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The Work: “We Are (Not) Always Right”

At the Rigshospital in Copenhagen, eighty managers have learned to use the American method ‘The Work’, which challenges assumptions about whether our beliefs are always right. It has made their working lives easier in an astonishingly short period of time.

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Pernille Lohse’s working life has changed.

– It’s almost getting boring, she laughs.

Pernille Lohse is a supervising nurse working in the surgical wing at Copenhagen’s Rigshospital, and part of what she does is to schedule patients’ operations. Previously this would lead to lengthy arguments, especially with a senior doctor from another centre at the hospital, because he always wanted his patients to jump the queue.

– I used to get so worked up that he couldn’t even see patients from the other departments: I had a complete overview, and he was only thinking about his own patients. What about the children with cancer? What about ...? We used to get into some real battles. I argued more

with him than with my husband! Of course, everybody got their operation in the end, but during busy periods we had to prioritise who came first. It was a basic practical issue, but it created an atmosphere throughout the entire workplace. Now I see things differently, says Pernille Lohse.

And that's not because Pernille Lohse's colleague has changed. Instead, she has.

The Work Asks If the Opposite Might Be As True

Along with seventy-nine other managers at the Rigshospital, Pernille Lohse has participated in two courses that teach a method called The Work, developed by the American Byron Katie, which is about exploring your own thoughts and attitudes towards a given problem.

The method consists, quite simply, of four questions (see factbox), in which you explore whether the thoughts you're having about a given problem are really true. For example: is it really true that 'my colleague only considers his own patients' interests', as in Pernille Lohse's case? Can you be completely sure of that? Might the opposite be just as true?

In order to challenge the truth of their thoughts, The Work encourages people to turn them around. For example: 'I only consider my own patients' interests.' Could that be just as true?

Central to The Work is the ability to differentiate between your own business, other people's business, and things you can do nothing about - referred to as 'God's business', although not in a religious sense.

The method helped open Pernille Lohse's eyes to the fact that she and her colleague were seeing the situation very differently.

- It became clear to me that my colleague was seeing the problem from his own perspective and nowhere else - but not because he didn't care about the other patients. These days I explain myself in different ways and

Facts About The Work

The method, which was developed by the American Byron Katie, consists of four questions you address to a problem or a feeling:

1. Is it true? (E.g.: is it true your colleague doesn't listen?)
2. Can you really know that it's true?
3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe the thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?

Then you're supposed to turn the thought around and find at least three genuine, concrete examples of how the opposite could be just as true. For instance: your colleague does listen. Is it true?

At the website www.thework.com you can find a 'Judge Your Neighbour' worksheet, which will help you apply the four questions to a problem. Here, you can also find facilitators of The Work.



communicate more directly, says Pernille Lohse.

The course has sharpened her awareness of her own basic assumptions.

– Many of my thoughts in everyday life tripped me up and got in my way. Now I understand the difference between things I can do something about and things I can't. So I don't focus my energy on anything other than the things I can genuinely do something about. It's been really good for my managerial skills.

The Method Offers Self-Insight

The course on The Work came about after Morten W. Andersen, head of health and safety in the workplace and management training, invited writer and coach Ernest Holm Svendsen to give a talk on presence. Ernest Holm Svendsen is also a facilitator of The Work, and since a survey into the working environment at the Rigshospital had revealed that employees often found themselves getting frustrated during the course of the day, they invited him back.

This time the talk was about The Work, and a number of the participants showed interest in taking part in a longer course – including Morten W. Andersen himself, who went on a course in Germany with Byron Katie, the inventor of the method.

– You get good at realising what beliefs you're using to interpret the world around you, and asking yourself

whether they're really true. We like to think we're always right. The method requires you to be brave enough to look yourself in the eye.

The Work hasn't previously been known as a work-related tool for managers, but the Rigshospital has now conducted courses for a number of them, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive: they received an av-



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Supervising Nurse, Pernille Lohse



erage score of 8.7 out of 10 in evaluations by the eighty people who have taken part – voluntarily.

– The voluntary aspect is absolutely crucial. Otherwise a course like this simply doesn't work. This sort of course definitely isn't everyone's cup of tea, says Morten W. An-



Andersen, adding that the positive response was due to the method's simplicity, which enabled the managers to concentrate on their jobs.

– The people who took part in the course have got better at dealing with conflict, focusing on the essentials and understanding their role. This is an important part of developing as a manager, says Morten W. Andersen.

Better at Tough Conversations

The Work has also proved useful in difficult situations, for instance during dismissal interviews.

– This is something many managers have trouble with. Some think: 'Oh, but what's going to happen to that person now that they've been fired? Are they also going to get divorced and end up losing their home?' Here you learn to focus on your task as a manager. You can't control what happens in someone else's life. Some people might see that as cold-hearted, but that's not what's going on. You're just becoming clearer in your communica-

tion, and you're listening more, says Morten W. Andersen.

Pernille Lohse agrees. She still uses what she learned, even though the course took place a good six months ago.

– Mostly I use it for myself, for example if I need to prepare myself for a difficult conversation. That's my job, but I don't always find it much fun. So I use the method in advance, to help myself realise why I think the conversation is going to be so awful. What is my business, and what is my employee's business? It clears my mind and

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Head of Management Training, Morten W. Andersen

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gives me the calm I need to concentrate on the discussion. That's not the same as being un-empathetic or not wanting the best for your employees and patients. It just makes it easier to separate things. You can see what's your responsibility and what isn't.

The Work was developed by American **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:

1. Identify the beliefs you have in a specific situation
2. Examine those beliefs by means of four questions
3. Turn the beliefs around and find examples of how the opposite may be equally true

You can find out more about **The Work** if you visit the website for The Work at www.thework.com.

Ernest Holm Svendsen who is conducting the courses at the Rigshospital is a Certified Facilitator for The Work of Byron Katie. You can learn more about his work and listen to a free series of podcasts on The Work at his website:

www.theartofbeinghuman.dk