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# **Storytelling and employee engagement from the CCO perspective: A case study in a nonprofit organization**

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# Abstract

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Employee engagement has become more of an important issue for nonprofit organizations as they have to maintain an unprofitable social mission with often stringent resources. This study problematizes that most research about employee engagement is from a managerial approach, while research from the “communication constitutes organization” (CCO) perspective recognizes the close link between communication and engagement. This study aims to develop a better understanding of employee engagement from the CCO perspective by examining how storytelling as a form of communication is practiced and relates to engagement in nonprofit organizations. A qualitative case study containing interviews and observations was conducted in a Danish non-governmental organization. Analyzing the findings with sensemaking, organizational identification and socialization theories, this study shows that not only communication but also the process of sensemaking are vital to employee engagement. The result indicates that when storytelling is practiced both as organizational strategy and culture, employee engagement is constructed as: reflective dialogue partners in relation to strategies, active communicators in relation to critical voices, and organizational ambassadors, which are characterized by value identification and trust. Additionally, this study also discusses potential negative sides of employee engagement.

*Keyword:* Employee engagement, CCO (communication constitutes organization), storytelling, nonprofit organization, sensemaking, coworker communication, strategic communication

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# 1. Introduction

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Nonprofit organizations are an important and unique part of our modern society, usually characterized as organizations dedicated to social missions that cannot distribute profit to stakeholders (Sanders, 2013; Koschmann, 2011). It is argued that there is an inherent dilemma in nonprofit organizations, which is to maintain an unprofitable social mission with often stringent imperatives of operating within a market economy (Weisbrod, 1998). Sanders (2012) theorizes the nonprofit sector as a contradictory space which operates in ways similar to the market because they are private and independent but also operates in ways similar to the state because they must contribute to the common good. Due to this inherent tension, employee engagement has become more of an important issue for nonprofit organizations compared with any other organizational types.

The concept of employee engagement in previous literature is mostly studied from a functionalist, managerial approach. However, Heide and Simonsson (2018) point out the limitations of this management-centered perspective of employee engagement and propose an alternative approach, grounded in the “communication constitutes organization” (CCO) perspective. Influenced by the work of Karl Weick (1969, 1979) to theorize “organization” as a verb “organizing” rather than a noun, communication scholars have claimed that organizations are communicatively constituted (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). In line with the CCO approach, the notion of employee engagement and its relation to communication and organization are conceptualized differently from the dominant views (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). First, the ideology and philosophy of science shift from functionalistic, management-centered to social constructionist, coworker-centered. Second, organizations are constituted in communication, characterized by ambiguity, complexity, and tensions. Third, engagement is considered as communicative enactment rather than a psychological state or trait. Fourth, communication as constitutive of social reality, is an integral aspect of engagement—communication is both a producer and a product of engagement (Heide & Simonsson, 2018).

Previous studies have argued that storytelling as a form of communication has positive effects in relation to employee engagement when implemented as a certain strategy. For ex-

ample, Gustomo, Febriansyah, Ginting and Santoso (2019) argue that direct storytelling is one of the intervention methods that provides cognitive stimulus to employees, which in turn affects their attitudes toward work such as employee engagement. Gill (2015) examines the link between using corporate storytelling as a valuable public relations (PR) strategy and employee engagement. However, most of these studies consider communication as one-way enacted from managers or the organization to employees, which neglect coworker's voices in the engagement process. Also, as Gabriel (2011) argues, the relationship between academic research and storytelling has been ambiguous since storytelling can be applied in various organizational areas which could be unclear when discussing its relation to employee engagement.

Thus, I argue that it is necessary to examine the relationship between storytelling and employee engagement from the CCO perspective in a nonprofit organizational context. Firstly, although the interest in employee engagement in the organizational and communication literature has generated a sustained discourse about the meaning and the relationship between employees and organizations (Akingbola & Berg, 2017), the current conceptualization of employee engagement is mostly studied from a functionalist, management-centered approach, which is considered as a psychological presence that can be affected by management interventions or communication practices, and examined through quantitative research methods (Welch, 2011; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015; Yadav & Morya, 2019). In other words, storytelling is usually only considered as management interventions, such as corporate storytelling, in order to generate employee engagement as a positive psychological presence towards the organization. I therefore argue that there is a limited understanding of storytelling as a form of communication in relation to employee engagement from the CCO perspective.

Secondly, nonprofit organizations have even more of a need to engage their employees and volunteers to build a strong coworker-organization relationship in order to achieve their organizational goals. One of the contentions behind much of the nonprofit literature highlights that employees are considered as key to building relationships with all organizational stakeholders and contributing to the meaning of the brand as the organizations' success is highly dependent on a strong brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Stride & Lee, 2007; Chapleo, 2013). Previous studies show that nonprofit organizations' brands play a significant role in strengthening awareness amongst target audiences, attracting donation income and volunteers (Hankinson, 2000; Hankinson, 2004; Sargeant, Ford, & Hudson, 2008). Engaged employees are considered as the "brand champions", who feel connected with the organization and work with full passion and innovation (Ind, 2010; Yadav & Morya, 2019). In addition, organizations that rely heavily on volunteers are usually facing the problem of self-maintenance,

which means “how do you sustain the social commitment necessary to keep the organization going—over time and through bad times and good?” (Cheney, 2011, p.241). The topic of volunteer retention is one of the main concerns of all the voluntary organizations, since volunteer burnout and dropout are the main challenges for them (Konieczny, 2018). Yanay and Yanay (2008) identify that “dropout” occurs in volunteers shortly after they start as they find out that their idealized vision of volunteering does not match with the encountered reality; while “burnout” occurs when long-time volunteers get demotivated after years of dealing with continued and unchangeable problems and fail to produce visible change.

Thus, this study aims to generate more knowledge of employee engagement from the CCO perspective and its relation to storytelling for nonprofit organizations. In this regard, a Danish non-governmental organization has been selected as the case organization. As one of the interviewees said, “We are all about storytelling”. In order to protect informant’s identity, the organization will remain anonymous and referred to as a fictional name *Action Now*. Action Now has implemented a new organizational strategy for two years which places more emphasis on a storytelling approach. The storytelling approach in Action Now provides an information-rich environment for this study to investigate how storytelling constructs employee engagement from the CCO perspective in nonprofit organizations.

## **1.1 Purposes and research questions**

From the CCO perspective, coworkers are positioned as central in the engagement process and their role as communicators and their relations to other stakeholders are becoming more important, especially for nonprofit organizations. Besides, as Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue, communication as constitutive of the organizational reality, is an integral aspect of engagement—communication is both a producer and a product of engagement. It is important to develop the understanding of communication and engagement by examining how storytelling as a form of communication practiced and related to employee engagement in nonprofit organizations. Thus, the purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, to identify and analyze how storytelling is practiced in Action Now. Secondly, to analyze how these different storytelling practices relate to coworker’s communication engagement from the CCO perspective in Action Now. The aim of this study is to develop a better understanding of employee engagement from the CCO perspective by examining how storytelling relates to coworkers’ communication engagement in Action Now. In order to address these purposes, the research questions are formulated as follows:



*(a) How is storytelling practiced in Action Now?*

*(b) How does storytelling relate to employee engagement from the CCO perspective in Action Now?*

## **1.2 Aims of this study**

This study aims to contribute to the existing research of employee engagement by applying the CCO approach. The dominant managerial perspective of employee engagement overlooks the difficulties of measuring the desired behavioral results of the management interventions by communication professionals and emphasizes mostly on the engagement outcome rather than the process (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). This study aims to uncover the relations between employee engagement as communicative enactment and storytelling as a way of communication through a qualitative case study. I argue that an empirical case study allows investigators to retain a holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, which can contribute knowledge of an organizational phenomena and the theorization of employee engagement in relation to storytelling (Patton, 2015).

In addition, there is scarce research about employee engagement specifically in a non-profit context while nonprofit organizations are faced with more complicated organization-employee relationships, indicating that employee engagement is crucial for their organizational survival. Thus, this study also aims to contribute more resources and knowledge about employee engagement for nonprofit organizations.

As Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič and Sriramesh (2007) define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (p. 3), this study also aims to contribute knowledge to the field of strategic communication since storytelling can be considered a purposeful use of communication. Scholars in the field of strategic communication argue that the current scholarship has mostly focused on communication professionals while managers and coworkers are also key actors when trying to understand and theorize the practice of strategic communication (Heide, Platen, Simonsson & Falkheimer, 2018; Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Thus, as they specifically proclaim the use of the CCO perspective, this study puts more focus on coworkers and their communication to understand the concept of employee engagement, which could contribute to the further development in the field of strategic communication.

### **1.3 Demarcation and disposition**

Alongside with the CCO approach, this study adopts a social constructionist point of view, stating that the reality is constructed by human beings and achieved through interactive conversations between people (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This study will focus on coworker's communication and interaction regarding storytelling practices in the organization.

This thesis starts with an introduction, followed by a literature review on employee engagement and storytelling in organizations, specifically in nonprofit organizations. Then, a theory chapter will be presented. Weick's theory of sensemaking (1995) and the concept of culture, socialization and organizational identification (Cheney, 2011; Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008) will be used as the theoretical framework for analysis. Next, the methodology chapter presents the social constructionist epistemological approach and explains how this thesis is conducted. Semi-structured interviews and observations will be used as research methods in order to conduct a close-up investigation to the nonprofit organizational environment, capture the coworkers' interactions and record the interactive conversations. Thereafter, an analysis from the interviews and observations will be presented. Finally, this thesis ends with a conclusion and discussion, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

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This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I will present the evolution of the conceptualization of employee engagement since one of the purposes of this study is to develop a better understanding of this concept. Then, I will present previous studies about storytelling in organizations. Last, this chapter will end with a synthesis about employee engagement and storytelling.

### **2.1 The evolution of the conceptualization of employee engagement**

Engagement as a concept has been widely used in many fields of study, including management, organizational communication and public relations. The enduring use and interest of the concept engagement indicate its importance but theoretically, the concept remains underdeveloped (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). In *The Handbook of Communication Engagement*, three main themes are identified about the conceptualization of engagement across different communication disciplines. The first theme emphasizes the socially situated nature of communication engagement, recognizing its social and relational focus. In other words, engagement is situated within a social and relational context where key actors in the relationship are recognized, such as organizations, stakeholders, consumers or employees. Therefore, “engagement as a social and relational activity becomes about facilitating diverse relationships for engagement outcomes” (p. 2). The second theme focuses on engagement as an iterative and dynamic process, where participation, experience, and shared action constitute the central components of engagement. It is through interaction and exchange that relationship emerged as an outcome, which highlights the strong connection to the first theme, the relational and social nature of engagement. Besides, engagement has been generally aligned with positive affectivity and outcomes while as a dynamic process, it is important to acknowledge that inevitably it could also bring unintended negative consequences. The third theme acknowledges the historical legacy of engagement’s psychological foundations as cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). Three themes of the definitions of engagement highlight the communicative nature within its conceptualization, and thus engagement will be

used as an important concept to explore the relations between coworkers and their organizations in this study.

The term engagement appears sporadically in different types of communication contexts (Taylor & Kent, 2014), while in this study the emphasis is on employee engagement. Welch (2011) reviews the evolution of the concept of employee engagement and identifies a series of waves. Firstly, the wave begins in the 1990s with academic work on the personal engagement by Kahn (1990, 1992), who is considered the academic parent of the employee engagement movement even though he did not specifically use the term. Kahn (1990, p.694) defines personal work engagement as: “the harnessing of organizational members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance.” This definition has become an influential foundation for further studies. As the term employee engagement is recognized by business consultancies and practiced in companies, interests from academics also emerged. Another influential definition is from Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), who consider job engagement in the context of organizational behavior and defined it as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 295). Welch (2011) concludes that these two frequently cited definitions arguably share a common focus on the manifestations of engagement: cognitive – absorption; emotional – dedication; and, physical – vigor. During the third wave, employee engagement received a surge of academic interest from more disciplines such as psychology, business, and management as well as practitioner literature (Saks, 2006; Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Albrecht, 2010). Kahn (2010) also reiterates the determinants of engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability and emphasizes that engagement is dynamic and subject to fluctuation. To summarize, according to Welch (2011), employee engagement is understood as “cognitive, emotional and physical role performance characterized by absorption, dedication and vigor and dependent upon the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability (p.335)”.

The evolution of the conceptualization of employee engagement discussed above signals a functionalist approach, indicating that employee engagement as a psychological state can be affected by management interventions or guided through certain communication practices, such as internal communication or internal branding (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015; Welch, 2012; Kenarova-Pencheva & Antonova, 2018), which is identified as the dominant perspective of employee engagement (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). This dominant perspective of employee engagement mainly reflects the third theme of the conceptualization of engagement that is stated by Johnston and Taylor (2018), while the social, relational nature

of engagement as a dynamic process focusing on interaction and exchange is relatively neglected.

From the dominant perspective, communication is seen as transmission of information and one of the variables driving employee engagement (Welch & Jackson, 2007). The majority of studies describe employee engagement from an organizational perspective as a drive to better organizational performance, which is enacted as one-way communication between managers and employees. However, the dominant perspective of employee engagement has been defined only partially from the conceptualization of engagement that is discussed above. The emphasis on interaction is missing and the relational, social dynamic is limited to only between managers and employees. In contrast to this, Heide and Simonsson (2018) propose an alternative perspective of employee engagement which is grounded in the CCO approach. It provides different views on communication, organization, engagement and their relations to each other. First, “CCO research presumes that it is in communication, in interaction, that social or organizational worlds are produced and reproduced” (Cooren, Matte, Benoit-Barné, and Brummans, 2013, pp. 262–263). Communication is not considered as a variable or a phenomenon to be investigated or a tool to be managed, but rather, is the constitution of organizations (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Second, instead of viewing organization as a noun or entity, the CCO perspective views organization as a verb or process that is constituted through communication, as organizing (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Furthermore, communication is both a producer and a product of engagement - “communication is vital in constituting engagement, but engagement is also enacted in communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2018, p.209)”. In other words, instead of viewing engagement as a product of one-way communication from managers to employees, the CCO approach considers engagement as a product of social and interactive sensemaking processes where coworkers act as communicators or dialogue partners. Thus, it puts much more emphasis on coworker’s communication and interaction to different organizational stakeholders.

The alternative perspective of employee engagement acknowledges that vague concepts such as engagement and relationship are difficult to measure desired behavioral results of the management interventions by communication professionals and recognizes the missing voice of employees in the engagement process (Hallahan, 2015; Holtzhausen & Zeffass, 2015). As coworkers are positioned in the central role in the engagement process, their roles as communicators and their relations to other stakeholders are becoming more important, it is part of the shift from bureaucratic to post bureaucratic organizations (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). It is argued that in the post bureaucratic organizational context, people work in loosely

structured networks, delegation, management by goals and visions, self-directed work and an emphasis on horizontal communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). In this regard, Heide and Simonsson (2011; 2018) point out three new communication roles for coworkers in relation to managers as co-leaders and dialogue partners; in relation to colleagues as team members; and in relation to the organization as ambassadors. For example, engaged coworkers can be expected to act as ambassadors both to the internal and external audience, or active communicators about the vision for the organization. However, research about employee engagement from this alternative perspective is relatively small and the communicative expression or enactment of engagement seems more or less absent. Thus, employee engagement in this study will be examined from the alternative perspective and further explored as a dynamic process where communication and interaction as the central components facilitate the relationship between coworkers and managers, colleagues and the organization.

## **2.2 Storytelling in organizations**

“Man is a storytelling animal by nature” (Eco, 1983, p.13). Stories and storytelling are part of our everyday life. For all of history, stories are one of the most important human traditions that shape our understanding of the past, present and future. Whether our mind is meant to be a story processor naturally or not, the ability to tell a story and make sense of the world is embedded in us (Boje, 2008). However, the relationship between academic research and storytelling has been ambiguous (Gabriel, 2011).

According to Czarniawska (1997), there are at least three forms of narrative in organizational domains: 1) people telling stories within organizations; 2) seeing organizational life and organizational phenomena as a form of narrative; 3) organizational research as a form of narrative itself. In this study, the first definition is applied - stories told by people within the organization and the organization itself. It is argued that even within each classification there are many differences between research due to different epistemological traditions (Musacchio Adorisio, 2009). One of the most cited studies on storytelling in organizations that is influenced by social constructionism is from Boje (1991). Concerning the definition of “story”, Boje views story as “a joint performance of teller(s) and hearer(s) in which often overlooked, very subtle utterances play an important role in the negotiation of meaning and co-production in a storytelling episode” (p.107). It emphasizes that both storytellers and listeners are meaning producers during the practice of relational storytelling, which is always ongoing in organizations. A story can generate a conversation, provoke response and interaction, indicating

that storytelling is inherently dialogic. He also argues that the idea of “story” is not necessarily having a full plot, since “people told their stories in bits and pieces, with excessive interruptions of story starts, with people talking over each other to share story fragments, and many aborted storytelling attempts” (p.112).

Interestingly, scholars in the organizational domain have strongly debated on story and narrative definitions, while in this study they are interchangeable and more focused on storytelling as a practice (Musacchio Adoriso, 2009). Storytelling is more than just telling a story, as Thier (2018) identifies five tenets of storytelling as narrative method practiced in organizations, which are 1) multiple perspectives instead of one-dimensional thinking; 2) appreciative listening instead of interviewing; 3) attention to context instead of dry facts; 4) reflection instead of mere documentation; and 5) participation instead of top-down processes (p. 16). Storytelling has been conducted as approaches to sense making (Boje, 1991; Heath & Porter, 2019), collective centring (Boyce, 1995), socialization of new employees (Brown, 1985), branding (Fog, Budts & Yakaboylu, 2005), corporate strategy (Spear & Roper, 2016), change (Brown, Gabriel & Gherardi, 2009) and etc. Considering all of these studies, it seems that storytelling has a number of applications in organizations, including making sense and altering the organizational reality; socializing new organizational members; delivering the brand promise and communicating corporate strategy. One important theme that emerges from these studies is the connection between storytelling, sensemaking and communication in an organizational context, as Boyce (1996) argues, “storytelling is an ancient medium for communication and meaning making” (p.20). Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT) recognizes that storytelling is an accepted method of communicating and human beings are innate storytellers (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Similarly, Barker and Gower (2010) argue that storytelling is a communication method, recognizing all humans as storytellers with the ability to send and receive messages that establish a value-laden reality, establishes a common ground among all participants and provides a faster method of establishing a social relationship.

Besides, storytelling has also been conducted specifically in nonprofit organizations, but the volume is rather small, and there is even less research in the communication discipline. Merchant, Ford and Sargeant (2010) identify that stories told by charity organizations can influence donors’ emotions and intentions. Dush (2016) explores the use of digital personal experience narratives of clients, staff and stakeholders in communications in nonprofit organizations. Chen (2012) argues that storytelling is a mechanism by which stakeholders can demand accountability to their needs for recognition and voice in voluntary organizations. These studies recognize the importance of storytelling and its relation to the nonprofit organi-

zation as a unique type of organization, however, more studies about storytelling in nonprofit organizations are required.

## **2.3 Synthesis**

The existing literature on employee engagement mostly focuses from a managerial and functionalist perspective, regarding it as a psychological condition that can be fostered through internal communication or internal branding. For example, Mishra, Boynton and Mishra (2014) argue that good internal communication, such as face-to-face communication, carried out by communication professionals can build trust with employees and eventually foster employee engagement. However, concepts like reputation or engagement are difficult to measure whether or not it is directly from the work and contribution of communicational professionals or not (Hallahan, 2015). Thus, I argue that such a managerial approach restricts the understanding of employee engagement and more importantly, employees' voices are neglected. From a CCO perspective, research about employee engagement requires more emphasis on interaction and communication situated in a social and relational context among coworkers. I believe by applying the CCO perspective to explore the concept of employee engagement, this could deepen the understanding of employee engagement as a process rather than merely a psychological state of mind, which will benefit both coworkers and the organization.

In addition, storytelling has been conducted in relation to various organizational subjects, such as socialization or strategy, but there is relatively little research about storytelling and employee engagement. Gill (2015) draws a link between using corporate stories to engage more deeply with employees in order to strengthen internal loyalty and effect a stronger external reputation and argues that storytelling can be a valuable public relations strategy to heighten employee engagement. It only indicates the relation between storytelling and employee engagement from one aspect, while I argue that storytelling as a narrative practice exists in multiple applications in organizational life. The five tenets of storytelling practice in organizations concluded by Thier (2018) pinpoint similar features of employee engagement from the CCO perspective, which emphasizes the multiple perspectives of thinking, listening, context, reflection and participation. As Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue, research about employee engagement from the alternative perspective is interested in the process where engagement is communicatively enacted and to tensions and paradoxes of employee engagement. Thus, this study aims to examine how storytelling as a specific communication phenomenon in relation to the communicative expression or enactment of employee engagement.



Furthermore, both employee engagement and storytelling are not receiving enough attention from studies in a nonprofit organizational context, while nonprofit organizations as a unique organizational type usually face a complicated organizational environment and the complexities of the organization-employee relations. I argue that it is necessary to study this specific issue in a nonprofit organizational context in order to produce more knowledge for nonprofit organizations to tackle their problems.

## 3. Theory

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In the following chapter, I will begin by presenting the theory of sensemaking. Then I will focus on one of the main features of sensemaking, identity construction and its relation to organizational identification, followed by a session about sensemaking, culture and socialization. Next, I will discuss the connection between sensemaking and storytelling. Lastly, this chapter will end with a theoretical reflection.

### 3.1 Sensemaking

Sensemaking, as Weick (1995) argues, is a well named concept because it literally means the making of sense, which is a process that involves “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.409). Sensemaking places stimuli into frameworks, enabling people to "comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, P. 51). Sensemaking is considered as an enormously influential perspective or theory in organizational studies, and has attracted attention from various areas such as the perception of cues, making interpretations and engaging in action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Brown, Colville & Pye, 2014).

Thomas, Clark and Gioia (1993) consider sensemaking as “the reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action” (p.240, as cited in Weick, 1995, p.5), which includes environmental screening, interpretation and “associated responses”. Similarly, Taylor and Van Every (2000) describe sensemaking as a way station on the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action. These two definitions both mention “action”, while Feldman (1989, as cited in Weick, 1995) argues that sensemaking does not necessarily result in action. It may result in an understanding that action should not be taken or that a better understanding of the event or situation is needed. Thus, sensemaking is a balance of making sense through thinking and acting in which there is always an element of both (Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012).

Weick (1979) introduces an organizing model which contains environmental changes, enactment, selection and retention. This organizing model is not a linear process. Instead, in-

teractions between enactment, selection and retention are taken place in the process, which influence each other as well as the environment. Weick (1995) uses the term “enactment” to describe how people construct their own enacted environments in organizational life. People in organizations usually overlook themselves as active actors are the one who choose to act and construct reality rather than being forced to react by the “environment”. Reality is constructed through authoritative acts, because “when people enact laws, they take undefined space, time, and action and draw lines, establish categories, and coin labels that create new features of the environment that did not exist before” (p. 31). As the definition of sensemaking stated above, the concept of sensemaking keeps action and cognition together. Weick (1995) believes sensemaking better explains how entities get there in the first place and action is a precondition of sensemaking. The recipe “how can I know what I think until I see what I say” highlights the action of saying, making it possible for people to see what they think. Hence, action sets the stage for sensemaking.

### **3.2 Sensemaking, identity and organizational identification**

Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is grounded in the construction of individual or organizational identity. Sensemaking always starts from a sensemaker, or in this case, an organizational member. A sensemaker is singular but no individual acts like a single sensemaker. Thus, a sensemaker contains multiple selves. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as grounded in identity construction:

“I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking, what implications do these events have for who I will be? What the situation will have meant to me is dictated by the identity I adopt in dealing with it. And that choice, in turn, is affected by what I think is occurring. What the situation means is defined by who I become while dealing with it or what and who I represent (p. 24).”

In other words, the sensemaker is always in a continual self-redefinition due to the need for self-enhancement, self-efficacy motive and self-consistency (Weick, 1995). Besides, organizational members represent both their own individual identity and the collective organizational identity. This means that individuals are personally motivated to preserve a positive organizational image and repair a negative one, and the organizational identity, either positive or negative image in turn might affect members’ interpretations of who they were, how they felt, what they faced, and what they were doing (Weick, 1995). Thus, identity construction is about making sense of the sensemaker (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010).

In line with the CCO perspective, the organization is rather a process of organizing constituted through communication than a stable object. Organizational identity is also a continuous process of defining and redefining self through communication. The question of “stability” is one of the difficulties in assessing organizational identity (Cheney, 2011). He argues that change, variation and conflict are an inevitable part of organizational identity because identity is shaped by multiple resources. As Nietzsche (1997, as cited in Cheney, 2011) states, he conceives of messages about who we are in terms of narrative. Stories that organizations tell about themselves fold into the identity and become the real sense of identity.

Organizational identification refers to a situation when people define themselves in terms of an organization (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008). When organizational members identify themselves with the organization, they internalize its mission, values and ideology, and adopt its customary ways of doing things (Cheney, 2011). Christensen, Morsing and Cheney (2008) also argue that identification is embedded in and shaped by the narratives we construct about ourselves. Previous studies show that organizational identification have potential capacities to generate positive organizational outcomes, such as work engagement and job satisfaction (Karanika-Murray, Duncan, Pontes & Griffiths, 2015). Karanika-Murray et al. (2015) argue that employees who have a strong and positive bond with their organization are also highly engaged in their work, energized and dedicated to their job satisfaction is derived as a consequence. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) also note that organizational identity is vital for understanding organizational action and employee engagement.

### **3.3 Sensemaking, culture and socialization**

As employee engagement focuses more on the communication and interaction rather than the outcomes, the focus on culture and socialization can also shift the attention to the process of engagement. Culture is usually a broad term in social science, which encompasses all characteristics that humans have in common and that distinguish them from other animals, defined as “a system of meaning that guides the construction of reality in a social community” (Cheney, 2011, p. 76). However, culture as a system of meaning is dynamic. It helps communities make sense of themselves and their surroundings, while being simultaneously informed and shaped by those sense-making activities (Cheney, 2011). It highlights that sensemaking in organizations is a social process that involves networking, interaction, shared meanings and joint actions. It is argued that the thoughts or behaviors of individuals are influenced by either

actual or imagined presence of others, even if what a person does internally is contingent on others. Thus, sensemaking is never solitary (Weick, 1995).

It is argued that one of the most important processes by which organizations communicate their culture is through the socialization of new members (Cheney, 2011). Organizational socialization usually refers to the process of members learning the behaviors, values, and norms appropriate to their positions within the organization (Brown, 1985). Scholars usually conceptualize the socialization process as several differing yet similar. Cheney (2011) develops it as three sequential stages: (i) the anticipatory stage; (ii) the encounter stage; and (iii) the metamorphosis stage. The anticipatory stage refers to everything that relates to a specific job or organization prior to the first day at work, such as brochures, manuals, annual reports, organizational videos and advertisements. In the encounter stage, the newcomer enters the organizational reality by dealing with daily tasks, coworkers and managers. The newcomer experiences surprises or discrepancies between expectations and reality and takes the messages from colleagues and superiors about rules, procedures, and practices seriously in this stage. The metamorphosis stage is when the newcomer seeks to become an accepted organizational member by adapting to the organization's expectations. The newcomer starts individualizing his or her role in the organization and negotiating definitions and methods related to specific tasks. As Cheney (2011) argues, "learning how to socialize new members effectively may help organizations establish stronger and more satisfying relationships with their employees—which could, in turn, result in a change in the culture" (p. 100). Thus, organizational culture and the socialization process are very important for organizations to build a strong relationship with its employees, providing a useful perspective for the study of employee engagement.

Brown (1985) found out that storytelling acts as a form of sense-making as the member moves through the stages of organizational socialization. He argues that stories and myths in organizations are related symbols and used by members to define the situation, or make sense, particularly salient in the socialization process. Suspitsyna (2013) points out that the similarities of social and cognitive characteristics involved in organizational sensemaking and socialization prompts some scholars to define socialization as a form of sensemaking. The outcome of socialization is also an ongoing process of interpretation and action.

### **3.4 Sensemaking and storytelling**

Over the past decade, researchers have examined the relations between storytelling and sensemaking in organizations (Boje, 1991; Boje, 2008; Rantatalo & Karp, 2017). Boje (1991) describes storytelling as the preferred sensemaking currency of human relations among internal and external stakeholders. Weick (1995) argues that most models of organization are based on argumentation rather than narration, while most organizational realities are based on narration, often disadvantaging people when they attempt to make sense of organizational life. The importance of storytelling in organizations is recognized gradually and the concept like 'storytelling organization' has emerged, defined as a "collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory" (Boje, 1991, p. 106).

This indicates that storytelling is closely related to the most distinguishing characteristic of sensemaking - focusing on the retrospect (Weick, 1995). It derives from "meaningful lived experience", which is stated in the past tense to "capture the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it" (p. 24)". First, "lived experience" indicates that the creation of meaning is an attention process towards something that has already occurred. Second, since the attention is directed backward, "whatever is occurring at the moment will influence what is discovered when people glance backward" (p. 26). Third, the only reference to these experiences is our memory as other materials such as text has elapsed, so anything that affects recollection will affect the senses. Fourth, it is worth noting that the stimulus-response sequence might be misleading since "only when a response occurs can a plausible stimulus then be defined" (p. 26). Several possible antecedents can be posited only after an action has occurred and the choice of "the" stimulus affects the choice of what the action "means" - both are greatly influenced by the context.

In addition, the meaning that people assign to their experience is not attached to the experience, but is selected. A problem for retrospective sensemaking is that there are too many meanings and sensemakers are overwhelmed by equivocality rather than uncertainty, which means values, priorities, and clarity about preferences are required to help them to give sense to the elapsed experience (Weick, 1995). Besides, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy which means that when people make sense of an event they look for cues that seems more plausible rather than accurate. The plausibility of sensemaking can be understood as the possibilities of given multiple extracted cues to interpret multiple realities and give multiple meanings rather than only one accurate interpretation which is unlikely to occur. The multiple plausible explanations to a common event within the organization might also

contribute to the inconsistency of sensemaking among organizational members (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). Weick et al. (2005) argues that plausibility is about redrafting of an emerging story, because a good story “holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p. 61).

Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) state sensemaking as a process of meaning materialization, is an issue of language, talk and communication when situations, organizations and environments are talked into existence. It highlights that communication is a central component of sensemaking, which makes it more likely to capture the essence of sensemaking. Among all kinds of communication, it is argued that storytelling implies sensemaking. From this perspective, Colville, Brown and Pye (2011) argue that sensemaking is essentially an act of cueing a story in the form of a frame that provides both a scheme of interpretation (i.e. the meaning of the situation) and a scheme for action (i.e. what you should do next).

### **3.5 Reflection**

As stated above, sensemaking is a central activity in organizations due to its close relations to organizational identification, culture and socialization. Since communication is a central component of sensemaking, storytelling as a form of communication implies sensemaking. Scholars have examined the links between sensemaking, storytelling and organizing, arguing that “storytelling is linked to sensemaking and organizing” (Colville, Brown & Pye, 2011, p. 12). The concept of “organizing” is proposed by Weick (1969, 1979), meaning that organizations are communicatively constituted as a verb “organizing”. Similar to this theorization, the concept of employee engagement from the CCO perspective theorizes engagement as communicative enactment (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Thus, this study aims to apply the theory of sensemaking to examine the relations between storytelling and employee engagement from the CCO perspective in nonprofit organizations.

## 4. Methodology and research design

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Qualitative research usually aims to understand social interaction in real-life situations, people's perception or responses or specific processes that are difficult or sensitive to study with quantitative research (Silverman, 2017). Thus, this study is conducted with a qualitative methodology as the purpose of this study is to examine coworker's perception of storytelling and how it relates to the communicative expression of employee engagement from the alternative perspective inspired by CCO in a nonprofit organizational context. The theoretical perspective indicates a strong social constructionist point of view and a focus on communication and interaction. This thesis applies a qualitative case study in order to investigate this organizational phenomenon in a real life context and develop as full of an understanding of the case as possible (Silverman, 2017).

This study is seeking to identify coworker's communicative engagement as a social process in a nonprofit organizational context rather than presenting a correlation or generalizing to a population. According to Silverman (2017), case study research aims to generalize to theoretical propositions rather than populations, and sample social relations rather than individuals. In this regard, Action Now is chosen as the case organization which is considered as a rich informative case for this study.

Next, I will present my epistemological point of view - social constructionism, and then I will present the selection of case organization, followed by the process of data collection, data analysis strategies and ethical reflection.

### 4.1 Social constructionism

This study applies the CCO as the meta-theoretical perspective, indicating a strong social constructionist epistemological approach. As discussed above, the main concept of this study - employee engagement, has mostly been studied from a positivistic approach. Most of the studies about employee engagement apply a positivist epistemological approach, assuming that only "facts" derived from the scientific method can make legitimate knowledge claims, which relies on statistical quantitative methods. However, social constructionism originates as a reaction against the positivistic research (Gergen, 2015). Organizations are faced with ex-



tremely complex environment and constant challenges to their own survival, especially non-profit organizations. Berger and Luckmann (1966), pioneer scholars for social constructionism, argue that reality is a social construction. It indicates that concept like organization and engagement should be an ever-changing process instead of a stable object. Therefore, in order to understand these ever-changing processes, the social constructionism standpoint enables me to understand how employee engagement enacts through communication in nonprofit organizations.

It is difficult to give social constructionism a single definition, but the common feature is its emphasis on social interaction. Social constructionism challenges the traditional view of knowledge and reality, such as positivism and empiricism, which assume an objective reality and knowledge is based on unbiased observation of the world. In contrast, social constructionism considers knowledge as constructed through the daily interaction between people, so as reality (Burr, 2015). In this regard, the communication and interaction among coworkers are essential for the study of employee engagement.

Among all the social interaction and practices amongst people, language is especially important in the building-up of “a social stock of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Language is not just a tool for communication, as Burr (2015) argues that language is a necessary precondition for thought since language provides categories and concepts as a framework of meaning for people to think. Language is also a form of social action, because the social reality is constructed when people talk to each other (Burr, 2015). Nowadays, many organizations have chosen English as the official language at work, but even if people speak the same language, they might not understand each other in the same way.

In this regard, the social constructionist approach guides this study to focus on social interaction and language among people and therefore, qualitative interviews and observation are chosen as the data collection methods. The theory of sensemaking also indicates a strong focus on meaning and interaction, and case study as one of the established methods used to study sensemaking draws on rich qualitative data, including interviews, observations, and archival data, to illustrate the process of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

## **4.2 Selection and presentation of the case organization**

First of all, this study follows the single significant case sampling as a design strategy. Patton (2015) argues that a single case does not have to be the first of its kind to be significant and to merit in-depth study and analysis. Any exemplar of a phenomenon of interest can be a worthy

single-case study. As this study aims to capture coworker's understanding of storytelling and how it relates to their communicative expressions of engagement in nonprofit organizations, a single significant case can provide a comprehensive, systematic and in-depth informative environment for the research (Patton, 2015).

Secondly, a purposeful sampling strategy is applied when selecting the case organization. (Patton, 2015). The following criteria was used when selecting the organization for the case study: (1) it is a nonprofit organization; (2) it has a storytelling approach within the organization; and (3) it can be considered as a post bureaucracy organization which is characterized by vision driven and loose structure. It is argued that in the post bureaucratic organizational context, people work in loosely structured networks, delegation, management by goals and visions, self-directed work and an emphasis on horizontal communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011).

As a result, a Danish non-governmental organization *Action Now* (fictional name) is selected as the case organization. Action Now is strongly positioned in its work to unite people in the struggle against social injustice, exclusion, poverty and inequality. People in Action Now share a common set of values, working together in more than 45 countries to empower vulnerable people to fight for rights, justice and dignity. It is also a volunteer driven organization with a large volunteer community across the world and more than 100 local partners in Latin America, Eastern Africa and Nepal, maintaining local offices in many of the countries, with its main office located in Copenhagen. In Action Now, storytelling is not only considered as one of the methods they use to organize and mobilize people externally but also as an internal communication method integrated into the organizational culture, providing a unique organizational environment for this study. It is worth noting that although the organization is nonprofit, it has a social entrepreneurship team which takes charge of a *Cafe* and a *Hostel* where all the profits will be used to support their project worldwide.

Next, I will present the data collection methods for this study, qualitative interviews and observation.

### **4.3 Qualitative interviews**

The qualitative research interview aims to “understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). Interview research from a social constructionist point of view suggests interviewers to engage in dialogue with participants and

thus actively contribute to the knowledge production (Patton, 2015). Qualitative interview research also emphasizes that people are not objects, mechanically controlled by causal laws, but rather as subjects who are actively engaged in meaning making. Researchers conduct interviews by talking to people to know their experiences and articulate their reasons for actions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

This study uses semi-structured interviews with an interview guide. For the semi-structured interview guide, it will include an outline of topics to be covered, with suggested questions that expressed in everyday language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Compared with the structured interview schedule, the idea of an interview guide in semi-structured interviews is much less specific and flexible, allowing interviewers to glean research participants' perspectives on their social world (Bryman, 2015). For this study, the sequence of the question is not very important since it is more about the interviewee's own experience about storytelling in the organizations and their understandings in relation to engagement. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) also argue that it is recommended to engage in the conversation rather than ask prepared questions on the interview guide without regarding the context. The interview guide is more about providing the researcher a direction to ask questions in this study.

#### ***4.3.1 Selection and criteria of interviewees***

In this study, 12 interviewees were selected in total. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argue that in common interview studies, the number of interviews tend to be around 10 to 15 due to a combination of time and resources available for the investigation and the law of diminishing returns. I follow two purposeful sampling strategies to select information-rich interviewees. First, I apply snowball sampling strategy to select 12 interviewees. With this sampling strategy, I was able to make initial contacts with a small group of people who are relevant to this research topic and then uses these contacts to continue contacting others (Bryman, 2015). I obtain interviewees' contact information from the organizational website and use email to contact them. When I asked those who answered my emails to recommend more interviewees, I applied the key informants, key knowledgeable, and reputational sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). For this study, people who have worked in Action Now for more than 5 years will be considered as knowledgeable since they witness the implementation and development of the storytelling approach and have deeper involvement with Action Now. Also, I purposefully select coworkers in different team in Action Now, in order to capture the dynamic process of employee engagement and different perspectives regarding this research topic in Action Now.

### ***4.3.2 Interview proceedings***

The first step of the interview proceeding is to create an interview guide (Appendix A). The interview guide includes three main interests, personal information, their experience about storytelling in Action Now and their understanding of engagement in relation to storytelling. Each interview started with a brief introduction of the research subject and a consent to this study. All the interviewees approved a series of statements mentioned in the consent (Appendix B), regarding audio recording, confidentiality, anonymity and so on. Interviewees are informed that information provided by them will only be used for my thesis study while their identity will not be identified.

Regarding the interview questions, I follow the nine types of interview questions suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), which are introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct questions, indirect questions, structuring questions, silence, and interpreting questions. Different types of questions are applied during the interview depending on how the interviewees answer. For example, follow-up questions and interpreting questions might be applied when some interviewees tend to answer briefly and not reveal enough details. As this is conducted as qualitative interviews, my initial interview questions are more open-ended. During the interviews, I tend to depart from the interview guide and follow up interviewees' replies and vary the order and adjust the focus according to different situations since the interviewer wants rich and detailed answers (Bryman, 2015).

After the time for interview was settled individually through email or message, all the interviews are conducted in the *Cafe*, which is located on the first floor of the *Hostel*, next to the main office building of Action Now. I believe that the *Cafe* provides not only a public space but also a familiar surrounding for interviewees to feel more relaxed and free to talk. All the interviews are conducted within 8 weeks, lasted from 32 minutes up to 70 minutes, audio recorded by phone, and transcribed verbatim. The audio recordings were transcribed after each interview, amounting to a total of 104 pages of transcriptions.

All the interviews were conducted in English, which avoids misinterpretation when translating the empirical material into another language. As English is the official working language in Action Now, all the interviewees are able to express themselves in English fluently. *Table 1* shows each interviewees' job title, fictional names, employment length and interview length.

*Table 1: An overview of the interview sample*

Job title	Name in the text	Employment length	Interview length
Learning advisor	Adam	> 5 years	35 mins
Activist & Volunteer	Billy	> 5 years	70 mins
Training consultant	Colin	2 - 5 years	40 mins
HR consultant	David	2 - 5 years	40 mins
Learning specialist	Erik	2 - 5 years	41 mins
Project manager	Frank	> 5 years	35 mins
Sustainability specialist	Gina	0 - 2 years	33 mins
Project coordinator	Hanna	0 - 2 years	46 mins
Social media specialist	Ida	0 - 2 years	36 mins
Event specialist	Julia	0 - 2 years	32 mins
Volunteer coordinator	Karin	> 5 years	32 mins
Hostel coordinator	Lena	2 - 5 years	47 mins

## **4.4 Observation**

Observation is another qualitative data collection strategy that I apply in this case study, including direct observation and participant observation, which draws attention to the fact that the researcher immerses him- or herself in the social life of those he or she studies (Bryman, 2015).

### ***4.4.1 Direct Observation***

As this study has chosen Action Now as the case, indicating that Action Now as an organization provides a natural setting and opportunity for direct observations, which is also an important source of evidence in case study. The purpose of direct observation in Action Now is to describe in depth and detail the activities that took place in the organizational setting, people who participated in those activities and the meanings behind them. Compared with interviews, direct observation enables researchers to see firsthand what is going on, rather than

simply assuming (Patton, 2015). The direct observation conducted in this study is less formal, which included two Monday meetings in the office, one lunch in the organization's canteen and a field visit to the Action Now office building, the *Cafe* and the *Hostel*. Information collected through these direct observations are written down as field notes and photographed. These observations provide additional information regarding the organizational culture and coworker's interaction, which is useful for the researcher to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

#### ***4.4.2 Participant Observation***

Participant observation is a special form of observation since “the participant observer immerses him- or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behavior, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions” (Bryman, 2015, p. 423). In this study, I chose the *Cafe* as the place for me to conduct participant observation as it is one of the most important social venues in Action Now. Organizational members gather in the cafe to socialize where communication and interaction are mostly occurred. The *Cafe* is also a venue where coworkers interact with external audiences, such as hostel guests, event participants and customers. Thus, I signed up to volunteer in Action Now and worked as a bartender in the *Cafe* for 5 shifts in total. I also attended several after work activities in the *Cafe* which can be considered as participant observation as well.

As a participant observer, I am aware of the fact that it is difficult to decide whether to be an active or passive observer (Bryman, 2015). Even when I am in a non-observing role, there is unavoidable involvement as long as I am in the *Cafe*. Thus, I consider my participant observation as having started after I signed up to be a volunteer and every time when I was at the *Cafe*. Participant observation necessarily combines observing and informal interviewing (Patton, 2015). As this study applied the social constructionist approach, it guides me as a researcher to put focus on human interaction and communication, as knowledge is constructed through daily interaction and conversation between people (Burr, 2015). The *Cafe* provides me the ideal location to examine how storytelling relates to coworker's communication engagement, and the experience as a volunteer provides me with more opportunities to interact with other volunteers and employees.

Besides, there are some problems when conducting participant observation, such as not having enough time to take notes when informal interaction or unplanned activity happens.

Bryman (2015) suggests the use of digital recorders to record initial notes and it is valuable to write down personal reflections about my own feelings. During my participant observation, when I noticed such situation I did not stop and take notes immediately, instead I waited until the informal interaction or unplanned activity ended till I wrote down the text on my phone as descriptive as possible, including my personal reflections on the observing situations.

## **4.5 Analytical process**

This study applies an inductive approach, aiming to generate theoretical analysis as the outcome from the observation instead of discovering universal causal generalizations (Patton, 2015). However, as deductive and inductive strategies are more of tendencies rather than separated by a “hard-and-fast distinction” (Bryman, 2015, p. 24). Thus, I am aware that in this study, theory is also used as a background but the aim is to generate more knowledge for the theorization of employee engagement from the CCO perspective.

Thematic analysis strategy is applied to analyze the qualitative data, including interview transcriptions and observation field notes, which is considered as one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2015). During my analysis, I followed six steps stated by Bryman (2015). First, after I transcribed all the interview recordings, I started to read through all the transcripts, field notes, Action Now’s organizational documents and photographs I took during the observation. Then, I began coding the materials, which was an iterative process. At the beginning, I coded as much as possible and tried to avoid taking notes or making interpretations at this stage. Then I started to reduce the number of codes and search for common elements in order to form them into themes. For example, at this stage, I was able to put different storytelling practices in Action Now into three main categories. Next, more connections between different interviews and relations to the theoretical concepts emerged. For example, as engagement is a vague concept, it is difficult to identify the direct connection between communication engagement and storytelling practices. After putting relevant codes into themes, it became easier for the researcher to discover the sequence between different concepts and portray the interconnections. Last but not least, themes that derived from the data are not intrinsically interesting and important (Bryman, 2015). It is important to justify the themes by ensuring they are relevant to the research questions and to the literature review. At this step, I chose the most relevant and interesting findings in comparison to previous studies to present.

According to Silverman (2007, as cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), a researcher's analysis should not only be based on someone's talk, or on a "fictitious monologue" in an interview. Instead, it is more important to see how one's talk relates to what individual B says, individual C says, and so on. It is argued that sequences play a crucial role (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Thus, in my analysis I attempted to present statements that are consisting of other lines rather than merely isolated statements.

## **4.6 Methodological reflections**

Case study research has been questioned with the conventional wisdom, for example, that one cannot generalize based on one single case or that case studies are arbitrary and subjective. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, while "the force of example" is underestimated (p. 228). For researchers, case study provides the closeness to real-life situations and multiple wealth of details. For this study, the choice of qualitative case study derives from the research topic and theoretical perspective. The aim of this study is to produce a better understanding of the relationship between storytelling practices in nonprofit organizations and employee engagement from the CCO perspective. It puts more emphasis on human interaction and more specifically, coworker's communication. I consider the case organization as a critical case as they implemented the storytelling as part of the organizational strategy and applied it in various ways, it "most likely" can provide me the opportunity to examine the relations between storytelling and coworker's communication engagement (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 231). I am also aware of choosing a "most likely" case is especially well suited to falsification of propositions, which can be considered as one of the limitations of this study. However, as the concept of engagement from the CCO perspective is rather overlooked in the literature, I argue that by conducting a critical case study can provide more insights in this field.

Another methodological reflection is about my role as observer. The role as a bartender in the Cafe has its own responsibilities which affect my observation to a certain extent. I am also aware of the role of participant observer has the inherent difficulty in balancing the subjectivity and objectivity (O'Reilly, 2012). However, I consider it as an experience as a new organizational member which gives me the opportunity to see through participants' eyes. Through the observation, I am able to understand the organizational reality including strategy and culture, which helps me to understand my interviewees when conducting interviews.



## 4.7 Ethical considerations

It is argued that ethical issues arise at a variety of stages of social research (Bryman, 2015). Several ethical concerns are considered carefully during this study. Firstly, when contacting informants, I assured them that anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed, meaning that their names or specific title, the name of the organization will not be revealed all the information I gathered from them will only be used for this study. I also made it clear about the aim of this study and the potential theoretical and practical contributions. Second, before each interview, an interview consent form was handed out to each interviewee (Appendix B). The consent form mainly clarified that interviewee's participation is voluntary; information will be remained anonymous and confidential; interviewee agreed to be audio recorded and original audio recording can only be assessed by me; the interviewer's contact is provided for seeking further information and clarification. Third, when conducting observation, it is more difficult to ensure everyone who is involved has the opportunity for informed consent. However, I stated my purpose of volunteering in the *Cafe* was to conduct observation for my study and ensured everyone who I worked with the aim of my study and potential participation during my observation while anonymity and confidentiality guaranteed. They all agreed to participate in my observation, but due to practical considerations, they were not provided with the consent form.

# 5. Analysis

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This chapter is divided into two parts, aiming to answer the two research questions. In the first part, I address three different storytelling practices identified in Action Now and analyze them with sensemaking, organizational identification and socialization theories. In the second part, I present how these storytelling practices are in relation to coworker's communication engagement from the CCO perspective in Action Now.

## 5.1 How is storytelling practiced in Action Now?

Through my interviews and observations, I identify three storytelling practices in Action Now. They are 1) in relation to organizational strategy; 2) in formal organizational settings; and 3) in informal social settings.

### *5.1.1 Storytelling in relation to organizational strategy*

The first storytelling practice I identify from the interviews and observations is that storytelling as a communication method when implementing their organizational strategy - organizing. It is worth mentioning that the term "organizing" here has a different definition from Weick's theory of organizing (1969, 1979). In the recent published Action Now's organizational strategy, the organizational mission is stated as, "we help organize communities of action that can take up the struggle against injustice, poverty and discrimination". Thus, organizing refers to empowering, educating and supporting people effectively to organize their own communities, establish actions and create changes. In this case, storytelling in relation to strategy has two types, the story about the organization and employee's personal stories.

Storytelling is a key method in organizing, as one interviewee said,

"There's a tradition of organizing which very much comes from the civil rights movement in the US, which for the last ten years have been influential, and the way that we, as activists within the activist community, think about activism or practice activism or practice organizing with grounded method where storytelling is definitely the key" (Adam).

In this regard, coworkers who work with organizing are encouraged to use storytelling as a communication method to reach and connect with the audience, both the story of the organization and their own personal stories. For example,

“[...]In our work with the young people, we use storytelling and we train all the young people. We are in some way using storytelling and personal stories, sharing personal stories to create common values. [...]An example is that we are going to a yearly political event on an island outside of Denmark, [...] we are having five or six workshops where we train young people to use their stories to use their common values to create changes and be on the stage and tell the politicians how their reality is and how their life is” (Colin).

Thus, storytelling is practiced as a communication method to fulfill the organizational strategy - organizing, mostly towards external audiences. According to the interviewees, storytelling is a step by step guide in organizing strategy as there are three types of stories, which are the “story of me”, “story of us” and “story of now”. These three types of stories combine the story of Action Now and personal stories to interact with external audiences, in order to organize and unite them as a community. The “story of me” is personal stories in relation to a specific issue. The “story of us” is the story that is connected with Action Now and listeners. The “story of now” is the story in relation to the priority and urgency in this specific moment. Weick (1995) argues that most models of organization are based on argumentation rather than narration, while most organizational realities are based on narration. The storytelling practiced in relation to the organizing strategy engages coworkers to include their “meaningful lived experience” into the organizational storytelling system, which is the most distinguishing characteristic of sensemaking - focusing on retrospect (Weick, 1995). It reveals the concept of ‘storytelling organization’, which was defined as a “collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (Boje, 1991, p. 106). Through these storytelling practices, the organizational reality is talked into existence, which is based on not only the narration of the organization but also each member’s personal stories (Weick et al., 2005).

In addition, Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue that when organizations implement their strategies, it is problematic if coworkers are not proactive or engaged since it is not only a question of information distribution but also about interaction, communication and sensemaking between managers and coworkers. For example, according to Colin, they share personal stories to build up relationships with young people, to organize them to speak on the

stage and fight for their rights from politicians. Three types of stories that they use indicate a strong process of sensemaking. They use personal stories to construct their own identities, to create common values with the external audiences and motivate them to act on certain issues. As presented above, sensemaking is considered as a balance of making sense through thinking and acting in which there is always an element of both (Colville et al., 2012). As sensemaking keeps action and cognition together, employees continuously seek and ascribe meanings from their own past experiences to the current situation when they are organizing people, resulting in a continual process of individual identity construction and an enhancement of organizational identification (Weick, 1995). The action of storytelling is intertwined with the cognition of their identities and values which reflects one and another. As Christensen et al. (2008) argue, identification is embedded in and shaped by the narratives we construct about ourselves, which are represented by the construction of the “story of me”, “story of us” and “story of now”.

Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue that it is important for employees to have knowledge about the organization’s priorities in order to realize the strategy. According to my findings, I argue that in this scenario, storytelling is a means of communication and sensemaking about strategic priorities. As one of the interviewees suggests, being more specific in the storytelling approach could be beneficial for communicating the priorities with coworkers, which accordingly, generates more trust between coworkers and managers.

“[...]There is also a big challenge that we have identified in a survey which is prioritizing which demanded areas we want to focus more on as we always want all, like do you choose poverty in the world or do you choose climate changes? [...]sometimes being even more specific in our storytelling could be beneficial for our work” (David).

Thus, storytelling practiced in relation to strategy acts as a form of communication and sensemaking to engage coworkers in the process of identity construction and strategic priority formulation.

### ***5.1.2 Storytelling in formal organizational settings***

The first scenario of storytelling is practiced in relation to the implementation of the organizational strategy and mission, but as one of the interviewees addressed, “storytelling in Action Now has a strategic element and a cultural element” (Adam), storytelling certainly has a cultural effect to the organization. According to my interviews and observation, storytelling exists in many aspects of organizational life, becoming part of the organizational culture. Thus, I

categorize the internal storytelling practices into two sessions, in formal/controlled organizational settings and in informal/uncontrolled social settings.

Storytelling is practiced in formal organizational settings in various ways, such as internal training or during meetings. For example, Action Now provides storytelling training to each employee every year and organizes events about storytelling.

“[...]Actually next week in two days from now, we have a big storytelling training for everyone who are working here permanently. And when they implemented the strategy, we went out of town, the whole organization, to learn how to do storytelling for the whole weekend” (Lena).

The storytelling trainings attempt to enable each coworker with the ability to apply storytelling in their day-to-day work, such as starting a meeting with telling stories. One interviewee said, “Every time I facilitated meetings with the volunteers, I always start with a story. I tell a subject and everyone tells a story about, for example, what's the most crazy thing you have experience with a guest last week?” (Lena).

I argue that when storytelling is practiced in formal organizational settings, it can be considered as a form of internal communication. It is argued that effective internal communication can contribute to a positive relationship between employees, managers, and the organization and help employees make sense of the organizational reality (Spear & Roger, 2016). Many interviewees said such storytelling practice during meetings helps them to build a stronger relationship with colleagues since they can understand their colleagues on a more holistic level. One of the interviewees said,

“It made me closer to my colleagues during their stories, knowing why they are working here and what form them the way they are. It made me realize that what we do is not making a bit more money than last month. Instead, it's more about the storytelling. Some people are not that interested in precisely how much money we make for the project, but they are interested in the stories about why we actually do it. There's a story behind it and not only numbers” (Karin).

From this quote, it can be seen that through storytelling, coworkers are able to construct positive relationships with their colleagues and the organization. The comparison between “earning money” and “telling stories” indicates that employees care about the organizational vision and mission more than the profit. As a nonprofit organization, one of the most distinctive characteristics is to maintain an unprofitable social mission while often stringent imperatives of operating within a market economy (Weisbrod, 1998). In this case, storytelling plays an important role to reduce this dilemma as it generates the process of sensemaking. During the-

se formal storytelling practices, employees are trained to ascribe meanings from their past experiences in order to make sense of the current organizational reality, questions such as who they are and why they are here. Sensemaking is essentially an act of cueing a story in the form of a frame that provides both a scheme of interpretation and a scheme for action (Colville et al., 2012). Stories of projects or organizational members provide the frame for coworkers to make sense of the organization and connect with each other.

In addition, as volunteer retention is one of the main concerns of all voluntary organizations (Konieczny, 2018), the storytelling practiced in formal settings between employees and volunteers also considers the process of organizational identification to reduce the tendency of volunteer dropout. As Nietzsche (1997, as cited in Cheney, 2011) states, he conceives of messages about who we are in terms of narrative. Stories that organizations tell about themselves and each organizational member's story are fold into the identity and become the real sense of identity. Through communication and storytelling, employees and volunteers internalize the organizational values and missions and it therefore becomes part of their individual identity.

Previous studies argue that storytelling is considered an effective way to communicate with employees as internal communication increases employee engagement (Brown et al., 2009; Gill, 2015; Gustomo et al., 2019). I agree with this argument to some extent. As presented above, when storytelling is practiced as internal communication in formal organizational settings, it can be considered as a way of sensemaking and identification to help coworkers and volunteers construct positive relationships with their managers, colleagues and the organization, and therefore mitigate the issue of volunteer dropout. However, these studies mostly are from the management-centered approach, addressing communication as one-way enacted communication from managers to employees. As this study applies the CCO approach in understanding employee engagement which puts employees in the center, there are also critical voices towards storytelling in formal organizational practices. As formal storytelling practices are mostly organized from the managers to coworkers, or coworker to volunteers, coworkers or volunteers might find that they are expected to share a story even if they do not want to. If they feel obligated to tell stories, or practices storytelling in an unnatural manner, the authenticity of the story might decrease. As one of the interviewees said,

“I don't have a problem to share personal stories but if it became a theory, then there's a falseness in it. If you share something personal in a session just because you believe it will bring you closer to people around the world, I don't think that's how it works. I think you share personal things because you want to share, and that's how you get

those connections. I think people can immediately feel if you come with the story that you practiced about yourself” (Erik).

By analyzing this quote, it reveals the limitation of the management-centered perspective of communication and engagement. In this setting, storytelling is originated from managers or the organization, aiming to construct positive employee-organization relationship and generate engagement. However, from the CCO perspective, organizations are constituted in communication, characterized by ambiguity, complexity, and tensions, which means communication is messy and difficult to control (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). The alternative perspective of employee engagement acknowledges that vague concepts such as engagement and relationship, are difficult to measure its desired behavioral results of the management interventions (Hallahan, 2015; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). It is important to be aware of the limitation of storytelling practiced in formal settings that originated from managers and the organization.

Besides, I also notice that when asked about storytelling, most of the interviewees have prepared a personal story. Some interviewees said if the same story has been practiced over and over again, it might be difficult to repeat. For example, Billy has joined Action Now for more than ten years and he said,

“It's a little difficult for me to say the same thing over and over again, especially because I've been here for so many years and know most people here. If I go to a meeting, half the people in the room already know who I am” (Billy).

Thus, when storytelling is practiced in formal organizational settings and originated from managers or the organization, it might not always generate positive outcomes because coworkers do not want to feel obligated to share stories nor practice the story over and over again. From the CCO perspective, communication is an integral aspect of engagement—communication is therefore both a producer and a product of engagement (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). If coworkers consider the storytelling in formal settings as inauthentic, they will feel less likely to participate and communicate, or in other words, less likely to be engaged. Storytelling in formal organizational settings is a form of communication and sensemaking that help coworkers make sense of the organization, construct trustworthy relationships with colleagues and mitigate the issue of volunteer dropout, but it is also important to be aware of the limitations in this scenario.

### ***5.1.3 Storytelling in informal social settings***

The third scenario of storytelling I identify in Action Now is practiced in informal/uncontrolled social settings, such as a casual conversation taking place in the *Cafe*. From the CCO perspective, communication among all organizational members constitutes the organization (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010), including all different kinds of informal chats among coworkers. It is important to examine how storytelling is practiced in informal social settings and how it relates to employee engagement. It is worth noting that the *Cafe* in Action Now is charged by the social entrepreneurship team and mostly run by volunteers. All the profits that they make will be used for supporting one of the organization's projects in the world. According to my observation, the *Cafe* is also a social venue for everyone in the organization, where many informal meetings, after work activities and social events are held. During a casual conversation while I was volunteering in the *Cafe*, one of the employees said,

“I consider the *Cafe* as my living room. If I want to be social, I will come here. If I don't want to be social, I am home. Because I think this is where I have lots of my friends, and this is also almost always a place where I am welcomed with open arms” (Field notes).

The *Cafe* is also used as an event venue, as one of the interviewees said, “You can book the stage. If you want it in the *Cafe*, you can create an event on Facebook and just invite people” (Julia). The *Cafe* serves as a special social venue for the organization where storytelling is practiced in this informal setting, also why I chose to conduct participant observation in the *Cafe*.

I argue that storytelling practiced in informal social settings are considered not only as communication, but also sensemaking and socialization. Organizational socialization usually refers to the process of members learning the behaviors, values, and norms appropriate to their positions within the organization (Brown, 1985). It was found that storytelling acts as a form of sense-making as the member moves through the stages of organizational socialization. As Cheney (2011) addresses, the socialization process has three sequential stages which are (i) the anticipatory stage; (ii) the encounter stage; and (iii) the metamorphosis stage. Suspitsyna (2013) points out that the similarity of social and cognitive characteristics involved in organizational sensemaking and socialization. Thus, it is argued that socialization as a form of sensemaking, is an ongoing process of interpretation and action.

At the anticipatory stage, people relate to a specific job or organization prior to the first day at work by, for example, brochures, manuals, annual reports, organizational videos and advertisements. For example, when I signed up to be a volunteer, the volunteer coordina-



tor handed me a brochure, and said, “This is all you need to know before you start working”. There is an introduction about the organization and the relations to the *Cafe* and the *Hostel* in the brochure, which explicitly addresses the organizational vision, mission and values. As I was volunteering for my participant observation, I read their organizational strategy from their website, which also helped me to get a basic understanding of the organization and how important the volunteers are for the organization. Then, I started taking training shifts as volunteers in the *Cafe*, which can be considered as the encounter stage (Cheney, 2011). I had different mentors for each shift who taught me through the rules, procedures and practices. During this stage, I had this conversation with two other volunteers.

Volunteer 1: “How do you feel about your first shift?” I: “Great! It’s just a lot to learn. My mentor is Michael and he taught me through everything without leaving any details.” Volunteer 2: “Haha yes that’s Michael. He always does that when he is a mentor.” Volunteer 1: “He was my mentor too. It’s been three years and he’s still the same” (Field notes).

I argue that even though this conversation is not a full story plot, it still represents the bits and pieces of a story (Boje, 1991). According to Cheney (2011), at this stage, newcomers make sense of the organizational reality by dealing with daily tasks and interacting with coworkers and managers. Take myself as an example, when I found out there was a lot to learn as a volunteer in the *Cafe*, I made sense of this “surprise” or discrepancy between my expectations and the reality through a conversation with other volunteers, realizing that my mentor had been very detail-oriented.

The last stage is the metamorphosis stage is considered as the process when newcomers seek to become an accepted organizational member by adapting to the organization’s expectations (Cheney, 2011). For example, after one of my shifts as a volunteer in the *Cafe*, I joined the after work gathering and wrote down this note afterwards.

“It was on a Friday night and many employees and volunteers hung out together in the *Cafe* and chatted in small groups. I was with four more people sitting outside by the street. A Danish girl told us a story. On the International Labor Day, some people wore face masks and threw fireworks on the street in Copenhagen but the police didn’t stop them. However, due to the “face mask ban” law, people in Denmark are not allowed to cover their face in public, so she spoke to three policemen separately, but they either asked her to go home or laughed at her, and said, “Good luck”. She felt very mad at the current political situation in Denmark. After she shared her story, another guy also shared a story about an injustice situation he saw on the same day in

Denmark. Then, followed by a Brazilian guy and a Dutch girl talking about injustice situations in their own countries” (Field notes).

Firstly, I argue that during this naturally occurring storytelling session, employees and volunteers exchange their stories against injustice which is part of the organizational values and mission. Newcomers seek to become accepted organizational members by accepting organizational expectations, which in this case, is identifying with the organization. This conversation can be seen as the practice of relational storytelling where storytellers and listeners are both meaning producers. After the first Danish girl shared her story, people started to respond and share their own stories, which indicates that storytelling is inherently dialogic (Boje, 1991). Besides, this conversation is about how people react against injustice, which is the main part of the organizational values and mission. This dialogic storytelling was naturally occurring in an informal social setting. The storytellers and listeners actively participate in the meaning creation process, such as “who am I” and “why am I here”. It indicates that storytelling is closely related to the most distinguishing characteristic of sensemaking - focusing on retrospect (Weick, 1995). By sharing their “meaningful lived experience”, they capture the organizational reality because “people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24).

Besides, Brown (1985) argues that stories and myths in organizations as related symbols are used by members to define the situation, or make sense, particularly salient in the socialization process. During this informal socializing setting, the story of the organization and their personal stories are used by themselves to define and make sense of this situation. It is not only a process of organizational socialization, but also the enactment of engagement.

As argued before, storytelling is practiced in Action Now during formal organizational settings, which might not always generate positive outcomes because it can be considered as internal communication that is only enacted from managers to coworkers, while the social interactive nature of engagement is neglected. While in informal social settings, storytelling has the dialogic feature that naturally occurs during conversations. I argue that the reason why storytelling can naturally occur during informal conversations is because storytelling has become part of the organizational culture and been practiced in relation to the strategy and during formal settings. The first two storytelling practices are not only communication methods, but also sensemaking activities that inform and shape the organizational culture (Cheney, 2011). As sensemaking in organizations is a social process that involves networking, interaction, shared meanings and joint actions, the more storytelling practices, the more values and trust are created and shared within the organization, which leads to a result that storytelling is

practiced in informal social settings. Together with the first two storytelling practices, the dialogic storytelling can be considered as a way of communication, sensemaking and socialization that helps coworkers to make sense of the organization and generate more engagement within the organization.

## **5.2 Storytelling and coworker's communication engagement**

Previous studies argue that one challenge for researchers when studying storytelling is the lack of an agreed upon definition of storytelling in the literature since storytelling can be applied in various aspects in the organization. It is important to identify how storytelling is practiced in the case organization first. As stated above, storytelling in Action Now is practiced 1) in relation to the implementation of organizational strategy and mission; and 2) in relation to organizational culture, including in formal/controlled organizational settings and informal/uncontrolled social settings. As Boyce (1996) argues, “storytelling is an ancient medium for communication and meaning making” (p.20). Storytelling as a unique form of communication and sensemaking, has different implications in relation to employee engagement, including making sense of the organizational reality, identification, socialization, etc. From the CCO perspective, communication is both a producer and a product of engagement - “communication is vital in constituting engagement, but engagement is also enacted in communication” (Heide & Simonsson, 2018, p. 209). Heide and Simonsson also address that engagement as a product of social and interactive sensemaking processes (c.f. Weick, 1995), is constructed in a process where the employee him- or herself acts as a communicator or dialogue partner. In order to develop a better understanding of employee engagement from the CCO perspective, I will examine how storytelling construct coworker's communication engagement. There are three themes about coworker's communication engagement emerged from the interviews and observations, which are engaged coworkers acting as 1) reflective dialogue partners in relation to the strategy; 2) active communicators in relation to critical voices; and 3) organizational ambassadors.

### ***5.2.1 Engaged coworkers act as reflective dialogue partners in relation to strategies***

The first finding about coworker's communication engagement that is constructed through storytelling is related to the organizational strategy and mission. As stated above, when storytelling is practiced in relation to the organizational strategy - organizing, it is used as a communication method to organize external audiences. Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue that a general understanding of strategy is usually related to the work and thinking of managers while coworkers are only considered as the executors. However, similar to the CCO perspective, "the strategy as practice perspective implies that ordinary organizational tasks of coworkers bring the strategic aims of an organization into being" (Balogun et al., 2015, as cited in Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Through storytelling, coworkers are active sensemakers who create shared meanings with external audiences as well as the organization. They are not passive strategy executors. Instead, engaged coworkers discuss their understanding of the strategy with their colleagues and attempt to improve it. For example, when one of the interviewees talked about the organizing strategy, he said,

"I think sometimes there is a lot like a *mismatch* between hundred percent organizing such as training people to demand something from the politicians, and a stage when we're doing the work where it's enough sometimes for some people just to be aware of who they are and how they can make the change but not really making the change on the structural level. [...] I think it's important to not only do the hundred percent organizing but also see the small victories as big victories for the young people" (Colin).

When asked about if he has talked about this "*mismatch*" with colleagues, he said,

"Yeah, yeah, we were talking about that and at first I think a lot of our colleagues and the whole staff were thinking we have to do one hundred percent organizing when we're doing things. But I think there is a common understanding that this organizing approach is not suitable for every work that we do" (Colin).

As Thier (2018) addresses, storytelling as a narrative method practiced in organizations brings more reflection instead of mere documentation. Storytelling is not only a way of communication but also as sensemaking when coworkers communicate with external audiences. Take this as an example, Colin realized it is important to celebrate small victories as big victories for young people because sometimes it is enough for people to just be aware of who they are and how they can make a change. While the organizing strategy puts emphasis on the actual action, which in this case is to make demands from politicians and see the change on the structural level. Colin noticed this *mismatch*, discussed it with his colleagues and developed a mutual understanding of the organizing strategy. Weick (1995) uses "enactment" to describe how people construct their own enacted environments in organizational life. According to him,

people in organizations usually overlook that they themselves, as active actors, are the ones who chooses to act and construct reality. Weick et al. (2005) also state that sensemaking as a process of meaning materialization, is an issue of language, talk and communication when situations, organizations and environments are talked into existence. In other words, organizational members make sense and construct organizational reality through language, talk and communication. In this case, Colin and other coworkers, chose to enact the “*mismatch*” situation that was talked into existence through their communication and storytelling. Storytelling provides coworkers opportunities to make sense of the strategy and develop reflection and improvements.

To improve the organizational strategy, coworkers cannot just be messages receivers, but rather reflective dialogue partners.

“If we don't speak about the challenge and only speak about unicorns, paradise and positive storytelling, then people will lose interest, because it gets it's too pink pictures. [...]I think positive storytelling is a good thing, but I think it can also be misused or abused” (David).

As Thier (2018) argues, storytelling brings more participation instead of top-down processes. By analyzing this quote, it can be seen that David reflected on the strategy and tried to improve it. He realized that it is also important to have a balance when using storytelling towards external audiences because people will lose interest if there are only positive stories. It indicates that engaged coworkers can be reflective towards the organizational strategy and express their own opinions in order to improve the strategy.

The storytelling approach brings more reflection and participation since coworkers are in a social and interactive sensemaking process where they can identify themselves with the organizational vision, mission and values. The more they identify with the organization, the more they feel motivated to improve its organizational strategy, as expressed in their communicative reflection of the strategy and communication with their colleagues and managers.

### ***5.2.2 Engaged coworkers act as active communicators in relation to critical voices***

The second finding about coworker's communication engagement that constructed through storytelling is coworkers acting as active communicators, especially in relation to critical voices. As Heide and Simonsson (2018) point out, communicating critical communication upward can clearly be seen as an expression of coworker engagement. From the functionalist

approach, employee engagement is always portrayed only as psychological state that can be affected by management interventions or guided through certain communication practices (Karanges et al., 2015), which means engagement is enacted as one-way communication between managers and employees. The coworker's interaction and communication are neglected. However, the CCO perspective considers coworkers as active communicators who are as important as managers, and engagement is enacted by communication among coworkers and managers, which can be identified from my observations in Action Now.

During my observation in a Monday meeting, I noticed that every coworker is encouraged to talk and express their opinions or advice.

“There is a whiteboard in the meeting room with sticky notes on it. It is said that if anyone would like to speak about anything, they can write down their names on one of the notes on the whiteboard. During the meeting, one of the coworkers left his name on the note and suggested to use another more efficient way to fill up the beer in the bar because last Friday customers complained about the serving” (Field notes).

Besides, during my interview, one mentioned that they set up a lunchroom for everyone to encourage coworkers to have lunch together. “We are actually encouraged to work across departments because the reason we set up the lunch here was so that we can split up, sit down and talk to people during lunch” (Ida). Another interviewee said, “The general secretary sits with the volunteers, you don't feel that there should be a difference. [...]you can talk with everyone, you can knock on the door of the general secretary or give anyone a call” (Lena). According to these quotes, it seems the communication climate is very open, and coworkers are acting as active communicators with both their managers and colleagues. However, as Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue, the idea of organizations as being organized from bottom-up implies the organizations are complex and messy. In order to discover the organizational reality, I believe it is necessary to further examine coworker's critical voices. Therefore, I continued asking interviewees about what tensions they have experienced and how they dealt with them as being active communicators.

One tension that emerges from several interviews is the choice of language. Although the official working language is English, some interviewees complained about situation when people speak Danish during meetings or regarding Danish speaking as a requirement in job advertisements.

“When we were advertising for a position, the HR first wrote they have to speak Danish. And they asked us for feedback on the job posting and I was very strongly saying that they should write either fluent in Danish or English. I think it's very discriminato-

ry because it's like the underlying prejudice in Danish society that they like to be able to talk to their colleagues in Danish at lunch even if they work in English" (Gina).

Also, during their Christmas party,

I have complained to the general secretary about it. During Christmas we had a Christmas party and most of the speeches and everything was in Danish so I don't really have a good time and I felt very excluded. I said this is ridiculous and goes against our values" (Gina).

Interestingly, the tension on the language use emerged from the interview shows that language is not just a tool for communication. As Burr (2015) argues, language is a necessary precondition for thought since language provides categories and concepts as a framework of meaning for people to think. Different language use not just causes the problem of communication, but also the process of sensemaking. Regarding this language issue, Gina spoke up directly to the general secretary, as Lena said, "you can knock on the door of the general secretary or give anyone a call". She communicated this problem directly with the general secretary and said this is against the organizational value, which is fighting against inequality and discrimination. She is a non-Danish speaker and felt discriminated under this circumstance. It indicates the process of sensemaking. Colville et al. (2012) argue that sensemaking is essentially an act of cueing a story in the form of a frame that provides both a scheme of interpretation (i.e. the meaning of the situation) and a scheme for action (i.e. what you should do next). In this case, the cue is the organizational values and story. It provides a scheme of interpretation, which is "speaking Danish during Christmas meeting is against the organizational value" and a scheme for action, which is "communicating with the general secretary directly".

Thus, I argue that organizational values are communicated through storytelling practices among coworkers while also considered as the cue for them to make sense of organizational events. Engaged coworkers are active communicators in Action Now, but more importantly, they are willing to speak up and communicate about critical opinions. As Lena said, "The more you identify with the values, the more you will also be aware that when you see something within the organization that is not right. Of course you say it, and of course you try to change it." The more they identify with the organization, the more they feel willing to communicate their critical opinions with their managers and colleagues.

### ***5.2.3 Engaged coworkers act as organizational ambassadors***

The third finding about coworker's communication engagement that constructed through storytelling is coworkers acting as organizational ambassadors. Heide and Simonsson (2018) point out that engaged coworkers act as organizational ambassador when their actions are in line with organizational values, missions and visions. In order to achieve this effect, there should be a clear connection between strategic visions, work and communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). I argue that storytelling as a form of sensemaking and communication is this connection. However, the meaning of being ambassadors as the enactment of engagement is rather absent in previous research. One of the interviewees gave an example of how she understood being an organizational ambassador.

“I am telling many people about it. If they don't know if they are interested, I will tell them and make them interested. The thing is, I think everyone who works here really, really strongly believe that this organization is working in the only right way of how you can make it a change in the world. [...]So I'm trying to tell all the guests about it because I want the guests to know that actually just by staying in and having a great time, they are really helping doing such amazing work. And the work could not be done if we were not collecting the money from running the *Hostel* and the *Cafe*” (Lena).

By analyzing this quote, it can be seen that the employee has a strong pride of the organizational vision, mission and values. She actively communicates the organization's vision and values to the external audience, in this case, the hostel and cafe customers. She is also willing to “make an extra effort” (Heide & Simonsson, 2018), saying if the customers in the hostel are not interested she will make them interested and realized how important they are for the organization. It should be noted that coworkers who are from the social entrepreneurship team have more chances to interact and communicate with external audiences such as customers in the hostel and the cafe about the organizational vision, mission and values. However, employees who are not provided with such opportunities also said that they always communicate with their friends and families about the organization's projects and achievements. As one of the interviewees said, “it becomes very much part of my identity” (Adam).

I argue that the first two coworker's communication engagement, reflective dialogue partner and critical communication, accelerate the third communication engagement - organizational ambassador, because when coworkers identify themselves with the organization, especially organizational values, and construct trustful relationships with their managers and colleagues, only they can become reflective and critical. It indicates a strong sense of trust and value identification within the organization, as I argue, that the role of organizational ambas-



sador is especially characterized by trust and value identification. Similar to those two roles, when engaged coworkers internalize the organizational values, they are more likely to become organizational ambassadors to communicate with external audiences about the values and achievements. While storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking, generates the process of organizational identification and therefore constructs coworker's communication engagement as ambassadors. One of the interviewees, Lena gave an example. During one official dinner meeting in the organization, they are provided with a talking menu with three subjects. The first talking subject was "Share your first experience as an activist". One of her coworkers from Uganda, shared a story about working against military in the war zone while her story was against the church not accepting female priest. She felt a little bit embarrassed at the beginning because she thought her Ugandan coworker's story was more "serious", but then she started to make sense,

"It's not about how extreme your case is. It's just as long as you experience something that is injustice for you or you see injustice and you act on it. That's the activist mind. And that's why we are both sitting around the same table. [...]I think that's the best memory I have with storytelling. I realized how insanely different we all are in this organization. And we all have that one specific mindset that collects us here" (Lena).

This quote captures her sensemaking process through this storytelling practice. It shows the retrospective aspect of sensemaking, which means in order to make sense of the present, we tend to compare with similar events occurred in the past (Weick, 1995). In addition, the meaning that people assign to their experience, is not attached to the experience, but is selected, as Lena selected meaning to her experience due to the extracted cues she received from her colleagues. Weick also points out that one problem for retrospective sensemaking is there are too many meanings which requires values, priorities, and clarity about preferences to help the sense maker make sense of the elapsed experience. In this case, it is the organizational values or more specific, the activist mindset that helped her make sense of this experience. From another quote, it can be seen that coworkers connect with each other by their mutual understanding of values. He said,

"I think particularly on the values. It is a very, very personal thing where we just do not even need to discuss our opinions on things. When we are put into working groups, we know we are the same lines of thoughts because we have the same belief of how you know about integrity, about ethics, about development aid in general. I think that is very, very strong" (David).

When I followed his answer and asked, “Do you think your coworkers are more or less engaged with the organization?” He immediately answered, “More rather than less.” It indicates he identifies himself with the organization, and internalizes its mission and values, which can also be found in other interviewees’ answers.

In addition, another characteristic of the role of organizational ambassador is trust. During the interviews, several interviewees also pointed out that they feel they can trust their managers and colleagues.

“I make the decisions on my work and I'm also encouraged to ask for advice from anyone, whatever they're doing, just walk up to them and ask in the office. [...]Everyone cares what you're doing. I had a problem once and everyone was super supporting. It was a nice feeling. I think I was like, ‘oh, I can trust these people’. They didn't judge. They just gave me the advice and told me not to worry about it” (Ida).

From the quote, it can be seen that through storytelling, coworkers are able to construct positive relationships with their managers and colleagues, which has also been discussed in the previous sessions. It is believed that there is a risk that the coworkers might communicate negatively about the organization if there is a low level of trust (Heide & Simonsson, 2015). While employees can gain trust by sharing each other’s stories, as one of the interviewees Frank said, “the more stories about motivation and the reason why you joined this community, the more you think you can trust these people. [...]so by telling stories and being honest, you can make the culture go in that direction”. Thus, coworkers construct trustful relationships with their colleagues as well as the organization in general through storytelling, which becomes one of the most important factors of being organizational ambassadors.

In corporate communication literature, it is frequently argued that organizations should speak as one entity with one voice (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Inspired by the CCO perspective, organization is constituted by communication which is always polyphonic (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Christensen et al., 2008). Thus, as stated above, storytelling is practiced in various ways in the organization and coworkers are encouraged to tell not only the story of the organization but also their own personal stories, which means the organization communicates with the external audiences in multiple voices. In this regard, storytelling embraces the polyphonic feature which enhances the engagement.

It is believed that engaged coworkers will have pride in their organization, prosper and make an extra effort when it is needed (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). However, it is worth noting that being able to identify with organizational values is closely related to the organization-

al type. Nonprofit organizations are different from, for example, commercial companies or governmental departments.

“Most people who work here, like most people who work for NGOs. It's very much not just a job. It's a personal thing. You know that you are connected to an issue, you are connected to the world, you want to do something differently. [...] You don't just go to work and then go home” (Erik).

Employees who work for NGOs are tend to feel more identified with coworkers and the organization as they all have a personal motivation to work there. As a result, employees in nonprofit organizations are more likely to have the same values with the organization from the start.

To conclude, to be an organizational ambassador, one should be able to identify him- or herself with the organizational values and trust his or her colleagues, managers and the organization. Storytelling is considered as a form of communication and sensemaking that enables coworkers to identify themselves with the organization and internalize its mission, values and ideology, which leads to coworkers' communication engagement - reflective dialogue partners in relation to the strategy, active communicators in relation to critical voices, and organizational ambassadors.

#### ***5.2.4 Challenge: Over engagement***

The evolution of the conceptualization of employee engagement stated in literature review shows that the dominant perspective of employee engagement mainly focuses on the psychological state of mind that characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Welch, 2011). From the alternative perspective, employee engagement puts coworkers in the center of a dynamic process focusing on interaction and exchange (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). In this case, engagement is more than just positive outcomes that originated from management, but also tensions and paradoxes (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). They point out that there are also dark sides of engagement, such as “overengagement”, which means when coworkers have difficulties in drawing sharp borders between work and home, it results in the producing of workaholics. It is necessary to examine the dark side of engagement from a coworker perspective.

As discussed above, storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking constructs coworker's communication engagement such as acting like reflective dialogue partners, active communicators and organizational ambassadors. On one hand, storytelling practices

provide coworkers with the opportunity to internalize the organizational values and therefore, they feel higher pride of the organization and more likely to be engaged. On the other hand, it could also cause dilemma for coworkers when they act as organizational ambassadors but their personal ability cannot fulfill the organizational values. As argued above, acting as ambassador means making an extra effort to communicate the organizational values with external audiences, while one of the interviewees gave an example of having difficulty in balancing the “extra effort” and values.

“I had a guest recently who has some mental issues and really needs help. [...]We tried to help her finding out where she could get the help that she needed, but she doesn't trust anyone and only wants us to help her. [...]But we need to tell her you cannot stay here. It's just not our competence is. And she started telling me all the values of the organization. [...]this is some kind of moral dilemma” (Lena).

As Lena said, it is a moral dilemma, since it is part of the organizational mission to help people who are under injustice or discrimination, but in the reality, like this situation, it is almost impossible for an organizational member to provide her with the help that she needs. When coworkers are engaged, they internalize the organizational values, vision and mission and express their communication engagement as, for example, organizational ambassadors as discussed above. However, one coworker might not have the competency to fulfill the organizational value by him- or herself. Organizational ambassadors are responsible for communicating organizational values with the external audiences while taking part of the responsibility to act as the organizational face. However, they are still one of the organizational members who does not represent the organization as a whole. Hence, when coworkers are engaged, or “overengaged”, they might find it difficult to draw a line between their personal identity and the organizational identity, and might have to face such “moral dilemma” when they are acting as organizational ambassadors.

Another example that might become the problem of overengagement, it is that engagement causes too much confidence and less flexibility in the organization.

“If you are very attached to your work and you have a lot of pride around your work, maybe sometimes you can be a bit difficult to let other people cooperate, like if you keep saying, ‘I have my approach and my approach is right’. [...]there's sometimes a tendency to take yourself too seriously” (Erik).

From the interviews, I argue that when coworkers are “overengaged”, they deeply believe that what they are doing is right and it is the only right thing to do, which can be seen from the former quote, “I think everyone who works here really, really strongly believe that this organ-

ization is working in the only right way of how you can make it a change in the world” (Lena). This confidence derives from the strong value identification. It certainly has positive effects, but it should also be aware that “overengaged” coworkers might create an unfriendly and unwelcoming working environment that hinders critical opinions in the organization.

The two examples stated above indicate that engagement also have dark sides, which can be categorized as “overengagement”. It is important to be aware of this challenge in order to generate a better understanding of employee engagement.

### 5.3 Summary

The first part of the analysis aims to answer the first research question, “*How is storytelling practiced in Action Now?*” I identify that storytelling in Action Now is practiced in relation to two aspects, as a communication method when implementing the strategy and as part of the organizational culture. Firstly, as Boyce (1996) argues, “storytelling is an ancient medium for communication and meaning making” (p.20), when storytelling is practiced in relation to the strategy, it is considered as a form of communication and sensemaking. There are three types of stories in this practice, which are the “story of me”, “story of us” and “story of now”. As Barker and Gower (2010) argue, humans as storytellers have the ability to send and receive messages that establish a value-laden reality, establish a common ground among all participants and provide a faster method of establishing a social relationship. During these storytelling practices towards external audiences, coworkers establish trustful relationships and create common values with external audiences as well as the organization. Besides, as Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue, it is important for employees to have knowledge about the organization’s priorities in order to realize the strategy. Through storytelling, coworkers are able to make sense of strategic priorities as they internalize the organizational values and identify themselves with the organization. In this case, storytelling can be considered as a tool to inform and communicate with coworkers about organization’s priorities.

Secondly, I argue that storytelling in Action Now has become part of the organizational culture. Organizational culture helps communities to make sense of themselves and the organization as a whole, while being simultaneously informed and shaped by those sense-making activities (Cheney, 2011). When storytelling is practiced during formal settings, it is considered as a form of internal communication. Previous studies argue that good internal communication can build trust with employees, contribute to a positive relationship between employees and managers, and eventually foster employee engagement (Spear & Roger, 2016; Mishra

et al., 2014). Similar findings can be identified from the analysis, as storytelling is seen as a sensemaking process that helps coworkers to build up a stronger relationship with colleagues, make sense of the organization, and internalize the organizational values and missions. However, when storytelling is practiced during formal settings, it is usually understood as one-way enacted communication originated from managers to employees. Interviewees address the problem of feeling inauthentic during formal storytelling settings or practicing the same story over and over again. There are limitations when storytelling is practiced during formal settings as storytelling has to be authentic and genuine.

From the CCO perspective, communication among all organizational members constitutes the organization (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010), including all different kinds of informal chats among coworkers. The third type of storytelling practice is identified during informal socializing settings. I argue that storytelling in informal settings is not only a form of communication and sensemaking, but also a process of socialization (Brown, 1985). Since storytelling is naturally occurred as in dialogues, it indicates that storytelling is inherently dialogic (Boje, 1991). The dialogic storytelling in social settings can be considered as a way of communication, sensemaking and socialization that helps coworkers make sense of organization, generates more dialogues and engagement within the organization.

The second part of the analysis aims to answer the second research question, “*How does storytelling relate to employee engagement from the CCO perspective in Action Now?*”. The findings from the analysis show that storytelling is part of the organizational strategy and culture and constructs coworker’s communication engagement in three ways: acting as reflective dialogue partners in relation to the strategy, as active communicators in relation to critical voices, and as organizational ambassadors. From my analysis, storytelling is considered as a form of communication and sensemaking when constructing coworker’s communication engagement. First of all, storytelling in organizations brings more reflection instead of mere documentation, and more participation instead of top-down processes (Thier, 2018). Through storytelling, coworkers are in a social and interactive sensemaking process where they can identify themselves with the organizational vision, mission and values. The more they identify with the organization, the more they act as reflective dialogue partners since they feel motivated to reflect on the strategy, express opinions and communicate with their colleagues and managers. Second, communicating critical communication upward can clearly be seen as an expression of coworker engagement (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Sensemaking enables coworkers to interpret organizational tensions or paradoxes, while the organizational story or values are the cues acting as schemes to guide them for actions, which in this case, act as ac-

tive communicators in relation to critical voices (Colville et al., 2012). Last but not least, engaged coworkers act as organizational ambassadors, who are willing to “make an extra effort” and communicate the organizational values with external audiences. I argue that these three coworker’s communication engagements are characterized by value identification and trust, which are generated through storytelling practices in the organization.

As argued above, storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking, generates trust and value identification for coworkers, while too much value identification can cause negative effects, which can be considered as “overengagement”. “Overengaged” coworkers might find it difficult to draw a line between personal identity and organizational identity when they acting as organizational ambassadors. Besides, too much value identification can also bring too much confidence and less flexibility in the organization where critical opinions might be hindered.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

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This chapter will discuss the findings of the analysis and contributions of this study. Then, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future study will be presented.

### 6.1 Contributions of this study

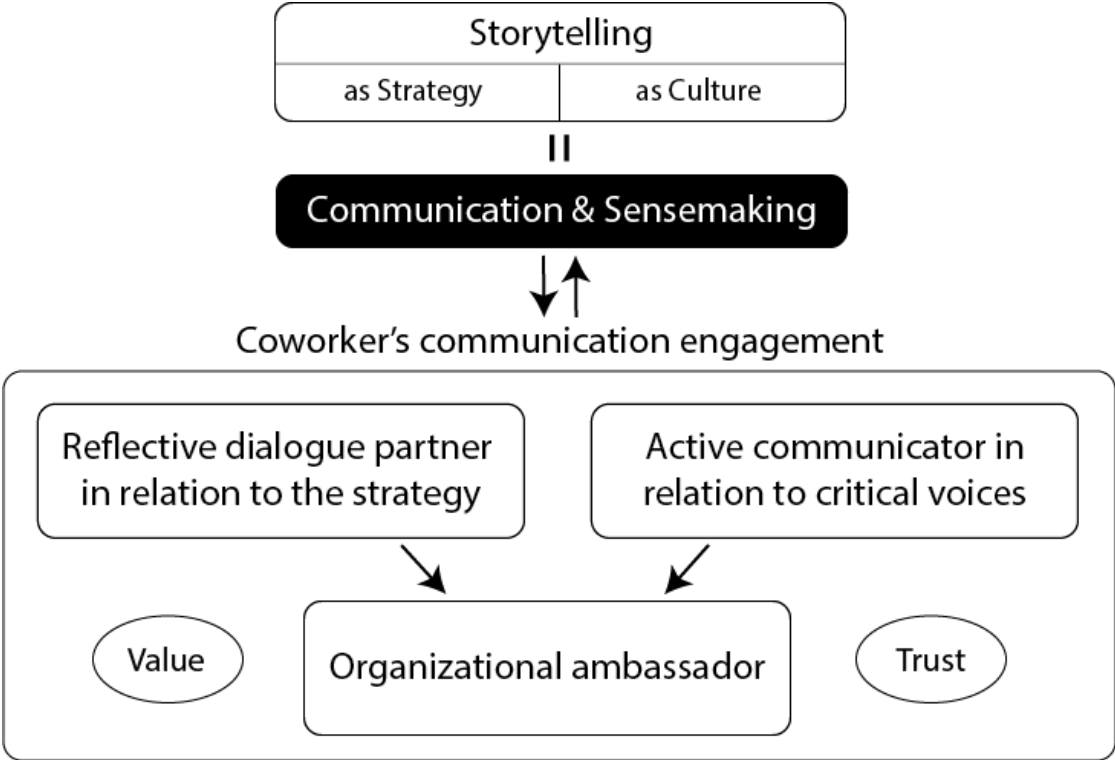
The first contribution of this study is the literature review chapter. By reviewing the evolution of the conceptualization of employee engagement and storytelling in organizations, I identify the conceptualization of employee engagement that is mostly studied from the functionalist, management-centered approach, regarding engagement as a psychological presence that can be affected by management interventions and neglecting coworker's voices. Besides, despite previous studies that have argued that storytelling has positive effects in relation to employee engagement when implemented as certain strategies, such as corporate storytelling or PR strategy, there is limited understanding of how storytelling is related to engagement when communication is considered one-way enacted from management to employees. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze how storytelling is practiced, and to analyze how these different storytelling practices relate to coworker's communication engagement from the CCO perspective in Action Now, aiming to develop a better understanding of storytelling and engagement in nonprofit organizational context (Welch, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Gustomo et al. 2019; Gill, 2015; Heide & Simonsson, 2018).

The second contribution of this study is the findings about storytelling. Storytelling can be considered as corporate storytelling strategy or PR strategy to communicate with external audiences, or as internal communication strategy to communicate with internal stakeholders. However, I argue that storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking, should also be considered as organizational culture. Organizational culture aims to help organizational members make sense of themselves and their surroundings, while being simultaneously informed and shaped by those sensemaking activities (Cheney, 2011). The cultural aspect of storytelling is more evident during informal social settings, as storytelling is naturally occurred as dialogues among coworkers. It is important to be aware that storytelling is not



only merely a communication strategy, but also part of the organizational culture that shapes and informs organizational members and the surroundings in various ways.

The third contribution of this study is the development of the understanding of employee engagement. As this study applies the CCO perspective, it is argued that communication constitutes engagement and engagement is enacted through communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). They point out the close link between communication and engagement and address three new communication roles for coworkers in relation to managers as co-leaders and dialogue partners; in relation to colleagues as team members; and in relation to the organization as ambassadors. This study develops their understanding of coworker’s communication engagement. In order to present the relation between storytelling and employee engagement from the CCO perspective more clearly, I generate a model to demonstrate how storytelling is practiced and related to employee engagement (*Figure 1*).



*Figure 1: Storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking constructs coworker’s communication engagement*

The findings suggest that storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking constructs employee engagement. Compared with the three coworker’s communication roles identified by Heide and Simonsson (2011; 2018), the findings suggest that through storytell-

ing, coworker's communication engagement is more featured with their sensemaking process, such as being more reflective as dialogue partners and more critical as communicators, while considering value identification and trustful relationships as two significant factors. Therefore, I argue that both communication and sensemaking are vital in constituting engagement. Moreover, this study also examines the potential negative sides of engagement from coworker's perspective, providing more insights on "overengagement".

The fourth contribution of this study is generating more knowledge to the field of strategic communication. Scholars in the field of strategic communication (Heide et al., 2018) emphasize the importance of a communication perspective on organizations, and specifically proclaim the use of the CCO perspective. By applying the CCO perspective, the fundamental concepts of strategic communication - *strategic* and *communication*, are examined and discussed throughout this study. Storytelling is both *strategic* and *communication*, and its various implications in organizations and relations to coworker's communication engagement are presented aiming to broaden the understanding of strategic communication.

## 6.2 Practical implications

There are two practical implications to nonprofit organizations. First, as storytelling can be applied in various organizational areas such as communication strategy to both external and internal audiences, it is important to be aware of the limitation when it is practiced as internal communication originated from management to coworkers. Storytelling should be genuine and authentic in order to realize its positive implications, such as generating more trust and value identification. Therefore, in order to reduce the tendency of volunteer dropout and construct a stronger volunteer community, nonprofit organizations can benefit from storytelling when it is not only practiced as a strategy, but also as part of the organizational culture where it is naturally occurred among coworkers.

Besides, nonprofit organizations aim to maintain an unprofitable social mission while often stringent imperatives of operating within a market economy (Weisbrod, 1998). Due to their *nonprofit* nature, it is difficult to construct a strong organizational brand without sufficient budget. However, nonprofit organizations have the need to brand themselves in order to realize their social missions. As the findings point out, storytelling as a form of communication and sensemaking constructs coworker's communication engagement, as reflective dialogue partners, critical communicators and most importantly, organizational ambassadors.

Nonprofit organizations can benefit from understanding the concept of employee engagement from the CCO perspective in order to reflect on their branding strategy.

### **6.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

This study has conducted a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews and observation in a nonprofit organization. Due to the time frame, the time for participant observation and sample size of interviews are rather limited. Thus, one suggestion is to conduct similar research with larger samples of interviews and for a longer period of time for observations in an extreme case rather than a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Although this study is specifically conducted in nonprofit organizations, I argue that gaining knowledge about storytelling and employee engagement from the CCO perspective is as important as in other organizational types. Another suggestion is to conduct similar research in different organizational types, such as service-minded organizations or multicultural organizations. Lastly, this study applies the CCO perspective and puts coworkers as the center of the engagement process, while in most of the nonprofit organizations, volunteers are as important as employees yet different. Therefore, I urge future research to examine the relationship between the organization and volunteers specifically in the process of engagement from the CCO perspective.

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# Appendix A: Interview guide

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Thank you for your willingness to participate and be interviewed as part of my thesis project in strategic communication. My thesis project is about employee engagement and storytelling in nonprofit organizations, and this interview will last approximately 30 - 40 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All information you provide for this study will be treated confidentially as your name and the name of the organization will be replaced by fictional names.

## **Part 1: Personal information**

1. Could you tell me about your current position in Action Now?
2. How long have you been working in Action Now?
3. How do you know about Action Now?
4. What are the reasons for you to work in Action Now?

## **Part 2: Storytelling**

1. How do you experience storytelling in Action Now? Could you give me an example?
2. Under what circumstances do you tell your stories? Could you give me an example?
3. What story does Action Now tell?
4. Who do you share stories with?
5. How do you practice storytelling in Action Now?
6. How do you think about this storytelling approach?
7. How does this storytelling approach relate to your relations to Action Now/your coworkers/managers?
8. What challenges do you have when you practice storytelling?

## **Part 3: Employee engagement**

1. Do you feel you are engaged? Could you give me an example?
2. How do you perceive “engagement”? Could you give me an example?
3. How are your relations to Action Now/coworkers/managers?

4. How do you participate in daily communications with your coworkers/managers?
5. What challenges do you have when you communicate with your coworkers/managers?
6. What improvements do you see in the organization? How do you deal with it?
7. In what ways does the storytelling approach affect your engagement?
8. In what ways does the storytelling approach affect your communication with your coworkers/managers?

**Part 4: Closing**

1. Do you have anything else to add regarding storytelling and engagement?

Thank you for your participation!

# Appendix B: Interview consent form

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## **Strategic communication master thesis** Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained by the researcher in Lund University until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation.



- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Huaiyang Chen

Contact: huaiyangchen@outlook.com

Affiliations: Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University

*Signature of research participant*

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Signature of participant

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Date

*Signature of researcher*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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Signature of researcher

-----  
Date