Management conversations in Danish companies

Communicating corporate values and strategies

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Abstract

Purpose – Good stakeholder relations are crucial for the corporate image and reputation of modern organisations. One important management tool for use in successfully establishing good stakeholder relations involves management conversations. Until now these conversations have not been investigated extensively either in general or specifically within the field of corporate communication. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this developing field of research by presenting the results of a study of management conversations.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper investigates the ways in which various management conversations are used strategically in companies to benefit relations with stakeholders and the image or reputation of the company concerned. The conversations studied are recruitment conversations, job appraisal interviews, round-table sickness leave conversations and dismissal conversations.

Findings – The paper shows that the companies involved are aware that such conversations should be used as tools for implementing their company strategy and values. However, the strategic potential of these conversations is not fully exploited, and specific crucial aspects like values communication are more prevalent in some conversations than in others.

Originality/value – The paper highlights the need to gain deeper insight into the correlation between various management conversations on the one hand, and management conversations and strategy on the other.

Keywords Conversation, Management techniques, Corporate communications, Corporate strategy, Denmark

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Management conversations play an important role in modern organisations, where good stakeholder relations are crucial for corporate image and reputation (van Riel, 1992, p. 9; Cornelissen, 2008, p. 197ff). Management conversations are used as an efficient value communication tool in today's organisations, which are increasingly run on the basis of values rather than rules, and where formal structures are often replaced by more project-oriented structures.

The authors are a group of researchers at the Centre for Corporate Communication, Aarhus School of Business, University of Aarhus, Denmark. The research group's primary aim is to gain more knowledge on the importance of management conversations in relation to the implementation of corporate values and strategies.

There have been a number of excellent studies of the role of management conversations from a business communication perspective (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Clifton, 2006; James *et al.*, 2006). However, there is still a substantial lack of empirical studies investigating from a corporate communication perspective the way in which these conversations can be used strategically to benefit relations with stakeholders and the image or reputation of the company concerned.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of one study, which is part of an ongoing project on management conversations. The aim of this study is to investigate the way in which various management conversations are actually used in companies. The conversations in focus are: recruitment conversations, job appraisal interviews, round-table sickness leave conversations[1] and dismissal conversations.

2. Theoretical framework and research questions
Research on management communication has traditionally focused on management functions like planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling, and on the manager's role in continuously persuading individual subordinates that the goals of the organisation are desirable (van Riel, 1992, p. 9). Recently, however, research has highlighted the manager's role in communicating corporate values and strategies (Larkin and Larkin, 1994; Elving, 2005) and the importance of management communication for the organisational and corporate identity of organisations (Bick *et al.*, 2003). Organisational identity is defined as "the shared values and sense-making of people within an organisation" (Cornelissen, 2004, p. 192). Organisational identity has also been described as the traits of an organisation in all its values, strategies and practices that give the company its specificity, stability and coherence (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Cornelissen, 2004). These traits contribute to the projection of a unique and authentic corporate identity, here defined as:

> [...] the profile and values communicated by an organization or the character a company seeks to establish for itself in the mind of its stakeholders, reinforced by consistent use of logos, colours, typefaces, and so on (Cornelissen, 2004, p. 185).

In this light, it is important that a sense of organisational identity becomes internalised by members of the organisation, so that they can live and enact the company's values in their day-to-day work (Cornelissen, 2004, p. 76).

Thus, it is no longer enough for modern organisations operating in a globalised market place to regard management communication as an instrument of control and information management. Management communication is vital in modern organisations not only to transmit authority and information, but also to achieve cooperation and alignment with corporate strategy and values (van Riel, 1992; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Cornelissen argues that senior managers can facilitate this understanding "by articulating and actively communicating the company's values to all staff within the organization through policy documents and internal communications" (van Riel, 1992; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2006). In this process, organisations need to link the corporate identity – the picture of the organisation that is presented to external stakeholders – to their organisational identity – the values that members of the organisation themselves associate with the organisation and ascribe to it. They also need to make sure that managers

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articulate and actively communicate their company's values to all the staff within the organisation through internal communication and various types of management conversation.

However, formulated values and the communication of values to members of an organisation by managers do not always lead to the enactment of corporate strategies and identities (Larkin and Larkin, 1994). For corporate values to be more than just words, the values portrayed must be integrated in various symbols and in the daily procedures of the organisation concerned. Management conversations are an example of such daily procedures in line with speeches, uniforms, reward systems, rituals, ceremonies, advertisements, etc. (Cheney *et al.*, 2004; Lievens *et al.*, 2007). By integrating values and strategies in their daily procedures, and by coordinating them across different departments, functions and activities, organisations hope to speak with one voice in order to create a unified impression of what they are and what they stand for. The fact that the integration of corporate values and strategies is often a challenge to organisations has been addressed frequently in the rapidly growing research field known as "Strategy as Practice" (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Here, strategy is defined as:

> [. . .] a flow of organizational activity that incorporates content and process, intent and emergence, thinking and acting, and so on, as reciprocal, intertwined and frequently indistinguishable parts of a whole [. . .] (Jazarbkowski, 2005).

In this sense, management conversations can be seen as organisational activities in which strategy is an ongoing, embedded and emerging practice involving both managers and ordinary employees. The focus of our study is to investigate in greater detail the extent to which Danish companies are aware of the importance of alignment between management conversations on the one hand and the overall company strategy on the other hand.

Figure 1 shows the role of management conversations in implementing a company's values and strategies and ensuring the interrelatedness between internal and external communication or between organisational and corporate identity.

From a corporate communication perspective, management conversations such as recruitment conversations, job appraisal interviews, sickness leave conversations and dismissal conversations constitute important links in aligning corporate and organisational identity. Each management conversation contributes both individually and as a whole to these links. As a result, an alignment between these types of conversation is crucial as far as the enactment of corporate values and strategy is concerned.

Based on our theoretical framework, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the importance and the purpose of management conversations?

RQ2. Which issues are important, and how are corporate values and strategies addressed?

RQ3. What are the main challenges in a corporate communication perspective?

These research questions are investigated in an online survey study as explained below.
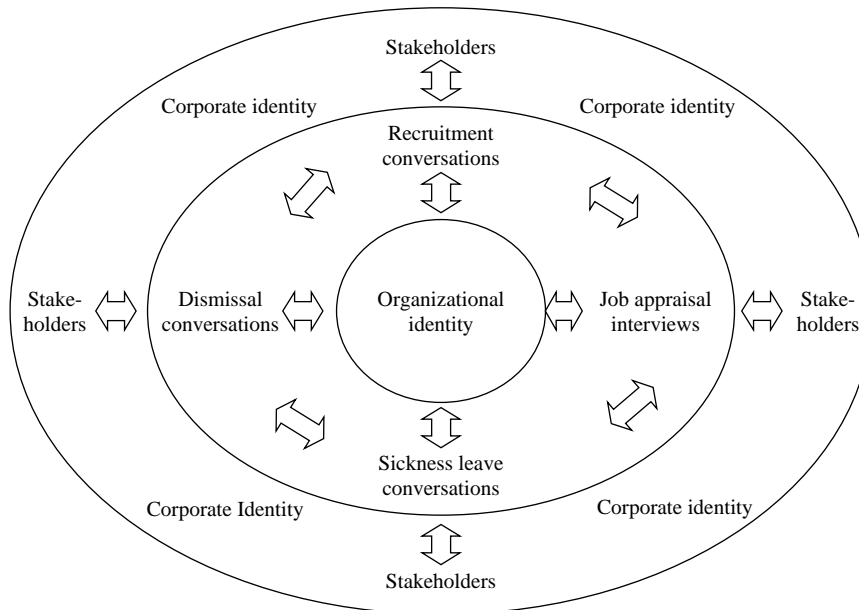
Source: Inspired by Cornelissen (2004, p.69)

Figure 1.
Management
conversations in a
corporate communication
perspective

3. Methodology

To address the research questions outlined above, the authors decided to focus on four main types of management conversation: recruitment conversations, job appraisal interviews, sickness leave conversations and dismissal conversations. These conversations were selected due to the fact that they are highly formalised in a Danish context, and because they represent different stages in an employee's life cycle starting with recruitment, followed by regular performance development, and (potentially) ending in sickness leave and dismissal conversations.

To investigate these management conversations the authors conducted an online questionnaire-based survey in December 2007, involving 167 of the largest Danish companies. Out of 167 questionnaires, 70 were returned, i.e. a response rate of 42 per cent. Most of the questionnaires were returned by human resource (HR) directors (77 per cent). Of the companies that answered the survey, more than 40 per cent had less than 1,000 employees, about 30 per cent had between 1,000 and 2,500 employees, and about 20 per cent had more than 2,500 employees.

A total of 30 questions were divided into two main parts:

(1) a short part containing general questions on strategic management conversations; and

(2) four main blocks of questions on the specific form of conversation in question.

The four main blocks consisted of questions related to:

(1) the participants;

(2) the purpose;

(3) the content; and

(4) the challenges of the conversation.

All these are factors which we regard as crucial aspects of a management conversation. The questions were formulated similarly for all four kinds of conversation – with a few exceptions related to the specific character of each conversation. The questions asked in the questionnaire included predominantly closed-ended questions. This was done to ensure that the answers of all the companies could be compared. Only when asking about the challenges that the companies perceived in connection with the different management conversations did we pose an open-ended question to avoid the risk of limiting the companies to a predefined set of answers.

On the basis of the theoretical framework, research questions and methodology outlined above, we will now present and discuss the results of our study.

4. Survey results

With regard to the kind of conversations conducted, 89 per cent of the companies in question have job appraisal interviews, 85 per cent have recruitment conversations, 37 per cent have dismissal conversations and 29 per cent have round-table sickness leave conversations. This means that recruitment conversations and job appraisal interviews are by far the most common kind of the four management conversations, whereas dismissal and round-table sickness leave conversations are used far less frequently.

In the following section, we will start by presenting the results for each type of management conversation and commenting briefly on them. We will then discuss how each management conversation helps to align organisational and corporate identity, how the conversations are intertwined in this objective, and what the strategic and managerial implications of our findings are.

4.1 Recruitment conversations

Research on the recruitment process has primarily focused on examining what should be contained in recruitment advertisements to attract potential employees (Mathews and Redman, 1996; Blackman, 2006). The corporate reputation of an organisation is another key factor that has been identified as having an important influence on the recruitment and retention of employees in modern organisations (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Fombrun, 1996; Cable and Graham, 2000). There is also a considerable amount of prescriptive literature within the field aimed at helping managers to find the right person for the job (Carroll *et al.*, 1999). If the management makes a wrong decision and employs the wrong person, the result may be very expensive for the organisation. Hence, one of the focus aspects in the prescriptive literature is how management should improve the interview process in order to employ the right person (Dipboye, 1982; Barnett, 2008). This type of conversation is the beginning of a future employment relationship between employer and employee, and thus it may have an impact on the future level of the applicant's commitment to the organisation concerned (Ferris *et al.*, 2002).

Participants. When asked about which members of their organisation participate in their recruitment conversations, 100 per cent of the companies in this study indicate that the closest manager often or always participates. In total, 82 per cent answer that

the HR consultant is always or often present, and 81 per cent say that the personnel manager always or often participates. A total of 51 per cent indicate that future colleagues are present during the conversation, and 17 per cent of the respondents answer that top management is present.

Purpose. A total of 85 per cent of the responding companies arrange recruitment conversations. In these conversations, 96 per cent of the respondents see the recruitment conversation as having an influence on the corporate image and reputation of the company. In total, 95 per cent of the companies answer that the main purpose of the conversation is to measure the applicant's personal values. This supports the impression that it is important for the employer to know whether the applicant identifies with the company's organisational values or not. A total of 95 per cent of the companies agree that the recruitment conversation serves as a tool for evaluating the expectations of the applicant with regard to the organisation and vice versa, and 94 per cent of the companies focus on the professional qualifications of the applicant. In addition, 93 per cent of the companies see the recruitment conversation as an opportunity to promote organisational values, indicating a clear focus on values in this type of conversation. The survey also shows that 68 per cent of the respondents see the recruitment conversation as a way of building a social relationship between leader and employee.

Content. In recruitment conversations the importance of various issues was as follows: personal qualifications of the applicant (100 per cent), professional qualifications of the applicant (96 per cent), applicant's reasons for applying for the job (96 per cent), applicant's expectations with regard to the organisation (95 per cent), presentation of the job (94 per cent) and presentation of the company (84 per cent). However, less attention was paid to salary negotiation (35 per cent).

Challenges. One of the challenges mentioned was the time aspect – the companies feel that the limited time available to find and appoint the right person for a vacant position was a challenge. According to the responses, the key challenges during the recruitment conversation are to evaluate the expectations of both applicant and employer, and to learn about the professional qualifications, motivation and personal values of the applicant. This is noteworthy because these aspects are also considered to be the main aims of this type of conversation. One group of companies also indicated that it is a challenge to learn about the applicants' reasons for changing jobs – reasons which could include prior termination and enforced resignation. This is interesting because this kind of information is one way to test the future commitment of an applicant. The companies also mentioned that another challenge is to conduct the interview so that an equal dialogue between the applicant and the employer is ensured.

4.2 Job appraisal interviews

As mentioned above, 89 per cent of the companies conduct job appraisal interviews. Hence, this type of conversation is the kind of management conversation that is used most frequently in the companies studied.

A job appraisal interview is a formal conversation between a superior and an employee about the employee's current and future job situation. Job appraisal interviews normally take place once a year. In the Danish labour market, job appraisal interviews have been under constant change within the last couple of years. When they were first introduced in the 1980s there was a focus on performance; but since 2000

there has been a shift towards various aspects of development (Asmuß, 2008, Frimann, 2004). This tendency is also reflected in the Danish term used for this kind of conversation, which can be translated literally into "employee development conversation". The focus on development not only has consequences for the content of such conversations, but also challenges the ways in which the interviews are conducted: instead of pure reporting about former performance, such interviews are now supposed to take the form of a dialogue between equal partners.

Participants. With regard to the participants in job appraisal interviews, it is interesting to note that most resources are still invested in leaders and the permanent workforce (this is in line with other studies such as Bülow Management, 1999, 2006). Far fewer resources are invested in temporary employees and employees who are paid on an hourly basis. This is noteworthy because recent studies indicate that an increasing number of companies appreciate the need to develop close relations with their non-permanent workforce as well (Bülow Management, 2006). However, the results of this study show that companies do not in fact invest many resources in this area.

Purpose. Most companies regard the main aim of job appraisal interviews as a question of retaining qualified employees in the company (95 per cent). They also regard such interviews as an important way of developing employee competencies (92 per cent). This reveals a clear focus on future aspects in the overall aim of the interviews. In total, 68 per cent of the companies regard these interviews as an important way of measuring job efficiency, which is in line with the findings outlined above: the focus is more on future aspects than on past performance. More than 77 per cent of the companies point out that they do not conduct job appraisal interviews simply to live up to the Danish legal requirements in this area. This again supports the overall impression that Danish companies actually regard (and intend to use) job appraisal interviews as an efficient tool for use in increasing value within their companies.

Content. With regard to the communication flow, more than 83 per cent of the companies regard job appraisal interviews as an important tool in giving feedback to the managers. This indicates an emphasis on the dialogue involved in such interviews. A total of 66 per cent state that they are aware of the importance of job appraisal interviews for the relationship between manager and employee. And with regard to the link between individual conversational events and questions of corporate image and reputation, 68 per cent of the companies agree that job appraisal interviews support their corporate image and reputation. This is crucial, as research on job appraisal interviews highlights the relevance of these conversations for (re-)defining and (re-)evaluating social relationships between the manager and the subordinate (Asmuß, 2008, Frimann, 2004). If the companies are not aware of this aspect in their strategic considerations for job appraisal interviews, they risk focusing on only one aspect of job appraisal interviews (the factual outcome), thereby neglecting the chance to exploit the opportunity to optimise the social relationship between the interlocutors at the same time.

Challenges. The main aspects mentioned can be divided into four groups, stretching from the operational to the strategic level. On the operational level, one group sees time limits as a main challenge. Companies in this group say that it is hard to find time to hold these interviews regularly and to follow them up on a regular daily basis. On a more strategic level, one group regards it as a challenge to provide the kind of dialogue that is intended in Danish job appraisal interviews. The kind of words used to express this challenge in the study were: equality, active recipiency, openness,

trust and mutual respect. Another group feels that the main challenge is how to develop the concept for the interview so that it does not become pure routine. And for another group the main challenge is how questions of overall strategy can find their way into each job appraisal interview. It is noteworthy here that the question of how to actually conduct the interview so that it lives up to strategic considerations (job appraisal interviews should involve open dialogue between equal partners) is a major concern. Related to this, many companies highlight the challenge of how to build a bridge between overall strategy and values on the one hand, and job appraisal interviews on the other. This is very interesting, as many companies also state that the bridge between overall strategy and conversational encounters is one of the main aims of job appraisal interviews.

4.3 Round-table sickness leave conversations
The round-table sickness leave conversation was developed in Denmark in the middle of the 1990s on the initiative of public authorities, trade unions and others (Pedersen *et al.*, 2000), and it is used voluntarily today by major Danish companies who have felt some pressure to assume some social responsibility. This development can be seen as a need for companies to establish and maintain good relations with their stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). In this light, the round-table sickness leave conversation can be seen not only as a personnel political tool, but also as a socially responsible activity and a stakeholder dialogue (Thomsen, 2008).

A total of 19[2] (out of 70) companies conduct round-table sickness leave conversations. Hence, this form of conversation is the kind of management conversation that is used least in Danish companies. A total of 15 respondents say that the round-table sickness leave conversation has high (or some) priority in comparison with an ordinary sickness leave conversation.

Participants. There are many participants in round-table sickness leave conversations apart from the employee concerned. In total, 17 respondents indicate that the nearest leader always or almost always participates in this type of conversation. Nine say that it is the personnel manager or the HR manager who always or almost always represents the company. Ten respondents say that a staff representative always or often participates in the conversation. Five respondents say that the municipal authority always or often participates and is represented by a social adviser. Four respondents say that a neutral consultant sometimes or always participates in the conversation. A doctor participates in rare cases (3). Colleagues participate only rarely (1). And in a few cases (2), other people apart from those mentioned above participate.

Our interpretation of the answers regarding the participants in the round-table sickness leave conversation is that there are many types of round-table sickness leave conversation, for example the small round-table sickness leave conversation (employee, nearest leader or HR manager and consultant or other person representing the public authority/municipality), and the big round-table sickness leave conversation (with many different participants).

Purpose. Nearly, all the respondents (17) regard this type of conversation as a job retention tool. Moreover, they see it as a chance to create a good working environment and ensure good working conditions (15). At the same time, they seem to agree (17) that these conversations signal that the company gives high priority to caring for its employees.

This means that the respondents regard the round-table sickness leave conversation as a conversation whose main purpose is to increase employee satisfaction and thereby shed light on the company's priority to care for its employees.

Content. Our study shows that the round-table sickness leave conversation is primarily used for the purpose of clarification. Furthermore, its function as a basis for decisions is highlighted. A total of 16 respondents say that the round-table sickness leave conversation is used to clarify the resources and desires of the employee concerned. In total, 15 say that the conversation is used to clarify the expectations of the company. Six respondents state that the round-table sickness leave conversation often or sometimes is used to clarify legal or insurance questions. Furthermore, in 13 companies the conversation is regularly used to clarify work environment questions. Finally, this type of conversation is used to clarify practical problems by 15 companies.

The round-table sickness leave conversation seems to be used as an open forum for decision making, a point which is highlighted by the respondents. This is also shown in the answers to the questions related to the result of such conversations. Here, the respondents paint a picture of a conversation which leads to many different kinds of agreement, for example an agreement on when the employee can begin to work again (15 respondents), an agreement on new work tasks (12 respondents), or an agreement on internal redeployment (seven respondents). The round-table sickness leave conversation may also lead to an agreement on job change (six respondents), or an agreement on continuing education or further training (two respondents). Other possibilities are an agreement on starting a new job that makes special allowances (six respondents), an agreement on a partial fit-for-duty report (nine respondents), or an agreement on retirement (one respondent).

On the basis of these findings, the round-table sickness leave conversation seems to be a fairly open conversation or a conversation with many different "outlets". Much effort seems to be made in order to find a flexible arrangement.

The concrete result of the round-table sickness leave conversation is often a plan (14 respondents). This plan may contain an agreement regarding a second conversation. Ten respondents say that the first conversation is always or often followed by a second conversation.

Challenges. One of the major challenges is related to the resources of the organisation concerned. One respondent says that the organisation concerned does not seem to have sufficient HR and managerial resources to participate in such conversations. Another respondent says that it is not always easy to motivate the nearest leader to take the initiative for these difficult conversations. Some kind of managerial support is crucial for the successful implementation of this type of conversation. A second challenge is related to the relationship between the manager and the employees in general, and between the manager and the sick or absent employee in particular. One respondent says that it is a challenge to persuade the sick or absent employee to participate in a round-table sickness leave conversation. For instance, it is very important to signal to the employee that the conversation will be conducted in the form of an open dialogue, and that the purpose is to reach a constructive solution for both parties. In this connection, several respondents indicate that honesty and intimacy must be governing concepts in round-table sickness leave conversations. Only in this way is it possible to get all the facts on the table. The third challenge to organisations highlighted by several respondents is how to reach a mutually satisfactory solution, a challenge, which is even

bigger when the employee is partly unable to fulfil his obligations or do his job. One respondent explains that this challenge or dilemma involves "maintaining the business-oriented perspective while at the same time paying attention to human-oriented aspects".

The statements of the respondents clearly show that the round-table sickness leave conversation is a challenge to organisations. More precisely, such conversations challenge their profit objectives, moral standards and communication strategy.

4.4 Dismissal conversations

When we use the term dismissal conversations in this paper, we refer to unilateral disengagements (Davis, 1973), in which only one party seeks to end the relationship. Unlike bilateral disengagement, in which both parties desire to end the relationship, the unilateral dismissal may require direct, confrontational disengagement strategies because these may be attempts to bring the relationship to a "sudden death" (Cox and Kramer, 1995). Most publications on the dismissal process are prescriptive works designed to guide managers in their efforts to terminate employment (Coulson, 1981; Granholm, 1991; Sweet, 1989), and very little scholarly work has focused on the elements and dynamics of the dismissal conversation itself. As a result, the majority of the literature within the field is written by and for practitioners with a focus on managing legal requirements and avoiding lawsuits, thereby failing to present a theoretically based account of communication during the termination process (Cox and Kramer, 1995). Although some research has investigated the communication in relation to voluntary turnover (Jablin, 1987; Allen, 1996; Scott *et al.*, 1999), little empirical research examines how employers communicate with employees during the dismissal process.

A unilateral disengagement may be the last resort for various reasons. On the one hand, an organisation may find itself compelled to lay off an employee when it becomes apparent that the individual cannot or will not perform the job in an appropriate manner due to professional or personal reasons. On the other hand, the organisation may also be forced to part with employees due to disappointing financial reasons, strategic reorientation, market conditions or poor management (Aggerholm, 2008). The logic that binds strategic management conversations together in everyday life involves the mutual perspectives, goals and aspirations existing in the close relationship between manager and employee. The dismissal conversation constitutes a radical disruption of this relationship because the perspectives of those concerned are suddenly opposed when they part company. The dismissal conversation places a strain not only on the redundant employee but also on the manager responsible for conveying the message of termination properly with respect for the employee as well as the corporate image of the company concerned.

Participants. Of the 44 companies who indicated that they make formal use of this type of conversation, 91 per cent indicated that the closest manager is present; while in 77 per cent of the companies an HR consultant always or often participates in the conversation. In total, 32 per cent of the respondents indicate that a shop steward is always or often present.

Purpose. A total of 63 per cent of the companies in this study arrange formal conversations with employees after a dismissal. Of these, the majority employ this type of conversation as an interpersonal tool focusing on the employee's emotional reactions

as well as his or her cognitive understanding of the management's disengagement decision. With regard to the emotional elements, 93 per cent see the main aim of the conversation as an opportunity for the manager to end the relationship in a decent way, while 83 per cent see it as a chance to handle the emotional reactions of the employee. A total of 72 per cent perceive the dismissal conversation as a way of counselling the employee in moving on with his or her working life. With regard to the cognitive dimensions of the conversation, 88 per cent see it as an opportunity to clarify and explain the reasons for the dismissal. However, the conversation does not only have an internal purpose. From a strategic perspective, 75 per cent state that the conversation also serves an external communicative purpose because the respondents believe that the conversations help to maintain their corporate image and reputation. Finally, 66 per cent view the conversation as an opportunity for the manager to enter into dialogue with the employee.

Content. The responding organisations were asked to rank the importance of various issues in a dismissal conversation, and the results were as follows: justification of the reason for dismissal (86 per cent), handling of employee reactions (85 per cent), coordination of the remaining employment period after the termination meeting (78 per cent), clarification of severance payment and possible compensation (78 per cent), termination of employment (76 per cent) and counselling concerning future career paths (63 per cent). With regard to post-dismissal communication, 15 per cent always follow up on dismissal conversations, while 26 per cent often do so. A total of 52 per cent of the companies rarely (31 per cent) or never (21 per cent) offer additional counselling.

Challenges. The answers can be divided into three overall clusters. The first challenge is the dismissal conversation itself, which is supposed to be characterised by dignity, respect and sympathy. As to the content of the conversation – the second cluster – the responding organisations mention the importance of providing careful explanations of the reasons for disengagement and clarifying the relationship between the employee and the organisation. Finally, managerial competences constitute a challenge. In particular, the organisations mention the management's ability to counsel the disengaged employee, to create confidence, openness and dialogue between the parties, to generate employee understanding as to the disengagement decision, and to retain the services of the dismissed employee between the period of notification and the actual termination of employment.

Having presented the results of the survey with regard to each management conversation, we will now discuss these results in relation to the overall research questions.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The main results indicate that the field of management conversations is an area of major interest for the companies studied here, and that the four types of management conversation selected for the survey are used for various purposes. But despite the fact that there are a number of similarities between the management conversations investigated in this study, there are also clear indications that companies pay different degrees of attention to the various types of conversation. This can be seen both in terms of how much use the companies make of the different management conversations, and in terms of the purposes they assign to them.

Whereas recruitment conversations and job appraisal interviews seem to serve a variety of purposes ranging from employee evaluation and performance measurement to value and expectation alignment, sickness leave and dismissal conversations seem to be more clearly focused on matching employee expectations with company strategy.

The different mono- or multipurpose focus is also reflected in the number of issues dealt with in the various management conversations. Recruitment conversations and job appraisal interviews frequently deal with a great number of different issues, whereas sickness leave and dismissal conversations focus more on one main aspect, namely the role of the employee.

With regard to the challenges perceived by companies, a high degree of similarity can be found across the four different management conversations. The companies express awareness that the conversations potentially can be used as a means to communicate corporate strategies and values, thereby ensuring a strong organisational identity. However, the companies also agree that one of the main challenges is how to create and ensure a strong link between company strategy and values and the conversation itself. This dilemma becomes apparent when they highlight the influence of the conversation upon the image and reputation of the company on the one hand, but indicate that the conversations are merely used as a practical tool to attract and retain job candidates and to ensure job satisfaction on the other.

Let us now discuss some of the implications of these findings in more detail.

The role of values in management conversations
Even though all the companies express difficulties with regard to the implementation of values in each conversation, there are differences in terms of which kind of management conversation is in focus. As far as the communication of values to ensure an alignment between organisational and corporate identity is concerned, the findings indicate that the four management conversations can be divided into two groups: in the first of these there is more focus on aspects of control and measurement. This is where recruitment conversations and job appraisal interviews belong. In the second group, comprising sickness leave and dismissal conversations, there is more focus on communicating corporate values. So even though the companies express awareness that it is important to include communication about corporate values and strategies in an employee's complete life cycle (including recruitment, employee development and dismissal) in order to attract and retain the best employees, there are indications that this potential is not exploited to the same degree in all four kinds of management conversation.

Aligning organisational and corporate identity
In the type of management conversation in which there is a greater focus on value communication (sickness leave and dismissal conversations), there is a good basis for companies to achieve a strong organisational identity. This can be seen as a precondition for companies in order to build a basis for alignment between their organisational and corporate identity. The two other types of management conversation, where the focus on communicating values and strategies is lower due to the variety of aims that need to be achieved, contribute less to a strong organisational identity. In this respect, these conversations may help to weaken the corporate identity by not making use of their potential to include a dialogue on values and strategies.

Intertwining the different management conversations
As discussed above, the four different kinds of management conversations can be divided into two main groups reflecting their focus on communicating values and strategies. This division into two groups implies that companies do not regard these conversations as a unified management tool for use in increasing and improving the communication of strategies and values. Moreover, the two kinds of management conversation that have the greatest focus on communicating corporate values and strategies are the ones that are used least in the companies (sickness leave and dismissal conversations). This indicates that the strategic use of management conversations for the communication of corporate values and strategies could be improved considerably. For the field of corporate communication, these results indicate that a stronger focus on the strategic dimension of these conversations is needed in order to ensure a strong correlation between the various types of management conversation, and in order to ensure that they are truly linked to corporate values and strategies.

Strategic and managerial implications
The discussion above emphasises the strategic importance and potential of management conversations as ways or means in which corporate objectives can be achieved and put into effect. However, in order to benefit from the strategic potential of these conversations, organisations not only need to integrate them in their overall strategy. They also need to use them strategically, which is not the case in the organisations in this survey. This indicates that the awareness among organisations of how to use these conversations strategically could be raised, and that communication between the strategic level of the company and the operational level of the company could be improved considerably.

Methodological considerations
Our study does have one research limitation: it focuses on the strategic level, and does not include data representing the operational level of organisations, i.e. managers who actually conduct the conversations investigated. Our data represent the human resource management function or the personnel strategic level of the organisation. This means that our findings do not directly address what actually happens in the conversations investigated. There may not be a link between what the organisations and managers in our survey say, and what they or the managers in charge of management conversations actually do. The link between what organisations and managers say and what they do is crucial, and should be investigated in further research by initiating supplementary qualitative studies like interviews or conducting video-based ethnographic studies to investigate the various management conversations in real life.

Notes

1. These round-table sickness leave conversations are a very ambitious form of sickness leave conversations involving many different participants. The argument for choosing these conversations is that they seem to be more interesting in a corporate communication perspective than ordinary sickness leave conversations.

2. Due to the small number of answers, the figures in this section refer to the actual number of answers instead of reflecting percentages as in the other sections of the study.

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