Foreword

From the very beginning in the field of organization development and action research there has been a central role afforded to the role conversation plays in enabling change to take place in social systems. Kurt Lewin himself actively pursued and developed settings in which conversation was the foundation for attitudinal and behavioral change. After his death, his colleagues and subsequently the scholars and practitioners who took his seminal research and insights into the world of organizations continued to explore ways in which conversation in groups could facilitate individual, group and organizational change. From T-group to team development, from the confrontation meeting to large group interventions, from intergroup conflict management to dialogue conferences, the heritage of Kurt Lewin has stamped itself on the applied behavioural science approach to change management that we know as organization development. In more recent years the work of Bohm, Isaacs, Schein and others has contributed significantly to the development of how conversation can be structured.

The flourishing of large group interventions - open space technology, search conferences, future search, whole scale change - have created structures whereby whole systems can engage in simultaneous conversation about the future of their organizations and communities. Another distinctive characteristic of organization development is the role played by the external consultant. In organization development, consultants work in a facilitative, process consultation mode whereby they work at enabling members of the client system to perceive their own issues, understand them and develop and take their own actions in their regard.

Within the philosophical tradition of action research, conversation has been equally central. The most important root of action research is in Lewin's work and one of organization development's distinctive characteristics is its foundation in action research. The philosophical traditions of pragmatism, constructivism and social constructionism have influenced and are influencing how action research is conducted. Among the expressions that action research takes, such as action science, development action inquiry, cooperative inquiry, appreciative inquiry among others, conversation plays a central role, not only in engaging participants with one another on issues of value and importance to them, but also in framing individual and group assumptions and lifeworld perspectives, which hitherto may have been tacit and unacknowledged.

Claus Jacobs' research engages all these issues. The context of this research is a changing organization, comprising multiple stakeholder groups, each with their own lifeworld and core assumptions and each affected by the transformation of the organization and by the organization's need to move responsively into the future.

The organization development process of visioning, taking action and reviewing was structured around conversation. The emphasis was on creating a physical and psychologically safe space for conversation to occur and facilitating conversation in order to help the organization move towards strategic change.

This research is an important contribution to the application of conversation to organizational settings in both organization development and action research terms. It shows how conversation contributes to organization change and develops important theory about the nature of conversation as a mechanism for organizational responsiveness.

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Foreword

Responsiveness is a crucial concept in organization and strategy research, yet it needs a more subtle and thorough understanding if we are to develop a frame of reference for modern, progressive models of organizations.

In their investigations on strategic change and organizational learning, Werner Kirsch, Karl Weick, Peter Senge and Claus Otto Scharmer refer to responsiveness when they conceptualize and reflect on an organization's necessary abilities for progress. Kirsch for example, conceives of responsiveness as a key property in his model of modern organizations that do not exploit their members. This consideration is even more relevant for (not-for-profit) service organizations as their offering is built on the relational quality of service encounters. In more general terms, responsiveness becomes necessary for organizations that need the support, participation and invovlement of its internal and external stakeholders if they are to survive. Despite these considerations, the rather abstract use of the term does not enhance our understanding of responsiveness per se. Due to the complicated and complex nature of the concept, to date its significance for organizational change and to strategic thinking in organizations does not seem to be at all evident.

In this book Claus Jacobs investigates the nature of responsiveness in organizations and its relationship to dialogue as a reflective mode of interaction. Based on his research, Jacobs identifies three properties of responsiveness, namely perceptivity, reflectivity, and adaptivity. Rather than proposing a single definition, he suggests a typology of responsiveness along these properties. Thus, responsiveness has different qualities depending on how these properties differ "in their distinct properties regarding focus, orientation, degree of complexity, speech gesture, relevance of statements, as well as variety and equality of voices." (p. 108).

He proposes responsiveness as a social construct, a perceived quality attributed to the organization. Furthermore, it can be conceived of as a process quality which is an inherent and integral part of communicative episodes within the organization and between the organization and its environment. As for dialogue and responsiveness in organizations, he rejects a linear and direct relationship between the two domains. Rather, he suggests that dialogue as a reflective mode of conversation can enhance responsiveness — in which case it is more likely that creative answers to stakeholders can be found in such dialogical, participatory processes of answering.

Based on these propositions this work gives us a subtle understanding of the nature and processes of responsiveness. Critically reflecting on his findings in the light of the dialogue perspective (David Bohm, Claus Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge); the communicative action perspective (Jürgen Habermas) as well as Karl Weick's sensemaking perspective, Jacobs successfully enriches and extends our understanding of these three important perspectives.

An especially remarkable and fruitful contribution is the discussion and reflection on Bernhard Waldenfels' conceptualisation of the Other, the Unknown and the Foreign. By drawing our attention to the very fine, subtle but nevertheless crucial distinction between response and answer, communicative interactions within and between organizations can then be reflected upon in terms of 'answerability', i.e. the ability to give an answer. As Jacobs puts it, "responsiveness then would translate to an organizational 'answerability', i.e. the ability to attentively listening to claims and demands, and not simply responding." (p. 140). Such processes of answering will result in an open answer that will itself trigger new answers from other participants in an ongoing, never-ending but very concrete organizational process.

Claus Jacobs makes a very appreciable and original contribution to the theory and practice of responsiveness, thereby deepening our understanding of responsiveness. In terms of organization theory as well as communication theory , this work reformulates the concept of responsiveness and challenges the dominant, yet simplistic metaphors of behaviorism. This work is a considerable contribution to theory as well as practice, and represents a substantial step toward a less ideological approach to participation.

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Summary

This study investigates the nature of responsiveness in organizations and its relation to dialogue as a reflective mode of conversation. Responsiveness as a theme emerged from the practical experience of the author in an organization development project with a residential care provider for people with physical and sensory disabilities. While strategy, stakeholder management and organizational learning literature acknowledges the relevance of responsiveness, none of the approaches proposes a comprehensive concept of responsiveness and its implications for communication with stakeholders. In all three literatures a behaviorist stimulus-response metaphor which unnecessarily puts limits to a dialogical, processual theory of responsiveness is employed. Therefore, it is suggested to explore dialogue as an appropriate conversational mode that holds promise to facilitate reflective conversations with and among stakeholders. Thus, two research questions are addressed: What is the nature of responsiveness? What is its relation to dialogue?

An interpretive case study complemented by a participatory mode of inquiry allows for juxtaposing differences in conversational modes with differences in responsive qualities. It is suggested to conclude that responsiveness can be conceived of as an attributed perceptive, reflective and adaptive capacity of an organization. With regard to its relation to dialogue, it is suggested to conclude that responsiveness and dialogue are not related in a direct, linear manner. It is rather by creating contexts for reflective conversations that might enhance responsiveness. *If* such reflective conversations take place, it is more likely that productive, innovative answers to stakeholder demands can be found in a dialogical process.

In terms of strategy, this research aims at contributing to an active notion of responsiveness in terms of strategic thinking. With regard to stakeholder management, an active mode of responsiveness contributes to authentic participation as a guiding principle for stakeholder management. As for organizational learning, active responsiveness can contribute to avoid perceptive, reflective and adaptive myopia. Finally, a philosophically inspired outlook intends to broaden the bandwidth of responsiveness even further. From a phenomenological viewpoint, responsiveness as a process quality refers to encountering the foreign, which requires developing and inventing answers in the process of answering. Based on these considerations, responsiveness then translates into the new challenge of 'organizational answerability'.