



How Meetings Affect the Accomplishment of Broad Responsibility in a Municipally Owned Corporation

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Abstract

Municipally owned corporations are important actors in the pursuit of the Agenda 2030 goals and are often formally obliged by their owners to work in this direction. This has however shown to be quite challenging, and managers lack knowledge about how to develop new ways of organizing to meet such responsibilities. The aim of this article is therefore to understand how the work of a top management team in meetings affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility. The analysis, which is underpinned by a communicative constitution of organizing (CCO) perspective, shows how the way specific communicative practices (agendas, minutes, timeslots, turn-taking, and stakeholder voicing) are enacted leads to the re-production of parts of the organization at the expense of the whole, the present at the expense of the future, and profit at the expense of the other dimensions of sustainability. This study contributes to the literature on public management by showing how communicative practices enacted in meetings make certain concerns present and others absent, thereby creating the conditions for the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

Practical Relevance

- A broad understanding of responsibility, meeting the needs of many and including all dimensions of sustainability, is suggested for handling the complex problems addressed in Agenda 2030.
- Handling broad responsibility requires more integrative and collaborative ways of organizing and managing work.
- For top management teams, for which working together in meetings is a most prevalent features of the day-to-day practices, understanding the significance of how meetings practices affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility is key.
- Particularly, the way specific communicative meeting practices (agenda, minutes of meetings, turn taking, etc.) are enacted are found to either support or hinder the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

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Introduction

Most countries have committed to the 2030 Agenda and have thus expressed the intention to drive change in this direction. This involves many organizations, but the role of public local organizations is often emphasized as especially important (Florida 2017). One particular type of organizations in this context are municipally owned corporations (MOCs), which in Sweden provide services where the corporations compete on the open market, such as central heating, electricity, and broadband (Thomasson 2023). The number of MOCs in Sweden has increased radically the last three decades, and those with a municipality as the majority owner represent a turnover of approximately five percent of the Swedish GDP (Bergh and Erlingsson 2023). What these corporations do (or not) has the potential make a large impact on the work towards the goals of Agenda 2030 due to the fact that these corporations are increasing in number and due to the impact that the

services these corporations produce and deliver have on the economy, society, and the environment.

However, the transformation towards the goals of Agenda 2030 has shown to be demanding, and mainstream local level activities have been carried out as usual (Krantz and Gustafsson 2021; Taylor et. al. 2021). Many reasons have been given for the lack of action. One is ambiguity regarding responsibility. In Sweden the national government points to municipalities for action, but since they are self-governing authorities working with the agenda is to a great extent voluntary and the level of ambition varies greatly between different municipalities (Statskontoret, 2020). Still, many municipalities are committed to the Agenda 2030 and even make their MOCs formally responsible for work in this direction by explicitly stating tasks and obligations in their own directives. This way of making the work an obligation is interesting, not the least since the voluntary character of engagement to the agenda has been identified as one of the main reasons for action not being taken (Tamvada 2020), regardless of if it concerns private or public organizations.

Another reason suggested for transformation not taking place is that efforts to respond to such complex transformation, while maintaining high levels of service delivery, are impeded by the way public organizations, and MOCs in particular, are organized and managed (Head and Alford 2015; Olsen et al. 2017; Maine et al. 2023). Central to these forms of organizing is the idea of dividing and limiting responsibility between different organizations and individuals. This demarcation of responsibilities has been questioned since it tends to cause actors to disassociate themselves from the wider consequences of their actions (Jensen and Sandstrom 2019). Instead, what has been suggested for complex problems, such as meeting the goals of Agenda 2030, is a broader understanding of responsibility that includes meeting the needs of the many, now and in the future (WCED 1987), including all dimensions of sustainability (Elkington 1998).

Public management research explores different ways to handle broad responsibility on an organizational level (Head and Alford 2015). Collective acting is seen as especially important (Koschmann et al. 2012; Head and Alford 2015), indicating some form of shared responsibility between, as well as within organizations.

Less attention has been paid to the mundane work carried out in the organization and the effect this work has on the accomplishment of broad responsibility. In particular, little is known about how those who are supposed to share this broad responsibility work together in practice, not least top management teams (TMT), despite the important role they play in shaping the long-term development of organizations (Hambrick and Mason 1984).

Whereas TMTs work in many different ways, TMT meetings are one of the main occasions in which they work together. Team meetings have been widely studied in the last 20 years (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2017) and have been shown to be consequential for outcomes at the team level and organizational level; however, less attention has been paid to how the enactment of TMT meetings affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to develop knowledge on how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility. To achieve this, the paper builds on the communicative constitution of organizing (CCO) stream of research, where communication is the means by which organization is constituted and sustained (Taylor and Van Every 2000; Schoeneborn and Vasques 2017). Moreover, the paper focuses on the empirical material produced by closely following the TMT of a MOC over a period of two years, where the owner of the corporation has formally requested the corporation to contribute to achieving the goals of Agenda 2030.

What emerges from the analysis is how certain communicative practices in meetings keep limiting responsibility. A discussion of ways to organize these practices differently for broad responsibility to be accomplished is then presented. This article thus contributes knowledge to the literature in the field of public management on the role of communicative practices in TMT meetings for accomplishing broad responsibility.

The article is structured as follows. First, the concept of responsibility is introduced, followed by an explanation of why it is important to study how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility. After that, the theoretical framework, the research

method, and the results from the case studied are presented. Finally, the analysis is presented in relation to prior literature, followed by a conclusion detailing the contributions made to the field of public management and suggested directions for future studies on responsibility and the goals of Agenda 2030.

Accomplishing the Goals of Agenda 2030: From Limited to Broad Responsibility

MOCs differ from other service-providing units within municipalities and private corporations in various ways (Thomasson 2023). In Sweden, MOCs are subject to public as well as private law. According to the Swedish Municipal Act (SFS 2017:725), the municipal assembly is obliged to determine the public purpose of each corporation through the Article of Association, and goals and objectives through an owner directive, as well as to secure transparency and accountability by appointing board members and auditors who oversee and control the operation of the corporation. This is not something that the assembly is required to do for other service-providing units within the municipalities. Moreover, according to the Swedish Company Act (SFS 2005: 551), MOCs need to have chartered accountants responsible for auditing the financial status. This applies to any corporation, but private corporations do not have to handle the ambiguity that the dual set of laws and auditors necessary for MOCs creates (Thomasson 2023).

Other than the board, the CEO of a MOC is the only one with formal responsibility for developing and implementing the corporation's strategy, including the risk of liability for damages toward the corporation, the owners, and other stakeholders affected by the organization (Granberg and Wallenholm 2017; Thomasson 2023). Since a CEO cannot lead or control the operation of the whole organization alone, it is common, if not a requirement, to form a TMT to share the overall responsibility for the organization. The purpose of the TMT and what guides its work depends on what the CEO and the team members have agreed upon, but it generally refers to the content of the owner directive and pre-supposes a long-term and organization-wide perspective on operations (Hambrick and Mason 1984; Hiller and Beauchesne 2017; Granberg and Wallenholm 2017).

In MOCs, it is common to organize and manage work based on the idea of limited responsibility (Head and Alford 2015; Olsen et al. 2017), which materializes in different ways. On the one hand, MOCs may be influenced by the logics of bureaucracy prevailing in local governments. In this case, corporations tend to demarcate responsibilities between functional areas and steer employees towards different specialisations. On the other hand, MOCs may be influenced by the result-oriented logic of markets, highlighting the performance of the organization itself rather than meeting the public purpose of the corporation for the benefit of the local society (ibid). This implies that responsibility is considered as a promise one commits to in return for something else and is limited to the one (or the group) to whom the promise is made and the content of the promise, until the promise is fulfilled (Kittay 1999).

These ways of limiting responsibility are, however, questioned in relation to the goals of the Agenda 2030 due to the risk that actors will resign from responsibility for the broader consequences of their actions (Jensen and Sandström 2019). For instance, organizations may comply with environmental laws, labour laws, and codes of conduct but still contribute to pollution and the suffering of humans.

Instead, a broader view on responsibility has been suggested that, rather than being restricted to a promise to the few, meets the needs of current and future generations (WCED, 1987), addresses the whole system (Jay et al. 2017), and includes the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity (Elkington 1998). Taking on such broad responsibility obviously presents a number of challenges and implies a multiplicity of tensions for a TMT to handle (Hahn et al. 2015; Jay et al. 2017). For example, while the importance of integrating all three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) into organizational practices seems to be widely accepted, many still adhere to a view where economic prosperity is prioritized when making decisions (Hahn et al. 2015; Hengst et al. 2020). Also, organizations have a tendency to ignore the timescale of their practices and outcomes (Ortiz de Mandojana and Bansal 2016), which may actually contribute to the prioritization of

short-term operational matters at the expense of long-term strategic matters (Wodak 2013). Finally, TMT members, who are expected to consider issues from their unit's perspective but also from that of the organization as a whole, may neglect to look beyond their own domains and act for the benefit of the organization as a whole (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013; Hambrick 1995), thus putting the team at risk of fragmentation of responsibility.

Addressing tensions is especially challenging for TMTs, because as the team tries to handle different needs and perspectives in parallel, it faces ongoing pressure to make clear and consistent decisions between alternative strategies in order to allocate resources and provide guidance for the rest of the organization (Smith 2014). At the same time, TMTs also have the authority and resources to change the established organizational practices to support the accomplishment of broad responsibility, something that leaders on lower levels only rarely have.

Hence, while challenging, the TMT plays an important role in developing ways of organizing and managing work that may support the accomplishment of the broad responsibility, which is required to pursue the goals of Agenda 2030. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on the work of a specific TMT, particularly how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

Accomplishing Broad Responsibility: The Role of Meetings

Broad responsibility requires collaboration (Koschmann et al. 2012; Head and Alford 2015), and while top management teams work together in various ways, their work is mostly performed in meetings.

Meetings are often defined as planned, co-located (physically or virtually), and episodic gatherings of people, where the participants interact for a purpose (Schwartzman 1989; Sandler and Thedvall 2017). Meetings are one of the most prevalent features in the day-to-day routines in workplaces (Sandler and Thedvall 2017). Meetings may be seen as occasions in which teams facing difficult tasks and challenges can interact and discuss problems and ideas, make decisions, and initiate change processes (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock 2012). Meetings may also be considered to be connected to each other as part of an ongoing process that contributes to organizing the work of teams and the organization as a whole (Duffy and O'Rourke 2015). The connection of meetings may be made when written text, such as minutes of meetings or power point presentations, travels across place and time. The connection may also be created through participants acting as communicative bridges or brokers, making sure that what was talked about in one meeting influences other meetings that they also attend. Moreover, a collection of texts, such as a written policy on how to conduct general meetings available in the meeting rooms together with guidelines regarding the duties of the chair and participants of a particular meeting series, may connect the meeting to each other if it is invoked in meeting after meeting. Understanding meetings in this way may support organizations working together to accomplish their shared responsibilities, through the ways meetings are organized and performed (ibid.).

While research on meetings is an emerging field of research, important contributions have been made over the last 20 years that help us better understand issues related to preparing and conducting meetings and the related consequences (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2017). One contribution concern how different types of organizations (public vs. private, for-profit vs. non-profit) use meetings differently (Allen et al. 2014). For public governments it is, for instance, most common to discuss quality, policy, and compliance while it for private firms is to discuss ongoing projects and clients' needs or wants. Moreover, the level of organization matters. For instance, it is more common to discuss clients' needs and the state of the overall business at the top-level compared to at other levels (ibid.).

Other contributions refer to how certain micro practices are used to frame the purpose and situation of meetings and thereby affect their performance (Alvehus 2021). Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) show that certain ways of interacting during meetings, for example, focusing either on problem solving, action, interaction, or procedures, impact the team and organization in both positive and negative ways. One particular area that has been studied is action-oriented communication in meetings, namely, the willingness to take on responsibility

and to make changes. One study illustrates that open-ended discussion, as opposed to limited timeslots, impacts the change of strategy (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008). Another study shows that certain ways of visualizing metrics create accountability for sustainability (Bentia 2021). Still, action-oriented communication seems to be rare in many team meetings (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock 2012). Instead, a great deal of the time in meetings is spent on analysing problems, on what has been done in the past, on details, and on why change is not necessary. Furthermore, Laapotti and Mikkola (2016) show that many management team meetings in public non-profit organizations are used as sites for information sharing with only a limited amount of group interaction.

In order to be able to change the form of a meeting, which has often become entrenched through repetition over time (Yates and Orlikowski 1992), Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. (2013) advocate for the use of procedural communicative practices, facilitating the meeting interactions themselves so that the meeting can become more action-oriented. For example, spoken statements (e.g. clarifying goals, giving directions, or summarizing) or critical reminders (e.g. asking the team to slow down, move on, reconsider issues, or to get back to the topic) tend to change the way participants act in meetings (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2013). Also, written text, for example, a written agenda (Seidl and Guérard 2015) or minutes of meetings (Duffy and O'Rourke 2015), can be used to impact the way meetings are enacted. However, procedural practices may also have negative consequences. For example, a management team meeting agenda that contains a large number of issues and limited timeslots has been shown to have a restricting impact on discussion, as it does not allow enough time for problem solving and action (Laapotti and Mikkola 2019).

Whereas the research on team meetings has made important contributions, illustrating that meeting practices are by no means trivial but quite consequential for how shared efforts may be accomplished and to what effect, the question of how TMT meetings affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility (involving the organization as a whole, a long-term perspective, and all dimensions of sustainability) has not been explored in detail.

Studying How Meetings Affect the Accomplishment of Broad Responsibility: A Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) Perspective

To better understand how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility, this paper builds on a processual-relational perspective, viewing organizations as processes constituted in interaction (Putnam and Fairhurst 2015), and practice-based theorizing (Nicolini 2012) with a particular focus on communicative practices, a form of social and situated practice. This allows for understanding how the communicative practices (text and talk) are reproduced and adapted in situ and what is thereby accomplished (ibid.). Combining the practice-based approach with the Montreal School of CCO approach (Taylor and Van Every 2000; Schoeneborn and Vasques 2017) means that communication is both what is studied (the communicative practices) and the theoretical framework used (Cooren 2015). This allows for understanding communication as the means by which organizing is constituted and sustained (Taylor and van Ever 2000). This implies that the accomplishment of broad responsibility depends on what is made present in various acts of communications in the meetings where the TMT works together. Thus, studying communicative practices in meetings, and what is made present through these practices, allows for understanding which aspects of the TMT meetings might affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

CCO states that communication has an inherently relational and performative character. Relationality means that communication unfolds *interactively* in conversations where people continuously take turns interpreting and making sense of what is being said and the situation, before being animated by their own matters of concern to voice a response, that in turn is left open for others to interpret, make sense of, and respond to. In this way, people collectively produce an overflow of matters of concern and interpretations that must be collectively negotiated before eventually producing a more or less agreed-upon account of the situation and

what matters, which then becomes a tentative common ground, though always subject to future revision (Taylor et al, 1996; Vasques et al 2017).

The performative characteristics of communication, in turn, mean that text and talk have agency (Castor and Cooren 2006), meaning that they make a difference. When people do something with words, they can usually explain what makes them do what they do (Cooren 2016). If these reasons are considered important, they become co-contributors and will express themselves through people's actions. For example, a manager's order or a contract may be made present through an employee's utterances and thereby have implications for what happens.

In CCO, the metaphor of ventriloquism is used to capture the idea of shared agency (Cooren 2010) and to illustrate how people in conversations act both as the ventriloquist, animating other agents, and as the puppet, being animated, and how they can position themselves as more one or the other (Cooren 2015). When positioned as the former, a TMT member may, for example, enable herself to embody the voice of the owner and thereby add authority to what is being said by calling on the owner directive. Therefore, as a fundamental feature of collaboration, authority not only stems from a person's position of power, it can also be coproduced in interaction by making sources of authority present (Benoit-Barné and Cooren 2009).

When positioned as the puppet, a team member may instead argue that, even though the goals of Agenda 2030 are important, the owner's request for financial return on investment makes it impossible for them to be achieved, that is, the request animates the team member. This does not mean that the idea of shared agency implies that people lose their own status as agent or can evade responsibility. Instead, as Cooren (2016) argues, it highlights the importance of viewing responsibility as an object of decision, based on careful evaluation of what matters in every situation. However, due to the complexity of many situations and the different value people may assign to them, this is never an easy task. Therefore, for different voices to be heard and negotiated, and decisions to be made, meetings are all the more important.

In order to make a difference beyond the situation at hand, matters of concern need to be provided with endurance (Vasquez et al. 2017). For example, by inscribing them into written texts, such as minutes of meetings, PowerPoint presentations, or written agreements, they will be able to be transported in time and place and thereby continue to work outside of the meetings or from one situation to another by, for example, specifying the criteria for success, defining objectives, and obliging employees to take certain actions (Cooren 2004; Cooren et al. 2007). Recognizing what textual agents accomplish is thus tied to the micro-level communicative practices in top management team meetings with the macro-level dimensions of organizing (Cooren 2004).

Material and Method

In order to accurately represent work being done in practice, the author has followed the work of a TMT by observing their monthly meetings and reading relevant documentation over a period of two years (May 2019 to April 2021), including a follow-up workshop to discuss the emerging results.

The case

The case corporation is a midsize (700 employees) organization operating in the energy and utility sector in a relatively prosperous middle-size town in Sweden. The corporation has shown positive financial results without any major service disturbances for many years. However, with the many ongoing transitions in society, such as climate change, changed legislation relating to environment and security, reform of the energy system, and digitalization, many changes need to be addressed. The owner directive (established in 2017 in relation to the actions of the board and CEO) states that the corporation must contribute to the goals of Agenda 2030, particularly to the reduction of carbon emissions and energy consumption, and to the transition to renewable fuels. This is expected to be achieved with sustained levels of profit and accessibility of services.

The CEO has appointed a top management team (TMT) to share overall responsibility for the corporation's actions. The TMT's responsibilities are defined through a list of nine duties, which are collectively agreed upon by the team. The duties describe what the team is expected

to do for the organization as a whole, what each member should do in relation to their own parts, and how the team should support the CEO on request. The team's collective duties concern working with business intelligence, strategic planning, and budget; the prioritization of common goals, and the collective action plan.

The TMT is a reflection of a rather typical way of organizing work in a MOC through the hierarchical and functional approach to the division of responsibilities. Out of 12 members, five are business unit (BU) managers, four are cross-functional (Communication, strategy, HR, and Finance) managers, one is the CEO, one the vice-CEO, and one the secretary. A central element in the TMT's work to promote shared responsibilities is their meeting practice. Once a month, the TMT gathers for four hours in a meeting chaired by the CEO. Before each meeting, the secretary arranges for a conference room at the corporation's head office (there were two exceptions during the study period when the meetings were digitally mediated due to COVID-19). The secretary also plans the agenda for the CEO, sends invitations, and writes the minutes of meeting. The way the monthly meeting is organized has stayed the same for many years. In addition to the monthly meeting, the TMT members are involved in parallel workshops:

- Re-organization workshops. Between September 2019 and April 2020, a core team of four TMT members met biweekly to reorganize the corporation.
- Strategy workshops. In November 2020, the team decided to prioritize working together to strategize and to dedicate two hours every month to strategic workshops.

Producing data

Given the practice-based approach, the author has worked to accurately capture the practices of the TMT by observing the way the team works together in every second regular monthly meeting (10 TMT meetings in total), in one re-organization meeting (Re-org), in two strategy meetings (Strat), and the concluding workshop. Moreover, in April 2021, the researcher conducted a workshop based on a preliminary summary of the researcher's observations.

All observations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, minutes of meetings, strategic plans, and other documentation belonging to the meetings have been collected and meticulously stored.

Organization and analysis of data

The analysis has been performed through systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2014), a non-linear, path-dependent process of tying together theoretical insight with empirical observations. This abductive approach has supported the continuous refining of the insights produced, going back and forth between theory and a close reading of the empirical material. As is typical of qualitative process studies (Langley et al. 2013), our analysis went through several stages of refinement.

First, the agendas for the 10 observed regular TMT meetings were analysed (Figure 1) based on the issue addressed, minutes spent discussing each issue, and the categorization inspired by prior literature (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Porter & Nohria 2020) in order to gain an overall understanding of what the TMT spends its time discussing.

Figure 1. Overview of the observed TMT meetings. The cells with numbers represent the minutes spent on the respective meeting issue

MEETING ISSUES	May 2019	Aug 2019	Dec 2019	Feb 2020	Apr 2020	Jun 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Dec 2020	Feb 2020	Average % of total time	CATEGORY
Check in	15	11	9	30	20	32	27	10	18	25	10%	Beginning
Last protocol	1	2	1	1	1	19	0	0	1	1	1%	Beginning
CEO statement	5	26	13	7	1	6	2	21	16	4	5%	Relating
Deviation report	39	25	23	21	21	15	36	20	23	20	13%	Monitoring
Financial report	30	69	17	43	31	21	33	16	19	18	16%	Monitoring
Tactical planning (score card)	2		15			26				1	2%	Monitoring
Sustainability report			40		7	46			41		7%	Monitoring
Benefits and compensation									17	11	1%	Monitoring
Strategic planning	21			24			25				4%	Strategizing
Business development			10			49				90	8%	Strategizing
Strategic competence dev.	11						17	14			2%	Strategizing
Mergers and acquisitions				24	33						3%	Strategizing
Processes orientation	25			29	63			9			7%	Organizing
Digitalization			28								1%	Organizing
Reorganizing	21	35		7	22	7		18			6%	Organizing
Management meetings	11		14								1%	Relating
Customers		32	26		20	10	33		25		8%	Relating
Informing the organization			5	4	2	2	1	2	2	4	1%	Relating
Evaluation		14	15	2	5	6	8	5	9		3%	Ending

Always on the agenda Separate workshops on the side

Second, the extensive data (all transcribed text) was analysed systematically for the doings manifested in the data and the activities were coded. Examples of doings are: “reporting one by one on present situation”, ”starting every meeting by giving voice to the Board” “reporting on budget for each BU”, or “moving on to next issue due to limited timeslot”.

Third, the coded data was re-organized in relation to each meeting issue in the 10 observed meetings. Each issue is then analysed for recurrent doings and what they may or may not accomplish by using the theoretical framework of CCO and the idea of textual agency in particular. One example is from the CEO statement in October 2020. As for most such statements, it is brief report concerning public relations or the next board meeting (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Example of doings and what these accomplish

Doings observed during the CEO statement	Accomplishment
<p>The CEO statement, always early on THE AGENDA:</p> <p>“At the next Board meeting, we have a new [service tariff] coming up. We believe it is on the correct level, but it might be an issue for discussion. Then there is our budget. We have a goal defined for [% profit].”</p> <p>Activities: PRESENTING GOAL FOR PROFIT, GIVING VOICE TO ONE STAKEHOLDER ONLY</p>	<p>By calling on the goal defined by the Board, the TMT lends authority to the importance of generating profit. In this way, a limited view of responsibility is reproduced.</p>

Forth, by going through the doings and accomplishments, the author noted how certain communicative practices in the meeting have specific consequences for the accomplishment of broad responsibility, as shown in the next section.

The enactment of these communicative practices in meetings is further described in the following section.

Results

Building on a CCO approach, this study shows how the enactment of the meeting of a TMT may affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility. In the following section, the significant communicative practices that have been identified are presented and illustrated with a representative example.

The practice of following an agenda

The TMT typically uses a predetermined written agenda to frame the purpose and situation of the meeting. By analysing the content of the agenda (Figure 2), three main observations are made:

1. Monitoring of operations (on average 39%) is made present far more often than strategizing (17%). This means that present matters are emphasized at the expense of future matters.
2. Two issues, deviation and financial reporting, are given special attention. They are always first on the agenda in every meeting, occupying almost a third of the total meeting time (29%), and they require the most comprehensive preparation by the members. By making the state of affairs of each business unit and shared functions more present compared to the overall organization, the managers are animated to primarily represent their own part of the organization in the discussions.
3. Even though sustainability reporting (7%) is on the agenda twice a year and thus integrated in the work of the TMT, it is decoupled from the other forms of reporting. The agenda thus limits the importance of the ecological and social dimensions of sustainability relative to the economic dimension, since profit is made present far more often.

Thus, following this kind of predetermined agenda produces a limited enactment of the TMT's shared responsibility, where the parts of the organization, the present, and profit are continuously made present far more often in the meetings at the expense of the overall organization, a long term-perspective, and all three dimensions of sustainability.

The practice of minutes of a meeting keeping

After each meeting, the secretary writes a summary of the meeting in the minutes, before making it available to all employees on the intranet. At the beginning of the subsequent meeting, directly after check-in, the chair makes reference to the minutes from the previous meeting, asking if anyone has objections. In most cases, no objections are raised, and the chair moves on with the meeting without making any further references being made to any previous minutes. An example of how this practice is enacted is described in the following vignettes.

Vignette of what the practice of minute keeping accomplishes

In May 2019, the issue of competence development was on the agenda. The HR manager presented a suggestion as a basis for a decision on how to work together to develop competence in key areas in order to transform the organization and meet the strategic goals. Six areas, one of which was change management, were prioritized and competence owners were appointed and delegated responsibility for competence development. The presentation was followed by a few questions and some clarification before the team acceded to the proposal. A brief summary and the decision was then documented in the minutes.

MINUTES - May 2019

8. HR

HR reminded the TMT of the importance of strategic competence planning for the overall goals to be reached. Therefore, key competences need to be identified, analysed, and developed.

The TMT decided: *to accept the proposed competence areas and the owners.*

In February 2020, the issue was back on the agenda. The HR manager presented the activity plans produced by the competence owners for a decision by the TMT. All plans included just a few activities, except for the area of digitalization. Half an hour was spent discussing how to reduce the number of activities for the last-mentioned plan.

MINUTES - February 2020

6. HR

HR informed the meeting on the issue of key competences and implications.

The TMT decided: *to accept all of the plans, except for one seminar that will be omitted from the plan for the area of digitalization.*

In August 2020, three internal business developers were invited to present a suggestion to expand the efforts regarding competence development in the area of change management, arguing that this is a neglected but key competence for meeting strategic goals.

MINUTES - August 2020

5. Change management

[name of Business managers] visited the meeting to propose that change management interventions be incorporated in ongoing change.

The TMT decided: *to postpone a decision until after the budget discussion for next year is settled.*

One month later, in September, the issue of change management was added to the agenda at the last minute. The BU manager, also the competence owner for the area together with the CFO, informed the others.

BU1: the CFO and I have discussed the matter further. Those with employees in need of change management training should make decisions themselves. This is not a decision for the TMT. It is up to each individual to decide whether to perform change management training for the personnel.

FM1: But I would like to point out that it is very important that we work with change management, as we have not done that before.

BU1: Yes, in the projects, it is probably a good idea. But that will be up to each steering committee.

Nothing else was said before the team moved on to another issue, but in the minutes, it was documented as a decision. In the subsequent meeting, this item in the minutes is formally accepted.

MINUTES – September 2020

11. Other issues

[name of BU and CFO] reconnect to meeting in August on the issue of change management competence.

The TMT decided: *that each BU is to decide for themselves whether to send employees and managers on change management training. Also, each steering committee for the projects decides whether to use change management in the projects.*

These vignettes illustrate how decisions to share responsibility for the organization as a whole, which were made in May and February and documented in the minutes of a meeting, were never raised again when the same issue was back on the agenda in September. Therefore, new decisions can be made, even opposing decisions, without any further deliberation.

The common practice of keeping minutes was in place, the matter of concern was articulated, decisions were made and documented, but, on closer examination, the practice is reduced to a minimum.

1. The minutes are quite brief and written after the meeting, by the secretary alone.
2. When returning to the minutes in the following meeting, this is done without going through the content of the minutes, and the minutes are therefore never allowed to guide the discussions.
3. The TMT often neglects to raise prior decisions in their discussions, and each issue is therefore handled as a new stand-alone discussion.

Thus, given the way this practice is enacted, the responsibility for transforming the organization becomes fragmented into activities for each business unit or project to handle separately, and the shared responsibility of the TMT is not made present.

The practice of having predetermined timeslots

In order to fit all issues into the limited time allocated for the meeting, each issue on the agenda is given a predetermined timeslot. The chair of the meeting ensures that the schedule is strictly observed. The following vignette illustrates how the practice of predetermined timeslots is enacted.

Vignette of what is accomplished through the way the TMT practices limited timeslots

In January 2021, the team held a strategy workshop for two hours. The workshop was initiated by the chair with a reference to the Board's request for a more rapid response from the corporation in terms of responsibility for the goals of Agenda 2030. The team is then asked to reflect on this request in smaller groups. When they return in plenum, they are given 20 minutes to share what has been discussed. This is exemplified by the following vignette.

TMT1: We are asked to be sustainable, profitable, the engine for the development of technology, and everything else. Still, one can easily understand profit as the most important deliverable. We should help the Board with a scenario analysis, showing the consequences of different choices.

TMT2: We discussed the contradiction between sustainability and finances. It is obviously profit that is at the top of the agenda.

TMT3: We would look to tie sustainability to urban development. Is that our contribution? While part of our operation is prohibited from generating profit according to the law, it can still contribute to sustainable urban development.

TMT4: To contribute to the transformation of transportation and the expansion of industry in the region, we must solve the issue of electric power. For that we need to collaborate with partners and make investments. It might not be profitable in the short term, but it is good for the city in the long run.

TMT5: It is important for us to decide on our purpose. However, profit is key. Without it, we won't have any choices to make.

TMT3: It is also our responsibility to supply certain services. We cannot choose to not deliver water or heat, for instance.

TMT5: It is not about refusing to do certain things, nor do private companies continue to run bad businesses. Still, we have to maintain a certain distance from the owner. For example, we said no to supplying [a specific service to a certain district], because it was unprofitable.

[...]

TMT6: We have to stop this discussion now.

TMT2: Just when it is starting to be interesting.

TMT6: We have to move on.

What this vignette illustrates is how the TMT uses the practice of predetermined timeslots to allow themselves to engage in an open discussion in order to problematize the issue by raising it in different concerns. However, when the time is up, they move on to the next issue without negotiating or agreeing on how to respond to the request. In this way, the time slots are an obstacle to the Board's request for a more rapid response to the goals of Agenda 2030. This is an example of how the team typically works in meetings. Once an issue has been covered for the allotted time slot, it is considered resolved. Rather than processing the issue, the team seems to be processing the agenda.

The team's broad responsibility for the goals of Agenda 2030 is therefore not being fully materialized.

The practice of restricted turn-taking

Every meeting begins in the same way, with a check-in where the members briefly report on their present situation based on a team building model with four different states of mind: inspired, content, in denial, or confused. One at a time, the members give an account of their own state of mind, while the others listen quietly. The following vignette illustrates the practice of turn-taking is commonly enacted by the TMT. However, the private statements are omitted [..].

Vignette of what is accomplished through the way the TMT practices turn-taking

In February 2021 the CEO starts the meeting by asking the team to go around the table to make a check-in. The member sitting to the right of the CEO starts.

TMT1: [..]. I am having a conversation with TMT2 regarding new business opportunities and external collaborations. It is great fun. Thumbs up!

TMT2: [..]. Work is fun, despite the challenges.

TMT3: I'm fine. The (financial) results for my BU were good. [..].

TMT4: [..]. Work is also good, but I have two main issues. The first is a cultural issue with one of the managers in one of the departments on how to work with the working environment. They have not been talking to each other for two years. We have physical meetings to handle the situation. I find it kind of exciting to see if it can be solved. The second issue is regarding our [cross-functional] processes. Still, we have not decided how to work. What does it mean to be autonomous versus corporate? How is it supposed to work? Apart from that, work is fine.

[..].

TMT8: [..]. At work, there's too much to do and my biggest concern is how to make things happen when we cannot meet face-to-face. I am facing great challenges in my business units. It is a tough period, and I worry.

TMT9: [...] I spend a lot of time on the issue of sustainability, it is quite challenging and diverse. We are not done yet. The meetings on individual performance review are lively but also intense. New issues arise requiring new meetings. [...]

TMT10: [..]. While there is an enormous commitment in the team for product development, there is still a lot left to be done, but such a small team. How is it possible to accomplish anything without our own resources? Well, together with others. It is the corporate challenge we have to staff for, to avoid fragmentation again. [...]

TMT11: [..]. So, thank you all, let's move on to the next issue.

The vignette shows how every TMT meeting starts with the quite restricting practice where attendees take turns speaking based on seating. This allows each speaker to focus on their own present situation in their own BUs or functions, without building on what has just been said.

When problematic situations are raised, no one responds or offers help. In this way, problems appear to be treated as something that should be handled alone by each individual member.

Different turn-taking practices have been shown to be useful for different purposes (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008). Open discussion, where members are allowed to be spontaneous, has been shown to promote strategic change. Restrictive turn-taking, on the other hand, tends to have a stabilizing effect. In the latter case, it is more difficult to interrupt others the way people do in ordinary conversations, and many ideas and reflections are therefore likely to be omitted (ibid).

What the vignette and other parts of the TMT meetings demonstrate is that there is a restrictive practice of turn taking and that this practice reinforces the members' existing responsibilities for their own parts of the organization at the expense of shared responsibility for the organization as a whole. The practice has a stabilizing effect (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008) and continuously obstructs the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

The practice of giving voice to absent stakeholders

The TMT has a practice of inviting employees, or asking someone in the TMT, to represent different stakeholder's views. This practice is illustrated by the following vignette.

Vignette of what is accomplished through the way the TMT give voice to stakeholders

In December 2019, the Key Account Manager (KAM) responsible for serving and growing the 10 largest client accounts was invited to deliver a status report.

KAM: Our key clients are asking for support on sustainability. Just a few months ago, we were participating in a client event, saying that our aim is to help our clients become sustainable, and now we have noticed an interest.

BU1: We need to be cautious. What does the client mean by the word sustainable?

KAM: For example, getting all the actors in the district to collaborate on, for example using redundant heat for greenhouses ...

FM1: It means all three dimensions of sustainability.

BU1: That is not in the scope of our responsibility. Do they really expect us to deliver everything?

[...]

KAM: If we stand up at a client event claiming that we have come all the way ourselves and are now turning to our clients to support them, what do we mean by that?

BU 1: I absolutely agree.

FM: How far will we go? My impression is that this proves that the clients think that we do a good job. They trust us. And when the municipality makes this request, it is because they are dismantling their own sustainability efforts to push them on us.

KAM: We would like to discuss the clients with the TMT again. Twenty minutes is very limited.

CEO: You should get together with the team working with product development.

KAM: We already are connected, but maybe we could have another dialogue with you in the TMT.

The CEO thanks the KAM and the meeting moves on.

This vignette illustrates that there are roles assigned to give voice to important stakeholder groups. The voices are allowed space in the meeting, and this has the potential to open the door to the accomplishment of broad responsibility towards a plurality of stakeholders.

In the meeting, the KAM highlighted the corporation's responsibility to support clients' sustainability work by being animated by the voice of key clients and the voice of the CEO by calling on a promise made in a client meeting. This responsibility is, however, denied by the team, seemingly not allowing the called upon voices the same significance as other voices in the meeting. When the time expires and the KAM asks for an additional opportunity to discuss this issue, the KAM is referred to a forum on a lower level of the organization. The stakeholders' voices are thus silenced, which in turn allows the TMT to avoid working towards broad responsibility.

Discussion

The aim of this article is to develop knowledge on how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility. By building on the CCO perspective, the analysis reveals that certain ways of enacting common communicative practices within meetings (following an agenda, keeping minutes, using limited time frames for conversations, using restricted turn-taking in conversation, and presenting stakeholder voices) keeps reproducing separation and limitation of the broad responsibility. It is not the communicative practices themselves, but rather the way they are enacted that enables or hinders the accomplishment of broad responsibility. In order for the team to accomplish broad responsibility, which is necessary for addressing complex challenges (e.g. moving toward the goals of Agenda 2030), other ways of organizing and managing meetings may thus be necessary.

The study contributes to existing literature in the field of public management, which mainly focuses on the systemic and organizational level in relation to accomplishing broad responsibility (Head and Alford 2015), by bringing attention to how the mundane work carried out by a TMT in a MOC plays a role in such accomplishment. More specifically, this paper opens the “black box” of TMT meetings to understand the significance of micro-level communicative practices within. This has implications for which aspects of meetings can be altered in pursuit of broad responsibility required for reaching the goals of Agenda 2030.

First, the practice of following a standardized agenda is a common way to frame the purpose of a meeting in order to render the meeting as meaningful for its participants (Seidl and Guérard 2015). Moreover, the use of a standardized agenda allows a series of meetings to be connected to each another as part of a process that contributes to the organization as a whole (Duffy and O’Rourke 2015). Since an agenda includes certain issues and excludes others, it affects what will be animated in the meetings and what will not. In this case, the agenda favours discussions on parts of the organization, the present, and profit at the expense of discussions on the overall organization, the future, and the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability. This practice thus stands in the way of accomplishing broad responsibility.

The reproduction of limited responsibility is further reinforced when the team repeatedly uses restricted turn-taking and limited timeslots in relation to the agenda. The practice of restricted turn-taking has also been found in other studies of management team meetings in public organizations (Laapotti and Mikkola 2016) where the chair also has a central role and much of the discussion takes place between the chair and one member at a time. This phenomenon may have a lot to do with the team’s duty to support the CEO, who is also the chair, and this may be more common in public organizations. The use of limited timeslots, which in this case leads to the processing of the agenda itself rather than the issues, resonates with the findings of Laapotti and Mikkola (2019). Such procedural communicative practices may admittedly compel the group to use the precious meeting time efficiently, but at the same time, they may stand in the way of quality in the handling of issues (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2013). Negotiations and the ability to move an issue forward to a consensual decision instead require discussions that are not subject to strict time constraints (Wodak 2013).

Second, in order to allow discussions in one meeting to carry over to other meetings, the practice of keeping minutes of meetings is commonly used in most organizations. In this case, however, the minutes of meetings are never used as a source of authority in the meeting discussions (Benoit-Barné and Cooren 2009), nor do the minutes support the transfer of issues from one meeting to another or outside of meetings where they can continue to make a difference for the organization (Cooren 2004; Cooren et al. 2007). Thus, efforts to accomplish broad responsibility in the TMT are impeded. Without taking the time to co-author the outcome of conversations (Vasquez et al. 2017) in a document that can travel across time and space there is a risk that conversations in the TMT meetings will lack significance outside specific meetings.

Considering the practice of keeping meeting minutes through a ventriloquial perspective, any of the TMT members may at any time ventriloquize the meeting minutes in order to remind the team of previous decision made and what actions they require. It is therefore not only the TMT member who may say what needs to be done, but also the minutes, which strengthens the speaker’s arguments. In case the arguments meet opposition, the speaker may turn to act as the puppet, using the meeting minutes to speak for itself. By understanding that the result of an interaction always depends on what issues are being made present and what puppets end up being ventriloquized in a conversation, the TMT members may use the communicative practices in a way that better support the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

Third, the TMT in this case enacts the practice of giving voice to absent stakeholder groups, thus promoting the broad responsibility for sustainable development. However, these voices are silenced by other voices in the meeting. Benoit-Barné and Cooren (2009) argue that for the voices of absent stakeholders to be heard, authority needs to be given to those who speak for them. The speaker may, for instance, act as a ventriloquist (Cooren 2015; 2016), animating documents (i.e. owner directives or client contracts) as sources of authority. It is also possible for the TMT members, not least the CEO, to use authority based on their position to enhance the status of those invited to speak for absent stakeholders by introducing them and offering

other support. The practice of silencing the voices of absent stakeholders in the case TMT may therefore be something the team may need to reconsider by examining who is given a voice, who speaks for them, and how their status can be made present.

In conclusion, to better understand how the meetings of a TMT affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility by studying the mundane work of a TMT in a MOC and using the theoretical framework of CCO, the article provides insight into how the way communicative practices in meetings are enacted makes certain issues present and others absent, and therefore contributes to create the conditions for accomplishing broad responsibility. Through these practices, the TMT meeting becomes an authoritative agent in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 and can actually have a significant impact, enough to enable the TMT to disregard the owner's directive. It appears that the TMT meetings in this case are, at least to some extent, more about processing of the meetings themselves, rather than being occasions in which the team interacts and discusses problems and ideas, makes decisions, and initiates change processes (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock 2012) or an ongoing process that contributes to organizing the work the organization (Duffy and O'Rourke 2015). This illustrates how the repetition and frequency of meetings allow relationships, norms, and roles to form and evolve over time (Yates and Orlikowski 1992) and, in this case, that the way TMT meetings are expected to be enacted has become fixed to such a degree that the communicative practices within nearly have become means of their own. Therefore, the author argues, when transforming the way of organizing and managing work to accomplish broad responsibility, the TMT can benefit from reflecting on how the TMT meetings, and the communicative practices constituting them, may be enacted differently.

The value of this study lies in the particular unpacking of how communicative practices are enacted in the context of a specific site. Despite the fact that the way practices are enacted by the TMT in this MOC is specific to this organization and that the results cannot be generalized to a population, it is still likely that similar practices are used in other MOCs and that the results therefore can be relevant also to them. The practices enacted in the corporation studied correspond to what Laapotti and Mikkola (2016; 2019) show, i.e. that management team meetings in public corporations mainly are used as sites for information sharing and that the agenda contains a large number of issues, something that allows only limited time for problem solving and action planning. Moreover, it is known that the way such organizations enact meetings are similar and that this way differs from the way meetings are enacted in private corporations and public governments (Allen et al. 2014).

Studying a MOC is of interest due to the significance such corporations may have for the realisation of the goals of Agenda 2030. Not the least, access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (SDG # 6), as well as the transformation to more affordable and clean energy (SDG # 7) mainly depend on MOCs. In Sweden, particularly, those corporations are important because of the increase in the number of such corporations over the last 30 years and the significance they have on the economy (Bergh and Erlingsson 2023). Studying a MOC obliged to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030, specifically, is also of interest since this work is for most corporations voluntary and this voluntariness has been identified as a main impeding factor for accomplishing such broad responsibility. Therefore, being able to illustrate how a MOC, for which working towards Agenda 2030 is not a question of voluntariness, still encounters challenges, allows for a contribution to the research field of public management. More generally, how MOCs work is still limited area of research, and more studies are therefore recommended.

Moreover, it is of interest to understand what top managers do and to what end. First, while TMTs have frequently been studied with a particular focus on how the characteristics of the team members shape performance, less attention has been paid to the team's work practices, that is, how they actually work together (Denis et al. 2017; Jarzabkowski et al. 2022). Secondly, most leadership research concerns the relationship between leaders and their followers, rather than the leader's responsibility towards their many other stakeholders (Kempster and Jackson 2021). This, however, does not mean that top management teams are the only members of an organization that impact the accomplishment of broad responsibility. Responsibility is taken throughout the organization (Denis et al. 2017). Therefore, research on the accomplishment of responsibility among employees on other levels of the organization may be warranted.

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