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Innovative Session Proposal

Co-construction of an action-research project about an organizational change process in a bureaucratic organization.

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1. Session description

The purpose of this session is to take the participants through the various steps that a
to be taken in our action research project which has run from 1992 until 2000 and is
embedded in a social constructionist framework. We start off by presenting some
background information that the researchers also obtained at the beginning of the
project. Provided with all the information they need, we then ask the participants,
sitting at tables in small groups of two to three people, to brainstorm a bit about the
next step that they would take, and why they 'd do so. We are also interested in the
participants' expectations: what do they hope to achieve by the next step they
propose? What is the likely outcome of their proposed actions?
The small groups write down their main ideas on a large piece of paper. After having
read and having discussed the various ideas put forward by the different groups, we
inform our audience of what we did in reality, why we did so and what the
consequences of our actions were.
Then, we tell the participants about the continuation of our research project, until we
arrive at a second point at which another important decision has to be taken. Again,

we invite our audience to think with us and to tell us what they 'd do in the given circumstances. They write down the result of this second brainstorming session. After reading and discussing their ideas, we present them with what we did, why we did so, and what the outcome was.

In this way, we confront the participants with the various steps that are taken during the action research project, and take their criticism and advice into consideration. Before all this, we'll start this innovative session with explaining the purpose and the format and ask the audience what their goals are and what their guiding principles are in order to obtain an interesting learning experience. After writing this down in the different groups, we'll summarize it and start with the first phase.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this innovative session is to experience the key findings and principles of our action research project and maybe to add, and create new ideas. The participants' involvement is very important in our action research in the Belgian Tax Ministery. By discussing the proceedings of the project with our audience, we want to come to a shared opinion or agreement on what our plan of action should look like, what various steps need to be taken, why these steps are indispensable and how they can be put into practice.

We carefully listen to the alternatives proposed by the participants and then try to come to an agreement. We think it's important to do this over and over again because our main point is to work from a social constructionist framework during the conference as well as in reality and to compare both events.

3. Goals

Our goals for this innovative session (and in the same time our findings from our action research) are:

1. Clearly proposing and seeking approval of **a general long-term value or principle of co-operation**. We look for a stepping stone, a common value or goal of real interest to all parties. We seek a win-win relationship. This innovative session it can be a significant learning experience, both for the audience and the researcher.

2. **Reaching joint agreement on the course to be followed and on the operational procedure** during each step. The joint consideration and exploration of several possibilities during each step of the co-operation, with reference to as many advantages and disadvantages of each alternative as possible creates a feeling of freedom to choose within the limits of the general long-term value or principle of co-operation for instance the principles of co operation and mutual learning subscribed to by both parties. Step by step we need to consider, in the light of the common goal, what might constitute a meaningful next step. This next step won't be taken up in the plan of action until all participants **consider it meaningful**. The end result of each step is jointly evaluated, and information about the continuation of the project the way it was carried in reality, is provided.

3. **Openness in communication**. By this, we mean saying as much as possible what you really think and usually hesitate to say, and urging the other party to be equally frank and forthright. We continuously test how direct we can be

with each other, and try to be so to the greatest possible extent. Being open and direct, then, continuously creating opportunities for questions and discussion, daring to give uncertain opinions, sounding out your own and the other side's statements. 'Striving towards' model 2-behaviour (Argyris, 1990).

4. **Reframing information, creating openings** to view things from different angles. For example, by following different frameworks of different participants, by regarding it as subjective perceptions. By appreciating different viewpoints yielding different views of reality, by 'experiencing' that there is no such thing as THE ONE objective reality but, rather, the many subjective perceptions that each individual finds 'right' or 'logical' from his own experience.

5. **Gradual recognition of each other as valid conversation partners**. From our social constructionist position we always make sure to jointly take decisions, always endeavoring to make our clients, our audience co-owners of the research.

4. Content of session

The content of the session is based upon two key moments in our action research project. For each step we will give the necessary background information and specific questions about decisions to be taken by the audience in order to co-create advises on how to tackle the problems. The way in which we share ideas and knowledge is new and innovative: it is a participative learning experience

In the following, we first give an overview of the entire project (4.1.) and then we work out two examples, (4.2.) the contracting phase and (4.3.) the design and execution of the supportive training process in three rounds.

4.1. Overview of the whole project

In outline, the project consists of a number of phases. The aim was a more effective and efficient running of the different parts of the organization. The research starts in **the contracting phase** in an atmosphere of uninvited (research-) guests. This changes gradually into joint recognition between the researchers and top civil servants from the Ministry of Finance as the point of departure for the joint operation: a research project of use to the top management and the organization. To enable co-operation between the researchers and clients, the project was initiated by a joint steering committee of top officials and researchers. This steering committee set the course and objectives throughout the project. The steering committee has received interim reports, and researchers and/or officials have approached it with proposals for further steps. The steering committee decides in each phase which proposals are to be executed and what successive actions they involve. It also plans the timetable.

During **the exploratory phase**, the steering committee decides to investigate how the employees perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of their departments. The employees are also asked about their ideal or desired organizational characteristics. Research during this phase therefore focuses on the 'shop floor' of the organization. Among the problems cited, management and the allocation of work was seen to be too exclusively bound by bureaucratic habit, rules and culture; the actual performance of the employee is not the central point in selection, assessment, training and promotion

policy; too little attention is paid to internal and external client-orientation; attempts at change clutch too exclusively at structural change that produces insufficient effects because of a lack of fit with the other organizational variables.

In addition to this research, a major restructuring plan with a pilot project has been set up inside the organization.

In the **in-depth phase**, we look into whether the problems, identified during the exploratory phase, are addressed and resolved in the pilot project in Ostend and in the restructuring plan. A benchmarking is carried out in large scale bureaucratic organizations such as banks and insurance companies, and in the Dutch national tax administration. The results of this benchmarking are then discussed in the steering committee.

The **advisory phase** consists in the first place of a three day workshop with the members of the restructuring group and the researchers, with joint investigation into how the restructuring plan might be added to and possibly improved using the research information gathered to that point.

Besides this research, a new task force 'support and internal control' has been set up with the goal of improving communication and control possibilities between control management and external departments. Discussions are being held with this new task force, courses are being run on the desired communicative attitude.

Together with the steering committee we formulate a number of suggestions regarding strategy, content and process. These ideas gradually develop during the research process and are tested for their practical applicability in all sorts of discussions. We scan the organization for groups trying to bring about change, mapping out common ground and points of departure. For instance, task forces are created to work out the restructuring plan. We then present the useful conclusions of the exploratory and in-depth phases for discussion with officials of the various task forces. We work with the task force personnel and organization to put together a management training program for the post-restructuring executive staff of the new departments. We also start management courses for existing executive staff. Meanwhile, we proceed with our co-operation with the top tax officials on the description of the function profile of these executives and on the basic guidelines for the new departments (including descriptions of organization and tasks).

As the different taskforces made progress, the tension among different departments and services increased and insuperable difficulties arose. Because of this, the implementation of the restructuring ground to a halt and was put off till the fall of 1997. When decisions were taken, we were called upon to work on the people's side of the organizational change and to help plan and realize the behavioral changes of member at all levels of the organization.

The organizational change phase
Change processes in large bureaucratic organizations start in the first instance as structural changes. When the top management has decided upon a new strategy in an organizational change process (e.g., to become more quality- and result-driven) and a new structure is developed, a very important step still has to be made: putting all this into practice. This means considerable behavioral changes in members at all levels of the organization, of leaders as well as of their subordinates. This is quite often the bottleneck in organizational change processes (Kanter, 1991). Without the necessary

behavioral change among the employees, the change of style, attitude, skills, knowledge and mind-sets, the change is a blind alley.

We discuss in 4.3 our plans to support the behavioral changes of members at all levels of the organization, the execution of these plans and their evaluation. We'll first give some more information about the context of our research project, the Belgian tax Ministry (4.3.1.) and our theoretical framework (4.3.2.) What do we know from the literature about change and learning processes influencing these behavioral changes of members in a large bureaucratic organization? How did we put this into practice in a training process in three rounds for the three different levels we designed together with the client organization (4.3.3.). What are the effects and results from the viewpoint of the members of the organization? Do people change their behavior?

4.2. In-depth illustration of the contracting phase

We concentrate on an in-depth illustration of how we worked from a social constructionist perspective in the contracting phase of the organizational development project within the Belgian Tax Ministry. In this contracting phase, we experienced a conversion from being uninvited guests towards a joint mapping-out of problem areas for research and to the feeling that 'there is something in it for me' for both parties. Looking back on our experiences, we can identify a number of process characteristics that have led to this change of mind and to the commitment of these clients.

We opted from the outset for an approach whereby research would be initiated jointly with officers from the Ministry. To this end, contact was sought with the chief executive of the Ministry of Finance, the Secretary-General, who for his part held further talks with the Minister of Finance. Later on we constructed a joint research project with the steering committee under the direction of the Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation. We join the tax officials in a study of the functioning of the Belgian tax system and generate proposals and measures for its optimization. The aim of this organizational change project is a more effective and efficient running of the different parts of the organization.

We attempt to explore the empirical world of the tax officials at different levels and to gain an understanding of their hopes, ideas and ideals. We hope to come to shared apperceptions of their reality and their ideals, and to help in the implementation of the findings of the research.

We start with an in-depth illustration of how we worked from a social constructionist perspective in the contracting phase of the organizational development project. Looking back on our experiences, we can identify a number of process characteristics that have led to this change of mind and to the commitment of these clients (see point 3. goals). We then make some reflections on our choice of action research in a government bureaucracy from a constructionist viewpoint.

We experienced a distinct difference between contracting with the Secretary General, the general manager of the ministry of Finance, and the Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation.

4.2.1. Contracting with the secretary general

The Secretary General at the Ministry of Finance was not exactly pleased with the unsolicited, unannounced researchers. Although representatives of the Ministry of Finance were involved in the decision making phase at this research project, it appears that the top was left uninformed. We therefore clearly started out in an atmosphere of uninvited guests.   The promoters placed their research assignment and program before the Secretary-General, who then presented it to the Ministry of Finance and subsequently wrote to the promoters, saying the study could proceed only under certain conditions of confidentiality and minimal co-operation by the officials.
In this first contact between Secretary-General and promoters, a complete set of earlier studies, notes and documents were placed at the disposal of the researchers. Meanwhile (March 1992), the researchers set to work, going through the publications at the Ministry of Finance as well as publications about organizational effectiveness and efficiency, personnel policy, management of change, civil services, etc. The research group sees its task as 'to conduct research generating proposals that are actually used and implemented in the Ministry'. Researchers and promoters share a common concern: how do we manage to make our customer a co-owner of the purpose and progress of the research? By way of preparation for negotiations with top Ministry executives, we analyze the conditions of our principal: the OSTC (Belgian Federal Office for Scientific, Technical an Cultural Affairs); of our customer: the Ministry of Finance; of ourselves as supplier of the research and of the product: the object and the structure of the research. Study work and interviews with frontline eye-witnesses from our own network in administrative circles threw up a number of ideas for obtaining and facilitating - the co-operation of the Ministry of Finance.

We will endeavor to align the aim and structure of the research as closely as possible with the wishes of the Ministry of Finance so as to make the latter co-owner. Our limitations include the (quite wide-ranging) restrictions of the contract signed with the OSTC, and our own wishes not to end up as a research report gathering dust in a drawer. We aim to generate, in consultation with our client, practically implemented research advice with a view to actual organizational development.
We therefore lay down various possible demarcation lines in our field of research as possible options, with a word of explanations in each case. For example: departments or entities experienced as very problematic; or smoothly running departments that can be used as models; or limitation to a single administration, e.g., Direct Taxation, because it is big and relevant, because a new Director-General has just been appointed and may be interested in data about his administration culled by third parties; or follow-up actions on previous initiatives (logos, modernization cells, radioscopy), or small pilot experiments in specific departments, or comparison of smoothly and less smoothly running departments, and so forth.

The second meeting between the Secretary General, his closest colleague, and the research group set out in the same atmosphere of faint resentment and the feeling of uninvited guests.
The atmosphere was changed by taking the objections seriously and by our repeated emphasis on the offered possibility of making two researchers available to them over a two-year period. Both top executives began by explaining the restrictions and possibilities of the Ministry of Finance. Our insistence on the question: 'how can we, despite the restraints, help you as top civil servants to find out something you consider

worthwhile using and implementing?' changed the atmosphere, and both top officials began to suggest areas of research which were noted by the research team and which shall be further studied and possibly developed.

They expressed their resistance and opinions in, among others, the following terms:
- Allowing outsiders in to observe and to become involved in the management of the Ministry of Finance is very dangerous. The outsiders lack sufficient knowledge of all the restrictions of the Ministry and our people are only too keen to tell all the negative stories going around and all their frustrations. And if the outsiders take that to the Press, ...
- University researchers often conduct research for no better reason than to gain a reputation in research.
- We must make our executives more like managers, but that is not easy in the civil service with all our restrictions.
- We know through previous research where to find the causes and inhibiting factors behind less than satisfactory running. Our question is: 'how to change our organization without provoking too much resistance?'
- If the external departments find out that we are investigating something or wish to change something, they become so nervous on the floor that they want the plan over before it is ready.

The research team also put forward its alternatives, points of departure and limiting conditions, attempting to unite their own wishes with those of the top officials. We want to provide data so as to enable them to press ahead with their policies with a greater power of conviction: upwardly to the Minister, in their own organization, and among their supporters. To do this, we concentrated on the tension between perceptions of the current organization and the desired or ideal situation, focusing not on the structural aspects of the organization but rather on the HRM side, on the human side, on the process side. To realize this, we aimed to set up a steering committee of top civil servants and researchers deciding together, step by step, what action is to be taken; the progress and results of the research would be reported to them, and they would adjust course and make further decisions, for instance on implementation.
It was decided to hold another meeting. The top officials would meanwhile look internally into the possibilities of co-operation and the researchers would develop the proposed alternatives and check their feasibility for research.

In the following meeting (11th May 1992) the top officials and the newly-appointed Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation appeared interested and ready to co-operate. Ideas were exchanged regarding different possible questions and objects of research, and the decision in favor of support to reinforce the management of the tax authorities at various levels. Research would then seek to establish the ideal and the present situation and qualification. Regarding method, the research group proposed to start with interviews in a limited number of departments, chosen either with an eye to representativity or for being models of good or bad management. The concrete development would be entrusted to a steering committee headed by the Director-General of the Administration of Direct Taxation, his top officials and the researchers. In the meeting the Secretary-General also stated the following conditions, all of which we found positive. Interviews will be held on the basis of a questionnaire approved beforehand by the steering committee. Departments are to be chosen after consultation with the steering committee and the departments of the

central committee shall also be consulted. A person from the top management will be member of the steering committee, that is to say, somebody not from the Administration at Direct Taxation who will keep the Secretary-General, as linking-pin, informed of developments. The aim of the research was jointly described with the Secretary General as: 'to provide support for the responsibles of the Ministry of Finance as regards effectiveness and efficiency via personnel policy. Account will be taken of limitations (constraints) within which the Ministry of Finance operates as a civil service. The research must make suggestions to develop certain initiatives within the Ministry.'
The Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation invited the associates he considered necessary for the Steering Committee to the next meeting (20th May 1992) in order to proceed to actual installation of the Steering Committee and the first practical discussions.

4.2.2. Contracting in the Administration of Direct Taxation
The atmosphere has changed completely now. The newly appointed Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation is clearly prepared to co-operate. He seems to sense opportunities in the research project, which makes him from this moment on a conversation partner and principal. After the introduction and introductory remarks, the researchers reiterate their initial promises: setting up a research project of practical use for the client designed to yield advice in consultation with the steering committee.
The Director-General of the Administration of Direct Taxation said:' If a research possibility of this kind comes our way, we try to use it to its maximum capacity. We should be able to do this by ourselves, but if we asked for it ourselves we would not get it. You came along at just the right moment. We had plans, so we get the opportunity to carry out scientific tests to improve and underpin them. We were, and are, interested in what goes on among the rank and file and what they want, what their suggestions may be'.
He pointed out that the acceptability of the research project would all depend on it being applied in the French speaking, in the bilingual and in the Dutch speaking departments.
The researchers replied that this was possible, one of steering committee members wondered from the start (to himself !) why such a research program could not be conducted in tandem by a Dutch-speaking university and a French-speaking university.
The subjects and general direction of the research were discussed in broad outline. Officials invited opinions on the internal bulletin Fininfo and asked for information about the Ministry's TV broadcasts. It was agreed that the two researchers should make contact with the different members of the steering committee to finalize the checklist before the interviews. The situation and problems of external departments were discussed frankly.
Stimulated by the chairperson of the steering committee, the newly appointed Director General of the Administration of Direct Taxation, a very open atmosphere prevailed that could be sensed in the direct expression of viewpoints, restrictions and limiting conditions by researchers and officials alike. He in particular, as recently appointed top manager, seemed to have confidence in us and to want to make free use of this opportunity to obtain support for his policy, to have two researchers interview the rank and file about their perceptions of the current and the ideal situation.

The other officials on the steering committee were inclined to share his vision, providing help and support during execution. In retrospect, all were impressed by the personality, openness and dynamism of their Director General.

The steering committee determines the structure and direction of the whole research. The steering committee has received interim reports, and researchers and/or officials approach it with proposals for further steps. The steering committee decides in each phase which proposals will be executed and what successive actions they involve. It also plans the timetable. Throughout the research, the researchers draw up agendas for meetings and forward any preliminary notes to all steering committees. After each meeting, they send all members a report of the discussions and any agreements reached.

This illustrates the point that where a government organization opts for action research, we must operate in accordance with the standards and values of that government organization. Respect of the hierarchical lines of communication all the way to the top is necessary as is, more particularly, prior discussion of actions and results with the top officials in the steering committee.
In line with our philosophy of organization as something in a constant state of becoming, where the players are constantly negotiating shared views of reality, it was proposed to start our project with research into perceptions among the employees in the rank and file (the external departments). We reported perceptions in the rank and file of various organizational aspects to the top management, and we then tried to reach shared perceptions of problems and advice.
The option for action-research and working alongside the steering committee further implies that, while no detailed plan and no detailed structured research phasing existed at the start of the research project, the objective was well defined: to contribute to the optimization of personnel policy.

We experienced a distinct difference between contracting at the top of the Ministry of Finance and that in Direct Taxation.
In the first contracting phase at the top of the Ministry, we set out as uninvited (research) guests, offered to, or rather thrust upon, our client.
Although representatives of the Ministry were involved in the decision-making phase of this research project, the top management would appear not to have been concretely informed. They expressed their perception as: 'this unsolicited research was forced on us; working on it will cost us time; allowing outsiders to research our organization can be dangerous and we already know our problems but do not have enough power to bring about change.'
In these first contacts, we acted from our constructionist view that only shared meaning is a starting point for joint operations, and from our own desire to gain admission and access to the field of research. Work cannot proceed unless the desire and the will for combined effort exist on both sides. We tried to elicit this desire and will to joint effort in the top of the Ministry of Finance. We did this by taking quite explicit account of the objections and conditions, jointly probing the organization for a subject we 'both' would find worthwhile studying and implementing, and by proposing a research structure wherein we, as researchers, visibly share control and authority with the officials.

In the contracting with the Administration of Direct Taxation, the mood is different. The newly appointed Director-General is ready for co-operation and openness. He stresses he is eager to make use of a chance, serendipitous research opportunity from a university. Adopting a co-designed research approach, a partnership gradually forms, with shared concerns and responsibilities.

In this contracting phase, we may therefore speak of a conversion FROM UNINVITED GUESTS TO A JOINT MAPPING-OUT OF PROBLEM AREAS FOR RESEARCH and to the feeling that 'there is something in it for me' for both parties.

In a later stage of our research, we asked various parties why they had participated in the first phase of our research. Their responses all pointed towards the process characteristics described under point 3.

We now jump to a later point in our action research. We'll discuss our plans to support the behavioral changes of members at all levels of the organization, the execution of these plans and their evaluation. We'll first give some more information about the context of our research project, the Belgian tax Ministry (4.3.1.) and our theoretical framework (4.3.2.) and how we put this into practice in a training process in three rounds for the three different levels we designed together with the client organization (4.3.3.). What are the effects and results from the viewpoint of the members of the organization? Do people change their behavior?

4.3. The organizational change phase: the training process in three rounds

4.3.1. The context

A major reorganization is currently under way of the Belgian tax ministry with its 28,000 employees. Until 1995, each Belgian organization or company was controlled twice by the Belgian tax ministry; once for income revenue or direct taxes, and once for VAT (value-added tax). This reorganization and the creation of a new tax administration, the *Administratie van de Ondernemings- en Inkomenfiscaliteit* (AIOF, the Administration of Corporate Taxes and Incomes) resolves this inconvenience for the taxpayer. Its ultimate goals are, on the one hand, a more efficient tax supervision system, resulting from the combination of resources and information available from the two former departments and, on the other hand, a more quality and customer-driven public service with one central customer contact point.

For instruction and training, the Belgian Ministry of Finance has its own internal training service, the National School of Finance. This internal training service has a large practice in specialized financial and revenue courses, but started management courses only as recently as 1992. The top management of the new Administration of Corporate Taxes and Incomes, the client organization, asked us, the external researcher and change agent, for a proposal for the support and training of their staff in the implementation of the reorganization. They asked us to work in co-operation with the internal training department of the tax ministry, the National School of Finance. We acted as a link between the client and this internal training service and, in a spirit of co-operation, set up the course and objectives throughout the project and evaluated and corrected the process continuously.

The new Administration of Corporate Taxes and Incomes was created in November 1997. It started as a new superstructure, consisting of parts of the Administration of Direct Taxes (or income tax) and the Administration for VAT (value-added tax). In the early days, it was directed by a team of five top managers

supported by a Preparatory and Support Team *(Dienst Voorbereiding en Begeleiding)* of 12 members. This large top management and support structure was again changed in March 1999, becoming a team of four top managers and six management committee members in support.

The new administration consists of 48 inspection centers, spread across Belgium. About half the inspection centers are Dutch-speaking, the other half French-speaking, and there are some bilingual centers in Brussels. The intention is that the tax files in the inspection centers are inspected for the two kinds of tax together. Polyvalent teams will do this with a team leader, which is a novelty. These teams consist of former employees of Direct Taxes and of VAT now working closely together for the first time.

4.3.2. Theoretical framework

It is typical of a bureaucracy for the processes of thinking, decision-making, execution and reflective feedback to be separated (Swieringa 1990, p. 86). Leaders in a typical bureaucratic organization (such as the Ministry of Finance) are merely supposed to follow the rules and procedures and to make sure that their people also follow the rules and procedures (Pinchot 1993, p. 26). Becoming more result- and quality-driven means more..., more delegation of responsibility, more sharing of information and more team-building (Beer, Eisenstat, Spector 1990, p. 159).

In order to become a more quality- and result-centered organization, the processes of thinking, decision-making, execution and reflective feedback have to come closer to the front office (work floor). People have to rely less on hierarchy, formal rules, procedures and function-descriptions and to be more focused on quality and results (Pinchot 1993, p. 29).

In a bureaucratic organization, change almost always means a structural change (Morgan 1994). But unless all the other organizational components are changed or will change, it is impossible to have a new and effective organization. Unless people at different levels change their behavior, effective or organizational change will not happen. Unless all organizational components - the "7 S's": strategy, structure, systems, staff, skills, style, super ordinate goals - are changed and are congruent with each other, the organization will not be effective (Waterman, Peters 1991, p. 556).

This new kind of behavior (being more focused on quality and results and less on hierarchy and rules) has not only to be taught and known by the managers, but also to be executed by them (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p.7). It is not enough that individuals possess this new knowledge and skills, they all have to behave in the new way and, therefore, collective learning processes are needed (Swieringa, 1990, p. 71). This means that people collectively learn to behave in a new way, following more flexible rules and principles. This new, collective, learning process is mainly an unlearning process of old, mostly unconsciously integrated behavior, such as, e.g., avoiding conflicts, always standing behind the boss, keeping in the background, avoiding uncertainties and criticism.

In order to be effective, the training for the new behavior has to be new enough to learn new things and old enough (= as before) so that the top management and the participants will trust it. Learning and integrating new behavior requires a balanced mix of old and new, of challenge and trust (Bouwen 1988). Harrisson (1970, p. 189) recommends the trainer to go one and only one step further and deeper than the present level of the participants. The training has to be a rather structured one (which is normal for members of a bureaucracy), with the learning purposes fixed and

coming from the new requirements of the new organization translated into new required knowledge, skills and attitudes. During this training, the new vision and new required behavior has to be presented in a rather convincing way (that is, resembling the previous situation). But the training also has to give them the opportunity to exchange opinions and experiences, to come up with new ideas and proposals (the new part). A further novelty is the two-way communication process instead of only selling or imposing. And the trainer has to be in a position where he can do something with the proposals and the frustrations. He has to have a link, or rather a contract, with the top management, so that the ideas and proposals of the members of the organization can be studied and taken into account (Swieringa 1990, p. 73).

We conducted this research and organizational development project as part of an action research study on the optimization of quality and service in the Belgian Tax Administration that started in 1992 and is still in progress. It is based on a social constructionist approach (Weick 1995; Gergen 1994; Bouwen 1994). This means that an organization is seen as a co-creation, as something in a constant state of becoming. Members have their own meanings, their own viewpoints, their own views on everything. The members of the organization are continually involved in negotiating shared views of reality in order to define a common basis for joint action. The organization is the result of these permanent negotiations. In line with this social constructionist approach, we opted for co-operation between researcher and clients and set up a joint steering committee. This steering committee set the course and the objectives throughout the project and evaluated the interim reports.

In line with this action research study, based upon a social constructionist approach, we look at each group and diagnose their actual situation, discuss their preferred or ideal situation, their own expectations and those of their superiors, and discuss the way to act in order to reach the next step to the desired situation, together with them. This process of collectively deciding to give the new organization the opportunity to succeed is the most decisive within the learning process. In these collective learning sessions, leaders and followers find themselves at the same (starting) level: they acquire new ways of thinking together about how they can optimally fulfill the requirements of the work; of deciding together what to do in certain conditions, or elaborating the criteria to take action and so on. In this way, account is taken of, and an answer found to, one of the basic weaknesses of a bureaucracy; the separation of thinking, decision-making, execution and reflective feedback (Swieringa 1990, p. 71).

How did we put these principles into practice and what are the results? We'll discuss this with our audience at the conference.

4.3.3 : The training process in three rounds for three different levels

In line with our framework discussed above, we designed the training in three rounds: first the Preparatory and Support Team (N = 12) in the presence and with the support of the top management team (September 1997); second, the directors of the inspection centers (N = 100) in the presence and with the support of the Preparatory and Support Team members (January to June 1998) and; third, we wanted to visit the inspection centers and train the team leaders (260 Dutch-speaking team leaders) in the presence of and with the support of the directors of the inspection centers (from October 1998 to June 1999).

We started for each level with a presentation and discussion with their bosses about mission and vision, aims and purposes, and possible courses of action. Each course was designed as a train-the-trainers course for the next level. In the training, each level worked as subordinates of their bosses through the same process, as they have to give later on as boss to their own subordinates. This means the process of becoming owner of the new vision and strategy by allowing subordinates to express and to discuss their doubts and their hopes, their resistance to change and their frustrations. By going through this process collectively, with the support of an external trainer-researcher, they co-create the insight that there is an opportunity for change and that they can choose to give the new vision the opportunity to succeed or not. By organizing the training in this way, we tried to set up collective instead of only individual learning processes and we have a link with the top management.

We evaluated the training at individual and group level. At the end of each day, we asked the trainees individually to write down what they appreciated and what they suggested might be improved as regards the content and the way of working (the method) of the training. We collected the individual evaluation sheets. We then discussed them in a group discussion.

Starting from the idea that an organization changes only if the behavior of its members changes, the intention was to study the effectiveness of the management training on the three levels through examining, one way or another, how much of it eventually finds its way into practice. However, the services of the new administration started in quite different circumstances and were not operational everywhere at the same time. There were quite significant differences between the inspection centers. The management was first present everywhere, from November 1997. But in certain services the team leaders and their subordinates then followed together, while in others only some team leaders came. Owing to all manner of logistical problems, it was February or even April before 60% of the personnel were present. Given these very divergent circumstances, there was little if any useful purpose to be served by research into the effective use of the new management insights and skills.

The situation was different once the training for the team leaders was given from March to July 1999 (third round). By then, all inspection centers were operational to an approximately comparable degree. The initial idea of going to the inspection centers and train the team leaders in the presence and with the support of the directors of the inspection centers had to be changed due to practical problems. Heterogeneous groups of 15 team leaders of different inspection centers were formed in Brussels and, without their bosses, they received their training between October 1998 and June 1999. We carried out follow-up research for these team leaders but only for the group of Dutch-speaking team leaders. At the end of the training, the team leaders were asked to consider which part of the course they wished to apply in their own workplace. They were asked to note one to a maximum of three work point(s). After 8 weeks, they would receive their card of work point(s) and a list of questions to fill in and return to us in the pre-paid return envelope.

 Purposes, content and evaluation of the three training rounds

4.3.3.1. First level, first training for the Preparatory and Support Team
In September 1997, just before the start of the reorganization, a two-day seminar was organized for the Preparatory and Support Team. This residential two-day course started with a clear statement of mutual expectations between the five top managers and the 12-person support team. It was preceded by a planning and appointments day.

The purpose of the course was to acquire understanding and skills in the typical character of this support-giving and advisory function and to work on perceptions, skills and attitudes more likely to encourage a more result-driven, supportive and learning management style. It also turned around styles of relations between officials and their staff, between employees, and between executive staff and their superiors. These perceptions and skills help to set up the new structures and work systems aimed towards the inspection centers' objective: more, thorough and polyvalent tax inspections. Indeed, new structures and systems in themselves do not give rise to organizational change. Only if the behavior of the employee's changes can the new objectives be reached.

It emerged from the oral and written evaluation directly after the course that the Preparatory and Support Team members gained a better understanding of expectations with regard to the new job, learned and refreshed new and old principles of management. They appreciated the practical training and tools in problem solving, conflict handling and meeting skills. The formula to work partly with a separate Dutch and French-language subgroup and partly in bilingual plenary sessions worked out very well. (The Preparatory and Support Team is staffed half by Dutch speakers and half by French speakers, and everyone is considered to be bilingual). The available time did however seem to be rather on the short side. The expressed wishes for further training included: how to use two-way communication and at the same time be effective and efficient, how to encourage the executive staff "under you" to discuss their problems openly, how to build up a relationship in which the other person sets himself high targets, how to act when teams performance is sub-standard, etc. ... They thus mainly occupied the relational plane, as to how to change the hierarchical relation into another, more two-sided or mutually questioning and testing relation.

4.3.3.2. Second level, second round of training for inspection center management

The external trainer, together with two or three members of the Preparatory and Support Team, then gave a four-day training course to the level below. The groups of about twelve to fifteen people were made up by inviting the two or three directors of an inspection center, with three to five inspection centers in the same region. The four days were spread between November 1997 and June 1998.

Each of the days were announced with a different topic. Beside the subject of the day, there was also ample time to discuss problems in the start-up of their own inspection center and own functioning. In this way, we mixed a structured training with free space to discuss the current problems. The objectives of the training turned around content as well as style and culture. Thus: bringing out the own expectations and the function requirements of the managerial function in the inspection centers (2 days), learning to preside meetings (1 day) and learning to hold planning and evaluation talks (1 day) as the objective of learning how to handle the new, more open, quality- and result-driven style.

The trainer noted that these middle managers were not used to thinking in terms of process. Both in their preparation of imparting information to their employees and in their preparation of meetings and planning discussions, there was a marked preoccupation with content. The training therefore laid heavy emphasis on preparation on the process side (how to approach talks and meetings in order to be effective as well as motivating from the employees' point of view) alongside the preparation of content.

The oral and written evaluations directly after the course showed that it was very new that the Preparatory and Support Team, their bosses, were setting up this process with them and were giving them the opportunity to express their doubts and hopes, their resistance to change and their frustration. They greatly appreciated the openness of the discussions, the spirit of collegiality, the involvement of the participants and the practical approach. It was clear that the support and the involvement of the Preparatory and Support Team had made a great deal of impact during the training. Regular meetings with colleagues starting up other inspection centers under the same difficult circumstances made mutual exchange, learning and support possible, and that was greatly appreciated. The fact that the training constantly required them to come together in discussions, and solve problems as a management team, means that they would find it easier to do this back at their own inspection centers.

However, there were so many logistical problems at the inspection centers during start-up that the trainees had the feeling that the improvements possible through solving these problems were many times greater than any improvements that they themselves could make by improving their management style and the things that they could control.

4.3.3.3. Third level, third round of training for team leaders or first-line management

The start of the reorganization in November 1997 was beset by a variety of logistical and organizational problems to do with the relocation of staff and offices. The quality- and result-driven management training of the team leaders was therefore planned later.

Work on the new structure has really gathered momentum since February 1998. A series of interviews was held with the team leaders during the autumn of 1998, probing their training requirements. These interviews found that the team leaders were more interested in clear objectives for their daily work, training in fiscal techniques and data processing, and that a management-training course was not seen as being the first priority. However, three areas were mapped out in which management training could prove useful, namely team-building, presiding meetings and supporting and guiding employees. The result of these interviews was discussed with the top management and the training department. The decision was made to devote one module per day to each of the themes for which the team leaders could register per separate day and on a voluntary basis. All previous training in the first and second round had been compulsory.

In all, approximately 130 of the total number of approximately 260 Dutch speaking team leaders registered voluntarily to follow one-, two- or three-day courses. 21 days of training were given in groups of about 13 persons. Roughly half the team leaders (5 groups) signed for three days, one theme being discussed each day. One group followed two themes, four groups followed one theme. Groups were formed randomly. The training ran from March to July 1999.

The object of the training is the promotion of a more participative, learning and result-driven style of intercourse between management and employees, between colleagues and with superiors. The three selected themes or course contents - effective team building, meetings, supporting and guiding employees - are its concrete expression. The more participative, learning and result-driven management style is a precondition for realizing the inspection centers' objectives, that is, more, thorough, result-driven and polyvalent tax inspections. Indeed, structural changes are not enough. Organizational change will not happen until the behavior of people changes.

The training revealed great differences between inspection centers as regards the extent to which the team leaders can or may give their team leadership. In some inspection centers, the director occupies himself with every last thing the team does... Teams in other inspection centers are allowed greater working autonomy...
Oral and written evaluations directly after the courses seem to dwell on the direct, practical usefulness of each of the three themes. The short theoretical discussions by relevant executives on team-building, meetings and giving feedback, the possibilities for giving and discussing personal examples, being in a direct learning situation and no longer having to speak in general terms, the comparison of experiences with colleagues, the awareness of having the same problems and the experience of supporting each other were very much appreciated. Comments such as: "are our bosses getting this too?" or: "our bosses need this as well" were often heard.

(P.S. After this third training session we evaluated the effectiveness of the training. We defined 'effectiveness of the training' as "the application of work points that they had chosen in the first two months after the course." We send questionnaires to all participants. We asked among other things, to what extent these
Work points had been uppermost in their minds and which elements had been a help or a hindrance to apply these points; whether they saw any effects of the application of their work point(s) and, if so, which ones; and whether others too noticed any effects. Finally, they were asked how effective they thought such courses were, as stimuli in the direction towards a more participatory, learning and result-driven management style in and during work. We can present you with this information, too.)

5. Description of format

This Co-construction of an action-research project about an organizational change process in a bureaucratic organization has a specific format.
The researcher will start the session by presenting the same background information that the researchers got at the beginning of the project. We will provide this information and the question to discuss on a leaflet. We then ask the participants, sitting in small groups of two to three people, to discuss what step they would take at a given moment in the contracting phase, why they would do so and what outcome they expect from their action.
We ask them to write down their group decision on large sheets of papers. After reading and discussing the ideas proposed by the different groups, we as researchers inform our audience of what we did in reality, why we did this and what the consequences were.
Next, we give information about the continuation of our research project until the plans for the restructuration are ready and we were asked to design the people's side of the organizational change project. Again we ask our audience to discuss and to write down what they would do in those circumstances, why they would do that and what they think the consequences could be. Again, after reading and discussing the different proposals of the various groups, we as researchers tell our audience about what we did in reality, the reasons for doing this, and the consequences of our action.

In this way, we confront all participants at the session with the different steps of our action research project and allow them to make comments, formulate criticism and give advice.

Before all this, we'll start this innovative session with explaining the purpose and the format and ask the audience what their goals are and what their guiding principles are in order to obtain an interesting learning experience. After writing this down in the different groups,we'll summarize it and start with the contracting phase.
Depending on how much time there is available, there can be more time for group discussion. I think a real minimum for this session is one hour, but
 90 minutes or two hours would be even better.

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Innovative Session Proposal

Co-construction of an action-research project about an organizational change process in a bureaucratic organization.

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1. Session description

The purpose of this session is to take the participants through the various steps that a to be taken in our action research project which has run from 1992 until 2000 and is embedded in a social constructionist framework. We start off by presenting some background information that the researchers also obtained at the beginning of the project. Provided with all the information they need, we then ask the participants, sitting at tables in small groups of two to three people, to brainstorm a bit about the next step that they would take, and why they 'd do so. We are also interested in the participants' expectations: what do they hope to achieve by the next step they propose? What is the likely outcome of their proposed actions?
The small groups write down their main ideas on a large piece of paper. After having read and having discussed the various ideas put forward by the different groups, we inform our audience of what we did in reality, why we did so and what the consequences of our actions were.
Then, we tell the participants about the continuation of our research project, until we arrive at a second point at which another important decision has to be taken. Again,