

In 2005, Nordisk Kommunikation consultancy conducted an in-depth survey involving 24 Scandinavian companies. The study revealed that line managers lacked important communication skills, restricting their effectiveness as leaders. Here, Pelle Carlo Nilsson and Thomas Heilskov describe how, together with a group of 13 organizations, they've developed a toolkit to guide and support managers.

Creating a versatile toolkit to support managers

The development process behind Nordisk Kommunikation's toolkit

By Pelle Carlo Nilsson and Thomas Heilskov

Last year, Nordisk Kommunikation conducted a major survey among 22,000 employees from 24 large Scandinavian companies. One of the key results from this survey was that line-manager communication skills were clearly insufficient. Confronted with the results, we decided to look for new ways to help managers become better communicators.

One of the solutions was an interesting co-project between 13 major companies from Denmark and Sweden. The ambition was to develop a communication toolkit to support managers in everyday communication with their teams. With input from all the companies involved, this project has now been finalized. This article describes how the toolkit was developed, its contents and purpose.

Identifying communication needs

The first and most important step was identifying what managers with different positions and levels

of experience need to become better communicators. To do this, we involved key individuals from the HR and communication functions in each participating organization.

The role of this team was to be responsible for conducting audits in their respective companies. They conducted interviews with specialists and managers in different positions within their organizations. In the interviews, managers were asked to identify what they perceived as their biggest challenges when communicating with employees. They were then asked to suggest the kind of tools they felt could help them be more effective communicators.

Based on the input from the audits conducted in each company, we created a database to capture managers' communication needs and a list of tools that could help them.

We then started to prioritize the needs captured on the database by how frequently they appeared. The most frequently listed challenges in the database related to issues such as:

- The ability to communicate effectively during change.
- How to conduct effective meetings.
- Creating a real dialogue with team members.

- How to plan communication effectively.

At the end of this initial stage of the process, we had a list of the key communication challenges that managers deal with most frequently in their everyday working lives.

Developing the tools

The next step of the process was developing appropriate tools to help managers deal with each these communication challenges. This part of the process was based on extensive best-practice research. We reviewed a number of different tools already in use in other organizations.

Based on our initial research, we knew that we had to develop a set of tools that were flexible to suit managers with different levels of experience and different approaches. For example, we found that senior leaders were looking for short and precise checklists of what to do, while less experienced managers were looking for more explanations, examples, templates and preparation sheets.

The solution was to create a set of tools that could be adapted to suit the person using them. It was also necessary to deliver the tools in two formats, as text documents and PowerPoint presentations. This was because managers felt that in some situations they would need a presentation to support discussions with their teams, while in others they needed a document to use for their own planning.

Testing the toolkit

The next step – a valuable part of the process – was to test the toolkit with potential users. To do this, each of the 13 companies involved was asked to take the toolkit back to their organization and test it with managers at different levels in the organization.

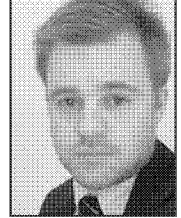
Before this initial testing, we incorrectly assumed that our many years of experience as consultants and trainers, along with our research into managers' communication needs, had given us the knowledge we needed to create a great toolkit. We thought these tests would simply confirm our own assumptions and possibly prompt some minor adjustments, if any. But testing the toolkit opened our eyes to a number of important issues we hadn't anticipated.

One example is the feedback we received on one of the tools developed to help managers conduct effective meetings. The tool was quite basic. It focused on what to do before, during and after meetings. The test revealed that this

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worked well with junior managers with less experience, but it didn't fulfill the needs of senior managers. Having mastered the more basic techniques already, they were looking for inspiration on alternative ways to conduct effective meetings (see Figure One, page 24).

It was clear from the first phase of testing that we would need to conduct further tests to refine and improve our toolkit.

Incorporating more flexibility

Feedback from the first testing phase confirmed that a central feature for a great communication toolkit is versatility. The tool has to meet different needs and levels of experience.

To provide this versatility, we adjusted each tool so that it offered a combination of features, such as:

- process models;
- checklists;
- tips and concrete examples, Q&A's and preparations sheets.

Making each tool a combination of different features turned out to be the right way to go.

Reassuringly, the final phase of evaluation showed that our redesign had been successful. ▶

↓ KEY POINTS

- In 2005, Nordisk Kommunikation launched a project with 13 major Scandinavian companies, to develop a toolkit to support managers in everyday communications with their teams.
- Research highlighted common issues with activities such as change communication, planning, team meetings and feedback.
- After reviewing existing tools in other companies, the development team created a toolkit that would be adaptable to individual needs, levels of experience and situations.
- Vigorous testing of the tools along the way highlighted the importance of versatility. To be effective, each tool had to contain a combination of different features.

Figure One: Suggestions for different types of team meetings

Meeting type	Why?	How to conduct the meeting
The stand-up meeting	Saves time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone standing up • Maximum 8-10 people • Work on a flipchart
The walk-and-talk meeting	Generates new ideas quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk during the meeting • Maximum 3-5 people • Only a few agenda points
The “Kaizen” meeting	Helps find and implement improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point out the challenges • Define alternatives • Decide alternative • Formulate next steps and action plan • Follow up on a regular basis
The problem-solving meeting	Generates quick solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and share the problem • Analyze the problem • Develop ways to solve the problem • Combine and choose solutions • Formulate next steps
The brainstorming meeting	Generates new ideas quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide where new ideas are needed • Specify a brief meeting time (10 mins) • Point out basic rules (the aim is to get lots of new ideas – not criticize, evaluate or judge) • Share ideas on a flipchart • Agree the best idea(s)
The 15-minute “nagging” meeting	Gives you a new starting point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone participates around the table providing short comments • Continue for a maximum of 15 minutes • Wrap up • Decide actions • Follow up at next meeting

Contents of the toolkit

Based on the list of communication challenges identified at the start of the project, the final version of the toolkit contains 12 tools to be used in everyday communications. These tools address:

- 1) **Evaluation.** A 360-degree self-evaluation tool

- 2) **Handling communication during a change process.** This tool helps ensure that messages about organizational change make sense and are accepted by employees.
- 3) **Streamlining meetings.** Hints, models and ideas to improve the efficiency of meetings.
- 4) **Giving feedback.** Simple guidelines on how to give positive feedback and handle dissent constructively.
- 5) **Planning communication.** A tool for step-by-step planning and quality control of communication efforts.
- 6) **Translating key messages.** A method for translating the company’s main goals and strategies, and enhancing their relevancy to the individual employee.
- 7) **Creating dialogue.** Checklists, meeting schedules and ideas to create “real” dialogue with colleagues.
- 8) **Coaching.** A simple tool for both planned and spontaneous coaching sessions, along with a guide on how to ask the right questions.
- 9) **Storytelling.** A step-by-step model for the creation of good narrative in terms of structure, figurative language and metaphors.
- 10) **Creating a communication contract.** A method for clarifying the manager’s and employees’ mutual expectations for communication, at the outset.
- 11) **Newsletters.** Hints and ideas on how to write an effective newsletter.
- 12) **Improving the communication system.** A method to clarify and improve the efficiency of a manager’s personal communication system.

↓ FIVE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF A TOOLKIT

Nordisk Kommunikation lists five essential ingredients for a successful communication toolkit for managers:

1. It’s a bit like an advent calendar with different doors that you can choose depending on the situation.
2. It consists of detailed and concrete instructions from A-Z, like recipes in a good cookbook.
3. It includes templates that managers can work in directly, for example, a template for developing a communication plan.
4. It provides inspiration and examples of different ways to solve specific communication problems.
5. It uses terms and expressions that are familiar to managers, avoiding jargon from HR or the communication function.

Rolling out the toolkit

The 13 companies involved in the project are currently in the process of rolling out the toolkit in their respective organizations. Each company has employed their own strategy, but common techniques include:

- 1) A large-scale roll-out – introducing the whole toolkit across the organization.
- 2) A gradual roll-out – introducing managers to a few tools at a time and thus slowly rolling out the toolkit.
- 3) A selective roll-out – introducing the toolkit via training programs and when providing support for specific situations.

When carrying out implementation workshops

for the participating companies, discussions around different roll-out strategies showed that there are pros and cons to each.

For example, with a large-scale roll-out, organizations will benefit from the momentum of the project and enjoy a certain buzz around the toolkit while it's new and newsworthy. This also creates a general sense of goodwill towards the communication department, which in turn helps to promote the profile of the communication function and their role in supporting manager communication.

However, a potential pitfall with this kind roll-out is that after a certain period of time, awareness and interest in the tools will perhaps start to dwindle. It becomes a challenge for the communication function to maintain awareness of the toolkit and promote its use.

In conclusion, the most effective roll-out strategy will depend on the specific situation in the organization where it's being used.

Further developments

The next step for this project involves making an interactive web version of the toolkit, enabling it to be used and accessed via the company intranet. We also plan to collate and share experiences of working with the toolkit from each of the 13 companies involved, with a view to making adjustments where necessary and possibly introducing new tools where necessary. The participating companies will meet on a regular basis in 2007 to share their findings and discuss further developments.

To read more about this toolkit go to: <http://www.nordisk-kommunikation.com/toolbox/english.php>

↓ EVALUATING MANAGERS' SKILLS

An important starting point for many managers when it comes to improving their communication skills, is developing a clearer idea of where they need to focus attention. For this reason, one important element of the toolkit developed by Nordisk Kommunikation revolves around helping managers to evaluate their own communication skills.

Figure Two (below), is an example of a model developed to help managers with self-evaluation, making them more aware of their responsibilities as communicators. The model is part of a 360-degree communication evaluation tool, included in the toolkit. The components of the tool are:

- A PowerPoint presentation.
- Invitations to people participating in the evaluation process.
- Evaluation sheets to hand out to the manager's own manager, other managers working at the same level and team members, to get a broad perspective of skills and how others perceive you.
- An action plan. This section encourages managers to discuss issues with an HR consultant, their own manager and their employees.

Figure Two: A model illustrating managers' communication responsibilities



Source: Nordisk Kommunikation

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