

‘Open but not blank’: Preliminary fieldwork for exploration of the influence of Transactional Analysis on internal communication in a case organisation

Lucia Würsch, Charles Sturt University, lwursch@csu.edu.au

Jill Fenton Taylor, Charles Sturt University, jfenton-taylor@csu.edu.au

Peter Simmons, Charles Sturt University, psimmons@csu.edu.au

Abstract

Internal communication is very important for organisational success, but often undervalued or neglected by leaders. Education in soft skills for managers and employees can help improve internal communication, foster personal and interpersonal abilities and contribute to a healthy organisational climate and culture. Some authors claim that Transactional Analysis (TA) can contribute to organisational improvement. This article explains how the researcher used ‘sensitising concepts’ to inform and orientate early fieldwork activities in a public administration unit in Switzerland. According to Patton (2016), sensitising concepts can be used to lead primary observations in a particular setting. They also provide a starting point for thinking about data and can act as an initial guide to research. In the context of this case study, the researcher sought to enter the field open to discovery but not conceptually blank. Two questions were asked: What sensitising concepts are identifiable in the internal training program booklet and TA courses for 2017? And in what ways do the identified sensitising concepts align with or differ from important mainstream concepts of internal communication? The researcher concentrated on words and meanings in the organisation’s internal training program documents, and found they suggested different ways of organising and relating. A list of six sensitising concepts – optimism, shared responsibility, DIALOGUE, practitioner repertoire of skills, espoused values, personal and professional growth – informed an open framework for the subsequent preparation of questions, interview guides and ways of working across internal communication and TA. The article shows that this loose framework of sensitising concepts has provided a starting point for an exploration of internal communication and TA that promises to enhance understanding of both.

Keywords: internal communication; sensitising concepts; soft skills; Transactional Analysis (TA)

Introduction

This article presents elements of an approach to enter the field in an organisational case study (Yin, 2014). One way to prepare for fieldwork is to utilise sensitising concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015) as key starting points for early fieldwork orientation. 'Sensitising concepts are windows into a group's world view' (Yin, 2014, p. 360). They help to lay out a grand frame for inquiry that embraces the researcher's own interpretations, the data and the field setting.

The literature review section provides background information necessary to contextualise this exploration of field entry. It explains the importance of internal communication for organisational success, describing 'hard' factors (such as structures and processes) and soft dimensions (such as interpersonal relationships and culture, power relations and employee engagement) that contribute to the quality of internal communication. It then introduces the field of Transactional Analysis (TA), and the subfield of Transactional Analysis in Organisations (TA-O). Focusing on TA-O, Hay's (2000) *Sailship of Success* introduces an approach to explain organisational success explicitly referring to both hard and soft dimensions. According to this model, internal communication and TA use similar concepts but different languages. The review then considers ways of building a sensitising framework to guide field entry for research.

The context for the study is a public administration unit in Switzerland that has applied TA through internal training for almost two decades. This investigation shows how qualitative inquirers can develop an open framework for preliminary research that identifies sensitising concepts, and starts to align the field of TA as used in organisations with that of internal communication.

This article uses the narratives available in the case organisation's 2017 internal training program booklet (Public Administration Unit, 2017) to identify a set of abstract and over-arching sensitising concepts (Patton, 2015) or a list of key terms (Charmaz, 2014). These are then provisionally aligned with concepts from internal communication literature and TA. Such a list provides a starting point for thinking about data.

Literature review

This section reviews literature that explains the context for the over-arching research project, including internal communication and TA-O. It then examines the approaches of two leading, complementary, contemporary qualitative scholars (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015) to entering an organisational field of study, before introducing the case organisation and the chosen method of entry.

Importance of internal communication

Internal communication is a changing area of practice (Ruck & Yaxley, 2013) and an emerging field of study (Welch, 2011), which has been conceptualised in various ways (e.g. Deetz, 2005; Ruck & Trainor, 2012; Shockley-Zalabak, 2014; Smith & Mounter, 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Shockley-Zalabak (2014), for instance, describes three main emphases or theoretical frames within specific aspects of internal communication: the

functional tradition (focusing on formal communication channels, structures and processes); the meaning-centred approach (exploring organisational sense-making and culture) and emerging perspectives (highlighting power distribution). As the most important element of moving the organisation forward, internal communication competencies and effective organisational communication play a crucial role for overall organisational functioning and success in today's communication environment (Rajhans, 2012). Effective organisational communication practices have a motivating effect on employees, increasing their performance and loyalty towards the organisation, assisting them to adapt faster to business challenges and helping them to quickly understand the organisational culture (Watson, 2004). As such, internal communication is strongly related to employee engagement (Ruck & Welch, 2012) and employee satisfaction (Downs & Adrian, 2004; Singh, 2013).

Despite its significance, internal communication is often neglected by organisations. Managers can be poor communicators: Murray (2013, p. 179) notes that communication is a 'top-three skill of leadership, yet sadly neglected'. This has a negative effect on employee engagement (Ruck & Trainor, 2012) and raises questions about how internal communication can be improved. The literature provides diverse approaches to influencing the quality of organisational communication. Some authors, such as Smith and Mounter (2008), emphasise refinement of communication structures and processes for achieving effective internal communication. Others suggest improving organisational climate and culture (e.g. Shockley-Zalabak, 2014) or using soft skills (Robles, 2012; Singh, 2013).

Hard and soft dimensions for improving internal communication

Effective internal communication needs hard dimensions such as communication structures, guidelines and strategies, as well as soft skills, including the ability to listen, diplomacy and resilience (Smith & Mounter, 2008). Definitions of soft skills vary; Robles (2012, p. 457), for example, defines them as 'character traits, attitudes, and behaviours – rather than technical aptitude or knowledge [that build] the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator'.

Authors such as Bailey (2014) argue that soft skills must be accorded even more significance than hard skills. Nowadays, soft skills are generally substantial assets for managers and employees in the workplace (Bolli & Renold, 2015; Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016; Robles, 2012), and soft skills training can be a good starting point for positively influencing communication in organisations and encouraging enduring success. As claimed by Singh (2013, p. 23), an organisation should strategically invest in the development of existing personnel:

Training for soft skills is important as total personality development is what is desired in the present times ... The behaviour of the employee should be made sociable through training and by giving more opportunities for teamwork. More time and efforts should be invested in the people to enhance their [soft] skills for the future and gain positive returns.

The illustrated importance of soft skills for effective communication and organisational success raises the question of how internal organisational stakeholders can acquire such abilities.

Transactional analysis to build soft skills

Berne (1961) introduced TA into psychotherapy and defined it as a social psychology and theory of human personality. It is a theory that provides a broad set of concepts and techniques. The various TA concepts were originally presented and developed by founder Eric Berne, then by followers in direct contact with him during his lifetime, and since by many others. They include *ego states (Parent, Adult, Child)*, *transactions*, *strokes (stroking)*, *games*, *rackets*, *life positions (OK–OK)* and *script* (International Transactional Analysis Association, 2013). These concepts can be used as instruments to analyse, understand and change human personality, interpersonal relationships and communication systems.

Since its inception, numerous definitions of TA have been proffered. For instance, the outline of the universal curriculum for an introduction to TA explains it as a ‘theory of personality and social interpersonal relations which may be used in situations of mutual consent for personal growth and change, professional development and social development’ (Aotearoa New Zealand Transactional Analysis Association, 2016). Several authors claim that TA can contribute to organisational improvement (Hay, 2000; Mountain & Davidson, 2011). Hay (2000) introduces a TA-O model that links what she refers to as ‘software’ of TA application to the hardware of organisational strategies, structures and systems.

Sailship of Success

At the World Conference of Transactional Analysis in Berlin in July 2017, Bernd Schmid (2017, p. 7) – an author of several TA-O books – explained TA as an approach to better co-creating reality through communication. This over-arching project here is concerned with understanding concepts from, and relations between, TA/TA-O and internal communication. Hay’s (2000) *Sailship of Success* can be used to explain how TA-O may influence and be related to internal communication. It presents an interesting discussion of the interplay between TA software of (psychological) safety, *stroking* (recognition), stimulation, and organisational hardware (strategies, structures, systems), with clear implications for important aspects of internal communication leading to organisational success.

The model (see Figure 1) uses the metaphor of a ship symbolising the organisation. On each side of the mast appear three sails labelled ‘strategies’, ‘structures’ and ‘systems’ on the left-hand side, and ‘safety’, ‘*stroking*’ and ‘stimulation’ on the right-hand side. The left-hand canvas, summarised by Hay (2000) as ‘hardware’, broadly corresponds, in terms of internal communication, to Shockley-Zalabak’s (2014) functional tradition. On the right-hand side, the ‘software’ sails ‘safety’, ‘*stroking*’ and ‘stimulation’ can be summarised under Shockley-Zalabak’s (2014) meaning-centred approach. In contrast to the functional tradition, with its structures and systems, the meaning-centred approach concentrates on the creation of the message’s meaning, which emerges through human interaction and focuses on internal stakeholders’ relationships, organisational values, norms and cultures.

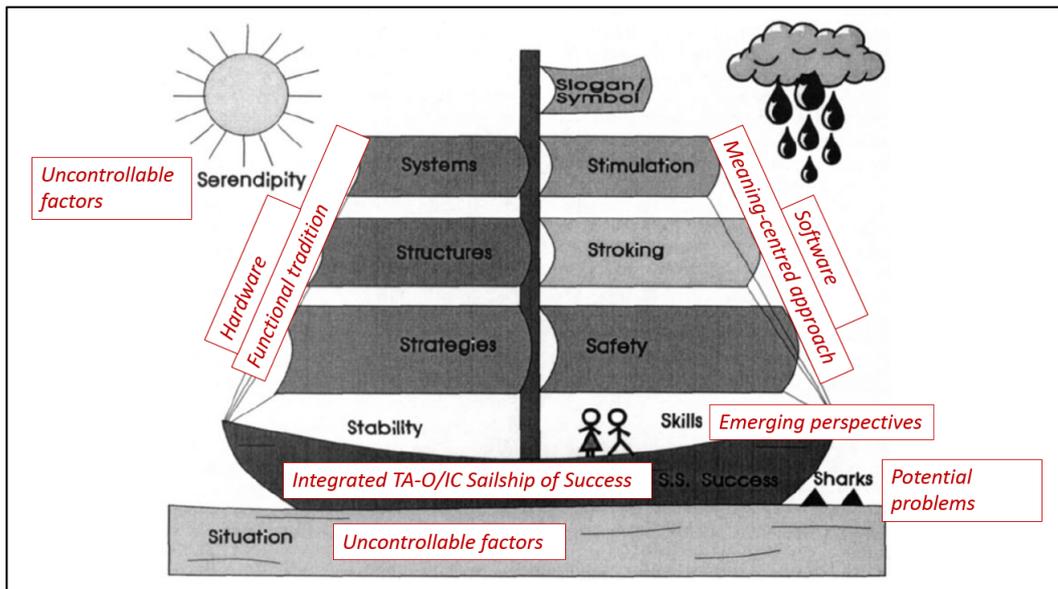


Figure 1: *Integrated TA-O/Internal Communication (IC) Sailship of Success*, adapted from Hay (2000), and aligned with internal communication concepts (Shockley-Zalabak, 2014)

The people on the boat represent leaders and employees. ‘Much of the stability of the ship depends on the skills of the people – how well they can set the sails to cope within the situation’ (Hay, 2000, p. 232). As a method for personal, interpersonal and organisational development, TA empowers employees and hence suggests – in terms of internal communication – an alignment with Shockley-Zalabak’s (2014) emerging perspectives. The flag on the top of the mast shows the symbol and/or slogan of the organisation, which should carry psychological meaning that reflects the culture of the organisation. The sea, sun and clouds symbolise uncontrollable factors such as changes in legislation, which can have an impact on organisations. Finally, the sharks stand for potential problems an organisation can face.

Figure 1 is an adaptation of Hay’s (2000) original *Sailship of Success*. It combines Hay’s (2000) TA-O model using TA language with the terminology and theoretical frameworks of internal communication introduced by Shockley-Zalabak (2014). The new model complements TA with notions of internal communication. It indicates that for organisational success, organisational ‘hardware’ (functional aspects) and ‘software’ (meaning-centred aspects) – or, in organisational communication, terms such as ‘organisational culture’, ‘employee dialogue’ and ‘employee engagement’ – are needed. Figure 1 leads to the idea that the language in TA and internal communication may differ while higher order concepts – further referred to as sensitising concepts – are similar. This suggests a possible ‘conceptual alignment’ of TA with internal communication. With such an alignment – that is, different labels for the same higher order concepts – TA broadens and deepens internal communication concepts, and the merge elevates TA in the field of organisational communication.

Building a sensitising framework

At this field entry stage, the aim of the researcher was to formulate an observational guide to the day-to-day lives of participants within an organisation. For qualitative research, Charmaz (2014) and Patton (2015) recommend an approach that allows for starting with an open mind, yet with an initial guide to exploration. According to Charmaz (2014, p. 30), 'sensitising concepts can provide a place to start inquiry, not to end it'. Such guiding empirical interests are consistent with what Blumer (1969, cited in Charmaz, 2014) describes as general concepts that form a loose framework for observing. This is also what Van den Hoonaard (1997, cited in Patton, 2015) advocates as a starting point for thinking about data where the researcher does not yet have a definite idea – organisational participants in internal communication setting(s) and TA-O. Such sensitising concepts will then help the researcher to identify incidents, interactions and conversations in the field, while remaining open to exploration and illumination in a specific setting.

According to Patton (2015, p. 359), observers 'do not enter the field with a completely blank slate', but rather formulate an open framework to guide field work as a way of breaking the complexities of planned human interventions into manageable and observable elements. It was also acknowledged that experienced observers often use sensitising concepts – alongside research questions and the design of the study – to help orient them to the fieldwork. Charmaz (2014) suggests treating these concepts as a point of departure for studying the life-world of participants while retaining an openness to exploring it.

Charmaz (2014) emphasises that sensitising concepts allow investigators to become fluent and confident with the organisation's structures, procedures and conventions. Researchers are then better able to engage with participants, guide the dialogue and keep conversations on track. In addition, researchers should familiarise themselves with the in-house language of the organisation by requesting published documents pertaining to areas of interest, initiating opening conversations with key participants and developing relationships within the field. This should help them to avoid mistakes, and to better understand internal training policy and procedure and their meaning to participants in the setting(s) being studied (Patton, 2015).

An 'open but not blank' approach (Patton, 2015), together with Charmaz's (2014) suggestion to not overdo reviews of the literature, was used to guide these early field activities. In order to identify favoured language and some key terms used by participants, the researcher drew on extant (or official) documents, such as the internal training program booklet of the case organisation. This organisation is a public administration unit, aiming to assist unemployed people to reintegrate into the labour market through effective consulting. The organisation comprises three main bodies of staff: managers, personnel consultants and administrative staff. It was chosen because it has regularly provided TA training to all employees for almost 20 years. The organisation offers other compulsory and non-compulsory training courses to its staff; these are published in an internal training program booklet. The 2017 edition provides an overview of the organisation's overall training philosophy, which includes content overviews of 20 courses. Two courses in which the researcher participated in 2017

were selected as being of interest: the TA 101 basic training course and TA advanced training course. This internal document, distributed to all employees, is one of the extant (formal) sources upon which the researcher drew to supplement informal conversations around matters of interest.

Questions for inquiry

The first inquiry related to developing an open framework:

Inquiry question 1: What sensitising concepts are identifiable in the internal training program booklet and TA courses for 2017?

The second research inquiry question aimed to use the list of (abstracted) sensitising concepts to aid the exploration of the alignment of the two areas of interest to the project: TA and internal communication, which each use their own language to label and describe concepts:

Inquiry question 2: In what ways do the identified sensitising concepts align with or differ from important mainstream concepts of internal communication?

Method

The aim of the analysis is to examine abstract sensitising concepts of TA as identified in the case organisation's 2017 internal training program booklet and to discuss their alignment with more mainstream concepts of internal communication, some of which were presented in the literature review.

Inquiry question 1

To identify sensitising concepts in the 2017 internal training program booklet, the researcher selected three of its sections: the outlines for the two compulsory TA courses and the introductory session. De Groot and colleagues (2006) claim that introductory sections of documents – for example, annual reports – provide a comprehensive framework for the narratives that follow.

Patton's (2015) 'Examples of Sensitizing Concepts in Various Contexts' provided the researcher with insight concerning how to build sensitising concepts, for example, in the organisational field. Inspired by those examples, the researcher reviewed and discussed the abovementioned texts for favoured 'terms, phrases, labels, and constructs that invite inquiry into what they may mean to people in the setting(s) being studied' (Patton, 2015, p. 360).

The following explains how the researcher identified the six sensitising concepts presented in Figure 1. In the introductory session of the selected extant document, for example, there is an extensive reflection about the employees' potential attitude towards the internal training courses (translated from German to English):

In this way, we hear, for example: 'Oh, now, I still have to attend this further training.' Sometimes we also hear: 'I want to', 'I can' or 'I have the permission

to participate in this further training'. (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 2)

This leads to the idea of *optimism*. The second paragraph of the same introductory text highlights:

As in other professions, the employer ensures that employees are qualified for daily business. It enables them to continuously develop and deepen their expertise and social competence. But it is also the responsibility of the single employee to permanently educate oneself. (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 2)

The over-arching idea here is *shared responsibility*. The following sensitising concept uses in-house language of the case organisation – the in vivo term 'DIALOGUE' (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 2). The capitalisation of the word *DIALOGUE* in the extant document indicates its specific contextual meaning and importance.

Practitioner repertoire of skills refers to the TA 101 basic course description and offers a list of desirable abilities, such as: 'increase advisory skills and broaden personal counselling strategies; support professional management of reality and dealing with complex situations; understanding of how to construct relationships through communication' (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 25).

Espoused values relate to 'further development of values and capabilities; willingness to analyse and change personal attitudes and values' (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 25). Finally, *personal and professional growth* refers to the TA advanced training course description:

Acquiring of basic knowledge of the motivational psychology; development of self-motivation and professional attitude in difficult situations of counselling; development of a personal counselling style; elaboration of concrete questions of your daily work; consider participating in this course every two to three years. (Public Administration Unit, 2017, p. 26)

According to Patton (2015), qualitative inquiry using sensitising concepts leaves terms purposefully undefined to find out what they mean to people in a particular setting. The six sensitising concepts developed for this open framework to guide early fieldwork are therefore: *optimism*, *shared responsibility*, *DIALOGUE*, *practitioner repertoire of skills*, *espoused values* and *personal and professional growth*.

Inquiry question 2

Once, the sensitising concepts were identified, the second inquiry question allowed the researcher to analyse whether they align with or differ from important mainstream concepts of internal communication and TA. Here, the researcher wanted to bring into line, for instance, the TA term of *stroking* with a soft skill (Hay, 2000) while internal communication has other labels and categories of soft skills (Bolli & Renold, 2015; Robles, 2012). She matched those concepts with the ones found in the literature review. The sensitising concept *optimism*, for example, resonates with the 'positive attitude' as a soft skill mentioned in internal communication literature by Robles (2012). At the same time, it also can be connected to the TA term of *ego states* with being in the *Adult ego state* – having a

positive attitude assuming personal responsibility. The same process of searching, finding and connecting the identified sensitising concepts to internal organisational communication and TA literature was conducted with *shared responsibility*, *DIALOGUE*, *practitioner repertoire of skills*, *espoused values* and *personal and professional growth* (see Table 1).

Table 1: Open framework for guiding early fieldwork aligning sensitising concepts with TA and internal communication

Field/ context	Sensitising concept	TA (Cornell et al. 2016) and internal communication
2017 internal training program booklet – introduction section	<i>Optimism</i>	Positive attitude (Robles, 2012) <i>Ego states</i> : Being in the <i>adult</i> stage, assuming own responsibility
	<i>Shared responsibility</i>	Employee engagement (Ruck & Trainor, 2012) Employee satisfaction (Downs & Adrian, 2004) <i>Life positions</i> : Being in an <i>OK–OK position</i> (the employee and the organisation are <i>OK</i>)
	<i>DIALOGUE</i>	Performance dialogue with employees (Kingsley Westerman & Smith, 2015) Performance feedback (Clampitt, 2013) <i>Transactions</i> : Understanding parallel, crossed or implied transactions as unit(s) of social exchange consisting of stimulus and response (McCormick, 1977)
TA 101 basic training course according to the International TA Association Training and Examination Handbook (ITAA, 2013)	<i>Practitioner repertoire of skills</i>	Soft skills such as communication, flexibility and interpersonal skills (DeVito, 2016; Robles, 2012) Creation of meaning through human interaction (Cheney et al., 2011; Shockley-Zalabak, 2014) <i>Games</i> : Understanding the dynamics of unhealthy relationships and knowing how to change them
	<i>Espoused values</i>	The articulated, publicly announced principles and values the organisation claims to achieve (Schein & Schein, 2017) <i>Life positions</i> : Being in an <i>OK–OK position</i>
TA advanced training course	<i>Personal and professional growth</i>	Work ethics (Robles, 2012) Interpersonal communication (DeVito, 2016) <i>Script</i> : Understanding of early decisions and becoming able to change them

Limitations

The presentation of the sensitising concepts in Table 1 and the attempt to compare them with internal communication literature and TA concepts risk criticism for being premature. While trying to achieve the sense of Patton’s (2015) ‘open but not blank’ approach to enter the field, the authors are aware that it is necessary to grapple with how their own world-view influences what they see (Charmaz, 2014) and to recognise the need for caution in interpretation and association. As an over-use of sensitising

concepts can become ‘desensitising’ (Patton, 2015, p. 159), the researcher was careful to be open to the different contexts in which participants interact in the setting being investigated. She considered the alignments and explanations, as presented, as preliminary to deeper explorations that occur on reflection in fieldwork.

An open framework for guiding early fieldwork

Table 1 presents an open framework for guiding early fieldwork aligning the field context with sensitising concepts, TA and internal communication. This open framework of sensitising concepts is useful as an initial guide and starting point for thinking about the data in this study, and ways to weave together the fields of TA, TA-O and internal communication.

Table 1 lists the case organisation’s extant documents (column 1), the identified sensitising concepts (column 2) associated with at least one mainstream concept of internal communication and a TA concept (column 3). This overview furthermore attempts to clarify the mentioned alignment with or deference from important mainstream concepts of internal communication concepts and TA from previous research. For each sensitising concept, the linked concept(s) of internal communication and TA are related to each other. The following section discusses the six sensitising concepts and how these can be used to illustrate day-to-day organisational communication as the researcher looks for interactions, conversations and events that may illuminate the case organisation in particular settings (Denzin, 1978, cited in Patton, 2015).

The introduction of the case organisation’s 2017 internal training program booklet highlights orientation towards, and fostering of attitudes described generally here as *optimism*. Robles (2012) acknowledges *optimism* as one of the top ten skills required in today’s workplace. *Shared responsibility* refers to the emphasis on both the employer’s obligation to make sure that employees are qualified for daily business, enabling them to continuously develop and amplify their expertise and social competence, and the employees’ responsibility to continuously educate themselves. Internal communication literature variously discusses and emphasises the relationship between employee engagement (Ruck & Trainor, 2012) and employee satisfaction (Downs & Adrian, 2004), generally as a consequence or indication of internal communication. In contrast, TA specifies and highlights the expectation that each employee needs to actively take responsibility for and contribute to their own development.

DIALOGUE features prominently in the ‘in-house language’ (Smith & Mounter, 2008, p. 105) of the training guide. The concept is used in reference to the annual appraisal interview, a meeting between superior and employee that aims to evaluate and provide feedback within a performance dialogue (Kingsley Westerman & Smith, 2015). Internal communication literature emphasises the importance of giving and receiving feedback as crucial for organisational culture (e.g. Singh, 2013). Common appraisal techniques often highlight one- or two-way feedback (Clampitt, 2013) rather than a ‘dialogue’. However, employee dialogue is a concept used in recent internal communication literature (De Bussy & Suprawan, 2012; Ruck, 2015). *DIALOGUE* is also related to the TA concept of *transactions*. There is, furthermore, an alignment

between the performance dialogue with employees, the performance feedback and the *transactions*; performance dialogue and feedback can be analysed with the help of the TA *transaction* concept.

Based on the TA 101 basic course, two further sensitising concepts emerged: *practitioner repertoire of skills* refers to a set of soft skills such as communication, flexibility and interpersonal skills (DeVito, 2016; Robles, 2012), which internal stakeholders can improve through participation in the internal TA training course. Those abilities align with the notion of soft skills in the internal communication literature (DeVito, 2016; Downs & Adrian, 2004). *Espoused organisational values* are abstracted from the course aims of reflecting on and further developing personal capabilities and values such as thinking clearly, being creative and being willing to assume sole responsibility. This sensitising concept refers to Schein's (2010) beliefs and values in an organisational setting. He explains that in a group learning process, such principles are generally developed from an individual's original beliefs and values – the personal sense of what should be, as distinct from what is. Furthermore, *espoused values* can be identified with the TA concept of *OK–OK position*.

From the TA advanced training course, *personal and professional growth* emerged from the course aims: acquiring basic knowledge of motivational psychology, development of self-motivation and strategies for successful counselling and professional attitudes in difficult counselling situations, and personal counselling style. This last sensitising concept relates to the internal communication literature about soft skills, and specifically work ethics (Robles, 2012) and interpersonal communication (DeVito, 2016).

Such an alignment of internal communication and TA concepts opens up new possibilities: on the one hand, the repertoire of internal communication concepts becomes wider by recognising TA concepts not only as valuable but also, with regard to their meaning, aligned with current internal communication concepts. On the other hand, TA concepts gain importance in an enlarged field of application, which is not just TA in organisations but TA in organisational communication.

Questions for contextual inquiry

Participant observation in this field commenced with three months of informal discussions with the organisation's head of unit, who had been with the organisation for over 10 years. This senior executive provided entry for the researcher (as initiator) to establish and strengthen relationships with outside consultant TA trainers (group facilitators) working with the organisation on the internal education and training program. These key contacts provided the researcher with organisational documentation and internal TA training course materials. This material was supplemented by informal conversations about course aims and content, and over-arching training program goals explaining how these initiatives were designed in accordance with the internal strategy and how they met organisational procedure and policy guidelines. These transactions allowed for the development of an open framework for guiding early fieldwork (Table 1). Following these initial contacts, it was agreed that the researcher would enter

the field to undertake a series of one-on-one in-depth interviews and formally attend, as a full participant, two employee TA training courses being conducted in 2017.

Patton (2015, p. 360) suggests formulating questions to research participants such as: What do the identified sensitising concepts (*optimism, shared responsibility, DIALOGUE, practitioner repertoire of skills, espoused values, personal and professional growth*) mean to the interview participants (managers, personnel consultants and administrative staff) in a certain context (in the case organization)? As the open framework highlighted new areas of interest, some additional inquiry questions came to light: What does the compulsory internal training program mean to organisational participants in terms of their day-to-day life experiences? What are the variations in meaning and the implications of these variations?

These questions were designed to raise consciousness in specific participant groups, and could be used to alert the researcher to relevant data in a variety of settings (Patton, 2015). For instance, two series of interviews were planned: Project 1, one-on-one interactions with senior management executives (communication strategists) and TA trainers (training accreditation facilitators); and Project 2, a series of interviews with managers and employees (TA training course participants) from across the organisation.

For Project 1, communication strategists and training accreditation facilitators were asked to share stories and experiences about the history of the organisation's use of TA; how the strategic aims of TA were relevant to the organisation's overall values and goals; and how TA contributed to the organisation's objectives. For Project 2, participant managers and employees were inquired to think about their first contact with the organisation's TA training course; their professional development since participation in the TA training course(s); daily work practices after participation in the TA training course(s); and sharing a TA story. From this starting point, the researcher went on to use sensitising concepts such as *DIALOGUE* together with the disciplinary perspectives to form interview questions – for example, What does the *DIALOGUE* with your supervisor mean to you? Are you applying TA concepts during the *DIALOGUE* with your supervisor? An interview summary sheet addresses the following questions: What was the most compelling TA story? What was the most significant moment for the researcher (as interviewer and story co-constructor)? What contexts stood out in relation to TA? What contexts were prominent in relation to personal/group communication skills? What are the researcher's reflections?

By examining interview data, the researcher may, for example, discover specific patterns in the interview participants' feelings or expressions about the performance feedback in the case organisation. Maybe the interviewees even use a TA concept such as *transactions* to speak about the *DIALOGUE*. Having understood the meaning of all three terms (*DIALOGUE, performance feedback, transactions*), it is important for the researcher to look at the data, listen to interviewees and think analytically about this gathered information.

After collecting the diverse answers, Patton (2015) suggests researchers ask themselves about the differences in meaning and its consequences of those variations. Further fieldwork activity allowed for more sensitivity as the researcher participated and observed others' interactions at the TA 101 basic training course and TA advanced

training course. The aim here was to further enrich a developing field experience by observing incidents, interactions and conversations as people experience the worlds in which they live and work (Patton, 2015).

Conclusion

This article principally illustrates a case of entry to an organisational field research setting. It explains and exemplifies sensitising concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015) and their role in providing a place to start a field inquiry. It furthermore shows a process, and finds that sensitising concepts can provide a practical framework and approach for such entry. This approach has been referred to here as 'open but not blank'. This article deliberately sought to enact an 'open but not blank' stance, borrowing and blending Charmaz's (2014) key terms and Patton's (2015) sensitising concepts. This 'open but not blank' stance enabled the researcher to explore openly, and describe the novelty in, the TA/TA-O concepts, while comparing them with more mainstream internal communication ideas. Some important implicit and explicit sensitising concepts in the 2017 internal training program booklet provided by the case organisation included *optimism, shared responsibility, DIALOGUE, practitioner repertoire of skills, espoused values* and *personal and professional growth*.

The article also suggests contributions to TA-O and internal communication that remain to be explored further. This includes the *Integrated TA-O/Internal Communication Sailship of Success* adapted from Hay (2000), which shows an alignment of TA and internal communication concepts (Shockley-Zalabak, 2014). Further, the article examined less abstract dimensions of internal communication and training. Hay's (2000) *Sailship of Success* provides a valuable model of TA-O, clearly showing that hard and soft dimensions of communication are integral to effective organisations and communication. Various features of the *Sailship* were readily aligned with the case organisation's TA training, and also with existing internal communication frameworks from scholars such as Shockley-Zalabak (2014) and Robles (2012).

In addition, with the help of the sensitising concepts identified in Table 1, the article highlights the conceptual alignment as suggested in Figure 1. It demonstrates that TA-O, as presented in this initial phase of the case study, includes principles, attitudes and skills that align with healthy internal communication. While the TA-O labels use words familiar to the mainstream, the meanings of terms such as *DIALOGUE* and *strokes* inside the case organisation appear to extend the repertoire of mainstream internal communication and TA concepts. This remains to be explored further.

Importantly, the article identified features of the TA training that may profoundly influence internal communication in positive ways. One possibility is in performance dialogue, as outlined in *DIALOGUE*, and as distinct from one-way and two-way performance feedback.

Another is the emphasis on the interdependence of intrinsic and extrinsic support for employee satisfaction and performance, expressed by *shared responsibility* – that is, that the organisation should support the employees, and the employees should also support themselves, both attitudinally and by taking responsibility for themselves.

References

- Aotearoa New Zealand Transactional Analysis Association (2016). Introducing transactional analysis, <https://nztaa.org.nz/index.php?page=introducing>.
- Bailey, J.L. (2014). Non-technical skills for success in a technical world. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 5(4), doi:10.1111/j.1365-2559.2010.03710.x.
- Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy: A Systematic Individual and Social Psychiatry*. New York: Grove Press.
- Bolli, T. & Renold, U. (2015). Comparative advantages of school and workplace environment in competence acquisition: Empirical evidence from a survey among professional tertiary education and training students in Switzerland, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2629983.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Cheney, G., Christensen, L.T., Zorn, T.E. & Ganesh, S. (2011). *Organizational Communication in an Age of Globalization: Issues, Reflections, Practices* (2nd ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Clampitt, P.G. (2013). *Communicating for Managerial Effectiveness: Problems, Strategies, Solutions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cornell, W.F., de Graaf, A., Newton, T. & Thunnissen, M. (eds). (2016). *Into TA: A Comprehensive Textbook on Transactional Analysis*. London: Karnak Books.
- De Bussy, N. & Suprawan, L. (2012). Employee dialogue: A framework for business success. In K. Ruck (ed.), *Exploring Internal Communication: Towards Informed Employee Voice* (pp. 106–17). Harmondsworth: Pearson Educational.
- De Groot, E.B., Korzilius, H., Nickerson, C. & Gerritsen, M. (2006). A corpus analysis of text themes and photographic themes in managerial forewords of Dutch-English and British annual general reports. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 49(3), 217–35.
- Deetz, S. (2005). Critical theory. In S. May & D.K. Mumby (eds), *Engaging Organizational Communication Theory and Research: Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 85–111.
- DeVito, J.A. (2016). *The Interpersonal Communication Book* (14th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Downs, C.W. & Adrian, A.D. (2004). *Assessing Organizational Communication: Strategic Communication Audits*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hay, J. (2000). Organizational transactional analysis: Some opinions and ideas. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 30(3), 223–32.
- International Transactional Analysis Association (ITAA) (2013). *Training and Examinations Handbook*, <http://www.itaaworld.org/sites/default/files/itaa-pdfs/train-hndbk/ITAA%20Train-Exam%20Hndbk%20Sec%2005%20Four%20Fields%20v.2013.pdf>.
- Kingsley Westerman, C.Y. & Smith, S.W. (2015). Opening a performance dialogue with employees. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 29(4), 456–89.

- Matteson, M.L., Anderson, L. & Boyden, C. (2016). 'Soft skills': A phrase in search of meaning. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 16(1), 71–88.
- McCormick, P. (1977). *Social Transactions*. San Francisco: Transactional Publications.
- Mountain, A. & Davidson, C. (2011). *Working Together: Organizational Transactional Analysis and Business Performance*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Murray, K. (2013). *The Language of Leaders: How Top CEOs Communicate to Inspire, Influence and Achieve Results*. London: Kogan Page.
- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Public Administration Unit (2017). *Internal Education and Further Training Offer: January to December 2017* [Internal training program booklet of the case organisation].
- Rajhans, K. (2012). Effective organizational communication: A key to employee motivation and performance. *Interscience Management Review*, 2(2), 81–5.
- Robles, M.M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453–65.
- Ruck, K. (2015). *Exploring Internal Communication: Towards Informed Employee Voice*. Farnham: Gower.
- Ruck, K. & Trainor, S. (2012). Developing internal communication practice that supports employee engagement. Paper presented to Public Relations and Communication Management: The State of the Profession conference, <http://www.ciprinside.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/bledcom-2012-paper-FINAL-3005122.pdf>.
- Ruck, K. & Welch, M. (2012). Valuing internal communication: Management and employee perspectives. *Public Relations Review*, 38(2), 294–302.
- Ruck, K. & Yaxley, H. (2013). Tracking the rise and rise of internal communication from the 1980s. In *Proceedings of the International History of Public Relations Conference, Bournemouth*.
- Schein, E.H. (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E.H. & Schein, P. (2017). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (5th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schmid, B. (2017). Systemic TA – approaches for co-creating reality. [PowerPoint slides]. Paper presented to TA- World conference, Berlin, https://www.isbw.eu/de/wissen-clicktotransfer/systemic_ta.php.
- Shockley-Zalabak, P.S. (2014). *Fundamentals of Organizational Communication* (8th ed.). Harlow: Pearson.
- Singh, A. (2013). Achieving sustainability through internal communication and soft skills. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 7(1), 21.
- Smith, L. & Mounter, P. (2008). *Effective Internal Communication* (2nd ed.). London: Kogan Page.
- Watson, W. (2004). Insider Communication Key to Improving Bottom Line—November 2003, <http://www.watsonwyatt.com/render.asp?id=12124&catid=2>.

- Welch, M. (producer) (2011). *Mary Welch@BledCom 2011* [Video file],
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTHt7N3haPc>.
- Welch, M. & Jackson, P.R. (2007). Rethinking internal communication: A stakeholder approach. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 12(2), 177–98.
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.