CHAPTER 1

Looking for Meaning in Interactions

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INTRODUCTION

The professional environment of change managers and organisation consultants is always searching for ways to give shape to change. That is why professionals try out interventions and why new insights arise from real-life experiences. These insights result in new ideas and theories about organising and changing. Over the past few decades, intervention methods have been invented and tested; these are geared towards searching, understanding, acting, learning and giving meaning. A characteristic feature of these methods is the attention given to processes of interaction whereby meanings about organising and changing are discussed.

We encounter these new intervention methods regularly in our collaboration with colleagues and in the literature. What surprised us was the diversity of the intervention methods currently being used. We were also surprised that there is often limited knowledge of the background to these methods. And we were most surprised by the fact that knowledge about the methods and the experiences associated with using them are not well known among the community of change managers and consultants. Therein lies a need and an opportunity, as we see it. There is a need to become acquainted with these most recent developments by describing the methods, the underlying literature and theories, and the experiences of the professional workers. Many organisation professionals and we ourselves need such a state-of-the-art overview. The opportunity lies in creating a book about these interventions in such a way that justice is done to the principles of interaction and the search for meaning.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS BOOK

Our objective is to help change managers and organisation consultants act in a well-considered way, and to contribute to the development of the discipline of intervention studies. We distinguish three objectives:

Intervening and Changing: Looking for Meaning in Interactions.
Edited by Jaap Boonstra and Léon de Caluwé.

1. *Provide an overview of promising and innovative interventions, with an emphasis on sense-making, acting and interaction.* We know relatively little about these interventions. We provide an overview here, but it is undoubtedly incomplete. And we are quite certain that in a few years' time we will have more insights, new methods and additional experiences.
2. *Stimulate well-considered and conscious application of these new methods.* In our opinion professional action is based on choosing intervention methods in a well-considered and deliberate fashion, with knowledge of the underlying principles and background. By applying these new methods, change agents can gain experience and exchange knowledge from experience and thus contribute to the development of the change management discipline. They can change the patterns of cooperation in practice in a meaningful way.
3. *Spread knowledge and experience in the professional community of change agents*, in particular *actionable knowledge* that enables us to act professionally. What matters to us is developing theories that are rooted in practice and that reflect systematised knowledge from experience, while at the same time these theories give direction to (professional) action. What is important for a theory of practice is whether the theoretical insights give a foothold to all kinds of applications and prove their effectiveness for the professional practitioner and user. The recognisability and practicability of the theory are the test of the empirical quality.

STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is structured as follows. In the following section we describe a number of aspects of the paradoxical world we live in, because this world not only forms the context in which professional change agents work, but is also the context out of which these new ways of thinking have arisen. Next we define the position of this family of interventions in relation to other interventions. The interventions in this book belong to a specific realm of opinions, visions of man and approaches that are very different from the other groups of interventions. The third section describes nine domains of theoretical knowledge and insights we have identified, and that form the theoretical foundations for the interventions. In the fourth section we describe the eleven basic principles we have distinguished as common to the interventions described here and work them out. They form the assumptions that lie at the roots of the components and the effectiveness of the interventions. We believe these basic principles can be the starting point for a better understanding of the effectiveness of intervening aimed at meaning in interaction. Finally, we describe the purpose of this book as an intervention in itself, aimed at sense-making in interaction.

SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN A PARADOXICAL WORLD

People are increasingly experiencing their life and work situations as complex, dynamic and unpredictable. This contributes to uncertainty and goes with the apparent contradictions we try to find a way through. In these dynamic worlds of tension, we see more and more unstructured problems for which a great diversity of actors are searching for meaning and creating realities.

Complexity and Dynamics

As a result of globalisation and the developments in communications technology, the boundaries between organisations and their surroundings are becoming increasingly blurred. Organising through networks and collaborating in logistical chains are on the increase. In many business sectors expansion is extending to the multinational level. This is often accompanied by the need for decentralisation and self-management at the local level. Data networks and new means of communication are changing the distribution channels among businesses and customers. These developments result in complex patterns of interaction among actors. The boundaries between nation-states are also blurring due to international cooperation and legislation, and because social issues are manifesting themselves at the global level. In our society there is ever more knowledge, acquisition of knowledge and exchange of knowledge. Knowledge is also becoming multidisciplinary, adding to its complexity. The acquisition, development and application of this knowledge elicit innovation and offer business organisations possibilities for new products and services. Western and Asian countries are competing in this area. Governmental organisations are faced with the question of how actors' knowledge can best be used in the development and implementation of policies. At the same time, policy impulses often have contradictory tendencies and strengthen opposing movements and dynamics in organisations and local policy-making agencies. The management of social developments seems to be experiencing a transition from political steering to influencing unstable networks. Government has partly increased this instability through privatisation, although privatisation does contribute to less ambiguous direction-setting from the point of view of shareholder value. The increased interdependence between public and private organisations is blurring the boundaries between the marketplace and government and leading to hybrid organisations that operate in a state of tension between the private and public sectors.

In studying organising and changing these new areas attract special attention, without consideration of the fact that traditional themes are fading into the background. Analysis of the contributions to the annual congresses of the Academy of Management shows that attention to cooperation, humanity, multiplicity, meaning and integrity is increasing (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Trends and movements in studies of organising and changing

Robust themes	Themes of the day
Entrepreneurship	Good governance
Business operations	Alliances and networks
Corporate strategy	Trust and conflict
Logistics and ICT	Negotiating
Bringing about successful change	Identity and meaning
Product innovation	Integrity and ethics
Accountability	Humanity
Corporate culture	Multiplicity

Paradoxes and States of Tension

In our everyday life we have to deal with conflicting movements and states of tension. Many people find that their work and living environments are less structured and provide less of a framework than in previous centuries. On the one hand, many people have short work cycles and the work of professionals is standardised through protocols. Work risks losing meaning as a result so that any sense of work may disappear altogether. On the other hand, people opt for entrepreneurship and work relations that offer greater freedom and where space is created for sense-making.

Innovation and Command

There is a growing need for innovation, but this is accompanied by with growing attention to control and command to prevent abuses. However, innovation requires risk-taking and that is at odds with command and control. Culture changes are also advocated to break through inflexible and rigid types of organisations and fight bureaucracy. Breaking up compartmentalisation by making space for self-management, and stimulating cooperation and behavioural change, should be an aid to these culture changes. At the same time shareholders and stakeholders desire a clear course and decisive control from management to reduce costs and achieve goals. Innovation disrupts the normal state of affairs, makes demands on resources, brings existing practices into question and can lead to unforeseen problems. Activities involved in innovation include exploring and renewing. Exploring means staying abreast of what is happening and for connecting the external world with the internal. It is the art of open-minded observation and of allowing multiple points of view to identify problems and consider new possibilities. Renewing is about finding the energy for renewal and identifying impulses for renewal on the margins of the organisation. Experimentation and self-management contribute to innovation. Vigorous, top-down management does not mix easily with self-management. It can be a paradoxical situation in which the need for control and management conflicts with innovation and renewal, and in which setting a clear course and vigorous management are at odds with exploring, experimenting and self-managing.

Business and Cultural Management

Business steering is mainly about structuring the organisation and controlling, organising and checking business activities. Points of particular interest are getting business processes into efficient order, clear internal structuring of activities, a transparent power structure, a clear assignment of responsibilities and powers, and setting up monitoring facilities and administrative organisation. These principles of control are essential to efficient business operation, risk management and the principles of justice, certainty and legal equality. What is required is taking measures to prevent (management) problems. Steering based on financial data and results is essential to healthy business operations. Insight into financial results is necessary for making investment decisions. At the same time, innovation and change processes often become stranded in organisations due to inflexibility in patterns of cooperation. Organisational culture and human behaviour are also of concern. This

approach sees the issues as human motivation, political behaviour in organisations, learning processes, culture change and leadership as very important. Meaningful activities in this world are stimulating people and bringing them together. The essential skill in stimulating is to bring out the best in people and give them the space to work on their own initiative. The aim is to bring out the best collectively, making the hidden game rules a subject of discussion and bundling forces. It is about recognising patterns and discussing them, so that they can be broken through. Bringing together as well as stimulating are about demonstrating trust and respect, bringing viewpoints together, creating a support base for change, and providing feedback on how people and groups function.

Scarcity and Abundance

If we define an organisation as a purposive social system in which people work together in a specific structure and produce goods and services using means and information, then taking decisions has to be a core activity of management. These decisions can be substantiated and their effectiveness measured. This perspective starts from a rational model of decision-making. It denies differences of opinion and has little time for negotiations and interest groups that want to exert their influence. Underlying this perspective on organisation is a classic economical world image that assumes scarcity. Managing strategic decision-making in that case is about attempting to predict developments in the area of organisations and assigning scarce resources and means. Information is an essential resource in rational decision-making. These days, however, it is not scarcity of information that is the problem but precisely the plethora of information. And in this age of unpredictability the profusion of options is more of a problem than the scarcity of goals. The basic assumption of scarcity leads to organisational decision-making that targets problem-solving. The rational model of decision-making starts with the detection of problems, setting goals, looking for alternatives, weighing up alternatives, making a choice and introducing and implementing the decision. This tendency towards problem-solving and goal achievement denies the abundance and energy that are present within and without organisations. The assumption of abundance aims at the future and the unknown. It looks at why organisations perform well in an uncertain world full of unlimited possibilities. The argument of abundance draws the energy and wishes and desires of people in the direction that is being taken. As soon as the perspective of abundance is chosen, new dilemmas arise. You can go in many ways in situations with unlimited possibilities. Going in a new direction means there is something you won't achieve; it may even mean you will lose something. Best solutions are no longer available. There will always be missed opportunities whatever is chosen, because any one choice excludes others.

Acting According to Aspects and Holistically

With an approach based on aspects, a problem is analysed from a single perspective. Following the problem analysis goals are formulated and solutions implemented. With regard to strategic planning, for instance, it is about formulating and realising strategic goals. The continuity of an organisation is then considered to be dependent on its adaptability to market demands and environmental changes. An aspect-based separation between

organisation and its environment primarily involves the central goal of the organisation and the way the objectives can be achieved. After taking strategic decisions about the organisation's goals it involves organisational decisions about how the organisation can best be set up to achieve those objectives and the change processes necessary. The structure follows the corporate strategy, and the strategy follows the environment. The strategic decisions are taken by systematically gathering and processing information about the environment and the results of earlier actions. Further, it is about monitoring the progress of realising the strategic course, evaluating results and accounting for the investment of funds in relation to results achieved. It is an orderly world that takes predictability and steerability as its starting point. A problem arises if insufficient information is available or no prognoses can be made due to a high degree of unpredictability of the changes or novelty of issues and themes. What is needed is a multiple and holistic perspective where several different viewpoints come together and a strategy gradually takes shape in a communicative process of involved persons.

Single and Multiple Value Systems

The dominant orientation of a number of business sectors is towards economic returns and shareholder value. From reasoning based on scarcity of raw materials and markets a competitive strategy is chosen in which financial returns on investment predominate as part of a survival strategy. What this strategy means for the physical and social environment does not enter the picture. The effects of the chosen strategy on issues of health, poverty, depletion of raw materials, burdening of the physical environment, conflicts, exclusion of population groups and social contradictions are scarcely topics of consideration or discussion. It is a question of a single perspective from the point of view of the shareholder that excludes the perspectives of other interested parties. Where a multiplicity of values is concerned, this approach is 'value-less', because it has only one value. Other businesses choose to position themselves from an aspect of social meaning and try to combine several values as a guideline for their actions. Sustainable business practice and social responsibility are topics of discussion and are translated into actions. It is precisely in dynamic environments – South Africa, for example – where perspectives from multiple value systems are often brought together and used for renewal. In dynamic environments the art is to combine these value systems through 'value-full' actions whereby attention is paid to shareholders' value as a source of finance for business practice and at the same time take the values and interests of other interested parties into consideration.

Planned Change and Looking for Meaning

Planned change is a process of steering and controlling aimed at achieving the change goals. This approach is based on the assumption that an organisation is in a stable state of equilibrium and that there must be balance in the relationship between organisation and environment. If the environment changes, the organisation must undergo a change from an existing state of equilibrium to a new state of equilibrium in which the organisation can again fulfil the environment's demands. It is about a relatively ordered approach. This ordering requires developments to be predicted, steered and controlled. To be able to make

predictions, the relations between cause and effect over the longer term must be taken into consideration. The approach of planned change is satisfactory in predictable situations if simple solutions to known problems are sought. The approach is less suitable if we encounter ambiguous issues and problems that are difficult to define, and unstable situations and unpredictable patterns of interaction. In that case we see processes of renewal that concern actors from diverse organisations. It is about transformations where new forms of organising arise and renewals are set in motion on the way to an unknown future. In this approach the choice is for communicative solutions, whereby actors talk with each other, look for meanings and create new contexts, and so develop a 'strategy'.

Order and Chaos

In the pursuit of order many businesses try to foresee developments in the environment and take advantage of them. To do this, managers and consultants opt for strategic planning and planned change. They attempt to analyse the characteristics of successful enterprises and replicate them, and they look for characteristics of the organisation that best suit the demands of their environment. Or they aim at specific improvements in the management of the organisation, relationship with customers or the ability to innovate. Alliances are entered into to reduce the unpredictability of the behaviour of actors. All these action strategies are aimed at the pursuit of order. Order requires predicting and controlling developments. One can question whether the pursuit of order is sufficient in a situation in which the environment is less predictable and we have to cope with problems that are difficult to define. That raises new dilemmas for change managers and consultants. It is about playing with dynamics and uncertainty. In the perspective of chaos, organisations are between the limits of stability and instability. Creativity is found in unstable situations; it gives shape to innovations. Movement begins in an unknown space with an unknown target. Because direction and target cannot be predicted, space is created for unforeseen processes, for creativity and for new forms of organising. This can lead to uncertainty, disagreement and conflict. But it is precisely these contrasting points of view that contribute to creativity and renewal. Innovation emerges through the exchange of different perspectives on organising. In that case it concerns multiple points of view, exposing interpretations and stimulating interactions to produce different solutions. Choosing to play with chaos brings about new issues. One tricky dilemma is providing space for differences of opinion and conflict without inertia entering the picture. Another dilemma is the degree of self-steering without fragmentation occurring between actors. Finally, there is the dilemma of boundaries being drawn in the interactions and cooperation with others.

The paradoxes and states of tension are shown in Figure 1.1. The art lies in recognising the paradoxes, balancing between them and connecting the extremes. This means connecting several perspectives and worlds and searching for new possibilities to deal with complexity and dynamics.

UNDERLYING PARADIGMS

This book takes as its point of departure a subjective and interpretative approach to organising, changing and learning. From this perspective we see the social world as one of people who talk to each other, work, interact, experiment, explore and give meaning to

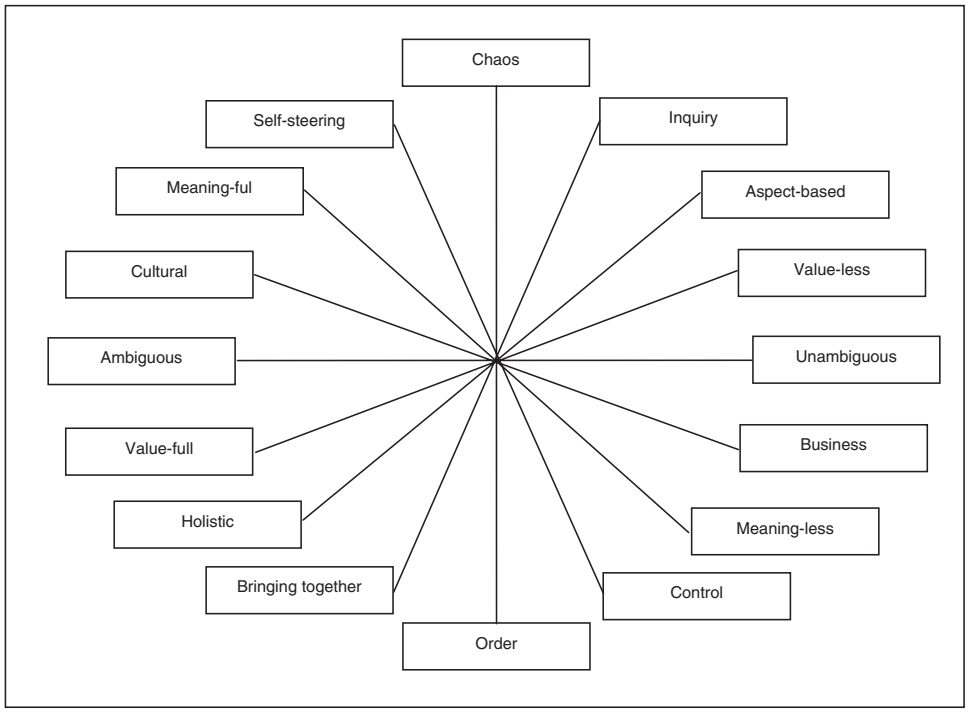

Figure 1.1 Paradoxes and states of tension in the world of organising and changing

the reality in which they live and work. In Figure 1.2 this book is placed on the left side. We deliberately chose a subjective approach, because it is from such an approach that we develop new interventions. We are denying neither the existence nor the meaning or importance of interventions that are rooted in objective approaches. They are effective in a different framework where other principles and values predominate. In this book we choose to elucidate interventions that are still in the process of being developed, less common and based on the subjective and interpretative principles and values.

Objective and Subjective Points of Departure

In this book we consider the development of knowledge about organising, changing and learning as a process to which all parties can contribute: participants, practitioners, managers, academics, staff members, customers and outsiders. Our ontological and epistemological basic principles are the foundation of our choice for interventions. Ontology is a series of general presuppositions about what reality is. One basic question is whether an objective reality exists outside of ourselves in a real world that can be discovered and researched empirically, or whether the reality is subjective and exists as a reflection of our individual consciousness, our perception and the meaning we create in interaction with others. Epistemology is a series of presuppositions about how we can understand that reality and exchange knowledge about it. A core question is the possibility of identifying knowledge

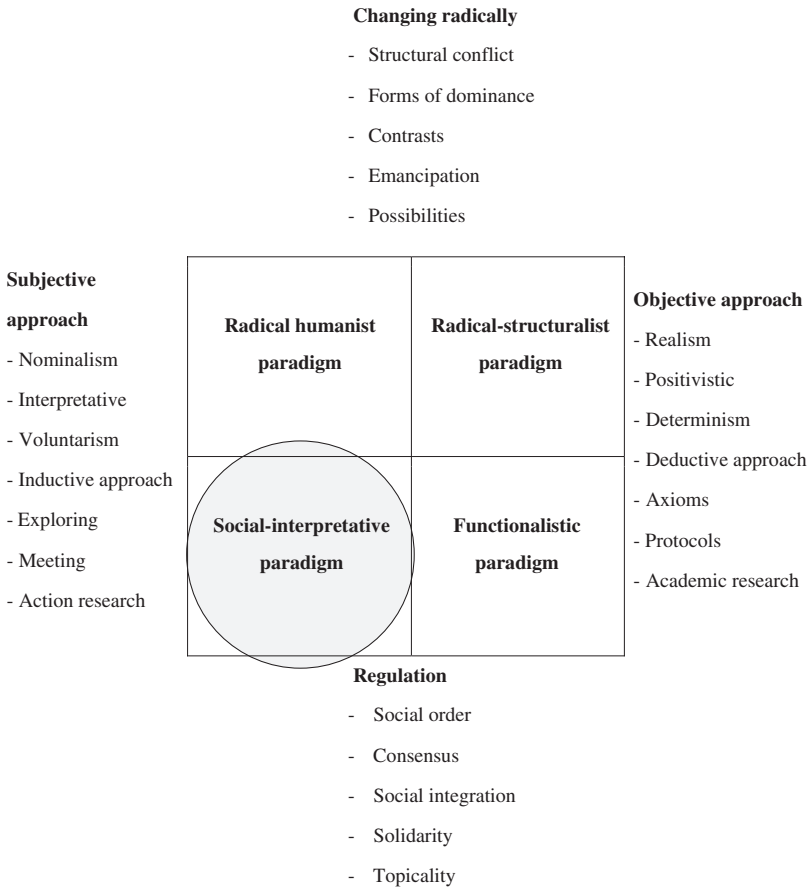

Figure 1.2 Paradigms in organising, changing and learning. Adapted from Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analyses*. London: Heinemann

as objective and generic, based on objective observations of causal relationships, or whether knowledge is more subjective, based on experiences and insights gained in specific situations and contexts that we can exchange in order to learn from them.

Determinism and Voluntarism

These presuppositions about what reality is and how we can know it are connected to basic assumptions about man and the relationship between man and the environment. The objective perspective on human acting supposes that people react in predictable ways to changes in their environment and that their actions are conditioned by external situations. The behaviour of people in organisations can be explained by the structure of the organisation or the structure of the needs of the people themselves. The laborious process of change is explained by the characteristics of the organisation or taken as resistance to change by individuals, because people should be striving to preserve their position or should not be

able to adapt to changing circumstances. The subjective perspective sees people as creators of their environment who can change their environment. Behaviour in organisations arises from interpretations of people's activities and their ambitions. If change processes proceed with difficulty, the cause is sought in the way people work together and the inability to look differently at the self-constructed reality. Imagining and expressing new possibilities can be a stimulus for renewal. These two contrasting perspectives are known as the contrast between determinism, in which behaviour is determined by characteristics in the environment, and voluntarism, in which people act to give shape to and create their environment.

Positivism and Social Constructionism

If the world is seen as an objective and true reality, then developing knowledge is based on objective observation and analysis of the relationships between aspects and variables. The world is quantifiable and denoted by laws. This is also known as a positivist interpretation of knowledge. If the world is seen as subjective, then the method of developing knowledge is based on understanding the ways people give shape to their world. The world can be understood by reflecting on change processes, by experimenting and by exchanging experiences and anecdotes. This is about an interpretative or social-constructionist scientific view. Action research (Eden & Huxham, 1996) and the methodology of *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) are suitable research methods in this interpretation.

The subjective and objective approaches (Burell & Morgan, 1979; Astley & Van de Ven, 1983; Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997; Jackson, 2000; Van de Ven & Scott Poole, 2005) are often contrasted in organisational and change studies. In their study on organisational and change paradigms, Burell and Morgan (1979) combine these assumptions about social reality with presuppositions about the pursuit of order through control and radical change through allowing chaos. On the basis of these two dimensions they distinguish four paradigms: functionalistic, radical-structuralist, social-interpretative and radical-humanist (see Figure 1.2). These paradigms have basic assumptions about organising, changing and learning that are often not made explicit.

Functionalistic Paradigm

The functional paradigm is based on objective, positivist and determinist presuppositions. A predictable and orderly world is aspired to, in which people cooperate and live harmoniously. In this perspective organisations have a clear task structure and lines of responsibility with well-defined positions. Little attention is paid to discrepancies. The methodical approach from the point of view of this paradigm aims at the efficient organisation and effective planning and execution of change. Often change managers and their consultants choose strategic planning and planned change. Interventions often used from the functionalistic approach include business process redesign, balanced scorecard, total quality management, benchmarking, time-based competition, strategic planning, restructuring, reorganisations, competence management, training programmes and the introduction of selection, assessment and reward systems. These interventions have been tested, described

in protocols and are used frequently (Kubr, 1976; Ten Have, Ten Have & De Jong, 1999).

Radical-Structuralist Paradigm

The radical-structuralist paradigm is based on objective, positivist and determinist presuppositions. This line of approach concentrates on structural conflict and has an eye for types of dominance, exploitation of the workforce and depletion of raw materials. Quality of life issues and problems that organisations cause in the social sphere are examined. From this perspective, change is seen as arising from fundamental conflicts and through political and economic crises. There is an idea that organisations can only survive if they can adapt to changing circumstances. Forming alliances and cooperation as well as the possibilities and effects of expansion are examined. The methodology is based on macro-analysis of the reality and survival strategies. Attention is paid to changes in the ownership and structures of organisations. From governments there are attempts to restrain the damaging effects of expansion, exploitation and depletion through the use of international agreements, covenants, legislation and governance (Dore, 2002; Peij, 2002).

Radical-Humanist Paradigm

From the radical-humanist paradigm people want to work on radical changes and improving working and living conditions. A subjective, interpretative and voluntarist approach is chosen. The paradigm offers a vision of organisations acting socially and provides insight into patterns of dominance and emancipation. In this approach people look for ways of modifying existing social relationships and breaking through patterns of dominance. The methodology brings together people with different perspectives to transform the living and work situations they have constructed. A holistic vision is chosen to interpret events and possibilities. The development of knowledge and methods is at the service of radical change. Methods used include open-minded observation (Hoebeke, 2004; Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider, 2005) and future-oriented search conferences (Future Search, Weisbord, 1992; Search Conferences, Emery, 2004).

Social-Interpretative Paradigm

From the social-interpretative paradigm people search for understanding of what is going on, starting from their subjective experiences and observations. The point of departure is a subjective and interpretative vision with the basic premise that people are capable of changing their reality. Events are considered to be true in the perception of people. The reality is seen as constructed socially by people who work, live and talk with each other. The social-interpretative paradigm aims at understanding the subjective and constructed world and looks for how social processes and contexts arise and continually develop. The methodology is based on gathering systematised experiences in case studies and action research. The theory about continuous change fits into this paradigm. In this theory change is a continuous activity at the local level where people associate with each other and give

meaning to their social reality (Boonstra, 2004). In change processes images of reality are exchanged, patterns of interaction are exposed and changes are given shape in a dialogue of actors. For the method this means creating contexts and supporting processes in which actors themselves give shape to processes of renewal. The essence is that feedback processes become visible, that there is space for processes of self-organisation, that processes of interaction get going between actors, that multiple voices are heard from multiplicity and variety, that meanings and presuppositions become visible, that shared sense-making arises in dialogue and communal alternatives for acting are developed, and that processes of acting, reflecting and learning are put in motion. The intervention methods in this book are based on this paradigm. The book gives an overview of the most recent interventions in this area.

THEORETICAL EMBEDDING

The literature turns up nine areas of knowledge that give input to the creation and theoretical foundation and support of the interventions. The interventions have an interdisciplinary perspective, in that they use insights from different areas of knowledge. We summarise these nine areas of knowledge next.

Chaos and Complexity Theory

Chaos and complexity theory presumes that organising occurs in complex, dynamic systems in which actors are continually interacting with each other (Gleick, 1987). Causal connections between specific actions and outcomes become blurred through the complexity of interactions of people inside and outside the organisation. In these interactions, the boundaries between organisations and environments are blurred. The interactions can strengthen or weaken each other. In the relationships it is a matter of positive and negative feedback. Negative feedback makes it possible to regain balance. Positive feedback strengthens developments that lead to instability. The patterns that thus arise make the outcomes unpredictable. Unstable situations give rise to creativity with which renewals gain shape and space is made for learning (Baets, 2002). According to Stacey (1996), these dynamics can be seen as a continual source of renewal. Self-organisation is a process in which the actors from a system spontaneously interact and communicate with each other, give meaning to events and create new situations through cooperation. The actors are spontaneously active, organise themselves and create new interactions in which renewal can flourish. In this concept chaos and order are not opposites – they are alongside each other. Self-organisation arises when stability and instability go together. For Zuijderhoudt (1992), self-organisation means that sooner or later new stable dynamics will be found that are none the less more complicated and more effective than the previous dynamics. Instability always gives rise ultimately to another stable situation if actors have insight into the dynamics of the system and can intervene in the processes of interaction. Stability brings rest, but is nevertheless temporary because new developments and patterns of interaction cannot be predicted and the complexity increases again. It is a bounded stability: periods of stability alternate with periods of instability.

System Dynamics

As early as the 1960s Emery and Trist (1965) characterised the dynamic environment as a *turbulent field*. According to them, the dynamics are caused by interaction between actors in an environment that is continually in motion. Emery and Trist believe that the uncertainty that this entails can only be overcome if actors interact with each other, look for a solid footing in collaboration and define norms and values together. System theory has developed further since Emery and Trist made their observations. Different authors have come to interpret organisation systems as dynamic systems. The most familiar one is Checkland (1981) with his system thinking and the *soft systems methodology* (1999) that stems from it. Stafford Beer uses cybernetics to look at systems from a dynamic approach aimed at learning. Senge (1990) is inspired by looking at patterns that affect each other and depend on each other. For example, he creates archetypes of organisation processes in which interactive causalities develop. According to Emmering and Wierdsma (2004), a dynamic view of an organisation has two functional reasons. First, the survival skills are continually increased if flexibility is developed through experience to cope with all kinds of influences. Second, this strategy results in the capacity to cope with these influences breaking away from the survival function. This means the organisation develops the possibility of itself exerting influence on its environment and partly forming this environment. The idea is that learning is always relevant to the preservation of identity in changing circumstances. This opposes the idea that organisations should always adapt to the environment. A related concept is organisational learning, which is well expressed by Weick and Westley (1996). They search for variation in order and disorder. They point out the power and potentiality of humour (as an example of variation in language), improvisation of routines (as an example of variation in action) and small, striking events (as a variation in chaotic circumstances). A related approach is working with games for policy development and organisational development (De Caluwé *et al.*, 1996; Duke & Geurts, 2004). This approach aims at having groups and organisations reflect on the processes that are developing here and now, to end up with expanding insight into the interactive capabilities and learning how to learn.

Spiral Dynamics

Graves (1971) originally developed a system to classify levels of consciousness. He called it *spiral dynamics*. It starts with a low level of consciousness that can be regarded as pure survival. The highest level of consciousness encloses everything. Levels of consciousness are repeatedly added that enclose earlier levels. The model gained its current form in Beck and Cowan (1996). The different stages that can be passed through are all designated. The stages originally concerned the development of people, but gradually that has been generalised into the development of groups, organisations and even societies. Wilber (1997) is one of the foremost thinkers in this field and a master of holistic thinking. In his *A Brief History of Everything* he connects the stages of development with spirituality, the notion of God and with the origin of life. He argues that today's problems have everything to do with processes of development from the past. He ends up searching for the inner knowledge, for continuous surprise, joy, salvation through insight and liberation through awakening.

Social Constructionism

One of the key themes in social constructionism is the role of sense-making in social processes. This way of thinking suggests that people construct their reality on the basis of what they experience. According to Gergen (1999), this subjective reality helps people understand what is going on. People become confused in ambiguous situations because the situations are difficult to understand due to multiple meanings and the multiple voices of actors. Gergen (2001) therefore argues for dialogue in which people construct new meanings of their social reality in direct interaction with others and create space for changing their situations. Weick (1995) believes that ways of organising come into existence through the meanings that individuals give to social situations. How events are interpreted depends to a great extent on the context in which the observation takes place. According to Weick, the meanings themselves are only formed retrospectively. Therefore, we can only understand what we are doing by interpreting what we have done before. The assumption is that through the exchange of pictures of reality, viewpoints, arguments and ideas, the participants will mutually influence each others' opinions and attitudes which will produce a common system of standards and values. According to the theories of social constructionism, interaction between the actors takes place in the context of the constructs that were produced by earlier interactions. What was produced earlier makes the production of constructs possible, but limits it at the same time (Hosking, 2004). The context is generated by interaction and becomes set, as it were, into a reference framework from which the reality can be understood. The common meanings or social constructs form a reality and cultural practice constructed by the actors in which common experiences are embedded that direct the course of action. The possibilities and boundaries of this manufactured context are not fixed. In Hosking's view the multiple and pluralistic character of this makes it possible to exchange, discuss and adjust the underlying meanings and belief systems. Hosking states that there are six methodological fundamentals to the social constructionism perspective (Hosking, 2004). Put briefly it is a process of mutual understanding in which multiformity, multiple voices and continuing interactions enable people to give new meanings to their actions and thinking, to the complexity of organising and to the issues related to organising.

Positive Organising

Looking for viable organisations and for positive deviations is the key to a movement that has been developing for a good ten years under different names. David Cooperrider invented Appreciative Inquiry (see Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003). The assumptions are simple: every organisation has something that works well. They are the things that give the organisation life, when it is the most lively, effective and successful, and connected in a healthy way with its interested parties, people concerned and communities. Appreciative Inquiry starts by identifying the positive forces in an organisation and sets out to connect people, groups or organisations with each other in such a way that it generates energy and increases the sense for change. It is a positive start to processes of transformation. Quinn (1996) propounds *positive organising*. The idea is to use the positive deviations of people by asking others how you add value to their lives. Ask them to tell you or write down when they saw you at your best and make a portrait of when you are

at your best according to the reflections of others. Doing that with each other in organisations creates a positive basis for learning and energy for renewal.

Open-Minded Observation and Appreciative Inquiry

Positive organising is closely linked to the methodology of open-minded observation or *naturalistic inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The art in open-minded observation is postponing judgement, not thinking too quickly in terms of solutions and considering events from several points of view. Open-minded observation takes place in natural surroundings and in field studies, whereby natural methods are used, such as observations, discussions and consulting sources and documents. Observations are collected, findings are interpreted and new action perspectives are experimented with, together with the people concerned. The method of open-minded observation fits in with the method of the fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and with the method based on *grounded theory* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to grounded theory, knowledge is deduced inductively from open-minded observations. This knowledge can then be put to use to discover underlying patterns. After open-minded observation and searching for underlying patterns, a picture can be visualised of what the future could be. This fits in with the ideas about Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003). It is not a problem perspective that is the central issue, but a quest for the power of organisations. In the depiction of possibilities in the future, it can help to look at other places and other activities where positive experiences have been had in making solutions manageable and realising ambitions. The three lines of approach are a summons to experiment with new insights and possibilities and to exchange experiences with these experiments so as to learn from each other.

Group Dynamics and Communication

A discipline that has been developing over a long period and that receives attention every so often is group dynamics. It is a hybrid of psychology, social psychology and sociology. It is about group formation, group development, communication, feedback, group processes, decision-making, conformity, group standards, identity, situational leadership and team functioning, among other things. In addition, knowledge and insight are developed about intervening in groups, about types of interventions and about levels of interventions as well as about the competencies of the intervener. The *Handboek Groepsdynamica* [Group Dynamics Handbook] by Jan Remmerswaal (1998) is well known in the Netherlands. All trainers and group workers will know the models of Watzlawick, Leary, Bales, Hersey, Blanchard, Bion, Reddin and Bateson. In the international context too, attention is being paid to communication, for example. Isaacs (1999) helps people put their feelings, fears, convictions and intentions on the table. He works towards *dialogue*: embracing different points of view; literally the art of thinking together. Wierdsma (2001) calls this the 'place of effort' (*plek der moeite*), where people reveal their convictions to each other. It refers to the idea that it takes a great effort to communicate with each other in a world of relationships, beliefs, motives, dilemmas and paradoxes. It requires deepening, reflection and making convictions explicit. On the other hand, it is well worthwhile looking for this place and devoting time and effort to it.

Learning Theories

Learning in organisations, organisational learning and learning organisations have become popular among academics, change managers and consultants over the past 20 years. This may be due to the increase in the importance of knowledge in organisations. There are many ways to give shape to that learning. Sauquet (2004) distinguishes four lines of thought. The *behaviourist school* is about designing effective education and training to impart new skills to people and teach different behaviour. In the *cognitive school* it is mainly about effective transfer of knowledge and acquisition of knowledge. These two schools stand in the tradition of the functionalist paradigm. The *pragmatic school* aims at learning through experience (Kolb, 1984; Revans, 1998). The underlying idea is that learning comes about in a cyclical process in which concrete experiences are followed by reflective observation. These reflections are then analysed and incorporated into new notions and concepts. On this basis, one can choose to experiment actively with new behaviour. This leads in turn to new experiences to reflect on. Smid (2004) and Wierdsma and Swieringa (2002) formulated rules to give shape to learning in a work context and make space for people to experiment. The *contextual school* is based on learning through experience by people who exchange interpretations and experiences with each other, experiment with new work methods and reflect on their own assumptions about human relationships and the context in which the acting takes place. The continuous process of defining and redefining organising in ambiguous situations influences the underlying cognitive structures of individuals and groups, the values and standards of actors in networks and the alternatives for action that arise in this process. This sets a process in motion in which assumptions and pictures of reality are put under pressure and formed anew, in which possibilities for learning arise and new repertoires of action take shape. The previous sections show that acting, reflecting and learning are inextricably connected with each other during processes of renewal in organisational networks. This book is mainly about learning through experience and contextual learning in interaction with others. According to Schön (1983) it is about *reflection-on-reflection-in-action*. It is about reflections on one's own thinking, acting and learning, and on the underlying assumptions that form the basis: the way you observe and interpret events, the way you define problems, how you analyse and conceptualise, and how you act and interact. It is about recognising one's own assumptions and patterns of acting and considering them fully again. In this connection Boonstra (2001) talks about 'renewing in learning', whereby learning and the renewal of dynamic systems fuse together.

Leadership

There is an enormous number of publications and books in the field of leadership. They concern conquering one's limits and the limitations and blocking of one's own self. To return to the essentials: oneself, self-knowledge and awareness of one's own values. Assink (2005) suggests that for leadership it is necessary to look yourself in the eye and ask whether this is the life you want to lead and whether you are really giving the world the best you have to offer. This asks for authentic and sensible leaders in four dimensions: spiritual, mental, emotional and physical leadership. Call it spirituality in a business context, call it inner leadership, call it new fairness. For Van Loon (2006), the essentials

for (new) leadership are: vision and enthusiasm, authenticity, rationality, listening, intuition and relationship with the body; the crucial role of dialogue; steering according to values and social engagement. 'Know thyself' seems to be the essence of leadership. With the subjective and interpretative approach, leadership is about keeping a continuous strategic conversation going (Van der Heijden, 2005). In this strategic conversation, trends are discussed, scenarios are worked through and meanings are exchanged to understand the present and give shape to the future.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERVENTIONS

In this section we describe the basic principles underlying the repertoire of interventions we are describing here aimed at meaning and interaction. These eleven basic principles arose during the process of compiling this book. So for us they are a provisional overview, but it is the start of a better understanding and of a more complete overview of the common basic principles.

These basic principles incorporate assumptions that we will make explicit. If these assumptions are not present or not relevant, their effectiveness will be extremely limited or absent. Table 1.2 lists the basic principles.

Limited Ability to Make Reality

All interventions assume that reality can only be made to a limited extent, that it is close to impossible as change manager or consultant to make or create the reality of others. 'Makeability' is based on the notion that one actor is the acting subject who sees other actors as objects to change and who can 'make' their opinions and behaviour. Changes in that case are defined and fixed in advance. Then the change agents get to work to realise those changes in other people. The interventions we are talking about are based on a limited idea of makeability. In fact, they are not based on the thought as expressed in the previous sentences. It is not a subject/object idea, but a subject/subject idea: the object talks back and is itself also a subject. Meaning is given, action is taken or not, influence

Table 1.2 Basic principles of intervening in looking for meaning in interaction

Basic principles for interventions that search for meaning in interaction
• Limited ability to make reality
• Positive portrayal of man in terms of growth and responsibility
• Combining thinking and acting, and diagnosing and intervening
• Changing is a collective action
• Context of ambiguity and intersubjectivity
• Conditions of space, freedom and respect
• Simplicity and beauty
• Giving sense, giving meaning and interaction
• Reality is layered and multiple
• Well thought-out and well-considered acting with intentions
• Equality and avoiding defensiveness

is exerted or felt, defence is undertaken or openness is displayed in an interaction and communication process between people. All actors are subjects and they create a reality together. That reality can also be disagreeable – for instance, arguing or offending and insulting. But it can also be pleasant, for instance inspiring and searching for synergy. Then makeability gets another meaning. If a subject wants to create something with another subject who also wants to create that something, that is a perfect context to create or to make the something.

Positive Portrayal of Man in Terms of Growth and Responsibility

All interventions are based on a positive portrayal of humanity: people want to achieve something based on their aspirations and challenges. In addition, they want to become increasingly better, they are self-critical and aim at learning and growing. The popular saying 'People don't have to be ill to get better' is very apt here. You can learn something anywhere; you always pick something up; every street corner holds the potential for surprise. The interventions are also based on responsible people. People are responsible for the way they think and act, for their thoughts and their deeds. They have that awareness and are therefore critical and reflective about what they think and do. They do not shift responsibilities on to others and do not blame others for what they say or do themselves. And they do the right things. This is an idealistic portrayal. It works as a perspective, for many interventions are aimed precisely at bringing that ideal closer and realising and developing that ideal in people. So it is not about surviving in undesirable circumstances, but about creating the future.

Combining Thinking and Doing

All interventions have the intention of strengthening the relationship between thinking and doing: do what you say, say what you do. This is a far cry from situations in which people fill all the space and time in meetings with words, without attaching any implication or consequence to those words, and very removed from situations in which people mainly act unconsciously or just do something, without reflecting (beforehand or afterwards). If thinking and doing are closely connected, we call that authenticity. People who act authentically are often accorded great credibility. They become transparent in what they want, what they stand for, why they do some things and not others. They also aim to act and do in such a way that this clarifies their own thinking and makes it credible.

Changing is a Collective Action

These interventions are not about Jack Welch or other so-called great leaders who have transformed large organisations and brought about huge waves of renewal single-handed. Here it is about the basic principle that realising change is always the result or consequence of many actors together giving shape to changes. They not only mutually adjust the contents of the change to each other, but also the approach and who does what. And they make explicit their presuppositions and points of departure. They become transparent to

each other in what they want, how they go about it and how they stand themselves. They can think and act collectively.

Context of Ambiguity and Intersubjectivity

All interventions are based on the idea that contexts and situations are full of uncertainties and ambiguities. And it is not about reducing those uncertainties or eliminating them, but about accepting them and learning to deal with them. This makes situations immediately ambiguous and open to more than one explanation, for all actors perceive the situation in their own way. They accept that. So the implication is that intersubjectivity is also necessary. The aim is to exchange perceptions of reality in an open dialogue and thus to arrive at shared or unshared realities and meanings. It requires great efforts from all actors to commit to each other, to talk at cross-purposes as closely as possible and yet create a common meaning.

Conditions of Space, Freedom and Respect

The interventions are based on a number of conditions, which we summarise under the headings: space, freedom and respect. Space is about the psychological and physical space people have to say what they think, and to do what they believe in. But also to look for what they have not yet found, to be uncertain about what they do not know (yet) and not to commit themselves to things they are not ready for (yet). Freedom is about people's choices which refer back to fundamental questions: What do you want and what don't you want? Respect is about your attitude and that of others, that you can say what you think, that you are taken seriously, that others will not abuse that and that you are careful in everything. It refers to basic values in human contact and communication.

Simplicity and Beauty

The interventions have two characteristics that are slightly more hidden. 'Simplicity' refers to the use of (sometimes centuries-old) rituals, folklore, celebrations, mythical actions, heroes. These interventions appeal to the most fundamental human motives and needs. That is why they can sometimes affect people so deeply and so essentially. Simplicity immediately shows what the essence is, what it is about. It hides nothing and one is not distracted by irrelevancies, redundancies or complications.

Beauty inspires. It creates visions of what is better, and gives courage to pursue it, even if that involves making sacrifices. Inspiration and aspiration go hand in hand. Art pieces consist of work done by people who are capable of coming to new aspirations and developing engagement to pursue those aspirations. This is called beauty. Interventions can have beauty: '(How lovely) . . . to do it that way. (How beautiful) . . . to tackle it like that. (How nice) . . . to say it in those words. (How beautiful) . . . to give shape to it that way.' A holistic approach is then often the most obvious. No delineating, isolating, dividing or departmentalising, but considering the whole and everything in connection and setting in motion.

Giving Sense, Giving Meaning and Interaction

The interventions are aimed at raising questions about giving sense: Why do we want this and do we do this, both at an individual level and at team and organisation level? Nothing goes without saying, wayside shrines are demolished. Words turn out to be aids with significant limitations. The meanings that people attach to the words, to the language, to body language and to the context, form the world in which they live and work. We still don't understand the process of giving meaning properly, but we certainly do understand quite well how important giving meaning is in human communication. The interventions explicitly provide space for that. One essential element of all interventions is the fact that interaction is stimulated and intended. They do yield a lot of interaction, discussion and meeting. And produce relatively little paper.

Reality is Layered and Multiple

The interventions see reality as a composite of layers and interaction between layers. There are facts and things, but also visions and thoughts. There are words and sentences, but also meanings, presuppositions and assumptions. One person looks for the causal maps, the underlying patterns or the underlying values. The other looks for the thread, the history or the obvious. The assumption of the layeredness of reality, however, is communal: there is more than we see or observe at first glance. And it is about learning to see from those other layers and lines of approach. Those lines of approach refer to multiplicity. You can look at reality in many ways. And if you do it in a way that is somewhat unusual for you, you see new things. And all the lines of approach together often turn up a complex picture.

Well Considered and with Intentions

The interventions are well considered because they often try to realise or develop particular intentions in a creative and innovative fashion. That is why the interventions cannot be conceived of as instruments. An instrumental view breaks them away from the intentions and values they ought to be embedded in. If you separate the instrument from its intentions, what remains will probably have lost its efficacy. Managers and their consultants then choose the Open Space method, for instance, because they do not have any better idea themselves or because they do not dare say what they think and they hope that the persons involved will bring it up themselves. The result is an unfocused meeting; people do not understand its purpose and become frustrated – for example, because of the lack of expected steerage. If an intervention is used instrumentally, the inventors note that people run off with their thing and clamour about misuse. Not only must the intentions and underlying values remain linked to the intervention, the intervener too is expected to know the basic principles and working methods and use them honestly. It is actually impossible to disentangle the intervention, underlying values, intentions and the intervener.

Equality and Avoiding Defensiveness

One-sided control thinking is still a breeding ground for defensive patterns in organisations. It is something change managers and consultants know only too well: they encounter it regularly. But what also happens is that they can also arouse defensiveness through their wish and desire to steer and control the intervention and the intended outcomes or effects. The idea that one person changes someone else calls that up easily, just like the thought of the intervener being responsible for the change and the people concerned not having to contribute at all themselves and to be in a position to keep themselves apart. It is about creating situations in which people together get a grip on the situation and do not have to make each other weak in order to be strong themselves. By being honest and open and not protecting others from negative feelings, one shows that one considers the other to be an equal. The intervener himself must therefore recognise possible defensiveness while he is acting, and not do so retrospectively. Complaining about the defensiveness of the customer, the client, employees or the organisation is a fairly defensive reaction in itself (De Man, 2003).

THIS BOOK AS EXAMPLE OF AN INTERVENTION

Getting an article published often takes a long time. Authors write about a topic they are interested in and professionally involved in. The article is finally written; then a journal has to be found to publish it. For months the author hears nothing. The article is discussed by an editorial panel, assessed and reviewed by experts. Articles are seldom approved immediately. One of the editors drafts a letter with comments and suggestions, based on expert judgement and the panel's discussion. The author receives the letter. Usually one is upset because of the profusion of what is not right, 'significant additions with respect to the existing literature', some 'rigorous rewriting of the definition of the problem' and 'more implications for actual practice'. Verbal communication between author and editorial panel is unusual. It is a protracted process with considerable loss of motivation and a great deal of writing and correction by the author and the editors and reviewers. This is possibly a caricature of the process. It is not always like that. But we wanted to approach the process of creating this book differently and apply the contents to its process of creation.

During 2005 we conceived of the idea of creating a special issue for a popular journal in the Netherlands. It suits our own interests well in gathering and collecting knowledge in this field. We are also curious as to what is available and what the experiences have been to date. We discuss ideas and topics, approach potential authors and discuss possible topics with them. These discussions result in new names and some interested parties turn up unprompted. We make a plan that puts ourselves and all authors on a set time line, but also in a clear perspective. The special issue will be presented at a conference in June 2006 at which all the authors will present workshops about their topics for interested participants. This all makes it easy to plan when the texts have to be at the printer and binder. We plan a pre-conference with the authors. That will give them the opportunity to get feedback on their drafts, give feedback to others and match their own contributions to others. It gives us the opportunity to get an overview of what we have. The texts are collected in advance and distributed to everyone. At the pre-conference one author is given

the floor; two others have examined his contribution specifically. All contributions are discussed for a whole day. There are tips, additions, changes. All the people involved have a clear vision of the entire special issue. Commitment to the realisation of the project evolves and motivation arises for completing the contributions. A few people drop out because they cannot keep up with the pace. We are busy making notes the whole day, notes that resulted in this opening chapter of this book. Jac Geurts gets additional ideas for the epilogue. Now it is May 2006 and we are writing the text. Most contributions have been completed and are of good quality. We made this special issue in seven months. The conference is bound to be interesting. Why don't we continue with this? Do a supplementary special issue in a couple of years' time? A continuing overview of new interventions? Most of the authors relished the project. We did have to slog away at it, but there were clear perspectives and we were well motivated. Above all, we saw enthusiasm and a great deal of interaction and giving of meaning. In the autumn of 2006 we could easily make a book of it. That is what we did and the result is in your hands now.

CONTENTS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This book has two introductions that place the interventions in the book in a broader framework. Fourteen contributions follow, elucidating specific interventions from a subjective and interpretative approach. Besides the methodical principles, examples from practice are also used to illustrate the interventions. These interventions are followed by two chapters with reflections on how change managers and consultants act. The book concludes with a critical reflection and a challenge to extend our experiences and knowledge further on interventions that take interaction and giving meaning as their point of departure.

Introduction and Theoretical Position

The book starts with two general introductions that place the interventions described in a broader context. This opening chapter by *Jaap Boonstra* and *Léon de Caluwé* is followed by *Adriaan Bekman's* chapter about the methodology of evidence. This methodology is embedded in the fields of knowledge described previously. The methodology aims at the development, changing and renewal of organisations. The key elements of the methodology of evidence are presented, after which possibilities for action are described to inquire and change the social reality of organising.

Storytelling and Inquiring Realities

François Breuer describes a narrative method in which people bring symbolics to life by telling stories. The stories represent the past and the unique experiences of the tellers and likewise represent new possibilities in the future. Telling stories is about a communal inquiry by the people involved. *Tineke Abma* provides an illustration from real life about how storytelling can form the basis for a dialogue in which mutual understanding comes about and conflicting viewpoints can be combined.

Learning Histories and Making History

Discovering stories is part of the method of a learning history. This intervention method brings people together who want to reconstruct the history of an organisation to learn from it and who want to make history together in the future. *Gerhard Smid* together with colleagues describes the background and the principles of this intervention method and shows how the method can contribute to knowledge development and change. *Leen van Driel* gives a practical description of how the method is used to give form and content to a renewal process in a school for secondary education.

Appreciative Inquiry and Realising Renewal

Translating past experiences to the present and to the future is one of the characteristics of future conferences. *Gemma van der Ploeg* and *Annemieke Stoppelenburg* describe future conferences as an open and action-oriented process in which interested parties involved in a complex problem search for what connects them in their vision of the future. The method of appreciative inquiry is directed towards investigating, imagining, changing and continuous renewal in organisational networks. *Luk Dewulf* and *Luc Verheijen* examine the backgrounds, working methods and action dilemmas of appreciative inquiry and describe a real-life example of how this method was used to bring about a process of renewal in a chemical company. Bringing about renewal can also be supported by making an open space in which ideas are exchanged and cooperation is encouraged to tackle difficult problems and to give shape to change. *Carla Vliex* describes the basic principles and effective components of working with open space as a large-scale system intervention and illustrates this with examples from practice.

Looking for Patterns and Possibilities for Renewal

When it comes to changing organisations, we often encounter underlying patterns that make it difficult to effect change. In that case it can be meaningful to examine these patterns and look for possibilities for renewal. *Hans Vermaak* used system dynamics as a basis for presenting the method of causal diagrams which provides insight into tough problems and enables interventions in those problems by facilitating interaction processes. *Hans de Sonnaville* chooses a similar approach, but he starts from social constructionism where it is more about providing insight into thought patterns and social constructions. *Dick van Ginkel* and *Mariette Thijssen* choose group dynamics as a point of departure for mapping out differences in underlying values and making them a subject of discussion in groups.

Learning to Reflect and Change

People who work on change can learn from it if they reflect on their own actions in those changes. Organising and changing then come together in a collective process of reflection and giving meaning. *Brechtje Kessener* and *Katrien Termeer* show four methods for

organising this reflective learning and illustrate their methodology of in-depth learning with a description of the practice at a ministry. To encourage reflective learning, conditions can be created that make it possible for people in organisations to deal better with diversity in thinking and acting. *André Wierdsma* works this out in a chapter about a methodology about collective learning processes in companies.

Reflecting on Acting and the Pursuit of Beauty

Change managers and consultants can develop their professionalism by reflecting on what drives them and what they do. *Julien Haffmans* wrote a personal reflection on the patterns in her own actions and on the role she wants to play as a guide in change. Do aesthetic considerations have any role to play in the actions of change managers and consultants? *Matthieu Weggeman* and *Irene Lammers* argue that beauty should be used as one of the leading principles where organising and changing are concerned.

Critical Reflection and a Look Ahead

This book is not finished. Our experience and knowledge grow through the acting itself and by us reflecting on what we do. *Jac Geurts* looks back on the contributions in this book and makes a number of incisive observations that provoke and challenge us to continue with experimenting and learning from interventions that generate meaning in interactions.

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