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The choice of location for the conference also entailed, of course, a visit to the town’s Viking Ship Museum. Here the participants were able to climb onboard Sea Stallion, which with a crew of 62 sailed from Roskilde to Dublin in the summer of 2007 – a difficult six-week long voyage in which the crew faced rain and high waves but also a challenge in terms of tolerance and social skills.

Things were much calmer during the conference itself which was held on the theme of “Living Leadership” – a theme that covered both tears and laughter. Group work was mixed with interesting lectures. The Danish performer Karen-Marie Lillevlund spoke about humour in leadership, while opera director Kasper Bech Holten said that his task is to get audiences to cry. But how does that work as a leadership tool …?

Here on the Viking ship Sea Stallion, 62 people spent six weeks together during a voyage to Dublin in 2007. The NFU conference participants were given a vibrant portrayal of this mentally and physically demanding experience.

Living leadership is listening leadership

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Leaders learn from their employees

Why don’t managers laugh?

People are not born good leaders
“Listen to those who meet the customers”

Managers must step back from the organisation into reality

“Each week, a good leader should sit down for a while with the personnel who work closest to the customers to hear what questions people ask and what they complain about,” said Siv Their of Helsinki University when speaking on the subject of Attractive Leadership.

“Today, it is the managers who learn and the employees who teach,” said Siv Their.

“But this is really not the way the traditional roles work, and the organisational structure in most companies does not encourage such an approach.”

According to Siv Their, there is widespread desperation among the managers of today. There are a multitude of different theories about how to act and in their desperation some managers even become afraid to make decisions. They call in various consultants but these usually have very little to offer and mostly just cost time and money.

“So it’s better that we use our own heads and hearts,” she said.

When we ask students these days where they would prefer to work they never mention banks and insurance companies. Why is this?

“Why are these companies so unattractive, what images are they conveying? You should think about this. The basis for an image is the way people experience the company, how the customers have been treated and how the company is presented in the media.”

Siv Their noted that many companies still use a box system – an organisational model taken from the army that is over 200 years old.

“Nine times out of ten, managers move people from one box to another and believe that they have done something good, but all they have done is create anxiety. This is a dead model; we should design a more living one. This must be based on who our customers are and what they want. This is the first thing we must analyse,” she said.

“Today’s managers believe that the organisation is reality. They know far too little about the market and about what customers want and how their values have changed.”

When Siv Their is asked to design an organisation she puts the customers at the centre. It should be the employees with the most brilliant social skills that meet the customers. The managers must not cut themselves off; they should even sit alongside sometimes and listen in.

She emphasises that the employees at the front line really must love dealing with people. You should really not sigh or roll your eyes when talking to customers. Such non-verbal communication says more than the spoken word.

“The customer’s first contact with the company is decisive. It’s not a question of the most senior executive or any other manager, but of the person who sits down there with a much lower salary and is...”

Managers increasingly important to the NFU

The conference “Living Leadership” in Roskilde in September 2008 was the fifth conference that the NFU has arranged especially for managers in the finance sector.

“Managers are an increasingly important target group for the NFU,” said General Secretary Jan-Erik Lidström when he opened the conference.

He told the conference that the NFU has a special programme for managers, partly founded on a study conducted in 2005. The study showed that managers are interested in the issues that the trade unions usually work with, but also that managers feel that the unions devote too little attention to issues that affect managers.

The NFU has a special managers’ group that works with these issues and that also arranged the conference in Roskilde. This group includes Lone Petersen and Lise Sørensen, Finansforbundet in Denmark, Hanne Houberg, Suora in Finland, Kirsti Grande, Finansforbundet in Norway, Gert-Ove Andréasson, FTF and Claes Björner, Finansförbundet in Sweden.

Hanne Houberg and Gert-Ove Andréasson from the NFU’s manager’s group relax in a pause during the conference they have helped arrange.

The conference was also the last one for Jan-Erik Lidström. He will retire at the turn of the year and was thanked by Lone Petersen for his many years of service as the NFU’s leading figure.
never invited to any meetings. Immediately outside the inner circle there are support groups, for example the salaries department. In the outer circle we have the senior managers. They maintain contact with the outside world and pass on their impressions throughout the rest of the organisation.

But a company’s formal organisation says far from everything about the actual situation. It’s like the top of an iceberg below which the informal organisation embraces factors such as norms, attitudes, secondary leaders, expectations and rumours.”

Attitudes are generated by knowledge, experience, and feelings. The strongest component is feelings.

“This is unfortunate, because if knowledge was the main component it would be easier to change attitudes. Successful companies are created by good ideas, but if people have negative feelings no good ideas will emerge. So for leaders it is important to reduce the negative feelings as much as possible. One way to do this is to inform the employees; otherwise they will develop their own ideas about what is going on – which are often mistaken.”

‘Secondary leaders’ are an important group to forge links with. They have not been appointed leaders but act as though they were leaders. They shape views and attitudes and can create a living hell for managers who fail to win their support.

It is also important for a leader to be aware of the employees’ values. Siv Their presented three stereotypes of value systems. In very simple terms these relate to:

A: the loyal employees who are always willing to give their support but do not contribute ideas of their own,
B: the careerists who strive for status and a high salary and who are eager to learn new things,
C: the modern and environmentally-aware employees who mainly strive for meaningfulness in life and want to understand the point of selling a particular product. They question things and have their own ideas. Today, it is this latter category that is growing.

However, the essence of what it is to be a leader also changes over the years. For the leaders of the past, the focus was on results and it was a case of teaching the employees to do the job correctly. The leaders of today focus mainly on processes and on getting the employees to do the job better.

“The leaders of tomorrow,” said Siv Their, “should focus on the world around them and on getting the employees to do the job smarter. They should do this through a multidimensional dialogue in which they mix different groups and see things from different perspectives – all with the aim of getting ideas to flow.”

She concluded with a short “to remember” list that all managers should consider:

1. Who is entitled to present ideas in your organisation?
2. Who takes part in your meetings?
3. Who has the chance to speak?
4. Who has the power to decide what is or is not a good proposal?

Her message is that everyone should be allowed to present ideas, that more people should be invited to attend meetings and encouraged to open their mouths and that those affected by the decisions should also be involved in making them.
Humour is an important characteristic of leaders, even in a serious business such as the finance sector. This was the message with which the Danish communications consultant and singer Karen-Marie Lillelund began a much acclaimed presentation that inspired both laughter and reflection.

“You don’t have to be funny yourselves,” said Karen-Marie Lillelund, “but as a leader you must allow humour at the workplace.”

We are often told that work and fun are opposites. We are not intended to have fun at work.

“Turn this around. We can combine work with having fun, but sometimes I think that people are frightened of humour. I don’t know what happens to people when they become managers. Do they stand in front of the mirror and say ‘grey is a nice colour’. A sense of humour is a skill and we shouldn’t be afraid of using it too often. Humour has a positive impact on both the sickness rate and the bottom line.”

As children we laugh 500 times a day, but as adults only 15 times. What happens? Well, according to Karen-Marie Lillelund, we learn at puberty how we “should” behave. We adapt and act in the way that is expected of us, and it is when something unexpected happens that people laugh.

It is often said that a good laugh prolongs life, and according to Karen-Marie Lillelund it has been proved that people who have fun live seven years longer than those who complain all the time.

She believes that humour at the workplace helps to create a cheerful environment.

“I am not saying that you should arrange parties every day, but humour generates energy and makes it easier to survive. There are situations in which humour is the only thing that helps.”

In the Scandinavian culture we do not tend to generate a lot of energy by walking around smiling and looking happy all the time. But this is something that we can train to do. It often requires so little to change the mood of a group of people.

“Management consultants have been telling us for ten years that we should celebrate small successes. But how often do we do so? And when did you last pop up at work and shout. ‘I’m back!’

A precondition for creating an easy-going and pleasant atmosphere is straightforward and direct communication. As a leader should be wary of those who stand around whispering on stairways or behave like martyrs.

Negative body language and facial expressions, or sly comments, do not promote such an atmosphere.

Say what you want and repeat it. We learn this when we are three years old and remembering it may give you an easier perspective on life. And choose your fights carefully,” said Karen-Marie Lillelund.

Three words are needed to create good communication: awareness, courage and playfulness.

“A good laugh improves leadership.”

We have a choice in most situations, we can either become irritated or we can choose to see things from the funny side.

“If you want a pleasant atmosphere you should choose the humorous option as often as possible. Collect jokes or funny stories and use them. They can act as an emergency break. On tough days it can be a good thing to be able to get a laugh.”

“I don't know what happens when people become managers. Do they stand in front of the mirror and say ‘grey is a nice colour’, wondered Karen-Marie Lillelund, who got a lot of laughs at the conference.

“I began by saying that you don’t have to be funny yourselves, but that you should allow humour at the workplace. And even if you can’t be funny you can be a little friendlier. Friendliness is the next door neighbour to humour. And remember: it starts with you if you want to create a humoristic environment. You can start tomorrow,” concluded Karen-Marie Lillelund.
The relationship with the manager is a decisive factor in determining whether an employee wants to stay at the company and develop. We therefore need managers who can see and listen to their staff.

“I cannot emphasise enough how important this is. Yet there are still not many companies that can provide this type of leadership,” said the Swedish psychologist Fredrik Bengtsson, who spoke about good leadership and gave the conference tips on several tools for better communication.

Fredrik Bengtsson comes from the company Haga Livscenter, which works with management development, organisational issues and health/stress.

Successfully performing the important task of seeing and hearing the employees requires a leader who:
- has a natural interest in people,
- has a relation-oriented leadership style,
- has good self-awareness,
- has the courage to stand up for his/her values and what he/she believes in,
- has time to be a leader,
- has support in the organisation for being a leader.

Fredrik Bengtsson made a distinction between the instrumental leader and the relation-focused leader. The former style of leadership was more suited to the industrial society, while the latter is more appealing to the young people of today. The relation-focused leader has a democratic approach, sees and removes obstacles in a flexible way, delegates and does not feel the need to exert absolute control.

A necessary tool in all leadership is communication. Everyone has certainly read books and attended several seminars on communication, noted Fredrik Bengtsson, but he also reminded the conference of several basic facts:

“We devote 75 per cent of our time to some form of communication. But quantity does not guarantee quality. Communication is not just about speaking, it also involves listening. Communication entails sharing experience with each other.”

So what are the characteristics of effective communication?

A basic definition is that the transmitter and the receiver perceive the message in the same way. We must know what it is that we want to convey. The receiver must understand the message. It is obviously a plus if some sense of well-being is also created.

Communication is also about influencing attitudes. The receiver may understand what we say very well, but not necessarily share our view. There are many different ways of putting a message across in order to achieve the desired effect. These may be verbal or non-verbal, with or without an explicit intention and with or without body language.

“The message is not just what we say,” stressed Fredrik Bengtsson.

“A change process requires that we go through four stages – contentment, denial, confusion, inspiration. But many managers make the mistake of going directly to the final stage.

Most of us are content with the way things are and do not really want to see change. When we are told about the change we enter a denial phase. The next stage is confusion and from there, in the best case, we move on to the final stage where we understand the point of the change and become inspired.

Managers often do not understand why people are so resistant, but a good leader tries to meet the employees at the point they are at in the process.”

Fredrik Bengtsson returned to how important it is to be able to listen. This is something that almost everyone needs to be better at. There are methods for developing this skill and he promised that those who succeed will be rewarded. He gave the conference a crash course (see the box below).

“Having time to reflect is something that many leaders lack. But balance is the basis for a successful and happy life and leadership,” said Fredrik Bengtsson.

**CRASH COURSE IN THE ART OF LISTENING**

- Be patient
- Let it take time
- Pay attention
- Be ready to learn
- Do not overreact to the message
- Do not pretend

"Listen" is the password for all communication

"Many managers lack the time to reflect, but balance is the basis for a successful and happy life and leadership," said Fredrik Bengtsson.
Kasper Bech Holten became the Artistic Director of the Royal Danish Opera at the age of just 26. Today he is 35 and visited the NFU conference to speak about enthusiasm in leadership.

Kasper Bech Holten told the conference that as a young opera director he did not have an easy ride to start with.

“The opera is full of huge egos who sometimes do not want to be directed at all. There are many primadonnas, and not just among those on stage. The term prima donna has a negative tone, but actually it’s a beautiful word. The first lady. Sometimes we complain that they are too egoistic, but remember that we have specifically trained them to perform there on the stage.”

In other words, it was a major challenge for Kasper Bech Holten to become the leader of this group of highly creative people. A large part of the challenge stemmed from the fact that there were no objective criteria to base decisions on.

“You have financial targets, but our job is to spend all the money. But I think it’s becoming increasingly clear in all operations that you cannot simply focus on results. The first time I realised what this job was all about was when a man in armour and carrying a sword rushed into my office and complained that there was not enough time to rehearse. But really he was frustrated about something else. I asked him why he was so negative until I suddenly understood that this was his way of getting a kick so that he could go out on stage…”

Kasper Bech Holten continued by saying that when it comes to creating art, democracy does not always work very well. When staging ‘The Marriage of Figaro’ he found that there were two options. He could do the classic version or a modern version of the opera as an erotic laboratory à la Big Brother. He decided to go for the second alternative.

“Six weeks before the premiere, Figaro said to me that he was looking forward to performing this classic role. In other words I have a problem. I have to stick to my plan and he has to feel that it is his character. So what do I do? I have to try to manipulate him into following my idea.”

It became apparent that this type of “manipulation” is a common element of the opera director’s leadership. But it is not as bad as it sounds; “everyone” knows what is going on:

“We play a game. They know that I manipulate them, I know that they know and they know that I know that they know…I call the whole process seduction rather than manipulation.”

A more difficult task for an opera director is to tell a singer that he or she is not good enough for the role.

“If a singer cannot do the job, I will not be doing them any favours if I let them go ahead. Having to be honest although I know they will hate me for it is the most difficult thing I have to do. Nevertheless, I have to find a way to communicate with them. My job is to find out what makes people tick. Leading modern people has to be done at the individual level.”

It is also important to have a common objective to aim at.

“It is my privilege to set a goal. Then it’s my job to get them to believe that they created it, but also to realise that there are different ways of achieving it. They must be so motivated to reach the goal that they do reach it.”

When he was relatively new in the post, Kasper Bech Holten asked the ensemble why they should do opera. He got answers such as “because we always have done” or “opera is so good”.

“I wanted better answers so that I could inspire them. Opera is so special. We communicate with all the senses. You should not just pity the character that is suffering on stage; you should feel the sorrow yourself. If we really want to measure the quality of our work we should have a hydrometer in the auditorium and see how much people cry during a performance. We’re here to get the audience to cry, it’s as simple as that.”

But how does this work as a leadership tool? And how is it relevant to the professionals who work backstage?

Kasper Bech Holten also found a way of motivating these groups.

The shift system was changed and all the personnel now follow the performance and work together.

“They have got their pride back and they love the job.”

Kasper Bech Holten emphasised the need to be visible as a manager and to not be afraid to show one’s feelings.

“It means so much to them that I see them and fill them with enthusiasm for their work. This is what leadership is all about. But it is easier said than done and I fail every day. We can attend lots of leadership courses, but what we have to offer is our motivation.”
Leadership must be learned

Do not believe in the myth of the charismatic, natural-born leader who can come in and save the organisation. Good leadership is something that you have to learn. This was the message of Nordea director Ove Hygum, who also told the conference about the bank’s ambitious management development programme.

Ove Hygum has many years of management experience in a variety of areas. He has, for example, been both a high-level trade union and political leader. Between 1998 and 2002, he was Minister of Labour in Denmark’s Social Democratic government. Since then, he has headed Nordea Capital Markets & Savings.

“The young people of today do not have at all the same ambition to be leaders that we had,” said Ove Hygum.

“In our generation we played the power game, but young people now value other things. They look for balance in life and often don’t want to be managers at all.”

The leadership style has also changed. Today we need “leaders” not “bosses” according to Ove Hygum. The new leaders must be good with people, see the potential of their employees and enjoy seeing them grow.

He also emphasised, however, how important the leaders are. There is research that shows a clear link between leadership and results. Good leaders make a difference. Successful management development programmes contribute directly to greater efficiency and profitability. It has been calculated that the increased return on such programmes amounts to 15.4 per cent.

At Nordea there are almost 4,000 managers. They are already good, according to Ove Hygum, but the bank is working to make them even better.

“For the great majority, leadership is something that you have to learn,” he said.

All management development programmes are not good, however. If they are to work, careful analyses of the organisation’s needs and clear objectives for the programmes are required. They also require the full support of the top management.

“If the senior managers don’t care, no one else will,” said Ove Hygum.

“There are no easy options. The solution must be relevant. If the training is at the wrong level or has the wrong focus, or lacks relevance for some other reason, the results will not be as expected.”

An important insight is that you as a leader must change the way you work when your responsibilities change. If you continue acting in the same way as before even though you have reached a higher level there is a risk that you will become a bottleneck in the flow. This is a common mistake according to Ove Hygum.

Nordea has four management programmes for managers at different levels: potential managers, new managers, experienced managers and executives.

The focus of the programmes may vary but they must always be linked to the business and to the bank’s strategy.

“Having inadequate plans is worse than having no plans at all,” said Ove Hygum.

“The current trend is towards more individual plans, increased customization and a focus on the company’s long-term needs.”

He mentioned the following areas as those that will become increasingly important for managers in the future: handling dilemmas, the capacity to reflect, learning to learn new things and the ability to help employees to develop.

“We have a lot of dilemmas to handle. For example, we need managers who are better at balancing their focus on quarterly reports with a more long-term, sustainable perspective. The world around us is becoming increasingly complex. It is a valuable asset to be able to step out of a situation and regard it from outside as a way of perhaps arriving at a different decision. Those who can cope with a constant state of change will be the winners. It’s a case of seeing this as a natural part of life and of taking every opportunity to learn something new.

Being interested in and able to coach others is another leadership quality that is becoming increasingly important.”

“Those who can cope with a constant state of change will be the winners.”
The programme for the Roskilde conference also included two sessions for group work. The first kicked-off the entire conference and was mainly social in nature to give the participants a chance to get to know each other. The second was more concrete and concerned what a leader should – and should not – be like.

Each group was asked to draw up a top-5 list of the things that are necessary to create living leadership. The groups were also asked to give at least one example of what not to do.

Several good proposals were presented. Some of the proposals were common to almost all of the groups, see the box alongside.

The management conference began with group work in which the participants started to get to know each other.

This is what a good leader should be

The most common proposals:
• Be able to listen actively
• Be open and present
• Show respect
• Involve the employees
• Motivate the employees
• Have a sense of humour
• Encourage development

Other leadership qualities that were called for were:
• Willingness/readiness to change
• Courage
• Have clear goals and show the way
• Celebrate successes
• Have self-knowledge
• Be yourself
• Create a multicultural environment

The “forbidden” list included the following:
• Manage by fear
• Ostrich mentality, being mentally absent
• Constituting an obstacle to development
• Limiting time for communication with employees
• Not being open to change and new approaches
• Focusing on your own career at the expense of the employees
• Military-style management
• Blackmail
• Criticising in public or laughing at people
• Talk but no action
• Grey suit