

Emotional boarding using the 'check-in'.

An empirical study on the effects of the check-in on emotions and decision making in a Dutch financial organization.

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0. Abstract and keywords.

This study investigates the relevance of emotions in group dynamics and on decision-making processes in a Dutch financial organization. In the context of an extensive cultural change programme the relatively simple intervention of the 'check-in' was introduced. Management at different levels of the organization used the three open questions of the check-in-procedure at the beginning of their meetings. This study consists of 14 case studies using semi-structured interviews and a survey amongst 767 employees to evaluate the use and impact of the check-in. The results show that the check-in is an effective intervention that invites people to express their feelings at the beginning of a meeting, generally resulting in a sharing of emotions. As a consequence awareness of emotional interactions, the significance of interpersonal relationships and respect for each other's views ameliorate. This appears to positively affect group dynamics, resulting in a collective focus on a shared goal surpassing traditional hierarchical patterns. The discussions in meetings are reported to improve in quality. In combination with a better understanding of the participant's points of view the decision-making process is improved. The use of the check-in requires a more listening and vulnerable attitude of leaders and participants.

Key words: emotion, connection, group dynamics, vulnerability, culture, decision-making, check-in.

1. Introduction and study design

1.1 Narrative

'They all trooped in with tense faces, many of them looking grumpy; little was said. The tension was tangible. After months of preparation and sending memos back and forth, detailing different positions and arguments, the time had come for the 140 senior managers to convene with the Executive Board to discuss the future of the organization. Their standpoints were widely divergent. The autonomy of the individual business units and the associated independence of the management positions were up for discussion. There was no confidence that the Executive Board would take seriously the nuances expressed by the local management teams. The predominant impression was that the Executive Board's view was likely to be imposed on them. The resistance to the board's view was massive.

It was a large room, with round tables at which the managers sat together in groups of ten. In the front there was a stage with the six - all male- members of the Executive Board sitting behind tables. Their faces, too, were tense – there was a lot at stake and there was a strong desire to arrange support for their views. To the Executive Board it was all too clear that the knives were out. But this was the moment: it was here that the discussion had to take place – that would enable them to move forward and set the tone for the future.

And then something remarkable happened – something unexpected. The day chair opened the meeting with a check-in. 'The time has come for us to enter into a dialogue with the Executive Board. Anything at all can be brought up. I feel this is quite an exciting moment; I have no idea how the discussion will go. That is why I would like to start with a check-in, consisting of three questions. The first one is, 'How

am I feeling?’ The second is, ‘Is there something that is distracting me from being fully present in this moment?’ And the third is, ‘What is my intention for this meeting?’ I am going to get the ball rolling by answering these questions myself, and then I will ask the members of the Executive Board to do the same’.

The board's check-ins start out on a rather flat note. Two of the board members share their opinions in a very businesslike manner: they appeal to the common sense of those present and emphasize the importance of the outcome of the discussion. The next two go slightly further in sharing their observations, admitting that they also feel it is quite stressful to have this discussion. The other two members speak even more candidly and share their personal emotions, their sense of discomfort and uncertainty. One of them states that the past few years have been tough for him personally as well – because of the relationships at the top, people building a wall around their positions, management being based on personal interests and there being a lack of opportunities to truly engage in open dialogue. There is, he says, a constant sense of insecurity, of not being able to speak your mind and say how you really feel – the feeling that you could be stabbed in the back at any time. He refers to the sense of impotence he senses when working together towards a solution, and the "every man for himself" mindset that appears to prevail. Everyone is fighting their own corner and mainly concerned with covering up problems or letting someone else take the blame. It has been an emotionally difficult period that has been characterized by a profound sense of isolation and powerlessness. It is a real personal confession, with emotion evident in his voice. The psychological pressure of the past few years becomes painfully apparent. The sense of disorientation felt by the leaders tasked with keeping the organization on track is clearly visible. A virtually

unstoppable outpouring of self-expression – and all this from someone who is known for being a man of few words.

You could hear a pin drop in the room. After his final words, which perfectly render the almost physically tangible sense of isolation that he has been experiencing, it remains quiet.

And then something remarkable happens. The faces of the people in the room relax, their eyes soften, people take a deep breath – they truly experience the emotion, with everyone collectively feeling the pain that was suffered.

Questions are asked thoughtfully. People accept what has happened and take a more quiet, reflective approach to figuring out where to go from here. ‘We want to talk to each other about what has been going on. Why did things go the way they did? We do not want this anymore, this organization deserves better – above all, our employees and our customers do.’ People ask about each other's personal feelings. They want to know what it was like so they can learn lessons for the future. The importance of sharing experiences, emotions and interpretations of events is emphasized. Everyone wants to know how this could have come to pass and people express the sincere wish to engage with each other in a more honest and authentic way in the future – to respect each other and not judge, but instead to try and learn to understand each other, even if there are differences of opinion. Many express their appreciation for the board members' personal openness and how they have revealed their vulnerability. People say that this gives them hope for the future.

This turns the opening of the debate into one not based on disparate opinions about the desired outcome or on points of view laid down beforehand, but one based instead on a collective emotion: the desire to do what is best for the organization for

which everyone present has a shared responsibility. A new willingness emerges to put aside personal interests and preconceived ideas, a willingness to listen to each other and share different perspectives – a willingness to work towards a solution together.'

1.2 Introduction

In the context of a positive behaviour support programme, the group of Hawken and Horner described a Check-In/ Check-Out procedure for pupils at schools. In this context, young adults with emotional and behavioural disorders received feedback on a daily basis that was demonstrated to improve their situation (Crone, Horner & Hawken, 2004; Hawken, Adolphson, MacLeod & Schumann, 2009). This intervention formed the inspiration to introduce a similar approach, adapted to the circumstances of the organization in which this research was performed, and is subsequently called 'check-in' throughout this thesis.

This study is about using the check-in as an intervention mechanism in collaborations between people. The 'check-in' is an intervention at the start of meetings and conferences that consists of the following three questions to be answered by all those participating in the meeting: 'How am I feeling?'; 'Is there something that is distracting me from being fully present in this moment?'; and 'What is my intention for this meeting?' The study focuses on the question whether using the check-in leads to a connection between people at an emotional level, and through this to different group dynamics and ultimately, better decision-making.

The study took place in a large Dutch financial organization where, in the context of a culture programme, the check-in was introduced as an intervention mechanism among the top 600 managers of the Dutch business units, representing a total

population of more than 35,000 employees. Top management, learning to use the check-in as an intervention, are all highly educated specialists and general managers who are accustomed to perform in a context in which discussions are mainly based on rational analyses and arguments. The organization, which operates both nationally and internationally, is highly complex, with many long-established processes, systems and structures that determine how decisions are made. The population at the top consists mainly of men (90%), whose perspective in debates is largely predicated on roles and positions in the organization. In this hierarchically orientated organization, there is a great distance between upper-level management and the employees on the work floor. The organizational culture is rather masculine. The organization is on the brink of a transformation, which requires broad support for some radical changes. Wide consultations with all the relevant stakeholders about the future of the organization need to take place. The support of employees across all areas and at all levels of the organization must be obtained for this to be achieved. Consequently, the organization initiated an extensive culture change programme, in which the check-in was introduced as an intervention method.

1.3 Research questions

The central research question in this study is whether the check-in is an effective intervention for expressing and subsequently identifying and channelling emotions of meeting participants, with the ultimate goal to achieve a better decision-making process.

The dominant research questions in this study are:

1. Does the check-in contribute to a better understanding of individual emotions?
2. Does the check-in impact on group dynamics?

3. Does the check-in have a positive impact on the decision-making process?
4. Do the management teams and staff incorporate the check-in in the organization's routine?

2. Literature Review on the relevance of emotions in organizational functioning

2.1. Emotions, at individual and group level

During the last decades the awareness of the impact of emotions in organizations has increased and scientists started to do new research in this field. Fineman (1999) describes how the scope of organizational studies is shifting to include emotion and how researchers have become aware that emotions are part of the “social order and social expression of work”. As a consequence, organizations from then on can be considered to be emotional places, because they function as an interplay of human intentions, human purposes and human interactions. According to Armstrong (2004) emotions express what is happening in organizations below the surface, because they reflect the underlying thoughts from our inner world. If we want to understand what is going on in organizations we should try to recognize and interpret the emotions of our colleagues and staff. Like in normal daily life, emotions, such as fear, joy, hope, happiness, sadness, anxieties and all other emotions people tend to have, appear of critical importance in organizations.

Akgün, Keskin & Byrne (2009) describe the term ‘emotion’ as ‘mental states of individuals, including feelings’ and argue that emotions shape work activities and behaviour of individuals and groups in organizations. Fineman (1999) states that this perspective means that we need to explore the feelings of employees, and to change the focus from ‘information’, ‘expectancies’, ‘demands’, ‘incentives’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘decision-making’ and ‘thinking’ to the unconscious desires and anxieties which are expressed in peoples functioning. The shift of our focus to the emotional life in organizations and the underlying processes can give us insights in the functioning of

the organization as a system (Armstrong, 2004). Kelly & Barsade (2001) describe how emotion influences group processes. They define group emotion as an affective state of a group, in which both individual-level affective factors of group members and group- or contextual level factors shape the affective experience of the group. They argue that group members introduce their emotions, feelings, moods, emotional intelligence and sentiments in the dynamics and interactions of a group. Consequently their emotional state influences the group process and group behaviour. Barsade & Gibson (2007) mention that group emotion can be defined 'bottom-up', which means that it can be seen as the various emotional states of group members.

2.2 Emotions, effects on behaviour, performance and strategy

Kelly & Barsade (2001) and later Barsade & Gibson (2007) indicate that group emotion has a direct effect on group behaviour, cooperation and performance. In a later study Barsade & Gibson (2012) describe how group affect both influences an individual's behaviour and attitude as well as group behaviour and group outcomes. They approach group emotion from an affective –compositional perspective, which includes the composition of individual affective traits, moods and emotions. Katsaros & Nicolaidis (2012) suggest that employees' emotions have impact on motivation and influence performance, commitment and level of effort. They describe that positive emotions in the workplace also enhance collaboration and flexibility and stimulate employees to set their goals.

Staw, Sutton & Pelled (1994) describe a conceptual framework in which they investigate what the impact of emotions in the workplace is. They show that employees with positive emotions have better results than employees with negative

emotions. Positive emotions lead not only to persistence and enhanced cognitive functioning but also to increased social functioning. Staw et al., (1994) argued that personal emotions affect personal and organizational purposes, and that people who feel positive emotions experience more positive outcomes in their roles than their more negative colleagues and have more social influence. The study shows that positive emotions generate better results for both individuals and organizations.

In this context they suggest that additional research needs to be done to relate the different kind of emotions (a.o. hope, fear, joy, sadness) with their impact on organizational performance. In addition they are interested to know how emotions are transmitted within organizations. In line with this, Huy (1999) describes that organizations with larger emotional capacities are better, faster and more effective in executing changes. The extent in which employees feel free to share their emotions determines their success to improve their collaboration. Huy indicates that decision-making is improved when people can express their emotions and uncertainties. He concludes that emotions are of essential importance in leading organizations and are the connection between rational and non-rational processes (Huy 1999).

Displayed emotions play a substantial role in strategic discussions, where "team relationship dynamics are a key mechanism, linking emotional dynamics and strategizing processes" (Liu & Maitlis, 2014). Liu et al. (2014) describe how emotion affects processes of top teams discussing new strategy and how emotional dynamics shape the strategic conversation. Even the physical emotional expression, or absence of emotions, create different outcomes in discussions. The way in which teams express emotions create different inter-relational interactions and processes. Sharing emotions can increase or diminish inter-relational connections and impact the value of strategic discussions. The same authors also experienced the meaning

of positive emotions on strategizing processes. In this study it was described that expressed positive emotions cause better cooperation and alignment of team members and also improve cognitive flexibility (Liu et al., 2014).

Some writers as Fineman (1999) and Bolton (2004) argue that emotions can be seen as valuable resources for management, based on which they can manage the goals and performance of teams and use the emotional dynamics as a competitive advantage (Akgün et al., 2009). Huy (1999) argues that emotional capability of organizations is the ability 'to acknowledge, recognize, monitor, discriminate and attend to its members' emotions, and it is manifested in the organization's norms and routines, related to feeling' (Huy, 1999, p. 325). The emotional capability of an organization is based on individual emotions and capabilities of employees, which are transferred to a collective emotional level. The collective emotions shape an organization's routines and processes and collective behaviour. This is a competitive advantage because this collective behaviour, this collective culture cannot be copied by other organizations, due to its unique composition of all individual employees. 'Emotional capability constitutes one dimension of the organization's internal capacity, which is difficult to imitate because it is embedded in the idiosyncratic social web of organizational interactions' (Huy, 1999, p. 342).

2.3 Emotional capability and change

Huy describes six emotional dynamics to illustrate 'the emotional capability concept' (see below) and shows how emotional dynamics and change dynamics interfere (Huy, 1999, p. 326). To implement radical change, organizations not only need cognitive oriented descriptions of their processes, but also have to recognize the underlying emotions and uncertainties of their employees when change has to be

implemented. To realize the change the understanding of the emotional impact on group members is more important than having a straight rational approach. This is also described by William Bridges (2009), as he describes the three transformational phases we have to go through if we have to transform our organizations. He mentions the phases of 'Ending', 'Neutral Zone', and 'New beginning'. In each of these phases people go through different emotional processes which highly influence the cooperation and orientation on the results the organization wants to achieve. The motivation of people and their willingness to cooperate depends on the way in which leaders cope with the transitional phases and on their openness and sensitivity to peoples anxieties (Bridges, 2009). In transformations we need emotions as a connection between the rational and the irrational processes. Huy (1999) states that organizations with high level of emotional capability can realize deep change, because emotional capability is a necessary feature for change. The six emotional dynamics which Huy (1999) describes are:

1. *Emotional dynamics of experiencing* that reflects the understanding of other peoples' feelings;
2. *Emotional dynamics of reconciliation* that reflects the peoples' ability to bring together opposing values about which people have strong feelings in the organization;
3. *Emotional dynamics of identification* that reflects peoples' emotional bonding with the organization;
4. *Emotional dynamics of encouragement* that refers to the organizations' ability to instill hope;
5. *Emotional dynamics of display of freedom* that refers to the organizations' ability to accept all the different individual emotions, without fear of reprisal;

6. *Emotional dynamics of playfulness* which refers to the ability to create an environment where people can experiment and are allowed to make mistakes during change (Huy, 1999, p. 336-340).

Akgün et al. (2009) investigated these six emotional dynamics in the context of a firms' innovativeness and showed that if an organization can instill hope among its members, encourages enthusiasm, and brings joy to the organization, they can develop new products in a more creative and efficient way, they can improve their business processes and renew and change methods. In general he showed that in an organization where people feel free to share their emotions, can communicate their emotions and experience that other people do the same and respond to their feelings, an organization can improve business and processes (Akgün et al., 2009).

2.4 Emotional Intelligence

The attention to the meaning of emotions in organizations has led to explorations on the influence of emotional intelligence of leaders and employees in organizations. Emotional Intelligence is described by Salovey & Mayer (1990) as the 'ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions'. Stein and Book (2010) add that emotional self-awareness is necessary in the realm of emotional intelligence. They note that emotional intelligence refers to the 'inner self' and means that emotional intelligent people need to know what their feelings are, how these feelings influence their behaviour and how their emotions influence the way other people experience them. It is important to know how you are in touch with yourself, and how you feel about yourself if you want to be sensitive to the emotions of others. Chien Farh, Myeong-Gu Seo & Tesluk (2012) theorize that employees with high

emotional intelligence create higher teamwork effectiveness and they demonstrate a positive relationship between emotional abilities and job performance, and state that emotional intelligence relates positively to teamwork performance. Employees with high emotional intelligence are sensitive to feelings and emotions of others and therefore can interpret underlying information that help their interpersonal interactions and decision-making. They also state that teams with more members with emotional intelligence have less conflicts and are more collaborative and effective in reaching common goals. Salovey and Mayer (1990) suggest that expressing emotions is a part of emotional intelligence and people who can express emotions accurately can better perceive and respond to emotions of others.

2.5 Emotion and leadership

Pescolido (2002) describes the role of leaders as managers of group emotions. Leadership needs to be connected to the emotions in a group. The leader has to recognize and interpret the various emotions and also needs to understand what the causes of these collective emotions are. By doing so, a leader can adequately respond to events that influence group emotions. Charismatic leaders feel connected to the emotions in a group, they understand these emotions and values and acknowledge that their leadership style is crucial for 'making events meaningful for followers' (Yukl, 1999).

McColl-Kennedy & Anderson (2002) describe the impact of leadership style and emotions on performance of employees. Both leaders and subordinates feel and express emotions, in a range from highly positive to highly negative. The exposure to situations that produce emotions can influence feelings, attitudes and behaviors of both leaders and followers. Grossman (2000) mentions that leaders who understand

emotions can stimulate employees to be more effective and efficient in their output. Transformational leaders use emotions to communicate their vision, tend to be optimistic and sensitive to employees' needs and provide individual attention to motivate their subordinates (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2002). Emotional intelligent leaders reflect upon their values, passions and purposes and create resonant relationships with others. They are in tune with the environment and use their emotional intelligence to share hope, compassion and mindfulness to inspire people (Boyatzis, Smith, Van Oosten & Woolford, 2012).

2.6 Conclusion.

Since the mid-eighties a growing interest in the topic of emotion in the context of organizations and leadership has emerged. The overall notion arising from this literature review is that organizations in which emotions can be expressed and shared perform better and are more capable to realize profound changes. Emotional sensitivity and emotional intelligence among leaders of organizations appears to be an important prerequisite to benefit from this potential. From this perspective any organizational intervention that accentuates emotions may be expected to have a positive influence on group dynamics and decision- making, the subject of this thesis.

3. Methodology.

This study is based on two different forms of research. Firstly, using fourteen semi-structured interviews, the management's experiences with the check-in were explored; secondly, a survey was sent out to a broader cross section of our organization (767 people) with questions on the use of the check-in and in part on the basis of the interview findings.

The semi-structured interviews were held with fourteen senior managers who were introduced to the check-in as part of the companies' culture programme. They were selected randomly from a list of programme participants. Six of the interviewees were female, eight were male. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes and were based on a pre-formulated questionnaire consisting of eight questions. In accordance with the format for case study research as described by Yin (2014), these were mainly 'how' and 'what' questions inviting the interviewees to expound on personal experiences and giving them the opportunity to highlight any issue emerging from the check-in. The interviewees were aware that I am responsible for the culture programme and am doing this research in the context of my thesis. I asked them to critically evaluate the effects of the check-in based on their own experiences, and share their observations about its impact in their own organization. The questions in the interviews were based on my own experiences with the check-in, which I have been applying during team meetings, conferences and large-scale meetings with employees or customers for more than a year now. In accordance with the approach described by Braun & Clark (2006) the interviews were analysed according to the most dominant themes: 'emotion', 'connection', 'group dynamics', 'vulnerability' and decision-making.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a survey was sent out to 767 people, comprising senior managers and employees involved in the culture programme (i.e. culture coaches and HR- advisors), all of whom work in the Dutch divisions of the organization. In addition to questions about the check-in, the survey included a number of additional questions about the progress of the culture programme, which are not used in this thesis. The response rate of the survey was more than 60%, i.e. 471 people. The questions in the survey were formulated to gain insight into whether different divisions of the organization are applying the check-in for conferences and meetings, and whether the respondents consider the check-in to be a valuable intervention. In addition, a number of observations mentioned in the interviews were tested.

The choice was made to undertake an empirical study using case studies because the phenomenon of the check-in must be considered within the context of the organization and the culture programme as a whole and cannot be seen separately from these. This empirical study is based on my hypothesis that the use of the check-in has an impact on group-dynamic processes. The goal of the empirical part of this study is to analyse the use of the check-in in practice. To this end a protocol was employed comprising the following steps:

1. Description of the organizational context.
2. Observations regarding the check-in using fourteen semi-structured interviews.
3. Observations regarding the check-in using a survey.
4. Cross-case comparisons by aggregating the main findings according to a number of theoretical concepts, such as emotion, connection, group dynamics, vulnerability and decision-making.

4. Research context.

The study took place at a large Dutch financial institution (55,000 FTEs, of which 35,000 in the Netherlands), present in 48 countries worldwide. The global economic and financial crisis has put financial institutions under severe pressure. The public's opinion of financial institutions has turned to contempt, especially since a number of major financial institutions had to be rescued with public funds. The government is extremely critical and has introduced additional legislation increasing the levels of supervision under which institutions must operate. In brief, the organization at which this study took place is part of a sector that is in the middle of an identity crisis, trying to regain the confidence of customers and society as a whole.

The organization itself has undergone a period of great upheaval. Turbulence at the top resulting in four board members leaving within a year, a scandal leading to a substantial financial settlement, compliance issues that require substantial time and effort to resolve, employees that are afraid and uncertain and customers that feel alienated. There is an awareness that the organizational culture needs to be changed. Substantial work needs to be done on raising awareness of collective behaviour, both within the organization itself and in terms of the way public opinion is formed outside of it. In these circumstances I was asked to design a culture programme that should transform individual and collective behaviour.

In the next section I will describe the composition of the culture programme and the interventions we have introduced in the organization. The study will then focus on one of these interventions: the 'check-in'.

In the context of the turmoil described above, the culture programme was designed aiming to regain and refresh our identity and goals. When setting up the programme, I focused on 'culture' as standing for our collective behaviour.

I started by defining three different perspectives to set up the culture programme.

First, the role of the individual: What does my personal behaviour mean for the culture of the organization? What are my inner drivers? Why do I behave the way I do? Am I aware of my deeper motivations, fears and needs and what are they based on? Secondly, if I gain insight into my behaviour and drivers, how will this affect my interaction with colleagues and subordinates? Thirdly, if we are working on this with each other, what are the implications for the shape of our organization, its processes and structures and how can we link the strategic priorities to desired behaviour?

4.1 Design of the culture programme

The culture programme is based on the afore mentioned questions. It is provided to the organization's senior and executive management over an extended period of time in the form of a series of two-day modules that we refer to as 'forums'. We began by having the organization's 600 senior and executive managers participate in the forums with their teams. This took place in groups of 25 people, each made up of an average of five management teams from both the local organizations and the central supporting organization.

'Fieldwork' is conducted in the periods between the different forums. The fieldwork aims to integrate insights from the forums and is supported by facilitators whom we have trained to provide assistance with the cultural change and the processes involved in it. The different teams are supported within their own organization by what are referred to as 'culture coaches'. Culture coaches are employees who have been

chosen by other employees to provide guidance during the cultural change within an entity because they are seen as embodying the desired culture. They help to design and initiate various interventions within their own unit.

Between the second and the third forums there is a team swap, with all the teams changing places for two days and visiting another team's offices.

4.2 Organizational Culture Survey

A worldwide survey (another than described in this thesis) among all employees provided the basis for the further development of the modules. This survey gave employees the opportunity to voice their opinions about the culture, the fears and uncertainties in the organization and the future course they would like to see. The results of the survey, in which more than 21,000 employees participated (a response rate of 43%), served as a mirror for senior management. How do employees view senior management and what changes do they think are required? How does this affect senior management's behaviour and the culture employees would like to see? The results of the survey were aggregated at the organizational level as input for the various modules. The most prominent outcome is that more than 66% of employees would like to change the current culture. There is a need for openness and transparency, honesty and adequate feedback.

4.3 Theoretical foundations of the culture programme

In designing the culture programme, we looked for models that could effectively be applied across large groups of people. Selected were Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, C. Otto Scharmer's *Theory U*, Ronald A. Heifetz's '*The Work of Leadership*', David Cooperriders '*Appreciative Inquiry*' and Robert Kegan's and Lisa Lahey's '*Immunity to change*'.

4.4 Structure of the forums

I will now go on to outline the structure of the three different forums and the various interventions that we provide to and practice with the teams. These exercises are meant to provide guidance to continue the work within one's own unit.

Structure of forum 1: The individual

Why are we here? What are the strengths in the organizational culture and what needs to improve? What do we want to achieve over the next few years in our organization in terms of behaviour? What is the desired culture? What choices do I make when it comes to my own attitude and behaviour? These are some of the questions that are discussed in the first forum. All participants in the forum analyse their individual behaviour in pairs. The key insights gained during this process are shared with the group and form a starting point for looking at individual behaviour and interactions within the teams with a fresh pair of eyes. Actively discovering the personal behaviour patterns and sharing experiences and insights provides people with the opportunity to practice connecting with and become aware of their 'inner self' – the source of their thoughts, feelings and actions.

In this forum we introduce the 'check-in', a simple intervention that can be used at the start of meetings to create a moment of reflection and bring people together at the emotional level. The check-in consists of three questions that each participant is invited to answer:

1. 'How am I feeling?'
2. 'Is there something that is distracting me from being fully present in this moment?'
3. 'What is my intention for this meeting?'

Forum 2: The employee

In the second forum we look back on what the teams have done in terms of the culture in their organization in the preceding period, supported by the facilitators and the culture coaches. We learn a number of new exercises that concentrate on listening, trust and giving feedback. The essence of this forum is to use the 'inner self' as one's starting point in learning how to be a better listener, bringing positive energy and creativity into the organization, setting personal commitments, practicing feedback conversations and building trust.

Forum 3: The organization

In the third forum we forge a connection between the strategic priorities of the organization and individual behaviour. By linking these goals to desired behaviour, we connect the content of the first and second forums with that of forum 3. It is about how we interact with each other, our employees and our customers.

5. Data analysis

The results of this study are derived from two research methods. First, a limited number of semi-structured interviews (n=14) with senior executives who participated in the first culture forum, at which the check-in was introduced as an intervention. Secondly, a survey was sent out to a larger sample of people (n=767) who have been introduced to the use of the check-in. 46% of this sample is made up of managers and 54% is comprised of employees, including culture coaches and HR advisors. The number of respondents was 471 (a 61% response rate).

5.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with fourteen people, all of whom are senior executives who hold responsibility for the management of independent entities. The size of their entity ranges from 20 to 1,000 staff. Together they represent nearly 4,600 employees working both for large-scale independent local organizations and departments of the central organization. These interviewees represent all the areas of expertise that are relevant to the organization. The interviewees were randomly selected from a list of participants in the culture programme. Six women and eight men were interviewed; each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. Below I will present the questions I asked during the interviews, along with a general overview of the findings for each topic. For a detailed overview of the interviews, see appendix 1. The analysis of the interviews was structured by focusing on a number of concepts that kept coming up in the responses, namely 'emotions', 'connection', 'group dynamics', 'vulnerability' and 'decision-making'.

Do you start your MT meetings with a check-in? Is it an official part of the management agenda?

Of the fourteen interviewees, eleven people reported using the check-in at the start of a meeting always, with the check-in being a fixed agenda item. They carried out a check-in not only within their own management team and the teams reporting to it, but also in other types of meetings, such as employee meetings or consultations with the workers council. Two people stated they do not always use the check-in, but use it depending on the nature of the meeting. A number of people do a check-in multiple times a day, even if it is largely the same group of people participating in each meeting. Discipline is important; it must be a natural habit. One interviewee does not use the check-in as such but a variation on it. This team has, however, adopted the associated terminology.

What were the key reasons for you to decide to introduce the check-in and what were your expectations?

For twelve senior executives, the culture programme prompted the introduction of the check-in at meetings and conferences. One team has been introduced to the check-in, but does not use it as such in their daily routine. Another team is now using the check-in whereas they had previously used their own version of it prior to its introduction as part of the culture programme. Three people did not have any particular expectations, but just began using it. Others expressed the expectation that it would work, the desire to be a role model in the culture transition and the wish to move away from only discussing business topics to also giving attention to personal issues. Another interviewee stated that the first forum led to the insight that there should also be scope for people's feelings within the organization. The culture transition has led to the use of this new intervention: 'The check-in is part of the new culture of addressing each other to and making decisions,' and 'What I hope to see, is that people cooperate in a more conscious way, more than they otherwise would

do. (...) checking- in results in a stronger connection.’ Another leader said: ‘It is important to understand how people are feeling.’

What are your experiences so far? Are there any differences in the group in the way people do participate?

A number of concepts came up repeatedly in the interviewees’ accounts of their experiences with the check-in: ‘emotions’, ‘connection’, ‘group dynamics’, ‘support’ and ‘vulnerability’.

The predominant experience was that the check-in leads to the sharing of emotions (n=8). By learning to check- in, people learn ‘to express things at the level of feelings’. This allows you to become aware of how other people are feeling and gives you the opportunity to ask questions. The check-in appears to be a natural way to find out how people are feeling. If you understand other people’s emotions, it becomes easier to support each other. The expression of feelings is important because it allows you to address issues more effectively and gives people the opportunity to ‘let off steam’ if they are not feeling happy. ‘People invite each other to share emotions. We are not used to it, but become aware of emotions.’ This creates openness and allows you to work together on mutual trust. Learning to share emotions can be a bit scary, but it is also important. If emotions are clearly expressed, it results in new energy in a group.

The interviewees described how people sharing their emotions with each other creates a connection. People truly connect with each other and become aware of the relational processes at play. Relationships deepen and the dynamics between the different people in the group improve: ‘It deepens relations. You share more than you normally would, especially private matters’, or as someone else puts it: ‘A wire of

connection enters the room.’ This results in greater respect for each other, which in turn leads to more integrity and a different *modus operandi*. People become more aware of how they interact with each other. As a manager, you get to see this interaction unfold. Nine interviewees talked at length about how using the check-in creates a sense of connection and cohesion.

Seven people considered the check-in to be an intervention that has a direct impact on group dynamics: ‘It creates an open commitment which is the power’; it brings emotions out into the open and the ‘contentment of employees increases’ as a result. The check-in is also helpful when it comes to providing each other support or sharing difficult issues with each other: it allows people to speak up when they are having a hard time or struggling with something, which makes difficult things less difficult. It gives leaders insight, enabling them to get involved and provide the required assistance more easily (n=5).

Four people stated that the check-in provides insight into when people are having a difficult time with something and enables colleagues to providing their support.

Four senior executives said they believed it is important to have the courage to be vulnerable as a leader. You set the tone, you provide the example: ‘You have to dare to show your vulnerability.’ Doing this requires crossing a boundary, but it is worth it: ‘It is quite hard to put yourself in a vulnerable position, but it is very positive if you do so.’ The insight emerges that there is more than merely the rational dimension: ‘It provides an additional dimension; one learns that there is more than reasoning.’

The responses reveal that the check-in is an intervention that creates a space for expressing emotions and that people are doing just that on a large scale. Voicing

individual emotions to colleagues in a team or during a meeting creates a bond between people and leads to a connection at an emotional level.

Have you actively used interventions to force team members to participate? And if so, what kind of interventions?

In eleven teams, everyone participated and no intervention was required. Everyone emphasized that it is important to lead by example as a manager: 'If you do it yourself, the feeling of trust grows,' and 'It is all about feeling, about engagement and personal feedback.' There are rare occasions when someone does not want to participate or needs more time to get used to the idea. Usually, after a while they end up participating after all. One manager had to enforce the use of the check-in.

The responses reveal that the check-in leads to the expression of emotions and is taken up very well in those teams in which it is introduced.

Can you give a brief overview of the effects of the use of the check-in? Did it contribute to a better mutual understanding? Did it result in a better understanding of individual positions? Did it contribute to a better understanding of individual emotions?

Eleven interviewees stated that one of the effects of the check-in is that emotions are identified, shared and given a place in the meetings. The use of the check-in creates more space for the sharing of emotions, and a new understanding of other people's emotions: 'You can get understanding of each other's emotions, you can share when you have something on your mind and you can share personal emotions.' This not only results in understanding and respect for the other person, but also gives leaders insight into the dynamics of their team and enables them to recognize trends.

Sharing emotions leads to greater mutual understanding (n=7): 'The check-in leads to a better understanding and improved relationships.'

'It is a type of reset; you connect with each other.' All the interviewees have observed changes in the level of connection and bonding between people. 'People become closer. They also speak up about the things they are unhappy about. It creates a connection, you are also 'human'. You have also worries, joy, emotions that are universal.' Sharing feelings and emotions with each other brings people closer. It creates an understanding of the other person's point of view, challenges and worries: 'You get much more understanding for the concerns of others at work as well in their private lives.' It leads to greater equality between team members, with this understanding and the insight into the other person's perspective bringing about a closer relationship: 'There is more understanding for the position that another is experiencing, it creates a stronger connection between people,' and 'The effect is that it helps you not to judge straightaway, but to wait and only judge when you know what other people are dealing with, it enhances the connection, people will seek out each other, which you want as a leader. Judgement becomes shared judgement.'

All interviewees indicated that the use of the check-in has a positive impact on the group dynamics. A number of elements play a role in this. Doing a check-in creates an openness that encourages people to give feedback and listen in a new way. The related effect is that you learn to appreciate the differences between people. It creates greater solidarity and the change in atmosphere enables people to genuinely engage in dialogue with each other about issues that are normally left undiscussed. Because people explicitly describe their feelings, you get the opportunity to ask questions and a shared frame of reference emerges. Knowing more about each other's feelings, concerns and backgrounds adds a new dimension to discussions. It

gives you a shared focus, instead of everyone competing for an opportunity to voice their individual concerns. 'Doing check-ins leads to a completely different team dynamics; it creates an atmosphere where it is being allowed to make mistakes'. It is important, however, that there truly is scope for this and that there is trust within a team, then 'the space is created where people dare to share their personal feelings'.

In addition, the respondents noted a number of overall effects of the use of the check-in, including learning to listen to each other in a new way and learning to ask questions, and the fact that it leads to a stronger desire to work together and a common focus. It creates a broader base for working together as a team instead of being power-orientated or concerned only with your own role and position. This enhances the performance of the collective. 'It is about trust, about being heard, about being perceived as a human. Then you can provide a top performance, but that also requires guts and courage.'

The responses reveal that doing the check-in draws explicit attention to emotions in official meetings and brings about a closer connection between people. It has a positive impact on the group dynamics that expresses itself in a shared focus and a shared goal.

Do you think the check-in can diminish or even ultimately eliminate hierarchical relationships?

Nearly everyone (n=11; one person hesitated) felt that the check-in can transcend hierarchical structures, provided that the leader is transparent, dares to show his vulnerability, and by doing so, encourages a genuine dialogue. 'The check-in helps to start a conversation on a more equal footing. It is a universal experience, disconnected from function but from human to human' and 'it connect people more

closely'. By sharing emotions with each other people are less aware of the position someone holds while they are doing this. It is a universal thing: 'We are all people with similar needs, we get more respect for each other.' Sharing emotions contributes to trust and a sense of safety: 'People can develop themselves, they have to know that they are being supported, valued and heard. Then they know that 'this is a place where I can be and where I am stimulated and challenged to make the best of myself'.

Can you give some examples where the check-in made a difference in decision making? And elaborate on the background?

'Sharing emotions definitely influences decision-making' and the decision-making process is influenced because people have more empathy and understanding for other people's opinions. When you know how people are feeling at any given moment in the process, it gives you a better understanding of the situation. You approach them in a different way and this has a direct, positive influence on the overall process. This enables the transition from a management style based on cognition to one based on feelings. The check-in creates a peaceful space and more time for reflection, and as a consequence, people are less focused on 'scoring points', but truly want to reflect on the decision that has to be made. Decisions become more balanced and less power-orientated. We reflect more on what is the best choice for the company as a whole, rather than 'what is best for me or my department'. On the whole, everyone (who uses the check-in, i.e. n=12) observed that the use of the check-in leads to different decision-making processes because it makes people more inclined to let everyone have a say. An awareness of how others are feeling creates understanding for individual points of view.

The responses reveal that doing the check-in, in which emotions are given a place and explicitly identified, results in a better decision-making process.

Can you describe the evolution process of the check-in? Does it stay 'at the surface' or does it really deepen the personal relationships?

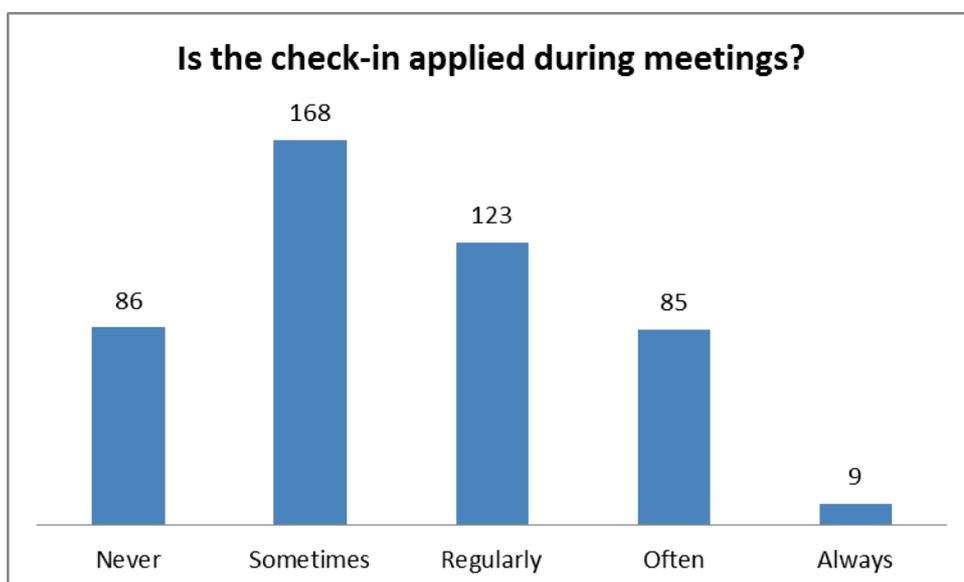
Everyone (n=12) acknowledges that the use of the check-in is the start of a process you embark on together. People have to learn to engage in an increasingly in-depth way and the check-in can be developed as much as people want. It is seen as a learning process in which people get to know each other better and better and learn to share their emotions and experiences. 'Once there is a sense of security, the experience gradually becomes deeper'; the check-in is a process that takes time getting used to. It is a process related to feelings. The more often you do it, as you develop a routine, the better it will go: 'It requires time to expose your soul'. It is important to truly listen and to talk about desires, needs and feelings. This creates energy, a sense of closeness and has a huge impact on the group dynamics and the atmosphere in the organization. 'You can reach deep emotional levels,' and 'Things are discussed that otherwise are unspoken, people get to know each other better than they used to and the understanding of other people's situations improves.' It is important that the leader has the courage to lead by example in being open and revealing his vulnerability. It is important that an atmosphere of integrity is created in which people feel safe. If these core conditions are met, this creates an additional dimension in people's working relationships. People learn to share their feelings and create emotional bonds in a team. The latter is important because it can be threatening to people if their weaknesses are revealed: 'Doing check-ins is working on building trust'.

The responses reveal that doing the check-in at an increasingly deeper emotional level is a learning process.

5.2 Survey

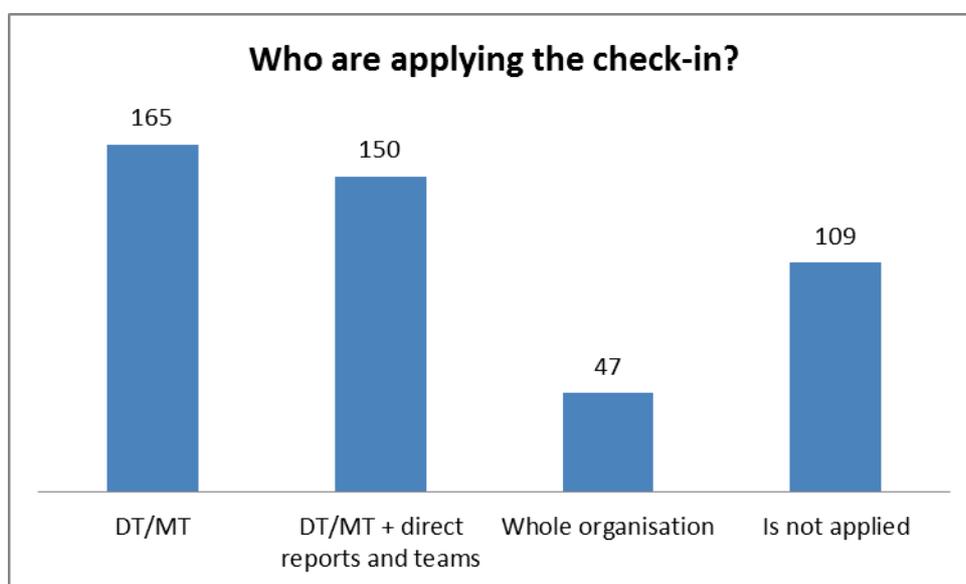
In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a survey was sent out to 767 people who have been introduced to the check-in. This group consists of the participants in the culture programme, senior management, the culture coaches who are supporting management during the culture transition process and the HR advisors. The response rate was 61% (n=471). 216 of these respondents were executives, members of a board of directors or a management team; 203 were culture coaches and 52 were HR advisors. The survey consisted of closed questions with a limited number of possible answers. The latter were formulated based on the reflections shared in the interviews. Before the survey was sent out, the questions were tested in a small group, which did not lead to any significant modifications. The questions were answered with the respondents stating their names and positions. The following questions were asked:

Do you use the check-in during meetings and conversations?



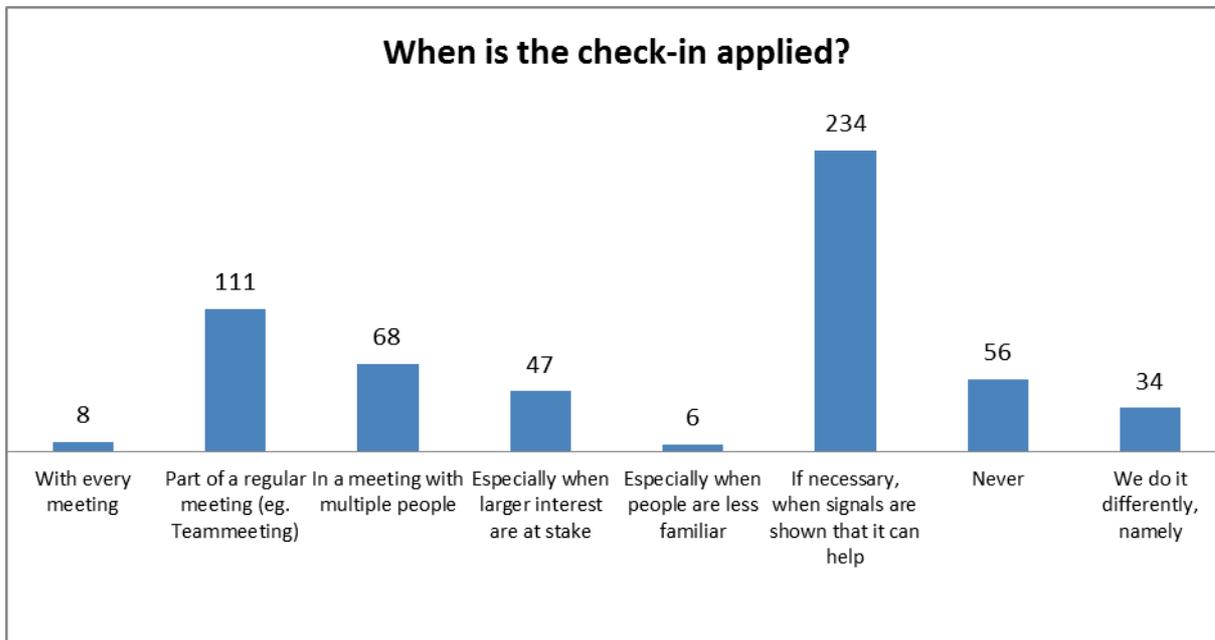
Nearly half of the respondents (46%) use the check-in regularly, often or always, 36% use it sometimes, and 18% never use it. All in all, 82% of the population uses the check-in.

Who is making use of the check-in? (DT= board of directors; MT= management team)



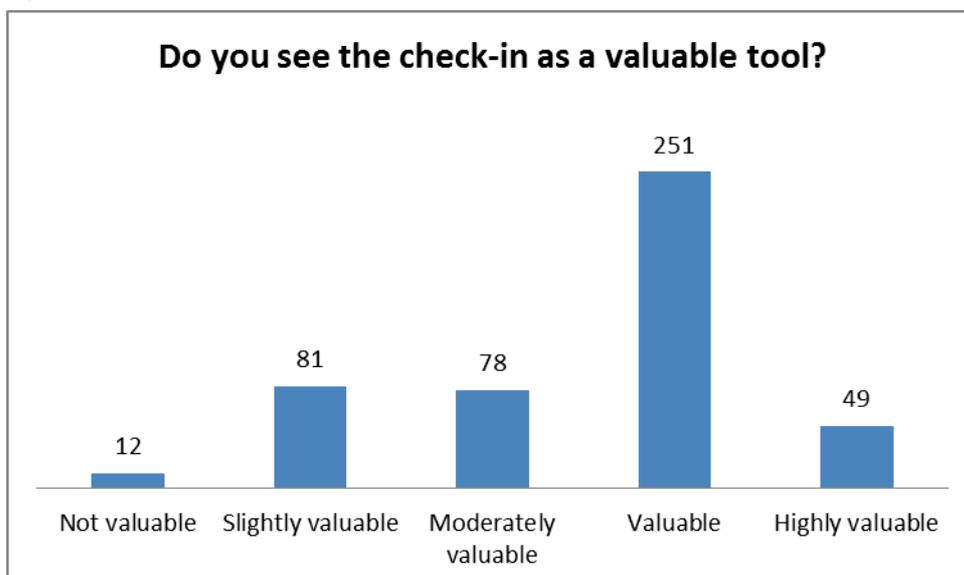
It can be concluded that in 45% of all cases in which the check-in is used, it remains limited to the highest level of management, while in 55% of cases it has also been introduced further down the chain.

When is the check-in applied?



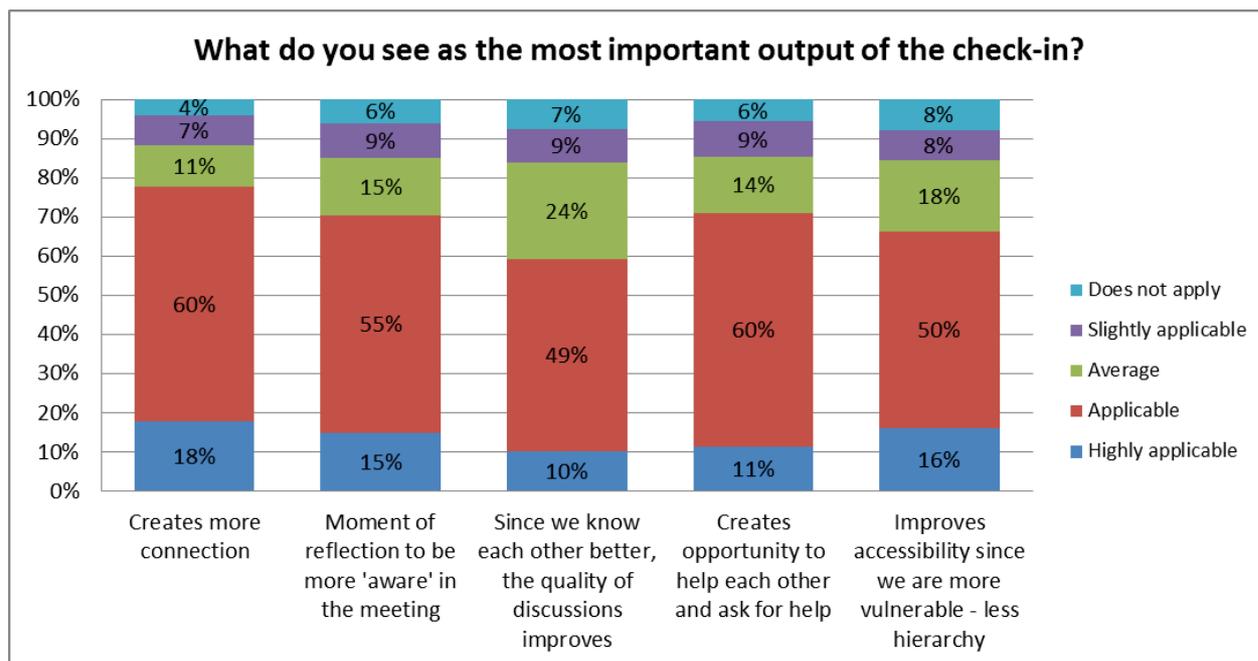
The responses to this question (in which more than one answer was possible) reveal that the check-in is primarily used as part of regularly held meetings, and where there are indications that it could have a positive impact on the quality of the decision-making process.

Do you see the check-in as a valuable tool?



The majority of the respondents regarded the check-in as a (highly) valuable tool (63%), and one-third of the respondents considered it to be of limited value (34%). A very small group did not see it as valuable (2.5%).

What do you see as the most important output of the check-in?



A majority of the respondents rated the check-in as making an important to a very important contribution to all the listed options, ranging from 78% for improving the connection between people, 70% for increased awareness in meetings, 59% for improving the quality of the discussion, 71% for creating the opportunity to provide each other with support and 66% for improving accessibility due to increased vulnerability. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask whether using the check-in results in better decision-making.

6. Results and findings

In this study I used semi-structured interviews (n=14) to investigate whether introducing and using the check-in at the start of meetings and conferences contributes to creating a connection between people at an emotional level, which in turn can lead to a better decision-making process. The dominant research questions as defined in chapter 1 are the following: Does the check-in bring about a better understanding of individual emotions, has an impact on group dynamics and behaviour within a group and result in a better decision-making process. In addition, I have attempted to gain greater, in-depth insight into the findings from the interviews using a survey (n=471) asking questions about the use of the check-in and its significance to processes within a group or organization. The results of this research are described below, divided into the four research-questions as defined in chapter 1.

Does the check-in contribute to a better understanding of individual emotions?

It is surprising how a simple intervention mechanism such as the check-in can be successful in encouraging people to share their emotions. The interviews reveal that the use of the check-in results in increased empathy for people's personal situations, challenges and problems. Over time, people feel increasingly comfortable divulging their personal emotions after a slightly hesitating beginning when the check-in was first introduced. People not only share issues they are facing in their private lives, but also the challenges they encounter in their organization. They feel free to talk about both their worries, fears and uncertainties in their day-to-day activities and their reasons to be happy and joyful. It enables an understanding of the various emotional standpoints with which people come to meetings. People learn to see each other from a different perspective and interact accordingly. This results in their engaging in

a more careful debate, with increased respect for the other person; integrity and care become part of people's relationships. Some respondents state that it leads to a reduction in competition and instead brings about an increased willingness to help each other. Tensions and uncertainties that are being felt are brought out into the open. Because emotions are clearly expressed, the deeper tensions that are present in the organization become visible, tangible and available for discussion. Oftentimes, these tensions have been there for years, but have never before been mentioned due to a sense of fear and uncertainty. This ties in with the research conducted by Armstrong (2004), in which he states that emotions in organizations are a reflection of the status quo within those organizations. People say that sharing emotions enriches relationships and that they feel appreciated and respected as a person. The interviewees also became very enthusiastic when they shared stories about the emotions that people have experienced and discussed, and recalled how they have been overwhelmed at times by the intentions, depth and openness. It seems that, over time, the inhibitions that are present at the beginning slowly fade away. Sharing their feelings gives people energy and inspiration. The interviewees recounted example upon example of people sharing emotions with each other. In all cases, it concerned very intense, personal stories that people sometimes had never shared with anyone else before. Another aspect is that the check-in results in people, who have been working together for years, talk to each other about what is on their minds for the first time. And because they feel that it works, they go one step further, deepen the relationship and truly engage with each other at an emotional level. This illustrates the conviction of Akgün et al. (2009) that feelings and emotions play a decisive role in work activities and form a part of individual and group behaviour. Leaders indicate that the insight they gain into employees' emotions is important for

them to get a sense of the employees' drivers and the dynamics in a team. This confirms Fineman's idea (1999) that employees' emotions are important information for management in setting performance goals and using the emotional dynamics as a competitive advantage. The check-in allows managers to see how the emotions of individual employees impact on group processes (Kelly and Barsade, 2001) and gives them greater insight into the team dynamics.

Does the check-in impact on group dynamics?

This study reveals that sharing emotions has a strong impact on group processes. In both the interviews and in the questions in the survey it was stated that people bring individual emotions into the group in a range of ways and by explicitly bringing them out into the open, they become what might be called group emotions. People say that, when positive emotions are expressed, it creates a kind of lightness in the group, while, when negative or painful emotions are shared, they dissolve into the air, as it were – the group absorbs them and makes them more bearable for the individual. It turns out that emotions can bring about a radical change in group dynamics, which confirms what has been described in the literature studied (Barsade et al., 2007; Katsaros et al., 2012). The emotional connection between people essentially creates a space in which it is possible to think about collective interests, about the collective goal, founded on a desire to work on something together and strengthen each other. Both the interviews and the survey clearly demonstrate that the check-in encourages cooperation and people offer help more readily when they know what colleagues are feeling insecure about. It creates a psychological and emotional space that connects people behaviourally, in accordance with that described by Schein (1992). The check-in leads to a shared sense of solidarity and allows people to develop. Interviewees state that they learn to listen to each other in

a different way; their experience is that the use of the check-in encourages them to truly listen, without judging. Subsequently, giving attention to each other results in respecting each other's values and emotions which creates a trusting environment. The check-in constitutes a collective time for reflection, where it is okay to be quiet while you are sitting around the table with each other; where you do not have to delve into the cut-and-thrust of challenges and debates straight away, but where you can take a moment to connect with your 'inner self' and share that with others. A number of people stated that it is sometimes difficult to find the right words to accurately express their emotions. That sparks off a kind of collective thought process in which people not only register the content of what is said, but also take on board body language and facial expressions. All these individual expressions impact on the group dynamics and group performance (Barsade et al., 2012). This leads to more reflection in a group and more frequent and increasingly balanced discussions. Bridges (2009) describes the three stages experienced by organizations undergoing change and the importance of managers remaining accessible during processes of transition. This reveals that people consider the check-in to be a moment of reflection that enables them to be more present in the conversation. The survey and the interviews also show that an important aspect relating to the group dynamics is that the check-in teaches people to reveal their vulnerability. Vulnerability suddenly becomes a topic that is acceptable to discuss. Leaders realise that they must set the right example and have the courage to display their own vulnerability demonstrating that more than solely rational processes exist. Daring to expose your vulnerability leads to people interacting with each other more 'from one human being to another' and hierarchical relationships becoming less prominent in employees' consultations with each other. The survey explicitly reveals that people feel hierarchical

relationships become less prominent as a result of the check-in being used. Because people get to know each other better, they experience an improvement in the quality of the discussions. Another element that emerged in nearly all the interviews is the aspect of connection. People sharing emotions with each other creates a sense of connection in a group, improves people's relationships with each other and their awareness of the relational processes at play and the way that people are interacting with each other.

On the whole, both the interviews and the survey show that doing a check-in at the start of meetings has a positive impact on the group dynamics. My observation is that the key effect of the check-in on group dynamics is creating a collective experience in which attendants feel increasingly connected.

Does the check-in have a positive impact on the decision-making process?

All the interviewees clearly state that the check-in and the sharing of emotions have a significant impact on decision-making processes. They mention a number of elements, such as the fact that it results in people wanting to help each other and that it brings about a better working climate because people understand each other's points of view. Having a sense of how the other person is feeling at a given moment can enable you to choose a different approach, which impacts on the decision-making process. This accords with Liu et al.'s research (2014) into the impact of emotions on the strategic discussions held by top teams that found that teams that share emotions with each other exhibit improved performance in strategic discussions. The interviews refer to the fact that the check-in leads to another management style not based on rationality alone but one that is more founded in emotion. Consequently, the check-in results in a process in which decisions are

made in a more balanced way. In spite of the fact that the interviews reveal that people perceived the decision-making processes to be more effective, the check-in predominantly appears to improve the quality of the decision-making process. The survey reveals that between 59% and 80% of the respondents felt that the quality of discussions improves as a result of the check-in, which is supportive for a qualitatively improved decision-making process.

Do the management teams and staff incorporate the check-in in the organization's routine?

The interviews reveal that, of the fourteen interviewees, eleven leaders always use the check-in at the start of meetings, often multiple times a day, even if the different meetings partly involve the same group of people. One leader does not use the check-in, but has come up with a different format instead; two leaders use the check-in at special meetings or if there are difficult items for discussion on the agenda. In all cases, the interviewees state that the use of the check-in is a process that needs to be learnt and that it requires discipline, and they also suggest that it is helpful to review the wording of the questions every once in a while and refocus on what the check-in is intended to achieve. The learning process is important, because building up a routine of using the check-in allows people to become more and more familiar with it, which, over time, enables them to share emotions and dilemmas with increasing ease and openness. Changing the wording and format of the check-in can help to refresh the impact of this intervention.

The survey reveals that, of the 471 respondents, nearly half (46%) use the check-in in their daily routine. A proportion of the respondents use the check-in occasionally (36%) and some never use it (18%). Of those who do use the check-in, in 45% of

cases the check-in is used by the highest tier of management, the remaining 55% also use the check-in in the teams reporting to them, resulting in larger groups of employees becoming familiar with its use. More than 63% of the respondents state that they regard the check-in to be a valuable or a very valuable tool. Those who use the check-in see added value across a number of key areas. It is striking that the majority (78%) states that the check-in creates a sense of connection. This confirms the findings from the interviews and is also consistent with what is described in the reviewed literature on the subject (chapter 2 of this thesis), that emotions at the workplace impact group dynamics and team performance (in particular Akgün et al., 2009, Barsade et al., 2007, Huy (1999), Katsaros et al., 2012, Kelly et al., 2001, Liu et al.,(2014), McColl-Kennedy et al. (2002), Staw et al.). Another aspect that is mentioned by a large group (60%) is that doing a check-in creates a moment of reflection, enabling one to be more fully present in the conversation. A few of the interviewees mentioned this as well. The check-in gives one an opportunity to close the issue of a previous meeting and focus on the meeting at hand. It would appear that the check-in is an intervention that helps people to 'land' and become aware of the 'here and now'. 59% of the respondents to the survey stated that the quality of discussions improves because people get to know each other better. The survey also reveals that the check-in leads to people offering each other help more readily (71%), which confirms the findings from the interviews. Many of the respondents (66%) stated that doing the check-in leads to a relaxing of the hierarchical structures and improves accessibility of the meeting leader and its members. The finding that people learn to reveal their vulnerability fully accords with the findings from the interviews.

7. Limitations

The study was conducted among a population that gained experience with the check-in at different points throughout a one-year period. This means that the length of their experience with the check-in varied, ranging from several months to one year, so the levels of experience varied accordingly. The interviews mainly involved senior managers and were not compared and contrasted with the views of their employees, who may have different perceptions of the use of the check-in. The study was conducted during a period of transition, during which the organization is actively working on changing the organizational culture. This may very well mean that there is greater willingness and receptiveness for the use of the check-in compared to an organizationally stable period.

8. Future research

As a follow-up to the study researching the impact of the check-in on processes in teams and organizations, it would be interesting to look at a number of aspects in more depth. In this study, random subjects from within the organization were interviewed and approached through a survey. I think it would be interesting to undertake this study among all the employees of a single division, to see whether the results relating to the impact of the check-in show it to be perceived in the same way by everyone, or whether there are different interpretations depending on subjects' hierarchical positions within the organization. It would also be interesting to explore which type of leaders use the check-in and which do not, and what that says about the degree to which they are 'managers of emotions'. And if not, the extent to which they are able to become this, and whether there is a link with their level of emotional intelligence. It would be interesting to examine to what extent the use of the check-in by leaders reveals something about their leadership style. In addition, it would be interesting to examine whether the use of the check-in by teams leads to better performance and better results. It would also be interesting to investigate whether there is a difference between men and women in how the check-in is being used and to explore if there are differences in subsequent results and in the use of language and terminology. The development of a vocabulary to describe feelings that could make the check-in even more effective is a further interesting topic for research. It would also be interesting to look at the use of the check-in in board meetings (i.e. in-group), and to monitor the improvements in relationships and group results and performance. Further research should also give an indication as to how the check-in can develop over a longer period of time and whether new formats can be developed. Finally, I think it would be interesting to develop a workshop based on the

check-in that could be used to further improve group processes at an emotional level. A vocabulary that people can use in order to learn to clearly identify their emotions at a deeper, more introspective level, should form part of this workshop, enabling the development of a shared language.

9. Conclusions

The results show that the check-in is an effective intervention that invites people to express their feelings at the beginning of a meeting, generally resulting in a sharing of emotions. As a consequence awareness of emotional interactions, the significance of interpersonal relations and respect for each other's views ameliorate. This appears to positively affect group dynamics, resulting in a collective focus on a shared goal surpassing traditional hierarchical patterns. The discussions in meetings are reported to improve in quality. In combination with a better understanding of the participants points of view the decision-making process is improved. The use of the check-in requires a more listening and vulnerable attitude of leaders and participants.

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