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## **Cooperative leadership - Key to the organizational success and staff development**

In recent years, the concept *cooperative leadership* has been adopted widely in organizational strategies, work environment assessments and in various goals and training programmes, as well as in numerous speeches by business executives. It is also delightful to notice that the term is being used in the coffee break discussions of work places. While it is easy enough to talk about cooperative leadership, we need to ask critically what people actually mean by it. In this article I will focus on the significance of cooperative leadership for continuous professional development, learning, and the shaping of future of work environments. Is cooperative leadership a viable way to go as a strategy?

I first used the concept of cooperative leadership in developing and conducting in-service courses and programmes at the University of Helsinki in the beginning of the 1990s. I also used of the notion *insight* as a key element in the philosophy of cooperative learning and applied it to the development of a learning organization. I have been able to enhance my understanding of cooperative leadership since 1989, when I first got involved in leading a three-year in-service programme for school principals at the University of Helsinki together with the Finnish pioneer of cooperative learning philosophy, professor Viljo Kohonen. He had been committed to it in depth during his residence for the previous year as a research associate at the University of California in Santa Cruz, USA. After that joint project of ours, I have been in charge of numerous other long-term in-service programmes for educators.

Soon after we began our work together with Viljo Kohonen, we got a new member to our Finnish expert team, Dr Pasi Sahlberg. We have published several papers and books together and conducted a number of in-service training workshops and long-term projects as a collegial team. Above all, however, we have been professionally engaged in understanding what cooperative learning is all about, in terms of both theory and practice. We have also been heavily involved in mediating the knowledge and know-how of cooperative learning in Finland by inviting many internationally distinguished experts of cooperative learning from all over the world to Finland to train Finnish educators in a large number of in-service courses and workshops. Subsequently we have also acquired further training abroad for ourselves by attending intensive seminars and presenting at conferences.

David and Roger Johnson were the first international experts to be invited to Finland, giving intensive teacher courses and workshops in

Lahti and Vantaa in 1991. They came back a couple of years later to give follow-up courses to Finnish educators. We have also been able to invite a number of other top-notch international experts on cooperative learning research and practice to Finland in subsequent years including, among others, Elisabeth Cohen, Bruce Joyce, Shlomo and Yael Sharan, Hanna Shachar, and Nancy Schniedewind. I have also had the opportunity to get introduced to the cooperative models of Spencer Kagan and Robert E. Slavin at different conferences and seminars.

The inputs from such eminent researchers, together with my own practical teaching experience and long-term involvement in in-service training, have made it possible for me to work intensively on a personal understanding of the philosophy and practice of cooperative learning over the past twenty years. I have had the opportunity to develop my own theory-in-use while working as a full-time consultant and staff developer on cooperative education.

### **Theoretical backgrounds for cooperative leadership**

In my thinking, the roots of cooperative leadership can be traced back to a holistic conception of man in philosophy (Heidegger, 1927/2000; Lehtovaara & Jaatinen, 1994, 1996, 2004; Rauhala, 1983), the theories of humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1983), and social psychology and group dynamics (Lewin, 1948; Johnson & Johnson, 1991), resulting in a number distinct approaches to cooperative learning. These approaches and their theoretical backgrounds have been discussed in detail by their developers (such as Elizabeth Cohen (Complex Instruction), David and Roger Johnson (Learning Together), Spencer Kagan (Cooperative Structures), Shlomo Sharan (Group Investigation), and Robert E. Slavin and Nancy Schniedewind. Summaries of these approaches by their original authors are also provided in various collections of papers (Sharan, 1994).

At first we were particularly interested in knowing how the different approaches of cooperative learning would work in Finland in different educational contexts. With a great deal of reading and over 15 years of experience, I have noticed that the five basic principles of cooperative learning developed by David and Roger Johnson, and shared by the other major approaches, are widely applicable in the context of Finnish adult education. These principles are as follows (Johnson et. al., 1990):

- positive interdependence
- face-to-face promotive interaction
- individual accountability/personal responsibility
- interpersonal and small group skills (social skills)

group processing

I have been exploring these principles in my books and articles with a number of co-authors (see Kohonen & Leppilampi, 1994; Sahlberg & Leppilampi, 1994; Leppilampi & Piekkari, 2001; Leppilampi, 2002). My challenge in this paper is to reflect on the principles from the point of view of cooperative leadership. I had my initial insights in this direction in the early 1990s when I was teaching about learning organizations and facilitating well-functioning teams in the leadership and staff development projects of a variety of work environments. My perception was that the principles of cooperative learning could be used very well in quite different contexts, both educational and business life.

At its best, cooperation means building a social community that supports individual learning towards increased independence, through interdependence. In learning organizations, social change is fostered by collegial learning, reciprocal learning and helping each other. Openness, dynamic interaction, group discussions and shared processing are the predominant characteristics of a learning organization. Personal growth and increased individual independence go hand in hand with social growth and positive group interdependence. Success in group dynamics will support individual independence. As the philosophy of cooperative learning is aimed at promoting individual and social learning, it constitutes a good basis for renewing leadership. I will now take a look at leadership from the point of view of the principles of cooperative learning, to clarify the connections between them and the development of a learning organization.

#### *i) positive interdependence*

Positive interdependence is not an easy concept to grasp. I conceptualise it as a kind of boosting the “we-spirit”. Even the most talented worker cannot be successful in an organization without the help of others. This is a matter of creating a shared “space” in which everyone feels both needed and that she needs others to achieve the common goal. Everyone feels being “in the same boat”. The success of a group depends on the success of each of its members, and the success of a member affects the success of others. Positive interdependence is indeed in the core of cooperative leadership. Members of a group have to perceive emotionally that the group is interconnected, and that mutual success is in the interest of everybody. In a situation like this, they have the motivation to work together and coordinate their efforts to perform a task. Interdependence is based on knowing the group members well, setting joint goals together, and establishing the common ground rules through negotiation. It is a

matter of “laying the first stones” for the beginning of a shared process of development.

*ii) Promotive face-to-face interaction*

The second important principle in cooperative leadership is promotive face-to-face interaction. Here, a strong and cooperatively oriented leadership constitutes the centre for building structures that “force” people to work together. A good leader models promotive face-to-face interaction, with a goal of creating a culture of personal encounters in the community. She/he is able to create genuine dialogue and encourages the staff to use personal discourse, body language, and we-expressions. She also knows how to tackle even hard issues constructively. A good starting point for creating a culture of promotive face-to-face interaction is the leader’s own model in encountering an employee.

Interactive communication becomes visible in group situations, in how small groups decide about the agenda of a meeting, where to hold it, or who will attend, reaching out of the constraints of traditional work place cultures. It sometimes makes sense to put away the tables in a meeting place to facilitate the transfer of ideas among the participants and to enhance face-to-face interaction in the small groups. After all, we communicate not only with words, but also with our expressions, gestures, sitting posture and other aspects of body language, as well as with the tone of voice. Interactive communication is concretized further in the “Good meeting behaviour”-example described in Diagram 2.2.

*iii) Individual accountability/personal responsibility*

The third principle of cooperative leadership is individual accountability/personal responsibility for the work to be done, involving learning at work and individual development of all the participants. The goal of such leadership is that employees assume a joint responsibility for the task of their group and help all group members to perform as well as possible. A good way to increase individual accountability is to have a ground rule whereby everyone has to be able to explain the task of her group or department to a visitor.

Individual accountability is evident when every group member feels responsible for the success of the group and also takes charge of her own share as well as possible. In meetings and planning groups, everyone has to be able to explain what was discussed, and how the group reached their conclusion. As regards the function of the group, everyone is aware of its basic task, roles of participants, responsibilities, power

relationships, ground rules, the aims of development and so on. A well-functioning group will not accept any “hitch hikers” (nor will it encourage “carrying of others’ burdens”). Instead, every member brings his/her own constructive input into the group performance. Individual accountability is the key to success, and it also involves responsibility for the other group members (supporting, social enhancement, empowerment, caring for others, and observing common ground rules and norms). Such a personal stance and commitment will contribute to a positive change in attitudes and behaviour and a good working atmosphere, ensuring the best possible result of work.

The concept of individual accountability is clarified by Tommy Hellsten’s (2001) notion of positive individualism, which is based on the kind of positive interdependence and community-orientation discussed above. Positive individualism develops when a person feels that he/she has been seen and listened to as her own self and her needs are met; and when a person gets recognition, respect and attention. In situations like these, the person learns to respect herself, to accept her feelings and to take care of her needs. She also knows how to put herself in the other person’s shoes in interactive situations. Negative individualism, countered by cooperative leadership and positive interdependence, on the other hand, is manifest when a person only sees others in an instrumental way, in terms of what they can give her, or how she can benefit from them. She views everything through her own purposes and cannot afford to give anything to others.

#### *iv) Social skills*

The continuing practise of social skills has an important role in creating a learning organization. The history of Finnish work culture cannot be described as being interactive. As a result of a long tradition of working in subordination and isolation, the mindset of dependence on the leader directing the work and telling what to do is deeply rooted in us. In recent years clear attempts have been made to increase social interaction in work places, but the culture working alone is slow to change. The common assumption that “employees do not want to take a responsible stance, even though they are encouraged to do so” is clearly misguided. The issue is rather about how they are invited to participate in the discussions. Over and over again, after a long strategy or budget review, I have heard the leadership asking, “Any questions?” After such a monologue, no one is eager to lengthen an already over-long meeting with any questions. Another reason for the silence is that no one is willing to make a comment due to fear of criticism and embarrassment of coming out.

The same phenomenon of silence is evident at organizational training events. A good way of involving the staff in the discussion is to use small talking groups. The following simple rule is enough to spark a fruitful conversation in any situation: “For a moment, please talk to your neighbours about what you just heard, and discuss what you perhaps did not understand or what you do not agree on”. To encourage active reporting of the points discussed in the group, it is advisable to agree on the ground rule that “everyone is able and willing to report” before starting the group session. In my experience, this procedure may at first feel frightening to some people. But when everyone has had a turn in the discussion, the fear usually eases and is replaced by natural interaction.

A genuine and interactive encounter of the members of a work community is naturally the dream of any cooperative leader. The greatest challenges concern the skills of the leadership and the staff alike for coping with difficult matters and conflicts. A leader with a low self-esteem and poor interaction skills usually deals with difficult matters in an authoritarian manner, using power-based means of subordination and government by norms and rules. No wonder that such a use of power can also be seen in the interactions of the company’s employees. An attitude of under-estimating, ridiculing and mocking, which may even develop into bullying, is another extremely questionable way of dealing with difficult situations.

The most desirable way to tackle difficult matters is genuine listening and respect of others. It is fair and directed to a common solution. In certain situations, communication also needs to be assertive and conscious of one’s rights, but at the same time also considerate and listening. Using the I-message (telling what I think and need, and how I feel) along with factual observations (with no interpretations!) has proved to be an efficient way of getting the other person genuinely involved in the discussion. In such cases it is desirable for everyone to have a possibility to share her feelings and try her own ideas. In genuine interaction, the participants also know how to listen attentively and check their understanding of what they just heard.

The leadership of the organization is always in the centre when a work community is learning social skills. Employees have to be taught explicitly, among other things, how to work as a group member as well how to lead a group with mutual trust and respect, involving fair and attentive listening, and sufficient negotiation and decision-making skills; and how to resolve conflicts. It is the duty of the leadership to model a desirable conduct in different situations. The same is also true when an organization is learning how to give positive feedback, encouragement and support. What would be more rewarding to a work community than having a “positive feedback virus” spreading?

### *v) Group processing*

Group processing is an increasingly common way to develop a cooperative learning organization. Shared reflection helps to build a bridge from personal experiences to new theories, concepts, models and procedures. Another dimension of reflection is learning to consciously observe how one's team, group and organization. The necessary meta-skills, combined with the development of cooperative skills, can be practised for example using the following kinds of questions: What happened, and why? What did the action feel like? Where did we succeed, where failed? How can we improve our working methods in the future?

Shared peer evaluation helps people to extract their learning from the experiences and use the insights in future work assignments and projects. The goal is that employees will recognize both their strengths and shortcomings in their own action. It is also advisable to make group agreements about personal development tasks to focus on them more consciously, promoting continuous learning. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of shared reflection in the creation of a learning organization. The critical evaluation of experiences in learning situations also develops the meta-cognitive skills of employees. After all, knowing oneself well is a basic key to learning and adopting new things, as well as to improved work efficiency.

Understanding these principles well and using them in cooperative leadership is an essential requirement for creating and maintaining cooperative culture in a work community. A good cooperative leader's professional expertise is not measured by how many leadership theories and procedures he or she knows, but rather in the ability to identify the right approach for the different leadership situations. Every meeting with an individual or a group is a new challenge whereby success depends on how well the leader is prepared for a new encounter, how his/her emotional intelligence works in it, and how well he/she is able to lead the ongoing process of interaction.

### **Cooperative leadership in action**

I have discussed the philosophy of cooperative learning and leadership in terms of the theory of experiential learning (Kohonen & Leppilampi 1994; Leppilampi & Piekkari 2001). It has been an important insight for me as a cooperative educator to connect the models of cooperative learning with the experiential learning theory (Leppilampi & Piekkari

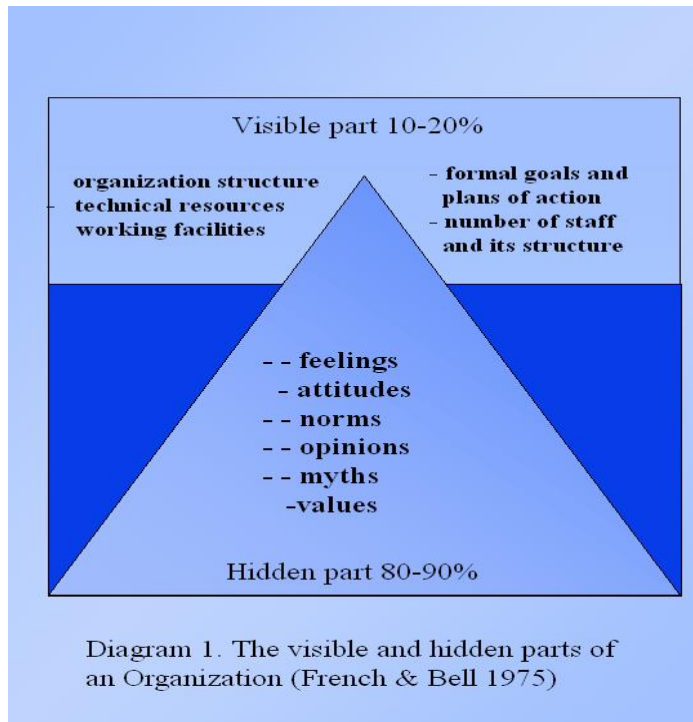
2001). I will now try to examine how this theory, originally developed for the teaching process, can also work in cooperative leadership.

According to the theory of experiential learning (Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001), an independent, intentional person is most committed to the improvement of herself and her work when she is free to choose her own development goals and decide on the means of pursuing them. Thus a person is most motivated when she feels that she can have an influence on all the stages of the process concerning her learning, from goal-setting to planning, monitoring and carrying out the plans and to evaluating the outcomes. A mature person is able to reflect on her own action critically even amidst everyday work tasks and pressures. She understands the significance of experience for learning. In her “meta-stage” of reflective evaluation, she is able to look back over her past action, deriving learning from her successes as well as mistakes. Genuine reflection is a very demanding skill that requires constant practice. This poses an important challenge for cooperative leadership and collegial development.

A cooperative leader guides her staff “walking alongside” with each of them, asking catalytic, thought-provoking questions, showing a genuine interest in the needs of her employees. A leader who is interested in the learning of her staff is also a humble listener who dares to confess her own weaknesses, to reveal where she is vulnerable, and above all her willingness to learn from others. With such leadership, the staff also dares to take risks and even fail without the fear of guilt. The organization is defined by a culture of mutual support and growth, in which reflection, supporting others and respect has become an everyday practice. Everyone develops herself, tries out new things, and encourages and supports others to try even when everything does not go as planned. The difference between a well-functioning organization and a less good one, then, is not so much in what is done, but rather in how it is done and how conflicts are handled. The background thinking here is that development is fostered by conflict resolution and reflection.

This line of thinking works for the growth of a small group as well as for the entire staff. Nowadays it is commonly agreed that a permanent change in the culture of a work community cannot be attained by rules given from above. In such a case, the staff may work obediently for a while, but in the course of time opposition will also spread fast. This results in back talk and resistance of leadership, which is likely to lead to a gradual breakdown of the organizational culture into small cliques that may eventually end up competing for power against each other. In a situation like this, the entire function of the organization is jeopardized. The “iceberg model” of the visible and invisible parts of the organization (French and Bell, 1975) describes how cooperative leadership can foster the coherence of an organizational culture.





The visible tip of the iceberg, the “official” part, is often required for creating the leadership’s long-term vision and goals, as well as the functional structures and resources. A good leader has a clear picture of the direction and the goals, but she also knows how to reach them together with the staff. Refining and developing one’s own thinking while at the same time listening to the staff is an important element of cooperative leadership.

This kind of leadership does not, however, mean endless and time-consuming discussions. A cooperative, strong leader knows when there has been enough discussion and necessary information for decision-making. When time is ripe for this, she firmly guides the group towards the majority view, or in a tight situation, even against the popular opinion. This kind of action is justified especially when the leader has genuinely listened to the staff, but then has to make an independent decision in a strong belief that it will be the best solution for the organization. In a situation like this, the leader has to recognize that she alone is responsible for the consequences of her decision.

The core message of the iceberg-model is that the hidden part in an organizational process of change must also be taken into a serious consideration. Change in the real culture of a work community is best attained by involving the staff at all the stages of the process of change, and by leading the process with skill. For instance, in a proper “footing process” of a strategy, the staff has an active part in debating the community’s values, norms, goals, procedures, rules, ways of solving

conflict situations, and so on. A good process relies on the innate know-how and the “tacit knowledge” of the organization, and values highly the available emotional intelligence as a part of successful development.

### Cooperative development of a work community

The iceberg model can be used for managing change according to, for instance, the model shown in Diagram 2. Through genuine encounters and mutually respectful dialogue (interaction in discussion, genuine listening and critical reflection), the participants are able to create different models for solution (divergence stage). After this, they agree on the development issues and the means that they will use to achieve these goals (convergence stage). Usually this kind of brainstorming process will produce a large number of possibilities, many of which will be feasible. The most common mistake is to start too many development processes at the same time. Therefore good leadership needs to have an ability to set priorities together with all the parties involved. Hargreaves et al. (1989) describe the stages of a good development process in their model (see also Hämäläinen et al. 1993, and Kohonen & Leppilampi 1994).

In Diagram 2 the model is presented in relation to experiential learning (in the circle in the middle of the diagram; Kolb 1984).

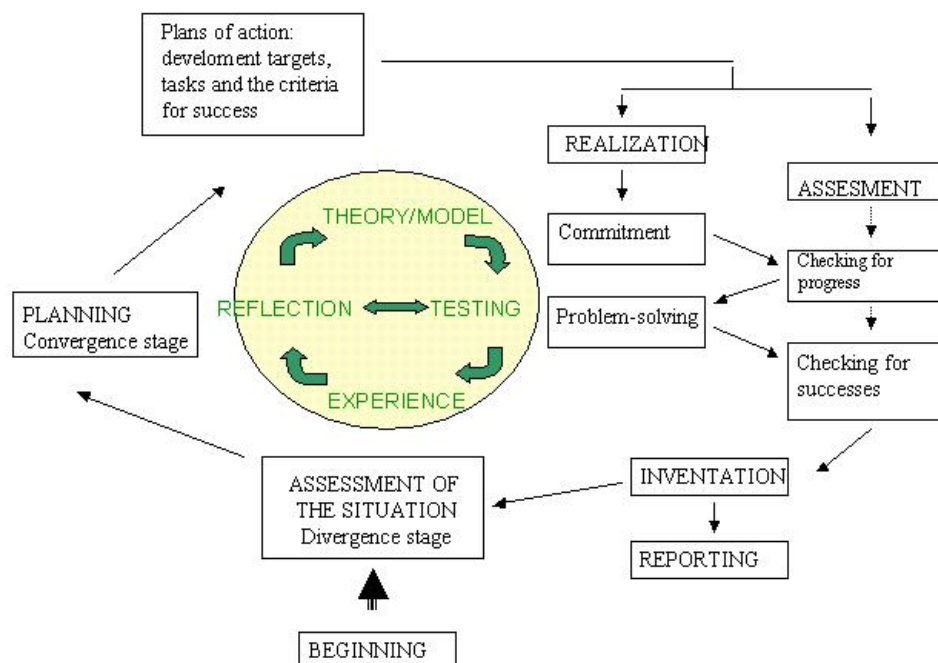


Diagram 2. Cooperative development process of a work community

A development process should start, according to the theory of experiential learning, with a thorough reflection of where one is and where one should get, based on each employee's own experiences and expectations. In this divergence stage, different cooperative techniques (meetings to map out problems, questionnaire, open discussion, guided cooperative process, etc.) are used to define the situation of the community or group at the moment. During the process, the community's strengths and development issues are examined in relation to the approved strategy. Reflection can also be targeted at daily practices, agreed rules, flow of communication, the relationship of everyday values to official values, mapping of learning, etc. The most important thing is that the staff feel that a successful process could lead to improved work conditions, well-being and motivation, and staff relationships.

After the review of the current situation, the evaluation proceeds to the convergence stage, whereby the issues to be developed are agreed upon, as well as their order of priority (the staff develop a theory/model of their own about how to proceed). What makes the model so useful is that, for example, a one-year plan can be drawn up for the organization using the model. It is important to agree a schedule for each target of development, i.e., when it is estimated to be at a stage in which the organization can move on to the next development issue.

As part of the plan, each target of development is assigned to a number of responsible members, including a definition of the criteria for success (i.e. how to verify that the process really proceeds and the goal is reached), and an appropriate follow-up procedure. In cooperative leadership, everyone chooses their participation in a project out of the 4-5 most important mutually agreed tasks at the beginning of the development process. The main thing is that everyone is a member in at least one development group.

In the course of the process, the project implementation (the testing stage for experiential learning) and assessment (reflection) go hand in hand at all times. In practise this means evaluations in the middle of the process, and reporting to all active members. Continuous evaluation is an especially important instrument of cooperative leadership, involving an attempt at a suitable balance between "pressure" and support. Support is particularly needed when the process is about to wither or when the skill and resources are about to run out. A leader can never leave the staff on their own, instead she always has to know where the community is going.

Defining the criteria for success in the beginning of each project and continuously redefining them as necessary will ensure that the process continues and that the staff remain motivated. Without documented, broad, concrete goals, the beginning situation is often forgotten. As a result, it is easy to feel that no progress was made. To

keep up persistence and an increasingly efficient process for the next target of development, a shared evaluation of what has been accomplished is imperative.

After the evaluation, conclusions are made about what has been learned and how the experiences and observations can be made use of in the future. Aiming at such a “meta stage” develops the organizational ability to deal with future processes. In this stage of the development process, the first circle of experiential learning is completed. The next cycle is started immediately after the previous one ends. At this stage, the staff has already gained new experiences, new knowledge and skill, that is to say, “the organization has learned”.

Agreeing on the individual responsibilities and the work schedule for the process at the very beginning is important for the work that is needed for a next target of development. The people who were handed the next target of development to undertake a couple of months previously have by now been able to do important subconscious mental work on their theme. Their selective attention has been focused on the target of development that they were actively involved in choosing. Due to this, the participants have been able to pay attention to, perhaps, an article, a book, a TV program, or a random discussion related to the topic of their choice. The employee in charge of the target may collect an article, jot down a note of what she heard or saw, and utilizes what she read in her own work, etc. She is working on the subject matter, even though the target of development might not be exactly actual at the moment. Thus the group has already acquainted itself with the matter better than the rest and will be ready to take over the responsibility of leading the development process. However, the responsible group itself will not do all the work needed for the project, but rather delegates and shares smaller tasks so that the agreed target of development gets done in due course.

### **Good meeting practises as an example of cooperative leadership**

According to my observations and the discussions I have had in my training, poorly planned conferences and meetings are the greatest loss of time in any organization. Conferences do not begin punctually as some of the participants are late to arrive to the conference room. Poorly planned things take up everyone’s time, an enormous amount of time is used for various announcements, only a few people speak, the discussion jumps from one subject to another, people may talk on the mobile phone during the meeting, they leave in the middle, the matters discussed do not involve everyone present, ... the list could go on forever.

Creating a cooperative culture and structures begins with cooperative meetings and conferences. A well-managed and smoothly running meeting or a conference serves as a miniature model of cooperative working for the whole organization. An efficient conference is the basis of any well-functioning organization. In Diagram 3, a model structure is given for a cooperative conference. It concentrates not so much on the technical issues of a conference, but is rather aimed at involving everyone in the meeting, genuinely and with keen interest.

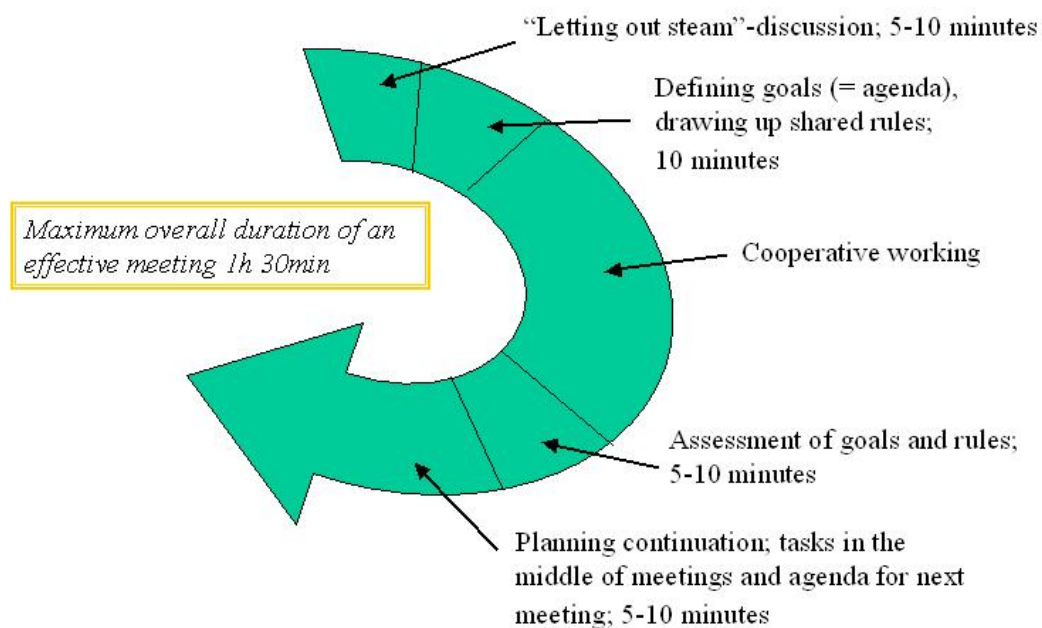


Diagram 3. Structure of a cooperative meeting

In a cooperative conference, everyone has a real possibility to participate in each stage of the meeting, including the preparation of each part. A useful practise for encouraging the involved people to arrive to the meeting room before the official beginning time is simply to offer them coffee or other refreshments during the informal talks. Free chatter helps them to detach from their present obligations and to orient themselves to the meeting, which will start exactly at the agreed time.

The choice of location and seating plays an important role in a cooperative conference; these choices will also convey the structure of cooperative leadership. It is customary that meetings are generally held in the same space time after time, and the same people may always sit on the same seats. The renewal of such physical structures starts naturally by taking this familiar practise openly under discussion. A meeting can start with a shared discussion in pairs on "why do we sit here, in this set-up?" After a few minutes' talk, the leader randomly asks what points came up

in the pairs. After a shared discussion, a decision is made to try out a new place for the next meeting and to consider the role of the location for the success of the meeting.

The interaction becomes more effective when the chairs are placed in the form of a circle and tables removed, especially in the case of discussion-based meetings and brainstorming sessions. And after all, why not have a meeting, especially small group planning sessions, for instance outside, in the garden? In a situation like this, some of the pair discussions can easily be done as a short stroll with a notebook to write down the ideas. At the end it is important to consider the new working methods together, reviewing the pros and cons of the experience.

Before going through the agenda, it is a good idea to check the schedules of the participants and to agree on the time of closing the meeting. By doing this, the leader can make sure that all the matters are discussed without interruptions, with no one leaving the meeting place before the end of the session. Besides, a time frame that is accepted together will usually result in a more disciplined discussion and a better resolution of all the points on the agenda. If some of the points cannot be resolved on time, everyone is conscious that an additional meeting is needed, or that the open issues will have to be moved to the agenda of the next meeting. It is imperative to close the meeting at the time decided together.

Defining and setting common goals is very important for commitment. In a well-prepared meeting, the agenda has been given to the participants well in time before the meeting. Including a suggestion for the decision of a given point, as discussed by the preparatory group, can be helpful especially in the case of difficult matters (see “planning continuation” later). As a result, the corridor discussions, so familiar in many organizations, are moved to the preceding days and everyone enters the meeting better prepared. If the agenda is not provided in advance, it is advisable to give the participants a few minutes for going through the points on the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. After this the chairperson can quickly ask the pairs for their opinion on how the points should be prioritized in the meeting.

Experience has shown that it is a good practise to divide the points on the agenda into three parts: announcements, points to be decided upon and points to be discussed. The announcements can be done more quickly by writing everything down on the agenda, and going through just the most important and question-provoking ones together. The function of the discussion points on the agenda is to be better prepared for the next meeting and possibly to agree on the persons to do some advance work on them in the meantime. In this context, cooperation is inherently

connected with the principle of equal participation whereby each member of the group is in turn responsible for the preparatory work.

In developing the practises for cooperative meetings, it is advisable to agree on a set of ground rules for a meeting. In my work, I have frequently come across with complaints that some people do not participate actively in a meeting. The fact that someone does not give an opinion in a meeting does not mean that she would not have one. The community is used to just a part of the participants discussing (usually the leadership and some actives), while others remain silent most of the time. Other frequent problems include, for instance, that the meeting does not stick to the points on the agenda, gets tangled with one point for too long, people do not listen to everyone's opinion equally, or cannot make clear decisions. Bringing such problems to daylight requires an open discussion in which everyone's experiences from the previous meetings are collected in pairs. It is a good idea to have enough time for this. A list of development issues for the meeting practises is created on the basis of material gained. These issues are then improved together systematically.

Using small group discussions and pair work to go through the most difficult matters on the agenda has proved to be extremely effective. After the proposal for the decision, each group is given a couple of minutes to agree on their opinion of the proposal, keeping in mind the principle that "everyone is ready to report". After this, for example, the leader asks each group member to assume an alphabet, A, B or C. Then the leader says that (for instance) member B of each group should prepare to give the group's opinion. In most cases, this makes sure that even the opposing opinions get the voice. No one is forced to talk in their own name, instead she can say "we were thinking with A and C here, that..." This procedure ties everyone firmly to the process, as everyone has to be able to explain the group's opinion on the matter.

The principles of positive interdependence and individual accountability become visible and tangible in cooperative work. Using group talk, or functions like that, might take a bit longer than the "ordinary" process, but in most cases it is well worth the extra time, by way of getting the points discussed properly and agreed on definitively.

In the evaluation stage, assessments once again take place in the pairs: how well did we meet the goals set? How did we succeed in working together? How did we work by the agreed rules?, etc. This stage will take about 5 minutes, but experience has shown that the time spent here will come back later in time that is saved through more effective meetings.

It is advisable to put the evaluation on the agenda, to make sure that it gets done. The goal of the evaluation is to find ways of improving future meeting practices, so the conclusions and agreements are written

down with this goal in mind. The question of who will be the chairperson and secretary in the future should also be discussed when considering improvements for the meeting practises. A practice of rotating order, changing the participants in these functions, has proved quite interesting. This practice makes the official leader of the group free to observe the participants' action from a different perspective. Sometimes it is advisable for the leadership not to take part in the discussion at all (or to enter only when the decisions are to be made), concentrating instead on observing the culture of decision making, the general atmosphere of the meeting, and so on.

Planning the continuation has been, along with evaluation, the most neglected part of the meetings. A general practice is that the schedule and location of the next meeting are settled, but other issues are left on the chairperson's responsibility. A very effective way of improving meetings is to have a discussion in the end on the points to be included on the agenda for the next meeting. At the same time, it is easy to agree on the participants in charge of preparing each point. This procedure involves members of the groups more firmly in the agenda. It is also in the spirit of cooperative leadership that everyone has a possibility to influence on the points that she will prepare. It is a good practice to work by the principle of equal participation and keeping a record on each member's contributions to the preparatory work.

The practice of good meetings discussed above is a firm step towards a cooperative work place culture, be it in the context of developing an organization or, let's say, of political decision-making. In many work places, the participants have made it a practice to display the model in Diagram 3 on the wall or on the tables of the meeting room, to remind everybody of the common principles of action. At the same time, the leadership team has agreed that each of them will use the same model consistently in all of the conferences and meetings they conduct. When this practice is observed regularly for a year's time or so, the mindset and culture of a cooperative meeting will spread to all conferences, meetings and discussions within the organization. Through this culture, the basis is laid for even wider cooperation in the functions of the organization.

### **Some concluding thoughts on growing into cooperative leadership**

Cooperative leadership is one practice of leadership among others. There are occasions when an authoritarian, strict, directive leadership position needs to be taken. Sometimes, luckily very seldom, even a raised voice is needed to "wake up" an employee to reality. On the other hand, when one wants to improve the social skills of the staff and enhance everyone's self-esteem, authority and aggression will not work; cooperation is



needed. It is important for the cooperative leader to have a repertoire of leadership practices and techniques, while remembering that a leader who is inspiring, professional, genuinely listening, and works according to the official values, is always needed.

My journey to the philosophy of cooperative learning and leadership, within the past 15 years, has been a very important process in my personal and professional growth. In my “previous life” as a coach for teachers I had thought and acted according to doctrines I had received in the 1970s. Looking back now from a distance, I have to admit that it was extremely difficult for me to unlearn my deep-rooted practices. The process of changing my professional identity from a classroom teacher to the instructor, head teacher and supporter, and finally a cooperative leader and educator, as I understand it from experiential learning theories, has been a long journey of personal discovery.

Even though I have understood the cooperative philosophy in theory, it has been far more difficult and slower for me to integrate it, emotionally, with my personal values in such a way that it has become a natural part of all my work as an educator. I assume that I was able to live more by the philosophy as the primary school head teacher, as soon as I realized that I could not do well without the support, collegial responsibility and participation of the community. Reflecting on my experiential learning autobiography, I find it easy to understand the immense task that leaders have to face in attempting to renew the culture of their work community towards the cooperative goal direction.

I am convinced that a significant individual change begins with an internal conflict in one’s own thinking and personal values. One of the most important tasks of a leader is to launch such a process of conflict with the help of catalytic questions and his/her own modelling of cooperative leadership, in other words, “walking her talk in”, as the saying goes in this context. To inspire a genuine motivation and desire for the change, she must encourage and facilitate everyone to understand her own need for the new ways of relating to others in the work place. This is a question of knowledge, will and deep-rooted values and attitudes.

My experiences of leadership education based on cooperative philosophy are very encouraging. In pursuing for a profound change in the behaviour, basic assumptions and the culture of the staff, cooperative leaders will continuously bump into new challenges. Most of the time the challenges are due to the participants not being used to voice their opinions in a large group, or to assume power and take a socially responsible stance in their own work.

When an employee has learned to live and work in a culture in which the leader gives orders and tells what to do, assuming a new kind of cooperative basic orientation is understandably a big step. It is hard for

her to learn to function in an interactive culture in which everyone has an opportunity to make decisions and choose one's way of working, with regard to the similar rights and duties of the others. One of the greatest challenges with delegating the tasks, from the leader's point of view, is that teaching something totally new to an employee usually takes up a lot of time from both the leader and the employee. The leader often has a temptation to fall in the "I'll-do-it-myself" trap. This in turn means that the she loses the time that could have been saved through delegation, and the employee loses the opportunity to learn a new, challenging working orientation and the potential of growth entailed in it. Both parties, then, will need a great deal of new knowledge, skill and support, and patience, in the new kind of learning process.

Growing older, I have also thought a lot about the foundation of the values on which ethical action, as I understand it, can be reasonably based. Reflecting again on my own experiences, it seems to me that what is essentially involved in cooperative leadership is nothing less than our very conception of man, that is, what it means to be a human being in today's world. This is the conception on which we inevitably build our thinking, action and human relationships. Veli-Pekka Toivonen conveyed this idea aptly in one of our numerous discussions on the matter as follows: *"Basically, the question is about how to construct a working model that accepts the wretched nature of humans (in other words, selfishness in all of us). With the help of an external power (Christian values foundation, forgiveness, shared ethically lasting values, shared rules, and the benefits of the common good and individual good on the same line), it is possible to choose a better way of living as a human being and undertake that as a commitment for personal enhancement."*

An immediate consequence of this thinking for leadership education is that there has to be a continuous discussion and agreement concerning the values that guide an organization and its leadership. At the same time, it is also good to create ground rules for constructive conflict resolution, agree on a permission to fail and to accept forgiveness as part of the organizational culture. In this context, forgiveness means abstaining from judgment. An organization in which failures are seen as part of development, not as something to be afraid or ashamed of, is usually a creative and successful community. The people in such organization are eager to learn from both their successes and mistakes. The organization explores together what factors contributed to an outcome and agrees on how to function in similar situations in the future, based on this lived experience. Working in an organization in which reflection has become an everyday practice is pleasant and everyone feels well.

Value discussions, which have proved important for development and success, have generally become more frequent during the past decade. Debates on values take place, not only in work communities, but almost everywhere where people strive for a common goal. A good example is my current hometown, Lahti, where decision-makers and hundreds of people have managed to meet several times over the past few years to discuss the values on which the municipal decisions can be based. Among the lecturers for the first seminar (in 2004) was philosopher Maija-Riitta Ollila. A local newspaper (Etelä-Suomen Sanomat, 29.1.2004) highlighted “generosity” and “**control of greed?**” from her theses. According to Ollila, futurologists have agreed that *“generosity is one of the values of the future. Knowledge is beneficial when your friend has it too. Then it can also be developed.”* This is a good basis for cooperative, interactive leadership. Where generosity prevails, knowledge is not kept away from others in the organization. Positive experiences, gained from benchmarking and networking, will enhance the significance of this value.

The second future value raised by Ollila, “**control of greed?**,” is explained by the increased number of daily choices we have to make. *“When life is nothing but choices, we no longer have time for anything else. We are always running somewhere, filling life with new choices. We need to choose less”*, Ollila concludes. This also applies to everyday work in cooperative leadership. In agreeing on the targets of development and deciding how to proceed, we often choose too many things **and kind of force ourselves to proceed?** too fast. In reality, our choices are driven by our values, and haste is the offspring of wrong choices. Are we unable to decide what is important to us, even though everyone should have time for what they consider really important for them? This is why we need to develop the kind of work community model shown in Diagram 2—to make principled choices, and agree on the responsibilities and schedules according to it.

It is **perhaps surprising?** to see that further grounds for increasing cooperation are also found in human well-being. According to Markku T. Hyyppä (2002), mutual solidarity improves the well-being of the population. In his research on the Swedish-speaking population of the Finnish coastal regions, he has come to the conclusion that they live longer and are healthier and more alert than other Finnish people. According to Hyyppä, it is important to build social capital based on interaction, participation, community-mindedness and shared trust among people. It is a question of the way of encountering others and living with them, with the goal of attempting to help others, trust in them and do something for the common good. An interactive cooperative network, or social capital, cannot be stored nor collected for a rainy day. Instead, it is

born out of common activities and shared trust, and vanishes in the lack of these properties.

Hyypä compares a community of this kind to the Moomin Valley. Peace, trust-based interaction, compassion—and peaceful pace—reign, even though there are all sorts of things happening all the time. People work together and separately, but they find each other when needed. Even though the community is seemingly closed and situated in a valley, its inhabitants travel out, return, and when visitors come there, they are immediately welcomed and accepted. This kind of Moomin Valley is a permissive, healthy community. I think these observations are largely about the same things as in the philosophy of cooperative leadership: social skills, open interaction, equal dialogue and constructive dealing with conflict situations. These factors are the basis for trust, and through trust, also for the evolution of a well-functioning work community.

In this article I have attempted to find both ethical and value-based grounds for cooperative leadership and growing into it. As a result we have an ideal of leadership, which would need almost inhuman functioning to succeed. Each leader is naturally responsible for their own growth, which has its basis in their own thinking and action.

In the first place, the leader first has to learn to act in the way he would like the whole organization to function. She has to learn how to meet, listen, support and wonder at people, and how to be constructively critical. This also has to do with knowing oneself. Tommy Hellsten says that *“a human being finds her identity in finding her own weaknesses. A humble person knows who she is, and he can afford to listen to others.”* Humility is a strength that does not deny weakness. It is a realistic characteristic that has its background in experiences of dealing with failures and weaknesses, and acknowledging them. The reward of humility is that a person learns to see her own limited scope and resources. The beginning of this kind of strength is thus in encountering one’s weakness.

Weakness also creates love. Through love, we can eventually grasp what in the end is lasting and valuable in life (Hellsten 2001.) Caring and loving are thus in the centre of growing to be a strong cooperative leader. On the other hand, caring and closeness are born out of truthfulness and open encountering of others in which even weaknesses are laid out in the open. Wisdom and personal growth are more about asking questions and wondering at things than about the answers. This line of thought is in accordance with the creation of a cooperative learning organization. We need each other’s help for reciprocal personal growth.

For Hellsten (2001), a good leader is also a hero. He says that a person who has the ability to listen to his/her own inner voice and act accordingly is a hero, even though the community does not necessarily

recognize it. Such a person makes her decisions based on her inner motives and values to which she is so strongly committed that they guide her action, and encourage others to follow her in her pursuit. Being a hero is also daring as it also entails confessing one's own vulnerability and failures. A good leader encourages the staff to be the hero from time to time. Hellsten makes a brave conclusion that a true **loyalty to an employer also means that a work community is willing to accept the crises it needs for growth?** The challenge is whether the leadership and rest of the staff are willing and able to face the crises and to what extent they can solve the problems arising in the process. Further heroic features include the courage to raise difficult matters for discussion and courage to put away the matters already discussed. One hears more by making space to others than by talking oneself. And after all, it is the opinion of the others that the leader needs for backing up a decision.

A cooperative leader, listening to her staff's interests genuinely, realizes that her action **may be driven** by the rush in the hectic working life. A strong leader takes the courage to step out of this rush when it is sensible for the well-being of the leader herself and the whole work community. In this way she guides others to make choices that are in favour of the community's values. At worst, an employee **may feel forced to make** work-related decisions against her own values. This results in a reduced job satisfaction, diminished motivation and fatigue. I wish to argue that we do not get exhausted by too heavy work loads, but rather by meaningless, monotonous work that goes against our own values. This again offers a challenge for a leader: how to encourage people to feel important in work and take on tasks that they conceive meaningful.

A cooperative leader has clear vision-based targets and goals, and the need to carry out the goals with the employees. To proceed in her goals, she has to be able to create a shared space of negotiation with the staff. Such a process supports employees' commitment for the goals and their positive goal-interdependence. Their feelings of satisfaction in relation to their needs encourage people to work together.

This is where the leader has made herself, as it were, almost "redundant" in terms of the acceptance of the basic goals in the work place. The staff is ready to work for the shared vision, leaving the leader some time to develop it further, to create resources, keep up connections, to develop herself and look after the staff. A positive whirlpool effect has been created—the whole work community develops while the employees and the leadership support each other and work together to resolve even difficult situations. At the same time, the organization functions as if it consisted of small-size enterprises, with the employees working in an entrepreneurial way in them. When this happens a cooperative learning

organization is born, in which every member also has the courage to take responsibility for a shared leadership.

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