

TOWARDS A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LARGE SCALE INTERVENTIONS

Robert P. Bood¹, Thijs H. Homan, Marius M. Rietdijk & Jacco C. van Uden
Center for Organizational Learning and Change, Nyenrode University

ABSTRACT

With the rise of the 'Learning Organization' came a plethora of methods, instruments, interventions and techniques claimed to enhance the learning capabilities of organization. One such category of methods is referred to as Large Scale Interventions (LSIs). This paper discusses LSIs based on some preliminary findings of a study of a LSI, which is currently midway its implementation. In doing so we take a rather critical perspective on LSIs by looking at the distribution of power when building 'Learning Organizations' through LSIs. Some of the intriguing questions we discuss are 'who is dominating the organizational learning process?' and 'whose learning stands central?'. LSI-theorists continually stress the open, participative and 'bottom-up' nature of their approaches but do LSIs really fulfill what LSI-theorists so emphatically stress?

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the age of the 'Learning Organization'. For years now, Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* is one the best-sold management books all over the world and available in tens of languages. In the wake of his footprints, many management scholars have written their own books that promise to guide organizations in 'building Learning Organizations'. Increasingly top-managers of organizations officially declare that 'they' have decided to become a 'Learning Organization'. To indicate that they take the matter seriously, they direct their managers to the appropriate courses; sometimes they do not even hesitate at transferring those who do not (intend to) cooperate. Not infrequently, some groups of employees welcome these initiatives with great enthusiasm and actively collaborate while others take such announcements for granted or even react rather cynically.

With the rise of the 'Learning Organization' came a (still growing) plethora of methods, instruments, interventions and techniques claimed by its creators to enhance the learning capabilities of organizations. One such category of methods is referred to as 'Large Scale Interventions' (LSIs). LSI is the generic term for a host of methods that aim to bring about large-scale organizational change by involving every organizational member (see e.g., Bunker and Alban, 1997). The present working paper reports on an empirical study of such a LSI in a department of the Dutch Ministry of Transport, which is currently halfway its implementation. The LSI in question is now in its second and final year of (extensive) support by a team of three consultants. The aim of the LSI is 'to strengthen the organization' which is deemed necessary by the director of the division to which the department belongs given (current) noticed organizational problems and (expected) strains

¹ Corresponding author: R.P. Bood, Centre for Organisational Learning and Change, Nyenrode University, Straatweg 25, 3621 BG Breukelen, The Netherlands, Phone: +31 346 291235, Fax: + 31 346 291296, e-mail: bood@nyenrode.nl

exerted by its environment. Up till now three so-called Large-Scale Events (LSEs) have taken place, the management of the department has been extensively coached, and a multitude of actions have been initiated by members of the department. Although the director of the division has stated that he is enthusiastic about current changes in the department, now in the second year of the LSI he demands concrete results.

With the purpose to fathom organizational processes LSIs induce and enclose, this paper takes a rather critical (and therefore deliberately partial) perspective on LSIs based on our findings obtained thus far. Doing justice to the nature of a working paper, the next section loosely presents a handful of theories and remarks that share a concern about the distribution of power in organizations. We then go into some characteristics of LSIs, outline the design of the LSI we study and shortly introduce the organization in which it took place. Next, we present some preliminary findings of the unstructured interviews we held preceding the first LSEs that signified the start of the LSI to the majority of organizational members; these findings throw some light on organizational life at that time. Subsequently, we summarize some of our observations of the LSI and the LSEs that have taken place. Finally, we critically reflect upon the LSI by answering the questions raised in section 2.

2. WHO IS DOMINATING THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING PROCESS?

We have chosen to take a rather critical perspective on LSIs in this paper. The reasons for this are basically two-fold. Firstly, the literature on LSI breathes an atmosphere of taken-for-granted 'rightness' of the postulated approaches. Its authors oppose against what they call 'traditional approaches to organizational change' which are said to be 'top-down' as a result of which 'commitment and ownership of problems and required changes' are missing and 'organizational changes often fail' (e.g., Bunker and Alban, 1997; Jacobs, 1994; Levine and Mohr, 1998). Most publications on methods of LSI are either written by inventors of LSI methods or by consultants who make a living out of it. None of them seriously questions underlying assumptions and points of departure. Instead there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence that proves the effectiveness of LSI as a tool for organizational change and stimulating organizational learning. However, in the spirit of Critical Theory, academics have an obligation to reflect upon the assumptions on which managerial practices are, often implicitly, build (see e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Our perspective follows from the loose set of theories and remarks that encloses our next point.

Secondly, several authors have emphatically pointed to ethical and political issues with respect to organizational learning (or processes of organizational practice or innovation in general), both on an organizational and an inter-organizational level. On an organizational level Sims and McAuley (1995: 9), for example, raise the following set of critical questions in context of organizational learning:

'whose learning are we talking about – who is allowed or encouraged to learn; whose power is dominant – who has the right to define what is worth learning and what is relevant; 'whose organization – who is seriously treated as a stakeholder. These are an essential part of all thinking about learning in organizations. Any discussion of management learning which takes them as unimportant is likely to fall naively into managerialist assumptions . . .'

In the context of control mechanisms, Perrow (1986: 129) distinguishes three types of control in organizations: 'direct, fully obtrusive ones such as giving orders, direct surveillance, and rules and regulations; bureaucratic ones such as specialization and standardization and hierarchy, which are fairly unobtrusive; and fully unobtrusive ones'. Building upon Perrow's classification, Martin *et al.* (1998) distinguishes three ideal types of organizations: the traditional bureaucracy, the normative organization, and the feminist organization. Bureaucratic organizations enclose Perrow's first two types of control. Normative organizations are characterized by Perrow's third, fully unobtrusive form of control. The latter rely on the internalization of values and achieve control by employees' self-policing. With respect to such organizations Martin *et al.* (1998: 431) note that:

'Researchers disagree about the desirability of normative forms of control. Some praise the harmony, loyalty, and productivity that are seen to issue from value congruence, while others argue that normative control strategies, in spite of their apparent emphasis on more egalitarian, participative ways of doing business, are in fact dangerously effective ways of asserting and enforcing managerial control of employees' behavior through cooptation and false consciousness.'

The unobtrusive control strategies exerted by normative organizations come close to the processes of socialization and indoctrination Mintzberg (1983) describes. These processes are, often with great subtlety, exerted by organizations to evoke identification with the 'ideology of the organization' with the purpose to strengthen loyalty to the organization. As Martin *et al.* note, normative organizations keep, in a modified and implicit way, many characteristics of their bureaucratic counterpart in place but in a less visible way.

Feminist organizations differ fundamentally from the two foregoing. Above all they seek to foster employee well being, rather than maximization of organizational efficiency or performance. The individual employee, not the organization, comes in the first place, which becomes visible when considering the freedom to express emotions in organizations (amongst other things). Martin *et al.* notes that the three types of organizations they distinguish differ in their orientations toward emotional issues. Emotions are generally condoned in bureaucratic and normative types of organizations insofar as they are instrumental to the organization's purpose; this can be considered 'emotional labor'. In feminist organizations, however, emotionality should be enacted to encourage the well being of the individual (at the workplace or in general) and community-building in the first place. This may coincide with the instrumental gain of the organization but need not. Based on a study of The Body Shop Martin *et al.* (1998) conclude that the line between the freedom to express (bounded) emotionality and emotional exploitation is often rather thin.

On an inter-organizational level, Burgoyne and Jackson (1997) draw attention to the processes of institutionalization of management learning in organizations. They argue that as a result of these processes organizations become dominated by an unitarist perspective in which the role of management learning is to serve the organization's instrumental goals (*cf.* Morgan, 1986). Indeed, the accelerating pace with which the group of 'Learning Organizations' grows, shows many similarities with processes of institutionalization as described by DiMaggio & Powell (1983) and studied by, among others, Tolbert and Zucker (1983): small groups of early adopters introduce organizational innovations after mature consideration and fully or largely aware of its implications, while large groups of followers adopt the same innovations considerably less deliberately and for different reasons, for

example, to enhance their legitimacy among stakeholders (i.e. ‘mimetic isomorphism’). In discussing the implications for social theory DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 157) point to the power elites are able to exert at key turning points such that they ‘often get their way’. Elites are often able to set premises and define the norms and standards which channel behavior. In addition, at ‘points of critical intervention’ they succeed in defining appropriate models of organizational structure and policy which then go unquestioned for years to come. To counter the dominant unitarist perspective in management learning Burgoyne and Jackson (1997) propose to replace the unitarist perspective by a pluralistic perspective that values the diversity of individual and group (with often conflicting) interests and goals.

The foregoing short overview of theories poses and raises a number of intriguing and intertwined questions with respect to Learning Organizations initiatives such as LSIs. Above all, who is dominating the process of organizational learning? More in particular, in the wording of Sims and McAuley (1995: 9), ‘who has the right to define what is worth learning and what is relevant?’. Moreover, who’s learning and goals stand central, those of individual employees or those of the organization? Does a LSI (implicitly or explicitly) promote a unitarist perspective or does it (actively) values and encourages multiplicity of views. Furthermore, can LSIs be said to be ‘in fact dangerously effective ways of asserting and enforcing managerial control of employees’ behavior through cooptation and false consciousness’ (see Martin *et al.*, 1998: 431)? Or, in different wording, are obtrusive control strategies replaced by unobtrusive ones? Finally, closely related to this, to what extent is individual emotional well being a true concern during an LSI or are emotions only condoned insofar they are instrumental to the organization’s purpose? In short, are LSIs in line with the open, participative, bottom-up, etc. nature of the approaches so emphatically stressed by LSI-theorists?

3. LARGE SCALE INTERVENTIONS

‘Large-Scale Interventions’ (LSIs) is the generic term for a host of methods that aim to bring about large-scale organizational change by involving, in principle, ‘the whole system, internal and external, in the change process’ (Bunker and Alban, 1997). LSI-methods come with a variety of lively names such as *Future Search* (Weisbord, 1987; Weisbord and Janoff, 1995), *Real Time Strategic Change* (Jacobs, 1994), *Search Conference* (Emery and Purser, 1996), and *Open Space Technology* (Owen, 1992). Bunker and Alban (1997) review twelve of such methods under the LSI-heading. These methods have largely been developed by consultants who were disappointed by the many problems that came with the ‘common’ or ‘traditional’ approaches to organizational change (Jakobs, 1994; Bunker and Alban, 1997; Levine and Morh, 1998). LSI-authors in particular react against top-down approaches wherein top-management decides upon which, when and how organizational changes need to be made. Top-down change is apt to create resistance and misunderstanding, even if the changes are thought out by a ‘representative’ group of employees. Instead authors on LSI stress the advantages of involving large groups in processes of organizational change. Levine and Mohr (1998: 306) formulate these as follows:

‘The traditional rationale for using large-group processes is that (a) people support what they help to create (thus reducing resistance to change) and (b) the diversity of knowledge mobilized

<i>Create community:</i>	fostering an environment where individuals come together as part of something larger than themselves that they created and believe in
<i>Build and maintain a common database:</i>	a common understanding of strategic issues informs the discretion of people at all levels so that they can make wise decisions, individually and collectively
<i>Preferred future:</i>	a collective “image of potential” for the future forms the basis for action today
<i>Reality is a key driver:</i>	a continual focus on the simultaneous and sometimes conflicting realities which exist in the internal and external environments of the organization
<i>Empowerment and participation:</i>	engaging the entire organization in ways that lead to ownership of and commitment to a shared purpose and future direction
<i>Real time:</i>	simultaneous planning and implementation of individual, group and organization-wide changes

Table 1
Principles of Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs, 1994)

through such large-scale involvement leads to greater creativity and innovation in both the technical and social system arenas (Bunker and Alban, 1997). A less emphasized but more significant benefit may well be that the very act of the participative design of the organization’s future technical and social systems ensures that the *necessary* changes in attitudes, skills, beliefs, and behaviors begin to evolve concurrently. In our own practice, we have repeatedly found, as have others (Jacobs, 1994), that when people are asked to collaborate in the creation of future realities – if their activities are structured to evoke the use of new skills and behaviors – the participants cannot help but be changed by the experience.’ [italics added; note the word ‘necessary’]

Most LSI methods consist of a set of guiding ‘principles’ (see for example *Table 1*) and a detailed recipe on how the LSI should proceed. Central in LSIs stand so-called Large-Scale Events (LSEs), large conferences in which, preferably, all organizational members are present. Participants are typically sitting in conscientiously composed small groups around tables, each table equipped with a flip-over. The conferences typically last two or three days and proceed following a tight and carefully designed time schedule (e.g., twenties minutes answering, ten minutes to report, etc.). Groups are asked to answer and report on focused questions (e.g., ‘what are current strengths of the organization?’, ‘where are you feeling proud of?’), to formulate questions in reaction to speeches (opinions, vision) held by the management or stakeholders, or formulate courses of needed action.

During the LSI studied in the first year two LSEs were held (one in March, the other in May): the first was a *Future Search Conference*, the second a *Real Time Strategic Change* conference. The former is oriented towards the future, while the latter has a strong focus on resolving current problems and developing action plans (see Bunker and Alban, 1992). Moreover *Real Time Strategic Change* conferences can handle larger groups (up to more than 2,000 people) than *Future Search Conferences* (maximum said to be approximately 70). Both LSEs were designed by the consultants and a so-called design team consisting of fifteen employees from all parts of the organization. The design team is said to be a

'microcosm' of the organization, in the sense that it is representative for thoughts, ideas, feelings alive in the organization.

A Future Search Conference aims to explore potential agreement between people with divergent views and interests and, based on this, develops a common, ideal future. An important principle of *Future Search* states that during discussions participants should emphasize points of agreement, instead of haggling about differences. Also, groups should not try to solve any (potential) problems they note but stop with their identification. A basic idea behind the conference is that enthusiasm and momentum ('energy') built during the conference will stimulate participants to implement any necessary follow-up action. Weisbord and Janoff (1995), the designers of *Future Search*, believe that 'change involves the whole person: mind, body, and spirit'.

The basic idea behind *Real Time Strategic Change (RTSC)* is that by simultaneously carrying out planning and implementation of individual, group and organization-wide changes (= 'real time'), people commit themselves to strategic changes and action is taken everywhere in the organization. The model behind *RTSC* states that resistance to change (R) will be overcome when sufficient dissatisfaction (D) with the present situation exists, everyone has a clear, positive and shared vision of what is possible in the future (V), and when they know what first steps (F) they have to take to move in the direction of the vision: $D \times V \times F > R$. The main principles of *RTSC* are summarized in *Table 1*. The *RTSC* in the LSI we studied lasted two days and was attended by approximately 125 people. An important goal of the first day was the creation of a 'common database' by widely sharing organizational information, like the necessity of change, organizational strengths and weaknesses, frustrations, etc. Jacobs (1994) argues that the 'common database' enables the group to act with 'one heart and one mind'. Participants were further asked to listen and react upon opinions expressed by external stakeholders (clients, suppliers, etc.), the vision articulated by the department's management team, and a speech of director of the division. The second day started when the management team presented their modified vision, changed on basis of participants' reactions on the first day. This vision was then referred to as the department's 'shared vision'. The following program focused on improving cooperation within the boundaries set by the shared vision. Participants were asked to give each other feedback on the functioning of their departments/areas (called 'giving Valentines'), think about a desired future and identify necessary action.

The LSI we studied took place within a regional branch of the Dutch Ministry of Transport. The department in question takes care of the public water infrastructure in a small but important part of the Netherlands, including the operational management of a number of (impressive) locks and bridges. The department is divided into four sections that each look after a part of the public water in the region. The departments are spread over the region and work relatively independently. A central staff that takes care of internal coordination, financial control and personnel planning supports the departments. It also keeps in touch with regional governmental institutions and develops regional policies regarding the water infrastructure. The department employs approximately 220 people, of which a fifth work in central staff. Most people are already working for many years within the department (on average more than 15 years), often in the same position.

4. SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Preceding the first LSE, that signified the start of the LSI to the majority of organizational members, we interviewed fifteen employees of the department selected from all organizational layers and sections; a next round of interviews (with the same members) will be held in November of this year. In general, interviewees were asked to express their view of organizational life. The (unstructured) interviews started with asking interviewees about their current position and tasks in the context of their section and then proceeded naturally, when probed to clarify issues that were not clear to the interviewers, to other themes and issues. The interviews were tape-recorded and all lasted between one and a half and two hours. We have summarized our findings that throw some light on organizational life in the organization as follows:

- Many interviewees show a strong and keen interest in the content of their job and consider their job as challenging in many respects. They are proud of what they do and are conscious to be a part of an organization with a rich history that has been and is important to the well being of the Dutch.
- Meanwhile interviewees complain about the flood of rules and policies lay down and the many obtrusive bureaucratic controls exerted by head office. As a result they feel they have to function 'despite the organization instead of thanks to'. The many control policies and checks take up much more of their time than they want (some state that it even takes more than 60% of their time). Also, they feel that new policies, changes and innovations are dropped from above without proper support.
- As a result, many interviewees have developed a rather cynical attitude towards the organization and nearly anything that is proposed by higher managerial layers. Anecdotes that illustrate how worse things are organized and arranged are many.
- Most interviewees are heavily oriented on their own section and their immediate colleagues and do not have many contacts with employees in other sections if not deemed necessary. Interviewees mostly speak in terms of "we" and "them", the former enclosing their own section (or even parts of it), the latter other sections or head office.

5. SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM THE LSI

Figure 1 shows the broad design of the LSI we studied. In section 3 we shortly described the broad format of the two LSEs that took place during the first year of the LSI, i.e. *Future Search Conference* and *Real Time Strategic Change*. The first conference was attended by a group of about 80 people, who were not randomly chosen but selected on basis of enthusiasm and representativeness for the organization. The second conference was meant to, in Jacobs' (1994) words, "get the whole system into the room" but only about 125 showed up. In particular, employees from lower ranking did not attend the conference. At the second conference, a start was made with formulating action plans for improvement. The implementation of these action plans constituted the heart of the LSI during the second part of the first year (*cf.* principle of 'real time'). We have summarized a selection from our observations from the first year as follows:

- a) The consultants seemed to value the process of the LSEs much higher than the content of topics raised during the conferences. This turned out in a number of ways. Firstly, as the tasks followed in rapid succession (for some parts, a new task every half hour) the

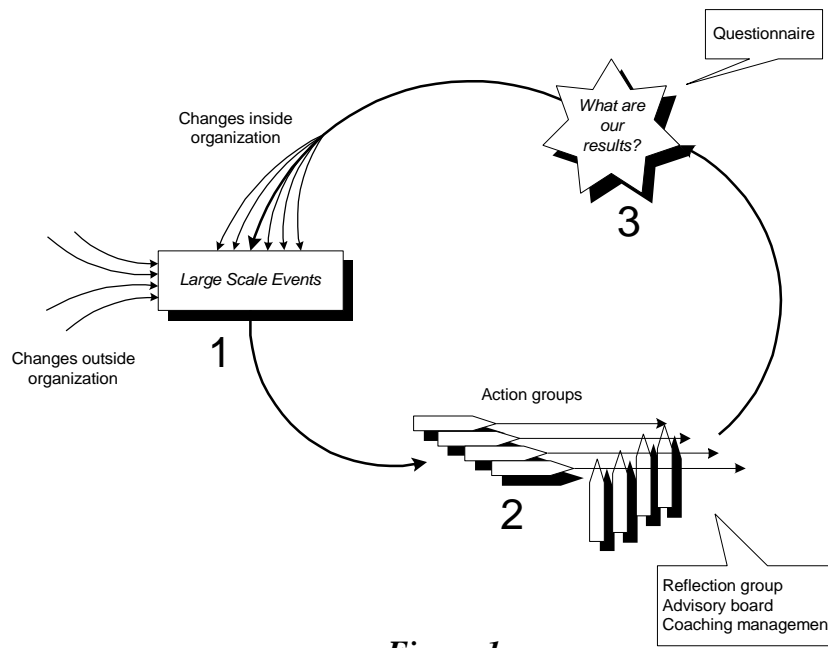


Figure 1
Design Large-Scale Intervention: "Infrastructure for Learning"

consultants continually stressed that holding on to the high speed prescribed by the tight time schedule was absolutely crucial. On several occasions they were visibly annoyed when people took too much time to report, talk, etc. Secondly, topics were not discussed in great depth. Raising (critical) issues seemed to be of greater importance than thinking about and fleshing out underlying causes. Thirdly, in several informal talks during the LSEs with the researchers, the consultants emphasized the importance of 'making the need to change clear' (in line with the formula $D \times V \times F > R$), 'building energy', 'creating awareness of organizational problems', and 'stimulating positive thinking'. Note that this also matches with the principle of 'creating community' in *Table 1*.

- b) The consultants had clear and strong ideas on how the change process should proceed and how the management team should act. In realizing these ideas, they continually pointed to the principles in *Table 1* (especially 'reality as a key driver': instantaneously deal with issues/concerns that emerge in the organization). Moreover, the consultants extensively guided the management team during the first year (and will be during the second year) as part of what they referred to as 'leadership alignment'.
- c) The LSE-conferences seem to act as (and meant to be) the catalysts of the LSI-process. Judging from the questionnaires filled in by the participants at the end of the conferences the conferences fulfilled this job properly: on both occasions they rated the quality of the conference on average well above 7 and estimated chances of success of the change process between 70 and 80 per cent. However, shortly after the conferences enthusiasm (or, in LSI-terminology, the 'energy level') dropped sharply. The consultants reacted in two ways. Firstly, they stated that this was to be expected and far from abnormal (referred to as 'escape behavior'). Secondly, the consultants increased their efforts, focusing on the implementation of the action plans, the management team, and the project team that collected data about the change process.

- d) The structure of the conferences strongly stimulated group building processes and the enforcement of (new) group norms. Judging from interviews and informal talks with the consultants and taking the principle of ‘create community’ in *Table 1* in mind, these processes are consciously aimed for. Several examples from both LSEs can serve to illustrate this observation.
- e) The LSI (and the LSEs) focused on the organization and its problems, not on the individual employee and his/her concerns. By way of illustration, during the conference, ‘stakeholders’ gave their opinion about the organization with the purpose to ‘make people aware of the position the organization is in’. Also, the larger part of the questions asked during the conferences were (directly or indirectly) about the organization (or parts of it) and its problems, opportunities, strengths, weaknesses, etc. As a last example, by focusing on the preferred, future organization (i.e. ‘preferred future’) the consultants purposefully distracted attention from current and individual problems.
- f) Many people were (and still are) quite critical about the entire change process. As one employee wrote in a newsletter, ‘a bit of chattering at a conference does not have that much impact’. During coffee breaks people complained that they had lost overview and purpose (partly due to the high speed). The fact that they got copies of everything the groups had written down on the flip-overs did not remove this feeling; most people did not even bother to read these copies. Moreover, half a year later only a small part of the action plans has been completed.

6. DO LSIs FULFILL THEIR PROMISES?

Authors on LSI stress the open, participative and ‘bottom-up’ nature of their approaches and place it, often rather dramatically, opposite to, what they refer to as, ‘traditional approaches to organizational change’. The consultants in the LSI we studied did not diverge from this point of view; on the contrary they seemed to have fully internalized theories and principles of LSI and propagated these regularly. Do LSIs really fulfill what LSI-theorists and consultants so emphatically stress? To answer this broad question we raised a set of more specific questions in section 2, which we make a start with answering in the following.

Firstly, who is dominating the process of organizational learning during an LSE? And who has the right to define what is worth learning and what is relevant? In the LSI we studied, the consultants played an important if not dominant role. Nobody but they directed the change process of which they had strong and clear ideas. They were the main designers of the LSI-trajectory and the LSE-conferences. Within the LSE frameworks they offered and given their many advises and arguments, the design team was only allowed to fill in details. Moreover, the consultants wrote the detailed scripts of the conferences (which are often translations of general LSE-formats) and they kept these scripts to themselves (members of the design team did not get a copy). Of even greater importance, the consultants judged the ‘rightness’ of behaviors, decisions, results, and efforts, in particular those of the management team. They decided the content of the agenda of meetings with the management team and the design team. Their influence became, for example, apparent in their judgement of the visions and mission statements the management team developed; they decided if these were satisfactory or had to be elaborated (either by saying so or by asking questions and giving hints). The consultants also judged the ability of members of

the management team to meet the behavior that they deemed necessary for the change process to succeed.

Although the consultants, thus, determined the context for learning, employees were encouraged to initiate actions for improvement (both at the second conference and after) and had considerable freedom in what they initiated. The consultants did not interfere with the content of these actions nor seemed to be highly interested in it. Instead they stressed the importance of starting up and finishing initiatives for action. They highly valued the number of initiatives, which they saw as an indication of the success of the change process thus far (in LSI-language: the number of initiatives said something about the 'energy level'). Moreover, they repeatedly warned (middle) managers not to hinder employees' initiatives in any way, which in effect enlarged employees' room to move and enabled them to work on topics and in directions beyond former possibilities.

Secondly, whose learning and goals stand central, those of individual employees or those of the organization? Moreover, does a LSI (implicitly or explicitly) promote an unitarist or a pluralist perspective? The interviews with the consultants, the LSI theory and principles to which they closely followed, the actions they took during the LSI trajectory, the agenda of the conferences, and our observations during these conferences all indicate a strong focus on the department and its' goals. The clear majority of questions were formulated on an organizational level (strengths, weakness, possibilities for improvement, etc.). Whenever questions were asked on an individual level (e.g., 'Where are you proud of?', 'What does frustrate you?'), it was always within the department's setting. Further, an important goal of both conferences was 'to get all noses in the same direction'. Everybody should have 'a shared image of reality' as one consultant stated and large scale conferences make this possible as they enable the 'building of a common database' in an efficient way; it is therefore important 'to get the whole system into the room'. After the LSEs a special team (the so-called DIT: Data Integration Team) was put in charge of the maintenance of this database. This was considered critical as people spread over the organization and initiate all kinds of action. According to LSE theory a 'shared image of reality' is said to decrease resistance to change and increase ultimate success. On the level of the management team the so-called 'leadership alignment' aimed at exactly the same goal. Judging from these observations, LSIs seem to explicitly promote an unitarist perspective instead of promoting variety. As many strongly associate variety with organizational learning (e.g., Huber, 1991), this element of LSIs seems to be at odds with the essence of it. Instead, groupthink seems to be encouraged on an organizational level.

It is more difficult to answer the question if the LSI was replacing unobtrusive control strategies by obtrusive ones. There are indications that this is the case. It was clear to both the director of the division and the head of the department that a strong top-down approach would not bring about the desired changes as resistance to it would probably be tremendous. Creating 'sufficient dissatisfaction with the present situation' first, as Jacobs (1994) prescribes, matches fully with their starting point. For this reason a significant part of the conferences was devoted to making employees clear of 'the critical situation the organization (and thus the department) is in'. Also, in an interview the head of the department indicated that he demanded full cooperation from the department's employees as 'they now got the opportunity to take part in the change process itself. Other indications can be found in the strong emphasis on the process of change, the value attributed to 'increasing the energy level' and the number of initiatives taken by employees, and the

group processes we observed at both conferences. On the other hand, however, being entirely in the consultants' hands, the department's head is subject to the same process as all the other employees of the department.

The third and final set of questions posed in section 2 relates to the emotional well-being of individual employees: to what extent is this a true concern during a LSI? This question is most difficult to answer univocally. On the one hand, judging from the foregoing it is a clear understatement to conclude that LSIs do not aim at building a feminist organization. Several examples indicate that the conferences only offered room for expression of emotionality if this was instrumental to the conferences' overall purposes. On the other hand, however, a year from its start many employees stated that the change process had improved things in the organization and that they enjoyed working in the organization considerably more than in the past. Employees pointed to the strong increase in the number of contacts between the department's sections. Moreover, for the first time in its history a joint party was organized for all department's employees.

So, do LSIs fulfill the promises authors on and advocates of LSI so emphatically stress?

LITERATURE

- Alvesson, M., & H. Willmott (eds.)(1992), *Critical Management Studies*, London: SAGE Publications.
- Bunker, B.B., & B.T. Alban (1997), *Large Group Interventions: Engaging the Whole System For Rapid Change*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Burgoyne, J., & B. Jackson (1997), 'The arena thesis: Management development as a pluralistic meeting point'. In: J. Burgoyne & M. Reynolds (eds.), *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice*, 54-70, London: SAGE Publications,
- DiMaggio, P.J., & W.W. Powell (1983), 'The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields'. *American Sociological Review*, 48: 147-160.
- Emery, M., & R.E. Purser (1996), *The Search Conference: Theory and Practice*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Huber, G.P. (1991), 'Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures'. *Organization Science*, 2 (1): 88-115.
- Jacobs, R.W. (1994), *Real Time Strategic Change*. San Fransisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Levine, L., & B.J. Mohr (1998), 'Whole system design (WSD): The shifting focus of attention and the threshold challenge'. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 34 (3), 305-326.
- Martin, J., K. Knopoff & C. Beckman (1998), 'An alternative to bureaucratic impersonality and emotional labor: Bounded emotionality at The Body Shop'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43 (2), 429-469.
- Mintzberg, H. (1983), *Power In and Around Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Morgan, G. (1986), *Images of Organization*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Owen, H. (1992), *Open Space Technology: A user's guide*. Potomac, MD: Abbott.
- Perrow, C. (1986), *Complex Organizations – A Critical Essay*. New York: Random House.

- Senge, P. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency.
- Sims, D., & L. McAuley (1995), 'Management learning as a learning process: An invitation'. *Management Learning*, 26 (1), 5-20.
- Tolbert, P.S., & L.G. Zucker (1983), 'Institutional sources of change in the formal structure of organizations: The diffusion of the civil service reform, 1880-1935'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28: 22-39.
- Weisbord, M.R. (1992), *Discovering Common Ground*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Weisbord, M.R., & S. Janoff (1995), *Future Search*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.