

Starting Point

A company developing, producing and selling consumer goods to large retailers realized that it needed to redefine its priorities. While it had become strong as a production company, it could not differentiate itself from its competitors anymore based upon its manufacturing capabilities. Its success hinged increasingly on the ability to identify new trends early enough in order to develop the corresponding products and marketing concepts which would make its retail customers more successful on their own markets. In order to focus a larger share of its resources on marketing, it decided to outsource the production of several product lines (as well as the technical part of their development). With this aim in view, it built a strategic partnership with a French contract manufacturer (while it was itself located in a German speaking country).

The first operational milestones of this project were reached without major breakdowns. However, both partners were quite unsatisfied with the quality of their cooperation: communication between the individuals involved proved to be difficult (not least because of language reasons), some sub-projects ended up in a mess and daily life was riddled with smaller and bigger difficulties. It finally became obvious that both partners could benefit more from the combination of their respective resources, if their way of working together could be improved.

Management therefore decided to create a small team of key individuals from both sides which would meet once a month.

Our Role

We were asked in December 2005 to support this team.

To start with, we attended the first meeting of the team with the sole purpose of observing how it went. What we saw indicated that there was quite some room for improvement: the agenda was rudimentary and therefore not helpful; we sat in a very small meeting room without windows in which nobody felt comfortable; the participants were constantly shuffling in their papers and referring to the data which they were themselves looking at, assuming (sometimes wrongly) that the others persons in the room had the same papers and data in front of them; etc. At the end of the meeting, we expressed the feeling that the members of the team had worked next to each other, but not really together.

Because of this assessment, we were asked in January 2006 to "pilot" the preparation of the next meeting as well as the meeting itself.

Our goal was to show the team members how they could achieve more by structuring their meetings – and their negotiations during such meetings – in a totally different way:

- We prepared a highly structured [agenda](#) indicating *who* was expected to do *what*, *when*, *how* and *why*.
- We chose a much larger room (which was unfortunately still without windows, but at least much more comfortable).

- We made sure that we had several pin-walls and flipcharts available in order to constantly visualize what we had to do and to capture the thoughts of the participants and the conclusions which they reached together.
- When participants started to deviate from the agenda, we made them aware of it and asked them whether they were intentionally doing it and whether they wanted to pursue in this way. If not, we brought the conversation back on track.
- When one participant said something and we had the feeling that others in the room did not really understand the meaning of it, we took the initiative to ask for clarification. At the end of the discussion of each point on the agenda, we summarized what had been said and decided, and checked whether everybody agreed with this summary.

Results:

At the end of the meeting or after some time, participants made the following comments:

- "Today there was a structure."
- "We found a way of working together well and to avoid misunderstandings or mistakes."
- "We succeeded in developing new rules on how to cooperate together."
- "Strategic issues were addressed. Our respective expectations became clear. We had never discussed those questions in such a clear way."
- "This time everyone knew what he/she had to do after the meeting... and up to now everybody followed through."

As far as we are concerned, we came to the following conclusions:

- The members of the team really discovered what they needed to know about their partner on the other side.
- The open way in which strategic issues were addressed enabled the representatives of the contract manufacturer to start thinking loud about how they could best use their own resources to help their client to become more competitive of its own market.
- The individuals in charge of resolving daily issues started for the first time to have lively discussions on how they could improve their collaboration.
- This time, the participants worked truly together – on not only next to each other.

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