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Charlotte Lex, Ph.D. Student  
Institute of Organization  
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark  
E-mail: cl.ioa@cbs.dk  
Phone: + 45 38 15 28 22  
Fax: + 45 38 15 28 65

Mr Jesper Madsen & Mr Uffe Sønderhausen  
The Confederation of Danish Industries  
E-mail: jem@di.dk, ufs@di.dk  
Phone: + 45 33 77 33 77  
Fax: +45 33 77 33 00

### **Using an existing partnership for developing and extending Environmental Understanding**

The issue to be discussed in this paper is how existing structures and relations between an organization representing employers and industry and the member companies hereof can be applied as a means of developing and widening the scope of environmental understanding which may provide environmental improvements. The way in which it is presented and discussed in this paper, in order to improve the processes for developing and widening the scope of these understandings, is to prepare and offer environmental training courses to companies on a voluntary basis.

Below, an account of the structure of this paper is made. First, we will try to build up a theoretical understanding of how actors - through their interaction - form and represent roles which to some extent structures and prescribes the action patterns within this interaction. The argument made in this respect is that given the history of the relationship between the two groups of actors, the two parties will be far more open to new ideas than if the interactions were new and not based on mutual understanding of the relationship in itself. Second, the theoretical understanding will be based on the notion that actors tend to develop new and widen the scope of currently existing meanings by way of these established roles by using the existing way of communication while changing the perspectives. These two approaches are based on Berger and Luckmann on their institutional theory and Blumer on his symbolic interactionism.

Later, we will elaborate on the empirical processes in terms of illustrating the aims and ideas at the core of the environmental training courses and processes by way of developing these. How may given structures be used as an advantage in creating training courses and how may the value of the

existing relations help or provide better conditions for improvement of the environment? These are some of the questions we will go into detail with in this paper.

### **Presentation of the relationship**

During the years, the Confederation of Danish Industries has represented Danish industry and has played a key role on the Danish labour market by negotiating and administrating a large number of Collective Agreements in favour of industry. Having a long tradition as an organization representing Danish employers and industry, the Confederation, DI, and its 4,300 member companies represent approximately 300,000 employees from a wide range within the Danish business sector.

Furthermore, in close collaboration with the Danish labour unions, the Confederation of Danish Industries is a major factor in relation to the establishment of remuneration standards and working conditions. The Confederation's objective is to form a flexible framework for negotiation which can serve as a guideline for local and individual bargaining. In terms hereof, the Confederation acts and collaborates on behalf of industry and its stakeholders within a confined system in which the workers and the employees are represented by different labour unions.

Finally, the Confederation of Danish Industries also safeguards the interests of industry in terms of general business policies such as taxes, governmental regulation etc. Where the first mentioned areas are seen as traditional fields of activity for this type of organization, the latter seems to be an area within which the Confederation is particular active in forms of opening up for debates and by lobbying the regulative authorities. In terms of the environmental issues, the Confederation has made intense efforts to prevent legal authorities from building up a fixed legal framework which companies needed to adjust their production to. Instead, the organization argued that companies themselves would be able to improve the environmental conditions in their own way whilst, on the other hand, securing or even improving their businesses.

Despite of these efforts and the heavy influence exercised by the organization on the environmental policies in Denmark, most companies have gone through various processes in their need to meet all the legal environmental restrictions they have been confronted with.

### **The theoretical framework of understanding**

Given the history of the relations between the Confederation and its member companies, it may be argued that they represent certain roles in relations to each other in their interaction. Using the ideas

of Berger and Luckmann, these roles seem to be of great importance to institutionalisation processes and necessary for the creation of universal rules and actions (Berger & Luckmann: 1966). Moreover, we tend to argue that roles structure and stabilise a given situation and, therefore, they contribute with a foundation for making changes and widen the scope of and/or redevelop existing ideas or norms.

### The development of roles

The roles are said to develop as soon as a common knowledge base of mutual typifications arises. In terms of possessing the characteristics of an intermediary of specific sectors in the common knowledge base, these roles can provide the actor with a cognitive consciousness about norms, values and emotions. The reason is that the actor, through the roles he is playing, is being drawn into specific areas of socially objective knowledge not only in a narrow cognitive sense, but also in a way where the actor gains this knowledge about norms, values and even emotions (1966; 96).

As stated above, it is not only sufficient to get the performance of a given role into a routine in order to have learnt the role. You have to be aware of or withdraw from the different cognitive and emotional knowledge bases which are either directly or indirectly suitable for the role. In relation to this type of demand for representing and socialising a given role, what Berger and Luckmann call a social allocation of knowledge has, thus, been established. The way these theorists see it, is that the social allocation of knowledge requires a distinction of knowledge between what is of general relevance and what type of knowledge is of specific relevance to the role (1966; s.96). Thus, making access to knowledge of central importance.

### How do roles contribute

When acting in a field which is fragmented and difficult to get an overview of, these roles act as a limitator for uncertainty and thereby they open up for exploitation and innovation - in this respect, as a way in which to overcome the various environmental injunctions which a company - being a part of the industry - is confronted with.

What is interesting in this respect is that it seems as if there is no need for changing roles prior to changing the environmental understanding among the member companies. Instead, the existing roles act as one of the stabilised points by representing certain behaviour, and demanding certain predefined actions on the part of the companies - actions which they are familiar with and which they easily accommodate themselves to. By using the understanding of roles and the relationship between an organization within trade and industry and the members hereof, we have now illustrated the elements structuring the field within which the companies are acting. Structures, we argue, make it easier to create or change an understanding.

Though, during the process of developing the requisite competences as a “service” partner of the member companies within the field of environmental management, there has been a slight change in

the role played by the Confederation - and it is still changing. The Confederation has a long tradition for being kind of a watchdog in terms of “protecting” industry against all kinds of regulations which may limit the “market forces” of companies. The Confederation has always undertaken the role of opposing environmental regulation and in consequence hereof the Confederation has got the reputation of “opposing the environment”. This role has slowly been changed. At present, the Confederation of Danish Industries is, thus, renowned as the watchdog of industry but also as a constructive collaborator for companies wanting to work in a structured manner on their environment relations. However, paradoxes are still linked to this dual role.

### **Symbolic interactionism**

After this short presentation of the structures which underlie the relationship between the Confederation and industry, we will now elaborate on the actual interaction of the two parties and look into the whole process of creating new meanings and understandings within environmental issues.

Following Blumer’s line of reasoning, Symbolic Interaction and the creation of meaning rest on three important premises:

- a. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning the things have for them.
- b. The meaning of such things derives from the social interaction you have with your fellows
- c. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process

In the face of new situations or new experiences, individuals, groups, institutions and societies find it necessary to form new definitions. These new definitions may enter into the repertoire of stable meanings. This seems to be characteristic of the way in which new activities, new relations and new social structures are formed (1969; p.133).

In symbolic interactionism, social organizations enter into action only to the extent to which it shapes situations in which actors are acting and to the extent to which it supplies fixed sets of symbols which actors use when interpreting their situations.

What we will elaborate on below is the importance of the actors’ interpretation and how this affects and determines the actions.

What characterises symbolic interactionism in terms of the understanding of human beings is that they seem to interpret or define each others’ actions instead of merely reacting to each others’ actions (1969; p.79) Furthermore, their responses are not directly linked to the actions of one another but, instead, they are based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Hereby,

interaction is mediated by use of symbols, by interpretation or by ascertaining the meaning of the actions of one another.

To reach this line of reasoning, Blumer builds on the understandings of interaction between human beings made by Mead. What characterises Mead's analysis is that he sees the human being as having a self. The rationale behind this idea is that human beings can be the object of their own actions, which means that they can act towards themselves as they might act towards others. The ability of acting toward oneself is, according to Mead, the central mechanism with which human beings face and deal with their own world. "This mechanism enables him to make indications to himself of things in his surroundings and thus to guide his actions by what he notes" (1969; p.80)

Using Mead's notion, Blumer creates an image of the actor confronting his own world with a mechanism for making indications to himself. The mechanism in itself becomes interesting since it is the one who is involved in interpreting the actions of others. To Blumer, the way to interpret the actions of others is to point out to oneself or relate the action to a given meaning or character which is already familiar to the self. Thereby, the actor may to some extent deduce the actions of others into something known or as Blumer puts it, the actor constructs or builds up his action based on his own indications instead of the action being a mere release (1969; p.81). Within these indications, an actor has to take into account the possibility of demands, expectations, prohibitions and threats which may arise in the situation he is acting in.

Considering the aspects above, the self indication becomes a moving communicative process in which the actors note things, assess them, give them meaning and decide to act on the basis of this meaning. Thereby, the actions of an actor are built up step by step through a process of such self indication that the individual pieces together and guides his action by taking account of different aspects and interpreting their significance for his prospective action (1969; p.81).

What underlies this understanding of human interaction is that an actor positions himself against the actions of others, is able to act back on them, rejecting, accepting or transforming them according to his own definition or interpretation of them (1969,p.82). Thereby, the behaviour of the actor cannot be seen as a result of things like social pressures, stimuli, motives, attitudes and ideas, instead it arises from how he interprets and handles these things in the action which he is constructing.

Having broadened the framework by presenting the assumptions which constitute the single actor, the aim, in the next part of this paper, is to present the idea of Blumer in terms of the interaction between actors or unit of actors as a way to see through the understandings of actors in the process of conceptualising and giving meaning to ideas or phenomena.

## **A presentation of the objectives of developing environmental training courses and the strategies used in the creation processes hereof.**

In order to describe the underlying intentions of this entire initiative and to present what the Confederation considers its most important role in relation to the member companies, we will try to present some of the objectives of offering these training courses and the considerations behind the steps which have been taken.

Prior to starting up an entire process of developing environmental training courses, brain storming was made and ideas were identified and discussed. First, the overall policy of the Confederation had to be taken into account. Given the history of this Confederation and the role it represents towards the member companies, the Confederation cannot be considered proactive to environmental improvement, at least not in the line of reasoning put forward by the Danish government. On the other hand, the Confederation sees self-regulation as a positive measure since companies through their development of environmental management systems are signalling responsibility which results in greater respect from politicians, local authorities and customers.

Therefore, the organization does not require that the members start up a process transforming the production into more environmentally concerned methods or force the members to participate in the courses. Instead, they offer to help those companies which have already shown interest in improving their methods, giving them tools and understandings in order for the members to be capable of leading their own processes into “greener production methods” and, more important, to integrate environmental management into the company’s existing strategies.

Second, the Confederation had to identify the potential participants and try to figure out how the environmental issues and all the legal, political and social requirements linked to these issues were recognised and met by the companies. Being in daily contact with a multiple of companies, the Confederation soon realised that the basic understanding of companies’ behaviour is that companies do not react from hostility, but rather from insecurity and inability to penetrate the amount and variety of all the environmental issues they are confronted with. Therefore, the training courses had to be focused on learning processes and to pass on experience from companies which had already tried to decrease their environmental impact instead of preaching to convert the companies.

Moreover, a survey of the existing courses on environmental management showed that a majority of these courses focused on the standards for management systems and audits of systems – rather than how companies could formulate a relevant policy or strategy for the individual company. Since the Confederation found it important that companies carefully considered the intention of their environmental management, the development of training courses started with courses on the formulation of environmental strategies (policies).

Another important objective was to make it easier for companies to adjust to a more environmentally concerned behaviour by developing individual solutions to problems and to meet their specific needs related hereto. The idea was to create some sort of identification of the environmental problems of a company by combining the external environment with the work which the company had been carrying out for years in relation to the working environment. The aim of such a policy was to solve the problems within a company by environmental regulation and general improvement of the environment while keeping or even improving the legitimacy, success and survival of the said company.

As the participants could not be expected to be experts at solving environmental issues, the messages had to be simple, built up around a lot of empirical examples and presented in a very pragmatically way. The Confederation of Danish Industries found that it would be their responsibility to provide a presentation of learning and strategic considerations which were considered important in an environmental context. Another important aspect for the organization was to let the point of reference be the existing attitudes and traditions from the companies themselves.

Finally, one of the aspects which were crucial for the Confederation of Danish Industries was to sell their environmental training courses as a means for their members of improving or recognising their policies on competitiveness, financial goals like value increment and environmental improvement. The argument for doing so was to disseminate the environmental consideration to the entire company, thus, creating cohesion among the different disciplines and levels of the company.

By looking at and treating the environment as a part of the management discipline, according to which, employees at all levels are involved in the environmental work and are given responsibility for these efforts, it becomes possible to involve the entire company in environmental concerns and improvements. Moreover, this may result in an improvement of the relationship between the company and its employees because of the learning processes which they have to examine together.

To a large extent, the training courses are based on a fundamental empirical understanding on how processes of change in manufacturing companies operate in general. Moreover, to a large extent, experience achieved by companies has been applied for the development of these courses. These experiences have been achieved by managers and employees in Danish industrial corporations as well as a large group of consultants who have worked with different types of processes for change in manufacturing companies. A typical trait for these courses is that, to a larger extent, they are the result of experiences achieved by a lot of different persons, than they are the result of the conviction of one particular person or a specific theory. Therefore, there will probably be more elements from classic theorists incorporated in the training courses than elements from theorists

within environmental management. The theoretic span will, thus, be quite wide - ranging from Mr Michael E. Porter to Mr Carl von Clausewitz.

### **How to create environmental training courses within the given structures**

Because of the history of focusing on the working conditions as part of an important governmental issue by the Danish government, Denmark has a long tradition for improving the working environment. In the line of understanding of the Confederation, it is found very important to combine the environmental understanding with the understanding of the working environment as it finds that these two aspects are interconnected. Likewise, Danish companies have a long-standing tradition of improving the working environment and, therefore, the combination of the two environments could help them more easily to understand the ways in which to improve the conditions for the external natural environment.

It was important that the training courses did not regard environmental matters in isolation from other – often more important – items on the companies' agenda. Another aspect which was found important to take into account was the necessity of speaking the same language - the economic line of reasoning and its vocabulary is the common language and competitiveness is used as the primary argument for green adaptation.

In order to ensure that the courses were founded on a total understanding of companies' conditions, the development often implied interdisciplinary work utilising expertise on matters as environmental health and safety, productivity, communication, strategic planning etc. In most cases, this expertise was found within different departments of the Confederation, but in some cases it was necessary to engage external consultants.

Above all, the training courses have been developed in close co-operation with representatives of the users: i.e. the companies. In some cases, the request for a specific course has come directly from one or more companies – in, yet, other cases, the idea has gradually developed in dialogue between the Confederation and groups of companies with related problems.

All new courses have been tested and assessed in collaboration with the companies. In most cases, the assessment has led to a redesign of the training courses so that the development process could be described as a kind of iteration.

As this section illustrates, the starting point for these new training courses has not been brand new but, instead, it has been the companies which have been at the core of things. Most often when the topic is concerned with ways in which to improve the environment, the experts take a very system-

based approach in relation to which techniques and standards are highlighted. New end-of-pipe solutions, new production tools for implementing, as e.g. cleaner technology and management or control systems, which may have the result that environmental certification is prioritised as opposed to looking at existing possibilities within the individual company for innovation of mind as well as method to generate more environmentally concerned behaviour and production. By scrutinising the company in order to obtain environmental improvement, the Confederation will not only use existing relations based on trust and loyalty in order to bring about changes, it will also unfold quite a new way for companies to understand the environmental issues.

Most of the training courses are addressed to companies which are at the start-up phase in the process of environmental management. A total of three courses aim at helping the management of a company to decide *whether* environmental management is relevant for them, *which issues* they should focus on and *what strategy* they should choose.

A fourth course aims at assisting the companies in environmental *communication* which is mostly relevant when an environmental management system has been established.

Finally, the Confederation has developed a computer based interactive program to assist in the *implementation* of environmental management systems.

### **Discussion: How to make use of the value of the existing relations**

As the courses have only been held during the last 2½ years, it is too early, at this stage, to detect any direct effect on the environmental behaviour of the companies. The only measurement of the quality and actuality of the courses rest with the response made by the participant in terms of assessments of the courses. The assessments from the courses seem to indicate that, in general, the companies are quite satisfied with the courses. First and foremost, because they feel that they are being helped through part of the considerations which need to be made - considerations which they did not even know they had to go through before they attended the course. These considerations cover e.g. what impact environmental conditions may actually have on the company today and in future, what competitive advantages the company may achieve by introducing environmental management and how work specifically can be planned and structured during daily routines. Thus, they feel more aware of things in relation to the job they shall do “back home” in the company and to a large extent they feel well prepared and ready to start working. Likewise, the assessments indicate that the courses profoundly weaken a substantial part of the prejudice governing environmental management on the part of the participants to the courses - e.g. that environmental awareness and competitiveness are two inconsistent features and that environmental management is rather cumbersome and expensive and exclusively is a question of introducing certified

schemes/systems. In all, the participants to the courses will go back to the company realising what the environment means specifically to them and their company and realising what they need to do back in the company and how to do it.

As mentioned above, most of Danish industry and the members of the Confederation of Danish Industries are confronted with legal standards and requirements which they have to conform to and fulfil. Moreover, as citizens in Denmark they take part in various discussions on environmental concerns and improvements or, at least, they know what is going on in this respect. They are, thus, confronted not only with requirements or pressure on how to perform the proper codes of conduct but also with a substantial number of solutions and ideas on how to improve the behaviour, products and production processes. All of this is included in a very fragmented field where many companies, as mentioned in this paper, consider themselves as quite vulnerable simply because they are not able to see through the environmental discussion and the rationale behind environmental regulation. Therefore, they feel insecure about this quite new field of activity which they have to live up to.

Using the theoretical argument which has been put forward by Blumer (p. 2), an actor and, thereby, a company is only acting on or responding to new ideas if its actions shape the situation in which it is acting and to the extent the action supplies fixed sets of symbols which the company can use in interpreting its situation. Hereby, a company is seen to participate in the construction process of an understanding of a given new phenomenon out of its own need for interpreting this phenomenon. In terms of the environmental debate, you might argue that the debate in itself shapes the situation for most Danish companies and, thereby, the companies will have an incentive to act within this field - an action which many of them have taken in their attempt to combine the environmental efforts with more financially rational initiatives.

A very important aspect within the development of the courses is that the Confederation's approach to the understanding of a company is that a company has to relate to a lot of different areas and factors within fields which might have an influence on their operations and behaviour. Therefore, the environmental aspect must not and cannot be seen as an isolated issue. Using this line of reasoning, the Confederation shares, to some extent, the same understanding of the limitations of incorporating an entirely new environmental language into the company and building up strategies which mostly focus on environmental improvement - it is simply found to be too difficult. As a means of combining the companies' need to become more environmentally concerned and still keep it a sound company in financial terms, the Confederation finds it necessary to translate the environmental concepts into the already existing language of the companies.

By taking this approach, the Confederation follows the same lines of reasoning which the companies tend to follow and, thereby, they participate in the set-up of symbols from which the companies are interpreting. Doing so might implicate that the companies themselves start out at an

exceedingly higher level of environmental understanding than would be the case if the companies were to start finding their own way through the wilderness of different understandings and meanings within the environmental discussions. This would be the case if the companies were to follow the behavioural understanding of Blumer, according to which, a company's behaviour is seldom based on things like social pressures, stimuli, motives, attitudes and ideas but, instead, it arises from its interpretation of a situation in which it has to act.

Looking at the environmental area this does not quite seem to be the case. Even though environmental initiatives seem to confront a company with legal rules or strong social pressures, against which the company needs to react, this is necessarily to be interpreted as a result of the rules and pressures in itself. Instead, the companies might interpret their situations and evaluate the pressures in terms of the possible effects which the companies may gain from acting in a positive way against these pressures. In terms hereof, the companies seem to pick out the issues which seem important to them from a larger strategy than just following the rules.

In terms of the training courses offered by the Confederation of Danish Industries, the situation seems more simple for the participating companies. While they may have and most often meet external pressures from the environmental field, the structure of the courses provides a certain degree of stability which again results in security. The companies know and feel certain that the Confederation is trying to help them and therefore it becomes easier for them to concentrate on the issues and problems instead of being aware of different agendas which they would have to relate to. The courses are, thus, based on the already existing legitimacy of the Confederation.

The reason hereof is that both parties, the Confederation and the companies, already have their fixed roles within the relationship - roles which are institutionalised in the sense that all the participants know what to be expected from the others and they react to their expectations in relation hereto. By offering environmental training courses, though, based on existing language and strategies within the company, there is a new set of contents which has to be communicated and built up. This will take place within the given roles of the two parties within which, the structures of the roles and the relationship, in general, will be unchanged. Having a good relationship and feeling comfortable with these roles makes it much easier to motivate the companies to "go green" and rethink the environmental aspect by communicating new understandings and meanings of words used in another context or interpreted earlier as negative buzz words to build up new conceptual frameworks.

Aiming to create a common understanding of environmental issues and, thereby, trying to make environmental improvement, the meaning of words used within the environmental field is discussed while at the same time codes of conduct are created, changed or extended as a result of the discussions. The way in which these courses are structured and communicated seems to indicate

what consequences this entire initiative, in terms of environmental training courses, will have on the relation and the ongoing dialogue. Therefore, the courses are held and follow the directions of the relationships and the existing roles, and in relation hereto, the Confederation provides the participating companies with new knowledge and different approaches to environmental issues. On the other hand, the participants contribute with their practical experiences and question the presented ideas in a way which opens up for a dialogue and both parties will learn from this and widen the scope of their understandings.

### **Conclusion**

The environment is applied on existing relations and mutual understandings - companies approach the Confederation because they find that the Confederation will be of help and do their best in order to help the companies. The Confederation has achieved a large degree of legitimacy in the mind of the companies. Therefore, they trust them when it comes to uncertain and risky environmental issues.

As this paper indicates, the Confederation seems to fill in the gap between the companies and the Government in terms of their different ways of understanding the environmental issues. While the Ministry of the Environment and Energy concentrates a lot on sustainable developments and wants everyone to think in these terms, we would argue that the Confederation of Danish Industries, by taking their origin in the existing understanding and language of the companies, is closer to actually making a difference in terms of becoming more sustainable.

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