

Dialogic management

In the (pseudo)hierarchical school system
– a naive understanding of leadership or
professional management behaviour?

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Leadership is the management of change - only differently from before...

There can be no doubt - the school system is undergoing fundamental change. Teachers, school management and school authorities are sensing ever increasing tension. Why?

The education system has a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure akin to political parties, churches, etc. Until very recently, “managers” often used regulations, edicts, instructions and the imparting of concepts in an attempt to bring about changes at “their” schools, which they treated as subordinate departments. This control logic no longer works. Why?

1. Our world is becoming increasingly networked, complex, fast-paced and at the same time more individualised. Rapid technical developments (e.g. information and communication technologies, virtual worlds), underlying economic conditions (e.g. tight budgets, the economisation of education) and social changes (e.g. different family structures, the need for whole-day support for pupils, migration problems, etc.) demand on-the-spot decisions - in each organisation (school) where such complexities arise. Customised decisions have to be taken very quickly with regard for local conditions, which often differ greatly from region to region.
2. If necessary education policy stipulations are to be implemented in everyday school practice (e.g. the comprehensive implementation of competency-based lesson plans as well as competency-based teaching through the realisation of educational standards and the associated examinations), everything will frequently be demanded “here and now by everybody”. However, if deeper changes are involved (e.g. a changed perception of the teacher’s role in the school as an organisation), the control factor of time often goes ignored (Figure 1).

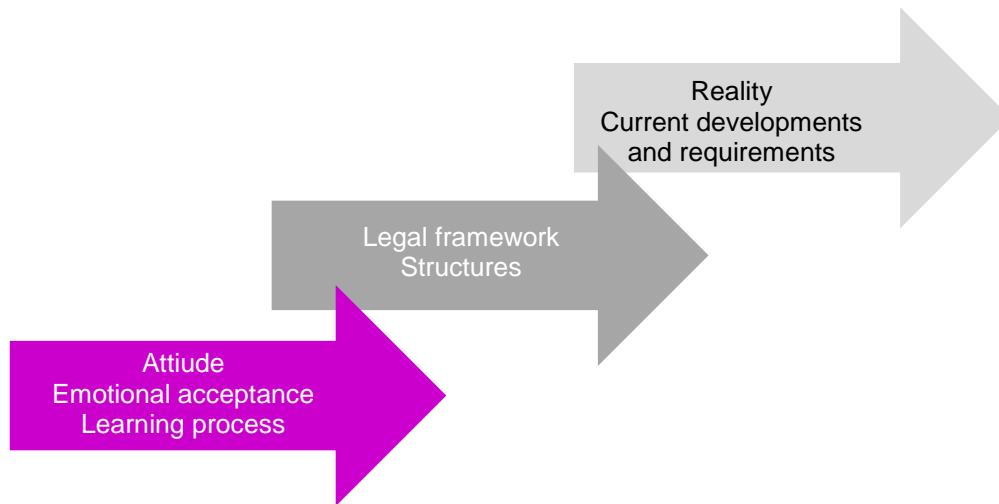


Fig. 1: "Good things come to those who wait..."

Current events often overtake well laid plans. Necessities and political decisions sometimes crop up quite unexpectedly. Managers usually respond to this by putting a lot of effort into persuading the other levels of the hierarchy or the staff. Much later on – we are dealing with a difficult bureaucratic system, after all – legal principles and/or required structures are hesitantly and mostly insufficiently “put in place”: (e.g. the legal anchoring of a quality management system for schools in the Federal School Supervisory Act, the provision of resources and the nomination of quality officers). This is usually where the manager’s work ends. These steps are necessary but not sufficient for

- creating lasting change processes and “touching” the attitude and emotional acceptance of key players and everyone else affected (see green arrow). If they want, these can continue to stay in their “comfort zone” - and nothing will ever happen!
- leveraging the subjectively well-founded workaround tactics of experienced system aficionados established over the decades (“We’ve lived through lots of reforms but haven’t participated in any of them”).

Leadership is the management of change - with all factors for success...

In order for the emotional acceptance of a change, which ultimately determines success, to truly come about, as well as the required learning processes amongst everyone affected, the following prerequisites must be met:

Dialogue is needed (a communication cascade or a management coalition on and between all levels of the education system’s hierarchy), especially about the “Why?” and the “Wherefore?” of the change. Only when the necessity and intended benefit are perceived as meaningful by everyone involved - i.e. make subjective sense - can a change process (a “paradigm shift”) be accepted (Figure 2):

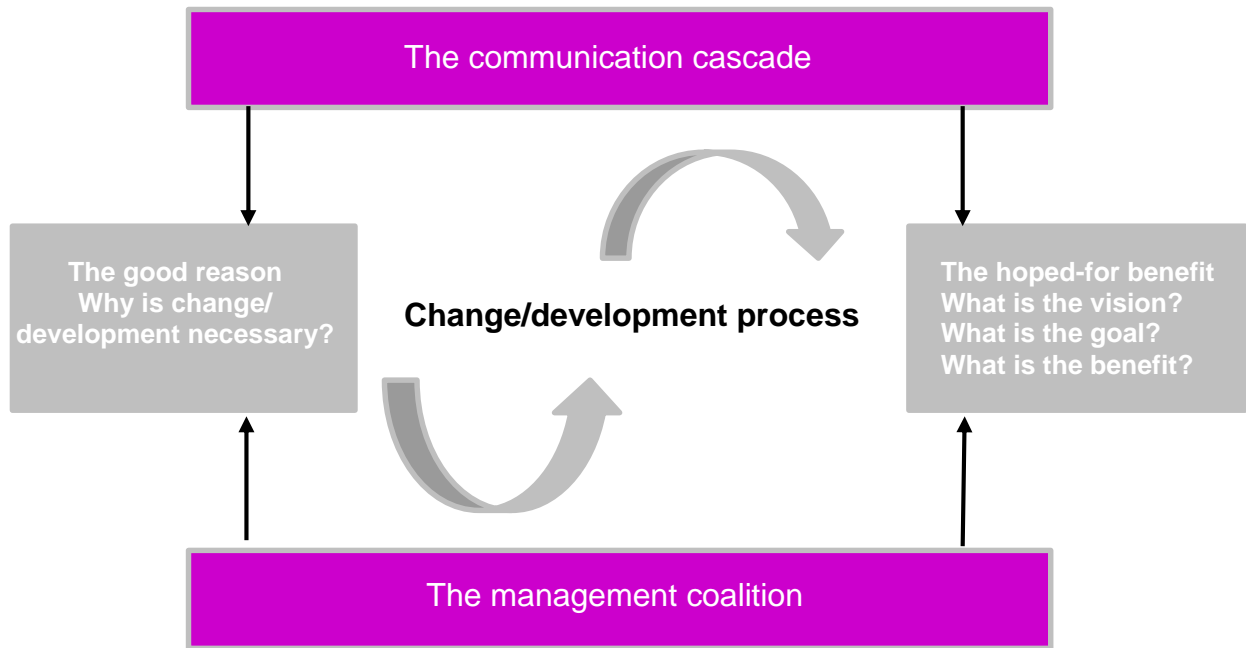


Fig. 2: Factors for success of change

Verdict at school level: When it comes to managing change in terms of attitude, schools and their managers have no other option than to act on their own authority, to take their “own matters” in hand and shape them (ownership). Which needs leadership - within the school!

Leadership is the management of change - with a focus on the process...

The factors for success outlined above are essential prerequisites for each change and development process. But which influencing factors matter for the successful change or development process itself? Figure 3 below provides a overview of this:

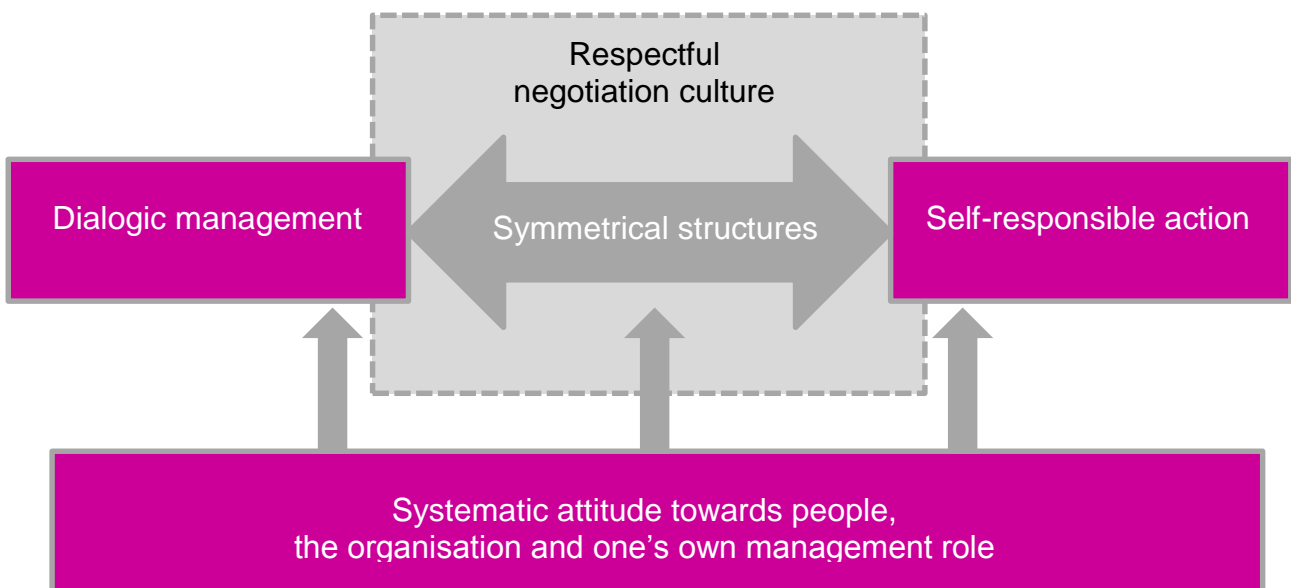


Fig. 3: Influencing factors of a more effective control logic in a change process in the education system

The big challenge for a true paradigm shift in terms of controlling change and development processes in the education system is having to fulfil all the influencing factors shown. In simple terms, this could be compared with a multiplication equation: If just one factor is “zero”, the result is also “zero”. At the same time, a dependency exists within the individual factors (symbolised by the three arrows at the bottom). These influencing factors will now be briefly explained, primarily on the level of the individual school:

a) Leadership is the management of change - with a systemic attitude...

The basis and “breeding ground” of any action is a systemic attitude of the manager or managers towards

- people (e.g. principal to “his” or “her” pupils),
- the organisation (e.g. school) and
- their own management role (e.g. as director)

In simple terms, a systemic attitude is the attempt to take “everything” into consideration. It’s an attempt that never succeeds because the observer is constantly redefining what “everything” is. In other words, when a principal “looks” at their own school, they see exactly what they currently see in the specific case, e.g.:

- which “environments” of the school system are currently important? (e.g. the regional school council, the parents, the municipality, etc.),
- which conflicts are currently viewed as being related? (e.g. pupil behaviour depending on how lessons are designed by a certain specialist group, etc.)

The manager is responsible for observing this view. This realisation of taking the self-made observational construct for what it is, namely firstly constructed from a certain perspective and secondly constructed personally (i.e. on the basis of personal preferences, values, etc.), makes it much easier to take a “bird’s eye view”.

This very quickly reveals that if the view of what is being observed can be expanded or changed as if using a zoom lens, then A does not necessarily lead to B. Different perspectives can then be adopted, different angles tried out and new findings obtained for the personal construct. For example, an “either...or” can then become a “both...and”. An often hastily strained “cause and effect logic” can be relativised.

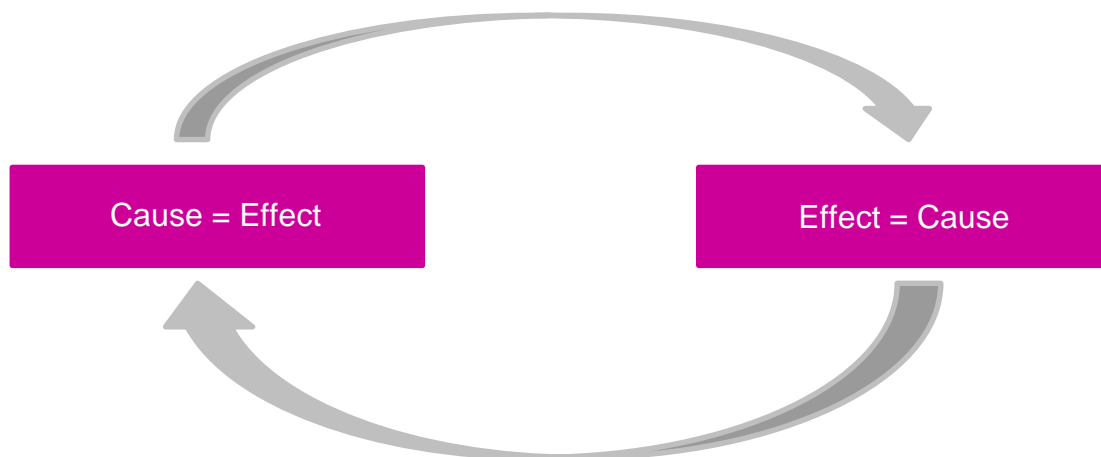


Fig. 4: A basic principle of systematic thinking

The systematic thinking and the “underlying” systemic attitude assumes that the education system consists of numerous living systems (individual people, groups, schools, departments of the district/regional school council/ministry, supporting organisations such as university colleges of teacher education, etc.).

The challenge for leadership lies in identifying and respecting the intrinsic logic of these living systems in order to then be self-responsible - for the people one manages, for the organisation one is responsible for and for oneself. And doing so by systematically exploring the meaningful options for action (with regard to the “meaningfulness” for the system currently under consideration) and deciding which to adopt in order to become effective.

b) Leadership is the management of change - dialogically...

If the school is increasingly and consistently held responsible for the service it provides (that of the pupils, teachers, managers, administrative staff, etc.), then management that focuses on controlling processes and outcomes will be required on all levels of the education system hierarchy more than ever before. That is all the more difficult when managers within the education system are severely constrained in the action they can take. They have little to no influence over the staff deployed, the budget or the legislation. Nevertheless, they are increasingly held responsible for the results (the “output”).

If schools are “thrown back” on self-responsibility, principals with an understanding of dialogic management will be needed, and if regions or federal states are to be strategically controlled in terms of education policy, this particular understanding of leadership will also be required. The system needs managers who are able to, have to, dare to and want to take responsibility for location-specific or region-specific school development (understood as the entirety of curriculum, staff and organisational development)!

Accordingly, in the sense of systemic attitude, dialogic management takes individuals seriously and dispenses with all attempts to condition them. It is based on the systemic attitude of respecting the “intrinsic logic” of the other without disregarding oneself and one’s own responsibility. Dialogic management is not a patent recipe in the sense of conventional management concepts, not a method, but an attempt to find ways of practising mutual respect and taking common action in specific management situations.

The goal is to arrive at an agreement accepted by both parties. It is the only way for an individual to take self-responsibility. That’s why dialogic management is also a matter of systemic attitude!

The dialogue manifests itself as a form of communication in which the participants help one another to develop personal insights and initiatives. The goal of a dialogic culture or dialogic management is therefore a form of collaboration in which the individuality of the individual is not only allowed to be expressed but is desirable and seen as a potential to be encouraged.

There is a psychological and a strategic reason for this:

1. Everyone wants to be taken seriously as an individual, with all their specific needs, competences and goals, in order to be both able and willing to perform. Developments in recent years show that - especially amongst younger employees (“Generation Y”) - work satisfaction depends less and less on material aspects such as a high income and increasingly on the individual experiencing their work as something meaningful and having the possibility to bring their personal skills comprehensively to bear. “Negotiation outcomes I support make sense for me”.
2. We are living in an increasingly dynamic and complex world (see above). When the future presents us with questions, it will only be possible to answer/solve these when they are close as possible to what can be imagined, calculated, estimated and predicted. But what aspects of the future can really be imagined, calculated, estimated and predicted? When it comes to problems that we do not know about (yet) in today’s education system, the average person has absolutely no answer to them. “However, if the system demonstrates the greatest possible variation, in other words it abounds with diversity and individuality, only then might someone or other be able to find an answer with their personal approach, with their very own thought patterns” (Hengstschläger, M. 2012, p. 13 et seq.). Diversity must therefore be seen as a resource, as a potential for mastering the future, and the negotiation outcome must refer to the organisation (e.g. the specific school) on which it can be seen to have an effect.

c) Leadership is the management of change - self-responsibly...

We have already mentioned the problem for managers (in particular at school level) of currently having very little influence over the way input is controlled. But what remains when responsibility for the outcome is called for, but the necessary power of implementation does not really exist? The answer - admittedly in somewhat simplified terms - can only be as follows: a communitarisation of self-responsibility on the basis of the systemic attitude, expressed through dialogic management.

If, as an independent organisation, the school is made responsible for its outcomes (education policy understands that as a paradigm shift from input to output, or rather: outcome orientation), then this will increasingly require as many people involved in the school system as possible to take responsibility both for their actions and for their failure to act.

However, a person can only be self-responsible if they know their strengths, weaknesses, limits, potentials, real options or limits for action and much that lies “beneath”, and if they also appreciate this to a sufficient extent. This is the point at which taking responsibility “matures”. If this basic attitude is assumed to exist in every person that one manages or is managed by, then a “meeting of equals” is possible. Taking system-relevant people seriously in their respective role (e.g. as teacher), with all their perspectives and attitudes, and at the same time also taking oneself seriously as a manager in the sense of a systemic attitude and knowing where “my own will, my own ability” and that of my organisation(s) lie(s), enables a “symmetrical” encounter / a “symmetrical” dialogue.

It may sound trivial, but the devil is in the detail, especially in the required negotiation.

d) Leadership is the management of change – in symmetrical negotiating structures on the basis of a respectful negotiating culture...

The leadership attitude required under these basic conditions and objectives of education policy is based on the negotiation, the “making up”, the agreeing. The manager actually has no other choice due to the lack or absence of input control. Short-sighted, authoritarian “acting without thinking” attitudes (“I command”) have frequently failed to be effective and are no longer sustainable in the long term - which can easily be seen by how an organisation (e.g. a school) performs. If an expert (e.g. a teacher) is denied self-responsibility or has it forced upon them by management, then this organisation of experts cannot be successfully controlled over the long term.

But what is the object of negotiation? It is the specific expectation of the role in the respective function as manager or expert! Principals work in the field of tension between “managing staff” - “managing the school as an organisation” - “managing oneself”. This conflict, which is intrinsic to the system, demands daily decision-making priorities from a principal who takes their role seriously. Loyalty is expected to be shown towards the teachers, the pupils as well as the school authorities, representatives of the regional and district education boards, and in parallel with this towards organisational units of the Ministry. And at the same loyalty towards the school as an organisation, a commitment to its future, its reputation, its reliability in basic ethical attitudes and many other things besides.

“Taking the lead” as a principal requires the acceptance of this systemic management conflict by everyone involved - the “zoomed image” must be big enough (see systemic attitude above). When the principal also succeeds in covering themselves, their own personality and their own needs well in this “multi-role expectation”, then a negotiation, e.g. with the competent school supervisor, has succeeded. Negotiating the goals that “his/her” school should or wants to reach in the next three years is both targeted and expedient. “Good negotiations” are then possible because they produce encounters on an equal footing, which assumes that both the opposite number and the principal will act out of personal insight and personal responsibility.

This, therefore, requires knowledge about oneself, about one’s own person, the sensing of one’s own “pressure points”, the experience of oneself in tricky situations, and at the same time requires strategic thinking for one’s own organisation (school), the building of professional and good relationships with the teachers and the administrative staff.

This doesn’t happen all by itself. One’s own (systemic) attitude is a prerequisite for the creation of a culture that enables and promotes this kind of (management) work between decision-makers on various levels of the hierarchy.

In order to reach agreements on an equal footing in terms of desired destinations, objectives, performance expectations, performance requirements, feasibilities and conflict solutions, the manager should create certainty for themselves in respect of the objectives, roles and structure (see Schubert, K./Degendorfer, W.) 2010, pp. 37-44).

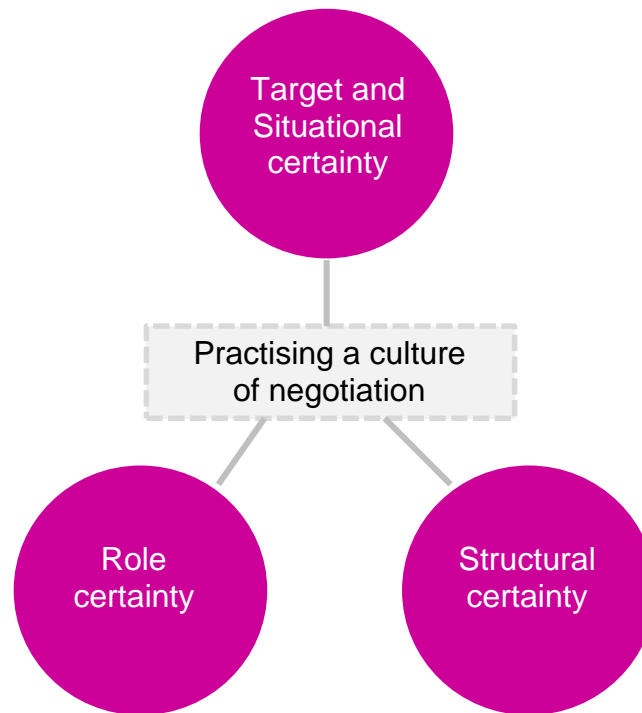


Fig. 5: Certainty in the negotiating situation

Target and situational certainty

In essence, negotiating is nothing other than a balancing of interests between people who are, at least in part, pursuing contradictory goals or interests and at the same time are dependent upon one another for the realisation of their goals or interests. In order for negotiating to succeed, the dialogue must take place on an equal footing as outlined above - and do so even though the negotiation involves people on different levels of the hierarchy (see Schulte-Derne, M./Schulte-Derne, M 2010, p. 52 et seq.). It is not about denying the hierarchy, but about holding negotiations on the

- content level (“What I can/know/have learned is worth just as much as what you can/know/have learned.”)
- personal level (appreciation of the opposite number as a consequence of appreciating myself)
- structural level (“My function differs from yours, but is equally as valuable for our negotiation.”).

That is often difficult to implement in practice because managers have been socialised in “sham proceedings” within the traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic education system. Negotiating often even has the nimbus of ignorance or decision-making weakness. The fact that exactly the opposite is true does not correspond to the existing system logic and requires a careful but constant focus on organisation development processes of the education system.

Role certainty

Ensuring that negotiating partners are clear about their roles and take responsibility is a professional criterion and an important object of negotiation. The frequently observed fears of a flattening hierarchy and the loss of power on the part of the higher hierarchy level can be countered if this level clearly communicates what it

- alone decides on and what it is solely responsible for informing the subordinate managers and experts about,
- makes the object of consulting, in order to have a differentiated image for itself for its own decision making,
- sees as the object of the negotiation and thus of the joint decision,
- allows to be decided without its own involvement.

Structural certainty

Negotiating also has an important organisational component. This concerns the structure of the school as an organisation and its upstream “departments”. This means that the increasingly complex organisational structures (e.g. implementation of SQA regional or school coordinators, which didn’t exist before) may require negotiating processes and corresponding competences of the persons involved, but at the same time the required principles and prerequisites are not or are not sufficiently created on an organisational level for this purpose. In this regard, the person responsible frequently lacks the understanding that negotiating needs a defined time, a place in which negotiating can take place, and above all clarity about what actually has to be negotiated with whom and how.

If an attempt is made to deal with the topic of negotiation only on the level of staff development, that shifts the view to the necessary framework - i.e. to structures in which the negotiating (e.g. in milestone and target-setting meetings) is actually even possible and desirable.

Leadership is the management of change – also and especially in SQA (School Quality in General Education)

The generally valid principles described so far can be used to derive the following theses for the educational policy initiative “SQA - School Quality in General Education”:

SQA as a coordinated interaction of all hierarchy levels of the school system for implementation of needs-based and location-specific school or curriculum process, which “also reach the pupils”, will only be successfully when

- a paradigm shift towards a systemic management attitude actually succeeds,
- it becomes visible through dialogic management behaviour of the persons responsible,
- it is based on self-responsibility,
- has symmetrical structures,
- and succeeds as part of an appropriate

negotiating culture.

SQA attempts to initiate and practise this required paradigm shift.

Figure 6 again shows the influencing factors as a prerequisite for the success of change and development processes (corresponds to Figure 3). Measures and structural elements are allocated from/to SQA by way of example (e.g. through the appointment of quality coordinators, through the management of milestone and target-setting meetings).

To put it another way: The SQA initiative would itself like to be experienced as a good example of a change control logic and a further claim to change (in attitude).

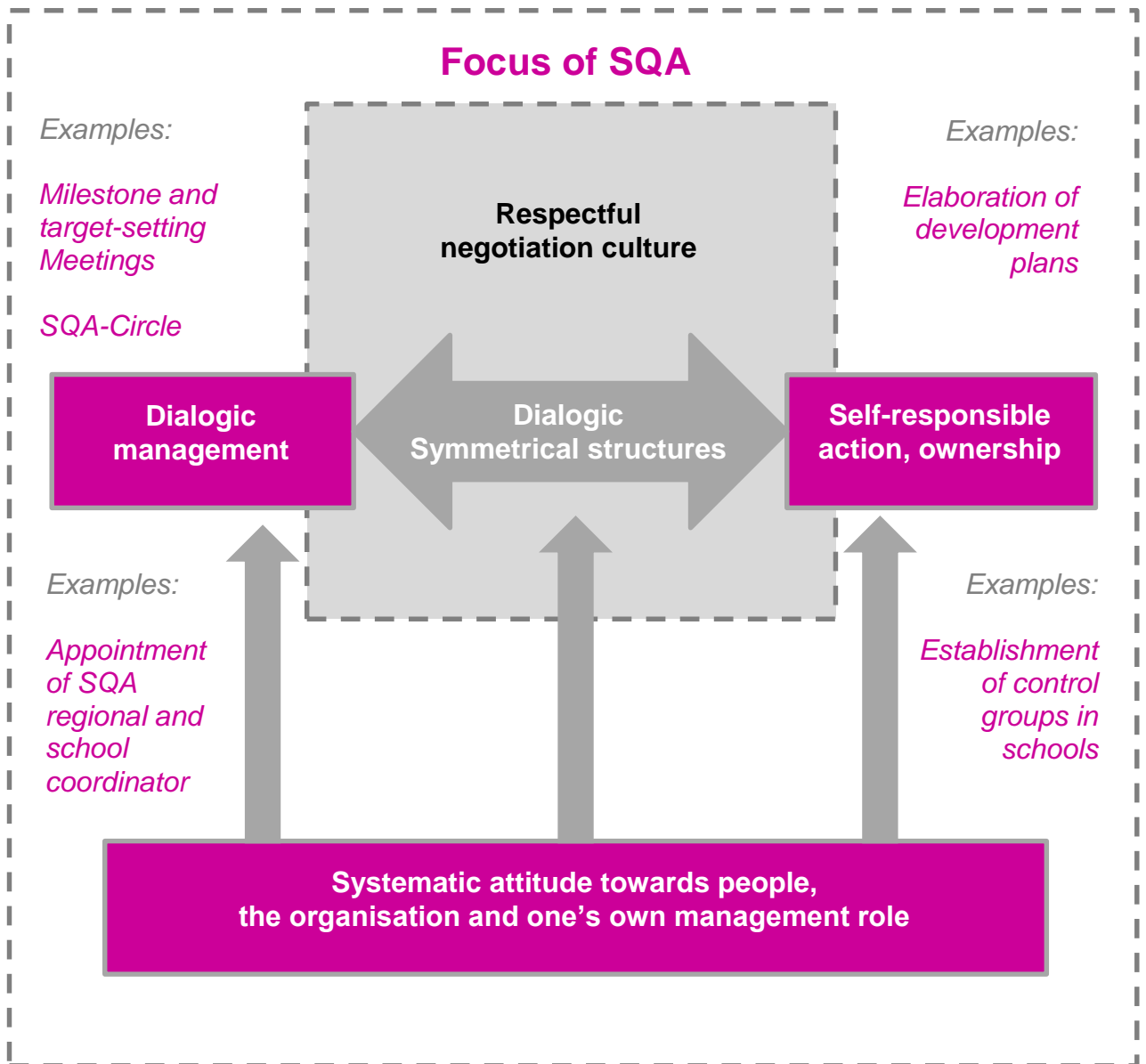


Fig. 6: Influencing factors of a more effective control logic in SQA (Quality Management in Schools providing a General Education)

More:

Hengstschläger, M. (2012): The average cases. Genes – Talents – Chances, Ecowin Verlag, Salzburg

Schubert, K./Degendorfer, W. (2010): "... and the right steps are indeed still too short..." Negotiating structures and the building of a negotiating culture in the hierarchical and bureaucratic school system are needed. In: Journal for School Development, 4/2010, Studien-Verlag, Innsbruck

Schulte-Derne, M./Schulte-Derne, M. (2010): How to establish symmetrical negotiating structures and an appropriate negotiating culture. In: .C/O/N/N/E/C/T/A (publ.): Living leadership. Practical examples – practical tips – practical theory., Carl Auer-Verlag, Heidelberg