

CASE STUDY (10)

STRENGTHENING COMPANY IDENTITY ACROSS THREE DIFFERENT NATIONAL SITES

Consultant/case author:

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Areas:

Team building and leadership development, intercultural training, building diversity skills, conflict management.

Note: This case highlights the idea and structure of *trialoguing*, i.e. asking two different groups to share ideas about each other, and having a third group observing and dialoguing about the relationship they see unfolding before them. You can read more about *trialoguing* on my blog at: <http://bjornzekelund.wordpress.com/2013/04/15/diversity-icebreaker-and-trialoguing-why-this-word/>.

Brief

This case is based on my work with the Diversity Icebreaker in an organization operating with three sites located in three different countries. The management team, responsible for these three sites, has observed negative attitudes among the co-workers towards each other, which – they explained – were rooted in the cross-cultural differences, remote work and at the same time a high degree of interdependency between them.

Thus, the objective of the intervention was to induce climate of respect and utilization of the diversity in the organization and consolidate it across the sites. To do so, it was proposed that local workshops would be held first for each of the sites, followed by a joint gathering of co-workers from all three sites to reinforce the effects across the organization.

Action

Local workshops

Three separate local workshops were organised at each of the sites; they lasted six hours each and had the following agenda:

1. Discussion: How, when and which interaction challenges do we experience when working with the other two sites of our organization?
2. Presentation: Introduction of ideas around the concept of Values and the 'Iceberg' metaphor of culture (we all share basic assumptions, degree of unconsciousness, values that guide behaviours and trigger emotions; values are integrated in language. Values are important for, international cultural differences as well as for organizational cultures as well as for professional organizations and institutions.

3. Group exercise: Discussion of stereotypes: outside (the stereotypes the others have about us) versus inside perspectives (the stereotypes we have about ourselves); taking identity and group dynamics into account. We joked in small groups about stereotyping from inside vs. outside about a profession we all knew; e.g. economists, accountants, sales people.
4. Presentation: Communication model for cross-cultural / across-differences interaction – Mapping-Bridging-Integrating.
5. Presentation: Cultural Intelligence – a research based model of intercultural communication as an individual competence.
6. Group work: participants formulated their representations of the *ideal* actions and behaviours, which can lead to a good interaction processes across countries inside the organization (first individually, then in groups).

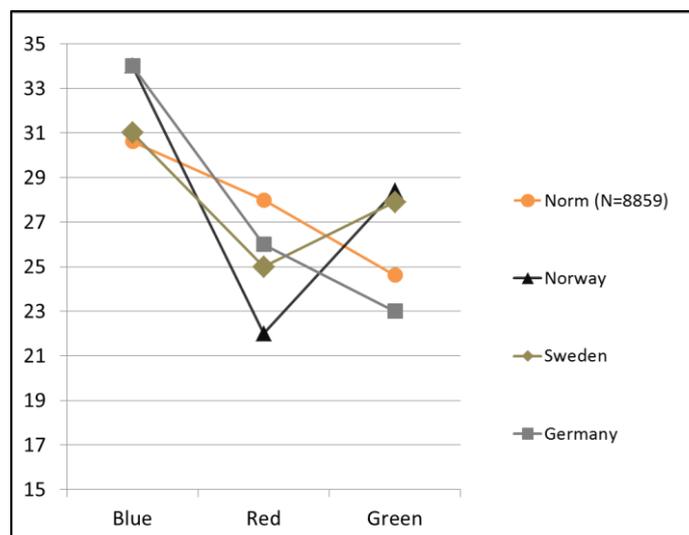
Collective gathering

Group-work results from points 1 and 6 were integrated as stimuli in a collective, full-day workshop held one month later. It had the following agenda:

The Diversity Icebreaker workshop - 1 h 30 min

The DI workshop was conducted with certain alterations to the classical scenario: diving of the participants into three colour groups was conducted first within the three national groups and in addition organized as to obtain a relatively even distribution of different colours in each of the groups. Then cross-cultural Red, Blue and Green groups were then combined of the most Red, most Blue and the most Green participants from each of the national groups. Furthermore, during the interaction process between groups in the presentations stage, I laid a strong focus on positive and negative wording in attempt to revise the stereotypes held by the groups and create a shared acceptance of this process of “revision and understanding of the meaning of Red, Blue and Green categories across the group’s real areas of activity within the organisation (e.g. how Red, Blue and Green manifests itself in every-day communication across the sites).

After the classic DI workshop, the group results for each of the nations were calculated using the Diversity Icebreaker Excel matrix and presented to the participants in relation to norm (they were not used actively during the seminar):



Dialoguing - international revision of national stereotypes - 2 hours

The structure, timing and ideas behind each of the phases of this part of the workshop:

a) Instructions.

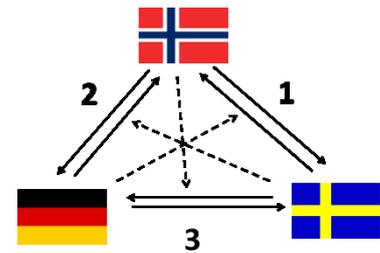
Explained by the consultant and handed out to the participants on a paper-aid describing the structure precisely.

10 minutes

b) Work in mono-coloured national groups (See the illustration to the right.)

The whole group was divided by the colours and by the nations, i.e. 9 one-colour and one-nation groups were obtained (three colours per nation). These small groups discuss the challenging experiences they had in interacting with the other national sites/describe the other two nations they work with.

15 minutes



c) Work in mono-coloured multinational groups

Three large groups were then created. Each group comprised of participants of one colour and different nations (e.g. a group of Norwegians, Germans and Swedish with Red preference working together; same for Blue and Green participants). The focus here was on how one nation perceives the other, e.g. how the German perceive the Swedes. The third group, in this example the Norwegians, were to reflect upon what they have observed in the interaction unfolding between the German and the Swedes. In their observations and reflection, the Norwegians, were asked to focus both on challenges and *smart interactive moves*.

The idea behind having the multinational groups working together in one-colour groups was to reduce the complexity of these interactions. Interaction with the people of the same, dominant preference (represented in Red, Blue or Green) is easier because the people taking part in it feel less different from each other by one dimension, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds.

Work in this phase was organised in three rounds; the participants received an overview with sequence and timing for each of the rounds:

Round 1:

1. Germans present to Norwegians
2. Norwegians present to Swedes
3. Norwegians and Swedes engage in a dialogue
4. Germans discuss among themselves what they think about the interaction they've just witnessed; Norwegians and Swedes listen to their comments
5. Norwegians and Swedes reflect on the comments from the German group and formulate learning points

Round 2:

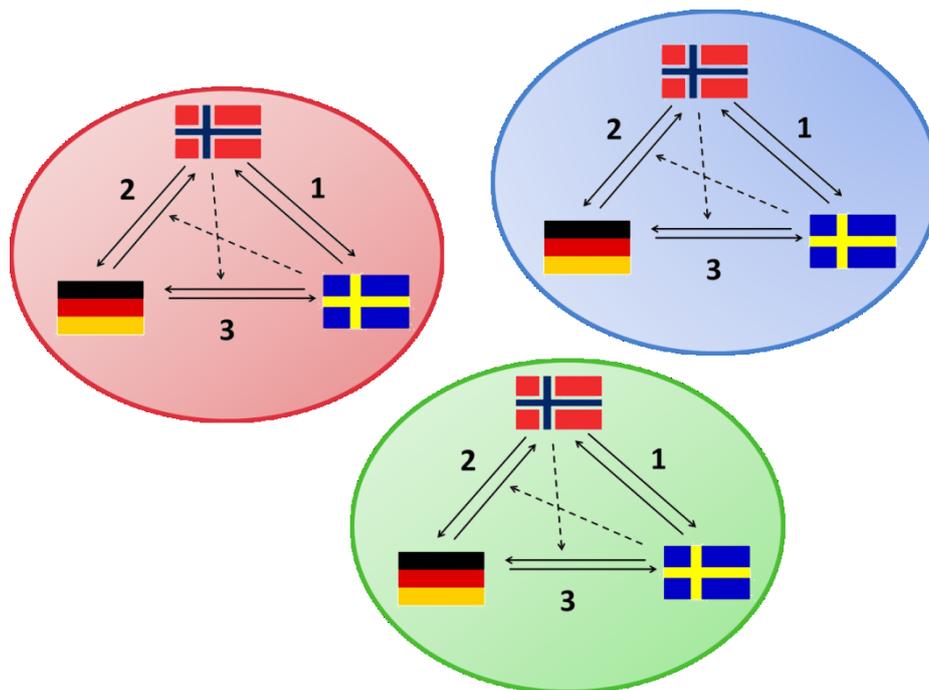
1. Germans → Swedes
2. Swedes → Germans
3. Germans and Swedes in dialogue
4. Norwegians give feedback; Germans and Swedes listen
5. Germans and Swedes formulate learning points

Round 3:

1. Norwegians → Germans
2. Germans → Norwegians
3. Norwegians and Germans in dialogue
4. Swedes give feedback; Norwegians and Germans listen
5. Norwegians and Germans formulate learning points

25 minutes per round (5 minutes for each of the turns)

The illustration below shows how the grouping of nations in colours and rounds were organised:



- d) 10 min exchange of learning in mixed groups (pre-arranged by the company's management as to reflect the operations of the organisation).

The exercise above illustrates application of the ideas from the Diversity Icebreaker in dialoguing – using the outsider's perspective on the interaction as a creative, add-on perspective.

In the beginning of this phase, I illustrated this idea by saying: "Being a good employee in a globalized organization implies being able to tell, advocate, ask, and listen – but also observe, comment, help people to better understand themselves and their interactions. This exercise will train all these components, by asking you to take on and train in these different roles."

World Café format work addressing specific challenges, mixing both colours and nationalities unsystematically

The exercise was organized in the *World Café* format and neither colours nor nationalities were used as a way of grouping the participants. Participants moved around the room and worked with a topic of their choosing.

There were 8 issues given and all were taken from the local workshop's (first exercise) outcomes, e.g. "Remote working – how to do it best?"

In addition to the topics, the following instructions were given to the participants:

Functions: At the table, please make sure that you have:

- a) a person who can document the findings well enough for a written document to be produced after the exercise;
- b) and another person who functions as a host, and who should stay at the same table all the times.

Task: You have with you the notes with ideas from the local workshops. For those of you who now are around the table:

- a) How do you understand these challenges?
- b) What are your ideas for solutions?

Write this on the flipcharts – you will present the results of your work at the end of the exercise.

There are 8 themes per table, please choose the ones you would like to work with. If there are more than 9-12 people who has chosen one set of themes at the table, split the group in 2 and work in parallel.

The work would be divided in two sessions with a coffee break between them.

Sequence:

- a) Group work Session I
- b) Coffee break – you can also use this opportunity to walk around the other tables and observe their work
- c) Group work Session II: You may change the table and add on the ideas to the work done in Session I.
- d) Presentation of the results – either by walking around and observing (if short time) or with a presentation from each group (if ample time).

Results

The results included:

- A positive atmosphere and constructive climate across the sites, during the day of the general session, but also in the following day when other activities were being worked through.
- Language to discuss a change across the cultures to discuss a change that was going to happen in the organisation.
- Management and HR representatives recommend this process other sites in their global organization.

NOTE:

In this exercise we had about 90 persons working in three trialing groups of 30 people. The openness, sharing of stereotypes and revisions, including humour and laughter were all very significant characteristics of this exercise. It implied so much noise that it was difficult to be seated in the same room when they worked in 3 groups of 30 people.

The continuity of topics from the local workshops – into subjects to be discussed in the world café themes seemed to function with both energy and relevance.

About the author:

Bjørn Z. Ekelund is a Norwegian organizational psychologist with 25 years of experience in managing small consultant companies, founder of Human Factors AS and creator as well as developer of the Diversity Icebreaker. In 2008 he was awarded with the prize “Best consultant of the year” for his international breakthrough with this concept. Read more [about Bjørn](#) and visit his [blog about Diversity Icebreaker](#).

