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Edited by Elisabeth Plum and Rushy Rashid.



IKEA

Preface

Dear Colleague!

This is a short story about five pencils who are asked to work together.

It's a simple story that can be used as the basis for discussions, and for learning about our individual prejudices and each other's differences.

We believe it is important to have the courage to point out our differences. We believe we can develop ourselves, our teamwork and our workplace through mutual honesty and curiosity. Only by acknowledging our prejudices and discussing them openly can we learn to accept and use each other's strengths to eliminate those prejudices.

We talk about diversity in the workplace. A workplace where we use each other's differences and strengths to achieve our common goals.

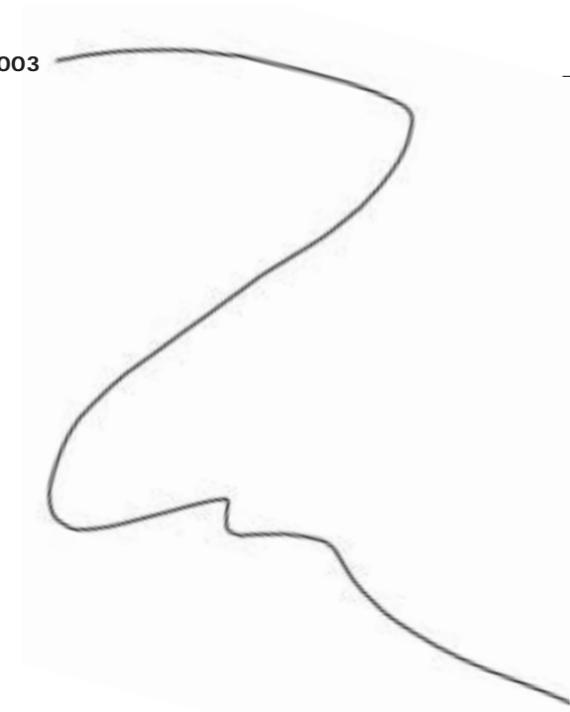
But showing consideration does not mean that we should avoid conflict: we need to discuss how

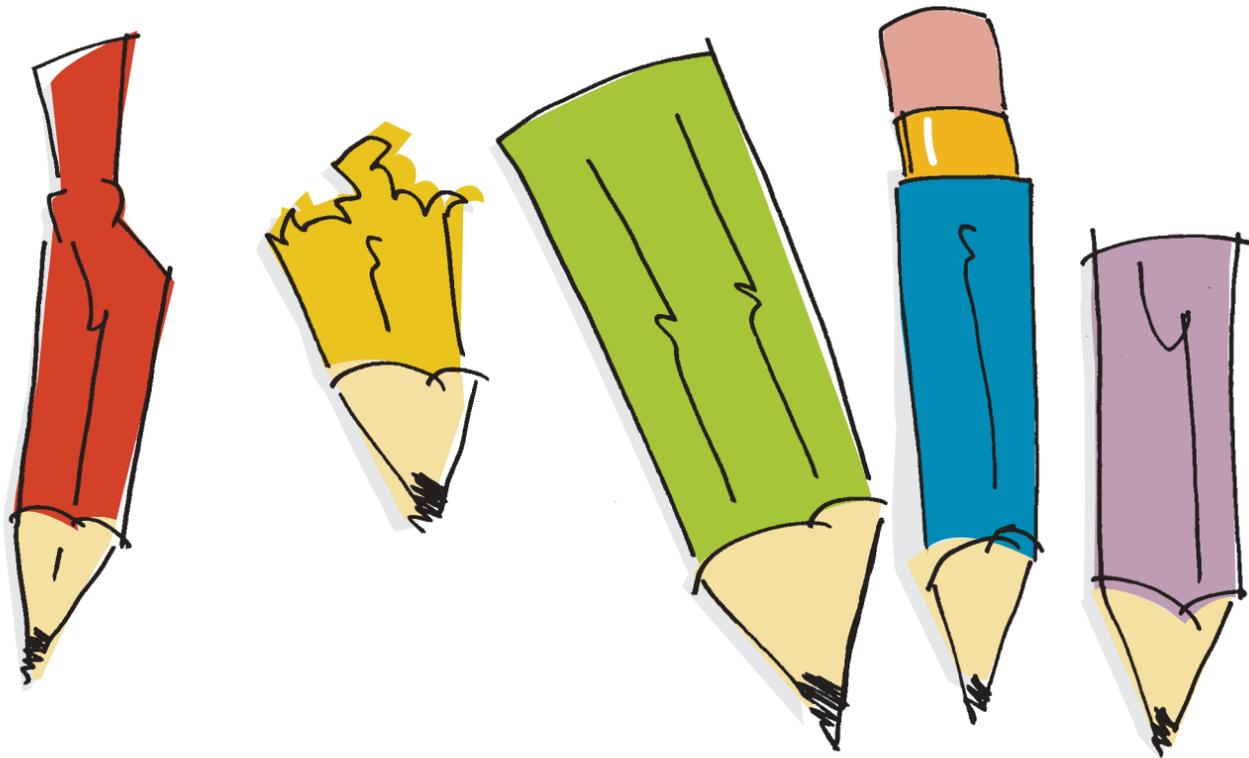
we can create better results all the time for ourselves, our customers and our company.

We hope you will be able to use the story as an introduction and preparation for IKEA's HR policy – and our perception of the strength of diversity management and our HR policy.

Enjoy!

IKEA Denmark September 2003





Once Upon a Time ...

...not so long ago, there was a furniture factory where a number of pencils worked at different desks. Some of the pencils had been at the factory for years, while others were new. There were soft pencils, thin pencils, thick pencils, hard pencils and sharp pencils.

There were pencils that drew with a fierce line, a cautious line, a wavy line and a hesitant line, and there were pencils that drew lines so straight you'd think they'd used a ruler (more often than not, these pencils turned out to be married to a ruler with whom they shared a pencil case). The pencils had been educated to different levels, were made at different factories and came in different shapes and colours.

Most of the pencils at the desks agreed with the board of directors that the furniture factory

should strive to improve all the time. This meant that the pencils would have to write and draw with ever more efficiency, creativity and quality-consciousness than now to create new and better results for the company's customers. The very same discussion was also taking place at many other factories: how can we grow so we can do even more exciting things in the future?

An Important Task

It was the work lamps who managed and distributed the flow of work and ideas at the desks. They could switch their bulbs on and off, and were therefore a vital part of the working process: any pencil knows how difficult it is to draw without a plan – and in the dark! The board of directors wanted to breathe new life into the factory. They had asked the work lamps to rack their bulbs with questions such as: “How do we make every single pencil stand out with its own unique line? How can the pencils write and draw even better together to create even better furniture? How do we make sure new pencils want to work at the desks?” But the board of directors also wanted more tangible results, namely new, best-selling products.

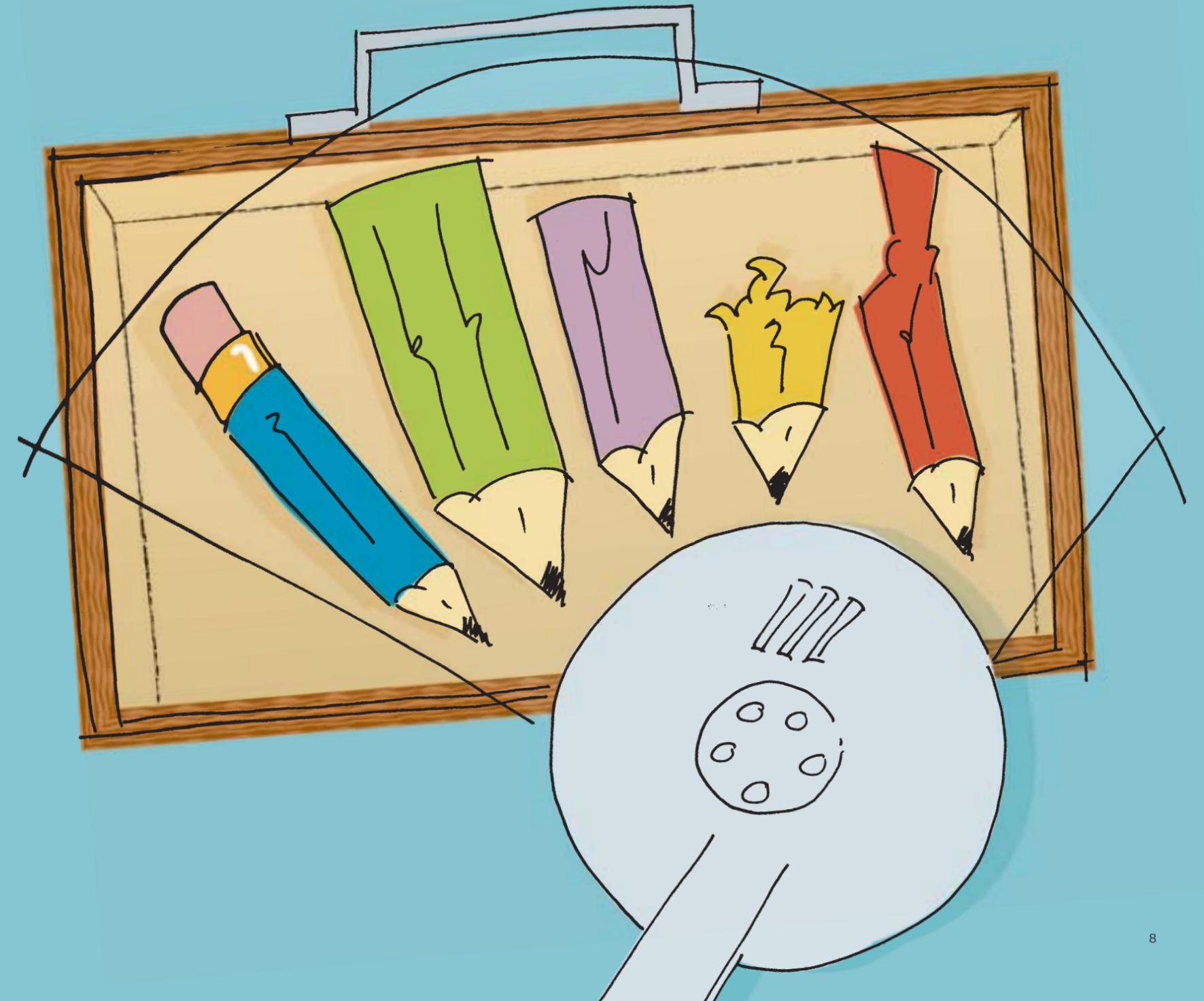
A very bright work lamp had been chosen to lead and light a desk which had been asked to develop a new chair. This particular lamp had often pointed out that better results and the development of the good working life were two sides of the same coin. Now, it would be able to prove it. The lamp had

been given a long lead to handle the task and to find the right pencils for the job.

The work lamp thought so hard that its bulb flickered. “The division of labour is too boring and too predictable here at the factory. All the pencils come and go at fixed times, and they all do pretty much the same things every day. And even though we’ve got lots of different pencils working here, it’s often the same type of pencils that work together without mixing with others”.

Suddenly the lamp lit up. Surely the solution lay in establishing a working group consisting of pencils that differed in terms of representation, personality, line, abilities and training.

Instead of sticking with the old adage that “birds of a feather stick together”, it was obvious that if you wanted to obtain new results and great ideas, then you had to mix the pencils. That way, they could learn from each other across the traditional divides and challenge each other to achieve even



better results. The aim must be to get the best out of everyone, to discover their hidden resources and achieve synergy. “Besides,” thought the lamp, “there are some pencils that hardly get a chance to speak, and others that have spent far too long doing the same thing.”

“Initially, the five pencils might think they’ve ended up in a strange group, but I’ll have to take responsibility and create a group that I believe in. I’ve already decided there has to be an unusual pencil and a pencil with a rubber – even though there aren’t many of them here at the factory yet. But I’m sure that’s about to change, and this kind of group will allow the pencils to become more tolerant and to discover each others’ skills. In the future, it will be more important than ever to respect other pencils’ special qualities. It’ll be my job to make sure they all thrive and get the best out of each other.”

The lamp had presented its idea to some of its lamp colleagues, but they had been highly sceptical. They thought it would simply create problems since the pencils were not used to working so closely with other types. But the work lamp

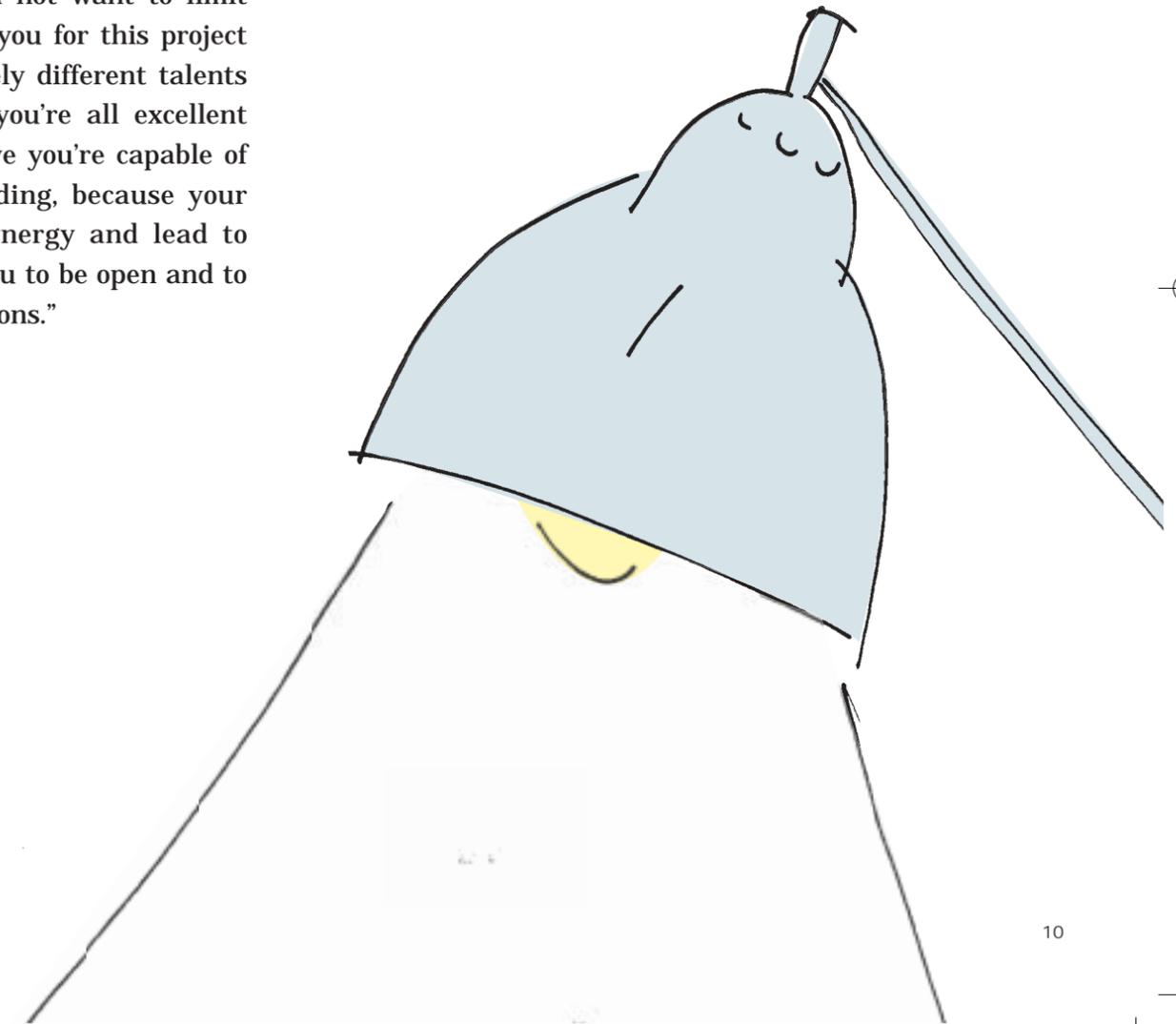
still believed in the idea of the diverse group – especially now that it was being asked to think along new, untraditional lines.

At last the day came when the work lamp could invite the five pencils to a meeting in the second drawer from the top. The lamp felt it had made five brilliant choices. It could feel the excitement in the drawer when it asked the five pencils to make themselves comfortable.

The work lamp began to explain the task ahead. They were to design a new chair which was to be used in many different situations. “I’d like to see a new and different chair which is practical and easy to mass-produce. A chair is an important product. More and more people spend more and more time sitting, so our new chair shouldn’t just be a bestseller, it should make everyday life a little better for the many people. This is a very important task with far-reaching consequences!”

The lamp, who by now had warmed to its subject, cast its light around to see whether the pencils were still paying attention. It was important for the lamp to communicate its vision and the core

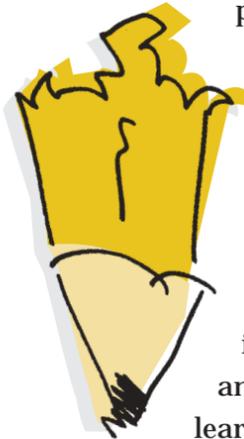
values so they would all understand the goal. Luckily, all the pencils seemed to be listening carefully. The lamp continued: “You’ve got a free hand as far as the design and materials are concerned, provided you observe the general requirements.” The lamp did not want to limit their creativity. “I’ve chosen you for this project because you all possess widely different talents and qualities, and because you’re all excellent co-workers. Together, I believe you’re capable of creating something outstanding, because your differences will generate synergy and lead to better results. It’s vital for you to be open and to accept each other’s contributions.”



The Five Pencils

The yellow pencil looked down at itself. The years had left their mark and it was a little scratched and faded. It thought back to the time when it was smooth and shiny and a full 17.5 cm long. Now it was just 8 cm long and the end was full of bite marks after years of hard work. But it had seen a lot and learned a great deal about life.

It had never trained in drawing as such, having had little interest in the study of lines or fonts. In its younger days it had been full of passion, throwing itself headlong into every new project, at times forgetting that its lead could break. The times it happened, it had been straight into the pencil sharpener and back to work. Nowadays, the yellow pencil had slowed down and used its lead sparingly. Its line was neither thick or thin, hard or soft, but something in between. Some would call it boring, but you could always count on it, and those who bothered to listen usually learned a thing or two.



While the work lamp described the task and what was expected of them, the yellow pencil wondered what its place would be in the group. “I must have been chosen for this project so the others can learn from my experience. It’s important to make use of pencils like me at times like these, when everything is changing and new kinds of pencils are joining the company.” In reality, it would rather have carried on with its usual tasks for the next couple of years before retiring. “But if the lamps think my expertise is important to this group, then so be it,” thought the yellow pencil. “But it’ll be hard to be part of a group where so many have gained a lot of fine qualifications but have no real practical experience. I’ll probably have to listen to a lot of theoretical chit-chat.”

A line as fine and delicate as that drawn by the red pencil was rare indeed. Highly sophisticated and very artistic. It had originally been trained to draw broad straight lines, but at some point it had switched to this fine and very meticulous,

but also extremely slow, style. Initially, the change had come about out of necessity because its lead broke so often after its end had become trapped in a drawer and crushed. But gradually it realised it had a special talent, and over the years it created a little niche. It had, however, taken years for the red pencil to accept its new appearance, not least when it ventured outside or met new pencils. Out of the corner of its eye, it would see others turning and twisting to look at it. At the various desks where it had worked, the other pencils were usually rather sceptical about its abilities initially, and some pencils never learned to address it in a normal way, but talked very c-l-e-a-r-l-y as if it were both deaf and dumb.

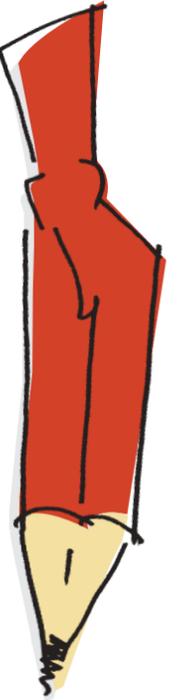
The red pencil thought it odd that the work lamp should have chosen it to work at this important desk. Surely the lamp knew that it wasn’t always reliable. “I hope I haven’t been chosen because they feel sorry for me. I hope I’ve been chosen for my special style, and because of my thoughtfulness and my ability to solve problems. I don’t have to draw all the long lines when the others can do it easily. Anyway, some of the other pencils in this group are even stranger than I am. That

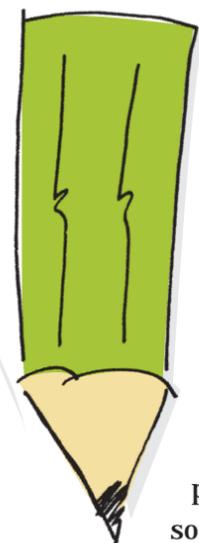
one with the rubber on the end – does it have any idea how we do things round here?”

While the work lamp talked, the green pencil drew a line on the paper in front of it. It was a long, thin and straight line that didn’t waver in the slightest. The green pencil had practised these lines over and over again until it had attained its goal: total perfection. It had been educated at the best schools and, despite its tender age, numerous awards for fine penmanship already graced its pristine pencil case. In actual fact, there was nothing in the green pencil’s life or attitude that spoke of indecision. It knew what was right and what was wrong, and saw no reason to experiment or try out new lines or forms.

The green pencil was a bit of a loner. It seldom mixed with other pencils and on the rare occasions that it did, it would meet up with other green pencils from its school days.

The green pencil was sceptical about the project. “What has the work lamp come up with this time? It often has these unrealistic ideas. It





should concentrate on following the rules and making everyday life more effective. And why does that old yellow pencil have to be a part of the group? You hear so many negative stories about this kind of thing.

I wonder if it even understands what we're talking about? I'd better keep an eye on it. There's even an obsolete pencil in the group. I wonder if this is some kind of social experiment?"

At that very moment, the work lamp was talking enthusiastically about its vision for the group; about how they were going to create great results for the company – starting with a fantastic chair. The green pencil thought to itself: "I just hope we're going to concentrate on the design task and not waste our time on drawing pretty pictures or getting to know each other." The work lamp must have chosen the green pencil because of its sense of quality and professional expertise, and now it was just a matter of getting started. Suddenly the green pencil was all excited about the thought of creating the perfect chair.

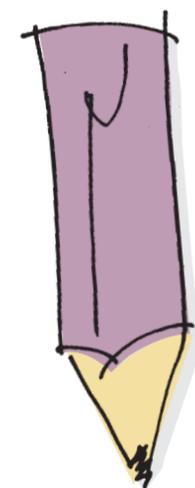
The blue pencil turned itself upside down and rubbed out a line. It had started sketching a chair while the work lamp was telling the group about the project. It was always full of ideas and would sketch one thing after another. Often, however, it would simply erase its suggestions again because it wasn't sure what was expected of it, especially when the other pencils gave it funny looks – as they often did. There were very few pencils with rubbers at the furniture factory, and it was usually seen as strange and different. It was easier to mix with other pencils with rubbers. That way, you didn't get in trouble.

The blue pencil had yet to complete its studies. You could tell from its lines that it was young and inexperienced, but there was an originality and a vitality to its work which made it quite remarkable.

"This is just the job for me," it thought. "I've already got a whole bunch of ideas as to how that chair is going to look. It'll also be nice to be part of a group where everyone is different. Maybe they'll all be more tolerant. And maybe they'll focus more on what I can do than on my rubber."

It looked around at the other pencils. "They're a bit past it, and that green one over there seems a little arrogant."

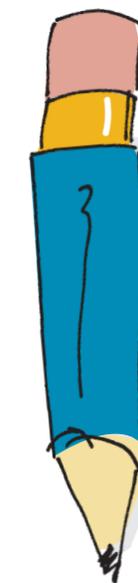
"It's going to be fun to be part of something new. Then I'll really be able to experiment," thought the purple pencil. It had recently joined the company and hadn't really settled in yet. But it wasn't really worried, since it was sure it would all work out – with a little good humour. It had, however, been anxious to meet some interesting co-workers, but it looked as if things were starting to happen. "Now I can finally get to know some people better and find out how they work around here." It took a look round the drawer. "I just hope



they're not as boring as they look. That old yellow pencil in the corner looks like it's about to fall asleep. Why do we need a little old stick like that in the group? Surely the factory could find something simple for it to do so it won't get in our way."

The work lamp was coming to the end of its speech: "It is your responsibility to draw and work together to the best

of your abilities, and it's my responsibility to support and guide you towards a fine, beautiful and exciting result. We'll get together when your first draft is ready."



A Speedy Suggestion

An awkward silence fell over the group once the five pencils had settled on the desk and, after some confusion, found a place each. No-one really knew where to start. Finally, the old yellow pencil spoke up: “Well, we’ve been entrusted with a very important task. I presume you all know that the five of us have been specially chosen for this project.” It looked around at the others. They looked anxious and ill at ease. “The company is expecting a lot of us, and we really must do our best. Personally, I’m glad the work lamp has included an old pencil like me...”

“Oh, you’re not that old,” interrupted the red pencil. “You have still a lot of good lines and sharpenings left. The most important thing is that we all contribute with what we have.” The red pencil wanted everyone to feel as comfortable as possible. Admittedly, it had also wondered why they’d pick an old fuddy-duddy like the yellow pencil when the aim was to create something new, but you had to be open-minded about these things. It, too, needed others to be tolerant.

The green pencil studied the others closely. It only knew a couple of them by appearance and had never worked with any of them. I certainly hope the work lamp picked everyone because they’re talented and hard-working, it thought. Out loud it said: “ I think it’s great that the company has chosen to focus on quality. I’m looking forward to presenting a sublime product with beautiful, straight lines.”

Having looked round the group to make sure it wasn’t interrupting anyone, the blue pencil said: “I’m glad the work lamp has included someone like me who’s not terribly experienced yet. But I have a lot of good ideas that I hope will be of use to us. I also think I can learn a lot from the rest of you.” It immediately regretted what it had said and thought to itself: “I shouldn’t have said that, now it sounds as if I’m not good enough.”

You would almost have thought the purple pencil had read the blue pencil’s mind, because at that very moment it said: “It’s not about being better,

it’s about being positive and working towards a common goal. And I think we make a great team. We don’t know each other yet, but we soon will. We’re all together in this.”

“Yes, let’s get started,” said the old yellow pencil, thinking they weren’t just there to talk. “First of all, we need to agree on a schedule and decide who does what.”

“Yuk, this sounds boring”, thought the purple pencil. “I can see the writing on the wall: that old stick wants us to talk for hours about rules and guidelines and procedures and before we know it, our creativity will have been stifled. Surely we can make a start in a simpler and more entertaining way.”

“Why don’t we start by finding out if anyone already has some idea as to what the chair should look like?” it asked. It had noticed that the blue pencil had been drawing away while the work lamp was talking. The blue pencil had erased the first sketches, but still had a few left. The purple pencil grabbed one of the sketches and held it up for the others to see. “Look how

busy the blue pencil’s already been. This really is a fancy chair.”

“Yeah, it looks quite interesting”, thought the green pencil. “It’s obviously something pencils with rubbers are good at.” It nodded and mumbled approvingly.

The red pencil was thankful for the good atmosphere at the desk, and said to the blue pencil: “To think you’ve already come up with an idea. It’s a mighty fine chair you’ve drawn. You’re certainly quick and creative.”

The old yellow pencil thought to itself that it had better refrain from criticising the ideas of the young. If the group thought it was a good chair – and they were all younger than the yellow pencil – then it was just a matter of finishing the drawing so they could show it to the work lamp. “Yes, it’s great that we’ve come so far already,” it said, “but it is only a sketch, so let’s all work together to create a working drawing.”

The blue pencil was stunned. It wasn’t used to its ideas being accepted so readily – or so quickly. It

could easily produce other sketches of chairs that were different and far more exiting. But if the others liked this chair so much, it was probably best to stick with it. The blue pencil certainly didn't want to rock the boat or be a nuisance, and it was rather happy that the others liked its idea.

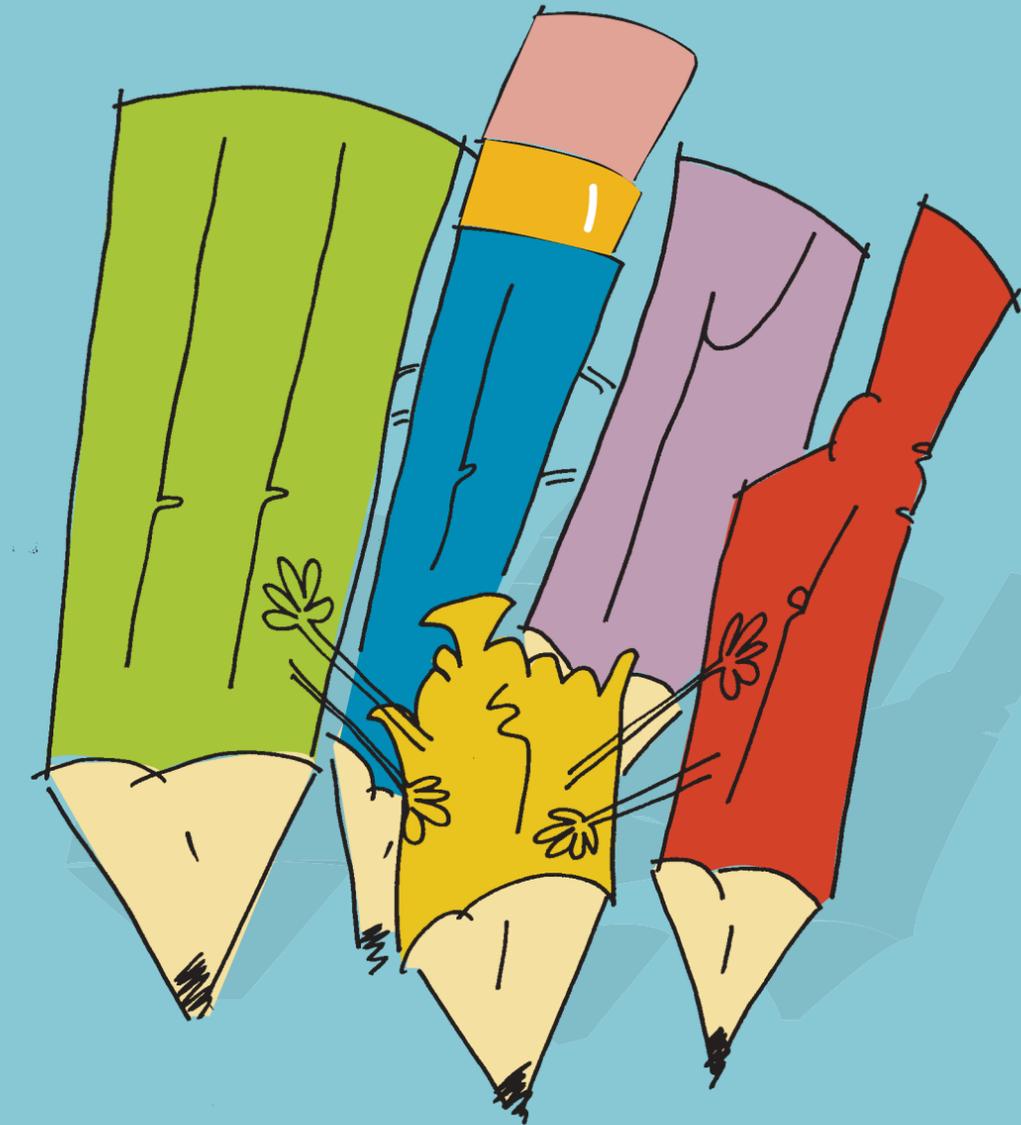
Soon, they were all busy drawing and scribbling as they discussed the fantastic new chair. Measurements needed to be worked out and suggestions for materials had to be prepared. Everyone had something to contribute. At one point, the red pencil was a little confused about a detail on the drawing which it felt might be a mistake. But it was reluctant to criticise the blue pencil's proposal, so it simply adjusted the drawing a little to something it hoped the others would like.

Alike or Different

The atmosphere at the desk was excellent. "I can't believe we're finding it so easy to work together", said the red pencil. "Especially since we were brought together because of our differences."

"Actually, I think we're quite alike," said the old yellow pencil. "We're all made of cedar with a graphite lead, and we're all hard-working and eager to produce a result."

The blue pencil was all excited: "Yes, you should never be put off by the fact that pencils look different on the outside. You might start to treat them differently, and that's no good at all." It spoke from bitter experience, having often felt like the odd one out. Time and again it had encountered misconceptions and prejudice. Like the time a knife-sharpened pencil had said: "You there, with the rubber – you prefer drawing curvy lines, don't you? And isn't there something about not being allowed to work on Tuesdays after 3 pm and having to take lots of breaks?" It often felt the other pencils at the furniture factory



thought of it not as a colleague, but as a representative for all pencils with rubbers around the world. It was sick and tired of having to deal with all the stories and myths about pencils with rubbers.

“Is the blue pencil talking about discrimination?” wondered the purple pencil. It thought back to all the discussions they’d had about pencils with rubbers at the company where it worked before. Particularly before any pencils with rubbers had been employed at the plant.

There had been some pretty hot-tempered debates that had gone off the rails, and everything seemed to have been reduced to the issue of rubber or no rubber. It didn’t want to be involved in a similar discussion again. “I think it’s fine that pencils look a little different, but surely it has nothing to do with this project” it uttered swiftly.

But the red pencil wanted a say on this important subject, too: “The bottom line is that we’re all the same. We are all equal. We must remember that, even though we obviously look different and have different abilities.”

The green pencil thought to itself that pencils did actually differ, but not in the way they were talking about. The greatest and most important difference lay in whether you were ambitious, proficient, lazy or indifferent. It had nothing to do with your outer shape or colour, it was a question of inner strength. “I believe all pencils have the same talent and the same ability to succeed – if they want to”, it said briefly and precisely, before concentrating once more on the paper in front of it. It was busy putting the finishing touches to their design and it was in the middle of a difficult line. It had done much of the work and made a huge effort because it did not want the others to leave too many vague and uneven lines.

The red pencil had completed its work and retired to a corner of the desk. It had been worried about whether its lead was going to break, and had worked hard to finish its own little section. Now it was relieved because everything had gone well.

The old yellow pencil was keeping an eye on the green pencil which had almost finished drawing the final perfect lines. The yellow pencil felt responsible for making sure the project went well, but so

far its assistance had not really been required. Everything had been so easy. But it wanted to make sure the work was completed properly. “Well, we’ve finished our proposal”, it said loudly and reached for the final drawing. “I suggest we invite the work lamp to a meeting in the drawer so we can show it what we’ve come up with.”

A Disappointing Meeting

When everyone had settled down in the drawer and the work lamp had turned on the switch, the green pencil quickly took the floor. It thought it was irritating that the old yellow pencil kept assuming the lead just because it was the eldest: “Here is our proposal for the new chair,” it said. “We hope you’re happy that we’ve been able to agree on a joint product so quickly. If I’d come up with the design personally, it would probably have looked different, but...” The green pencil was interrupted by the old yellow pencil: “I think we should stop talking and let the work lamp take a proper look at the drawing.” It looked at the other pencils which all nodded. The green pencil thought it was extremely rude of the yellow pencil to interrupt it in the middle of a sentence. It didn’t let on, however. Instead, it simply gave the old pencil a somewhat impertinent nod, aware that it had to make a good impression now the work lamp had arrived.

The work lamp looked at the drawing for a long time, shining a light on it from every angle. Then it cleared its throat and looked at the whole group. "Thank you for your contribution. I can see that you all agreed very quickly on this chair, but perhaps I didn't express myself correctly: speed was not of the essence. To be quite honest, I think this chair is boring." It looked at the five pencils to gauge their reaction. It was vital for them not to lose their enthusiasm. "Tell me how you interpreted the task and what exactly happened." The yellow pencil began by giving a short description, and one by one the others pitched in with their versions. To begin with they spoke hesitantly, but as they discovered they pretty much agreed on the sequence of events and realised that the lamp was listening carefully, they became more animated and provided more and more examples.

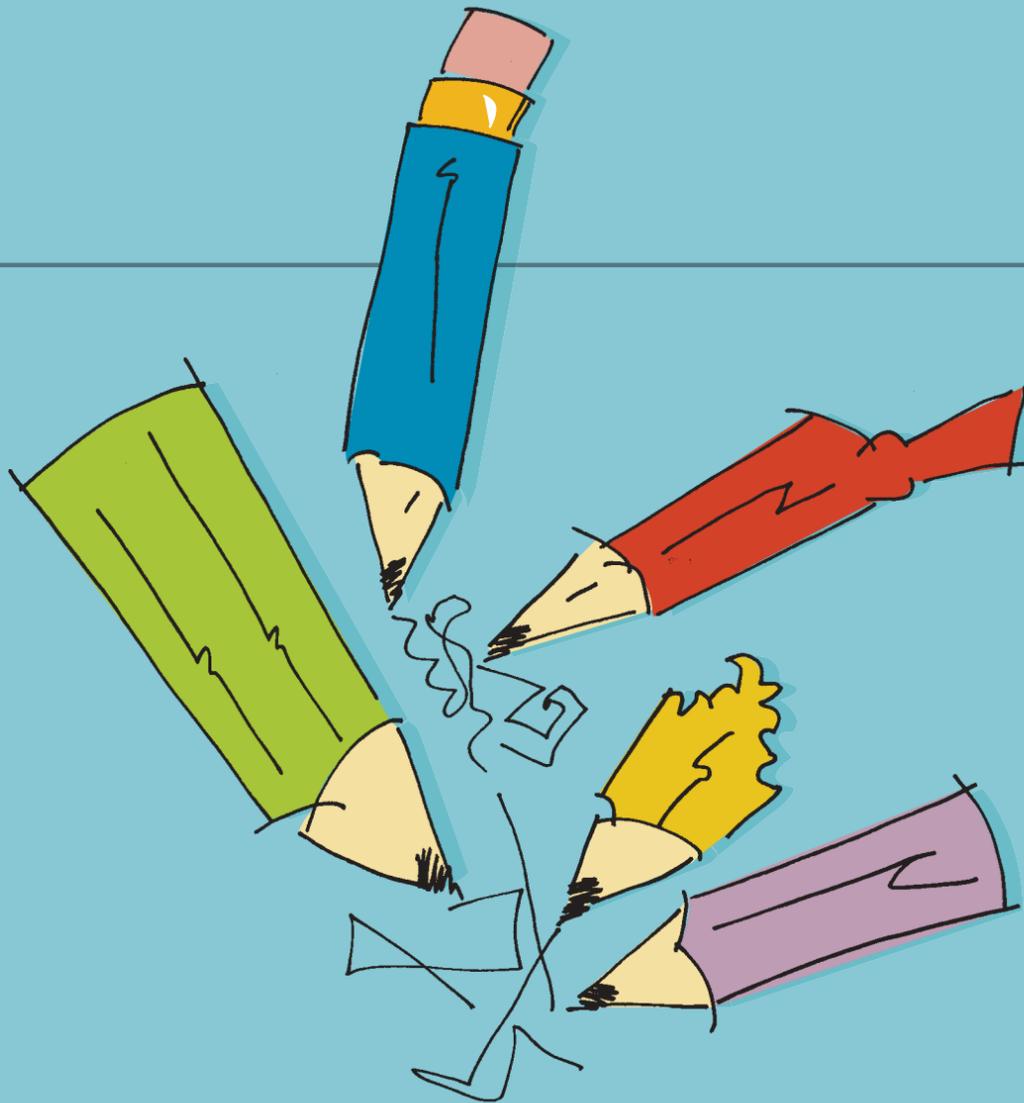
From their descriptions, the work lamp realised it had only said half of what it thought it had told them at the first meeting in the drawer. Inside its own bulb, the vision and the task had been so clear that it thought they were obvious to others, too. Now, however, it understood that it would have to explain things more clearly to the pencils in future.

"I obviously didn't make myself clear when I first told you about this task," it stated. "It sounds as if you have focused too much on your similarities and shown too much consideration towards each other. You've all deferred to the other members of the group, so we haven't seen the full extent of your talents. Instead, you've agreed on the lowest common denominator. The result is harmony, but not a great deal of synergy."

"Now I'd like all five of you to show me how unique you really are. You have different skills and different needs – and there is room for you all and a need for you all in this group. I don't want to see anyone holding back. Call me if you have any problems, but let's meet again tomorrow in any case to see how things are going."



EXCESSIVE CONSIDERATION
STIFLES CREATIVITY



Back to the Drawing Board

“Great”, thought the blue pencil, “if we’re all supposed to demonstrate our different talents, I can really show them how creative I am.” It had plenty of ideas for a new chair, and quickly chose a quiet corner where it could draw in peace. First, however, it popped into the pencil sharpener to sharpen its point so it was ready to go to work. This looked promising.

The green pencil was offended by the fact that the work lamp didn’t like their proposal. It had worked itself to the bone creating a working drawing and adjusting the uneven lines drawn by the others – all to no use. But then it remembered that it hadn’t really been all that keen on the blue pencil’s idea. It had gone along with the others because it wasn’t sure what was popular nowadays. Now, however, it had come up with a really good idea: “If the work lamp wants to see my special talents, then I’m done putting up with inferior quality. If I study the chairs drawn by the world’s best furniture designers, I’ll be able to add the perfect details to our design.” It rolled away to

find the bookcase containing books on furniture making.

The yellow pencil thought back to all the great chairs it had helped to produce over the years. Could they really come up with something new? Oh well, creativity was not its strong point. It had to find something it was good at, something it did well: it would figure out how to manage the decision-making process. This knowledge would be vital the next time they met. They could start with a round where everyone spoke in turn. Then, they could split the decision-making process into several parts, it thought and wondered whether there were other voting rules that were more suitable.

“I’d like to draw a chair the way I think it should be, using all of my senses – there’s far too much focus on heads and minds in this group,” mused the purple pencil. “What’s my favourite kind of situation, and what kind of chair would fit in?”

It lit up a cigarette – smoking helped it to think better – and started daydreaming. It was startled awake abruptly by the yellow pencil shouting: “You can’t smoke in here. Don’t you know it’s no smoking? Put out that cigarette!” Then it was the green pencil’s turn: “You smokers think you have the right to smoke anywhere, otherwise you see it as an attack on your personal freedom. How typical for you to try to sneak a smoke even though the smoking policy clearly does not allow smoking in here. Worth taking the chance, eh?” The green pencil looked sternly at the purple pencil.

Oh dear. The purple pencil had been so busy daydreaming it had completely forgotten it was at work. It knew perfectly well that smoking was only permitted in the smoking drawers and outside the factory. This wasn’t a very good start. What happened if you violated the rules of the smoking policy while you were still on your trial period?

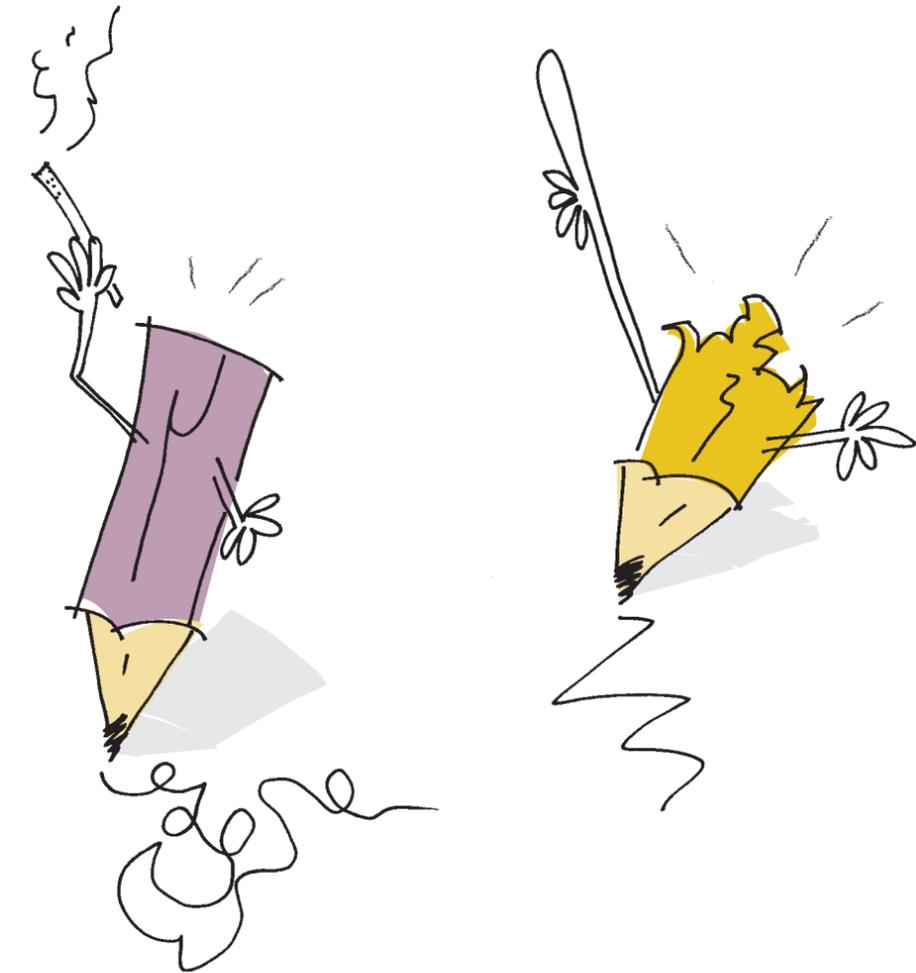
Irritated, the blue pencil looked up from its drawing. “Alright, alright, take it easy. I think you’re getting things mixed up. It’s about the smoke, not about telling smokers off and labelling them as a

certain type of pencil. The most important thing is to get rid of the smoke.”

The purple pencil breathed a sigh of relief. It thought back to the time when it had applied to join a highly creative firm. When they had discovered it was a smoker, they had refused to employ it. The purple pencil had been furious. To think you could be so narrow-minded that you didn’t want to employ good pencils just because they smoked cigarettes in their spare time. It was pure discrimination. Perhaps they wouldn’t employ stained pencils either, or pencils that mixed with pens in their spare time? Thankfully, they weren’t so square at this workplace.

“I’m sorry I lit up in here.” The purple pencil looked at the green pencil. “I think it’s only fair that I have to smoke in the smoking room.” It looked down at the blank sheet of paper in front of it. The urge to smoke had disappeared. It was time to show the others what it was capable of.

SEE MY ACTIONS
AND NOT THE PERSON YOU THINK I AM



The new Proposals

They met up in the drawer later the same day with their sketches. Once again, the yellow pencil took the floor. “I suggest we start by looking at all the proposals and then discuss what we think of them. In the end we have to agree on just one proposal, so we’ll probably have to take several votes and finish by choosing the best of three.”

“I agree that we should start by looking at all the proposals,” said the blue pencil, “but I think the rest sounds very complicated. Do we have to be so formal when there are so few of us?” It was annoyed with the old pencil for sticking to its usual slow pace.

“Let’s just look at the proposals, then we can figure out how to make a decision later. Surely it won’t take that long,” said the purple pencil, thinking that it didn’t really matter whether they picked one proposal or the other. Voting repeatedly sounded very confrontational, and it was bound to create a really bad atmosphere.

The blue pencil put its new drawings up on the wall. It went over the first, the second... the third, the fourth... and the fifth proposal, enthusiastically telling them about the ideas behind each proposal and the pros and cons in relation to the work lamp’s task description. It totally lost track of time and talked and talked... and talked.

The yellow pencil cleared its throat: “Thank you very much. Now, I think we’ve had a thorough introduction to your many proposals.” The blue pencil looked confused: “But that was just the first five drawings. I have plenty more. It’s important to see as many suggestions as possible, otherwise the same thing will happen as before and we’ll stifle our creativity.”

“Wasn’t the idea that we should each present one proposal?” asked the green pencil. It was overwhelmed by all the ideas and worried that its own first-rate proposal would disappear in the welter of suggestions. It couldn’t believe the gall of that blue rubber pencil, but maybe it was

typical for those kinds of pencils. The old yellow pencil calmly suggested they should wait to see the rest of the blue pencil’s proposals until the other pencils had presented their drawings. The yellow pencil secretly hoped the blue pencil would skip the rest of its proposals.

The red pencil proudly began to unfold its drawing. It represented a rough sketch of some kind of armchair where you had to recline halfway in the arms of a giant teddy bear. “I hope you can see what this is supposed to look like, even though the sketch isn’t as clear as your drawings.” It described its suggestion in more detail. “Here’s a chair where you can relax in comfort and never feel alone. You can use it when watching TV, reading, or talking on the phone.” The green pencil was getting tired of hearing about the other pencils’ awful suggestions. It still hadn’t had a chance to show its own drawing because the red pencil got in ahead of it. Angrily, it shouted: “How typical of you to design a chair in which you can only relax. Aren’t you taking this seriously? You have to be able to work in it, too – didn’t you listen to what the lamp said?” For once, the red pencil lost its temper: “I can’t believe how

narrow-minded and boring you are”, it sneered. “Do you think life is about nothing but work? Do you think others want their lives to be as boring as yours? Haven’t you heard that everyone’s talking about how important it is to find a balance between work and leisure. That work is supposed to be a game to get the best out of us. Our chair has to reflect all this!” The green pencil replied: “I am certainly not boring. I’m just very serious and I want to make sure that we get the right result. Our proposal must be based on first-rate professional expertise, not on airy-fairy ideas and whimsical notions.”

“Steady on you two, why don’t we take it easy?” The purple pencil couldn’t believe how seriously the others were taking this project. It felt like suggesting they all have a drink to relax and lighten the mood, but it didn’t think that would be allowed during working hours. In order to change the subject, it said instead: “Aren’t there any other impressive proposals for us to look at?”

“Yes”, said the green pencil, suddenly getting very excited. Finally, its turn had come. It slowly unrolled its proposal and put it on the desk with

an almost religious expression on its face. “I suggest that we take the very best from our leading furniture designers and combine it to come up with the most magnificent chair. Just look at this.”

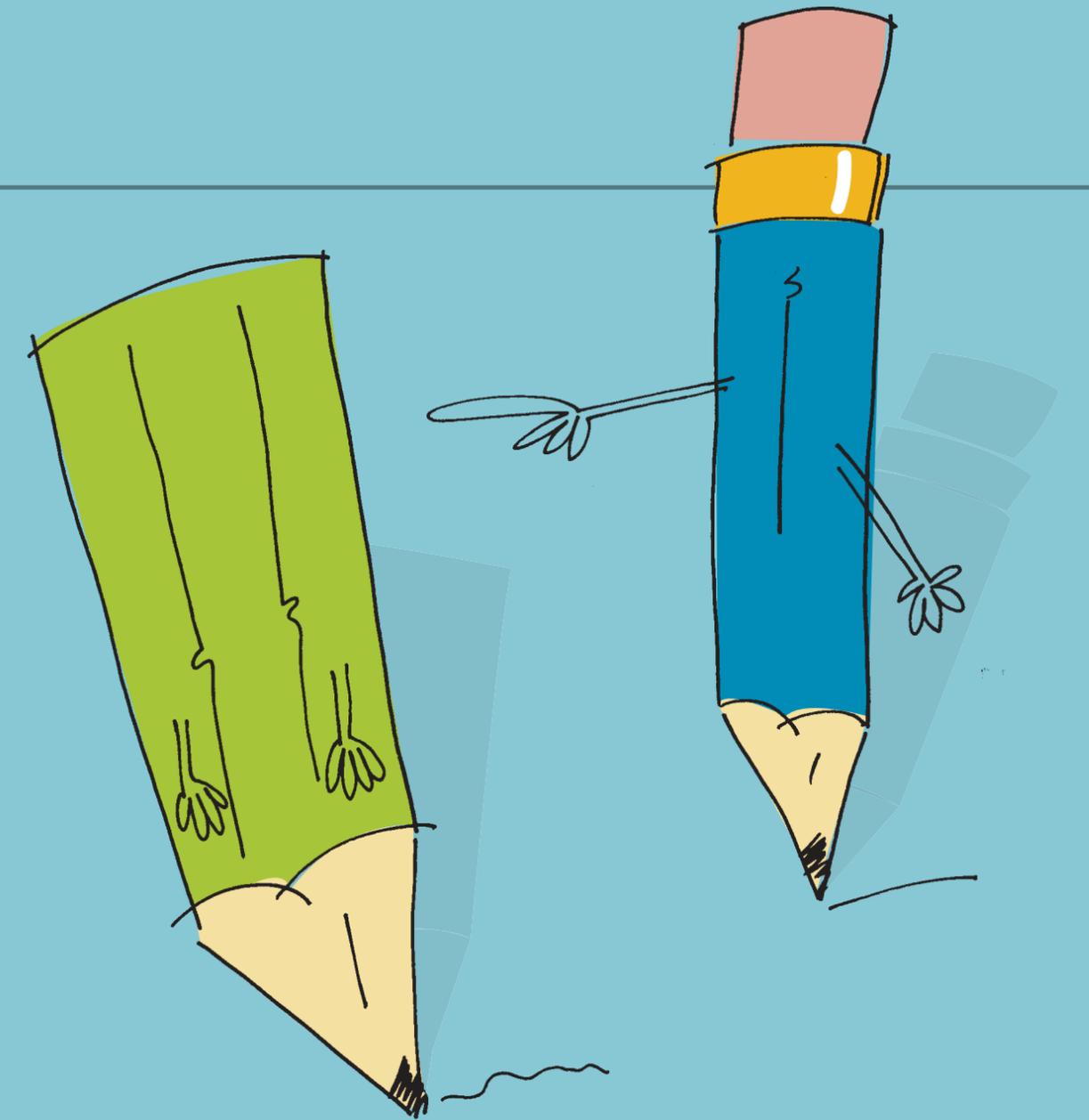
The others studied the meticulous drawing, an elegant piece of art with perfect lines and carefully drawn intricate details. “We can’t just steal from the classics,” said the blue pencil carefully. But the green pencil was unstoppable: “It’s called inspiration, and it’s used by all the leading furniture designers. Wouldn’t you agree that this is the most impeccable drawing you’ve seen today? This chair may not be as comfortable as some of the other suggestions, but it would undoubtedly win a prize for furniture design.”

Suddenly, it was all too much for the blue pencil: “Now hang on, you have to be able to sit comfortably in our chair. You don’t buy a chair just to look at it. You’re the only one who’d come up with something like that, because you’re too big and fat to sit in a normal chair.”

A Quick Remark

The room was absolutely silent. They all held their breath, shocked by the blue pencil’s remark. The old yellow pencil thought it was typical that it was the blue pencil with the rubber that had been so embarrassing. Obviously, it didn’t really fit in with the rest of them. Admittedly, however, the blue pencil had actually said something out loud that the yellow pencil dared only think. When the big green pencil had been appointed to join the group, the yellow pencil had wondered why. It doubted whether it was possible to be highly skilled or in control of anything at all when you were so sloppy about your own appearance. If the yellow pencil were to be honest, it would have to admit that it thought the green pencil looked disgusting.

The green pencil felt faint and wished it could wave a magic wand and disappear from the drawer. It was so upsetting when someone made a reference to its size. Often, it was done covertly: the other pencils would look askance at it without saying anything, only to look away quickly



and act as if nothing had happened when it caught their eyes. It had often felt that few demands had been placed on it at the desks where it had worked since the others did not think it was capable of much because of its size.

The green pencil certainly wasn't proud of its shape, but it had learned to live with it. Instead of worrying about its appearance, it increasingly tried to surround itself with beautiful things at

home in its pencil case: "If you think I'm big, then you should see some of the pencils I meet at The Big Pencils Club. Yes, I am a big pencil and so what? To be honest, I think you should mind your own business. Have I criticised you for having a rubber on top? Have I teased the yellow pencil because it's full of scratches? No. Inside, I'm just like the rest of you, and we have more important things at hand than to talk about our appearances."

IT'S NOT HOW WE LOOK
BUT WHAT'S ON THE INSIDE THAT COUNTS

The blue pencil breathed a sigh of relief. Mercifully, the green pencil hadn't lost its rag completely over the offensive remark. "I apologise for my stupid remark. It is totally irrelevant to our work whether we are fat or thin, short or tall. And you're absolutely right – we'd be better off figuring out how to choose our favourite design."

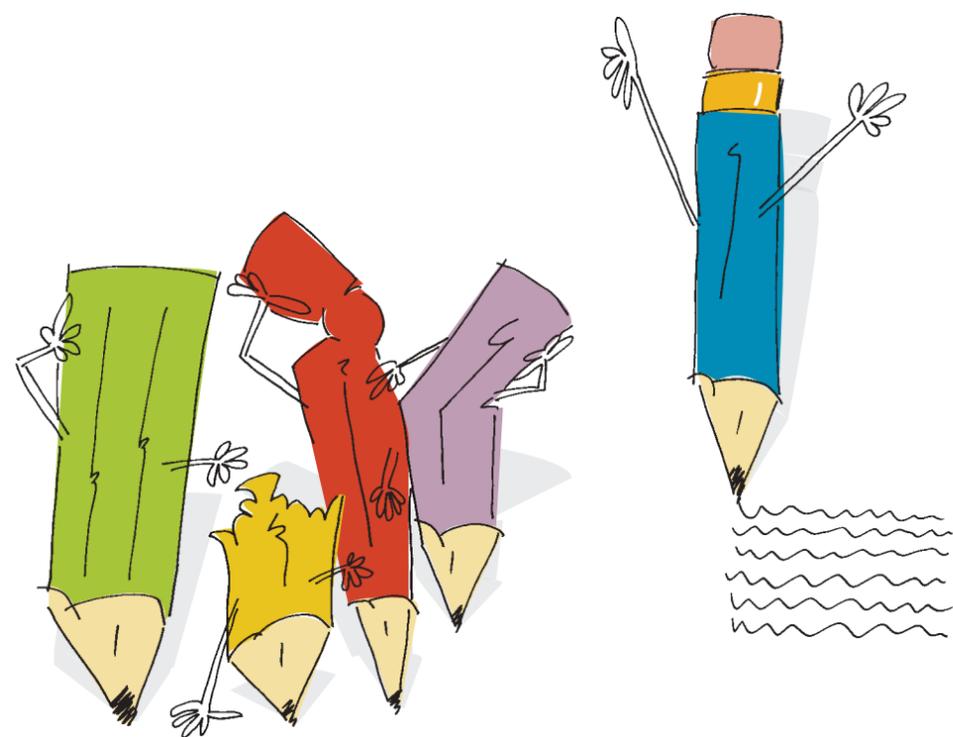
The red pencil cleared its throat, nodded and said to the green pencil: "I think your suggestion is stylish and beautiful, but have you considered that it is going to be very expensive to produce the chair using the materials you have chosen? We must remember that our company specialises in creating beautiful furniture for the many. I think we should let the exclusive companies produce furniture for the rich. Perhaps you should sell your design to one of them? You could earn some money and maybe even win a prize." This suggestion gave the green pencil something new to think about. The red pencil was right – the idea was simply too exclusive and the price would be far too prohibitive. The chair wouldn't sell very well at all. Carefully, it rolled up its drawing.

Different Differences?

The blue pencil eyed a chance to present its other ideas. It began putting more drawings up on the wall. The green pencil and the old yellow pencil looked at each other. Were they thinking the same thing? The old yellow pencil was getting rather tired of the blue pencil with the rubber. Had it no idea how to behave at all? It was totally uninhibited. It could at least try to fit in with the way things were done here at the company.

"I was looking forward to seeing more of your suggestions", said the green pencil sarcastically, "we have almost nothing to choose from". The blue pencil, still busy putting up drawings, turned around and smiled happily at the green pencil. Its smile froze, however, when it saw that the green pencil did not seem to mean what it had just said.

The red pencil came to rescue: "You are so rude. I bet you wouldn't be so critical and sarcastic if it were another kind of pencil. I actually think we ought to listen more carefully to our rubber



pencil here. It has come up with some very valuable contributions and it is far more creative than the rest of us. That's what comes from having a rubber and being a part of the rubber pencil crowd. Just look at the shiny gold band that keeps the rubber in place. In future, this is the kind of pencil we can come to for inspiration and good ideas."

The blue pencil felt like it was at the mercy of a whirlwind, tossed around between personal issues and something entirely different. It had no idea how to react. The strangest thing was that it didn't know what was worse: the peculiar but obviously hostile behaviour of the green pencil and the old yellow pencil, or the excessively affable manner of the red pencil. It turned towards the

red pencil which, after all, was doing its best to be friendly: "It's very kind of you to praise my talents, but I'm really not all that different just because I have a rubber. And not all pencils with rubbers are particularly creative."

The purple pencil, which had been a little distracted, suddenly sprang to life: "Listen, you're

SARCASM CUTS DEEPER
THAN YOU THINK

the only one with a rubber in this group, so of course you're different from the rest of us – but don't worry, that's OK."

The blue pencil was about to jump out of its sleeve. "Do you think all pencils with rubbers are identical?! We're just as different as the rest of you. It's the same thing every time: people only

see my rubber and not the rest of me.” It almost shouted the last sentence across the entire factory. In the deep silence that followed, the blue pencil regretted shouting so loudly, but it had been grappling with these ideas for a long time now. “I know what it’s like,” said the red pencil very softly. “Others judge me by my otherness. But you only have to visit the Association for Crushed Pencils once to see how different we all are.”

“Yes,” said the green pencil, “my size often means that people lump me with all the other round pencils, as somebody who’s jolly but has a weak character. Sometimes I begin to act the way they expect me to – just to be noticed.”

“I’m just popping out to the big pencil sharpener”. The blue pencil needed to get away from all the attention. It needed time to gather its thoughts.

EXCESSIVE SYMPATHY
CAN BE AS HURTFUL AS REJECTION

From Security to...

When the blue pencil returned to the group it was clear there were still problems, but the discussion had turned to something else. The old yellow pencil was in the middle of making a suggestion: “...so I suggest you leave it to me to decide how we are going to organise the rest of the process. After all, I’m the one who’s been here longest.”

The purple pencil protested: “There are five of us involved in this project, and nobody has been chosen as the leader of this group. Not even you, even though you’re the oldest.” With increasing irritation, it had listened to the old yellow pencil’s long and systematic description of decision-making procedures and voting rules and thought: What an old fuddy-duddy, it’s way behind the times!

The green pencil was equally annoyed and thought: That old Viking no. 2 needn’t think it can decide everything just because it’s been around since the time of quill pens. It hadn’t even been trained in this field. Out loud it said: “Lots

of people may have used a Viking like you when they went to school, but that does not automatically make you a better pencil than the rest of us. You need to acknowledge technical competence instead of being so pig-headed and obsessed with your own systems.”

The old yellow pencil was shocked. It didn’t understand their hostility, and found it difficult to see how things could be done differently. It wanted desperately to avoid chaos and assumed the others felt the same way. Why did these youngsters always refuse to listen to the voice of experience? They would rather rush around with their unrealistic ideas and their lead too far out in front. Them and their theoretical training...

The yellow pencil withdrew slightly. This teamwork stuff was difficult. It thought back to the time when there were only two types of pencils at the company – yellow and dark red. Things had been far easier then. There had been a clear division of labour, with the yellow pencils taking care

of the overall design and the important decisions. They talked to the lamps and to each other, and decided how things should be. The dark red pencils took care of everything else, including the working drawings and any other work which did not require the special knowledge and strength of the yellow pencils. And when a new yellow pencil came to the company, there was never any doubt about its place: it was trained to do the same work as the other yellow pencils. Similarly, when a dark red pencil was employed, it performed the same duties as the other dark red pencils.

The yellow pencils and the dark red pencils had been happy with the way their duties were divided. It had felt natural. Admittedly, some of the dark red pencils had once demanded they be allowed to perform the same duties as the yellow pencils – particularly tasks which had to be agreed with the work lamps. The old yellow pencil thought this was very strange; it was not the kind of thing that had happened before.

Over the last few years, everything had changed. Suddenly, there were lots of new types of pencils

WERE THE GOOD OLD DAYS
REALLY ALL THAT GOOD?

you had to consider. The worst part was that the new pencils thought everyone was capable of doing everything, and with the right education and the right lines there was no need for a fixed division of labour between the pencils. Phew, it was a good thing that its time as an active pencil would soon come to an end. Its point felt dull and it went off to freshen up in the pencil sharpener.

All was quiet when the yellow pencil returned to the desk. It would seem they were still stuck. They had to solve their differences – soon, the work lamp would come to inspect their results. Suddenly, the purple pencil broke the silence: “Listen, I think we’re far too different to be able to work together on this project. It’s a waste to spend so much time arguing. Working together should be fun! Why should we suffer just because the work lamp wants to test some bright new notion that differences create synergy? I think we should tell the work lamp to its face that this can’t be done.”

The purple pencil came under attack from both the red and the yellow pencil – even the green pencil, which had once been the most sceptical of

them all. The red pencil felt slighted: “We’ve been entrusted with an important task which must be solved, and we can’t just give up halfway! It takes time to learn to work together in such a diverse group.”

“Yes”, said the green pencil, looking directly at the purple pencil, “we weren’t put together just to have fun all the time. If you just give up when the going gets tough, you’ll never feel the joy and satisfaction that come from a job well done – especially when faced with a tough challenge.” The purple pencil ducked a little and remembered that it hadn’t really contributed a great deal. Admittedly, it had made a sketch of a chair, but since it was a little sloppy as usual, it hadn’t insisted on sharing it with the others.

It felt it played an important role when it made sure the atmosphere was good and that everyone was having fun. But it seldom had to struggle, and because its lead was rarely put to use, its trips to the pencil sharpener were few and far between. Out loud it said: “Okay, let’s sharpen our points and start drawing so we’re ready with a new proposal when the lamp comes rushing in.”

IT TAKES TIME TO LEARN
TO WORK TOGETHER

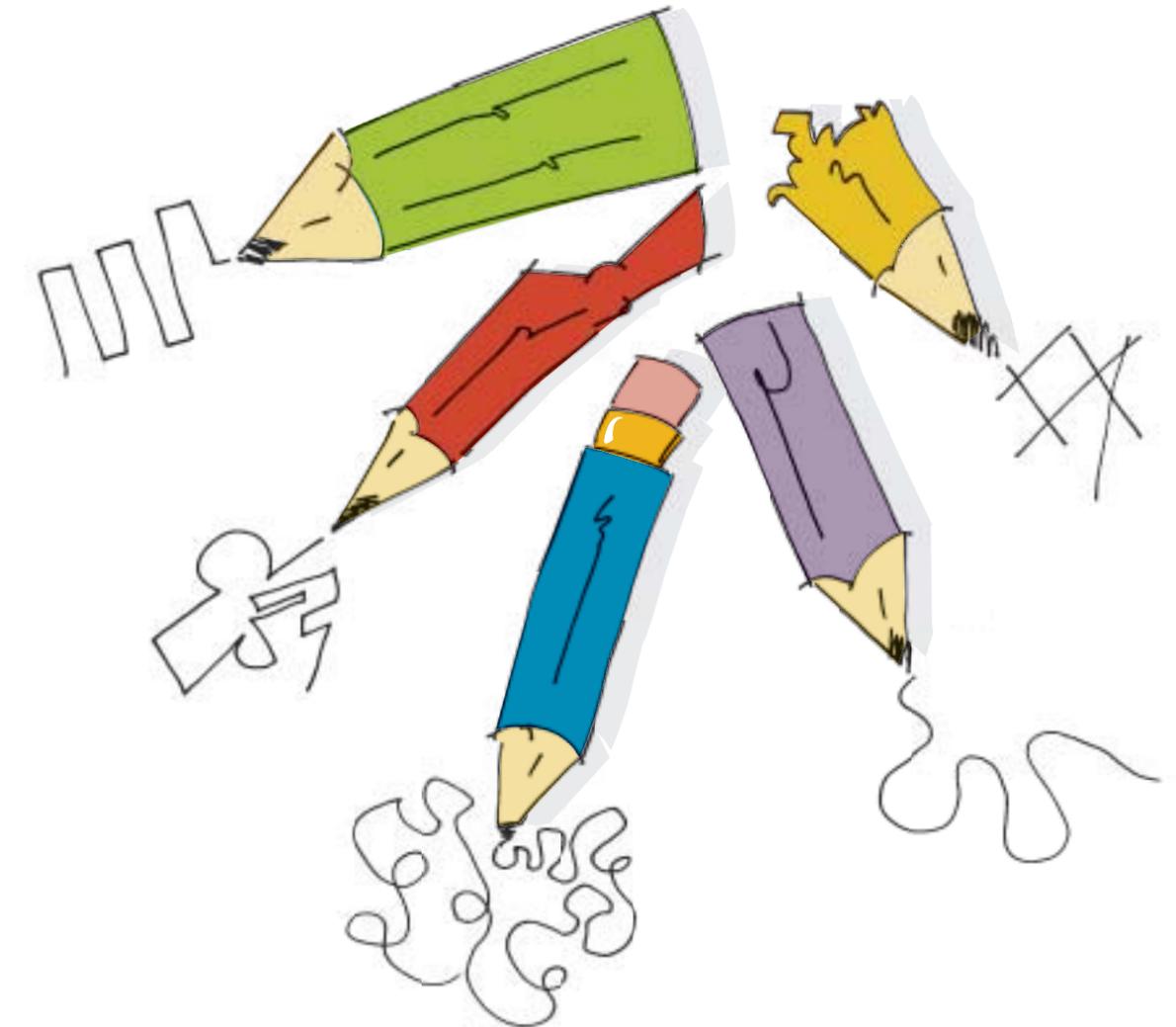
Back on Track

At that very moment, the light from the work lamp hit the desk and the five pencils. The lamp asked for a status report. The green pencil started: “We don’t have a new proposal yet because... well, we’ve actually reached a deadlock and we can’t agree on anything.”

“Okay, tell me what’s been going on.” This time progress was slow: every time one of them started to speak and give its own version of events, it became clear the others saw things differently, especially when it came to apportioning blame. Some kept shaking their heads, and almost no one was allowed to finish their explanation without being interrupted by the others.

The work lamp spoke up: “I’m not interested in whose fault it is. Of course you have different opinions, but you’ll have to listen to the others – even if you don’t agree with what they say. Once we understand each other’s points of view, it’ll be easier to figure out how you can get out of this mess and start to work together.”

This time they all found the space to talk, and no-one interrupted. When the work lamp felt sufficient light had been shed on the situation, it said: “The last time we spoke the problem was that you focused too much on your similarities and on the things you could agree on. This time, its sounds



as if you've gone to the opposite extreme and focused purely on the differences between you. You have all insisted on having your own way. You have neither listened to each other nor tried to work together. You have rejected each other's ideas, and fought to find a leader and to decide whose way was the right way." The pencils mumbled and laughed a little. The work lamp had a point. The red pencil nodded slowly: "I think we've argued too much, and there have been too many personal attacks." It looked at the green pencil.

The work lamp quickly continued: "I appreciate that you needed to express yourselves individually having initially inhibited each other for the sake of consensus and harmony. But it's not a

matter of A or B – ideally, it should be a question of A and B. It's a matter of everyone using their special skills, while helping the others to do their very best. Now, I'm asking you once again to show what you're all capable of – by creating a joint product. Remember, you're all alike and different at the same time."

To be on the safe side, the lamp asked: "Are you all clear about what you're doing?" They all nodded eagerly. The lamp sensed a kind of restlessness, but hoped it was because they were impatient to get started. Perhaps there was also an imperceptible sense of relief that the lamp had acknowledged their co-operation difficulties without losing its composure when it heard about the lack of results.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO BE THE SAME AND DIFFERENT
AT THE SAME TIME

A Joint Suggestion

When they were alone again, the old yellow pencil spoke: "I have an idea as to how we can continue our work. If you're prepared to listen, that is?" "If you can keep it short", said the green pencil and the whole group started laughing. The old pencil smiled and continued: "I suggest we start all over again and divide the work between us so we can all leave our mark on the chair without interfering with anyone else's work. That way, it'll really be a joint effort."

"That's a good idea. Nobody will be held back by anyone else, and nobody will argue", said the blue pencil. It was eager to develop its ideas without having them quashed by the others. "That sounds fair", said the green pencil. It was looking forward to working in peace to the high standards of which it was so proud. The purple pencil was also happy with the idea: "Since the design is meant to be innovative, why don't we agree that the rest of you will design a leg each? Then I can draw the seat." It had a great idea for an attractive seat which it had seen on one of the blue pencil's

drawings. It shouldn't be too hard to complete the design.

They decided to glue the five contributions together to create one big drawing once they were ready. It was a relief to be able to see an end to the deadlock. All five went to work, and soon the room was quiet. Scribbling and scratching on paper, and the occasional quiet whistling, were the only sounds.

All of a sudden, the purple pencil was unsure as to what material they had agreed on. "I probably wasn't listening to what was being said," it thought and kept on drawing. It was loath to break the silence and show itself up. Instead, it presumed they had agreed to use steel since that was the last material they had talked about.

At the appointed time, they all appeared with their contributions. Even the purple pencil had managed to finish on time and was terribly proud of itself. The five drawings were taped together.

First the right front leg and then the left, then the right back leg followed by the left back leg, and finally the seat. It was an unforgettable moment. The five pencils stared at the result in complete disbelief. Then they all began to speak at once. “But didn’t we just agree...” “Didn’t we agree that...” “I’m sure we agreed that...” They had all had a very clear picture in their heads of the type of chair they were aiming for – but they were five very different chairs!

Someone started to giggle and soon they were all laughing. The purple pencil laughed so hard it started going red. The chair looked ridiculous – what could they have been thinking of! They had completely forgotten to agree on measurements, type and materials.

The blue pencil stood up and took the drawing down, turned itself upside down and rubbed until all the lines were gone. No-one tried to stop it – the drawing was just too embarrassing. Nobody, however, criticised the yellow pencil or the purple pencil for their suggestions on how to approach the work, since they had all readily accepted their ideas without thinking. The green pencil hoped

the drawing had not been seen by anyone at the other desks, but at the same time it just couldn’t stop laughing. Together with the purple pencil, it began to parody the strange sales arguments the marketing pencils would have to come up with to sell the advantages of their monstrosity.

Their mutual blunder had brought them closer, and they were no longer so worried about making fools of themselves. Instead, they were all eager to come up with a new proposal as quickly as possible. They must have made every possible mistake by now and be ready to come up with a valid suggestion.

At that very moment, the work lamp came past the desk on its way back from a meeting with the other lamps. The sound of laughter and loud voices made it curious, so it stuck its light bulb over the table to see what was going on. “What’s happening here? Are you enjoying the work all of a sudden?” it asked.

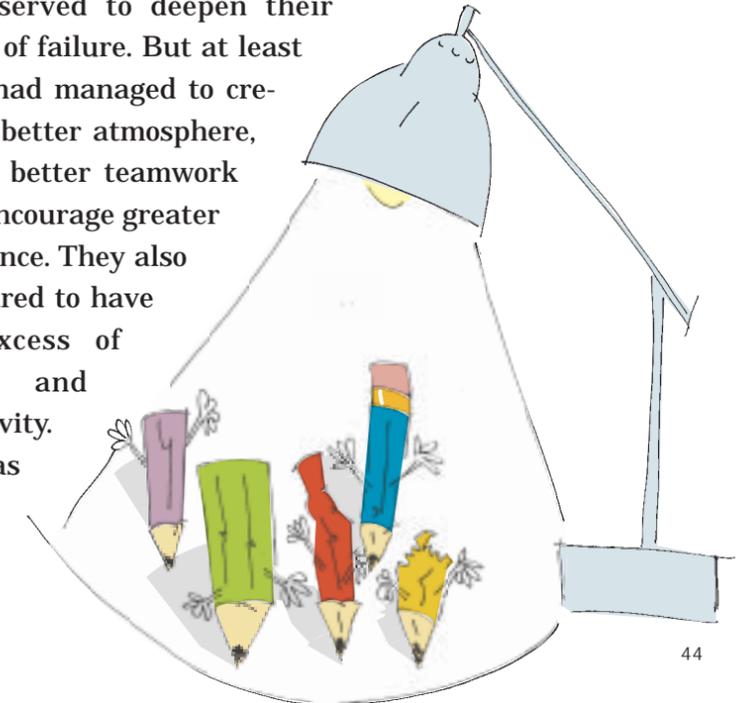
The green pencil cleared its throat: “Yes, we staged a little experiment and I think I speak for everyone when I say that we’ve learned a lot.” The

lamp tried to elicit further information, but none of the five pencils was very forthcoming. “Could you tell me what you’ve learned, then?” it asked.

The red pencil ventured to speak: “We have tried three different approaches and none of them were any good.” “Three?” asked the purple pencil, afraid once again that it hadn’t really been listening. The red pencil continued: “Yes, first we aimed for what the lamp called the lowest common denominator. That was quite pleasant, but no-one had a chance to demonstrate their unique skills or show what they were really capable of because we were all far too accommodating. Next, we split up and did our own thing. But when we met up again, it was obvious that we’d gone off in different directions. We all stuck to our guns and wanted the rest of the group to respect our taste. All we could see were the differences, and we ended up arguing. Finally, we imposed a strict division of labour. We didn’t really work together at all, we simply put together our individual contributions.”

The work lamp listened in disbelief. “You mean you simply glued together your initial ideas?” it

asked. “Eh, not exactly,” said the green pencil looking down at the desk, “we started all over with new suggestions.” The lamp was stunned. They had simply rejected a huge number of ideas without so much as a second glance. Were they totally incapable of spotting the necessary resources? The lamp was about to blow a fuse – had they completely misunderstood what this task was all about? Then it remembered that it had put a lot of effort into getting them to make friends again last time they met. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to ask them to describe their problems in detail – it had only served to deepen their sense of failure. But at least they had managed to create a better atmosphere, foster better teamwork and encourage greater tolerance. They also appeared to have an excess of ideas and creativity. It was up to



the lamp to help them mobilise their resources and get back on track.

The work lamp checked to make sure its light was shining on the whole group before it said: “It seems I still have a lot to learn about managing a diverse workplace. I’ll stay with you until you’ve made a good start on the project. Let’s start by reminding ourselves what the task is all about.” The lamp repeated its vision for the new bestseller and the chairs’ importance for a good everyday life for the many. It also went back over the product-related demands to avoid any possible doubt.

“You’ve already drawn a lot of suggestions, so there must be plenty of ideas around. Let’s put all the drawings up on the wall.” At long last, the blue pencil would be able to present the rest of its many proposals. The yellow pencil hadn’t drawn any sketches, but it tried to hide this by helping the blue pencil hang up its drawings. The lamp asked them to walk around and look at all the drawings. “Try to think about each other’s ideas and points of view. Don’t criticise or focus on shortcomings, flaws and obstacles. Let’s see if we can find some useful ideas.”

Fourth Time Lucky

They all studied the different drawings while discussing the finer details and more or less creative ways of combining the different proposals. After some time, the red pencil came across an exciting sketch featuring the blue pencil’s unique style. The red pencil couldn’t figure out what material the chair was supposed to be made of, however, and asked for clarification. Excitedly, the blue pencil explained that it was a completely new type of material that combined the advantages of the best materials on the market. “It’s durable, flexible and comfortable to touch.” Little by little, the others became interested in the exciting new material and they all agreed to try it. It wasn’t just innovative, it was also very cheap.

“So we can remove all the proposals for which this material is not suitable.” The work lamp tried to jolly things along so they could move on to the next important decision. They went through all the drawings in order to pick out anything they could use. “What does this sketch represent? It is upside down?” The yellow pencil was pointing to

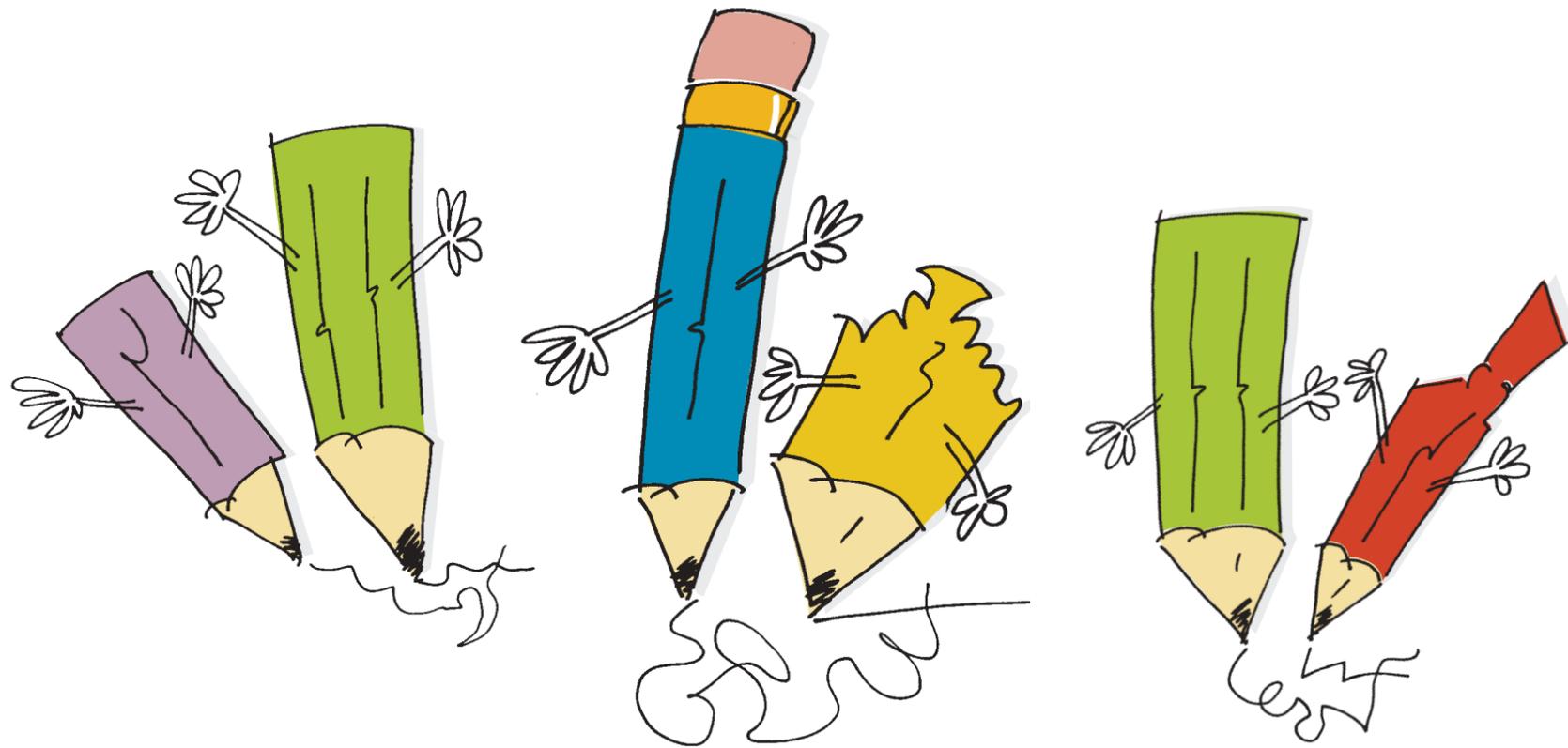
a small piece of paper featuring several sketches. The purple pencil approached it warily – it wasn’t proud of its solitary contribution. As per usual, the artwork was shoddy. “Well, I’ve tried to draw something that will double as an arm chair, an office chair and a dining chair depending on which way you turn it. Good, eh? But I don’t know if it’ll work in practice.” No-one had ever seen anything like it, but it was a shrewd idea. Imagine having a chair like that at home in your pencil case!

The five pencils gathered round the drawing which, it was true, was just a rough sketch. The green pencil recollected an amusing detail from one of the furniture classics which would be ideal for the arm rests. The red pencil had some ideas as to how the chair could be turned without too much effort while still being safe to sit in. The blue pencil kept comparing their ideas with what was possible with the new material. The old yellow pencil turned out to know a great deal about different production processes, and it voiced a number of objections and questions that none of the others had thought of. Occasionally, the purple pencil and the blue pencil would moan

about its tendency to pour cold water on their ideas, but the work lamp rightly reminded them that it was very important that the chair could be mass-produced.

The blue pencil suddenly remembered that it originally thought it had been included in the group only so the others could learn greater tolerance towards blue pencils. But it actually felt itself becoming more tolerant, too. Right now, for instance, it actually felt that even the annoying old yellow pencil had its good sides.

CLEVER PEOPLE LEARN
BY THEIR MISTAKES



The green pencil was finding it difficult to accept that the chair was to be made of this strange material. "I'm not convinced everyone will like this rough surface." Its remark led to a new discussion, and a couple of the others began to doubt the choice of material. But then the blue pencil came up with yet another good idea: they could produce a range of different covers. This might even generate additional sales revenues – it could easily become fashionable for customers to change their chair covers according to their mood or the season.

The work lamp had to speak up to be heard: "I'll leave it up to you to finish the design work. You've become very good at listening and getting the best out of each other even though you have so many different things to offer. When you're done, simply pass the working drawing and the specifications to the design department so they can produce a full-size model of the chair for tomorrow. Then we'll show it to the other pencils!"

On its way home, the red pencil thought to itself that it was good there were so many different kinds of pencils in the group. It thought back to

the time when it had been part of a special project for crushed and broken pencils. It had worked at a desk which was known for its social responsibility. The problem was that with all those special measures and considerations, it had felt that it was only ever thought of as a defective pencil. It was far easier to show what you were capable of in this chair project.

The following day all five pencils turned out for the presentation at the desk – freshly sharpened and very proud. A model of the chair revolved slowly on a pedestal in the centre of the desk. The five pencils all agreed it was the most beautiful and exciting chair they had ever seen.

"Great! Cool! Excellent!" uttered the purple pencil excitedly. Working with the others hadn't always been plain sailing, but towards the end things had started to gel. It had never realised that it had any creative talents. This had to be the first time it had ever been praised for its professional skills.

Pencils from all the other desks began to roll on to the table. They got up and crowded together at

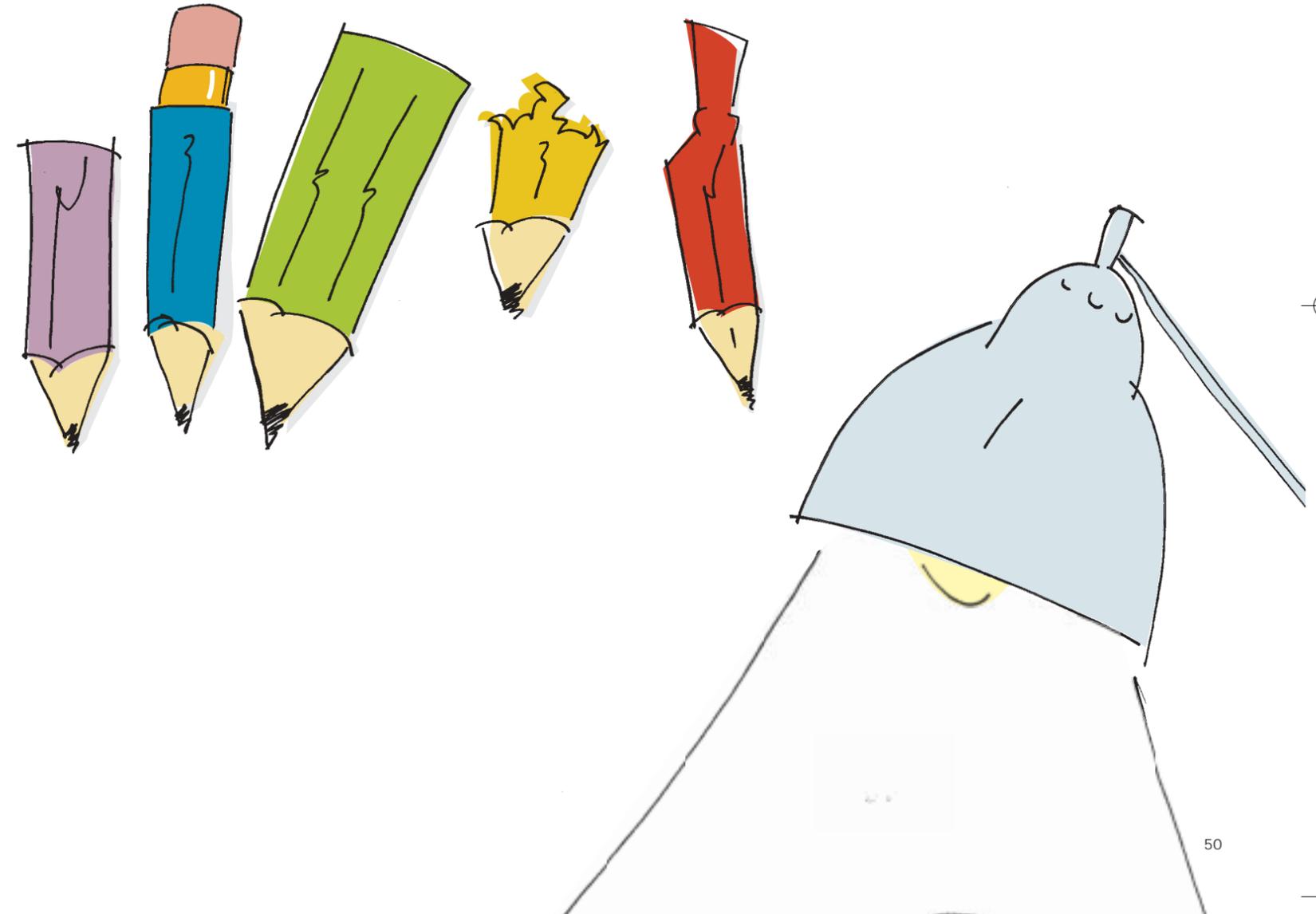
the foot of the pedestal, creating a veritable forest of pencils. The chair's details were studied from every angle, and the conversation flowed freely. The green pencil stood by, smart and newly sharpened, and listened to the assessments of their chair. It was proud of the fact that they had achieved such a high level of technical proficiency. It suddenly remembered how sceptical it had been about working alongside the blue pencil, and admittedly the blue pencil had done some funny things along the way. But after a while, the green pencil had almost forgotten the rubber – once you got to know someone, you began to notice other things. And although the blue pencil had trained at a different school of draughtsmanship, there was nothing wrong with the quality of its work.

The work lamp did its best to illuminate the entire desk. It was very proud of the five pencils, of the chair – and of the process as a whole. This chair was really something else. So had dealing with this diverse group of pencils been very different from dealing with a more homogenous group of co-workers? No, not really. When it came down to it, it was all about making sure that the

basic issues such as clear objectives and values were in place, as well as listening to each other and creating a good dialogue. The only difference was that these things became even more important when the co-workers had different qualifications and points of view, because you could no longer take anything for granted.

There had been many problems along the way, as the work lamp said in its speech, but they had learned a lot from each other and from the process. You had to accept that mistakes might happen, and that some things took a little longer. Otherwise, we'd never try anything new or attempt to shift the boundaries of our working life. The most important thing was to learn from this group's experiences and avoid making the same mistakes next time. Perhaps we should share the story of the five pencils with the work lamps and the pencils...?!

The end



Exercises

1/The many different similarities and differences

The story of the five pencils touches many aspects of human differences and similarities:

- age
- education
- communication style
- pace
- ethnic background
- fear of conflict
- morality
- language
- personality
- smoking
- gender
- social background
- religion
- thoroughness
- irony
- experience
- handicap
- creativity
- life situation
- weight problems
- orderliness
- dress
- lifestyle
- sexual orientation
- professional pride
- sense of humour

These elements are part of every individual's identity. You can split the differences, and the similarities, into different levels:

1. The visible and primary factors including age, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation and handicap. We cannot hide or discard these aspects, and they are used to classify us as "youngsters", "women", etc.
2. Our education, religion, social background, language, marital status, experience and values are all the result of our background and way of life.
3. But there are also many personal differences such as temper, communication style, technical ingenuity, interests, pace, creativity, self-knowledge, ambitions, interpersonal skills, etc.

When we talk about "differences" between individuals, most people think about the differences listed in group 1. These are the ones that society has focused on, and you cannot possibly fail to be aware of these elements. The problem is that these differences can become all important if we believe there is a direct link between the visible differences and all the other differences. When that happens, we move into the realm of stereo-

types: "men are...", "Muslims are..." or "young people are..."

We are all a certain gender, age, social background, ethnic background, etc., and we would all like to be seen as complex, rounded individuals. No-one wants to be reduced to a mere representative of a group.

Questions for discussions

- When do you identify with your different characteristics?
- What type of situation makes you feel part of a group – and which group?
- Which factors do you feel affect job performance?
- Which of these aspects are relevant in terms of the workplace? Which do you feel are irrelevant and associated purely with our private lives?
- Which pencils do you think are male? female? why?
- What about their sexual orientation, ethnic background, nationality...

2 / The New Tenants

The aim of this exercise is to become aware of your own views and prejudices as regards different groups of people. How do we assess others – as individuals or as representatives of a particular group?

You live in a group of eight flats which you co-own with some of your friends. Three of your tenants are about to move so you need to find replacements. You have put an ad in the paper and received a number of replies. Further information about potential tenants has been acquired by means of phone calls. You and your friends must now choose your three new tenants.

1. Mette is 25 years old and comes from Northern Jutland. She is working as a cleaner at a rest home until she starts nursing college next year. She is an active member of the Danish People's Party.
2. Rafad is an Iranian refugee. He is a 29-year-old student. He is very active politically and supports the resistance movement in his homeland. He believes in armed resistance and is wanted by the Iranian intelligence service.

3. Flemming is 35 years old. He is on welfare and the weekend father of a five-year-old girl. He used to work for a motorcycle mechanic, but was fired as a result of problems with customers from a motorcycle club which competes with Flemming's own club.
4. Achmed comes from a family which originated in the former Yugoslavia. They have lived in Vesterbro for many years. He has just turned 18 and started at technical college. He is interested in moving because he would be close to his family and friends.
5. Sussi and Zara are partners and rock musicians with different bands. They are both 33 years old and occasionally live on welfare when there is no work for the bands.
6. Peter is 25 years old and has been to prison for two months for assault. His social worker has told you in writing that it is very important for Peter to get another chance. Living with a group of new people would be ideal. The rent is not a problem, even if it exceeds the price of a single room.

7. Lone and Keld have lived in a commune in the country. They want to move to the city, but want their lifestyle to remain ecologically sound. They are 51 and 55 years old and are not a couple. They have many suggestions for creating a more ecologically sound household.
8. Thomas is 24 years old and is studying to become a teacher. He is blind but manages well with his guide dog, which will of course be living with him. He is a parliamentary candidate for The Social Liberal Party.
9. Anders is 41 years old and a carpenter. He called you to say that he would like to move in because it is close to his friends. He sounded a little threatening and practically implied that it would be a bad idea to turn him down.
10. Selda is 25 years old. She comes from a Turkish family which follows the Koran to the letter. She had been promised in marriage to a man from Turkey, but has chosen to go her own way and is currently staying with a Danish friend. She is studying law at university and wants to live her life as a Dane having been here since she was born. She

has approached you very discreetly to ensure her family does not find her.

11. Sigurd is studying for the Higher Preparatory Examination. He is 19 years old and wants to go to medical school. He would like to leave home because of trouble with his parents. Sigurd and his father got into a fight because the father discovered that Sigurd had grown cannabis plants in a corner of the garden.

Read through the list on your own, putting a plus or a minus by the applicants that you definitely can or cannot live with. Having allocated a plus or a minus to all 11 applicants, you should now list them in order of priority. Put a 1 by your favourite applicant, followed by a 2 and a 3 by your second and third choices. Do not discuss your choice of applicants at this stage.

- Split everyone into groups of four or five and go through every participant's list and summarise the group's allocations on a flip-over sheet.
- In your group, discuss the possible reasons behind the choice of tenants.

- Ask every group to present their choice of applicants.

Next, ask everyone to discuss the differences which will no doubt separate the different groups. The discussion may be prompted by the following questions:

- Who would we like to get close to and why?
- Who would we definitely not live near and why?
- Are there any common features which characterise the individuals or groups that have been allocated the most minuses/most pluses?
- Are there any specific reasons why we reject some people but think others are OK?

3 / Bring on the prejudices!

This exercise is designed to make us more aware of our prejudices and where they come from.

Choose 8–10 different groups of people.

Ask every participant to write down (on Post-It notes) the first two words that come to mind when the following categories are mentioned:

- bag lady
- Muslim
- blonde
- biker
- manager
- German
- etc.

Collect the slips for every category and stick them on the wall under the headings 'bag lady', 'Muslim', etc.

Next, imagine a German coming through the door. Look at the Post-It notes to see how the group views and judges members of this category.

Encourage everyone to discuss how our stereotypical views and prejudices may lead us to judge someone we do not actually know.

Continue with questions such as:

- Where do we know Muslims, Germans, bag ladies, etc. from?
- Where do our immediate perceptions stem from?
- What can we do to get to know them better?
- When did you last invite a(n)... home for dinner?
- What would happen if we were more open and curious?
- Which questions would it be okay to ask?

4 / New norms

The purpose of this exercise is to show how our perceptions and norms change over time, and to discuss the norms and prejudices we associate with certain groups.

Method

Ask the participants to think about the norms they associated with the various groups as they were growing

up, and the norms they associate with those same groups today (ask every participant to fill in a form).

Examples:

Men 'Then' were supposed to be the breadwinners; men 'Now' can earn less than their wives.

Women 'Then' were supposed to stay at home while the children were small; women 'Now' can have a family and a full-time job at the same time.

Group	Then	Now
Men		
Women		
Persons aged 40+		
Gays/lesbians		
Ethnic minorities		
Parents with children under 6		
People with a handicap		
Cashiers		
Managers		

Hang up a flip-over sheet for each group under separate headings. Then ask the participants to write their 'Then' and 'Now' norms on the different sheets.

Focus on one group at a time and discuss the ways in which our perceptions have changed over time.

- Are we talking about major or minor changes?
- Do the participants agree on the norms?
- What consequences do these norms have in terms of our behaviour in the workplace?
- Which themes crop up for the different groups?

5 / Behind the Stereotypes

The aim of this exercise is to demystify our prejudices and to look behind the stereotypes and see how differently we see people as a group and as individuals.

Method

10 co-workers from Marketing and 10 from Finance, or 10 Muslims and 10 Christians (or whatever, provided there are two different groups) are invited into a room.

They will typically sit separately.

Ask each group to describe the other. What characterises the other group? How do the others differ most markedly?

Return to the large group and listen to the descriptions. List the words used to describe the other group on the board.

Form pairs that consist of a member of each group and ask them to spend 30 minutes talking about:

- Their lives and dreams

- How they differ

- How they are alike

Return to the large group once again and discuss:

- What happened when we switched from group level to individual level?

- How does it feel to be seen as part of a group? as an individual?

- Is there anything we can do here in the workplace to see each other as individuals and not just as representatives of a group?

6 / Pet Names, Nicknames and Other Names

The aim of this exercise is to become more aware of the prejudices that may underlie various names and terms. How do these terms affect us and the way in which we communicate?

Method

Split the participants into two groups, e.g. women and men, or those below 40 and those over 40, or those over 170 cm tall and those under 170 cm tall, etc.

Ask each group to discuss the following:

- What do we like to be called? at work? at home?

- What do we not like to be called?

- How do we react when we are called something we feel is derogatory?

Assemble the groups and ask them to take turns to share their answers with the others.

Next, split the participants into new groups based on different factors and repeat the exercise. Make sure you use different types of categories, i.e. visible, invisible, hereditary or acquired differences. Use work-related differences such as professional expertise, area of employment, seniority, etc.

The exercise may be repeated several times. Finish with a discussion about interaction and humour in a diverse workplace.

7/Who Would you Employ?

You have been appointed Department Manager for a whole new department which is responsible for seasonal goods and activity goods at your store. You have been asked to employ three individuals to work full time in the department.

You need to hire the following: 1 Deputy with responsibility for seasonal goods, 1 Area Manager with responsibility for activity goods, and 1 Sales Assistant with responsibility for shelf-filling and other tasks. These positions do not require any professional or theoretical background; instead, you are asked to focus on personal aspects since an excellent introductory programme will be offered in connection with all three positions.

Which of the following applicants would you select for interview? And for which position?

1. John is 57 years old. He is divorced but is waiting for his new wife (aged 31) to come over from Thailand. He worked for 39 years as a warehouse assistant at a wholesaler but has been out of work for the past three years having been fired follow-

ing a disagreement with his immediate manager. In his spare time, John has been an active member of his trade union and his local darts club.

2. Ahmed is 23 years and comes from Morocco. For the past three years, he has lived in Denmark with his Danish wife whom he met in a hotel in Casablanca where he worked as a bartender. Ahmed has never had a job in Denmark because he has found it difficult to learn the language. After two years, he has given up on the language school and intends to find a job instead. (He is, however, fluent in Moroccan and French and speaks reasonable English.) Ahmed spends his spare time in a Moroccan club, and with his wife and their new-born son.
3. Line is 19 years old. She is separated and lives alone with her one-year-old daughter. The father is violent, and has paid her several visits and threatened her with revenge. Line left school after the tenth grade and found work as an assistant in a discount supermarket. She left the job recently when she went to live on her own. Now, she concentrates on taking care of her daughter, but she would like to work again because she is finding it

difficult to manage on welfare. Line spends her spare time with her daughter, her family and friends. She would like to take the Higher Preparatory Exam and perhaps become a nurse, but these are long-term plans.

4. Aysir is 37 years old and comes from Palestine. He has lived in Denmark with his wife and their four children since arriving here as refugees 12 years ago. Since then, Aysir has run a number of different businesses, including a pizzeria, a flower shop and a kiosk. For the past year he has worked as a taxi driver, but he would like to get back into the retail sector. Aysir has been active in the Palestinian fight for justice and is now an active member of a group that supports the Palestinian freedom fighters.
5. Gulsüm, who is 19, was born and bred in Denmark. She recently left home having chosen to live 'like a Dane' with her Danish boyfriend. Her family has chosen not to have any contact with her. Since dropping out of business college, Gulsüm has worked for her uncle's cleaning company, but has now been let go as a result of her decision to leave home. Gulsüm spends her spare time going out in the evenings.

6. Henriette is 34 years old and lives with her husband, the managing director of a large IT company, and their two children aged 1 and 3. Henriette trained as a sales assistant in a clothes shop and has been a full-time housewife for the past three years. She is ready to go back to work again now, possibly on a part-time basis. Henriette spends her spare time with her children, her husband and their many friends.
7. Søren is 19 years old and has just completed a one-year course leading to a higher commercial examination. He lives with his boyfriend Jakob, also 19, who is studying to be a cosmetologist. Søren would like a job for the next 2–4 years before applying to the Danish School of Design to study industrial design. Both Søren and Jakob are active members of Copenhagen Gay Life and both love acting.
8. Julie is 32 years old and lives in a privately owned shared flat with six other mentally retarded individuals. Julie receives a disability pension and would be subsidised by the local municipality if employed by the company. She has worked in a small hardware store for the past seven years, but

would like to try something new. Julie spends her spare time with her friends.

9. Kim is 19 years old. He was adopted from Korea when he was three years old and currently lives with four other young boys at a production school. Kim has had a troubled childhood, and at the age of 13 he was part of a group that became involved in criminal activities. Later, Kim started to smoke pot and take ecstasy. For the past two years, Kim has stayed clear of drugs and crime, and is now trying to find himself a flat and a job. He would like to work in a shop. Kim spends his spare time role-playing and giving short lectures at schools about his experiences.
10. Lene is 28 years old. She recently married Peter. For the past six years, Lene has worked as a sales co-ordinator for an office supply company, with responsibility for a team of two co-workers. She used to work in external sales, but could not handle the stress and was therefore offered an internal position. She misses the contact with customers but is not interested in direct selling. Lene and her husband are active Jehovah's Witnesses and spend their spare time repairing their new house.

11. Enrico is 39 years old and lives alone with his 10-year-old daughter. Enrico has lived in Denmark since he was 8 years old. As a youngster he was a bit wild and very interested in cars – especially other people's! He has spent a total of two years in prison for car and vehicle theft. He has not been involved in any criminal activities for the past 11 years. Enrico escaped the criminal environment after training as a post office employee and has since worked as a letter collector. He spends his spare time with his daughter whose handball team he coaches.
12. Niels is 60 years old and a widower. He has just been dismissed after 30 years as a Senior Sergeant and manager of a materials store at the local military base. Niels feels he has a lot to offer and had not planned to retire for a number of years. He has therefore applied for various different posts in the private sector. Niels spends his spare time with his children and grandchildren and is an active member of the local rifle club.

Split into groups of four and choose the three people you would employ on the basis of the personal descriptions given above. You must explain why you chose/rejected the various candidates.

On the basis of your discussion, answer the following questions:

- Who did you choose for the Deputy post, and why? What prejudices came to light as you were making your choice?
- Who did you choose for the Area Manager post, and why? What prejudices came to light as you were making your choice?
- Who did you choose for the Sales Assistant post and why? What prejudices came to light as you were making your choice?

Ask all groups to list their teams on the board. Once the last group has presented its choice and listed the members on the board, discuss the following:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen teams?

Words and Concepts

Diversity management is all about having a workplace for the many and a workforce that reflects the diversity of customers in the immediate area. It is all about showing consideration for individual co-workers and meeting individual needs. Diversity management implies the hope and the belief that diversity can strengthen the company, creating growth, change and new results.

“Integration” – there are three different ways of dealing with minorities in the workplace, be they minorities in terms of nationality, gender, ethnic background or anything else.

1. Segregation – the different groups remain separate, either because they keep to themselves or as the result of a strict division of labour. A type of ghetto is created.

2. Assimilation – the members of the minority group renounce their cultural characteristics in order to be accepted by the majority and to assimilate its principles and culture.

3. Integration – the members of the minority and the

majority retain certain aspects of their original culture and renounce others to assume certain aspects of the other culture. Together, the majority and the minority create a new common culture, where the individual cultures retain a number of basic traits and develop these to blend with the surroundings.

Stereotypical perceptions are highly simplified attitudes or fixed perceptions which are repeatedly reiterated, whether they relate to ourselves or others. Stereotypical perceptions may be a type of generalisation based on reality. These perceptions are, however, clichés and do not apply to all members of the group in question. Example: “Men are good with technology. Women are good with people.”

Prejudices are preconceived opinions, usually derogatory views of things or persons unknown – at times amounting to actual scaremongering. Prejudices may lead us to ascribe particular motives and a group identity to an individual, such as: “Young people never...” A prejudiced attitude means that you only see certain aspects of an individual. This may hinder dialogue and teamwork.

The term “culture” has many meanings, but is used here to describe the norms, rules, perceptions and

values shared by a particular group of people. Culture endows people with an identity based on their nationality, social background, ethnic background, age, profession or workplace. The culture is often invisible to the members themselves because they simply see it as the right way to do things. On the one hand, culture is a fixed point expressed by our behaviour or our relationships and on the other it is subject to constant development when individuals communicate.

Equality means making sure everybody has the same opportunities. Treating people equally is not synonymous with equality since people have different attitudes and lifestyles. In other words: to treat people equally, you have to treat them equally differently.

Preferential treatment means positive discrimination against a particular group. This often involves a temporary compensatory arrangement implemented in order to speed up equality so you do not, for instance, have to wait 50 years to achieve an equal distribution of male and female school teachers.

Discrimination means that people are discriminated against in some way because of their gender, age, weight, ethnic background or sexual orientation so that

they do not receive the same salary, the same access to the job market, further training, management posts, etc. Discrimination may be obvious, such as reserving promotions for certain professional groups and thereby denying this opportunity to members of other groups. Much discrimination, however, is indirect: a manager may fail to offer a mother of three a place on a training programme because he does not feel she would be able to handle it and does not want to put pressure on her. Opportunities for promotion or further training may also unconsciously be arranged to suit men as the norm, in terms of family duties and the age for career change. Discrimination may occasionally be the result of prejudices and ignorance.

TO TREAT PEOPLE EQUALLY,
WE HAVE TO
TREAT THEM
EQUALLY DIFFERENTLY



IKEA