The day Holger decided to attend the department meetings!

Holger decided to participate in the department meeting! How odd! Like lots of 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 meetings? He turned up because he could get help to solve the urgent challenges he's having with his project at the moment! 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' skills, 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 that the entire department got together. Day to day, the project managers worked in their own corners and silos 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 skills 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 department 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 habit. It's about changing what we usually do, for what we must or should do, but never get done! (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 “system 1” behaviour and start practising “system 2”, involving new constructive behaviour 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”! (ref. Morten Münster: *I’m Afraid Jytte From Marketing Has Left for the Day: How to Use Behavioural Design to Create Change in the Real World) and* Daniel Kahneman: *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 skills, focusing on graphic presentations on flip charts and feedback on presentations from particularly a psychological angle. Then, we devised a project manager programme, consisting of three classroom courses which provided the basis for all the project managers’ subsequent IPMA certifications.

Both processes contributed to the foundation of the department, establishing relationships and trust among the participants, and created an environment fostering curiosity and willingness to learn new skills and from each other and providing the participants with a psychological sense of ease which made it okay to “fail” and to show vulnerability. The focus being ‘we are all learning and need help from each other’ and this contributes heavily to establishing psychological safety (ref. Amy Edmondson: *The Fearless Organisation: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth*).

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 attitude of the participants was clear: I was the department manager, so I would draw up the agenda. This gave rise to a lively debate on why we were holding the meeting and who benefited from it. Changing our habits and what “we usually do” now consisted in: it must be <u>our</u> meeting, meaning that it must be of value to everybody, not just the department manager. In this way, we started a journey of development, establishing and practising another form of meeting and thereby a new behaviour (system 2). We drafted then a set of utility values for the meeting. What would get us to experience the meeting as a success and give it meaning? We established the utility values relatively quickly. It was a much bigger job to get to a joint view on how to realise these values. You have to be terribly concrete on precisely what and how. Every single utility value generated an interesting debate on what it takes

Figure 1: Utility values posted on the wall in the meeting room

for us to experience the utility value. For example, the utility 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 utility values. It took a great deal of time and we spent several department meetings working on it. We succeeded and worked out a matrix of concrete initiatives for every individual utility value. It’s important that the project managers take turns facilitating this process to avoid it being “controlled” by management. See the illustration (Figure 1) flip chart of utility values. In English: Involve me, engage me, experience being a department, gives me sparring, involves practical experience, supports knowledge sharing, provides knowledge (about the company), expands my competencies)

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 skills development. The individual project manager chairing the meeting would use these key words to plan and facilitate the processes at the meeting.

It was agreed that nobody was allowed to show any Power Point presentation unless the message was communicated on a flip chart in advance 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. (A printed agenda written in Word was distributed four to five days before the meeting, so everybody could prepare, but the actual agenda would be on the flip chart at the meeting.) This became to a great extent the realisation of the course on presentation. Great creativity was displayed in drawing imaginative agendas.

As 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’ skills. It would typically amount to a few bullet points from every participant which everyone should have read before the meeting.

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?’ 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.

It’s crucial that the meetings have a structure which everyone is familiar with (the experience of security: 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 other’s experiences 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’ skills.

In addition to chairing the meetings, the participants also took turns taking on the other jobs required to hold a successful meeting, such as: secretary, voting, breakfast, birthday celebration, themes, punctuality monitor and registration.

The chair would decide which items the meeting focus on based on: What's important right now? As a whole, the items would ensure relevance, continuous knowledge sharing and the building of relationships among the project managers. We build up a number of backlogs.

All meetings were evaluated on the utility values in writing. The participants could only answer YES or NO as to whether the individual utility 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.

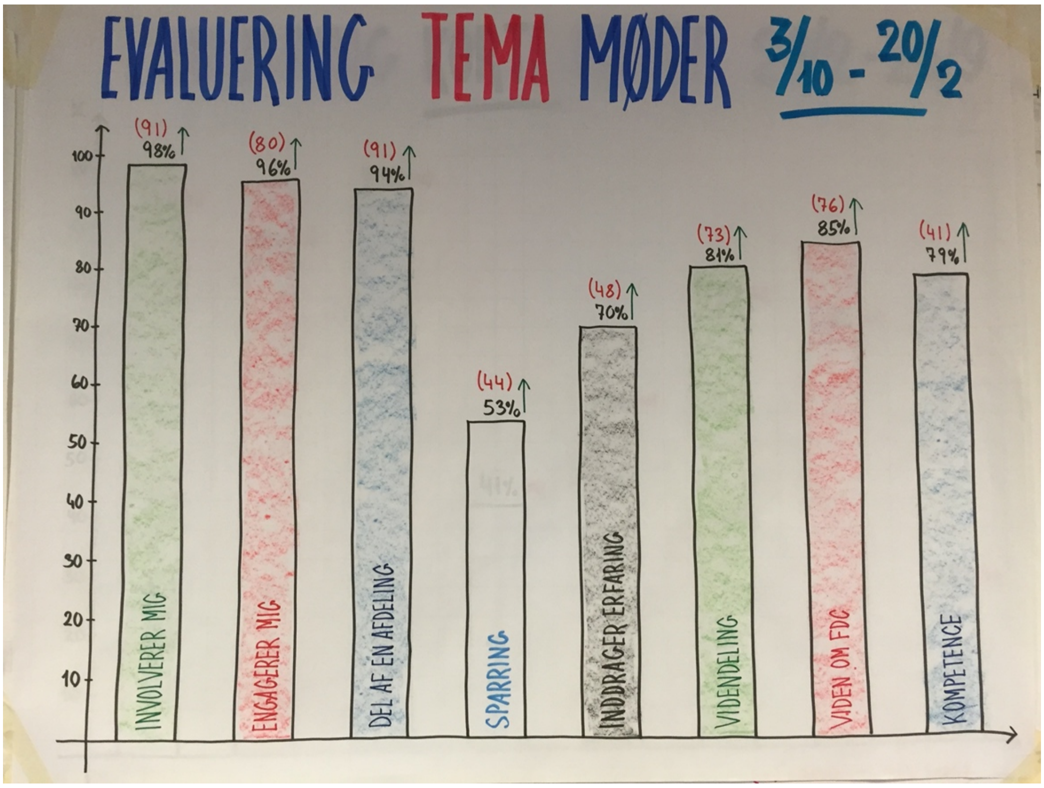

Figure 2: Status on the evaluation of the utility values for theme meetings. Black figures are current evaluations, red figures the previous evaluations.

The professional topics of the 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 (backlogs). 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.
- The vision, purpose and goal of the department: A good idea to include at regular intervals to remind everybody
- "I Wonder why" 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 stories: What can we learn from each other's successes?
- Exercises with key learning points in small reflective groups – that is, knowledge sharing in small groups about challenges

- Topics for strategic 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 had deep reflection teams, also with action plans. Both processes were conducted in small groups.
- Topics to develop the project concept.

To highlight and support our changed behaviour, we had:

- A dedicated meeting room which could only be booked by project managers – otherwise only via the reception. 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 entered the meeting room.
- The department logo: "We're sharp" and the image of an eagle. The eagle flies high up in the sky, monitoring the world with a keen eye until it suddenly strikes, catching its prey with 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
- Expanded our good stories into "company news" in the form of People & Projects, with contributions from other departments; later we also published People & Meetings on meeting discipline.

In this way, it became <u>our</u> meeting and not my meeting. Now, that's why Holger went to the department meetings!

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