

# PHRONESIS AND POLITICAL ACTION IN MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

KARINA SOLSØ  
SYDDANSK UNIVERSITET  
KAIV@SAM.SDU.DK

HENRY LARSEN  
SYDDANSK UNIVERSITET  
HLARSEN@SAM.SDU.DK

## ABSTRACT

This article takes issue with the question of quality improvement in management development. By narratively presenting a concrete experience, it is explored how management development can be located in the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*, which emphasizes the practical and ethical dimensions of management. By thinking about management as political action (Arendt, 1958), the question is raised: how can improving the quality of management be related to *phronesis* (practical judgment) in the sense of creating public spaces within which it becomes possible for managers to engage in reflective processes? Drawing on the work of Stacey (2012) it is suggested that management development can be thought of as a practice of reflexively taking experience seriously, both individually and collectively. The contribution of this article is a novel way of thinking about quality improvement in management development – an approach that responds to some of the limitations of more traditional approaches, and which at the same time takes up questions about power, politics, ethics and ideology.

## INTRODUCTION

Improving quality in an organizational context is often related to “quality management”, which has been a research field for many years (Shewhart, 1931). In the field of quality management, a dilemma has emerged, which was originally formulated as “the productivity dilemma” (Abernathy, 1978). The dilemma concerns a proposed incompatibility of short-term efficiency and long-term adaptability. This dilemma is reformulated in the context of quality management as the “quality dilemma” (Fundin et al, 2017), where it is presented as the dilemma of whether to focus on efficiency (doing things right) or effectiveness (doing right things).

Although the distinction between efficiency and effectiveness is developed in the context of quality management and represents two different approaches to improving the quality of services and products in organizations, a similar distinction can be made in the context of management development. In general quality improvement in management has focused on “doing

things right” – an approach which fits with the dominant assumptions underlying management in general. The most prevailing theories about management rest on a rational thought style, which permeates the academic work at most business schools as well as the consultancy industry (Clegg, 2006; Mowles, 2015). This management paradigm rose out of the industrial age and the rise of bureaucracy with its strong appeal to administrative rationality. The roots of this particular way of making sense of management practice are based in the natural sciences with their inherent ideology of predictability and control (Stacey, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2001). In this paradigm, the work of managers is characterized by neutrality and rationality, and it is a core assumption that managers should pursue efficiency, high productivity, and low costs through the application of analytical and scientific management tools and methods (Cunliffe, 2002; Adler, et al., 2007). In this paradigm, improving the quality of management becomes an issue about efficiency. Management development is mostly regarded as a matter of becoming familiar with the right theories, tools and techniques and developing skills in applying them in the right way, in the right circumstances (Stacey, 2012; Mowles, 2015).

However, this paradigm has not gone unquestioned. A large body of literature encourages caution in relation to the acceptance of a purely rational way of reasoning about organizational matters, and management in particular (Brunsson, 1985; March and Simon, 1958; Joas, 2000; Stacey, 2011; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

One of the critics of a highly rational way of thinking about management and organizational phenomena is Ralph Stacey, who together with colleagues (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002, Mowles, 2011; 2015) has developed the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. The main argument against this dominant paradigm is, that thinking about organizational matters in purely rationalist terms fails to give an account of the complexity of organizational life, as managers in their everyday lives experience it. Drawing on insights from the complexity sciences as well as sociological, philosophical and psychological ideas, Stacey & Mowles (2016) argue that by continuing to assume that managers are in control and able to steer an organization in the desired direction by applying the right tools and techniques, fundamental questions about the nature of

organizational processes continue to be neglected. They argue that the practical experience of managers demonstrate that organizational processes are far from rational, controllable and predictable. Contrarily, it is argued that it is more plausible to describe organizational reality in paradoxical terms, where organizational processes are seen as certain and uncertain, predictable and unpredictable at the same time.

Stacey and Mowles (2016) conclude that reducing management to a matter of applying the right tools and techniques in the right circumstances, trying to establish predictability and certainty in an unpredictable and uncertain world is not necessarily helpful, since the promise to predictable outcomes often remains absent. Like other management scholars (Holt, 2006; Shoter & Tsoukas, 2014), Stacey (2012) draws on Aristotle's intellectual virtues to reflect on the question about how management may more helpfully be conceived.

### EPISTEME, TECHNE AND PHRONESIS

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2009/349 B.C.) distinguished between different intellectual virtues, which are different ways of knowing about the world. Aristotle describes *episteme* as universal, scientific knowledge, which is achieved through analytical rationality. *Techné* is described as craft and art and has to do with technical knowledge about the world. Where *episteme* concerns *know why*, *techné* has to do with *know how* (Flyvbjerg, 2001). It is easy to think about management in terms of episteme and techné. Episteme concerns theories of management, and techné has to do with the tools and techniques of management. However, in this context, what becomes interesting is the third intellectual virtue, namely that of *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is mostly understood as practical judgment or prudence. Aristotle describes the prudent person as one, who is "...capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man" (Aristotle, 2009 p.1140a24-1140b12, quoted in, Flyvbjerg, 2001: 2). *Phronesis* therefore has to do with what is ethical and practical; it has to do with deliberation about values in relation to practice, and *phronesis* as a skill emerges from – and requires experience (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Whereas it is obvious how *episteme* and *techné* fits with the knowledge and the tools in management development, it is not as clear what *phronesis* may refer to. Drawing on Aristotle and on Flyvbjerg's (2002) interpretation of the intellectual virtues, Stacey (2012) argues that in order to understand the practice of management in all its complexity it is worthwhile not reducing it to either technocratic or epistemic disciplines, but instead to emphasize the virtue of *phronesis*, which he describes as practical judgment.

Emphasizing *phronesis* opens for a way of thinking about management, which involves power and conflict,

and which does not see these as destructive by nature (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Rather, by drawing on the work of the American pragmatist, George Herbert Mead (1934), Stacey (2012) sees organizational reality in paradoxical terms, where conflict and cooperation are present at the same time. The task for managers is not to get rid of conflicts through implementing the right tools, but through paying attention to the ways in which the paradoxical quality of cooperation and conflict contribute to the ongoing emergence of change (and stability). Conceived in this context, improving the quality of management becomes a question, not only of having the right knowledge and the right tools, but also being able to draw on experience to develop the capacity for making practical judgment in complex situations; judgment, which also has an ethical horizon. This notion leads Stacey (2012) to a practice of "taking experience seriously", which is an invitation to engage in reflexive inquiries about one's lived experience.

Following these ideas, management practice may benefit from being seen not only as episteme and techné but also as *phronesis*, with an increased focus on understanding the ability of managers to exercise practical judgment in the complex and messy nature of the everyday. Improving the quality of management comes to focus on the ability to continuously understand and find ways to engage with more of the complex dynamics of processes in organization. This, however, raises a question about what quality improvement in management development may look like?

In the following, a narrative, based on the lived experience of one of the authors (Karina), is presented. The narrative becomes the starting point for reflections on the potentials and the difficulties in trying to facilitate reflexive quality improvement in management.

### NARRATIVE

I sat on my chair watching the CEO of the university college standing in front of the 37 managers on the level just below the senior management team. He had a smile on his face, and the spark in his eyes indicated that the smile was genuine. He had some good news to share. With great pride, the CEO told the managers that they had passed through the quality accreditation process with outstanding grades. The managers clapped and shouted as a response to the good news. The CEO immediately turned to thank all the managers for the dedicated work. He went on to thank and praise the manager of the quality department, who had worked hard in the entire process and had succeeded in creating strong bonds of collaboration within the entire organization in the process of preparing for the accreditation. There was a shared sense of satisfaction and relief due to the success. The sense of satisfaction was however mixed with another thought – did we actually put too much effort into this? What is exactly the purpose of spending so much energy on the quality accreditation if less would have been enough?

Underlying these questions is the experience that the relationship between the accreditation and the actual quality of the institution is not necessarily a strong one. What they celebrated was not necessarily the high level of quality of the university but their ability as an institution to create results in a political game. From pure relief and satisfaction, the atmosphere in the room changed – the experience of maybe even having put too much effort in to the accreditation reminded them of the amount of time they spend on bureaucratic procedures - something which causes conflicts for many of the managers in relation to the employees, who experience a sense of alienation due to all the bureaucratic work that they feel limit the time they have to do what for them is the “real work”. Paradoxically the need to engage in the quality accreditation constrains them in improving the quality of the institution by requiring them to spend so much time on a bureaucratic procedure. Some complaints emerged about the amount of effort they had to put in to servicing “the system” and the increasing demand for control that is enforced on them. Some of the managers obviously felt and expressed that the general linear and procedural approach to improve the quality of the institution is not necessarily fruitful. They experienced that what in their daily practice helps to improve the quality of the institution seems to be completely separated from the formal quality system.

Interestingly the very context of the conversation was exactly an opportunity for improving the quality of management at the university. The celebration of the results of the accreditation took place in the middle of a management development program. This program was based on a paradigm about development very different from a linear and technocratic one. I was in the role as external researching consultant, designing and facilitating the program together with internal consultants at the university. The design of the program was based on a reflective and inquiring approach.

This was the third module of a programme which consisted of 5 modules altogether. The program ran for 10 months and the first two modules had had the themes of leadership in complexity and strategic management, and particularly the second module had been intense and somewhat turbulent. At the previous module (module 2), we found ourselves in intense explorations of problematic patterns of interaction between different people and groupings in the organization. Various issues were raised, and a shared interest in the collaboration between the senior management team (level 1) and the 37 managers at level 2 emerged. Heavy critique was expressed in relation to the theme of collaboration, and it caused a variety of difficult emotions, which had to be dealt with. Experiences and statements that are often not expressed in the open were articulated and became the issue of engaging discussion. Finding ourselves in this intense and challenging conversation caused another question to emerge – a question about the nature of that particular conversation: How is this helpful? How does

the unique quality of this conversation help us to move on?

The group worked hard to try and find out, what might be the next steps for all of us to take in order to make this conversation the starting point for the emergence of new and more helpful patterns of interaction. Over the course of the two days the group managed to move ahead and we left each other with a sense of a way forward, but also with a sense of disturbance and destabilization. An important topic of discussion had been opened up through an insistence on creating a public space for exploration of experience, but only in the coming days and weeks would it be possible to conclude whether the intense inquiry would lead to productive change.

Staying in such an open-ended exploration of the managers’ concrete lived experience and the questions that experience raises, is far from easy. There is a constant and strong pressure towards solutions and new actions that can be decided upon. Staying in the inquiry at little longer leaves many managers who socialized into the habitus of institutional life with a sense of ineffectiveness and impatience. Being able to stay in a process of inquiry, which inherently involves the expression of diversity and often conflicting perspectives seem to be difficult for many to endure. It seems to threaten or challenge a shared ideal of pace, progress and effectiveness.

#### METHOD AND REFLECTION ON THE NARRATIVE

The narrative is based on a piece of consultancy, conducted by Karina. The experience of taking part in the modules has been the subject of critical reflection both amongst the authors of this article but also together with particular managers and HR consultants at the university college. As such, the following reflection on the experience is not “just” reflections of the researching consultant, but is a result of a process of critical engagement with the experience with various people in a “community of inquiry” (Dewey, 1938). Drawing on a pragmatist approach to scientific inquiries, emphasizing abductive processes, Stacey & Griffin (2005) argue that the justification of research is not done by an appeal to objectivity, but rather by engaging with a broader community about meaning and relevance.

Having found ourselves in conversations about this experience, questions have emerged around what this may tell us about quality improvements in management.

After having celebrated the success of the quality accreditation process, the managers quite quickly went on to express a sense of alienation and frustration with regard to the amount of time and energy they have to spend on quality procedures, which is in practice mostly related to the ideal of efficiency – doing things right. They were sceptical about whether the effort would

actually help them to improve the quality of the work at the university. This sense of alienation and frustration left them with a longing for a more innovative way of approaching quality improvement. A way of interpreting their response would be to see it as a longing for a focus on “effectiveness”, rather than on “efficiency”. At the same time, however, they also expressed scepticism and impatience when they got engaged in what Karina as a consultant experienced as a more innovative and reflective way of approaching quality improvement in leadership – a framework, which challenges the linear, procedural and rational approach. This experience raises a question, worth paying attention to: How can quality improvements be conceived in the context of management development, if it is seen primarily as a phronetic phenomenon?

### DESIGNING AND FACILITATING REFLECTIVE QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS IN MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

In the initial conversations with the HR consultants, together with whom the management development programme was designed, it became clear that the senior management team did *not* want a standard programme. They wanted the programme to deal explicitly with the unique organizational context within which all the managers were employed. As such, the initial ideas about the programme were formed already by an awareness of the limitations to context-independent tools (techné) and knowledge (episteme). The programme should meet two ambitions at the same time, namely management development *and* organizational development. The senior management team had an ideal of the programme contributing to the ongoing development of the practice and identity of the institution. Karina was asked as an external consultant to help design and facilitate the programme based on the theory of complex responsive processes. Karina was at that time in the process of finishing her professional doctorate at University of Hertfordshire, where the theory of complex responsive processes is continuously developed, and she had co-authored a Danish introductory book on the topic (Solsø & Thorup, 2015).

Based on the requests of the senior management team and with inspiration from the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, the aim of the program was to increase the ability of the managers to exercise wise judgment in the midst of being in complex situations.

Through a long preparing and planning process, the consultants and Karina explored how the invitation to “take experience seriously” (Stacey, 2012) could be taken up as an approach to management development. This led to a design, which emphasized reflexivity as a core activity.

Among other techniques this was materialized through “reflexive narratives”. The managers were asked to write narratives about particular events, where something happened which puzzled or disturbed them; something which they wanted to explore together with management colleagues. The narratives were written from a first-person perspective and involved descriptions of their “inner conversation”, thoughts, emotions, actions and questions in relation to particular events.

Throughout the programme, the managers worked together in smaller groups – four managers in a group, designed by the HR consultants - reflecting on dilemmas and challenges that they had documented in written form. The managers responded very positively and engaged in the work in the smaller groups, which enabled them to engage in lively exploration and discussion about the concrete work they were doing.

On each module, we asked one or two of the managers to read out loud their narrative in a plenary session<sup>1</sup>, and these reflective plenary sessions most often turned in to intense inquiries. Since the narratives touched on delicate issues and questions, power relations became negotiated implicitly as diverse perspectives and opinions were in play. What was explored and negotiated, therefore, was not just the question of how the work of management is taken up and practiced in a particular situation, described in the narrative. Rather, the exploration turned into negotiation of meaning, power, identity, status, and ideology (Elias, 2001). As soon as the managers started to respond to the questions that came up in the discussion, they often had a lot at stake, since expressing critique or ambivalence towards colleague’s ways of practicing or thinking as managers would potentially disturb the stability of relationships.

Throughout the programme we experienced that the plenary sessions were difficult. Or to be precise – it was not all plenary sessions that were difficult. When the quality of the plenary became one of negotiating the identity and the future reality of the institution, the conversation often became a struggle. The particular reflective form of conversation raised the questions about whether this conversation is actually helpful or not? How does the unique quality of this conversation help us to improve the quality of our work as managers?

The difference in the response of the managers to the *group* work and the *plenary* work is interesting. How can it be, that it is experienced as more helpful and less a struggle to engage in reflective conversation in smaller groups rather than in a plenary discussion? And how can it be, that Karina together with her fellow consultants continued to sense that the plenary

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<sup>1</sup> Before the module we would have engaged in a conversation with them, and they would have agreed to participate in this unique way

reflections were important? Why did they hold on to this form, when they experienced scepticism and critique from the managers?

In order to reflect on these questions, we will turn to the work of Hannah Arendt, who through her concepts of “the banality of evil”, “political action” and “the public realm” might illuminate these questions.

## THE BANALITY OF EVIL

One of the concepts for which Hannah Arendt is known for is “the banality of evil”, which she developed in her reflections on witnessing “the Eichmann trial” in Jerusalem in 1963. Adolf Eichmann was the highest-ranking officer with formal responsibility for the death of the many Jews in concentration camps. Listening to Eichmann accounting for his actions during the Holocaust, Arendt was struck by how Eichmann displayed neither guilt nor hatred towards the Jews. He claimed to have no responsibility for his actions, since he was simply doing his job. He explained to the court that he had done his duty, not only by obeying orders but also the law (Arendt, 1963). Through the concept of the banality of evil, Arendt argued that the most dangerous evil in society is not the brutality of psychopaths or evil persons during oppressive governments, instead, the dynamics of totalitarian regimes appear when people simply “do their duty” without thinking about the consequences of their actions (Arendt, 1958). Arendt builds on her reflection on the banality of evil to suggest, that evil in totalitarian regimes occurs due to the inability of human individuals to think, whereby thinking is related to the exercise of judgment. By this Arendt meant, that through modernity and the rise of bureaucratic and rational thinking, we as humans developed a tendency to act in accordance with the procedures of the system, simply doing what we are supposed to do without too much reflection on the broader consequences.

## FUNCTIONAL STUPIDITY

The critical management scholars Alvesson & Spicer (2012) articulate a similar critique to a purely rational thought style. They draw on theories which emphasize the limits to rationality (March, 2006; Brunsson, 1985) to articulate scepticism towards the tendency to ignore or avoid the importance of critical thinking or reflection in management. They introduce the term *functional stupidity*, to describe some of the consequences of the absence of a reflexive practice in organizations.

Functional stupidity is organizationally-supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and ‘safe’ terrain. It can provide a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function smoothly. This can save the organization and

its members from the frictions provoked by doubt and reflection. Functional stupidity contributes to maintaining and strengthening organizational order. It can also motivate people, help them to cultivate their careers, and subordinate them to socially acceptable forms of management and leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012: 1196).

Functional stupidity thus contributes to the order and stability of relationships in the organization by marginalizing the space for critical engagement with diverse perspectives.

The distinct relevance of Arendt’s work in a contemporary organizational context has not to do with Nazism and totalitarian regimes per se. The relevance has to do with the dominance of bureaucratic thinking and instrumental rationality, which is also the context of the research by Alvesson & Spicer.

## LABOUR, WORK AND (POLITICAL) ACTION

In exploring how bureaucratic thinking became so dominant through modernity, Arendt introduced a distinction between *labour*, *work* and *action* as three forms of activity that are fundamental to the human condition. *Labour* represents the biological life of man as an animal. *Work* corresponds to the artificial world of objects while *action* corresponds to the plurality of individuals (Arendt, 1958). Arendt argued that through modernity we came to instrumentalize action to make it a matter of work – of fabrication of tangible products.

The modern age, in its early concern with tangible products and demonstrable profits or its later obsession with smooth functioning and sociability, was not the first to denounce the idle uselessness of action and speech in particular and of politics in general (Arendt, 1958: 220).

Arendt’s analysis let her to argue, that the modern age resulted in an exclusion of political action by turning it into a matter of work. Political action became instrumentalized to rational procedures, and political action has been degraded into a means for other ends, instead of being an end in itself. This is evident in the narrative, in the question raised by the managers as a response to the struggle of engaging in the plenary reflective process. They asked the question about how the particular form of conversation was helpful in order for them to improve their practice. In those plenary discussions, the managers had the opportunity to act politically in the sense of taking part in the ongoing negotiation of the future of the organization. However, as their question demonstrates: In today’s modern organization, this is not seen as an end in itself, it has to be a means to an end of improving the quality of management. The only legitimacy of creating spaces for that kind of conversation thus becomes its ability to function as a means for an ideal of improvement.

## POLITICAL ACTION AND THE PUBLIC REALM

Arendt was worried about the marginalizing or exclusion of political action, since she saw the capacity for thinking and for political action as the possible bulwark against the evil forces that she herself experienced in the Second World War. Faced with the potential damage of the banality of evil, which can arise when masses of people stop thinking critically about what they are doing, Arendt argues that thinking about ourselves as political animals with the capacity for political actions is necessary. Reducing political action to work or fabrication destroys the space within which we humans think about ourselves as bearing responsibility. Arendt's work is an encouragement to engage in the power negotiations, where power means to act in concert (Arendt, 2014), and act politically in the sense of taking up a voice, and respond to the situation, we find ourselves in.

'Action as distinguished from fabrication is never possible in isolation' (Arendt, 1958: 188), and therefore, Arendt emphasizes the concept of "the public realm" or "the public space" to point to the space within which people can engage politically in explorations and discussions about their shared world.

Arendt's description of political action and the public space is helpful in trying to make sense of the questions formulated above: Why did the managers respond like they did to the plenary reflection? Why did Karina and the consultants continue to insist on creating that space?

Locating management primarily in the virtue of *phronesis* implicitly becomes (as mentioned above) linked to conceiving management in the context of ethics and practice. The plenary reflections positioned the managers as political animals in the sense of expecting them to take up a voice in the public realm. Taking up a voice unavoidably leads to the expression of plural perspectives, which is exactly Arendt's point. There are no promises, however, that acting politically in the public space is easy or unproblematic. Our very sense of self is being negotiated in those conversations. The work of Elias (1994) helps to describe the processes of inclusion and exclusion that unavoidably are played out, when engaged in such intense negotiations: those plenary reflections became so intense because expressing diverse perspectives involved including and excluding each other in emerging dynamics of power figurations (ibid).

In coming back to the focus of this paper, a new question emerges: How is the creation of a public realm for critical reflection helpful in terms of improving the quality of management?

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT BY CREATING PUBLIC SPACES FOR EXPLORATION AND NEGOTIATION?

In her use of the word "space", Arendt refers to the concept of "polis", which is more than a physical space.

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be (Arendt, 1958: 158).

In this quote Arendt emphasizes that polis and the public space is not just about a physical space. Creating an environment where it is possible in a reflexive way to take experience seriously is not just a matter of getting people together in a room. Working with management development as an activity of a reflexive practice in a public space requires reflections on the dynamics involved when people act politically together.

Designing a management development programme which is based on an ambition of "taking experience seriously" in the public space is almost bound to foster critical questions and responses, since it diverges strongly from the expectations, most managers would normally have in regard to a management development programme, resting on a more rational approach

Most managers – although they might reveal doubt in private conversations - are used to articulate themselves as incredibly effective, in the sense of making decisions, taking action. Some of the managers expressed this out loud by saying that they would like to "speed up" the process and move quicker from reflection to action. We interpret this as an idealisation of the manager who is capable of acting quickly and forcefully and making decisions. Slowing down, taking time to reflect on organizational reality as it is experienced in the everyday is almost a provocation for the sense of self that these managers want to present and enact.

As a consultant, Karina has previously worked on a tools based approach with management development. A growing dissatisfaction, however led her to question this approach. The doubt that emerged was related to scepticism about whether learning all the tools and techniques actually fulfil their promises.

The urge to try to develop a different approach can very well be described with reference to the experience of "stupidity" that is described by Alvesson & Spicer. By focusing on theory (*episteme*) and tools (*techné*) there is a risk of neglecting the practical experience of managers and there is a risk of establishing an idealised and simplified version of reality, rather than struggling with making sense of the messiness of actual management experience (Mowles, 2011). The idealized form of thought and speech does not resonate with the complexity of management reality, but can easily lead to the absence of critical reflection that Alvesson &

Spicer also mentions. Furthermore, it locates the work of managers within the individual manager, which fail, then, to recognize and wrestle with the more social nature of the work of management

This dissatisfaction led Karina to think about how management development can be approached in a way that do justice to the issues and questions that people actually find themselves thinking and talking about?

Drawing on the method of “taking experience seriously” in the form of reflective narratives was one way of trying to establish a form of conversation that could fulfil this image. Although it showed out to be difficult, it served as an invitation to something important

Locating management development in the context of phronesis, and by doing so not reducing management to instrumental rationality, but also including value rationality, showed out to completely change the quality of conversation. In addition, as mentioned by Flyvbjerg (2001), by doing so, management were also seen in an ethical context. Along the invitation to a phronetic perspective Arendt (1958) invites to a practice of acting politically in the public space by engaging in reflexive ways in relation to lived experience, a practice that is further elaborated on by Stacey and Mowles (2016). These forms of conversations are anything but rational, certain and predictable. Rather they often turn into intense explorations and negotiations of identity, power and meaning, which cause strong emotions for people, and the need for spontaneous action is felt risky (Larsen, 2006).

Through a practice of taking experience seriously as a collective group of managers, what is achieved is an increased ability to understand and recognize the complex dynamics and mechanisms involved in the work of management (Stacey, 2012). From this ability to recognize patterns of interaction in organizational contexts, the managers may become more effective in the sense of “doing the right things”. What emerges from reflective processes is a gain in the phronetic skill. As well, it is an ability to notice, when a public realm is needed in order to be able to act politically together in forming the future of the organization.

## SHADOW CONVERSATIONS

Having emphasized the importance of locating management development within Arendt’s concept of (political) action, this can easily lead to an idealisation of the public space and a reflexive practice, which may have its own problems. There are some nuances here worth paying attention to.

A concept that we have found useful in reflecting on the social mechanisms that get played out in the public space is “shadow conversations”. In the plenary

explorations at the University College, it was obvious that there were themes that were difficult to explore in the open; themes that were easier to inquire into in informal settings, rather than in a public space. Some of these themes can be thought about as shadow-themes, which are themes that are experienced as illegitimate and which go against the official ideology (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Larsen & Larsen, 2013). Whenever there is interaction between people, shadow themes emerge. They are a central part of interaction, and they enable and constrain what can be said out loud in a group. Establishing a public space within which managers are invited to take their experience seriously and reflect on their management practice can easily lead to negotiations – not only about the quality of management, identity and power relations, but also about the dominant ideology of the company, which will provoke shadow themes. At the same time as themes are brought up in the public, new themes will emerge as shadow themes. Therefore, establishing a public space for exploration and discussion about the quality of management will often provoke shadow themes, which are then potentially being raised in the open, or alternatively negotiated behind doors, both of which then again can cause some disturbance. Whether or not this disturbance is helpful, is often difficult to know, and as such, the question of how to respond to shadow themes being raised or being hidden is one of practical judgment. It is worth, however, to recognize and take the transformative nature of shadow themes seriously (Larsen and Bogers, 2014), and to reflect on how disclosures of themes from the shadow are influencing the patterns of conversation, including some of the managers or consultants are not part of.

## THE PUBLIC SPACE AND RESPONSIBILITY

It is important to be aware of the potential side effects of a reflexive practice. Critical reflexivity can destabilize relationships and reinforce differences, that may end up threatening the order and stability of the work being done in organizations (Mowles, 2015). Therefore, taking experience seriously in a collective reflexive process can easily have damaging consequences. This is why Alvesson & Spicer (2012) emphasize “functional” in functional stupidity. Not being reflexive together is functional, and by starting to engage reflexively with each other, it is easy to disturb the organizational routines and functionality. This reflection leads to questions about when it is helpful or not to try and establish a public space. This question is far from simple and involves many considerations. One of them is related to the relationship between exploration and negotiation, and the expectations people may have about what kind of forum they will participate in. Whereas the ambition is typically articulated as one of exploration and inquiry into the lived experience of managers, what often happens in practice is, that the inquiring and explorative quality of the conversation

turns into one of negotiation. A common response in these situations is that it is the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure, that exploration is separated from negotiation, since it may become unclear, otherwise, what is actually going on.

However, whereas there are obviously complex aspects of responsibility that the facilitator has to pay attention to, it is at the same time often the ambivalence and ambiguity of the conversation that enables new shifts in conversational patterns, which can become the starting point for broader change. Therefore rather than creating very clear rules for the conversation in terms of inquiry/exploration versus negotiation, it can be just as productive, to stay *with* the tension of exploration and negotiation and continuously be aware of the shifts in the quality of conversation. This can lead to moments of calling people's attention to what is happening *in* the conversation, which can be a powerful way of creating understanding of the nature of change (and stability), and the shifts in meaning that is beginning to present themselves. Therefore, the turn from an inquiring to a negotiating quality of the conversation can be highly productive and fits well with Arendt's ideal of political action in the public space.

In making judgment about how to go on, none of the involved can have a full overview and know with certainty what will be the right thing to do. There are often various competing goods at stake at the same time, which altogether influence the sense making carried out by the people involved. Instead of reducing the complexity and limit the scope of ideals, we suggest, drawing on the work of Dewey, that the capacity to suspend judgment and continue inquiry (Dewey, 1891) is often helpful in terms of arriving at a more nuanced understanding.

We notice that in these interactions, the responsibility is usually placed on the facilitator or the manager. In these situations, the phronetic judgement is important, such as being careful when inviting people to take their experience serious in a collective way. However, one person can never carry the responsibility for what happens in a group alone, since the meaning of the interaction emerges as a consequence of the responses of everybody present, and ripples out of what anyone can know in advance.

What each of us does matters even though we cannot know what the outcome of our actions will be (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; 401).

In this complex matter, it is important not to locate responsibility within individual persons, while at the same time also remember that nobody can predict the outcome of interaction between people. Responsibility thus becomes a matter of continuing to get engaged in responding to the consequences of our interactions, as questions of responsibility come up.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to take issue the question about the quality improvement in management.

The general discourse in management is located within a rational thought style, which assimilates the tradition of efficiency in context of quality improvement. This invites to an apolitical discourse, in which power and negotiation is left out.

Drawing on Arendt's concept of the public space and thinking about managers as political animals can lead to a novel way of thinking about quality improvements in management. Acting politically, thus, becomes linked to taking up a voice in the public space, exercising judgment and participating actively in the ongoing reconstruction of the future and identity of the selves as well as the organization.

In this article, the practice of management has been located in the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*. According to Aristotle *phronesis* is the only virtue, which balances instrumental rationality with value rationality, and thereby includes a perspective on ethics (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In line with other researchers (Backström, T., Fundin, A., Johansson P.E. (2017), the article has demonstrated a perspective on quality improvement in management which avoids dualistic thinking. Effectiveness and efficiency are seen as paradoxical qualities of experience, and by inquiring into the lived experience of managers it can become possible to understand the potentials for quality improvement.

Thinking about management as a phronetic activity and management development as a question of developing the practical judgment in the public space as well as in the shadow conversations is different from more traditional ways of approaching this topic, which typically focus on knowledge (*episteme*) and tools (*techné*). Since *phronesis* can only be developed through experience, a way of approaching management development can therefore be one of "taking experience seriously" in a reflexive way. Through a narrative which sketches a particular experience with approaching management development in a reflexive way, it has been exemplified how people can respond to such an approach.

A way forward in approaching management can be one of thinking about the practice of "taking experience seriously" as a resource. This means taking the ordinary and lived experience of managers as the starting point for quality improvement in management. Furthermore, in order to more fully take seriously the ethical dimension in the concept of *phronesis*, it has been proposed to rethink management and emphasize



“political action” as central to understand how the exercise of practical judgment also involves ethical considerations.

By drawing attention to the critique to reflexivity and to the concept of shadow themes, we have described some of the limitations to our argument about the potentials of thinking about quality improvement in management development as a matter of public realm. These limitations have to do with responsibility, and the phronetic judgement when inviting people to take their experience seriously in a collective way.

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