
Conspiring fruitfully with professionals: new management roles for professional organisations

Hans Vermaak

Twijnstra Gudde Management Consultants, The Netherlands

Mathieu Weggeman

Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

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Abstract

Professionalism still is on the way up. However, the working methods of managers and professionals do not develop at the same pace. Professionals often seek out their workplace within an organisation but then proceed to act as soloists, which makes fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment the rule rather than the exception. The manager's reflex dictates that he/she tackles problems with control and command, resulting in all sorts of conflicts. It is argued that this dysfunctional habit can be corrected by introducing a clear division of roles: professionals manage the primary process, managers the secondary processes. Peace then will be restored but fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment are still evident. We have found heuristically that these core problems only can disappear when professionals and managers tackle them in a concerted action by developing a collective ambition, investing in mutual learning and setting performance standards. Although professionals' loner genes hold them back in concerted action on these matters, they can overcome this resistance when managers are willing and able to orchestrate a dialogue on these matters. This is a tall order, but the core problems can thus be transformed into inspiration, growth and dedication.

Last summer, in Zimbabwe, one of us bought a couple of statues, made by the Shumba brothers: a dancing woman and a strong man in the form of a stool. Colourful carvings treated with shoe polish. Because they have such a special quality, the demand by galleries for the Shumba brothers' work is increasing. The brothers are masters of their art. In their workshop they give free rein to their imagination, envisioning the form that the wood was meant to take. They only make what they fancy. Most of their work is sold directly from their own workshop, which they only open when they feel like it. Because their statues are in such demand, they can name their own price, which is obviously high enough to support them.

The Shumba brothers confirm the ideal picture of the independent professional. Sculpting, writing, and consultancy are typical examples of professions ideally suited to working alone or with a select group of friends. A sign on the door is enough to start business. These freelance professionals are their own boss, they possess the expertise necessary to do a good job. They are capable of determining themselves when to seek help from a colleague or expand their knowledge in the confines of the classroom. These professionals choose their own clients and set their own price. Obviously, if you are good enough at your job, you can permit yourself this freedom.

During lectures, we often ask professionals what motivates them. The answer is always the same: their craft, their professional development and their interaction with colleagues. This answer is also confirmed by research, (see Table I). Their own field of work provides inspiration. Working hours and even financial security are of secondary importance. Why else would you be a sculptor when you know how difficult it is to earn your living with it? This type of professional often turns out to be an interesting personality; source of great stories, ideas and contacts. As a result of their training and independence they are often quite self-assured and have the courage to be authentic. To the outside world they perceived as "walking talking vitality". Truly something that everyone, at some time or other, aspires to be. It is no wonder, therefore, so many people

like to call themselves professionals. Nico Goebert, economics editor of a Dutch morning newspaper, illustrates this: "Being a journalist is a great job. You can wear whatever you like, you don't have to watch your words the whole day and you appear to be more important than you really are".

From being happy on your own to being miserable together

Some professionals, like the Shumba brothers, work on their own, but most seek their workplace within an organisation. There is a reason for this. Table II lists the reasons why economics, business-management, technology, computerisation and agricultural-engineering students in The Netherlands look for employers: to be able to provide good products and services together with others, to expand their experience, to have an inspiring working environment, to be able to receive further training and international travel opportunities etc.

Consequently, many modern professions seek organisations where they can develop their talents. Conversely, organisations are becoming increasingly dependent on professionals. The age of Henry Ford lies far behind us. "Why must I have the whole man when his hands are all I need", the carmaker once said. Automation and computerisation have since eliminated a lot of such manual work. The busiest sector is no longer industry but the service sector; education, health care, media, accountancy, consultancy, financial and legal services, etc. Of the Dutch graduates that left university in the year 1994/1995, 90 percent are now working in the service sector. The buzzwords in this sector are high speed, high tech, high flex and high touch: fast knowledge-intensive service, made-to-measure and based on personal contact. Just these four characteristics already imply the need for independent professionals.

It would appear to be a splendid symbiosis between professionals and the modern professional organisation, but it is everything but plain sailing. The catch is that a professional employed by a company must surrender part of his/her independence thus saying good-bye

Table I

What gives professionals satisfaction?

	%
1. Pleasure in my own work	30
2. Atmosphere in our own group; interaction with colleagues	20
3. Progress in my own work, achieving objectives, getting projects up and running	17
4. Satisfaction with facilities	14
5. Atmosphere and co-operation within the university	11
6. Developments in my personal life	7
7. Management interference	3

Note: Based on a survey at Maastricht University; $n = 351$

Source: Weggeman (1992)

Table II

What do Dutch graduates look for in a job?

1. Interesting products and services
2. A sound basis for a further career development
3. A dynamic organisation
4. Varied work
5. Connection to a fast-growing market
6. Permanent training
7. Foreign travel
8. A strong corporate culture
9. Job security
10. Chances for fast promotion
11. An environment in which creativity counts
12. A good salary

Source: van Leeuwen (1997)

to the ideal of the fancy free artist. This certainly applies to the 40 percent of the graduates who aspire to a career with a multinational (Van Leeuwen, 1997). Multinationals and complete professional freedom simply do not go together.

Medical specialists are a good example of professionals with limited freedom. With regard to their own profession and their own development, they do not allow themselves to be dictated to by hospital management. But a surgeon would never improvise when removing someone's appendix: not only is his/her reputation and that of the hospital on the line, but there is also the question of legal liability to consider. If a surgeon goes too far in playing solo then his/her peers and management will, eventually, call him/her to task. Furthermore, most surgeons do not choose their own clients. Patients are referred to them by the hospital or local family doctors. As a rule, the reputation of the hospital outweighs that of the specialist and thus forms the primary consideration for referral. Figure 1 illustrates how the autonomy of the medical specialist,

the soccer player and the priest comes nowhere near that of the artist. Priests too do not chose their own clients because when they move to another diocese their parishioners do not follow them. Let alone if they switch to another faith. Furthermore, their training and their fellow professionals are all part of the same organisation: the church. There are, of course, differences; no two professionals are the same. Autonomy and the professional status it brings are things that each professional must personally command, time and time again.

The psyche of the professional does not allow him/her to betray his/her principles. Even if he/she chooses for the advantages of coexistence within an organisation, he/she finds the restrictions that go with it difficult to accept and, as a consequence, professionals may behave as if they are freelancers. Many professionals believe that it is legitimate to treat their work as a hobby and to go it alone. In that case collectivity in products and services is hard to find. What is more, a good professional achievement is considered to be of paramount importance. "To spot the expert, pick the one who predicts the job will take the longest and cost the most", was the conclusion of organisation expert Bloch (1980). Furthermore, professionals find it hard to agree among themselves about the current or desired quality of their work. As a rule, the opinion of others carries less weight than their own. Why should a colleague know better? Opinions offered by clients or bosses are especially taken less seriously because they come from outside the professional arena. As a result, collective innovation and learning is thwarted. Knowledge is seen as a prized possession that you keep for yourself, locked away from prying eyes.

Our intent with this article is to contribute to the further development of theories concerning the management of professionals. The content is based on relevant literature, exchange of views with managers and professionals, case histories, deduced trains of thoughts and experiences of the authors who have worked their entire careers in and for professional organisations and still do. Therefore the content of this article can be considered as the results of a knowledge eliciting process carried out interactively by two reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983).

Three core problems in professional organisations

From our study three core problems appear dominant: fragmentation, because professionals like to go their own way,

mediocrity, because there is too little enthusiasm to learn from one another; and non-commitment, because there is too little focus on results. Paradoxically, these problems destroy to a large extent the advantages that the professional gains by working in a team; the dynamic working environment where you learn together and together manage to complete interesting assignments. Managers also suffer from the effects of these problems. A recent study carried out among 300 managers into their most urgent problems came up with a familiar list (see Table III): "the creation of cohesion within the organisation" is the number one problem followed by "getting professionals to work result oriented" (Burger, 1995).

On the one hand these three core problems seem to be recognised by all parties and to occur in most professional organisations. On the other hand the standard replies from professionals and managers often only serve to bring organisations out of the frying pan and into the fire. How come?

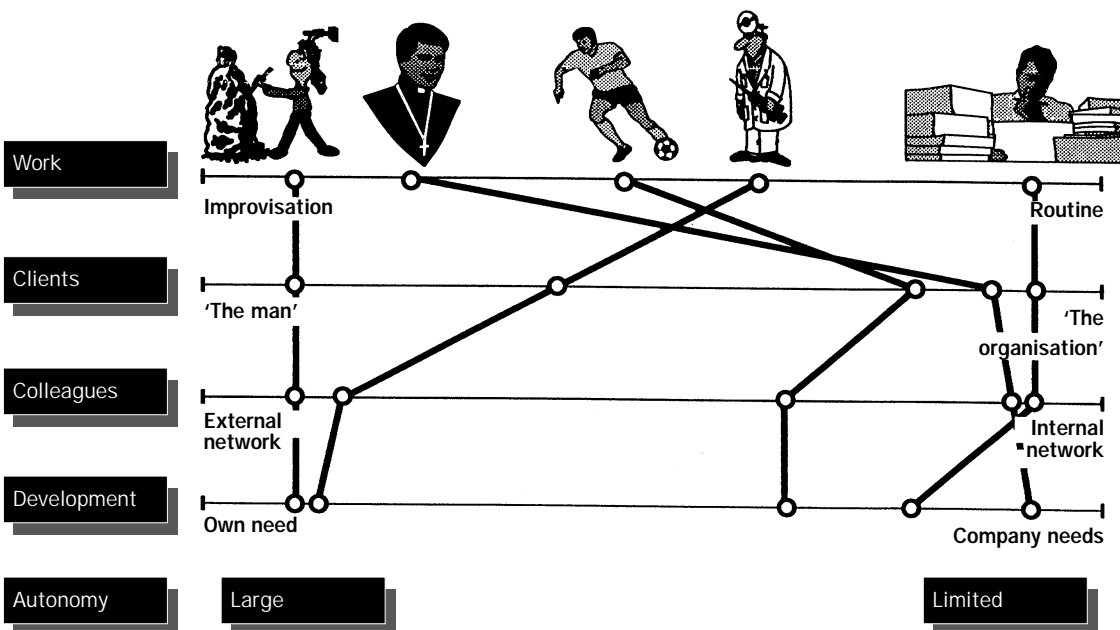
Favourite reflexes

Professionals can have long and heated discussions on the three core problems mentioned. But in this respect also, they behave as typical freelancers: everyone has his or her own (shrewd) solution. Admirable democratic decision-making processes often run foul in the hard reality of "too many cooks

spoil the broth". Frustrated by feelings of impotence in dealing with the core problems, professionals suddenly may start behaving like old-fashioned wage slaves and the problems are laid at the manager's door. Take the example of the school that was faced with serious financial shortages. The teachers had spent a lot of money that had not been budgeted and, in this same period, the Ministry slashed the budget. The only thing that the teachers could agree on was that their work was under-valued by society at large and so, to them, the best solution seemed to be not to try to cut costs internally but to send the administrator to the Ministry to see if he could squeeze out more funds.

So, the core problem always lands with the manager. What does he/she do? He/she tries to get to grips with the situation. "At the *NRC*, (a Dutch national, evening newspaper), we had, for a short time, a director who had had an important position in the civil service in Luxembourg and had been a civil servant at the Ministry of Transport. His name was Stijkel. He thought that if he wrote a memo and sent it to the relevant functionaries he had done what was necessary. Of course, nothing happened, nothing ever got done. Stijkel was bewildered. 'Damn!', he murmured, 'Why don't these people put their ass in gear?'. The man just couldn't understand the least thing about it", says André Spoor, former editor in chief of Elsevier and the *NRC*. Perhaps Stijkel thought that he was

Figure 1
 Professionals in all shapes and sizes



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Table III

What problems do managers have?

	%
1. Creating cohesion within the organisation	45
2. Getting professionals to work result-oriented	35
3. Determining and holding course	23
4. Balancing individual and organisational goals	22
5. Discouraging in-fighting and over-specialisation	22
6. Effective guiding of professionals	22
7. Measuring professional results	20
8. Dealing with conceitedness and self-opinioned professionals	20
9. Quality management	18
10. Dealing with tension between managers and professionals	18

Note: N = 309

Source: Burger (1995)

still working for the Civil Service. Government organisations, industry and transport are the worlds where rules and procedures have proved to be successful. They are successfully applied to standardise and streamline work processes. There is nothing wrong there. But because, in the past, these sectors employed the most people, that is where many managers learned their trade and where most management theories were born. Control from above using rules and procedures has become a management reflex, which has even become canonised in management literature. It has shaped the identity of managers. Media, shareholders and managers themselves talk about “the man at the helm”, “the man pulling the strings”, someone who should and can be held accountable for the results.

This implies that the manager is someone who has the power to command and control his/her organisation. Truly an almost mythical role and, in any case, an ego booster. Old habits die hard and Stijkel’s behaviour underlines this. The question then becomes whether something that works for industry works equally well in organisations of professionals.

“A machine is a machine, a factory a factory but a professional is not always a professional: nature is not democratic and, as far as the intellect is concerned, does not make us all equals. Accordingly there are good artists or scientists and bad artists and scientists. The good ones make good art or science; the bad ones poor art or science. (...) [Yet] our trend is to replace creativity by numbers, quality by quantity. Our reason is analogous to saying that if one woman can provide a child in nine months, nine women will produce it in one. Our reasoning does not

hold even for this simplest form of creativity. There are pregnant and non-pregnant ones among us, and only those who are pregnant, pregnant with ideas, will be creative” (Szent-Györgyi, 1961). Whereas industrial work-processes are governed more by the machines than by the (replaceable) machinists, in the case of professionals the situation appears to be just the opposite: the machines are easier to replace or add than the workers. What happens here when you want to run the show in the industrial way anyhow?

Control from above? Sabotage from below!

Just as, at the turn of the century, one of the founding fathers of the consultancy profession, Frederick Taylor, measured the productivity in factories with a stopwatch, there was a director of a publishing house who, at 9 a.m., stood at the front door with a watch in his hand and asked the journalists as they entered the building, why they were late. He wrote down their excuses on a large “excuse poster” that was hanging in the entrance hall and he thought, as Taylor did, that this would help to increase productivity. It had the opposite effect. Irritated journalists who had worked late just shrugged their shoulders. It put a damper on their zest for work: professionals do not like it when managers are continually looking over their shoulders! Research has confirmed this (see Table IV). Professionals are allergic to everything that smacks of bureaucracy, bosses and policy.

As a result, professionals keep a weather eye open for what their managers are doing. They consider it legitimate to offer

Table IV

What irritates professionals?

	%
1. Slow procedures, unclear structure, inefficient meetings, bureaucracy etc.	38
2. Interference from management and managers	28
3. Internal conflicts of interest	27
4. Financial policy: a mixture of waste and cut backs	19
5. Personnel policy: too slow, too impersonal	18
6. Problems or conflicts in own group or department	18
7. Lack of services and facilities	11
8. Lack of dedication and zest for work from personnel	9
9. Problems with own work (e.g. fragmentation)	7

Note: Based on a survey at Maastricht University; n = 351

Source: Burger (1995)

unsolicited criticism and if the manager does not take the criticism seriously, it puts their backs up. The manager is then regarded as an alien influence, an enemy from another world. Organisation researcher, Badawy (1982), characterises this view for a research environment as follows: "The scientist sees the manager as a bureaucrat, a paper shuffler, a parasite, an uncreative and unoriginal hack who serves as an obstacle in the way of creative people trying to do a good job, and a person more interested in dollars and power than knowledge and innovation". If this "hack" also shows the tendency to control, sabotage is sure to emerge. Professionals are of the opinion that they have the right to ignore management decisions when these conflict with their professional standards; all in a good cause, of course. This does not always happen openly, it is more a question of "pocket vetoes". Take as an example the situation where the manager wants to set a limit to the fragmentation of professional activities. The professional listens politely and back on the job floor he/she just carries on in the same old way.

Conflicts, conflicts, conflicts

It is easy to get into a vicious circle: the manager tries to control things – the professionals sabotage this. The manager steps in once more, and so on and so forth. This is typically how conflicts are born. Organisations of professionals happen to be good breeding grounds for this kind of conflict because both parties, management and professionals, occupy positions of power. Professionals have expertise power thanks to their knowledge and network of peers. Managers have their hierarchical position to set against the power of the professional. These powers are well matched; but the intriguing question remains: Who should be in charge, the one who is the boss or the one who knows. The professional usually does not need much time to come up with an answer. Thus, in the past, medical specialists were able and willing to lash out against hierarchical control. Just before the summer of 1997, Dutch specialists placed a full-page advertisement in the national dailies. The headline parodied the warning on cigarette packets. The advertisement stated: "The new law forces us to dance to the tune of the hospital and insurance accountants. A development that is diametrically opposed to the Hippocratic oath and medical ethics". Their conclusion in the small print at the bottom was: "common sense should tell you we are right!".

In the resulting discord, it is easy for one of the parties to become a casualty of war. In most cases it is the manager. We have looked at a list of our consultancy assignments covering the last few years. In organisations where professionals were concerned, there was talk of a change of management instigated by conflicts with professionals in more than half of the cases. Is there truth in the rumour that professionals are unmanageable?

New times – new roles

The Dutch stage director Hans Croiset, recently shared what he had learned during his many years of service: "In the past, if you didn't arrive at a rehearsal with the scenario worked out, you hadn't done your homework. During the readings, the actors checked if there were enough directions added to the script, to see if you knew what you were talking about. Luckily that's a thing of the past. When I started to direct, it didn't take me long to realise that after two days those notes became irrelevant. Because the actor has always been the pivot around which the whole play revolves: the one who absorbs the text and interprets it differently to the way in which you, the stage-director, could ever have envisaged. Any director who says that it happened just the way he wanted it is simply a liar."

Croiset threw all idea of trying to control out of the window and instead, gave the actors the freedom to get on with their work. Not only because professionals do not take kindly to being managed, thus giving rise to conflicts, but also because the activities are not easily controlled. This also applies outside the world of the theatre. If our boss wants to keep a grip on our consultancy activities, he/she would have to visit the clients jointly with us, he/she would have to approve the advice beforehand etc. This would not only frustrate us. It would also slow things down, inhibit flexibility and stand in the way of the personal touch, while those are exactly the things that our clients value. What is more, the boss can never master all the specialities of his/her consultants. Control is, therefore, impossible.

Is the consequence that the boss has to become invisible? Is he/she only allowed to exercise restraint? On the contrary! There seem to be other important roles that he/she can fulfil. There are good examples in daily practice and literature that provide us with clues. They do not lead to a cure-all but do offer perspectives. In literature we can read about "the intellectual sorrow of

management theories” (Beulens, 1997) and the “collapse of management mysticism” (Locke, 1996). Nevertheless the empirical studies presented combined with our case-based experiences stimulate the development of new heuristics concerning compatible new roles for managers and professionals.

I. Roles in the primary process: the “coach” and the “meritocrat”

A recommendation to managers is: not to avoid the workplace but to seek it out. Not as a controller but as a person concerned who likes to offer support. The manager concentrates on the people themselves and hardly on the content of the work and how it is tackled. This turned out to make professionals less inclined to avoid their managers. They carry out the primary process, in a way they think fit. The manager often can be found on the job floor and has a real interest in the work and the ideas of the professionals: management by wondering and wandering around. This stimulates professionals to regard their manager as “one of us” and help his/her hostile image to vanish. He/she will be ready to praise the staff who gets the job done instead of claiming the credit for him/herself. This motivates professionals, because they place much more value on recognition for their professional accomplishments than, for example, long service to the firm. The manager searches for challenging assignments that he/she knows will inspire his/her people and he/she coaches those who are in personal or professional difficulties. During these processes, the manager gains knowledge about clients, work areas and the “hidden rules” of the primary process. In fact Simon (1986) even calls supervisors who perform this role creative managers: “(they) are people who can receive great satisfaction from creative outcomes, even when their role in producing those outcomes has been an indirect one – specifically a managerial one”.

This supporting role of management assumes a matching role for professionals. The terms that are used for personnel have, in this context, a meaning. An “employee” carries out the work that he/she is given. A “staff member” is more on equal terms with his/her boss and a “professional” is the boss over his/her own work. If the manager relinquishes responsibility for the work process, the professional must assume that responsibility, otherwise, nobody is responsible. If he/she is to have operational autonomy, the professional should process the following qualities (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995):

- high intellectual standards;

- a strong sense of commitment to re-create the world according to one’s own perspective;
- a wide variety of experiences, both inside and outside the company;
- skilled in carrying on dialogue with customers as well as with colleagues within the company;
- open to carrying out candid discussions as well as debates with others.

This is asking a lot. It demands not only technical expertise and skills, but also social and entrepreneurial abilities. And sometimes even more is asked: the ability to reflect and learn, the will power and guts to face difficult situations. This implies that the professional puts him/herself on the line and this is only worth it if the work is strongly compatible with the ambition and talents of the professional in question. In her first novel Connie Palmen (1991) wrote: “You have to face up to a talent in the same way you face up to life because, one day, they will come together and that talent will be your life and it will be your talent to live. A talent that remains a false promise will kill you; of that I am convinced. You will have that nagging feeling of how life could have been and then, at a certain moment, of how it should have been.” Professionals who are true to their talents belong to the meritocracy: the rising class whose competencies make them stand out from the rest. There is a simple test to see if someone belongs here: a member of this class bases his/her security on his/her curriculum vitae and not to his job. If, at the age of 52, he/she would become the victim of re-organisation, this will hardly turn out to be detrimental for either his/her prestige or his/her career.

If a manager assumes a coaching role, he/she needs these meritocrats but not every professional can or will achieve these heights. In the computer branch, where the development from “technically-oriented programmer” to “client-oriented consultant” has been extremely swift, it marks a watershed. When a certain financial institution re-organised its financial department, it placed great emphasis on the self-management of individuals and teams. New jobs of increased complexity were created. During coaching sessions, many people said that they would opt for jobs far below their current working level. They were afraid that they would not be able to live up to the new standards being set after having worked as “employees” for so many years. Their honesty was admirable.

Employees do not become empowered simply by management’s say so. Also, managers should be wary yielding to the short-term advantages of creating high-energy work

situations: people may become addicted to stress or burnout at an early age (Harrison, 1987). In this case, the managers of the institution responded appropriately: if an employee is not able or willing to take the challenge, he/she will be demoted or asked to leave, using every means possible to make this transition as painless as possible.

II. Roles in the secondary process: the caretaker and the sponsor

As far as the job floor is concerned, the professional is in charge and the manager offers support. But the organisation is more than just the job floor. There are things such as administration, logistics and information technology, the secondary processes. As a rule, professionals do not know the first thing about these matters, which, however, does not lessen their urge to interfere with them. We have heard doctors speaking with conviction about information technology, artists about book keeping and school teachers about personnel management. Such interference is rarely productive. If a professional turns his/her hand to secondary process management, you lose a good professional and gain a bad manager. This is because professionals think and work differently than managers. Whereas the manager strives for continuity and efficiency for the organisation and can deal with things as a matter of routine, the professional is searching for the beauty of his craft and is, at heart, an improviser. These noble professional characteristics do not relate easily to, for example, the routine necessary for administration, the care called for when carrying out personnel policy or the conscientious planning that precedes computerisation projects.

This is why professionals must allow managers to get on with their job. This kind of self-control serves not only the organisation, but also the professionals themselves. Feltmann (1993) remarks: "Those working because they love their job will avoid management responsibilities in order to preserve their mental health". After all, professionals are passionate about their work and have little love or time for bureaucracy and policy. Why then, should they get involved in it?

Aad Kranendonk, former consultant at KPMG, used to "always delegate this sort of thing to the next level up". He not only left the secondary process tasks up to others but accepted that not everything will be carried out to his complete satisfaction. His role, and the desired role of the professional in general, becomes one of "sponsor" of his managers' activities as caretaker. Complete satisfaction with regard to secondary processes would not

be humanly possible anyway: it is not only certain that his/her colleagues have other priorities but the manager must take external factors into consideration as well such as the labour market, the competitive structure or the demands of shareholders/financiers. In any case, absolute satisfaction is really unnecessary. Professionals stay with an organisation for reasons of interesting work, colleagues and professional development. No matter how well a company's infrastructure is organised, it is not the reason why they stay. And if it is functioning reasonably well, it will never be the real reason why they leave. Therefore, a manager does not have to strive for perfection.

Having to do the dirty work can be regarded as the caretaker role of the manager. This role does not sound very glorious and indeed it is not. Dealing with matters such as the political environment, personnel policy, computerisation and financial administration all supports the primary process. If a manager takes on these secondary tasks, he/she is providing a service. This does not make these tasks any less important. It is true that they will not make a company, but they could break it and for this reason they must be well organised. This is where management skills, clear-cut hierarchic relationships within internal departments and the autonomy of the manager come into their own.

The professional's sponsor role and the manager's caretaker role complement each other well. The division of roles, however, does require some monitoring. When an exciting issue comes along, these roles tend to be forgotten. Just as professionals are up in arms when managers interfere with their work, so must managers defend themselves against interference from the professionals. Whenever professionals attempt to interfere, it is up to the manager to lay down appropriate rules as to whether the professionals are allowed to be informed, to be consulted or to co-decide on this or that specific issue. We remember the grumbling when the head of a consultancy practice was being appointed, all because the consultants wrongly presumed that they had complete say in the matter. When management did not follow the consultants' choice and appointed their own candidate the professionals felt as if they were scorned. Unnecessary unrest and grumbling could have been avoided if, beforehand, it had been made clear that views were appreciated but that the decision was not theirs to take.

Peace and quiet

The manager's reflex to tackle problems with control and command precipitates conflict.

This mistake can be rectified by clear role separation. The professionals thus have their territory, as do the managers. The meritocrats get on with their work and sponsor the caretaker in optimising general and facility issues. Support by managers on the job floor strengthens good relationships between both parties. There is a lot gained by this and the organisation will not be torn apart by conflict. Peace and quiet prevails, but the core problems of fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment are still ever present.

The question is whether we should not set our sights higher. Maybe it is better to wear out than rust out. After all, professionals are looking for dynamism, growth and creativity in an organisation (see Table II) and managers enjoy it when their company leaves the competition standing. Harrison (1987) describes six characteristics of what might be achieved beyond peace and quiet by what he calls a “culture of commitment”:

- 1 The work situation engages the whole person.
- 2 The values that people experience in the work transcend personal advantage. The situation evokes altruism, which is satisfying to everyone involved. People feel they are working for something bigger than themselves.
- 3 People “give their all” working long hours without complaint.
- 4 People supervise themselves, seeking out what needs to be done without direction from above.
- 5 The situation fosters high morale, teamwork and a sense of camaraderie. The group frequently feels itself to be “élite” or “special”.
- 6 There is a sense of urgency: people live “on the edge”, putting out high energy for long periods of time.

The persistence of the fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment stem from the fact that the professional is a loner. Can the place be brought to life by a binding passion instead of divisive argument? How can professionals conspire with each other instead of against the manager? This brings us to the roles which may create synergy.

III. Roles for synergy: the stage-director and the conspirator

Management scientist Senge (1990) used the following metaphor: “There is a phrase in jazz, ‘being in the groove’ that suggests the state when an ensemble ‘plays as one’. Jazz musicians talk about this in almost mystical terms: ‘the music flows through you rather than from you’”. Time flies when you make music in this way. Such synergy is ideal, but

how does it come about? It cannot be announced beforehand by the orchestra leader from a podium. Professionals regard that as haughtiness, “not invented here”. Musicians get “in the groove” by tuning in to one another. Such fine-tuning requires listening attentively, give and take and looking for areas where you can complement or boost one another’s performance.

Because many professionals think they know it all, their conversations often quickly turn into discussions. You can regard a discussion as being a civilised form of combat within which each party defends his old opinions. Useful enough in some situations, but it creates winners and losers and, consequently, even more fragmentation. The discovery that there are common interests, demands of professionals to realise that none of them is all-knowing and that only by bringing differing points of view together in a dialogue, a new and more complete wisdom can be achieved. This is graphically illustrated in John Godfrey Saxe’s (1816-1887) poem about six blind men and their encounter with an elephant. The first blind man felt a wall (the flanks), the second a spear (the tusk), the third a snake (the trunk), the fourth a tree (the knee), the fifth a fan (the ear) and the sixth a rope (the tail). In the poem, this results in a quarrel. Saxe tells us that the moral of the story is that they would have got a better picture if they had worked together. By the same token, a jazz musician said: “I cannot master by myself the practice of being a great jazz ensemble”. Dialogue is the key.

This brings us to the professional’s desired role: the conspirator. As conspirators, they search for common denominators. They are willing to behave to some extent in a manner contrary to their nature. They agree, temporarily, to put their own opinions to one side and to regard one another as allies. This is not easy for any of them. “Most of us are afraid to expose our inner thoughts, for fear that others will find faults in them. These fears are inborn and are only strengthened during our school days and later at work. Everyone remembers the trauma in the classroom when it was your turn and you didn’t know ‘the right answer’” (Senge, 1990). Why do professionals want to expose themselves like this? Because they suspect that the organisation will be a better place if colleagues are heading in the same general direction. Because they hope to find the “groove” with one another. But confusion is always around the corner and the discussion reflexes are tough to break. As soon as anyone is allowed to disturb the learning

environment by expounding his “truths”, the dialogue is over and done with.

This leads to an important rule: it is essential to have an independent “stage-director” present to lead the discussion. This can be an outsider but it is an ideal role for the manager too, for directing a conspiracy is a very rewarding task. Support for the director’s role grows with every round of successful talks, and the professionals are more than happy to discover that freedom and intimacy can go together. They chose to be professionals for the freedom it offers but they joined an organisation for the joy of professional collaboration.

As an outsider, one of us supported a company of IT consultants who were searching for a good way to work together. The first consultant was desiring more personal interaction, the second more respect for his seniority, the third more professional content and the fourth more entrepreneurial spirit. There were others who wanted a quick fix. These differences were felt to be a problem. It took a whole day to discuss all relevant points of view. By ensuring that listening took precedence over argument, the differences were bridged and were even found to complement each other. Such dialogue days are now a routine and fruitful part of the company’s way of organizing itself.

The first step is always the hardest. The role of stage-director is the most difficult one for the manager compared to being coach or caretaker. In the day-to-day work situation the professionals get on with their job while the manager creates conditions and provides the facilities. But when it comes to dialogue they need each other. The content of the discussion is contributed by the professionals while the manager leads the process. This requires a knowledge of social processes, the skill to lead discussions and the personality to see it through. The ideal manager is a reflective practitioner: “Through reflection, he can surface the tacit knowledge understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialised practice. He can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself [and others] to experience” (Schön, 1983). It also helps to have a couple of methods up your sleeve, especially where it concerns specific subjects where dialogue is vital for synergy. For there is still fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment to avoid.

Dialogue about the course: from fragmentation to inspiration

When individual professionals give rein to their hobbies, fragmentation occurs. In that

case collaboration with colleagues suffers, as does mutual inspiration. Furthermore, it is unavoidable that most hobbies will have no (financial) support if priorities are not set across the board. An organisation cannot be innovative in all fields at the same time. The clients are not satisfied either; the organisation is Jack of all trades but master of none.

Maister (1993) suggests the following solution: “the key message to managers of professionals is: create meaning. Help your subordinates to find the excitement in their work”. In the words of Eckart Wintzen – founding father of a Dutch software multinational: “I do my utmost to spirit up my people with enthusiasm and to inspire them to work well together”. Once the spirit is there, chances are that action will follow. It is not only the clergy who have a vocation, every true meritocrat has one too. And if it happens to be a common vocation, then there is a good chance that, even months later, the day-to-day activities in the workplace have not lost touch with the course that had been mapped out. Toffler (1970), puts this in a nutshell, “You’ve got to think about (the same) ‘big things’ while you’re doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction”. A common inspiration is only attainable if it is collectively “forged” by the professionals in question.

They have to work out the course together and burn the midnight oil to get it right. After all, you learn a lot more by setting up a strategy than by just reading about it. There is another reason for formulating the strategy together: the professionals have much of the know-how on which the strategy should be based: they know professional developments, their clients and, with a bit of effort, they know themselves.

Example: strategy forming at a School of Arts

It demands a lot of the directing skills on the part of the manager to ensure that dialogues with the professionals about the course to be taken are productive. How do you tackle this? In consultant’s jargon we call the method “participative strategy development”; it is a mouthful but it describes the most important characteristics (see Figure 2). The Utrecht School of Arts, an institute of higher professional education, consists of four faculties that differ considerably in their didactic approach and in their degree of autonomy (Bosman, 1996). As in many professional organisations, there were infighting and cherishing pet projects. Changes in financing, international competition and dynamism within the profession were factors, which made it necessary to make

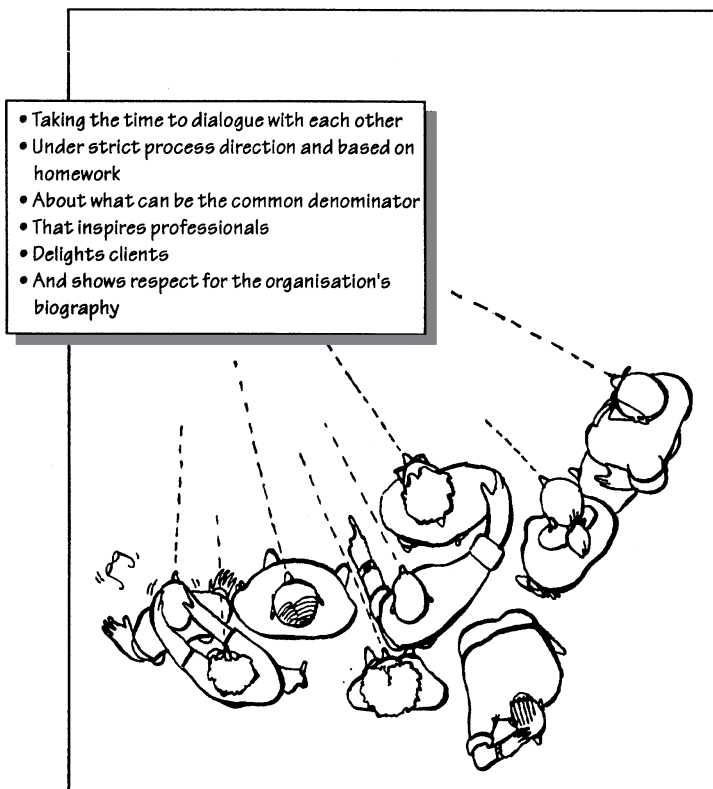
concrete decisions about where they were heading. A broad forum of 40 people was established who jointly formulated a new strategy during five work conferences, over a period of six months. There was time between the conferences to consult with colleagues and to do the necessary homework. This homework is important. You have to have information about external developments, internal problems and biographic "roots" to avoid a lot of waffle. This information was gathered and presented by the participants themselves based on the assignments set by the facilitators. Process management was tight and in this case delivered by externals. This ensured "fair play" more easily in the eyes of the participants. The professionals decided about the content, but the chairmanship, the tempo, the assignments, the models etc., were in our hands. This was to prevent anarchy because each professional usually has his own idea about the approach that should be taken. In order to introduce a new common language, the models used were new to the field of art education. The analysis was qualitative because, in this case, it was the main ideas that were important and not the details. After six weeks, there was a collective ambition (mission) as well as underlying

faculty strategies, all based on organisation wide knowledge and testing. Poets among the faculty and students published haiku and limericks parodying the mission, making it even more a topic of discussion within the school.

How do you know if the mission makes sense? One strong point of the mission developed is that it pays attention to students and teachers as well as to the character of the school. An organisation is on the wrong track if it does not pay equal attention to its clients, its professionals or its own history. Another strong point is that the course is not so ambitious as to give rise to daydreaming but is ambitious enough to prevent lethargy. The mission statement covers almost a whole page, long maybe, but this was only the first version. The longer it exists, the pithier it will become. Have they got the wording right? Certainly not, and teachers did have some criticism. This will always be the case. More important is that everyone to a large degree can identify with the statement, commit him or herself to its implementation and see possibilities to proceed with subsequent steps.

Two years after the development of this strategy, not many people in the Utrecht School of the Arts know the mission by heart but everyone well remembers the discussions during the writing of it. And there's the rub! It is not the piece of paper that counts most, but the interaction processes that create and capture common inspiration in the minds of those involved. There does not have to be 100 percent agreement. The result of a good dialogue might even help some individuals to realise that it is time to look elsewhere. Those remaining carry on with zest and will be able to take a few knocks, because according to Nietzsche: "Who knows the whys and wherefores can endure almost anything".

Figure 2
Participative strategy development



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Dialogue about the profession: from mediocrity to growth

Finding common inspiration is a big step forward. The next step for the professionals is to be able to turn it into a reality. This brings us to the core problem of mediocrity. Professionals who do not develop and share their knowledge together rest on their laurels. Innovation suffers as a consequence. Those geniuses who are few and far between might still gain new insights and skills from external peer-networks but the rest are left out. Even worse is the forgotten minority of lonely professionals that continues to function badly. This costs clients; and according to consultancy expert Charles Handy (1994), is a financial drain on the company: "I estimate

that the intellectual assets of a corporation are usually worth 3-4 times tangible book value. Yet if CEO's are asked how much of the knowledge in their companies is used, they typically say: about 20%".

This quote illustrates the fact that professionals form the economic pivot on which the knowledge-intensive organisation turns. But if you look at how much energy is put into the planned exchange and development of knowledge, it is negligible compared to for instance financial planning (in professional organisations, it would be better if it was the other way round). Physicist Werner Heisenberg (1971) confirms the importance of professional knowledge sharing. In their discussions, Pauli, Einstein, Bohr and Heisenberg himself reached revolutionary conclusions that they could never have arrived at on their own. Years afterwards, he concluded: "Science is rooted in conversations". Not that it comes naturally for professionals to learn together. Sometimes the top dogs think that their position is weakened by sharing their knowledge with others and the underdogs are afraid that if they admit that they still have something to learn, they are messaging that they are not good enough. However, this resistance does not run deep, because every top dog loves to be recognised for his achievements and it is inherent in both groups of professionals that they wish to develop their thinking, acting and being. This resistance dwindles even further if the professionals are invited to have a say in the set up of professionalisation, thus increasing their chances that they will be supported to learn what, when and how they like. On the other hand there is always the odd man out that is more interested in the perks than in his overall contribution. Therefore a certain amount of direction on the part of management remains vital.

Example: professionalisation at 3M

A short description of targeted professionalisation as a method is given in Figure 3. Based on the research process of 3M (Graham, 1996), we will describe a few of the aspects involved. The company is mainly a production company, not typically the ideal environment for professionals. However the company considers innovation to be vital to its existence and for this reason, would not dream of contracting-out research work. The mission states: "Thirty per cent of 3M's annual sales comes from products less than four years old". How can they stimulate 8,000 researchers to share and develop knowledge? 3M's 60,000 products are spread over the market groups but this does not apply to the underlying technology. Technologies are the common property of the

researchers. They do not hide their knowledge in the cupboards of some 100 laboratories but in a company-wide database that is used intensively. Furthermore, there are 33 company-wide technology platforms where researchers with common interests meet one another. Researchers are encouraged to spend a lot of time developing personal networks, supported by two staff departments specially created for this purpose. In this way, each researcher creates his or her own co-operative relationships and friendships. What is more, 15 percent of the professional time can be spent on further investigation into own pet projects in which pals can be involved (Friday afternoon research). If a researcher wishes to invest more time and money in a project, he/she just has to find sponsors from anywhere within the organisation.

The nice thing about the 3M example is that classic training forms are hardly used for the exchange and development of professional knowledge. There are still traditional training programmes but they are of a different kind: teaching the researchers the unwritten rules and the informal ways to get things done in the hostile world of mainstream business culture and industrial culture. The "eleventh commandment", "Thou shall not kill new ideas for products", is a recognised way of protecting innovation in the early stages against efficiency experts. There is a story of how a researcher, during the development of 3M's Thinsulate, which has since become a commercial blockbuster, managed, with the help of the eleventh commandment, to frustrate five attempts by the big boss to torpedo the project.

One characteristic of good professionalisation is the active learning of skills in the field of self-management, change management and project management. It is true that professionals do not like compulsory training but it can be much less time consuming than technical training anyway. Plus it is exactly these "social" skills that empower people to take charge of their own work and learning processes. These skills thus catalyse professionalisation as a whole. The training about 3M's "informal ways" seems to provide a good example here. In contrast, technical knowledge must be spread on a need to know basis. At 3M, it is up to the professional to consult a database, to visit a platform or to log into his/her personal network. Good professionalisation usually places emphasis on learning in groups (see Table V), as in 3M's platforms. Here, knowledge can be accumulated and the trainees can learn from the fellows, and the fellows from their masters. Furthermore, during the work processes the ideas about professional quality come

Figure 3
Targeted professionalisation

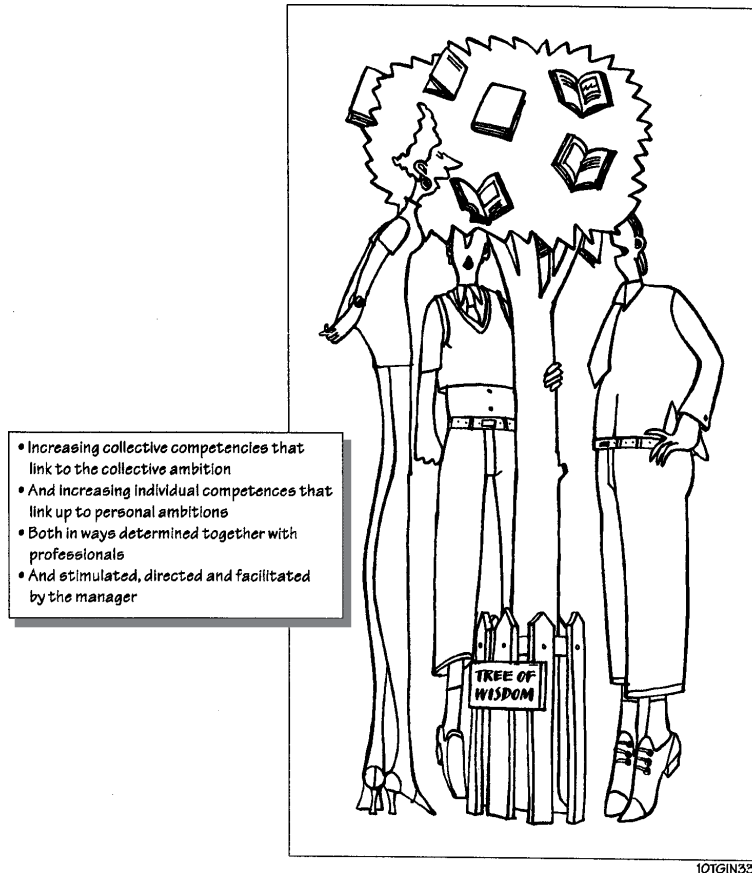


Table V
Work forms for professionalisation

Individual	In groups	Organisation wide
Learning by doing	Personal networks	Communications technologies
Self study	Peer assessments	Quality control systems
Coaching/supervision	Peer coaching/clinics	Knowledge information systems
(Self)assessments	Group assessments	Recruitment and selection
Learning assignments	Learning assignments	Personnel rotation
Product development projects	Product development projects	Game simulations
Publishing	Publishing	Synergy sessions
Internships/sabbatical leaves	Game simulations	"Hypertext" structures
External training	Open space meetings	
	Internal training/work conferences	

together organically, leaving the organisation with one less tricky affair to worry about, because decision making on performance standards in this type of organisation is a *mère à boire*. Organisation-wide work (infra) structures such as 3M's database, technology platforms and free-Friday afternoon research can be considered as the icing on the cake. But no matter how professionalisation is set up, at the end of the day what counts is how much has actually been learned and applied.

Thus the company's growth in products and services and the personal growth in seniority of its professionals are the real telltale signs of good professionalisation.

Dialogue about the results: from non-commitment to dedication

Common inspiration ensures that professional organisations are less fragmented and professionalisation counters mediocrity.

Managers have thus tackled two of the core problems. What remains is the concern whether professionals actually reach the results that have been envisaged. This brings us to the last core problem: non-commitment. Professionals are creative when it comes to deadlines, budgets and product requirements. The adjustments are always one way: deadlines are put back, budgets are increased and product requirements become fancier. Clients are the ones (intended) to pay for it and managers have difficult meetings with the shareholders trying to explain why the business results are not as agreed on earlier. Colleagues also suffer if the professional, once again, does not fulfil his/her promises. It makes no sense if the manager continually tries to keep the professional hard at it or tries to lay down the law about how the work should be done. Professionals are allergic to bossy behaviour and all manner of procedures. Manuals are despised. It is, however, possible to make concrete agreements about the targets to be achieved. Moreover a good professional – and who wants to regard him/herself as anything else – has enough pride and daring to display the result of his/her work. The architect proudly shows off his/her new bridge design and computer programmers their latest software, certainly if this can lead to recognition and reward. Even deadlines can sometimes aid the professional. Duke Ellington once admitted: “Without a deadline, baby, I wouldn’t do anything”. But the agreements about results and deadlines are only taken seriously if the professional him/herself has made them or at least has participated in the process of target setting. He/she will not accept them if they are imposed from above and, therefore, the manager and the professional have to negotiate those targets. This concerns a particular type of directing: the manager organises a dialogue between two parties about the desired results in which he himself is one of the parties representing the collective ambition. The more participation there was in creating this ambition, the easier the target-negotiations will be while the professional will feel more supported and less strangled by the agreements reached. For why would a professional not bind him/herself to agreements about results, which only serve to realise the ambition of which he/she was co-author?

Example: output review in a consultancy firm

In consultant’s jargon, we call this method of reaching agreements “output review” (see Figure 4). At Twijnstra Gudde, we have applied this method to ourselves for several

years. Together, once every four or five years, we rewrite our collective ambition. At the beginning of each year, bearing the mission in mind, each consultant and each consultancy group enters into an agreement with his/her manager in a contract meeting, resulting in Personal and Team Commitment Statements. These agreements include not only the desired results but also the support needed from “above”. It works both ways. First, each individual and each consultancy group makes a proposal. This is done deliberately in this order and not the other way around because it is better that the professionals themselves indicate what they are willing to commit themselves to than that managers have to guess at it. Besides, research has indicated that professionals are inclined to set higher targets for themselves than they would accept from their managers. Experience has shown that after some negotiation managers accept most proposals. We suspect that this is because most consultants are in agreement with the collective ambition. However, sometimes adjustments are necessary in order to tune the group’s results and the individual’s results better to each other as well as to the mission. Midway through the year, a coaching meeting takes place to establish whether all is going well and where support is necessary. In the course of the year, other priorities can be set but only together with and sanctioned by management. At the end of the year, an assessment meeting takes place during which the results that have been attained are compared to the agreements that were made and discrepancies are discussed. Rewards, up to a certain extent, are also dependent on the results of this discussion. This can vary from a raise in salary, a bonus or professional extras such as further education or, in the coming year, time out to be able to write a book. All in all, this concerns three or four annual discussions per employee. This is time consuming, but the fact that professionals carry out their activities rather autonomously saves the manager more time.

What do good result agreements look like? In any case, they should be short and concise so that everyone can easily remember them. Table VI shows an example of what they can look like at Twijnstra Gudde. The table of contents of effective result agreements is derived from the mission. In our mission, terms such as (professional) innovation and working in multi-disciplinary teams figure. Therefore, in the statement mention is made of what the consultant is planning to do in the way of product and personal development and to which discipline and markets he

Figure 4
Output review

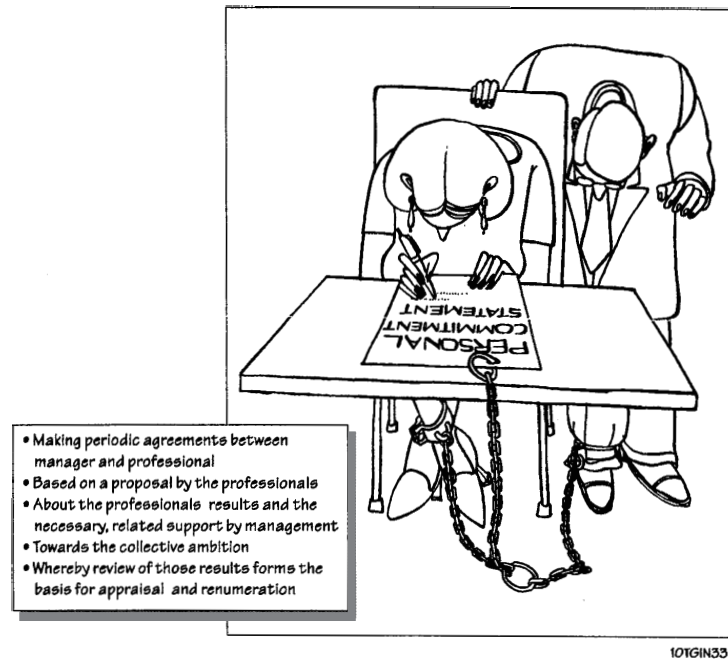


Table VI
Personnel commitment statement

Activity	Result	Time (days)
External assignments	80 percent of assignments in the fields of education and healthcare, aimed at TQM/quality management systems NLG 300,000 turnover Five extensive assignment evaluations	160
PR	Improvement/updating of TQM brochure Two articles and two conference papers	15
Product development	Survey of education administrators on leadership style Auditing instrument for quality management assurance Set up a knowledge archive on quality management assurance	20
Personal development	Two-monthly peer-coaching sessions with x and y Internal training: conflict management External training: financial management	15
In-house	Sounding board group on computerisation Responsible for the organisation of this years' social events	10

will confine himself. Good commitment statements are as free of bureaucratic jargon as possible. Only our turnover is expressed in terms of quantity because the agreements are already clear enough to avoid non-commitment. Furthermore turnover and customer satisfaction are measured formally. The rest is up to the consultant him/herself to report, formally or informally. However binding the agreements look on paper, there are always ways in which a professional can get round them should he/she want to. It is, therefore, more important that the manager as well as the professional understand and

rely on one another. If this is the case, the formal rites of negotiation are no more than a reflection of the informal dialogues that take place in the course of the year during which manager and professional together have discovered the key that enables individual professionals and the organisation to be dedicated to one another.

A fruitful conspiracy

We began this article with the freedom-loving professional who started working with

Table VII
Managing professionals' "new style"

	Coach	Caretaker	Stage director
Working domain	The primary process	The secondary process	Organisational synergy
Management activities	"Wandering around and wondering about" Providing recognition and challenges Coaching	Dealing with "upstairs" Supervising staff departments Facilitating the primary process	Participative strategy development Targeted professionalisation Output review
Tackles the problem of	Conflicts caused by management interference	Conflicts caused by professionals' interference	Fragmentation Mediocrity Non-commitment
Intended effects	Professional freedom and responsibility Conflict reduction	Managerial freedom and responsibility Conflict reduction	Inspiration Growth Dedication
Desired role of the professional	Meritocrat	Sponsor	Conspirator

an organisation because he/she thinks he/she can enrich his professional life by working with colleagues. The inability of professionals to commit themselves, resulting in a situation where fragmentation, mediocrity and non-commitment abound, can make this pleasure pall. The old management school of command and control merely makes things worse, creating conflicts in professional organisations.

A manager can make a difference if he/she seeks to find a new style of leadership. The essential message is that professionals want to get the chance to contribute to the collective ambition of the organisation. It is up to management to create the conditions which make this possible. The suggested management roles, activities and the effects envisaged are summed up in Table VII. It looks simple enough, but it is no self-fulfilling recipe for success. Where control stops, adventure begins. The aim: to strive constantly to falsify the following statement (Arrow, 1980) while knowing in advance that you will never succeed 100 percent: "There is plenty of reason to suppose that individual talents count for a good deal more than the firm as an organisation".

Success is marked by having professionals' love of freedom coalesce with common inspiration, mutual growth and – dedication. Which manager would not be inspired by these possibilities? Those maybe, for whom it is too much trouble. Not every manager will be able to work with so many self-opinionated professionals even if he wants to. Nor will every professional be able to trade in his independence for "freedom in solidarity" even if he/she is so inclined.

Ben Knaapen illustrated the presented view on professional organisations at his farewell as editor of the *NRC*. When asked if he would

miss the newspaper, he answered: "Tremendously. They are a bunch of self-opinionated guys, prima donnas, just like any of us. But if you don't let petty, office politics drive you mad, then this is a very special, inspiring group of people. Every day, you can have fantastic discussions about post-modernism, morality, how to deal with the colonial past etc. Every day the newspaper is a sort of conspiracy".

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Application questions

- 1 What is a professional?
- 2 Look again at Table II - what do Dutch graduates look for in a job? Do the

same criteria apply in your experience?
What might be different and why?