

### Starting Point

In 2004 Deutsche Telekom AG – the leading German telecommunications company – created a European Works Council (EWC), i.e.: a body intended to improve the right to information and consultation of employees within larger European companies.

Such Councils, the members of which represent the employees from the different units of a company in various countries within the European Union, usually face two issues:

- the difficulty to ensure the quality and efficiency of cooperation within a highly heterogeneous team;
- the hurdles which need to be overcome to gain acceptance and make oneself heard at the level of four major stakeholders (the company itself, its employees, the labor unions and the public).

To tackle these issues, which the Deutsche Telekom EWC indeed faced itself, the decision was taken to organize a series of internal workshops, one of them devoted to the "standing" of the Council. The goal of this workshop was to determine how the Council should behave and present itself, to raise its power of influence in relation with its different internal and external stakeholders.

We were asked in June 2006 to assist the participants in preparing and holding this workshop.

### Our Role

In our view, the purpose of such a meeting is to pool the ideas and opinions of all participants, which are often divergent, in order to reach an overriding common objective. For this reason, we see no fundamental difference between this kind of meeting and a negotiation; in both instances, the process needs to be carefully managed.

In this case we were confronted with two issues in particular:

- Complexity of the communication process: The eight participants of the workshop spoke three different languages, most of them did not understand their foreign colleagues when they expressed themselves in their mother tongue and as a group, they did not share a good enough command of one common idiom such as English. Simultaneous translation was therefore required. Making sure that everybody would understand the same thing when using words like "standing" or discussing other similar concepts was bound to be difficult.

- Goal achievement: Although they hardly knew each other at the beginning and were not used to work together regularly, the participants had only two days to draft a project and action plan designed to raise the standing of the EWC, and to get prepared to present this plan in front of the Council as a whole.

We started by preparing a highly structured agenda showing *who* was expected to do *what*, *when*, *how* and *why*. This agenda was distributed in advance to all participants, in order to make them aware of the fact that concrete results were expected from the workshop and give them time to get prepared.

Within the limits of what was feasible considering the constraint of using microphones and headphones (because of the simultaneous translation), we got away from the traditional sitting arrangements. We organized the room so that we could use visualization techniques extensively and thus structure the discussion process from the beginning to the end in a transparent way.

At the beginning of the workshop, the participants made an analysis of the gap between "what is" and "what should be": what is the current "standing" of our Council and what should it be in the future? A facilitated brainstorming then helped them to identify the real stakeholders, and to develop a series of measures to be taken jointly in order to raise the standing of the Council.

## Results

The goals of the meeting were achieved within the given timeframe: the expected action plan was ready at the end of the workshop and all participants backed it up. They jointly and convincingly presented it during the following plenary session of the Council.

After the workshop participants made the following comments:

- "You came up with some kind of toolbox and emptied it in front of us. We were quite taken aback by this because we were all familiar with the way this kind of workshops usually unfolds. The way it actually went was however surprisingly different. I'm very happy with it."
- "Joint understanding of key concepts was achieved. This was indispensable."
- "Very systematic job; without external support, the workshop would never have been so well structured, focused on the task to be accomplished and finally successful in terms of reaching concrete results."
- "I would like to stress the fact that great emphasis was put on integrating each and every participant in the process."
- "A multilingual workshop represents a special challenge, not only for the interpreters and the participants, but also for the person in charge of managing the process."

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