

CASE STUDY



SLAGELSE
KOMMUNE

CASE STUDY: Improving Project Management Consistency, Efficiency and Effectiveness

How a municipality in Denmark overcame departmental conflict and communication barriers to create a collaborative approach to project management.



OBJECTIVE:

To create a unified project management organization in support of a greater development focus.

When Slagelse Kommune, a municipality of 77,000 people in Denmark, instituted a goal of becoming more development focused in 2008, it took a bold first step, replacing four of the five members of the Board of Directors, bringing on new directors of service, welfare, development and economics. The new board immediately saw that one of the primary obstacles to efficiency and effectiveness within the municipality was the lack of a system for managing projects.

From department to department and even from project to project, there was no consistency across the organization in the way projects were handled: Different people and departments used different tools, and some had even created their own tools and processes, using terms and methods that were completely foreign to the other groups and individuals they interacted with. There was no one way to tackle a project, and as a result, teams were often mired in miscommunication and conflict.

As Head Consultant of Strategic and Organizational Development, Tina Larsen was charged with addressing the issue through the creation of a project management organization.



CHALLENGES:

To overcome communication obstacles and conflict within a highly diverse group of professions that need to collaborate on complex projects.

Larsen says the challenges of inconsistencies and communication breakdowns are somewhat inherent in a municipality due to the breadth, variety and complexity of its responsibilities. From departments dealing with abused children to those working on organizational development or engineering, there are many, extremely different professions working together. Most companies, she notes, face a similar problem, with distinct functions ranging from finance to production to human resources to sales.

“These different professions each have their own rooted discourse and this can cause communication problems, if you’re only rooted in what you do every day.”

Larsen’s goal was to develop a program that ensured all stakeholders understood the terminology, processes and best methods for tackling a project. This program would include not just project managers but anyone who had a responsibility for participating in and contributing to projects.



SOLUTION:

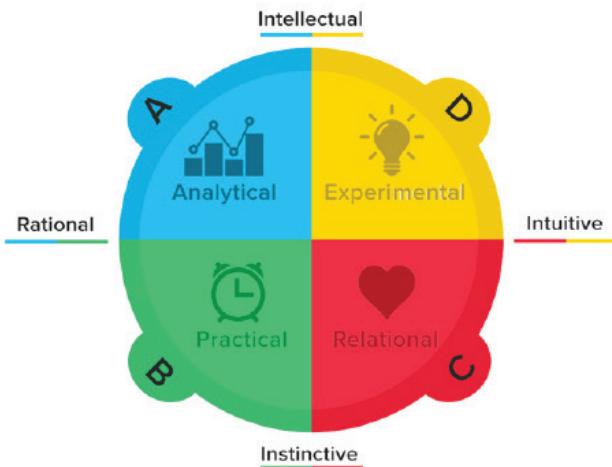
Incorporating thinking preferences into project management training as a foundation for streamlining communication, developing an appreciation for differences and resolving conflict.

“It’s a great model because it’s rooted in something biological and physical as opposed to the type indicators that focus on the psychological. Those don’t really have the same appeal. This is a single, easy-to-understand and use tool but based on robust methodology.” – Tina Larsen, Head Consultant of Strategic and Organizational Development, Slagelse Kommune

In the process of developing the program, Larsen was introduced to the Herrmann Whole Brain® Model and Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®). After reading The Whole Brain® Business Book, she immediately realized that understanding others’ preferences for thinking would be an enormous help in streamlining processes and communications, and in helping people tailor their approaches to different people or problems. By building Whole Brain® Thinking skills into the program in addition to project management models, she would be giving participants the tools to improve communications and minimize conflict, two of the most critical issues affecting the project management arena.

Another important factor in choosing the HBDI® assessment and Whole Brain® Model as core elements of the program was the scientific validity of the HBDI®. As a public sector organization, Larsen says they are highly cognizant of how they spend the public’s money and wouldn’t consider a methodology that wasn’t validated.

“It’s also a great model because it’s rooted in something biological and physical as opposed to the type indicators that focus on the psychological,” Larsen adds. “Those don’t really have the same appeal, and after a few months, you don’t even remember what your type is. This is a single, easy-to-understand and use tool but based on robust methodology.”



After completing HBDI® Certification, Larsen began developing the initial project management course through collaboration with Herrmann International Denmark (www.hbdi.dk), weaving the Whole Brain® Model and HBDI® throughout.

After the first course was delivered, she was a bit surprised by the reaction.

“What people really took away from the first course—the thing they talked about the most afterwards—was the Whole Brain® Model. Even though the course included a brand new project management model, the participants said they thought the Whole Brain® Model was the most valuable thing they learned.”

Larsen believes that is because the “easiest parts” are the project management tools. The more difficult elements, the ones project managers struggle with the most, are the communications and conflict issues that commonly occur when working with a wide range of people with many different backgrounds, interests, preferences and goals.

She notes that people can quickly consume a great deal of energy with “antagonistic dialogue” if they are unable to find common ground to move forward, so participants saw this as a huge value.

“With so many different, multifaceted professions, Whole Brain® Thinking was giving them a way to bridge the professions, from economists to engineers to caretakers for the elderly.”

Particularly because stakeholder management is such an important part of project management, the project managers found they could use the model and language of Whole Brain® Thinking to plan and facilitate better communications with stakeholders of all types.

The municipality is following the project management program with initiatives involving HBDI® Team Profiles, department programs and several courses that have the Whole Brain® Model at their core, including a meeting facilitation course and a conflict management and teamwork course.



“We’re experimenting with using the Whole Brain® Model in all areas and encouraging people to do so,” Larsen says. “If the topic is innovation or economic development or something else, let’s walk around the quadrants to see how we can best tackle it. And what are the profiles of the people involved? How can we use that in our thinking?”

Larsen says the approach is “so good at creating awareness about preferences that it helps you get through all four corners of a topic” to address it completely. What might seem complicated on the surface can be tackled in a straightforward way because the model “helps it come out quite easily.”

And while she is working on the additional course offerings, including the program that will provide a Whole Brain® approach to conducting meetings, Larsen says project managers are already using the concepts “on the fly” in meetings with outside municipalities.

RESULTS:

Improved communication, significant reduction in conflict, better decision-making and Whole Brain® Thinking integrated into the day-to-day work environment.

“Whole Brain® Thinking has significantly minimized conflict—within the project management groups, with the work they do with people outside the groups, and with the stakeholders outside of the organization.” – Tina Larsen, Head Consultant of Strategic and Organizational Development, Slagelse Kommune

Larsen describes the environment since the rollout as one where people “do their research” before a meeting so they can adequately prepare. For example, since the program, project managers have begun applying Whole Brain® Thinking to ask for help in planning for meetings or communications, asking questions like: “If my preferences are high yellow [D-quadrant big-picture thinking in the Whole Brain® Model], how should I approach this meeting with someone I know is high green [B-quadrant detailed thinking]?”

They also find that simply mentioning an upcoming meeting will trigger conversation and advice, such as “You both prefer conceptual thinking, so be sure to structure the meeting and have an agenda to keep on track,” and “He prefers analytical thinking, so you better bring your facts and figures.”

Most important, it’s grounded in acceptance: “It’s not about trying to change someone; you don’t see them as ‘faulty,’ it’s just how they are,” Larsen says. “So you can leverage people’s thinking styles and strengths and adjust your own to adapt to them. You use thinking constructively in the situation you’re in.”



While she was initially surprised the biggest excitement and “ahas” from the course had to do with thinking preferences instead of the new project management methodology, Larsen says the reaction is really a reflection of the value Whole Brain® Thinking has brought to the project management discipline.

“It has significantly minimized conflict—within the project management groups, with the work they do with people outside the groups, and with the stakeholders outside of the organization.”

Larsen adds that at least 50% of the initial group who went through the project management training wanted their superiors to take the HBDI® to learn their thinking preferences as well. “I’ve never seen people really take a model at face value and really apply it and have fun with it like this before.”

Even long-term, well-respected and effective managers are coming to her asking to take it. “People are queuing up to take it! The word of mouth has been incredibly strong.”

It’s becoming a common theme in other Danish public institutions as well. According to Casper Littrup, Partner at Herrmann International Denmark, “The results Slagelse Municipality has experienced are consistent with what we’ve seen among other Danish municipalities applying the concept.” He says these kinds of successes are driving a growing demand for Whole Brain® solutions from local municipalities and other public institutions throughout the country.

In terms of creating a project management organization, Larsen says Whole Brain® Thinking has provided the necessary cultural foundation by improving communications and reducing the number of conflicts by a considerable degree. As the concepts continue to spread throughout the organization, beyond just projects, the work is paying off more and more.

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“If you’re working with project models, it’s so important to get it out to every corner of the organization. When you invest in buying these systems—Whole Brain® Thinking, Project Management, whatever they are—to get the full benefit you have to get it out there. You have to take the time to do it because the little anecdotes really tell you how far you’ve moved the organization and the culture, and that’s when you start creating value. For us, small things are adding up to a big total difference.”

And no less important, Larsen says, “It’s fun! There’s positive energy around it.”

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