

CHAPTER 16 Communication Barriers in Management Consulting - Niklas Luhmann

I

Whenever management consulting is under discussion, the layman (a category that includes practically all scholars) first of all thinks of applied science. It is debatable whether microeconomics or financial science, social psychology or perhaps even sociology ought to be the paradigmatic science on which consulting can be based. The answer may well depend on the problems posed by each individual case; for complex problems that touch on several disciplines at once, an “interdisciplinary” orientation is considered advisable. In all of the disciplines, the basis of consulting consists of a specific competence derived from empirically established generalizations.

Known statistical probabilities are applied to each individual case, even though they are meaningless in individual cases. One makes such mistakes discreetly, only to compensate for them by means of detailed analyses of the object in question. In certain rare cases, these analyses are subsequently evaluated for the purpose of controlling and correcting the scholarly hypothesis.

In this model of the relationship between consultants and companies, there are no deep-seated problems of communication. For whatever reasons, the consultants may be inclined to present their knowledge as certain and their proposals as based on careful work. In so doing, they surpass reality in a way that cannot itself be included in their communication. As is generally the case with application-oriented research, management consultants too are the perpetrators, as well as the victims of a certain “rhetoric of application”.¹ At precisely the same time that they are active for economic or other reasons, they fall victim to the difficulty of addressing the specific communicative relationship in which they participate within this relationship (it is well known that the Palo Alto School has identified this problem as the cause of paradoxical communication). However, once one has begun to trust the concept of applied science, this difficulty does not constitute a fundamental problem; at most, it causes disturbances and derailments of

¹ See Mulkay (1987).

communication. If one trusts in the concept of applied science, one also trusts in the communication that comes with it. For what would science be, if it could not be communicated?

For a long time, the resulting practical difficulties were written off as being due to "complexity". Ever since the publication of a famous essay by Warren Weaver – an essay from which, in the meantime, an entire literature has sprung² – it has been known that for large and complex systems, among which business corporations must doubtless be counted, there are no adequate scientific methods and findings; for science has methods only for systems that are small enough to be described with a few variables, or for large, but homogenous, quantities that can be processed statistically. However, in view of the tight corner in which research found itself, the only advice to be given was to continue trying anyway and to gradually expand scientific competence concerning this problem of complexity. In this process, one guideline for the reduction of complexity could be to focus on the particularities of the individual cases and avoid generalizations. To this purpose, management-consulting companies cultivate the "experiences" that inevitably accumulate with a large number of individual projects. Now, the problem is how these experiences can be recorded, publicized, and discussed within the consulting group – in seclusion, as it were, and apart from day-to-day business. However, this merely returns us to the problem of induction and the problem of illegitimate generalizations; in addition, the stories and the very convincing "practical examples" acquire a questionable predominance.

Some communication problems can be settled, if one assumes that the consultants possess scientific competence and have to include communication concerning their competence in their communication with the company. Certain expressive means can accomplish this – for instance, a white laboratory coat and a knowing countenance. However, these means will be sufficient only if the advice given can be implemented strictly on technical grounds. "Strictly technical" means, in this context, "without knowledge of the theoretical connections". In the field of application under discussion, such a reduction to the strictly technical is not useful, precisely because of its complexity. In such cases, theories must be "understood" in the process of their application. Application tests whether the implied marginal conditions actually hold true and continue to hold true, or whether they have to be modified and even abandoned when new information affects their presuppositions. If the consultants want to avoid being incorporated permanently into the action network of the company, thereby being recruited and "employed",³ they must transfer a sufficient amount of information so that

² See Weaver (1948). Examples of more recent work and conference volumes are: Lanzara and Pardi (1980); Université des Nations-Unies (1986); Bocchi and Ceruti (1985).

³ The currently practiced compromise is temporally limited employment for consultants.

the company can act not just according to their suggestions but according to the theory that lies behind them. However, the more embedded a theory is in further theoretical connections – that is to say, the more its scientific quality increases – the less such a procedure can be implemented.⁴ Like the economic system itself, the consultants who attempt to establish a scientific basis for their proposals are forced to simplify and popularize their external communication – that is, to change the language. Furthermore, it is noticeable that in the field of research dedicated to the theory of the firm, fashions change constantly. The meaningless names of these fashions (such as “organizational development” or “strategic planning,” etc.), at the same time, do suggest a completely new orientation of research and consulting and thus can serve as self-congratulatory labels in the scientific, as well as the economic, competition between consulting firms.⁵

Undoubtedly, it is not a matter of giving up the model of applied science altogether because of these weaknesses, and of adopting a counter-model while keeping the flag flying. There is no counter-model available for such a switch. We only want to pose the question of whether it is indeed correct that everything a consultant knows or finds out can actually be communicated in the same way as science can be communicated. In addition, we would like to examine whether there might be conceptions that would encourage precisely the cultivation of such non-communicable knowledge.

1.1 II

The model of applied science suggests that we should aim for the production of the highest possible degree of agreement; it also suggests that communication is the means to achieve this goal. It acknowledges that communication may be difficult, but insists that it can be improved from the point of

⁴ Nowadays, however, the theory of science assumes that the limitation to “adjacent” theoretical connections is precisely typical and that it would be impossible in science to bring about a change in theory without this limitation. Cf. Polanyi (1962), p. 59, and (1983), pp. 72 f. Also, Philippe van Parijs (1981), p. 50. This merely means that science itself has a problem with its own complexity.

⁵ Even systems theory is often perceived in this sense, as a “scientific program” or a program for applying science. Of course, nothing is to be said against that. However, to conclude, therefore, that systems are nothing really given but merely analytical constructions or models, would be a serious, undue reduction. This is the *modus operandi* of a theory of science whose method derives from a naïve conception of the theory of science (see e.g. Lenk and Ropohl 1978, esp. Ropohl’s introductory contribution; concerning the application of the theory to microeconomic research; see Lenk, Maring, and Fulda 1985). The naïveté that no theory of science should allow itself consists of a lack of reflection: namely, the reflection that the system concept is also applicable to the person who uses it for his analyses, and therefore cannot very well be understood as a construct without empirical reference. In other words, one ought not to confuse the relativity of all statements in regard to a particular observer (system references), and the specific case of the system of science functioning itself as the observer.

view of its own problems. By contrast, a systems-theoretical analysis may urge an entirely different thought upon us: namely, that consulting firms are interested in the preservation of their own practices.⁶ They value system boundaries, which they reproduce in their own operations. They must prevent their best employees from being recruited by their client firms. They must be able to end consulting relationships that have lasted too long, even when their clients do not require it or when it explicitly goes against a client's wishes. Often, they will view the multiplicity of tasks, the similarities and differences of problem areas in client firms, and the methodology of their own *modus operandi* as learning conditions that allow them, in the long term, to improve not only their market position but also the interest and motivation of their employees.

While the demand for management consulting is often created through internal conflicts in a firm (this is equally true for successful and less successful, or even almost ruined, firms), the consultants must set a high value on being able to stay neutral in the face of internal conflicts. If they agree with one side, it has to appear like a "coincidence", and should, whenever possible, be justified by reasons that are unique to the internal dispute. Often, conflicts within a firm will make it advisable to search for a third alternative that will not be perceived as taking the already established point of view of one of the quarreling factions. Thus, consulting often has the function of providing open or latent conflict therapy. How its effect expresses itself on the firm's balance-sheets may then become a side issue.

Seen from a systems-theoretical perspective, a consulting group thus preserves and reproduces itself in an *environment* that emerged as a consequence of the group's own differentiation and is given *for it*. Its preservation and reproduction as a system-in-an-environment cannot be reduced to the sum of all system-to-system relations, not even if the sum of these individual relations could be expressed by means of a monetary amount per time unit, the profit or loss of the consulting firm. In distinguishing system-environment relations from system-system relations, we acquire a tool for posing the problem, one which could gain importance in the treatment of communication problems; for no system can communicate *with* its *environment*. Communication always requires an addressee: that is, another system, one which must be understood in turn as a system-in-its-own-environment if one intends to communicate with it.⁷

⁶ There is no need to understand this principle in the narrow sense: that is, merely as the preservation of the economic profitability of the firm. It also applies when a consulting firm, perceiving more opportunities than it can exploit during a boom period of its particular market, tries to confirm its "identity" even when turning down lucrative inquiries.

⁷ In this sense, our case study concerning consulting firms is merely an example for a much more general problem; for no system can communicate *with* its environment, although every system must reproduce itself *in* its environment – or it ceases to exist.

This means that the unity of a system participating in communication and the unity of its environment can neither be included in the communication nor expressed by means of communication. The unity of the difference between system and environment is merely being reproduced in communication. If we proceed from the distinction between system and environment and thus from systems theory, we gain a certain insight into the problem of incommunicability (we are not obliged to proceed in this manner; to do so is and remains the decision of the observer). That a group of consultants, as in our case, cannot communicate itself completely (but is nonetheless capable of communicating internally about this impossibility of complete communication) is due to the fact that communication is the operation by means of which the group carries on its own autopoiesis, and thus the means by which it regenerates its own unity, as well as the difference between this unity and its environment.

1.2 III

In the process of applying this general insight to the case of management consulting, I intend to explicate this insight in several steps. There will be some obvious parallels with other forms of therapy (psychotherapy, family therapy, systems therapy, etc.); such parallels have become elements of the self-understanding of many management consultants because of regular contacts with these forms of therapy that are initiated by communications under the influence of science. However, in the following we will not pursue these possible expansions of our inquiry. Instead, we will limit ourselves to management consulting.

Thanks to our earlier treatment of complexity, we can now recognize the positive function of a difficulty that we hitherto looked at from a rather negative angle. The complexity of the theory nexus at the base of the consultants' judgments and proposals is not just an obstacle on the way to success. It also ensures the continued non-identity of the systems. By accepting demanding theoretical foundations, the consulting group gains the possibility of holding its own language aloof and thus avoids being drawn into the jockeying for position and the factions that occur within the client system. In this sense, incomprehensibility can serve as protection. "Assumptions guided by theory enable consultants to remain in the position of observers and to avoid assimilation to the role of participants."⁸ Whether such theories, according to scientific criteria, are true or untrue (or, in most cases, merely promising and connective), and whether or not they prove effective, is only of secondary importance in regard to this problem. They mark and

⁸ This point is made by Exner et al. (1987), pp. 267 f. with reference to Kind (1986).

protect the unity of the system that employs them. The functions of marking and protecting the unity of the system may remain latent for both sides of the consulting relationship; in fact, they must remain latent for the client side. If one tried to communicate about these functions within the relationship, communication would become “paradoxical” in the precise sense of the term, as it has been defined by systems therapy.

Once we have accepted this, additional prospects open up. Thus, the consultants may well search for and employ theoretical principles that cannot be accessible to the companies that hired them, at least as far as the structure of these principles is concerned. The consultants might be particularly interested in “latent” structures and functions. As soon as they begin to observe how a company observes or, rather, how observation is enacted in a company – in other words, how distinctions are drawn and indications made – they can assign a meaning to the problems of this system that is not at the disposal of the system itself. And even if it were possible to transmit this meaning, the transmission would affect the meaning semantically and turn it into a different meaning; and even this meaning would be observed differently depending on the system from which it is observed. Thus, the insight into latent problems, functions, and structures does not necessarily exclude the possibility of trying to include this latency in the communication; of making the “unconscious” conscious, very much as in psychoanalysis; and of thereby achieving certain effects. However, the meaning of the schema “latent/manifest” reaches much farther than this enactment of consulting strategies. Consultants who work with this schema of observation have to make the choice of whether they want to expose the latent functions and structures or whether such a course of action is not advisable. In precisely those cases in which they notice that latency itself has a function – for instance, the repression of unsolvable problems – they will go about exposing such latency hesitantly as long as they can neither predict nor control its effects. At the very least, they will suspect that exposing the “fundamental lie” of the observed system might lead to catastrophe. “Catastrophe”, in this context, is to be understood as another principle of stability and thus, in all likelihood, as another “fundamental lie”.

Latency is not just any sort of absence. It is not a normal side effect of structural or operational selections, arising from the fact that something in particular is marked instead of something else. Latency is a *specific* mode of absence; it is a “sustaining” – one might almost say a “subjective” – mode of absence on the basis of which structural selections really become possible. It should also be said that it is not a matter of the “unmarked space” – the colorlessness of light, the noiselessness of air, the whiteness of paper – in other words, the medium that makes the tighter couplings of specific forms really possible. Rather, it is a matter of a specific type of prohibition that itself remains inaccessible. Different theoretical interpretations of this fact

are possible – for instance, in Sigmund Freud’s or perhaps in René Girard’s sense. If we look at the proposed theory on which I base my argument (a theory which itself is sustained by such a prohibition), we see that every distinction that is used operationally can itself be distinguished; however, at some point we can no longer ask: distinguished from what? And why?⁹

Now that the perfume of psychoanalysis has lost much of its flashiness and fascination, we can put the problem under consideration into a more general form with the help of the cybernetics of second-order observation. The central issue is that the observer of an observer has and can use (or not use) the possibility to see that which the observed observer *cannot* see. All observation (including second-order observation) deals naïvely with its own distinctions. It must presuppose the reference of such distinctions: that is, it must assume that the distinction (let’s say: cause/effect; guilty/not guilty; profitable/not profitable; protecting the environment/destroying the environment) designates something real. In other words, it uses its own distinction as a blind spot that organizes the possibility of observation. This blind spot can be replaced only if it is exchanged for another blind spot. Thus, every system’s own basic distinction becomes a *natural* necessity, while a distinction used by others becomes merely an *artificial, contingent, chosen, and replaceable* schema. But it is precisely this differentiation that can be seen and communicated only if one has confidence in the distinction “natural/artificial” and uses it naïvely, namely by presupposing it.¹⁰

This turn towards second-order cybernetics can be clarified if we compare such cybernetics to classical theories of reflection. If we formulate the basic problem as the reflection of reflection, we end up with an infinite regression and, even worse, with a hierarchical architecture that signals our own superiority. The reflection of reflection takes place at a “higher” level and promises better insights. However, we also know that an infinite regression cannot amount to an infinite improvement. Instead, all too soon the point of minimal utility will be reached, to speak in economic terms. Second-order cybernetics dispenses with this comprehensive architecture and thus avoids any gesture of superiority.¹¹ The relations of observation remain strictly horizontal relations, no matter how intricate, demanding, and recursively ordered they may be. Precisely in regard to the salient point – that is, the

⁹ This might well be the reason why George Spencer Brown (1971) bases his logical calculus on the injunction: “Draw a distinction!”.

¹⁰ When we speak of “presupposing” something, we explicitly refer to that which once upon a time was called “the subject”; however, we no longer assign a substantive meaning to this concept, but an operational meaning, a meaning related to events.

¹¹ On the critique of this pretension of theories of reflection and on the demand for a strictly horizontal arrangement in the post-modern style, see also: Latour (1988a), pp. 168 f. However, Latour then (pp. 175 f.) turns explicitly against the (incorrectly presented) language of observers observing observers.

operationally necessary naïveté concerning one's own basic distinctions – there is no hierarchy. At most, there are the following questions: What is productive for which purpose? And how much complexity can be built up on the basis of the connectivity of one's own distinctions and indications?

By now, plenty of theoretical concepts have emerged that overtly or covertly take advantage of the possibility of observing that which observed observers *cannot* observe. Management consultants, for instance, can recognize (or believe to recognize) that a high level of personal attribution of successes and failures may, at the same time, serve as an indicator of concealed structural problems that nobody can touch without burning their fingers. In such cases, one speaks of “designated patients”. “*Symptoms* are readily attached to persons (and groups); among other things, such localization serves to protect the structure.”¹² This view corresponds to the general insight of systems therapy, which often is called “systems” therapy precisely because of this very insight: namely, that problems, for the most part, cannot be cured at the place where the client localizes them. One variant of this theory can be found in the theory of mimetic conflict and the violence it provokes, violence that does not affect the causes of the conflict but instead affects certain chosen victims.¹³ According to this theory, the problem is produced by rivalry: that is, the unbearable equality of needs and desires that leads to the establishment of violent differentiations (conversely, the so-called Palo Alto School of systems therapy took the collapse of differences as the starting point of its method of problem identification). In turn, such diagnostic theories are distinctions – distinctions, however, that cannot be transferred to the client whose problems they help to shift. They merely serve as the consultant's instrument for the construction of functional equivalences, or as the background assumption for the construction of “injunctions”, by means of which the system is to be moved to another, less painful, view of the problem.

We are not questioning the scientific value of using such concepts in the service of intervention. Also, we leave open the question of the extent to which they have been used successfully in practice to date. We are only interested in the assumption on which they are based. This assumption implies that a system could be overstrained through insight into (or communication about) its own structures. The old concept of “latent” structures applied merely to regularities that could be recognized only by means of specific data collection and statistical analysis.¹⁴ This poses merely methodical problems and perhaps problems of complexity, but not communication problems. The other version of latency, derived from psychoanalysis, is more

¹² Exner et al. (1987), p. 268.

¹³ See Girard (1982).

¹⁴ Empirical social scientists prefer to use the term “latent structure analysis”. Following Paul Lazarsfeld they thereby refer to a specific measuring method with dichotomized indicators.

likely to admit the question of whether enlightenment is a responsible option or might have destructive consequences, for which reason it might be averted. Second-order cybernetics provides yet another variant of this concept. In this theory, specific latencies – namely, the non-distinction of the distinction that is cognitively operational in each case – appear as the absolute condition of the possibility of cognition. Thus, the difference of distinctions itself becomes problematic; distinguishing distinctions is of no help, since such a procedure merely reiterates the same problem.

1.3 IV

If one splits up that which is given as “unmarked space” (in Spencer Brown’s sense), as “matter” (as it is used in Aristotelian philosophy), or as “world” (in Husserl’s sense) by means of the distinction between system and environment, a strange effect ensues. The two sides of this distinction are given only in the distinction itself. That is to say, they are given only for those who use this distinction: namely, the observers. The unity of the system can be found neither in the system nor in the system’s environment. The unity of the environment can be found neither in the environment nor in the system. The unity of one side as well as the other is, in the strict sense, nothing but the unity of the distinction that separates and thereby unites these two sides. Only the observers can see the unity of the system, since only they can distinguish the system from the environment. An observer need not be an external observer; in fact, in the case of the system “society”, there is no sufficiently complex external observer. The system itself can be the observer. But in that case, the observer must conduct the observation of the system within the system itself and use some of the system’s operations in the process. This amounts to the drawing of a boundary between operations of reflection, which use the distinction between system and environment, and other operations that produce and reproduce the difference of system and environment (according to the way the observer can see it at that time).

This state of affairs, including the problem of reflection it contains, makes evident the advantages that can be gained by separating external and internal observation, other- and self-observation. Self-observation is always bound to include reference to itself and thus, in the course of its execution, to change that which it intends to observe. External observation can objectify the system it observes. However, this objectivization also happens only by means of its own operations of observation (that is to say, by means of operations of observation that depend on the underlying structure and distinction).

Thus, possibilities of observation that could not be realized merely by self-observation within a system can be gained from the difference between internal and external observation. This difference presupposes system

difference: that is, in our case, the separation of firms that provide management consulting from those that receive it. It can be observed from both sides by means of the proper distinction; this is true even for a third observer who might be interested in a theory of management consulting (as are we right now). The choice of distinction that must be made operationally in any given system is always based on an irreducible arbitrariness. However, this only means that one has to rely on observing who operates with what kind of distinction.

This somewhat complicated interlude was necessary in order to make clear that the differentiation between external and internal observation gives rise to communication barriers that cannot subsequently be dissolved. This is especially true when both sides internalize the distinctions and then are in a position to observe the difference between the two sides, the two systems, the two perspectives, etc. Since every observation *qua* operation needs to be based in the system, the separation can never be “sublated.”¹⁵ The advantages of this separation can be exploited only if one accepts the separation. Even if the systems communicate intensely, this does not change anything, since the difference is and remains presupposed in the communication. A new system arises out of communication: the contact system of the consulting relationship. Now, this system can also be observed with regard to its own states, its own developments, and its own selections. Communication does complicate the system/environment relations; however, it does not change anything about the fact that everything said is said by an observer,¹⁶ and that every determination must be determined by a system relying on a distinction.¹⁷

1.4 V

It might not be a good idea to ask believers or even theologians whether it makes sense to distinguish between God and man. They will answer with the distinction “believing/unbelieving” – that is, a distinction that permits them to designate their system. Entrepreneurs who are asked why they distinguish between profit and loss will, in all likelihood, refer the questioner to the psychiatric care unit of their company. Committed environmentalists would gasp for air if one contested the usefulness of categorizing their information by means of the distinction “protecting the environment/destroying the environment”. Systems theorists may feel much the same way if they are

¹⁵ In light of this concept of “sublation,” let us only remark that Hegel made such an attempt in his *Logic* and marked it with the concept “Spirit”. *However, ever since then nobody has tried again.*

¹⁶ This is actually a quotation! See Maturana (1975), p. 324.

¹⁷ Evidence for the increased acceptance of this view in organizational science can be found in Probst (1987), esp. pp. 68 ff. and *passim*.

prevented from conducting their analyses by means of the distinction "system/environment". After all, in all these cases, we might say: Let's do it differently; however, this might at the same time mean: From now on, this is no longer a concern of mine.

In everyday communication, things and events, states and changes, are talked about. The designation of that, about which one talks, is possible only by means of distinctions. For the most part, these distinctions remain merely implicit; they are a side effect of the designation of something as "this" (and nothing else). Language is fully adjusted to this mode of communication. Among other things, language is able to designate distinctions (as in the example above); but even then, the context of distinctions within which the distinctions in question are thematized, and from which they are distinguished in turn, remains merely implicit. Let's test this assumption. If one poses the question of the distinction between God and man to theologians, it is not clear from which distinction this particular distinction is distinguished: from the distinction between God and the Devil? Or God and creation? Or God and Christ? Or perhaps even man and animal? Or man and system? – etc. If the question is directed towards the distinction that is fundamental in each case, the burdens of communication increase, but the problem does not disappear. In the final analysis, operational positivity – the autopoiesis of communication – remains preponderant. It does what it does, always by means of particular distinctions.

It can be very useful for the practice of management consulting to return to the question of the distinctions by means of which communication manages to designate something: that is, the means by which communication manages to choose and determine specific topics. The consulting group may also develop theory preferences for certain distinctions with which it works: for instance manifest/latent, structure/function, system/environment, perpetrator/victim (Girard), first-order observer/second-order observer, etc. As soon as one's own distinctions are distinguished from those of the client system (formulating the problem in this way is itself a distinction of distinctions), the presupposition of a common world vanishes. By means of this distinction of distinctions one becomes aware of the fact that criteria, as well as learning processes, are different in each case; whenever they are put into action, they depend on a certain schema and they are used in relation to a specific distinction. Now, here, a choice must be made (once again by means of a distinction): namely, whether one prefers to reconstitute a common world or to insist on the differences and continue working with incongruent perspectives. In the former case, communication becomes difficult and eventually amounts to a *refined illusion*. The latter possibility could be called a *refined incongruence*.¹⁸

¹⁸ It hardly needs to be said again that in this case, as in previous cases, a problem is decomposed by means of a distinction.

This analysis goes far beyond all theories that were invented centuries ago using such concepts as simulation and dissimulation. It barely has anything in common with psychoanalysis, and even less with the therapeutic methods and goals of psychoanalysis. However, it hints at the possibility that the logic of distinctions is linked to the process of differentiation. In order to differentiate themselves, systems use blind spots specific to themselves; that is, they use distinctions with which they identify blindly. This is not likely or even possible in every society. However, modern (or, as some would prefer to say in reference to this issue, postmodern) society is expansive enough to make this form of differentiation possible; in fact, one might even expect such differentiation. Indeed, one counts on communicatively unbridgeable differences, on a pluralism of "values", "ideologies", or "discourses", to use a recent term.

A study of management consulting can show that the problem of differentiation is not at all limited to intellectual and emotional mega-concepts and, furthermore, that it is not merely a problem of society in its entirety, of political goals, social movements, and the organization of excitement and alarm. On the contrary, it also makes everyday distinctions possible in areas where a common world-view and common goals have hitherto been assumed as given or at least as intended.

The more theoretical and conceptually precise such an analysis is, the more likely is its empirical verification. Evidently, management consulting moves from strictly microeconomic goals and a strictly microeconomic analysis (which merely attempt to copy the world of the entrepreneurs and seek to improve their position) to a mode of observation and description that, while not giving up this orientation, attempts to reconstruct unity through difference. In the relationship between consultants and company this leads to communication barriers – to incommunicabilities that arise not only on the tactical (i.e., simulation!) but also on the structural level. To put it differently, the consultants' imaginations become dependent on distinctions that they can, by themselves, neither distinguish nor communicate any longer; instead, they must use them operationally (the alternative, therefore, cannot be yet *another* distinction; it must be the *cessation* of further distinctions). This move does not take place at the cost of communication. It does not lead to a situation that would no longer allow the communication of all that has been communicable hitherto. A more likely conjecture might state that an increase in communication, an intensification of system-to-system relations above a certain threshold, is possible, but only by means of a single difference; that is to say, it is possible as the increase of communication by means of incommunicabilities. In fact, the experience of this phenomenon is nothing new. It had already been noticed in the seventeenth century in matters of love and religious conduct. In both cases, the increase of (socially reflected) communication and the issue of sincerity were central.

1.5 VI

Finally, the critique of the model of applied science is also of importance for the following questions: How are the consultants observed from the viewpoint of the client company? How are they selected? And, one might almost say, what kind of consulting do they receive? If we stick with the classical model, the only question of concern is how well consultants know that which they can know. This question presupposes a reality that is independent of observation. However, this condition is by no means a given, as even the theory of science now admits.¹⁹ The description of reality depends on the observer. This leads to the question: Which observer do we choose if we want to know what is going on (undoubtedly, most often we will choose ourselves, of course)? In the best-case scenario, we might be able to neutralize the differences between observers by using an “injunctive” logic that formulates operational injunctions (that is, an operational calculus) that lead to the same result for everyone, if they are heeded.²⁰ However, as soon as it is no longer merely a matter of formally (logically) processing distinctions (forms), but rather of processing a content-related choice of specific distinctions, the difference between the observers – and that means the difference between the consultants – becomes relevant. They can be distinguished from each other according to which distinction each one of them employs as that distinction which is not put into question. In other words, they are observed in regard to that which cannot be observed by them. They are selected because of their specific blind spots.

Of course, normally, such a degree of circumspection and lucidity can hardly be assumed. Instead, names provide some orientation: personal names, names of companies, names of theories. Reputation is condensed into names. Differences in reputation, as well as the history of already existing contacts, direct the selection. However, if this is indeed the case, then it is not possible for the company in search of management consulting to fully rationalize the choice of consultants and subsequently to fully rationalize how each should be treated. Indeed, for these purposes, communication barriers would once again be indispensable. It would be necessary that the form of the observation (that is, the distinctions by means of which consultants construct that which is reality for them) could be chosen. Observers can neither see themselves nor the distinction they employ, because it guides them invisibly, very much as if it were a particular perspective. This simply means that consultants are chosen and subsequently observed in regard to that which they cannot see. Furthermore, communication about this blind spot is not possible.

¹⁹ See von Foerster (1981). On the application to the relation between knowledge and intervention see also Sgritta (1988).

²⁰ Spencer Brown (1971). On the application to problems of therapy, cf. Simon (1988).

The problem is not, first and foremost, a problem of deliberate suppression. Neither is it primarily due to the impossibility in practical communication of saying everything all at once, or the subsequent problem, which is that the sequence of communication does not allow the pursuit of every hint of a potential meaning. The real problem lies in the difference between the levels of first-order and second-order observation: that is, in the difference between the observation of things, events, objects, and the observation of observers. Strategy and the restriction of communication for practical reasons can be used in order to preserve this difference. But even when communication is not controlled in such a way (such control could in any case happen only in a very limited fashion and only by means of psychic systems), one recognizes on the level of second-order observation that it is impossible to integrate everything that can be seen from this level into the first-order level. If there is a second-order observation at all, goals such as “enlightenment” or “the application of knowledge” have no bearing any longer; the autological component of this second-order level of observation forces this insight upon us. Consequently, “knowing better”, gestures of superiority, leadership pretensions, and the hierarchization of the difference between levels must be avoided.²¹ In the absence of such things, we gain the chance of letting difference *qua* difference become irritating, stimulating, and eventually productive. And this, to be sure, would be true even if the consultant were able to convince the client company to institutionalize such a difference of first- and second-order levels within the company itself – namely, as the difference of levels of communication about communication about communication.

– Translated by Peter Gilgen

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²¹ Laudan’s study (1984) is an attempt to use this same hierarchical interpretation of the differences between levels of communication in order to explain how, in science, highly probable dissension is turned into consensus. But Laudan’s theory rests on a purposive concept of action and would fail if the conceptualization of the difference between levels were detached from this base.

