

K1 – Communicators Association



# WHITE PAPER

## Conversations about a meaningful society

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"Communication comes from the Latin word 'communicare' and can be translated as 'to make common'. We believe that fostering common ground is the primary ideal for professional communicators."

"Hope is not a strategy. We cannot rely on creating a meaningful society based on hope alone. But it is equally true that strategies without hope are ... hopeless."

"What kind of society do we want to live in and pass on to our children and grandchildren? The answer to that question can and should be addressed by professional communicators through conversations that involve broadly."

# Objectives of the White Paper

Communication as a profession has seen significant development over the past half-century. Never has there been such a great need for professional communication - and this applies not only in individual companies and organisations but throughout society.

The wicked societal challenges currently with the climate crisis, the corona pandemic, geopolitical strife and - at the time of writing - the war in Ukraine clearly show that we need new and better ways of talking to each other that reduce conflicts and promote decisions made in agreement and acceptance.

We need to learn to talk with each other in ways that bring everyone together – as citizens – to create shared visions of the future with ideas and hopes for a better and more meaningful future. The public democratic debate once played this role, and the Danish welfare society is one of the results of this. But the public conversation is now in dire straits, suffering from solid polarisation and mistrust.

Professional communicators can help create positive narratives about the future by engaging in the ways our conversations take place. Approaching the challenge can open new opportunities for professional communicators and create a society with more meaning and cohesion.

In this white paper, we discuss professional communicators' roles, competencies, and responsibilities in contributing to developing a meaningful society. The white paper is intended to inspire communicators and provides insight into the theory and concrete tools to facilitate meaningful conversations. At the same time, the white paper presents a proposal for communicators' social responsibility as a professional, ethical framework for professional communicators' *raison d'être*.

We are aware that the challenge is colossal and that the theories and tools we present are by no means exhaustive. However, we hope it will encourage communicators and others to contribute to better and more meaningful and unifying conversations in society.

Culture changes as individuals change. Individuals change when we see value in creating things together.

This white paper was created in a longer joint process in K1 – Communicators Association and could not have been realised without the support of The Union of Communication and Language Professionals. Together we can make a difference, and we hope many professional communicators will become part of the movement towards a meaningful society.

# Why are conversations so crucial in a meaningful society?

## **Disasters are crises without hope**

We live in a time of crisis. The climate crisis, the corona crisis, the war in Ukraine, massive crises of confidence and geopolitical strife are just some of the challenges that define societies in the 21st century.

All the crises we experience today are created by people - and finding solutions completely depends on our abilities to communicate and collaborate. On the one hand, this is worrying and could make the outlook for the future bleak. But therein also lies a possible path to a better and more meaningful future. Because, unlike actual disasters, hope still exists during a crisis. The hope is that we will be able to find solutions, just as we have succeeded in cooperating on restrictions and developing vaccines in record time during the coronavirus pandemic, thereby avoiding huge, unnecessary death tolls.

It is true that 'hope is not a strategy' and that we cannot rely on creating a meaningful society based on good wishes alone. But it is equally true that strategies without hope are ... hopeless. And we need hope and positive visions of the future to be able to return to life as it was before the pandemic and to ensure a sustainable future here on earth for our children and grandchildren. It is in the hope for the future that we find the energy and motivation to cooperate and act for the common good.

The crises themselves do not give hope. It is our belief that we can solve crises and create a better and more meaningful future that creates hope. In other words, we need strong shared narratives about a better future that create cohesion and enthusiasm to contribute to solving the crises we face. In the family, at work, in our society and globally.

## **Professional communicators can help create shared future narratives**

For almost a century, all modern societies have worked with a vision of developing societies in which future generations have better opportunities for prosperity, welfare, and development than the previous ones – in the Nordic countries specifically 'the welfare society'. With the crises we are experiencing today, this is no longer something our descendants can take for granted.

What kind of society do we want to live in and pass on to future generations? Professional communicators should engage by designing conversations that involve people broadly that can give solid answers to these questions.

## **Conversations are a super weapon to solve society's crises**

The crises we are experiencing today are so-called 'wicked systemic problems'. We do not fully know the extent of the problems, and we only know whether possible solutions work in retrospect - after we have tested them in practice.

This causes a 'crisis of understanding' that is only exacerbated by misinformation, polarization, and distrust in decision-makers, media, and experts in society. Here we have, as professional communicators, an opportunity to bring our skills into play. Because it is precisely meaning-making and trust that is the professional, ethical core of our profession - that is why society invests in our education.

Unfortunately, our competencies can also be used for the opposite. To distort and create distrust, e.g., of a political opponent, in the many power struggles that permeate our society, and where it is more about winning and getting right at the opponent's expense than talking to each other, becoming wiser together and developing better solutions together.

Is it naïve to call conversations a superweapon? Maybe. And surely, there are many cynics who will laugh. That said, we all know almost instinctively that we are right; It is frivolous to continue to believe that we can solve our serious crises without finding ways to solve them together, even with those with whom we do not immediately agree. The developments of recent years speak for themselves.

## **Professional communicators' social responsibility**

Most professional communicators have traditionally seen their main roles as producers and advisors, but have otherwise left it to other professions to develop more concrete proposals for solutions to societal crises: Engineers, architects, lawyers, economists, etc.

However, there is an increasing need for a diversity of disciplines to solve the increasingly complex crises we face. This is not to say that communication and conversations are the solutions to it all. But what we can do is bringing engineers, politicians, and citizens together - and therefore we also have a responsibility to shoulder.

It is our hope that professional communicators will take responsibility and contribute to a movement towards a meaningful society - small and large. Seize the opportunity and start where it makes sense. It can be in the company where we work, in the community we are part of, in the school where our children go, or on social media.

As professionals, we must choose between using our skills to manipulate, create greater distance and serve special interests - or to check facts, ask good questions and listen, ensure a good tone, and make everyone smarter.

### **New skills and an updated communication ethic**

In this white paper, we present a range of theories and tools to create meaningful conversations. For some professional communicators, this may be familiar material from the journey the profession has been on for the past 50 years. But it is also clear that there may be a need to acquire new skills. Here we are particularly interested in the role of the facilitator. Unlike previous roles as producer and advisor, it is crucial to success that we recognize that our primary task in a meaningful society is not to market pre-defined messages or try to manage communication. The task is to create conversations where everyone feels included and heard and contributes with insight and reflection.

In addition, the increased social responsibility means we as professional communicators sharpen our professional ethical compass. Whereas communicators were previously promoted on their ability to sharpen, simplify, and perhaps distort messages, the future legitimacy of our profession will depend on us imposing ethical standards on our way of working and being transparent about our practices.

# Perspectives on the meaningful conversation

## **Habermas' dominion-free communication as a starting point for democratic conversations and citizenship**

As human beings, we communicate with each other for many different reasons. To be together, to pass on information, to show who we are or our attitudes, to influence others, etc.

In this section, the reason is conversations that aim to create the best possible *decisions* that have been fertilized in the best possible way by the people who have entered the conversation (qualification). And where the same people acknowledge that they have had sufficient opportunity to have their say in the conversation (legitimacy).

The now 93-year-old German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has since his youth taken a close interest in the conditions for reason-oriented, democratic conversations, which he has described in the theories of 'universal pragmatism' and 'dominion-free conversation', which are a form of guiding principle for an ethically correct democratic conversation.

With universal pragmatics, Habermas puts conversation and language at the centre of the way we should organise our coexistence. Democracy and sensible conversation are for Habermas the only just form of government in which we can form well-functioning and voluntary communities.

The essence of the theory of the dominion-free conversation is that there are a series of conditions or ideals that everyone who participates in the conversation must fulfil. The conditions are:

1. **Understandability:** Using a common language that everyone can understand.
2. **Reliability:** Telling the truth (to the best of your knowledge).
3. **Sincerity:** Saying what you mean.
4. **Equality:** Everyone has an equal right to speak.
5. **Transparency:** Talking in ways that everyone recognizes and respects.

As can be seen, there is nothing mysterious about the conditions. Still, nevertheless, the experiences of our everyday lives, and the many conversations we enter professionally and privately, are that it can be very difficult to practice these conditions or ideals.

The more at stake, not least emotionally, for the people involved in a conversation, and the more hierarchy and power struggle between the characters, the harder it will often be to live up to the conditions.

Examples are politicians debating an issue, two people on a blind date, or conflicts at work. In all these conversations, one may be tempted to cheat a little on the scales, poke the other party a little or use one's power to get one's way, for example, when the politician cherry-picks data that supports her point of view, when the man on the date is not completely honest with his intentions, or when the boss verbally trumpets his employees.

"So what?" you could say.

The problem, of course, is that conversations that do not adequately live up to the ideals will result in decisions that are less well-lit than they could be and in which those who do not feel heard do not feel obliged by the decision either. In short: bad decisions with low ownership.

At the same time, the ideals of dominion-free conversation are so fundamental in ordinary good behaviour that a person or organisation who repeatedly does not live up to the ideals will be labelled untrustworthy and unwanted interlocutor.

## **The dominion-free conversation in practice**

As professional communicators, it is our responsibility to use our professional skills to create as much value as possible in the contexts we are part of. It will often be to support constructive conversations about, for example, the organisation of our society or companies to best handle the challenges of today and tomorrow. Discussions of trends such as sustainability as well as inclusion and diversity are good examples.

There are several concrete levers that we as professional communicators can use based on the ideals of dominion-free conversation:

1. *Agreement on the ideals*: Make sure there is agreement on how you want to talk and why. That it is not about being right but being able to learn and become wiser together and be able to make the decisions that provide the most value for the whole community. Specifically, the ideals can be formulated as a communication policy, or as conversation rules for a meeting, a dismissal process, or a workshop. It is a mistake to think that people have thought about and live the ideals by themselves. They are far more likely to show up with their own diverse expectations and agendas, which is why the conversations often become more of a battle than a learning exercise.

2. *Understandability*: As a communications advisor, it is your responsibility to be the linguistic watchdog that ensures a language everyone understands. It can be about something as simple as securing translations into local languages in international contexts or avoiding technical language across disciplines. It can also be about ensuring the comprehensibility of complex issues, as we have just exemplified during the corona pandemic, where concepts such as T-cell response and late complications were suddenly something that was discussed over the dinner table. We are often asked if we can turn something very complex into something that is understandable on three lines. Here, our answer should more often be: "No, this requires an investment in time for our employees to understand the complexity - it cannot be quick-fixed."
3. *Reliability*: Many professional communicators are brought up in a paradigm of persuading others about a message, and most of us have probably tried to sharpen messages or omit otherwise relevant caveats to make the message simple and strong. This does not work in the dominion-free conversation. Here we must all present the cases as true as possible, even if it may mean increased vulnerability and complexity, openness about dilemmas and thus longer conversation time.
4. *Sincerity*: As with the truth, many professional communicators have also helped to equip a spokesperson with messages and discussed strategies before an important meeting where considerations such as "maybe you shouldn't speak your one hundred per cent honest opinion in that area" have been included. This is also against the ideal here. Instead, we should direct our advice and training towards how the spokesperson can best express and explain his or her sincere opinion, even when it is not popular and even if it makes people uncomfortable.
5. *Equality*: Equality is about organising communication processes in ways that give all interested parties a reasonable opportunity to have their say while ensuring that everyone who speaks out is listened to and considered. This can prove to be a major and long-term challenge for many professional communicators. It can be about convincing management to establish open and long-term decision-making processes, create open and eye-to-eye communication cultures and implement communication methods (e.g., SoMe platforms) that provide an easy opportunity to talk to each other. Yet, very often longer decision processes will

result in a shorter implementation process, so it might be a good investment.

6. *Transparency*: To enable people participating in a conversation to contribute in the best possible way, it is necessary that their expectations are aligned. The vote can be both unspoken in practice known and recognized for all (this is how we have always done), but also based on clear descriptions of new/concrete conversations/decision-making processes. It is our responsibility as professional communicators to be guarantors that expectations are aligned, known, recognized and clear. It may be perfectly legitimate and necessary that not everyone participates in discussing and making all decisions - the important thing here is that the process is clearly communicated and generally accepted.

### **The wicked challenges facing society in an Anthropocene**

Our age has just been named 'The Anthropocene Age' and covers an age in which nature no longer exists without the influence of man. The Danish anthropologist Nils Bubandt has in the book "*Anthropocene - the story of the world of tomorrow*" put into words the new age and the challenges for us humans.

As such, the challenges are well known. What is new is the realization that in the Anthropocene, man has become a geological force of nature. This puts an end to our notion of dividing nature and man, which is the basis for the division of our knowledge institutions into the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, which have existed since the Enlightenment. The beginning of the Anthropocene age has been set for 1950, because it is precisely in the last 70 years that man has had an accelerating impact as a force of nature, creating the crises we are trying to solve today.

In a Nordic context, this is disturbing, because it is precisely during this same period that we have seriously developed our welfare societies, which most Nordic people want to protect. But if the society we have created in Nordic at the same time requires that four planets are needed if the rest of the world were to introduce our way of life and thus emit just as much CO<sub>2</sub> - then the Anthropocene causes a crisis of understanding, because it breaks with the optimism that has driven our modern visions of the future and reassured us in, that we helped create a better future for our children than the one we live in.

### **The progress story of the Nordic welfare societies has suddenly turned into a Greek tragedy**

Thus, there is a need for a new positive future narrative, and it is here that we communicators come into play. Our ability to create meaningful conversations and

images of the future are critical to prevent that dystopias will gain the upper hand. Unfortunately, there are already signs that they have.

To solve the crisis of understanding in the Anthropocene, we communicators have a special responsibility to help create new attractive narratives of the present and future and to contribute to the stories helping to create hope, unite us, and put action behind the words.

There are already some suggestions: *the techno-theologians* who hope that with new technology such as Elon Musk's Space-X program, we can save humanity by colonizing Mars. Or the *animists*, who base their conception of the future on the fact that we as humans recognise that we are not a superior animal species, and other animals must thus also be granted democratic rights on a par with humans.

According to Bubandt, the task is not to find one prevailing vision of the future, but rather to create space for different and conflicting visions of the future to live side by side.

Man-made crises such as the climate crisis are what are called *wicked problems*. In other words, we are faced with a paradox. There is a need to act now, but no one can predict whether (all) our actions will lead to new and greater challenges or are the right path towards a better and, for example, greener future.

Inspired by Bubandt, the answer must be that we must pay tribute to those who have the courage to act and who at the same time invite reflection on the advantages and limitations of their proposed solutions. Instead of polarizing the debate by, for example, talking about "tin foil hats" and "Mette's sheep" in the Danish corona debate, we should create space for reflection, where everyone can contribute with their perspectives so that we can jointly find new solutions over time. Because no one today has the full and true solution. And certainly not if we are all to accept, co-finance and live with the solutions - then they must balance a wide range of issues such as efficiency, how they harmonize with the values and needs of different citizens, how they affect other social conditions, etc. etc.

## **The role of communicators in solving the wild challenges of society**

In addition to helping to create new narratives for the future, we communicators also have the skills to play a crucial role in solving the wicked societal challenges.

In the green paper "Building Better Systems", the Rockwool Foundation's Unit for Social Intervention describes four keys that can unlock systems and thus meet society's wicked and systemic challenges:

1. Purpose

2. Power
3. Resources
4. Relationships

Especially purpose, power and relationships are keys that communicators have the skills to use.

The most effective way to change a system is to change what systems are for – their *purpose*. In recent years, professional communicators have worked to develop and activate the purpose of companies to bring together all stakeholders - managers and employees, customers, owners, users, etc. about a meaningful narrative about why the company exists - its *raison d'être*.

These competencies will be beneficial to bring into play in other areas, such as discussions of our ecosystems because a new common narrative about the purpose of the way we have organized our societies and ecosystems will open for the development of new solutions. Experience from the companies clearly shows that the purpose stories that are authentic and make immediate sense to most stakeholders can have a large and unifying effect. Conversely, experience also shows that a purpose developed and described by, for example, a small management team and which appears non-authentic and "corporate" to most stakeholders, can almost do more harm than good to meaningfulness, trust, and cohesion.

According to the Rockwool Foundation, it is almost impossible to change the purpose of a system unless there is also a shift in who has the power to decide how resources are distributed, what is important, who decides, and what is a good result. In short, systems only change if the resources in the system are changed in a fundamentally new way. Here, communicators' competencies in public affairs can advantageously be brought into play, and we can design democratic conversations that allow more voices in society to be heard and listened to - so that the distribution of resources does not primarily benefit those who already have the most power, and who already shout the loudest and have the most effective lobby resources to influence public opinion and political decision-makers.

And finally – *relationships*. All systems are a collection of several parts, which are put together to create a common result. Each part has limited meaning but cannot bring about change on its own; It is when the parts are brought together around a common goal, that they form a coherent and collaborative system, that the power to create real and lasting change arises. Communicators' ability to gather and establish conversations across stakeholders, make them think holistically and ultimately engage in collaborations on common goals will be crucial.

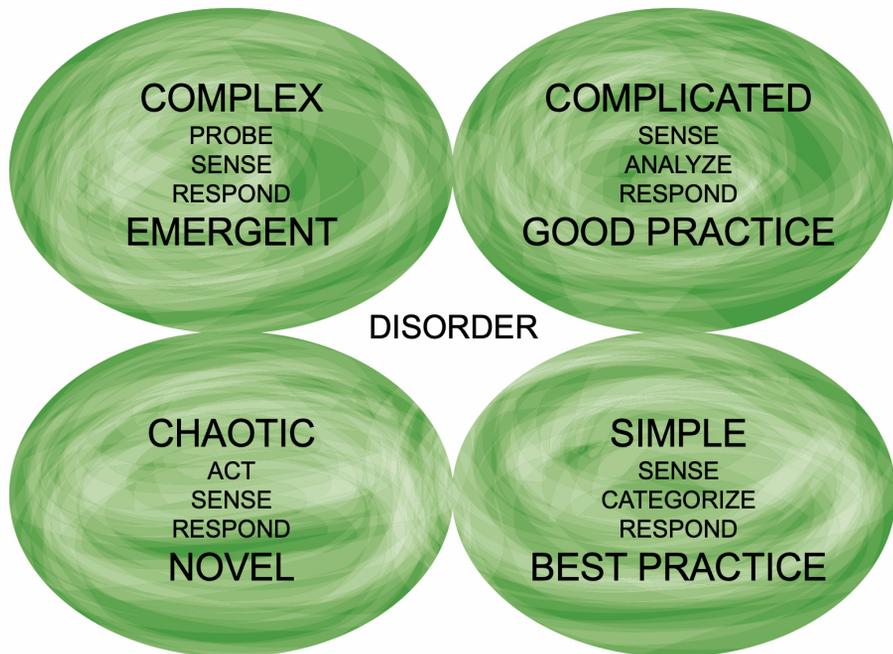
# Meaningful conversations in practice

## **How can we make sense of complex challenges?**

As described many times already, the challenges in recent years have been in line, and where companies and organisations may previously have been able to relate to keeping their own house in order, the rules of the game have now changed. Employees – and to a very large extent the youngest generations – choose workplaces that make a meaningful difference in society – by which they can identify. Customers have become far more critical and demand companies' follow ethical standards and contribute to solving major societal challenges. Even the calculating investors have realized the importance of investments in more long-term and sustainable value creation - and as they say: The market is always right.

So how can we as professional communicators (so to speak) help 'make sense of the madness' and thus contribute to companies and others being equipped to engage in meaningful conversations - perhaps even about topics that are traditionally far from their traditional purpose and work?

To make sense of the individual problem, the Cynefin model (see figure) can be a good help. Developed by Dave Snowden in 1999, the model helps management make sense of difficult situations. New societal challenges that companies are expected to address can be classified according to one of the four categories so that the company gets off to a good start in its problem management by addressing the problems in ways that the nature of the problem requires.



Dave Snowden: Cynefinmodellen, 1999

1. *Simple problem* (reflect, categorize, act): Here there is a clear connection between cause and effect, and the solution is obvious. A consensus has been reached in public opinion on what can and should be done, and what is right and wrong. In these cases, it is about being inspired by best practices and acting decisively.
2. *Complicated problem* (reflect, analyse, act): Here cause and effect can be figured out, but require special expertise. Here it is about having access to professional experts and following good practices.
3. *Chaotic problem* (act, reflect, respond): Here the problem develops like wildfire, and it is about containing the problem and extinguishing the fire resolutely and effectively so that it does not spread. The companies (e.g., Maersk) that acted quickly in connection with the war in Ukraine have met broad support, while organisations that waited to withdraw from Russia (for example, Carlsberg) have

experienced reputational losses.

4. *Complex problem* (try, reflect, respond): Here cause and effect are only visible in retrospect. The climate crisis is a good example of how responsibility and solutions are continuously under negotiation. Climate action can be praised one day, while the next it can be touted as useless or greenwashing. In other words, it is a question of following the debate closely and calibrating one's answers.

It is especially the complex problems that we experience more of in society and that organisations are expected to deal with. And precisely because of the special nature of complex problems, conversation can be the key to creating meaning and companionship.

### **As a communicator, how do you get a buy-in from management to facilitate meaningful conversations, and what does it take?**

When professional communicators meet and discuss their professional practices, the talk often turns to their collaboration with the top strategic management and how we can best help and support them to be successful. There is also no doubt that our individual success as communications advisors stands or falls with the perceived benefit we bring to the table.

Unfortunately, it also means that over the past 50 years, our profession has become accustomed to itself - and the rest of the company - to the fact that communication people are typically some nice types on the staff that you call when important decisions have been made, and it needs to be made understandable to others. We as a professional group must address this limitation if we want to influence our companies and society in more meaningful directions seriously.

It is not a problem that we take responsibility for communication. It is our core area and must remain so, and there are many things at this level where our professional choices have a huge impact on the creation of meaning. But if we are to be able to live out our full professional potential, we must pave the way for ourselves in relation to becoming part of the decision-making processes. Because as mentioned several times in previous chapters, a very large part of the meaningful conversations and decision-making processes are about involving more voices - to both qualify the decisions and make them more legitimate.

### 1. Decide to become an activist!

In our experience, the journey towards access to the strategic decision-making processes starts with you deciding that it is a goal you want to achieve and that you subsequently throw your inhibitions, neatness, and modesty overboard to achieve this and be able to influence the decisions made in the company.

There are no textbooks that can tell you how to do this in practice since it depends on myriad complex contexts. Some describe it as "*corporate activism*", where you as a communicator find your own ways and develop your own methods and competencies to achieve your goals. And we're not just talking about egocentric career goals here — but about actually being able to fully activate your professionalism, for the benefit of both the company that pays your salary and the society and world that you're a part of.

### 2. Understand what management wants!

However, a completely banal premise is that you understand what, in popular terms, keeps management awake at night. Both what gives them nightmares - and what gives them wet dreams. It requires you to access and have conversations with management, listen to them and build familiarity with them. It also requires you to learn what management knows about the company and business, that you learn to read a financial report, etc. So, although the premise may be banal, it cannot be achieved without new learning and new skills that few communicators learned as part of their education.

### 3. Challenge the management - in their language!

As a self-appointed corporate activist, you must go out on the battlefield of opinions and dare to challenge others in relation to which themes are relevant that we discuss and decide on in the company as well as in society. Can and should a large financial company like Nordea, for example, take a stand on agendas such as gender equality, LGBTQIA+, child labour or the salary of nurses?

The whole discussion about inclusion and diversity is a very good example of an agenda that has grown decisively large, and which no modern large Nordic company can deny having an opinion on and a strategy for working with - but where the agenda has grown big in the surrounding society first - and where the companies that who were the fastest to understand this, today stand with an advantage ahead of their competitors.

Crucially, however, we as 'corporate activists' understand how to talk about these agendas with our management groups in a way that they too understand the 'meaning of the madness'.

As all communicators know, meaning arises when we reflect on a phenomenon in our own life world. LGBTQIA+ is a good example. Here there is a very basic ethical position in

which all companies should support the idea and movement away from sexual oppression. And in addition to ethics, many considerations that are closer to the company's operation and development - e.g. recruitment and retention of new, younger employees for whom sexual diversity is a given thing, openness to the customers who may belong to a sexual minority (e.g. 10% of Danes are homosexual according to some studies - after all, a significant part of customers), to avoid negative publicity and loss of reputation because we do not relate to the issues of the time and a signal to the rest of society that we naturally take part in the issues that also concern the rest of society. And yes - what modern CEO wants to get the label "dinosaur".

There are, as the example shows, plenty of opportunities to make issues that may be immediately peripheral to the company attractive to strategic management.

#### 4. Come up with solutions - not problems!

A fundamental challenge for all new agendas that are pressing is to gain space and attention, and it is important to understand that this is a completely real and legitimate problem in all companies and management groups. The day has only 24 hours, and if a fire occurs in one of the company's factories, it takes precedence over the preparation of a new equality policy. The operation and development of the core business will always be given the highest priority.

For the same reason, it is crucial that we as 'corporate activists' take it upon ourselves to find attractive and manageable ways to discuss and concretely work with new issues. You can do this by being creative and thinking in engaging and energizing initiatives, and by starting by activating other enthusiasts to also become 'corporate activists'. Perhaps (in continuation of the example above) dialogues in the company about LGBTQIA+ could be facilitated with the aim of the company reaching clear personnel policies in the area.

#### 5. Create meaning – not work conflicts

Basically, our businesses have evolved for centuries – and thankfully for the better on a long list of measures. On many significant parameters, we've never been better. However, there is a big 'but' with which we also started this White Paper - there is a serious risk that the constant positive development from generation to generation has reached an endpoint. When wild crises have developed into outright disasters in the past, the consequences have been enormous - with major conflicts in the labour market, in society and in the world community. The two world wars of the last century are the most frightening examples of this, but also the Cold War, apartheid, etc., etc. are things we should do everything possible to avoid in the future - because major disasters and conflicts cost well-being, human lives and make us all poorer.

We believe meaningful conversations with the qualification and legitimization of joint decisions are the best alternative to big and wild conflicts. This applies in a very small way, from when we must figure out how best to use our saved maintenance account in the cooperative, to how we relate to the perhaps more than 100 different gender identities in the labour market, and not least how we solve probably the biggest crisis - the climate crisis - that our generation of citizens and decision-makers must find solutions to.

## **What is a meaningful conversation?**

"People, companies, organisations don't just express a narrative when they talk about themselves, they constantly create their identity through the stories."

Michael White, Map of Narrative Landscapes 2008

A meaningful conversation is where both parties experience that they both contribute to the conversation – and both parties experience that they are talking about the right thing, and both parties have the experience that the conversation will lead to new realisations. That is, the relationship, the subject, the way, and the goal in play.

Gregory Bateson says that we always communicate at content and relationship levels, and we can't separate the two. Every time we say something (content), it will always be interpreted and responded to in relation to the relationship the two parties have. If there is full confidence and goodwill, many things will slide effortlessly and unnoticed. But if the relationship is weak, both parties will constantly simultaneously interpret how that content relates to the relationship - and whether it reinforces or frays the relationship. And if the relationship is characterized by holes and bumps, then it will shine through the interpretation and thus the response to the said content.

An important thing that Gregory Bateson is often quoted for is that it is impossible not to communicate. One can never not say nothing, because it will also be perceived as communication. It is fundamental for meaningful conversations.

## **We are co-creators of our world**

In addition, the objectives of our conversations and the backgrounds of the conversations are essential. Barnett Pearce writes about how we create and are co-creators of our social worlds – we all enter into many different worlds (contexts) and we are co-creators of many social worlds.

**"Communication is more a way of creating the social world rather than a way of talking about it."**

Barnett Pearce, Communication, and the creation of social worlds 2007

Rather than saying 'what do you mean by that?' the relevant question is rather:

- "What are we doing together?" and
- "how do we do it?" and
- "how can we create a better social world?"

With our communication, our stories, questions, and interactions, we create each other, and our reality (and note - there may be more of them). This perspective gives us as communication professionals an active role and function, for which world do we want to be a co-creator?

## **What tools can we use to create meaningful conversations?**

We, humans, want to act in accordance with our conception of the world. Therefore, for example, it helps employees to tell that they are building cathedrals rather than just carving stones. That story helps employees tighten their buttocks and give the stone an extra punch. The same goes for all of us - if we see a higher goal for our work, we hump away. It is the stories that drive us as employees and as a society. The stories show the way for what we strive for.

Stories have an impact on the world we create - both for which society we want to build, and in the small stories in our daily lives. The small stories at work, for example about why we should prioritize this over anything else, should preferably be in accordance with the company's WHY, so that the employee can understand and accept reprioritizations and changes.

## **Meaningful conversations depend on how we listen**

In the book "Theory U" Otto Scharmer has described the value of conversations to ensure co-creation and renewal. The way we listen here has a decisive impact on the nature of the conversation - do we listen to win or to learn?

Our intention with the conversation and our way of listening is thus crucial to the outcome. It is therefore worth taking inspiration from when we want to create meaningful conversations.

### **The four interlocutors:**

#### 1. Small talk

We all know the polite phrases when we meet new people. Here we talk nicely to each other about, for example, the weather and use polite phrases. The purpose is not to listen to what the other person is really saying, but that we want to maintain a good mood. And small talk is the first step to building a trusting relationship with each other.

#### 2. Debate

When we listen, most people have an automatic listen mode. That is, when we hear something with which we completely disagree, we say it out loud if we assess that the relationship and circumstances can bear it. Otherwise, we keep our mouths shut and go in an arc around it to avoid talking about it anymore.

The debate can be valuable, and it is important to have conversations that can have the character of constructive conflicts. But the conversations do not create much new if it becomes a question of us wanting to fight for our own views at all costs and therefore not relating to the opposing party's views. We listen to find points of attack in the opposing party's argument so that we can win the debate.

Automatic listening is often assessment listening. It often leads to a discussion with the aim of convincing the other person of my (right) point of view. Therefore, we must listen more broadly than our automatic listening and learn that we can listen with several different ears. And we must learn that our response to what we hear will depend on our way of listening.

#### 3. Dialogue

In contrast to the debate, dialogue as a conversation differs in that we try to understand the opposing party's views. We ask clarifying questions and use our empathy to put

ourselves in the place of the interlocutor. We do not listen to win, but to learn and understand.

#### 4. Co-creation

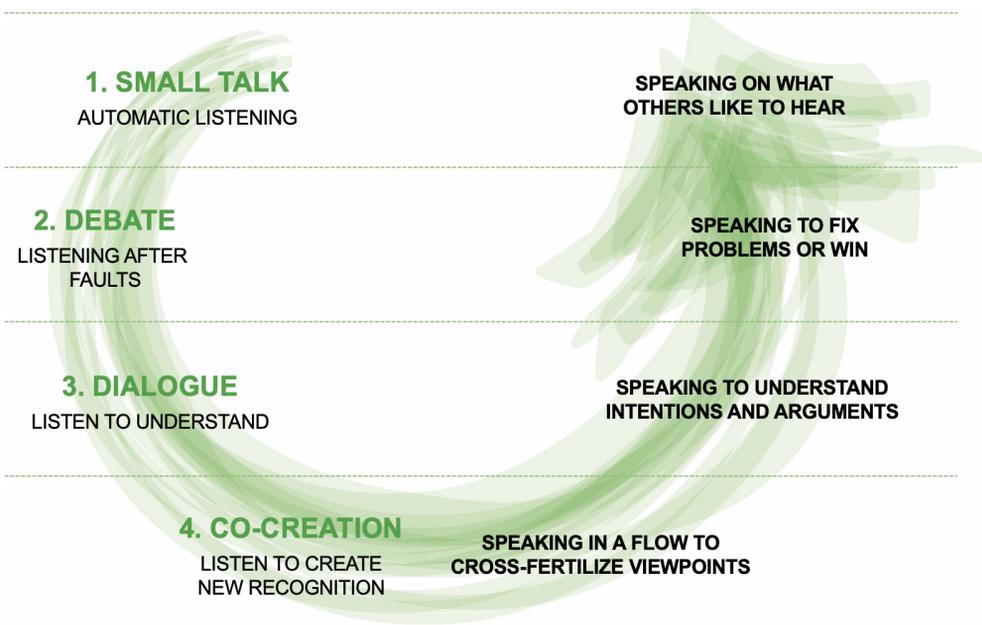
The most developed form of conversation is where co-creation occurs. Here it is not just people who talk to each other and share their own views. A flow arises in which views are cross-fertilized and new perspectives and solutions emerge.

The first step to changing others is to create a trusting relationship. You do this by listening, and with their starting point asking further, and where the questions create change in the other - for example, as opposed to shooting the new thoughts and ideas into people's heads.

### Variety of listening styles

We can set our listening on different frequencies, where agree/disagree can be a form of listening. But we will also be able to set our listening to understand the values behind

## CONVERSATIONAL FORMS AND WAYS OF LISTENING



when he says that what is it based on? What values are at stake, is it caring for the economy, community, and innovativeness? We could listen for what experiences a statement is based on? or what future statements point towards.

In groups, you can ask participants in advance to take different (relevant) listening positions and then subsequently hear what the different positions have noticed based on their listening position. The subsequent dialogue will be multifaceted based on the understanding that all perspectives must subsequently be heard by others to create a broader understanding of what is said and of the content. A solid and broad understanding provides a solid foundation for further weighing the choice of the different options.

### **Ask questions to learn more**

As just described, our response depends on what we have heard. When we no longer listen with debating ears ("I agree/disagree"), and therefore no longer give our own opinion as a follow-up, we can ask ourselves a new investigative place and ask questions.

Questions point in one direction - they can point towards me wanting to learn more about myself (existence), they can point towards the other (ethics), or they can point towards us becoming wiser about something together (cognition). Existence, ethics and cognition are the three big E's of philosophy. So, the investigative place we put ourselves in will have a direction - being aware of the direction and what the question points towards can help along the way - what is it that you would like to learn more about and investigate further?

We are talking about a shift in the communication profession. Communication professionals must move from sender-oriented push communication to creating more cognition and creating bridges for cognition, as Brenda Dervin describes it with "bridging the gap from sensemaking theory" - which is also about creating understanding and cognition.

### **Examples of questions that create a realization**

As we have automatic listening, we also have a series of automaton questions that we often resort to. These questions are often called *detective* questions or *linear questions*, such as:

1. Who else was there?
2. What happened?
3. How many are there?

And it can also be completely closed questions:

4. Have you tried it before?
5. Do you agree?
6. Do you like what you experience?

Other questions that will broaden the realization are what are called *circular questions*, such as:

7. Try to describe what happened.
8. How will others view it, e.g., your boss, your mother, former colleague?
9. What will be your take on why this has happened? What other commandments could there be?

And these may be questions that are more *hypothetical*:

10. Looking 10 years ahead, what will we say about what we are experiencing now?
11. If you had everything in the world, what would you do? If you had a 1/10 of what you have now, then what?
12. If you were Pippi, what would your suggestion be?

By asking wondering and curious questions, you create a new realization – a realization that can lead to seeing something new, and perhaps make you want changes you had not seen before.

## **Go into meta**

We have already described that questions point in a certain direction. And often you can find yourself rolling along a road because the arrow came to point in that direction. Therefore, sometimes you must "go into meta", and lift your gaze on what is happening right now and here. Raise your gaze and look at which direction the arrow is pointing. Are we going to the right place? Are we talking about the right thing?

Reframing can be a good concept to pull in when we talk about going into meta. Because as we have just written about, our conversations can take a direction - and one follows the other. In the same way, the way we find solutions to problems will depend on what we see as a problem. We can often come up with a full brainstorm on how to find solutions, and the walls can be covered with yellow patches and cardboard cards with good solutions. But they have all come in response to what we saw as the problem, to

begin with. Therefore, it is often valuable to dwell for a moment on what problem we would like to solve - could there be other ways to see the problem?

A good example that is often used to explain problem-solving reframing is to imagine that you are going to celebrate your birthday and that you want to kick it off. When we picture "birthday", we see cake or dinner, maybe a glass of wine or more. We see guests eating. And we plan that birthday with this starting point: Which cake should we choose? What and where should we eat? But if we reframe our birthday and say, I want to create an event where I'm celebrated, or where my guests have a good experience, or experience something new. Or where they are going to meet each other because I have the most beautiful and wise friends. In this way, we raise our eyes and begin to consider completely different options: Are we going on an excursion? Should I be in the centre? Should it be dancing or deep conversations? When we think about these questions, we will be able to come up with other suggestions that create exactly the event we want to hold as a birthday party.

## **Build trusting relationships**

Having said all this: the first step in all communication is to create a trusting relationship. You know it - if you don't have confidence, you'll be on guard and you'll sit and notice anything where you don't agree or where there could be sinister ulterior motives. And vice versa; If you like people, then you are more likely to trust their skills and their intention.

Harvard Business Review has done a survey of whom we would most like to work with when selecting team members. And here *likeability* scores higher than competencies. Of course, everyone prefers to choose the ones where they get both, but if they must choose between either high likeability or great skills, then likeability wins. Because who wants to work with those we don't like?

Therefore, it makes sense to work on getting people to like each other - we do not have to be best friends, but likeable. Of course, you only gain deep trust over time, and when you show that you can trust each other - that you keep your promises, deliver to the agreed deadline, that you are honest and can trust what the other person says. But there is a quick trust. The one that arises immediately when we meet another human being, and here we are quick to make our judgment - do we like them or not? Factors that subconsciously play a role in the first quick judgment of trust are, for example, the smile, the experience of kindness (in body, voice, and words) and the experience of being listened to.

Of course, we all find that our first judgment of another can be disproved if we later experience new pages that can either disappoint or excite and thus change the first impression. But trust is the foundation of the conversations we have.

### **Facilitating conversations - our meeting muscle needs rehabilitation**

Many people find that meetings are a waste of time, and our meeting muscle has become limp, which causes us to become disengaged. Commitment is important for our competence to act and must be expressed in all of us - this applies to internal and external meetings. Edgar and Peter Schein write in "*Humble Leadership*" that leaders must increasingly see themselves as the ones who provide knowledge to be added to the company. It can be knowledge of socio-political trends such as gender and equality, or climate and sustainability, or ethical responsibility for subcontractors. But it can also be simple knowledge of competitors or suppliers. Top management must move away from seeing themselves as omniscient, where they must ensure that knowledge and strategic decisions flow down through the hierarchical levels. Schein and Schein write that now top management must ensure that knowledge flows up and across the organisation.

The reason is that we live in a VUCA era (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) where no one has knowledge and insight into everything - therefore it is important that necessary knowledge reaches the right ones, quickly. In addition, top management must ensure that you can work together to bring knowledge and different perspectives into play. Therefore, there is a constantly growing need to be able to facilitate conversations where important knowledge and professional perspectives are listened to, and that knowledge is passed on around the organisation. That is, conversations in which there is genuine communication, rather than the collective monologues in which no one listens, but only wait to tell what is on their minds.

Good conversations do not arise by themselves. They must be facilitated. One of the goals of good facilitation is that conversations can take place that would not otherwise have occurred. And preferably conversations where you discover that the meeting participants do not say the expected, but instead experience that more people say something they have not said before and maybe even thought. The basic rules for general good facilitation must be introduced so that engagement can be found and maintained.

The basic rules of facilitation are:

1. Send a clear agenda where it is clear to everyone what the purpose is.

2. Plan the facilitation of the conversation with variety.
3. Facilitate so that participants can get involved and get on the field so that they can contribute constructively, and so that conversations arise that are not predictable.

A good rule of thumb is that if you end the conversation by talking about what worked well and letting the facilitator role go around, then you will most likely gather the good tricks.

### **Cultivate democratic fitness**

We can all participate in the democratic conversation. However, just as with physical exercise, being in shape is beneficial. Byens Hus in Roskilde and WeDoDemocracy has developed a training program for the democratic conversation, where the focus is on training 8 conversation muscles:

1. Empathy: In a democracy, people are different. You must be able to put yourself in someone else's shoes.
2. Active listening: In a democracy, we look for solutions. You must listen, wonder, and ask.
3. Attitude: In a democracy, there are many ways to go. You need to know what you think and why?
4. Verbal self-confidence: In a democracy, opinions must be broken. You must dare to participate in the debate.
5. Disagreement: In a democracy, we often disagree. You should be able to use it without getting angry or upset.
6. Compromise: In a democracy, there is never 100% agreement. Choose your battles.
7. Mobilization: In a democracy, you must have others with you. You must be able to speak from your own heart to that of others.
8. Activist: In a democracy, you can do anything. Get going.

# Communicators' social responsibility

"He who has the ability has the duty,"

A.P. Moeller

Professional communicators, unlike many other professions, have been reluctant to take responsibility and offer solutions to major challenges. The reason may lie in the fact that the communication profession is still young and evolving. In the early years, communicators were hired to shield the organisation from society - such as press officers, spin doctors, etc. But it can also be because professional communicators have not been fully aware of how valuable abilities communicators have - not only for the organizations they work for but also at the societal level.

We hope that this White Paper has highlighted the fact that communicators have skills that can and should be brought into play. And if you have the skills, you also have the duty.

Professional communicators should therefore do away with the roles of gatekeeper, spin doctor and commentator in the past and instead step onto the stage to join other disciplines in offering themselves to solve societal challenges.

One of the responsibilities of communicators is to foster meaningful conversations, help reduce polarization, and facilitate inclusive spaces where everyone feels involved and heard. If we only aim to win wars, we overlook the fact that we can lose peace. The conversation is a prerequisite for peace and for sustainable development - locally and globally. In other words, the responsibility of communicators lies in creating meaningful conversations.

We can live our responsibilities where we each experience that we can make a difference - in the organisations, we work for, and the communities we are part of. We can contribute to the development of new positive visions of the future, which contribute to creating hope for a better future, unite us as a society and mobilize organizations and communities to act on the crises we face.

At the same time, we have a responsibility to create space for different visions of the future to live and unfold side by side, as well as contribute to reflection. We communicators need to support leaders who dare to show the courage to act, but at the same time show their vulnerability and reflect on what new problems we create when we try to solve the challenges of our time to the best of our knowledge.

# Ethical compass for communicators

Ethics is the way we act towards other people. A professional ethic for professional communicators is about how we use communication as a professional tool, both when we apply it ourselves and when we advise others in communication. A professional ethic, on the other hand, is not about personal or private ethical considerations, e.g., whether you want to work for the cigarette industry as such.

As professional communicators, we need a professional ethical compass to guide our professional choices. Here we are not just thinking of a professional ethic on a piece of paper, but rather a professional ethical competence, which is included quite naturally when planning and implementing communication activities. So, the ethical considerations become as natural as considerations about messages, target groups and channels.

It is no secret that we as a professional group have been a diffuse identity that for several years has been challenged on its role and credibility. Many think of a communicator as someone who supports the special interests of politicians, organisations, or companies, and this is also both right and legitimate. What has created challenges for our profession is our working methods, where not least spin doctors (and the like) have in many ways been allowed to paint a picture of communicators who do not go out of their way to use unsophisticated methods to secure and shift power.

This is in stark contrast to other professions such as doctors, lawyers, or accountants, where there is an expectation of probity. If the accounting is approved by an auditor, we generally think that it is true and fair. Do people in Denmark think a message must be true when it has passed through the communications department? Presumably, unfortunately, they probably think the opposite; what we do is make things sound better than they really are.

Together with those we work for and advise, we share a common challenge that is repeated in Denmark and globally - namely a fundamental decline in trust in decision-makers - politicians, business leaders and managers of special interests. This is a major problem for our society, where cohesion and the ability to make informed and legitimate decisions together are diminished.

As a professional group, we as communicators have been active actors in this development. We must also take responsibility for reversing the trend and creating greater mutual trust in our society, companies, and organizations.

## **The ideal: To make common**

To create greater mutual trust in society in organizations and communicators, we must return to the idea of making things common: Communication comes from the Latin word 'communicare' and can be translated as 'to make common'. 'Community' have the same basic meaning.

We believe that making common, or helping to make common, is the primary ideal of professional communicators. When something is done together, we experience the same case relationship and make it possible to talk about it together and make decisions.

As professional communicators, we help others establish a common picture of case matters and make it possible and help to be able to talk about these matters and make good decisions. For example, this can be political, corporate, and communication to citizens/patients/customers or campaigns.

To succeed in 'making common', we believe that resilience is a keyword for professional communicators. Honesty (or sincerity) means that when we are in conversation/communicating about a matter of fact, everyone involved must speak out without lying or distorting the conversation for their own benefit. Whoever lies or speaks manipulatively or strategically is not obtrusive (but untrustworthy).

We all have different prerequisites for speaking out on a given matter, but regardless, we should aim for conversations where people are equal; where there is no one who has privileged status over others and can speak freely.

By opting for reliability, we necessarily opt out of deliberate/calculating/strategic manipulation, where we manipulate via lies, distortions or concealments. We are aware that one cannot communicate about the world objectively via texts (in the broadest sense) - that there are always opt-ins and opt-outs, but one can strive for the greatest possible correctness and truth in communication, considering the framework and possibilities under which communication takes place.

## **Guiding principles/values in the professional ethics compass for communicators**

### 1) Decision-capability:

- We support informed and legitimate decisions and their diffusion.
- Qualified because the most suitable are effectively involved in the decision-making process.
- Legitimate because anyone with a (special) interest in the case is openly involved in the process.

- Diffusion because we ensure that informed and legitimate decisions can come out and affect people's knowledge, attitudes, and actions.

## 2. Honesty and sincerity – do not lie, mislead, manipulate, or conceal:

- The saying 'we must tell the truth, but we do not have to mess with it - and, moreover, it does not pay off in the long term' must be replaced by ...
- 'We must always speak the truth, even if it may damage our cause here and now - and we must do so because it is the right thing to do!'

## 3. Openness and transparency – being transparent about intentions, processes, interests, etc.:

- When explaining ourselves or being asked, we must try to explain ourselves with as much openness as possible, for example, about a given decision - or about a problem that we would like to have solved.
- Whom we work for/what interests we serve must always be openly communicated, both when communicating for a particular point of view or against.

## 4. Understandability and meaning:

- For something to be "made common", it must be understood and make sense to everyone involved in the communication.
- The communicating parties must understand what the case relationship is all about, and the communication must make sense of the case, and what it means for the individual or the interests he or she represents.

## 5. Co-creation:

- The ideal of democratic conversations is two-way co-creation, listening as carefully as speaking, and where the goal is that we all become wiser through the conversation.
- There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, for example, for purely practical reasons (why we sometimes choose representatives to make decisions on our behalf, e.g., politicians or leaders)

## 6. Communication professionalism:

- Professional communicators use methods that have been developed through experience, testing and documented impact and that are generally professionally recognized by the professionals working in the professional field.

- Professional communicators know their professional strengths and weaknesses. They stick to taking on tasks that they have professional experience in solving and refrain from the opposite. Always.

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# About the initiative: Conversations about the meaningful community

With this initiative, we at K1 – Communicators Association want to give a voice to the movement towards a meaningful society.

As professional communicators, we focus daily on creating meaning and trust, and it is these skills that we want to offer and bring into play. We want to create a broad and cross-party movement and want to invite everyone to join the conversation so that it gains power and strength.

In Denmark, we are proud of our welfare society and other countries around the world look with admiration at how we have been able to create a safe and trusting society where everyone, at least in principle, has free and equal access to education and health care as well as a safety net with social services. But it has also become increasingly clear that we live in a time of upheaval, where new answers and solutions are needed if we are to ensure the viability of the welfare society for future generations. What are we doing to solve the climate crisis? How do we reverse the worrying trend in young people's mental health? And how do we ensure a society where there is still trust in decision-makers, authorities, experts, businesses, the media, and citizens?

Our bid is *a meaningful society*, where the reactivation of the citizen as a firebrand and thus the desire to protect the community and contribute to cohesion plays a crucial role. The corona crisis has shown that the potential is present. People seek community and find meaning in contributing what they can.

Participants in the initiative group:

- Jesper Sloth Møller
- Danny Nørskov
- Jesper Witt
- Jacob Søby Bang
- Pelle Nilsson
- Signe Bonnén
- Anders Schroll

# About K1 - Communicators Association

K1's story begins in the fall of 2016, when a small group of committed communicators in Denmark set out to create a new community for communicators. The ambitions were high and the resources small. Fortunately, the interest from other communicators was noticeable, and soon several enthusiasts signed up for the work of building K1 up.

Together, the K1s have created an association where everything revolves around communication. Where everyone contributes and takes responsibility. Where we have many good friends but no commercial interests. Where we can meet across communication specialities, education, and age. Where our diversity challenges, inspires, and develops the communication profession.

In short, an association where the K stands for the communication contribution you put into it yourself. Today, K1 is an established association with over 400 members, and more are being added.

If you want to know more about K1, write to us at [k1@k1kommunikationsforening .dk](mailto:k1@k1kommunikationsforening.dk)

# Postscript

## Connected Communication and Language

The communication profession is undergoing rapid development. New and higher demands are placed on our professional field. Fortunately, many of us can - and would like to - provide perspectives on the future professional standpoint for communicators.

K1's white paper: "Conversations about the meaningful society", is one of them. It pushes the boundaries of what the communication profession can and must do in the future, what we as communicators can contribute, and what responsibility we should take on. It is a solid and good signal on behalf of the profession when you manage to rise in the helicopter, take stock and set a direction.

The world is moving, and the field of communication is moving with it. Increasing complexity in society places demands on the quality of communication and dissemination that must make difficult and complex messages understandable. As communicators, we are no longer just the ones who 'put vermicelli on'.

The playing field has become more extensive so that communicators can contribute differently. The development opens a new professional potential where communicative skills should be used in a different context.

The rules of the game have also changed. The issues we have previously worked with have changed, dynamics and roles have changed, and thus expectations of what we as communicators should deliver. "Conversations about the meaningful society" paints a motivating picture of the future potential of the communication profession. One can only be encouraged by the. But this also entails responsibility and courage to proactively play themselves on the field and contribute with their competencies.

For years, communicators have contributed with their communication skills, analysis apparatus and consulting skills as the primary professional foundation. Now the subject potentially takes another quantum leap in its development, and K1's white paper offers an idea of the possibilities of becoming part of the solution to future societal challenges. Important.

With development, uncertainty also arises; What exactly does it mean, where does the conversation begin, and how do I become a facilitator? Therefore, an essential part of the future conversation is finding common ground in acquiring and bringing newer skills across other disciplines. And thus, the dialogue between the communicators is of absolute importance.

Also, beyond the framework set out in the White Paper, forums like The Union.

Communication and Language Professionals, K1 – Communicators Association, and other communication professional forums are responsible for creating and breathing life into. So, we use each other, ensure a solid professional community, and make a reference for professional pride in the field. There can easily be more of this if we are to get rid of being 'the nice ones' who accept the task but instead define it themselves.

"Conversations about the meaningful society" contributes to a solid professional platform where we can strengthen each other and our work as communicators. As practitioners, we are all part of creating and looking after the legitimacy and honesty of the profession. We contribute to the credibility of the work every single time we practice it. Therefore, it is also reassuring that there are several of us who look in the same direction and support each other in reflecting on our professional field and defining our future potential.

Let the conversations begin. We look forward to them.



Cathrine Holm-Nielsen

*Chairman, The Union of Communication and Language Professionals*



"Where communicators used to be promoted for their ability to sharpen, simplify and perhaps distort messages, the future legitimacy of our profession will depend on us imposing ethical standards on our way of working and being transparent about our practices."

"The primary task of professional communicators is not to market pre-defined messages or try to control communication. The job is to create conversations where everyone feels included and heard and contributes with insight and reflection."

"The way we listen has a crucial impact on the nature of conversations – do we listen to win or to learn? Good conversations don't happen by themselves. They need to be facilitated. One of the goals of good facilitation is that conversations can take place that would not otherwise have occurred."

"Communication comes from the Latin word 'communicare' and can be translated as 'to make common'. We believe that making commonality is the primary ideal for professional communicators."

"Hope is not a strategy. We cannot rely on creating a meaningful society based on hope alone. But equally true is that strategies without hope are ... hopeless."

"What kind of society do we want to live in and pass on to our children and grandchildren? Professional communicators can and should address the answer to that question through conversations that involve broadly."

"As professional communicators, we must choose between using our skills to manipulate, create greater distance and serve special interests - or to check facts, ask good questions and listen, ensure the good tone and make everyone smarter."



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