



Dansk Industri

Actively managing differences

They found the overlooked resource for innovation.



Companies typically organize important development work in cross-functional projects and often they struggle to access the full potential in these project groups. Companies miss the opportunity of getting outstanding business results because they don't succeed in capitalizing from the differences in the groups.

By focusing consciously and thus more strategically on the differences among team members, a development group in Dako, a global diagnostics company, found their hidden potential for innovation and developed valuable new knowledge.

Having competent experts is not enough

The group was in the final stages of developing an instrument with a business potential of many million DDK. The deadline was getting close and the group still faced unsolved technical issues. In a situation like this, a project group is under great pressure. Missing the deadline is no option due to the high profile of the project and the high costs associated with the successive delay of other important projects.

The group constituted a typical cultural complexity. The members came from several organizational units, had different work functions, and had professional backgrounds such as hardware engineers, software engineers, logistics experts, chemists, and bio analysts. Furthermore, they collaborated with an important partner organization based outside of Denmark. Even though the project group had a friendly work climate, the project manager thought that the professional groups were too focused on their own issues and didn't consider taking full responsibility for the overall result.

Managing differences - the overlooked resource

The solution to their problem and the overlooked resource for innovation was the ability to create successful collaboration with people who think and act differently from oneself. To develop this competence the project group took a pit stop from their every day routine and spent a day exploring their actual collaboration and trying out new ways to communicate.

Even though some may have thought that using a day was an unnecessary waste of time in this hectic project phase, the team members discovered new knowledge and aspects of the other professional groups by seeing the world from their perspective.

How did they get access to this resource?

During this pit stop day the group discovered that each professional group had used their own cultural autopilot and had taken too many things for granted about each other. They were not aware that the other groups thought and acted according to their own views and logic. They had a preconception about what the other could contribute with, but during the day it became apparent that they only had simple knowledge about each other's expertise. They didn't know what they didn't know and therefore didn't consider asking the others and inviting them in for their opinion.

They found out that more often than necessary they would go on cultural autopilot instead of using manual control by observing and listening more carefully to others. They discussed specific challenging situations and thereby found the value of involving and asking the other professional groups for advice and help. They learned to value "stupid" questions from others and to embrace interference as a gesture of a joint ambition to develop and create a better product. Interference in one's tasks is not always regarded positively and can



About Elisabeth Plum

Elisabeth Plum is an experienced organizational consultant with a particular focus on how to capitalize on differences in project management, cross-national collaboration, and change management.

Elisabeth holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Sociology from University of Copenhagen and has written numerous articles and books of which the latest are:

- "Samarbejde lokalt og globalt, forskelle er vitale" (Gyldendal 2013)

- "Cultural Intelligens – the art of leading cultural complexity" (2008) in Danish: "Kulturel Intelligens" (Børsen 2007).

Read more about the books via links below.

Questions or comments?

You are welcome to send Elisabeth an E-mail.

[Samarbejde lokalt og globalt](#)

[Cultural Intelligence](#)

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Want to know more?



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activate emotional friction. However, constructive interference is a means for innovation. For both parties involved it means leaving one's comfort zone, which requires preparation, tact, and emotional maturity.

Beyond silo thinking

The group took a strategic leap from working in silos to actively using their differences, searching for new possibilities and thus questioning their habitual thinking. By combining and integrating their expert knowledge in new ways, the group found the overlooked resource for innovation and consequently was able to speed up their problem solving process. They resolved the technical issue in the instrument through new kinds of dialogue and thus found new knowledge about a vital element.

Differences do not automatically lead to innovation

Differences in a group are often seen only as a potential for problems, but it is important to flip the perspective and see the positive potential of differences. There is a huge business potential when teams succeed to capitalize on their differences. Differences do not automatically lead to innovation and actively embracing differences is not done in just one day. It requires a continuous focus on empowering team members to use their differences, confront others, and integrate their expert knowledge in all relevant situations.

Facts about Dako

The Dako group used the dialogue tool Vital Differences® that provides an effective way to activate the important differences in a team.

You can read more about the Dako case and other cases in the Danish book "Samarbejde lokalt og globalt" (see link in the box on the right) and read more about this dialogue tool below.

[Vital Differences](#)

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