**Organizing and complex corporate strategic impact of local strikes and labor actions of cleaning staff**

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**Abstract**

In many boardrooms strategy is considered to be a central responsibility. In other organizations strategy is considered to be the result of daily social interactions between many people working in that organization. But what will happen when boards of corporations who outsourced their cleaning work are challenged by emerging labor actions or strikes of (cleaning) staff employed by cleaning contractors but directly influence the performance of these corporations. In union literature these emerging actions with or without the support of unions are called ‘Organizing’. This paper has the purpose to contribute to strategy literature, explaining how managers have dealt with complicated unexpected organizing events, with players who seem not to stop at the boundaries of their own firms. The authors will connect an example from practice, to a social interaction view on complexity theory. This theoretical perspective can help managers and scientists to develop a different understanding of the strategic consequences of unexpected boundary-less challenges.

**Introduction**

The term organizing from a labor union perspective was (re)introduced in the Netherlands in a newspaper article of Esther Bijlo in Trouw of the 17th of April, 2010. The term ‘Organizing’ in this particular sense is explained using the examples of the developments of strikes of cleaning staff at high profile locations like airports, railway stations and ministries. The term is strongly connected to the earlier explanations about organizing by Karl Weick (1979). Weick’s process approach of organizing offered an alternative for the structural approach of organizations. According to the structural approach managers redirect their actions on the basis of results. In his work Weick focuses more on interaction processes and not exclusively on results (de Man, 1996). Bijlo (2010) explains the union perspective of organizing showing how cleaning workers as a group started to protest about their wages and working conditions and how the unions have taken up local initiatives of these cleaners and helped them to coordinate their actions. In literature organizing examples show how union representatives initiate small local protests which can develop to major strikes, without guidance from central union bureaucracy. If we refer to the term organizing in the rest of this paper we use term in reference with union work.

The strong competition in the cleaning industry and the low price buying strategies by the principles do not give employers much room for extra negotiation, beside the one or two year general labor agreements, which are bound for everybody by government rules. Although probably unusual in Anglo Saxon countries, in the Netherlands union work has distanced itself from what is happening in the actual workspace. Trade unions as organizations have become part of decision making processes together with government, employers about the developments of countrywide social working relations. In Holland these talks are called the “Poulder model”, resulting in very few serious labor conflicts compared to the rest of the world ((Van der Velden et al., 2007; SER, 2008). This in principle advantageous situation is one of the reasons that managers are not always well prepared in dealing with unexpected labor actions.

The bureaucratic approach of the unions, like participating in national formal debates, is emphasized by De Beer (2011). He explains that by introducing an informal organizing approach union leaders start to feel threatened in their own roles, when they initiate labor actions but have little or no control on how these actions develop. This diminishes their possibilities to negotiate with employer representatives about possible new agreements. You can only work on compromises if you are sure that the people you represent will follow the agreement. In the case of organizing this is highly uncertain. De Beer’s view about organizing can also be explained from a complex responsive processes perspective as developments of local processes that have no controllable or linear connection to the desired outcome. This approach is described by Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) and Stacey (2009; 2012) and is based on analogies with complexity theory (Murray Gell-Mann, 1969; Gershenson, 2008), the work of American pragmatists on the psychology of the individual and the group (Mead, 1934) and social interaction theories of Elias (1939, 1972). From this perspective organizations are not seen as a system but as boundary less processes of local interaction leading to global outcomes (Stacey, 2009; 2012). Although from this perspective global outcomes cannot directly be influenced by any party, the outcome itself paradoxically influences how local processes develop at the same time.

In the case of the cleaning strikes, people did what they thought was right and did not follow any union party line. The process of strikes and actions was uncontrollable for union leaders and was executed by the workers themselves. It took the union leaders some time to adapt to this new situation and some of them still have problems supporting this approach. In the Dutch society other groups in general public started to support the actions of the cleaners and put pressure on the behavior of the union leaders. Faced with this new action phenomenon union leaders had to rethink their strategic options. This organizing approach somehow leads to better results of final agreements (Carter, 2006) as it finally did after the cleaning strikes in the Netherlands. But how does this influence the roles of union leaders? Normally employees will target their own employers if they are unsatisfied. In this case the cleaning workers, through their actions also directly targeted the large contract parties outsourcing the cleaning work with sit ins and other protests, pulling these principals into the conflict. They also stopped doing their cleaning work, leading to dirty airports, stations and trains. If cleaners (partly) shut down a railway station or an airport terminal and if you do not send the army, which in the Dutch circumstances would be highly unusual, as a principal, you cannot look away. So you also are faced with a strategic question: how to react? You are not a direct contract party to the workers but indirectly they make it look like they depend on your terms. The question might be raised, why the principles, being the clients of the cleaning companies, did not terminate the contracts and tendered for new suppliers. One reason for this could be that the enormous amounts of money involved in this type of cleaning-contracts would require a European tender process which would take a long period of time. Next to that, in Holland cleaning companies and other service companies are obliged by law to hire the employees working at a specific site from the company who loses the contract. In this case a change of contractor would not solve anything, people still would not go to work. Because of these events large principals had to reevaluate their strategic position in this conflict. They moved more and more to the centre of a conflict they did not want to be in the first place. They were forced to take a more active position by their own airline- and train customers, who started to complain and insisted that something should be done. The point we are trying to make here, is that strategic developments and challenges do not stop at the front door but can be seen as an unexpected myriad of groups of people following their own intentions and at the same time influencing the intentions of all others who somehow operate in the same sphere. This was the case for union leaders as for the boards of directors of the commissioning companies. We connect the events to a specific line of thinking in social complexity theories, using a complex responsive processes approach (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). From this perspective global developments are always a result of patterns of local interaction. Also conversation in a board of directors is considered an important, but local pattern. If members of a board of directors want to change strategic aspects in their organization they will have to engage in the conversation in the local processes that are most influential in the development of that specific business area. At the same time the global results of all these actions paradoxically influence the way local patterns and conversations develop. How this can work out in practice will be explained in a case narrative based on the practice experience of one of the authors.

**How the story developed after the fist severe strikes, and the emerging of new strategic challenges**

The senior representatives of the principle companies started to understand that the conflict would not disappear if they would not take action themselves. Despite the fact that the conflict was between cleaners and their employers they felt that some initiative was needed to get a discussion going. But who are the people to talk to? Although the principle companies were directly targeted, it felt impossible to directly participate in the ongoing negotiations with the cleaners, which actually were no negotiations at all. Also the unions had come to the conclusion that the best chance to reach a result was to support this targeting of the large principle organizations even if this meant that they would lose their feeling of control over the actions. At the end the corporations were the parties who were responsible for the contracts and were paying the bills. A conflict which started at a very local level slowly moved up in the hierarchy of the different firms. At a certain point it was hardly possible to enter the different buildings of airports and railway stations because of the high stacks of rubbish. All in all not what people might expect in Holland. Together the boards of the railways and the major airport decided to suggest, that their HR directors would join the negotiations with the unions and the cleaning employers. From that moment the story developed in unexpected directions. This is the story of one of the involved HR directors, who is also one of the authors, from that point in time.

***The narrative***

In the beginning of 2010, then in my capacity of HR director of NS (Dutch Railways), I started a conversation with the HR director of Schiphol, the airport of Amsterdam, to do something together to keep the damage of the cleaners’ strikes within limits. We tried to influence the negotiating social partners, employers and trade unions, to close a deal. This did not go very well. After many months of tiring negotiations and informal talks over a glass of beer the suggestion came up, quite spontaneously, under the pressure of the moment, to create a common platform of employers, clients of employers and trade unions. It was said that the social partners would not be able to attack the negative spiral of price competition on their own, which meant that the confrontation with the cleaning staff would not come to an end. They needed the help of large and powerful client organizations and they asked me to dedicate time and effort after my retirement to create such a platform and produce ideas and actions to stop the cut-throat price competition in the Dutch cleaning industry.

On the basis of my personal sympathy for the case of the cleaners I agreed to take the chair of this platform, yet to be created. Because of my past experience (20 years ago I had worked 13 years as personnel director in a large cleaning firm) I aimed at formulating and prescribing productivity norms for the industry as a base for reasonable price setting. I started to convince several other large organizations to take part in the ‘Code committee’, got representatives from employers and trade unions straightforward involved and had lengthy debates over the position of cleaning consultants. In the cleaning market 'independent' consultants had found their place, advising purchase departments on buying and controlling cleaning operations. Under employers the reputation of the independent consultants was not very positive. At last we decided to give them a chance and invited one of them in the committee.

The committee started with 20 participants, representing four different blood groups: large clients, employers, employees, and consultants. Expectations were not clear, starting points quite different and we had no example as a point of reference. We started with the aim to find out what we could do together to effectively counteract the disastrous price competition. So at least the group shared a common opinion: something needed to change in the market and all parties wanted to join hands. But the consultants started to concentrate on defining the productivity norms, on the basis of their professional expertise, the unions focused on strict procedures for punishing bad practices, the large clients were hesitating to create unmanageable commitments and the employers wanted the large clients to take the initiative and to be the first to take the burden.

Discussions arose and the tone of the debate became quite sharp. We agreed to make an inventory of problems, to get a clearer picture of the actual (dis)functioning of the market place and we agreed, after quite some debate and time, to

focus on formulating a code of conduct. All parties suggested elements for this code of conduct, but the content of these elements varied widely. From the one hand very detailed and clear-cut productivity norms and legal formulas, on the other hand broad formulated ethical norms and principles. This led to accusations of "micromanagement” on the one hand, and "escapism" on the other hand and indeed high tensions between the members of the committee.

I tried stubbornly to create a climate of trust, "everything should be said”, openness, and gave a lot of room for debate and exchange of thought. Most participants aimed for a quick product of our meetings, but whereas a smart target of our endeavors was simply not available, this was not realistic. The fierce discussions and the hot debates though reflected a growing commitment to the common cause, even if that cause was not easily articulated.

After half a year, in which the garbage piled up, I asked the committee to give me 1 month, over Christmas 2011, to try to formulate in isolation, a concept for a Code. Reluctantly the members paused argumenting, and gave me enough trust to make some sense out of all the elements of analysis. I realized that connecting the different elements in the chain produced more synergy than just the addition of more knowledge and expertise.

In January I produced a lengthy document, in my view a fair balance of different opinions, and a good mix of ethical principles and some, but not too many, concrete and measurable elements. Although many changes were proposed (and effectuated!) from that moment on the committee acted more together and became more confident that we would be able to present something worth signing and selling to the larger community. The sharp discussions had also led to a certain group cohesion, and all the volunteers became advocates in their own circles of the Code as it developed. Particularly in the employers association doubts had arisen whether the degrees of freedom of acting in the market should be restricted. The delegation in my committee needed strong arguments to continue their effort. The unions created often tension while keeping on blaming and shaming companies that in the mean time had violated what they (the unions) saw as unjustifiable. The different unions wanted the commitment of the committee members, but continuously stretched the trust in their willingness to act together as a team. The consultants complicated all drafts by adding too many details, being accused by the others to create their own work in the future. And, finally, the Dutch authority for competition (NMA) made herself heard, warning us not to transgress the rules of the law of competition, e.g. by bringing competitors together to influence pricing strategies.

All of this had not been foreseen, at least not by me. In the course of the development of the Code our focus has been shifted:

1. From client norms to market behavior.
2. From measurable to directional.
3. From instrumental to principle based.

None of this was the result of a masterminded plan. A complex pattern of discussions, inputs and reactions gradually emerged into a growing consensus on what we were doing. Certainly also the growing group cohesion played an important role.

In June 2011 we proudly presented our Code to the minister of Labor, Henk Kamp, and after that to the outside world. Then we had the luck that a few cases were brought forward in which we could apply the Code in practice. In three cases large organizations defined their requests for proposals for cleaning, based on lowest price only, where the Code emphasizes quality criteria next to price. All three client organizations agreed on our arguments, after quite some hesitation!, and that led to a feeling of success in the market place :"the Code is working". The word spread out rapidly. The Dutch association of purchase managers (NEVI) unexpectedly promoted our Code to its members and now I was able to get a lot of large organizations to sign in on the Code. Focusing on "flagships" we got Unilever aboard, ABNAmro, the city of Amsterdam, more than 100 large client organizations. Nothing succeeds like success.

In the beginning of 2012 the negotiations for the next collective labor agreement started and that led to a standstill in my Committee. The unions profiled themselves once more as the sole defenders of the case for the cleaners, and the first successes of the Code process were put under the carpet by them during this campaign. The large clients feared that signing the Code would not help keeping strikes at bay, and the employers were bitter that all their good efforts in the committee seemed to have been in vain. The negotiations were tough; the process came to a halt with enormous frustrations, even though the negotiators had come very close to a solution. Also frustrated I offered my assistance and probably because of the built-up relations during the last year this was accepted. After two days of informal talks we came to an agreement on the last blocking issue, and the social partners quickly agreed on a new collective labor agreement. In this agreement many of the demands of the cleaners were met actually ending all strikes and actions,

Over summer of 2012 we resumed the Code process and out of the blue other branches (catering, security, temporary workers) wanted to share in the committee and the Code, thus proving the success of our efforts. Interestingly the first focus of other branch organizations seemed to be to subscribe the Code, not so much on the (learning) process of sharing an effort to create an answer on a common issue. Looking back, I cannot provide a recipe, not for the content (even if now we have an agreed text for the Code), nor for the process (even if now we can look back on a successful committee history of conversation), like Churchill I can only promise "blood, sweat and tears”, but it turned out to be worthwhile!

**Theoretical Background**

We will start with a short overview on three general lines of literature: that of organizing, a general view on strategic approaches and a social complexity view.

***Organizing***

The literature on union organizing focuses very much on how union leaders should develop better strategies (Boxall and Haynes, 1997; Fletcher and Hurd. 1998; Carter, 2000; Warskett, 2004; Osterman, 2006; Cregan et al., 2009; Fiorito and Jarley, 2012; Serdar, 2012). On one side authors try to explain how union leaders can better connect to their members. On the other side authors focus on the results union leaders and members can achieve if they better understand the power influences of organizing activities. It is also important to emphasize that organizing demonstrates a large portion of self organizing activities by the people planning or executing labor actions. This seems to increase the chance of success but very much reduces the direct influence of union leaders on what is really happening. Hurd (2004) explains the difficulties of unions in the US to maintain membership numbers despite the incidental successes in local labor conflicts. In the Netherlands organizing is still a relatively new phenomenon in which the union strategy seems to be to let chance play an important role. There is little strategy literature explaining what the consequences can be for corporations on questions emerging from unwanted involvement in an unwanted conflict. Nauta, Blokland and Witteveen (2013) connect organizing to the perspective of strategic morality. A company outsourcing a contract cannot accept just anything the contractor does in relation with their employees. They approach the question about responsibilities of the outsourcer for employees of the contractor from a human resource perspective. Recent catastrophes in the textile industry in Bangladesh also act as a wake-up call to this moral conscience. One cannot deny that this perspective more and more plays a role in the strategic choices companies make. From a complexity perspective we would like to emphasize that what is labeled as organizing in many cases could also be described as self organizing in the terms familiar in the complexity literature, a development without a program, plan or blueprint (Stacey, 2011). From this perspective organizing can paradoxically be seen as an organized process of self organization.

***Strategic schools***

When we look at the different strategic schools, can we find suggestions how to deal with the upcoming question of taking a position in an unplanned but unavoidable conflict? A conflict you are more or less dragged into. Most strategic schools focus on strategy developments in the corporation or firm itself and are prescriptive or descriptive in nature. This is well explained by Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998) in their Strategy Safari. Participatory schools like the micro strategy approach or the Strategy-as-Practice approach offer more possibilities to understand how local strategic developments can be connected to day to day practice (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003; Ketovi and Castener, 2004; Regnér, 2003; Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl, 2007; Dionysiou and Tsoukas, 2008). These approaches acknowledge that people are not acting in isolation and that strategy arises from the plural social networks to which they belong. Strategizing is then conceptualized as a situated, socially accomplished activity, which comprises actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices they draw on in accomplishing that activity. If we accept that we are dealing with a complex far from linear strategic question Burger (2007), Chia and Holt (2006, 2007, 2009) and Raynor (2007) all focus on the paradoxical aspects of strategy developments. No developments emerge in isolation and every move always inhabits the counterforce. These authors emphasize the unpredictable nature of strategy making. They embrace uncertainty and ambiguity as a reality of daily practice. The ideas of Burger, Chia and Holt and Raynor come closer to the understanding that a strategic question can emerge out of the blue due to the circumstances arising from daily practice. They all explain that members of firms can become paradoxically a participating and non involved party at the same time. The consequence of this statement is that no party can control or direct the process. Nonaka and Zhu (2012) focus on strategy as practical wisdom, with examples from business areas across industries and nations and particularly from emerging economies. In their view there is no universal ‘best practice’, and there can be no narrow minded wisdom either. The enduring wisdom they share with readers is pragmatism based on ideas from Chinese and American pragmatist literature. American pragmatists that also play an important role in understanding the views of a complex responsive processes approach (Stacy, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). Because the real world appears to reward what works and to penalise what doesn’t, and we humans are pragmatic in our wise moments. Nonaka and Zhu (2012) show us many examples of pragmatism in action leading to successful strategies. While professors can hide behind single-issue models, managers cannot. If they do, they will be punished by real-world complexities (ibid, 2012, pp.49-50).

***A complex responsive processes perspective***

Burger (2007) turns to the complex responsive processes theory described by Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000). According to this approach strategy develops in many local interactions as joint process, without plan, program or blueprint. The global outcome cannot directly be influenced or controlled by any member in the organization. This does not imply that people in the different organizations do not have purposes or goals, even when reaching all their goals is highly unpredictable. The reality is that strategic developments emerge in all kinds of figurations in and between all the different groupings playing a role in the conflict (Elias, 1939).

In the described example the groupings comprise: cleaning workers, union representatives, employers, principals, consultants, pressure groups, customers of the different organizations and at a certain point even people from government. No one was actually in the lead and in the end all these groupings are depending on each other in very complex relations, with not very clear ends and means. People do not feel restricted by the virtual boundaries between the different organizations or groups they belong to. In our view this phenomenon will increase due to the unlimited boundary-less means of modern communication tools. Groot and Homan (2012) have tried to explain, using a complexity perspective, some of the leadership consequences of unexpected movements by different parties in decision making processes in the development of a security organization in a large railway organization. Unions, works council, groups of workers and government officials all had different agenda’s how to deal with new legislation and senior leadership had to deal with this. If we try to connect the pragmatic insights of Nonaka and Zhu (2012) with a complex responsive processes view we want to emphasize that is important to stay connected to the world around us but need to understand that managers can only play an influential part in the many local processes they can or will participate in and cannot control or design their preferred organizational settings (Stacy, 2005; Groot, 2011)

**Narrative and reflexivity as practical research methodology**

The paper is built around a narrative account of one of the authors, who participated in the described process. The story offers the possibility to connect academic knowledge to real experience and practice and is followed by a short literature overview regarding the organizing, strategy and complex responsive process literature. According to Mitchell and Egudo (2003), narrative approaches, involving story-telling methodologies, can be used as an alternative method for the study of human action and can be seen as a version of the interpretative approach in the social sciences. Mitchell and Egudo position story telling largely in the postmodernist paradigm. Postmodernists question the modernists’ philosophical assumptions of rationality and universal truths, and the application of scientific empirical methods to problem solving. This is one of the reasons why narrative methodology is accessible for research in the field of complex responsive processes, where a key element is taking one’s day-to-day experience seriously. An important suggestion from this perspective is not to think of what we should do but be aware of what we are actually doing in our daily practice. It is through these narratives that actual research areas can develop.

Ricks (2002) does not see difference in the use of narratives between researchers and practitioners. Ricks, Mitchell and Egudo are drawing conclusions about the meaning of ‘what is’ after determining these stories to prepare action. Both are studying a particular phenomenon and could be said to be using a phenomenological approach to study these stories, although the formats and the way the stories are used are quite different. To achieve a successful narrative, the reader has to be taken inside the hermeneutic circle, because narrative is pervaded with an awareness of the centrality of time, allowing it to move beyond the individual experience of history to create a communal history (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Brohm and Janssen, 2010). An important point has to do with the ‘truth claim’ made by the narrative itself and the analysis of it according to criteria of validity stipulated by the researcher. A personal narrative is by example a very accurate but small-scale type of research but can cover a wide range of theoretical approaches. Reflecting on the reflections of the narrative offers the opportunity to perform academic research on daily practice. Management research from a complex responsive process approach enables the practitioner/researcher to position him- or herself as an involved participant within the area of research while also, paradoxically, being both subject and object of the research at the same time (Stacy, 2010). These ideas can well be connected to the thinking of Flyvbjerg (2001) about social science. He explains that we need to take the academic view on practical wisdom seriously by referring to the ideas of phronesis already introduced by Aristotle. Also Flyvbjerg’s practical views play an important part in this paper.

**Reflections on the development of strategy as a non controllable complex social process**

The agreements based on the new Code were reached after strikes and actions not primarily focused on their own employers but more on the large corporations that subcontract large parts of their cleaning work, like government agencies, the airline industry and the railway industry. Only after the HR directors of the principle client organizations started to participate in the conversation between cleaners, unions and cleaning employers, something started to move and especially after having a drink together after one of these long meetings. We think that during the process many of the insights of the known strategic literature were very helpful, but was this enough? Union leaders and boards of directors were confronted with unusual circumstances asking for unusual strategic approaches. The involvement of the HR directors in itself did not offer any new solutions but opened new doors. Pettigrew et al. (2002) already wrote about the choice to look for new opportunities and try to reach out to other disciplines, with an open eye for multiple methods and perspectives necessary to grasp complex reality, more focusing on webs of alliances. The notion that entering a conversation may suddenly offer new perspectives is also related to views from the complex responsive process literature. It can be seen as a social view on adaptive complexity theories in which the analogies of the natural science approach of complexity are connected to the responsive interaction described by the American pragmatists. In this view people can develop understanding about each other’s ideas and develop some common ground through conversation (Mead, 1934). These common grounds, developed by different people coming from different groupings, can spread out to other figurations then the ones in which people normally participate, leading to new extended understanding and ideas (Elias, 1939; 1972).

The complex responsive process perspective (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000; Stacey 2011) is based on the idea that organizations and society develop through local patterns of interaction forming new figurations as processes of self-organizing interaction between agents. What we describe as organizing activities of the cleaners can also be considered as self organizing interactions in their community. Another important perspective is that ideas in organizations and groups emerge through conversation (Shaw, 2002; Shotter, 1993). Both authors emphasize that these conversations shape the development of the organization, even the very loose connections described in the narrative. Still the question remains open why suddenly the process took a turn after which the developments slowly moved in a direction in which a solution came within reach. A complexity perspective makes people understand that many unpredictable developments, sometimes in a paradoxically way, will take place mostly all at the same time (Burger, 2007). All these developments have some kind of conversational process as a starting point. Experience of people dealing with these very complicated situations can help taking initiatives at the right time, this is not all serendipity. Gladwell (2000) explains how important it is to understand the context of the message, the messenger and the message itself and to focus the efforts; you cannot talk to the whole world. These changes will most of the time occur during the different conversations, in which leadership and social development will go hand in hand (Groot and Blokland, 2008). However to give yourself this opportunity you need to engage in the ongoing processes, even if they seem to be no part of your direct responsibilities (Groot, 2011). Also in the strategic marketing discussions (Mulholland et al., 2006) it is new to speak of self organizing, conversational strategies, in which there are no boundaries or levels, only patterns and figurations of communication emerging in sometimes very successful directions. Mulholland et al. (2006) describe the upcoming resistance to dismiss firm boundaries and frontiers in organizational thinking. Nonaka and Zhu (2012, p. 80) describe strategy as the network effect of theories, exemplars, contents, activities and consequences. All these involve in strategy, in making a difference. Every strategy can be seen as such an interactive process and contingent accomplishment. One aspect of strategy – talking, believing, having, doing or living – cannot be understood or coped with properly, without being linked to other aspects. To people involved in the emergence process, strategic outcome is a combination of intended and unintended consequences of managerial actions and environmental factors. Strategic emergence need not, indeed cannot, be explained solely as the product of human foresight or deliberate planning, nor can it be reduced to mindless behaviors or random chances (Nonaka and Zhu, 2012, p. 128). Nonaka and Zhu (2012) present several examples from western and Eastern societies and organizations demonstrating that leaders willingly accept that in real practice people in these societies and organization develop intended strategies in different directions that originally intended even when these initiatives are formally forbidden, like the development of local entrepreneurship in China. It became clear that these local developments lead to better results than foreseen in the original strategic plans. It is important to have view on global or holistic outcome and at the same time realize that a global result can only be influenced in local interactions.

Looking at the outcome of the organizing processes and the emergence of the negotiation initiatives, our suggestion is to connect social complexity thinking, in which organizational boundaries are denied, to other strategic approaches and conversation. This will offer new opportunities for unexpected but not completely random outcome.

**Summary**

We do realize that we touched many topics that emerged during the processes. We more or less see that as a consequence of trying to explain developments from a complexity perspective. From this perspective living with uncertainty and unpredictability is important, which does not mean that leaders are not playing an important role in their organizations. In this paper we want to emphasize our view that global developments are the result of influencing patterns of local interaction and conversation. This also means that managers need to react locally to strategic challenges caused by unexpected global events. In the paper we paid attention to:

* Union organizing can lead to unexpected events during times of labor actions and strikes. These actions do not stop at the organizational boundaries of the union.
* Board members of principle companies sometimes need to engage in processes that seem to be no part of their direct responsibility.
* Strategic questions can develop in unplanned directions and will not confine to those areas where actual strategic planning took place. It can turn out different than expected. This often requires a pragmatic approach of senior management, which can mean not to interfere, even when the original strategic plans are heading in a different direction.
* Managers of principle companies need to consider their moral responsibility for working conditions of employees of contractors and subcontractors.
* A complex responsive processes approach focuses on the importance of understanding the development of local processes of conversation leading to global outcome. Nobody can control this outcome, but it can be influenced by participating in these local processes. However a global (temporary) result will paradoxically influence the local discussion at the same time.
* Experienced managers and union leaders have developed a better understanding of those local processes which can be very important in the development of the global outcome and they will act accordingly.
* A narrative/ reflexive method can bring authors and readers closer to the experience of the real complex series of events. This helps to better understand the complexity of the described phenomena and connect these to practice.

**The Story continues**

In the early winter of 2013 railroad construction workers went on strike because of the high pressure on working condition and extreme low contract prices as a result of the tender procedures used by the government agency responsible for railroad construction and maintenance. In a newspaper article (Trouw, 2013) the board of the government agency explains that they have no part in this discussion and employers and employees need to solve their own conflict. Although every situation asks for specific pragmatic action, reading what others have done in comparable situations might shed some other light on the conflict between principles, construction companies and the organizing approaches of railroad workers and the unions who represent them.

The social approach of complexity thinking offers many opportunities to reflect on the strategic events described in this paper. A further detailed reflection on the development of the discussion described in the narrative can help to uncover new insights. Insights that can be helpful for managers to better understand similar situations they find themselves in. We need to make the remark that no situation will ever be exactly the same, which is one of the very important understandings of the complexity sciences in our daily life and work.

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