



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context. The following topics were mentioned several times.

- care for and the death of parents
- developments in health care: dedication, dealing with errors, constraining
- conflicting roles in young mothers
- birth, young children
- the crisis and the pressures it causes, fragmentation and impoverishment
- confidence, optimism, tipping point, pressure leading to renewal
- dealing with children, young adults
- feeling vulnerable, the death of young people
- the loss of open-mindedness
- pressure to gather information in advance, to record information
- the need to satisfy a multitude of expectations, demands
- the pressure of meeting your numbers, spread sheet management
- bureaucracy as a defence against vulnerability
- uncertainty, not knowing how to behave as a citizen
- money as the central factor in many people's lives

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Participants discussed in small groups of 3-6 people what the central themes of the Listening Post were. This was recorded on a poster board. Subsequently, in a plenary discussion it was decided what the themes were that we would discuss in further depth during the day. These were:

1. TO BE
2. CONFIDENCE
3. SPREADSHEET REALITY VERSUS THE OTHER REALITY
4. TOO MUCH

A fifth theme was also determined: POWERLESSNESS. When only two people want to continue with a theme, they distribute themselves among other groups. The theme POWERLESSNESS was not elaborated on in a separate group.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In subgroups of 4 - 8 people the themes were explored in depth in a number of rounds and hypotheses were formed. A component of this was visiting a different theme group or receiving participants from another group. Each theme group had a facilitator who combined this role with that of participant.

Analysis 1

TO BE

Society exerts a lot of pressure on the individual to conform. Conforming to the norm in order to achieve, in order to look a certain way, in order to have a paying job. It is difficult to be different, to do things differently, to be different from friends and family. It evokes the desire not to trouble oneself with these things, instead just to be, not to have to. A desire for the world of a cherished, young child who is still at home and does not yet need to go to school.

The conviction to want to be yourself, to do it your own way arouses a fear of being left standing alone. There is the individual who wants to stand out from others and also the desire for connectedness, wanting to belong, and forming groups.

It is hard work to be yourself, to find your own answer to the expectations of the outside world. Can I tolerate differences, diversity? This also relates to the demands and expectations that you set for yourself. 'To be' is not lying on your back and watching the clouds roll by. It is to be open to the things that come your way – standing firmly on your own mountain and remaining connected to the world. By focusing intensely on yourself, your own inner world, you can handle the pressures from outside better. There is also a different way: that of the 'visiting anthropologist'. To what extent do you take part in the system and to what extent do you stand outside of it? In order to be yourself maybe you do not really need to work so hard.

Is there a situation of increasing societal pressure on the individual, who thus feels that his personal space increasingly is becoming smaller? Is fantasizing ever more necessary in order to relate to the larger systems? Is the wish to be yourself understood as an attempt to avoid being hurt? Is it, then, perhaps not (only) about 'to be' but also about living, survival?

Analysis 2

CONFIDENCE

With confidence we are confronted with the challenges posed by time. These challenges are great, because there is an expiration date stamped on The Netherlands, Inc. It cannot last for much longer.

Several organizations and processes are approaching their expiration date. Traditional attitudes about organization and control – the pressure of monitoring and centralized control – no longer fit in these times, they no longer work. In organizations the primary process and the managerial processes constitute separate worlds; in large companies this also applies to the financiers/owners.

The economic and financial crises, the changes in the global economic and political relations, sustainability problems, social justice...there comes a tipping point.

This raises uncertainty and a strong awareness of the importance of the economic basis of our existence. It evokes feelings of uncertainty, fuelled by memories of the frugal, post-war years and the stories from our parents about hunger during WWII.

In society there are already new forms visible. Take, for example, Buurtzorg [trans. Neighbourhood Care]: an organization where now roughly 4000 people work, and in the last few years (2011 and 2012) chosen as the best employer in The Netherlands. The company was founded in 2006 by a district nurse, who, out of dissatisfaction with the bureaucratization of the health care system, created an alternative. With autonomous district-based teams supported by excellent technological resources and very little overhead, Buurtzorg has managed to succeed in providing better home care within the existing (legal, financial) framework.

At the local level there are countless initiatives to create more connections between citizens. New ways of organizing are arising. In the (international) corporate world, too, dissent is emerging: arguments for the 'pancake economy' as opposed to the 'pyramid economy.'

Many other longstanding counter movements in the Netherlands have gained a critical mass in the last few years. For example, the widely supported action against the 'Plofkip' [factory farm-raised chicken]. Within a few weeks, the action to keep the chicken from factory farms off the supermarket shelves was successful. Furthermore, the term Plofkip was adopted within a short period of time into the Dutch lexicon.

In order to continue with all of these changes a basic sense of security is important. At the macro level it helps to have a connection with others.

Confidence in ourselves enables us to find new connections and forms that can be an answer to the problems and questions of the time. We can derive that confidence from our personal histories in which every one of us has dealt with problems and challenges. We have searched for ways to deal with them and have found a way. So it is that we have learned how to develop ourselves, finding new solutions for new questions.

Analysis 3

SPREADSHEET REALITY versus the primary process

Management information systems and the primary processes are described as two realities in an organization that are dependent on each other. However, they polarize, they pull loose from each other. This can be seen in various sectors: education, health care, government. There is a separation between thinking and doing. The numbers give the illusion of control and manageability and that you can intervene. The opposite, however, seems to be the case; the numbers distract you from what it is really about.

Because of the polarization you will be tempted, as a professional, not to take responsibility for the managerial processes. You turn away from it and do your own thing on the work floor. With a little bit of fraud, you create a bit of space for yourself.

There are also advantages for maintaining a polarization between the two systems, because the problem is always the other.

However, in that dynamic you lose what you actually stand for. Less polarization would be desirable – looking again for connections, daring to go against the system, paying attention to the feelings of security.

Analysis 4

TOO MUCH

Citizens experience increasing pressure to achieve; to inform and be informed; to be connected to various networks and present themselves through social media; to take on and combine many, various roles in order to survive in times of economic uncertainty. There is actually no other choice than to go along with it, join along and fight to save your hide. We are overwhelmed by the abundance of what is coming at us.

This raises many fears and feelings of dependency. Fear of being an outsider if you do not join along. Fear of losing a job to increasing competition, loss of income and economic independence. Fear of poverty, loneliness and social isolation.

We realize that we strengthen those feelings of dependency by focusing ourselves on the outside world. By doing so, perhaps we make the issue bigger – we maintain it – because we pull in more

influences. Perhaps our focus on the outside acts as a distraction, so as not to deal with what is there. It helps to focus attention more on oneself, our inner world, in order to establish connections between inside and outside, their conditions, between myself and my work.

The increasing complexity of society, the growing influence from information technology and the economic crisis engulf us and evoke feelings of fear and dependence. Fear that one's own chances for tackling it will fall short and we will no longer count in society.

Connections of themes and hypotheses

In a plenary session the analyses and hypotheses from the theme groups are presented, and connections are looked for: are there links between the experiences and hypotheses from the four themes?

In the plenary session there is a discussion of the connections between the themes, which after the session ends results in the formulation of a number of hypotheses:

- Due to the increased complexity of society (the economic crisis, influence from information technology) citizens experience pressure for performance and information (TOO MUCH). This raises uncertainty over the extent to which they can and want to take part and what the place is for the individual in the overwhelming influence from outside. The desire to be able to 'just be yourself' (TO BE) expresses the difficulty and challenge of combining your own inner world with the overwhelming influences from current society.
- Due to the realization that the expiration date of our economic system as we know it is in sight, citizens experience both fear of and hope for a new world that is less about systems and more about people. This is expressed in harbouring a wish for CONFIDENCE in the future and also in the development of concrete activities that go back to the primary functions of economic and human relations (examples: small-scale neighbourhood and business initiatives that can, amongst themselves, provide services independent of the large organizations). In addition, the experience of management processes and primary processes in large organizations seems to be two realities that, in many instances, are already experienced separate from each other (SPREADHSHEET REALITY VS. PRIMARY PROCESS). The illusion of polarization offers the psychological possibility to push the problem away from yourself. Yet, there seems to be an increased desire here to more strongly represent the primary processes in the management reality.
- Leadership did not emerge as a distinct theme in this Listening Post. We wonder why that might be. Is confidence in leadership so diminished that it hardly has a place in the collective consciousness? The theme was indirectly reflected in the fact that one of the convenors, when visiting a subgroup, was invited (challenged?) to actively participate and, thus, to step outside of his role.
- It was noted that, except for the group TOO MUCH, all the groups had visitors from other subgroups during the 'visiting exercise.' We cannot hypothesize a link.

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