process was not an option, top management and the project group sought possible actions. They convinced each other and the researchers that the best option was to proceed as planned. The emergency response manager said:

> We just cannot make a different decision in this stage of the process. But we must do judo with the barriers that we encounter, not go right through. At least we must hold on to our goals.

The chief commissioner said:

> You have to take one step back in order to go one step forward. I am not worried so much. We don't want the same to happen in this organization as happened at the rail-ways, an ongoing discussion about who is in the right. I hope that the differences between these two organizations are that a copper will never let us down. You just cannot choose a different approach in the middle of an implementation process.

The project group members said:

> If you leave the door open, a draught will come in. That also killed off the railway board of directors, therefore we will not allow changes in the concept. Perseverance

is the best option, will produce the best results, will lead to clarity and will not cause loss of face.

This enactment of 'proceeding as planned' was both the consequence of and confirmed and enforced the police officers' ongoing criticism that 'top management never listens to us' and 'enforces changes upon us' in an ongoing pattern of action (cf. Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005). Figure 1 reflects the total cause map of the whole police force's accounts.
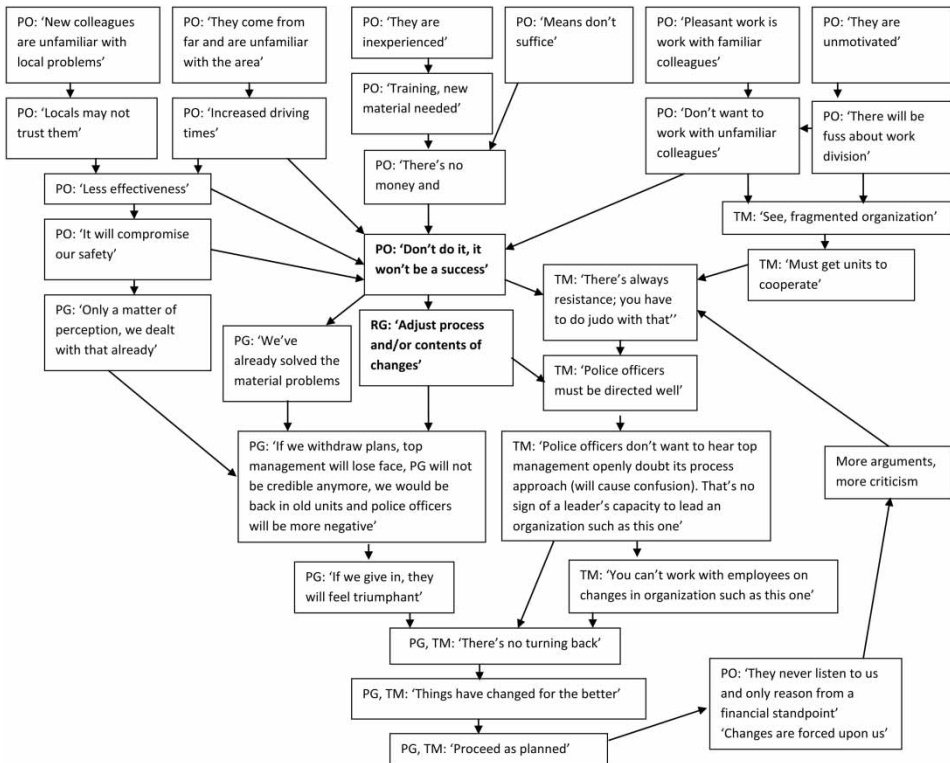
Figure 1. Cause map – police organization. PO, police officers; PG, project group; TM, top management; RG, research group.

The OD researchers' role ended with the decision to proceed as planned. Two weeks later, however, the supervisory triangle consisting of the major (=head of local government), the chief prosecutor and the chief officer of police discussed the problems concerning the new emergency response. The lack of commitment to the regional emergency response gave the other members of the triangle cause for concern and they recommended that the chief commissioner engage in a conversation with middle managers about the problems. The chief commissioner discussed the changes with his team leaders, concluded that support for the changes was extraordinarily low and that responsibilities should be placed

lower in the organization. He then asked the team leaders how he could let them 'be chief commissioner' and engaged in an open discussion about the changes with them.

Discussion

Pattern of Sensemaking and Interaction

A number of factors seemed to move the police organization towards a pattern of deadlock, and an attempt was made by the OD researchers to make sense of these factors. Police officers assumed that top management never listens to employees, always and only acts from a financial point of view and ignores security issues. They also related the changes to their daily work and used their expectations of what the changes would mean for their work to build their argument. Their sense-making seemed to incorporate the fear that the changes would threaten the effectiveness of emergency response and would threaten work pleasure. Because they value an emergency response that is fast, effective and tailored to the local situation, they wished to preserve the local character of the emergency response and wanted to work only with familiar colleagues. As a consequence, they resisted the changes and tried to convince top management and the researchers of their perspective (i.e. sensegiving). Top management, by contrast, wished to change the culture of fragmentation and was looking for a way to integrate the different units and departments. On the basis of these values, they strived for a regional organization of emergency response.

Other possible arguments, such as not wanting to work with cocky specialists, and financial considerations that are also likely to have influenced police officers and top management arguments and actions, remained 'unspoken', although speaking about them might have helped to address and possibly break the pattern.

The chief commissioner was a new leader who walked into established routines and patterns and tried to change them. While doing so, he probably experienced threat. Top management and the project group presumably weighed these – personal and organizational – threats against the alternative of giving in to criticism (cf. Bartunek *et al.*, 1999). But the ongoing criticism, the constructed identity of who and what a chief commissioner should be and should do, a person who has an opinion and is able to take decisions, the chief commissioner's assumption that police officers must be directed, the project group sensemaking, and the fear of losing face and position if the plans were withdrawn, apparently pushed top management to adopt a forceful role. They then tried to convince each other and the researchers that this was the only option (i.e. sensegiving), but this role also reinforced the police officers' criticism and reinforced the pattern (cf. Skålén, 2004).

Top management responded to resistance, but apparently also helped to create resistance. The police officers responded to a top-down change approach, but they are also likely to have helped to create this approach by their ongoing criticism. This is what Weick (1995) refers to with his concept of enactment: people themselves produce part of the situation (and the other actors in it) that they face and

try to make sense of. Both parties seem to have kept each other fixed in a pattern of ongoing escalation. Bateson (1972) calls such a pattern 'symmetrical escalation': top management reacts with a similar action to the actions of the police officers. It is a two-way process: resistance is induced by a forceful approach (Hosking, 2004), but resistance also reinforces the choice of a forceful approach. The result is a build-up of conflict that grows deeper and deeper with each respective oppressive (counter)action. If none of the actors gives in, the result is stalemate.

The pattern was repeated in the interactions among top management, the project group and the researchers: the researchers, with their survey feedback approach, focused mainly on the police officers' point of view and suggested that top management adjust their approach. They did not explore the metalevel pattern of stalemate that police officers, the project group and top management had created together, and did not discuss how to break the pattern. In top management and project group sensemaking, the researchers probably threatened to unbalance the situation and therefore added to the threat of loss of position and face. As a result, the researchers became part of the pattern and reinforced it. The pattern in this case appeared to be more or less broken by the intervention of a higher order power. The question remains, however, whether this intervention also changed the top management and police officers' underlying assumptions or only their actions (Argyris, 2004).

Conclusion: Implications for OD Assumptions and Interventions

Current OD assumptions do not fit problem situations similar to the one in this article. Better steering, for example, will probably be counterproductive because it may reinforce or confirm the pattern. Butterfield (2004) argues that, in police organizations, it may even be counterproductive and dysfunctional. Neither will trying to reduce resistance be very productive. The same goes for empowerment: change management will probably not appear very credible if empowerment is espoused in a context of forced changes (cf. Argyris, 1998). Decentralization may help to lessen tensions somewhat, but it does not address the underlying pattern. The most effective way to break the pattern is probably to make it explicit on a higher (meta)level, that is, to stand above the pattern and reflect on it, understand the consequences, and change the values, assumptions and actions that have led to the creation of the pattern.

A sensemaking perspective offers OD practitioners potential insight into the patterns of action underlying stagnation in change processes. It can be used to develop a model or causal map of the change process, and OD practitioners can use this map for interventions. For example, they might use causal maps to reflect patterns of stagnation in discussion with the actors involved, or develop maps together with these actors as an intervention to stimulate reflection and learning (group model building; Vennix, 1999). But to actually enrich OD by adopting a sensemaking perspective, a first requirement is reflection on OD assumptions and substitution of some dominant assumptions by new ones grounded in sensemaking (cf. Clegg and Walsh, 2004). Table 1 presents some new assumptions for OD that are more in line with a sensemaking approach.

Table 1. Old and proposed new organization development (OD) assumptions

Old assumptions	Proposed new assumptions grounded in sensemaking
Employees as inherently good and full of potential, but hindered from developing their potential and dependent on organizational 'aspects'	Employees as agents and sensemakers who strategically act to influence change when they see opportunities for it (cf. Weick, 1995)
A focus on entities, 'aspects' of organizations as barriers to change	A focus on processes of sensemaking, causal patterns of interaction, fears, interests, positions, values and identities, and how these hinder change (Weick, 1995)
Change as an episodic 'event' that can be orchestrated and managed with the right tools and methods	Change as a stream of interactions (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), the reality of organizational life and its ongoing and communicative character, and how it deals with the matters of daily practices (Taylor, 1993). Change management as connecting to ongoing discourses of change and new practices (cf. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002)
The place and role of leaders as leading and supporting the OD process. The leader changes the organization's culture. Employees as capacity suppliers and potential barriers who should be allowed to participate and be empowered.	Leader and employees as actors in a sensemaking process. Both affect each other.
Existing hierarchy and power differences as context factors (Marshak and Grant, 2008).	Power as constructed in mutual interactions (Weick, 1995) and constrained by the expectations that have interactively been created in relation to power bearer's corresponding role and position. Changing power and position implies reshaping the context in which it is embedded and therefore reconstructing an existing situation that people have constructed together (Taylor and Van Every, in press).

This study did not use self-reports but relied on the researchers' interpretations of the data (cf. Bartunek *et al.*, 1999). However, people are mostly unaware of their assumptions (Argyris, 2004) and therefore unable to make them explicit. The article has shown how people can keep each other trapped in processes of sensemaking as a result of their fears, values and arguments, whether articulated or hidden. Becoming more conscious of such patterns and making explicit use of sensemaking perspectives can help OD researchers to better understand their research context, add valuable insights to their theories and develop more focused interventions.

The article raises some interesting new research questions. It would be intriguing to learn more about how to purposefully act as an OD practitioner in sensemaking processes. Another idea for further inquiry concerns the role that different kinds of (open and hidden) arguments play in sensemaking and how to deal with that.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. The questionnaires were distributed among 440 police officers (both in basic police work and in specialized services), team leaders, the project group and top management. A total of 351 respondents filled out the questionnaire, a response of 54% of all 650 affected police officers. The results were used for survey feedback to top management and the project group.

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