“CCO in Practice:” Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO)
Pre-Conference, Rotterdam, July 1-2, 2014

Imagine what could happen when practitioners share issues they face with a group of CCO-friendly scholars. What new angles of perceiving their issues would professionals get? Which new areas of research would scholars discover? How can our scholarship inform organizational practice? This pre-conference will try to achieve answers to these questions.

“CCO in Practice” provides an opportunity for CCO scholars- and CCO friendly scholars- to discuss and reflect on organizational communication challenges with practitioners. We plan to include a methodology workshop, focusing on video analysis on the first day. The second day of this preconference will be dedicated to bring together scholars and practitioners interested in a communication-centered perspective. Together, we can explore the translation between CCO theories and practical issues.

To prepare our discussion, we have asked a CCO-friendly practitioner, Peter Knoers, to provide us with three “cases” describing organizational challenges that the community currently struggles to understand (see an introduction from Peter and the description of the three cases below). Practitioners are asking for new ways to analyze and intervene to address these challenges. Please choose one of these scenarios to react to from a CCO perspective. What could a CCO lens say about this problem? What kinds of insights could be gained? To what extent could CCO thinking be applied to formulate potential “solutions?”

Please submit your reaction to one of the scenarios below in a short essay of 800 words by March 14th. Email your essay to David Novak at novak@eshcc.eur.nl. We will respond to your submission by March 31st.

The specific location for the pre-conference, in Rotterdam, will be announced in the coming weeks.

Questions may be directed to coordinators Mark van Vuuren (University Twente, H.A.vanVuuren@utwente.nl), Amanda Porter (VU-Amsterdam, a.j.porter@vu.nl) or David R. Novak (Erasmus University Rotterdam, novak@eshcc.eur.nl)
Organisation development from a CCO perspective?
A practitioner’s quest

Peter Knoers
Senior Partner, HVR Group

It seems as if regular organisation and communication theories and models are increasingly inadequate to analyse and influence the reality of today’s organisations. The dynamics of change in and around organisations grow stronger by the day, whereas most organisation concepts are built on the premise of stability and continuity. In a quest for new paradigms my colleagues and I have looked at what CCO can bring to the table. We already use CCO related methods in our analysis and consulting practices, but are still far away from a more comprehensive approach. Therefore, it would be very interesting to explore with scholars what a CCO perspective could bring to some of the practical challenges we encounter. But first let me introduce myself.

My name is Peter Knoers. I am the senior partner of an OrgCom consulting agency in the Netherlands called HVR Group (www.hvrgroup.nl). I have been part of the OrgCom field for almost 35 years now, both in larger companies and government agencies as well as on the consulting side of the table. And I’m still learning every single day.

Our team at HVR Group is dedicated to finding new perspectives on the construction and development of organizations that better match today’s realities, as well as enhance our understanding of how organisation and communication “coincide”. We are not alone in this quest. A growing number of OrgCom professionals are looking for new methods of analysis and intervention, since the old ones no longer seem to work. So, let’s talk. I summarized three issues we encounter in the following cases. I hope to stimulate your thoughts in this issue, and that it may inspire you as well. I hope for a discussion which helps to gain insight in future practitioner’s use of CCO concepts. First of all, let me try to explain the challenges of today’s organizations.

The Organisation Paradox

Organisations are confronted with a volatile world and lots of important changes. Increasing and ever changing customer demands. Outcries for public transparency. A media revolution that puts every opinion just a mouse click away. The further emancipation of work forces supported by education and development all around the globe. Extremely short product life cycles. Competitors starting in attics or garages that grow global in no time. In short, change is everywhere. Any time. Any place.

Most organisation theories and models are not created to cope with change. On the contrary, most see stability as the normal, daily state of affairs and change as the exception. Special change programs and specialized change agents are put in place to help organisations move from one state of stability to the other (“Unfreeze-Change-Freeze”). While in reality change has become the normal state of affairs and stability the exception. This has to do with the specific way in which we have learned to look at organisations. We call this The Organisation Paradox. To get a grip of this paradox let me take you back to how most organisations are established.

Take for instance a person who wants to start a bakery or a teacher who decides to start their own school. At first, this is just a matter of getting the proper material in place. For the baker that would mean flour, yeast, water, other ingredients, one or two ovens, a place to bake and to store, a place to sell the bread, et cetera. Perhaps some people to help. And then, of course, lots of bread loving
customers. The teacher needs a building or at least a classroom, blackboards (perhaps even digital ones nowadays), paper and stuff, tables and chairs. Then, perhaps a colleague or two. Or even more. And, of course, parents and children that believe in the way of teaching.

In the beginning a lot of organizing is needed to get the show on the road. And then - in some mostly unnoticed moment - something changes. The movement changes into a ‘thing’. The verb becomes a noun. Organizing becomes Organisation. Change becomes stability. In that same moment an important change of focus happens. Attention shifts from the optimization of the process to the future and continuity of ‘the organisation’. What started as a means to an end (baking and selling bread, teaching children) ends up as the end itself. Organisation professionals focus on things like efficiency and efficacy, on structure and systems, on decision-making models. Communication professionals focus on organisation identity or brand, on reputation or corporate image, et cetera. In all these activities, the future, continuity and prosperity of ‘the organisation’ dominates their minds and strategies instead of the original goal.

Almost all organisation theories and models take ‘the organisation’ as the centerpoint of their ideas. They take the organisation for granted and rarely step back to look at the broader picture: What was it that we wanted to achieve in the first place? And is an organization (this organization) still the best way to reach that achievement?

The Organisation Paradox helps us remember that an organisation is just a means to an end. It helps us take a step back. To look at ‘organizing’ again, instead of merely at the organisation. This leads to refreshing new insights. Putting the organisation itself up for discussion is not always easy, nor is it popular. But it creates new opportunities for organizing and communicating that we now tend to overlook. And it is better suited for a reality in which change is the daily, normal state of affairs.

**Challenges: Three cases**

In our consulting work we try to help companies and government agencies to face their challenges by taking a different perspective. We go back to The Organizing and refrain from taking The Organisation as a given. This is not very common in a society that is dominated by organisations. And it sometimes takes a lot of effort to help our clients ‘let go’ of their ideas. Creating organisations is a common reflex in modern society: “If you have a problem, create an organisation to deal with it.” Can it be done otherwise? We think it can. And we think it must. I present three different kinds of challenges that we come across nowadays. And we’re curious about your views.

1. **Construction of organisations**

The reflex to construct an organisation is too common. In the Netherlands for instance, government has decided to make municipalities responsible for Youth Care, the care for children with educational or developmental problems. A long chain of institutions is already involved in this youth care issue: schools, mental health institutions, doctors and hospitals, police, justice, neighbourhood watches and of course the children themselves, their parents and their social network. So how should municipalities go about this new task? What we see is the common Organisation Reflex: they build a new Youth Care Desk (with Director, building, logo, et cetera). Instead of finding new and innovative ways to let all those institutions work together for the benefit of the children (by means of better communication for instance) they create yet another organisation. The question thus becomes: What alternatives can a CCO perspective suggest to the organization reflex of creating new institutions?
2. Temporary organizations

More and more organisations already have a temporary status. Consortia of companies that build bridges or highways for instance. Or taskforces for large events (e.g. Olympics, Political Summits) that form a temporary chain of co-working institutions. But it is still very complicated to create those chains in such a way that every participant can play its role most effectively. Most temporary organisations look like normal, stable organisations. With the same command and control steering systems. And with all the symptoms of their not - temporary counterparts. Are there other ways to “construct without freezing”?

3. Organisational Decline

If there is construction, there also has to be destruction. It is not very popular to think about the end of an organisation. It does not fit into the common, mostly implicit premise of an organisation as an end instead of as a means to an end. But what if we did take organizational destruction into account as a positive intervention? When the time has come to lay down an organizational “shell” that has outlived its function, wouldn’t it be better to think about how future organizing could benefit from the remnants of this organisation. About what could and should be continued and if so, in what new organisational construct? Up to now we wait until an organisation collapses, sometimes long after it’s expiration date. Why? And at what cost? Are there other ways? Should we not be less afraid of organizational death?