Understanding and Managing Conversations from a Knowledge Perspective: An Analysis of the Roles and Rules of Face-to-face Conversations in Organizations

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Abstract

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This article presents a discussion on the role of face-to-face conversations for social knowledge processes and sense making in organizations. Given the importance attributed to conversations in the literature, but also the many conversational routines that prevent knowledge creation and sharing, the question pursued is how conversations can be managed to foster developments in organizational knowing. We particularly focus on the role of explicit rules as one means to manage conversations from a knowledge perspective and analyse contributions from knowledge management, organizational learning, decision making and change management. In order to refine and systemize the discussion on the multitude of conversation rules, we propose a management framework by drawing on communication theory. Implications for management as well as future directions for research on conversation management conclude the article.

Keywords: knowledge management, conversation management, dialogue, sense making, conversation rules

Introduction: The Role of Conversations in Organizations

In recent years, interpersonal communication has become a central issue in organization research (see, for example, Barry and Crant 2000). In this paper, we will focus on one domain — knowledge management — and outline the roles that have been attributed in this specific context to interpersonal, face-to-face conversations. We will further analyse the means that are proposed in the literature for the management of conversations and particularly focus on conversational rules. We apply a focused understanding of conversations as those interpersonal interactions that occur 'during co-presence and by virtue of co-presence', in which people interact with each other through verbal statements, but also through glances, gestures and positioning (Goffman 1967: 1).[1] Conversations are not understood as mere means to transmit information, as conversation partners also engage in interactions to affirm themselves (Goffman 1981) and express their relation with others (Watzlawick et al. 1967). By participants continuously engaging in conversations, the social context is recursively formed (Giddens

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1984) and human knowledge is developed and shared (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Interpersonal, face-to-face conversations are central to organizational knowing. Weick emphasized back in the 1970s that members of an organization make sense of their daily actions through meetings and conversations (Weick 1979: 133–4). Donnellon et al. (1986) showed that face-to-face discussions are important for sense making and organized action because of four concomitant communication mechanisms: metaphor, logical argument, affect modulation (behaviours that evoke or alter sentiment), and linguistic indirection (ambiguity in expression that enhances consensus). Furthermore, conversations are a highly flexible, interactive and iterative form of communication, and participants can ask clarifying questions, deepen certain aspects, ask for the larger context of a specific issue, and gradually adapt their communication style and content to the language and knowledge of the vis-à-vis. Finally, compared with written communication formats, people create shared experiences through conversations (Dixon 1997). They use them to build trust and strengthen relationships (Harkins 1999). These relational factors are fundamental for sharing (Szulanski 1996), creating (Von Krogh et al. 2000) and integrating knowledge (Eisenhardt and Santos 2000). For example, in the process of knowledge creation, building trust within conversations is important for sharing tacit knowledge within a microcommunity (Von Krogh et al. 2000: 125) and in finding a (verbal) structure for tacit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

Conversations, however, also lead to numerous challenges for knowledge management: the previously praised flexibility of conversations gives rise to situations in which topics alternate chaotically, and conversation partners have difficulty in identifying possible outcomes of a conversation. Conversations are also ephemeral, and contributions of interaction partners vanish the moment they are pronounced, which makes complex comparison difficult. In addition, several of the advantages of conversations for knowledge (transformation) processes are bound to the physical co-presence of the participants (para- and non-verbal signs are important factors in the sense-making process). Geographic distance still represents a major challenge to the use of conversations for the management of knowledge (Chidambaram 1996). Finally, certain conversational routines and interaction patterns, such as defensive arguing (Argyris 1996) or unequal turn taking (Ellinor and Gerard 1998), negatively affect knowledge development or sharing in teams.

Given the centrality of face-to-face conversations for processes of knowing and the challenges bound to this form of communication for knowledge management, the central questions we pursue in this paper are how interpersonal, co-located conversations can be managed to facilitate social knowledge processes as the creation or integration of knowledge and what role explicit conversational rules play in this attempt. Our focus on conversational rules has three reasons: first, (implicit) rules are said to be central guiding mechanisms of conversational behaviour (e.g. Giddens 1979; Lyotard 1984; Orlikowski 2000; Wittgenstein 2000). Hence, it is important to understand better what conversational patterns and rules favour sense making and social knowledge processes. Second, we believe that the use of explicit conversational rules represents an

interesting form of managing conversations as this potentially allows for both flexibility and structure. In order for a 'management' of conversations not to be counterproductive, imposing rigidity where flexibility is needed, approaches to conversation management have to acknowledge the situational and flexible nature of conversations. While the quality of some conversations would suffer from too much structure and management (e.g. during informal coffee-break conversations, free form break-out sessions, or very personal and emotional discussions), many conversations lack sufficient structure, are not managed well, and could benefit from a more consistent approach. Finally, as we will show in this paper, the use of explicit conversational rules to manage conversations has gained considerable attention in the literature on conversations and their management in organizations. By analysing this literature, we aim to propose a more systematic view of this form of conversation management and offer a synthetic management framework for knowledge-intensive[2] (i.e. complex, non-routine) conversations in organizations.

Method

We limit our analysis to scientific contributions that discuss the role and management of conversations in the context of organizations and that apply a knowledge perspective. Technically, we focus on papers published in management journals and consider those from communication journals only if an article's content is explicitly embedded in an organizational context in either title or abstract. We do so, first, because our aim is to understand how the discourse on interpersonal, face-to-face conversations is led within organization studies related to knowledge management. The second reason for the narrow focus is that the format of this paper would not allow for a systematic review of the literature on face-to-face conversations in general. This literature is vast and covers a variety of contexts (e.g. everyday conversations, health-related conversations), thematic issues (e.g. relationship conceptualizations in conversations, turn taking, communicative functions), and approaches (i.e. conversation analysis, ethnomethodology), for which reviews already exist (on ethnomethodology, see Atkinson 1988; on conversation analysis, see Heritage 1999). We therefore limit ourselves, in terms of context, to formal organizations (i.e. firms) and, in terms of thematic focus, to the role of conversations for social knowledge processes in organizations. Thus many contributions from ethnomethodology, although pertinent for the analysis of sense making, have not been considered in this paper, as their context of analysis is outside the firm. With this focus it is possible to show dominant themes and approaches and outline how the discourse on interpersonal conversations in organizations could profit from research conducted in other areas.

We structure this paper by outlining, in a first section, the various understandings and definitions of interpersonal conversations in organizations and by discussing the different roles that have been attributed to them. Based on the literature analysed and on the insights from communication theory, we propose a framework for the management of conversations, which identifies six dimensions

of conversations on which conversers draw when making sense in their interactions and which thus have to be considered in conversation management. We use the framework as an analytic lens to review conversation rules as they are discussed in the literature.

In our view, an analysis of conversation management in organizations is of value at this point to establish interpersonal, face-to-face conversations in organizations as a relevant research topic within the realm of knowledge management and to understand how the integration of research on conversations from other fields could be pursued and in which direction future research should be heading.

Perspectives on Conversations

One could argue that the study of face-to-face conversations in organizations is part of the more general discipline of organizational discourse analysis. Discourse analysis in the organizational context analyses how discourse is intertwined with processes of organizing and how organizational practices are shaped by the way meaning is negotiated in organizational discourse (Fairclough 2005; Grant and Hardy 2003: 7; Heracleous and Barrett 2001). There are several studies that primarily focus on talk and conversations in relation to organizing (Gronn 1983; Huisman 2001; Iedema et al. 2003; Mauws 2000). On the other hand, if discourse analysis is understood narrowly as the linguistic analysis of language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence, the studies on conversations in the organizational field are not confined purely to discourse analysis.

Various authors adopt different meanings of 'conversation', hence some clarification regarding terminology is needed. While the term is often used loosely as an equivalent of talk (Goffman 1981: 14), there is also a broader understanding of conversations as 'the form of human transactions in general' (MacIntyre 1981: 197, as quoted by Shotter 1993: 1). It is said that conversations constitute the background of our beings as it is in conversational activity that we constitute ourselves and our worlds (Shotter 1993). In a more narrow understanding, conversations are a form of social interaction that shows a specific form of local organization (i.e. it takes place within a small group of people who are physically co-located, who alternate their turn taking and who refer not only to verbal but also to non-verbal signs) and that serves not only to exchange information, but also for conversation partners to relate to each other and develop a shared reality between them (Goffman 1967: 1; Levinson 1983: 318). In the following, we will use the second, narrow understanding of the term and view conversations as the face-to-face interactions within a small group of co-located people, interacting through verbal and non-verbal means. We will particularly focus on conversational activity rather than conversation as a unit (Levinson 1983).

In organization studies, authors who have applied a knowledge perspective to the study of conversation (in the narrow sense of the term) have attributed a variety of labels, definitions and descriptions to the term. Remarkably, many

Table 1. Prescriptive Labels and Definitions Attributed to Conversations in Organizations

Label	Definitions/Descriptions	Authors
Appreciative conversation	A conversation in which conversers collectively share diverse ideas, try to identify positive possibilities by focusing on past or current strengths, and at the same time challenge existing thinking and organizational practices.	Barge and Oliver 2003
Decisive dialogue	A form of conversation that addresses the ineffective organizational culture of indecision. This dialogue is characterized by openness and inquiry (the outcome is not predefined), candour (expose sensitive issues, air conflicts), informality (invite conversation partners to ask questions), and, in the final stage, by closure (decide course of action).	Charan 2006
Dialogue	A specific form of conversation in which conversers collectively aim to open up problems into multiple perspectives in order to explore the whole among the parts and the connections between the parts. In dialogue, conversers combine inquiry (i.e. inquiry of the underlying assumptions of statements) with disclosure and aim to learn about a problem involving all dialogue partners and to create a shared meaning among many.	Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Isaacs 1999; McCambridge 2003; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Schein 1993; Senge 1990; Tannen 1999; Thomas et al. 2001
Generative conversation	A conversation in which different bodies of knowledge meet the individual subject and in which the conversation partners develop new knowledge and generate innovative activities. Generative conversations are creative as the linking of concepts and ideas as well as the upholding of divergent ideas are encouraged.	Steyaert et al. 1996; Topp 2000
Good conversation	A vocal interaction in which people speak up and challenge views and assumptions and in which all sides participate and listen to each other's view.	Quinn 1996
Good fight	A conversation that keeps a constructive conflict over issues from degenerating into dysfunctional interpersonal conflict. Participants try to argue without destroying their ability to work as a team.	Eisenhardt et al. 2000
Great talk	A conversation where questioning and doubt are institutionalized, and big and broad questions are legitimized.	Gratton and Ghoshal 2002
Honest conversation	A public, organization-wide conversation about essential issues of a firm. It instills a process of engaging people to uncover the 'truth' in order to enable fundamental change.	Beer and Eisenstat 2004
Powerful conversation	An interaction between two or more people, which progresses from shared feelings, beliefs and ideas to an exchange of wants and needs to clear action steps and mutual commitments.	Harkins 1999
Skilful discussion	A conversation in which novel avenues are explored and it is aimed to create a deeper meaning and insight. However, some sort of closure (e.g. make a decision, identify priorities) is envisioned. A skilful discussion incorporates some of the techniques and devices of dialogue, but also focuses on tasks.	Ross 1994
Strategic conversation	A conversation oriented towards the advancement of the company; it is focused on the creation of future business (i.e. the creation, acquisition and allocation of resources for the future). It promotes a dialogue for understanding rather than an advocacy for agreement. A micro-level interaction between superior and subordinate to obtain an understanding of the actual origin of the feelings of exclusion and the presence and absence of energy around strategic initiatives.	Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Manning 2002; Von Krogh and Roos 1995; Westley 1990

contributions in the organizational realm show a rather prescriptive orientation, as can be seen in Table 1. In fact, interpersonal conversations are discussed in the literature as 'dialogue', 'appreciative conversation', or 'skillful discussion' and many authors seek to define the parameters that lead to conversations with such prescriptive qualities (Gratton and Ghoshal 2002; Harkins 1999; Ross 1994). Researchers who study 'dialogue' in organizations, for example, define it as a specific (normative) conversational form in which participants collectively open up problems into multiple perspectives to explore the whole among the parts and see the connections between the parts (Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Isaacs 1999; Schein 1993). Such prescriptively oriented contributions mostly propose a communicative behaviour (e.g. balance inquiry and advocacy, explore differences and look for their interconnections and the shared meaning rather than polarizing viewpoints) that facilitates innovation and learning. However, they fail to empirically analyse and systematically describe actual conversational patterns, as we will discuss below.

Next to contributions with a prescriptive focus, there is a relatively small community of authors who look at face-to-face conversations from a descriptive standpoint and outline their (multiple) functions within organizations. These authors use generic terms such as 'conversation' (Ford and Ford 1995; Overman 2003), 'talk-in-interaction' (Huisman 2001), 'meeting' (Schwartzman 1989) or 'team talk' (Donnellon 1996). Schwartzman, for example, defines a 'meeting' as a 'gathering of three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group' (e.g. to exchange ideas or opinions, to develop policy and procedures, to solve a problem, to make a decision) (Schwartzman 1989: 7). Research methods that are applied in this area emphasize the role of context and employ discourse (e.g. Donnellon et al. 1986) and conversation analysis (e.g. Huisman, 2001: 350), as well as ethnographic methods (e.g. Schwartzman 1989: 187). Schwartzman (1989), to continue the example, draws on ethnographic material to question the task-relatedness of meetings and to emphasize activities of sense making instead. Compared to the many prescriptive contributions, however, the descriptive studies form a small minority within the predominantly prescriptive body of literature on the study of conversations in organizations.

A second observation of the study of knowledge-intensive conversations is that conversations in organizations have so far been studied from at least four disciplinary perspectives: knowledge management, organizational learning, decision making and change management. Giving an overview on these four areas, we can refine our statement about the prescriptive orientation of research of conversations in the organizational domain.

In the field of knowledge management, the contributions on conversations outline the central role of dialogue and face-to-face conversations for knowledge processes without empirically analysing conversations in detail (Overman 2003; Thomas et al. 2001; Topp 2000; Von Krogh et al. 2000). While Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) generally argued for the importance of dialogue in the knowledge-creation process, Von Krogh et al. provided some more specific suggestions on how conversations should be managed. They outlined four principles for managing conversations (active participation, conversational etiquette, editorial

judgement, innovative language) and showed how they can be applied within the various phases of the knowledge-creation process (Von Krogh et al. 2000). However, they do not investigate empirically to find out which conversational behaviour hinders or enables which group knowledge processes in practice.

Authors who view conversations from the perspective of organizational learning represent quite a homogeneous group of research. Many refer to David Bohm who presents a prescriptive picture of conversations and directly relates them to thought. In his view, the ability to adopt systemic thinking or to question mental models is dependent on how people interact with each other in conversations (Bohm 1996). Dialogue — as a qualified conversation that is characterized by systemic reflection and inquiry — helps to uncover premises, inferences and defensive routines (Argyris 1996) and thus becomes central to innovation and organizational learning (Dixon 1997; Schein 1993, 1995). Researchers in this field open the black box of conversations (at least conceptually) and highlight various conversational mechanisms (Argyris 1996; Harkins 1999). These studies show a particular prescriptive orientation and lack extensive descriptive accounts on the micro-processes of conversations. Their synthetic case-study work (Argyris 1996; Gratton and Ghoshal 2002; Harkins 1999; Isaacs 1993; Senge 1990) mainly outlines the importance of dialogue and its impact on the organizational reality, as well as how to best profit from this potential, but provides only little evidence on specific interaction patterns.

In the third area where face-to-face conversations are studied in the organizational domain, decision making, extensive research has led to a solid empirical base. Of the social psychologists and communication scholars who are interested in group decision making and group communication, many adopt a rather functional perspective on conversations (e.g. conversations are instruments for dealing with tasks and making decisions). In this view, communication is a medium of group interaction and mediates the effects of personal traits or of task characteristics which impact on the decision-making process and outcome. We do not refer to this body of research systematically, as excellent reviews in this field already exist (Frey 1996; Frey et al. 1999; Hirokawa and Poole 1996). It is important to note, however, that there are few empirical studies that view conversations not from a functional perspective but as constitutive of group decision making (Hirokawa and Poole 1996: 7). Only the latter understanding opens the way to analyse conversations from a knowledge perspective by analysing how people actually make sense of a problem or decision situation within conversations. Linguists such as Huisman (2001), or management scientists such as McCambridge (2003) and Eisenhardt et al. (2000) aim to understand how the formulation and content of decisions are connected to the (communicative) situations in which they are produced.

Authors who approach co-located interpersonal conversations in the context of change management mainly hold a constructivist view of organizations: conversations are the generative mechanisms in which change occurs and not only a tool for it (Ford and Ford 1995). Changes in single face-to-face interactions and in modes of conversing can gradually lead to alterations in organizational discourse and allow new behaviours and beliefs to be established within existing routines and structures (see, for example: Barge and Oliver 2003; Barrett et al.

1995). The empirical work in this field is based on a limited number of case studies (Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Manning 2002; Shaw 2002; Steyaert et al. 1996).

Finally, there are contributions in which authors argue for the central role of face-to-face conversations for organizations in general. Conversations are vital in shaping the sociocultural system and reality of an organization. Most of these contributions are conceptual (Barge and Little 2002; Bohm 1996; Donnellon 1996; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Quinn 1996; Weeks 2001), while a few present qualitative evidence (Isaacs 1999; Schwartzman 1989).

A first analysis of the literature on co-located, interpersonal conversations in organizations reveals that these contributions show a predominantly prescriptive focus and that they are mainly conceptual in nature (including only anecdotal evidence). Case studies have been used to argue for the importance of conversations for organizing and social knowledge processes and have not resulted in analyses of real-life conversations. The research on group communication and decision making constitutes an exception to this trend, but as it mainly adopts a functional perspective on face-to-face conversations, it is less fruitful if we are interested in conversations as the central mechanism for social knowledge processes and sense making. A first suggestion for future research is therefore to consider studies outside organization science, in which informative empirical material abounds. These contributions can be found in the areas of argumentation studies (Walton 2000), or medical communication (Gülich 2003). Furthermore, complementary to the currently well-positioned case study research, future contributions in the field should study micro-interaction patterns in conversations and their relation to larger organizational processes and structures (as, for example, Barry and Crant 2000). An impediment to this research strategy may be the reluctance of managers to let researchers participate in their operational or strategic conversations.

After this brief overview of the field, we will review one specific way of managing conversations from a knowledge perspective in the second part of this paper — the application of conversation rules — and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

Exploring Rules for Conversation Management

Many authors who approach interpersonal conversations from a knowledge perspective discuss explicit conversational rules as a way of managing conversations and changing conversational behaviour (Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Gratton and Ghoshal 2002; Von Krogh et al. 2000). In conversations, implicit rules of communication can be identified that guide conversation partners on how to make sense of their interaction. Wittgenstein, in his philosophical investigations, argues that it is because of these rules of communication that language has meaning (Wittgenstein 2000). Sceptical that language is based on truth conditions (where meaningful declarative sentences stand for facts), he proposes that language is meaningful because the members of a community use the same rules in their 'language games' (assertability condition) (Kripke 1982: 73). They

use, for example, the symbol '+' to mean addition or to know the meaning of 'red' because they have established a rule for distinguishing red from non-red objects. However, relevant rules and regularities can be observed not only in relation to words or single speech acts, 'they appear in the domain of conversation, in which successive speech acts are related to one another' (Winograd and Flores 1987: 64). There are implicit rules that determine how conversation partners organize turn taking or how they deal with disagreements or with power relations. These sets of rules are developed through practice and ongoing conversations and form the structure of conversations (Giddens 1979; Orlikowski 2000).

Specific implicit rules and communicative behaviour patterns may not be in line with certain objectives that are pursued with conversations. Chris Argyris, for example, discussed 'defensive reasoning' (on a cognitive level) or 'defensive routines' (on a behavioural level) as one problematic conversational pattern which inhibits learning. 'Defensive reasoning occurs when individuals make their premises and inferences tacit, then draw conclusions that cannot be tested except by the tenets of this tacit logic' (Argyris 1994: 81). Other such negative patterns are 'destructive argumentation' (Ellinor and Gerard 1998), 'dichotomic reasoning' (Tannen 1999), or groupthink (Janis and Mann 1977).

To address such problematic implicit rules, conversation rules as explicit statements can be used to guide and coordinate communicative interaction (Shimanoff 1980). The idea is that through socialization, people will gradually appropriate (interpret, try, adapt) such explicit rules until the (problematic) implicit ones are substituted and new conversational routines are formed. The potential of explicit rules to change conversation practices sustainably still stands on contested empirical ground. In another context — decision making (Sutcliffe and McNamara 2001) — it has been shown that explicit rules may change (decision) practices in the short term, but that previously established routines re-emerge after a certain time.

The most prominent formulation of rules for leading conversations stems from Grice and is subsumed in his 'cooperative principle': 'make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice 1975: 45). Tied to this principle, Grice discussed four maxims: one of quantity (give as much information as is required, and not more than is required), one of quality (do not say what is false or that for which you lack adequate evidence), one of relation (be relevant), and finally one of manner (be clear, orderly and avoid ambiguity) (Lindblom 2001). Grice recognized that these maxims are an ideal and that they are frequently not followed by conversation partners. Even if a conversation is ambiguous and badly ordered (and there is a 'break' in the maxim of manner), conversation partners try to make sense of it. However, depending on the gravity of a 'break', it might become difficult to share and advance knowledge in such a conversation.

In the predominantly prescriptive literature on the management of conversations, conversational rules are proposed as a fruitful approach. Topp, for example, proposes that, in conversations aiming at the development of new knowledge, interaction partners have to play with ideas (and do not use them

against each other), use misunderstandings as a creative source, explicitly link each contribution to the next, and introduce moments of silence (Topp 2000). Compared to other means of structuring conversations — such as formal procedures (for a review, see Sunwolf and Seibold 1999) and conversational tools (Eppler and Sukowski 2000) — conversational rules do not structure conversations excessively, but leave flexibility, which is an important characteristic of conversations (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999). Rules also have the advantage of being easily memorable and through their 'vividness also aid in focusing reflection' (Putnam 1994: 261).

Apart from these arguments in favour of the management of knowledge-intensive conversations through explicit conversational rules, there are limits to their use. First, conversational rules cannot be imposed or implemented mechanically. Barge and Oliver (2003) claim, for example, that they have to be bound by a spirit of appreciation and collaboration. In addition, communicative rules do not usually have a mandatory character (Schall 1983) and their introduction does not guarantee that conversation partners will change their behaviour. In fact, they have the choice to follow, creatively use, or not to follow the rules, an aspect that conversation management through rules needs to take into account. At the same time, conversational rules are bound to a specific intention, goal and context (Von Krogh and Roos 1995) and what is a fruitful conversational behaviour in one setting (e.g. assessing different options) can be inhibiting in another (e.g. creating new ideas). Thus, some of the rules we encountered are mutually inconsistent, as they address different knowledge processes. While fostering a positive attitude may be functional for conversations focused on change, this may be counterproductive for learning, as argued by Argyris: 'in the name of positive thinking managers often censor what everyone needs to say and hear' (1994: 79). Von Krogh and Roos (1995) argue that strategic conversations should be guided by principles that radically differ from those of operational conversations. Hence, context-specific rules are proposed for leading difficult conversations (Harkins 1999), initiating change (Barge and Oliver 2003), or stimulating group learning (Argyris 1994).

Many of the authors who propose conversational rules mainly focus on a few isolated prescriptions for conversational behaviour. Dixon, for example, proposes that conversations that incite learning, so-called 'hallways', should be discussions, not speeches, where interlocutors participate equally and multiple perspectives are considered. Rather than being dominated by an expert proposing the right answer, conversations should focus on collective sense making, where meaningful answers are elaborated by all participants and with the help of mainly primary data (and not elaborated and inferential information) (Dixon 1997). Like Dixon, many authors point to important single aspects of conversations with regard to knowledge, but leave out other significant elements (e.g. how to deal with formal and informal power structures present in groups conversing) and do not explicitly show how the single rules relate to each other.

In view of this fragmented situation, we aim to systemize the work on conversation rules and propose a more systemic picture of what is considered to be characteristic of conversations that facilitate collaborative knowledge processes. We would like to propose a framework for the management of conversations,

along which single rules can be allocated and conversations managed. In this way, the relationships between single prescriptive rules can become apparent.

Towards a Framework for Conversation Management

With the framework that we propose we do not aim to extend or replicate general communication models, but present a simpler, management-oriented structure that explicitly refers to the evolving, communicative context in which conversation partners make sense of their interactions. The framework (shown in Figure 1) outlines six dimensions that define the conversational context in which conversation partners try to make sense and co-construct knowledge when interacting. These are: the message, the conversation process, the conversational intent, the mental models of the participants, the group dynamics and the conversational background. The framework is prescriptive as we propose that these dimensions can be addressed by conversation management initiatives. In the following, we thus discuss the six dimensions of the framework and present a diagnostic question for each dimension to facilitate this management approach. The questions anticipate and better contextualize the discussion of the rules that we subsequently review.

The six dimensions of the framework are derived from classical communication models. Communication models (Schramm 1954; Shannon and Weaver 1949) generally identify the communication partners (sender/receiver, speaker/listener, interpreter, etc.) and the message to be the minimal structural elements of communication. However, from a knowledge perspective, linear, sender-based transmission models of communication (Shannon and Weaver 1949) fail to emphasize the sense-making process involved in communication. Authors advocating these models proceed from the assumption that meaning is a property of the message and is fully specified by its elements. Yet, messages have to be selected, contextualized, interrelated and appropriated by the conversation partners, not merely through a cognitive process, but through the communicative action. Receiver- or meaning-centred models (Gerbner 1956; Herrmann and Kienle 2004; Krauss and Fussell 1998; Merten 1999; Sonesson 1997) therefore propose elements as the 'inner context' (e.g. knowledge, image of the audience, attitude, previous experiences) and 'the outer context' (e.g. situation, environment, cultural values) (Herrmann and Kienle 2004; Merten 1999) as additional fundamental elements of communication. The framework presented in Figure 1 takes these elements into account and refers to mental models and conversational intent as the 'inner' context of a conversation. With regard to the 'outer' context, we differentiate between group dynamics (interrelational aspects present in the group conversing) and a structural communicative background (i.e. the organizational setting) since the proposed framework is specific to interpersonal conversations within relatively small groups and the relational dimension between interaction partners is particularly important. The various dimensions of the framework are not static, but change throughout the conversation process.
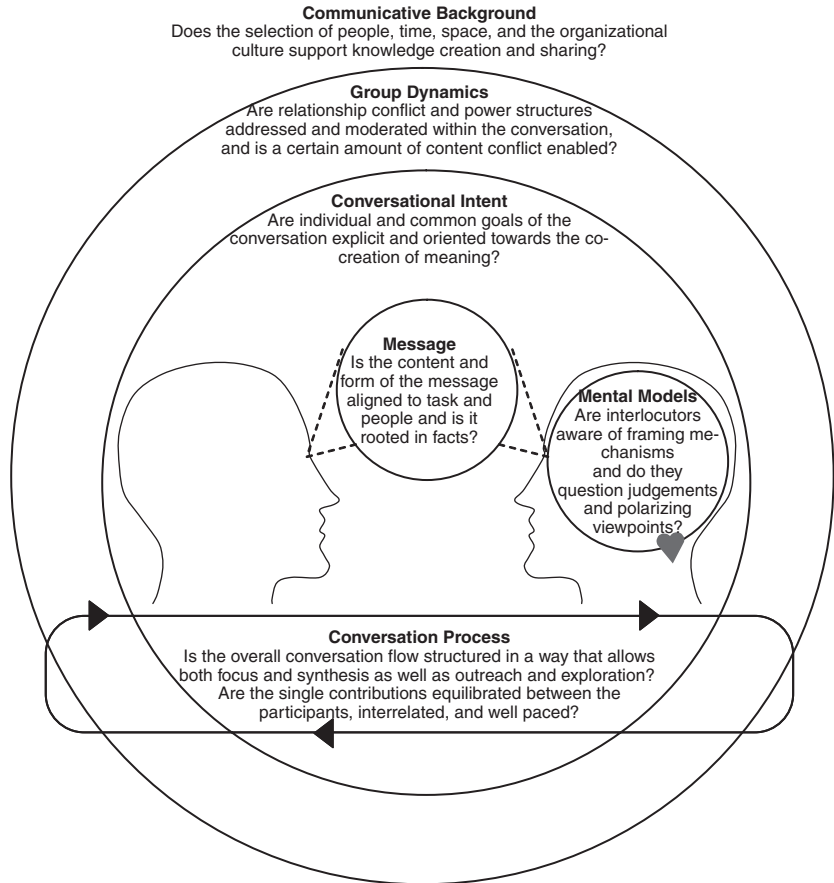
The first dimension we thus propose to be considered by conversation management regards the exchanged messages of a conversation, which includes all

signs that are shared by conversation partners. From a knowledge perspective, the main question we can ask is: Does the message (both in its format and its content) provide appropriate cues so that the conversation partners can make sense of it, given their inner (i.e. the interaction situation) and outer (i.e. organizational) context? Appropriateness not only refers to the alignment of the message to the specifics of task and audience (Krauss and Fussell 1998), but also to whether it is rooted in facts or not. The more a message is rooted in actual facts, the more one can be confident that the inference processes are not subject to severe misinterpretations (Argyris 1996). This aspect refers to a first interconnection of this dimension with the one of the mental models. Another interconnection exists with the group dynamics dimensions. The 'para-verbal' (i.e. intonation) and 'non-verbal' (i.e. gestures) qualities of the message are of great importance for the emotional and relational aspects of the communication (group dynamics). Situations are frequent where verbal signs are correct and clear, but the para- and non-verbal signs express underlying interrelational conflicts.

Early on, communication models were criticized for being static and not taking into account the dynamic nature of communication (e.g. Merten 1999). The process dimension responds to this critique and signalizes that messages succeed each other, that the interlocutors change their roles from speaker to receiver and back to speaker, that initial intentions might change during the interaction, and that group dynamics and even mental models might gradually alter. This dimension represents the time element of conversations and designates the flow of a conversation in time (e.g. the agenda of a meeting). The process of a conversation is recursive (therefore the circular representation in Figure 1) and creates, on the one hand, expectations for future interactions (feed-forward) and, on the other, allows feedback on interactions that have already occurred (Merten 1999: 107). The question that will be addressed by rules related to this dimension is whether the overall conversation flow is structured in a way that allows for focus and synthesis, as well as exploration. Also, are the single contributions balanced between the participants, do the single contributions build on each other, and are they paced in a way that permits silence, reflection and attentive listening? Various authors have different opinions regarding an adequate degree of structure in a conversation process reaching from very loose and open (i.e. Bohm 1996) to carefully planned (Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Harkins 1999) process structures.

The third dimension of the framework regards the conversational intent and includes the specific common and individual goals which are pursued through a conversation. It reflects the idea of intentionalist models of communication (see: Krauss and Fussell 1998) for which the messages do not carry meaning, but are only vehicles of the communicative intentions of the speakers. In conversations, participants often do not have the same or even compatible goals and individual intentions often remain obscure to others. The supposed or explicitly shared conversational intent is one of the main elements people draw on when making sense of an interaction (Giddens 1984). However, differences between presumed (by others) and one's own intentions of speaker and receiver can lead to misunderstandings and thus have to be considered by conversation management.

Figure 1.
Key Dimensions and
Questions of
Conversation
Management

Communicative Background
Does the selection of people, time, space, and the organizational
culture support knowledge creation and sharing?

Group Dynamics
Are relationship conflict and power structures
addressed and moderated within the conversation,
and is a certain amount of content conflict enabled?

Conversational Intent
Are individual and common goals of the
conversation explicit and oriented towards the co-
creation of meaning?

Message
Is the content and
form of the message
aligned to task and
people and is it
rooted in facts?

Mental Models
Are interlocutors
aware of framing me-
chanisms
and do they
question judgements
and polarizing
viewpoints?

Conversation Process
Is the overall conversation flow structured in a way that allows
both focus and synthesis as well as outreach and exploration?
Are the single contributions equilibrated between the
participants, interrelated, and well paced?

The relevant question (related to conversational rules) is thus: Is the communi-
cational intent explicitly shared by all participants and is it oriented towards the
co-creation of meaning?

The mental models are the deeply anchored, internal pictures of how the
world works (Senge 1992) and represent the frames with which we choose
information, make sense of it by relating it to a certain situation or to other
information (Kim 1993). In face-to-face conversations, mental models play an
active role in the selectivity of the attention, the interpretation of a message and
the construction of meaning. As outlined by Winograd and Flores, the cate-
gories and structural linkages of mental models are not purely individual, but
presuppose a consensual domain and, thus, some kind of social interaction
(Winograd and Flores 1987: 52). When constructing or making sense of a mes-
sage, emotional aspects also come into play (that is why in Figure 1 the circle
around mental models includes a heart icon). We use a whole network of val-
ues, convictions, assumptions and psychological dispositions for our sense
making and move in a nanosecond from the original message to our interpreta-
tion of it (Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1993; Schein 1993). Conversers are

often usually unaware of the active role of their mental models, which leads to implicit misunderstandings, unsound inferences, and rather aggressive forms of discussions. An important diagnostic question for conversation management is thus whether the conversation partners are aware of the mental models and framing mechanisms that come into play in a conversation and whether they are able to suspend and question them (Argyris 1996; Isaacs 1999; Schein 1993; Senge et al. 1994).

Group dynamics are the socio-psychological aspects that are present in the conversation and that emerge as a result of the interaction between the participants. When groups co-construct meaning within conversations, group dynamics play a central part in the collaborative sense-making process. Each conversation incorporates both an aspect of content and of relation (Watzlawick et al. 1967). The participants not only treat factual issues, but always consider (at least implicitly) the relations between them. The sender communicates his/her self-image and says something about the relation between him/her and the others. The relational aspect of the communication gives the receiver indications of how to interpret the content of the message. Group dynamics are also the cause of 'political' conversations and mistrust, which are obvious in conversations where only certain people speak, particular issues remain taboo, and participants try to save face and do not dare to contribute dissenting views (Janis and Mann 1977; Schein 1995; Von Krogh 1998). Here, another interrelationship between the group dynamics dimension and the communicative background can be identified. Group dynamics are strongly dependent on the organizational structure, the formal and informal hierarchies, and the communication culture. We will see that the main question in this dimension is how to deal with informal and formal power structures and how to cope with relationship conflict (in particular how to ensure that content is not primarily understood on a relational level) so that knowledge can be effectively shared, created and integrated.

The last dimension of the framework is the communicative background. It represents the larger setting in which conversations take place and includes communicative structures of an organization (e.g. reporting systems), the physical space (e.g. sitting in a circle), and the habitual and organizational setting (hierarchies, guiding values, norms and relationships within the organization or the single working groups). Conversations are embedded in this larger context and, at the same time, conversations shape and structure the communicative background (Giddens 1984). Ford et al. call this dimension 'background conversations' and define it as the 'unspoken "back drop"' that is manifest and presupposed in single interpersonal conversations (Ford et al. 2001: 108). Often, however, conversation partners are unaware of these socially engrained values, assumptions and behaviour patterns, and their interactions could profit if they were able to reassess and reframe those assumptions (Ford et al. 2001: 116). The key diagnostic question in this dimension is thus whether the selection of people, the allocation of time, the choice of the physical space and — most of all — the organizational culture support the creation, sharing and integration of knowledge. By structuring the physical contextual elements of conversations (e.g. providing coffee corners or/and time for informal encounters and socializing), the less tangible context of conversations can be influenced

(i.e. organizational culture) and conversations can be managed in an indirect, less rigid way.

We have presented the six dimensions of conversations as distinct, while stressing their interdependencis. Group dynamics, for example, influence the conversational process: in a conversation with strong formal or informal leaders (group dynamics), the turn taking (conversational process) is most likely to be dominated by one or two conversers. In addition, some of the conversational dimensions can be more easily managed than others. Conversational problems can be discovered and managed along the quite visible dimensions of the message and process. Yet, challenges on these dimensions are linked to the less accessible dimensions of group dynamics or mental models. Future research could examine this proposition and study whether certain problems of less tangible and manageable dimensions (such as mental models or group dynamics) can be addressed by measures that act on the more tangible dimensions (process, message).

A Synthesis of Rules for Conversation Management

In this section, we use the proposed framework and its six dimensions as an analytic lens to examine the literature on conversations that discusses conversational rules to enable social knowledge processes, such as knowledge integration and knowledge creation. For each dimension of the framework we present schematically (Tables 2 to 6) conversational rules as they have been discussed in the literature.

On the message dimension (Table 2), conversational rules concern either the form or the content of a message. Regarding form, humour is said to facilitate the co-construction of meaning (Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Making hypothetical expositions and using innovative language are

Table 2. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding the Message

Expansive message form (verbal and non-verbal)	
• Foster innovative language and experiment with new words	Von Krogh et al. 2000
• Engage in hypothetical reasoning and scenarios	Von Krogh and Roos 1995
• Use humour	Eisenhardt et al. 2000
• Use visual support to gain focus	Harkins 1999
• Make clear statements by avoiding euphemisms and talking in circles	Weeks 2001
• Use a neutral and moderate tone (intonation, facial expressions, body language, type of language) in difficult and stressful conversations	Weeks 2001
Fact-based, prioritized and positioned message content	
• Select topics that are broad, relevant and personally meaningful to participants	Gratton and Ghoshal 2002
• Focus on the issues that matter most	Beer and Eisenstat 2004
• Distinguish between facts and opinions and make the rationale behind positions explicit	Margerison 1989; Quinn 1996
• Include data in a democratic way and remain close to it	Argyris 1996; Dixon 1997; Quinn 1996
• Distinguish between identifying problems and giving recommendations	Beer and Eisenstat 2004
• Allow a certain level of ambiguity in strategic conversations	Von Krogh and Roos 1995

also central activities for the creation of new knowledge (Von Krogh et al. 2000), as they facilitate the development of new visions and looking at familiar issues from new angles. Other rules concern the content of the message, such as the rule that urges participants to distinguish facts from opinions (Margerison 1989).

On the process dimension (Table 3), certain rules concern the way a conversation should be structured as a whole, while others regard the alternation and flow of single statements. Regarding the first aspect, the question is discussed of how strict and in what way conversations should be structured and planned. Bohm made the argument that the natural flow (and with it flexibility and openness) is a major strength of conversations (Bohm 1996). On the other hand, authors see value in defining clear phases for conversations and argue that conversations should include both divergent and convergent phases (Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Harkins 1999).

With regard to micro-interaction processes, some authors mention that the various messages should be connected explicitly (Topp 2000) and that there should be pauses between contributions (Isaacs 1999; Topp 2000). Moments of silence are important to calm down frenetic or aggressive discussions and to allow participants to reflect upon assumptions, arguments or emotions (Ellinor

Table 3. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding the Conversational Process

Explicit macro-conversation structure

• Structure conversations in the following phases: analyse actual status; define fictitious, realizable objectives; elaborate main driving forces, root causes; draw out possible solutions; define action plan	Barge and Oliver 2003; Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Harkins 1999; Manning 2002
• Structure the conversation in time by including converging and diverging phases	Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Harkins 1999
• Plan the agenda	Ross 1994
• Convert generalities to specifics and migrate from specific issues to general principles	Margerison 1989
• Start the conversation as broadly as possible	Topp 2000
• Edit conversations appropriately, make incisions to crystallize main concepts	Von Krogh et al. 2000
• Make specific proposals for changing communicative behaviour	Ford and Ford 1995

Balanced and well-paced micro-interaction processes

• Alternate the contributions of the various participants in balanced ways to actively encourage participation and collaboration	Barge and Oliver 2003; Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Dixon 1997; Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Von Krogh et al. 2000
• Let the communication flow be continuous and speak when the spirit moves you	Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Von Krogh and Roos 1995
• Always link new statements to the previous contribution	Topp 2000
• Do not rush but allow silence between phrases	Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Isaacs 1999; Topp 2000
• Engage in effective and deep listening (listen to whole phrases, rephrase, etc.) without resistance, to ensure common understanding	Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Harkins 1999; Isaacs 1999; McCambridge 2003; Ross 1994; Topp 2000
• Alternate talking with writing down individually, in order to lay out differences and make possible constraints explicit	Beer and Eisenstat 2004

Table 4. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding Group Dynamics

Authentic content conflict

- Speak with one's own voice and maintain a healthy level of   Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Quinn 1996
  content conflict over issues
- Be hesitant to interpret a critique on a issue as an   Argyris and Schön 1978; Isaacs 1999
  interpersonal attack

Moderate relationship conflict

- Manage interpersonal conflict by focusing on facts and   Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Quinn 1996
  multiplying alternatives to enrich the level of debate
- Disarm attacks by restating and clarifying intentions   Weeks 2001
- Lead personal talks to establish trust and empathy and   Gratton and Ghoshal 2002
  to clarify relational aspects
- Legitimize emotions   Gratton and Ghoshal 2002

Balanced formal and informal power structures

- Balance power structures by leaving power fluid and   Ellinor and Gerard 1998;
  defining roles dynamically   Von Krogh and Roos 1995
- Suspend roles and status or pick them as a theme if they   Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Ellinor
  exert too much influence on the conversation   and Gerard 1998; Senge 1990
- Actively share responsibility and leadership (by speaking   Ellinor and Gerard 1998
  to the group and creating common goals) to encourage
  participation and collaboration
- Become aware of games and tactics and name them in   Topp 2000; Weeks 2001
  order to neutralize them
- Honour your partner by acknowledging responsibility   Weeks 2001

and Gerard 1998). Another rule states that contributions should be balanced among all participants to best include the various perspectives (Ellinor and Gerard 1998) and share knowledge. This rule of the process dimension directly refers to the group dynamics dimension (actively sharing responsibility and leadership to encourage participation and collaboration).

The rules regarding the group dynamics of conversations (Table 4) aim to give answers to the question how the participants of a conversation can deal with relational issues so that these do not inhibit the group from completing its task successfully or creating and integrating knowledge. Various authors suggest that it is necessary to be able to address interpersonal issues and lead emotional talks to create an atmosphere of trust (Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Gratton and Ghoshal 2002). In conversations in organizational settings, participants have different functional and hierarchical roles, and a narrow understanding of one's responsibility might reduce the degree of participation, of challenging ideas, of proposed alternatives or of shared knowledge (Dixon 1997). Therefore, various rules propose means to deal with power structures (e.g. suspend roles or status and balance power structures) (Argyris 1996; Bohm 1996; Eisenhardt et al. 2000; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Senge et al. 1994).

The rules and principles regarding the mental model dimension (Table 5) aim at creating awareness in conversers about their own inference processes and at developing a critical capacity towards the way they make sense of messages. If such processes remain hidden, participants continue to misunderstand each other, fall back into the same paradigms, and are incapable of seeing interconnections between perspectives. For this reason, one central rule of the mental model dimension is to uncover underlying assumptions (Argyris 1996). In a

Table 5. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding Mental Models

Balance between (playful and analytic) discovering and focusing	
• Uncover underlying assumptions and unfold the invisible patterned reality	Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1993; Isaacs 1999; Quinn 1996
• Balance inquiry and advocacy (engage in advocacy by providing data, and explaining your reasoning	Argyris 1996; Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Dixon 1997; Ellinor and
• Engage in inquiry by slowing down the speed, reframing, open up for new solutions, asking for the person's observable data and reasoning, and by asking yourself what led you to a specific point of view	Gerard 1998; Harkins 1999; Ross 1994
• Release the need for specific outcomes and leave room for exploration, imagination, and learning	Bohm 1996; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Quinn 1996
• Institutionalize doubt, vigorous, disciplined questioning and big, broad questions	Gratton and Ghoshal 2002
Suspended immediate judgements and emotional reactions	
• Suspend assumptions, certainties and your judgement, acknowledge that they don't have to be out of necessity and actively engage in reframing problems and issues	Bohm 1996; Dixon 1997; Isaacs 1993; Isaacs 1999; Senge 1990
• Suspend and observe your immediate reactions (e.g. anger)	Bohm 1996; Topp 2000
Interrelated statements and viewpoints	
• Do not polarize viewpoints, but explore and respect differences and look for their interconnections and the shared meaning (systemic thinking) also by putting yourself in the other person's shoes	Bohm 1996; Dixon 1997; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Isaacs 1993; Isaacs 1999; Putnam 1994; Senge et al. 1994; Topp 2000
• Develop a shared meaning and seek (but not force) consensus with qualification	Dixon 1997; Eisenhardt et al. 2000; McCambridge 2003
• Think of the dynamic nature of things	Isaacs 1999
Affirming options	
• Develop an affirmative and generative competence and think in terms of positive possibilities and solutions rather than problems	Barge and Oliver 2003; Topp 2000

second step, the conversers learn to suspend and question their assumptions, certainties and judgements (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1993, 1999; Senge 1992). The argument is not that certain mental models are wrong and have to be changed, but that less defensive, knowledge-developing conversations can emerge when conversation partners deal more reflectively with their own inference processes.

Systemic thinking (Bohm 1996) is important to see the interconnectedness between various aspects and to discover the complexity of certain issues in a conversation. It therefore leads to conversations that are less aggressive because they are not oriented on either/or thinking and therefore on winners and losers. Conversers should also balance inquiry and advocacy (i.e. balance discovering and focusing, encouragement and criticism). This implies that one has to inquire further into new alternatives, explore other standpoints, and inquire into one's own viewpoints (its reasons, implications, etc.). The aim is to see the connections between viewpoints.

The rules regarding the conversational intent of a conversation (Table 6) mainly originate from authors from the field of organizational learning who distinguish between general goals of any conversation in which a shared meaning is to be co-created, and specific, context-related goals. Bohm (1996) argues that the final goal of dialogue is to enhance learning, innovation and understanding, which is why the conversational intent has to leave room for unforeseen

Table 6. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding the Conversational Intent

Explicit individual goals of the particular conversation	
• Pay attention to your intentions and make sure that the intentions of the various participants are shared by the conversing group	Bohm 1996; Ross 1994
Shared aim of conversations for the co-creation of meaning	
• Define common objectives and a shared vision to be pursued jointly	Eisenhardt et al. 2000
• Do not define the conversational intent too narrowly, but leave space for unforeseen outcomes	Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Harkins 1999
• Let the intention of a conversation be threefold: advance the agenda, create shared learning and create stronger relationships	

Table 7. Conversational Principles and Rules Regarding the Communicative Background of Conversations

Assorted people and roles	
• Ensure that relevant information and individuals are present at the conversation, e.g. involve generalists	Gratton and Ghoshal 2002; Von Krogh and Roos 1995
• Assign a facilitator who holds the context of dialogue	Senge 1990
Allocated time and conversation formats	
• Create time and space for (emotive) conversations	Gratton and Ghoshal 2002
Supporting space	
• Choose and arrange the physical space of a conversation so as to facilitate a certain type of conversation (sitting in circles, blocking out interruptions, holding meetings outside the walls of the organization, etc.)	Bohm 1996; Harkins 1999
Shared conversational culture	
• Establish a conversational etiquette and communicate it at the beginning of a meeting	Beer and Eisenstat 2004; Gratton and Ghoshal 2002; Von Krogh et al. 2000
• Make the type of conversation (e.g. strategic conversation) explicit	Von Krogh and Roos 1995
• Create a safe haven for participants by making openness and trust the rule rather than the exception and by encouraging and rewarding the injection of new perspectives	Ross 1994

outcomes. Harkins (1999) states that a conversation should always include three general objectives: advancing the agenda, creating shared learning, and creating stronger relationships.

While some authors argue for the necessity that conversers share their individual objectives (Bohm 1996; Ross 1994), others have found that it is difficult and unlikely that conversation partners reveal their personal intentions (Wittenbaum et al. 2004) and that it is more possible to define clear common objectives next to the individual ones. Eisenhardt et al. argue that working out shared objectives is important for the group to create a collective vision and not see the conversation as a simple exchange of individual interests where some win and others lose (Eisenhardt et al. 2000).

Finally, various authors discuss rules regarding the communicative background of conversation. Some rules (see Table 7) concern the selection and

constellation of participants, and certain authors see a great advantage in includ-
ing a facilitator who leads the conversation but does not impose an artificial
hierarchy. Suggestions regarding the physical space of conversations range
from placing participants in a circle up to organizing strategic meetings outside
the organization's walls to break away from habitual hierarchies and communi-
cation behaviour. Another important set of rules regards general conversational
etiquette and the conversational culture. Other aspects of the context, such as
organizational values, are rarely considered in the literature on conversations
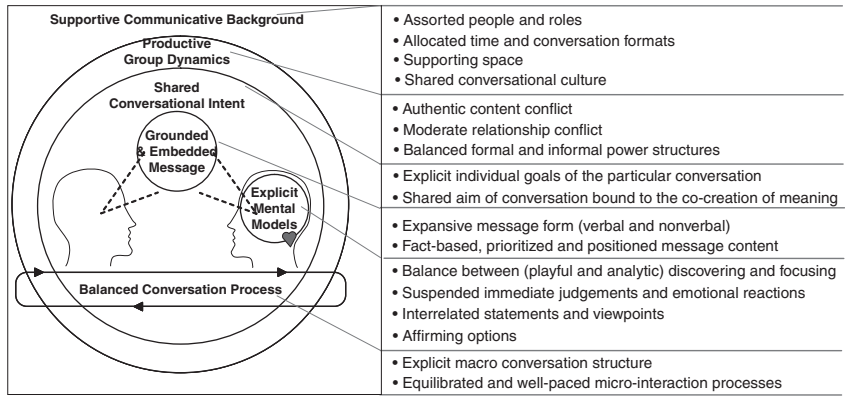and merit further research attention.

Conclusion: A Framework for Conversation Management

In this paper, we have argued for the centrality of conversations for social
knowledge processes and for a communication approach towards issues of
knowledge management. Members of an organization often engage in sense
making during conversations and it is primarily through this type of interaction
that they share, create and integrate knowledge. Yet, conversations are often
characterized by implicit rules or routines that inhibit knowledge creating or
sharing. Given the importance of conversations, we have argued for their active
management from a knowledge perspective. By analysing the contributions on
conversations in organization science, particularly those that stress learning,
sense making and knowing, we have found a considerable prescriptive orienta-
tion. The most visible aspect of this prescriptive research is a focus on compil-
ing conversational rules; explicit conversation rules are proposed as an
approach for the management of conversations. Because a myriad of often unre-
lated conversational rules have been presented in these studies, our contribution
has focused on organizing this substantial work and structuring it into a coher-
ent framework, based on the standard elements of classic and contemporary
communication models. The framework emphasizes the key variables of con-
versations and how they affect each other, as well as how they can be managed
in order to contribute to knowledge creation and integration.

Figure 2 is an integrative result of this analysis and presents a prescriptive
framework for the management of conversations. It ties the six dimensions of
the management of conversations to the conversational rules reviewed from the
literature.

In view of this analysis, future research directions emerge. Empirical
research should investigate whether conversations that are characterized by a
conversational behaviour as prescribed by the presented framework actually
facilitate social knowledge processes. With such results at hand, our proposi-
tions on how the six dimensions of the framework interact could be refined and
supported. In view of the context-specific nature of rules, research should fur-
ther analyse how the framework can be adapted to the particular processes of
knowledge creation, sharing or assessing. Rules that emphasize structure and
clear steps may be useful for implementation-oriented discussions, while rules
that stress openness and the suspension of beliefs may be useful for creative
strategic discussions. Such a research endeavour could lead to the resolution of

Figure 2.
A Framework for the
Management of
Knowledge-intensive
Conversations in
Organizations

Supportive Communicative Background	• Assorted people and roles • Allocated time and conversation formats • Supporting space • Shared conversational culture
Productive Group Dynamics	• Authentic content conflict • Moderate relationship conflict • Balanced formal and informal power structures
Shared Conversational Intent	• Explicit individual goals of the particular conversation • Shared aim of conversation bound to the co-creation of meaning
Grounded & Embedded Message	• Expansive message form (verbal and nonverbal) • Fact-based, prioritized and positioned message content
Explicit Mental Models	• Balance between (playful and analytic) discovering and focusing • Suspended immediate judgements and emotional reactions • Interrelated statements and viewpoints • Affirming options
Balanced Conversation Process	• Explicit macro conversation structure • Equilibrated and well-paced micro-interaction processes

the at times contradictory rules as discussed in the framework. Another research stream could investigate how the proposed communication rules are appropriated by conversation partners in real organizations and examine their long-term effects (e.g. the interaction between micro-conversational practices and larger organizational processes and structures). An alternative way to root conversation management suggestions in a stronger empirical base would be to integrate existing research on conversations from non-organizational domains. Research in the fields of argumentation theory (such as on argumentation schemes or fallacies) or in the application areas of medical and health communication (such as communication problem taxonomies) could be assessed for use in organization theory.

Having described the advantages and drawbacks of conversational rules, we believe that future research should also investigate other means of improving the quality of conversations. Such alternative means are important for conversers to acquire and interiorize effective conversational behaviour as defined by the various conversational rules. An example with a focus on training is McCambridge's study (2003) on the use of film extracts to teach conversational behaviour. Augmenting conversations with interactive, real-time visualization software provides another interesting alternative. In particular, applications that are based on interactive, content-specific visuals (Mengis and Eppler 2007; Weinberger and Mandl 2003) or on visual metaphors (Haber et al. 1994) seem promising from a knowledge perspective. Not only do they foster reflection on one's own conversational routines, or invite conversers to try out alternative conversational patterns, they also provide an additional language (visual semantics and syntax) to enrich sense making. Such a varied set of playful and analytic, reflective and active means that either strongly or loosely structure conversations seems necessary to help conversation partners internalize the conversational behaviour prescribed by explicit conversational rules.

A final implication of this paper regards the development of differentiated approaches to conversations, based on their specific application contexts (ranging from change discussions to strategic conversations). The term 'conversation management' seems adequate for this kind of systematic, balanced and differentiated approach to conversations and gives a voice to the increasing awareness

of the fundamental importance of conversations for social knowledge processes and organizational life in general.

Notes

1   In a broader view (beyond the scope of this paper), the concept of 'conversations' also includes other forms of discourse that can take place over large time spans (i.e. centuries). Conversations, broadly conceived, can be led as monologues or dialogues and include different people over time. Single interpersonal interactions are related by 'intertextuality' that provides continuity and both forms and constitutes reality (Ford et al. 2001).
2   We argue that conversations among people with in-depth, problem-relevant knowledge regarding complex, unclear and emergent issues merit being treated differently than small talk or routine, operational conversations. We refer to the former interactions as knowledge-intensive conversations.

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