

Strategies for Development of Leadership in Daycare Centres and Schools

Paper based on results from development projects, and new understandings from training programmes and formal education.

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Abstract

The overall purpose of this multi-paper symposium is to present the strategies, experience and results from projects, training programs and formal education aimed at enhancing leadership skills in daycare centres, residential institutions, and primary and lower secondary schools (hereafter called 'schools'), from both a research/evaluation perspective, an educational perspective and a consultancy perspective

In recent years, Denmark has seen major focus on good leadership as a way of ensuring quality education for children and young people in daycare centres and schools. The government has initiated several programs to enhance the leadership skills of managers of daycare centres and schools. Money has been allocated for local leadership development projects, and there has been investment in new types of leadership education and training.

The symposium and the associated papers view managing schools, daycare centres, and residential institutions under the same heading, because Danish organisation of these areas is under the same municipal administration and this means that they have more characteristics in common than differences that separate them. Schools, daycare centres and residential institutions make up an important part of the public sector in Denmark, with strong political focus and priority. The areas have, and historically always have had, a pivotal role in the development of the public welfare system, and therefore they are a crucial element in the Danish economy. The public sector in Denmark is part of the solution and not a fundamental problem, as it is in other liberalistic and 'New-Public-Management'-oriented economies, for example. This does not mean that there are no significant and unsolved problems in the Danish public sector. This is precisely one of the main reasons why we, together with others, have decided to explore approaches to, and experience of, management in this

part of the public sector, in the hope that on this basis we can contribute new perspectives on appropriate approaches to management at schools, daycare centres and residential institutions.

This paper contains three different approaches and perspectives to leadership; research, education, and practice. For the sake of simplicity the papers are referred to as paper 1, paper 2 and paper 3.

Paper 1: The first paper and the first part of the symposium represent the research angle and will focus on the experience and results of implementation of three main types of strategies to develop leadership skills. These strategies have been found from amongst a range of development projects financed by the Danish government: the excellence approach; the knowledge-gap approach; and the reflection approach.

Paper 2: The second paper represents the practice angle by examining how managers perceive the conditions for exercising management and choosing management strategies, focusing on the question "What do managers themselves want to improve in their practice?"

Paper 3: The third and final paper represents the education angle through addressing the question: "What works in leadership training, and what links theory and practice together? These questions will be explored in relation to leadership training on the basis of systemic and appreciative methods.

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Paper 1: Evaluation of the implementation and effects of three different strategies to enhance leadership skills

By Persille Schwartz and Camilla Wang, Danish Evaluation Institute

During the last three years, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) has conducted an evaluation of a range of different sponsored leadership training/education projects in Danish municipalities. The purpose of the evaluation is to uncover and describe the specific hypotheses underlying each project on ways to enhance leadership skills. The project also aims at assessing the implementation processes and effects of the different strategies used.

The results of the evaluation can help to identify what works in leadership training programmes and help to qualify future training/education programs. More generally the evaluation can also provide managers with a better decision base for choosing a training programme.

The evaluation design combines detailed case studies of some of the projects with more general data from the total pool of projects (13 out of 84 development projects are specifically aimed at management). Sources of data are interviews with managers and staff at daycare centres as well as stakeholders and educators, written self-evaluation reports from the projects, and professional dialogues at seminars.

Preliminary results of the evaluation, which was completed in June 2009, identified three main strategies in leadership training/education. These are:

1. The "excellence approach"
2. The "knowledge-gap approach"
3. The "reflection approach"

1. The "excellence approach"

This approach builds on an understanding that development of the field will be by identifying the best management or manager and taking this as a point of departure or benchmark for development of the rest management in the area. This will typically be by utilising mentor schemes in which the excellent manager guides the inexperienced or less competent manager in a sort of 'craftsman-apprentice' approach. However there are also projects which aim at defining characteristics for good management in order to use these in, for example, inspection visits, manager development interviews, mentor schemes and recruiting future managers.

Results

Mentor schemes are particularly suitable for increasing the parties' awareness of the necessity of strategic management, but it is hard to say anything further about the results of mentor schemes. The project aiming at identifying indicators of good management which can be used in mentor schemes, for example, defines good management as institution management of very high pedagogical quality, assessed on the basis of the following factors: High parent satisfaction, low absenteeism due to sickness, low staff turnover, and the institution's own competence assessments at individual and institution levels. Here, they have

concluded that the characteristics of the type of management found in good institutions are: visionary with a clear understanding of the pedagogical task, high professionalism, creating synergy between external demands and the values of the institution, visible, supportive of employee initiatives, appreciative, open to differences, open and clear communication, and follow-up as part of the management process.

Perspectives

The project owners are the municipal administrations and they have expressed a high degree of satisfaction in using good leadership as an indicator in development. The challenges are linked to the focus on the best management and the best manager, as this can lead to personification of management, so that the contextual restrictions of the management task are not necessarily incorporated in the design of the craftsman-apprentice approach. Moreover, if it remains closed, the definition of the excellent risks becoming difficult to challenge by other and perhaps more relevant interpretations of good management. The definition may then lead to stagnation rather than development.

2. The "knowledge-gap approach"

This approach is about filling in specific gaps in managers' knowledge in relation to new legislation, requirements, expectations and responsibilities. This could include providing information on language assessments of children, documentation methods, evaluation, administrative and organisational issues such as board and parent cooperation, or more pedagogical issues which make the manager a professional 'leading light', for example through knowledge about inclusion, appreciation, creating learning environments etc.

By far the majority of the development projects adopting this approach utilise education/training courses from established, official places of education to equip their managers in the pedagogical field (e.g. through selected modules in diploma courses within special pedagogies, inclusion, appreciative pedagogies etc.). The teaching processes are often built up as a dynamic alternation between courses and professionally relevant projects in participants' own practices.

However, there are also a number of projects aiming at establishing independent fora or networks for internal knowledge-sharing within the municipality, for example thematic days held by pedagogical consultants or managers possessing specialist knowledge about an area which is deemed to be relevant for knowledge sharing, or networks with professional focus to follow-up a specific education/training course.

Results

Not surprisingly, there are reports that cooperation between daycare centres and the administration in general has been enhanced in place where networks and other fora for knowledge sharing have been utilised. However, participants are looking for more actual teaching in development projects which involve knowledge building through establishing knowledge networks.

Places at which there have been education/training activities describe in their results that people have 'learnt about' and 'formed a common foundation' which can be both professionally and methodologically based. General experience with regard to education/training activities is that there is a need for knowledge which can be coupled to specific practice

rather than more general, broad thematic or theoretical knowledge which requires much translation and conversion by the manager himself.

Combining coursework with homework or small projects in participants' own practices is generally very popular, but nevertheless translating the knowledge acquired into new action in practice seems to present a great challenge, which not all projects have fully managed to deal with. One explanation is that homework often drowns in hectic life at the institution, where the manager is more interested in ensuring that things work now, rather than future development. However there are also development projects with which institutions say they have reached a point of saturation and exhaustion. They would like to take part, but they cannot cope with having to continue with the projects in their own practices.

Perspectives

Participants appreciate the new knowledge they have acquired and that they 'have learnt about' a topic. However, it is thought provoking that, in general, the results refer to a level of knowledge attained and a common level of knowledge, rather than the results arising from actually implementing this knowledge. This does not imply that such results do not exist, but it does indicate that there is a possible challenge for management in coupling the knowledge acquired to action in practice.

The idea behind the knowledge-gap approach is that the input of knowledge should help equip managers to carry out specific tasks, at administrative management level for example, or it should update participants' pedagogical skills to enable them to stimulate development as professional mentors or role models in their institution. On the one hand, therefore, it is important for the manager to keep up with specialist (pedagogical) developments in order to meet the demands relating to being professionally visionary and to 'showing the way', but on the other hand managers of daycare centres also want priority placed on management knowledge and skills.

Traditionally, managers in this area have attained authority and status through their specialist pedagogical knowledge and experience. When a manager is to set priorities for consumption of resources, solutions focusing on the management perspective, perhaps involving delegating the specialist pedagogical expertise to other employees, are not the first which spring to mind. This distinction, between pedagogical, specialist management and organisational management, is an ongoing problem at Danish daycare centres, and this is emphasised in the fact that more than half of the development projects specifically aimed at management focus on this theme.

3. The 'reflection approach'

This approach is about developing management skills to practice leadership in a world of constant change with a need for self-managerial staff. Focus is on the manager's own reflective skills and ability to create reflective processes in his/her organisation.

Development projects which focus on developing managers' reflective skills and process-management skills have many different approaches. Some introduce specific reflection tools on thematic days or in networks, but by far the majority offer their managers actual continuing training courses at diploma level, for example, often supplemented with individual supervision or supervision in network groups. One project also attempts to increase

managers' reflection by having them use video recordings to document the pedagogical practice at the institution. However, all the approaches share a focus on organisation management such as change management, process management, process analysis and coaching (often on the basis of a systemic appreciative approach) as well as the ability to analyse management frameworks, for example through evaluation and implementation of research-based knowledge.

Some projects have sought to generate reflection by involving managers in developing new forms of cooperation. For example, one project has gone the whole way and utilised structural reorganisation to involve employees from all important specialist groups to reflect on and prepare an entirely new common strategic foundation. Using this new strategic foundation as a basis, management profiles have been prepared for the various new structural levels, and then competencies held or lacking with managers were identified in relation to this. After this, on the basis of the competencies identified, a training plan was drawn up with courses and network groups for sparring, implementation and evaluation.

Results

The results reported from these approaches have generally been enhanced strategic management and managers who have developed a dialogical competence so that the management culture is now characterised as having an appreciative and reflective approach. Some places have seen that managers have become proactive with respect to municipal initiatives and that they display an insight and understanding for the perspectives from other organisational positions than their own.

The project involved all the central players in a process to rethink the strategic foundation, and it saw a high level of commitment, sense of community and motivation for the management task. The network philosophy is being promoted and there are coached conversations between managers about the various challenges, even though other feedback from the managers indicates that the implementation processes at institutions are already running more smoothly (because of managers' improved analytical and strategic perception).

Perspectives

Competence development focusing on increasing managers' abilities to reflect, analyse and enter into dialogues, as well as multiple perspectives seen in context by central players seem to provide good results in relation to developing the management process itself. The descriptions of the results in the projects focus in particular on altered cooperation and implementation processes and this indicates that the knowledge acquired by the managers on the thematic days or during training courses has been transferred into practice where a common language and starting point, dialogical competence, and openness for changes in perspectives seem to have been particularly significant for the implementation process. Some projects have seen a certain amount of role distortion during the dialogical processes in which a challenge to the approach could be that the dialogical processes may blur the fact that in practice there is a special power, influence and responsibility linked to the various positions in the organisation so that all perspectives of, and wishes for, a specific development direction are therefore not equally valid (are equally worthwhile).

Conclusion

The three approaches we have identified lead to different types of results, but they are all relevant approaches to competence development in management work and they each have challenges to be addressed. There may be various preferences for a specific approach to management competence development and presumably these will work differently in different institutions, organisations and countries, depending on their traditions and culture. The point is not to choose between the approaches, but to explore each of them and reflect how together they can inspire development of approaches to management development in our respective institutions, organisations and countries.

Paper 2: Which skills do managers themselves want to develop – and how can they do this?

By Peter Ulholm & Niels Erik Hulgård Larsen University College Copenhagen

The purpose of this paper and presentation is to present and discuss what managers themselves focus on as necessary skills to develop, how leadership training/education can combine theory and practice, and how research and managerial practice can be brought together.

The Department of Leadership and Organisational Development at the University College Copenhagen has many years' experience in leadership development in the form of action learning processes and formal training/education programs. The target group is primarily managers of schools and daycare centres. The empirical bases for this paper consist of data from a PhD research project from the Diploma Programme of Leadership at University College Copenhagen (UCC), including desk research of managers' final exam projects and interviews with managers and educators.

The paper starts with a presentation of the most important findings from the desk research, and these are then discussed and compared with points from various interviews with managers and educators.

Empirical data collection for the project: conditions for school management

Background

The report studied the problems raised by school managers in their final projects for the Diploma Programme of Leadership at University College Copenhagen. The aim of the study was to outline how school managers describe their management tasks and their most important management challenges.

Primary narrative

The narrative, which permeates most of these descriptions by school managers of their tasks, is that the conditions for managing schools in Denmark have changed drastically over the past 10-15 years. Amongst other things, this is apparent in the current high position school management is being afforded on the political agenda. In general this reflects the great significance of schools and the rest of the public sector for the welfare society of the future, as can be seen in the Danish government's vision to create the 'best schools in the world'. More specifically school management has attracted a great deal of attention and

activity from many professional actors in the field, including researchers and continuing training institutions. This interest in school management is a consequence of both Danish and international trends in which strong focus is on management in the field of education. Studies from international organisations have often analysed important problems and defects in current management practices. In extension to this they have indicated the need for a more professional school management, partly by enhancing strategic leadership at schools. This study should be read on the basis of this backdrop.

Form and argumentation

This study focused on three relationships for management in the final projects: management in relation to teachers, parents, and the administration. Next, the report isolated three management strategies at stake in the final projects: the quitter, the filter, and the proactive manager.

1. Management in relation to teachers

The final projects reveal a tendency for school managers to describe conditions for teachers as being very different today than in the past.

Some are somewhat nostalgic in their descriptions of the past. It was a time when the teaching vocation was much respected and when, to a great extent, the individual teacher managed him or herself, while today the teaching profession has been devalued. Others talk about 'the call', which previously characterised 'the teaching vocation', but which they now feel has been replaced by counting hours and clock watching.

On the other hand, the older generation of teachers is presented as 'private practitioners' with a culture which is very resistant to change. They manage themselves, but not in the right way.

There is a certain amount of ambivalence with regard to the understanding of the teaching vocation. The teaching idea is idolized in some places, but in others (sometimes in the same project) it is described as a physical impossibility today.

Projects dealing with themes such as psychological working environment, absence due to sickness, introduction of self-managing teams, and the quality reform, present teachers within this ambivalent framework, moving between a nostalgic picture of the past and criticism of the inertia in accepting and implementing change. The quality reform is an overall strategy and reform package which aims at raising the quality of public services, in part through management development within the educational sector.

2. Management in relation to parents

Narratives about the dramatic changes in schools are reiterated in descriptions of the relationship with parents.

Some criticise the situation that, as they see it, the authority of the school is being replaced by the school as a service. Parents' social perspective is being replaced with focus on the individual.

Commercialization, free choice of school and competition with the private sector are also presented as problems. For example, one project describes the ambivalence they perceive regarding the policy of inclusion in relation to the political decision for free choice of school for parents. Here, demands for more inclusion of pupils with a non-Danish ethnic background mean that parents exploit the free choice of schools and move their children to other schools, including private schools. They experience having to manage under market-like conditions, but also on the basis of decisions which they have not made themselves, and which they feel could make their schools less competitive.

Relationships with parents raise questions regarding the role of the school manager in relation to protecting teachers from parents, involving parents in the school board, and attracting parents as 'customers'.

3. Management in relation to the administration

With regard to relationships with the administration, it is clear from the final projects that schools have been a special focus area over the past 10 years. This strongly emphasizes the need for an ability to work in a politically led organisation and navigate through many policies and initiatives. One project raises the question of how school managers can possibly live up to the overwhelming expectations of them, for example demands for new forms of organisation and written documentation. These demands are often accompanied with cut-backs.

Another project deals with the issue of school managers having to accept and implement measures they do not consider good in practice with a 'false enthusiasm'.

Again there is ambivalence, this time regarding how the administration controls, and how managers should deal with this control as a loyal civil servant, even though they do not believe that it necessarily improves conditions for carrying out the 'core task'.

4. Three management tactics

The report isolates three types of management tactic. They appear as absolutes in the quotes below, but the vast majority of school managers would probably not present them in such absolute terms, but rather as tactics they utilize in some contexts, but not in all.

1. The quitter

"There may be many reasons for changing job; a desire for new personal and private challenges has been part of the reason for all three of us. But the most important reason for us all has been the general constriction of our management space."

In this situation three school managers have resigned with the reason that their 'management space' has been constricted. It is becoming difficult to fill school-manager positions, especially in Greater Copenhagen.

2. The filter

"The individual school manager should ideally act as a filter for the barrage of demands and expectations falling from officialdom above."

In this quote, the school manager perceives himself as an umbrella, protecting against the torrent of demands from above. This is a tactic utilized by several school managers to a

greater or lesser extent, for example because they want to make life less 'complex' for their staff.

3. The proactive manager

"The world is in motion and we are in a constant process. Therefore there is no final solution, only temporary ones. In the same way new opportunities are constantly cropping up. So, look around you all the time and think the unthinkable. Today, the role of the manager is more exciting than ever before, so that today there is vast room to manoeuvre and create your own management profile."

Others try and focus on the opportunities rather than limitations in today's management environment. These types of tactic indicate that some school managers consider management conditions restrictive and the role of the manager as a matter of filtering, while others seem to have found the solution by being one step ahead and thinking the unthinkable.

Reflections on the study

It should be stressed that the three strategies mentioned above should not be considered mutually exclusive. For example, the proactive strategy and the filter are often closely linked, almost as strategic prerequisites for each other, unless the filter is practiced as a purely protective measure and thus is entirely reactive. Active 'filter management' requires proactivity and therefore conscious decisions on how and when this type of management is to be applied. This requires a sense of perspective, including the ability to analyse one's own organisation and external conditions and not least an ability to communicate with stakeholders in and around the school.

Successful management is to a great extent dependent upon managers' ability to understand and master the cacophony of 'languages and dialects' in play at the school as well as the multitude of systems - finances, administration, technology, control, politics, management, leadership and market. This complex of many systems, languages and conflicting rationale and interests represents the web of pressure the proactive school manager must be able to embrace and manoeuvre within. And there's no simple solution here. The issues and the management challenges are paradoxes or dilemmas and therefore they have to be resolved by communication which matches this. The manager, or managers jointly, who master this communication will be better equipped to build bridges between the various systems and thus have better access to influence and power.

Reflections on the study have also brought two other important relationships into play; 'the manager's relationship with himself and his own leadership', and 'management in relation to managers in a specific management team'. It is crucial that these 'new' relationships are brought into play in order to understand and match the challenges which, for the individual manager, are linked with having to seize control of the space for management and action which is necessary to manoeuvre competently in relation to the previously mentioned web of pressure and paradoxes.

Para logical afterthoughts

Paradoxes and dilemmas have come to stay as permanent items on the management agenda. Like other basic management conditions, there is no opting out from paradoxes and dilemmas, unless the manager decides to quit. The two concepts are an inevitable part of the

management reality and a challenging basic ingredient of the management task. Firstly because of the innate complexity of the two. Secondly because managing this complexity calls for very different methods of communicating, choosing and deciding than those made available by well known problem-solving and management strategies. Neither linear communication nor the manager can do it alone, they need others around them, such as colleagues in the management team, in order to find ways and appropriate communicative responses to the paradoxes. As mentioned above, communication cannot solve its paradoxes, but it must manage them so that they don't appear as paradoxes, and this is done through 'unparadoxing' - a strategy for shutting our eyes to the paradox. Unparadoxing unfolds the paradox's built-in difference by supplementing, replacing and overlaying this difference with a set of new differences.

Paper 3: A case on management development and school mergers

By organisational management consultant, Finn Borch, and business manager, Per Møller Janniche, Rambøll Management Consulting, Attractor.

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All work at Attractor is based on the systemic, narrative and Appreciative Inquiry ideas regarding how theory and practice are integrated in managerial and organisational development. We convert this knowledge into a constructive, action-research-based approach and respectful basis for learning, school development and sustainable solutions.

This paper discusses how we can create an optimal learning setup, when managers wish to develop, learn more and become better at their jobs. This final part is an example of how management development and the management approaches mentioned earlier can be converted into a management development process in practice.

The discussion will be based on a specific case; a merger process between Danish basic schools and the management challenges arising in this context. The case has been described thoroughly, as we believe it is necessary to understand fully the learning setup which has been developed to match the current situation. During the case study, problems experienced by school managers are linked to systemic and appreciative points. Finally, the paper describes and discusses the learning process implemented to make the managers involved more qualified to act in the situations dealt with in the case. Learning setup, methods applied and understanding will be further discussed at the workshop, however the workshop will not deal with the case itself. The case deals with management at basic school level (grades 1-10).

Management development and municipal development

In 2007 extensive mergers of municipalities took place, and Denmark's 198 municipalities were reduced to just 98. In this connection, Attractor was involved in two large management development projects for 800 managers from two Danish municipalities, arising from the merger of 10 smaller, independent municipalities. The purpose of these projects was to coordinate the managers' perception of the mission and vision of the new municipality, and to convert the new values into examples of good management practice seen from the perspective of municipalities and citizens.

Concurrently with the work on mission, vision and values, the new municipalities introduced new individual structures and organisations. All sectors and organisation types in the new municipalities were affected by this work, including schools.

In order to utilise benefits of rationalisation and to develop up-to-date, flexible and sustainable school systems, several schools were merged, whereas others were closed down. Both scenarios involved great management challenges in implementing processes.

An objective of both projects was that managers in the new municipal school systems were properly prepared to deal with change management and development management. Therefore, the upcoming organisational mergers were chosen as a practical and theoretical framework for the management development projects.

This case compiles experience from both processes. The case includes a description of the way school management can be carried out as a result of the mergers, and a discussion of the terms and objectives with which Danish school management must generally comply. Finally, the case discusses how establishing a systemic constructive theory can contribute to developing a new practice for school management.

Reflections on processes of change, school management and systemic constructivism
The use of the concepts of change management and development management in relation to other management tasks may give the perception that managers only occasionally make changes and developments.

However, most managers in primary and lower secondary schools, and not least their employees, probably think that their school is constantly changing. Therefore, managers and employees often find themselves in situations, where they must think differently, act differently and process emotional consequences of the disturbances caused by these changes.

The disturbances themselves are not a problem. Where adapted disturbances seen from a systemic understanding are perceived as a precondition for learning and developing, unadapted disturbances are perceived as an obstruction to learning and developing. Therefore, the way to understand and address the disturbances is important for how these disturbances can be managed. Change and development may be perceived as a state rather than an exception. This means that change management and development management have become two of the most sought-after disciplines for school managers.

If we look at school mergers, we can hardly imagine a more extensive organisational process of change. Mergers represent a change of structure, which often entails changes in relation to the mission, vision and strategy of the school as well as its organisational structure and culture. They require changes in the organisation of work with regard to performance of tasks, new personnel policies and development of new ways of cooperating between management and employees.

School mergers are often followed by long periods of turbulence in the organisation and for the individual employee. Some people find this very chaotic and enter a state of panic. Others see mergers as a new world of opportunities.

Therefore, it is extremely important that the managerial task on developing a strategy for the merger process has a positive outcome. The strategy must be discussed on a regular basis, and must reflect a cohesive procedure or pattern, which is transparent in relation to the visions and methods that are to steer the process in a specific direction.

Seen from a systemic, organisational perspective, organisations exist to give people a sense of belonging and meaning to their lives. Meaning is created on the basis of ideas and stories of how the future will look. In other words, ideas of the future determine people's actions in the present. Our assumption is that reality is created through the language used in interactions between people. Therefore, meaning and coordinated perceptions are created to coordinate common action. Language does not reflect an existing reality, but provides us with tools to make us capable of interacting with each other; making the construction of reality possible. In other words, the world, i.e. reality, comes into existence through our conversations with each other.

Dialogue as a strategic conversation

Communication is important for how we perceive a given situation. When managers meet resistance in their dialogue with teachers, pupils and parents, it may be useful to perceive this resistance as an invitation to talk about what is important for the 'complainant'. The perception of resistance is the perception that something could be different, and that this 'something' is linked to possible alternative perceptions, which could open up for resources, desires and dreams rather than inadequacy, barriers and problems. The point is that the dream was there before the frustration.

Therefore, during a process of merger, it is important to pay special attention to how communicative processes and linguistic articulation are being used. The visions that are to carry the merger through successfully may be exemplified during the discussions between the various players. The objective should be to achieve the highest possible degree of transparency, so that all parties involved are heard, valued and recognised and their contributions become important for the life of the new school. And this part of the objective brings us to the case study. In our case study, the school manager develops his/her skills, so the best possible merger can take place.

Another and just as important objective is the desire to create general learning from the process. In other words, the process is not only seen as an opportunity to achieve knowledge and understanding of what the various players find important and what strengthens the relational bonds between the players. It is also a chance to develop the communication types, process tools and strategy perceptions that could be applied in other assignments as a natural part of the organisation's repertoire. When this objective has been achieved, the organisation can reflect on its own qualities. Through developing organisational learning competencies the organisation can change its own circumstances.

The most powerful and meaningful events in a merger between organisations occur when something sensational happens that amazes and surprises. It might leave people puzzled, lead to unexpected conversations and push people in a direction they did not think was possible.

Emerging and learning strategy processes

We know from international studies that between 50% and 80% of organisation mergers are more likely to fail than succeed (note 1). The main explanation behind these disappointing figures is that the decision-maker pays no attention to the human factor and has no plan for how employees could benefit from being included in the process of developing the new organisation. Other important factors are the lack of consideration for the new types of cooperation a merger entails, and the high prioritisation of a centrally formulated culture as the basis for the life of the new organisation. Therefore, the strategic planning of mergers is often based on misconceptions:

- The first misconception is that it is possible to predict and predetermine developments. At all levels - internally and externally in the organisation - there will be unexpected occurrences to which the merger strategy must be adjusted.
- The other misconception is that it is prudent to separate work on long-term strategies from the day-to-day operations. This means that there is no connection between strategies and reality.
- A third misconception is based on the assumption that organisations work and can be managed rationally.

Strategies for processes of change require a balance between exploitation of the known and unknown. Just as in the everyday practice of the school, learning is promoted by finding the optimal breadth of experimentation and variation. You could say that the benefit from exploiting what you know and what you can do is safer and quicker than the benefits from exploring the unknown. In this search for the known there seems to be a desire to resolve the unknown. However, many of our most important experiences as human beings do not deal with resolving the unknown, but rather they create and explore it. Therefore, there is great potential in trying to use the unknown as an initiator for discovering new meanings, new identities and new relevancies.

The school manager's ambition should be to prepare a learning strategy process for school mergers. A process that will inspire all employees involved to contribute to developing a new school, where everyone will thrive and be proud of their work

Change management and development management as a process of interpersonal and relational education

In school mergers employees and parents must tackle many challenges. The individual employee will typically fluctuate between forward-looking faith and motivation and retrospective pessimism and disillusion. For parents, the insecurity often makes them feel powerless, which in some cases brings them together to express their wish to become involved in the process. It can be emotionally difficult to go through a process of school merger. Most people feel they lose control when they let go of 'the objective truth' and security. This feeling should be respected, and there must be space for people to express, discuss and re-interpret this feeling.

Through attitude and behaviour, the school manager can show a good example and be open, reflecting and curious about the forthcoming changes. By trying to understand and recognise what is said by employees and parents, and by asking constructive questions, a new perception of a more attractive future can be created.

The school manager's task is to make a contribution, be involved, and provide input and perhaps suggestions for change during the process. All to show that the establishment of a good decision basis for an emerging process depends on the employees and school manager being able to reflect on the challenges they meet. The school manager's task is to be able to spot resources, make them visible for the employees, and engage in dialogue on the positive image of the past, the present and the future. When communicating, the school manager must focus on executing the primary task, i.e. the merger. The school manager must encourage and invite employees to reflect on the communication used to promote implementation of the process. The school manager must stress that coordinating perception and action is a value that should be part of the organisation's culture.

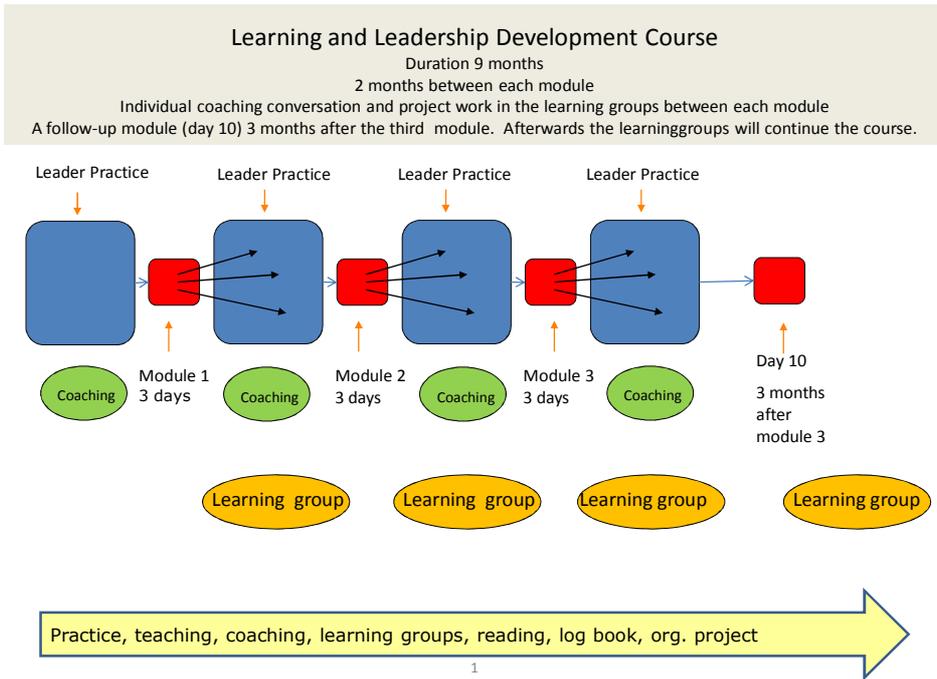
Based on the premise that we construct our social reality through language, the choice of linguistic approach is important for the results of dialogue in the merger process. We all know that the way we ask a person is reflected in the answer we get. Therefore, how we communicate with each other is important. If we focus on problem-oriented logic, we focus on inadequacy. However, if we focus on solution-oriented logic, a variety of possibilities will emerge. Wittgenstein expressed this more poetically: "It is in language that expectation and its fulfilment make contact".

On the basis of this, management development processes in the new municipalities were planned according to a recognised study approach (Appreciative Inquiry). In this way, it was possible to manage development and change processes in a constructive and forward-looking way, respecting the persons involved in the processes, and creating learning from the best past experience, so that this could be integrated in the process towards the new future ahead.

Learning-theory basis and organisation of the management development process

With our perception on action-learning and action-research-based approach to management development, you cannot learn about management in the classroom. You have to make a connection between theory and practice. This can be done by relating theories from teaching to cases or development projects from the participants' own organisations. This can also be done through individual coaching and by involving and establishing partnerships between participants in learning and sparring groups, and these participants' employees and perhaps their superiors, providing an organisational anchor which can contribute to learning for both participants and their organisations.

Management development processes in the new municipalities were planned and implemented on the basis of the following model:



Content and dynamics of management-development processes

Management-development processes were categorised in 3 three-day residential modules, each with its own theme:

Theme 1: personal leadership: mastering different roles as a manager

The introductory module ensures a thorough introduction to the basic systemic perceptions and how these are used in practice. The module concentrates on enabling individual managers to master the most important management roles and skills in various types of conversation. The module focuses on how to conduct efficient, competence-developing and performance-enhancing conversations in all aspects of a manager's working day.

Theme 2: Strategic management: mastering efficient development processes and strategic conversations

This module focuses on increased understanding of the organisation as a system of units that influence, and interact with, each other through communication. The organisation will benefit from such an understanding, because it gains insight into organisational structures and communicative processes that are constantly unfolding in any organisation. Methods are introduced and practiced to make efficient change and development processes in the organisation. These include training in team coaching skills as well as an involved and appreciative management style. Furthermore, the module focuses on the ability to carry out strategic conversations in the organisation.

Theme 3: Change management: change management in a systemic perspective

The third and last module focuses on the most recent theories and research on change management, which are converted into specific methods the manager can use in his or her

working day. The field is explored and the classic perception of change management is coupled with the systemic perspective.

Coaching conversations:

Prior to the first module - and between the subsequent modules - each participant had a two-hour individual coaching conversation. The first coaching conversation was a clarifying conversation, where the individual manager could survey the challenges his/her organisation was facing. The merging of municipalities and structural changes were also discussed. The manager's managerial skills and skills of the entire organisation were identified, and work was started on an action plan for strategic work for the following 9 to 12 months, covering the development process. The next three coaching conversations followed up the action plan.

Learning groups:

Participants were organised in learning groups that, during the development process, worked as sparring fora and laboratories for ongoing development processes in which the individual manager was involved. The residential modules regularly gave 'homework' to the learning groups, which became important for developing learning and dynamics for the participants. The learning groups met for half-day meetings after each module. Apart from supporting the managers in the learning groups, the objective of establishing learning groups was to support developments of professional and relational networks, which could connect the new municipalities, and develop a language that could express the values and practices the municipalities wanted to implement. The objective was that the networks would continue after the end of the development process.

Logbook:

The desire was to bring participants together to reflect on their own execution of management in relation to the concept of changeability. The philosophy behind this prioritisation is that the knowledge acquired very quickly becomes outdated. In other words, today managers are required to acquire new skills and knowledge quickly. Therefore, seen from a learning perspective, the challenge of the development process was that managers could achieve knowledge-acquisition skills, i.e. the manager would become good at what leads to learning.

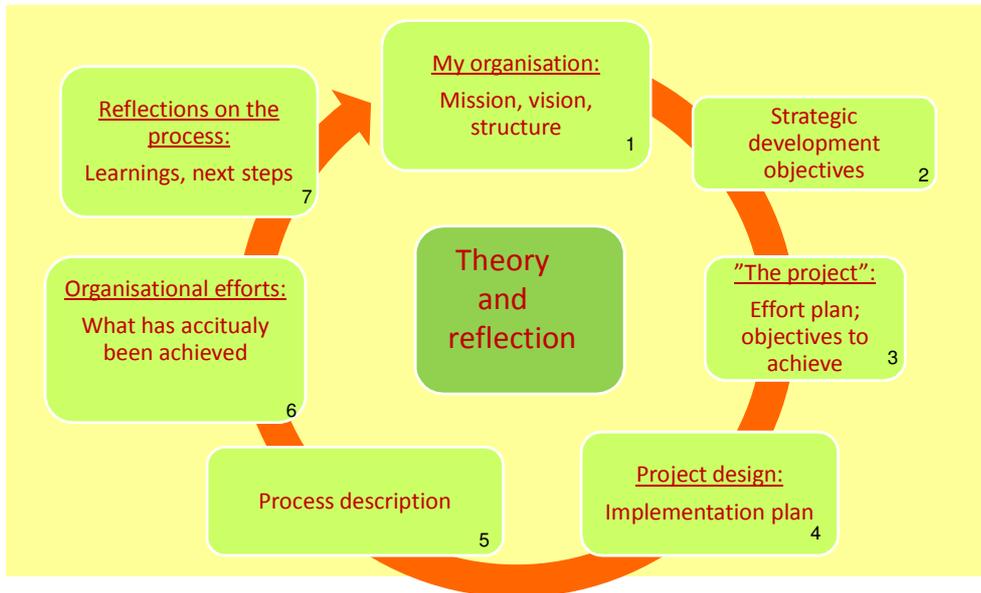
Working on a logbook should help the manager to learn and develop his/her own learning strategies. Reflections on own learning are written in the logbook. The manager reflects on the things done well and on the things to be improved.

The organisation project:

During the process each participant works on a specific development project in his/her own organisation. The project is chosen by the manager on the basis of discussions with employees from the organisation.

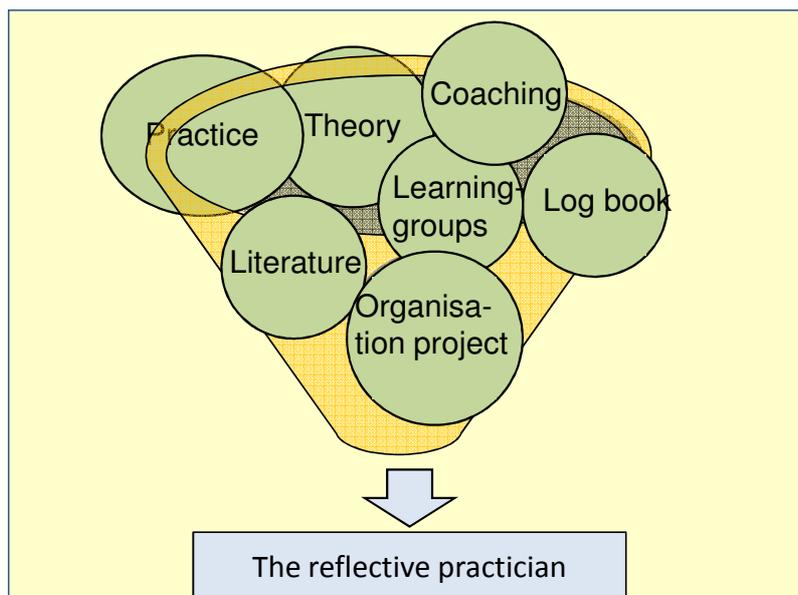
The actual project is conducted on the basis of the following model:

Action research project plan



Context and dynamics

The development process is seen as a progressive circular dynamic, in which participants interact in many different learning contexts. The challenge and focal point of the development process are constant focus and reflection on how the different learning contexts can be brought into play and interact with each other. The desired result is illustrated in the following model:



Reflections on learning results of the management development process

Evaluations of the modules, with a total of 800 managers, show that management development processes have led to remarkable results in relation to the overall objective of coordinating a perception of the connection between the overall mission/vision of municipalities and the values, from which management should be developed. Managers see themselves and their organisations as sort of pioneers, who develop new dialogues with each other, users and administrations, thereby anchoring development by the new municipalities through specific work in practice. They experience positive synergies, although the larger organisational units also pose new challenges in dealing with increased complexity. At meetings etc. where managers meet within their own or across administrative areas, people have experienced a common language and a relatively coordinated way of thinking. This has proven to be very effective. The biggest difference is probably in the way managers perceive their leadership position and their possibilities for acting as managers. Particularly, the appreciative, relational and emerging approach to conversations and processes seems to generate new opportunities. The word companionship has been mentioned as an important factor in managers' and employees' perception of what work at school is about.

Final reflections

The school manager has the floor. The school manager must be capable of having conversations. Conversations are characterised by expressing something at least two people are doing together. From a constructivist perspective this means that we create something together in conversations. In other words, the manager is no longer responsible for transforming information or for doing something to someone. Now it is more a case of creating something together – doing something with someone.

We come into existence through language, and in our conversations on the future we find the answers to what we ought to be doing in the present. Conversation is the source from which we get our perception of the world, and conversation is the source from which actions that create the future find their energy.

The big questions are: What conversations should I engage in, what should they be about, and how do I know if they help the other part?

Answers to these questions may hold some of the greatest managerial challenges of our time: Answers should no longer be found by the school manager alone. They can only be found in conversations between the school manager, employees, the administration, parents, pupils and other parties interested in having conversations with and about the school.

Managerial orientation has changed from 'knowing the answers' to developing conversations where the ability to 'be good at asking inquisitive, challenging and provocative questions' become the primary aspect in a common search for new and constructive ways forward. A paradigm shift is taking place.

Note 1

McCann, Joseph E. & Gilkey, Roderick, *Joining Forces; - Creating and Managing Successful Mergers and Acquisitions*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1988.