



THE POWER OF “AND”: FOSTERING CREATIVE TEAMS AT HYDRO ALUMINUM

BY MARIANNE M. AAMODT AND MARA SENESE

How can we inspire individuals to contribute value to the whole company and not just their group or department? In 1998, Marianne M. Aamodt was appointed chief financial officer for the Hydro Aluminum Metal Products Division, in Oslo, Norway. She teamed up with Mara Senese, a consultant specializing in facilitating learning environments, to foster creative teams and a professional learning community at all levels of the division's financial organization. Our aim was first to establish a common vision and shared values and then to focus on specific projects to enhance financial processes on the whole and strengthen collaborative efforts within the financial function. This is the story of our three-year process.

Trust and Community

The year before Marianne took office, the division developed a new strategy to ensure that customers' orders were filled in an optimal way. This initiative had significant organizational consequences, because business units had to cooperate in a way they had not done before. Up to this point, they had operated independently from different countries and locations. To support this strategy, the company installed an integrated IS-IT system, which required a standardization of work processes and a change in mindset for employees.

The financial function mirrored the complexity of the division. A year after this change was introduced, staff members still resisted aligning their work processes with those of other business units and utilizing the IT system's full capacity. For them to share their knowledge and competency more effectively with each other, the financial group needed to reduce internal

competition, establish greater trust, and feel as if they belonged to a community that served the whole division.

The Power of And

To address these challenges, we decided to promote the power of “and.” In all of our activities, we linked seemingly disparate concepts, such as vision/values *and* reengineering systems/practices; creativity *and* complex financial issues; fun *and* tough business problems; and individual growth *and* team empowerment.

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Behind this double focus were some core beliefs and assumptions:

- People offer the highest leverage for bettering an organization. When individuals become aware of the potential for improvement and are involved in setting the direction and establishing the values they want to live by, they naturally move in that direction.
- To be engaged, people must have a clear image of what they want to create. In addition, they do best by starting with small steps and achieving results quickly.
- When people understand and identify with the whole, they recognize the importance of their contribution and can better align their unit's vision with that of the company as a whole.

We decided that the best way to put these beliefs into action was through large-group events. Twice a year, we conducted two-day gatherings where people worked on specific, ongoing organizational goals. The setting was informal, and people were invited, not ordered, to attend. To attract participants, we worked to establish a reputation for providing challenging, fun, and result-oriented activities. Before each gathering, we clarified the results we wanted and looked for ways to incorporate creativity, play, and an element of surprise. Throughout the event, we carefully monitored activities and changed the program's content if people became tired or disinterested.

At every event, one or two top executives talked about the main strategy and development plans for the division, often using material prepared by the financial group in this larger context. These presentations gave the group a sense of the big picture and signaled the importance of their individual contributions. We kept employees who didn't attend informed of the results through an intranet newsletter.

Vision/Values AND Reengineering Systems/Practices. Before we began conducting these events, the financial group had only a vague idea of its role within the company, which many perceived as simply providing financial reports and business analysis to management. When people came together as a community, a new vision emerged: to create value for the division by being a proactive team player in business decisions, seeing the big picture, focusing on the future, being flexible and energetic, and continually seeking improvement.

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To reach this vision, during one of the gatherings, the group decided it needed to establish a culture characterized by respecting the individual, sharing knowledge, challenging each other, and recognizing and rewarding success. As they began to work together differently, based on these values, new opportunities became visible. The group was able to identify “low-hanging fruit,” that is, easy-to-do actions that yield high-leverage consequences. No one could see these possibilities before because work processes had been fragmented.

Creativity AND Complex

Financial Issues. To keep energy high and encourage innovative ideas during the events, we employed creative methodologies, including the World Café. In the World Café, four to six people from different functions, levels, and locations sat at each of dozens of small tables scattered throughout a large room. The tables were covered with sheets of paper, and participants used colored pens to record the ideas that emerged from their conversation. Members from each group then moved to other tables, carrying the “seeds” from their conversation with them to share with others.

The method’s success lies in coming up with a question that “travels well” (see “The World Café: Living Knowledge Through Conversations That Matter,” V12N5). Some questions we used were: What does it mean to create value for the division? How can we make the new business system the heart of the financial community? The café setting created a relaxed atmosphere in which people felt at ease sharing their thoughts and listening to others. Losing much of their defensiveness, participants began to appreciate diverse perspectives and engage in intense business-oriented discussions that often yielded remarkable discoveries and insights.

Fun AND Tough Business

Problems. We wanted our team-building efforts to be tied directly to

increased productivity and results. As such, the games we used related specifically to strategic initiatives and were grounded in daily tasks. For example, to help participants understand process thinking, we gave each group a set of papers, each marked with an element involved in cake baking. Participants had to arrange them in a flow chart, indicating inputs, outputs, activities, and tools. As a result, many felt they finally understood what process thinking was all about.

Another favorite activity was learning how to line-dance, which we presented as a metaphor for understanding the importance of aligning systems. Decked in special t-shirts with cowboy music booming from the speakers, participants struggled to master the dance’s difficult steps. When they achieved success, with everyone moving together, the group burst into spontaneous clapping.

Individual Growth AND Team Empowerment.

We made stress management a theme at several events. Participants appreciated being able to share their struggles with pressing deadlines and uncomfortable situations. They were surprised at how common their problems were and learned stress-reduction techniques.

To give participants a sense of continuity, momentum, and accomplishment, we allotted time for presenting project results to the whole group. The group then provided feedback and celebrated milestones. This process made individuals more visible to the entire division and also gave everyone a sense that their input was needed and welcomed.

At every large-group event, Marianne awarded the “Golden Glue” prize to individuals who clearly contributed most across business units. We usually had a closing ritual at the end of each gathering that summed up the accomplishments of the event; for instance, each person might describe in one word their most important learning.

Group Achievements

The financial organization has radically changed in the past three years. By

pooling individual competence, using integrated systems, and improving processes with a focus on creating value for the division, it has become a proactive, future-oriented partner with other business units, providing valuable input on strategic divisionwide decisions. Taking on new responsibility and succeeding has released creative energy into the organization. This enthusiasm was particularly obvious when the group completed a large process analysis in record time on top of ordinary workloads.

In 2000 the financial organization received a prize from the Norwegian Association of MBAs. Although the award was specifically conferred upon Marianne, she openly shared the honor with her colleagues for their willingness to try a new approach and for following through with dedication and determination.

Currently, the whole aluminum division is being reorganized and downsized to become more effective and efficient. In addition, the parent company has made a large acquisition with substantial integration challenges. We believe that, through their participation in this change process, the individuals in the financial community have become better equipped to deal with the challenges they are now facing. ■

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