

## Employee Driven Innovation in Team (EDIT) – Innovative Potential, Dialogue, and Dissensus

Kristiansen, Marianne; Bloch-Poulsen, Jørgen

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# **Employee Driven Innovation in Team (EDIT) – Innovative Potential, Dialogue, and Dissensus**

Marianne Kristiansen, Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen

The article deals with employee driven innovation in regular teams from a critical, pragmatic action research perspective, referring to theories on innovation, dialogue, workplace learning, and organizational communication. It is based on an action research project “Innovation and involvement through strengthening dialogue in team based organizations” funded by the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. 18 teams from one public and two private organizations participated in the project. The article defines the concept of employee driven innovation (EDI) in relation to theories on innovation, workplace learning and action research, and presents EDI as a fairly new field of research. EDI is conceptualized as a participatory endeavour differing from a mainstream understanding of innovation as surplus value for the organization. The article focuses on incremental, organizational process innovations co-created across conflicting workplace interests in and between teams.

The article argues that it is meaningful to assert that every employee has an innovative potential, no matter of what educational background or sector and that sometimes, this innovative potential might be facilitated through Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings (DHTM) with a dissensus approach.

During the action research process, it became important to organize a special kind of DHTMs as a supplement to ordinary team action meetings close to day-to-day operations, but separated in time and space. They focus on how to improve existing organizational routines and work practice in order to produce value for the organization, better work flow, and improved work life quality. These meetings are discussed in relation to similar organizational constructs within Scandinavian action research.

The action research process made it clear that it is not enough to set up DHTMs if they are going to facilitate EDIT. They must be characterized by a dissensus approach, combining dissensus organizing and dissensus sensibility. Dissensus organizing means that team conversations must be organized in ways where silent or unspoken, critical voices speak up. This can be done by using, e.g., pro and con groups or a bystander. This demands, too, that team members, managers, and action researchers develop dissensus sensibility to open up for more voices, for indirect criticism, and for more democracy in the decision process trying to balance dialogues in multidimensional tensions between consensus and dissensus.

The article grounds the complexities of this process in thick presentations of DHTMs in Team Product Support, Danfoss Solar Inverters and Team Children, Citizen Service, the Municipality of Silkeborg, Denmark. It demonstrates how these meetings created different organizational process innovations, and how theoretical concepts like DHTM, dissensus organizing and dissensus sensibility were developed from practice.

**Key words:** action research, participation, employee driven innovation, dialogue, dissensus, team

## 1. Initial definitions: innovation and dialogue

Innovation is on the agenda worldwide. This article deals with employee driven innovation in regular teams from a multi-theoretical perspective, referring to theories on innovation, dialogue, workplace learning, and organizational communication.

The article is based on an action research project “Innovation and involvement through strengthening dialogue in team based organizations”, financed by the Danish Agency for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and Ernst B. Sund’s fond. In the project, we have co-operated with 18 teams at Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI), Computer Science Corporation (CSC), and Citizen Service, the Municipality of Silkeborg, trying to co-create conditions for employee driven innovation.<sup>1</sup> The approach can be characterized as critical, pragmatic action

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Werner Fricke who has been an inspiring and frank critical friend and dialogue partner throughout this project as well as in earlier ones. At a

research, combining action, research, and participation (Greenwood 2007; Reason/Bradbury 2008; Bradbury 2010; Greenwood/Levin 1998) (see paragraph 3).

We define employee driven innovation in teams as a new idea created by employees which results in a new, shared, and sustainable routine (Hoeve/Niewenhuis 2006; Feldman/Pentland 2003). This definition of innovation positions itself as part of a growing understanding of innovation as encompassing not only technological, but also organizational processes (Nielsen 2004; Fagerberg/Mowery/Nelson 2005). In this article, EDIT deals with two examples of incremental, organizational process innovations.

Based on inspiration from related theories on innovation, organization theory, and workplace learning, the article argues that innovation is not only the product of especially gifted, creative members of an organization, but can be conceptualized as an interactive process between employees (Lundvall 1988, 1992). Moreover, innovation is not to be understood as creativity followed by implementation, but as an ongoing, complex feedback process (Stacey 2001). Finally, this definition of EDIT resonates with the concept of practice-based innovation within research on workplace learning (Ellström 2010). Ellström understands workplace learning as a fundamental mechanism behind practice-based innovation where learning and innovation begins with “a disturbance or the emergence of a problematic situation in the conduct of a task or in the interplay with other people” (Ellström 2010: 36). This article shows how two problematic workplace situations resulted in new organizational process innovations.

An important question is when a new work routine can be understood as employee driven innovation. We think it has to meet three equally important, intertwined criteria:

- It must create value for the organization
- It must improve work organizing

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meeting in Copenhagen in 2008, he drew our attention to his concept of Innovative Qualifikationen and to earlier AR literature on innovation. When writing this article, he made us aware of some major shortcomings of an early draft and inspired us to get back on track. We are grateful to Werner who is a gifted, dialogic editor seeing what is (not) there and suggesting what can be developed in ways that make you want to do it.

- It must improve work life quality for the employees.

Based on international stress research, we define work life quality as a combination of involvement, meaningfulness, support from colleagues and management, sufficient information as regards major change processes, reward, and an appropriate balance between demands and resources (Kristensen 2007).

Thus, the above definition of EDIT differs from a widespread understanding of innovation as radical, research based, technological improvements primarily situated within R&D-departments (Amidon 2003) and/or within a particular, creative class (Florida 2002). Research results have documented that, mostly, innovations in Denmark are of a different kind (Lundvall et al. 1999). They tend to be incremental, i.e., smaller, stepwise improvements on a day-to-day basis.

The definition differs, too, from a mainstream concept of innovation understood as improvements creating surplus value for the organization on a burning platform (Bason 2007; Bessant 2003) and as “a novelty that creates economic value” (Schumpeter 1934). We fear this management concept might reduce innovation to a form of modern rationalization by focusing mainly on the first of the above mentioned three criteria (Waring 1991). As action researchers, we have a democratic (Gustavsen 2005) or participatory approach emphasizing a humanistic and social approach to EDIT (Høyrup, 2010). This implies that if a new routine does not create improved worklife quality, it is not to be considered an innovation. We emphasize this because the mentioned three criteria are often in conflict.

Inspired by Bohm (1996) and Buber (1994, 1965), we initially define dialogue as a conversation where on an equal footing, you inquire into a subject based on your (work) experiences. Dialogue is characterized by sharing, daring, and caring (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). Share means you are willing to let others partake in your knowledge and knowledge creation, and vice versa. Dare means you are willing to take risks and question your own basic assumptions and those of others. Care means you treat each other with respect in spite of differing attitudes and interests.

Accordingly, we understand dialogue as a conversation with a special quality (Stewart 1999) that differentiates it from, e.g., discussion or negotia-

tion. It unfolds in a space becoming sufficiently safe to make everybody feel free to express their points of view, a space opening up for and addressing critical voices and dissensus. As such, we understand dialogue about work practices as one of several possible sources of employee driven innovation where it is vital you address tensions and differences (Stewart/Zediker/Black 2004; Baxter 2006). If you are not dedicated to making room for different voices and conflicting interests in a team, if you reduce dialogue to consensus, i.e., a sort of group-think (Janis 1982), then you might produce invalid routines and research results. These results might, e.g., be new routines based on a consensus only reached by those in the team who actually spoke up in the conversation.

Democratic dialogue conferences focusing on learning from differences within networks across organizations and regions have been carried out by, e.g., Gustavsen (1992, 2005). They intend to let democracy and innovation serve each other. We share the innovative focus and the pragmatic and democratic approach of dialogue conferences, and its focus on practice driven innovation based on interaction (Shotter/Gustavsen 1999). We differ by focusing on EDIT within organizations (Gustavsen 2005); by trying to co-produce immediate actionable EDIT; by underscoring that dialogues are conversations defined by a special communicative quality; and by acknowledging that refining the concept of dialogue, dialogic competences (e.g, dissensus sensibility), and dialogic organizing (e.g., dissensus organizing), are an integral part of the action research process itself.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Purpose: Employee driven innovation through dissensus**

Several action researchers underline the importance of creating a special space for shared inquiry and dialogue (Coleman/Gearty 2007; Eikeland 2006; Kemmis 2008; Pålshaugen 1998; Action Research 2009). The article highlights how continuous, systematic dialogues on a special kind of team meetings can facilitate employee driven innovation in teams. We call these meet-

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to do credit to the extensive literature on dialogue conference in Scandinavia and to present a thorough description of similarities and differences.

ings dialogic helicopter team meetings (DHTM). They are a supplement to ordinary team action meetings where you follow up on action plans. They are close to day-to-day operations, but separated in time and space. The purpose is to co-create a special, reflective space for dialogues where team members and managers in co-operation with us as action researchers can look at their work processes from above, inquiring into well functioning aspects as well as routines and practices in need of improvement (see paragraph 4 & 5).

Pålshaugen (1998) distinguishes between work organizations and development organizations including dialogue conferences; Eikeland (2006) between on-stage-performance in work organizations and back-stage-reflections in development organizations. These concepts seem to have the same intention as the distinction between dialogic helicopter team meetings and team action meetings: all of them try to create a more democratic arena for workplace learning.

The article has two purposes:

*Firstly*, it argues that it is meaningful to assert that every employee has an innovative potential, no matter of educational background or sector.

*Secondly*, it argues that this innovative potential might be unfolded through dialogic helicopter team meetings if they are characterized by a dissensus approach welcoming differences, tensions, and conflicts as possible vehicles of EDIT.

The first purpose arises from a paradoxical situation. Employee driven innovation seems fairly well known in practice in organizations, but has so far not attracted equivalent attention in research and policy making (Høyrup 2010). Ellström (2010: 27) asks how “can a workplace be understood as a site for learning and innovation?” Within related research on work place learning there seems to be a growing interest in workplace as a learning arena (Olesen 2010), but there seems to be less research combining studies of workplace learning with EDI (Høyrup/Møller/Sø Rocha 2010). Møller’s (2010: 165) analysis of European innovation policy based on EU documents 2005-2009 concludes: “Employees in general and their creative and innovative potential are still not part of any systematic innovation strategy ...” EU documents seem to focus mainly on researchers and professionals. Within action research, Fricke (1983, 2009) has developed the concept of innovative qualifi-

cations and Gustavsen (1992, 2005) has combined action research and innovation in inter-organizational contexts. Although there are several interactive research communities, innovation centers, and action research projects on innovation, particularly in Scandinavia (Johannisson/Gunnarsson/Stjernberg 2008; Nielsen/Svensson 2006), it is our general impression that research and policy making on EDI is a fairly unexplored field.

The second purpose departs from a distinction between consensus and dissensus. Both consensus and dissensus have a product and a process dimension. Consensus refers to an agreement (product) as well as to an understanding of conflict or disagreement as an anomaly in need of repair in order to re-establish the existing order (process). Correspondingly, dissensus refers to disagreement (product) as well as to an understanding of disagreement, tension and conflict as a natural state in every team and as a possibility for establishing a new order (process) (Vindeløv 2007). This article focuses on differences in point of views, interests, tensions, and conflicts as a possible vehicle of EDI (Deetz 2001; Stewart/Zediker/Black 2004; Baxter 2006; Phillips 2009).

We define this process dimension as a dissensus approach. Dissensus approach is the opposite of avoiding disagreement (consensus as a process), maintaining differences as 'enemy pictures', or trying to convince others by adhering to your own arguments. Dissensus approach means you face disagreements, tensions etc., with an open mind. This encompasses specific ways of organizing conversations at DHTM, which we call dissensus organizing as well as a specific dialogic competence, which we call dissensus sensibility:

The article demonstrates that it is not enough to schedule a dialogue on helicopter team meetings. Dialogues must be organized in ways that enable every point of view to be voiced. It is not all team members who speak up spontaneously. Usually there are silent or unspoken, critical voices, too. Simultaneously, dialogues must be organized in ways that will allow for the structure, communication, and process of the meeting to be addressed as part of the dialogue itself. DHTM deals with the content of dialogues as well as with the organizing of dialogues in ways that might promote EDIT. We call this democratic endeavour dissensus organizing.



Dissensus sensibility means openness to address possible disagreements or tensions in (team) conversations whether they are categorical (i.e., deal with different points of view) or relational. Dissensus sensibility interferes with (other) dialogic competencies like, e.g., empathy (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). Basically, dissensus sensibility meets disagreement with open questions and abstains from trying to convince. The purpose is to open up for more voices (Bakhtin 1981), for democracy (van Beinum/Faucheux/van der Vlist 1996) in the decision process, and for valid research results.

However, dialogic helicopter team meetings with a dissensus approach are not enough. If employees have years of experience of not being listened to; if they are used to top down decisions and organizational changes without being involved; if their suggestions are met with automatic counterarguments; if the culture is characterized by social concrete blocks (Kristiansen 2007), i.e., stiffened basis assumptions impossible to address, then it is either uphill or impossible to change anything simply by a dialogue.

The article presents two “thick” case descriptions (Geertz 1973) from the action research project where employees handled dissensus in ways that resulted in new organizational routines. In action research literature dealing with dialogue, we would like to see more examples of grounded cases which in detailed and concrete ways show the complexities of how dialogues take place in practice. In this article, we would like to show how theoretical concepts on dissensus are developed from practice as we have done earlier with concepts like social concrete blocks, self-referentiality, midwifery, etc. (Kristiansen 2007; Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004, 2005).

The article concentrates on two action research processes on EDIT constructing innovative organizational routines: one with Team Product Support, Danfoss Solar Inverters from February 2008 to January 2009 resulting in a new model of informal review meetings with the development department; the other with Team Children, Citizen Service, the Municipality of Silkeborg from April to September 2009 ending up with a back up model.

### 3. Research design

#### *Critical, pragmatic action research*

As mentioned above, the research approach of the project can be described as critical, pragmatic action research. We understand this as learning processes combining action, participation, and research. Pragmatic action research is sometimes presented as part of a continuum between two ideal types: a more practical, result-oriented approach and a more theory driven and theory reflecting approach (Johansson/Lindhult 2008). We position ourselves in the pragmatic part of this continuum with a critical perspective.

The approach of critical, pragmatic action research is not understood as a method to produce instrumental solutions to practical problems (Greenwood 2007). The intention is three-dimensional:

- to practice shared inquiry in a dialogue to produce new actionable routines for the participating employees/teams
- to co-construct new ways of organizing processes that can facilitate the production of these new routines
- to develop theoretical concepts in order to understand these processes facilitating this kind of employee driven innovation (Bradbury, 2010; Argyris and Schön 1996).

We try to practice this three-dimensional intention in a local/emergent rather than an elite/a priori way (Deetz 2001) balancing between a critique of pragmatic action research for being only practical or result-oriented consultancy, but not research (Eikeland 2006) and a critique of critical action research for being elitist.

There are many different versions of participation within action research. Some understand participation as a certain technique or technology used to solve specific problems, e.g., in management studies or in projects funded by global organizations as, e.g., the World Bank (Chambers 1997; Cornwall/Pratt 2003). Others define participation based on, e.g., critical theory (Kem-

mis 2008), feminist theory (Reid/Frisby 2008), systemic theory (Ison 2008) or participatory philosophy (Reason/Bradbury 2001, 2008).

We are especially inspired by Eikeland's (2006) native-performer-community paradigm where participants and researchers co-operate changing roles as experts. We understand participation as a process of co-inquiry where researchers and employees work and learn together in shifting relations based on different professional competencies and interests. This is based on the insight that today, processes in organizations are so complex and unpredictable that they can be grasped only by a shared effort. Employees know best where their own shoe pinches. As such they contribute with experience and knowledge about specific work processes that we do not have as action researchers. Conversely, we contribute as researchers with theoretical and practical knowledge of communicating and organizing meetings and processes (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2009a, 2009b). Greenwood and Levin (1998) understand this difference as a question of scope (local vs. general knowledge). We understand it as different fields of expertise.

Research implies that as two groups of professionals, employees and action researchers, we reflect collaboratively in and on action in an endeavor to develop new methods and concepts in and about EDIT. By means of the common denominator, professionals, we attempt to transcend an often used hierarchical distinction between researchers and practitioners and understand employees and action researchers as professionals with different fields of expertise, competencies, knowledge, and sometimes different interests (Gunnarsson 2007). As such, action research in organizations can be conceptualized as workplace learning meaning "practices of learning *in, for, and through* the workplace" (Høyrup, 2010: 143).

### ***Dialogic helicopter team meetings***

Dialogic helicopter team meetings became an important element in the research design. It was a product of the process. Initially, we planned to observe ordinary team action meetings, comment on team communication and collaboratively change them in an innovation facilitating direction.

After the first team meetings in 2008, we presented our observations and invited the teams into a dialogue. In this way, it became apparent that team meetings were characterized by communicative patterns that did not facilitate EDIT. Employees were busy and heavily production oriented. They focused on a given issue and came up with practical solutions. They changed rapidly to a new subject even before they had concluded on the former. They looked for possible shortcomings and pitfalls rather than thinking collaboratively elaborating on each other's ideas, etc. The team action meetings had a fast, how-to oriented pace that turned reflections and why-questions into a stop. Sometimes, action and research became opponents fighting about the agenda rather than stimulating co-players. If the meetings continued as usual, a certain pattern repeated itself: the usually talkative persons continued talking and consensus was reached among their voices only. We recognized that organizing separate helicopter team meeting in special ways was of crucial importance.

Dialogic helicopter team meetings were thus born in a cross between different interests. Management, employees, and we had a common interest in not wasting our time. One of the managers expressed it this way: "The process has to kick ass!" Some managers complained that they did not have meetings in the organization lasting for 3 hours. So setting up helicopter team meetings with a 3 hour agenda was sometimes a struggle in itself. Some employees expressed their skepticism: was the process kicked off for the benefit of management or us as action researchers; would they be able to use the results themselves, if there would be any; and how about their work overload? It probably would not decrease by participating in these team meetings, perhaps even on the contrary? These typical AR-dilemmas (Pedersen and Olesen 2008) point at the importance of our three-dimensional concept of innovation as not only surplus value for the organization. We insisted on co-operating with regular teams, and only on issues and routines which the teams as well as their managers thought it meaningful to improve.

We finally designed dialogic helicopter team meetings as a supplement to ordinary team action meetings, close to daily production, and yet separated in time and space. They are off-line close to in-line to use Tidd and Bessant's (2009) distinction. Helicopter team meetings are characterized by ongoing

dialogues between team members, including the team manager, and between them and us, followed by decisions. Everybody participates as co-learners, based on different professional experiences and competencies. The meetings last about 3 hours in order to make decisions based on thorough reflections, with an interval of about 2 months. They are taped to document results and prepare the next meeting. At the first meeting, the team decides the issues they want to handle during the process within the framework marked out by management and in accordance with the perspective of strengthening EDIT through participation and dialogue.

Between dialogic helicopter team meetings, the teams tried to “implement” their decisions validating if their decisions and proposals for new routines improved their work life quality. The results were inquired into and evaluated on the next meeting, after which the eventually renewed routine was tested. This was a repeated, local, emergent process with results unpredictable for the team, its manager, and us (Stacey 2001). In collaboration with the teams, we tried to find out if there were special ways of communicating and organizing helicopter team meetings that would open up for dissensus, and if these would eventually promote EDIT.

Action research is often presented as a cyclic process alternating, in various ways, between diagnosis, planning, action, reflection on action, and evaluation (Coghlan/Brannick 2005; White 2003). We understand the above mentioned changes between dialogic helicopter team meetings, action, and new reflections as dimensions within such a frame work. We emphasize action research as an emergent process. This implies that it is not possible in advance to say if and when dialogues will result in EDIT, and if the resulting routines will produce an improved practice. It also implies that new research questions probably will emerge in the process.

### ***Contextualizing dialogues***

Dialogic helicopter team meetings are embedded in interconnected global and national, economic and political contexts, as e.g., the global fiscal crisis, the Danish reorganization of the public sector with fusions of municipalities, tax stop, and centralization of certain citizen service functions. These contexts

made themselves visible in various ways during the process. A helicopter team meeting was cancelled with short notice at Danfoss Solar Inverters because of an emergent crisis in relation to a foreign supplier. The day before we closed the process in the Citizen Service in Silkeborg, a plan for centralization of certain citizen service functions was proposed by national authorities in Copenhagen, implying the removal of these functions from Silkeborg, etc.

Besides, there are local, organizational contexts with conflicting interests between management and employees, departments, team members, etc.

The dialogic principles of sharing, daring, and caring thus enfold in power relations where there are always already differences in interests and (potential) conflicts (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004). Bohm (1996) and Buber's (1923, 1965) definitions of dialogue are not sufficient to understand dialogues at helicopter team meetings, because these philosophies do not have any concepts of context, organization, and power. Thus, we understand dialogues as special qualities in conversations unfolding in the tension between consensus and dissensus in local contexts where differences in perspective, conflict, and power are always already embedded (Pearce/Pearce 2004; Pearce 2007; Phillips 2009; Pedersen/Olesen 2008; Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006).<sup>3</sup> We comprehend organizational communication as balancing creativity and constraint (Eisenberg/Goodall 1997) and communication as power relations in shifting patterns of enabling and constraining (Stacey 2003).

#### **4. Team Product Support: informal review meetings**

##### ***Production vs. development***

Team Product Support at Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI) has 8 employees and a team manager. The team is part of Supply Chain (SC) at DSI which is a fast growing, relatively new high tech plant producing advanced grid-connected inverters for residential and commercial solar energy applications to the

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<sup>3</sup> We have chosen not to address AR questions of power in this article (Gaventa/Cornwall 2008).

global market. The plant is owned by Danfoss Group, a large, global organization in Denmark among other things known for its thermostats and valves. The team was fairly new when our co-operation started. They work as process specialists and are in charge of test principles, tests, mechanical drawings, and cell construction. In this section, we focus on work relations between Team Product Support and their colleagues in Product Development (PD).

When starting in February 2008, we asked the team to make a self assessment facilitated by an external engineer. On a scale of 0 (worst) to 10 (best), they assessed individually how good or bad they were to fulfil the goals they wanted to change during their co-operation with us. This assessment was repeated in January 2009 to measure possible changes in the intervening period. Clear interfaces and improvement of communication with different departments, especially with PD, was one of the six goals Team Product Support chose to pursue. In the first assessment, the team estimated this goal on an average to be 2.3. At this time, Peter, a member of Team Product Support, described their co-operation with PD in this way:

Peter: There is a cleavage between production and development ... we have different ways of understanding work problems ... Some think that somebody in the other department does something which actually, they do not ... Sometimes, this turns into a fight or a dispute. It is important that we clear the table, but we haven't done this ... People in PD are developers, but it can only become a good product if we talk with each other. They are really different people and we are different, too, when they look at us. So it is important to get everybody to talk properly to each other.

In the quotation above, Peter focuses on differences and possibilities of handling dissensus between SC and PD. A year later, Team Product Support assessed that their co-operation with PD had improved on an average to 6.9. What had happened in the intervening period?

In August 2008, Team Product Support introduced informal ad hoc review meetings with colleagues from PD. Heidi tells how these meetings started:

Heidi: ... We were blaming the mechanical people [in PD] a little. We needed some drawings because they had not finished theirs yet. Then they made a lot of drawings and asked us to review them. Two of us began reviewing them and found a lot of mistakes and some items we would like them to change. One of the drawings was so complicated that we had

drawn it completely red with things we would like to be changed. We thought we could not defend to return it to them with all these red marks. So we agreed to invite them to a short meeting where we would present what we wanted to be changed. Then a man from the mechanic PD-group said: “Hey, this is really good. Imagine that we could meet and talk about these ideas”. You know, all of us left the meeting very happy. We really managed to have a dialogue. We have become better at entering into a dialogue with them.

Marianne: What has happened?

Heidi: We carried out some tasks between the helicopter meetings with you. One of them turned out to be that we could also walk to their place. We cannot expect that they come to see us. So I did. Whenever I was in their building, I went to visit them – just to show the flag – asking what you are struggling with. Before, we just talked about them over there. Then suddenly, the two of you [Marianne and Jørgen] asked:” Is there anything you can do to improve your co-operation with PD?” We had never thought about this if you hadn’t asked ...

Jim: Our method has improved. We realized that this works, so we use it.

Heidi: You are able to cross the river even when there are big waves.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Dissensus sensibility: crossing the river***

Earlier, Team Product Support talked about “them over there” in (PD) and “us” in (SC). They were inclined to look for errors, to draw red marks in the drawings they got from PD, and to hold their hands. As part of the action research project, Heidi and others began to visit unannounced in PD in the early autumn of 2008. This resulted in Team Product Support taking the initiative to invite colleagues from mechanics in PD to a brief meeting about the drawings. By means of a dialogue, they found a solution across different professional competencies and skills in the two departments. This meeting

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<sup>4</sup> Methodologically, we have chosen not to question Heidi’s presentation in the interview. Moreover, we did not interview team members from PD who might not share Heidi’s version of their experiences. Seen from a dissensus perspective, this is critical; but listening to the tone and the energy of Heidi’s voice, it never occurred to us to question her story during the interview.



launched a new organizational routine of short, focused review meetings between PD and SC. The team and we understand these meetings as an example of an employee driven, organizational process innovation.

Team Product Support tells how these meetings have improved work life quality not only for themselves, but also for their colleagues in PD:

Heidi: To-day, we focus more on co-operation. Instead of building barriers, we try to ask: "What about helping each other with this problem?" We do this within mechanics where we have developed very good relations. They and we tell each other that it is so good to meet instead of just sending letters and envelopes with drawings up and down between us. We have developed a really good co-operation, believe it or not.

Peter: You know it is all about co-operation. Earlier, we just blamed them. To-day, we often say that we have a problem instead of saying that you have a problem. This has become better.

Borrowing Heidi's metaphor, Team Product Support started to cross the river between SC and PD also when there were big waves. We interpret this as an example of the team beginning to practice dissensus approach through dialogues as ways of handling disagreement between SC and PD. This became apparent when Heidi and a colleague thought they could not defend to return the drawings to PD with all the red marks. Instead, they positioned themselves in their PD colleagues' shoes and acted on their mutual differences by inviting them to a meeting. Both Peter and Heidi mention that they have improved working together on differences with PD instead of building barriers and blaming them. We understand this as examples of dissensus sensibility where Team Product Support inquires openly and acts on differences between SC and PD. Thus, we interpret that the concepts of dissensus approach and dissensus sensibility make it possible to understand the process that resulted in a new organizational process innovation, i.e., ad hoc review meetings across classic clashes of interest between production and development.

Simultaneously, the review meetings have resulted in surplus value for the organization. Jim tells, e.g., that they have reduced the number of repeated errors as well as costs. On a review meeting with PD, he realized that a new

product with a new option would not be able to pass the test. If he had not had 14 days to get things sorted out, the consequence would have been:

Jim: ... that the next production of this product with the new option would be stopped in the test apparatus. If you must deliver tomorrow at let us say three o'clock, then you simply can't. That is expensive. The customer will be very unsatisfied. How many of these delays will it take before he is no longer our customer?

Peter: This example really shows how important it is that you talk with the guys in PD.

The new shared routine created by the team in co-operation with colleagues from PD may well be known in other organizations. For Team Product Support, DSI, it is a new organizational process innovation created across production and development. As shown, it is beneficial to the work life quality and the workflow, but also to the production and the development department, i.e., to the organization as a whole. These ad hoc review meetings might seem inferior, but they were an initial answer trying to cope openly with dissensus between SC and PD. This was an organizational problem for DSI as such, because at the time they had severe problems initiating a crucial project across SC and PD.

### ***Dissensus organizing: a bystander***

Prior to this process innovation co-created by PD and SC, Team Product Support had focused on their team internal co-operation for some time.

When starting the action research process, we did not see them as a team, rather like an assembly of individuals working with different tasks. Their meetings were characterized by certain communication patterns: they were production- and solution-oriented to a degree that almost made us lose our breath; to our best knowledge this pattern would not create EDIT. Two team members describe their high speed meetings this way:

Hans: That's a good idea. We'll take that. Let's continue. Very action oriented. If the job is defined partly, it's nearly done. We start right away. We don't necessarily reflect on possible consequences. We just have to do it.

Ole: Maybe, half a year later, we find it was shit.

Besides, we were often confused: just before the team seemed able to make a decision, they changed subject. Or they produced a string of counter arguments not inquiring into each other's points of view, but focusing on five mistakes as they did with the drawings from PD.

Accordingly, we reorganized the helicopter team meetings. We introduced a bystander function (Isaacs 1999). It is the self-observing team ego monitoring team communication, attuning expectations in order to secure a shared focus. A bystander has a meta-helicopter perspective on team communication patterns and makes these patterns an item on the agenda periodically. A bystander does not comment on individual communication.

Usually, a bystander is a person well acquainted with shifting between being present and being distant. Torben was a naturally born bystander talent in Team Product Support. Whenever the team talked in circles, were side tracked or stuck in disagreements, etc., he meta-communicated:

... now we are repeating ourselves ...  
This is not quite the item on the agenda ...  
Let's not jump to conclusions ...  
Are we completely sure that we have finished this subject?  
We will address this later according to the agenda ...  
I'll just list our topics and decisions ...

The bystander function is an example of dissensus organizing. Team Product Support used it regularly and produced some improvements. In their final assessment, they mentioned that their "meetings had become more efficient" and that they usually managed to stick to the point. They had introduced a nonverbal sign moving their hands forward and towards each other, meaning: "Keep focus/Stay focused!" in order to get back on track.

### ***The social aspect underlying EDI***

The team emphasized that the most important changes were that they had come to know each other not just professionally, but personally and socially, too. This contributed to improving their work life quality:

Heidi: I think we have come to know each other really well.

Peter: We have become good at talking to each other compared to what we did before this process.

Heidi: We know each others' strengths and weaknesses now. If Jim is excellent in some field, I'll ask him.

Jim: Sometimes I can see: 'Now, she's got a problem', so I'll help her ... this is not only professionally ...

Peter: We care about each other. It means that your daily work becomes digestive, so to speak, because we have this very good atmosphere.

Moreover, the team underlines they have got the big picture of each others' competences and tasks, and that they help each other in ways they did not do before:

Marianne: It wasn't like this a year ago?

Heidi: I didn't know my colleagues very well. Today, we are much more into helping each other.

Peter: That's right.

Heidi: We have realized we can't do everything ourselves. You make too many mistakes if one of your colleagues does not check your change requests before release. Peter did not do this, so he asked me: "Will you control this, please?" I didn't have time, but on the other hand, I thought I'll do it, because he helps me, too, when things are getting heavy. So, I used the time I didn't have. That's superb.

European research results on innovative teams point at similar conclusions: long term focusing on social processes and team development is crucial if teams are going to be innovative (Hohn 2000).

Accordingly, we assume that the development of robust social and professional relations in Team Product Support contributed to creating the new organizational, ad hoc review meeting routine. During the first period of our co-operation, team members developed their competences of using and openly coping with their professional and social differences internally. Afterwards, they succeeded in expanding this dissensus sensibility and dissensus organizing in relation to PD co-producing ad hoc review meetings, based on actions planned at helicopter team meetings as part of the action research project.

## **5. Team Children: a back-up model**

### ***Team goal and a new back up model***

Team Children, Citizen Service of Silkeborg Municipality, has nine employees trained within office work. The team consists of two professional groups: Maternity (maternity benefit, maternity leave, etc.) and family benefits (child welfare, kindergarten allowances, etc.).

At a helicopter team meeting with Team Children in April 2009, we ask them to single out the most important burning issues they want to improve during a period of three meetings until September 2009. A high-priority goal turns out to be organizing their work flow. When are they going to work at the front desk (where they serve citizens face-to-face), in the back office (where they work in depth with difficult cases without being disturbed by phone calls), and in the new contact- or phone centre (where they answer phone calls from citizens)? Can they organize their work in ways that encourage competence development across the two specialist groups within the team so that experienced employees within maternity can serve simple cases in family benefits and vice versa?

By September, the team has succeeded in co-producing a back up model. Instead of placing two employees at the front desk (i.e. one from maternity and one from family benefits) as suggested by management, they have decided to have one employee at the front desk only who can get help from an expert in the other field of expertise, if a citizen service within this field becomes too difficult. Below, we will show that this new model is an example of EDIT creating surplus value for the organization, a better way of organizing the work process within the team, and improved work life quality. As in Team Product Support, working with a problematic situation across conflicting workplace experiences in a team seems to facilitate EDIT (Ellström 2010).

### ***Organizational background***

When starting our co-operation with the Citizen Service of Silkeborg Municipality in 2008, they were involved in a number of organizational development projects caused by a major municipal reform, where three minor

municipalities had been merged into one large municipality in the bigger town, Silkeborg. Management had introduced a new interdisciplinary team structure where everybody was organized in service teams as opposed to the former work division in offices with separate fields of expertise. Earlier, an employee could concentrate on, e.g., taxes or pensions. Now (s)he was supposed to be able to serve citizens within, e.g., housing or child care at a general service level, too. A competence development towards generalist employees was considered necessary.

The managerial decision of introducing interdisciplinary service teams might be considered an innovation, i.e., a common, new routine. Several of the employees did not think so. At a kick-off meeting with all employees, we realized that several of them feared the new team structure would cause reduced quality in citizen service. What would happen when an employee specialized in family benefits was going to serve citizens within, e.g., passports or drivers' licenses. The new team structure was not considered an innovation. At the meeting, we used a letter box to which half of the 70 employees wrote anonymous letters. One of the employees wrote the following which was read aloud: "Dear letter box. Will our professional specialist skills remain on the same high level as it is now or will the generalists take over? In hospitals, it is better to be operated by a specialist than a generalist!"

In March 2009, after a period of two organizational changes in team structure, management decided to implement a new structure aiming at balancing management ideas of interdisciplinary service teams with employee wishes focusing on specialist competencies and incremental competence development. Within this structure, there were four service teams, including Team Children besides a Support team and a Coordinating, expert team in charge of competence development without managerial charge. In this way, Team Children and we had gone through a period of several changes in the team structure when our co-operation started in April 2009.

When interviewing team members after the end of the project, we became fully aware of the price paid by some of the team members in terms of stress and reduced work life quality due to the organizational merging process before our cooperation. We learned, too, that within Team Children there were two groups of employees in particular: a large group of older, experi-

enced employees and a smaller group of younger ones. Conflicting interests between these two groups came to play an important role in the helicopter meeting described below and in the development of the back up model. Lise, being part of the first group, described her experiences of the merging of municipalities and the subsequent organizational changes in this way:

Lise: Simply, these last years have been the toughest ones in my whole work life. I have never disliked being busy, but I can hardly describe how it has been. In some ways, it has been awful to put it briefly. I have paid my part of the merging of municipalities. If one is to compromise with what has been the core value of one's work, then it becomes difficult when you cannot deliver quality service on time ... I have changed from working in a small to a large municipality, from working individually in an office to working in teams, besides having changed my professional field of expertise. I am in favour of changes and am able to accept them, but there needs to be a governing idea of the purpose of these changes. It has been difficult for me to see this idea.<sup>5</sup>

Henriette, belonging to the younger group of employees, had a different perspective:

Henriette: One of the results of the process has been that to-day, we can make our own decisions as a team to a larger extent. We are the ones who have our fingers in the dough; we are experienced and have professional competencies. Management is more inclined to listen to us now. So, we have gained more freedom as a team ... To-day, we can make our own decision about, e.g., the back up model. Our team manager supports our decisions and says "this is good work; we can always adjust later, if necessary". Our improved co-operation with management has been the best part of the process.

### ***Dissensus organizing: Pro and con groups***

At the next helicopter meeting in June 2009, we follow up on the decisions and action plans made by the team in April. Gertrud and Lone attend the

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<sup>5</sup> The interviews with Lise and Henriette were made in October 2009 after the completion of the project. The interviews were part of an article which the 70 employees and managers of the Citizen Service and we wrote jointly to a professional magazine for Danish municipalities (HK-Kommunalbladet, April 2010).

meeting, too, as expert consultants responsible for competence development in Team Children. The team manager is not able to join the meeting. The meeting deals with the team's priority of organizing tasks.

At this meeting, we divide Team Children into two groups. Half of the team presents advantages of their present ways of organizing tasks, the other half its weaknesses and suggestions of how to improve it. We started to develop the principle of these pro and con groups when working with teams at DSI and CSC. It is a way of organizing a focused dialogue on a draft, topic, problem, or situation. The idea is to make criticism legitimate and to open up for all voices, including critical and silent ones. We consider pro- and con groups an example of dissensus organizing, like the principle of bystander. We often use them in combination with working in shifting small groups where employees get to know each other. A member of Team Children describes her experiences of pro and con groups in this way:

At helicopter meetings, we have been divided into small groups consisting of 2-3 colleagues and been asked to discuss what is good about a proposal; a different group was to point out drawbacks and reservations. I think it was a good way to do it and we have used it in our teams afterwards. Now people know that we can do it this way. For some persons it is easier to get things said if there are only a few present. And it is legal, too, because it is presented as a common point of view to the rest of the team afterwards. Some people feel very bad about speaking up in larger groups ... even if a person did not say very much, then space was created without the silent ones feeling uncomfortable.

The con part of Team Children reports that they disagree with management who has decided to prioritize work at the front desk and in the phone centre:

Hanne: We talked a bit about how prioritizing of manning sites creates many problems, because manning of the front desk and the phone centre is prioritized. This is a management's decision; but it means that we do not have time enough to get our work done in the back office.

Jørgen: Does this mean that work in the back office gets a lower priority?

Hanne: Yes.

Dissensus organizing by means of pro and con groups surfaced conflicting interests between management and Team Children on how to prioritize



manning sites. Seen from Team Children's perspective, they do not have time enough to work in depth on difficult cases in the back office, because there are too few resources.

### ***Conflicting interests within Team Children***

The continuation of the conversation shows there are conflicting interests, too, within the team on how to organize its work flow. When co-operating with Team Children, we learned that conflicting interests between team members were often expressed in indirect ways. No teams are alike and certainly not Team Product Support and Team Children.

Bente starts the conversation by presenting a proposal of putting through phone calls. This would imply that more people could work in the back office:

Bente: What if we put through phone calls to the back office, because actually, there are only 4-5 face-to-face inquiries about maternity services a day?

Elly supports Bente's proposal by adding two new arguments:

Elly: You could save some time, if you put through phone calls to the back office. Then you could answer the phones there and sit next to each other professionally [if you need sparring].

Ella has a different perspective:

Ella: I do not agree on this. It might cause an awful lot of noisy phone calls ...

Gertrud, an expert consultant, presents a proposal which might take the objections raised into account:

Gertrud: One does not need to turn on the loud phone tones. One could still prioritize that only one person from the group is going to be on phone duty this day, and one could still sit together, couldn't we? Of course, I know we are going to talk on the phone.

At the meeting, we begin to experience the conversation as a discussion where one point of view is met by a counter point. Jørgen begins to feel a bit bored because he has experienced this communicative pattern in many teams.

Marianne begins to wonder why Ella does not agree, but does not ask her. In hindsight, we could have done something to facilitate a dissensus approach. Unfortunately, we were so absorbed in trying to make sense of what they were talking about that we had difficulties listening to the unspoken or indirect part of the conversation, too. So the communicative pattern of counter arguments continues:

Ella: I do not like this.

Bente: It is silly to sit at the front desk, when there are only four or five inquiries ...

Lise: We also talked about the possibility of starting to serve citizens in both professional disciplines when working at the front desk, so that we only tie up one person there? This might help a little bit.

Ella: This seems to be the purpose.

Henriette: Then you are thrown into each other's professional discipline.

Elly: We do not think this can be done in the phone centre, because there are too many expeditions, but at the front desk, I think it can be done.

Gertrud's proposal is supported by Henriette, because it will throw the team into competence development; by Hanne, because it will reduce time at the front desk; by Elly, if it is only applied to the front desk, but not by Ella. Today, we understand her sentence: "This seems to be the purpose" as an indirect way of voicing criticism saying that she does not agree with management priorities. At the meeting, we did not practice dissensus sensibility by addressing her statement openly.

Before the project, we knew it was important to listen for the unspoken in organizations and for silent, individual voices (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2000). During the meeting, we began to become aware of a major conflicting interest or dilemma between younger team members (Henriette) in favour of competence development across professional disciplines and older team members (Ella) in favour of maintaining high specialist quality service. If we had interviewed the team members before these meetings, it would have been easier to find out what was at stake. In the situation, we began to listen for differences within the team and to understand that conflicting interests were expressed in indirect ways. Only on the surface, the conversation was dealing

with putting through phone calls. Indirect communication was not only present in this team, but part of a large cultural pattern in the municipality where management thought they had listened to employee criticism during the change process and where critical employees experienced that they were not listened to.<sup>6</sup> Only slowly, did we begin to understand practically that the action research project was embedded in a cultural system characterized by indirect communication. Was it possible to talk openly about conflicting interests within the team being part of this culture?

During this project we learned that bringing the unspoken to the table, sharing conflicting interests and different workplace experiences might be a way to develop EDIT. We strengthened, too, our ability to listen for what is unspoken or expressed in indirect ways. This contributed to developing the concept of dissensus sensibility and practically to becoming wide awake.

### *A back up model*

Gertrud continues to present a proposal of a different way of organizing work at the front desk:

Gertrud: One could do it by having a back up expert from the other professional discipline, so that it is possible to get help from an expert colleague at any time, because there will often be questions one cannot answer. But if one knows that it is always possible to call a colleague ...

Jørgen: Does this mean that if one works at the front desk, then you will have a back up expert from the other field of expertise if you do not have the necessary skills?

Several: Yes.

Jørgen: Will this be accepted by management?

Several: Yes

Jørgen: So could you actually do it now?

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<sup>6</sup> We did not inquire into why several critical voices were silent. As mentioned, it might be due to a certain culture in the organization, but perhaps also to the fact that all team members were women describing themselves as nice and decent, etc.

Several: Yes

The questions above might be interpreted as an example of *napeco* (Eikeland 2006), a native performer community, where researchers and employees as two groups of different professionals learn from each other.

At this point, we began inquiring into differences. What does each individual member of Team Children think of the proposal:

Marianne: What do you think of the proposal we are discussing now? ...

Gertrud: I think it is possible to save time by doing it this way ...

Bente: It must give more time in the back office.

Hanne: It might help, too, in the phone centre, so you do not need to sit there for a whole day. It is a bit tough.

Lone: It gives new possibilities of making a work flow chart. I think it is a good idea for us to go on with.

Gertrud: I think we should discuss it at our next team meeting, so that it can be put into action before the holidays.

Jørgen: If we look at the proposal from a distance, what do you think the arguments against it would be? ...

Gertrud: I do not think there will be any. If we look at it from the citizens' point of view, they will still be serviced by a professional person, because there will be a back up colleague. The advantage will be that you are not tied to the front desk for the whole day.

Elly: I am quite sure that in the beginning we'll need to call our back up person, so the citizens can get the same kind of service.

Gertrud: There are many services where you need to know level 3 [the expert level].

Ella: Yes, many services start as level 1 [the simple level] and end as level 3.

Gertrud: That is true.

Ella: But then you can phone your back up colleague. So, I think, too, it is a good idea.

Henriette: Sometimes, you need to be pushed a little into a new situation in order to learn more. I think it is about not wanting to give your own

professional discipline a low priority, so if you are pushed a little into a new discipline then ...

Elly: I think the ones, who have spoken, have given positive feedback. I think, too, it is a good idea.

Team Children seems to reach consensus on the proposal of a back up model. The model takes all the different interests raised so far into consideration. It will save time, so there will be more time to work on difficult cases in the back office (Henriette). It will provide different possibilities of making work flow charts (Lone). It might provide some relief with phone calls at the front desk (Bente). The proposal pushes team members a little to start competence development in the other professional discipline (Henriette). Finally, it makes sure that everybody in the team can call a back up colleague when a service develops from level 1 (a simple service) to level 3 (a specialist service) (Elly and Ella). At the meeting, we thought that the proposal of a back up colleague made Ella change her mind, so that she now thinks "It is a good idea". Ella confirmed this after the meeting. The proposal means that everybody in the team can be helped professionally by a colleague so they are able to offer high quality service to citizens within the field where they are not experts.

### ***Dissensus sensibility: surfacing silent voices and indirect criticism***

When transcribing the tape, we realized that especially Gertrud had been active in presenting proposals. At the meeting, we failed to see a possible positioning of power implied in this attempt to define the agenda (Davies/Harré 1999). Up till now, we had been less sensible to some of the critical and silent voices. Jørgen's observing ego was on the edge of drowning in the continued counter arguments on a subject matter difficult to understand, Marianne was wide awake listening for what was not said without knowing what to do. At the meeting Elly helped Marianne to strengthen her dissensus sensibility when summing up the discussion by saying: "I think the ones, who have spoken, have given positive feedback". By means of the phrase "the ones, who have spoken ...", Elly helped her direct her attention towards the ones who had not spoken yet and who might disagree:

Marianne: Are there any reservations about the proposal?

Hanne: I am wondering if our goal is that we shall reach level 1 before September [on the other professional discipline]. I think it is okay to talk about serving in both disciplines, but if we are going to do that, then we shall very rapidly jump to level 3.

Some voices: No

Hanne: You will very rapidly risk getting those questions where you'll become a nincompoop.

Lone: I do not think so. Our goal is level 1 by September [for everybody in the other professional discipline]. What we are trying to solve now is that we do not tie up two persons at the front desk.

Hanne: Okay, yes.

Jørgen: Were you persuaded by what Lone said? I did not understand it completely myself ...

Lone: I understood you thought we might be speeding up the process?

Hanne: I did.

Lone: I do not think we are going to do that and I do not think we should. One needs time to read the templates and to adjust them. So, I think still our goal is level 1 by September.

Hanne: Okay.

Marianne opens by asking if there are “any reservations”. This question presupposes that there has been co-created a space sufficiently safe for everybody to dare to present criticism if they disagree. Hanne asks if the proposal means that Team Children is going to speed up its goal and reach more than level 1 by September. Her point of view is grounded in experiences of becoming a nincompoop when not being able to answer complicated questions asked by citizens. Earlier, Ella touched on the same topic when mentioning that inquiries could easily develop from level 1 to level 3. Finally, Hanne brings the conflicting interests within the team to the surface. Lone, one of the expert consultants, emphasizes that the goal is the same and that the proposal is only about not tying up two persons at the front desk.

Several older, experienced, Citizen Service colleagues have expressed points of view similar to Hanne and Ella. They have felt uncomfortable when not being able to answer questions raised by citizens. They experienced this

as a professional dissatisfaction of not being able to provide high quality service to citizens. A team member describes this as a loss of work life quality:

The work pressure here influences me so much that I do not feel at ease. I think it is very difficult to find out what the quality level is and then reduce my own standards. I belong to a generation where we were trained in providing a high degree of quality. I think this is very difficult. It influences me personally. I experience it as a daily pressure and it reduces my work pleasure which I used to have.

The proposal of the back up model tries to take this problem into account. A generalist from one professional discipline works at the front desk with a specialist in level 3 from the other discipline in the back office. In this way, Team Children can answer citizens in qualified ways either alone or assisted by a colleague in the back office. The new routine balances or bridges between the conflicting interests of the younger team members focusing on competence development and the elder team members focusing on quality within existing fields. The team decides to test this new routine before our next helicopter meeting in September 2009.

### ***What happened to the back up model?***

After summer holidays 2009, we received this mail from the team about the back up model:

... It has turned out to become a success. It gives more time for working in the back office. There is more collegial sparring, too, when working there. When working at the front desk, we call for help and then it is easier to be trained in the other professional discipline, because you listen and look at what your colleague is doing.<sup>7</sup>

It seems like the new routine works in practice. At the meeting after the summer holidays, Gertrud tells:

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<sup>7</sup> We did not interview all members of the team individually about the back up model, thus the mail might conceal differences within the team that we are not aware of.

Gertrud: I think, too, it means better citizen service. Instead of messing about with something where citizens know you feel insecure, then you call for your professional, specialist colleague who knows how to handle the problem.

In October 2009, all Citizen Service employees and managers met for a final, half-a-day session. Here, Team Children presented their new routine and their experiences with it to all their colleagues at café-meetings. In this way, the back up model became part of a general knowledge sharing process.

### ***Employee or collaboratively driven innovation?***

On the face of it, the team and we understand the back up model as an example of a new employee driven innovation. It means better work life quality for team members and better service for citizens. However, we do not think that the conversation above can be interpreted as an example of a dissensus approach. The team conversation can best be characterized as a discussion (Bohm 1996) marked by indirect ways of expressing conflicting views where team members speak from their own points of view. We are almost the only ones asking questions addressing possible tensions. Only when seen from a total perspective, this conversation can be interpreted as a process with dialogic qualities. We talked with Team Children that they could develop their dialogic competencies, e.g., by asking open questions to each other trying to think with and not against the other. We realize, too, that both Team Children and we might develop our dissensus sensibility. As professionals, both the team and we are in a process. Perhaps collaboratively driven innovation is a more appropriate concept in this case than EDIT?

## **6. Expanding the number of active innovators**

In relation to the first purpose of the article, the examples of the two new organizational routines (ad hoc review meetings and the backup model) indicate that everybody can contribute to EDIT no matter of educational background or sector. It is crucial that EDIT takes place on an equal footing based on the employees' multiple experiences. In both cases, the new incre-



mental routines developed from a problematic work situation across different and conflicting employee interests.

EDIT thus implies a radical expansion of the body of active innovators. Every employee seems to have an innovative potential. Other examples of incremental, organizational process innovations from the project are a new time estimation process at CSC and a new model for co-production of learning in the transition from one project to the next (Clemmensen/Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2009). Outside the project, skilled and unskilled employees in the production- and maintenance-department at Lego co-produced a new model for organizing their cooperation which resulted in a 50% cut down of unplanned production breakdowns and improved work life quality across departments (Bisgaard/Bloch-Poulsen 2002). A team of office workers in a public institution co-created a model in one of our action research processes where they succeeded in integrating substitution, competence development, and work process descriptions. This contributed to reducing stress, improving co-operation and efficiency as reported by the employees to a journalist (Therkelsen 2010).

## **7. Innovation through dissensus in dialogue**

In relation to the second purpose of the article, the described two examples of new routines show how conversations with dialogic qualities can be a source of EDIT if employees and/or action researchers practice a dissensus approach. The process in Team Product Support points out how a dissensus approach in relation to team internal affairs was expanded to the relation to colleagues in Product Development resulting in a model of informal review meetings. The examples indicate, too, that DHTM might unfold innovative employee potential under certain conditions. Both examples show that employee driven innovative potential does not unfold automatically in a dialogue. To call a meeting a dialogue meeting does not change much.

### ***Dissensus organizing as a precondition for EDIT***

The first condition is about practicing dissensus organizing at DHTM to make space for differences, conflicting interests, voices, and unspoken criti-

cism. In Team Product Support, employees trained to keep focus by means of a bystander, but more importantly went through a process of getting to know each other: personally, socially and professionally. Bystander and pro and con groups combined with small groups are examples of dissensus organizing. In Team Children, there were silent, critical voices at the initial helicopter team meetings who remained unspoken until they were asked. By means of pro and con groups the employees highlighted a conflicting perspective between them and management.

We understand dissensus organizing as a necessary condition for creating sustainable, employee driven innovation that every team member can experience as theirs. Shared ownership is crucial. Dissensus organizing must be practiced differently in different contexts, because no teams are alike. In Team Product Support, it became important to use a bystander, because the team tended to focus on practical matters and solutions here and now. From time to time, the bystander commented on the communicative group process, e.g., an imbalance in the distribution of time allotted for speaking; lack of following up on decisions etc. In Team Children, it became important to include silent and critical voices, because members of the team did not automatically speak up. This meant that pro and con groups and alternating between small and short, humming groups and plenary sessions became ways of organizing DHTM.

Along these lines, we try to organize the process and the meetings in ways that attempt to involve every team member. As such, EDIT has two dimensions: it is about the contents of dialogues, i.e., about particular, improved work routines; and it is about organizing dialogues that might result in these innovations locally.

Even if critical voices are included, you cannot be sure teams will create a new sustainable routine as was the case in Team Children and Team Product Support. Dialogue is a possibility to inquire into whether teams can reach a consensus through a dissensus approach, not a guarantee. Organizing dialogues in these ways is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for creating EDIT.

*Dissensus sensibility as a precondition for EDIT*

The examples of the ad hoc review meeting and the back up model show EDIT as a complex process unfolding in a context of different and conflicting interests between employees in different departments, between management and teams, and internally between team members. The examples demonstrate that if EDIT is to succeed, it is vital that the teams get to know each other personally, socially, and professionally and that all team members feel free to express their ideas, reservations, and criticism, no matter if these are experienced as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. Many old as well as recent studies of groups and teams (Barker 1999; Janis 1982; Hohn 2000) have documented that consensus orientation easily emerges in groups. This implies that those team members who are in favor of a given point of view or direction will be heard and listened to, while critical points of view often will have no voice, will be stigmatized as wrong, marginalized, or excluded. This can also take place across teams as indicated by Team Product Support talking about Product Development as “them over there”. Barker (1999) uses the concept of internal “concertive control” in teams denoting a relational power mechanism. It governs team members without their knowing and contributes to securing consensus about a solution through a consensus process excluding dissensus. Consequently, as employees, managers, or action researchers, it is essential to pay attention to workplace differences, tensions, and conflicts and let them unfold in the process as vehicles of EDIT.

In Team Children, dissensus sensibility became particularly important, because team members did not voice criticism directly. In Team Product Support criticism was out in the open as polarities between PD and SC. In Team Children, it was not until Hanne openly expressed her experience of being a nincompoop when serving citizens that the team organized a new work routine that included everybody: also Ella. Based on this, we claim that dissensus sensibility contributes to creating more robust, social knowledge as well as sustainable, employee driven innovation (Gunnarsson 2007; Nowotny/Scott/Gibbons 2001).

As action researchers, this implies that we facilitate processes in ways that highlight dissensus by questioning the unspoken if possible, continuously checking possible reservations in ways that open up for differences and legitimate criticism. As mentioned, we have experienced many pitfalls in this process. How do you, e.g., react practically if a team member is critical of highlighting differences and wants to stay silent?

Action researchers as well as team members (including managers) will always balance on the edge between consensus and dissensus, between taking the actual work organization for granted, i.e., as natural (consensus) or considering it as just historical, i.e., up for a change (dissensus). Practicing dissensus approach is a never ending story of dilemmas and paradoxes.

## **8. Dialogue in the tensions between consensus and dissensus**

Internationally, there is a growing focus on action research projects taking place in a tension between systems- and life world (Habermas 1981; Wicks/Reason 2009). In our understanding, systems world is an example of imposing consensus top down. Dialogues at internal team meetings as well as action research projects as such take place in a tension between consensus and dissensus. Accordingly, it is a basic question whether the systems world of organizations and the life world of the participating team members are compatible. There are no simple answers to this question in the international action research milieu. Wicks and Reason (2009) present some examples of this type of tension between, e.g., a demand from the systems world for quantitative data, external validation, and “participative conformity” (consensus) vs. a focus on the life world and the project participants on here-and-now as well as on long term goals that might disturb status quo (dissensus). The authors underline that some of these tensions cannot always be solved and point out that action research projects work in and with paradoxes and discrepancies (2009: 257). In connection with action research projects within larger systems, Martin (2008) emphasizes the importance of diversity and learning through differences and inclusion. We would like to add that this seems to be a *sine qua non* if EDIT and practice-based innovation is going to depart from work place learning (Ellström 2010; Gustavsen 2005).

The focus of this article on tensions between consensus and dissensus has affinity to Pearce and Pearce's (2007) tensional understanding of dialogue, warning against sacrificing differences on the altar of agreement, as well as to Philips (2009). She argues in favor of an understanding of dialogue embracing:

... a struggle between the centrifugal and the centripetal tendencies towards, respectively, difference and unity (p. 9).

Within this perspective, dissensus approach can be seen as an endeavor to open up for the centrifugal powers in conversations. These understandings of dialogue are crucial for EDIT, as some dialogue theories seem to emphasize a consensus dimension (Bohm 1996; Buber 1923; Habermas 1981).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, a dissensus approach must address multidimensional tensions: a tension between consensus as a product and dissensus as a process where you balance between the wish for a solution everybody can back up and the importance of listening to unspoken, critical voices; a tension between consensus as well as dissensus as a process, i.e., between considering the given order with its routines as natural or as changeable; and a tension between the systems world and the life world.

In this article, we have presented thick case descriptions in order to demonstrate how basic concepts like dissensus approach, -sensitivity, and organizing were created from practice. We think these thick descriptions fulfill the criteria of dependability, i.e., the constructivist counterpart of the reliability criteria in qualitative research (Bryman 2008).

The results of this project point at the importance of a dissensus approach as part of a democratic endeavor combining dissensus organizing and dissensus sensitivity to listen for unspoken voices, to address indirect reservations and criticism with open questions, and organize the process in ways that makes criticism legitimate. This might open up for everybody's innovative potential and EDIT combining surplus value for the organization, better work organizing, and improved work life quality. But, as mentioned earlier, dialogic dissensus approach is only one among several sources of EDIT and

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart, Zediker, and Black (2004) present a different interpretation of Bohm and Buber emphasizing their tensional dialogue concepts.

only sometimes it is possible to cross the river. Although it is a wide spread opinion that dialogue creates the social world (Baxter 2006), dialogue is sometimes innavigable as some types of social world or organizational culture seem to exclude dialogue.

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*About the Authors*

Marianne Kristiansen:

associate professor, Ph.d.

Department of Communication and Psychology,

Aalborg University,

Lautrupvang 2B,

DK – 2750 Ballerup

E-mail: [marian@hum.aau.dk](mailto:marian@hum.aau.dk).

Phone: +45-99407354 (work), +45-20275655 (mobile).

Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen

external lecturer at the Master Programme of Conflict Mediation,

Copenhagen University, partner in Dialog, former associate professor in philosophy of science at Roskilde University, Denmark.

Address: Dialog, Frederik VI's Allé 2, 3rd, DK – 2000 Frederiksberg.

E-mail: [dialog@dialog-mj.dk](mailto:dialog@dialog-mj.dk).

Phone: +45-40177352 (mobile)

[www.dialog-mj.dk](http://www.dialog-mj.dk)