

Moving flexibly within clear boundaries

Steering the organisation through professional dialogue

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Towards another view on business transformation

Executives often ask themselves how they can make a radical and clear-cut transition from A to B with their organisation, e.g. from supply-oriented to demand-driven, from traditional to digital, from tightly organised to agile, etc. But is that the right question to ask? Obviously, the need to adapt to a changing world and market is real. It is often moving or perishing. But is everything that used to be the core of the business now suddenly superfluous and can the new be realised only with a complete 'paradigm shift'?

Many organisations indeed embark on a disruptive change process where everything is turned around. In addition to all kinds of organisational changes, employees go through a kind of collective ideological 'car wash' through large-scale culture change programs to completely re-set the way of working. The aim is to flush out the old ways of thinking and operating, and to pump new frameworks and working methods into it. All built around on new appealing corporate values, such as: 'Customer centric!', 'Outside in!', 'Digital!' 'Agile!', etc. To increase the contrast, the old ways of working are labeled as 'navel gazing', 'rigid bureaucracy' and 'old-school working methods'. We want to get rid of these. Don't we?

But are all those old and outdated values really superfluous? Ultimately, they served the organisation well in the past. And they may still be able to serve it. They may even be needed to balance the ship. Some examples: It is great to focus on customers and their needs, but on the other hand you have to monitor internal efficiency and available resources. Does an organisation that only follows the market trends and flexibly moves along with its changing environment, still have its own vision and course and is it still in control? And without a personal touch, won't digital become an anonymous cyber swamp where customers get lost?

And does such a disruptive paradigm shift work in practice? Implicitly or explicitly, people receive the message that everything that they did yesterday with full conviction is suddenly not good enough

today. That it should be done in a completely different way: 'much better now!' Their familiar points of reference are removed and they are expected to embrace the new normal with great enthusiasm. But people are not machines that you can switch at the touch of a button. Many therefore go into silent or open resistance, duck, wait for the storm to pass, or think it will last their time. You can try to overcome this by hiring all new people and letting existing employees leave, but that also means a great loss of knowledge and experience, as well as of the necessary cohesion, stability and loyalty. This is particularly relevant for knowledge-intensive organisations, where the intelligence is not only in the systems, but also and especially in the people.

The trick is not to *replace* the old with the new, but to *enrich* the existing with the new. In addition to introducing 'new' values, this also means revaluing the 'old' values. In order to do this effectively and credibly, we must make abstraction from their current appearance and return to their original purpose and meaning. What was the original positive intention behind the perhaps outdated and dysfunctional shape it has taken over time? For example, 'bureaucracy' is not about 'standard operating procedures', 'cumbersome paperwork' or 'KPIs' but in its essence it is about creating transparency, objectivity and being in control. These original values can actually help to make, for example, 'agile working' fully productive instead of hindering it.

Instead of thinking in terms of either-or choices, the challenge is to see how we can combine the power of the existing and the new. How can we turn a paralysing dilemma into a stimulating paradoxical challenge? For example, how can we combine the power of a well-oiled machine with that of an agile swarm? How can we be extremely customer-oriented and still keep our standardised processes? How can we use Digital to enhance the personal touch?

The professional dialogue

To engage your colleagues in this, a straightforward 'from A to B' culture change process is therefore not the appropriate way. Instead of 're-setting' people, it is better to offer them the tools to effectively cope with the continuous tension between A and B. This can be done by initiating a process whereby colleagues can talk to each other about what is needed at any time in terms of A and B. We call this process 'the professional dialogue'.

You can start with formulating your corporate values in terms of polarities. These polarities are areas of tension between two apparently opposing - but also balancing – values; fields of tension that all staff members are confronted with in the performance of their daily tasks. E.g. 'As a healthcare professional, I must give personal attention to my clients on the one hand and organise my work efficiently on the other hand.' 'As a service desk operator, I am expected to take into consideration the specific situation and needs of each customer, but also to comply with the internal standards.'

Within these two poles, people need to continuously move and switch according to the situation. Both sides are not only necessary for the organisation to be able to adapt to its environment, they are usually also implicitly present in the organisation, namely in its people. If you look closely at the different teams in the organisation, you will find a mix of different approaches and visions related to this polarity in each team. Within a healthcare provider, you will find people who do it all for the personal care and attention they want to give to each client on the one hand of the spectrum, and professionals who love nothing more than to work efficiently and to complete their care tasks in an uninterrupted flow on the other. With all shades of gray in between.

How to shape professional dialogue in your team and organisation

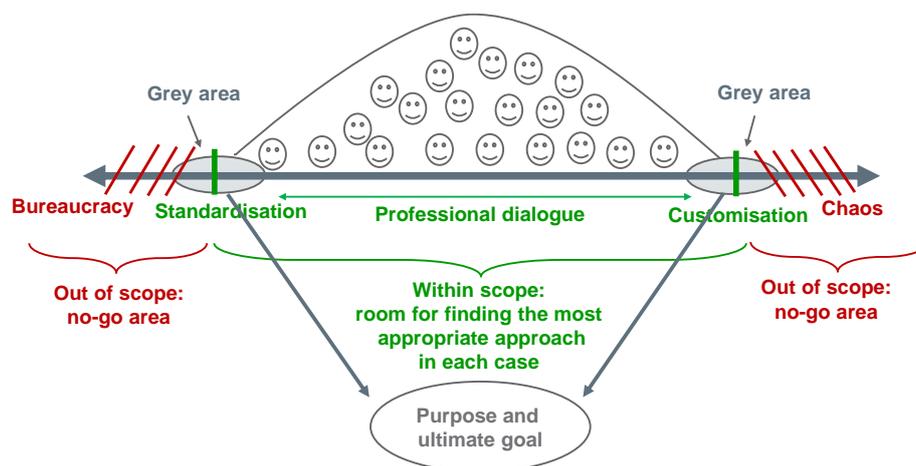
Rather than spending a tremendous amount of time, energy and money on trying to achieve a uniform way of working, with few if any results, it's much more effective to take advantage of the power of differences. This can be done by setting up a process of professional dialogue within the team (or

among teams). Professional dialogue is about how we, as a team, deal with some key polarities in our daily work and how we need to balance between the two poles concerned on a case-by-case basis.

The starting point is a specific polarity that every team member feels and is confronted with in their daily job and that everyone struggles with to some extent. This polarity is usually related to the nature of the tasks, the market situation, the environment or the circumstances in which one operates, or the general style and methods of the organisation. In a service team, for example, there might be tension between the delivery of 'standardised' and 'customised' solutions or between 'personal attention' and 'efficiency' with respect to customer contact.

Professional dialogue is a practical way to achieve more peer-to-peer management and self-organisation (as described in section 5.3) and to make less use of all kinds of top-down control mechanisms, detailed procedures and hierarchical structures. This approach is especially effective for teams of professionals and knowledge workers or in more unpredictable environments where flexibility, adaptability and quick response are crucial for success.

A number of steps are required in order for this dialogue to be conducted properly. These are shown in the figure below, using the example of customisation versus standardisation as the polarity:



The steps:

1. Identify the core polarity of the team

The first step is to explicitly name and discuss the main polarity that the team is confronted with and that often affects the work and atmosphere but is not always mentioned in so many words. As a team leader or coach, you can ask the team members which area of tension they feel the most and between which two opposing values or expectations do they have to navigate every day. You will soon identify a number of common themes. Focus on the core polarity that is most strongly felt by everyone. It is important to refer to it in a neutral way, without implicit or explicit preference for either side; so not 'orderly' versus 'chaotic' or 'bureaucratic' versus 'client-oriented' but 'structured' versus 'flexible' and 'customised' versus 'standardised'. The key role for the team leader or coach is to create a safe environment by highlighting, both in words and action, that both opposite poles are essential for doing a good job as a team.

2. Define the boundaries

It's fine that people have different styles and approaches, but are there limits? What is acceptable and what isn't? In the example of standardisation versus customisation: "It's good

that we're adhering to the standard service provision agreements, but if we stick to them too closely, at all times and in every situation, then everything will become unacceptably slow and bureaucratic." And the other way around: "It's great that we're creatively looking for solutions to satisfy the specific requirements of our client, but if we make exceptions all over the place, then we'll end up with complete chaos." Therefore, it's important to set boundaries: What are the no-go zones? For example, when searching for the balance between a personal and business-like approach: Empathising with someone's personal situation is fine, but twisting the truth and bending the rules to support someone is clearly not. Everyone has a different perception of what is acceptable and what isn't. What might be a white lie for one person could be outright corruption through the eyes of someone else.

It will also often become clear through dialogue that different people can mean very different things with the same words (like 'standardisation' and 'customisation'). This often leads to confusion and an unfounded sense of consensus or disagreement. It is therefore important to clarify the concepts that everyone uses by using many concrete examples.

Using concrete examples from daily practice is also the way to build a shared view on what the boundaries are: "What do we think of this approach in this case? And what if we would go even one step further? What would happen then? Would it still be within the range of what we consider to be acceptable or would it be over-the-top?" By doing this, the team explores the boundaries of what they consider acceptable and makes these boundaries explicit. Of course, as a leader, you also have an important contribution to make in this regard because your role is to ensure that everything is still in line with the overall objective, approach and style of the organisation.

In either case, it's important to be clear on the extent of freedom. How wide or narrow is the authorised bandwidth for different approaches? Do team members really have a lot of room for intervention options, or is it rather restricted?

3. Make the purpose clear

The two poles in approach or style are merely means to achieve the overall goal of the organisation. The overall goal of a school could be, for example, to help children grow up to become independent adults. One child might benefit more from specific guidance and the other from being given freedom and space for exploring. Whatever you apply (guidance or freedom) must in any case serve the purpose. This ultimate goal or purpose often gets buried beneath all kinds of well-intended derived goals, KPIs, guidelines, frameworks, procedures, checklists, etc. That's why it is essential to go back to the purpose again and again so that it's at the top of everyone's minds. "That's why we're all here." The purpose should be simple and understandable and really touch people emotionally. It shouldn't just be formulated as a list of beautiful sounding values, some of which "I just don't have at the front of my mind". If you have to rack your brain, you can already be sure that the values don't reflect the essence. Stories are a great way to make this really stick; stories that are told, retold, enriched and adapted to the changing context, like a living fabric.

4. Allow for mistakes and recognise grey zones

The fact that you are working within a margin inevitably means that judgments will be made that afterwards may prove to be wrong. No matter how clearly you try to define what is and what is not acceptable, there will always be grey zones. You can never anticipate or think up rules for all possible cases. What you can do is set up a process of peer review and intervision where these kinds of borderline cases are systematically discussed. Such discussions don't necessarily always have to involve 'the boss' but can also take place among

colleagues; a dialogue that starts with open minds regarding the issue at hand and not fixed opinions and self-righteousness.

5. Allow individuals to switch styles

If you were to plot the natural style of all team members along the axis between two poles, you would see a particular distribution pattern; perhaps a normal distribution or perhaps a curve towards one or both of the extremes. The shape of the curve gives an interesting visualisation of how like-minded or diverse the team is and where tensions may arise between different parties. It is also a dynamic and systemic process. For example, if a majority of the team positions itself on one side of the spectrum, some others will feel the need to position themselves more on the other side, not necessarily because they have a natural predisposition for this side but just to keep the team in balance.

Taking a position on the line between the two poles is therefore not a static fact and should certainly not lead to any sort of classification or typecasting: “You belong to the group of standard workers” or “you’re one of those who is keen on customisation”. Team members should also be encouraged to broaden their behavioural repertoire by practising other styles as well. This should all be done without forcing people in one direction or the other, otherwise changing styles will become a completely unauthentic and not credible trick.

As a leader, you can help initiate and stimulate this process by working with your team to:

- identify their core polarities: What is everyone struggling with?
- determine the margin: What is considered acceptable and what clearly isn't, based on concrete examples?
- keep the ultimate purpose at the front of everyone's minds by regularly sharing with each other concrete stories and anecdotes relating to this.
- name the grey areas and regularly discuss frequently recurring examples in these areas: What are possible approaches? What are their advantages and limitations? Make 'dealing with borderline cases' a standard item on the agenda of the team meetings.
- establish and apply the rules of the game for holding a dialogue, such as 'listen to each other before judging someone'.
- encourage team members to slightly broaden their own behavioural repertoire, to experiment with other styles and approaches, and to become more skilled in using the (opposite) competencies of colleagues.

[Ivo Brughmans](https://paradoxical-leadership.com) is a philosopher and management consultant. Ivo is fascinated by paradoxes and the challenge to bring together opposite approaches, both in personal leadership, organisations and society as a whole. Ivo has written several books on this theme, developing a 'both/and' perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living, managing, governing and coaching. Ivo lives in Antwerp, Belgium and works with public and private organisations around the globe. See also <https://paradoxical-leadership.com>.