

# Being (on) time – our relationship with time and temporality in organisational practice

Birgitte Pedersen

Volume 1

Issue 1

Winter 2017

## Keywords:

*before-the-fact,  
block view,  
beyond OD,  
relational, dialogical,  
time, temporality,  
Chronos, Kairos*

## Citation Link

## Abstract

Thinking about time as something separate to us dominates organisational practice<sup>1</sup>. Identity questions, career plans, hopes and dreams for both the individual as well as the organisation are built upon a timeline, and tools and models are designed to remove the obstacles into the future. This paper's aim is to inspire the professional to be aware of the difference between chronology and temporality in order to include more temporal aspects into their organisational work. The right timing, readiness and attention to temporality in language are examples of indicators on the temporal forms, and it all begins by accepting that we are temporality ourselves – regardless of whether we are able to articulate or notice the forms appearing right in front of us.

## Resumé (Danish)

Organisatorisk praksis i dag er præget af, at vi tænker "tid" som uafhængigt af alt andet. Vi isolerer "tid" på en tidslinje, og vi bygger vores spørgsmål, karriereplaner, modeller, håb og drømme for både den enkelte såvel som for organisationen op omkring denne tidslinje. Formålet med denne artikel er at inspirere den fagprofessionelle til at tænke over og skelne mellem "tid" som kronologi og som temporalitet, så der kan inkluderes flere temporale aspekter i det organisatoriske arbejde. Udover at skabe en opmærksomhed på sprog, parathed og den rette timing, er formålet med artiklen at pege på behovet for den fagprofessionelles indre accept af, at mennesket i sig selv en temporalitet, der former og fortolker tid – uanset om det enkelte menneske er bevidst om det eller ej.

## Introduction

I come from a part of the world where it is important to be on time. The train will depart whether you are on it or not. It becomes a symbol of TIME, as a fixed entity beyond our control, departing and running at a consistent pace – from the past, through the present and into the future – no matter how we live our lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am referring to an organisational context primarily in the private sector but I expect that those of you working as therapists, trainers or leaders in the public sector will identify with what I am describing and find the ideas useful in your own work environments.

We have no problem relating to time as a static “it”, as if we were standing on the platform right beside time, identifying it, measuring it, looking for patterns or laws in it, making precise calculations of when and what something is going to arrive in the future. John Shotter (2005, 2011) calls it aboutness (monologic)-thinking when we relate to everyday life while sitting down, observing it, without actually being involved in it. Thinking about time as something existing separately to us has significant consequences on the context we notice, what we experience, and the story we tell about ourselves.

Let me be the first to admit it. Yes, I was brought up, and have brought others up, in the belief that we can only think about time. It has shaped my ideas, systemic practice, and my job as a director for people and organisational development. I never used to question how conversations inside an organisation are often divided into brackets of one hour; how meeting rooms reflect the one-hour rule (size, furniture etc.); and, how even the refreshments are shaped as bits of easy consumption in the so-called “break-out-rooms” located along the line of one-hour meeting rooms. Even inside the meeting room, a predefined timeline shapes the conversations. Before the meeting, the chair of it will have sent out an agenda, and ordered the sequence of items to be covered within a certain timeslot. Even systemic-inspired meetings, in the part of the world I come from, often begin by agreeing on an agenda and so an implicit timeline together. We close the meeting by summing up right away, or someone does it for us in the shape of “meeting minutes” later on. Sometimes even a survey is sent out, asking participants for their impressions of what happened inside the meeting room, inviting them to evaluate through sad or happy smiley faces, feedback and suggestions for how the next one-hour time slot ought to proceed.

As a young manager I admired the more experienced managers for their ability to apparently control and tame time. They made their deadlines and finished the meetings on time, regardless of whether they chaired the whole meeting or only joined in for part of it and often had to adapt to previous presenters overrunning their assigned time slot. I was impressed because they could do it without even looking at their watch. At that time, I worked as a manager in the Human Resources (HR) department, and one of my tasks was to recruit new employees. I examined the Curriculum Vitae of the candidates for signs of good time management and other evidence of a proven-successful track record. The CV was, of course, already designed as a timeline, with plenty of both work and off-work showcases of successful time management. The job interview lasted an hour and as the recruiter I was allowed to ask as many questions as I liked. About anything. It was considered a scoop for the company when I was able to hire a person who had both a proven track record from previous jobs, as well as personal achievements such as marathons, mountain-climbing, cycling, raising a large family. All these activities would suggest that the person is managing time, not the other way around.

I practised “being on time” for several years and one day I too was able to “feel” when time approached an hour and it was time to end the meeting. I was very happy, and believed I had achieved some of the important milestones on my career plan. Despite my newfound independence from the watch on my wrist, I kept relating to time as an object separate to me and something I could control in order to do something. Just like we can control a car to take us from A to B, or a pencil in order for us to write something. The car and pencil exist without us using them. We exist whether the car or pencil are there or not. Whether time is there or not. In the same way, we believe we can use time in order to achieve the life we aspire to. Driving a car or using a pencil requires training in order to live up to the norms of good driving or writing in a style others can read. Because I made no distinction between a car, a pencil or time, I accepted this widely-held belief as “truth” back in the 90s and organised several time-management trainings for staff. The big calendars with

coloured tabs we used back then are today replaced by apps accessible through several devices, making it easy for us to monitor and check how our or others' expected lives look in the near future.

### **Our relationship with time**

Although we would never admit it, we are no different to Frederick Taylor who, a hundred years ago, used a stopwatch to time a worker's sequences of motion (Pedersen 2012). We think about time just like him. We design structures, systems and shared targets and we provide financial rewards for employees quantified by performance metrics like time (Tollman et al 2016). Our thinking about time has made us obsessed with time. Time is money, and the postmodern human defines its relationship to the world through a clock.

### *Chronology*

Thinking about time as something separate to us is not necessarily a problem, if we use chronographic (Chronos) to denote a year or a period of time. Cultures that document life in writing have invented different ways of describing certain lengths of time. Some take a point in time in the past as "the beginning of time" and continue on in a straight line, while others refer to the earth's orbit around the sun. Some call years by names, some by numbers. Time can be cyclical i.e. a constant evolution of everything or an eternal recurrence in harmony with nature or linear (Hansen 2009, p.29), in the sense that something existed in the past and never will come back.

In ancient Greece they did not measure time in years. Time was equal to whatever was happening in the sky, which is why we categorise their relationship to time as cyclical. When you stand on Earth and look into the sky, it looks like our relationship with the sky is expressed as a circle. A circuit. Time bites its own tail, and every "year" everything repeats itself. A new Socrates and a new Plato will be born again, the next time the stars appear in a certain relationship/position (Hansen 2009, p.36).

The day had twelve hours, but a working day lasted from sunrise to sunset. It meant that a day in Athens was fourteen hours in midsummer and nine in midwinter, or - to put it differently - an hour would last seventy minutes in summer and only forty-five in winter (Hansen 2009, p.28).

### *Linear time*

The chronology dominating the Western World was primarily shaped by Christianity, based on a belief that time is one long timeline. The world's timeline was created once in the past, and will disappear sometime in the future with a reference to a fixed point in time when Christ was born, for example (Hansen 2009, p. 38). The introduction of calendars with "years" (around 525 AD) and the appearance of the mechanical clock in Europe in the 14th century changed the concept of time. Now it was seen as being made up of fractions, each a fixed length and therefore a point of common reference, thus allowing humans to make plans across practices (Hansen, 2009, p.28) as a contrast to each practice's Kairos (see description later in this paper).

Fixed, measurable length was enhanced with the Age of Enlightenment, when René Descartes (1596–1650) promoted the idea of the autonomous self and the first formulation of mechanical laws and principles of nature. In other words, he thought of nature and all its phenomena as working like a machine or clock with mechanical processes.

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) developed this further by introducing the idea that time is absolute. Stephen Hawking, physicist, describes it like this:

“[Newton] believed that one could unambiguously measure the interval of time between two events, and that this time would be the same whoever measured it, provided they used a good clock.” (1988, p.20)

We began to think about time as an objective line. Today we enjoy lines with an end. Deadlines. We use the line to make sense and meaning. A project manager uses the line to look back on time, seeking evidence of innovations and changes in the way we live that will showcase the project is a success. Because the project manager believes in time as a separate line, it makes sense to conclude that we in the future will look back too, and notice all new inventions. Because of the line, the project manager may believe that our learning accumulates: we get wiser and wiser, our ancestors in comparison appearing dumber and dumber in our eyes.

The project manager has forgotten that the timeline and the clock are only illustrations or representations of time, not actually time itself (Uggerhøj 2005, p.12). We draw our timelines retrospectively, and this focus only allows us to describe the event from the point on the timeline where it has appeared. These “after the fact rationalisations” (Shotter 2014) confuse us, so we mix up the cause of a phenomenon with its consequence (Shotter 2015, p.64) – e.g. the hands of the project manager are trembling, so he needs a cigarette to calm down. But it is precisely because of his tobacco addiction that the absence of a cigarette makes his hands tremble (Pedersen 2012). Seeing the connections too late (Shotter 2015, p.65) blinds us to how we actually live our everyday lives, and how much occurs in the experience of a person before an event takes place. Try reading it again slowly: much occurs in the experience of a person before an event takes place. Let us look at some examples demonstrating the point.

### **Temporality – you are time**

With Chronos or sequential time we can express a one-dimensional aspect of time. In the following we are going to add a dimension - spatiality - in order for us to notice time through something's existence as it temporalises through a spatial existence. We will use a cornfield, a cookie/biscuit, and a movie to show how.

#### *The cornfield*

When I was 8 years old and my grandfather took me to one of his cornfields, he added a spatial dimension to our conversations. Until then the cornfield had been a boring topic in grown-ups' conversations, and I did not pay much attention. I knew of course that the corn was going to be harvested each year, but I did not know that it was the temporality of the corn rather than the calendar that my grandfather used as the judgement criteria.

On this particular day, he grasped the grain between his fingers and let them carefully examine it. It was almost like a dance between his fingers and the grain. He smelled it. He even took it into his

mouth while chewing slowly. “Now it is your turn”, he said. I did as he asked. “Now, remember how that felt”. We performed the ritual every day, and slowly I began to notice how the sensations changed as the grain ripened, and my fingers became sensitive enough to notice the different shapes of the grain.



**Chronos** Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

**Kairos** 2014 2015

My grandfather pointed at the many connections the resulting grain was an echo of: the weather conditions, the nutrients from the soil, the quality of the seed, the experience of the farmer etc. He called it Kairos, with reference to Greek Mythology about the Kairos (Caerus), the god of the fleeting moment (Auchet, 2015, p. 216). He described Kairos as the right moment to harvest, as it is the turning point in time.

The right moment will soon be over and gone and cannot be recaptured. Kairos could be in September one year and November the next. He taught me to notice how Kairos caused a ripple effect of actions: when to hire the combine harvester, when to hire extra labour, and when to tell me and my

friends not to play in the “forbidden” cornfield anymore, so we wouldn’t risk damaging the crop or getting harvested ourselves along with the corn.

Today, creating similar awareness of Kairos is very much part of what I do. I no longer “roll out” top-down strategy plans as I used to do. I am much more eager to get the organisation ready – creating an awareness and curiosity about where we are about to go next. I set up programmes for mentors and mentees and other combinations of novices with experienced professionals. I do it in a way so as to avoid the one-hour brackets, and instead follow the sequences within the profession and the tools and models there created with the purpose of noticing.

It is a double learning, as the mentor might have never thought about how the tools and techniques were tailored from a practice, and maybe took it for granted that the techniques were used everywhere. I use learning portfolios and journey sketch boards as ways to nudge the conversations between them about learning (Pedersen 2012).

### *The cookie*

Let us leave the cornfield and think of what happens if we take the processed corn and combine it with other ingredients, so we get a cookie (a biscuit). Now, imagine a cookie. What do you see? A baked cookie? Or how it looked in the various stages before going into the oven? If you were to draw a cookie you would probably draw it as an “after the fact” ready-to-eat cookie, similar to the one on the bottom right:

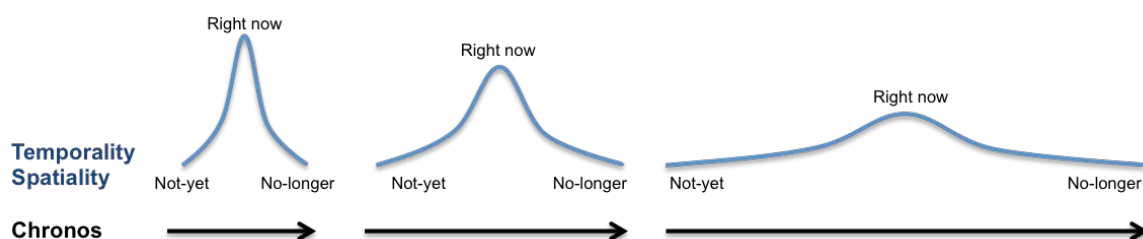


“The cookie happens in its own time, but sensing it is relative to the dynamics of the observer.”

(Pedersen 2016)

Unlike the corn, the cookie is not a culmination of the evolutionary, biological processes called morphogenesis. The cookie is not an organism growing organically, but consists of the outcome of several organic processes.

The cookie has a temporal form. We can notice the temporal form as the cookie undergoes a “passage” or “transfer” from the “not-yet” through the “right now” and into the “no-longer” (Bruzina 2000, p.73).



The temporal form does not follow the clock. If you play with temperature in the room, it will affect the passages and it could take thirty minutes or two hours to bake the cookie. The Chronos time is also dependent on the humidity of the flour, the age of the yeast, the efficiency and temperature of the oven, the altitude of the kitchen in which the oven stands, and how long the baked cookie is left to rest before you eat it or resist temptation and put it in the cake tin.

In other words, the professional baker notices and experiences, not only with the eyes, but with the nose and by using touch, feeling the tension between finger and the material. You might even say they use all their being to judge how the structure and nature of the cookie changes and dilates in space, and therefore has a spatial dimension to it. A baker would hesitate to give you baking instructions relating to Chronos time only. It is an important difference between method-led, manualised practice (using chronological technique) and relationally, contextually-produced know-how about how to go on.

The temporal form is an anchor point in my practice. Signs of “before the fact” are the questions and the related answers. They act as “distance-measuring devices”, instantly showing us the spatial distance between us. “What does “cookie” mean?” tells us that I, from my standing point, cannot see what you are describing and calling a cookie. “Did you use less sugar this time?” suggests that I am standing near to you, and can actually taste the difference in your cookies compared to the last time you made them. The closer we stand in relation to the topic we are co-exploring, the more our questions tend to reach out for answers of differences and similarities in time.

As senior managers, my peers and I usually get very short deadlines to make decisions on long-term investments. It seems contradictory, and it can be a terrible experience for the colleagues who suggest a new investment, if senior management only asks “W-questions” indicating that they stand kilometres away from the one suggesting the investment. “What are the business goals this project is aiming to achieve?”, “What will be the consequences if the project does not go ahead or fails to deliver the objectives?”, “Will the project require staff retraining?” etc. are examples of such “what”, “why”, “who”, “when”, and “how” questions.

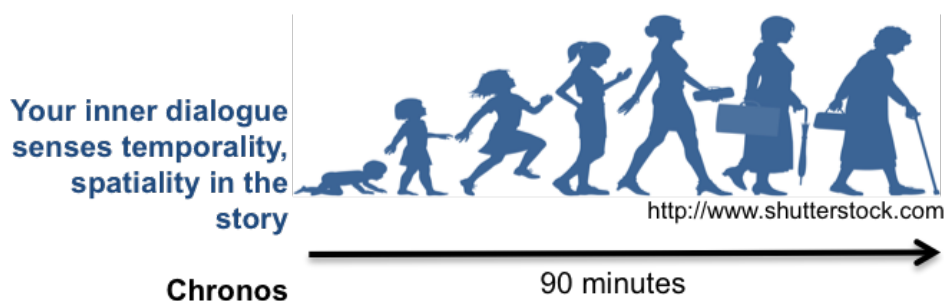
It can be a terrible experience for senior managers too, if the answers are kilometres away from the actual situation of the organisation. Sometimes we only have a superficial business case (a document capturing the reasoning for initiating a new investment) in front of us, with no answers to how to change our current situation, together with several other business cases and an agenda with lots of “matters of approval” ... and a one-hour timeslot. This is all we have to judge if it is the right moment to invest or not, even though – from the single project (spatial) point of view – it seems like a wise thing to do.

### *The movie*

A cookie and a cornfield are visual, tangible objects, so now let us explore “something” in time while attending to the temporalness of its being and occurring (Bruzina 2000, p.69). Let us explore a story – which, as such, is invisible but noticeable because we are temporality ourselves.

Let’s use the example of a story that traces the life of a girl from the age of eight, right through to her as an old woman. Maybe her grandfather owns a cornfield. Maybe she loves cookies. In order to make our point, let us imagine that the story is told through a movie (or a book, if you prefer).

The transformation of the little girl into an old woman characterises a life timeline – and that is, of course, not the same as claiming that the actual passages in the story happen while you are spending ninety minutes watching the movie (or a week or so for the book). Your whole body senses that time is passing while you watch the sequences of pictures played at high speed (Campbell et al 2010, p.7), because you are temporality yourself.





In organisational life, the imagination of “after the fact” events often clash with the “slowness” of real life. An impressive strategy, a plan to introduce new “values” or the acquisition or merger of two companies’ cultures often includes conversations where the inner “pictures” in high motion are not in sync with Kairos, readiness, or the spatial circumstances etc. Not even the best storytelling techniques can keep the 2020 strategies, and soon to be 2025 strategies, as believed guiding stars, because sometimes the stars are too far away from today’s reality or they simply vanish, overtaken by disruptive ideas literally uprooting and changing the way we think, behave, live etc. So, what I do instead is to invite colleagues, from the high-speed story they are imagining they are part of, to think about the ecosystem that surrounds them here and now. Often, we have conversations about:

- Why do we do we exist as an organisation?
- How are our way of doing things affecting the customer experience?
- What would a disruption of how we do things be a response to? (What is the problem we are trying to solve in a new way? Why now?)
- What would it take to be our industry disruptor?
- Are any of our competitors preparing to disrupt our industry?
- What will disruption mean to our value chain?
- Will we need to look for other indicators? Key predictive indicators as well as key performance indicators? How do we do that? Is big data the answer?
- How will disruption affect our jobs, the craftsmanship, the professions, the identity of the practitioners?
- What does it all mean for the way, and what we consider performance when, we recruit and train people, promote people, reward people ... Say goodbye to people?
- How do we create moments, touchpoints and conversations between us and the customers to bring it all together?

### **Unclear time frames**

Our experiences – baking the cookie, harvesting the corn, or watching the movie – consist of possible “aha moments” or “now I get it!” moments, where we see, hear or sense connections for the first time or when we feel we have solved what had been, until that moment, a puzzle for us (Shotter 2011, p.66).

Our experiences are not sequentially accumulated in the sense that your pool of experiences gets bigger and bigger, but time expresses itself as we begin to relate present experiences with previous experience. From a Chronos point of view, meaning emerges when we are responding to an experience; but, from a temporality point of view, time is expressing itself through the meaning we add to an experience. If we are sitting in a car and the driver drives too slowly, thus making the journey time long, we get bored and frustrated. That is the meaning we add to the experience. But if the driver drives too fast and we get to our destination quickly, we might feel frightened and attach a different meaning to the experience. Time expresses itself through how we respond to the situation, and therefore the meaning we attach to it.

I sometimes meet colleagues who feel we cannot live up to all activities required from us now, as well as others who believe we can. The former imagine the future in a way that may leave them anxious, or feeling lost in the current now. The latter may feel excited, with adrenaline pumping through their veins when they demonstrate how they are able to tick off tasks on their to-do list before the deadline; if we asked them about how they imagine the future, they might mention a future of successes, promotions and rewards, believing they are related to their actions in the



present now – that they deserve it. There might, of course, be other images which relate to a bigger cause etc.

We are time, a temporal process, but we are also being a temporal process in time – as opposed to how it was to be a temporal process in another time. Bruzina (2000 p.71) advises: “We therefore have to be careful not to confuse these two frames, and think we are dealing with temporality as such, when we may, in fact, be presenting a living conscious being in time.” Barad (2007 p.390) has a similar point: “We are responsible for the world of which we are part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped”.

Many of us think of our life as a Chronos line with past, present and future and we use it as a skeleton for our experiences (the “I get it” moments). We have a kind of “block view” (Dainton 2010, p.9): a solid block, containing something fixed and unchanging. The assumption rests on the notion that, as Chronos time moves forward, changes will occur (Dainton 2010, p.4). The only way you can control the impact of the changes occurring in the future is to perform different activities in the “now”. We conduct gap analysis, set up action plans with stretched targets, pay a coach to help us achieve our targets, and believe we are helpful to others when we offer good advice on how to squeeze the most out of our time and energy. Everything with the purpose of designing our own destiny.

Irrespective of whether you consider yourself a social constructionist, philosopher, natural scientist, artist, eco-systemic or someone without a label who believes in flux and fluidity, the use of a temporal skeleton sets the foundations of your work. Regardless of how much the narrative-inspired systemic practitioner puts effort into trying to re-author or introduce new perspectives e.g. by the use of a re-authoring conversation map, (White 2007), or works on coming up with other unique episodes enabling you to tell other stories, she has already set the frame. This frame sets the direction you should start from (the past) and tells you which signs and plots you should search for (static and visible) so you can conduct an “after the fact rationalisation”. Rationalising in this way will give you the impression that you can see the future more clearly and work out what to do right now (step out of this path or keep doing what you are doing).

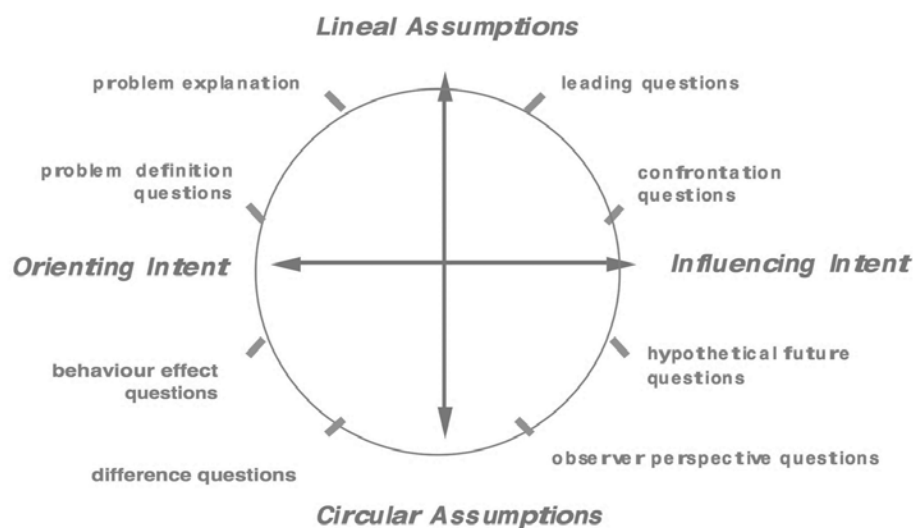


The block view (adapted from Pedersen, 2012)

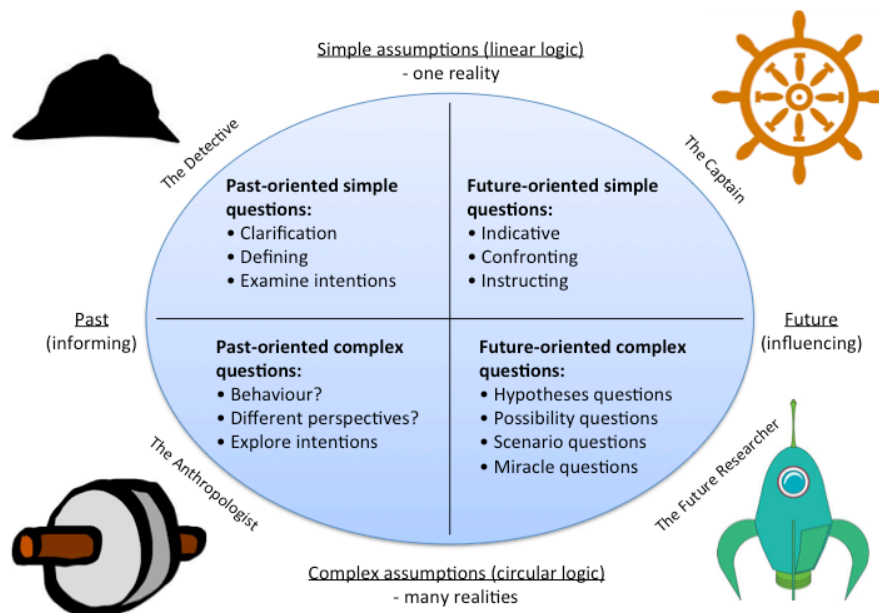
When we mix up the two frames (being time in time as opposed to being time in another time) and watch life through the block view, we are at risk of “losing sight of” (as walking in a fog) who we think we are, and our “sense” of that “I” (self). This is the opinion of Quist (2004 p.290), who based her PhD thesis on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s and German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s thoughts on existence and time.

The unclear timeframes and the feeling of “losing sight of” are also anchor points of my practice. The most common themes in the conversations I have, they played a major role in the beginning of my relationship with systemic practice, since I, too, had lost sight of who I was or thought I was going to be. I was fascinated by systemic ideas – for example, multiple descriptions of the self (e.g. Gergen 1991). But I was drawn to a systemic practice based on a premise of the block view. Because I believed “time” was an object, I was primarily interested in finding the right “tools” and “techniques” so that I could notice a better future, polish the present now, or wrap up the past like a package or scrapbook (Barad 2007, p.ix) - and thereby change the consequences of “time”.

One of the first tools I learned about was a compass of linear and circular questions relating to the past or future based on the Milan school ideas (e.g. Boscolo & Bertrando 1993) and, among others, expressed by Karl Tomm (1988). The questions were useful when I worked with colleagues having trouble reaching set targets in time. I noticed how the ideas were captured in images based on the block view: a past, a present and a future. I learned to begin an organisational development intervention as the detective understanding the problem (in the present), then searching for the reasons in the past as an archaeologist, imagining the future as if I were already in the future, and ending in the present where I, as a captain, “get into the driver’s seat” and set the (new) course.



Karl Tomm (1988) original model



Systemic practitioner's use of the model (Myllerup 2013)

However, my almost mechanical use of the questions was never the intention of Karl Tomm. On the contrary, he said that:

“the question “prefigures” the response in that it structures the domain of an “appropriate” answer (...) or at least an answer in a particular domain (...) The kinds of questions a therapist chooses to ask depend on what kinds of answers the therapist would like to hear. Whether or not the client accepts the therapist's invitation to provide an answer in the "appropriate" domain is quite another matter, but to select the question is to restrain the range of "legitimate" responses. This selectiveness gives the therapist an enormous amount of influence in setting and maintaining a direction for the conversation.” (1988, p.13)

The unclear time frames and the block view were also shaping my systemic practice dealing with change on a larger scale. I drew upon voices like Kurt Lewin, by many (e.g. Boje 2012, p.11) considered the father of organisational development (OD). Also based on the block view, he suggested applying the steps of “unfreeze”, “moving” and “refreeze” of group standards when we work with change (1947). A similar timeline, but of emotions, is alive today (e.g. Bridges 1991; timeline of “ending”, “neutral”, “new beginnings”).

One of the most well-known models in organisational work today is the “8 steps of change” model by John P. Kotter (1996), an American author and professor at Harvard Business School, who had a major impact on leadership curriculum/literature in many universities in the 90s and beyond. Since the majority of today's executives studied at that time, the model – consisting of a Chronos timeline and an easy recipe to follow to help organisations come from current state to future state within a certain time period – is still thriving.

Newer models – designed to be future-oriented as a response to past-oriented, problem-solving models – are also shaped by the block view. For example, David Cooperrider's and Suresh Srivastva's ideas of appreciative inquiry (1987), focusing on the best that is in the (Chronos) now, to realise the ideal of what might be in the (Chronos) future, with the consent of what should be and for the reality of what can be.

Non-models inviting reflection in, or on, action (e.g. Donald Schön, 1984) look upon events after they have occurred – for example, a conflict between two people – and the focus is on “after the fact”, how to avoid the conflict next time.

Although different tools, all are shaped by the idea that the Truth (with a capital T) about something (working, not working) is fixed by the perspective from the present. In other words, they do not leave much space for the idea that Truth changes over time, and, as such, may be related to the actual time it is identified; or, that we are constantly negotiating the story and ideals in relation to what we experience in what we call the now.

The mix of timeframes and the block view is putting pressure on the professional practitioner to add value to the future state by delivering tools and solutions in the present – regardless of Kairos, readiness or the imaginative work made in high motion.

## Prospects for the future

I still “feel” when one hour is approaching, and am still sometimes trapped in my thinking of time as an object. I realise it is not helpful if an organisation from one day to another gives up the one-hour meetings or may not think about the future - but by having a conversation about it, a first step is made to change the way we today, like robots, participate in boring meetings or talk about strategies as if it alone will make the dream come true. Not surprisingly, this paper will not end with an attempt to predict the future or provide you a (chronological) recipe of activities which would lead to a preferred future. Instead, I will close the paper by pointing at some aspects that helped me orient myself into noticing the contours of temporality in organisational development.

**1.** We need to forget Descartes' idea that the world is controlled by separate laws of nature (Shotter 2015, p.76). No corn, cookie or story unfolds in the same way – and the mix of flour and yeast does not necessarily result in a cookie. We know this long before it actually appears as a cookie or not, if we pay attention and sense the flux of activities occurring right in front of us (Shotter 2015, p.69). In the same way, there are no laws ruling that if you complete a marathon, go river-rafting with your colleagues, or adjust your movements based on feedback from strangers, you will be successful in your job life. The same goes for development on an organisational scale: investing in, and cautiously following, one of the many OD models will not necessarily ensure your company will survive a crisis or transform itself into what you happen to imagine in a strategy workshop.

**2.** We must begin to notice time and temporality in our own lives – and then how this intertwines with the lives of others – for two reasons: A) If we do not include our own temporal form in our work, we risk standing beside the events, looking at them, not taking part in them, and therefore going directly into “aboutness” thinking. B) Our plastic brain will continue to notice aboutness signs, unless we create circumstances for it to notice something differently, such as the connections before the facts. Creating circumstances means adding a spatial dimension, by leaving the imaginary

timelines and beginning to walk alongside others. Instead of acting as neutral, systemic question machines, we should walk together and explore the “becomings” in front of us.

**3.** We need to remind ourselves that it is not about a person thinking about time or not. Temporality is present regardless of whether you construct it in your social world or not; it is present regardless of whether you pay attention to stories about time only, and therefore look for signs confirming your conclusion. It is not about telling another story. Temporality is there, whether we notice it or not. Temporality was expressed in the story I shared at the beginning of this paper; about the managers I admired because they were able to manage time without even looking at the clock. It was a story about my relationship to temporality at that time. The managers in the story may very well be masters of temporality – adapting their task to the circumstances they are in. They may very well be constantly preparing (before actual planning, see Shotter, 2015) by asking themselves how best to talk about their topic in the dedicated, fixed timeslot in the actual meeting, with respect to the audience, the decoration of the meeting room, the noise, time of day etc. They may very well think of Kairos and the “not-yet”, “right now” and “no longer” temporality of the conversation with the participants. And so, they might have a constant focus on how individuals emerge through, and as part of, their entangled intra-relating (Barad 2007, p.ix), and therefore what ought to happen in the meeting in order to continue the conversation in the next time slot, and bring the conversation into other conversations.

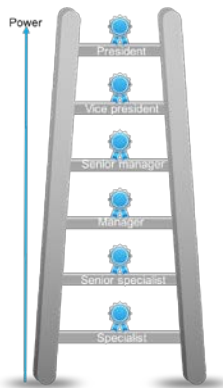
**4.** We need to think of the capabilities of the organisation as time and temporality – as a “not-yet”, “right now”, “no longer” movement. Promotions no longer just fulfil a vacant position. Design of organisational structures no longer just consists of functional components expected to input value into the chain of an organisation. Policies are no longer just laws or rules to follow. Job descriptions no longer exist separately to each other. Technology is no longer just monitoring Chronos time. Ways of working together in projects are no longer with separate deadlines. Decisions should no longer wait for a meeting. All these things are part of enabling the organisation to notice new aspects of the daily business and business-critical needs, working less with Chronos and more with Kairos. Chronos is our concept of choice to estimate how long we need to get ready to achieve the targets we have set. In contrast, Kairos enables us to have a “reality check” of an ecosystem, just like in the cornfield, telling us when to do something rather than stick to a timeline we defined months ago. These reality checks (or check-ins as we call them in my organisation) help us to notice other options besides the traditional gap-closing tools (corrective actions). They also allow us to work with multiple purposes, as one area of an organisation’s business may be closing down, while another is starting up. It makes it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between beginnings and endings, here and there, past and future and so on (Barad 2007, p.ix).

**5.** Before we even begin to consider one of the many OD recipes, we need to consider the notion and set-up of spaces (touch points) for colleagues (and customers) – or what Shotter calls moments of common reference (2015, p.164) - which allow them to meet and begin the walk together and thereby construct “aha moments”. An organisation before the fact is made up of its organisational practices, shared processes, guidelines, policies, stories etc. If we add touch points into these (for example, mandatory reflecting dialogues between manager and employee, structured team reflections, daily briefings, frequent check-in across structures), they can shape the organisation more than if we only introduce reflexivity when people attend training (for example, by using action-learning design). When the touch points are interconnected across processes, functions, professions and across time (for example, the output of the daily briefings is used as input to the structured team reflections), they are at the same time linked into one coherent flow of preparations and

“becomings”. It is easier to “see” how the outcome of one conversation adds value to other conversations – and, after a while, people begin to incorporate similar touch points into their own planning, beginning to pay attention to what happens in functions other than their own, and how this affects the customer/client. Of course, the setup must consider how the touch point appears (virtual or in an office). We would need to think about interiors, and how to invite people out of traditional meeting rooms, giving new space to temporality.

**6.** We need to carefully examine which of the organisational structures continuously maintains the mix of frames and block view. One example is, career plans often illustrated as a ladder.

The idea is shaped by the block view, when people begin to think of it as a sign of investment in their future. It sometimes invites the use of energy to find the shortcuts to reach the top as fast as possible. I have seen all kinds of attempts to win the race – for example, adding false achievements to CVs or trying to make friends with the “right” people. The attempts to network your way up become especially clear after an organisational change, when many are suddenly not friends anymore.

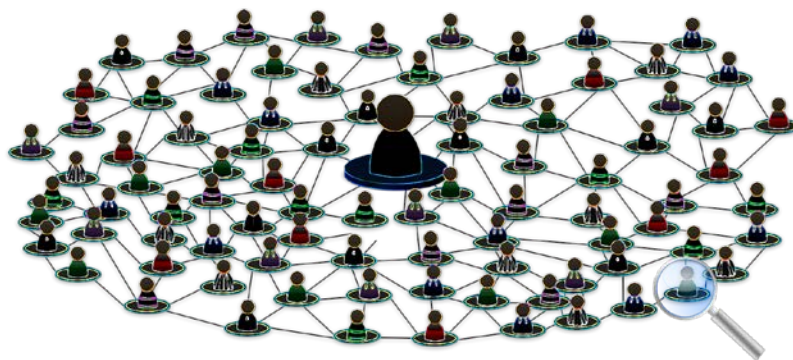


The career ladder (Image: Author)

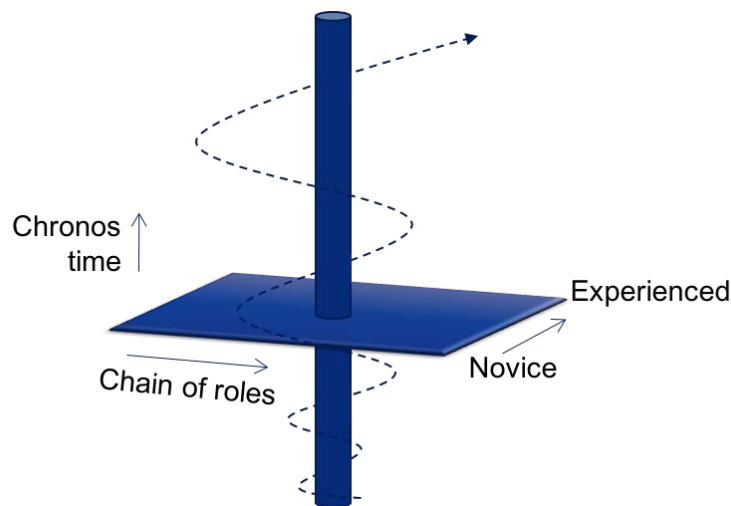


The hero in fast speed towards the top imagining a vertical and horizontal timeline (Image: Author)

What we can do instead is to think of the organisation as a web of connections and add a spatial dimension to it. We can approach it as a space-time-continua like the one Albert Einstein was thinking of when he coined the idea about SpaceTime (Fritzsche 2001, p.116). If we zoom into one colleague, it means that we are able to notice the aspects of her movements in four dimensions (time + 3d):

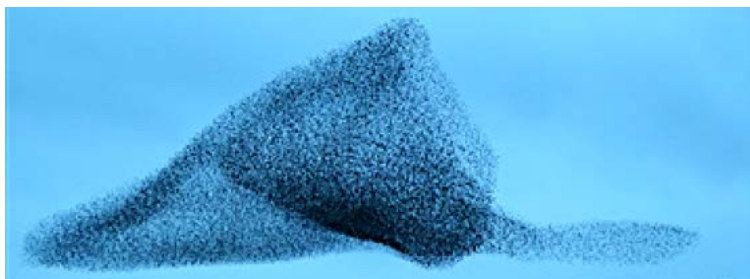


A web of practices and practitioners in time and in its own time (Image: Author)



4 dimensions (3d+time) Image adapted from Pedersen, 2012

- a) Chronos **time** often used to refer to seniority, reflecting the length of time the colleague has been employed. At the image above you will see it as a vertical timeline moving upwards – while the dotted line shows us how the movement in this case unfolds in relation to three spatial reference points:
- b) A colleague’s shift between roles within the organisation, adding layers of knowledge from different positions within the web of connections, allowing colleagues to dive into the difference in what counts as knowledge (we call it quality) across practices.
- c) A colleague’s experience within a practice going from novice to experienced. We can support the process by introducing “apprenticeships” (mentors, learning coaches etc.) which allow conversations of “losing sight” and “aha moments” rather than milestones along a straight timeline. We use reflecting (b)logs for this purpose.
- d) A colleague’s being as temporality herself. She is constantly fluiding between not yet, right now and no longer. She happens in her own time, but sensing it is relative to the dynamics of the ones in the web observing her. Her movements respond to those of her colleagues and co-form the total movement of the system, which from the outside looks like a murmuration of birds.



An organisation’s temporality forms of “not yet”, “right now” and “no longer” moments. Image: Pederse



**7.** We also need to pay attention to language, as a nest for continual mixing of frames and block views. Every language expresses time and temporality from a wide variety of parameters simultaneously (Hansen 2016). Languages include different aspects seen from the subject's point of view. We are able to express whether an activity is, or has been, if we talk about the result of an activity, or whether we indeed experience an activity (going from "not-yet", "right now" to "no-longer") or more a state we are in (going from "not-yet", "right now" to "no-longer"). Some languages are tenseless (for example, Kalaallisut, spoken in Western Greenland). Nonetheless, they convey temporal information as precisely as the English tenses, but by means of a very different system, e.g. by making reference to time implicitly in the way, for example, moods, context and morphemes are combined (Bittner 2005, p.339).

Now, if you work for a global organisation as I have done for many years, you may be used to using Global English (Dunton-Downer 2010; Schell, 2008) when you communicate with colleagues. Global English refers to a form of English intended for an international audience – and, sometimes, attempts to simplify the language wipe temporality off the organisational language map. It is not a problem as long as we instead express temporality, like Kalaallisut, through the use of context, images etc. In the beginning I thought of Global English as naïve and childish, and I appealed for the use of "proper" English. I even thought I was able to introduce aspects of temporality by an overuse of the English "–ing" forms. However, several colleagues have over the years described how my attempts in their world sounded like a foreign language, which they named "systemic language". I realised my attempt to describe something in the making distanced systemic practice from a shared language in the organisation.

**8.** We need, once again, to remind ourselves that time and temporality are not the answers to everything that puzzles us, and there is no recipe of 8 ways to notice time and temporality like Kotter's 8 steps of change. The 8 ideas closing this paper should not be read as a timeline, nor separate to our practice. At any time, we can step out of this paper's temporality, or pay attention to how the notion of temporality changes when you leave the paper and explore your (spatial) context. Just like when two people are talking face-to-face and have their mobiles with them, texting other people while they speak. They jump in and out of the spatial contexts, participating in several "nows" when they are part of the conversation in the room, as well as the threads on the mobile. Only *time* will tell how the appearance of multiple "nows" in different spatial contexts might change the contexts we notice, what we experience, and the story we tell about ourselves.

**The End!**

## References

- Auchet, Marc (2015). Mellem Kronos og Kairos. Tiden til politisk handling hos Kaj Munk. In: Ploug, Thomas (Eds.) *Mening med tiden*. Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag.
- Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. London: Duke University Press.
- Bittner, Maria (2005). Future Discourse in a Tenseless Language. *Journal of Semantics*, 22(4) 339-388. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jos/ffh029>
- Boje, David M (Ed.) (2012). *The Routledge Companion to Organizational Change*. New York: Routledge.

- Bridges, William (1991). *Managing Transitions. Making the most of change*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, Perseus Books Group.
- Boscolo, Luigi & Bertrando, Paolo (1993). *The times of time*. New York: W.W Norton.
- Bruzina, Ronald (2000). There Is More to the Phenomenology of Time than Meets the Eye. In Brough, John B. & Embree, Lester (Eds.) *The many faces of time*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Campbell, Joseph Keim; O'Rourke Michael & Silverstein, Harry S. (Eds.) (2010). *Time and identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cooperrider, David L. & Srivastva, Suresh (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In: Woodman, R. W. & Pasmore, W.A. (Eds.) *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 1 Stamford: JAI Press.
- Dainton, Barry (2010). *Time and Space*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.
- Dunton-Downer, Leslie (2010). *The English is Coming! How One Language is Sweeping the World*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Fritzs, Harald (2001). *Eine Formel Verändert die Welt*. München: Piper Verlag GmbH.
- Gergen, Kenneth (1991). *The Saturated Self*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hansen, Bjarne (2016). *Conversations about language, time and temporality*. Presentation, summer 2016, University of Copenhagen.
- Hansen, Mogens Herman (2009). *Tidens triumf. En historikers tanker om tid i historien*. Studier fra Sprog- og Oldtidsforskning. Museum Tusulanums Forlag. Københavns Universitet. Copenhagen
- Hawking, Stephen (1988). *A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. London: Bantam Press.
- Kotter, John P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lewin, Kurt (1947). *Frontiers in Group Dynamics. Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change*. *Human Relations*. June 1947 1(1), 5-41.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100103>
- Myllerup, Bent (2013). *Your Strategy for Asking Powerful Questions*. 42 Blog 2013/Oct/07. Retrieved 22 July 2016 from: <http://www.agile42.com/en/blog/2013/10/07/your-strategy-asking-powerful-questions/>
- Pedersen, Birgitte (2012): *Beyond Talent Management: A Relational Portrait of Companies Adapting to Global Financial Downturns*. Professional Doctorate thesis. University of Bedfordshire.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10547/322164>
- Pedersen, Birgitte (2016): *Unpublished notes*. Presentation at Bedfordshire International Systemic Winter School 2016.
- Quist, Wenche Marit (2004). *Tidslighed og eksistens hos Kierkegaard og den tidlige Heidegger*. Ph.d-afhandling. Det Teologiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet.
- Schell, Martin A. (2008). *Developing a Global Perspective for Knowledge Management*. In Rahman, M. *Hakukur Information and Communication Technologies for Economic and Regional Developments*. London: Idea Group Publishing.
- Schön, Donald A. (1984). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shotter, John (2005). *Goethe and the Refiguring of Intellectual Inquiry: From 'Aboutness'-Thinking to 'Witness'-Thinking in Everyday Life*. In *Goethe's Delicate Empiricism*. *Janus Head*, 8(1), 132-158. Amherst, NY: Trivium Publications.

Shotter, John (2011). *Getting It: Witness-Thinking and the Dialogical...* In *Practice*. New York, NY: The Hampton Press Communication Series, Hampton Press.

Shotter, John (2014). From “after the fact” objective analyses to immediate “before the fact” living meanings. *Culture & Psychology*, 20 (4), 525–536. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X14551302>

Shotter, John (2015). *Bevægelige verdener. Prospektive begreber til situerede sociale undersøgelser*. Forlaget Mindspace, Copenhagen.

Tollmand, Peter et al (2016). *A New Approach to Organizational Design*. BCG Perspectives. The Boston Consulting Group. Retrieved 22 July 2016 from <https://www.bcgperspectives.com/content/articles/people-organization-smart-design-for-performance/print>

Tomm, Karl (1988). *Interventive Interviewing: Part III. Intending to Ask Lineal, Circular, Strategic, or Reflexive Questions?* *Family Process*, 27 (1) 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1988.00001.x>

Uggerhøj, Ulrik (2005). *Tid. Den relative virkelighed*. Aarhus Universitetsforlag. Aarhus.

White, Michael (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

## Author

**Dr. Birgitte Pedersen** is tutor, supervisor and director of studies for the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire. Birgitte is also Director for People & Organisation at LandboNord, a business consultancy in Denmark mainly targeting the agriculture and food industry. She is Deputy Editor of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* and she is a founder of the consultancy Phronetica.

Email: [mail@birgittepedersen.dk](mailto:mail@birgittepedersen.dk) or [birgitte.pedersen@beds.ac.uk](mailto:birgitte.pedersen@beds.ac.uk)

URL: <http://phronetica.com/>

## Citation

Pedersen, Birgitte (2017). Being (on) time – our relationship with time and temporality in organisational practice. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 1 (1), 18-35. <https://doi.org/10.28963/1.1.3>