

CASE STUDY (13)

AN HR DEPARTMENT'S USE OF THE DIVERSITY ICEBREAKER

Consultant/case author:

Bjørn Z. Ekelund

Areas:

Multiple HR functions

Background

This case is about a retail headquarters with about 200 people. The organization has distribution of O&G related products in 8 different countries. The work described here concerns the Norwegian business unit, only.

One of the HR people in the organization got to know the Diversity Icebreaker through colleagues when it was used in another retail organization. She was involved in some of the DI seminars there. The HR people in this organization started, in the spring of 2013, to plan implementation of the concept for the Norwegian business unit. In one of recruitments for a talent program they used the DI categories to create a more open atmosphere – and get more shared experience in the use of the concept. They decided to run a Diversity Icebreaker session for everyone belonging to the Norwegian part of the headquarters. Bjørn Z. Ekelund was asked to lead this in a 1,5 hours session.

Action

About 150 persons attended the large classic DI session of 1,5 hours. It was executed with 15 different groups working in parallel. Three internal HR people followed up the group work in order to make sure that everybody understood the tasks given to the groups the same way.

The total group was strongly Blue, but the laughter and insights in learning took place like what we normally see. Later on in the seminar there were different activities taking place – and coloured hats were distributed to participants in line with their DI colour. Participants applied spontaneously the language of Red, Blue and Green in the evening and the weeks before summer holiday.

Resulting in expanded use

After the summer the HR people registered that there were still lots of people talking about Red, Blue and Green – mostly in a positive way – but also some presented some negative views, basically not taking the concept really seriously. At first, the management team meeting following the summer holiday the operational leaders were instructed to discuss DI results and learning points in their teams. The HR people offered facilitation help in this follow up process and most of the teams appreciated this support. Focus was on reminding, sharing individual results, reflection on team practices influenced by the colour profiles –and then the question was discussed of how they could use this later.

A large IT project was strongly influencing the organization this autumn, and in one of the reviewing processes during this project the participants were distributed in different mono coloured groups to review the project with a special colour perspective. Since the organization where constituted mainly of people that were really Blue – the ideas that came from the Green and Red group were different from normal review feedback, and for this reason very valuable.

In internal meetings the HR people have used the colour categories in examples in their information giving. It seems that some interactions in the teams and among leaders have been “explained” by the challenging differences between Green and Blue persons.

Seeking more information for further development

At this stage they asked for a meeting with experienced consultants from Human Factors AS in order to learn from other’s practice. We spent 2 hours together exploring their initial ideas. Their focus was: “How can we utilize the Red, Blue and Green in the ordinary activities that the management and HR department control? And, especially, how can the different initiatives support each other in order to implement the language in practice?” This was a true innovative meeting where we from Human Factors AS shared ideas from different organizations and seminars. Some new ideas came up. But, an essential part as well as the feeling of being more secure on how they as HR people could work in order to strengthen the application of Red, Blue and Green perspectives – and how this could be linked to activities in the organization that created value. They felt energized, courageous and looked forward with joy. We were impressed about their attitude and initiatives. We very often experience HR people who would like us to present what we can do and offer them. This time we met a group of HR people that asked jointly “How can we utilize this tool inside our on-going activities in order to promote business?” What we saw was that the easy understandable and functional language of Red, Blue and Green was taken by the HR people as a tool to realize business objectives –and we were invited in as a creative player in interaction with their ideas and practice. They really took charge. We think they will really make a success out of it.

Ideas that emerged in the meeting

- Could it be possible to look at the communication of performance criteria for managers and employees, and in their implementation, in terms of the colour codes in order to make it more positive and easy understandable? Yes, it was possible, except “personal integrity” which probably is neither Red, Blue nor Green – but probably a mix.
- In change processes – Red, Blue and Green could be applied as an easy model for managing change in personal interaction, both for leaders communicating with employees as well as for interaction between employees. Green: Purpose/Why. Blue: Processes /What. Red: People /Who.
- Next summer there will be arranged a large franchise / managers gathering with 300 participants. The use of DI in the seminar in a traditional way was suggested by the HR people, but ideas were also shared from earlier research on Red, Blue and Green where shop management perspectives and customer interaction could be in focus. Red, Blue and Green was first time used in order to train for diversified interaction with customers in 1995.

- In the recruitment process they used a personality assessment, and they reliable scores from everyone in their file. Could it be possible to see if there are some colour-types that were preferred due to the criteria they had set up?
- 2 departments should merge, and the literature around third culture, a transformative integrative process might be relevant to look at.
- In the management program for the 8 countries they have decided to use Diversity Icebreaker colours and not the standard 4 colour versions that had been used other places. Since all the managers were familiar, it would be easier to continue this practice and implement it in the broader part of the organization.

Learning from HR use of Human Factors AS

In this interaction we met a 2 person HR group that planned initiatives themselves in how to implement the DI concept in the organization without any pre-planned meetings with us in Human Factors AS. Their self-reliant attitude made them phrase the question on how they could promote changes in the organization based upon the use of the Red, Blue and Green language. In order to strengthen their own understanding of the potential use of the concept, they asked for a 2 hours idea generation with experienced Human Factors consultants. This meeting functioned as an interaction that sparked off more ideas and confirmed the value of some of their own practice. In Human Factors we see such meetings as an innovative knowledge creating process. And, we too, learn in such situations. In this organization they used 3 different mono coloured groups in an evaluation of a large scale project – this was something we never ever had heard about. But, it made sense. since Red, Blue and Green are relevant perspectives on problems and problem solving processes. An amazing way of doing it – and it illustrates how competent HR people can play in line with the natural change processes and where we basically only were involved in a 1,5 hour summer seminar.

About the author:

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

Read more about Bjørn [here](#).

