Agility – most teams lack the discipline!

Discipline – it's a word that makes most people wince. They often associate it with perseverance, whether in the context of losing weight, saving money, or writing reports. It leaves a bad taste in their mouth, as it smacks of duress and austerity. Those whom I label as completely lacking discipline get particularly unsettled – and this is something that I do quite often. Why? Because most teams are erratic, aimless, and chaotic in their communications and collaborations.

Stephanie Borgert, 2017

In seminars and workshops on the topic of self-organization, I often work with an exercise based on Boris Gloger's "Ball Point" game. In several short iterations, the team's task is to pass as many tennis balls through their hands as possible. In between the iterations, they have one minute to reflect and to decide upon improvement measures to be taken; they then estimate how many balls they will manage in the next round, and continue with the game.

Before the start of the first round, the team has the opportunity to organize itself. This is the moment when theory and practice drift far apart.

Theory:

* The participants agree upon a decision-making process.
* The participants discuss what the essential roles are.
* The participants resolve what approach they want to start with for the first iteration.
* The participants decide how they will resolve further matters or how they will communicate in general.

Practice:

* The team starts frantically talking amongst them-selves, immediately discussing the WHAT of the task instead of the HOW of their collaboration.

* Since no one enjoys cross-talking amongst a group of 7 to 35 people, the participants quickly break off into smaller groups.
* The discussion frays apart, but what all of the threads have in common is that they only discuss the WHAT.

At the end of the predetermined preparation time, I ask the group for an estimate for the first round. There is a brief silence, and then a few guesses are called out. Is there any coordination? Not a chance.

And usually, this is something that does not improve over the course of the entire exercise. Some teams start without even making an estimate, having completely forgotten their environment (i.e., me). Sometimes, no one bothers to count how many balls passed through the team, and they are left with no result. One team actually just stopped before the end of the iteration, because all of the balls had been passed

around once – not even thinking to start passing the same balls around again.

The most striking aspect, though, is that almost every team sets itself up in a circle and that many do not change this configuration throughout all of their iterations. People remain stuck on the idea of optimizing and never even think about trying out something new structurally. For this, how-ever, communication and coordination would be necessary. Sure, this may be an artificially constructed situation and ultimately just an exercise – but unfortunately, it is typical of how one can observe people working together in team meetings, at presentations, or just in everyday work life.

In most organizations, every-thing seems to be regulated and predefined – and after all, with so many handbooks, guidelines, process descrip-tions, etc., the framework for everything should be clear, right? And this way, everyone can focus on the WHAT – with the HOW apparently being cleared up already. Appearances can be deceiving, however. And thus, the excessively bureaucratic and "true-to-the-process" working style gets people out of the habit of coordinating amongst themselves. Discourse about the HOW is practically non-existent. If the structure is then removed from such teams and they are left to their own self-responsibility, then it ends up like a chicken coop – a wild jumble with lots of chattering, but without insights or decisions.

Nowadays, however, agility is in vogue, and even traditional organizations feel the need to at least "give agile a try". Agile work is based on personal responsibility and (allowing for) self-organization. And this is precisely where the gap occurs. People suddenly no longer know what they are supposed to do. They are told that this new form of work will make them more satisfied and productive. Yes, this is possible – but only if the teams and the empl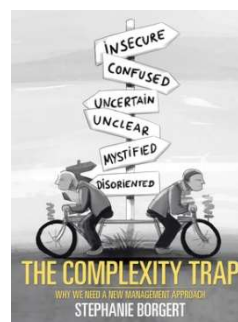oyees relearn to take responsibility, to coordinate their collaborations, to engage in discourse about the HOW, and to have the courage to make all decisions. This requires time and space for practice, and certainly also a bit of guidance. Every organization should be clear about what exactly is involved. This sort of discipline in interactions leads to team- and self-reflection, flexibility, and organizational defiance in the face of bureaucratic nonsense and other such disruptive factors. Discipline leads to conscious discourse and conscious dissent. It is the opposite of duress and austerity – rather, it demands trustful collaboration, productivity, and creativeness.

About the author

Stephanie Borgert is a speaker, management consultant, and forward thinker for a contem-porary management approach. She helps managers, directors, and project leaders become "masters of complexity" and not leave their success to chance.

Recommended reading

The Complexity Trap: Why We Need a New Management Approach

Stephanie Borgert 200 pages, paperback, iUniverse, 2017, $17.75, ISBN: 9781532019524