

Power exercise in leadership development - reflections

By Mogens Lilleør

Abstract

Analysing a leadership-training programme called The Necessary Conversation I shed light on how 'inviting managers to join the programme and them completing the course' is an exercise of power integrated in organizational life concerning co-creating agency.

In doing this I draw on Niklas Luhmann on communication; Michel Foucault on power, in particular the concept of 'pastoral power'; Mark Bevir supplementary on agency and the concept of governmentality, Rom Harré on positioning. I supplement these perspectives by adding views of Kåre P.Hagen on the concept of the 'principal agent'-relation and views of Søren Kierkegaard on leading supportive.

I distinguish between two concepts of power: Localized power as a possession which functions as a cause as well as a relation, i.e. power such as command, domination, coercion, and punishment; Non-localized power, i.e. the anonymous depersonalised power qua structure and language.

I focus my analysis by the Luhmann concept 'interpenetration' and the Rational Choice idea of the principal-agent relation. My, main focus, however, is on the Foucault concept governmentality incorporating the concept of pastoral power. In this analysis, I draw in Kierkegaard.

My concluding remarks mainly centres on the relation between pastoral, strategic power and the systemic ideas of 'transparency' and 'recognition'. I suggest that both transparency and recognition should be understood as modes of pastoral power exercise.

Power exercise in leadership development - reflections

The obligation to confess is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us. (Bevir 1999:5)

Context

Following up on a leadership development programme 2006-2007 X-municipality developed and implemented a training programme called The Necessary Conversation concerning just about 200 of its managers.

The overall objective is that the municipality wishes to maintain and develop a professional handling of service to citizens. This calls for strengthened efforts in relation to recruitment and development of a qualified staff. This means further that the municipality, as an attractive workplace must develop and sustain good environment for employees. Leadership is a cornerstone in relation to this. To master constructive dialogue with employees is central to leadership.

Case

The programme was developed in spring 2008. The managers were invited and the programme ran mainly from autumn 2008 to spring 2009.

It became obvious to my colleagues and me during the development of the programme, to distinguish between two sorts of necessary conversations, i.e. the informal preventive necessary conversation and the formal necessary conversation. The idea behind the concept 'preventive necessary conversation' was gradually developed to be 'through good conversation practice to prevent that a problem ends up requiring an official, formal conversation, i.e. a conversation that directly focuses on the legal consequences'. The preventive necessary conversation, therefore, should be understood as a conversation merely based on a feeling telling one to do the conversation, though short of data - whether the subject is about absence, suspicion of an alcohol abuse or problems about 'deliver the goods' in daily practice. This conversation is not focusing on the legal consequences.

Viewing the overall number of necessary conversations in the organization the emphasis clearly should be on the preventative. X municipality wishes as referred to that the official conversation, as far as possible should be avoided through daily preventive conversation practice. Some preventive conversations are easy some are difficult. The municipality has as its ambition to facilitate that both easy necessary, preventative conversations and difficult, preventative necessary conversations are conducted timely and competent. The focus of the programme The Necessary Conversation therefore is on the informal preventive necessary conversation. It is about communication in the sense of dialogue that creates good solutions for both parties in the conversation, i.e. an agreement which somewhat clichéd 'has two winners' rather than one, or rather than two losers (as is often the case when a problem must be solved within an official conversation).

The programme involved that the participants along with actors exerted conversation in relation to fictional cases. The course introduced and trained a range of techniques to conduct conversation well. The intention being to promote the participants to master conversation in terms of 'timing', 'preparation', 'clarity of context', 'maintain pur-

pose and focus' and 'process conducting', 'role-hold', 'handling the emotions in play'. The course alternated between short and long 'caseplay'-exercises in conducting conversation followed by reflections in groups, in pairs or single.

My perspective - guiding question

Inviting the managers to join the programme might superficially sound as quite an innocent act, something like inviting one to join a party. For some of the participating managers, perhaps many, the interest in qualifying the practice of conversation might even coincide, and the course might be so pleasant to join due to the set up and the mode of facilitation, that it is almost impossible to imagine that power plays any role in the gathering.

However, in this paper, I will reflect on the role of the invitation to join the programme, the relation constituted thereby. It is obvious for me that organizational life exposes the members to various forms of influences vertically and horizontally. My analysis intends to explore and unfold how inviting the managers to join the programme and them completing the course is an exercise of power that should be recognized as an integrated part of organizational life concerning co-creating agency. What is the nature of power involved and how does it relate to the concept 'strategic', and the values 'transparency' and 'recognition'?

In doing this I draw on Niklas Luhmann to sketch the communicative basic relation between the parties. I draw heavily on the power-perspectives of Michel Foucault, in particular the concept of 'governmentality' and 'pastoral power'. And I add views of Kåre P.Hagen on the concept of the 'principal agent'-relation and by Mark Bevir on agency and the concept of governmentality, which I relate to a view of Søren Kierkegaard; and I draw on Rom Harré concerning positioning.

I have chosen to use two terms from the Rational Choice Theory to sharpen my focus. The term 'principal' denotes the inviting or commissioning part, which I am part of together with the executive board and colleagues in the HR sector, and the term 'agent' denotes the executing part, in my case the managers participating in the programme, mainly heads of institutions.

Basis - the programme as communication

An important part of the relation between the principal and the agent concerns communication. Following Niklas Luhmann communication happens between systems, i.e. between autopoietic systems. Autopoietic systems, in this context the principal and the agent, are systems of communication that themselves create all the elements they consist of. In a sense they are operatively closed, i.e. no system can create elements for another system. In spite of the closed-ness, communication happens, and relations are constituted. Luhmann uses the conceptual pair 'penetration / interpenetration' to describe the interconnections between systems in communication:

'Penetration' occurs when a system unilaterally makes its 'complexity' available to another system.

'Inter-penetration' is when this occurs reciprocally (Luhmann 2000:257), they converge in the sense that they use the same elements, though always with a different selectivity, i.e. a different history and different perspectives on the future (Luhmann 2000:259).

Basically, communication is about the systems' availability to one another. Communication is when a message is understood (or adopted) in the sense that the receiver connects to the content. Understanding however, does not mean that the recipient has the same understanding as the sender, but merely that the statement is accepted in some way (either confirmed or contradicted or something in between). The point is, that communication itself occurs recursively in that the receiver relates to the message, i.e., the sender-system's boundaries are included in the receiver-system's area of operations (Luhmann 2000:261).

In my case, the invitation as well as the completion of the programme might both be considered as a sort of structural coupling, complex though, which mediates between systems, i.e. promotes the interpenetration between systems by translating between plenty of systems of meaning. By way of the set up and the mode of facilitation, the course might facilitate an encounter between the ideas and intentions of the principal and of the agent, provided that it recognizes the various perspectives at stake. Following Luhmann, to facilitate an encounter between systems the course should promote that each closed system provides meaning to the actions of the other system in a way that makes sense for the other as well. This, I take, might be described as a sort of co-created meeting place. On the other hand, one might feel tempted, spontaneously irreverent, to describe the relations involved in terms of control and discipline, and consider the relations counterproductive. To me no doubt, communication as an interpenetration facilitated by a top down 'invitation' from a principal to an agent to join a programme and actually the agent completing the course is a matter of power exercise, but as I see it, the issue is not just about power or absence of power, but more a question of the nature of the power exercised.

Closing in on the subject – principal agent

A principal-agent relationship is a relationship where one person (or more) acts on behalf of another (or more), i.e. is a caretaker of another's interests. The acting person is considered 'the agent' acting on behalf of the other named 'principal' (Hagen 1990:4). The principal delegates a task and responsibility to the agent. The principal, however, must ensure that the agent carries out the principal's interests. The principal aims therefore at developing 'instruments' that promote the agent acting in the principal's interest. This is a general problem (Hagen 1990:4), which is constituted by a number of factors, some of which being: 1) The agent's actions affect the utility of the principal, they pose a risk to the principal, thus a potentially loss of utility. 2) The agent's actions are representing an investment or self-sacrifice for the agent and thus a loss of utility. 3) All things being equal, both the principal and the agent seek to minimize their loss, the principal representing the interests of the organization.

In my case, the delegated task and responsibility concerns leadership, i.e. the conducting of the relevant conversations with employees in daily practice as to promote the professional handling of citizen-services. Sometimes, however, conversations are not conducted timely and competent. There are talks that in itself are difficult, but often you as manager helps making talks more difficult by being reluctant to take them, by pushing them in front of you, perhaps because of uncertainty in relation to how to take the first step or how to deal with the unexpected in the conversation, the employees emotions or your own, etc. The agent following his own interests in the short run, not taking the conversation, creates perhaps expensive costs for the princi-

pal, for the organization and for himself in the long run.

The relation between principal and agent is asymmetrical in at least two ways: a) Some acts are hidden for the principal: The agent knows his own efforts, the principal don't, can not observe it. b) Some knowledge and information are hidden: The agent holds information that the principal cannot know. The agent may even withhold information (Hagen 1990:5-6). To ensure that the agent carries out the principal's interests the principal must establish a structure or a system that encourages the agent to do the right thing, i.e. typically an incentive- or reward system (Hagen 1990:3-4).

The actual course in my case might be seen as a tool promoting the principal's insight in the agent's world, perspectives, knowledge, values, competences, and way of action, presupposing of course that the principal, in my case represented by HR, participates. The course is also to be considered a tool to promote results that match the interests of the principal. The programme might therefore be considered part of a system that encourages the agent to act in accordance with the principal's intentions. To do leadership development in an organization is in fact to encourage the agent to act in accordance with the principal's intentions. The programme as such might be considered a refined and complex set of inter-penetrations, which as well is to be considered a refined and complex exercise of power. To follow that lead, the question is: What is the nature of the power exercised?

Two power perspectives

The principal agent model might suggest that the power involved is a straightforward matter where the principal as some sort of a sovereign, has the power to force or control the agent had he not lacked the relevant general view, knowledge and information. From a classic perspective on power, this might be the outcome of an analysis. This conception originates from the theorizing on sovereignty (Foucault 1978:93-95). Power in the conception is primarily meant to be a mechanism associated with the monarch, the state and its institutions that manifest as means of regulation and determining limits and restrictions on subjects. The basic power principle is law backed by a sovereign. Following this line power is dealt with in terms of 'possession' and 'control', rendering the location of power as well as power as a substantial cause of events a major issue.

Foucault recognizes the conception but expands power analysis to cover also power in the sense of 'exercise of power', i.e. the influences and functions of power covered by the term 'governmentality'. By this understanding, power exercise is not just a question of "imposing law on men, but of disposing things (...)" (Foucault 1978:95). Disposing things concerns:

" (...) men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc."
(Foucault 1978:93)

In this perspective, power does not only work through law and rules, but also by tactics and techniques, i.e. disciplines, campaigns, incitements and structure (Foucault, 1978:100), i.e. power exercise consists of employing tactics rather than laws, and even using laws themselves as tactics (Foucault 1978:95). Power analysis should replace focus on sovereignty with sensitivity towards the complexities of power relations constantly created and dissolved, i.e. sensitivity towards non-localizable controls manifested in disciplines and the exercise of so-called 'pastoral power':

"Governmentality (...) refers to the way in which the modern state combines sovereignty and discipline with a type of power akin to that Foucault had analysed in his study of confession, so the idea of pastoral-power points to the entry into the public realm of the Christian notion of the shepherd tending the individual conscience by techniques such as self-examination and confession." (Bevir 1999:11-12)

I think both perspectives apply to my case:

1) Localized power as a possession which functions as a cause (power to) as well as a relation (power over), i.e. power such as command, domination, coercion, and punishment. This is the direct exercise of mostly formal power, operating through the hierarchic division of powers. When, as in my case, the principal invites the agent to participate in the programme it is intended as a straightforward command from an authority de jure on the basis of an explicit strategy intended to position the agent in a certain way. Following Rom Harré et al., a first order positioning occur whenever someone commands someone to do something, i.e. one places the other as one with a duty to obey and reflexively oneself in a position with a right to command (Harré & Langenhove 2003:20). Though the invitation is a command some might receive it as a true invitation and it might be turned down, as in fact also happened in my case, the positioning thereby being questioned and turned into a reflexive positioning. Even if the invitation actually was intended as an invitation allowing for a certain freedom of rejection, it might on the other hand be received as a command, i.e. when positioning the agent as a competent agent with judgement the principal might experience that the agent constitutes the relation by positioning the principal as one with a right to command and reflexively himself with a duty to obey. Even if power is localised the effect is somewhat out of control, i.e. communication occurs only when the receiver connects to sender.

2) Non-localized power, i.e. the depersonalised power exercise qua system and structure, manifest for instance in frames, distinctions and metaphors in language. This is power exercise in the sense that the one part, the principal, structures and contextualizes the sphere of action for the other part, the agent. Positioning happens as a result of the specific structure and use of language in meeting places, as in my case, the course, where staged dialogues structured by a certain *set up* positions the participants in various ways involving 'self-examination' and semi public 'confession', for instance as critiques, as reflexive practitioners, as witnesses, as actors, i.e. mainly in a performative, first order positioning with the purpose of facilitating both a individual and a collective third order reflexive positioning (Harré & Langenhove 2003:20-22). This is power exercise in the sense of governmentality. If the principal participates, the set up incorporates both principal and agent implicating no one is in control, i.e. structure, language etc. works anonymous depersonalised (non-localised) and both

principal and agent are subjugated as self-examiners and confessors. If the principal does not participate, the process of positioning the agent during the course might be seen as a subtle power exercise, implying the principal participating incognito represented by the structure, the expectations and of course by the facilitators executing the 'rationale' of the programme.

Strategic, pastoral power

I would like to unfold the concept of governmentality, i.e. pastoral power, a little further concerning the strategic aspect. Spontaneously one might say that the course in my case, understood as a meta-reflexive process constituting having conversations about conversations, cannot be power exercise. But considering that the metareflexive process takes place in a manner where the principal structures the scene and perspective of the other by symbols and set up, it is an exercise of so-called invisible confessional pastoral power.

The Christian idea and practice behind pastoral power is first and foremost exercised towards the other for his salvation. Each subject has a duty to examine and confess with the aim of salvation. Following Foucault (Foucault 1978:103) one might say that this idea has permeated the modern state and organizations applying methods to ensure employee's 'earthly salvation', as in my case urging managers to constantly reflecting on their identity and practice as managers. During the course, both public 'confession' and private 'self-examination' take place: When for instance the agent is participating in the caseplay 'Back from sick leave', a conversation between Poul (sector commander of Healthcare) and Nina (team leader in a rehabilitation unit), who has been absent on sick leave: The play presents a conversation incorporating some problems and dilemmas and afterwards the plenary assembly reflects individually and collectively as well as discusses different options and suggestions to bring the conversation in a more convenient direction. As a main challenge, the agent contributes directly to the play in the role of the sector commander. The agent exhibits attitudes, thoughts and competences in leadership.

The strategic stance of pastoral power in my case concerns the facilitating of the agent developing the relevant skills, values and perspectives. Focus is therefore on the mind of the agent, i.e. change has to go through the agent's consciousness. This type of stance is well known in relation to care, treatment, and education as well: To promote change you have to work with the mind of the patient, client, or the pupil. I would like to quote a well-known piece of Søren Kierkegaard (in Danish¹), which indicates both the strategic part and the art of power exercised:

"At man, naar det i Sandhed skal lykkes En at føre et Menneske hen til et bestemt Sted, først og fremmest maa passe paa at finde ham der, hvor han er, og begynde der. (...) For i Sandhed at kunne hjælpe en Anden, maa jeg forstaae mere end han – men dog vel først og fremmest forstaae det, han forstaar. Naar jeg ikke gjør det, saa hjælper min Mere-forstaaen ham slet ikke. (...) Men al sand Hjælpen begynder med en ydmygelse; Hjælperen maa først ydmyge sig under Den, han vil hjælpe, og herved forstaae, at det at hjælpe er ikke det at herske, men det at tjene, at det at

¹ Translation in English on page 10.

hjælpe ikke er at være den Herskersygeste men den Taalmodigste (...)."
(Kierkegaard 1982: 96-97)

Retold in my leadership-context: The principal wishes to promote the agent to conduct both easy preventative necessary conversations and difficult preventative necessary conversations timely and competent. But the agent has a slightly varied understanding of what 'necessary conversations', 'timely' and 'competent' entail. The principal will lead the agent to the understanding and acceptance of 'necessary, timely and competent'. The principal must then start with the agent's perspective and understanding of 'necessary, timely and competent'. The principal therefore should have knowledge of two things, i.e. what 'necessary, timely and competent' in fact entail and the agent's conception of it. The principal must further hold a strategic perspective on the situation to secure the agent is moving in the right direction. By focusing on the agent's relation to 'necessary, timely and competent' and the process that should lead the agent on the trail, the principal has distanced himself from the agent. He sees the agent in a double perspective: The agent's actual understanding of the subject and the process that should lead the agent to develop understanding and acceptance of new perspectives and demands. But this distance must not have the purpose of domination, rather should it support the agent,- is the point of Kierkegaard.

Following Foucault the aiming at domination is violence, because it denies the ability of the other to act. Violence manifests itself whenever one denies the agency of the other by seeking to define the actions the agent must perform (Bevir 1999:13). Power exercise on the other hand makes the agent able to come into play where the agent has a capacity to act (Bevir 1999:13). Power manifests itself whenever one act and influence on the agency without attempting to determine the particular actions (Bevir 1999:14). The principal's task is to promote change in the agent by making the agent to change himself. My point is that in positioning oneself in such a strategic stance the principal creates a distance implying the double perspective. Through this strategic stance, the principal analyses the agent's capabilities, competence and attitudes and how he can influence them and what the agent will do in response.

This strategic basic setting, I believe, should be considered an important part of any leading action, which is concerned with an agent to develop or change agency. It matches Foucault's concept of the 'pastoral power' as a 'conduct of conduct' denoting both the directing of (self) management of other and to act on other's behavior. Because the principal wishes to develop agency, he has to exercise power. If he dominates the agent, the process will be counterproductive. Following Kierkegaard the power exercise should be 'to serve' and 'be patient', i.e. leading supportive. Following Foucault, governmentality implies "govern in such a way that he (the governor) thinks and acts as though he were in the service of those who are governed." (Foucault 1978:96).

Concluding remarks and perspectives – transparency and recognition

My intention was to shed some light on how inviting the managers to join the programme and them completing the course regarded an act of power exercise might be seen and recognized as an integrated part of organizational life concerning agency. In a hierarchical organization in a principal-agent perspective the power is in play not only in the formal localised sense. Power actions are mediated through communication, and exactly this implicates some vagueness concerning control. It is the receiver that

constitutes communication and this might result in a strategic re-positioning of the principal. Both in vertical and horizontal relations members of an organization are influenced by structure, language, agency etc. in a way that makes the 'power' in power exercise difficult to detect. The relevant concept of power to describe the relations might be 'governmentality' which covers among other things the powers of structure, language, and discipline, for instance captured in the metaphor of (staged) pastoral power.

One might, as a systemic manager or consultant, consider 'transparency' as very important to oppose power, i.e. the more you are transparent concerning your motives, aims, and methods, the less power is involved in the relation. Relating to my analysis above it is clear to me that we ought not talk about relations separated from power, such would be empty connections, and is perhaps more a matter of exclusion. We should rather be concerned with the sort of power that constitutes the connections, i.e. the influences and the way they happen. In this perspective, I suggest 'transparency' itself being considered an example of pastoral, confessional power, when one makes public one's motives, aims, methods, and presuppositions. So, transparency, which might be considered a protection against power in the traditional, localised conception covering domination, should itself be regarded a power exercise in sense of governmentality, i.e. to guard against the counterproductive exercise of one sort of power without being liable to act in the same way, takes another sort of power exercise.

This understanding of transparency I think connects fine to the important idea of recognition. Pastoral power implicates a strategic attitude. Some might find that counter-appreciative, but defining 'strategic' as acting on the expectation and calculation that the other part acts and how the other part acts as a respond to my act (Elster 1990:28), the strategic stance is confirming, i.e. it recognizes the capacity of agency of the other. Communication as interpenetration, i.e. something that only happens reciprocally, I consider confirming for the same reason. I suggest therefore that recognition, i.e. acting confirmative, rather than being seen as opposed to power exercise as such, should be understood in terms of exercising strategic pastoral power.

So, transparency and recognition are important if agency shall develop in the intended direction. This implies leadership and consultancy locally involving acting subjects exercising tactics; and it implies the individual tactics taken together forming structures exercising power.

References

Mark Bevir 1999: 'Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency Against Autonomy', in *Political Theory*, Vol.27, No.1. Postprint at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/postprints/1084>

Jon Elster 1990: *Nuts and Bolts for the social sciences*, Cambridge University Press (1989).

Michel Foucault 1978: 'Governmentality' in *The Foucault Effect, studies in governmentality*, with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault, G.Burchell, C Gordon and P Miller (eds.), The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Kåre P.Hagen 1990: *Principal-agent teori: implikasjoner for offentlig styring og politikk*, Norsk senter for forskning i ledelse, organisasjon og styring.

Rom Harré & Luk van Langenhove 2003: *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford (1999).

Søren Kierkegaard 1982: 'Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed' i *Søren Kierkegaard, Samlede værker*, bind 18, A.B. Drachmann ed., Gyldendals Forlag (1859).

Niklas Luhmann 2000, *Sociale Systemer*, Hans Reitzels Forlag (1984).

My translation of the Søren Kierkegaard quote on page 8:

"When one has truly to succeed in leading a fellow man to a certain place, first and foremost, one must be careful to meet him where he is and start there (...). Truly to be able to help another, I have to understand more than he - but first and foremost to understand what he understands. If that I do not, then my wider understanding does not help him at all. (...) But all true help begins with humility; the helper must first be humble towards the one he will help and thereby understand that to help is not to reign but to serve, to help is not to be bossy, but to be most patient (...)"