Shaping Organizational Transformation Processes with Creative Agility

Impulse Text
Communication, Language, Storytelling

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Communication promotes Creative Agility and vice versa - analog as well as digital. Especially in organizations, it is crucial to perceive the value of language and communication and to act „creagile". By means of modern practices such as storytelling, approaches and perspectives can be designed for complex, situational challenges. The unconventional yet systematic working methods of creagility are particularly effective in an environment of uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

How do I use this impulse text?
This impulse text with interesting facts about communication, language and storytelling is designed for self-study and as a personal research diary. The following five symbols mark an interruption in the text and invite you to pause, reflect, or take action:

Take time to think.

Write down initial associations.

Share respectfully.

Listen attentively.

Read carefully.

In addition, each page has a margin column and an area at the bottom. Both are color-coded. In the columns, write down key words, notes, questions, and ideas. At the bottom, you will find space for your summary and essentials in your own words.

Let's go! Have fun!

Situational Communication as a future skill

According to Prof. Dr. Ulf-Daniel Ehlers, educational researcher and professor of educational management and lifelong learning, mindful leader and art-of-communication expert, **communication skills** are among those future skills that are indispensable in times of need for organizational transformation, along with sensemaking, ambiguity, decision-making, reflection, design thinking, innovation, future and design, and digital skills. Organizational structures, values, leadership and communication structures must interact in order to build an organizational culture for future skills (Ehlers & Meertens 2020; Ehlers 2020a/b; Ehlers & Kellermann 2019).
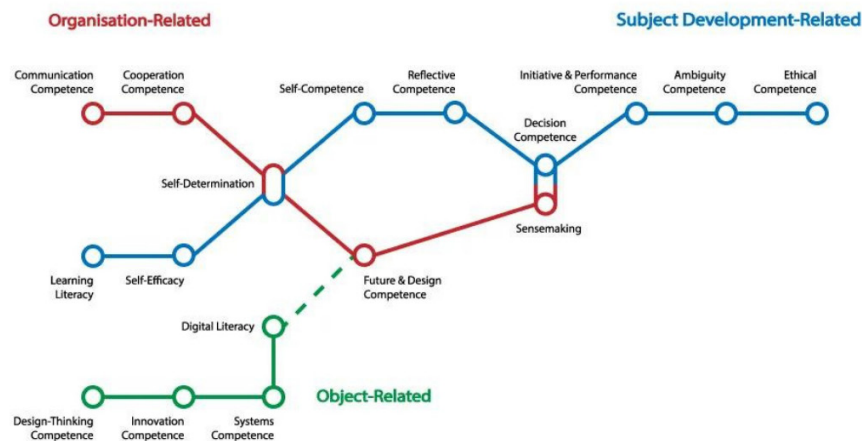

Figure 1: Future Skills Map (Next Skills 2022)

Futures skills are „future-relevant skills" (Ehlers 2020) hat enable us to master the challenges of an uncertain, ambiguous, complex, and volatile future in the best possible way. Communication competence is also an organizational competence, because practitioners in their respective functional roles interact in and with other organizations as well as social environments - and do so permanently. However, communication competence not only includes linguistic knowledge and skills, but also the ability to conduct conversations and dialogues, to help shape public discourses and establish consensus, to deal constructively with criticism, or to present one's organization to different stakeholder groups. All this with the aim to act appropriately in different publics, contexts and situations.

The development of **Creative Agility** is a future skill to face new situations in a creatively agile way and to communicate with each other in an impactful and respectful way – both digitally and analogously (Borghoff 2021). But not only that. „Creagility" can be seen as a multi-perspective living interplay of artistic and creative strategies, practices of communication and organizational development, enriched by the organizational experiences of professional practitioners in different roles, situations, contexts and public spheres.

Discover Creative Agility and communicate situationally

- What do you spontaneously associate with Creative Agility?
- How would you describe your way of communicating in everyday work?
- How does your way of communicating change when you are faced with a complete, ambiguous task?
- How do you communicate when you are in an unsafe or unsettling situation? Are there „creagile" elements that help you to communicate in a way that is adapted to the situation?

Why we communicate and why communication makes sense

No sentence has made philosopher and psychoanalyst Paul Watzlawick more famous than this: „You cannot not communicate, because all communication (not only with words) is behavior, and just as you cannot not behave, you cannot not communicate." (Watzlawick 2015). Communication is action and communicative action fulfills a function: through the use of signs of interaction in relationship with people, we construct social meaning. With and through communication we shape our lives, our togetherness, our work. Communication is ubiquitous, omnipresent like the air to breathe. Our society functions as a communication society in which many things are always possible everywhere. Organizations decide what is useful for the respective participants and thereby create value (Stücheli-Herlach 2017). Value creation takes place in work and communication procedures and processes, which nowadays have to be permanently rethought, adapted to the situation, and established. How do dialog, collaboration and participation succeed in situations of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity? We must constantly discover, try out and reflect on this anew in order to function with regard to communication. This brings uncertainty and causes anxiety, because social practices and forms of cooperation are constantly being renegotiated. Everything changes – permanently (Borghoff 2021).

Shaping change communicatively

- How do you personally react to the permanent change?
- How do you shape change in your professional roles, in your team, in your department, in your organization?

Case story: Decision-making and leadership communication

Problem situation: In a print shop, the managing director is absent for a long time due to illness. The son of the managing director is working in the company. When asked whether he would take over the management of the company, he does not answer. Currently, a long-standing production manager is in charge of the management. He has no official decision-making authority, so he cannot determine the company's financial and business policy and thus cannot influence the current situation. There is a lack of orientation and great dissatisfaction among the employees. The situation is increasingly becoming a psychological burden for the staff. A decline in sales becomes apparent.

• Before you continue reading, think about what you can do and what steps and approaches you can take to solve the problem.

Solution: An external consultant works out a joint commitment with the CEO, the son and two other key persons in the company. The goal of the open discussion is firstly to clarify the roles (Stücheli-Herlach 2015; Weick 1995) vof personnel with leadership tasks, including the transfer of decision-making authority, and secondly to communicate role changes and changes in decision-making authority promptly through the company's internal communication channels. The setting of the conversation should be designed in such a way that the needs of all participants can be perceived and openly communicated. It is not a matter of hoping to be understood, but of courageously making oneself understood. Because: „The ones who understand themselves communicate better." (Friedemann Schulz von Thun).

Case reflection: Non-action due to non-communication can jeopardize corporate value creation, operational success and ultimately the existence of a company. Change can happen when employees at different hierarchical levels talk to each other, communicate about the current problem and describe the current situation. An open discussion about the current situation helps to identify which roles may not be filled or are miscast, who can and wants to take on which role now, ad interim and in the future.

Decision-making communication
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Leadership Communication
• Sackmann, Sonja A. (2021). Führungskommunikation. In Einwiller, Sabine, Sackmann, Sonja & Zerfass, Ansgar, Handbuch Mitarbeiterkommunikation: Interne Kommunikation in Unternehmen. Pp. 237-256. Wiesbaden: Springer.
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Communication Psychology
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• Schulz von Thun (2014). Miteinander reden 1-4: Störungen und Klärungen / Stile, Werte und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung / Das „Innere Team" und situationsgerechte Kommunikation / Fragen und Antworten. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

Understanding my communicative actions

- How do my socialization and professional role:s shape my communicative actions and behavior?
- Do I communicate differently in a professional context than in a private one? Where are differences, where similarities?
- Am I more introverted or extroverted? How does this influence my way to communicate – orally or in writing?
- How do I deal with routines? To what extent do I get involved in new things and how do I do that?
- How do my inner attitude and, if applicable, adopted attitudes influence the way I communicate verbally or in writing?
- What skills, traits, situations, or environments help me to realize and live my full communication potential?

How our language shapes communication

Organizational procedures and processes are based on **„symbolic (ambiguous) worlds of meaning"** (Berger & Luckmann 2009), which are constantly changing and can only be experienced and understood when practitioners from different departments or areas talk to each other, exchange ideas, and talk about their experiences. These worlds of meaning are also **„worlds of knowledge"** (Dreesen & Stücheli-Herlach 2019: 124). A central practice of meaning production is **„sensemaking"** (Weick 1995), which emerges through the deployment and use of language (ibid: 39) and is one of the future skills of our time (see Figure 1). These are typical **patterns of language** use that fulfill certain functions and actualize certain meanings in a situational context, for example, keywords, themes, metaphors or other rhetorical devices, narratives or argumentations (Borghoff 2021). By naming, describing or rewriting worlds of meaning by means of words, sentences, sounds, texts or images, these become tangible, comprehensible and communicable to practitioners in their various professional roles. They manifest and show themselves in **organizational discourses**.

> "A discourse is a social (also: organizational) process of understanding how the world (also: organization) is to be interpreted and shaped. Discourse is shaped by material reality and has an effect on it through social (also: organizational) practices. (It) expresses itself in (...) texts (conversations, images or other communicative artifacts) that represent the knowledge and thinking of a particular time." (Bendel Larcher 2015: 16)

Explore and recognize linguistic patterns

- How do I express myself in and with words?
- What are my favorite words? (Adjectives, verbs, nouns, word combinations, specific foreign language expressions)
- Which words do I not like? Which words trigger me and why?
- How do I communicate without words, i.e. nonverbally? To what extent am I aware of this?

Case story: Conflict communication

Problem situation: The situation is a closed meeting of an SME from the metalworking industry with the involvement of an external consultant. The question to be worked on together is: How can we achieve a communication that promotes a culture of relationships, cooperation, problem solving and transformation? In the morning, the consultant first works with the employees from the assembly and production departments. In the process, points of conflict, especially with the top management, are brought up in a very emotional way. In the afternoon, managers from the executive floor, employees from purchasing and sales, and administration join in. Because of the emotionally charged morning, the consultant fears that things could escalate to an extent in mixed but unmoderated small groups. This would not be conducive to further collaboration. She therefore asks herself how she can organize the afternoon in such a way that all voices are heard and contribute to resolving the points of conflict.

Solution: The consultant adapts to the new situation in the short term by discarding the original strategy concerning the form of collaboration at the retreat after the lunch break. She chooses the new method of the circle discussion, in which all persons sit in a circle. Based on a guiding question, all participants are invited to share what is important to them. The circle directs the communication so that all statements can be considered equally without being discussed. This is a perfect opportunity to practice listening. Symbolic objects, such as a ball or a handheld microphone, can support the conversation format. A person who wants to say something takes an object from a basket in the center of the circle. Only that person is then allowed to speak. In the case study, all opinions were put on the table. This resulted in an understanding of each other's positions. At the end of the closed meeting, the next steps were jointly defined in order to work on the conflicting concerns „discussed" in this way in a solution-oriented manner.

Case reflection: Unspoken conflicts can have a massive negative impact on corporate value creation and productivity. It is therefore essential to bring up these „invisible" conflicts in a time-limited setting (e.g., a closed meeting), to name them concretely, without evaluating what is said. And this as early as possible. Subliminal conflicts are often based on disappointed expectations. If these are addressed in a protected setting, while adhering to clearly defined communication rules, the projections of mutual expectations hidden behind them have the opportunity to finally come to light. For those involved, this is sometimes an exhausting but also healing process. It should be noted that communication in strongly hierarchically structured companies functions differently than, for example, in smaller self-organized agile teams. In

terms of conflict management, aspects of diversity in particular play a central role (i.e. gender and role, sexual orientation, age, national and social origin, mentality, world view/religion, language, skin color, education and marital status). Likewise, in large international companies, intercultural and international communication (Peters 1997; Kumbier & Schulz von Thun 2017; Meckel & Kamps 2003) should also be considered in order to be able to resolve conflicts in the long term.

Active listening

- What do I like better? Talking or listening?
- What would it be like if I reversed my communication pattern? What happens if I listen appreciatively and actively ask questions in order to better understand my counterpart? How does this change my perception of the situation I am currently in?
- What helps me to listen actively?

- **Conflict Communication**
  Pfab, Werner (2020). Konfliktkommunikation am Arbeitsplatz: Grundlagen und Anregungen zur Konfliktbewältigung. Wiesbaden: Springer.

  Listen
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Ask appreciatively

- What is a well-asked question for you personally? Why?
- Which question:s do you feel are appreciative? Why?
- Look at Figure 2 and reflect: Why do you pose which question? How would you eventually reformulate the question?
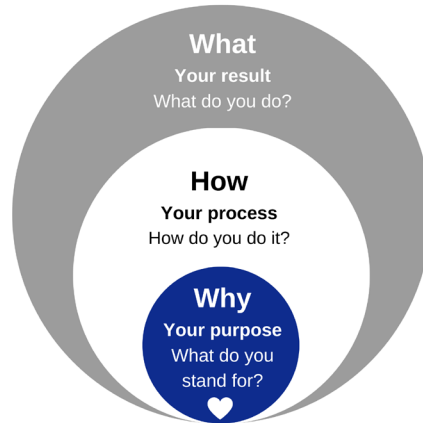

Figure 2: „Golden Circle" (Own illustration according to Simon Sinek 2019)

Take a look at Figure 3 and answer the following questions with a view to possible conflicts in your organization, if necessary in exchange with a colleague.
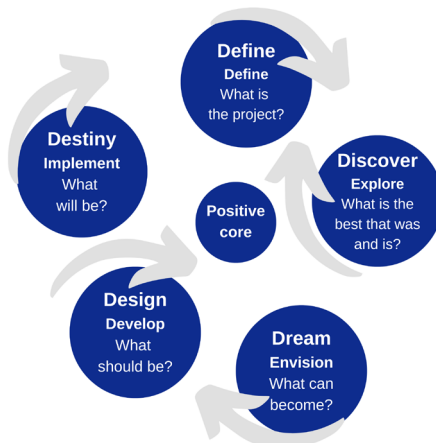

Figure 3: Appreciative Inquiry (Own representation based on „Appreciative Inquiry" according to David Cooperrider 1999)

Case Story: Innovation Communication and Design Thinking

<u>Problem situation</u>: The plans for the new meeting center in a community meet the expectations of everyone involved. When costs come into play, those involved are disheartened and ask themselves, "How are we going to finance this? Surely we can't afford it!"

- What could bring about a change in the thinking and feeling of the people involved?

Solution: Karl, a rather quiet participant, courageously takes the floor and points the way forward: „I think the new meeting center makes sense for our local community. The costs for the meeting center are not much higher than the houses we built for our own families. Thus, we will also manage to finance the meeting center together." Emotionally, the die is cast with this statement. The other participants are convinced by Karl's argumentation and the group decides to stick to the project.

Case Reflection:

In every process that is supposed to bring about something new, there are phases of uncertainty in which those involved ask themselves, „How is this going to work?" The goal is in sight, but the path to the goal is still in the dark. The goal in this case story is the result of a long iterative process using **design thinking**. From many ideas, perceptions and experiences, the common picture emerged in the form of a vision and a concrete plan for the development of a community meeting center. The participants developed the idea together. Everyone was allowed to participate. The decisive factor for the decision to implement the project was ultimately the courageous statement of Karl, who put the financing costs of the community project in relation to the financing of a single-family house.

Stimulate and design innovations

- If I can participate, I give a higher degree of importance to what is happening. How can we get citizens, employees and members of an organization more involved?
- When I look at my team, who dares to be critical and address sensitive issues? Who is capable to steer the group into a new direction?
- What framework conditions are needed for our team to develop something new? How can we promote openness to innovation and creative power?

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Designing visions together

- How can we create a shared vision? How do we go about it?
- How do we strengthen our „we" or our „we-culture"?
  ►See also impulse text Arts-based Strategies and Artistic Interventions
- How do we co-create?
- How do we get from the problem to the solution?
  What communication practices do we use?
  ►See also impulse text Ambiguity and Contradiction

Case story: Digital communication

Problem situation: Angela has invited the members of the newly formed project team in the service sector to a digital meeting. The next steps are to be planned together. The quick thinkers speak the most by taking the floor. Individual participants do not get a chance to speak. The meeting is unstructured. The mood in the group gets worse and worse.

Solution: Angela suggests agreeing on clear rules for the conversation: Whoever wants to say something raises the virtual hand. Everyone is allowed to speak in turn, the others listen. Angela appoints a person to ensure that all virtual hands are seen and that the appropriate people get a chance to speak. With this simple rule, communication becomes successful and the next steps can be determined together. For the next meeting, the project team also agrees to send small groups into breakout sessions in order to open up the possibility of actively exchanging ideas with other participants.

- How do you react when you can't get a word in, when colleagues interrupt you or simply speak in between? How do you deal with this? Do you continue to speak, or do you fall silent?
- Consider what other opportunities the digital space offers you to make yourself heard.

Case Reflection:

When working with people who do not yet know each other, the check-in, i.e. the conscious arrival and getting to know each other, is essential and reliable for a good working situation. It is worthwhile to clearly communicate the rules of the conversation and the course of the meeting. This is even more true in the virtual space. Since it is often not possible to get to know each other informally before a meeting and the body language signals remain invisible, the focus must be placed even more strongly on the conscious control and design of the social process. The more digitization has advanced in an organization, the more attention the topic of humanity needs. This is the most important insight that organizational consultant and author Sebastian Purps-Pardigol has gained while dealing with the digitization of companies (Kretsch-mer 2018). Increasing digitalization is changing collaboration. Digital transformation must therefore not be limited to the mere implementation of digital technologies. Corporate culture must change along with it, likewise also the way we communicate and interact with each other in the virtual space.

Stimulating digital exchange and practicing communicative participation

- How can you ensure that participants can get to know each other and exchange ideas at the next virtual meeting? How can you actively facilitate informal communication?
- How do you ensure that all people have their say? (Examples: virtually raise your hand, use the chat function, consciously assign the word).
- How do you make sure that the participants can openly communicate their own needs unabashedly? (Example: request for coffee or toilet break).
- How do you activate interactive collaboration and communication in the virtual space in your organization through the use of digital tools?
- How do you support colleagues so that they are empowered and not excluded in their digital participation?
- Think about and share with your colleagues what similarities and differences analog, digital, and hybrid communication have in common. What role do facial expressions, gestures or body language play?

Shaping organizational and digital transformation with Storytelling

Our world is a narrative one, says philosopher, writer and literary critic Roland Barthes. The narratives of the world are infinite and the variety of linguistic genres inexhaustible. Narratives take place through spoken or written language, gestures, images or videos. Narratives are ubiquitous, not only in myths and legends, fairy tales, dramas, comedies, or cinemas, but also in conversations and texts. All groups and social communities (including digital ones) have their own narratives (Barthes 1977: 97).

Narratives not only reflect and shape our lives, but also our working world, in which we play different roles when we interact linguistically with each other and thereby help shape organizational transformations.

Storytelling is a linguistic pattern of action that is closely related to the concept of story (Perrin & Wyss 2016: 244). Stories direct and guide our attention, our perception, our emotions, and our process of understanding and cognition. In contrast to pure data and facts, they are remembered more easily and can therefore be reproduced just as easily. This is due to the fact, that the storyteller draws on memorized images that are and can be recalled comprehensively. It is human to perceive situations and experiences through our own „glasses" and history. We often block out what we are against and reinterpret stories. ►See also impulse text Dealing with Ambiguity and Contradiction

We can only communicate with each other if we draw on common patterns of interpretation that cut across systems or are anchored in organizations. Perrin and Wyss (2016) refer to the so-called **"basic narratives"** from which stories develop: For example, „good guy wins against bad guy" (Biden victories over Trump in the 2018 U.S. election), the „inevitable catastrophe" (Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine in 2022), or „feasibility overcomes destiny" (development of vaccines against the Covid19 virus in 2021). Because of these and similar ingrained thought patterns, we can pick up on stories started by others and continue to tell them. In this way, we help shape organizational and societal discourses. Stories follow a **narrative dramaturgy (plot)** that mostly contains the following elements. ►See Figure 4: An initial situation, a conflictual event or suspense, the resolution of the conflict or suspense, and finally the moral of the story.
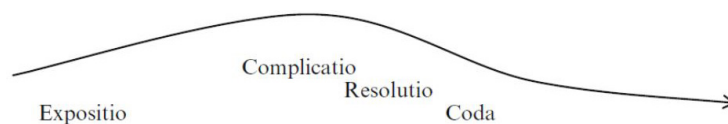

Figure 4: Narrative dramaturgy (plot) (Perrin & Wyss 2016: 244)

Organizations are characterized by a meaningful solution to complex problems (cf. also **"sensemaking"** as a future skill). The solution involves practitioners in their respective professional roles in the form of heroes and rescuers with superhuman powers, but also victims and losers. The narrative dramaturgy reflects the cause/effect relationship underlying the story in the form of a recognizable context of meaning that links situations and settings, time, actors in different roles, their actions, perspectives, motives, and unexpected events. (Perrin & Wyss 2016; Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013: 30f.). If such a narrative context of meaning reflects the identity of an organization, and can be understood by public audiences like customers, employees, the media, and society, we also speak of **storytelling as a narrative form of communication** (Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013: 35; Fröhlich, Szyszka & Bentele 2015: 1148). This also includes the image and reputation of an organization, for which public attention and interpretive power must be ensured. Narrative self-representations are, for example, **corporate stories**. These feature inherited elements and structures of narratives that support the organization's management of identity, attention, and interpretation (Krüger 2015: 100). As a narrative, communication, and problem-solving method, storytelling is not only applied in journalism, marketing, consulting, or therapeutic contexts, but also in educational, political, cultural, or scientific contexts. Likewise,

practice routines such as leadership, management, and entrepreneurship are communicative tasks, which is why **entrepreneurial storytelling** (Borghoff 2017) is also spoken of when it comes to founding a company or developing a business model. **"Storytelling Organizations"** (Boje 2008) show that and to what extent narratives are an important part of the strategy, the development as well as the learning processes of an organization.

The fact that stories have the power to make abstract things understandable and to convey them can also be used for **Digital Storytelling in organizational transformation** – by using digital technologies. People do not just consume stories by reading, listening or watching, but can actively participate in shaping them as prosumers on blogs, social media, news portals, streaming platforms and in virtual realities. Terms such as visual, interactive, transmedia or data storytelling show the variety of possibilities in virtual space. Digitally mediated stories are particularly powerful when they are told by the people who „wrote" them. Through the multimedia interweaving of text, images, moving images, music and sound effects, people can be addressed and reached on several sensory channels - visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory. This makes it possible to generate a high degree of empathy, involvement, identification, and connection - for example, in the context of company portraits, job postings, product presentations, events, campaign communication, or Instagram stories. **Digital Storytelling** is ideally suited for training important future skills such as creativity and design competence, flexibility or co-creation.

Using stories and storytelling analog and digital

Creating stories promotes the futures skills of communication and digital literacy. Think about and exchange ideas with colleagues.

- How do I tell an exciting story? (Method: Storyboard)
- How do I make my story understandable for others? (Method: Storytelling circle)
- How do I write a 250-word script for my story? (Method: Screenplay)
- Which media elements are important for my story and why? (Texts, images, videos, sound)
- How do I combine these elements in the storyboard? (Method: storytelling strategy and goal, planning the video).
- How do I create a video? What programs and tools do I use? Why? What makes sense? (Method: video editing)
- How and on which media platforms do I share a story with others)? (Methods: screening, platform selection, publishing)

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Example projects from adult education:

- Digital Storytelling Handbook in the framework of the Erasmus+ project CERTIFY
- TOOLBOX Digital Curricular Stories of the SPES Future Academy

The future starts now!

The future is „creagile"! The future is you!
The future is us!

Now!

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