

# Theatre leadership from a communication perspective

## Führung im Theater aus kommunikativer Perspektive

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### *Abstract*

Although communication is inherent in leadership, it has not yet been explicitly investigated in cultural management research. This explorative study addresses leadership in theatres from a communication perspective. It is based on the theoretical approaches of communicative leader-member-exchange and aesthetic leadership. In 37 interviews, first- and second-level managers in German theatres show a high level of awareness for the importance of their communication. Nevertheless, internal communication appears to be weakly structured in terms of strategic organizational communication, even though it seems to become more systematic. The integration of conflicting organizational areas (especially the aesthetic, technical/workshops and administration/financial area) is regarded as a decisive communicative leadership-task both in short-term (moderating, negotiating) and in long-term (permanent dialogue/fostering mutual understanding) perspectives. Furthermore, the results contribute to refine the approach developed and point ways for future research on leadership communication in theatres.

Obwohl Kommunikation ein wesentlicher Aspekt von Führung ist, wurde sie in der empirischen Kulturmanagementforschung bisher nicht explizit untersucht. Diese explorative Studie befasst sich mit Führung in Theatern aus einer kommunikativen Perspektive. Sie basiert auf den theoretischen Ansätzen des kommunikativen Leader-Member-Exchange und des Aesthetic Leadership. In 37 Interviews an deutschen Theatern zeigen Führungskräfte der ersten und zweiten Führungsebene ein hohes Bewusstsein für die Bedeutung ihrer Kommunikation. Dennoch wirkt die interne Kommunikation in der strategischen Organisationskommunikation nur schwach strukturiert – scheint aber derzeit systematischer zu werden. Die Integration konfligierender Organisationsfelder (insbesondere Kunst, Technik/Werkstätten und Verwaltung/Finanzen) wird als entscheidende kommunikative Führungsaufgabe angesehen – sowohl kurzfristig (moderieren/verhandeln) als auch langfristig (permanenter Dialog/Förderung gegenseitigen Verständnisses). Weiterhin helfen die Ergebnisse, den erarbeiteten Ansatz zu konkretisieren und zeigen Wege für zukünftige Forschung zur Führungskommunikation in Theatern.

### *Keywords*

Führungskommunikation, Interne Kommunikation, Leader-Member-Exchange, Aesthetic Leadership, Theatermanagement

Leadership Communication, Internal Communication, Leader-Member Exchange, Aesthetic Leadership, Theatre Management

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural businesses have been repeatedly recommended to optimize internal processes (ZULAUF 2011) and to focus systematically on employees through strategic personnel management (SÜSS 2012). This is becoming increasingly important for German theatres, as they are becoming more and more complex to manage due to fundamental changes in their financing and audience motivation (KNAPPE 2010; SCHMIDT 2017). Moreover, pressure is mounting from public debates on cultural policy and leadership, triggered by arising labour union initiatives, especially in the artistic area (SCHMIDT 2017). In managing and leading organizations, communication is essential – organizations cannot function without communication (SCHNEIDER et al. 2014). Since its crucial role in leadership (VRIES et al. 2010), it is important to investigate leadership from a communication perspective (HACKMAN/JOHNSON 2013).

Correspondingly, communication is given high priority in theoretical literature or guidebooks for leadership, staff management decision-making in theatres (RÖPER 2006; SCHMIDT 2012) as well as orchestras (MERTENS 2012) and artistic organizations in general (BAECKER 2009; KLEIN 2009; TRÖNDLE 2006). Leadership communication is also stressed in the context of change management (THELEN 2008), process implementation (KNAPPE 2010, SCHNEIDEWIND 2012) or mergers of artistic organizations (FÖHL/HUBER 2004). Zulauf (2011) emphasizes the significance of internal communication in general for organizational development in cultural enterprises, but notes likewise: “In cultural institutions there is predominantly no systematic internal communication” (ZULAUF 2011: 19). Considering empirical studies, leadership communication has been identified as a relevant factor among others for the relationship of artistic and financial managers (REYNOLDS et al. 2017) and for reducing conflicts among different departments (ALLMANN 2013) in theatres. Some other studies mention communication marginally while discussing decision-making processes (COSSEL 2011), interactions between managers and employees (BOERNER 2002) or the relationships of conductors or directors to an orchestra or theatre ensemble (KOIVUNEN 2003; SAUER 2005).

However, although leadership communication was identified as a relevant research topic and comes up as an important factor in empirical cultural management research, there was – to the best of my knowledge – no systematic research on this topic from a communication perspective. The present study aims to provide a framework for such an approach and

explores the relevance, challenges and success of leadership-communication in theatres. In the following, leadership communication and the specific conditions of leadership communication in artistic organizations are discussed from a theoretical perspective. From these, I will derive exploratory research questions addressing the relevance and degree of professionalization of leadership communication as well as its significance for the successful integration of conflicting organizational areas in theatres. Afterwards, the methodical approach to investigate these questions is explained followed by the results, which are then summarized and discussed.

## 2. Leadership-Communication

Leadership in organizations is hardly imaginable without communication (VRIES et al. 2010; MACIK-FREY 2007). The coordination of tasks or dissemination of information are just a few of the communicative processes that are part of everyday management life. Leadership and its objectives, such as motivation and decision-making, cannot be achieved without communication (HASLAM 2004): Neuberger (2002) reports that communication accounts for the largest share of a manager's working day. Studies show correlations between management communication and job satisfaction and/or motivation (MIKKELSON et al. 2015). In addition, experiments have proven positive influence of management communication on work performance (BOIES et al. 2015; KUHNEN/TYMULA 2012).

Despite such results, and although both leadership and communication research emphasize the connections between the two concepts, established leadership theories do not focus on communication processes (COHEN 2004). However, recent attempts could show that established leadership theories and communicative variables can be well integrated (BAKAR et al. 2010; VRIES et al. 2010; FIX/SIAS 2006). A very promising approach emerges from the Leader-Member-Exchange theory (LMX) (GRAEN/UHL-BIEN 1995) as it takes into account the relationships between leaders and their employees. These "dyadic" relationships differ in their quality. Leadership is successful when a manager maintains positive bilateral relationships with his or her employees (WEGGE/ROSENSTIEL 2014). This two-way relationship perspective fits well with communication theory since communication can be defined as a dyadic interpersonal exchange of information (HACKMAN/JOHNSON

2013). Although communicative aspects do not play a role in the original LMX theory, various studies have shown that, based on the LMX theory, connections between leadership and communication can be well investigated (ERBEN et al. 2019; FIX/SIAS 2006; HERTZSCH et al. 2012; SCHNEIDER et al. 2015).

This study of leadership communication in theatres correspondingly takes into account interactive communicative relationships across different hierarchical levels. In relation to the subject of the study – the theatre as an artistic enterprise – additional factors must be considered: Different organizational fields, which could come into conflict, have to be integrated in artistic enterprises and can be a challenge for leadership communication in theatres, which is discussed below.

### 3. Conflicting organizational fields in theatres

Leadership faces particular challenges in theatres (VAKIANIS 2006). Different groups of employees whose interests vary and who are involved to different extents in the actual outcome – the productions – have to be integrated. The needs of artists, which are shaped by aesthetic considerations and are not always rationally or functionally founded, are not clear or easy to plan and measure and are countered by economic and structural conditions (STEIN/BATHURST 2008). Costumes and stage sets are produced in workshops, which are mainly used by craftsmen. Their work, which can be judged according to craftsmanship criteria, is incorporated into the productions that are developed and interpreted by the dramaturgy, direction or actors. The most intensive contact with the audience members is at the cloakroom or at the box office, where employees usually perform purely administrative tasks and have no aesthetic training (RÖPER 2006). Tensions between artistic thinking and managerial or economic thinking as well as their potential for conflicts are well investigated both for artistic organizations in general (ALEXANDER 2002; AUVINEN 2001; REID/KARAMBAYYA 2009; TOWNLEY 2002) and for the theatre in particular (EIKHOF/HAUNSCHILD 2007; KLEPPE 2018; RØYSENG 2008; COSSEL 2011).

The coordination of employees across conflicting organizational areas requires leadership processes under “dual rationalities” (CRAY et al. 2007). A theoretical approach that considers artistic and non-artistic rationalities in leadership and enables to investigate their integration is described by a concept called *Aesthetic Leadership* (GUILLET DE



MONTHOUX et al. 2007). This approach assumes that leadership must be attentive to both aesthetic and rational areas of any organization and therefore applies in particular to artistic organizations. The authors further differentiate the non-aesthetic rationality and define three ideal-typical 'fields' characterized by different 'philosophies' that exist especially in cultural enterprises: a management field, an administration field and an aesthetic field. Managers must ensure that all three fields are integrated and avoid individual fields dominating others. The management goal must be that all fields are kept in 'flow' (GUILLET DE MONTHOUX et al. 2007).

The present study takes up these considerations: Leadership communication is not only seen as an interactive communicative relationship across different hierarchical levels but also across conflicting organizational fields. However, two issues remain to be addressed in the context of the aesthetic leadership approach and will be discussed below. First, the aesthetic leadership approach applies to artistic organizations in general, and the authors do not formulate general empirical indicators that allow a clear distinction of the fields in theatres. Secondly, the authors do not explain how flow could be further defined and operationalized as a management objective.

### 3.1 Differentiation of conflicting fields

Concerning the identification of different fields, a first approximation can be made via the so-called 'philosophies' which Guillet de Monthoux et al. (2007) describe to characterize the different fields. The philosophy in the *management field* is economic: goals are measurable, for example in profit, capacity utilization or revenue. Since management is not defined as executive level, the focus lies on financial issues and does not rule out that there are no managers (or: leaders) in other fields as well. In the *administrative field* the philosophy is bureaucratic: rules are established and observed. Laws and regulations from outside must be obeyed. Structures and processes establish internal order. In the *aesthetic field* the philosophy is philosophical: the goals lie beyond calculations and bureaucratic rules. Quality is not objectively measurable in terms of financial key figures but evaluated by aesthetic judgements. Artistic action can go beyond conventions. Its urge for freedom is very high (GUILLET DE MONTHOUX et al. 2007).

These reflections provide indications for a preliminary differentiation of areas in theatres. The aesthetic field covers those areas that are directly involved in the artistic process, such as ensemble, direction or dramaturgy.

The management field should include those departments that take on mainly financial tasks, such as financial management, accounting and controlling. The administrative field is most likely to apply to personnel management, facility management or the legal department, as rules and laws provide the framework here. Additionally, the administrative field is likely to apply to public relations, the technical departments and workshops, as they work towards art but do not belong to the financial administration. However, since these departments are not purely bureaucratic, a more pragmatic working definition is used. In the following, I will distinguish between an artistic field, a management field that performs mainly financial tasks, and an administrative field that performs mainly organizational tasks. Following the theoretical approach of this work, leadership communication must keep these areas in flow. What this might entail is subject of the following discussion. The adequacy of these areas will be examined in the further course of this study.

### 3.2 The management of flow as a leadership task

The three fields discussed above have to be kept in balance and, according to Guillet de Monthoux et al. (2007), connecting them is a leadership task. The authors define this alternatively as a process – “managing the flows between” (p.: 268) the fields – or as an outcome of leadership – “all three fields must be in flow” (p.: 271). With regard to the communicative scope of this study, flow can therefore either be referred to as the quality of communication relations across the field (an independent variable) or be seen as a consequence of high-quality communication relationships (a dependent variable). Since this is of major importance for the conception of future studies, this should be clarified in more detail in this study.

There are some indications that the procedural perspective is more relevant. Aesthetic leadership is described as “connecting the fields” and assuming them “to be of the same importance” (GUILLET DE MONTHOUX et al. 2007: 268). Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst (2017) interpret aesthetic leadership as construction of mutual relationships across the fields – which in turn matches the LMX theory. This would mean for the present study that LMX dyads must have an equally high quality (i.e. ‘be in flow’) across the fields in order for leadership to be successful.

However, it should not be disregarded that GUILLET DE MONTHOUX et al. (2007) also refer to Csikszentmihaly (2004) who defined flow in the workplace as a subjective experience of an individual's total immersion in the tasks assigned to him or her (ENGESER/

SCHIEPE-TISKA 2012). Accordingly, flow has been operationalized as an outcome variable in the context of leadership and internal communication studies: When employees perceive managers as supportive (SOSIK et al. 1999), or communication positively (RAU/RIEDEL 2004) they tend to experience flow in the workplace. Apart from these individual experiences of flow, there are approaches trying to measure flow as a team experience (HOUT et al. 2016). It could therefore also be possible that flow experiences must be regarded as a relevant outcome of leadership communication.

This vagueness in the aesthetic leadership approach will be countered in this study by analysing the role of leadership in managing the flow of communicative relations and as a relevant communication outcome with regard to the components of flow-theory.

### 3.3 Research Questions

From the above discussion, perspectives arise to examine leadership across conflicting organizational fields in theatres from a communication perspective. Since this study is intended to provide an initial investigation of leadership communication in theatres and to sharpen the theoretical reflections, three sets of explorative research questions are formulated in the following. The first set of questions is intended to enable an investigation of relevance and manifestations of leadership communication in theatres, which is fundamentally directed at the importance that managers place on their communication (RQ 1.1). In addition, communication objectives are explored (RQ 1.2), since leadership communication is usually not accidental but associated with intentions (for an overview see RETZBACH/SCHNEIDER 2012). Furthermore, internal communication does not only occur face-to-face, but also through other channels and media (for an overview see HUCK-SANDHU 2016). Therefore, the usual communication instruments in theatres are investigated (RQ 1.3). In addition, it has been repeatedly stressed that internal communication is more successful if it is part of a strategic management process (DOLPHIN 2005; MEN 2014). This includes that communication instruments are purposefully oriented towards their objectives (HALLAHAN et al. 2007) and planned on the basis of systematic analyses (GRUNIG/HUNT 1984). In order to clarify to what extent leadership communication in theatres is seen as a strategic management process, it is necessary to ask whether the communication instruments are oriented towards their objectives and strategically planned (RQ 1.4).

RQ 1.1: What relevance does communication have for managers in the theatre?

RQ 1.2: What objectives do managers pursue with their communication?

RQ 1.3: Which instruments are used in the communication process?

RQ 1.4: To what extent are communication instruments oriented towards the objectives and strategically planned?

This perspective on the relevance and manifestations of communication is supplemented by communication across conflicting fields. Accordingly, the second set of research questions concentrates on the extent to which leadership communication in theatres has to consider different organizational fields. Since the fields were presented as potentially conflicting, particular notice is given on the situations in which the fields clash (RQ 2.1). In order to determine the relevant fields (as discussed in section 3.1) and communication across them (as discussed in section 3.2) more precisely, it is examined whether typical areas can be demarcated along the lines of conflict in theatres (RQ 2.2). Since communication is crucial for conflict resolution (KRAUSS/MORSELLA 2014), its significance in leadership communication across the areas is particularly investigated (RQ 2.3).

RQ 2.1: Which cross-area conflicts must leadership communication in theatres consider?

RQ 2.2: Can typical organizational fields be demarcated along the lines of conflict?

RQ 2.3: To what extent are conflicts resolved through communication?

As discussed above, leadership communication is intentional and can have an influence on employees and organizations depending on the quality of communication (SCHNEIDER et al. 2014). Accordingly, it is asked which factors are relevant to evaluate communication in theatres (RQ 3.1, for an overview see the discussion of communicative items in Schneider et al. 2015). In addition to these criteria, questions are also asked about the actual evaluation in the self-image of managers (RQ 3.2) and in the external image of others (RQ 3.3) to reflect a relational perspective across hierarchical levels and organizational fields. Finally, it is also clarified to what extent intended communication outcomes (RQ 3.4) correspond to flow theory (for an overview see ENGESER/SCHIEPETISKA 2012) or other established dimensions of organizational diagnostics (for an overview see FELFE/LIEPMANN 2008). Answering these ques-

tions should also help to clarify whether flow as a management task is more related to the quality of communication relationships across areas or their impact on the members of the organization as discussed in section 3.2.

RQ 3.1 Which are the relevant factors for the evaluation of communication?

RQ 3.2: How do managers evaluate their own communication (across the fields)?

RQ 3.3: How do managers evaluate the communication of their subordinates/executives/colleagues (across the fields)?

RQ 3.4: To what extent do criteria for successful communication match with flow-theory and other established dimensions of organizational diagnostics?

Since the research questions described above are intended as first insights into leadership communication in theatres and to sharpen respective theory, an explorative study was developed and carried out, which is described in the following section.

## **4. Methods**

To address the research questions outlined above, problem-oriented interviews with first-level managers and department heads in theatres were conducted. In the following, the sampling-strategy, the interview procedure and the analytic approach are presented before the findings are reported and discussed.

### **4.1 Sampling**

The sampling-process followed three theoretical aspects. The first aspect considers the LMX theory by interviewing people from different hierarchical levels. The selection aimed at first level (artistic managing director or financial managing director) and second level executives (e.g. head of dramaturgy, head of technical department, head of press department, director of operations). The second aspect reflects the differentiation of organizational fields according to the aesthetic leadership approach as discussed above. People were recruited from different departments according to the artistic field, the management field that performs mainly financial tasks, and the administrative field that performs mainly

organizational tasks. This selection has a strong focus on leaders but supports the investigation of dyadic relationships between hierarchical levels within management as well as across areas because those at the top-management level should have regular personal contact among each other.

The third aspect emerges from specific structures of the German theatre landscape. For this purpose, persons were recruited at state, city and regional theatres with different management models, such as dual leadership/direction, board of directors and management by municipal sponsor. For a comprehensive overview describing the characteristics of the German theatre landscape, which was slightly adapted for this study, see Schmidt (2017). Only public theatres were considered, as they are most affected by the changes described in the beginning (RÖPER 2006, SCHMIDT 2017). In the selection of theatres and within multi-genre theatres, a focus was placed on the acting sector in order to keep aesthetic traditions constant as a confounding variable.

A selection of theatres was made based on the yearbook of the Guild of the German Stage (GDBA, 2017). If possible, personal and professional contacts were asked to recommend the study to executives in the respective theatres. In the selected theatres, the relevant managers and department heads were each written an individual invitation letter. In cases of denials or non-responses, a new theatre with a similar structure was selected until each type of theatre was represented at least once. In total 173 managers from 32 theatres were contacted and 37 managers from 12 German theatres were interviewed between April and July 2017. In 5 theatres it was possible to talk to all requested interview-partners, in 3 theatres about half participated and in 4 theatres only single persons participated. On average, 5 people were invited per theatre, the response rate for those invited was 22% and the average attendance rate within the theatres that participated was 60%. Table 1 gives an overview of the final sample according to the criteria discussed above.

## 4.2 Procedure

The problem-oriented interviews were semi structured and lasted between 20 and 67 minutes with an average duration of 41 minutes. The procedure was described in detail, and the confidentiality of the answers was clearly pointed out to the participants. The interview guide followed the research questions. First, participants were asked which role communication plays in their daily work and with whom they communicate with most

|                              | Total | Regional theatre | City theatre | State theatre | Dual leadership/direction | Board of directors | Managed by sponsor |
|------------------------------|-------|------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <i>First-Level-Managers</i>  |       |                  |              |               |                           |                    |                    |
| Artistic managing director   | 6     | 2                | 3            | 1             | 4                         | -                  | 2                  |
| Financial managing director  | 7     | 1                | 3            | 3             | 5                         | 1                  | 1                  |
| <i>Second-Level-Managers</i> |       |                  |              |               |                           |                    |                    |
| Tasks mainly artistic        | 11    | 2                | 4            | 5             | 8                         | 1                  | 2                  |
| Tasks mainly organizational  | 10    | 3                | 4            | 3             | 6                         | 1                  | 3                  |
| Tasks mainly financial       | 3     | 2                | -            | 1             | 1                         | -                  | 2                  |
| Total                        | 37    | 10               | 14           | 13            | 24                        | 3                  | 10                 |

Table 1: *Description of the sample.*

frequently. In the following conversation, it was worked out which objectives they pursue, via which channels they communicate and if there were any indications for strategically planned communication. Respondent were then asked to discuss their previous responses in relation to the communication relationships with executives, subordinates or colleagues. The second part addressed the second set of research questions elaborating the extent to which leadership communication in theatres has to consider different organizational fields. Wherever possible, reference was made to relevant contents of the previous discussion. The main focus was on conflicts between the various fields and possible solutions. Addressing the third research question, participants were asked to evaluate their own and others' communication. Attempts were made to develop hypothetical criteria for what ideal communication might look like and what impact it would have on the organization. At the end of the interview, the first research question was referred back to by asking executives to evaluate the statement that communication at theatres has a low significance and what developments they expect in the next 10 years. Such a provocative statement can be a basic stimulus for deeper discus-

sions (MEY/MRUCK 2011). All interviews were conducted by the author, recorded and transcribed according to the recommendations of Gläser and Laudel (2010).

### 4.3 Analytic Approach

The transcripts were examined by a content analysis approach following the principles of content structuring (SCHREIER 2014). In a first step, statements contributing to the analysis of the research questions were identified and summarized. These summarized statements were compared and similar ones clustered in a second step. A third step examined if these clusters can be described with existing concepts with regard to objectives (RETZBACH/SCHNEIDER 2012), instruments (HUCK-SANDHU 2016), evaluation of leader-member-communication (SCHNEIDER et al. 2015), general communication outcomes (FELFE/LIEPMANN 2008) and flow (ENGESER/SCHIEPE-TISKA 2012). When not assignable to such concepts, additional categories were formulated inductively. After having summarized and categorized the summarized statements, all interviews were re-examined for the final categories. Afterwards, differences and parallels between hierarchical levels and organizational fields were explored.

## 5. Findings

The results are presented below for each research question. At the end a summary of all results is given, which are then integrated into the existing theory. Afterwards, the central findings and their implications are discussed.

### 5.1 Relevance of leadership communication in theatres

When asked for the importance of communication (RQ 1.1) in their daily work, the participants emphasize that communication plays a *key role* in their daily work. It has “a key function in corporate management” (11, 36, 3),<sup>1</sup> accounts for “*most of the working time*” (05, 15, 3) and “*is in principle my job*” (04, 12, 3). The further discussion about the relevance of communication reveals repeatedly that many managers reflect inten-

1 To retrace quotes, they are labeled with theatre ID, participant ID and paragraph number.



sively on their own communication. For example, a dramaturge explains "We devote a lot of time and attention to the audience. We have to take this communication just as seriously internally" (02, 05, 75). Others discuss that information provision is not only about the factual level, but also "my personal style and attitude flow into it" (02, 06, 3). In addition, elaborated communicative maxims are explained, for example: "My premise in every conversation is that the other has freedom of movement" (06, 20, 125). A frequently conscious and active examination of communication and leadership becomes particularly clear in the discussion of the provoking statements formulated at the end of the interview. Only a few reject the statement that internal communication in theatres has a low significance. Slightly more participants agree and about half of the respondents take a more differentiated assessment. A rather rejective position is often explained by the situation within the interviewee's own organization ("I just said the opposite for my theatre" 12, 37, 89) and with the conviction that "theatre wouldn't work if communication was that bad" (04, 12, 59). Some of the respondents who tend to agree believe that communication problems in theatres are inevitable and can hardly be solved ("There are many personalities in the theatre who are good artists, but who have not internalized the rules of communication or do not want to have them" 06, 20, 97).

However, the vast majority of respondents seeing problems in leadership and communication often refer to current cultural policy debates and expect change in the next 10 years. They discuss in particular the strict hierarchical structure of German theatres, "In many theatres there is still the model of the almighty artistic managing director – that is an obsolete model." (02, 08, 66). However, the principle of hierarchy is rarely put into question, but rather the way in which leadership is exercised. Many artistic managing directors emphasize that "theatre must be hierarchically structured" (01, 01, 79) and "must be a bit feudalistic in structure" (03, 10, 119), but nevertheless declare that "they must be structured in flat hierarchies" (01, 01, 79) and "leadership must be aware of transparent communication into the complete depth of the structure" (03, 10, 119). Second level leaders in particular expect current labour union initiatives will drive change, "A variety of factors, such as the current 'ensemble network', make grievances public, and theatrical management must now respond to them. In order to react, problems have to be tackled and this can only be done through communication" (06, 19, 123).

Such developments can already be seen in some theatres. Many respondents from all areas and management levels express an interest in

improving their “ability to communicate with staff” (05, 15, 89). In one of the theatres surveyed, all managers completed a joint management training and agree that “this was a good experience” (02, 08, 72). In another theatre it is mixed, “we had a seminar once. It was useful for me. But I know that a lot of people said it was just esoteric” (07, 23, 98).

Although many people expect change, some also stress that many communication problems are caused by structural issues that are likely to remain – like scarce financial resources which “don’t get better through communication” (07, 24, 89). Conversely, some also see with concern “further shortages in money and manpower, which lead to a densification of work, and communication usually suffers as a result” (10, 33, 81).

## 5.2 Objectives, instruments and strategic planning of communication

In the discussion of their communication objectives (RQ 1.2), participants focus on workflow organization. “Mutual *information*” (10, 33, 5) and *coordination* like the “distribution of tasks” (06, 16, 5) are the most important aspects mentioned. Another essential objective in communication is the “*solution of problems*” (06, 21, 13). Especially for employees at the second management level, problems are a reason for communication with their superiors, “when I have a problem, I go to the artistic managing director” (06, 19, 37). During the discussion about their objectives, managers already emphasize the special conditions of theatre operations, particularly the *high degree of complexity*. There is “a lot of information that has to flow together when scheduling” (04, 12, 13), *asymmetrical working hours* (“Operating time is from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., in different shifts”, 02, 06, 3) and the *short-term nature of artistic processes* (“Many things happen very suddenly”, 05, 13, 3).

While there are hardly any differences between the interviewees in these operational aspects, artistic executives have an additional argument. Artistic managing directors and chief dramaturges often stress that communication is also very important because *theatre processes themselves are discursive processes*. “Communication is the medium we represent on stage” (06, 20, 5) and therefore “the foundations of the company’s structure and culture are communicative” (03, 10, 5). People working in the artistic field in particular cite the “*discussion of artistic content*” (05, 14, 9) and “*artistic processes*” (02, 08, 9) as a relevant communication objective. This embraces the artistic work (“editing a play’s text with

directors, giving feedback on rehearsals" 12, 37, 17), discussing "ideas with others" (06, 21, 13) or "programming the season" (02, 05, 11).

However, in the discussion of the communication objectives, organizational factors are named above all. Only single participants describe individual employee-related objectives. "A positive *working climate*" (08, 30, 11), "*motivation*" (04, 12, 5) and "*satisfaction*" (06, 18, 9) also play a role but remain much less relevant than organizational objectives.

In line with the communication objectives, the instruments used in the communication process (RQ 1.3) primarily serve coordination purposes. The "*personal face to face talk*" (08, 31, 15) and "*various types of weekly or monthly meetings*" (02, 08, 19) dominate among almost all respondents. Personal conversation is usually mentioned as the first one among others, and frequently explicitly emphasized as the "most important" (05, 13, 11). It is often added that this type of conversation takes place "fast and at short notice" (06, 21, 9). In cases of "difficult or complex subjects" (01, 04, 13) or "sensitive topics and personnel issues" (07, 24, 15) the managers always rather consider the personal conversation and "avoid writing down conflicts" (10, 35, 15). The meetings – usually management meetings where "the closest management team meets" (02, 05, 9), but also meetings within and across the departments – are described as very institutionalized, frequent and regular, but there are also respondents that say "we try to keep the number of meetings low" (06, 21, 9).

Apart from personal conversations and meetings, the main channels frequently mentioned are e-mail and telephone. The medium *e-mail* polarizes strongly. Several participants say they "don't like the medium" (08, 26, 13) but "it cannot be avoided" (07, 24, 13). These people often find "too much is written" (07, 25, 35) and criticize "collective mails to the whole group" (04, 11, 13). But there are also some who consider e-mail as "very important" and their "most frequent and intensive" (10, 33, 15) tool of communication. Most frequently discussed reasons for using e-mail are "different work hours" (06, 18, 18), a need for "proof that information was passed on" (01, 03, 17), "short clarification or instructions" (02, 09, 17) or "to inform many people at the same time" (05, 14, 13). *Telephone calls* are often seen as a "shortcut" (02, 05, 23) for personal communication if the other person is not nearby and are described as "similar to a personal conversation" (10, 34, 17). The "*internal internet*" (07, 22, 13) and partly explicitly the "planning software" (04, 12, 15) is named seldomly and rather by respondents from the financial management or administrative support. Only very rarely mentioned are "*messages on the bulletin board*" and "*mobile short messages*".

While most communication media in line with the communication objectives primarily serves coordination purposes, there are also few references to further communication activities. One artistic managing director wants to establish structured forms of dialogue, for example “open space or world cafés” (09, 32, 9). A dramaturge explains that the quarterly published theatre magazine not only addresses external target groups but also “the whole house – the stage door keeper reads it, the box office cashier and the departments” (04, 11, 59). However, these remain individual measures that are not integrated into a systematic internal communication strategy (RQ 1.4). If the participants are explicitly asked about the extent of planned, purposeful internal communication, they tend to associate planned communication with *periodic appointments* which are “set up like a standing order” (04, 11, 19). Others even argue that besides meetings, communication *should not be planned* because they “have to react extremely spontaneously” (01, 01, 19). The overall impression is that even after a few explanations, most participants cannot imagine how internal communication could be strategically planned. This is interesting in the respect that, as some respondents – especially the dramaturges and press officers – answer questions about strategic planning by saying that they “could answer it for the external communication right away. The media work very differently and with target groups in mind” (04, 11, 15). The *knowledge for the strategic design of communication measures is obviously present* in some theatres, but it is not applied to internal communication.

However, in some cases there is also the *mention of systematic strategic approaches*. In one theatre, executives report that an “employee survey was carried out” (05, 14, 47), criticism on communication was specifically taken up and measures were accordingly modified. In another theatre, an “informal meeting was developed” (03, 10, 111) jointly by the directors and the ensemble, which is not intended to serve coordination but to improve the exchange and atmosphere. At several theatres there are “long-term planned feedback interviews with employees” (03, 10, 35). One theatre has even had these designed by an external expert: “Feedback interviews are mandatory once a year” (02, 07, 23) and are “structured and documented with predefined templates” (02, 06, 33). All these measures were recently introduced at the theatres and, in line with the results above, show that there is a shift towards more employee orientation and professionalization of internal communication.

### 5.3 Leadership communication across different organizational fields

The extent to which leadership communication must consider conflicting organizational fields (RQ 2.1) was frequently addressed by respondents without being explicitly asked in the interview. One manager remarks – when asked for the role of communication – that “one has to moderate between different interests” (08, 30, 13) – for example when the limited number of hours of the technical department is confronted with the needs of the artistic planners. That kind of conflict, related to resources, is the most frequently mentioned and exists in particular between the artistic and technical area. This involves *personnel and time resources* because “not only financial aspects play a role, but also the manpower available at a given moment” (08, 27, 63). This is often explained by “workshop capacities and lead time” (02, 05, 55), “set-up and dismantling of stage sets” (12, 37, 63) and the “fixed working hours of stage technicians, which do not exist in the artistic area” (02, 05, 45). Conflicts also emerge between artistic and financial areas over *financial resources*, since – from the perspective of an artistic managing director – “the financial managing director’s interest in a balanced budget can conflict with artistic interests” (03, 10, 51). Conversely, financial managing directors state, “Although we have business plans with objective content, the expectations of art are of course always disappointed” (07, 22, 54). Although the resources of the technical departments naturally also concern the economic basis of the house, resource-based conflicts between these areas are rarely described. This seems less a matter of financing issues than of *information and planning processes*, for example when the technical area “does not comply with public procurement directives” (11, 36, 45). Planning processes are also an important field of conflict between artistic and technical area as well as financial management because “the artistic side wants to make decisions as late as possible and the technical side and the financial side want to make decisions as fast as possible” (02, 05, 45). Another important area of conflict between artistic and technical departments are *safety-issues* like “occupational safety” (05, 15, 43) and “assembly ordinance” (01, 03, 55). Between the artistic and financial departments there is furthermore the conflict between *artistic freedom and marketing considerations*, which is reflected less in the selection of pieces but in questions of “sponsoring” (06, 16, 70) or “a corporate design predefined by the financial managing director” (07, 24, 49). There are also conflicts of a *content nature* because “artistic con-

cepts were not understood" (02, 05, 77), but they are mentioned less frequently than the others.

Another frequent cause of conflicts are *differences in personalities*. On the one hand, it is explained that communication must be "oriented towards each individual" (08, 27, 37), regardless of the different areas. On the other hand, differences between people are also "related to the different areas of responsibility" (01, 01, 73). The most frequent issue is that "artists are much more pronounced individualists" (08, 30, 45) and problems are the easier to discuss the "further away the employees are from the stage" (08, 30, 51). This is often explained by the fact that in discussions with "a director or an actor I have to consider a completely different emotional range" (06, 21, 67), while "it is easier to discuss issues objectively with the technical director, regardless of person or personality" (07, 22, 44). Some second-level managers also describe this explicitly for their superiors: "The artistic managing director is more impulsive as a person, than our financial director" (06, 18, 64). However, there are also participants that emphasize "at the theatre work quite emphatic people, in the end also in the technical area" (02, 06, 21). In addition to the level of personalities, managers distinguish between *different principles* in different fields and mention "certain cultural differences" (02, 09, 31) between a "Dionysian principle of art production and an Apollonian principle of order and structure" (03, 10, 65). Essentially, these are, as already mentioned above, about a more objective versus creative perspective, becoming visible in "hard facts versus artistic processes" (02, 06, 55). It is emphasized repeatedly that the technical area and the financial area have "clear rules" (06, 19, 75), "technical conditions or requirements" (08, 27, 51) and "legal issues or budget issues" (02, 07, 33). Although, interviewees see "artistic processes that are permanently subject to fluctuation and change" (01, 01, 13) and with regard to communication "it's not just about information, it's also about searching for artistic content. In other words: you argue about it sometimes" (08, 27, 39).

The discussion also provides fruitful indications of the central lines of conflict on the basis of which it is possible to distinguish between fields (RQ 2.2). Overall, it can be seen that many conflicts repeatedly arise between artistic, technical and financial areas, the latter including marketing and administration support. Frequently, this distinction is already made without asking as "artistic, technical and administrative" (05, 15, 71) area "between which must be mediated" (11, 36, 26). This differentiation is also reflected in the conflicts described above, but also becomes explicitly clear when participants define a "decisive moment"

(02, 06, 75). Very often “conflicts arising at the mock-up set rehearsal” (08, 26, 45) are mentioned here, because both the technical and the financial feasibility of artistic ideas can be questioned there.

When it comes to how differences and conflicts are dealt with (RQ 2.3), most executives agree that these “things don’t have to exclude each other but of course are difficult to get together” (05, 13, 29). Integration is seen as a specific communicative task: “At the theatre are more different groups than in any other company – and that’s where communication is important” (09, 32, 3). Consequently, participants often define their own role as an integrative and communicative one. Artistic planners see “ex-changing between extremes as main communication field” (06, 19, 65) and technical directors emphasize their “key position between artistic and technical departments” (01, 03, 33). A head of press and marketing defines his or her own job as “uniting the different ideas of financial managing director, ticket sellers and dramaturges” (06, 17, 53). A head of operations describes his or her own task as “determining latitudes in payroll and financial accounting” (02, 07, 37). Likewise, dramaturges see themselves as the “place where the different needs of the house converge” (10, 35, 3). Additionally, among the financial managing directors one task is defined as “finding a balance between the artistic mission and the basic conditions” (10, 33, 47). Among the artistic managing directors, “communication between departments” (09, 32, 3) is considered very important, and they emphasize the importance of “decisions that are supported by everyone” (02, 08, 27) and furthermore their dual role “between making art possible but also being sensitive to financial issues” (01, 01, 41).

The way in which this integrative communicative role is exercised can be differentiated according to *short-term strategies for conflict management and long-term strategies for conflict transformation*. In most cases, conflicts that arise are “quickly discussed through short official channels in order to arrive at a goal-oriented solution” (01, 01, 49). Depending on the extent of the conflict, the people involved “meet for a conversation or address it in one of the regular meetings” (02, 05, 49). In these conversations it is important to “mediate” (04, 11, 37), and due to the complexity of the operations, it is also a question of “negotiating skills of the department heads” (06, 19, 67). But there are also rather rare cases in which “you have to be tough and enforce your leadership position” (06, 18, 70), for example when a technical director enforces safety regulations, artistic managing directors enforce expenses against a financial



managing director or – the other way around – a financial managing director forbids spending.

The more long-term strategies aim at creating a culture that prevents conflicts or supports their productive processing. This seems particularly possible when decision areas are recognized, and there is a high willingness to improvise and to compromise in the realization of artistic work. For this, it is important that “everyone is aware of everyone’s roles” (03, 10, 65) and to raise “mutual trust [...] and awareness of the needs of the others” (04, 11, 55). In order to achieve this, the importance of communication is again emphasized. Within these strategies, there is an important difference between the hierarchical levels. Participants from the second management level rather emphasize their moderating role in cases of conflicts. Particularly leaders on the first management level – artistic managing directors as well as financial managing directors – promote a “permanent dialogue” (02, 08, 39) in which decisions are made transparent or define the development of “a value system in communication with the aim of a mutual understanding” (11, 36, 37) as a central leadership task in the theatre.

#### 5.4 Evaluation and success of communication (across the fields)

In order to investigate how participants evaluate communication between each other (RQ 3.1), it was first determined which factors they consider most. Regarding the level of information, it is important to participants that communication is “as *efficient* as possible” (03, 10, 39). Information should be distributed “fast” (10, 35, 55), “reliably” (02, 05, 29) and “goal-oriented” (06, 16, 34). Regarding the level of relationship, they expect in particular “*frequency, openness and honesty*” (05, 14, 61). One should be able to “talk about everything” (04, 11, 23) and be “open to new ideas” (05, 13, 55). Opinions should “not be expressed behind closed doors” (06, 18, 94), but discussed on the basis of “willingness to engage in conflict” (07, 23, 79), “mutual *respect*” (10, 35, 55) and “*trust*” (02, 08, 59). There are also differences in expectations between hierarchical levels. Managers on the second management level demand “*transparency* about what certain decisions are based on” (07, 23, 47) from executives. First level managers demand that their subordinates’ communication is *loyal*, “not tendentious, but realistic” (10, 33, 33).

In regard to evaluating one’s own communication (RQ 3.2) the participants tend to have a rather positive self-image in relation to the above dimensions. Some, however, take a critical view of their own



communication, and it is noticeable that these negative aspects are discussed especially due to shortage of time. Many see a lot of potential for improvement and have the demand on themselves to communicate better, but explain that the “high work pressure” (10, 33, 65) impedes it. A similar picture becomes apparent in evaluating the communication of others (RQ 3.3). Some respondents say that they are “satisfied that everyone is doing their best, but dissatisfied that we all have so much to do making it often impossible to communicate sufficiently” (08, 30, 67). Furthermore, the different organizational fields become relevant when participants evaluate others’ communication. Rather negative evaluations follow the fields of conflict, as discussed in RQ 2.1. In the case of positive evaluations, the mutual understanding outlined above is referred to. Communication is valued better for example by the artistic area, when “financial management and technical management have a feeling for artistic processes” (02, 05, 41) and, conversely, by the technical area, when “the artistic managing director not only has in mind the artistic product, but also the personnel planning” (01, 03, 45).

When asked for their desired consequences of successful communication (RQ 3.4), managers again refer to information (“everyone is informed”, 10, 35, 61) and coordination (“processes are smoother”, 02, 07, 75). In addition, managers also see consequences of good communication which are less related to the processing of work, like a “better working atmosphere” (08, 26, 81) and consequences which relate to the individual perception of employees. Good communication ensures “work without fear” (07, 24, 73) and that “everyone works more satisfied” (06, 19, 103). In addition to these aspects of well-being and job satisfaction, managers also expect that the better communication is perceived, the “higher motivation” (11, 36, 67) and a strengthening of “identification with the theatre” (08, 26, 85) will be. References to components of the flow concept – especially the merging of action and total immersion into the activities – do not occur at all in the interviews.

## 6. Summary and Evaluation of Results

Regarding the first set of research questions, exploring the relevance and manifestation of leadership communication in theatres, it can be stated that managers in cultural institutions attach great importance to their communication. It plays a key role in their daily work, accounts for most of the working time and is partly equated with the job as a manager. This

is consistent with the findings of studies conducted among business managers (NEUBERGER 2002). Likewise, the focus on information and coordination as a reason for the importance of communication and among the objectives executives name is very similar to managers in other industries (HUCK-SANDHU 2016; RETZBACH/SCHNEIDER 2012). However, managers working in the artistic fields also mention culture-specific aspects, such as the accentuation “theatre processes themselves are discursive” or the communication objective “discussion of artistic content”. With regard to the communication instruments, the results only partly correspond to the state of research. Although personal communication and meetings are likewise dominant in other companies (HUCK-SANDHU 2016), the very low importance of the intranet is rather unusual.

What is also visible and consistent with existing assumptions for cultural enterprises (ZULAUF 2011) is the relatively low degree of systematic internal communication. Although managers are certainly concerned about the appropriateness of their communication in the context of their objectives, they describe little strategically planned communication – some even reject it. This is apparently not due to a lack of knowledge. Such considerations are well established in many theatres in external communication. However, it must also be emphasized that the study’s participants have a high level of self-reflection, formulate high demands on their own communication and are sensitive to current cultural policy debates as well as labour union initiatives. Some participants are very intensively involved in their communication and expect changes towards more employee orientation and professionalization in the near future. This already seems to have an impact on some theatres, which have introduced first systematic communication measures and targeted management training. However, some managers also expect that existing structural and especially financial problems will be intensified in the future and will negatively impact internal processes, which cannot be countered even with good communication.

With regard to the second set of research questions – the significance of conflicting organizational fields for leadership communication – it becomes apparent that most respondents are very aware of differences across areas and often discuss them before being explicitly asked. Different ways of thinking play a role for leaders, as conflicts arise for example due to different personalities and different principles. Usual types of conflicts are furthermore about financial and personnel resources, time management and security issues. The conflicts show up along a more objective

versus creative perspective, which fits the usual findings (CRAY et al. 2007). However, there are also differences within the objective areas as suggested by Guillet de Monthoux et al. (2007). The types of conflict especially differ between artistic and technical area and between artistic and financial area. There are also conflicts between technical and financial area. Considering these lines of conflict, a sharper distinction of organizational fields emerges: While the artistic field is composed as initially assumed (see section 3.1) a more appropriate differentiation for the management field and the administrative field emerges from the interviews. Conflicts with regard to structure and regulations primarily affect the cooperation of artists with the technical departments and workshops. Other areas that were suspected in the administrative field are more suited to the management field. For example, conflicts among artistic area and press-departments are frequently about marketing-issues. It seems more appropriate to isolate a technical field, including the workshops, and to extend the financial field by administration support. This corresponds to the differentiation frequently and explicitly made in the interviews between artistic, technical and administrative area.

In terms of the way conflicts are dealt with, the interviews essentially reveal two strategies that can be properly described by concepts that have been established in contemporary peace and conflict studies (MIALL 2004). Conflicts can be resolved in the short term through explanation, mediation and negotiation (conflict management) and in the long term by leaders' promoting permanent communication for a sustainable organizational culture of mutual understanding that prevents conflicts or, if conflicts arise, supports to resolve them more productively, with positive effects for organizational culture and knowledge (conflict transformation). The long-term strategy in particular describes considerations of the aesthetic leadership approach (GUILLET DE MONTHOUX et al. 2007) very precisely. Most participants see themselves as responsible for mediating between areas, and leaders on the first management level in particular see it as their job to create a communicative culture of mutual understanding. The results thus show that the integration of areas is a leadership task and particularly a communicative leadership task.

The importance of this task is also supported by results of the third set of research questions, which address the evaluation and success factors of communication. If respondents perceive a high level of mutual understanding across the areas, they also rate communication with persons in the other areas better. Furthermore, the factors for evaluating communication, are close to the reflections of Schneider et al. (2015). Effectiveness,

sensitivity to the needs of others, a mutual understanding, taking one's time as well as open and intensive communication, especially in cases of problems, are of central importance for the interviewed managers and do not vary across hierarchical levels and organizational areas. Considering the success factors of communication, the executives' communication objectives become somewhat clearer. While participants named rather organizational than employee-related factors as objectives of their communication, they mention such factors as consequences for successful communication. Besides *information* and *coordination*, employees' *well-being*, *job satisfaction*, *motivation* and *identification* as well as a positive *working atmosphere* are important outcomes of good communication – which corresponds to the usual instruments of organizational diagnostics (FELFE/LIEPMANN 2008). Dimensions of flow in the workplace do not seem to be a relevant communication outcome. In the communicative perspective, the essential management task seems to be to establish a good communication flow between the different areas so that organizational processes and work-related attitudes of the organization's members reach a high quality.

## 7. Discussion and Limitations

This study provides a first explorative insight into leadership communication and internal communication in theatres. It becomes clear that these issues are regarded as important in theatres, although little systematic attention is paid to them. However, they are being discussed, and there are currently changes towards greater professionalization. A limitation is that these statements cannot be generalized within the explorative design. A possible sampling effect must also be considered. People who scrutinize their own communication may be more motivated to participate in a leadership communication interview than others. There is still much potential for further investigation, and this is where the present study makes its essential contribution because it sharpens the access to the field of research on an empirical basis.

Thus, it could be shown that the different organizational fields are relevant for leadership communication in theatres. The three-field approach by Guillet de Monthoux et al. (2007) proved to be very fruitful in the interviews. Along the identified lines of conflict emerges a useful discrimination of an artistic field, a technical and workshop field as well as a field of finance and administration support. Furthermore, it became

| <b>Relevance and manifestations of leadership communication in theatres</b>                         |  |
|---|--|
| RQ 1.1:   | Participants intensively reflect their own communication and are sensitive to current debates.   |
| RQ 1.2:   | Communication objectives tend to be organization-related (information, coordination).  |
| RQ 1.3:   | Personal conversations and regular meetings dominate as communication channels.  |
| RQ 1.4:   | Internal communication is rarely strategically planned – but several examples indicate current change.   |
| <b>Significance of conflicting organizational fields for leadership communication in theatres</b>   |  |
| RQ 2.1:   | Conflicts emerge along different rationales and principles as well as financial and personnel resources, time management and security issues.  |
| RQ 2.2:   | Conflicts arise primarily between artistic, technical/workshops and financial/administration area.   |
| RQ 2.3:   | Integrating conflicting fields is a communicative task in short-term (moderating, negotiating) and in long-term (permanent dialogue/fostering a communicative value system of mutual understanding).     |
| <b>Evaluation and success of communication across conflicting organizational fields in theatres</b> |  |
| RQ 3.1:   | Communication should be efficient, frequent, open, honest, respectful, trustful, transparent (esp. top-down) and loyal (esp. bottom-up).   |
| RQ 3.2:   | In the participants' self-perception poor communication is mostly justified due to a lack of time.   |
| RQ 3.3:   | Participants also see a time dilemma in their external perception, but also evaluate communication with executives/subordinates/colleagues better, the higher the mutual understanding across the areas. |
| RQ 3.4:   | Participants expect ideal communication would lead to good work processes but also would create a good working atmosphere and affect motivation, well-being and satisfaction of employees.               |

Table 2: *Key findings of the study.*

clear that established constructs of communicative LMX diagnostics can be applied to theatres. In contrast, flow does not seem to be a relevant consequence of communication. Since executives see their task in mediating between the fields and fostering mutual communication across the fields, it seems more appropriate to assume consistent communicative relationships ('in flow') across the fields as a relevant antecedent for positive communication outcomes. Established employee attitudes such as employee satisfaction and motivation show up as useful outcomes. Another outcome that emerges from the interviews is the integration of fields that could be established by fostering a shared mutual understanding through communication. Instruments for researching interdisciplinary

teams (STEINHEIDER et al. 2009) could be appropriate for evaluating such integration.

Further studies should now examine whether the impressions gained about the importance of communication, its objectives and instruments can also be traced quantitatively in the field. A broad-based survey in theatres would be essential to obtain generalizable results. Furthermore, differences between areas should be methodologically adequately proven. Finally, a verification of the effect that leadership communication can have on the integration of fields and communication outcomes is also a task for future studies.

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