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How trust and understanding in a municipal organization can lead to more effective and credible leadership

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Abstract

This auto-ethnographic paper intends to bring forward trust and control issues in a practical setting of a communications department of a Dutch municipal organization. The current situation entails that management in the municipality approaches IT projects from a linear and reductionist perspective, assuming that the world is controllable, predictable and manageable. Experience has shown that these projects often do not lead to the desired results. In this paper we discuss the balance between trust and control that is essential for sustainable change management, but it is important to note that this balance is context dependent and can only be achieved by learning from our own behavior by reflecting on our thoughts and actions. This approach, which puts practical experience in the centre, is based on insights from complex responsive processes theory, could lead to more sustainable project management, and allows us to explore what is really going on within the municipal organization.

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1. Introduction

In the described process we learned that attempting to change people's behavior by communicating through a technological instrument turned out to be ineffective. In the paper we describe another perspective on leadership during IT change processes. The current management style in the municipal organization is predominantly a power over approach with a top down hierarchical culture. One of the practical consequences of this approach is that it reduces employee initiatives and prevents them from reverting to more successful change behavior. We want to argue that if change managers would use their power to facilitate the change process the involved employees would feel more secure to stick out their necks to explore new IT territories. The narrative describes an IT project called "Visual Management", in which a power over style was used. The project was controlled and regulated by managers that were high up in the municipal hierarchy. Leadership was strictly power related; the managers gave the orders, and the employees had to comply, an example of command and control. The project entailed the installation of a screen, good visible for the entire group, which displayed the workload of the employees, in order to make them more productive. The employees however, felt mistrusted, and eventually sabotaged the screen. The Visual management projects seemed to fail because management chose to one-sidedly rely on control instruments in order to change the behavior of the employees, instead of involving the employees in the project.

The paradox of the distorting effect entails: the more influence management wants to have on the primary process, the more the distorting effects increase (Korsten, 2007). One of the reasons is that employees attempt to reject performance measures in which they are directly and individually the object of measurement. Professionals will become defensive arguing that the performance is a result of a co-production with others, affected by circumstances and having a dynamic. Paying more and better attention how people interact and the hidden aspects of behavior, as presented in the complex responsive processes theory can lead to potentially better results (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2012; Groot, 2011). Our goal of describing this event is to show what really happened during this change project, instead of completely relying on technological forecasting. Instead of focusing on the common rationalities of the decision-making process, we focus on local interactions between people within the municipal context. By looking at these unpredictable interactions between people that create their own psychological and social reality from a complex responsive process theory perspective, new insights might possibly emerge, leading to a better understanding of social implications of technological project developments. The story is written as a narrative using an auto-ethnographic approach from the perspective of one of the authors (WB) as a senior project manager in the project 'Visual Management'. Thereafter the narrative is reflected on by both authors.

2. A narrative of a municipal change project

As the IT manager of the organization I (WB) got involved in the project when I received an invitation to join the project group 'Visual Management' by e-mail from the manager Citizen Affairs (who I will call Karin), a member of the management team. In this e-mail, Karin wrote that she wanted to start the project Visual Management, in order to increase the performance of the 'Work' department, by installing a screen that displayed the workload of the department. The management was dissatisfied with the performance of the employees of the Work department, because the number of people who received welfare had increased a lot, while the amount of people who got a job thanks to the department decreased. According to the management, better control instruments would be the solution to increase the performance of the employees. After everybody had shortly introduced themselves, Karin started her presentation about the state of affairs of the Work department, which she manages. The management was not satisfied with the present results. Karin soon started talking about control instruments, which could save the department, or that is how Karin put it at least. After everybody did their presentations, Karin started to formally explain how control instruments work. She was standing bolt upright and made gestures like a teacher in front of a class of pupils that had to be convinced. The project group kept silent, but I noticed that some project members shook their head out of rejection. A month later, the screen was finally in use, after being introduced by Karin. The employees started to make agreements about what to do when the number on the screen increased. They decided that they all had to their work more quickly. They stuck to their agreements for a couple weeks. But slowly but surely the department became more restless, because the number on the screen was not declining but increasing steadily. Management started to become more critical of the results, and they decided to set higher standards. This sparked a