

Unfolding the paradox of dialogue

– leveraging social systems theory and third elements

Harald Tuckermann & Thomas Schumacher

School of Management

University of St.Gallen

Switzerland

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correspondence: harald.tuckermann@unisg.ch

Abstract: Drawing on social systems theory, we aim to advance traditional views on dialogue by introducing a paradoxical perspective. The paradox of dialogue is the possibility and impossibility of understanding. Using different approaches to unfold the paradox, we propose matrix of conversational dynamics that include the classical view on dialogue and extends it by introducing a third element. We illustrate two different third elements - an alternative perspective and the immersion in a different site – and show how these can promote the emergence and acceptance of new distinctions that help to unfold the paradox of dialogue.

1 Introduction

Dialogue gains increasing relevance as we experience heated interactions in today's complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity and the surfacing of what Rittel and Webber (1973) call "wicked problems". These are issues like climate change, social inequality or the measures to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, in which organizational members face paradoxical issues and adaptive challenges with little agreement about underlying assumptions and no known solutions (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Instead of engaging in debates and discussion that reproduce the fragmented positions and fuel paralyzing conflicts dialogue offers an alternative pathway (Bohm, 1998). Dialogue aims to overcome fragmentation by inviting participants to reflect their own and other's assumptions (Cunliffe, 2004; Isaacs, 1999b), i.e. the distinctions with which they turn to, observe, and thereby understand the world (Tsoukas, 2009). There are numerous insightful works in organizations (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Schumacher, 2022) and community settings (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017) that show the potential of dialogue and provide practical tools and instruments on how to foster the probabilities of dialogue to occur. Given the insight that our thinking lacks self-observation as it occurs (proprioception Bohm, 1998), scholars highlighted the pre-conditions participants need to enact for dialogue to occur (Isaacs, 1999a; Isaacs, 1993; Scharmer, 2000; Scharmer & Käufer, 2008; Schein, 1999). Tsoukas (2009) further elaborates dialogue conceptually and argues that dialogue fosters the emergence of new distinctions by which actors make sense and act in their world. Such distinctions provide the basis for generating new insights that can turn into action to advance on the issues at hand. His work contributes to the existing insights of the importance of reflection in dialogue (Cunliffe, 2004), based on the assumption of a socially constructed "Wirklichkeit" (not: reality) in relation (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2001).

As many of the above scholars, Tsoukas (2009) focuses on how individuals. Besides these

important insights, dialogue is improbable and fragile (e.g. Kahane, 2017b) because it presupposes mutual understanding in order to achieve it (Murphy, 2011: 23). In presupposing its aim, dialogue becomes paradoxical. Instead of following Murphy (2011: 23) “not to expect too much of dialogue”, we ask: How can we unfold the paradox of dialogue? This question guides our paper with which we aim to contribute to a conceptual understanding of dialogue. We believe that such an understanding strengthens the basis from which we can further develop dialogue as a form of communicating to jointly tackle the wicked problems we currently face.

To address our question, we introduce the paradox lens (Smith & Lewis, 2011) to dialogue and use the processual concept of paradox of social systems theory (SST) (Luhmann, 1984, 2000) to problematize mutual understanding. Mutual understanding is possible when participants reflect others’ and our own assumptions (Cunliffe, 2004), or distinctions (Tsoukas, 2009). However, understanding is also impossible because it is always relative to our own understanding (Luhmann & Schorr, 1986). Thus, dialogue becomes a paradoxical process that implies the possibility and impossibility of mutual understanding (Ortmann, 2004).

Drawing on prevalent approaches to unfold paradoxes, we introduce a matrix of conversational dynamics (Putnam et al., 2016). As so-called either-or approaches, discussions or debates enact a separation between the distinctions of the dialogue participants. Traditional dialogue concepts (e.g., Isaacs, 1999) aim to relate these distinctions directly in a both-and approach. We add a so-called “more-than” approach which relates different distinctions through introducing a third element (Janssens & Steyaert, 1999) to unfold the paradox of mutual understanding in dialogue.

Empirically, we illustrate this more-than approach by drawing on two different settings of our research: one is a learning journey (Schumacher, 2022) which provides a dialogical approach in management education for executives uncovering processes (like suspending organizational routines or triggering generative dialogs) to reflect on their own assumptions,

promote the emergence of different perspectives, foster new collective understanding, and encourage organizational change. The other setting is member in our longitudinal field research (Gutzan & Tuckermann, 2017). In this so-called “feedback workshop”, the researchers provide a third element by sharing their observations with practitioners. Such settings are known to be fragile (Iedema, Degeling, Braithwaite, & White, 2004) because practitioners mutually observe each other as well as the researchers who share their observation with the practitioners.

While our examples illustrate the paradox of dialogue, the settings are less complex than, for example, pursuing dialogue in heated public context, like that around measures for and against the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, we believe that our more protected settings are promising to carve out the unfolding of dialogue as a paradoxical operation.

We contribute by first, a paradoxical understanding of dialogue and introduce approaches to unfold this paradox instead of aborting dialogue. Second, the proposed matrix of conversations highlights two different trajectories for dialogue that distinguish between a direct and indirect relating of the involved understandings. Third, we illustrate the latter and highlight the importance of a third element to support dialogue.

2 Classical view on dialogue

Dialogue ‘as a free flow of meaning between people in communication’ (Bohm & Krishnamurti, 1985: 25) emerges as a ‘joint activity between at least two speech partners in which a turn-taking sequence of verbal messages is exchanged between them, aiming to fulfill a collective goal’ (Tsoukas, 2009: 3) and has been demonstrated in various fields like politics, communities, and education. Authors like Bohm (1998), Isaacs (1993), Senge (1990) and Tsoukas (2009) have made significant contributions to the understanding of organizational dialogue.

Despite different understandings of dialogue that split into humanistic, hermeneutic and post-modern camps (Deetz & Simpson, 2004), Stewart & Zediker (2000) show that dialogue is a dynamic, emergent, processual happening between distinguishable moments and that, as practice, it centrally and inherently implicates ethical concerns.

Dialogic forms of interaction remove uneasiness experienced by interaction partners. To understand each other, dialogue partners influence each other and develop their understanding, helping find a common language (Argyris, 1991). Tsoukas (2009) shows that, by distancing themselves from their previously held views, dialogue partners create new distinctions; common sensibility emerges. This occurs through reflexive understanding of the dialogue partners' own utterances, prompted by the exchange.

Distinction between content and relational aspect is central in making dialogue productive. Dialogue partner statements include actual information, as well as relational communication aspects. This metacommunication (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) indicates how the utterance is to be understood and 'goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, not just the assumptions themselves' (Bohm, 1998: 9). Moreover, according to Bohm (1998) dialogue is likely to be more productive when the individuals take active responsibility for their relationship, a condition that Tsoukas (2009) calls relational engagement. Relational engagement leads individuals to make themselves more open to one another, often resulting in high-quality connections, emotional caring capacity, and a shared new sensibility.

Bohm emphasizes that, to accomplish dialogue, it is essential that everyone agrees to suspend judgement in the conversation. 'What is called for is to suspend those assumptions, so that you neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad...' (Bohm, 1998: 22). Thus, by suspending

assumptions and judgements, individuals bracket their vulnerability and uncertainty and establish a state of mutual favorable expectation. Further pre-conditions to enhance dialogue include participants to agree that the situation in questions requires change (Kahane, 2017b), that each participants enters with their own (valid) assumptions (Isaacs, 1999b); that participants aim to shift their listening from themselves to the other (Scharmer & Käufer, 2008); or that they speak their minds openly (Scharmer, 2000).

Such conditions promote dialogue and enable questioning underlying assumptions as well as inquiring into the assumptions of the other participants. In the course of the conversation, dialogue enables to overcome polarities to engage in a shared and collective thinking about an issue in question (Isaacs, 1999a). In such a way, dialogue aims to achieve mutual understanding by exploring own and others' assumptions to move onto a new understanding.

3 A paradoxical view on dialogue

The above pre-conditions point out the paradoxicality of dialogue: “The paradox of dialogue is that the end point of any dialogue must be assumed by the dialogue partners at the outset... If the condition of the possibility of mutual understanding is mutual understanding, one should not expect too much of dialogue.” (Murphy, 2011: 23).

Instead, we further elaborate on the paradox of dialogue. The paradox lens (Smith & Lewis, 2011) argues that paradoxes are ubiquitous, often defined as contradictory persistent inter-related elements, that serve as distinctions for participants to understand and act in the world. As elements – e.g., learning and performing (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), profit and social missions (Jay, 2013), change and stability (Farjoun, 2010) in organizational settings - “reflect back on and impose on each other” (Putnam et al., 2016: 12), their relation is paradoxical: the interdependence and persistence of the elements implies the possibility to relate them. Their

tension or mutual exclusiveness implies the impossibility to relate them. More generally, paradox is defined as an operation that simultaneously implies its possibility and impossibility (Ortmann, 2004) (Luhmann, 1995).

Dialogue provides an example of such a paradoxical operation: On the one hand, mutual understanding is possible because participants are non-trivial systems (von Foerster, 1994). Participants can change the ways in which they observe their world, by reflecting on the other participant's utterances that can lead to reflect and change one's own distinctions (see Tsoukas, 2009). On the other hand, and because participants are non-trivial observers, such observing others and oneself always requires distinctions. Thus, understanding others – i.e., observing their distinctions – occurs within the realm of one's own distinctions. Therefore, understanding is always relative to one's own distinctions which inhibits mutual understanding. In other words, dialogue is paradoxical in that it simultaneously implies the possibility and impossibility of mutual understanding.

The paradox lens has elaborated on how to cope with paradoxes on individual, group, organizational and societal levels. Putnam et al. (2016) distinguish three approaches:

- *“Either-or approaches* treat contradictory poles as distinct phenomena that function independent of each other” (Putnam et al., 2016: 58). Reactions can be to avoid the paradox or oppose the paradox by choosing one of the elements over the other which includes also separating the two elements.
- *Both-and approaches* treat “opposites as inseparable and interdependent” (Putnam et al., 2016: 60) by fostering such a perspective cognitively – i.e. paradoxical thinking -, by oscillating between the elements over time, or by striving for a balance or integration of the elements.
- *More-than approaches* aim to develop a novel, creative synergy by moving outside the opposing elements or by situating them in a new relationship which actors can achieve

for example, when they reframe their understanding, include third elements or spaces that foster reflection and experimental action (Putnam et al., 2016: 65).

3.1 A matrix of dialogue to unfold paradox

These approaches inform our matrix model that follows Tsoukas (2009) who argues that dialogue enables new distinctions. Distinctions are central to observing, defined as distinguishing and indicating one side of that distinction (Luhmann, 1995). According to social systems theory (SST), observation is the fundamental operation by which humans and social systems make sense of and enact the world (Luhmann, 1990). From this perspective, understanding means to observe the distinctions others use. Surfacing distinctions is important because we are partially blind to them, because one can logically not simultaneously observe one's own distinctions while using these distinctions. But because we use distinctions when we observe others, we employ our own distinctions with their own blind spots, which in turn can be observed by the other who observes us, who are subject to the same condition. In this respect dialogue becomes paradoxical: it allows for understanding (by observing others, who observe us) but inhibits understanding because understanding requires distinctions to surface the distinction. Dialogue creates the conditions for understanding and against it simultaneously, which Ortmann (2004) calls an operative paradox. An operative paradox resides within the process of communication, and thereby moves our attention from the above conditions to the interaction between distinctions. This interaction can be direct between two distinctions A, and B, or indirect. Besides this first dimension, the second dimension refers to the effect of the interaction, i.e., whether it involves new or changed distinctions or not. With these dimensions, we suggest the following four-field matrix to depict approaches to coping with the paradoxical nature of dialogue:

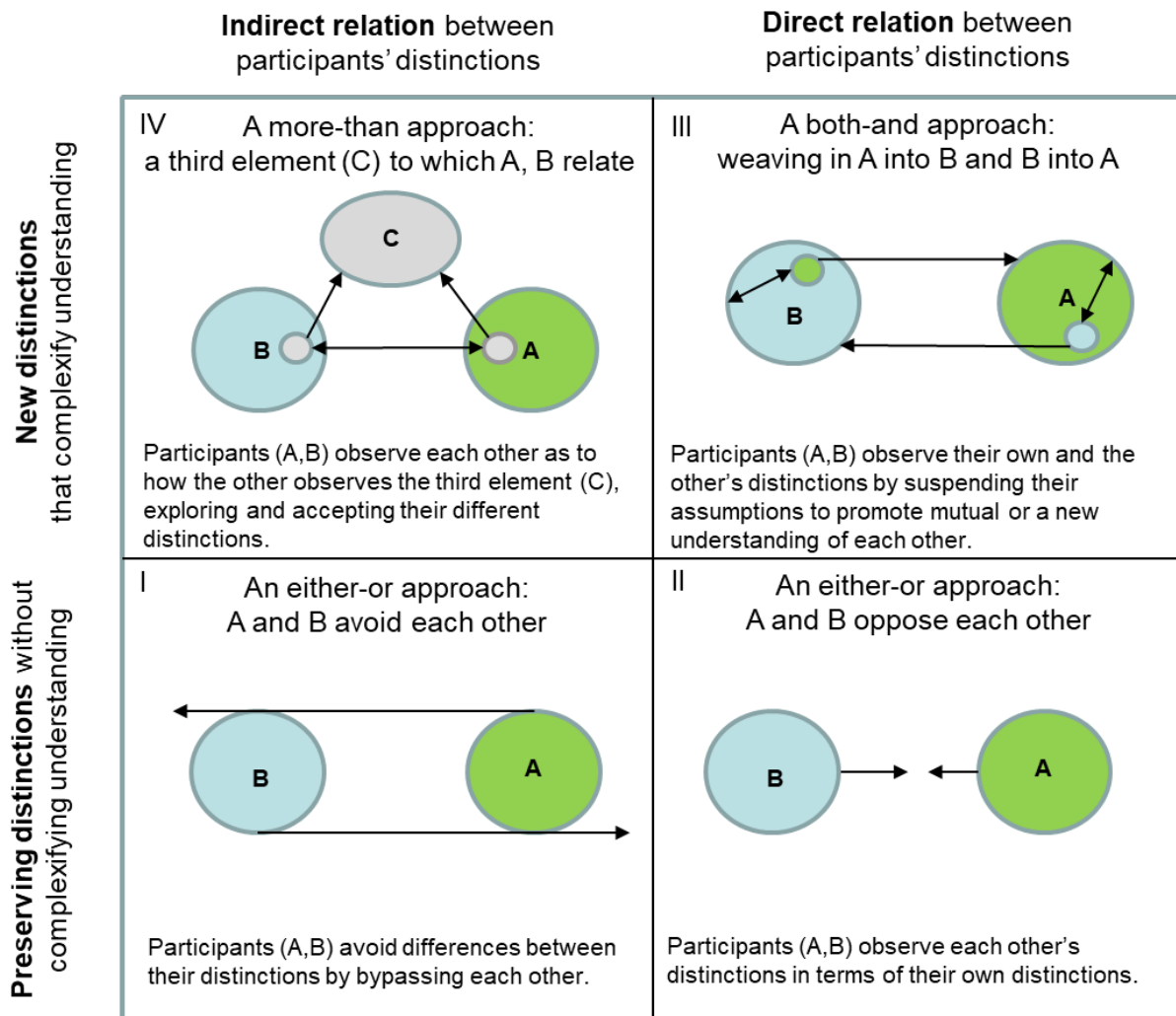


Figure 1: Matrix to cope with the paradox of dialogue

Fields I and II express “either-or” approaches to unfold the paradox of understanding, implicitly or explicitly treating the different distinctions (A and B) as separate. The unfolding dynamic of Field I is when participants aim to avoid surfacing differences between their distinctions, e.g. by talking nice (Scharmer, 2020). This conversational dynamic preserves the distinctions (A and B), thereby reproduces the status quo or prevalent understanding of a wicked issue. The same effect might occur in Field II, also based on the idea of separated distinctions. The differences of distinctions surface. Participants observe and evaluate each other through their own distinctions, e.g. as in discussions or debates that tend to enhance polarization (Bohm, 1998). At the end, one distinction might win over the other; one might leave; or both distinctions agree to disagree, and the conversations ends while preserving the status quo.

In contrast, Field III and field IV trajectories allow for new distinctions to complexify the understanding of an issue in question. As in existing concepts of dialogue, they require participants to reflect and thereby assume an exploring instead of an evaluating attitude, based on the assumption that their distinctions (or understandings) are part of the issue in questions (Kahane, 2017a). As such, dialogue of Field III is a both-and approach to unfold the paradox of understanding. The known approaches of dialogue fit in this field as they highlight the importance of self-observation through suspending one's reaction (Bohm, 1998), or by self-distanciation (Tsoukas, 2009). Participants observe their own distinctions triggered by their reaction to the utterance of another participant. This self-observation helps to surface otherwise taken-for-granted distinctions to re-consider and possibly change them. Uttering these observations invites a process of mutual self-reflection during which participants weave in the others' distinctions into their own, thereby changing their own distinctions. This both-and approach of mutual understanding between A and B complexifies the understanding of the issue in question. In difference, Field IV does not imply a direct relation between distinctions of A and B, but an indirect relation through including a third element (C). This element serves as a reference point or a change in context "which creates space for developing both realities" (Janssens & Steyaert, 1999: 122), the distinctions A and B. As we will illustrate below, a third element can be an alternative perspective (see the "feedback workshop") or a third site for instance, as in the case of the learning expedition. In difference to the direct reflection of A's and B's distinctions of Field III, the dialogue in Field IV engages participants to reflect their distinctions in the light of the third element and in the presence of other participants. A listens to B making sense of C according to B's distinction (and vice versa). Thereby, A can observe B's distinctions (and vice versa) to detect both differences and similarities to A's making sense of C. Other than in field III, dialogue in field IV does not presuppose a mutual understanding, but introduces a shared reference (C) to mutually observe each other's distinctions. Thereby, the third element (C) helps

mitigating the risk of direct confrontation between A and B, which would move a Field III dialogue into that of Field II. Like Field III, Field IV trajectories complexify the understandings of a wicked issue in question. Furthermore, the third element can also promote acting on the wicked issue, because of what participants learned from the chosen site visits (learning expedition) or from the alternative perspective (feedback workshop).

Our matrix resonates in part with the insights of prior concepts (Bohm, 1998; Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2000) of distinguishing trajectories of unfolding conversations. But instead of focusing on the individual roles, the above matrix focuses on the relation between the distinctions. Thereby, we aim to illumine possibilities for accepting new distinctions, to complement the insights that refer to the participants involved (Tsoukas, 2009). In this respect, the dimensions of the matrix differ: For example, Scharmer (2020) uses dimensions that are geared to the participants – reflexivity, focus on parts or the whole – our matrix is geared to the effect of the conversation and on whether the distinctions relate to one another directly or indirectly. We thereby build on Janssen & Steyaert (1999: 134) who argue for a complexifying indirect relating of two distinction through a third element: “[...] the “third” element provides a means for playing with the boundaries of the two realities. ... The “third” element is not a goal in itself, but rather a means for connecting the two realities.”

4 The “feedback workshop” and the “learning journey”

After this brief introduction of unfolding the paradox of dialogue, the empirical examples illustrate two variations of dialogue (Field IV). The first illustration regards a so-called “feedback workshop” during which a research team of the first author shares their insights of a two-year change initiative with the practitioners. The second illustration is a so-called “learning expedition”, the second author investigated. The learning expedition exemplifies an intentional

intervention, whereas the feedback workshop exemplifies a non-intentional intervention. Despite the different settings and methods, both examples share that a third element plays an important role in fostering dialogue by offering a different perspective through researchers or through engaging with different contexts.

4.1 Feedback workshop: from results to development capacity

During the workshop a new distinction emergence and gained acceptance among the participants by using the presented research insights as a third element. On one level, the turn was from focusing on tangible results of the lean initiative towards focusing on the participants' capacity in developing their clinics' organizing practice. On another level, this turn meant a first step from self-understanding as rather separate clinics towards mutual support, thereby strengthening the self-understanding as a department as a host of the clinics.

The topic was the so-called "lean hospital" initiative. Launched by the hospital CEO, the aim was that the different departments analyze their own processes to reduce unnecessary activities, so that professionals had more time for patients and for the hospital to reduce costs (Gutzan & Tuckermann, 2019). The head of the department, Tom, promoted the initiative in his department. In each clinic, the procedure was similar: Tom established a team consisting of about five members and himself, who visited the clinic and observed their work practice for a day. A workshop follows with the clinic to identify challenges in their work and define initiatives for improvement. The clinics then selected improvements for implementation.

As researchers we accompanied the initiative in three of the department's clinics by shadowing their daily work, observing the workshops, conducting interviews, and collecting documents. The practice partners expected our outside perspective on how the lean initiative developed over time as an input for discussion their further development. We fed back our insights from theorizing the process data (Langley, 1999) via the so-called "feedback workshop" with the group of clinic heads and the department of inner medicine (Tuckermann & Rüeegg-

Stürm, 2010). This workshop provides the core of the following illustration, substantiated by contextual information.

A core challenge within the department of inner medicine at the time was the relationship between department head (Tom) and the clinic heads. Tom had been newly appointed two years before and was head of general inner medicine. Some clinic heads questioned openly the role of the department in general and that of the lean initiative. Regarding the former, for example, Paul– head of gastroenterology - refused the research interview because he feared we “*spy on him and his clinic*” on behalf of Tom. Roger – head of oncology – openly questioned the entire lean initiative from the start because its benefit was unknown but costs significant. Tom – as head of the department – pushed for the lean initiative because it would allow to acquire further resources from hospital leadership and thereby enhance the legitimacy of the departmental structure vis-à-vis the clinics.

4.1.1 Beginning of the workshop with setting the initial focus

The “feedback workshop” began at 4 pm on a Thursday afternoon. Besides the research team, there were 17 members of different clinics with their heads of clinics, of nursing and administrative staff as well as department leadership. The hospital’s lean manager and an internal senior consultant had supported in conducting the two-year initiative of introducing lean management in the different clinics. The table provides an overview of the participants:

Name	Unit	Function
Tom	Department of inner medicine	Department head, clinic head of general internal medicine
Nicole		Departmental nursing director
Daniel		Administration: department manager
Franziska		Secretary of head of general internal medicine
Helena	Clinic of gastro-enterology	Administration: head of clinic’s secretariat
Martin		Clinical nursing director
Simon		Leading doctor
Paul		Clinic head (medical doctor)
Tsogyal		Clinic head (medical doctor)

Regina	Clinic of pneumology	Secretary
Peter		Leading doctor
Beatrice		Team leader, nursing
Aurelia	Clinic of nephrology	Team leader, secretary
Phil		Leading doctor
Hans		Clinical nursing director
Joe	Administration	Organizational Development expert, former departmental nursing director
Chris		Lean manager of the hospital
Research team	University	Research team (5 persons) facilitates workshop, presents observations, and documents the conversation

Table 1: workshop participants

Tom welcomed the participants and transferred the facilitation to the research team. After a brief round of introduction, followed clarifying expectations. Participants expressed their expectations to review the outcomes of the lean initiative, i.e., the changes that different clinics had implemented. Their idea was to evaluate whether these changes were worth the effort, because *“we put a lot of resources and time into these observations, the workshops to identify issues and improvements and then implementing them”* (Phil).

4.1.2 The focus on tangible results

Accordingly, the research team listed the changes they had observed and that interview partners had reported in their respective clinics. The table of tangible results triggered disappointment. Paul says: *“Looking at the table, I wonder. The results are of the whole initiative are pretty poor. Ok, we increased the staff in the secretariat, that is great, but the other things here (points to the list) ... What have we done really? We moved around furniture and that was it?”* (group breaks out in laughter). Hans adds: *“We had that point (point to the list), to install a text messaging system that reminds patients of their appointment. Well, you saw the meagre results after we put so much effort in.”*

In response, Tom aims to explicate further changes to counter the impression of the poor results. He continues by asking other clinic members of their experience throughout the lean

initiative, thereby shifting the attention from tangible results to what his colleagues have learned as they observed others, or when others came to observe their clinics' daily work:

Name	Utterance
Tom	How did you experience that?
Paul	I think as the ones who are evaluated, we are quite blind to our own issues. When you receive the feedback, one usually thinks, well that is how we have done it for a long time. There is no need for something new. As an observer, you think: what are the processes that work and where is it tedious? But when you are blind in your own clinic, you do not see it that way. It depends on the perspective and role you have.
Tom	And what was it like when you came to observe the cardiology clinic?
Paul	You realize quickly where they are well organized and where it hurts
Aurelia	I think in our clinic of nephrology things run smoother now. We really implemented quite a lot of things, all those we identified in the workshop after the observation. Of course, in the beginning it was difficult, but we managed. When I hear Paul on the cardiology, I think, yes, we had quite a lot of things to change over the past two years. But now we are at a point where it works a lot better than before

Excerpt 1: Shifting towards the experience with the lean initiative

This excerpt illustrates a first turn in the conversation. Elaborating on their own experience, clinic members realized that the results were not as poor as some interpreted from the list. Johannes (researcher) points out that gradual changes are hard to measure: “*What I hear is « the initiative did not result in a lot». But such processes are like watching a child grow. For*

the parents the change is hard to notice. But for the visiting aunt, it is different. So, one hypothesis could be that the initiative runs in gradual steps without “shocking events” so to speak.” Phil replies: “*Then it is hard to evaluate the lean initiative*”. Chris, the lean manager, adds that lean implies rather a way of seeing to continuously improve work processes and not so much a program with clear-cut deliverables. Albeit implicit, participants appeared to understand that the lean initiative could not be evaluated by its tangible results.

4.1.3 Emergence of the new distinction on the developmental capacity

The researchers present the second observation on the conduct of the lean initiative. They show the steps taken that was similar in all clinics by setting up an observation team with members of other clinics (clinicians, nurses, clinic managers) who went for an observation day (a so-called “Gemba walk”), followed by a meeting to share their observations with the clinic members that was facilitated by the lean manager and aimed to identify possible improvements. The clinics’ leadership decided on their implementation. Despite the differences of the clinics, these steps illustrate a similar procedure to work on improving the clinics daily work.

Reflecting on the conduct of the lean initiative, the following conversation illustrates the emergence of the distinction of the capacity to improve organizing practice in the clinics:

Name	Utterance
Joe	I really believe these Gemba-Walks, these observations, are important. Otherwise, we would not be where we are right now. These are our own resources.
Tom	(turns to the participants). What is your impression? Do you have a better picture of the other clinics’ work after all the observations?
Paul	Somehow. We just talked about it more than in the past.
Helena	Also, for example, we have introduced regular team meetings.
Paul	But that has nothing to do with it (with the observations).
Helena	After all, since that workshop after the observation we do it every Wednesday

Martin	Yes, I think in our clinic the attention or consciousness for the others has increased somehow
Tom	What was it like in your clinic, Paul?
Paul	Well, the point is that we take more time to reflect on what we do. And that lean initiative forced us to do that, and also to look at the staff of the secretariat who have tired eyes and do something about it.
Philipp	I cannot quite specify what changes the lean initiative triggered. We started a lot of stuff. But I also believe that lean helped here.
Daniel	I think, we have established quite some platforms (regular meetings) on different levels within the clinic. Some we had initiated before, but the lean initiative gave it another push, after we saw what the workshop that followed the observation could help us.

Excerpt 2: shifting towards the capacity of developing their daily work

In the above conversation, participants elaborate the more intangible effects of the lean initiative. As the participants try to pinpoint them, the new distinction begins to emerge, albeit partially contested by some participants. Paul, for example, denounces that the introduction of Helena’s continued team meeting resulted from the initiative but also elaborates on the newly introduced meetings and his broadened view (taking seriously the fatigue of the clinics’ administrative staff). Paul and others affirm these subtle changes in coordinating and organizing through meetings (so-called “platforms”), substantiated by Philipp and Daniel. Rather than the previous focus on tangible results, now the learned capacity for further development begins to gain acceptance - what Joe initially called “*our own resources*”.

4.1.4 Gaining acceptance of the new distinction by exploring clinics’ issues

To employ “*our own resources*”, the participants split into groups of their clinics and work on issues they could address using what they had learned in how to conduct such improvements. Within the groups, we observed the presence of both distinctions. Within gastroenterology clinic, for example, Paul continued his disappointment of “*just tinkering*” with

the furniture, countered by Helena who argued for the change in view and collaboration for improvements. As Matthias raised the issue of how their clinic would engage in the planning for the new hospital-wide IT-System, Paul emphasizes: “*I definitely want to keep the interdisciplinarity when we approach this and our other issues.*” Martin continues:

Name	Utterance
Martin	We can detect our problems somehow ourselves, but we should explore them with others. Each clinic knows their problems for themselves, but we do not know those of the other clinics and also their ways of trying out solutions. Like that problems that the patients do not show up
Paul	With whom would you want to meet?
Martin	With the clinic of pneumology, the wards.
Paul	But you know what that is often like. We sit around producing paper and at the end nobody knows where it is, and nothing changes.
Martin:	Then we need someone who takes the lead, just like Tom. He took charge of the lean initiative and kept the overview.
Paul	Yes, we need some sort of facilitator who can help us move through the process so that we can detect the challenges with the other clinics, also with anaesthesiology, and try to find ways how to handle these interfaces.

Excerpt 3: Group discussion of making use of the new distinction

This excerpt illustrates the changing distinctions from a content-related disappointment to a process-oriented use of the acquired capacity on how to improve the clinics’ organizing at the interface with other clinics as well as on coordinating on general issues like the IT-System. The group begins seeing a role of the department on working through these issues by providing someone with an overview and being in charge which would promote a stronger collaboration between clinics, i.e., “*the interdisciplinarity*” (Paul, above).

In another example, the clinic of pneumology discusses similar topics in their own clinic as well as the challenge of handling the interface with other clinics when it comes to treatment

processes that stretch clinical boundaries. At this point, the group begins elaborating on how to coordinate with the others on various topics, including the new IT-System. In addition, this group talks about how to maintain the development capacity learned throughout the lean initiative. Given the perceived extreme effort, the group starts to evolve the idea of a “mini-Gembas” to continuously work on smaller issues.

These two examples illustrate the emerging acceptance of the new distinction to focus on the capacity to develop the daily work – marked by keeping interdisciplinarity and Mini-Gembas. Thereby, participants find a way to tap on “on our own resources” to improve daily collaboratively and starting to appreciate the usefulness of the department. By working with the new distinction, the insight into their learned capacity for collectively improving daily practice gains acceptance. The distinction of tangible results moves into the background.

4.1.5 Reflection

The so-called “feedback-workshop” illustrates how the research provided a third element to support the emergence and acceptance of a new distinction. The initial focus on tangible results became accompanied by the distinction of the participants’ own capacity to improve their clinics with the help of other clinics. This movement highlights several aspects: First, the participants followed the prevalent distinction on tangible results, which was contested within the department as the different positions of Paul (clinic head) and Tom (department head) indicated. Acknowledging the difficulty of assessing the initiative opened the space for turning to the new distinction, which was substantiated by the research observations that highlighted the similarity in procedure across the different clinics. Even though some participants (see Joe on “our own resources”) appeared to have this distinction in mind, the research perspective served to foreground this distinction. Over the course of the workshop, the new distinction provided an alternative beyond promoting (as by Tom) or contesting (as by Paul) the lean initiative, which resonated the clinic-department relationship.

However, the new distinction was not readily available to and accepted by the participants. Instead, it required elaboration, for example by sharing the different experiences with the lean initiative both during the observational visits and during clinic internal improvements. This part of the conversation allowed clinic heads to acknowledge their “Betriebsblindheit” (operational blindness) and provided the grounds for accepting stronger interdisciplinary collaboration when developing one’s own clinic.

Finally, the new distinction gained acceptance as the participants began working with it by elaborating internal and cross-cutting topics for which they could apply the capacity for improving their daily work. This elaboration included the need for support by other clinics and the department to coordinate and guide such activities (e.g., by Paul, and Phil) In this way, the participants created their own acceptance by weaving it into their existing distinction.

4.2 Empirical illustration 2: Learning Expedition

4.2.1 Starting LX

The Learning Expedition (LX) examined here involves managers of an international pharmaceutical company (PharCo), with about 6,000 employees in Europe and elsewhere. PharCo is a research-driven company developing and selling products in reproductive health and related fields; it identifies itself as a ‘fertility company’. The organization has its own manufacturing facilities in Europe and other locations and has acquired bio-tech companies, expanding its capabilities in biotechnological and traditional pharmaceutical manufacturing. However, according to a PharCo manager, both the company’s geographic expansion and its overall product sales had reached ‘growth limits’. Prior to the start of the LX one of the participants described PharCo’s key challenges in their struggle to grow: *‘There is very little innovation going on.’*

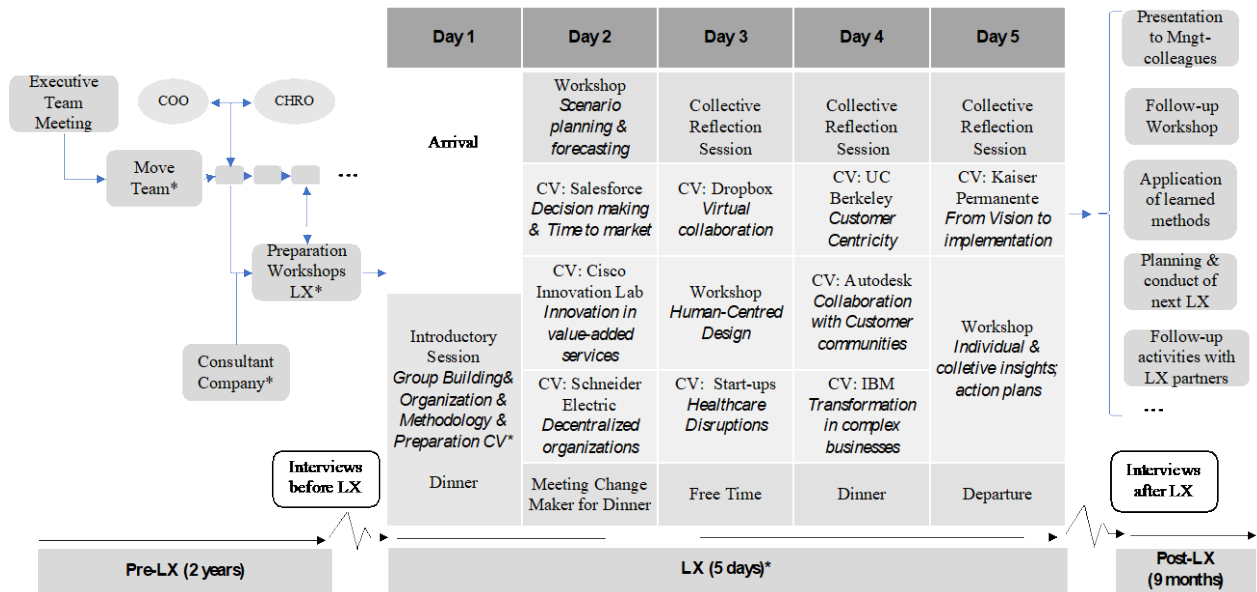


Figure 1: Overview of the LX (visual mapping)

During a meeting two years before the LX, about 80 PharCo managers decided to create a group of eight managers, that became known as the ‘Move team’ and was dedicated to ‘*accelerating and embedding a learning culture/change in the organization keeping PharCo at the forefront of the pharmaceutical industry and creating a sustainable and successful business*’. The team ultimately decided to participate in an LX with a consulting firm specialized in organizing and facilitating LXs (see Figure 1). In addition to the Move team members, other managers with comparable regional or functional roles were nominated including two executive board members, making the LX group more heterogeneous and broad-based. The overall group of 13 managers had never worked together as a unit, and some members were curious about the possible group dynamics: ‘*Mary and Alicia don’t listen and... have a way of expressing their views that is pretty much ‘my way or you are stupid’.... I’m not sure how this will influence the dynamic.*’

Parallel to participants’ nominations, preparation of the LX started off with identification of the organization’s most current relevant challenges and concerns. This inquiry took place as a co-development between PharCo representatives who organized the LX, its participants and the facilitators preparing the LX.

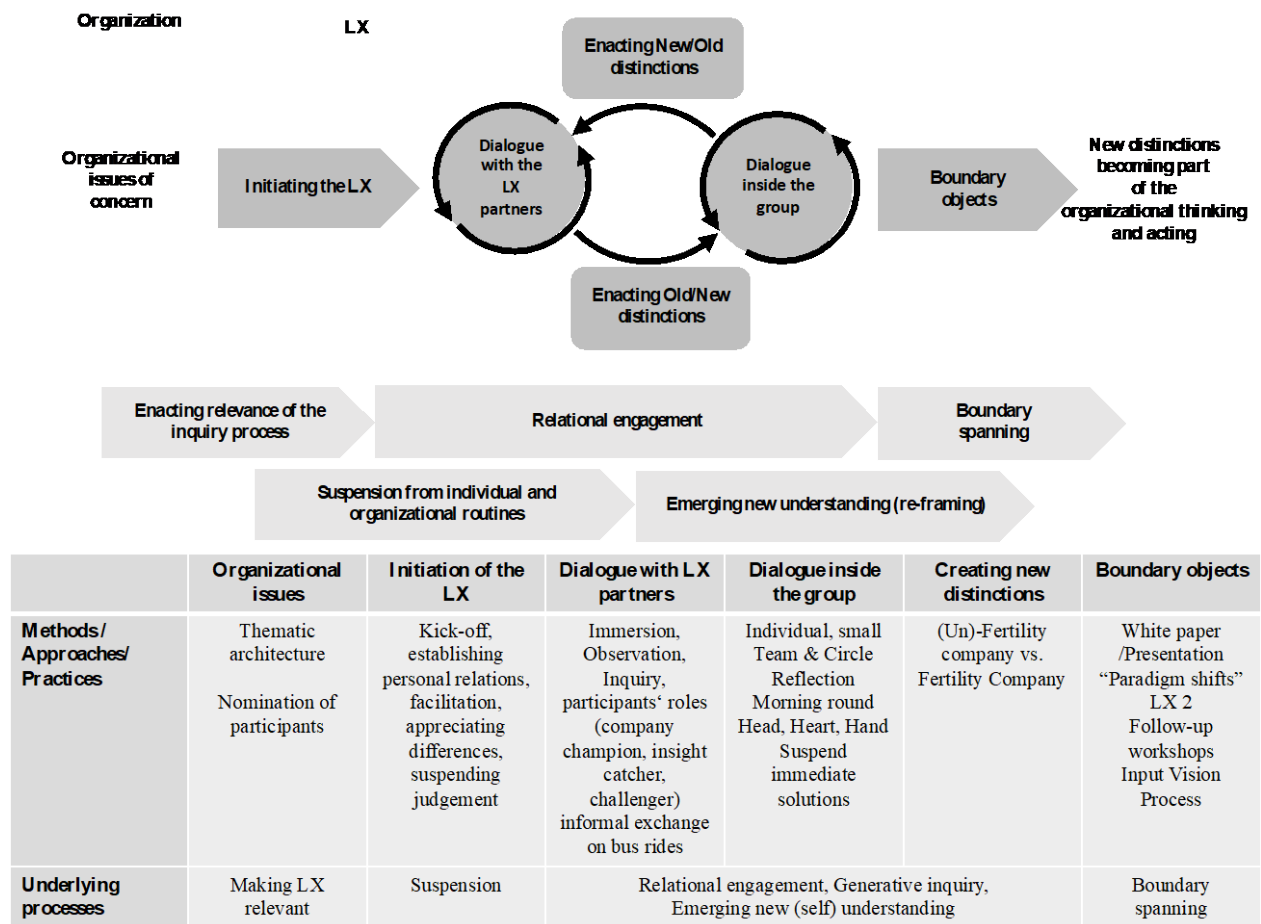


Figure 2: Model of a LX as dialogic OD process

Out of this inquiry, three central topics evolved: enabling and embracing innovation, building future-ready organizations and ecosystems, and fueling collaboration in decentralized systems. Various program design elements revolved around these topics.

As participants arrived in the evening, the initial LX session kicked off: getting to know one another, introducing the LX program, learning how to approach visits at LX-partners and emphasizing the importance of participants' dialogue, including an interview training on exploring partners' organizational practices. The LX required them to become curious, value differences and *'not just satisfy our immediate intellectual curiosity'* as one manager said. Reflecting on their lack of experience with the LX format, they openly expressed their uncertainty as to whether it would create value added and deliver new insights.

4.2.2 Dialogue with LX partners and inside the group: a new understanding of fertility surfaces

Following the kick-off, participants explored the San Francisco Bay area the next day, suspending their personal and collective routines and immerse in the different context, as a participant reflects:

When I sit in my own office, 80 percent of my day is occupied by seven or eight meetings... and I check my mobile phone...maybe 50 times a day. But during the learning expedition I didn't. Maybe I checked five times a day on the bus. So, you stop your day-to-day job and spend time...in a 'strange' or unfamiliar place, talking to [and]...meeting unfamiliar people, and then focusing on learning.... I think that's the beauty of this LX.

Due to time differences, dense program, and facilitators' request to focus on the program, participants suspended everyday interactions with their usual partners to interrupt their typical routines. The program structure suspended hierarchical influence; two executive board members made personal commitments, as one of them mentioned: *'Phil and I had agreed before the LX we would intentionally step back ... to make sure we did not act hierarchically.... not to take over even when we were tempted, but to hold our tongues'*. Schein (2015) referencing Isaacs (1999) underlines the importance of suspension to allow surfacing and processing of more ideas and the natural achievement of group consensus.

The program included activities with various partners; participants had the opportunity to visit larger organizations and start-ups, within and outside the pharmaceutical industry, where they experienced occasionally provocative views from other executives and experts. One visit that was later repeatedly cited was a discussion at a young startup founded two years earlier; the company had won a Startup Award for development of a fertility tracking sensor bracelet. This determines women's fertile days with almost 90% accuracy, by tracking nine physiological parameters through the bracelet, such as heat loss, pulse rate and temperature. The young

company had reached two milestones by securing \$30 million funding and counting 10,000 pregnancies among their users. Reflections on these visits showed uncertainty triggered by collective apprehension about possible disruptions in PharCo's industry. Personally, observing artificial intelligence applications in their field created questions about PharCo's future.

Following the visits, the previous day, each morning of the LX started with a 90-minute meeting about participants' observations and reflections. During this session, individuals considered questions individually using a personal LX diary and sticky notes, then in small groups and finally in a circle with all participants. The facilitators invited them to exchange their insights in small groups and filling out cards that were later revealed to the entire group.

Andy: The morning reflection was very important. Each of us...makes different observations. To have this opportunity to synthesize observations among ourselves is a very important investment of our time. I learned a lot through this experience.

The exchange with colleagues and the 'opportunity to hear other people's ideas' and 'reflect in a less hierarchical way' brought participants back to PharCo's situation:

Philipp: It started with what takes place at, for example, Dropbox. But then you compare how PharCo is doing it.... So, I'd say the benefit is that you have to consolidate your understanding of the companies you saw and what you learned. The reflection time allowed us to summarize and also put it into context, as well as getting other people's opinion of what they learned.

The participants did more than acknowledge the benefit of reflection time as a way of discussing diverse observations and perspectives and developing a shared picture. They also appreciated the reflection period because it enabled them to enter the experience with new partners in a more prepared way. The combination of group exchange, work with a partner and collective reflection on diverse observations, feelings and insights were experienced as mutually interdependent. The mixture led to 'a very open discussion culture during the week. People

discussed topics that they never touched on before. And they developed interest in topics they had never been interested in before', as one participant noticed.

One of the ongoing thematic threads was the concern about where PharCo's fertility business was going. During one of the morning dialogues, questions like *'Are we going beyond just fertility?'* or *'Do we need to become a "TripAdvisor" for fertility e.g., with ratings and results of clinics?'* arose in reaction to the encounter with IBM and the start-up with the fertility tracking sensor bracelet. These questions were accompanied by instant concerns like *'To provide such solutions will require extreme change'* and *'How do we change and sell the message?'*

A subsequent morning dialogue finally resulted in an exchange in the circle with all participants about the implications for the PharCo and the group.

Jan: The start-up presentation was a link to a solution thinking. It was a reminder that if we open up to be more than a drug provider, there are actually very few limitations to what we can consider in terms of innovative approaches.

Oscar: Their customer base is much broader than ours. But it's something else that plays here, we need to point the way for it. That's what you're saying?

Jon: They're not speaking from a drug perspective. Why do we have to?

Oscar: From a patient perspective.

Jon: Not a patient. A customer.

Steven: The interesting thing is you're a solution provider, but I don't know if this is a limitation. For the moment I'm just thinking.

Jan: You can think – and don't just focus on therapeutics.

Alicia: Yes. Exactly.

Jon: If you're really going to be a solution provider, you have to – we have to be otherwise therapeutic. It's really challenging.

Alicia: Are we a fertility company? Are we an infertility company?

Jan: Mm-hmm.

Steven: Right now, we are an infertility company.

Oscar: IVF (In-Vitro-Fertilization) actually.

Alicia: We treat infertility through IVF. But if we say we are a fertility-company.

Alicia: Then, everything is replaced.

Jon: But now it's a much bigger thing.

Jan: This whole discussion is probably going to be like Watson or Cisco – who were willing to re-transform themselves, or are we going to stay in our safe bet?

During a later workshop at a design company, two groups intensified the discussion on the fertility issue. The first group, wanting to improve patients' benefits and their overall quality of life and health, worked on the question of *'how might we incorporate customer insights into our organization?'* They identified an internal issue holding them back: *'the organization itself is not aligned on the importance of customer insights and how/when to apply those insights'* and came up with *'internal initiatives such as education about the benefits and value of patient centricity'*. Another group arrived at the mission of *'wanting to better people's lives as a driver or motivator for growing the company.'* Identifying the overarching issue holding them back, they came up with: *'who they are'* which included, among other aspects, a *'maturing portfolio of products'* and that *'success was not scalable for the future'*. From this they understood *'that they should be using their mission of wanting to better people's lives and applying that as a filter towards evaluating products'*. Future steps would include, among others:

'rather than focusing on fertility drugs specifically, they could think more broadly about maternal health in general and how they can be an effective partner in that effort. Some group members suggested that they could think even more broadly still and create products that service women's health as a whole, not just focusing on the pregnancy or fertility

periods in life or shift to products related to family health which would focus on pregnancy or fertility, but for both men and women.'

The fact that the group started without some of the group members knowing each other personally was certainly a challenge, particularly since they were aware of hierarchical differences. While suspension from organizational interaction and routines provided starting conditions for the dialogue to become productive, participants also tacitly, or explicitly, needed to convey what kind of relationship they wanted to have with each other. Participants were very aware of this dimension:

Edgar: First of all, it's relevant for the personal level. So, it's what each individual wants to participate and contribute. But then also it's about relationships. It's about how we all relate to each other and trust each other. ... I think we have the ability to look for the higher good.

The experience with partners and diverse activities fostered the group's cohesion and encouraged participants' mutual contact and strengthening their relationships. Participants concluded that the LX was quite positive *'because we as a team saw something new together'* – an element that (Scharmer, 2000) calls seeing together and considers essential for changing the individual and collective perception as a prerequisite for subsequent change.

To convey how participants had learned to think about PharCo as a fertility company employing a different perspective on, for instance, customer centricity, different communication approaches such as white papers, workshops, or the additional LX served as boundary objects. According to Wenger (1998), such artifacts, documents, concepts, and other forms of reification support members of different 'thought worlds' to organize their interconnections. The creation of these boundary objects after the LX was an attempt to share their new understanding and convey this to colleagues who had not experienced the LX.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we asked the question: How can we unfold the paradox of dialogue? In response, we applied paradox and systemic theory perspective to two case studies. First, a learning expedition (Schumacher, 2022) that provides a dialogical approach in management education for executives enabling reflection on their own assumptions, promoting the emergence of different perspectives, fostering new collective understanding, and encouraging organizational change. Second, the member validation in a longitudinal field research in a hospital setting (Gutzan & Tuckermann, 2019) portrays the researchers sharing their observations with practitioners, enabling them to let a new distinction emerge and gain acceptance. These two examples illustrate how a third element can provide the means for the emergence and acceptance of new distinctions. More generally, the examples illustrate a more-than approach in coping with the paradox of dialogue, thus complementing a process perspective to the known individual pre-conditions to handle the fragility of dialogue.

In this section, we discuss two significant contributions of the paper. First, by differentiating between direct and indirect relating between the participant's distinctions we show how a third element introduced a context that can influence the process of dialogue in different settings and how context can support the development of productive dialogue. In comparison, the classical understanding of dialogue (Bohm, 1998; Isaacs, 1999b) pursue to relate distinctions directly. By exploring their own distinctions, dialogue partners can develop an understanding of each other that complexifies the understanding of a wicked issue in question. At the center of this process participants become aware of their and their dialogue partners' distinctions and weave in the others' distinctions into their own (see for example Tsoukas, 2009). Paradox theory refers to this process as both-and-approaches (Putnam et al., 2016). Indirect relating refers to a process during which the context influences dialogue partners' own distinctions and thus

enables them to observe their own organizational practice differently. Thus, the context influences the dialogue in the way dialogue how the participants observe this context or third element. The context can serve as a reference point, as we illustrated empirically and can thus be understood as “a ‘third’ element which creates space for developing both realities” (Steyaert & Janssen, 1999: 122). As in our illustrations, a third element can be an alternative perspective (e.g., of researchers) that promoted a process view on the lean initiative. A third element can also be a third site, as in the case of the learning expedition, that creates a fertile ground for the participants’ reflecting their distinctions. Therefore, context obviously plays an important role in enabling the creation and acceptance of new distinctions in dialogical processes.

Second, taking into consideration the role and influence of context on the dialogical process the model can serve as a starting point for enabling and facilitating productive dialogue. Although we can only give a first indication how development can be enabled by taking context into consideration both empirical illustrations show, that change in perspective can be accomplished by inviting context into dialogue. Therefore, it seems essential that context plays a role beyond that in the both-and approaches (Field III) where the other’s context might have been taken into consideration but is still seen from the own perspective and distinction. However, this will not suffice to see oneself from the other’s perspective but rather from – perhaps after having become aware of it – again from one’s own distinction. This will often lead to a sympathetic and warm evaluation of certain, limited aspects of the other’s distinction but not to see oneself through the eyes of the dialogue’s partner.

Therefore, a more-than approach (Field IV) requires the full immersion into a different context enabling a multidirectional partiality and an empathy that goes beyond a sympathy for singular elements of the dialogue partner’s distinction. This understanding for the other’s perspective includes the understanding of the contextual embeddedness of the distinction as well as the seeing of one’s own distinction through the dialogue partner’s eyes. In our illustration

this immersion changes in perspectives that lead e.g., to the new distinction of being a fertility company was a complex combination of the suspension of the managers usual context, the immersion into a different context (in this case a start-up) and the reflection of their own distinction (fertility-infertility) in a dialogue setting. In other words: the experience of the same distinction (fertile-infertile) together with the completely different context (start-up vs. traditional pharma company) triggered openness, understanding reflection of their own usage of this key distinction of the pharma managers self-understanding.

The two illustrations give a first indication of the requirements, possible support, and facilitation aspects how to include and benefit from the context as a third element to shift from Field III to Field IV. Additional aspects might be helpful in this regard, for example, differentiating different kinds of contexts might play a role. Also: in the case of organizations, it might be important to explore how new distinctions emerging in dialogic settings (or interactions systems how Luhmann would call them) can influence the acceptance or adaptation of new distinctions in organisational communication (i.e., decision making communication in Luhmann terms). In the case of the LX subsequent groups that went for similar LX learned about the distinctions as well and the start-up was invited into the organization.

In this paper, we elaborated on the paradox of dialogue. We argued to unfold the possibility and impossibility of mutual understanding by first proposing a matrix with different approaches to unfold the paradox. Second, we focused on introducing a third element into the conversation between different distinctions. As illustrated with the two examples, this element creates a context that can foster the emergence and acceptance of new distinctions to unfold the paradox of dialogue. In this way, we complement classical views on dialogue that strive for mutual understanding through directly relating different distinctions.

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