Keeping 'good atmosphere' alive:
Narrative ideas in organisational consultancy

By Dorte Nissen

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Abstract

A conflict is ruining cooperation and good atmosphere in a team – a process consultant is invited to join in. Intertwined with telling the story of the team, this article will focus on various narrative and poststructuralist ideas, and on the implications these might have for the task of the consultant. Cultural ideas about 'communication as a remedy to problem solving' are often dominant in requests to a consultant but these ideas may contribute to escalating the conflict. Working from the assumption that, in any organisation, relevant problem-solving skills are already present and can be brought forward, I share reflections and ideas on how to structure the session and how to apply elements of witnessing practices in order to facilitate coordination in the organisation.

Keywords: narrative, narrative mediation, organisational development, conflict resolution, outsider-witness, consultation, poststructuralism

During the last few years, I have been very much inspired by ideas drawn from poststructuralism and social constructionism. Narrative therapy is a goldmine of inspiration for linking these ideas with daily practice.

I work part of my time in organisational consultancy and I teach people to become organisational consultants. In this field I see many possibilities for using narrative ideas and practices. When we introduce these ideas to the consultants however, they sometimes express reservations like:

'How do these ideas fit with group consultation?'

Or, 'Are these ways of talking not too different from the average organisational discourse?'

I am interested in responding to these reservations. In this article I will tell a story about a particular consultation and share some of my reflections and ideas on how we might apply narrative ideas and practices into our work with organisational life. I hope this can contribute to more experimenting, more sharing of ideas, more articles, and so forth, since not that much is written about reflections and practices in this area.

Beginning of the story

I was requested by a human resources partner in a larger company to assist a smaller autonomous team in the information technology department to 'get on with each other better' in their professional life. During the previous year, the work climate in this team seemed to have been deteriorating, tension had been building up, and they had not known how to move on.

In such consultations, I generally instigate a planning process involving people from different parts of the organisation. In this particular situation, a preparatory meeting had been cancelled as a result of circumstances in the company and I had to get the initial information on the phone. I talked to the human resources partner and subsequently to the manager. I inquired into *their* stories of what had been happening as well as into their ideas about how these stories might be told from the perspectives of various team members. We were all very clear that this was not to be understood as *the story* but merely to serve as a place to get started.

In these initial conversations, I was told a background story about three women who had been working together in this team for years, with one other younger woman joining the team a bit later. These four people all had office backgrounds with supplementary information technology training and had managed well for years until the workload had started to increase tremendously. One had been on sick leave for a considerable time as a result of stress. One-and-a-half years ago, two new professionals were hired – two younger men with specialist education in the information technology field. Recently another two people had been hired. They were to start just a few weeks before the planned consultation was to be held.

I was also told that people had started to come to the office manager and to the human resources partner (both of whom were not part of the team and had several teams to attend to) with complaints about the behaviour of the other part of the team. The manager had tried to ask people to resolve the conflicts by themselves, hoping that this would be a useful way to go.

A month earlier, a longer meeting had been held where the conflict had been discussed, but things had not seemed to get better. The team seemed more or less to be divided into two

groups who were hardly speaking to each other. Nobody seemed happy about the situation, but everybody seemed to be at a loss about how to go on.

The framework for our working with the team was negotiated to be on the following basis:

- Collaborative preparation would be in writing or on the phone.
- One full day consultation event would take place. The manager and the human resources partner would be present on this day.
- A follow-up consultation would possibly occur.

But before continuing with this specific case, let me just sidestep for a moment to some theoretical reflections: some reflections on consultancy and conflict; and stories and identities in the organisation.

In the daily life of organisations, myriads of storying processes are going on. These are stories that, amongst other things, deal with understandings about how the everyday life in the workplace should be, about what it means to be a professional in this particular field, and about how a good colleague should act.

When we are living these stories from moment to moment, some of our initiatives will be picked up by colleagues, while other initiatives will pass unnoticed. Many of our initiatives will not be storied and might disappear over time. From this perspective, our sense of self and identity can be seen as ongoing negotiations with the people around us all the time.

Therefore, my professional identities – for example, how to be the right kind of professional and colleague – will all the time be at stake in the workplace. Which initiatives are picked up and which are disappearing will affect my stories about myself and my range of possible actions.

Keeping this in mind, one of the tasks of the consultant is to provide the framework for people to tell and co-create stories of professional identity, and also to provide the opportunity for people in a workplace to witness each other's preferred stories.

A narrative perspective on differences and conflict

In organisations, differences are dealt with everyday. This is often done by means of conversations, by coordination of meaning through sharing ideas on how to move forward, and by efforts to develop shared language and shared values.

From a narrative perspective, we give meaning to events in our lives within the framework of the narratives within which we live. We also understand the intentions of ourselves and others from within these narratives (White, 2001). Winslade and Cotter (1997) stated it this way:

> From this perspective, the differences between us that from time to time lead us into conflict are not necessarily to be resolved but to be understood ... there are different versions of meaning to be explored rather than sets of facts to be discovered. (Winslade & Cotter, 1997, p. 254)

We are able to deal with the different ideas of the other person, if we can make meaning around what is happening. On this assumption, it is of less value to the organisation to struggle for shared language and values than to go for meaning-making around similarities and differences in ideas, intentions and values, so that the people in the organisation are able to coordinate and possibly move on together.

So differences are around all the time but they do not necessarily lead to conflict. Most of the time, people use skills and knowledges of how to deal with differences in ways that make it possible to go on together. Conflict is something that just happens every now and then – and conflict might better be thought of, not as something to be resolved, but as an expression of the differences in the narratives, beliefs and values to be understood.

The problem-solving skills are already there

Sometimes though, stories of conflict, avoidance and non-interaction might take over. These stories can overshadow stories of cooperation, curiosity and respect. Gradually, very thin descriptions of the relationship with the other person take over, to the extent that it becomes increasingly hard to see the good intentions of the other, and the skills and knowledges about how to deal with differences become less visible. At those times, it can become hard for the parties to take any responsibility for what is going on.

The task of the consultant is to provide a framework for exploring various ideas and values connected to conflict stories in order to make room for new preferred stories to emerge – stories that in my experience often will be connected to concepts like 'cooperation' and 'respect'.

It is not, however, necessary to fall back on an explanation of deficits in people's problem-solving skills. Nor do these skills have to be imported from expert knowledge. As in narrative work with communities, there is an assumption in narrative work with organisations that:

> … there exists a stock of knowledges about life and skills of living within the community that are relevant to addressing these very predicaments and concerns. We also assume that many of these knowledges and skills and the relevance of these to the present circumstances of the community will be thinly known or relatively invisible to the members of these communities. (White, 2003, p. 25)

White (2003), drawing on Foucault, suggests that, in communities 'that have relatively loose relationships and a relatively recent history' (p. 25), these knowledges can be less visible in favour of culturally dominant ideas and 'truths'. Organisations like this particular organisation, or many organisations for that matter, might fit very well with this description. That is, there will be ideas and practical know-how which people will draw on when relating to each other but, at the same time, everyday ways of going about things are denied, not noticed, and not storied, since they are set as insufficient, irrelevant or even naïve in the light of dominant ideas in organisational life.

A common discourse about conflicts and how to fix them

An example of a dominant, powerful or global 'truth' could be the idea of 'good communication as a remedy' to problems in the organisation. In the written request for the consultation we had been asked to assist to 'strengthen communication, respect and tolerance in the team'. This request is quite a common one, since one of the dominant discourses in western society is what Michael White describes as 'the discourse of healthy communication as a remedy to resolve disagreements':

> In the adoption of ... metaphors from information technology by the human sciences, communication was accorded a high status. The development of specific communication skills was now considered a panacea for many difficulties of human life ... The relationship problems ... were newly understood to be the outcome of absent or insufficient communication or of poor or inadequate communication. The resolution of relationship difficulties was to be found in the development of more functional communication styles ... It was open, direct, accurate and honest communication that was to be aspired to, for not only was this considered desirable, but 'healthy'. (White, 2004, p. 10)

According to this discourse about communication, we should speak our minds freely and openly and, in times of conflict, it is even more important to do so. Therefore, conflicts are often seen as either the direct effect of, or at least sustained by, 'poor communication'. From this perspective, the best way of proceeding is to get more 'direct communication' going. The consultant should assist the parties involved in adjusting their communication or even teach them a different way of communicating.

In the organisation in this example, the management had tried to pave the way for people to communicate with each other. The human resources partner spoke about how she would ask people who had come to her and complained about each other to go back and speak to each other about the complaints. But this request had not had the effects that they had hoped for – things had gradually gotten worse over time.

Presumably most of the members of the team would have also considered this a good time to have things out in the open. From my experience, the discourse of communication as a remedy is a very powerful discourse, and to most of us in western culture it would be a 'taken-for-granted idea'. Most people would say that to communicate, to give straight feedback, or to speak their minds openly, is in general what they ought to do – and even more so in times of conflict.

Effects of the 'communication as a remedy' discourse

This is the point in time when conversations tend to die out. Even when drawing on ideas about the value of 'honest feedback', it is my experience that a lot of people will refrain from actually Doing it.

From a narrative perspective this can be understood in different ways. Michael White comments on the effects of this communication discourse like this:

The act of communication is not a neutral act – in the act of communicating with each other about relationship difficulties partners are constructing each other's identity, and the identity of their relationships. For example, in the context of efforts to resolve difficulties through direct communication, partners can be not only confirming the negative conclusions that they hold about each other's identity and about the identity of the relationship, but further constructing these negative conclusions. The further development of these negative conclusions has significant shaping effects on relationships, contributing to complications that can become increasingly insurmountable over time. (White, 2004, p. 10.)

Refraining from 'honest feedback' might therefore occur because of earlier experience that it did not have wished-for effects or even that it escalated conflict. While the dominant story supports direct communication, stories about good effects from other kinds of actions, such as trying to connect in other ways, may be marginalised.

Another possible understanding is that the experience of direct communication can violate people's preferred ways of being a colleague or an employee, or their preferred ways of relating to other people in general.

Concern and hesitation about having to talk about the conflict can thus be understood, not just as unhelpful resistance, but as the implicit expression of values, skills and knowledges that are commonly not acknowledged but rather pushed aside by the dominant 'communication as a remedy' discourse.

Workplace conflict and effects on identities and relationships

Conflict in workplaces can take various shapes. My guess is that, in workplaces like this one, people would rather avoid each other than engage in open conflict. Sometimes avoidance is accompanied by ambiguous remarks or outbursts of irritation or anger – expressions that offer the other person less favourable positions from which to respond. Both avoidance and angry remarks or outbursts can pave the way for the establishment of a very vicious cycle, accompanied by large amounts of pain for the parties involved.

When the 'truth of honest feedback' idea is dominant and things are still not said, several consequences can ensue. First, negative conclusions about the other(s) are left unquestioned, which can provide a solid base for escalation. Secondly, people tend to think it is their own fault that they don't like the experience of direct communication and that there is something wrong with them if they don't actually do it. One effect of this widespread experience might be the production of a feeling of personal incompetence in dealing with difficult matters, an image of oneself as inadequate and fearful of conflict.

Since the power to define situations is never equal, some people have more legitimacy for their descriptions of what is going on, and others will be more likely to be inscribed in thin descriptions. But everyone might find themselves positioned by others in ways that are not how they want things to be and/or they might see themselves acting in ways that were not in line with their beliefs or values about how to be a good colleague.

As a result, everybody's sense of himself or herself as a professional and a colleague might be in jeopardy. Generally it is my experience that people express hopes for the conflict to stop or to be minimised in order to make space for other kinds of cooperation. Conflicts in the workplace seem surrounded by a lot of personal suffering.

Bearing in mind the widespread idea of communication as a remedy, it is no wonder that some people would be slightly apprehensive about what is going to happen when anticipating an organisational consultation like the one in this example.

Organisational consultancy as definitional ceremony

Organisational consultancy can be understood in terms of definitional ceremony.

Definitional ceremonies … provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms garnering witnesses to one's own worth, vitality and being. (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 267)

Viewed from a narrative frame, the consultancy can be seen as an opportunity for members of an organisation to share some different stories. These can be stories of identity, of hopes and values, or of knowledges and skills. As consultants we are interested in facilitating processes of telling, listening and responding to enable each speaker to feel recognised in the responses of the others.

It is not easy to listen and respond in such ways, not in life in general, not in organisational life, and certainly not during times of conflict. Most of us have extensive training in listening for meaning – our own meaning, that is – which makes us change everything into our own words, our own grammar, and our own logic. We are used to evaluating what is told in terms of agreement or disagreement, or asking ourselves whether the other person needs something like help or critique, praise or applause.

When a sense of conflict has taken over much of the relationship, it becomes even more difficult to listen to the other. Everyone has their ears and mouths full of their own version of things. To facilitate processes of listening and responding, therefore, presents a huge challenge to the consultant.

Drawing on the anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, Michael White (2000; 2007) has further developed the metaphor of definitional ceremony into practices of witnessing through tellings and re-tellings that contribute to the thickening and enrichment of preferred stories.

The processes of witnessing that White outlined are quite structured, with interviews of each witness focusing on four categories:

- What caught your attention in what the person told?
- Which images came to your mind about what this person intends for her life?
- How does this resonate with your own personal history?
- Where does listening to this take you to?

To people normally engaging in very different discourses, the format can initially seem somewhat rigid and somewhat strange. I introduce it as a ritualised way of Doing the kind of acknowledgement of each other that we sometimes do in everyday ways. When discussing or participating in meetings, I really enjoy and feel enriched (1) when others actually hear what I say, (2) when I can hear that they understand what I am about, (3) when they let my words have resonance and relevance into *their* lives and *their* challenges – and (4) when they somehow transform that into some kind of inspiration which is relevant to them. These things happen now and then, but often very quickly. Engaging in witnessing practices makes it possible to linger in these forms of acknowledgement.

The structure makes it clear when to talk and when to listen, and it is my experience that this makes listening a lot easier. At the same time, the structure makes it possible to stay focused on intentions and hopes of the participants. The purpose is to listen to each others' stories and perspectives and thereby create the possibility to connect, to coordinate and to move towards shared purposes, such as a pleasant work atmosphere or increased flexibility in the cooperation. These shared ideas or purposes emerge through listening and responding. It is not the task of the consultant to point out shared ideas or platforms but solely to create the framework and to keep a decentered and curious position (White & Morgan, 2006).

The task of the consultant

Drawing from these various narrative ideas, I see the task of the organisational consultant as providing a context for persons to listen to each other's stories in ways that make it possible to:

- understand differences as growing out of different narratives with different beliefs, values and preferred identities
- explore any shared purposes
- elicit and richly describe knowledges and skills that make it possible to build on these purposes.

Before the consultation day – engaging with different stories

Often consultants try to conduct telephone or live interviews before the actual meeting, and with various intentions. For those involved in the conflict, the telling of parts of the story to an outsider to the organisation can have various effects, such as:

The opportunity to articulate one's story, before having the other party listen (Winslade & Cotter, 1997). The initial telling of the story might have a clarifying effect. It might be the first time that a person has had the possibility to tell a more or less coherent story about their point of view. Having their perspective listened to and thereby acknowledged as a legitimate story, even by an outsider, often has profound effects (Winslade & Monk, 2001):

- Gaining a sense of the attitude and types of questions that will be part of the consultancy.
- The chance to start thinking of the conflict rather than of the others as the problem.
- Reviewing ways of responding to and dealing with the situation (skills and knowledges) that the person is already practising.

For the consultant, there are also important effects. As well as getting the consultancy started, the consultant will gain a sense of the various ways of talking about the difficulties in the organisation. This is not with the intention of working out what is really the matter but in order to get a sense of the storying processes at this particular place and to prepare the consultant's ears for listening.

To assist people to tell their story has a double function. Firstly, it helps us as consultants to prepare ourselves to listen carefully for the complexity of the issues. It also gives an opportunity to generate ideas for the structure of the meeting. It is also possible to attend to some of the dominant cultural stories that could be involved for both the organisation and the consultant – discourses that would shape certain things as unquestionable truths, or as viewpoints and values that are in line with those of the consultant (Winslade & Monk 2001; Winslade, 2003). Feeling that you agree and that you understand the person speaking could make you think that you know what the conflict is all about. Here this would be reason for concern – signs that you as a consultant might be listening in particular ways, to favour some ideas and marginalise others.

What is told to the consultant in initial interviews will not be brought into the consultation day, but it will help us to prepare our ears for what is being said on the consultation day. It will also help us generate initial ideas about which kinds of issues might be discussed at a later stage. Since we could not in this case do such live interviews, we decided to send participants some questions by email and asked them to send back the answers.

Inspired by the idea of introducing an externalising voice right from the beginning (Winslade & Cotter, 1997), the questions were as follows:

- We would like to know a bit about how things look from your point of view.
- What would you say you are struggling with? What do you think we need to know about your situation? When did this start? If you were to put a name or a headline to this trouble, what would you call it?
- What effects has 'this' had on your enjoyment of your work? On your enjoyment of life? How does 'this' affect your relationships and cooperation with the team?
- Are there parts of your cooperation or relationships that have not been totally undermined by 'this' (specific parts or situations)? Which parts might these be?
- What strategies have you used to continue daily work while this conflict has been going on?
- What would you particularly wish would happen during our day together? Why would that be a good thing?

All the persons from the team answered the questions by email and the answers told stories of longstanding conflicts with little hope of change. A conflict was described that had permeated into all areas of relationship and it had resulted in a split into two groups. There were also some requests for tools of communication.

First consultation day – addressing conflict

After an introduction, the manager spoke about the background for our presence. We introduced the day's program and outlined, firstly, that we wanted to listen to each person, since we were interested in everyone's way of seeing things and, secondly, that this would not be a day of debate or other forms of exchange of ideas.

The group was given pen and paper and asked to listen in a very specific way to each of their colleagues. What is in your colleague's heart? How does he/she want to be a professional or colleague? How does she want this workplace to be? And so on. They were asked to write responses down so that they would stick closely to the words used, even when it was hard not to change them into one's own.

Individual interviews

Most of the day was a plenary session – we interviewed each team member for ten to twenty minutes, while the others listened. After two or three interviews, the others could be interviewed and respond from the witness position. The first ones to be interviewed were the manager and the human resource partner.

Each interview was structured more-or-less from the categories of Position Map 1 (White, 2007) as a guideline. The first part of the enquiry was to give each person a chance to describe and *name* the kind of trouble that the team was facing – when 'it' started, what sustained trouble, and so on.

Then we explored the *effects* of 'it' for this particular person – effects on the person's relations to colleagues, to work life, to one's sense of self as a colleague and as a professional, and (if the person was interested in exploring this) effects on life outside the workplace. Listening to the ways that the conflict was having effects on the lives of others had great impact. It created possibilities for the parties to unite in what was often a common purpose, namely to have the unpleasant situation stop. We would ask the person to *evaluate* or take a position on these effects and to *justify* this evaluation in relation to his or her preferred ideas on cooperation and on being colleagues*.* We might also touch upon relationships where the person had connected to these ideas, or we could ask about everyday strategies that they were using in their efforts to make things work in the organisation, despite the effects of the trouble.

After two or three interviews we would ask the rest of the group to respond. We would ask questions like:

- What were you connecting with in what your colleague said?
- What is your sense of what she is hoping for or what is important to her?
- How does this fit with what is important for you?
- What does hearing all this make clearer or more possible for you?

Through the interviews, some shared purposes emerged. Everybody agreed on certain hopes. Through listening to each other about the effects of the conflict, it was clear that the conflict had put a great strain on everybody and that everybody wanted to engage in a different spirit of cooperation. It was generally thought, however, that achieving this different spirit should come about through the other person changing their behaviour. Everybody, nevertheless, wanted fun and laughter to come back again into the team. The term, 'good atmosphere', was used often during the day to describe what they were hoping for. There were also many different ways of understanding what was spoken about. Some were quite surprised to hear how others had understood events and positions. When they looked at things from this perspective, it made their own actions look different.

Near the end of the day, we asked them to interview each other in pairs using questions such as:

- Name one or two things that this day's conversations have highlighted for you – for example, things you have heard yourself or somebody else say that stood out.
- If you should take a small step or initiative to help 'good atmosphere' to have an easier life here, what might that be?

In the subsequent round it was acknowledged by everyone how the conflict atmosphere made everyday life difficult, and several people pointed out that listening to each other had made them look at some of the challenges they had as a team in a totally different light. Strong commitments to do things differently in various ways were also expressed. We asked about the need for follow-up and the group decided that they wanted a follow-up consultation.

The follow-up – thickening stories

Due to summer holidays and busyness, four months passed before the scheduled follow-up. In order to help my planning, about two weeks before the follow-up meeting, I phoned the office manager to get a brief idea about how things were. From the office manager's perspective, things were much better. She could see that new steps had been taken – steps that she considered important, but these were still fragile.

The importance of follow-up consultancy

With this concern about things being fragile, the manager touched on an important point. If we assume that we live out complex stories, then it is crucial to appreciate that our stories can hold complex and contradictory experiences. When a story of conflict has been the framework of much of the action and understanding in the organisation for a long time, new storylines will be very fragile for quite some time.

For some time after the first consultation, there can be a high spirit of enthusiasm. People will tend to see their own and others' initiatives in a different light, and they tend to understand the actions of others as more meaningful through the perspectives of the other stories they now have. New initiatives will be taken, and responses will be slightly different. The first part of the consultation provides possibilities for important steps, new developments and new stories, but is merely the first part of the re-authoring process.

When everyday life, with all its demands for speed and effectiveness, gets its firm grip of an organisation, insecurity, confusion and tiny misunderstandings can easily return. The enthusiasm from the first consultation can be squeezed and the all-so-familiar conflict stories will be right at hand to offer a powerful framework for understanding what is going on. A dichotomy may seem relevant: *either* the old story is correct *or* the new one is, rather than that there are several stories co-existing.

In order for complex, rich stories to develop, it is important to spend time looking at the new initiatives taken. Otherwise, these initiatives that can be easily overlooked, as stories of cooperation, curiosity and respect are not yet rich enough to incorporate the complexity of everyday life.

Some might think that further consultation is a waste of time, since everything is now okay. Quite a few – at least in Scandinavia – might be skeptical of too much celebration of progress. Expressions of such enthusiasm might be considered very American corporate style and too far from local tradition.

The consultant has an important job to do here. From a narrative perspective, re-authoring conversations and rich story development are central to the work. Focusing on overlooked initiatives and responses, and discerning and honouring marginalised knowledges and skills, is critical to the development of complex and multifaceted stories.

Each individual in the organisation can look at their own initiatives and responses and evaluate the connection to personal knowledges, skills and values. Knowledges and values need to be contextualised, so that the consultant can further interview people about the relations that were foundational for these understandings.

Another consideration is that talking about the initiatives, and about the skills and knowledges connected with them, allows both the individual and the group to prepare for problems that make a comeback. ('What would be for you the first signs of problems returning?') It is also an opportunity to share reflections on the variety of skills and knowledges present in the group about dealing with the problem.

In this light, I saw the follow-up day as an occasion that would make it possible for this group of people to:

- identify and give significance to various steps or initiatives that had been taken to keep alive or even strengthen 'good atmosphere';
- evaluate the significance of these steps in relation to their contribution to 'good atmosphere' and other preferred values;
- evaluate initiatives and responses in relation to knowledges, skills and values of the individual;
- link these initiatives together to shared stories of cooperation;
- thicken these storylines or values;
- anticipate some of the difficulties that might arise in future if workload or other sorts of stress were to invite 'conflict' and 'bad atmosphere' back again.

The structure of the consultation

After a brief greeting by the manager, the participants were asked to form pairs and interview each other using the questions below as a guideline. The purpose of the interview was to focus on developments since the first consultation and, thereby, create a foundation for exploring preferred stories of collegiality and good atmosphere.

- Think about the time that has passed since we were last together.
- What did you decide to try to do when we left each other? How would you name that? What headline would you give it?
- On which occasions have you most enjoyed being a colleague with these people here? What was part of making that occasion special? Who did what?
- What steps (small or big) have you yourself taken to strengthen 'good atmosphere'? Tell about one or two episodes. Have you noticed something others did to contribute? What was possible for you to do as a result?
- Have there been times when you felt the conflict-mode or the not-talking-together try to sneak up on you again, but without it succeeding? If yes, tell about an episode. What did you do? What did others do? How did you like that? Why?

Individual interviews – storying initiatives

The interview followed the structure of the first consultation. I interviewed three persons and then I interviewed the others in the group from the witness position about what they had heard. I continued in this way until everyone was interviewed.

The focus here was on identifying initiatives – initiatives that had been planned towards the end of the first consultation, initiatives that had been taken without planning, or familiar initiatives that had been sustained. I find inspiration in White's use of Vygotsky's ideas on scaffolding from the 'known and familiar' to the 'possible to know' (White, 2007). On this occasion, questions like the following were part of the interviews:

- What have you done since last time in order to keep not-talking-together and bad atmosphere at a distance?
- What small actions have you or others taken to keep it away? Give an example – where were you – what happened? What would you call that?
- Was that a usual thing to do, or did you have to make a special effort?
- If you had to make a special effort, how did you manage to take that step?
- What were your intentions in taking that step?
- Are there other things you've done recently that are connected to these things?
- Former bosses or colleagues – would they see connections to things you've done before?
- Which other steps have you seen your colleagues take – steps that were important to you? What did these steps make possible? Why is that a good thing?
- How did you manage to notice in the hurry of daily life?
- What does all this say about how you prefer to be as a professional and a colleague?
- How do you prefer things to be when there are differences around?
- These preferences you are talking about here – when and together with whom would you say that you've learned to appreciate them?
- So how would you hope to contribute to cooperation and good atmosphere – here or in other groups?
- If somehow no-talking-together or no-respect should start sneaking in again, what do you think you'd do?

The following are examples of conversations during the day. The transcripts are made from notes taken by two of my interns who were listening and writing throughout the day. The interviews and the Danish article have been read and approved by members of the organisation.

Sean

Sean was one of the young men with a specialist education in information technology and he had experienced conflict in the team. On the first day, he had ended up deciding he wanted to try to limit his hours at work to avoid getting so exhausted and unhappy. But before speaking about that, he wanted to talk about another initiative he realised he had also taken:

So, Sean, now it seems that 'good atmosphere' is around a lot more, is there anything you have done to make it hang in here?

Well, now that we speak about things - funnily enough there is especially one thing I have done – it is entirely different from what I planned to do last time, but … I have

improved my checking up on whether other people understand what I have explained to them – to make sure that what I have told them has been handed over to them in a good way.

What is this about, did you start to talk or explain in a different way, to ask more questions or … what would you say is different?

No, more like when I have explained something, the rounding off is different, I would say.

What made you start noticing this rounding off? What happened? What were you Doing that made you notice this?

I think I caught myself in a situation where I heard myself being arrogant … it was with one of my colleagues, doesn't matter whom now. But I had explained how to do something and all of a sudden I could hear myself. I was so arrogant and, if there is one thing I simply hate in other people, then it is arrogance. It is not necessary to talk to other people like that.

So how is rounding off connected to not-arrogance?

You know, I do tend to get irritated if I have to explain the same thing over again. But now I more often ask whether it makes sense what I am saying. And, if it does, then I know that I have tried my best. So I don't feel like such a jerk, if people don't understand. Because I would blame myself, if people didn't understand and maybe get cross with them, but now I am prepared that more questions may come and that is fine.

Is this rounding off a new thing for you?

No – I don't know – maybe it is not entirely new, but I don't think I have given it much thought before. But … I think as things were earlier on here, I would show despair and rejection, that is how things were here.

What would you prefer instead of arrogance?

I definitely want to be forthcoming and kind, to be a person that people like to come to and ask for help.

What is good about kindness and forthcomingness, would you say?

It gives a much better atmosphere – instead of making everybody feel silly and stupid.

Does this tell anything about the sort of colleague you want to be?

Just like Jim said, I want to be some kind of a resource that other people can use. Like being able to inspire other people. To be able to pass on what I know in a useful way.

This wanting to pass on to others in a good way – where did you pick that up in life? How did you learn that?

Oh definitely from my father (laughs). You know, he was the sort of man, if you asked him a question, like, 'How hot is the sun?' he would use all kinds of things to illustrate and he would draw and talk for three hours. He would do a lot of teaching and talking.

Was that a good or a bad thing, do you think?

It was a good thing! Well, it sure could be too much some times, but mainly it was definitely a good thing.

Why was that?

Because it meant your questions were never stupid. And that is how things should be. That arrogant picture I got of me – I did not like that. That was not nice at all. That was not at all where I wanted to go.

Sean had more or less identified this step in the very moment of the interview. It made him take a strong position against arrogance and a position in favour of forthcomingness and kindness. By talking about the intentions and values embedded in this step, Sean got the opportunity to develop a story about these values and to identify his father as a source of this value and of these practices.

Bente

Bente was rather new in the team. She had started to work in the organisation just before the first consultation day. On that day, she had stated that she had never really met the effects of the initial conflict.

As you said, you never really knew 'bad atmosphere' here, since you were absolutely new here last time we saw each other. And since 'good atmosphere' seems to be around more or less everyday now, how do you take part in keeping it alive?

Well, if anybody needs to let off steam or stuff about the others then I would like to listen and hear their story, but I will not necessarily say that they are right. I will not join in with my own ways or my thinking; I will not contribute to gossip. I will neither bear witness to them being right nor prove them wrong or disprove that they are right. I am not going to be part of that game. So I am stating clearly which part I will play and which part I won't.

That is a pretty clear statement you make there. Can you say some more about what you intend to get at by listening but not joining in?

I want to make my contribution to making some of the conflicts that have been here shrink. I don't want to judge what other people are doing. Certainly now and then I can vent my spite about this or that or somebody. I am not an angel. So I think it is okay to judge for oneself, but I don't want to participate in other people's judgings.

That sounds like rather a strong principle to me, is that so?

Yes!

Is this a workplace principle or is it more a general-life principle?

Hm … I guess it is more of an over-all principle.

From whom in life have you been acquainted with this principle?

I don't know from whom, but I clearly recall when. It is an experience I have, from when I was a day-care mother. I was a day-care mother for quite some years when my kids were small. We were this group of like twenty day-care mothers and there was a lot of stabbing each other in the back, and stabbing just spoils working together. It makes such a bad atmosphere, it is unbelievable. Things can be done in so many ways. If we were all to do the dishes, we would all do it in different ways, but we would all get it done. My way of doing things is not better than anybody else's way. So at least we should not join in being grumpy about other people's ways. It may escalate faster than you would imagine.

What would you say that this principle is about?

I would say it is about benefiting from the differences – enjoying the differences. We are all different, but in a good way, we have very different skills and competences, we need to remember that we all have different strong sides and resources – and these differences are an advantage to our team. The more we know about each others' differences and resources, the more we are able to benefit from it all. Then, when I need an answer about something, I can immediately go to the right person – when I know who it is.

How is it for you to act from this principle in this team here?

I think it is easy. During the time I have been here, the atmosphere has been good and that makes it all so easy to be here. It is not great to be here if people sit around in their own corner and grumble about others. Then you don't feel like helping each other. And then differences are not used to their advantage. You don't feel like helping someone who puts up a cross face. The good atmosphere makes us work together much better.

So from your way of seeing things – what would be a good thing to do if 'bad atmosphere' starts creeping in again?

I think we should remember how valuable the differences are – and then I think we should be careful not to join each other in grumpiness.

At an earlier workplace, Bente had acquired knowledges and skills about how to deal with people judging each other. She makes firm statements about how she wants to act according to this principle. She also has ideas about what to do if 'good atmosphere' becomes threatened again.

Response using the outsider-witness structure

The following is an example of a response from a colleague:

Carl, what stood out to you when hearing Anne and Bente?

First of all, it is great that Anne told all she did the other day [*personal matters about why she is often away on sick leave*] – I know it is a very big step she took, and it is just good to hear her talk about it like this.

Talk about it like what?

Like feeling good about it and just talking about it. Because I don't think it was an easy thing to do for her. Just like she said, it was difficult.

Do you get a sense of what is dear to Anne or important to Anne in this matter?

It is like a victory for her, I think – she won a battle. And somehow it is like a victory for us as a team that we got through all this. We would never have guessed in Spring that we would end up fine, would we?

How does this taking big steps and fighting a battle fit in with your doings and thinkings?

You know, I had to make some difficult decisions in my life as well. I've been there – so that is how I appreciate how much it takes to go through with it.

Why is it good to hear Anne talk like this – anything that this makes possible for you?

Now it is much easier to understand what is going on and much easier to ask Anne about how things are.

Any other things you were drawn to?

And then I think it is a cool thing that Bente said that she is not going to join the game!

What was it especially she said that you noticed?

The thing about that she would listen if people would come to her and talk about or maybe complain about the others. Then she would listen, but not join in.

As you see it, why would you say that it is a cool thing to do?

Because I think it is a good way to make sure that you do not contribute to everything getting worse again. I like that. I would love to be able to do that, but I think it is hard – I don't know if I would be able to stick to it. But I will try. And it is good to know that she thinks like that, and then it is always easier to go to her, if you need to talk about something.

So hearing Anne tell about the big steps she has taken, and Bente tell about her ways of responding to others – where does this take you? Anything that becomes clearer to you about life in this team? Or maybe something you want to do a little differently?

Well, mostly I feel happy about all this. Already it is so much easier to talk to both Anne and Bente. And it is good to hear them talk this way. I really feel we can go on together now.

Did you get any inspiration for what you might do?

As I said, I will try to do like Bente does – I think that is a good way.

Carl seems to want to tell Anne that he appreciates how big a step she has taken, which later on makes Anne respond that, with this (and others') appreciation, she now feels 'fit to fight' and ready to go on in this team. Also Carl seems to be inspired by Bente's clear statements and description of problem-solving skills.

Judgement very easily finds its way into these responses. In high conflict situations, such judgement might make it hard for people to listen to each other without protesting, whereas here there is a lot of wanting to applaud each other for the steps that have been taken. Looking at the transcripts also highlights how some of these responses challenged my ability to ask questions that would avoid producing too much judgement – so there is plenty to work on further.

Ending the day

The day was ended by establishing interviews in pairs followed by a round of brief closing responses. The interview was structured from the following questions:

- From what you've heard yourself or others talk about today, what stands out for you – something you've learnt or something that is more visible?
- What effects might it have for you to notice that?
- Periods with lots of stress can return and, if conflict is threatening to eat up cooperation again, what would you like to keep Doing? Why is that?
- Are there things you would like to do a little less or a little more? Why is that?
- Who would you like to come and ask you how things are going for you concerning staying with these intentions?

Everyone was asked to say what had become clearer to them and to speak about any further possible steps they were planning towards taking care of good atmosphere. The questions in this final interview again touch on dealing with upcoming challenges, just like the individual interviews during the day. These are not superfluous repetitions. During the day's interviews, many reflections and witness responses have been brought forward, and this final part is an opportunity to pick up on other people's ideas and connect to them. A continuous thickening of the problem-solving skills in the organisation is taking place, and these are important moments for coordination of joint strategies of the group.

Finally everyone had the opportunity to make a few comments on how the day had been and whether they had felt comfortable in the room. Generally, there was a feeling of having enjoyed being together in this way and a sense of, 'This team can manage most things right now'. The manager stated that she was glad they had chosen to do a follow-up day so that things could be digested more. From my point of view, the atmosphere had been light and easy – and a lot of humour had been involved throughout the day.

End of story

This story is an example of my exploration of narrative ideas in organisational consultation. I very much enjoyed working with this group. Though such a process certainly is a journey with periods of confusion and frustration, it is, at the same time, a tremendous joy to work together with a group moving from conflict to cooperation or, as it was put here, from bad to good atmosphere. To feel the tension dissolving and easy-going-ness enter in, was a privilege.

The individual interview structure combined with the responses in the outsider-witness structure gave rise to a stronger focus on the individual stories and values. To me it seems to make a more multifaceted meaning-making process possible.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to this particular organisation with which I have been collaborating. It is not an easy thing to just open one's doors to consultants in times of complexity and conflict. It takes courage to discuss all the dilemmas with a person who is not familiar, and I am grateful that the organisation has made this article possible by allowing me to publish my reflections.

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Appendices

Hello again to all of you,

I enjoyed very much being with you all – both in May and now this Monday.

Now, when some days have passed, it becomes even clearer to me that all your initiatives and knowledges about how to keep good atmosphere alive were also very inspiring to me. I am going to take all this along in my professional life.

As we talked about, I have now written down a list of all the various kinds of knowledge that was brought forth the other day – knowledges about how to keep good atmosphere alive, and observations about what you have let good atmosphere bring along.

Thank you for cooperating so well and making my job so easy – it is great that you all went along with the plans I had made, even if parts of them seemed somewhat strange to you.

I send my best regards and wishes for your team and you all,
Dorte.

Knowledge in this team about how to keep good atmosphere alive

Jim: To share with the others when you feel under too much stress instead of just trying to cope with it as long as possible.

Anne: To share with the others why some challenges in one's private life affects being at work. To have conversations with Christine if support is needed. To receive positive feedback from the rest of the group when you tell things about yourself.

Sean: To be forthcoming and helpful and to try to check out whether the colleagues understand what you are explaining. To not work very late – it gives bigger surplus of energy the next day in the team. To talk about things we have in common during the breaks.

Bente : To listen if a person is frustrated about a colleague, but not to join in. To appreciate the advantages of all the differences in the group.

Carl: To reflect on how one's self contributes to what is going on in the group. To meet the others in a positive way even if one's mood is not the best. To think about – when people do something you dislike or think is strange – that probably it is the right thing for them to do.

Sanne: To ask questions and show that you are interested, when people are telling you things. To share a bit about our lives and thoughts since we share a lot of hours of the day. To share smiles even when there have been things troubling you.

Peter: To share jokes and fun. To offer help when others need it. Observations in this team about what good atmosphere has brought along.

Christine: There is more space for everyone. More appreciation of the various ways of being in the group. A lot of energy and a possibility to move on. The team can now use the energy for

some of the development projects that have been waiting. Good atmosphere made it possible for Anne to take the steps she has taken.

Jim: There is a certain openness now. The people in this team distribute assignments faster and better. Duties are easily swapped. Even the on-duty schedule for the coming holiday has been made before Jim asked for it.

Sean: The openness makes it easier to know how to react when you are in doubt.

Peter: We have more fun, when days are not too busy – share jokes, etc.

Anne: The good atmosphere has broken down the wall between Carl and me.

Sanne: Good atmosphere makes it easier to solve problems among ourselves before going to the management.