The day Holger decided to join the department meetings!

Holger decided to participate in the department meeting! How odd! Like most other people, Holger has attended countless meetings – not least department meetings – and found them to be boring, long-winded, often pointless, unorganised, without an agenda and altogether an enormous waste of everybody's time, particularly when there's important stuff to be getting on with for actual customers! Maybe your experience is fairly similar?

So why did Holger then decide to participate in the department meeting? He turned up because he could get help to solve the urgent challenges he's having with his project at the moment, build relations and get some competence development.

The meetings were no longer about getting through the same old uninspiring agenda, making desperate attempts to deal with all the items and listening to the boss droning on about how everybody must hand in their time sheets on time! Now, the meetings were about finding solutions to specific problems and honing the participants' competencies, while focusing on the overall development of the department as one well-oiled unit. Project managers were no longer "lone wolves"; they were now members of a community which could help each other with here-and-now issues and professional development. The meeting was the only time during the week that the entire department got together. Otherwise, the project managers worked in their own corners of the organisation.

In this article, I describe how to establish and develop a project department based on my previous roles as Department Manager and Head of Projects and Methods with a major Danish IT company. I was tasked with establishing/revitalising a project department and a project concept to handle the company's expansion and growing pains. This meant more projects, more project managers, more complexity and more strategic focus on competencies and project deliveries.

It started with Deming's quality cycle: Plan–Do–Check–Act. I'd had success using that on several projects when I was the project manager. On my projects, this model was used as a tool to handle uncertainty, build confidence and foster the belief among the participants that the project could deliver the agreed results.

It could achieve all that while maintaining focus on generating results, collaborating and potentially improving on both. The idea was therefore: if this model can be used at project meetings, it can also be used at the project managers' department meetings and serve as an example for the project managers on their own projects.

It's about changing habits and attitudes, retrospectively the power of habits! It's changing what we usually do for what we perhaps should do, but never get round to (ref. Charles Duhigg: *The Power of Habit*). What we usually do at department meetings which makes them a waste of time needs to change!

We need to design a behaviour that makes it attractive to attend department meetings! Using the new term 'behavioural design', we need to change our usual behaviour "system 1" and start practising new constructive behaviour "system 2" at meetings and on projects. The change must take a very concrete form, so everyone knows what it means and how it's achieved in practice – "no bullshit bingo"! (For terms: system 1 and system 2 – please ref. Morten Münster book: *I'm Afraid Debbie from Marketing Has Left for the Day: How to Use Behavioural Design to Create Change in the Real World* and Daniel Kahneman book: *Thinking, Fast and Slow*).

In preparation, two important processes were initiated which contributed to a good start-up. First, all the project managers participated in a course on presentation competencies, focusing on graphic presentations on flip charts and feedback on presentations, particularly from a psychological angle. Then, we devised a project manager programme, in which I taught three residential courses that provided the basis for all the project managers' subsequent IPMA certification.

Both processes contributed to rebuilding the department, establishing relationships and trust among the project managers. This was combined with a focus on being curious, learning from each other, helping each other and learning new competencies, which provided the participants with a psychological sense of ease, making it okay to "fail" and to show vulnerability. The focus was 'we're all learning and need help from each other' and this contributed heavily to establishing psychological safety (ref. Amy Edmondson).

Having completed the course on presentation, the participants started taking turns chairing the meetings and receiving feedback on their facilitation of the meeting and use of flip charts. It was a natural progression from the course. The view being that we sign up for a course in order to be able to use what we have learnt in our daily lives!

Then, the focus shifted to the department meeting itself. The approach of the participants was clear: I was the department manager, so I should draw up the agenda. This gave rise to a lively debate on why we're holding the meeting and who it would benefit.

Changing our habits and what "we usually do" now consisted in: it was to be our meeting, meaning that it had to be of value to everybody, not just the department manager.

Values posted on the wall in the meeting room – in danish

In this way, we started a journey of development, establishing and practising another form of meeting and thereby a new behaviour "system 2". Then, we drafted a set of values (success criteria's) for the meeting. What would get us to experience the meeting as a success and give it meaning? We established the values relatively quickly. Translation: involve me, engage me, the feeling to be a department, give me coaching/ sparring (help me), involve practical experience, support knowledge sharing, provide new knowledge, expand my competencies.

It was a much bigger job to get to a joint view on how to realise these values. You've got to be terribly concrete on precisely 'what' and 'how'. Every single value generated an interesting debate on:

What does it take to achieve the value? For example, the value of "engaged". It took next to no time to agree on its importance, but what had to happen at the meeting for everyone to feel engaged?

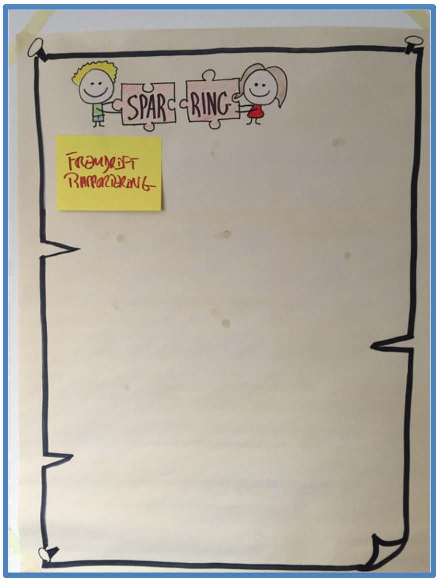
We managed to find two to three concrete activities or processes for all eight values. It took a great deal of time and we spent several department meetings working on it (in fact using the loop PDCA). We succeeded – we worked out a matrix of concrete initiatives for every individual value. It's crucial that the project managers take turns facilitating this process to avoid it being "controlled by management". See the illustration (flip chart) of values.

Important key words for the concrete activities and processes included: involvement, co-determination, influence, visualisation, active participation, dialogues, no Power Point presentations, focus on concrete challenges and especially competence development. The individual project manager chairing the meeting would use these key words to plan and facilitate the processes at the meeting.

An agenda (in Word) was distributed four to five days before the meeting, so everybody would have time to prepare. It was agreed that nobody was allowed to show any Power Point presentation unless the message was communicated on a flip chart first and approved by all participants. This meant that the agenda of the meeting was written, and more specifically often drawn, on a flip chart and presented at the meeting. This became, to a great extent, the realisation of the course on presentation. Great creativity was displayed in drawing imaginative agendas.

In preparation for the meetings, everyone provided a brief status report on their contributions to the overall development of the company's future project concept and the project managers' competencies. It would typically amount to a few bullet points from every participant which everyone was to have read before the meeting.

The flip charts with News and subjects for Coaching/ sparring



It took a lot of practice and discipline before everybody had both written their own bullet points and read everybody else's before the meeting. After this, the focus of the meetings shifted from debates on 'what have we done or achieved?' to debates on 'what will we do going forward? (check, reflect, act). For example, the participants spent a great deal of time and energy discussing current challenges on the projects and bouncing ideas off on each other.

The competence development stair case

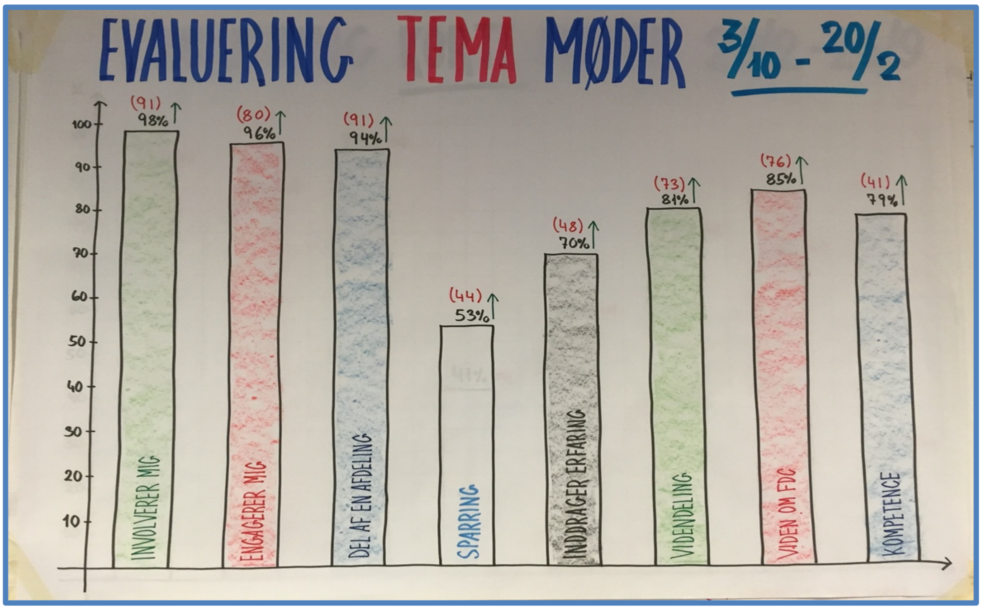
It's crucial that the meetings have a structure which everyone is familiar with (the experience of safety: system 1), while at the same time, there's a keen focus on learning (i.e. practising of system 2) and reflection (being allowed to make mistakes and learn from the experiences of others in the form of real-life stories). Moreover, the items on the agenda must always be relevant and make sense in relation to current project challenges and the development of the participants' competencies.

In addition to chairing the meetings, the participants also took turns taking on the other jobs required to hold a successful meeting, such as: chair, minutes of meeting, evaluation voting, breakfast, birthdays, project themes and templates, monitor of punctuality, librarian, PMO, multiple choice quiz, feedback and attendance.

The chair would decide which items to focus on based on: what's important right now? As a whole, the items would ensure continuous knowledge sharing, relevance and the building of relationships among the project managers. We had a backlog for most of the topics.

All meetings were evaluated on the values in writing. The participants could only answer YES or NO as to whether the individual value had been achieved. The project managers took turns being in charge of the voting which was anonymous to me as the department manager. See the illustration of the evaluation for a six-month period in Figure 2.

The evaluations were the "check" step in the cycle. They included dialogs on products (project concept and templates, process (project management of projects and department meetings) and people (personal competence development and building relations).



Status on the evaluations of the values of theme meetings.

Black figures are current evaluations, red figures the previous evaluations.

The fixed agenda topics were:

- The vision, purpose and goal of the department
- What are our deliveries to the customers (and company)?
- Who are we (a matrix of who is working in what project and theme)?
- What is status (check on what we have done so far – must be read as preparation)?
- What do we do now? – The focus on the meeting!

The specific topics might include:

- **Goal of the day:** distributed with the notice convening the meeting, selected by the chair of the day from a jointly prioritised list of topics. The meeting started at 8.59 and finished at 10.49. Likewise, all items on the agenda were started at odd times to focus the mind.
- **Wondering's list:** what are we wondering about at the moment? A good tool to handle rumours, challenges, innovative initiatives, knowledge sharing and conflicts
- **News:** news since the last department meeting, including news from the executive board and the company's management, to make sure that everybody is updated
- **Good real-life stories**: what can we learn from each other's successes and failures? Exercises with key learning points – that is, knowledge sharing in small groups. What can we copy from the good stories?
- **Topics for coaching (sparring)**: We used two processes: "What's on your mind" was a particular favourite, which is a process to handling urgent challenges and includes action plans. Then, we used discussion teams for more in-depth reflection, also with action plans. Both processes were conducted in small groups using the reflective team process
- **Topics to develop the project concept**: topics that are necessary to develop the company's project concept

To support our behaviour changes:

- We had a dedicated meeting room which could only be booked directly by project managers. All others must book at the reception (if the room was available). Important so we all could have many more or less planned meetings (what a privilege!).
- All our activities were visually communicated on cards and flip chart sheets which were posted on the walls. Thus, we had transparent communication among the project managers and everybody else who came into the meeting room.
- The department logo: "We're sharp" and the image of an eagle. The eagle flies high, surveying the world below with its keen eyesight until it suddenly strikes, using its sharp claws.
- The project manager's tool box: for visually facilitating own project meetings and for visual planning with the aid of cards and masking tape.
- We turned our good real-life stories into "company news", taking the format of People & Projects, subsequently with contributions from other departments.
- We published the leaflet People & Meetings on meeting discipline and good meeting practice.

Holger together with colleagues

In this way, it became ***our*** meeting and not my meeting. Now, that's why Holger went to the department meeting!

About the author

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