

Towards better communication and cooperation

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Abstract

This case study presents an SF intervention in the context of a merger situation. It follows the design, delivery and results of an assignment to improve communication, participation and cooperation.

Context

Following a process of acquisition, a group of autonomous plants producing building materials was integrated into one organisation with a strong central and directive management. The local plant managers were unhappy. The central services made decisions for their local production plants without much communication, although these decisions affected their business results. There was a lack of communication, both vertical and between production plants. The new organisational structure led to slow decisions, little information, less connection with the market and little awareness of the company's policy goals.

The effects were: many discussions, not feeling respected, and feeling less responsible as decisions were being made higher up. As one plant manager put it: "Local managers still know what and how to produce, but they do not know why we do it anymore." The business unit manager, under the stimulus of a local plant manager, took the initiative to hire a consultant to improve communication with the central services and between plants in the business unit.

At the kick-off meeting I announced a SF approach in co-creation with all the stakeholders. We would include the

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perspective of all participants in a dialogue, appreciating that all stakeholders are the experts in their solution. All participants welcomed this.

Their aim was to improve communications in the new organisation structure, with more consultation in order to achieve better cooperation. We used a metaphor: ‘We are not changing the motor, but looking for the right oil to make it run smoothly’. The participants stated they hoped for:

- productive and respectful relationships between services and production plants
- better information and communication, respecting those who are responsible for production
- stronger unity, all pulling in the same direction
- restored confidence by the top managers and central services in what plant managers do
- better horizontal communication between production plants, and a better self-organising competence.

Our approach consisted of the following phases.

Day 1:

1. Start up.
 - a. Reminder of the aim and the expected results.
 - b. Checking expectations: how will this be useful?
 - c. Clarification of the new organisation structure by the CEO.
2. Plants and central services as internal customers.
 - a. What works well already?
 - b. Input roundtables (using the kitchen table format from Alan Kay) with both plant managers and central services. While one party was talking, the other party did not intervene. Afterwards they were allowed to comment on the other’s perspective and add what they could do to improve things. The questions they discussed were:
 - i. How is what the other party does useful to you?
 - ii. What works well in the current collaboration?

- iii. What would better cooperation in the future look like?
- iv. How would that be useful?
- c. Developing the future perfect in mixed subgroups and identifying the advantages.
- d. Next steps: By means of what kind of actions or activities can the communication and cooperation become even more successful?



Day 2: Half a day session, one week later.

1. We started with the overview of all the concrete ideas to improve communication and cooperation between plants and central services, and between plants.
2. In a following step participants gave weighing points to those ideas that would make the biggest contribution. These 4 topics came out of that:
 - clarifying all responsibilities
 - optimising the plant managers' meetings
 - briefing by product development and sales
 - collective quality targets.
3. Elaboration. These 4 priorities were considered in 4 simultaneous task groups. From a central point I

presented the questions of the well-known coaching steps: 1) Future perfect, 2) What works already? 3) Resources, 4) Next steps, 5) In this last part I asked who would be the owners of the actions. All actions were presented to all participants.

4. Closing: How do we find the results of these sessions up to now? Are we nearer to our goals? How has this been useful?



The task groups went into a six-week period to get the actions into practice.



Day 3: Follow up session.

1. The goal and the best hopes.
2. Sharing of good experiences in the six weeks implementation period.
3. The task groups reported on the steps that were taken on the 4 actions, the progress that had been made and how this had helped to reach the organisation's goals. All actions got plenary feedback. Special attention was given to a matrix of responsibilities, for which the task group asked for input from everyone, and obscurities were discussed and solved.
4. The task groups elaborated further on: How can this process be continued, what will be the next steps?
5. Closure: How has this been useful? And Lessons learned.

Evaluation

After two weeks, the updated reports from the task groups were sent around together with an evaluation questionnaire. They especially appreciated 'the constructive attitude, the openness and input of all visions', and 'the design of the workshop in which conflict situations were switched into opportunities to improve the way we function'. To the question: "How can you make progress sustainable?" one participant reported: 'I learned especially that communication is something that one can start and organise oneself, even from an underdog position. If we bring that into practice, we can only become better (and happier)'.

Conclusion

The initial request was focused on positions that people take in the organisation (who has the right to be directive to whom) and was bent towards an interactive perspective: 'How do we come to a better communication and consultation'. The relations among the participants shifted from tension to participation in a constructive attitude and in mutual respect to

contribute to solutions. During the sessions they experienced what they wanted to realise in their daily practice.

In the first part the input-roundtables were an excellent way to take in the stories of all parties and to make the others reflect on it. It allowed everybody to express their best hopes. The SF approach made the client the owner of the desired future, and the specific actions and the steps towards it.

My lesson learned

For reasons of cost-efficiency the client selected only those people that were working closely together. But if these people want to behave in a more consultative way, it would be good if their managers would allow and support this. Next time I will put this on the agenda more explicitly.

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