

The Work of Byron Katie



ERNEST HOLM  
SVENDSEN



MORTEN W.  
ANDERSEN

# THE WORK - A SIMPLE TOOL WITH AN ENORMOUS EFFECT

- THE WORK OF BYRON KATIE IN BUSINESS -

The Work of Byron Katie is a way to undo the stressful thoughts and limiting beliefs that are the true cause of our problems. In this article we share our experiences of using The Work of Byron Katie in management training at Rigshospitalet, Denmark's largest hospital.



The executive meetings are completely different now. Suddenly we find ourselves discussing the core tasks – there is less of a power struggle.

Vera Timmermans, Head of Department



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**Clearer communication. Increased focus on core tasks. Better management at meetings. Less conflict. Greater clarity. More peace. Higher effectiveness.**

These are but a few of the effects that participants ascribe to the management courses on The Work, which have been conducted six times thus far at Rigshospitalet, the largest hospital in Denmark. Each course runs for six days at two-week intervals, with fifteen to twenty attendees in each group, and the starting point for each course is the surprising assertion that all the problems the participants face are in fact due to their own way of thinking, which is why the solution to those problems has to begin with them. Once that part is done, the rest is purely practical.

‘There are far fewer situations where I get annoyed, and I am much more willing to hear what people actually say, in case I’m overlooking something. My focus is on our common goal, where our egos are less important,’ says Vera Timmermans, Consultant and Head of the Department of Pathology at Rigshospitalet. And the exact same story can be heard throughout the other departments, clinics and centers: an increased focus on the task at hand and an ability to avoid taking things personally.

### **What is The Work?**

The Work is a tool that helps us examine and let go of

the beliefs holding us back. The reason why it is so effective is that these beliefs are the true cause of our problems. Once we let go of our limiting beliefs, we are able to see and communicate clearly, and to simply do what is required in any given situation. We stop getting in our own way by making up stories about what is going on.

Clinical Specialist Nurse Marianne Nybro Grum describes the change she observed in her co-manager, Lead Nurse Pernille Preisler like this: ‘We’re at a meeting and one of the other participants is very provocative. She’s the kind of person who can really get on your nerves. She’s domineering, boastful and keeps trying to derail the conversation, and in the old days she would have been able to get under Pernille’s skin. But now Pernille seems completely relaxed. It’s as if the other person can’t provoke her at all. She is present in the task, exploring it and coming back to it. I’ve now seen this on many different occasions, and it is super constructive for everybody involved.’

### **It takes two to tango**

For a conflict to become a conflict, there must be (at least) two people involved. If one person completely loses interest in playing his or her part in the conflict, it simply cannot continue. And if, moreover, that person’s contribution is replaced with clarity and straightforward communication, then the character of the situation changes altogether.



We have known this for a long time. It's why most of us try again and again to rise above conflicts and act 'professionally'. But doing so comes at a price. At times it requires great effort. It often needs preparation and processing after the event, it can easily give rise to gossip and negative energy, and keeping all our explosive thoughts to ourselves can create immense internal pressure.

But what if we stopped believing that what the other person did or said was a problem? What if we no longer wanted them to change, and instead concentrated on listening to their opinions? What if we were to keep out of their business, focusing instead on being entirely present in our own?

### **The three kinds of business**

One of the central ideas in The Work is that there are three kinds of business: there is *my business*, there is *other people's business* and there is *God's business* (which should not be understood in a religious sense, but rather as a shorthand for all the things that we are unable to control - earthquakes, flooding, power cuts, delayed trains and so on). To expend any energy on God's business is an obvious waste of time. No matter how much we complain about the rain, it won't make it stop. To continue insisting on leaving those wellies in the closet is not only inefficient but just plain stupid. The weather is a condition, and learning to distinguish

between conditions (which we cannot change) and actual problems (which we can change) can help us direct our energies the right way.

Achieving the ability to remain in our own business is one of the most constructive and effective skills we can develop through The Work. Real change only happens within our own business: it is the only place where we have any actual influence.

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The employees now have a well-rested and focused manager. I don't stress as much as before ... actually, I don't feel stressed at all.

Vera Timmermans, Head of Department

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'Of course I'm empathic and have feelings for my staff. I'm just able to distinguish between what is mine and what is theirs - and I can avoid getting emotionally involved in what a dismissal means to them,' says Head Nurse Pernille Lohse. 'I don't expend energy on it in the same way anymore. It's about the job: what is my responsibility, what is hers, and what is our working relationship?'

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I am more focused on the fact that I can be as happy when it rains as when the sun is shining. It's all in my head. And it rubs off on the rest of the staff.

Pernille Lohse, Head Nurse

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### Natural and continuous change

Most people agree that their focus at work ought to remain on whatever is the primary goal; or they do when they have time to think about it. But this is precisely the challenge when we find ourselves in a difficult situation. One of the interesting aspects of The Work is that it is not primarily a tool that we use *in* a situation. We use it *afterwards*. We use it to explore the beliefs that influenced our behavior when we were in that situation, and as we do so these beliefs change, causing us to naturally and spontaneously act differently next time we find ourselves in a similar one. What has changed are the fundamental thought patterns within ourselves that were making us act inappropriately – and this is not something that we then need to cling onto or remind ourselves of. Once we've realized something about ourselves, we don't suddenly become blind to it.



'I have become much more conscious about seeking approval: what sort of e-mails am I sending out? What am I writing? Why am I addressing my Head Nurse? Is it only because I need acknowledgement or do I have an actual message?' explains Lead Nurse Line Holm Knudstrup. 'And if that's what I need – if I want acknowledgement – then I'll ask directly instead of beating around the bush.'

### What did we do?

The Work was introduced at Rigshospitalet as part of an attempt to create a better workflow and limit disruptions. Interruptions and disturbances are a major issue in a working environment like ours, where unforeseen events are an everyday occurrence. Great efforts had been made in this area, but no one had previously worked with the disruptions that arise in our heads.

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She has become really good at presenting possibilities to the staff, so that it doesn't come across as defensive but is clear and focused.

Janne Lise Bruun, Clinical Lead Nurse – about a co-manager

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When a doctor interrupts a nurse in the hospital pharmacy, it has ramifications beyond the two-minute interruption – just as important is the period afterwards, when the nurse will disrupt her own workflow (and maybe even that of her colleagues) because of her irritation at being interrupted for a third time while she is mixing medicine.

In an attempt to respond to these inner disruptions, we arranged a series of one-day workshops that focused on The Work. The goal was that the participants would be able to use The Work afterwards, and although



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the workshops did offer much food for thought and prompted a great deal of interest in the method, it turned out that trying to get people ready to use The Work after just a single day of teaching was too ambitious. Moreover, we also found that it was crucial that the participants sign up voluntarily. The Work is a process that requires immersion and a willingness to look closely at one's own beliefs, and not everybody is ready to do so.

### **A longer course**

The demand for an introduction to The Work continued, and we wanted to create a course that enabled participants to work with the tool on their own afterwards. This is why we decided to offer a six-day course, and as this places quite a demand on resources we decided to recommend the

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course to managers only. Currently we are onto the sixth group of attendees, and have also run the first three-day 'advanced' course for those who were especially interested. It has all been a great success. After each course we asked the participants the following

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I like that I don't fly off the handle. That I am able to use my temper to be efficient instead of becoming annoyed.

Berit Woetmann Pedersen, Consultant

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question: 'On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the best, how would you rate your benefit from the course on The Work?' The average response was 8.73, which is an extremely high score, especially for a longer course such as this one.

On the first courses we observed that some participants dropped out, and they may have felt differently. Because of this we are now careful to make sure that the participants know exactly what they are signing up

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I don't use as much energy anymore when I need to have a difficult conversation. I just get it done.

Pernille Lohse, Head Nurse

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for. Instead of simply attempting to describe the course to them, we encourage anyone who is interested to talk to one of their colleagues who has completed the course, and so far this change in approach has meant that there have been no more dropouts.

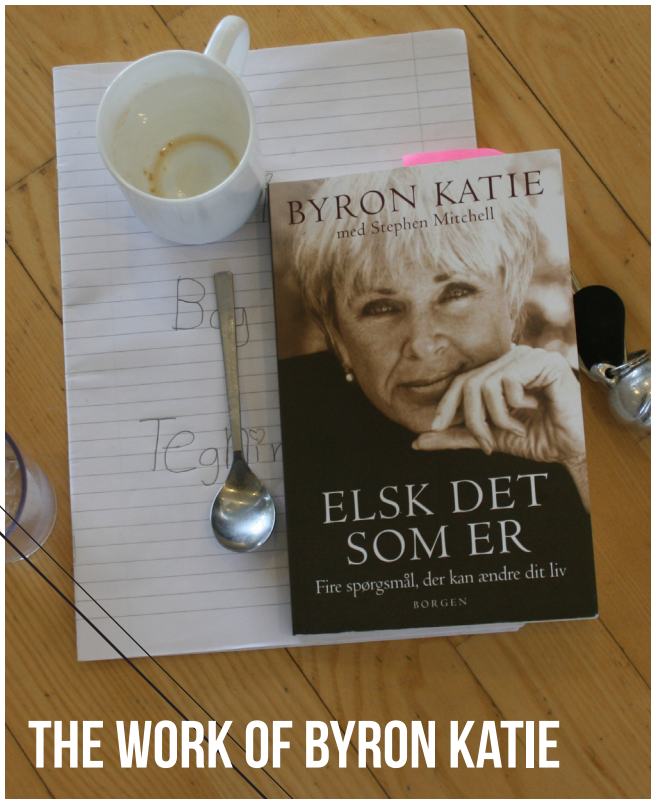
### The Work – a tool for managers

The Work was not created specifically as a tool for managers, but it's a great fit. In an analysis of successful leaders in the health service, the Danish leadership

forum *Væksthus for Ledelse* specified five core competencies that are characteristic of successful leaders:

1. The leader demonstrates genuine interest in and respect for others.
2. The leader treats difficult situations in a calm manner.
3. The leader communicates with everybody clearly and straightforwardly.
4. The leader is passionate about making the organization work.
5. The leader involves him- or herself in relevant strategic issues.

The first four points are central to what The Work can help us with, something that is also evident in the responses given by the managers who participated in the course. They have become calmer, clearer about their responsibilities, more straightforward in their communication, more respectful of their staff's boundaries and more focused on what makes the organization stronger.



## THE WORK OF BYRON KATIE

**The Work of Byron Katie** was developed by Byron Katie, who suddenly realized after a long period of severe depression that her problems were caused not by reality but rather by her own perception of reality – by her thoughts and beliefs.

**The Work of Byron Katie** consists of three steps:

- First, we identify the beliefs we have in a specific situation.
- Second, we examine those beliefs by means of four special questions.
- Finally, we turn those beliefs around and find examples of how the opposite may be equally true.

You can read more about **The Work of Byron Katie** at: [www.thework.com](http://www.thework.com).

### **Calm, clear, involved**

As Head Nurse Pernille Lohse says, 'I could sit down and cry and feel sorry for myself because we'll only become more busy over the next ten years. But I could also focus on how to get the job done within the given framework. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to do something about the framework, but we can help each other into a positive spiral instead of a negative one.'

Clinical Specialist Nurse Marianne Nybro Grum offers an example from her own co-manager, Lead Nurse Pernille Preisler, who also attended the course:

'There was a very tense situation with one employee where Pernille was very aware of her own business and the employee's business. This made Pernille very present – she listened and was actually able to help. Previously she would have been carried away and tried to save the employee, but instead the employee realized that it would be best for her to find another position. It seemed positive and reassuring that Pernille handled her managerial role in that way. She seemed settled, calm and focused on the essentials. Afterwards I thought, wow, that was handled really well. It was respectful of the employee and a very cool way of showing leadership.'

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There is a greater sense of gentleness and a new tone in the department. This was noticed by one of the managers, who had been away on maternity leave. There is a different atmosphere among the staff – more lightness.

Vera Timmermans, Head of Department

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Sometimes I would get so irritated with the people I was working with and was ascribing all sorts of motives to them. But I don't do that anymore. I can see now that it's all in my head.

Mette Rosendal Darmer, Nursing Head of Centre

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It is exactly this clarification of the role of manager – and an ability to separate the personal from the professional – that is an important part of the overall benefit of the course.

'I've become more conscious of my role as a manager,' says Lead Nurse Line Holm Knudstrup. 'Am I a teacher, manager, mother or what? It bothered me before. In staff matters, for instance, where I tended to take things personally. Now I speak as a manager and not as Line the individual. I remain in my managerial role, which allows me to communicate clearly.'

### **The Work with other managers**

One of the things that we were particularly interested in was how the participants experienced doing the course alongside their colleagues, and we were amazed how positive the response was. Nursing Head of Centre Mette Rosendal Darmer explains: 'In my previous position I sent a number of Lead Nurses on the course. It provided us with a common language and the ones that adopted the method would use the tools from The Work at meetings.' And Head of Department Vera Timmermans elaborates: 'The fact that the management team uses The Work has many positive effects. It contributes to clearer communication within the team, greater understanding and more listening. We have simply become more efficient, and the team is more consistent in terms of communicating with staff.'

But the course is equally beneficial for managers attending without their direct colleagues. As Head Nurse Pernille Lohse says, 'It is something I use because it works for me. It is all about me, and this would be true regardless of how many of us attended the course.' Some might even feel more comfortable attending it alone. As Consultant Berit Woetmann points out, 'You might find yourself in a situation where it's difficult to be honest. Where you're holding back. After all, it's not possible to go back and say, No, I didn't really mean it.' This is also why voluntary participation is so crucial for us.

**The most important element in good leadership**

Getting involved with The Work requires a willingness to face yourself. But for those managers who are ready, The Work has proved to be an exceptional tool for helping them to deal with the kind of complex personal challenges inherent to a managerial role in a simple and concrete manner. Most of the management tools we are normally trained to use teach us how to handle strategic and relationship problems. In The Work, for the first time, we have a specific tool that helps us deal with the most important part of our work as managers: ourselves!

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I don't worry as much now.

For instance, cutbacks: this would really affect me before. This time, when redundancies were announced, I was able to be constructive about it.

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Line Holm Knudstrup, Head Nurse

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Morten W. Andersen**

Cand. Techn. Soc. (Tek-Sam)  
 Head of the Department for Working Environments and Management Development at *Rigshospitalet*, in charge of the overall strategic development of the field. External examiner on several courses at Roskilde University and Aalborg University.  
 □ [morten.westerbjerg.andersen@regionh.dk](mailto:morten.westerbjerg.andersen@regionh.dk)



**Ernest Holm Svendsen**

Cand. Mag. in dramaturgy, an improvisational actor and author of several books, among them the bestseller *Be Here Now*. INLPTA-certified Master Coach and trained facilitator in The Work. Formerly employed as Lecturer in Creativity and Communication at Aarhus University and Adjoint Professor of Innovation at Aalborg University. Runs courses and workshops, primarily for companies and organizations through his company *Kunsten at være menneske Aps*.  
 □ [ernest@kavm.dk](mailto:ernest@kavm.dk) // [www.kavm.dk/us](http://www.kavm.dk/us)