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Tensions Beneath the Surface
Hoshin Kanri as a Tool for Strategic Conflict Regulation

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Abstract This paper investigates *Hoshin Kanri*, a planning, implementation, and control method aimed at translating organisational goals into actionable plans through a streamlined and cooperative approach. Conflict is assumed to be a threat to organisational stability, arising from misalignments in objectives, values, and motivations within the organisation and between its members and the organisation itself. The hypothesis posits that *Hoshin Kanri* implicitly adopts the *cooperative principle* as a persuasive strategy to channel conflict while keeping it latent, yet leadership practices and workflow digitalisation contribute to its violation. Accordingly, the application of conversational implicatures to *Hoshin Kanri* will be examined. Specifically: (1) the rule-based system of conduct it generates (*deontology*); (2) the intersubjective space it articulates (*negotiation*); and (3) the leadership approach it structures (*procedural*). For this purpose, a methodological framework combining semiotics with pragmatics and social systems theory will be applied, allowing the analysis of corporate communication as a space of interaction and manipulation aimed at constructing shared meaning. The empirical analysis is grounded in a corpus a corpus a corpus compiled through the participant observation of operational practices in two multinational companies headquartered in the EU. The main findings suggest that applying the cooperative principle to *Hoshin Kanri* leads to a syntax of *non-impoliteness* aimed at reinforcing the system's self-referentiality and ultimately impacting the organisation's ability to autonomously develop proactive responses to contingency.

Keywords: conflict, organisations, cooperative principle, leadership

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0. Introduzione

The aim of this paper is to investigate *Hoshin Kanri*, a strategic planning method integrating goal-setting, implementation, and review cycles to enhance organisational performance through improved communication and staff development. The method involves formulating several vision statements (typically four) to foster breakthrough thinking regarding the company's future direction (Liker 2004). Goals and action plans are then crafted to reflect the collective outlook, with progress periodically monitored through performance audits. The overall objective is to promptly respond to changes in the operating environment, with a focus on developing employees' soft skills.

The strategic alignment required by this method relies on clear and purpose-driven communication, which implicitly enacts Grice's *cooperative principle* as a prerequisite for effective deployment. This is particularly evident in cross-functional coordination, where shared metrics such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) must be collectively constructed to mediate between organisational goals and operational constraints[1].
According to Grice (1975), human exchanges typically reflect a cooperative effort, with each participant recognising a common purpose or a mutually accepted direction. Grice specifically identifies four categories of conversational implicatures, formulated as core maxims, serving the purpose of promoting cooperative exchanges: *Quantity*, to avoid both reticence and verbosity; *Quality*, to ensure accuracy and verifiability; *Relation*, to provide relevance; and *Manner*, to prevent ambiguity.
Quantity serves, for instance, to design and report SMART[2] objectives; *Relation* helps to engage employees and fosters commitment; *Manner* supports in auditing personnel performance, with feedback tied to corporate goals; and *Quality* aids in reducing time spent on unproductive tasks, allowing teams to lower the risk of decisions made from flawed data. This suggests that high levels of cooperation may strengthen teamwork, while low levels could hinder the attainment of goals.
Despite the considerable attention *Hoshin Kanri* has garnered within management research, its strategic-communicative dimensions have yet to be thoroughly examined.
By promoting collective engagement in defining and implementing objectives, *Hoshin Kanri* seeks to stabilise organisational patterns. Thus, the cooperative principle implicitly enables companies to align their communicational resources with strategic goals, thereby optimising methods and procedures while minimising unnecessary efforts (Tetteh, Uzochukwu 2014). Moreover, *Hoshin Kanri* is progressively adapting to decentralised and data-driven environments as Industry 4.0 evolves (Suvarna *et al.* 2021). Grice's principle may support shared meaning-making in asynchronous communication.
However, workflow digitalisation may lead to both information scarcity and overload (Choo 2016). This can affect the phatic, conative, and referential functions of communication (Jakobson 1960), challenging the maxims of *Quantity*, *Relation*, and *Manner*. Likewise, the absence of non-verbal and paraverbal cues heightens the likelihood of miscommunication and may breach the maxim of *Quality*. The overemphasis on alignment and cooperation may thus conceal latent tensions, particularly where digital procedures and communicative asymmetries limit the space for meaning negotiation (Baker *et al.* 2024).
This paper examines how a method conceived to support coordination may also function as a mechanism for containing latent conflict, precisely by questioning whether valuing cooperation contributes to conflict management or instead risks neutralising, disguising, or displacing it.
We advance the hypothesis that the cooperative principle is implicitly mobilised as a persuasive device to regulate interactional expectations and contain latent tensions. Building on a prior discussion of conflict and its organisational relevance, we investigate how: (1) conversational implicatures lead to a deontological system of rules intended to guide members' conduct; (2) digitalisation impacts on this system, shaping a *negotiational* space where evolving conditions for strategic governance emerge; and (3) how the application of the cooperative principle fosters a *non-impoliteness* syntax, positioning the leader as a *procedural* delegate within the management system.

[1] The examples discussed in this paper are based on data collected through fieldwork (cf. *infra*). They have been edited and condensed in compliance with the space limitations of the editorial format.
[2] An acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

Particular attention is given to digital workgroups, whose asynchronous exchanges often lack prosodic and proxemic cues that typically support collective meaning-making. Under such conditions, the implicit application of conversational implicatures may expose organisations to a greater risk of misunderstanding, ultimately threatening the cooperative logic underpinning methods like *Hoshin Kanri*.

1. Methodology

This paper is grounded in an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines Paris School generative semiotics and its contemporary developments with U. Eco's interpretative approach, Gricean pragmatics, and N. Luhmann's social systems theory to investigate core issues in organisational theory (management).

Generative semiotics enables the decomposition of corporate dynamics into logical structures that are then organised into a cohesive and coherent whole, highlighting how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and stabilised. Modal theory clarifies the conditions for value alignment (Greimas 1983), while the tensive approach (Zilberberg 2006) traces the friction zones within organisational flows.

Eco's interpretative semiotics contributes to clarifying how meaning production relies on shared cultural and co-textual knowledge. *Encyclopaedic competence* (Eco 1979), in particular, enables organisational members to activate inferential pathways that support adaptive interpretations in ambiguous or under-specified settings. Grice's cooperative principle (Grice 1975) illuminates how local pragmatic effects may emerge from broader communicative needs, aimed at resolving violations at the macro level (Simons 2016). Taken together, interpretative and pragmatic perspectives offer tools for analysing meaning as a dynamic process, highlighting the stabilising role of cooperation within organisational systems.

Finally, social systems theory (Luhmann 1984) provides insight into how communicative dynamics contribute to the organisation's autopoiesis, namely its capacity to reproduce itself by selecting and distinguishing elements compatible with its self-referential logic. Rather than the aggregate of its members, the organisation is conceived as a social system constituted by communications that autopoietically self-structure to align conflict with strategic governance.

The proposed approach responds to the need for articulating the internal grammar of communication with the situated modalities through which it is realised. Workflow digitalisation reveals how communication unfolds within hybrid networks, composed of both human and non-human actors (Latour 2005), and embodied in material and relational positions (Braidotti 2017). By conceiving organisations as social systems, this perspective offers a conceptual framework for analysing both formal processes and in-process dynamics as complementary meaning-making operations involved in the system's reproduction. The distinction, therefore, does not stem from the nature of the object under investigation but rather in the function it fulfils within the autopoietic process[3].

Accordingly, we understand communication as a dynamic and *factitive* interactional space (Greimas 1983), wherein the interplay between the act "*Mitteilung*", the information "*Information*", and its decoding "*Verstehen*" (Luhmann 1984) is rooted in the production of shared meaning (Landowski 2006).

Applying this theoretical framework to *Hoshin Kanri* entails a shift in analytical scale whose purpose here is not to treat the method as a communicative interaction *per se* but to explore the underlying conditions it assumes and organises. As a structuring device for

[3] This paper is a part of a broader theoretical reflection currently underway, focusing on the interplay between text and practice in organisational meaning-making processes.

organisational communication, *Hoshin Kanri* generates a grammar of communication, and it fits within an interactional regime based on tacit cooperation and conflict regulation.
The analysis is based on a *corpus* of data collected through direct observation (*participant observation*) conducted in hybrid and digital mode within two companies based in the European Union (EU): the subsidiary of a US-based manufacturing firm and the branch of an EU multinational specialised in Digital Factory Research & Development (R&D) solutions. Both companies have implemented *Hoshin Kanri* as a tool for organisational coordination. The fieldwork extended over four weeks and specifically focused on workflows and internal communication processes, observed across in-person, hybrid, and digital settings. The documentary *corpus* includes: Human Resources (HR) management and quality assurance internal policies; X-matrices[4], KPI guidelines, operational notes, and feedback protocols. Sensitive data collected have been processed in full compliance with EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR).

2. Conflicts

Conflict is an inherent feature of intersubjective dynamics, arising when individuals or groups hold divergent goals, motivations, or value systems (De Dreu, Weingart 2003). It is thus crucial in organisations, where pursuing shared objectives can clash with the diverse attributes of their members. A paradoxical issue lies precisely in the need to cooperate in pursuit of common goals with colleagues whom they did not personally select and whose aims frequently diverge from their own.
Conflict also occurs when organisational values are not aligned with those of employees. (Schneider *et al.* 1995) underscore the tendency for organisations to *attract* and *select* organisational members who share their value systems, while experiencing *attrition* among those who do not. The combined effect of attraction, selection, and attrition shapes the company's structure, while providing insight into its internal dynamics.
Conflict, however, is not inherently dysfunctional. When managed through appropriate contractual frameworks, it can support collaboration and drive innovation (Fisher, Ury 1981). It constitutes an essential precondition for strengthening commitment (Weick 1995), while tensions arising from divergent roles may foster internal improvement[5] (Edmondson 2018).
Conflict therefore plays a *pivotal narrative role*, by articulating a hierarchy of programmes that may enhance or hinder performance. It functions precisely as a turning point, marking a shift in the course of events, often triggered by an acquisition of knowledge or a reversal of roles. Its escalation may lead to unproductive outcomes; its effective management enables strategic responsiveness (Thakore 2013) and correlates with higher levels of performance (Safi, Khairkhwa 2024). As a result, a cooperative approach to teamwork has gradually been adopted in strategic management, particularly in relation to the shift from autocratic leadership towards more collaborative models (Wang *et al.* 2019, Pizzolitto *et al.* 2023).
Until the second half of the 20th century, a large majority of companies relied on authoritarian techniques to manage their staff. After the Second World War, the American *Training Within Industry* programme was introduced to Japan, promoting hands-on engineering training on the shop floor and encouraging collaboration between foremen

[4] The *X-matrix* is a *Hoshin Kanri* visual planning tool that links strategic priorities to yearly objectives, operational plans, and KPIs. It supports the integration of long-term goals with daily decision-making.
[5] Accordingly, *Conflict Management* has emerged as a field of practices and models aimed at preventing, addressing, and converting conflict within organisations. Its objective is not only to mitigate the adverse effects of conflict on performance but also to harness its potential as a driver of change and innovation.

and workers. Japan's cultural emphasis on mutual support aligned with the programme's principles, which had a profound impact on industries, especially on Toyota.

The *Toyota Production System* (TPS) was developed in the late 1940s. It emerged as a 'manufacturing philosophy' designed to promptly resolve anomalies (*jidoka*) and synchronise processes (*Just-in-Time*) by removing overburden (*muri*), inconsistency (*mura*), and waste (*muda*) (TMC 1998). The success of TPS paved the way for the broader *Lean Manufacturing*. Developed by MIT researchers, this model is grounded in the principle of 'doing more and more with less and less – less human effort, less equipment, less time, and less space – while aligning with customer demands' (Womack, Jones 1996: 15).

Over time, *Lean* principles were extended to sectors like health and services, evolving into even broader *Lean Thinking*. This approach promotes a culture of continuous improvement (*kaizen*) and waste reduction across all domains, emphasising the importance of a streamlined mindset in every facet of the organisation. Later on, Western companies increasingly began to adopt "The Toyota Way[6]", on the assumption that harmonious workplaces would be key to improving processes (Shah, Ward 2007).

Hoshin Kanri originated in post-war Japan as a core feature of *Lean Thinking*: whereas *Lean* prioritises waste removal alongside productivity maximisation, *Hoshin Kanri* seeks to synchronise long-term strategic objectives with optimised daily practices. This is achieved by promoting cooperation and a streamlined approach (Liker, Convis 2012). Inaccurate or overwhelming data may generate significant inefficiencies; conversely, reducing information waste is a strategic lever for strengthening outcomes. *Lean* methods and tools are thus recognised as a key for optimising organisational functioning, even across multicultural environments (Bell, Orzen 2011).

From this standpoint, the assumed use of conversational implicatures contributes to shaping purpose-driven exchanges, in line with the *Lean* approach to waste removal, including communicative ones. In digital workplaces, this cooperative logic must contend with the lack of environmental cues, along with asynchronous exchanges. Effective exchanges are therefore essential to prevent dispersion and ensure strategic alignment.

This reflects a tension between cooperative exchanges promoted by *Hoshin Kanri*, and the contractual and polemic structure of interaction, according to which conflict is intrinsic to organisational dynamics.

Cooperation draws on encyclopaedic competence and assumes that communication is a product whose interpretative outcome depends on its generative mechanism (Eco 1979), notably through strategies intended to foresee expectations. Thus, it is grounded in a set of believing techniques intrinsically bound to the pragmatic situation of their application. Conflict, by contrast, introduces a rupture. It is a parasitic social system that exploits the contradictions of communication and absorbs systemic resources. Its criticality lies precisely in the extent of this involvement, so that the system on which conflict feeds is compelled to keep it within acceptable limits (Luhmann 1984). To manage it, the organisation introduces role differentiation and establishes *decisions*, understood as codified operations, recognisable within the system and serving to constrain future communications (Luhmann 2000). Accordingly, we assume that the tacit deployment of conversational implicatures performs a stabilising function within a typically contractual and polemical framework, shaping how members adapt to strategic governance.

Hence, the cooperative principle may be conceived as a persuasive strategy. Persuasion, as a form of *cognitive doing*, involves modalities to make the enunciative contract acceptable and to ensure communication effectiveness (Greimas 1983). Conversational implicatures guide exchanges as purpose-driven, encouraging adherence to corporate aims without

[6] A 2021 study indicates a *leanness* level of 56% among a sample of fifty companies, comprising 42.5% small, 44.7% medium-sized, and 61.3% large enterprises (Medonos 2021).

requiring overt contractual spaces. They also shape the normative framework (obligations, values, and beliefs) allowing alignment to appear frictionless even when latent conflict remains unresolved.
However, framing the misalignment as 'communicative waste' may also risk obscuring the structural role of conflict in the autopoietic production of the system's elements. We assume, indeed, that conflict, as a dynamic process, may be framed as a generative threshold, through which the internal structure of the organisation is reconfigured via the conversion of roles, practices, and shared meanings. Ignoring or suppressing tensions may undermine the very cooperation *Hoshin Kanri* seeks to preserve.

3. Deontologies

Hoshin Kanri (Japanese: 方針管理, 'policy management') is a strategic planning method designed to ensure that organisational mission, vision, and goals are effectively implemented and communicated across all levels, from top management to the *frontline*.[7]
The method is built on four principles: (1) committing to a long-term philosophy; (2) designing effective processes for reliable outcomes; (3) developing personnel to enhance organisational impact; (4) promoting corporate learning through continuous problem-solving.
This approach to measured production rate "*heijunka*" is likewise applied to HR management, in which it shapes leadership models that rely participatory decision-making "*Catchball*[8]" and streamlined communication to build trust and foster teamwork. If leaders manage departments solely according to their own interpretation of business objectives, conflict is likely to arise. Similar outcomes may occur if their personal goals diverge from broader organisational aims or from those of other departments. A further risk emerges if targets are vaguely or ambiguously formulated, as employees tend to deprioritise unclear goals in favour of specific ones (Kesterson 2015). According to Hutchins (Hutchins 2008), *Hoshin Kanri* thus supports the shift from function-based to process-based management, with the former producing low performance due to wasteful remarks, and the latter achieving high-performance outcomes through cohesive exchanges. As a consequence, if *kaizen* is the intended goal, communication is *the key* to reaching it.
In this perspective, *Hoshin Kanri* provides the *contractual framework* within which Grice's principle drives communication towards performance effectiveness: where conflict results in suboptimal performance, the cooperative principle contributes to optimising[9] the allocation of time and resources, thereby reducing the overall semiotic load.
To prevent conflict from undermining systemic stability, the organisation relies on decisions as stabilising devices that pre-structure communicative expectations (Luhmann 2000). Accordingly, conversational implicatures enable *Hoshin Kanri* to precisely determine the *direction to be taken* by establishing a *persuasive doing*, from which an *interpretative doing* derives. This allows decisions to carry shared value and reinforces the contractual framework within which conflict can be contained in a non-disintegrating form.

[7] Military catachresis, the diaphasic variable 'frontline' is widely institutionalised in managerial literature and has proven recurrent in fieldwork data. It refers to employees operating at the interface of production and service delivery, introducing a motivational framing that channels organisation's semiosis.
[8] The diaphasic variable 'Catchball' derives from the conceptual metaphor of 'throwing and catching a ball' and *euphorically* refers to the continuous and dynamic exchange of ideas and information among all members of the organisation.
[9] Optimisation' refers to the application of the principle of simplicity to syntagmatic procedures. It involves reducing analytical operations and selecting the most efficient model or representational system. In the case of complex narrative programming, this results in 'functional optimisation' (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 263).

The term *Hoshin Kanri* indeed comprises four elements: *Ho* (direction), *Shin* (focus), *Kan* (alignment), and *Ri* (reason). Little wonder that *Hoshin Kanri* is often compared to the way a compass needle consistently points towards the North Pole, specifically to how iron filings align on a sheet of paper when a magnet is placed beneath it. Each filing represents an employee, with all employees aligning with the company's vision (Hutchins 2008). *Hoshin* refers to the direction to be taken, that is, the *policy*; *Kanri* relates to the approach for achieving it, as *strategy* rather than management.

Policy is the social domain that governs the regulation of relationships within a community, either directly or indirectly linked to the exercise of power (Alonso Aldama 2022). It provides the framework within which operations must align to ensure consistency with the company's aims (vision) and purposes (mission). As such, it sets out the *fiduciary contract* and steers the decision-making process. *Strategy* pertains to the operational process for assessing these relationships. It is realised when a decision-making body can be isolated and assumes the existence of a bounded space from which relations with external targets and threats can be managed (De Certeau 1980).

We assume therefore that *Hoshin Kanri* may be conceived as a *strategic policy*. A correlational hierarchy organises relevant values within the policy; an underlying relational one guides the strategic roadmap, providing the frame through which conversational implicatures drive the shift from axiology to ideology and deontology.

The *Hoshin* policy articulates both the *mandate* and the *actantial grammar*. The former concerns the attribution of roles and obligations within a value-oriented task; the latter defines the syntactic structure of formal narrative functions[10] within the event's narrative logic. Both are structured around the commitment to a 'manufacturing philosophy' and sustained by the thymic investment. Such investment allows the organisation to operate through a *seducing doing*, in which team members – from management to the frontline – are expected to embrace the company's conflict-free vision and shared goals, promoting collective purpose and synchronised action.

The participial suffix *-ing* conveys both an ongoing action and the impact exerted by the subject, modalised on the bulestic plane (*wanting-to-be*, *wanting-to-do*). Here, persuasion operates through knowledge rather than power, leading the subject to believe that fulfilling the assigned role confirms their functional relevance within the system. What is framed as alignment is equated to *empowerment*, prompting the subject *to want* which is already prescribed. As a result, *Hoshin* articulates an *axiological* framework grounded in virtual values that guide corporate strategic direction. This explains why the method is euphorically regarded as a means to develop core capabilities through continuous learning and problem-solving skill enhancement (Jackson 2006).

The *Kanri* strategy provides the competence and sets the conditions for performance through a persuasive modality operating as a *seductive doing*. Unlike the participial suffix *-ing*, which indicates an ongoing act and its effects, the adjectival suffix *-ive* implies a disposition rather than a realised impact. According to Landowski (1989), normative devices may operate through an impersonal form of persuasion, whereby obligation arises not from coercion but from an assumed shared knowledge. Here, the organisation assumes the syntactic role of a systemic Sender, framing strategic alignment as adherence to a collectively sanctioned normative model. Consequently, *Kanri* does not enforce action but positions the subject within a space of possibility, shifting the modal posture from external obligation to internalised *engagement*.

[10] In Bertrand's (2000) model, actantial roles are organised by sphere of action: *sender* (manipulator, judge, and helper), *subject* (and addressee), and *object of value*. The opponent's sphere is subsumed under the *anti-subject*, which belongs to the action field of the *anti-sender*. The antagonism between subject and anti-subject foregrounds the polemical structuring of meaning.

This dynamic activates the alethic axis (from *having-to-be* to *wanting-to-be*) and sustains performance through identification with values conceived as endogenous to the system. As a result, *Kanri* defines an *ideological* structure that actualises selected values through the construction of action plans and modalised roles. According to Heskett (2012), the TPS, from which *Hoshin Kanri* originates, has indeed become so deeply embedded in employees' mindsets that it shifted from a strategic tool to a key part of organisational culture. Saruta (2006) refers to this as a 'culture of control', which fosters strong company loyalty while reducing the voice of those who might challenge authority.

The subject's deontic overmodalisation (*having-to-wanting-to-do*) outlines an interactional space in which systemic expectations are communicated through soft, coded devices rather than direct imperatives. Here, politeness serves a strategic function: what is framed as horizontal collaboration actually downplaces hierarchical asymmetries through contractual simulacra. Politeness strategies, as Brown & Levinson (1987) note, reduce threats to face by minimising imposition, particularly in institutional settings. Moreover, in Japanese companies, politeness training fosters appropriate social conduct (*tatemae*) and the strategic selection of norms best suited to achieving the desired social effect (*wakimae*) (Dickel Dunn 2011).

Hoshin Kanri adopts this principle to diffuse prescriptions through formalised communicational devices, such as KPIs and X-Matrix, presented as shared tools rather than imposed commands. Hence, the cooperative principle does not operate here as a conversational norm but as a regulatory mechanism that narrows the range of acceptable communications through systemic simulacra of *commitment*. What emerges, ultimately, is a *deontological framework*, that is, a system of conduct rules that govern professional activities and are routinely observed as part of organisational roles.

To conclude, although *Hoshin Kanri* emphasises the adherence of all organisational members in setting goals and action plans, it is ultimately grounded in an underlying top-down approach. This is characterised by a hierarchical decision-making mechanism that stabilises the three *dimensions of meaning* (Luhmann 1984), with the cooperative principle enabling the *objectifying camouflage* of decisions and prescriptions by minimising enunciative marks (Greimas 1983), thereby framing them as instances of necessary collaboration.

The material dimension (*Sachdimension*) defines the object of communication, here organisational goals and action plans. The cooperative principle establishes an identity-based distinction between what is relevant to the system and what is not, thereby reducing environmental complexity and orienting subsequent communications. The social dimension (*Sozialdimension*) shapes the communicative horizon of possibilities through the functional distribution of roles within the organisation. The cooperative principle stabilises decisions by modulating members' expectations and ensuring the autopoiesis of the system. The temporal dimension (*Zeitdimension*) articulates the distinction between punctuality and duration, organising communication within a perfective present that actualises both the terminal aspect of the event and its presupposed durative component. This enables the system to retain a memory of past selections and enables anticipatory orientation in decision-making.

4. Negotiations

Digital work is an ongoing phenomenon involving the integration of high technologies into workflows and production processes and driving extensive connections between human beings and technological tools. Humans increasingly rely on technologies to accomplish their tasks; technologies, in turn, are subjected and conform to the constraints arising from the interaction with humans and tools. Hence, remote collaboration practices

cannot be reduced to information transmission but rather emerge from situated, multimodal processes involving real-time adjustment (Dondero *et al.* 2013).
The introduction of highly advanced technologies – such as cobotics[11], CPS[12], and Digital Twins[13] – underscores a paradigm shift, allowing us to consider the worker as «the marker of an evolving historical radical process» (Braidotti 2017: 7) whose posthuman condition is embedded in inhuman and a-human relational dynamics (Wolfe 2010).
Actor-Network Theory (ANT) highlights the relevance of non-human actors in the production of knowledge. B. Latour (2005) notably introduces the notion of «collaborative networks» to describe how technological devices contribute to science-making practices. This approach reframes the subject–object distinction and reconsiders the association of matter with passivity. Rationalist inhumanism underlines that the power of thinking and acting is not bound to the human condition. This perspective foregrounds the materiality of smart, Internet-bred entities and «hyperobjects» (Morton 2013), focusing on the productive mechanisms they issue from, their qualities, and interactive capacity for interconnection (Roden 2014, Wolfendale 2014). We assume that the human/non-human distinction is increasingly dissolving, with non-human actors assuming a primary role in knowledge production (Latour 2005).
Essentially, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is shaping a world in which virtual and material manufacturing systems flexibly interact on a global scale, blurring the boundaries among physical, digital, and biological spheres (Schwab 2016). As a result, new operating models are being developed, structured around human-to-human (H2H), human-to-machine (H2M), and machine-to-machine (M2M) relationships.
Such interplays expose new conflict risks, which arise, for instance, from simultaneous occurrences of information scarcity and overload. Despite the finite capacity of working memory, humans are constantly stimulated by an increasing amount of digital information, whose relevance is often difficult to assess (Eppler, Mengis 2004). Empirical evidence specifically suggests that information overload is tied to substantial performance losses, particularly due to interruptions and discomfort (Rigotti 2016), and that decision-making processes may be affected (Phillips-Wren, Adya 2020).
Additionally, team collaboration applications, particularly Instant Messaging Technology (IMT), suggest an implicit requirement for conciseness to align with the streamlined mindset prescribed by *Hoshin Kanri*. Fieldwork data suggest that diamesic variation may lead to breaches of the cooperative principle, including over-reticence (*Quantity*), reliance on *ipse dixit* or peremptory statements (*Quality*), unclear topic shifts (*Relation*), and heightened risks of ambiguity and confusion (*Manner*).
Lastly, exchanges conducted via IMT lack non-verbal and paraverbal cues. Even though emoticons act as *enunciative anchoring markers* and fulfil roles comparable to verbal productions (Halté 2016), they also are inherently polysemic. Their meaning may fluctuate significantly depending on accompanying verbal elements (Jaffel 2019) and, more broadly, on the *encyclopaedic competence* (Eco 1979) to which the system refers. As such, face-to-face exchanges remain considered a more comprehensive means of communication than emails and messages (Kauffeld *et al.* 2016).

[11] *Cobotics* is the field of human-robot collaboration, involving direct or remote-controlled interaction between humans and robots to achieve a common goal.
[12] A *Cyber-Physical System* (CPS) is a computational system that continuously interacts with the physical environment in which it operates, integrating physical processes with computational and communication capabilities.
[13] A *Digital Twin* is a virtual representation of a real-world physical product, system, or process (the *Physical Twin*), designed to function as its indistinguishable digital counterpart. It is utilised for practical applications such as simulation, integration, testing, monitoring, and maintenance.

The lack of non-verbal and paraverbal cues may thus affect the cooperative principle itself, becoming a source of misunderstandings and *aberrant decodings* (Eco, Fabbri 1978).
Fieldwork revealed that diaphasic variation (e.g. jargon, registers, acronyms) may lead to denotative mismatches, where the meaning attributed differs from the intended one; for instance, the acronym RCA, used to refer to *Root Cause Analysis*, was misunderstood as *Returnable Container Agreement*. Moreover, circumstantial pressures arising from H2M and M2M interplay may weaken the source legitimacy; for example, an automated KPI dashboard alert was disregarded by workers due to previous false positives. More crucially, the receiver may be driven by needs contradicting the intended persuasive aim of communication and will likely align it with their personal foresight network, as when a new protocol was perceived as temporary due to conflicting workload forecasts. Hence, politeness and cooperation expectations set by *Hoshin Kanri* may remain unachieved.
Expectations are condensations of meaning, indicating what a given situation envisions while providing stable guidance amidst contingency. As such, they shape the ground from which decisions emerge (Luhmann 1984). Their strength thus lies in suggesting what *should* happen rather than what *will* actually occur. This aptitude for communication to foresee and adjust to subsequent others is essential for system stability; nevertheless, it also further narrows the range of possibilities.
In ordinary exchanges, which do not require sophisticated premises, expectations are unlikely to be disappointed. For instance, when asking 'What time is it?' the expected reply is not 'It's raining'. Conversely, in uncertainty-forecasting scenarios like *Hoshin Kanri*, expectations are more prone to failure, substantially increasing the system's vulnerability. This explains the structuring of a top-down system of behaviour. The former relies on the commitment to the manufacturing philosophy, and the reliability of processes and outcomes; the latter involves enhancing soft skills, particularly problem-solving, as core drivers for continuous improvement.
Accordingly, communication *effectiveness* is aimed at ensuring expected goals (*kaizen*) within the scheduled time, while still neglecting the intensity and extension-related valences of value objects, as well as the additional practices it engages with (Alonso Aldama 2022). Violating the norm will result in conflicts, sanctions, and even its strengthening.
Fieldwork suggests, for example, that neglecting *Catchball* criteria, and imposing top-down decisions through IMT without actual frontline participation, may weaken the cooperative principle. *Catchball*, in fact, is grounded in a configuration that assumes the horizontality of exchange, relating more to the pragmatic conditions of enunciation (*Sozialdimension*) than to the object of the utterance (*Sachdimension*). As observed, when leaders fail to engage the team in decision-making, the fiduciary contract is destabilised.
Such asymmetry reflects a dual modal ambiguity. Although the leader is not formally entrusted with a prescriptive modal charge (*not-having-not-to-do*), they may still exert it through an impersonal *manipulative doing*, where obligation arises from the shared horizon of possibilities embedded in organisational roles (*being-able-to-do*). The team, although not formally required to comply with the leader's approach (*not-having-to-do*), may be induced to align with the organisational philosophy to avoid sanctions, thereby activating a cooperative yet equally impersonal *having-to-do*. Otherwise, it may claim a breach of the cooperative principle, thus activating a can-refrain stance.
Essentially, this contractual space is shaped by an *encompassing axiological framework* (Greimas 1983), which brings into tension three modal codes. From the leader's side, the *code of pride*, aligning *freedom* with *obedience*; from the team's side, either the *code of submission*, combining *obedience* and *powerlessness*, or the *code of humility*, merging *independence* and *powerlessness*.
In the case analysed, the team displayed *passive resistance* (*having-to-do*, *not-wanting-to-do*), causing a delay in decision implementation. The organisation responded by *prescribing*

coaching sessions for the leader and redistributed the assigned resources. Subsequently, the *Catchball* process was formalised by *requiring* structured feedback mechanisms to secure two-way communication. Such a configuration further circumscribes the contractual framework, enabling the organisation to observe and address contingency. In response, organisational members – particularly middle managers and frontline – devise *tactics* to adjust to strategically organised spaces, bricolaging tools and opportunities as they arise (De Certeau 1980).

We observed, for instance, episodes where top management announced the adoption of the *Kanban*[14] system via email, with the aim of reducing inventory and optimising workflow. In two out of three cases, however, the frontline decoded the managerial communication aberrantly, aligning it with their own expectations and either anticipating or postponing production signals to manage overload.

We define 'negotiation' as this interplay between the organisation's strategic policy and the bottom-up tactics of its members, and 'negotiational' as the resulting framework. In legal and diplomatic terms, *negotiation* refers to the set of transactions leading to formalise an agreement and encompasses both the trading process and the tangible outcome that results[15]. Hence, this *negotiational* space is intrinsically dynamic and may be understood as a logic field of oppositions and implications in which roles, expectations, and values are ceaselessly rearticulated through the interplay between interpretative cooperation and strategical conflict.

Notably, cooperation and conflict represent the two poles of a *continuum* structured by an interactional grammar that modulates communication according to the system's degree of constraint or openness. Far from being opposite poles, they represent complementary modes of meaning articulation within a constantly redefined space.

Cooperation is grounded in encyclopaedic competence, understood as a situated repository of knowledge that enables organisational members to activate inferential paths *conforming*[16] to the manufacturing philosophy. Paraphrasing Eco (Eco 1979: 28), the organisation works as a «lazy machine», and the reference to a shared encyclopaedia of programmes and values, such as those promoted by *Hoshin Kanri*, enables meaning to emerge by aligning intra- and intertextual references to a shared horizon of expectations. Conflict, by contrast, feeds on systemic contradictions, acting parasitically and necessitating continuous regulation through stabilising decisions (Luhmann 2000).

Accordingly, negotiation may be conceived as a *tensive grammar* governed by shifts in intensity and extension, that is, by the degree to which the event is experienced and the breadth of its unfolding (Zilberberg 2006). Cooperation follows a logic of *visée*[17] (gradual grasp) and *parvenir* (incremental attainment), oriented toward progressive stabilisation; conflict, instead, is triggered as *saisie* (sudden input) and *survenir* (unexpected occurrence), leading to modal shifts and breaks in the linear flow of exchange.

These tensions unfold across the three dimensions of meaning. In the *Sachdimension*, they concern the selection and validation of corporate goals; in the *Sozialdimension*, they relate to the attribution of roles and the regulation of normative expectations; in the

[14] *Kanban* is a scheduling system for *Just-in-Time* based on the replenishment of inventory as it is depleted. It aims to prevent stockouts, minimise overproduction, and introduce a rational demand-led inventory management process.

[15] While adopting a more operational perspective, M. Zacklad (2020) highlights the transactional dynamic that shapes the interplay between actors and artefacts.

[16] In Quality Process and Assurance, *conformance* refers to the extent to which a product's design and operational features meet predefined standards or technical specifications.

[17] The translations of Zilberberg's concepts are provided by the author: *visée* may be translated as *grasp*, *parvenir* as *to attain*, *saisie* as *input*, and *survenir* as *to occur*.

Zeitdimension, they are tied to the autopoietic reproduction of the system through anticipatory and retrospective operations.
Politeness, therefore, takes on a distinctly strategic role, functioning as a regulatory mechanism that modulates the intensity of requests and the extent of expected adherence. 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice 1975: 45). As formulated, Grice's principle integrates this modulation into formalised communications, such as KPIs and X-matrices, generating *polite* simulacra of cooperation. The fiduciary contract is thus preserved through soft modal markers which support the interplay between the top-down strategic policy and its bottom-up adaptive tactics.

5. Leaders

According to Womack and Jones (1996), traditional production systems rely on tacit, bottom-up knowledge, which inherently risks partial resources optimisation by addressing waste locally but failing to address it on a broader scale. In response, *Lean* proposes combining explicit, top-down knowledge with the direct, bottom-up involvement of personnel in decision-making process. This blended model seeks to streamline resource optimisation and improve the organisation's overall balance.
Lean leadership reflects this shift from a function-driven approach to one centred on responsibility, positioning this function as a direct commitment in supporting the team's progress (Stogdill 1950), rather than as hierarchical authority.
In line with the continuous improvement (*kaizen*) principle, continuously developing soft skills is essential to prevent errors and transform them into opportunities for learning and innovation when they occur. Furthermore, leader's direct engagement in operational processes (*Gemba*) is essential for gaining clear insights into workflows. *Gemba Walks*, for instance, provide opportunities to observe the process chain, evaluate outcomes, pose respectful questions, and strengthen teamwork. Similarly, *Go to Gemba* enables real-time task monitoring, timely identification of inefficiencies, rapid deployment of interim countermeasures, in-depth root cause analysis, and durable solution standardisation (Liker, Convis 2012).
Meanwhile, the leader actively fosters team development by leveraging skills, expertise, and qualifications to deliver value. While the frontline concentrates on process execution with a focus on merit[18] and commitment, the leader ensures coordination and addresses operational challenges (*ibid.*). *Hoshin Kanri* provides the strategic framework that supports this alignment.
Such an approach highlights the centrality of the leader's role in setting clear goals, while enabling the team to determine the means of implementation. The purpose is to build a work environment where adherence is not understood as submission but as a conscious and voluntary choice (Chapoutot 2020), in keeping with 'Toyota Way', which prioritises the organisation over the individual.
Accordingly, the leader embraces a style that embodies Lean values, implementing the streamlined approach cohesively (*Shitsuke*). This principle, articulated through the maxim "do it without being told[19]", underscores the role of self-discipline as a driver of organisational improvement. Rather than the formal application of rules, it emphasises

[18] The noun 'meritocracy' (from the Latin *merēre*, 'to earn', and the Greek *kratos*, 'power') originally referred to a despotic form of government in which an individual's social position was determined by IQ and work aptitude (Young 1958). The lack of reflection on equal opportunities thus reinforces *Lean Thinking* top-down approach.
[19] This foundational *Lean* principle is well established in managerial literature and mirrored by fieldwork observations (*see also* Dough 2015).

their internalisation and the conversion into best practices and ingrained habits (Hutchins 2008).

Organisational members are thus expected to autonomously understand and fulfil corporate expectations, thereby removing the need for constant supervision (Heskett 2012). Fieldwork, however, suggests that this assumption, reinforced by workflow digitalisation, may result in new breaches of conversational implicatures: over-reticence (*Quantity*); validation required (*Quality*); replacing relevance with opportunity (*Relation*); and clarity with implicitness (*Manner*).

As such, the loss of partial contents in favour of broader discursive unity results in an underlying semantic vagueness, reverting realised cooperative values to a virtual state. In their place, procedural values emerge, reducing communication to automatism (Greimas, Courtés 1979): from 'avoid both reticence and verbosity' to 'refer to' (*Quantity*); from 'ensure accuracy and verifiability' to 'confirm/deny' (*Quality*); from 'be perspicuous' to 'be propitious' (*Relation*); and from 'avoid obscurity' to 'allude' (*Manner*).

The simultaneous affirmation and violation of conversational implicatures results in an ambiguity which may provoke new conflicts, destabilising the system. Since structures of expectations reshape indeterminate complexity into potential infractions (Luhmann 1984), the leader pre-emptively defines forecasting patterns to react to them.

According to Landowski (2005), social interactions are shaped by four distinct regimes of meaning: *programming*, based on norms and rules; *accident*, rooted in unpredictability and irregularity; *manipulation*, grounded in strategic *causing-to-do*; and *adjustment*, which relies on aesthesisic[20] and mutual coordination. The operational framing of communication thus reflects the retreat from of a relatively uncertain regime, still open to unexpected effects of meaning (*manipulation*), in favour of a more reassuring yet potentially redundant one, which may ultimately devolve into a void of meaning and insignificance (*programming*). This application of the cooperative principle may be conceived as a continuous attempt to programme a *critical distance* between leader and team, aimed at preventing conflict escalation, particularly when communication involves non-human actors.

We assume that such a dynamic contributes to establish a *non-impolite syntax*, stemming from the logical articulation of the axiological category *politeness* vs. *impoliteness*.

Politeness rests on the recognition of the subject's autonomy and serves to mitigate threats to face. It enables the communication of disagreement or individual stances while preserving relational harmony and affirming the social need for inclusion (Brown, Levinson 1987). It also pertains to the intersubjective and negotiational dynamics that unfold through interaction (Culpeper 2008). Impoliteness, by contrast, entails the exercise of power aimed at causing a face loss (Locher 2004). As such, it restricts the action-environment, prompting either self-preservatory reactions or deliberate non-response (Culpeper 2008).

On the axis of subcontraries, we assume that *non-politeness* lies outside the systemic expectations of politeness, without necessarily posing a threat to face. It marks efficiency-driven communication which does not entail a direct exercise of power but shifts the focus from cooperation to execution. As such, it delegates narrative and modal competences from the subject to an operational device, producing an *impersonal enunciation* that excludes what deviates from the norm (Alonso Aldama 2018).

Finally, we assume that *non-impoliteness* refers to a conflict-defusing strategy implemented through procedural devices. By withholding impoliteness cues, it operates as a formalised, goal-oriented communication that does not explicitly threaten face. It is not, in fact, the absence of impoliteness that informs this framework but rather its structural

[20] Greimas (1987) introduces the notion of *aesthesis* to designate he mode through which meaning is perceived and grasped via sensitive experience.

incompatibility with the system, enabled by an organisation that anticipates and assimilates divergences into pre-established patterns. The delegation of narrative and modal competences from the subject to the organisation produces an *a-personal enunciation*, turning the subject into a delegate of the bureaucratic system (*ibid.*). Impoliteness, therefore, is neither expressed nor repressed; rather, it is neutralised through devices meant to deactivate it. Here, the cooperative principle acts as a functional threshold, allowing polemical tensions to be concealed. Communication, once normalised, does not require impolite markers to convey distance or disagreement: the device itself reframes them into elements of systemic coordination.

Non-impoliteness is defined, on the content plan, by a relentless focus on effectiveness and, on the expression plan, by an inchoative-durative aspectuality and an ascending *tempo* (Zilberberg 2006), which expands from the moderate but fluid and dynamic (*Allegretto*), to the fast and animated (*Vivace*), and to the rapid and energetic, which engages the pathemic dimension (*Velocissimo*[21]). Field observations reveal that the expression-substances related to this rhythm pertain to recurring operational practices, e.g. prompt and concise IMT replies, codified feedback formats (acronyms, emojis, standard tags), streamlined task breakdowns, and routines of immediate traceable control. Accordingly, non-impoliteness suggests conflict regulation through rhythmic markers.

This syntax empowers the leader to effectively perform operations such as real-time process adjustments (*jidoka*), levelling production to address demand fluctuations (*heijunka*), and promptly optimising production cycles (*Lead Time*). It also enables the exercise of a *factitive doing* that bans authority and discourtesy, while shaping an effectiveness-driven H2H and H2M negotiational space (Fig. 1).

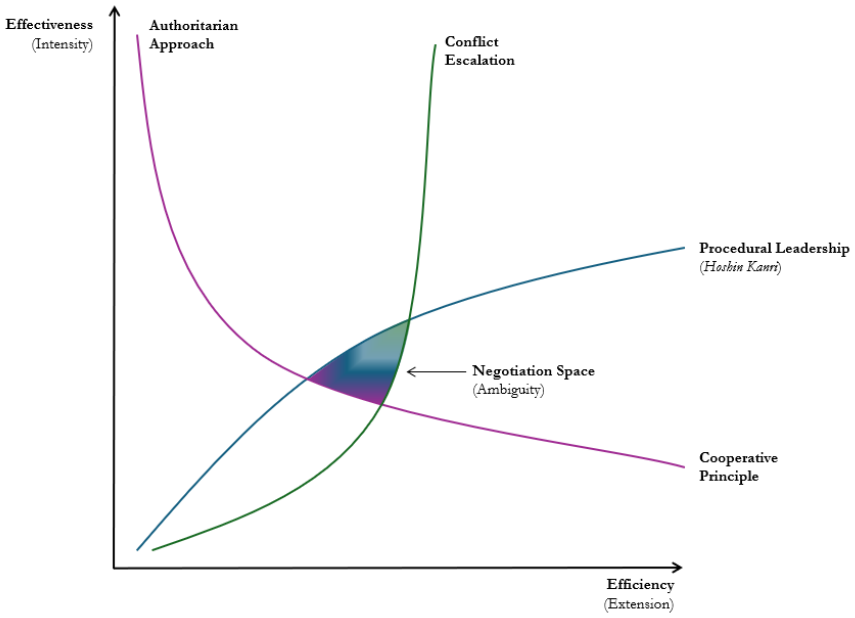

Fig. 1 Non-impolite syntax

Effectiveness, as an intensive mode, concerns the transformation of a given state within designated timeframes. It manifests through a *tempo* that could be described as *Doppio più*

[21] The agogic movement indications employed are intended purely as a metaphorical and stylistic reference and are not meant to imply a reflection on musical language.

mosso[22], combined with heightened tonicity, producing an effect of closure and stability. It thus reflects a localised agency, whereby the subject intervenes on a preconfigured object without integrating deviations. As such, effectiveness relies on an *implicative syntax* ('if… so'), favouring immediate resolution over procedural distribution.
Efficiency, as an extensive mode, concerns the penetration of possibility margins into the presence field. It unfolds through progressive temporality and diffused spatiality, enabling the system to accommodate interplays among subjects, resources, and values. It thus pertains to a distributed agency, geared towards the system's accommodation over time. As such, efficiency aligns with a concessive syntax ('although...'), which incorporates drift and transition.
Authoritarian leadership may thus be read as a management model aiming to «close the open» (Zilberberg 2012: 156). It reflects a tensive ascent that enables immediate impact, while narrowing the negotiation space.
Regressed to a virtual state, the cooperative principle shapes communication around corporate expectations and adjusts it to systemic constraints. It reflects a tensive decline, attenuating and decompressing conflict, managed through a functional non-impoliteness, formally aligned with the organisational order.
The ambiguity stemming from the dual application and violation of conversational implicatures enables the leader to assertively express, defend, and pursue corporate interests. Rooted in behaviourism, *assertiveness* describes the skill of expressing needs and opinions directly, proactively, and contextually appropriately, enabling collaborative problem-solving and preventing both aggression and passivity.
It is positively related with *efficiency* (Ames, Flynn 2007), understood as the optimisation of resource consumption in producing an outcome and assessed through the ratio of outcomes to resources consumed (Gilbert 2002). It requires, in fact, active listening and the acknowledgment of others' needs and opinions as having the same footing as one's own. Active and reflective listening may, thus, be compared to *epoché,* or the suspension of assent, understood as abstaining from forming an opinion or belief in any direction, to observe the other within their own *System-Environment* (Luhmann 1984).
However, such ambiguity also interferes with the system's double contingency, making the proper observation of team behaviours more challenging.
This shift towards *effectiveness* results in an *impersonal* order that overturns the subject-object relationship, assigning decision-making authority to the norm (Alonso Aldama 2018). Precisely, the leader will be required to act as an *authoritative*, rather than *authoritarian*, subject, capable of inspiring and motivating, yet simultaneously relegated to the *status* of non-subject, as the strategic policy asserts itself as autonomous and binding, stabilising the norm and sanctioning any potential violations.
Hence, *procedural leadership* reflects a managerial model in which authority does not reside in the leader but is delegated to *Hoshin Kanri*. The leader formalises decisions by applying the method, performing as an operator of its normative grammar. Meanwhile, communication is conveyed through standard tools that restrict the space for deviation. It reflects a moderately modulated tension, in which decision-making is both concentrated and concentrative of the system. The elevation leads into the doubling, producing an effect of absorption of lack. Conflict, *although* present, is modulated rather than managed. It is thus *Hoshin Kanri*, and not the strategic interaction between the leader and the team, that establishes the *fiduciary contract*. Such contract is based on a modal distribution, in

[22] In musical notation, *Doppio più mosso* designates a metrical intensification: the *tempo* marking remains stable in beats per minute (bpm) but the rhythmic units are halved, producing a faster perceived pace. Within tensive grammar, it may be related to the *relèvement-rédoublement* system (translatable into English as *elevation-doubling*) (Zilberberg 2012).

which the leader is expected to *having-to-be* consistent with the corporate vision and *having-to-do* by complying with systemic procedures. This modal configuration does not frame the leader as a coercive subject but rather as the delegate of a systemic *wanting-to* and *knowing-to*, which he turns into operational guidance for the frontline. Non-impoliteness reflects this configuration, as it does not rely on an explicit value system but on performative compliance. As such, leader's directive function is absorbed by the procedural framework regulating its exercise.
This further intrasubjective conflict entails the risk of the leader's *desubjectivation* (Agamben 2006), as the norm not only dictates its conduct (*performance*) and know-how (*competence*) but also actively shapes its identity, normalised with corporate standards. Enabled by the cooperative principle, systemic self-reference allows the leader to channel preset responses to change, outlining rules for conduct aligned with corporate values, while reducing it to a (non-impolite) operator within the management system.

6. Conclusions

«An organisation is a system with a logic of its own, carrying the full weight of tradition and inertia» (Rockefeller III 1973: 72) within which relations may be conceived as a matter of conversion: how to reframe a win-lose problem into a win-win solution (Zaleznik 1977). This explains the lack of adjustment to expectations in response to potential occurrences, and the tightening of norms, as well as the emergence of an interactional and meaning regime, which may be referred to as *normed adjustment*.
Although Landowski (2005) conceptualises interaction and meaning regimes as *processes* articulated through *paths* from one regime to another, we assume a transitional zone between programming and adjustment, subsuming features of both regularity and sensitivity logics. Actually, normed adjustment is not understood as a mediation between processual rigidity and interactional flexibility but as a paradoxical form of regulated adaptation, in which the request for cooperation effectively becomes a *having-to-adjust* according to *Lean* principles.
The implicit application of the cooperative principle within *Hoshin Kanri* converts indeed the modal power of being collaborative and engage in teamwork into a persistent obligation to absorb conflict before managing it. On the other hand, the inherent risk of adjustment still remains insecurity.
Adjustment, as a regime anchored in sensitive coordination, entails a situated logic without predetermined rules, and involves the continuous modulation between «offering and gaining hold, abandonment and control, letting act and resuming control» (Landowski 2005: 78)[23]. As a non-programmed regime, it also implies a structural exposure to instability, whose intrinsic risk is precisely uncertainty. Such a precarious equilibrium requires continuous action on the edge of the possible: a threshold whose violation could trigger the catastrophic discontinuity of the accident.
In *Hoshin Kanri*, this risk increases when adjustment becomes regulated, namely, translated into systemic expectation and embedded within standard procedures. If programming 'cannot be contained within functional limits and tends, conversely, to impose itself as an end in itself' (*Ivi*: 75), the resulting risk may be characterised as an *insignificant insecurity*. This point, we suggest, opens further research paths, particularly concerning the art of 'controlled *dérapage*': the way in which the logic of sensitivity constantly approaches the limit, the irreversible and the unthinkable, to the extent of occasionally crossing the threshold (*Ivi*: 78).

[23] All translations from the original French are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

More broadly, conceived as a possible form of assertiveness, the cooperative principle functions as a modal simulacrum aimed at replacing the uncertainty of aesthesia with the insignificance of regularity. In doing so, the system excludes any strategic interaction based on persuasive and interpretative processes that entail some degree of trust or distrust (Alonso Aldama 2020), undermining the organisation's ability to autonomously craft proactive responses to contingency.

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