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How to Do CSR with Dialogic Meeting Talk: A Conceptual Framework for Managing Change in Cross-Sector Social Partnerships

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Abstract

Within the theoretical framework of Cross-Sector Social Partnerships [CSSPs], strategic communication and dialogue and by use of an example drawn from a case study of a CSSP, this article argues that Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] initiatives are best developed in partnership-wide meetings involving relevant stakeholders. Importantly, it proposes a framework for analysis. Following a theoretical discussion of the interconnectedness of CSSPs, strategic communication and dialogue, the article outlines a framework for analysis. It delineates the potential of the framework through an analysis of a partnership-wide dialogue conducted in a local CSSP at a seminar/meeting dealing with the creation of common understanding for a social inclusion project among internal and external stakeholders. The analytical findings support the main argument and the conceptual endeavor by illustrating how common understanding of the need for social inclusion is constructed through a partnership-wide meeting organized as dialogue.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility [CSR], cross-sector social partnerships [CSSPs], partnership-wide meetings, dialogue, strategic communication

1. Introduction

Definitions of cross-sector social partnerships [CSSPs] generally put emphasis on elements such as cross-sectorial collaboration, commitment of resources, problem-solution and social issue [1, P. 18]; [2, P. 14]; [3, P. 3]; [4]. The definitions have to a large extent been used as conceptual frames of reference for understanding, describing, interpreting and developing partnerships as a political tool and innovative form of cross-sectorial collaboration to address social inclusion [5]. Two perspectives seem to dominate the partnership literature: A private organizational perspective (e.g. [1]) and a public governance perspective (e.g. [3]). As a consequence of this, partnerships have also been conceptualized as a stakeholder dialogue (e.g. [6, 7]). The dialogue has been conducted in four “arenas”: business-nonprofit, business-government, government-nonprofit, and trisector [5]. According to [5, 8], research on CSSPs is multidisciplinary using conceptual

platforms, e.g. resource dependence, social issues, and societal sector platforms. Within the sub-field of Cross-Sector Social Interactions [CSSI], the focus has for example been on unpacking more generally oriented key processes that lead to success [7, 9–13]. Only more recently, communicative platforms have been used [9, 14–16]; see also the review by [17].

This is surprising in light of the conceptualization of partnerships as a stakeholder dialogue. It is even more surprising that research using empirical evidence is almost non-existing. This paper aims to contribute to the empirical investigation of the communicative aspect of CSSPs. Within the theoretical frameworks of strategic communication and dialogue and by use of an example drawn from a case study, we will answer the following research question:

How can corporations successfully develop Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] initiatives in partnership-wide meetings with stakeholders organized in a CSSP?

The example we will use is a partnership-wide meeting in a local CSSP in Denmark. The meeting, which becomes apparent in the analysis, not only represents one principal entity with an overall strategic intent to reach a specific outcome but is used strategically by the partnership management in order to establish legitimation towards new organizational practices, i.e. social inclusion through job integration and job retention. We will argue that the structure of the meeting can be seen as the concrete, in-situ practice of strategic communication organized as dialogue. By use of theories within the field of strategic communication and dialogue, we will argue that strategic partnership dialogue is relevant at both a macro and a micro, interactional level in which specific instances of text and talk can be used strategically to establish legitimation. Following a theoretical discussion of the interconnectedness of cross-sector social partnerships, strategic communication and dialogue, we outline our theoretical framework and present our analysis. The analytical findings support our argument and conceptual endeavor by illustrating how common understanding of the need for social inclusion is constructed through dialogue at a partnership level.

2. The interconnectedness of CSSPs, strategic communication and dialogue

In their article from 2012, Koschmann et al. [16] introduce the concept of *collective agency* - the capacity of strategic communication practitioners, e.g. CSSP managers, to influence a host of relevant outcomes, e.g. social, economic and environmental change, beyond what individual organizations could do on their own. The authors argue that partnerships develop depending on “how people interact” [pp. 339–340]. Thus, the conventional conception of dialogue—in which the term references ends-oriented talk that advocates a simplistic openness, urges personal sharing, and gives precedence to consensus and common ground over conflict and argument—is not likely to be helpful according to the authors [who refer to [18–20]]. This is because dialogue is seen only as a special case of communication used when groups are forced to overcome differences. The conventional conception of dialogue also assumes that meanings are private and internal and can be expressed more or less productively if the situation is structured well, forming the basis for compromise as a decisional procedure [and outcome]. The authors argue that a more richly communicative conception portraying dialogue as implicit in communication such as meanings, identities, and agendas (e.g. [21]) is more helpful. This view of dialogue acknowledges that participants hold different [and often deeply opposed] positions. Further, a simultaneous ethic of inclusiveness and confrontation is more likely to generate the meaningful participation needed for the creative, integrative, and legitimate

solutions participants seek [22]. The research by [16] is supported by research by e.g. Brennan et al. [23]; Crane and Livesay [24] and [15].

In this article, we will follow [16] and argue that a more richly communicative conception portraying dialogue as implicit in partnership-wide meeting agendas is helpful for understanding for example how common understanding of the need for social change is created in and among stakeholders in a CSSP.

In a more general discussion of the agency of strategic communication practitioners, [25] introduce the *principal-agency theory*, which holds that principals [i.e. owners or shareholders] appoint agents [i.e. managers] to act on their behalf through contracts, output measurement and rewards. Hence, within the field of strategic communication there seems to be an implicit notion that communication agents due to the purposeful and instrumental nature of this particular communication activity act and speak on behalf of someone else. Overall, the guiding principles in any strategic communication, change and learning process, whether in the public or private sector, are about understanding what changes are needed, and how to manage and communicate them [26]. Creating vision, showing wholehearted and visible support for the change, maintaining buy-in to mission, sense-making and feedback, communicating goal achievement and establishing legitimation have been seen as pivotal to maintaining commitment to corporate change programs [27, p. 128]. Especially, the creation of common understanding and legitimation is a challenge in organizations where change is driven by changes in dominant values and practices [28–30], which is most often the case in organizations that have chosen to engage in a cross-sector social partnership. Thus, managers in such organizations need to navigate between the heterogeneous discourses expressed within the organization and the discourses expressed at the partnership level. Research has demonstrated that the strategic use of communication, e.g. in the form of narratives and metaphors plays a pivotal role in attempting to facilitate the disruption of taken-for-granted practices and confront or overcome potential adversaries [31–34]. Our focus is not on narratives and metaphors as strategic communication but on dialogue structure.

Overall, the field of strategic communication positions itself at the intersection of management strategy and communication [35]. Argenti et al. [36] define strategic communication as “aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” [p. 83], whereas [37] define it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” [p. 3]. Both definitions rely on the ideas of rationality, predictability, and *free agency* [38], and as such the term “strategic communication” implies an overall focus on the purpose of the message as well as the intentions of the sender, as the communicator, according to the definitions, seems to have decisive influence over the communication process. The elements of purposeful intent inherent in strategic communication clarify the purpose-driven nature of an organization’s messages, and hence according to such understanding of strategic communication, a manager is “apt to enter a conversation, make a statement, prepare a document, or deliver a presentation with a preset goal, a strategic intent, in mind” [39, p. 124]. Hence, strategic communication recognizes that purposeful influence is the fundamental goal of communication by the senders, i.e. managers in CSSPs, and within such instrumental view, communication is characterized as something managers do to accomplish something else [40–42]. This line of research is supported by CSSP research, e.g. [7, 9–11, 13, 43] in discussions of the effects of interactions across sectors with the aim of unpacking key processes that lead to success.

In this article, we will argue that the study of strategic communication encompasses more than goals, means and outcomes at a partnership level solely conducted by managers on behalf of a principal entity. From our perspective, strategic communication is also conducted at a meso and micro level with the purpose of for instance gaining support towards corporate changes and new organizational practices

through the creation of common understanding. As a result, we will pursue the idea that strategic communication is not merely a macro-organizational discipline but can also be seen as a particular micro-level mode of communication, which can be applied with the strategic intention of gaining common understanding and legitimation among the organizational members. In specific, we will pursue the idea that dialogue as a particular mode of communication is a key element of building relationships, common understanding, learning and commitment at both a micro and a macro level [44–48]. We argue with [49] that agents, i.e. CSSP managers, have the potential to deliberately and effectively choose and carry out certain [communicative] actions. As such, from Giddens's perspective, the communicator is able to reflexively play an active role in shaping the organization and its members through his/her strategic communication role in the organization [37, 40]. Within this line of thinking, it becomes blurrier who is the communicator who is able to play an active role in shaping the partnership, its members – and ultimately social change.

On the basis of the above, we argue that managers in CSSPs deliberately and effectively choose and carry out certain communicative actions which will help them to obtain common understanding and legitimation in relation to internal and external stakeholders. In addition, we argue that managers in CSSPs acting as change agents navigate between the heterogeneous texts and talks expressed within the organization and the texts and talks expressed at the partnership level. Hence, the struggle for common understanding can be seen as a strategic communicative endeavor conducted at both a textual, discursive and interpersonal level and a more overall, formalized organizational level. By use of our exemplary analysis we will expand the understanding of the management and communication of change in a CSSP to also encompass the more agency- and dialogue-oriented discipline of strategic change communication in CSSPs. Below, we elaborate on the concept of dialogue and how to analyze dialogue.

3. The micro-, meso- and macro-level study of CSSPs as dialogue

Our analytical framework is rooted in dialogue analysis. Thus, we analyze the meetings in the CSSP as dialogue, focusing on how social change is constructed in dialogic meeting talk. Our framework is outlined in Section 4 below.

We argue that dialogue is both a *formal structure of discourse* [50–53] and a *discursive practice*, i.e. an approach to language analysis which concerns itself with issues of language, power and ideology. A discursive practice in foucauldian terms [54] is the process through which [dominant] reality comes into being. Thus, dialogue is not only a tool for managing interaction with a specific goal, but also a concrete communicative practice that relies on language. We extract fundamental notions from different disciplines and areas that we find relevant in the analysis of dialogue as a tool in partnership-wide meetings for change.

As one of the fundamentals of communication as a formal structure, conversation analysts [53] introduced the concept of *turn taking*, a turn defined as any participatory act committed by the respective discourse partners. The interaction rests on specific rules for turn taking which respect the rules of politeness of the specific culture in which we speak; certain openings are inevitably followed by certain responses, the so-called *adjacency pairs*. A question and an answer constitute such an adjacency pair, just as does a request and an acceptance, a greeting and a greeting response. If one of these openings is not followed by the expected response, this is understood as a violation of the politeness pattern, which underlies all verbal interaction. A question and an answer consist of such an adjacency pair given that the construction is held together by the expectation of an answer. Added to this is

the fact that some types of answers are *preferred*. Conversation analysts have also made the observation that an opening and a closing surround almost all interactions. According to [50], politeness can be derived from fundamental anthropological notions of what it is to be a human being. The basic notion of their model is that of *face*, defined as the public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself, which is divided into negative face – or freedom of action and the wish that one's actions will not be constrained by others – and positive face, the positive self-image that people have and their desire to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. *Face Threatening Acts [FTAs]* are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain their self-esteem and be respected. Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTAs, and speakers use these strategies for lessening the threat. Questions and requests can be more threatening than other acts or be put forward in a relation of power, which underlines the threat. Questions, requests and other threatening acts are therefore often prepared and explained before and after, so that the face of the interlocutor is protected. Any speech act may impose on this sense and therefore paves the way for preparatory acts.

Conversations with a clear purpose, such as for example conversations conducted in an organizational and/or partnership context, have another common feature: a logical structure. The Geneva School [52], drawing on works by Bakhtine, Austin, Searle and Grice, and Goffman, among others, understands *dialogue as a hierarchical or logical construction*. According to this school, dialogue consists of units at different levels [for example, a superior versus a subordinate exchange], which are tied together in different ways. In practice, it can be difficult to delimit the units. However, one possibility is to consider a meeting between two or more persons in a certain place and in a certain space of time as a unit [51, p. 214]. Furthermore, a unit can be defined by its topic, as topic shifts can mark the transition to a new unit. The starting point of the model is a conception of dialogue as negotiation. This means that a dialogue is not closed before the partners have reached an agreement, including agreeing that it is not possible to reach an agreement. This also means that a turn is not complete until it is so clearly formulated and motivated that the recipient is capable of answering. According to models of dialogue analysis, a good dialogue is characterized by the fact that the partners know their rights and duties. They have a right to speak and they have a right to expect something from their dialogue partner. For example, they can expect an answer to a question. At the same time, they have duties, such as listening to their dialogue partner.

We will now outline our analytical framework.

4. Framework for analysis

In line with the general view of the study of organizational/strategic communication [55], our model consists of three levels of analysis: context, structure and process. First, as our focus is on talk as a change management tool, we distinguish between the organizational context (i.e. the CSSP for social change) and the communicative context (i.e. strategic/change communication). Next, the selection of theories and areas studied shows dialogue as both a formal structure and a discursive practice. We believe that only by encompassing both of these fundamental sides of dialogue, it is possible to actually analyze and use dialogue as a change management tool. Formally defined, dialogue becomes an idealistic concept, seldom found in its pure form but more in 'combinations' or mixed forms in real contexts. Context is an important part of our framework in that dialogue depends on situational

characteristics related to both the organizational and the communicative context, not least *goal-orientation*.

The specific approach we take is to base the analysis of our partnership-wide dialogue on central notions or concepts and definitions gathered from each of the theoretical areas outlined above. On this basis, we establish a number of parameters and elements which allow us to analyze partnership dialogue as a concept which will allow managers in CSSPs to deliberately and effectively choose and carry out certain communicative (inter)actions, e.g. turn-taking, in order to obtain common understanding and legitimation in relation to internal and external stakeholders (**Table 1**).

The field of change management and strategic communication has for example also contributed with concepts such as perspective or motivation for using dialogue [e.g. effectiveness, organizational learning etc.], purpose [e.g. social purpose, problem solution, negotiation etc.], organizational levels of analysis [e.g. dyadic, group, wide-organizational, and extra-organizational, including the concept of multiple, interrelated levels of analysis]. From dialogue theory we have borrowed a formal structure and elements such as turns, adjacency pairs and beginning, middle and end. Other important elements are related to the relationship: who has taken the initiative, who holds the floor, who has the power and so forth. Politeness/Face-Threatening Act is a central concept here. These elements can be used/combined in different ways, i.e. discursive practice, and in principle there is a *script* for each situation.

Level of analysis	Parameters	Example of elements (our case study)
Context	Organizational context	CSSP for social change: social inclusion
	Communicative context	<i>Strategic/change communication</i> : Collective agency, the capacity of strategic communication practitioners, in our case CSSP managers, to influence a host of relevant outcomes, e.g. social change, beyond what individual organizations could do on their own <i>Goal-orientation, principal-agency theory</i> – due to the purposeful and instrumental nature of the particular communication activity, communication agents act and speak on behalf of someone else [in CSSPs, the partners typically speak on behalf of stakeholders such as for example owners, investors, employees, governments, etc.]. Creating vision, showing wholehearted and visible support for the change, etc. are pivotal to maintaining commitment to corporate change programs. Our example focuses on creating common understanding and legitimation.
Structure	<i>Dialogue as a formal structure (i.e. an approach to language analysis which concerns itself with rules and fundamental anthropological notions of what it is to be a human being.</i>	Turn taking, adjacency pairs, preference system, Face-Threatening Act (FTA), middle and end (goal orientation or not) – functional relations between structural elements
Process	<i>Dialogic as a discursive practice (i.e. an approach to language analysis which concerns itself with issues of language, power and ideology)</i>	Relationships, partnerships, organizations, etc. develop depending on how people interact, here dialogic partnership-wide meetings. Dyadic, group and extra-organizational levels are not addressed in our example. Script

Table 1.
Levels of analysis and elements of dialogic organization-wide meeting talk.

In our analysis, we use central concepts from our above framework to examine the specific ways in which dialogue is carried out strategically at the text and talk level, focusing on various ways of organizing the talk to create a sense of common understanding. In specific, we will show how the various moves applied strategically by CSSP management can vary in intensity, insofar as some moves of building common understanding may be stronger than others. By applying a dialogue structure, we want to show that management navigates between the heterogeneous texts and talks expressed within the organization and the texts and talks expressed at the partnership level.

5. Research methods

The empirical material for our exemplary analysis consists of observations made in a local CSSP for social change in Denmark, the focus being on a partnership-wide meeting organized by the partnership to initiate a dialogue with employees and other stakeholders about the development and the implementation of a model for CSR in the private company [56]. In this article, the focus is on the partnership-wide meeting, in particular how the meeting is organized. A central quote is used to illustrate the “extreme”, systemic change potential of the selected case [57].

For the purpose of our research, we used extensive observations throughout a two-year period in the social partnership established between the private company and a public partner [4 seminars, 25 steering group meetings, 11 background meetings, 6 group “sparring” meetings, 6 evaluation meetings and 3–4 meetings in the different working groups from 2000 until 2002]. The observational work was combined with interviews, of which two were in-depth interviews with the partnership management from which the above-mentioned quote is taken. In this article, the focus is on the partnership-wide dialogues conducted over the two-year period. We have used a note-taking technique (note-taking, coding, categorization) and subsequently analyzed our data by use of dialogue analysis in order to extract central concepts [cf. our framework for analysis] and thereby enrich our understanding of partnership-wide dialogues as a particular mode of strategic change communication. In this article, empirical material from our case study has been selected purposely as an example to best support our argument.

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6. Analysis

Below, we delineate the potential of our framework by applying it on an example drawn from our case study consisting of observational data from a successful CSSP for social change. The focus in our example is on the initial steps in the partnership, i.e. building common understanding of the need for a social inclusion “project.”

6.1 Context

The *organizational context* is a CSSP for social change. Over a period of two years, the private company (rescue company) and a public partner have worked hard to

develop and refine a model for CSR focusing on social inclusion (people outside the labour market) and sustainable HR (retaining employees in the private company). The decision to take “affirmative action” was taken at the strategic management level as a result of the increasing pressure from government.

The *communicative context* is a context focusing on communication as a change management tool. It is interpersonal and involves employees and managers at different levels in both organizations who met each other/participate in workshops, seminars and different kinds of meetings. The focus in our example is on partnership-wide meetings used initially in the partnership as tools for relationship building and strategy development. The work was highly structured, focusing on elements such as formal contracts or agreements, success criteria, well-organized cross-sector oriented groups [e.g. sparring group, steering group and working groups] and time schedules. The groups were formed after the first partnership-wide meeting according to participants’ wishes regarding the group profile and outcome of the project. The process and the dialogue between the partners on the content of the agreement were of vital importance to the effect and the results obtained. It was necessary to establish a *platform for dialogue* [with an expression used by the partnership] and to ensure that the circumstances for the change process were ideal. The aim was to build mutual understanding and positive relations between the private company and the public partner and between the partners and various groups that had any kind of stake in the partnership, such as trade unions and NGOs.

6.2 Structure

The *platform for dialogue*, i.e. the expression used by the CSSP in our case study in order to explain the goal of the dialogue, was established in three phases (three seminars) of which we will focus on the first and initial phase, i.e. the opening seminar. **Table 2** below shows that this seminar was organized as a dialogue consisting of three turn-takings: an initiative, a reaction and an evaluation/closing. We see that the specific rules for turn taking were observed insofar as the initiative is followed by a response (the notion of adjacency pair). The construction is so to say held together by the expectation of a response. The positive evaluation of the response indicates that the response is a so-called preferred response. Thus, the partnership can close the dialogue and proceed to the next phase in the CSSP.

Dialogue structure [exchange consisting of three turn-takings]	Change process
Phase no 1 A: Initiative [opening seminar]	The partnership [steering group] with the public partner in front: presentation of the context for social responsibility and invitation to employees in the private company and other stakeholders to contribute to and participate actively in the project/partnership.
Phase no 1 B: Reaction	The employees in the private company and other stakeholders: identification and discussion of crises, potential crises and essential possibilities.
Phase no 1 A: Evaluation/closing	The partnership: thank you very much for your contribution; outline of future work.
A = the partnership, B = employees at middle management level [nearest manager] in the private company and other stakeholders.	

Table 2.
Developing the project in a dialogical process.

6.3 Process

All major representatives from the partners in the CSSP were involved in the dialogue. Before the opening seminar, the so-called steering group had met several times to negotiate the contract and prepare the partnership-wide dialogue. At the opening seminar, the steering group with the public partner in front presented the context, in particular the pressure from government who had asked private companies to take a social responsibility and the decision made by top management in the private company to take affirmative action. In particular, there was a need to explain to the employees in the private company and the other stakeholders why the partnership with the public sector was necessary or beneficial. In this way, the primary role of the public partner at the seminar was to legitimize the project and the contract made with the private company (authoritative power). The employees at middle management level in the private company and other stakeholders (e.g. unions and NGOs) were asked to discuss the whole idea and identify potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This was their contribution to the dialogue/process. The steering group reflected upon/evaluated the contributions from the employees and others and closed the partnership-wide seminar by outlining future work. In this way, the dialogical structure (initiative, reaction, evaluation/closing) supported the purpose of the dialogue, i.e. establishment of common understanding. This common understanding was necessary in order to proceed with the implementation of the project. The dialogue used in implementing the strategy was more closed than the one used in developing the strategy. The employees were for example not invited to give feedback (managerial power). The communication was rather two-way and asymmetrical relative to the two-way and symmetrical communication of the development phase. This is natural when it comes to the communication of decisions. According to James E. Grunig, the situation and the purpose determine which communication form is best [58–60].

Summing-up, our analysis has illustrated contextual, structural and process-oriented parameters that are relevant to analyzing and understanding partnership-wide meetings as a change management tool. Importantly, it has illuminated the interplay between these parameters. We find that partnership-wide meetings in CSSPs for systemic change can be analyzed and organized on much the same terms as interpersonal and intergroup dialogues, which we believe can inspire us to rethink social change as a dialogue, i.e. dialogue as both a formal structure and a discursive practice where issues of language, power and ideology are involved.

7. Discussion

Within the theoretical framework of Cross-Sector Social Partnerships [CSSPs], strategic communication and dialogue and by use of an example drawn from a case study of a CSSP, this article has argued that partnership-wide meetings can be analyzed and practiced on much the same terms as ordinary interpersonal and inter-group dialogues. Importantly, the article has outlined a framework for analysis and delineated its potential through an analysis of a partnership-wide dialogue conducted in a local CSSP for social change.

The analysis shows that the change project was developed in a partnership-wide dialogical process. The dialogue was goal-oriented, which we see from the third turn, insofar as it temporarily closes the dialogue. In order to analyze partnership-wide meetings as dialogue, we have drawn on a number of parameters and elements selected from various theoretical fields [turns, adjacency pairs, opening, closing, goal orientation, sequence etc]. However, if we compare partnership-wide

dialogues with interpersonal and inter-group dialogues, we see two major challenges, the first one being how we delimit very big dialogue units, and the second how we determine the functional relations between these units.

We have proposed considering a meeting between two or more persons at a certain place and in a certain space of time as a unit [[51]: 214]. This is nevertheless problematic since partnership meetings between several people often involve reorganization. New people join meetings while others are not invited or do not show up. In our example it was characteristic of the change process that the employees in the private company and the other stakeholders were invited to participate. Their active participation was required especially in the first part of the process [bottom-up approach] and less so in the second part [top-down approach]. It was also characteristic that the public partner was actively involved. A close investigation of the role distribution between the private company and the public partner shows that the public partner played a well-defined and somewhat alternative role. The role of the public partner can be characterized as that of legitimization, change agent and professional sparring partner [e.g. social legislation and political ‘winds’]. For example, the public partner helped the company to establish a sense of urgency [61] by explaining to the employees why social responsibility is a common responsibility and issue. In order to analyze the specific roles of the participants, it is necessary to delimit the dialogue units more rigorously.

As for the functional relations, we have established different kinds of functions such as initiative functions [questions, requests etc] and interactive functions [e.g. evaluation]. For example, the question raised at the opening seminar had an initiating function. The relation between the question and the reaction/answer was linked by an expectation, i.e. a so-called preferred answer. Other channels than meetings and seminars are possible, and this is why we propose to characterize the form of interaction as multimedial. Thus, in order to further analyze the functional relations, it is necessary to define the different channels used.

The above case shows that the delimitation of structural dialogue parameters was possible, and that the approach or the method was successful in lasting change. Today, both partners organize their work in new ways. Referring to the evaluation of the project, the top management in the private company of the case study mentions, for example, that the new models and tools that have been developed have helped the company to save time and money. Furthermore, the top management mentions that the cross-sector collaboration has resulted in innovative thinking:

In the beginning, it appears that the pressure from the public sector to take on a social responsibility or engage in a partnership is problematic because it is detrimental to competitiveness. However, new methods and new technologies often follow which become business activities themselves [participant evaluation, top management].

The partnership can be seen as an example of social change through organizational learning in a CSSP, since the structure, culture and processes have changed in both organizations [62]. The dialogue forum created by the partners has paved the way for cross-sector learning. The main condition for creating this forum was that at the very beginning the partners made a strong effort to create a ‘we’ contract and identity [joint purpose, joint value creation, mutual benefits, clear role distribution etc]. Management’s dialogue with employees and other stakeholders is enhanced by projects like the one described here. It is clearly in the interest of the organization to develop a new, more consciously motivated dialogue culture as a result of organizations’ more stakeholder-oriented approaches and

new role in society. The role of organizations has changed, and we have shown that dialogue is an important tool in the management of change and learning. Organizations clearly need to motivate employees to participate in a new form of dialogue with new roles in relation to central stakeholders like customers. Through a development project like the one described here, employees and other stakeholders can become dialogue partners. Based on our analytical framework and exemplary analysis, we suggest that partnership-wide dialogues for change must be clearly structured in order to ensure participation, common understanding and commitment.

8. Concluding remarks

This article has investigated the creation of common understanding for a social inclusion change project through partnership-wide meetings organized as dialogue. The investigation was conducted within the theoretical frames of strategic communication and dialogue and by use of an exemplary analysis of a partnership-wide dialogue for social inclusion. The analytical framework was rooted in dialogue analysis. The empirical data for the exemplary analysis consisted of observational data from a case study of a CSSP.

In the article, we argue that the study of strategic communication encompasses more than goals, means and outcomes at a macro-organizational level solely conducted by manager agent on behalf of a principal entity. In addition, the study of strategic communication must also be conducted at a meso- and micro-level with the purpose of for instance understanding how to gain support towards social change and new organizational practices through the creation of common understanding at an interpersonal level. Thus, it is important to map the three levels.

Our findings confirm previous research demonstrating how management actors create understanding by use of certain strategies [63–65]. It adds to this research by proposing a novel dialogical approach to the study of CSSPs and by identifying strategies in partnership-wide dialogues used by managers in private and public sector organizations. As such, we claim that it is possible to argue for the existence of and the notion of strategic, intentional and purposeful communication at a micro-, meso- and macro-level, namely in relation to the in-situ enactment of partnership-wide dialogue. Overall, the research contributes to uncovering the social world articulated in partnership communication of social issues. In addition, from a practical perspective, our analytical findings indicate that managers in private and public sector organizations participating in CSSPs need to pay attention to different “available” meeting structures and agendas among which the formal structure of dialogue and the agendas of government seem to be the strongest in terms of arguing for social change.

We acknowledge that this exemplary study may have a number of potential shortcomings restricting its validity. In particular, the current study investigates strategic communication and the creation of common understanding towards internal and external stakeholders in only one CSSP. While this organization was selected for sound reasons, the sample may only be representative of this [type of] partnership and its management. However, we believe that additional empirical studies, e.g. micro-, meso- and macro-level case studies, investigating strategic communication and the creation of common understanding in text and talk towards internal and external stakeholders in other types of CSSPs could bring research a step forward.

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