

# Lost in the present moment—an action research study on employee experience of involvement in change processes in the public sector in Denmark

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the importance of organisational culture in organisational change processes and development, and is supported by an action research study of a change process in the public sector in Denmark. The main objective of the study is to gain insight into *employees' subjective experience of involvement* in change processes. By examining employee experience, this study takes us a step away from the main theme of research in change processes that focuses on organisational change management. The conclusion of the study points out four main themes, which are as follows: 1) the employee experience of involvement in change processes was a feeling of not being involved even though a formal involvement was prepared; 2) the groups presented different reactions to the experience of not being involved, from developing containment in one group to regressive avoidance behaviour and social defence in others; 3) organisational social defence was a main factor in developing a “them” and “us” culture between employees and the management; and 4) there was a lack of organisational containment stemming from overwhelming emotions and the lack of a shared meaning and understanding between employees and the management.

**Keywords:** employee involvement, change processes, defended subjects, organisational silence, organisational culture, culture congruence.

## Introduction

Research on employee and organisational silence has highlighted the need for team leaders and managers to be aware of silence and to analyse the factors influencing group behaviour (Broeng, 2019). Morrison (2014) argues that “voice is associated with a wide range of positive organisational outcomes, such as learning, improved work processes, innovation, error correction, the curtailment of illegal or immoral behaviour and crises prevention” (p. 178). An organisational climate encouraging discussion evolves only if supported by psychological safety and openness in the system as a whole (Broeng, 2019). The unconscious life in organisations has a major impact on the interrelatedness between employees and management especially during change processes and can exact a high psychological price.

The case presented in this article was motivated by the findings that despite positive attitudes to employee involvement and a formal system to support organisational involvement, the employees felt they were not being meaningfully involved in the organisational change process. Inspired by research on

employee and organisational silence, the case focused on the employees' experience and the process of working with them to express their criticism, their well-being, and their shared understanding of the processes in the changing organisation. Reflecting this aspect, I questioned whether employees chose to remain silent about important issues at their workplace as a sign of dysfunctional organisational processes and basic assumption behaviour (Bion, 1993). If so, I argue that we must consider dysfunctional organisational processes as a system issue reflecting the organisational culture. Furthermore, we must consider silence to be a sign of dysfunctional processes that affects, and is affected by, the organisational culture characterised by injustice, inappropriate group behaviour, management challenges, and the proliferation of basic assumptions (Bion, 1993; Hopper, 2003; Miller, 2010).

The pre-understanding behind my research is formed by three key understandings:

1. Employees see things that managers do not. They have an inside perspective on the organisation whilst dealing with customers and interacting with other employees (Broeng, 2019). The relatedness in the organisation seems to create a climate of silence in which the employees as a belonging group are relating to each other (Stapley, 2004).
2. Communication is the key to the success of an organisation, and if employee silence occurs, communication will suffer and ultimately harm the overall functioning of the organisation and the change process. Research shows that silence can exact a high psychological price (Morrison, 2014) and can smother innovative and perpetuating poorly planned change projects (Bagheri et al., 2012).
3. Seeing an organisation from a system psychodynamic perspective helps to understand the organisational culture as "a network of thoughts, ideas and feelings that create the social system as it is and more creatively, as it might become" (Long, 2013, p. xxiii), defined by its boundaries, tasks, and roles (Miller, 2010; Von Bertalanffy, 1969). The theory on basic assumptions is premised on the unconscious life of organisations (Bion, 1993).

This article is organised into four parts. The first part introduces theories of organisational culture and an understanding of how culture develops. The second part introduces the research methodology. The third part introduces the merger case "Lost in the present moment" and the analysis of the organisational culture related to the findings. In the last part, I discuss the importance of the organisational climate and a management improving a climate for speaking up together with cultural congruence as important factors in reducing staff frustrations and organisational silence.

## **1. Organisational culture and its importance for organisational development**

The inspiration to work with organisational culture can be dated back to the theoretical work in the fields of anthropology and sociology in the 1920s. In

the 1960s, researchers were interested in looking at the patterns of meaning and how these patterns influenced individuals, groups, and organisations (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2012). The primary reason for conducting research in this field is to gain an understanding of the major impact culture has on the success of an organisation (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2012). However, as Stapley (2006) argues, there is a wide divergence and lack of consensus of meaning about organisational culture, which leads to confusion and a lack of understanding of the phenomenon.

In this article, I am focusing on the system dynamic approach to understand organisational culture and its importance in terms of development and change. Knowing how organisational culture develops will give us the opportunity to learn how we can influence it. Stapley (2006) says that “culture develops out of the interrelatedness of the members of an organisation” (p. 173), which is what I term the “organisational holding environment”. In the following, I will provide a brief introduction to the understanding of culture as a reflection of ourselves as members of the organisation and how it takes form in the interrelatedness.

### ***The organisational holding environment***

Stapley (2006) points out that the organisational holding environment is fundamental in understanding how culture develops. The concept of “organisational holding environment” builds on the theoretical work and concept of “holding mother” developed by Winnicott (1960) through his work with the development of a safe environment for children. Winnicott worked with the term *holding mother* consisting of two qualities: “the environmental mother”, and “the object mother”. His thoughts were that a child needs both external and internal qualities to develop as a person. If it is not possible for the object mother to contain and represent healthy social and ethical values, anxiety and social defence can be activated, and the child will experience that it is difficult to trust others. The child develops an understanding that he or she is responsible for taking care of the object mother by asking: What can I do to make mother stable, and what should I *not* do to keep mother stable? In this perspective, the concept of the *holding mother* represents the self and the inner and external structures internalised in the child.

Taking the concept of the *holding mother* into an organisational frame helps us to understand that the organisational holding environment is experienced through perceptive processes (Winnicott, 1960, 1971). The *holding mother* concept points out that the experience from the first relation in the family, internalised as our first significant other, forms the foundation of the identity of the person in the first group in life. As members of an organisation, we filter the perceptive information, and through conscious and unconscious processes, we match them against the knowing from our experience. Both Winnicott (1960) and Bion (1993) were concerned with the notion of how the environment helps transform the child’s sensing of data into thinking. The two fundamental characteristics of such an environment are on the one hand

empathetic interpretation and tolerance and on the other the containment of aggression and sexuality (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). The experience of what forms safety and what forms anxiety and defence leads members to react in a way that makes the organisation stable. As an example, employee silence instead of speaking up about important issues as a reaction to the climate of the organisational culture.

Describing how anger, anxiety, or other emotions are neither eliminated nor allowed to disable mental function, Bion developed the concept of “containment” introduced for the first time in the paper “Attacks on linking” (1959). In this paper, Bion writes about projective identification<sup>1</sup> which “makes it possible to investigate feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them” (Bion, 1959). For projective identification to be successful, the processes of containment and contained must work in tandem, but the internalised container may be destabilised by the introduction of new ideas or experiences. This may result in mental disaster, provoking the individual to feel that the psyche dissolves into meaningless and incoherent fragments. In Bion’s description, the individual’s evolving thinking rests on the ability to tolerate such upheavals and on openness towards finding new ways of organising their scattered thoughts (Visholm, 2004). As indicated by Hopper (2009), the incohesion caused by processes such as the traumatic merger process may stimulate basic assumption behaviour in the group. Should the organisational holding environment *not* be perceived as good enough by the members, it may result in regression or an anti-task culture (Stapley, 2006). Moreover, the employees’ sense of having lost their belonging group (Prodgers, 1999) and their accustomed containment in the organisation seemed to be projected onto an ideal image of a belonging group or onto the management of the organisation. In becoming the objects of the employees’ projection of a loss of an idealised organisation, the projected group or management must carry the burden of containing organisational anxieties.

In the organisation, everyone is a part of several groups, and as Rouchy (1995) says, in the secondary group (the organisation), identity is formed by “conforming, protecting and institutionalising identifications” (p. 137). Group members in organisations undergoing change are facing a loss of the belonging group that used to offer objects of transference and contain their individual projections. The breakdown of the network of psychological contracts that tied them to the old structure leads to experiences of failure, guilt, and anger (Broeng, 2017; Visholm, 2004). The interpretative stance and the role of reflection (Krantz, 2006) for the employees and management is important in developing containment and understanding the pattern of the organisational dynamics. In this perspective, our early experiences constitute a foundation from which we can relate and respond to change and conflict resolution in our organisational life (Shapiro & Carr, 1991).

### ***The organisation-in-the-mind***

As described above, the relation between individual and organisation evolves as a complex and dynamic process of socialisation and assimilation

of the organisation's culture. An organisation does not exist in isolation. It is an open system (Miller & Rice, 1967) that interacts with the external world and depends on the openness of the organisation. This provides some of the external objects for the system that is influenced by the context of the society in which the organisation is placed. Gabriel (2004) argues that entering an organisation is in some way like visiting a new country; one sees a lot of unfamiliar things, and unfamiliar things have unfamiliar meanings. Making sense of things is difficult, and getting simple things done is difficult too. Through this process, the values and beliefs of individuals are transformed by their involvement with the organisation (Gabriel, 2004) and their internalised picture of the organisation-in-the-mind.

The construct of an organisation-in-the-mind that the members of the organisation interrelate with is an object they create from the perceived view of the organisation's holding environment. Having developed a construct of the organisation-in-the-mind, the members adopt forms of behaviour they feel are appropriate to them under the circumstances. The members perceive that these forms of behaviour are imposed on them by the holding environment through processes which occur on both a conscious and an unconscious level, comprising rational and emotional aspects. If not contained, the forms of behaviour lead to resistance to change. An organisational culture formed by containment supports the courage to talk about the experiences that have an impact on the life of the organisation, even if it may be criticism of the management's decisions or mutual collegial conflicts.

### ***Resistance to change***

Kurt Lewin (1948) was a pioneer in research on "resistance to change" and the first to describe the theoretical understanding of this concept (Heinskou & Visholm, 2004; Madsen, 2009; Miller, 2010). Lewin saw the concept of resistance to change as a force to keep balance in the organisation, mobilised by the employees to protect a group norm of value. He pointed out that it is important for change processes that employees are instructed by their leaders in relation to the themes coming up in the change process to help encounter the resistance to change which is inevitable. Lewin's (1948) theory has been further developed, and Kotter and Cohen (2002) point out that it is important to understand that "people change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings" (p. 1).

Lewin sees the construct of resistance to change as a system issue and not as an individual phenomenon. However, resistance to change has primarily been considered an individual psychological phenomenon and a part of the individual's social defences. In this way, the responsibility for unsatisfactory results of change processes can easily be placed on individuals. It is important to reflect the shift of attention from individuals to the overall system undergoing change by developing a more adequate understanding of individuals' attitudes toward change (Choi & Ruona, 2011). The concept of containment is

important in relation to contain projected emotions. To be expectant, reflective, and exploratory before initiating a reaction or action is essential. Robert French (French et al., 2002) calls this competence “negative capability”. The manager’s competencies in negative capability are of crucial importance for the way the employees will feel involved and in contact with the actors in change processes at an individual, group, and organisational level, rather than withdrawing from the difficult processes in a way that can be interpreted as resistance to the changes.

The concept of resistance to change must be reflected in organisations as a social defence, triggered by the anxiety arising from changes in a stable everyday structure. From this perspective, a key focal point is the role of the management and its influence on organisational culture.

### ***Organisational culture and management***

Psychoanalysis recognises the effect of management on organisational culture, whether at the level of an individual organisation or of society. Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) argue that a leader’s neurotic style can be mirrored in the culture and strategy of the organisation. They point out five different types of pathological culture: paranoid culture; avoidant culture; charismatic/dramatic culture; bureaucratic culture; and power culture, reflecting a suspicious management style (Gabriel, 2014). To a certain degree, features of all these cultural types may be beneficial to an organisation. Seeking to change culture by introducing new sets of values or by putting it through a process of organisational learning is unlikely to be successful. Individuals become far too dependent on their delusions to give up their values easily (Gabriel, 2004). Faced with uncertainty and anxiety, they set up psychological boundaries through projections and introjections which seriously distort the organisation’s rationality and task. As the Kleinian theory of defences against anxiety explores, individuals may collectively project bad objects onto a single member of the organisation (could be the manager) or a stigmatised social group (racism) whilst introjecting the idealised qualities of a good object. Scapegoating is thus a feature of many organisations, enabling individuals to deal with internal anxiety. A study of Menzies Lyth (1988) established how an organisation’s own bureaucratic features (rules, procedures, task-lists, paperwork) act as a support system for the defensive techniques. By allowing ritual task performance, by depersonalising relations with the patients, and by using organisational hierarchies, nurses were able to contain their anxiety.

This suggests that senior managers must not only understand the deep nature of organisational culture as influenced by them, but also how they are influenced by it themselves. Interventions must always work in a focused way with senior managers in relation to the issue of culture and the kind of holding environment they have created. Therefore, any organisational change must at least begin with the senior management changing itself, and in doing so, begin to create a qualitatively different holding environment that in turn will prompt other cultural changes within the organisation.

### **Organisational culture**

As outlined in part one of this article, the concept of organisational culture has its roots in the internalised external and internal structures from the *holding mother* in childhood. The family is the first organisation in which the individuals learn about themselves and others, about emotions and strategies, authorities, and social defences. The individual brings experience into new belonging groups formed by the organisation they hold in the mind. If the patterns of the culture resemble a truth about the organisation, the culture will be introduced to the new members, and if the organisation is not in congruence with the task, signs of dysfunctional structures will develop together with the resistance to change, created by the way both the management and the employees influence the culture.

Stapley (1996) argues “the organisational culture is a pattern of inter-relatedness where signs and artefacts will make visible how the organisational culture is in congruence with the task of the organisation” (p. 161). In addition, Krantz (2006) says that “periods of change in organisations put great strain on the ability of their members to contain their anxiety” (p. 1). From this framework of how organisational culture develops and how a pattern of dynamic processes contributes to a culture that can be either functional or dysfunctional for change processes, I will turn to the research methodology and the case showing employee silence as a sign of dysfunctional organisational culture.

## **2. The research methodology**

The position for the research is the psychodynamic organisational psychology focusing on the employee experience of involvement in change processes.

The empirical data presented in this article was derived from an action research (AR) project involving employees from the same service organisation in a Danish municipality. The action research took the form of dialogue conferences, focusing on *employees’ experience of involvement in change processes* at their workplace—not formal processes of employee involvement but *the subjective experience of involvement*. By using dialogical action research methodology, I attempted to support the employees’ reflectivity and ability to express themselves through actions with the aim of obtaining a more beneficial change process for the employees.

A key aspect of the AR was to define my role as facilitator and develop an experiential learning environment to encourage employee involvement. In collaboration with the groups, I sought to develop a negotiated interpretive stance (Shapiro & Carr, 1991) supported by *mirroring, exchange, free-floating discussion, resonance, and translation* to create change and raise unconscious patterns to a conscious level (Foulkes & Anthony, 2003). In the process of reflecting, testing, and understanding the reality of one’s own role (as participant) and task in relation to the organisation in a wider context, I worked with mirroring the participants by encouraging them to see themselves

reflected in another group member. By seeing a group as a “hall of mirrors”, the change in the individual can happen primarily through change in the other members of the group, for example, when their feelings, attitudes, and opinions develop. Exchange amongst group members is essential to change processes. However, deep-rooted and sensitive emotional levels of interpersonal relations must be involved to create a spontaneous and free exchange of ideas, which was essential to the study and verbalisation of group relationships.

Against this background, the data collected during the AR process was analysed using the philosophical hermeneutic approach (Gadamer, 2007). Subsequently, C. S. Peirce’s sign theory was applied to create an understanding at a deeper empirical level of the employee experiences as signs obtained by the AR analysis. Signs are here partly perceived as manifestations of “the deep and unconscious”, which cannot be examined directly, but which I assume are present as a relationship that manifests itself in the concrete and observable through the employees’ statements, dialogue, and behaviour.

Paying attention to signs, both consciously and unconsciously, was essential for understanding the deeper analysis of the dialogue conferences. The concept of understanding is characterised by the understanding being subjective (CP 7.547)<sup>2</sup>. Thus the understanding is context independent, but includes a network of causality (Bhaskar, 2008), which means that employees’ experiences are examples of “real life”, their “holding mother” experience, but their *empirical realisation of the actual and real* arises only when there is a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms, for example, personal life story, experiences (causality). This will be perceived differently depending on whether the participants are employees or leaders in the organisation and depending on whether they need to implement the changes or are the user. This is an expression of a *differentiated reality* (Bhaskar, 2008).

### 3. The case “Lost in the present moment”

“Lost in the present moment” is a saying from Bion’s work building on his personal experiences as a tank commander during the First World War. Bion developed a metaphor “to think under fire” (Bower, 2005) related to personal competences in “reflecting and being rational under huge pressure” (p. 43). Bion also used the concept of *negative capability* to formulate the importance of working “without memory or desire” (Bion, 1978) in understanding the importance of: “tolerating ‘ignorance’, uncertainty, mystery and doubt” (Lopez-Corvo, 2003, p. 178). Bion’s work with the concept of the *present moment* became truly relevant in the action research study that I refer to in this article.

The backdrop to the case was the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm emerging in 1983, signalling a comprehensive shift in the way social welfare and public services were perceived (Dalsgaard & Jørgensen, 2010).



Following the 2007 national reform of the local government—the setup in the case when three municipalities merged into one—the organisation of the citizen services departments had been restructured several times to improve and rationalise operations and facilitate access to municipal services. However, its management, consisting of a director and three geographic district heads, had been unchanged for several years. The three separate administrative units were each supervised by a district head, charged with responsibility for day-to-day services within his area of authority. The employees were connected to an array of teams in a matrix organisation, being assigned to both a local district and a task-based team dealing with, for example, child benefit, driving licences, or disability services.

In contrast to the citizen services department, the organisation and work routines of the library services department were only marginally affected by the 2007 reform. The tasks and composition of staff at three different locations remained unchanged, with the three separate administrative units continuing their diverse work routines and procedures. Whilst the new management had no historical experience to base its decisions on, most of the staff had been employed for many years, some up to three decades.

The integration with the citizen services department began in May 2012 with the appointment of an interim director to take over from the former library services director. With a brief to downscale library services resources, she cut the staff, discharged four persons, and entered into severance agreements with six employees. Three deaths had occurred during the same period. Later, nine employees left their jobs for various reasons.

The widely different cultures of the two municipal organisations meant that they were not equally prepared for the change process. In the library services department, the new regime had upset long-ingrained routines and relationships. The staff's response to the imminent changes is reflected in a working team member's comment stating that "heaven and earth were turned upside down", which indicates that the prospect of losing hard-won benefits and the ensuing bitterness had been laid bare.

### ***The analysis of the case***

The analysis of the AR refers to a mutually communicative problem based on the understanding of projective processes, transference, and projective identification as part of basic assumption processes in the organisation. In the following, I will give some examples of how these problems were expressed.

The two AR groups worked very actively with their task related to the change process. This contrasted with the managers' statements saying that the employees would not cooperate and that they are "resistant to change", expressed directly by the management to one of the two AR groups. The participants developed a strong relationship in the AR groups trying to have a voice through the work with the implementation of the "actions", whilst trying to create meaning, understanding, ownership, and containment in the groups. Their commitment illustrated that even though the participants were

characterised by anxiety about the changes they were facing, they actively worked to create developing processes that only to a limited extent are reflected in the management's statement. The management's approach with favouring positive capability and statements, talking "about" the employees as "troublemakers", together with the divisive events caused aggression and disunity amongst the employees. An example was when the managing director invited one group out to lunch. She invited the group because she wanted to show her appreciation of their work, but she did not do anything similar together with the other groups. It had serious repercussions both for the people who had been selected and for their colleagues. An employee called Sofie said:

Some get attention and others do not, but it creates division rather than connections. But why does she do it? There are many who are doing a good job. I really think that those poor girls, they were really affected by it, and they were not allowed to say anything to anyone. I do not even think it is envy. The next day we got a collective reprimand that we should address our frustrations to the right place.

In another situation, a group of colleagues who were working with a specific task were invited to participate in a study trip. An employee named Karen said:

I told a colleague from the group that I and two others from the group were invited to participate in a study trip. She was stunned and thought it was something strange—why was I? I could not answer that. I wanted to tell her that because I, too, was surprised to be asked. It was not something we had heard before in our group at all. It had been mentioned that we might have to work closer together, but ... I am glad to be pointed out, but I wonder if it can affect the mood in our group in the future.

And another employee, Joan said:

I simply do not understand why the management picks out a few and sends them on a study trip!

The projective space and the judgemental favouritism culture in the management team led to communicative problems and jealousy which again led to a split between the employees. It was not possible to establish a mutual meeting with an interrelational contact between the employees and the management because of the risk of failure.

One of the first signs leading to the awareness of employee silence became clear during the first meeting with the first group. As part of the presentation and establishing contact for the work to come, we discussed the research methodology and one of the employees said:

*Hannah:* "I don't want to be recorded on video, it's okay with audio, but not video."

I asked her, "Why not?"

*Hannah:* “I don’t want to be recognised by my manager—I could risk losing my job.”

Another sign appeared during the first meeting with the human social health (HSR) AR group. During this meeting, one of the employees, Anna, had a serious stress breakdown leading to a lengthy period of sick leave. She found it very difficult to find ways to work positively with the change process together with the management at the same time as she witnessed the management refusing to talk with the employees if they were not alone and outside the group. The employees found it difficult to talk with the management alone because of the judgemental culture and anxiety related to the possibility of losing their jobs. It was impossible for her to bring in this understanding to the management and get them to change their practice when talking to employees.

*Anna:* “I feel really bad about myself that, I feel really bad about myself because, as I say to myself, of course I can manage this, I just can’t control it” (starts crying).

Other signs emerged between employees in one part of the organisation talking about “many corpses in the cargo”, referring to past experiences which have not been talked about. In addition, when the management stated that they only wanted to hear the good stories and not the bad ones, the employees reacted with silence. The employees in the AR groups found it difficult to be heard, met, and taken seriously. Sara, an experienced employee, said:

We’ve been through a lot of things the last two to three years, first our whole management stopped and I know we have to look ahead, but I think we need to get our backpacks cleaned up together.

And her colleague, Laura says:

Especially in the library area, it is stated that there is still a “corpse in the cargo” that needs to be cleaned up. There are reports of discussions every day that you cannot handle yourself. Good initiatives on cooperation between the departments have been initiated, but these have been stopped in connection with the merger process.

The AR participants worked with the interpersonal relationships through containment and meaning-making, and they mourned with the prospect of having to say goodbye to their belonging groups of which some had been part of for more than thirty years. In this AR work, there was a great need to contain frustrations, powerlessness, dealing with stress symptoms, and create a statement that could help colleagues to form opinions through the process; matters that the participants talked about with their colleagues. The many “corpses in the cargo” and the lack of openness and trust in the management led to a stress-related sick leave, serious well-being problems, situations of turbulence, frustration, and a cross-pressure for employees who wanted the change process but did not experience that they were being taken care of. A social worker named John said:

Our manager is saying that he does not want us to say: “it will probably not succeed.” He asks us to come up with some ideas and to come up with something constructive. And then there is the fact that people are sitting on their hands.

And his colleague, Lotte continues:

We asked everyone at the meeting and found out that everyone had the same frustrations and that we are extremely sad, scared, and unsure of the process.

A period of silence occurred when important matters were raised even though the HSRs encouraged their colleagues to talk to the management. However, because the management wanted the employees to come to them (alone), the employees did not say anything about important issues. A negative spiral of silence occurred between the employees and their management, and no one took the initiative to talk about how to work with employee involvement, even though this was the reason why we met. An employee, Mike said:

We know we have to come up with something constructive but then there are people who just sit on their hands—they are perhaps the ones who are complaining the most, then they just lean back and then I can also refrain from saying anything.

An employee, Suzanne says:

And I also think that we have to mention what the process does to people when this is going to happen. It has nothing to do with us not wanting to change, it has something to do with what it does to people mentally, the frustrations we have.

As this picture of the organisation became visible to the HSR AR group, the AR group invited the management to a meeting to discuss ideas on working with employee involvement. However, the management group did not have a shared understanding of the importance to work with employee involvement and the needs in the group of employees. On behalf of this the employees felt ignored, devalued, and agreed not to take this initiative again. The manager said:

If there was any, I pretty quickly knew could “cast balls”, and that was told over and over again, and she could also make “one feather turn into five hens”, then it is one of the other HSRs that works in that group. I almost think it is a crossroads, isn’t it? And that old culture of loss and grief, to say goodbye to all these things—they have to accept that it’s not going to happen.

And he continued by saying:

It is important for her to be an HSR, she can make the smallest things become big and she has been on sick leave and all this—and when we are working with strategy, she is always negative.

Psychodynamic processes in the group influenced the implementation of the merger process by creating a risk that the management would look at the processes in the employee group as if the employees had unequivocal

resistance to change. Looking at it from the subjective experiences in the group of employees, the group had a legitimate reaction in which they had a voice in something that was crucial and important to them and their workplace; a voice which was not only about the positive processes but also about how to meet the difficulties the employees were facing.

### ***The organisational culture as a sign***

Through the work with interpreting the analysis of the participants' actions and experiences related to the interpersonal culture in the organisations, a metaphor for the projective processes emerged in the form of a "two-way mirror". The metaphor was inspired by the "one-way mirror" which is a mirror that is transparent on one side but not on the other. In the analysis of the case, the metaphor as a sign expresses the absence of a common object: a lack of contact, a lack of affective resonance, and a lack of containment. This contributes to the development of dysfunctional mirroring and the development of basic assumption processes.

The metaphor highlights the employees working in a dynamic interplay on one side of the "glass wall" and the management working on the other. Both parties see and hear each other, but they do not perceive each other emotionally. Separately and without dialogue, perceptions can be created, which the individual is not aware of and which cannot be recognised by the other. The metaphor shows that management and employees do not establish contact about the same object such as employee involvement in change processes. There are two different objects, whereby both parties experience disagreement in the communication. They do not talk about the same thing, even though they think they are. When two different objects are discussed (an employee perspective and a management perspective) without attention to this split in the dialogue, it results in projective processes and the experience of not being seen, heard, and met for both parties.

The projective processes contribute to the development of a "them–us thinking" through a paranoid–schizoid position where both parties are pre-occupied with their own fragmented issues. They did not connect with each other in the process of change even though a meeting was planned. Experiences and emotions, conscious and unconscious, developed between the actors in the change process and influenced dialogues and contact. The more overwhelming the emotions, the more anxiety arose and the more difficult it was to receive real information, the more distorted the different experiences became. The culture in the organisation made strong dysfunctional mirroring between the two parties possible with management favouring one group over the others and pointing out troublemakers. A culture of judgement, mistrust, and seeing the employees as having resistance to change led to organisational silence. Communication between the two parties suffers and ultimately harms the overall functioning of the organisation and the change process. This organisational culture leads to silence and a high psychological price (Morrison, 2014) which smothers innovation and perpetuates poorly planned change projects (Bagheri et al., 2012).

#### 4. Discussion

In this article I have described how conscious and unconscious patterns of dynamic processes contribute to the organisational culture and the serious impact it has on the employee's experience of involvement and risk of speaking up. With this, I would like to pave the way for a wider debate in the field.

My research shows that the lack of a common object between employees and management causes different pictures in the mind of the change process and that silence arises when essential information is not communicated between employees and management.

In the case above, the management did not want to be in the dynamic AR process together with the employees, and thus, the management did not become part of the employees' understanding of the troubled issues arising in implementation of the change processes. The interpretation made an "organisational projective split" visible between the employees and the management when the realities of employee involvement were distorted by both the employees and the managers' projections. Seeing the employees as troublemakers and their reactions as a resistance to change, at the same time as the subjective experience by the employees sees the management as having resistance to involve and work together with the group of employees, is crucial in the analysis. As mentioned, the "two-way mirror" metaphor as a sign expresses the absence of a common object: a lack of contact, a lack of affective resonance, and a lack of containment. This contributes to a "them-and-us" thinking.

The analysis indicates that when the change process was introduced, the psychological contract about the nature of the work disappeared, and the projective space was stretched. Consequently, psychodynamic processes were activated with anxiety and defence mechanisms such as projection, splitting, and denial. The realities of the change process were distorted by both the employees' and the management's mental defences. The analysis indicates that this is an area that embraces both management and employees through projective processes in the absence of organisational containment.

Using action research dialogue conferences as the methodology and the semiotic approach to extend the understanding of the findings in the action research seemed to be important for the process to understand and interpret the unconscious dynamics in which I, myself, became a part. In the analysis of organisational silence as a sign of the organisational culture, a systemic approach opened up the opportunity to focus on the interplay between the parties for a psychodynamic reflection. However, the uncovered structural problems with decision-making, organisational learning, communication, and so forth also exhibit systemic failure. Using a system psychodynamic framework for the analysis of silence as a sign of underlying dynamics offers a deeper understanding of how unconscious processes influence organisational dynamics. The lack of encouragement to become involved in the change process initially made the employees extremely hesitant to discuss

their grievances with either their team leaders or their elected representatives—a situation that was changed only as a result of the action research groups' strenuous efforts. It is difficult to see how the employees' voice could have been articulated without the action research groups and the formal communication structure with elected representatives. This both underlines the importance of the role of the management in focusing the organisational culture and developing ways of involvement, helping to reduce the risk of an "organisational projective split" and its consequences, as well as the important data from the dialogue conferences shows the action research groups' empowerment in creating space for speaking up.

## Notes

1. Projective identification: in the object relations theory of Melanie Klein, projective identification is a defence mechanism in which a person fantasises about his ego being pulled apart and projected into the object in order to harm or to protect the disavowed part.
2. CP refers to Peirce (1894).

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