Managing Administrative Reform through Language Work. Implementing Lean in Swedish Public Sector Organisations

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Abstract
The paper accounts for the early implementation of Lean in two Swedish public sector organisations justifying Lean as a remedy for the negative consequences of New Public Management (NPM). But is Lean radically different, or rather yet another NPM reform? We use a social constructivist approach and focus on the role of language in influencing employees' minds and subjective perceptions, and thereby mobilising new patterns of governance. The concept of 'language work', comprising three organisational levels, is suggested for analysing the meaning and consequences of the Lean efforts studied. The analysis reveals that the first level of Lean language work largely mirrors typical NPM ideals, including entrepreneurship, empowerment and customer orientation. In contrast, there are more salient differences at the second level about labels used for organisational classifications having both empowering and disempowering effects on categorised peo-ple. At the third level of analysis targeting the day-to-day practice, we see a return of NPM performance measurement–oriented practices and their (often-unintended) conse-quences discussed in research on NPM reforms, although they surface in somewhat new ways, including communicative symbols and other linguistic expressions. The main contribution lies in the conceptualisation of language work widening the scope of the constitutive role of language to include the levels of political programmes and technolo-gies of government as well as organisational classifications.

Is Lean After NPM?

In the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's staff magazine, the Lean coordinator explains that they originally called his unit the Lean Central but soon after decided to change it: 'I've abandoned the word [central]. It's a catastrophic label reeking of authoritative control. Instead, I want this to become the Lean Development Council, where the other Lean coordinators and I meet. As a counselling unit, we provide advice. We have a certain expertise'.

This quote illustrates the importance of the choice of words, or more gener-ally the use of language. The background to this statement is that the agency in question had been criticised for its highly authoritative management control, and to

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mobilise organisational change, it was crucial to use a convincing language. Indeed, language is a central component of constructing the reality that organisational members perceive and live by (Ford, 1999). Language has for quite some time caught the interest of scholars intrigued by organisational identity and change. It has been discussed in terms of narratives, storytelling and sensemaking (Boje, 1995; Weick, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997), pointing to the importance of the story/narrative formed about and within the organisation. Scholars have explored the multiple narratives and stories surrounding an organisation and how they might affect its identity as well as hinder or contribute to organisational change (Tyler, 2006; Brown, 2006). In this article, we wish to extend the knowledge of the use of language in governing organisations, or as in our cases, in mobilising change through the implementation of the Lean model in two public sector organisations. By language, we mean the labels used to conceptualise Lean, those used to categorise employees with various Lean responsibilities and those that occur when Lean activities are performed in day-to-day practice. The focus of our attention is neither the story nor the narrative created in the organisation through Lean efforts, but rather how labels are used to signal, mobilise and implement change. Lean is particularly interesting in regard to language because in our two cases it is marketed as a management model, even a philosophy, unlike NPM. But *is Lean radically different, or rather yet another NPM reform?*

A specific strand of research highlighting the role and power of language regarding NPM reforms (Miller and Rose, 1995; Shore and Wright, 1997; Urla, 2012) is useful for our purposes, particularly the literature on *labels*. At a general level, labels remove ambiguity and direct attention to certain issues by clarifying how things should be understood, and sort one thing from another (Weick, 1995; Bowker and Star, 1999). Labels classify, for example, what constitutes a 'cost' or a 'bottleneck', and in doing so, they tell us what should be counted as such and that these practices are important to consider. Although categories, classifications and labels may appear almost 'natural' and taken for granted, they are socially constructed and as such they are not neutral sorting or language devices (Bowker and Star, 1999; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990, 1993; Hacking, 1999, 2007; Kelemen, 2000). Labels make up things, activities and people (cf. Hacking, 1986). Thus, labels not only form work practices but classify people and how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others, such as citizens categorised by public sector organisations, or employees categorised by managers within organisations (Douglas, 1986; Lakoff, 1987; Hacking, 1999, 2007; Garsten, 2003; Tamm Hallström and Boström, 2010). Moreover, Shore and Wright (1997) discuss the role and power of language in terms of *semantic clusters*. This research points to the fact that management models and ideas carry certain clusters of labels, such as 'best practice', 'quality', 'benchmarking', 'empowerment', 'result-, and so forth, that together form a particular language. The power of dominant semantic clusters lies in the fact that they define what is perceived to be relevant problems and also appropriate solutions to them (cf. Rose and Miller, 1992). Language thereby becomes an important vehicle for mobilising and sig-

nalling new patterns of governance (Bourdieu, 1991; Islamoglu, 2009) but also for influencing the minds and subjective perceptions of employees (Foucault, 1988, 1991; Martin, 1997; Oakes et al., 1998).

Thus, in the article, we view the use of language as a powerful way of governing and more specifically build on theories of labels and semantic clusters to analyse the language work conducted by the two organisations studied – the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Swedish municipal public sector, in particular preschools – in their implementation of Lean. To provide an answer, we suggest a language-work lens through which we examine how the Lean language is articulated, what semantic clusters are formed and what these clusters signal within the organisation. In our material presented below, we focus on the following three levels of language work.

1) Conceptualisations and the communication of the Lean philosophy by various organisational actors;

2) The establishment and use of new organisational categories to support the Lean implementation; and

3) The day-to-day practice of working with the Lean toolbox.

The first level roughly corresponds to what is discussed in the literature on NPM reform as the discursive, programmatic level of analysis. This is the most abstract level, focusing on discourses of NPM, including words such as 'continuous improvements', 'empowerment' and 'result-based management' (Rose and Miller, 1992; Miller and Rose, 1995; Shore and Wright, 1997; Urla, 2012). In relation to the programmatic level, these scholars have studied the interrelated technologies of government, the instruments used to realise the programmes – a focus somewhat similar to our third level about the day-to-day practice of working with the Lean toolbox. The focus of those studies has been on the seemingly neutral performance measurement systems and other calculative devices used for management accounting and control and how these often have explicit, negative and unintended consequences for the daily lives of organisational members (Butterfield et al., 2004; Hood and Peters, 2004; Kennedy and Widener, 2008; Diefenbach, 2009; Christensen and Laegreid, 2011; Fullerton et al., 2013). We share this interest in the way technologies of government are practised and the discussion about their perceived neutrality linked to the use of numbers, statistics and calculations as well as the attractiveness of how accounting information provides an air of transparency. According to the framework we propose, there are, however, additional dimensions of language work relevant to the analysis of this technology level, such as organisational and communicative activities surrounding, supporting and complementing the use of numbers and calculations.

Finally, we suggest yet a third level of language work that has not received as much scholarly attention in these contexts, namely the role and power of labels created for employees. There is, however, an emerging literature on labels and categorisations used to analyse the workings of administrative procedures in bureaucratic work that we can use. In this literature, the labelled people under scrutiny are often citizens categorised by civil servants/case workers using ad-

ministrative procedures to decide whether people are 'employable', 'knowledge-able' or 'disabled', for example (Diedrich and Styhre, 2013; Diedrich, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2011; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2013; Holmqvist, Mara-velias and Skålén, 2012; Østergaard Møller and Stone, 2013). One finding of these types of studies is that such labels often have a dark side as they have what Hacking terms looping effects (Hacking, 2007). Garsten and Jacobsson (2013) express this in terms of empowering versus disempowering effects.

> The [coding] procedures may have empowering as well as disem-
> powering effects. The moulding of subjectivity that the process of
> work capacity assessment implies is a subtle form of control in which
> the subject herself is, so to speak, invited to participate. It may have a
> mobilizing and empowering effect, in that it may serve to support and
> articulate qualities and strengths in the individual, or assist in creating
> awareness of shortcomings that may be addressed (Garsten and Ja-
> cobsson, 2013: 846).

While this literature has mainly focused on how public sector organisations classify citizens, how organisations' employees are labelled has so far received less scholarly attention (for a few exceptions, see, e.g., Garsten, 2003; Tamm Hallström and Boström, 2010; Boström, Klintman, Casula Vifell, Soneryd, Tamm Hallström and Thedvall, 2014). With the studies accounted for in this paper, we can thus reduce this gap.

Our analysis of Lean in two public sector organisations discussed using three levels of language work shows that this work takes on different shapes in that the labels formulated at the programmatic level form a semantic cluster of labels (Shore and Wright, 1997) unlike the one created when categorising and labelling employees. And the same goes for the labels associated with the Lean toolbox used in everyday Lean work.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we present the background and methods. Second, we account for our empirical material from the two organisations studied, which has been sorted according to the above-mentioned three levels of language work. Third, we conclude by answering our research question and discussing in what way our findings add new knowledge to the literature on the use and power of language in management control set-tings.

Participating, observing and interviewing in a government agency and a municipal district

We report some of the findings of two studies[1] that use participant observation of, and interviews with, employees involved in Lean work at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (the Agency for short) and in the Swedish municipal public sector, in particular preschools. The Agency is a national government agency with about 13,000 employees. The preschools are run by the municipality, in this case within a municipal district of the City of Stockholm, and the public pre-

schools in question employ about 400 people. The chosen approach offers a strategic point, what Marcus terms 'strategically situated ethnography' (1986), when studying the introduction and use of Lean in public organisations. First, both organisations are currently undergoing major change processes in their way of organising and controlling daily activities, which offers ample opportunities to examine the social order of organisations, as '[i]n times of change, old practices are destroyed and new ones are constructed, which invites the questioning and de-construction of the previous social order' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996: 1). Second, the Agency and the municipal preschools are different types of public sector organisations, though when examined remarkably similar in many ways in terms of the Lean implementation. Moreover, both organisations describe Lean as an attractive management model since it is framed as a philosophy and emphasises both customers and employees. One idea the organisations studied share is the assumption that if the employees continue to make customer value improvements according to the Lean scheme, the organisation will be more effective and qualitative, and employees will find work more enjoyable.

The study of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency was conducted mainly in 2013 and 2014 using a qualitative method and is based on twenty interviews with representatives of the top management team, support functions, such as the HR management, controllers, representatives of the Lean Council, division managers, project leaders of temporary working groups established to look at specific Lean issues; and case workers who are also employed as Lean coaches. Moreover, in September 2013, participant observations were conducted for two days at a value stream mapping workshop held at one of the Agency's departments. During the workshop, field notes were made, totalling twenty-four pages. Finally, documents such as the appropriation directions, annual reports and the staff magazine, *Dagens Socialförsäkring* (DS), were collected and analysed.

The study of the municipal public sector consists of field notes (366 pages) from participant observations carried out at a consultancy-run training course for Lean coaches (three days), six Lean Forum meetings within the district and one at the Lean Network meetings, where the City of Stockholm's Lean directors attend. Participant observation has been performed over six weeks in two different preschools as well as at two Lean whiteboard meetings, two value stream mapping processes and one moment-of-truth process. The study is also based on two interviews with the municipality's development strategist and one with a head of unit at a preschool. The authors of this paper have translated all the quotes.

Communicating Lean: A shift from control- to trust-based management?

Lean is a management model that originates from the automotive industry, primarily Toyota Motor Corporation (Womack et al., 1990). At the programmatic, discursive level, Lean is presented as both a philosophy and a toolbox, where 80% is philosophy and 20% a toolbox (Womack et al., 1990; Modig and Åhl-

ström, 2011). In this section, we show how Lean is communicated within the organisations studied. More specifically, the focus is on how language work is played out at the programmatic level when Lean is communicated among employees.

At a training course for Lean coaches held in the municipal district, the Lean coaches, regular employees who are the drivers of the municipality's Lean work, were trained in the fourteen principles of Lean, which they should teach to their fellow employees. This was part of the emphasis of Lean as 80% philosophy and 20% tools, where the philosophy is based on these fourteen principles from Toyota.

The two consultants, Carin and Monica, from the consultancy firm teaching the Lean coaches, posted the principles on the walls of the conference room.

Principle 1. Base your management decisions on a long-term philosophy, even at the expense of short-term financial goals.

Principle 2. Create a continuous process flow to bring problems to the surface.

Principle 3. Use 'pull' systems to avoid overproduction.

Principle 4. Level out the workload (*heijunka*).

Principle 5. Build a culture of stopping to fix problems, to get quality right the first time.

Principle 6. Standardised tasks and processes are the foundation for continuous improvement and employee empowerment.

Principle 7. Use visual control so no problems are hidden.

Principle 8. Use only reliable, thoroughly tested technology that serves your people and processes.

Principle 9. Grow leaders who thoroughly understand the work, live the philosophy, and teach it to others.

Principle 10. Develop exceptional people and teams who follow your company's philosophy.

Principle 11. Respect your extended network of partners and suppliers by challenging them and helping them improve.

Principle 12. Go and see for yourself to thoroughly understand the situation (*genchi genbutsu*).

Principle 13. Make decisions slowly by consensus, thoroughly considering all options; implement decisions rapidly (*nemawashi*).

Principle 14. Become a learning organisation through relentless reflection (*hansei*) and continuous improvement (*kaizen*).

(Field notes from a training course for Lean coaches in 2012)

The principles encourage an organisation to create problem-identifying processes, make slow decisions and foster an exceptional, active, learning employee who gets it right the first time and makes continuous improvements through the standardisation of tasks and visualisation techniques. The consultants underlined the importance of the Lean philosophy, arguing that if the Lean coaches cannot communicate and get employees involved in the philosophy, they will not succeed in making the municipal district Lean. The employees need to understand the philosophy; they cannot just use the Lean tools, the consultants maintained. The idea of Lean as a philosophy that the employees should absorb was also visible in the principles. Principles 9 and 10 explicitly addressed that employees and leaders should follow and even live by the philosophy.

At the Agency, an HR manager talked about Lean as a trust-based means of managing, where the Agency was moving towards the new Lean way of working through a shared belief in empowerment and the decentralisation of responsibility, which was contrasted with the old, control-based way of running the Agency. A so-called Lean coordinator (cf. below) reflected in a similar way, pointing to a difference between the old control- and measurement-based system and the new value-based management control system introduced by Lean.

> Right now there are strong inconsistencies between what in some
> way may be called value-based governance with trust in employees
> and this highly numerical governance that we have when we measure
> performances in terms of the number of administered cases per hour
> and making quotas [Swedish: *pinnjakt*] (Interview with Lean coordi
> nator, spring 2013)

To visualise the Agency as a Lean organisation, it developed its own Lean model, a circular figure surrounded by key concepts and expressions, such as 'continuous improvements – dare to challenge', 'efficient flows based on customer needs', 'to get quality right the first time' and 'identify deviations and problems in flows and their causes'. In the middle of the circle was the principle 'Respect for people' surrounded by the categories 'Customer', 'Employees', 'Suppliers' and 'Partners'. Whereas the last two mentioned were almost never referred to during the interviews, there was much talk about customers specifically but also about the role of the employees. One interviewee from the HR department described the employees' previously weak position, something that Lean was supposed to change.

> Our organisation is run fairly authoritatively, and as an employee
> you're fairly used to being loyal and not do much else than what
> you're told to do. Now they want to change this perspective, towards
> a clearer and broader responsibility for workers. [. . .] Again, we have
> a tradition of authoritative management, meaning that when the man
> agement talk about "customer, customer, customer", we talk about
> that too. [. . .] And we have really been quite introvert in the past. We
> haven't given the citizen much thought. [. . .] You bet, we have

> thought about our own work procedures. In other words, we perhaps
> haven't thought of the employee as an individual [either: our addi-
> tion]. (Interview with a member of the HR department, spring 2013)

In sum, the new patterns of governance mobilised around the semantic clusters
of the Lean management model in both organisations were a value-based man-
agement model said to be grounded in trust and encouraged an active, learning
employee who gets it right the first time and makes continuous improvements
through the standardisation of tasks and processes. Making the employees feel
comfortable and enjoying their work were understood to benefit the customer. In
both organisations, there seemed to be an understanding that Lean shifts the
focus to trust and continuous improvements from below as well as emphasises
the customer.

Classifying Lean workers: New roles and activities signalling softness

In this section, we account for the language work involved in the labelling of the
employees' roles and the activities established to support the implementation of
Lean. Inspired by categorisation literature, referred to in the introduction, which
views categories as social constructs that may have interactive consequences, we
discuss how this language work affects how employees prioritise and understand
their work situation in relation to Lean.

To introduce Lean into the Agency, the director general appointed an *HR
manager* – a person who had worked for a large private company – to become
the head of the Lean effort, with responsibility to ensure the implementation of
Lean. A crucial step was to establish the *Lean Development Council*, or Lean
Council for short. As noted in the introductory vignette, the Council was origi-
nally named the Lean Central, but this label was abandoned soon after as it
'reeks of centralised control', as one interviewee explained, which was seen as
part of the old, difficult era of the Agency. The Lean Council was led by a *head
Lean coordinator*, who explained that the Council was loosely composed of
about fifteen *Lean coordinators*, who met once a week. One of the Lean coordi-
nators elaborated on the Council's role as being a counselling unit, rather than a
control unit. One way the Lean Council provided counselling was through the
development of a manual to be given to all employees as a form of educational
material. According to an interviewee, the head coordinator's leadership is non-
authoritative and almost 'unpleasantly effective'.

> [The head Lean coordinator] waits for others to approach him. [. . .]
> The day they ask something, he will help them, but if they don't ask,
> he doesn't do anything. And I must say, it's almost unpleasantly ef-
> fective. [If he were] to step forward and say, "Shouldn't you do it this
> way instead?" people would be defensive. [But] the day they say,
> "What are you doing over there in the Lean Council?" [and he re-
> plies] "All right, I'll tell you!" Then it's completely different. It's ac-

tually quite fascinating (Interview with Lean coordinator, April 2013).

Moreover, there were some thirty so-called *Lean guides* (Swedish: *vägvisare*) that answered to the Council, but they mainly travelled around Sweden and trained the Agency's 13,000 employees in the Lean philosophy, the Lean tools and how to use them. At the local level, the organisation had *Lean coaches* – employees designated to support the Lean work in their departments. They could be a head of a unit, but also others, case workers, for example, as no formal skills or backgrounds were required for a coaching position. One informant told us it may also be someone unsure about Lean and therefore was given this special role as a way to (hopefully) become more positive, which may be seen as a co-optation strategy. Preferably, however, it was someone showing an interest in Lean and who had pedagogical skills and could communicate a positive image of Lean so as 'to get the others on board'. One coach elaborated on why he applied for this position.

> I was interested and I believe it's possible to develop good teamwork, that there are possibilities, I mean to think about improvements and how we can make the work more efficient. And fun for me to do something more than just case work, thus on a personal note [. . .] I think I have fairly good leadership skills and can make a group of people work well together. (Interview with case worker/Lean coach, April 2014)

One of the coaches' main tasks was to manage the work of the so-called *Improvement teams* (consisting of 10–15 people), which should be set up in all departments throughout the organisation. A Lean coordinator described the coaches as method specialists conducting the weekly meetings in front of the Lean whiteboards being put up all over the Agency. Through teamwork employees were expected to engage in continuous improvements.

While some interviewees were positive to the Lean efforts, some also brought up negative aspects, for instance one Lean coach described some managers as delegating too much responsibility to coaches by letting them handle difficult (managerial) questions.

> Sometimes when teams tell me that they haven't done anything since last time, and I ask them why not, then you have a tough situation, because it's really not my job to pose such questions. It should be the boss. This has resulted in some coaches having decided to quit their coaching assignments. (Interview with case worker/Lean coach, March 2014)

Another coach talked about the difficulties in making the teams function as groups rather than as a set of individuals.

> It's difficult to explain in words, but I've never experienced a work-place where employees prioritise their own performance as much as here. The whole structure, with in trays and how you are measured and controlled by quantitative indicators; well, the whole [perfor-mance measurement] structure makes employees think about them-selves. That makes my work difficult [. . .]. We have teams on paper, but honestly, we sit here with our me trays and each case worker for her or himself. (Interview with case worker/Lean coach, April 2014)

As described so far in this section, to realise the Lean reform a number of new categories had been established within the Agency that were not automatically or even generally consistent with the managers and controllers of the 'old' organi-sation, and which signal 'softness' by using labels such as 'coaches' and 'coor-dinators'. All the coaches interviewed said that they were attracted to the Lean philosophy, expressed through the semantic clusters discussed in the first empir-ical section and the 'soft' categories explored here, and therefore had been ini-tially enthusiastic about taking a role as a Lean coach. After a while, however, some became less positive as this position sometimes proved difficult.

Although the municipal district was neither the same size nor as geograph-ically spread as the Agency, we observed similar categories and labels in this organisation. At an early stage, a *development strategist* was hired responsible for building a Lean organisation; this involved the establishment of *Lean coach-es*, *Improvement groups* and a *Lean Forum*. The Lean coaches worked in the whole district and it may be a Lean coach who normally worked as a preschool teacher that coached a home care unit to introduce Lean into the work of the home care personnel. The ultimate goal, however, was to have all units form their own improvement groups working on continuous improvement. As with the Agency, the categories not only denoted softness but were also based on the idea of a flat organisation and a bottom-up perspective where the employees should suggest the improvements. This was also what attracted many of the employees to become Lean coaches. In one of the observed Lean Forum meetings attended by the Lean coaches, they introduced themselves to each other, and one of the Lean coaches explained that the bottom-up perspective appealed to her. 'That it's the people working with the issues who are set to change them'. The other coaches agreed.

Still, sometimes the Lean coaches found themselves in workplaces with a poisonous atmosphere . As with the Agency, the Lean coaches occasionally had to do the job of the managers, solving personnel problems rather than teaching Lean. Furthermore, they frequently had to manage the sometimes-difficult-to-reconcile opinions and ideas of the people in the Improvement group. This was often because the improvement groups were deliberately set up to include people who did not agree with each other and people who were positive to Lean and others who were not. The fact that they included people who were negative was frequently described as a strategy to get them interested. In this way, some man-agerial responsibility was shifted from the management to the Lean coaches.

In sum, if we look closer at the labels chosen for the organisational categories in both the organisations studied, they communicate 'soft control'. Rather than viewing Lean as a tool for vertical control through management decisions, control and reporting, Lean was, through a semantic cluster of labels, about 'improving', 'coordinating', 'coaching', 'counselling', 'advising', 'having dialogue' and new positions, such as 'coach', 'guide' and 'coordinator', were created. It is worth noting that these new positions formed new hierarchical structures within the organisations. These soft hierarchical structures blurred the boundaries between managers and Lean coaches, where the latter on the one hand felt boosted and empowered by their new roles, and on the other experienced resistance and felt burdened by the responsibility.

The day-to-day practice of working with the Lean toolbox

In this section, we present the language work conducted in the daily work practice of the organisations studied. More specifically, we examine the labels and other communicative symbols used in the day-to-day practice of working with various Lean tools. If the Lean board is one important tool in the Lean toolbox for organising change, value stream mapping is another. We will give examples of the language work involved when employing both tools.

One of the Agency's support departments organised a six-day workshop, the purpose of which was to map the value stream of the procurement process. The mapping of the value stream would then be used as input for the writing of a standardised process description of the Agency's purchasing process. At the start of the workshop, brown paper was put on the conference room wall. The workshop leader was an internal consultant from the Agency's Process Department, that is, the central department responsible for all process standards used for managing social insurance case work. Thus, not a person involved in purchasing issues, but rather hired for her expertise and years of experience of standard-setting work. She explained that the purpose of the workshop was to come up with a rough process description of all the steps of a purchasing process, from start to finish. They used Post-its to fill the process description with contents, illustrated step by step – first how it worked at present (Swedish: *nuläge*) and then what they wanted the process to look like with consideration given to customer values (Swedish: *nyläge*). Numerous details were to be specified before appointing someone to write the process standard.

Post-its in five different colours were used to map the stream flow, but the ones most discussed during the workshop were the yellow, pink and green. *Yellow* symbolised the main activities, or principal steps, of the entire process, for instance the preparation and planning of the purchasing process, the specification of the product criteria to be met by the suppliers, the evaluation of offers, or making a purchasing decision. *Pink* Post-its were used to specify customer value, for example informing them of the overall process and its components. *Green* Post-its were used to clearly indicate administrative values or output, such as an action plan for the entire purchasing process, a sufficient number of offers from

suppliers to be compared, or a signed contract with the best supplier. Following the discussion during the workshop, however, it became clear to us as observers that the work did not start from scratch, which is usually not the case in any standard-setting process (Tamm Hallström, 2004, 2006).

The Agency's process standards typically end up as 200- to 300-page documents, filled with highly detailed instructions on the various steps of the case work. The level of detail reappeared when the workshop leader described characteristics of a 'good standard'. However, the many details regarding the purchasing process discussed at the workshop – details that, according to the workshop leader, had to be specified in order to really map all steps of the purchasing process – met resistance from some of the purchasing officers present. Although most participants could see a value in specifying the crucial steps of the process to ensure that all legal requirements were met and customer values were maximised throughout the process, they still hesitated because the number of various coloured Post-its rapidly increased, meaning that the process description to be written based on these Post-its would turn into an extensive and detailed typical process standard. As the writing of a standard would be finished, the workshop leader explained, the purchasing department's senior managers would add indicators and measures. They were to be used for follow-ups on the standardised work in terms of deviations and improvement suggestions discussed at the weekly meetings with the Improvement teams.

During the workshop discussions about the choice of wording to use to describe the different steps of the purchasing process, the six purchasing officers sometimes disagreed not only over what concept best described various activities but also the order of the different steps. The workshop leader explained that they needed to come to an agreement about how to label each step, and about the exact order of the steps.

> You must get it right, now. What concept do you want to use? How do you want to define all steps and activities and values? What we do here at the workshop and the subsequent writing of this standard will make your processes more public. You've done all this work before in somewhat different ways, but now these processes should be standardised and made public and they should be followed in your daily work from now on. (Statement made by the workshop leader, observed in September 2013)

One of the purchasing officers said that she was somewhat worried about using such a standard as it became all the more detailed.

> I can't stop thinking about people who won't act in a "normal" way; people who won't act as we plan here. It'll make it hard to follow these process descriptions step by step. (Statement made by a purchasing officer participating in a value stream mapping workshop, observed in September 2013)

According to the workshop leader, this kind of situation simply had to be solved. A purchasing department manager added that it was a question of management and thus something that they should be able to handle. The purchasing officer who expressed hesitation clarified that most customers at her department were actually managers and they were particularly hard to influence. After some discussion about whether going to the next level of management was a realistic solution in these situations, the workshop leader finished the debate with a final argument.

> The troublemakers must be dealt with separately. Most people still want to do it right. (Statement made by the workshop leader, observed in September 2013)

The language work in the value stream mapping was indeed a language of rationality (Drori and Meyer, 2006) and numbers (Porter, 1995; Miller, 2001; Thedvall, 2006, 2012) that signalled that the aim of this mapping work was to increase both efficiency and transparency, which made it difficult to resist (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008). There was yet another aspect of the language work that communicated something else. Using brown paper on the wall and the moveable coloured Post-its symbolising activities and values conveyed a sense of being home-made and of simplicity, and the continuous use of wordings such as 'you are the ones who decide' made the value stream mapping activity appear open and inclusive. Words, colours and numbers filled the language work with communicative symbols.

The room was crowded; a Lean-board meeting was being held in one of the municipal district's preschools. Half of the staff was standing in front of the Lean improvement board – there was an assumption that if the participants stood up, the meetings would be more effective, and therefore they were urged to do so. The other employees were outside taking care of the children. They would soon switch places. Melissa, the workplace leader, explained that they would from now on meet every week in front of the board. It would take about 15 minutes. Melissa urged everybody to go to the board and mark a green, blue or red dot for each day of the week. This was to show how the respective days were perceived. She explained: a *green* dot if it had been an exceptional day, for instance if something happened that could be shared as a good example; *blue* for a normal day; and *red* if something was not working. But then, she said, they had to give an example of how to improve it or at least suggest a possible tool from the Lean toolbox that could help solve it. On the board, there was a column in which improvement suggestions should be put together with a clarification of what needed to be done, when, by whom and at what stage of the process they were. The last mentioned was determined by putting a P, D, C or A (in accordance with the Deming circle: Plan, Do, Check and Act) in the column.

Elisabeth, one of the preschool teachers, wondered whether she had misunderstood something. She had noticed that the board was often full of green dots. Her unit's board was, however, time and again covered in blue dots. She be-

lieved that they might have a different standard than the others for what could be green. She asked if they should have a discussion about what the various colours actually meant. Melissa said that it was OK that they had a lot more blue: 'It's *your* perception'. Elisabeth was insistent, saying that maybe she had misunderstood, but was it not the case that they should put a green dot if they had a positive example. The Lean coach said that it could also be the case if they had a good chat with a parent or a hug from a child that made them happy. Elisabeth said that she was confused. She thought it had to do with the organisation, not the subjective feeling. She was told that it could be both. After the meeting, we talked to the Lean coach about the dots and she said that there was some negativity in the unit where Elisabeth worked; she understood Elisabeth's point, but they needed to be positive about their work: 'There are some strong-willed people who tend to argue with each other. So it's important to highlight the positive'. What Mary, the Lean coach, meant was that if they start to think of a hug from the child or a good chat with a parent as making their day 'green', the unit would send a more positive signal that it is a 'green' one. In this way, the language work of labels and other communicative symbols guided the employees' perceptions of the work and practices. More precisely, these colourful symbols – put on Lean boards and sorted into various columns to be filled with (preferably positive) information about the weekly performances – signalled simplicity, transparency, inclusiveness as well as rationality.

In sum, we argue that the language work which takes place in the day-to-day practice helps foster the right Lean behaviour. It encourages the standardisation of work practices through the language work performed in value stream mapping, where each step of the work process needs to be classified. It also promotes the active employee by using the visualisation techniques of the Lean board, on which the responsibility for improvements is plain to see for all the passing employees. It is clear that with the soft language, the idea of a philosophy, the use of brown paper, Post-its and colourful dots – together giving a sense of inclusiveness, simplicity and empowerment – comes a rather controlling toolbox.

Conclusion: Mobilising change through language work

The question posed was whether Lean was radically different in the two organisations studied, or rather yet another NPM reform. Using the notion of language work, our analysis shows that no straightforward answer can be given as there is a diversity that evolves between the different levels of language work.

The first level analysed involves the Lean philosophy, where we investigated the language work and the semantic clusters of Lean formed and articulated in the organisations. At this level, the language work concerned communicating Lean in the organisation. It was about making employees enthusiastic about working with Lean and encouraging an active, learning employee who gets it right the first time and makes continuous improvements through the standardisation of tasks and processes. There was an assumed causal relationship between employees' enjoyment of work and customer satisfaction. The labels used in the

language work process of communicating Lean in both organisations point to classic NPM managerial language in terms of empowered employees, the emphasis on continuous improvement and a focus on the customer (e.g. Rose and Miller, 1992; Kelemen, 2000; Urla, 2012). The Lean reform in both organisations was, however, enforced by top management, and employees had no choice regarding participation in improvement work, and employee empowerment could only be performed within a strict framework defined by the management. This phenomenon has also been observed in critical research on NPM reforms, showing that the idea of empowerment often takes a back seat to stronger ideals of managerialism (Diefenbach, 2009). In this sense, Lean is merely another NPM reform (Arlbjørn et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2011). Although there are many similarities, the semantic cluster of labels is, however, not identical to that of other NPM reforms. The framing of Lean as a philosophy rather than a management tool, which emphasised the slow, rational, systematic and empirically grounded consensus decision-making opened up for a different framework for the governance of organisational practices.

The second level involved the organisational categories and structures, where the Lean management model had brought with it certain organisational roles or 'soft' categories, such as Lean coaches and Lean guides. Many of our interviewees, enthusiastic about Lean and the ongoing process of change welcomed this sematic cluster of labels. They believed it signalled a certain seriousness to the reform since a number of new positions were created throughout the organisations. These roles, however, formed new bureaucratic structures within the organisations, with new hierarchical arrangements that entailed new organisational activities, for instance the Lean coaches who participated in the municipal district's Lean Forum, or as in the case of the Agency, where the Lean coordinators coordinated Lean efforts throughout the organisation, and the Lean guides educated all employees in Lean thinking and work. The use of these soft categories and the new hierarchical structures formed have not been discussed in the NPM literature, and in this respect Lean seems to differ from NPM reforms. Another way of mobilising change through reform could, for example, have been to develop and expand existing positions and hierarchical structures to adapt to new management control initiatives (cf. Granlund and Lukka, 1998; see Paulsson, 2012, regarding management accountants), rather than establishing new additional positions as observed within the Lean reforms studied. In that sense, it was another type of language work than found in NPM reforms, where the emphasis had been on managers and hierarchical structures with the support of accounting instruments and management accountants (Hood, 2000; Diefenbach, 2009). What was evident from our material, though, was that the new organisational categories affected the employees applying for such new positions. The head coordinator of the Agency's Lean Council was indeed perceived as an authority and a leader, but the Lean coaches' situation was somewhat ambiguous. In terms of Garsten and Jacobsson's discussion (2013) about empowerment and disempowerment, our cases showed that Lean coaches on the one hand feelt boosted and empowered by their new roles, and on the other experienced re-

sistance and felt burdened by the very fact that they were Lean coaches, thus confirming the two-sided nature of labels. This tension that revolved around the new organisational positions mobilised employees to reflect more generally on desired organisational practices and how they could be achieved through governance structures and incentive systems. More research is, however, needed on the consequences of categories established for an organisation's employees in order to further develop knowledge of dimensions such as empowerment versus disempowerment due to such categorisations and labelling.

Our analysis of the third level of language work – the daily practices of the organisation – showed how the organisations studied implemented various measurement and visualisation techniques to encourage 'activation'. Our studies have limitations as they were conducted during the early phase of Lean implementation, and more studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of this type of language work. We have, however, noted the role of language work in mobilising commitment to change also at this level, with value stream mapping that was open to employees at lower hierarchical levels and arranged in a simplistic manner, in turn giving an air of inclusiveness and empowerment. Still, as demonstrated, the Agency's mapping work was governed by procedures and templates developed by the central support function responsible for work standards. Thus, on the one hand, the employees carried out the value stream mapping, and not a special unit hierarchically superior to the operational level, and on the other hand these mapping sessions in the Agency were convened by an internal consultant from the department that usually set all standards for case work, encouraging detailed and specified standardisation, measurement and classification of work practices, in turn reducing the employees' room for manoeuvre. We also witnessed subtler language work techniques for rationalising and standardising work practices, such as colourful dots on the Lean boards, where employees were supposedly encouraged to put red dots to signify room for improvement, but where the green dot was the ultimate goal. And these boards are classic techniques of the visual management prevalent in NPM reforms. Thus, we see clear similarities in the ideals of Lean and NPM. By using brown paper, colourful dots and Post-its, Lean was, however, characterised by a certain softness and feeling of home-madeness, but there was nothing soft about these communicative symbols and the language work involved when employing them in daily work practices. This conclusion is in line with Rose's analysis (1996) of empowerment as a form of self-management. Still, we observed tensions in the use of the Lean toolbox, which in turn opened up and evoked reflection among the employees on the value of the rationalisation and standardisation processes undertaken through value stream mapping and Lean-board meetings.

So, the language work involved in getting rid of the negative associations of the aforementioned label 'Lean Central' was realised by the semantic cluster of labels formed in the Agency in terms of new positions and organisational units, though with some unexpected hierarchical blurriness in the roles and tensions evoking reflection on governance structures. Thus, by adding the labelling of people and organisational structures to the framework of language work, we

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contribute with new perspectives on the power of language in governing organisational practices. Moreover, with this analytical tool distinguishing between three different levels of language work, inconsistencies between levels can be identified, which increase our understanding of the variation in the outcome of administrative reforms.

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Notes