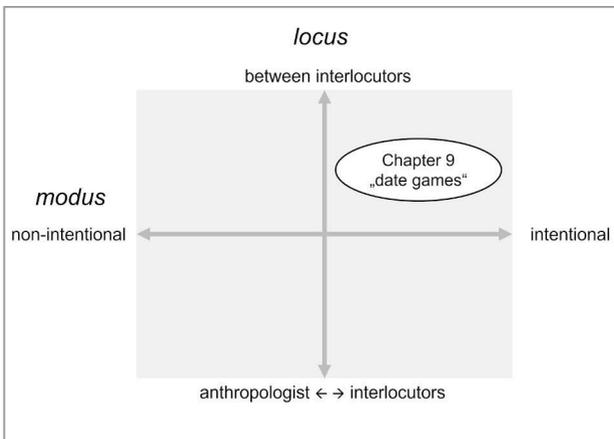


## 9. Modus intentional: Date games

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From the *locus* anthropologist ↔ interlocutors analysis, this chapter and the following chapter (10) will shift to analyse the working misunderstandings between my interlocutors at Advice Company. In this context, I will refer to misunderstandings between the sub-systems *within* the organisation, as well as those between the organisational system and its environment. This chapter will illustrate the intentional *modus* of working misunderstandings through the collaborative practices of information control (described in Chapter 8) that I call “date games”. Figure 18 positions this chapter within the analytical dimensions of the L/M quadrant.

Figure 18: Chapter 9 on the L/M quadrant



The analysis focuses around the central commodity of Advice Company – the client project – and particularly the working misunderstandings around

delivery dates. A delivery date seems a rather unambiguous, objective and clear piece of data. However, the ethnographic examples will show that the individual sub-systems strategically select information on delivery dates during the project planning phase, and these dates become intentional working misunderstandings between interlocutors.

To approach the “date games” from a theoretical perspective I will introduce the concept of double contingency through the framework of Systems Theory (Section 9.1). Section 9.2 provides ethnographic accounts of date games as working practices within Advice Company and analyses them from the theoretical perspective of double contingency in the context of working misunderstandings. The examples illustrate how the value client centrality structures the date games in the project planning stage. In Section 9.3, I contrast the use of these games in the execution phase, during which the value ground reality becomes more relevant; this reverses the direction of the games, at least to the point of escalation. Section 9.4 provides examples of date games in the system/environment interaction and traces collaboration practices beyond the organisational boundaries. I show that the date games also involve clients and highlight the circumstances under which the date games are terminated when as the working misunderstanding reaches a point of unravelling. In a concluding section, I position such cases within the L/M quadrant and reflect on the way in which delivery dates depict intentional working misunderstandings as a central element of client project collaboration.

## 9.1. Double contingency and cross-system interaction

When two social systems interact, the encounter is coined by uncertainty, as both sides know that the other may select from a range of possible actions and it is unclear which action will be selected. The other system’s selection of action is unforeseeable unless a mandatory option exists. Luhmann, in line with Talcott Parsons, refers to this as contingency: “Something is contingent insofar as it is neither necessary nor impossible; it is just what it is (or was or will be), though it could also be otherwise” (1995a: 106). As the condition applies to both systems with respect to the other, it can be understood as double contingency. This leads to an interdependency whereby each system

seeks to pre-empt the actions of the other on the basis of its own selection. This is problematic, insofar as social systems are “black boxes” to each other:<sup>1</sup>

The basic situation of double contingency is then simple: two black boxes, by whatever accident, come to have dealings with one another. Each determines its own behavior by complex self-referential operations within its own boundaries. What can be seen of each is therefore necessarily a reduction. Each assumes the same about the other. Therefore, however many efforts they exert [...], the black boxes remain opaque to one another. (Luhmann 1995a: 109)

This opacity of interacting social systems thus allows for only an assumption of the action that will be selected by the other system as a consequence of one’s own system’s selection of action. In contexts in which each system seeks to prompt a specific action within the other system, this is only successful on the contingency of a trigger-causality, rather than an effect-causality, unless the systems are structurally coupled. As the latter is not the case amongst the sub-systems within Advice Company, their interactions remain in a situation of double contingency and are caught in a self-referential circle that is difficult to resolve: “I will do what you want if you do what I want” (Luhmann 1995a: 117).

The next sections illustrate how the interactions between Advice Company’s emergent sub-systems are coined by “date games” as strategies for dealing with the other system’s opacity and the double contingency situation. I will furthermore argue that intentional working misunderstandings around delivery dates provide a method of overcoming the self-referential circle.

## 9.2. Date games and working misunderstandings

The ethnographic accounts provided in this chapter pertain to cross-system communication in relation to project planning and progress tracking.

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1 Gregory Bateson also uses the term in this sense: “It’s a word that comes from engineers. When they draw a complicated diagram of a complicated machine they use a sort of shorthand. Instead of drawing all the details they put a box to stand for a whole bunch of parts and label the box with what that bunch of parts is supposed to do. [...] But it’s not an explanation of *how* the bunch works” (Bateson 1972: 40, emphasis in original).

They serve to illustrate how collaboration between sub-systems is organised through the use of delivery dates as working misunderstandings. Such situations do not occur with every project across the organisation, yet they are observable in various independent situations across different teams and divisions. The examples selected reflect this wide distribution of the phenomenon.

### 9.2.1. Mitigating double contingency

When a client announces interest in commissioning a project with Advice Company, the client consultants, whose function is to engage in boundary work, are the recipients of this request. As specialists in communication with the environment, they are responsible for triggering actions within the organisational system on the basis of environmental impulses. Together with communicating specifics about a project (see Chapter 10), a client sets an expected delivery date for the final project and sometimes a few milestone dates to measure interim progress. These dates are then discussed within the client consulting team and the team usually proposes that a later delivery date be agreed with the client. Client consultant Aniket remarked: „Some clients will always crunch your timelines, whatever you tell them. They push, whether feasible or not, and even if we deliver the project only 1 day before the initial deadline they say: ‚See, this is why I pushed you.‘“

From this quote, one can already anticipate the nature of the tension-laden date game with the client systems, which are addressed in Section 9.4. At this point, I will continue to describe the process from the moment a delivery date is agreed with the client. After this point, the project is officially launched and the project development process begins, together with the mechanisms of information selection by each sub-system, as deemed necessary for collaboration (see Chapter 8). When the client consultants inform project coordinators about the project, they select the delivery date they assume is required for a successful and timely project delivery to the client. This selection occurs on the basis of assumptions about the action that will be triggered within the opaque sub-system, as client consultant Neelam indicated:

You know, the data preparation teams will be late in any case, because the execution guys will only start working when the deadline comes near... So I give the project coordinators shorter timelines, keeping the buffer for me.

Otherwise I will be the one sitting there doing long hours to deliver to the client on time.

Along the project development process, teams are briefed by the functionally preceding team, which is hierarchically higher on the client centricity scale, and this team communicates deadlines for the tasks they are briefing. These deadlines are selected and processed within each sub-system on the basis of the same mechanism, as Asif from the project coordination team explained: „The client consultants might agree for example on 20 days [until project delivery to the client], but they give us only 15 days. And we also do the same only: when project coordination gets, say, 15th of next month to have it completed, we tell to the execution teams the 12th.“

Asif describes an example for the double contingency in the cross-system interaction: When client consultants inform project coordinators about the delivery date of a new project, they select this information based on the expectation that the project coordinators will work towards that shorter deadline, so that even a delay will not result in an issue. But client consultants have no insight into the selection mechanisms within the project coordinator's system and hence cannot pre-empt the action that will be triggered within the project coordination team. Accordingly, the client consultants' sub-system is opaque to project coordinator Asif and the selection mechanisms that lie behind the delivery date are a black box for him. But equally, he makes assumptions about the alternatives that may have been chosen by the client consultants – decisions that are contingent for him. He does not know if the delivery date he was given is congruent with the client's final deadline, or if/which alterations to the date occurred to trigger a specific action within his system. He can choose to work towards the deadline given or decide that it is an artificial date that was set to allow the client consultants additional time to create their final report. Conversely, the client consultants do not know if Asif will choose to work towards the date they communicated to him or if he will select an understanding of the date as a ballpark timeline that he may or may not aim to fulfil. This is the double contingency that both sub-systems must deal with, along with all other (sub-)systems involved in the project development process.

The date games are, on the one hand, a strategy of extending the double contingency and reducing the risk emanating from the opacity of other sub-systems for successful interaction. On the other hand, they enable cross-system interaction: delivery dates are bits of information that can be processed by the involved sub-systems; hence, they engender follow-up communication.

### 9.3.3. Playing on client centrality

The double contingency lends an interesting twist to the date games, making them more than a waterfall of rational risk mitigation practices. Asif's quote suggests that the different teams suspect that the delivery date information they receive has most likely been edited (i.e. pre-selected) by the preceding team in a way that this sub-system perceives as appropriate for achieving their goal of a timely delivery. Sheeba, a project coordinator, commented upon reviewing the briefing on a new project with – as was relatively common – urgent timelines: „Those consultants play oversmart on us. They have some 5 to 10 days' buffer, but don't tell us. And we only have unnecessary pressure, which we need to push down to the other teams.“

Similar to her colleague Asif, Sheeba was perfectly aware of the fact that she was kept in the dark about the actual delivery dates that were agreed with the client and that they were most likely later than she was told. Project coordinator Neha explicitly mentioned the opacity of the client consultants' sub-system and the selection mechanisms that led to the delivery date she was given for completing the project: „I know the execution teams won't deliver, because they can't deliver and still I have to pressurise them. We want to understand more about the reason of pressure. Here nobody says „No" easily, first all say ‚Yes'.“

Apart from Neha's desire to gain more insight into the client consulting team's selection processes behind the delivery dates, her statement reproduces the internal boundaries of the organisation. As the client consultants orientate on a different value than the execution teams, who operate on the basis of the value ground reality, she expresses the notion that she has to protect the execution teams from the client-centric consulting teams (these boundary iterations are covered in detail in Chapter 10).

The quotes furthermore suggest that the project coordinators select an understanding of the delivery dates that incorporates consultants' unjustified accumulation of extra time for their final work step in the project. This leads to the interpretation of delivery dates as ambiguous and up for negotiation, rather than clearly defined and binding. Project coordinator Sandesh accordingly referred to the project planning process as a “bargaining game”, referring to the delivery date “game” as a local metaphor: “You know, it's like a bargaining game, and sometimes you have to play it like that to win it.”

The relative meaning of the delivery date was also confirmed by Rohan from the project execution team in the street office: „We sometimes have to

commit to unrealistic timelines, when they tell us client needs it. And everybody knows it's unachievable, even consultants. But project goes ahead only and we deliver with delay." It might not be surprising that the rules of the "bargaining game" were determined by the value client centricity – at least most of the time. When I accompanied embedded team member Anas at the city office, he commented on his strategy of "outsourcing" a task to the standard team. The fact that he associated the term "outsourc[ing]" with the standard team, which was located within five metres of his desk, communicates the boundary between the two job types I illustrated in Chapter 6 (Section 6.1.2), which outlined the internal differentiation of the city office. Anas claimed that, in these cases, he never disclosed his real delivery date and always kept a buffer. When he needed to send something to his manager on a Friday evening, he would tell the standard team he needed it by Wednesday. When I asked for his reasons for doing so, his answer was similar to the statement of client consultant Aniket at the main office: „Because I need that buffer, as their [the embedded team's] work will most likely not be up to the mark, so I will have to spend time in reworking it. If I tell them my real delivery date the standard team might also only deliver on Friday evening and then I will be the one who is sitting late and getting under pressure.“ As a member of the embedded team with an overseas manager, he saw himself as occupying a more superior position on the client centricity scale than his colleagues on the standard team. This led him to feel entitled to request an early delivery date.

Similarly, project coordinator Preeti utilised an interesting argumentation strategy during an update call with a freelancer team manager at the street office. The team manager was apparently unable or unwilling to guarantee that his freelancers would deliver the outstanding tasks by the deadline they had initially agreed to. After several minutes of discussing why such a situation had occurred, Preeti raised her voice: "I can't tell the client that because of your freelancer's skill-set problem this work can't be done by end Feb!"

Her leverage of the term "client" is remarkable, as Preeti would most likely have no opportunity to tell the client anything about the project. She was not in a function assigned to boundary work. But her work location – the main office – differentiated her as an employee located in the most client-centric office in the organisation, and this suggested that she would have a closer position to the client than her colleague in the street office. She was able to

select this message due to the opacity of the social system of the main office to the street office employee she was interacting with.

These examples show that the date games were only a superficially rational sequence of interdependent decisions, such as the kind assumed by game theory – a method of economic modelling introduced in the 1940s by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern (2007[1944]). Beyond the use of date games as a risk mitigation praxis, they were also used as the basis for collaboration across sub-systems. They facilitated collaboration not only across offices, but also across teams within each office. Considering the physical proximity of each of the teams in the offices, it seems rather unlikely that such a level of information control could have been exercised. But given the internal differentiation strategies and boundary manifestations of emergent sub-systems (as illustrated in Chapter 6, Section 6.1), such a phenomenon is comprehensible.

The date games imply an idea of collaboration as a means of purposive information control, iterating the hierarchical structure of the organisation along the client centricity scale. In conjunction with the concept of collaboration discussed in Chapter 8, the date games illustrate that information is not supposed to flow freely through the organisation for all sub-systems to dispose of. Rather, information is a resource – a commodity associated with the client centricity scale: the more directly it comes from a client the greater potential it has for manifesting the organisational hierarchy. The date games also provide insight into each sub-system's view of the other systems in its environment, with respect to anticipated actions: the decision to communicate an earlier delivery date is made on the basis of an assumption that the other system will deliver late. Such assumptions are a relevant aspect of why the delivery dates can be understood as working misunderstandings.

### 9.2.2. Delivery dates as working misunderstandings

When the client consulting teams communicate a delivery date to their project coordinators they deliberately select an earlier deadline than the one they are working towards. As a consequence, the delivery dates used for planning are not as precisely defined as the agreed calendar dates suggest. The client consultants, the project coordinators and the execution teams each assume that the communicated delivery date will not be met: “everybody knows it’s unachievable” (Rohan).

The calendar deadline that is communicated between sub-systems, which serves as a basis for interaction, is therefore a working misunderstanding: the point in time the client consultants or the project coordinators understand as the expected delivery date is not transparent to the other system(s). Within the client consulting team, the expected moment of task completion lays somewhere between the project completion date agreed with the client and the delivery date that is communicated to the project coordinators – the latter of which they do not expect to be met. When the client consultants and project coordinators interact in their project planning on the basis of the communicated delivery date of the 20th of April, neither of the two parties encodes this date as the corresponding moment on the calendar, but as a later date. But the interaction works successfully on the basis of these calendar delivery dates.

The working misunderstanding can also be classified as intentional, because the interacting parties are fully aware of the fact that the communicated delivery date is subject to differing ascriptions. In spite of these different meanings across the systems, the communication praxis is repeated within Advice Company. Project collaboration is even *dependent* on the ambiguity of the delivery date, as the two sub-systems would otherwise be caught in the self-referential circle of double contingency. Hence, they need the date games and the delivery dates to operate as working misunderstandings in order to facilitate cross-system interaction.

The working misunderstanding remains at play as long as the margin between the project delivery and the client's completion date is deemed manageable by the client consultant. But at times the opacity of delivery deadlines leads to delays that endanger the timely project delivery to the client, and thus the success of Advice Company. In these moments, escalation strategies replace collaboration.

### 9.3. Date games reversed: Status reports and escalation

The rules of the game are set by the organisational structure, which provides the consulting teams with the most direct information from the client side in the environment about project delivery dates. The other teams only receive information from the preceding team in the project delivery process and must take their decisions on the basis of this information. The project planning phase is characterised by decision-making on the basis of an asymmetric

information structure between client consultants and other teams, with interdependent selection processes connected with this information structure. For the following phase of the project execution, however, we witness an opposite information structure, as the execution teams make use of the most direct information from the other side of the organisational environment – the freelancers.

### 9.3.1. Flipping the game: Status reports

When the project is in its execution phase, date games can occur in the opposite direction. At this stage, the freelancer team managers decide which information to select in the communication process – namely how long it will take for their freelancers to fully complete the given tasks and collect the data required. The sub-team at the receiving end of this communication is the project coordinator team. This team must decide which understanding to select from the information impulse at their sub-system's boundaries and how it should be processed within their own system. Such a message might include information from the freelancer team leads about a delay in the project progress; the project coordinator must subsequently decide if this delay might still be okay or if it will require intervention. The project coordinators must then take a decision on which information should be selected for the client consulting teams.

In this situation, the project coordinators exhibit information control for successful collaboration with the client consulting teams. Some use Asif's strategy, which he revealed when I accompanied him. Client consultant Raveena came to his desk and requested a status update on one of her projects that was nearing the end of the execution phase. Asif told her that he could not prepare the status update on the project that day, as they had agreed he would send her an update on Thursdays. He referred to the number of other projects he had to take care of and promised to put her project update on the top of his list for Thursday. Raveena was not content with the situation, but accepted Asif's objection. Once she left to return to her desk, Asif commented that Raveena might have escalated her requests if she had seen today's data on the project progress, which had been slower than expected. He thought that, had she seen this, she would not have listened to his explanations about the progress agreements he had made with the freelancer team leads for the outstanding work. He expected the progress to increase significantly over the next few days, and he hoped to provide Raveena with an update on Thursday

projecting a delay that was minor enough to remain within her tolerance margins and to skirt escalation.

In this case, Asif selected information about the project status according to his understanding of the agreed delivery date. The next example shows how project coordinator Neha received pre-selected information from the execution teams on project GREEN<sup>2</sup>, which was almost a week past-due. Over lunch, she complained with the other project coordinators that she was in trouble because the freelance team lead had apparently given her “fake information”, as she called it: „Last week he told me that the work tasks are completed and the freelancers would only have to consolidate their stuff. But now he tells me that they need time until Sunday to complete the work.“ She said it was not clear to her if he had intentionally given her the wrong information or if he had just blindly trusted his freelancers’ statements about having the work tasks completed and passed this update on to her without verifying it. Her colleague Preeti confirmed that notion:

It’s a trust issue. He might well have given you wrong info and now blames it on the freelancers. That’s very easy, because they are not part of the organisation, nobody will ask them, nor will they have to face any consequences. Same is with the client consultants. They never mark [copy] us on client emails to not share the timelines they have agreed with the client. Sometimes they push us to complete the work tasks even one, two months before the project delivery presentation is due.

Preeti’s comment illustrates her suspicion that the client consulting teams use their functionally more direct access to the client as an information advantage to play date games. But her comment also illustrates that the freelance team lead might use his information advantage to play the date game in the other direction, by selecting information according to his system’s understanding of the actual delivery date. As he has access to the most direct information on the work completion status, he is in a position to select which information is communicated to his project coordinator colleagues in order to prevent an escalation – just as Asif did with his client consultant colleague.

The date games operate according to the value client centricity, with sub-systems that more closely interact with the client most knowledgeable of the agreed project completion date with the client. Consequently, the client consultants are able to select information for communication with the next sub-

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2 I invented this project name; I could have equally named it BLACK or RED.

system, the project coordinators. The employees at the street office work at the least client-centric location in the city and hence receive the most indirect and pre-selected delivery dates for the completion of work tasks. During the execution phase, however, the information levels get flipped upside down. The work tasks providing the data basis for a client project are fulfilled by the freelancers. The freelancer team leads operate according to the ground reality as the leading value, and during the execution phase, these roles have the most direct information on the project status. The freelancer team leads select the status update information they perceive as relevant for successful interaction in order to prevent escalations of issues to management. In this phase of the project, ground reality is the more relevant value (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Project Phase and Information levels

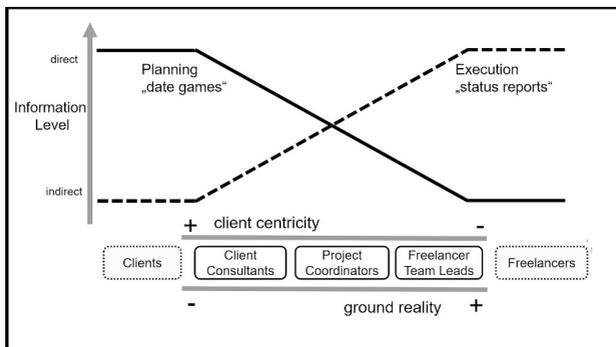


Figure 19 illustrates furthermore that project coordinators are in the middle, between the client consultants and the freelancer team leads, and must consequently master the different information selection processes at play. In order to execute their function, they must operate intentional working misunderstandings to maintain interactions without provoking dissonance. Project coordinator Neha's manager referred to this as "diplomacy":

**Neha:** I had a feedback call with my manager yesterday. I was told I have to be more diplomatic. How can I do that?

**FM:** What do you mean by diplomatic?

**Neha:** My manager said I should be more diplomatic in my communication to not have issues coming up, no escalations to him, you know. But it is very difficult for me. I am used to be[ing] very open and say[ing] how it is [...] So here it is very difficult for me to not tell things or sometimes I feel I almost lie about it. But my manager said I should be more diplomatic when things go wrong and not tell everything at that moment. I was told I have to manage things more on my own now without the help from the management level and be more diplomatic so that things don't get escalated, I should be more independent. I have to mentor these two new joinees, so I should be like that.

“Diplomacy”, as a trait that Neha’s manager demanded that she develop, can hence be regarded as the ability to manoeuvre successfully between different understandings of delivery dates and status information. For the project coordinators, it refers to the art of manipulating the working misunderstanding in relation to a delivery date on both sides, interpreting both the delivery date they have been given by the client consultants and the actual deadline by which they need to complete the tasks. They must also be able to use a delivery date to collaborate with execution team leads, in order to enable them to complete the project tasks in time for the client consultants, despite their differing interpretations of that deadline.

### 9.3.2. Escalations as emergency breaks

While the level of information is inverted from the planning phase to the execution phase, the overall hierarchical differentiation of the organisation along the client centricity scale remains. As a consequence, the working misunderstanding about status reports during the execution phase can be instantly brought to a point of unravelling through the mechanism of escalation. When a client consultant sees the successful and timely delivery of the project to the client jeopardised, even when his or her own buffer is factored in, he or she must inform the next management level of the situation.

Once a project status is escalated to management by a client consultant, the collaboration between sub-systems immediately ends. Until that moment, the interaction between sub-teams is a carefully balanced communication structure based on intentional working misunderstandings that cater for the opacities of the sub-systems. When a project is raised to escalation, however, the client consulting team – or its manager – can request direct and detailed

information on the execution process and insight into the mechanisms of the other, less sub-systems. An escalation of a project status to higher management attention is followed by a wave of teleconferences and meetings, during which managers of the involved teams review the situation in detail and have their staff work on micro-level action plans. The choice of an escalation path to enforce project completion is regarded as ultima ratio, as explained by client consultant Gopal:

There are two options how you can make people work for your project quicker and harder. The primary one is rapport. If you share a good rapport with people they will work for your project quicker when you ask them to. If you don't, then your work might be put back and might get lapsed. So this works based on the relationships we have. The second option is escalation via the managers. But via this route a person might do the work maybe twice or thrice for you, but then it will not work anymore, so I try to avoid that if possible. Issue is, when you escalate, people don't work only. So what happened now on this project was, we figured we have to work hard on the execution tasks. So I in a first step I involved Srinat [a colleague with a good informal connection to the execution teams], but the people just did not move at all. Then we played it hard via email escalations to both division heads. This helped to get a clearer picture of the situation and all that is still to be done. But basically, now we have to plan in next week to pacify their [the freelancer team leads] burned egos and be friendly. And only then they will start working. You have to treat them with a hot/cold blow strategy.

Through Gopal's perception of having "burned egos" from an escalation, one can assess its dysfunctional nature in the organisational system. Using escalation to cut the interaction across sub-systems (and hence the working practice of date games and status reports) might achieve a short-term goal, but it has serious consequences for the communication system. The working misunderstandings with respect to delivery dates and status reports are important for collaboration across the organisational system, and escalation strategies cannot serve as an alternative strategy to overcome the double contingency.

## 9.4. Date games across system boundaries, and their limits

Thus far, I have shown how working misunderstandings around the delivery date play an important role for the successful collaboration of the organisational sub-systems when delivering a client project. When these date games are played within Advice Company, the framework is set by the organisational structure of information directness and sub-systems' hierarchical positions along the client centricity scale. When timelines for project delivery are negotiated with clients, however, the communication process sprawls across system boundaries. In this section, I will illustrate this with two case studies that show how the date games are played beyond organisational limits and sometimes reach a point of unravelling.

### 9.4.1. Boundary work positions

Within the organisation, client consultants process the delivery date information for further handling. But these delivery dates are the outcomes of the consultant team's "boundary work" (Holtgrewe 2003: 64). The consultant teams comprise a functional sub-system concerned with the organisational boundaries with the environment – in this case, the clients. As I illustrated in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2), the freelance team leads perform the same "boundary work", but they do so in order to craft and maintain the organisational boundaries with the freelancers (Holtgrewe 2003: 65). While both sub-systems are structurally similar, their disparity in status is determined by the organisation's dominant value client centricity that is of fundamental significance to the client projects.

Client consulting teams are in a hierarchically higher position than the other sub-systems that perform "boundary work", such as the freelance team leads. Client consultants paradoxically are, however, in a weaker position to shape the relationship with the environment according to the organisation's own interests, as the decision to place a project order with Advice Company is taken solely by clients. In contrast, the decision to hire freelancers for their services lays with the freelance team leads; similarly, the HR department determines the type of relationship the organisation has with tertiary education

institutions<sup>3</sup>. Hence, in these cases, the decision-making lies within the organisation.

The delivery date games that are played across organisational boundaries represent an interesting analytical category due to their close connection in time. Organisations differentiate themselves from their environment not only by communicating their boundaries, but also through time dimensions. Luhmann speaks of the emergence of system-immanent time, which must still adhere to the time of the environment (Luhmann 1995a: 185). By analysing the manipulation of delivery dates, one can trace how the organisation processes impulses from the environment – from clients into its own context – and how varying time dimensions play a role in the organisational boundaries. We have seen above that the date games build on and (re)produce internal differentiation. Similar system-environment date games are at play with clients, yet with distinct differences to the internal date games, as I will illustrate in the following two cases from two different client consulting teams within Advice Company.

#### 9.4.2. Playing client delivery date games

Sneha, a client consultant, informed Deepak, a junior colleague, about a client request that had just arrived in her inbox. After exchanging general information about the project's topic and scope and a preliminary action plan, Sneha asked Deepak to call the client to speak about timelines (i.e. delivery dates). During the phone call, the client told Deepak that she wanted the project to be delivered by the 15th of December. Deepak promised to check if that would be possible, but he warned her that it might not be achievable. As his reason, he explained that the earliest the project execution teams could complete their tasks would be the end of November, depending on the freelancers' productivity.

But instead of revising her deadline, the client argued that she needed the project report and recommendation for a planned top-level management board meeting on the 17th of December. She would need the recommendations to form the basis of a discussion at that meeting, so she could push for

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3 The HR department decides whether or not to establish a campus recruitment agreement with a business school and the execution team leads are responsible for the decision to utilise a freelancer's service on the basis of Advice Company's skillset requirements.

a strategic decision before the year's end. Deepak again announced that he would check on the feasibility of her request and get back to her. He got up and walked to Sneha's desk to discuss this phone conversation with the client. With a frown, Sneha said that she would not buy into the client's delivery date timelines, and her idea of a realistic project delivery was "something like mid-January". Then she told Deepak in an explicit, though not unfriendly tone that he should not share with clients any information about when the project execution work would be complete. The reason for this is that the client might push for delivery of the report soon after the execution team's work tasks were complete.

While both looked at the calendar on Sneha's computer screen, on which she clicked back and forth between the weeks, the two began to discuss whether the client's board meeting on the 17th of December was a bluff. Each brought to the discussion facts they knew about the client's organisation (relating to its management structure and their experiences with past projects). They finally concluded that the client must have mentioned the meeting as a bluff, and that the said board meeting would not actually happen – at least not on the 17th of December. Therefore, Sneha calculated the project plan with a potential delivery date of the end of December. Before concluding the ad-hoc meeting, she reiterated to Deepak that he should not share timelines about individual work tasks with clients.

The next day, when I asked Deepak about the timelines for the new potential project, he told me that he had decided not to send the revised delivery date proposal to the client, but to ask (via email) for a phone call to discuss the timelines. When I asked if there was a chance for alignment he replied in the affirmative, because Sneha had said that she would be able to deliver the final project in January, but would have the option to offer a partial update and preliminary analysis on the 20th of December. He rated this scenario as a good basis for agreement, as both he and Sneha had come to the conclusion that the client was bluffing about the board meeting on the 17th of December. Deepak therefore felt confident that the client was creating a buffer for herself that they would be able to negotiate.

The call with the client was scheduled for the afternoon. When Deepak and Sneha gathered in a meeting booth to prepare for it, Sneha proposed to enter the discussion with a project delivery date of the 17th of January, with a preliminary report a week earlier, on the 10th of January. Her final comment before Deepak started to dial into the conference call crisply summarised her bargaining strategy: "The client will be upset with this, but we anyhow should

put this timing into our initial proposal. Why crunch timelines at the beginning, let her beg for it.”

Consequently, the client got an initial delivery date proposal of the 17th of January, which was then “negotiated and mutually agreed” for the 3rd of January with a preliminary report on the 20th of December.

This example illustrates the strategies employed by the consulting teams in executing their “boundary work”. Both Advice Company and the client organisation had the target of finalising the project in the most convenient time-frame for each of them and the double contingency made this a challenge for both sides, as such targets were rarely in congruence. The client opened the communication by selecting a first delivery date, which Deepak and Sneha – the boundary specialists – processed within the system as “unachievable”.

The follow-up communication Deepak selected was aligned with the project process within the organisational system. His feedback was that the client’s requested deadline was “unachievable because execution teams only ready too short beforehand”. The selection of understanding from the client system can only be inferred from the follow-up communication, for which the date of the executive board meeting was selected to iterate the validity of the expected delivery date. Hence, the selected understanding of Deepak’s response to her request was definitely not “unachievable”, but might have been “if they stretch they maybe can”.

Processing this selection of understanding in the client’s system hence led to the decision to “increase pressure” by selecting an utterance that rebuked the client’s internal hierarchical structure (executive board), its system-immanent time (meeting date) and the constitutive necessity of decision-making in the system’s time context (requiring a strategic decision before year-end). The selection of understanding from both Deepak and Sneha of this utterance is remarkable: they selected to understand it as a bluff – determining that the strategy employed internally at Advice Company for collaboration across sub-systems was being used by the client to achieve a buffer on her end.

Both boundary specialists assumed that the decision of the client system was to select an artificial meeting date in order to increase the pressure on them; hence, they decided not to align their delivery dates. The client, respectively, was most likely aware that her counterparts at Advice Company would not understand her delivery date request as the date that would ultimately be demanded. Therefore, “delivery dates” became an intentional working misunderstanding in this cross-system communication: both sides were aware

of the other party's differing understanding, yet this misunderstanding was used to foster the project initiation process.

According to Luhmann's concept of communication, information cannot flow directly to another system; instead, it causes an irritation at the boundary that gets processed according to the system's structural framework. The communication described above illustrates that social systems do not communicate directly, but via the selection of an utterance and understanding. When Deepak said "unachievable", the client responded with a revised delivery date request. If there had been direct communication between the systems, then this follow-up communication would not have made sense, as the status "unachievable" would have triggered follow-up communication to inquire about a possible delivery date.

It becomes clear how these intentional misunderstandings of the delivery date are used for the interaction: they reiterate each system's structures and shape them through internal processing mechanisms. Sneha emphasised the organisational border of Advice Company when she said – twice – that it was not advisable to give a client information about the planned delivery of tasks from the execution teams, as doing so would provide too much information about the organisation's decision-making options when playing the date game with the client. This informational edge with respect to the internal processes of the organisation maintained the equilibrium between clients and consulting teams in the delivery date games, as clients had an advantage, by default, through their decision-making power.

### 9.4.3. When the date games stop working

The second example, from a different client consulting team, illustrates what can happen if this equilibrium is hampered by an advantage of information and decision-making power on the client's side:

Manhas and Brijesh were client consultants on the same team. During a cigarette break, Manhas explained to me that they were "arming" themselves for a discussion about the delivery dates and pricing of a new project opportunity with a – in his words – "stressy client". The client had basically demanded that Advice Company deliver the project as soon as possible and had given the consultants his expectation of what he thought was an achievable delivery date. Back at the desk area, Brijesh and Manhas prepared for the call. Both reviewed the background information about the project before calling their teammate at Advice Company's Delhi office. All three discussed the

delivery dates they would suggest and the arguments they would use to back up their proposal, as they liked to avoid committing to very tight timelines.

The twist that added complexity to the upcoming call, as Brijesh explained to me, was that the client was a former employee of Advice Company who had “moved to the client side” almost two years ago. Therefore, he knew the organisation’s internal processes around client projects, including, of course, the date games. Consequently, his knowledge about the organisation, in combination with his decision-making power with respect to assigning projects to the organisation, gave him a favourable position, as – to him – Advice Company was not completely opaque and contingent. A few minutes prior to 3.00pm I accompanied Brijesh and Manhas to a meeting room. Manhas dialled into the teleconference and the three of us sat around the phone in the middle of the small table, which was set to speaker mode.

As foreseen by Brijesh, the phone call proved difficult. The client gave the two consultants a “hard time pressurising on delivery dates”<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to the client from the previous example, who referred to system-internal dependencies on management meetings or other relevant deadlines (e.g. year end) in her own organisation, the client here built his argumentation solely on the project process within Advice Company. He demanded to see the internal project design for his review in order to give his input to it. He had also prepared his own calculation of the project’s time plan, with an assumption of how long the execution teams should take to complete their tasks and when the project could be finalised by the consultants. When both Manhas and Brijesh tried to push back on these delivery dates, he continued with his argumentation that they had support from the teams in the city office and consequently should be able to deliver. The gap between the delivery dates the two parties aimed at amounted to several weeks, not days.

During the phone call, the tone became more aggravated with each negotiation round. When Manhas told the client that Advice Company would not be able to count on support from the city office team, the client continued to remind his counterparts of his professional past at the organisation. He was surprised to hear about the situation and concluded that something must be wrong with the company’s strategy. When he worked at Advice Company he had support available and was of course also expected to increase his workload to achieve timelines for client projects.

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4 As per Manhas’ summary at the team’s desk area after the call.

The discussion continued for another 25 minutes, during which Manhas, whom I had come to know as a calm and quiet person, started to show signs of impatience and frustration: between the client's wordy argumentations he would grimace and/or push the "speaker mute" button on the phone, so the three of us could hear what the client was saying but any conversation on our end would not be transmitted to the client. This function enabled Manhas and Brijesh to enter into lively discussions amongst themselves, during which both heavily gesticulated.

But it didn't help. The final agreement was that the two consultants would revise their timeline to bring it closer to the client's expectations. The client did not budge from his initial delivery date. When the call ended and Manhas finally disconnected the phone, he commented that "this guy is just talking on and on, lets nobody speak". While we left the meeting room and walked back to the desk area, both Manhas and Brijesh continued to discuss the call. Upon sinking into his office chair, Manhas uttered with a frowning side glance towards me that now his work intensity levels had doubled<sup>5</sup>.

The communication in this example is remarkably different to that of the previous example. Here, the delivery date game was played from a special point of departure: the client had previously worked at Advice Company and therefore had once been part of the organisational system he was now interacting with from his new position at a client's organisation in Advice Company's environment. He had selected an understanding of the initial delivery date Manhas gave him according to the interests of the client system he was now a member of (i.e. to achieve as early a delivery as possible). But his information processing not only occurred along the guiding difference of the client's system, but it also incorporated his knowledge of Advice Company's structure, or what he believed to be the structure. This can be inferred from his follow-up-communication: he did not move from his initial proposal and justified his iteration through his assumptions about the client project development process at Advice Company.

The client's decision to insist on his initial delivery date<sup>5</sup> was grounded on the certainty of his knowledge of the possible decision options of his counterparts at Advice Company and which option they might choose. Thus, the

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5 When I conducted snapshot analyses of communication events, I asked my interlocutors to describe the intensity level of their current work phase. When I had asked Manhas that the morning, he had indicated a rather low level.

interaction was not determined by double contingency. Manhas tried to balance the asymmetry in negotiating power by selecting an utterance about the unavailability of the support team at the city office, attempting to indicate to the client that his assumptions about the client project process within Advice Company might no longer be valid. This follow-up communication allowed for the assumption that the client might have selected an accurate understanding of the information. But the client made clear – through his reference to client centricity as the leading paradigm within Advice Company – that he still had knowledge about other aspects of the organisation’s structure that he could consider for his decisions in the delivery date game.

An expression of this notion of intrusion into their system could be registered in Manhas’ reaction of switching off the phone microphone to discuss with Brijesh a possible resolution to their situation. He tried to actively re-establish the boundary towards the client by technically cutting the communication channel. At the same time, he sought to reinforce the social system of him and Brijesh, through conversation. The call nevertheless ended with an unravelled working misunderstanding and two slightly dejected consultants. This situation can be compared to Bohannan’s ascertainment that the colonial working misunderstanding only remained “working” as long as the two systems were kept apart (1964: 25). The date games as working misunderstandings could not be played with this client, as the ex-employee was aware of the processing mechanisms within Advice Company. Apparently, this was not a singular phenomenon. Cathy, a client consultant I did not accompany but happened to share good rapport with, replied to my question of whether she had ever had former Advice Company employees as clients:

Yes, that happens indeed from time to time, as quite a few colleagues are happy to move to the client side. And this is always potentially problematic. Why? Because they believe to know exactly what is going on here, but they don’t understand that their knowledge is several years old. And since they left, a lot might have changed. I once had a client who accused me of having made a mistake and complained with my manager. But in the end it came out that here simply our processes have changed and we didn’t do the things anymore the way he thought we would.

I described the above meeting incident, which I had experienced several months before our conversation, and asked if she could relate to it:

Oh yes... [laughs] I can very well relate to that! See, on the one hand, yes, that client was right insofar as it is theoretically possible to deliver the project in a shorter timeframe. But this only works if we consider only that one client's project. In reality we need several projects running in parallel to cover our business, and so all are working on several projects in parallel. Plus, if something goes wrong on our end and we have to do re-work, then the shorter timeframes are again unfeasible. So, netnet [the strict net] timeframe of a project might be shorter, but not in actual practice. Of course it is difficult to deal in a project timing conversation with a client, who actually knows all this. Because he is also very aware that you just can't say officially: "Yes the actual sum of work steps is shorter and we could deliver your project earlier, but we have to consider other clients' projects and to cater for potential issues on our side." This is why it is always a bit tricky to negotiate with ex-colleagues on the other end at a client.

Other ethnographic studies have described this "breaking point" of the misunderstanding (Losonczy and Mesturini Cappo 2014: 2), as well as a "cognitive unravelling" (Reed 2006: 159) or "fallen mask" (Cole 2014: 545).

I have demonstrated in these cases how date games as intentional working misunderstandings around delivery dates are a constitutive element of cross-system communication that enable each system's boundary work. However, the second case study illustrated the result of the opacity of the two interacting systems ceasing to subsist. Similar to the escalation strategies in the previous section, this situation ultimately prevents the misunderstandings from "working".

## 9.5. Concluding remarks on intentional working misunderstandings

The date games, as played both inside the organisation and across the organisational boundaries, use delivery dates as an intentional working misunderstanding. The different (sub-)systems attach their own meaning to the dates through system-specific selection processes in the communication events; this enables an uninterrupted series of follow-up communication and decisions – constitutive operations of the autopoiesis of the organisational system.

In the communication processes observed in the example of the internal team-specific project deadlines, the hierarchically higher team selects information that they assume will produce their desired outcome once processed by the subsequent team in the process chain. The selection of understanding within this next team and the processing within the sub-system, however, might be different from what the previous team expects. I have illustrated how the subsequent team factors an assumed pre-selection of information by the preceding team into its decision. The fact that all interacting parties are aware of the differing ascriptions of the communicated delivery date makes it an intentional working misunderstanding.

During the planning (i.e. date games) phase of a project, information levels align with the organisational structure along the client centricity scale. However, once the project is in the project execution (i.e. status reports) phase, the situation reverses: in this phase, the freelance team leads have the most direct up-to-date information on the project's progress and the orientation changes towards ground reality as the more relevant value.

This assumption of a pre-selection of information and an intentional working misunderstanding relating to the meaning of "on track for delivery date" was reflected when Kashish asked me to reveal knowledge about the execution progress of his project GREEN, as he feared "something might be boiling up there" (see Chapter 8, Section 8.2). He was aware of the selection processes that had occurred before the project's status update had arrived with his team, and that his idea of "on track" might subsequently differ significantly from that of the other sub-systems. This incongruence between information power and hierarchy level during the execution phase strongly characterises the second phase of the client project, which depends on the intentional working misunderstanding around communicated delivery dates for bottom-up collaboration.

In most cases, the top-down planning phase did not unravel the misunderstanding, as to the system's structure prevented individual sub-systems from gaining insight into the other sub-systems' available information (e.g. the definite agreed delivery date with the client). But the situation differed in the bottom-up situation. If project status information that had been transmitted to the consulting teams failed to be understood in line with the interpretation of the delivery date they had initially selected in the planning phase, an escalation process would start. Therefore, I argue for the inclusion of another aspect of working misunderstandings in the toolbox of analytical

categories: the distinction between ongoing working misunderstandings and those that terminate at a point of unravelling.

Through the involvement of consulting team leads, instant direct access to project status information from execution teams could be obtained. At this moment, the collaboration would end to make room for a more intense and resource-binding mode of communication. To this point, however, collaboration would rely on intentional working misunderstandings of delivery dates (and status updates) to enable successful interaction between the sub-systems, as project coordinator Sandesh concluded in an interview:

We [project coordinators] feel that the consultants know it [the delivery date] is unachievable, we know it is not do-able, and the execution teams definitely also know it. Yet we go ahead only – it's "I-pretend-I-don't-know" style of working here that does the job.

This quote connects the working misunderstanding around date games to the intentional *modus*: all parties were aware that the communicated delivery date had been pre-selected by the previous sub-system and they therefore allowed themselves to attach their own meaning to that date. The impulses that arrived at the sub-system's boundaries in the form of information about a delivery date were not congruent to the selection of the sub-system's understanding of it. Because of these ambiguities at play around the actual delivery date, which all interacting systems were aware of, the project collaboration led – in the vast majority of cases – to the successful, timely project delivery to the client. This also underlines the assertion of organisational sociologist Nils Brunsson that “a lack of rationality is not necessarily a disadvantage for organisations” (2006: 35). While this chapter has illustrated how the intentional *modus* of working misunderstandings can serve as a fruitful analytical category, the following chapter will trace the non-intentional *modus* of working misunderstandings.

