

Building of the kitchen-table: in search of an alternative model for in-company leadership development programs

Authors

Chris Sigaloff, senior advisor at Knowledgeland (Kennisland)

Iselien Nabben, senior program manager at Nyenrode Business University

Erwin Bergsma, senior HR Advisor at the SVB

1. Introduction

In 2006 Nyenrode Business University developed a leadership development program for the Dutch Social Insurance Bank (the SVB) which is responsible for the administration of state pensions, child benefits and other social insurances. The program was entitled: “The kitchen-table: a platform for change and leadership”, and its aim was to support the top management in a process of change.

The purpose of this process of change, which had been instigated by the Minister of Internal Affairs, was to transform the SVB from a social insurance ‘factory’ into a more user-oriented and innovative service organization. Many activities had been introduced, such as the development of a strategic plan, a blueprint for the implementation thereof, and the setup of an internal change organization responsible for its implementation. Real change, however, in how the managers worked had not yet taken place. It was felt that the organization was caught in a deadlock situation. The main reason for this deadlock was the lack of collaboration and interaction between the top management, with the result that managers looked for scapegoats and shied away from accepting responsibility or taking initiative; there was an overall feeling of frustration.

The top management group, consisting of forty people, included the board of directors, the managers at the head office, the directors of the field offices and a group of managers specifically responsible for implementing the process of change. Thus, the group was diverse, including different hierarchical levels. The various subgroups had different perspectives and interests concerning the changes at hand.

Initially the SVB approached Nyenrode Business University for a leadership development program which could provide the necessary input in order to change the behavior of the individual managers. However, as we started investigating, the focus of the program changed from individual learning to more collective learning. The main issue was not changing individual behavior per se, but changing the way the whole system works together. We conceived of the following image: we would focus not so much on the space between people’s ears but on the space between people’s noses!

As the title of the program suggests, the program was set up in such a way that a space was created for the management group to become a collective in which they could search and

experiment with innovative ways of working. The kitchen table (aside from being covered in food) is the place in the household where family members meet and discuss problems and (with a bit of luck) come up with solutions. The kitchen table is not exclusive, it is also a place where guests can join in. One may argue that organizations miss a place like this; the boardroom table has a different connotation, and is often characterized by formal talk, strict hierarchy, hidden rules, and decisions made by few.

Before elaborating on the design of the program, and why we believe it is an innovative approach, we will present a theoretical framework on innovation and change, and subsequently on learning and on the function of leadership development programs. After presenting this framework we will go into the practical implications of a leadership development program, its design, its results, the criteria for its success, and the lessons learned for Nyenrode, for the SVB, and for our thinking on the concept of learning in general.

2. A theoretical framework: in search of a new approach towards learning

Most thinking about organizations is based on the premise that organizations have to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the outside world. Change-programs are based on attempts to remodel the organization so that it makes the best fit with the outside world. The responsibility for changing organizations, change based on top-down control and instruction, lies in the hands of the top managers.

Means frequently used in attempting to induce change are strategic plans, blueprints, projects, implementation programs *and* leadership development programs. Leadership development programs are often meant to professionalize the managers responsible for implementing a process of change. The underlying thought is that by changing individual behavior through introducing new perspectives and skills, organizational change will also take place.

This 'classical' perspective might be characterized as what Varela (1984) calls an 'input-type description', which describes the way an organization interacts in specific ways with its environment, through a well-defined set of inputs followed by a transfer function. This has been the dominant stance for understanding natural systems, such as the brain, and, by analogy, social systems. Likewise, many of the theories on organizations, change and management are based on this perspective.

Unfortunately, this approach used for improving organizations remains mainly unsuccessful. Beer and Eisenstat (1990) concluded that most change programs do *not* produce change! For one thing, it is often not clear what the exact identity and boundary is of what needs to change, since humans transcend any particular property attributed to them. Secondly, it proves difficult to identify which of the existing variables (assuming that they exist) need to be introduced in order to lead to the desired change. As a result, one is often confronted with the fact that change driven by input-type description not only leads to meager results but also creates negative side effects. These kinds of interventions, intended to do good, often do more harm than good.

Luckily, Varela offers an alternative perspective: the possibility of viewing an organization as an 'operationally-closed system' which cannot be described by a set of inputs, but rather by the nature of its internal coherence which arises out of its interconnectedness.

By using this perspective the question is not how organizations change (since they change all the time) but how organizations can maintain self-organization within constraints, therefore learning how to survive, adapt and renew themselves. Internal freedom is then possible as long as there is enough interaction and therefore enough variation.

This distinction between 'input-type description' and 'closure-type description' can also be applied to leadership development programs. The main consequence of this is that leadership development is no longer seen as an educational program in which managers are supplemented in their knowledge or changed in their behavior, but as a support system in which managers can operate as a collective in which problem-solving and innovative capabilities are increased by stimulating interaction, variation and new forms of leadership. This implies that a leadership program is not about transferring knowledge, but about supporting the collective so that it can itself create the knowledge necessary in order to improve and innovate.

3. Getting started: setting the kitchen table

After having received our assignment from the board of directors, we did *not* design a program, but we started with a round of interviews with the different actors involved. It quickly became apparent that people in different positions within the organization had different - often opposing - perspectives on the situation. There was definitely pain in the organization but that pain was felt in different ways depending on the position one had. It became apparent that the need for change, which was outlined in the strategic plan, was not subject to criticism, but the way to achieve it was.

After these interviews, we organized a management meeting for the whole group of top managers, in which we discussed our findings and presented different approaches on how to deal with them. The theoretical distinction outlined above was presented.

This meeting, which released a lot of energy, resulted in a collective agreement to embark on a process guided by the closure-type description (although this term was never used) in which the main focus would be on improving the self-organizing capacity of the top management. It was here that the name 'Kitchen-table program' was born.

The management group continued by identifying the following objectives for the program:

- to improve the quality of the relationships within the top management group;
- to clarify one's perceptions of one's various roles and responsibilities;
- to encourage the taking of initiative and responsibility, thereby strengthening leadership;
- to improve the work-climate and atmosphere, resulting in more fun in the workplace;

- to create a better view of and understanding of the needs of the outside world (clients, users, political realities);
- to strengthen the connection between daily work and the process of change.

Furthermore, it was stated that it would be important for the leadership development program to cooperate closely with the internal change organization responsible for the implementation. It was agreed, therefore, that the project leaders specifically responsible for the change process would participate in the program, as would also the board of directors.

Finally, a steering-team was formed, consisting of managers representing the different groups in the organization. The steering-team would be responsible for designing, monitoring and adapting the program to ongoing developments. The program managers of Nyenrode were part of the steering-team, as well as the HR advisor, who was the internal project leader. It was also agreed that there would be regular meetings between members of the steering-team and the board of directors.

4. The program itself: the ingredients of the kitchen-table

The kitchen-table program consisted of a framework which, on the one hand, provided necessary structure, and, on the other, provided room for improvisation, flexibility and a sense of ownership.

Essential to the proper functioning of the framework was that it would not be extraneous to the standing organization itself (as the ‘classical’ approach is almost by definition)—but would have sufficient mandate to actually change the SVB: that what happened at the kitchen table also needed to influence what happened at the boardroom table.

In order to achieve this we created a program consisting of three elements:

1. modules at Nyenrode University;
2. breakthrough issues led by breakthrough groups;
3. the annual management meetings, incorporated as part of the program.

Three modules of two days each took place on the Nyenrode campus. At these modules the whole group came together and the different viewpoints were examined. Furthermore, the modules were set up as a type of simulation in which one could experiment with new ways of communicating and working together. The modules were open for ‘guests’ from the outside, such as experts, politicians, coaches, teachers, clients, etc. Very important, finally, was reflection upon the results of the various inputs and interactions, and how these results could be transferred to the standing organization.

The breakthrough issues were issues identified by the entire group as being crucial for making the process of change successful. Groups of managers - in different actor configurations - tackled these issues, and, in fact, concrete results were achieved. We called these groups breakthrough groups. These groups tackled orthodox problems in unorthodox ways. Each group was provided with the support of a mentor. The results and outcomes were presented at the final meeting. The groups did most of their work on their own outside

of the modules at Nyenrode, although in all of the modules there was room for reflection and exchange.

The kitchen-table program started and ended with the SVB's own annual management meetings. At these meetings the link was made between the kitchen table and the boardroom. The final meeting ended with a new agenda for the coming year, incorporating the results of the breakthrough groups.

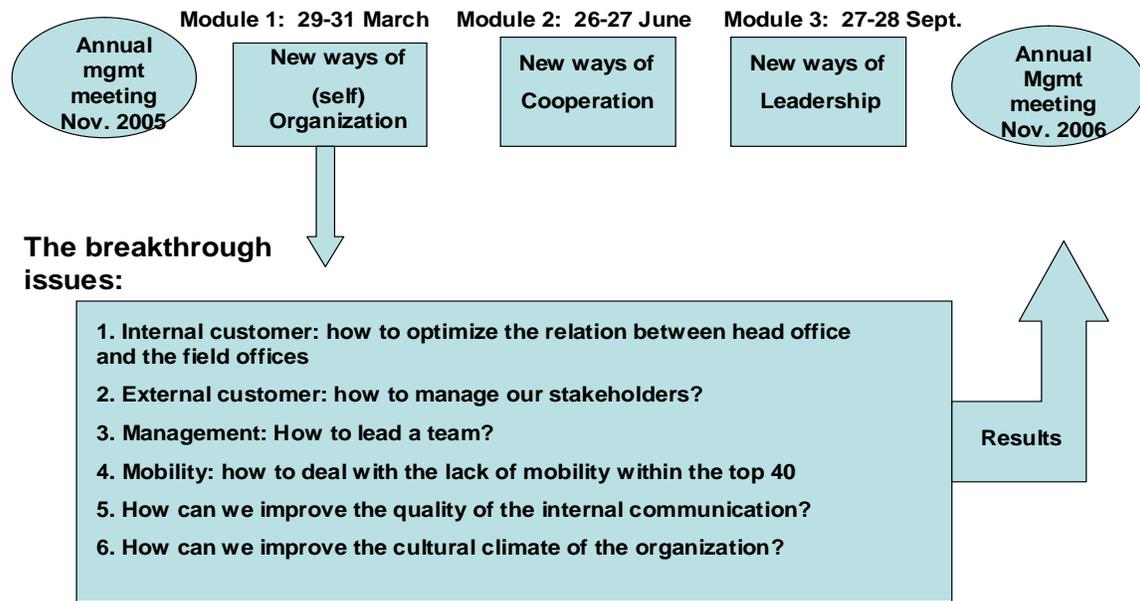


figure 1: the basic outline of the program

5. Results

The program as a whole has been viewed as being successful by the SVB. The main achievement has been the improved climate within the top management group, which increased their cooperation and their effectiveness. It became possible to view internal differences as strengths rather than as weaknesses and the group gained experience in communicating, coordinating actions and making decisions more effectively. Besides having solved some crucial problems, the management group increased its problem-solving capability. Furthermore, the program created energy and momentum and generated a feeling of confidence because a deadlock situation had been turned around.

Besides these collective results, individuals reported that the program had brought them a general feeling of positivism, a clearer view of the dynamics of change, a greater insight into the different positions within the organization and a strengthened sense of leadership.

Although, the breakthrough issues were an important part of the program, they were not the easiest. It was here that tension arose between the logic of the standing organization and the logic of the participants in the breakthrough groups. The organization, unsurprisingly, adhered to the input-type approach, while the breakthrough groups were trying to find new solutions for old problems by stepping off the beaten track, taking small steps without knowing exactly where they were going. Especially when tension mounted, the standing organization had difficulties in accepting the way the breakthrough groups functioned, and tried to marginalize the results.

The breakthrough issues:	Concrete results:
1. The internal customer; how to optimize the relations between head office and the field offices?	An investigation in supportive and destructive patterns; agreements on how to work together in the new situation
2. External Customer; how to manage our stakeholders?	'Open House' meetings with clients and political stakeholders
3. Management; how to lead a team?	Renewed self confidence and personal growth of the participants in the specific breakthrough group
4. Mobility; how to deal with the lack of mobility within the top 40	A job-hopping carrousel which gave the opportunity to switch jobs for a short period of time
5. Culture: How can we improve the quality of the internal communication	The building of a structure for collegial consultation within the top 40
6. How can we improve the cultural climate of the organization?	The set up of SVB cabaret performances with the intention to stimulate humor and fun

Figure 2: results of the breakthrough groups

The aspect that turned out to be the most challenging was the ambition to connect the leadership development program with the standing organization. There continued to be pressure to keep the kitchen-table separate from the boardroom. There even seemed to be a territory conflict between two logics, namely the logic of the change organization, which adhered to the input-type description, and the logic of the leadership development program, which chose for the closure model. Although the kitchen-table specifically had tried to build bridges by incorporating the breakthrough issues and the annual meetings, it became clear that when conflicts of interest became manifest, the old hierarchical relationships would inevitably dominate.

6. Success criteria – what made it innovative?

We believe that the major distinction of the kitchen-table program was that it was designed and managed according to the closure-type description instead of the classical input-type description. This implied that the leadership development program was not seen as an educational program (an expert system) but as a support program in which managers could

become a collective in which they themselves could find and create solutions to the problems confronting their organizations.

It is one thing to be clear about an ambition, it is another to realize it.

The following points, in our estimation, have been crucial to the kitchen-table's success:

- we did not start by presenting an outline of a program but created a setting in which the management group gave voice to the kind of support they desired;
- the level of cooperation between Nyenrode and the SVB was high (the role played by the steering-group was effective);
- a program was created that was flexible and open enough to anticipate and adapt to the ongoing process;
- a program was set up in such a way that it functioned as a simulation of the desired way of working and leading, instead of a program which mainly talked *about* leadership and improved ways of working;
- breakthrough groups focused on experimentation and action;
- the annual management meetings were incorporated into the program in order to link the kitchen-table to the boardroom.

Finally, something can be said about our role as program managers. Our aim was to create a collective which was able to generate new relevant knowledge. This was done, not by using fixed techniques or methods (often limiting the freedom of the participants), but by (1) eliciting the variety of inputs, by (2) re-ordering and recombining them so that new possibilities for action could arise, and (3) by creating space for reflection and re-thinking which could lead to stable and sustainable modes and patterns of organization and learning.

7. Lessons learned

As the program developed and results were evaluated, it became clear that the program for the SVB differed substantially from traditional leadership development programs. The image of the kitchen-table helped us in articulating some of the substantial differences. We believe that our experiences can be of use to Nyenrode, to the SVB, and to thinking about the concept of learning in general.

For Nyenrode the kitchen-table program can serve as a model for future leadership development programs which aim to support organizations in their process of change and innovation. Although the specifics of the program are not replicable, (as it was created for one particular organization, the SVB), the various building blocks can be used in other programs. Programs must have a so-called open architecture, meaning that the structure is designed but that the participants themselves create the content.

An important lesson for the SVB is that in order to really change it is necessary not to treat a leadership development program as just another project in which one gives an assignment, delegates it and afterwards measures its outcome; if a leadership development program is meant to be an instigator of change and innovation, it must be able to play according to other rules and also have sufficient authority. This means that even when tension mounts

the mandate of the program must be safeguarded. Only then can the old and the new approaches towards change and learning supplement each other.

Finally, we can say that the experience of this leadership development program brought us a richer understanding of the notion of learning. According to Bernard Scott (2001), it seems beneficial to view learning as a process of adaptation in which systems survive by adapting to their world and by actively becoming 'informed' of how their worlds work. In addition, humans learn intentionally. We consciously set ourselves goals. We deliberately practice habits and skills. We reflect, conceptualize and converse. We share ideas and come together to learn and to teach. Learning is not so much about 'acquiring' knowledge but can be understood as a process of knowing and coming to know.

From this stance, a leadership development program which has the aim of supporting an organization in its process of change, should not focus on the transmission of knowledge to managers, but on creating a setting in which learners and teachers are much more in conversation with one another, hopefully leading to new relevant knowledge. Thus, learning as a conversation, a conversation which might as well take place at the kitchen table.

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