

Everybody can speak, fewer can communicate

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One evening, an old Masai was sitting at the savannah together with his grandson. The old man told the boy about a fight inside human beings. He said: *“My son, the fight is between a giraffe and a jackal which are inside all of us. The jackal is envious, egocentric, greedy, complaining, anxious, self-defensive, self-unaware, arrogant and untruthful. The giraffe is reliable, self-reflective, empathetic, kind, clear-thought, polite, honest, preserving and fair.”* The little boy asked: *“Which of the two wins?”* The old man answered: *“The one you feed.”*

This paper is mainly based on research performed in a Norwegian innovation program called VRI (Means (in Norwegian “Virkemidler”) for Regional R&D and Innovation), which was established by the Research Council of Norway in 2007. The objective of the VRI program is to increase R&D-based regional innovation by stimulating cooperation and learning between companies, research institutions and counties. Every Norwegian region has its own VRI project.

In spite of constituting the back-bone of VRI, the term “communication” was absent from the initial program documents (Wiik 2009). The importance of communication appeared, however, through concepts such as cooperation, collaboration, competence brokering, dialogue conferences, learning, and action research, which are frequently appearing in the program documents. The consequences of how people communicate in practice were not paid any attention at all. Attention has been defined as “the psychic energy that makes events occurs in consciousness” (Fried et al. 2001 in Heerwagen et al. 2006:136). According to Van de Ven (1986), management of attention is a significant problem with respect to management of innovation. Lack of attention implies that our thinking and behavior happen automatically and thereby without much consciousness (Beck et al. 2005, Wiik 2009).

The absence of the term “communication” in the initial VRI documents is not a coincidence. Research on the role of communication in innovation processes is scant. In spite of words such as dialog, cooperation, and collaboration often being connected to innovation, it is very rarely described how communication should be practiced in order to promote innovation. In VRI, we started with an explorative research design in order to understand VRI *per se* as well as in relation to companies, regional R&D institutions and governmental funding institutions at both regional and national level. Soon, we noticed that there was a lack of agreement in the VRI organization concerning both goals and what actions to be carried out (Wiik and Morsut 2011). We also noticed a lack of communication competence among the participants. As a

consequence of the lack of communication competence, the VRI participants were neither able to express their own view nor to listen to other peoples' views in a way that led to common goals and thereby to goal-oriented progress. They often repeated their own point of views seemingly without paying attention to what other participants said.

Rosenberg (2003) has studied various styles of communication worldwide. He has observed that in situations perceived as unclear, unsafe, or difficult most people express themselves in a primitive and critical language. In his courses, Rosenberg uses the metaphor "jackal" to describe this way of communication. The jackal has attributes like caring for itself only, and by taking from others. On the other side, Rosenberg (ibid.) observed cultures characterized by a more empathetic way of communication. He uses the metaphor "giraffe" as a symbol of this kind of communication, due to its big heart and long neck. The heart symbolizes emotions, while the long neck symbolizes the importance of seeing behind the words. Emotions and empathy constitute the core of Rosenberg's theory. The objective of the present paper is to describe and reflect upon how communication influences learning and innovation, with a specific focus on the giraffe and jackal language.

Methods

In order to be able to understand, document, and influence how communication is practiced under real conditions, our main methods have been observation and action research (e.g. Berg 2004, McNiff and Whitehead 2006). In order to bypass the social desirability factor (Wiik 2011), both observation and action research are convenient approaches. The objective of the VRI research project is to measure as well as to promote the impact of VRI. The promotion part of VRI corresponds with the use of action research. At the start of the project, we told the different VRI groups that we would both observe and participate as action researchers. We also informed them about our focus on process and communication. We did not repeat this message at every meeting. In addition to follow the formal VRI groups, we also observed how participants of focus groups communicated. These participants represented companies which had got support from VRI. The moderator of the focus groups informed the participants our observation study which was performed through specialized focus group windows (one-way sight windows). The focus group participants were not informed about our observation of communication since this was not the main goal of the focus group interviews. The main research question concerning these focus groups was to clarify the companies' attitudes towards VRI in an innovation perspective.

In addition to observation studies, we performed interviews of 20 VRI participants from the regions of Rogaland and Agder; 10 participants from each region. Managers at different levels were interviewed as well as competence brokers and researchers. The questions concerned communication from different points of view: (i) How the person perceived communication in own organization, (ii) how the person perceived communication within the different VRI groups, and (iii) to what extent the issue of communication was discussed within their respective organizations.

Notes and transcribed data from dictaphone uptakes were analyzed by a coding technique called “Grounded theory” described by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

The Agreement Matrix

To explain how communication can be a tool for innovation, we start from the Agreement Matrix developed by Christensen et al. (2006). According to this model (Fig. 1), the first step in any change initiative is to assess the level of agreement in a group or organization along two critical dimensions. The first is the extent of agreement on what we want to achieve, i.e. our goal. The second is the extent of agreement on which actions to perform, which is linked to our mental models of cause and effect.

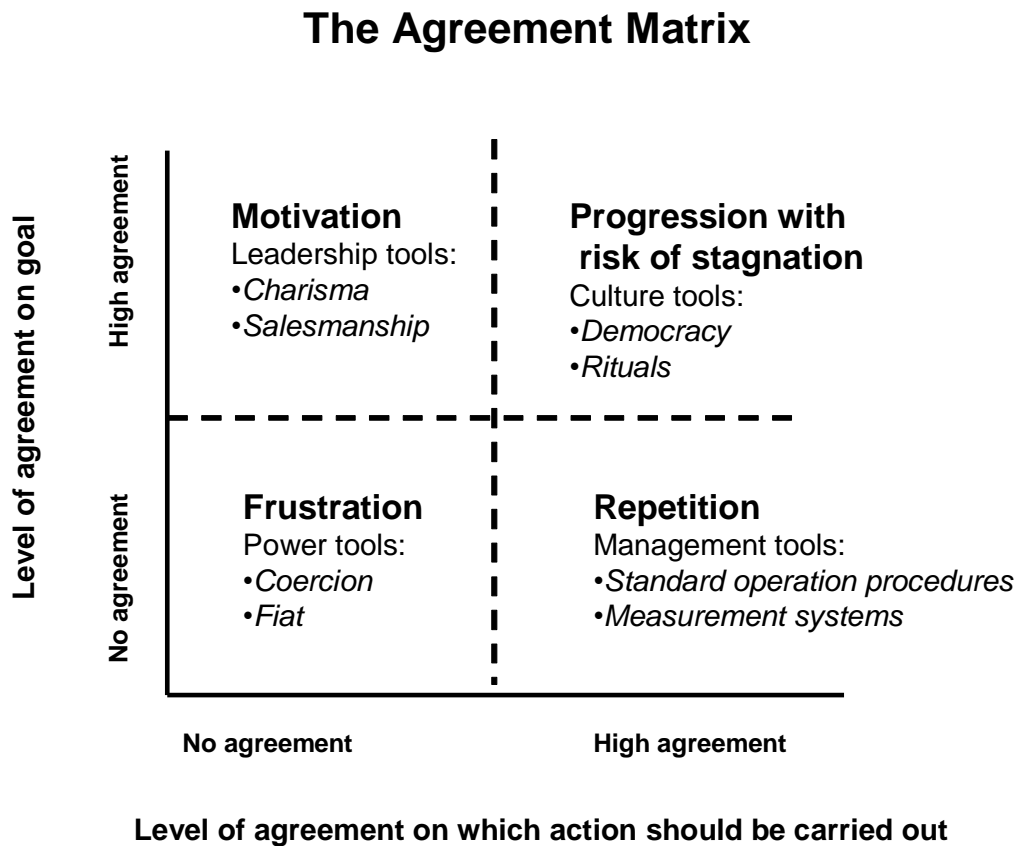


Figure 1. The model is based on the Agreement Matrix by Christensen et al. (2006). The concepts in bold within the quadrants are based on results from investigations of VRI (Wiik and Morsut 2011). The different cooperation tools in standard font as well as examples of more concrete tools in italic are given for each quadrant.

According to the Agreement Matrix (Fig. 1), the extent of agreement along the dimensions determines the nature of cooperation. There is no perfect quadrant in the Agreement Matrix; each position carries its own strengths and challenges. When people do not agree either on what they want or what to do, not very much happens in a coordinated way. Frustration is likely to appear. This frustration tends to move people in direction of the lower-right quadrant. In this quadrant, people have little passion for the goal, but they agree upon what to do in order to reach prescribed results. However, the risk is that the actions become repetitive and not much reflected upon. By agreement on goal, but not on which actions to perform in order to reach the goal, motivation towards action tends to be stimulated. In the upper-right quadrant, participants agree on both goal and what to do in order to reach it. This may seem optimal, but groups and organizations staying too long in this quadrant tend to be rather resistant to change and stagnation may be the outcome. The reason for stagnation may be that a new, challenging goal is not set when reaching the first one. By stagnation, the group or organization moves to the lower-right quadrant, i.e. the one characterized by repetition.

After more than three years of operation, some of the VRI groups are still in the lower-left quadrant while others have moved to the lower-right quadrant (Fig. 1). A couple of groups also agree on both goals and what to do. Different cooperation tools are needed as a function of agreement on goals and actions (Fig. 1). A mismatch between cooperation tools and agreement quadrant results in lack of cooperation within the group (Christensen et al. 2006). Our research has shown that in some groups of VRI there has been a good match between agreement and cooperation tools, while in other groups there have been a mismatch (Wiik and Morsut 2011). Our conclusion is that the Agreement Matrix is a suitable model in terms of diagnosis and choice of cooperation tools as a function of agreement. We don't see how the tools can be used for change in spite of the paper of Christensen et al. (2006) having the title "*The Tools for Cooperation and Change*". We propose to include a change tool covering all the quadrants. This tool concerns communication competence. By this, we think that the Agreement Matrix would be very useful for both cooperation and change.

Neither agreement nor disagreement, but lack of attention

After having practiced observation and action research in the board and other groups of the VRI organization for about three years, our conclusion is that it is not only about agreement or disagreement, but often about lack of attention. In the agreement matrix, the dimensions vary from "*no agreement*" to "*high agreement*". The designation "*no agreement*" may easily be understood as "*disagreement*". "*No agreement*", however, may also be interpreted as "*lack of attention*". To the question "*What do you think about VRI regarding clearness of goals and tasks?*" most competence brokers answered that there was a complete lack of awareness on these issues. "*I perceive the goals as unclear – don't see any relation between goals and*

results.”, (ii) “It is more or less impossible to offer clear and understandable information on what VRI is about.” The board showed the same lack of awareness. On questions concerning goals, they did not really answer the questions. (i) “Real management is difficult. The relation with the research project is unclear. The role of the board as the manager of VRI is unclear.” (ii) “The group is too big.” It seemed like the board members had not reflected on the importance of goals.

Our interviews about communication showed that the interviewees had not reflected much upon this issue. Analogically to the issue of goals, some of interviewees did not give relevant answers. Others answered that they had never discussed the issue of communication or how to communicate in the workplace setting. The issue was in a way non-existing.

We perceive it as relevant to discuss the concept of attention in relation to the concept of “dominant logic” (Bettis and Prahalad 1995, Ray and Chittoor 2005, Wiik et al. 2010). Dominant logic is common, unconscious mental models among a group of people. One important aspect of dominant logic is that it preserves existing ways of thinking within the group. According to the authors, a strong dominant logic limits the organisation’s ability to learn and innovate. Our results indicate that there has been a dominant logic in VRI concerning processes and especially communication. This dominant logic may be expressed as “Everybody can speak.” The implication of this logic is a lack of experienced need to increase the communication competence.

The phenomenon of “dominant logic” is related to what Argyris (1990) describes as “defensive reasoning”. Defensive reasoning occurs when individuals take premises for valid even if they are questionable. A part of defensive reasoning is “skilled incompetence”. According to this concept, we are skilful at something when we act automatically and without awareness. We do not pay much attention to such actions because we produce them in fractions of a second. Only when we become attentive to our actions based on defensive reasoning and skilled incompetence, we can change our behaviour deliberately. In order to increase our communication competence, we have to pay attention to and reflect upon this issue.

Innovation as a product, a process, or both

Most words ending in “-tion” are ambiguous regarding product and process (Hacking 1999). The word “innovation” shares this ambiguity. The term innovation may denote both a product and a process. The product represents an output of innovation while the process may be regarded as an input. Among the definitions of innovation (Wiik 2011), some are product-oriented while others are process-oriented. The one in “White Paper, Report no. 7 to the Norwegian Parliament” is product-oriented: “a new product, a new service, a new production process, a new application or a way of organizing which are launched in the market or adopted in

production in order to create economical values". This definition constitutes the foundation of the Norwegian innovation policies, including the establishment of the VRI program. An example of a process definition is *"the multistage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, services or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace"* (Baregheh et al. 2009: p. 1334). The definition of innovation by Kanter (2000) as development and exploitation of new ideas includes both the process and product perspectives. The product perspective of VRI manages our attention, not towards process and communication, but towards the commercial end product. The product perspective of VRI can easily be documented by how the impact of VRI is measured, i.e. through quantifying the number of company contacts, meetings, PhD dissertations etc. The process and mixed definitions of innovation, mention process and cooperation, but they do not operationalize how processes is going to be performed in practice. Concerning the process definitions, there are not established methods for measuring impact. Our results from VRI indicate that "what is measured is what is focused upon".

In search for a new model of innovative communication

The Agreement Matrix is a suitable model in terms of diagnosis and tools for cooperation as a function of agreement. The model is less clear when it comes to how to achieve change. Our hypothesis is that empathetic or mutual learning communication will make it possible to manage change when leaving the lower-left quadrant (Fig. 1). Empathic communication constitute dialogue as defined by Isaacs (1999:45): *"Dialog is about evoking insight, which is a way of reordering our knowledge – particularly the taken-for-granted assumptions that people bring to table."* The concept of "communication" is not synonymous with "dialogue", but it the concepts have something in common. According to Kaufmann and Kaufmann (2009) communication is a process where a sender transfers a message to a receiver with the purpose that the receiver will understand the meaning. The referred definitions of dialogue and communication, respectively, indicate that dialogue concerns learning and reordering of mental models, while communication does not necessarily involve learning. Communication, however, also involves empathy since messages should be transferred with the aim of being understood by the receiver.

Brønn et al. (2005) have developed a comprehensive communication model called the "Wheel of reflective communication management" (Fig. 2). This wheel is composed of four communication models, named informative, persuasive, relational, and discursive, respectively. The informative model describes communication as a tool for informing the right people at the right time about e.g. the organization's plans and decisions. The purpose is the transfer of information. This model might be appropriate for people not agreeing on anything (lower-left quadrant in the Agreement Matrix). The aim of the persuasive model is to gain control over the

receiver of the information. In the lower-right quadrant with agreement on what to do, but not on goals, the persuasive model is considered convenient. This model is also relevant in the upper-left quadrant with high agreement on goals, but not on what to do. The corresponding tools in this quadrant are salesmanship and charisma. The relational model aims at achieving mutual and beneficial relations between sender and receiver. The goal is to reach consensus. When people agree on both goals and actions, the relational model seems to be the model to use. However, by using this model too extensively, learning and innovation will probably suffer. The three models mentioned her, i.e. the informative, the persuasive, and relational, are appropriate when being within a quadrant. We think that none of these models are appropriate when it comes to moving from one quadrant to another.

The term “discursive” in the discursive model denotes that this kind of communication change our frames of understanding, which corresponds to learning. According to this model, disagreement about our different frames of understanding can be more important than seeking harmony. Discursive communication stimulates new ways of thinking which further may result in innovation. We perceive discursive communication as dialogue in its true sense and as outlined by Isaacs (1999).

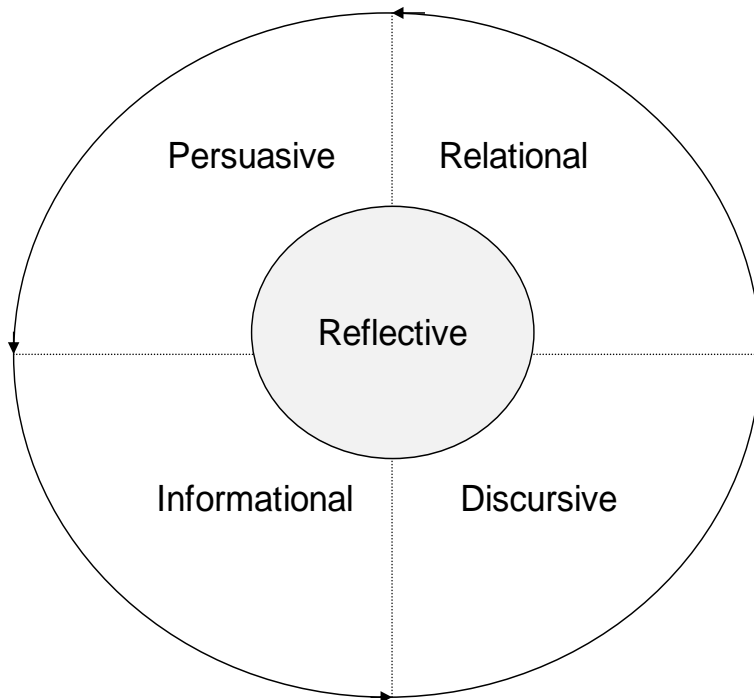


Figure 2. Wheel of reflective communication management (Brønn et al. 2005).

The dialogical/discursive model is typical of what Berg (2005) calls two-way symmetrical communication, because it promotes mutual understanding and learning. The philosophy is that when people disagree about difficult issues, they have something to learn from each other.

Berg's description has much in common with Argyris' (1990, 1991) double-looped learning model which is based on commitment and openness to others' opinions.

Through their models, both Argyris (1990, 1991) and Berg (2005) have described what we define as "mutual learning communication" (Wiik 2009, Wiik and Morsut 2011), which in theory represents the best way to promote innovation. Mutual learning communication means that we explain our points of view and invite others to challenge our views in a way that stimulates reflection. Paradoxically this kind of communication seldom occurs within organisations (Argyris 1990, 1991, Berg 2005). Nothing indicates that this model of communication is occurs in clusters or networks which are considered essential for regional innovation.

Mutual learning communication should be increasingly implemented in organisations through the management development practice of action learning, which seems a successful tool especially in small firms. According to Anderson and Gold (2009) action learning describes a wide variety of approaches where a group of individuals focus on a problem and explore together the different views on the issue of learning from each other. The premises here are two: (i) there is no learning without action; (ii) communication plays a paramount role from the beginning. One of the most important consequences of action learning is its impact on identity formation: interaction and communication in groups force the participants to move from the so called comfort zone to unexplored areas of identity, shaping new understandings and insights (Anderson & Gold 2009). Many people do automatically escape from this path by the use of defence mechanisms. If activated, defence mechanisms become the main reason why mutual learning communication is still not developed within organisations. According to Bateson (1994), we choose not to put ourselves in vulnerable learning situations, like active learning, because they involve feelings of weakness. Another important reason why mutual learning communication seldom occurs is lack of competence regarding communication.

Several scientific papers touch upon communication as an important element in managing innovation (e.g. Boutellier et al. 1998, Cyert and Goodman 1997, Gomes et al. 2005, Kivimäki et al. 2000, Irwin et al. 1998, Lee-Kelley and Blackman 2005, Leonard-Barton 1995, Madhavan and Grover 1998, Sethi et al. 2001). From those papers we bring forward the significance of common mental models, emotional support from colleges, encouragement of initiatives, and conscious use of conflicts. Irwin et al. (1998) emphasize that relational competence, and specifically communication, is fundamental for innovation to occur. They wonder why there has been such a scant focus on how to practice communication in order to promote innovation.

Rosenberg's (2003) communication theory "Non violent communication", also known as empathic communication, represents a valid operationalisation of mutual learning communication (Berg 2005, Wiik 2009, Wiik and Morsut 2011). Rosenberg (ibid.) has studied

various styles of communication worldwide. He has observed that in situations perceived as unclear, unsafe or difficult most people express themselves in a primitive and critical language. He uses the metaphor *jackal* to describe this way of communication. On the other side, some cultures had a more emphatic way of communication. He uses the word *giraffe* as a symbol of this kind of communication, since the giraffe has the biggest heart of all land animals. The heart is the symbol of emotions, which constitute the core of Rosenberg's theory. He outlines how emotions can be used as a basis for reflection. If we pay attention to our emotions, we are able to actively listen to ourselves and others. This theory fits with Argyris' "double loop learning" and Berg's (2005) two-way symmetrical communication. Therefore it constitutes a means of implementation of "mutual learning communication". According to Rosenberg (ibid.), we should activate four levels of attention in order to both express ourselves and listen to others in an empathic way: (i) we observe what is said and done; (ii) we are aware of our feelings and use this awareness for reflection; (iii) we express our needs and invite others to express theirs; (iv) we make clear what we want from others and what we can do for them, using a positive and concrete language. By using these steps, the sender can express herself/himself in an honest and empathic way and the receiver can easily understand and visualise what is desired. On the contrary, a vague language offers a weak guidance for change.

In order to move along the dimensions of the Agreement Matrix, we should consider the Wheel of reflective communication with focus on empathic communication. In order to encourage movement from one quadrant to another it is important which of the four models to use. The movement from one quadrant to the next involves significant change and our hypothesis is that conscious use of mutual learning communication will promote this movement. This involves a high level of attention and competence on communication. Everybody can speak. Not so many are aware of how to communicate in order to learn and innovate. Managing innovation through communication does not happen automatically, but requests communication competence and courage from at least one of the participants.

We find that communication is of key importance for learning and change. Dialogue can trigger creativity in individuals and activate the driving forces of knowledge beyond the individual capacity. According to Fiol (2002), a new product or a new service will not be developed, unless this is reflected in language. Most theories on communication focus on the best way to communicate and don't discuss the sides of communication considered negative, i.e. the *jackal* language as described by Rosenberg (2005). As a new insight, we believe that, even if empathic communication is optimal for learning and innovation in most situations, the *jackal* language may arouse self-reflection in both the sender and the receiver. However, beneficial effects of *jackal* language on self-reflection and learning are only likely to occur in cases where at least one of the actors have is aware of the *giraffe* and *jackal* components of our communication.

In the perspective outlined in this paper, appropriate communication promotes development and simultaneously reduces the activation of psychological defence mechanisms.

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