

It's all about the conversation



Fredrikstad Kommune in Norway is on a ten-year journey to shift its culture from traditional to innovative. With 6,500 employees across multiple locations within the city, the task is akin to turning round a supertanker. But, says internal OD consultant Beate Midttun, the Team Management Profile has proved invaluable in catalysing behaviour change – including through the Covid-19 crisis.

In 2017 the city of Fredrikstad, an hour south of Oslo, was voted Norway's most attractive city, based on social, economic and environmental factors. It blends history, tradition and culture with a modern, technology-enabled living and working environment. The Old City is Northern Europe's best-preserved fortress city, and there is also a thriving urban centre. With a population of 82,000, Fredrikstad is the country's sixth largest city – and it's growing fast.

Fredrikstad Kommune is the organisation responsible for implementing city council decisions and strategies in the municipality. With 6,500 employees, the majority of whom

– 4,500 – work in the health and welfare sector, it's the city's biggest employer. The Kommune itself is on a ten-year culture-change journey from 'tradition' to 'innovation', and Beate Midttun, an internal organisation and leadership development adviser, has been moulding the strategy and leading the change programme, starting in the health and welfare sector.

Midttun began her work at the Kommune in August 2014, in occupational health (OH), and was bewildered by the unequal treatment of male and female council workers. "There were two different streams of people coming into my office," she recalls. "There were men

working as firefighters, divers, sports hall and swimming pool attendants, and people working with paint and other toxic materials – where annual health checks were mandatory under the Norwegian Working Environment Act. Then there were women, working in sectors where those health checks weren't mandatory, but who were exhausted and in need of support."

Realising she couldn't solve this problem from where she was, Midttun left her role in OH in December 2015 and went to work for Nina Tangnæs Grønvold, the leader of the health and welfare sector, whom she recognised was on a mission to change the



organisational culture. (Grønvold has since become Kommunedirektør – effectively, chief executive of the entire organisation, reporting to the mayor – and is spearheading the culture change programme.)

Midttun's new role was within organisation development (OD), with an early remit to address engagement and employee happiness. However, she kept noticing 'corridor talk' around the challenges presented by the organisation's culture of part-time working, and she started to explore the research literature on the issue. As she got to understand more she began to believe that the part-time culture was the underlying cause of health care workers' exhaustion.

The part-time working culture has prevailed in Norway since 1987, when the government reduced the working week from 40 to 37.5 hours. "Both men and women in healthcare used to work full time and the proposed 'solution' was intended to avoid them having to work every other weekend, but instead just one weekend in three," explains Midttun. While the government's intention was good, there were unintended adverse consequences – notably, a steady increase in part-time work contracts, insecurity, unpredictable working hours, increased use of short working days, intensive working patterns and unstable work relationships.

The part-time challenge

While a part-time working culture might seem ideal to many overworked staff, the reality is very different, says Midttun. "Part-time working has strongly affected the work environment, the quality of work and the effectiveness of our organisation over the past 30 years," she says. "Teams were in a state of constant flux. For example, I was leading a team of 40 or 50 people, and they were coming and going all the time. I felt that people's loyalty to each other and the employer was low, and an extremely high level of short-term absence (which had become normalised) seemed to reflect people's lack of engagement and unhappiness. We needed to improve quality,

become more innovative, and to move from manual routines to more digital solutions and platforms."

Realising that the part-time culture was the core OD challenge in the organisation, Midttun also understood that changing it would involve tackling the multi-layered power dynamics and dependencies that supported the status quo. Still perhaps the biggest difficulty the municipality faced was that because part-time work was institutionalised, it lacked the money to finance full-time work for everyone. Hence the need for a ten-year programme, because effecting the change would be akin to turning round a supertanker.

Once she got the green light from Grønvold to focus on addressing the 'part-time challenge', Midttun set the direction of the required change initiatives and interventions, and since then has been co-ordinating the work and acting as process leader in group interventions.



We used the Team Management Profile to break the communications impasse

The culture change programme is ambitious and wide-ranging in its scope. For example, the council wants to foster more cross-functional collaboration, a more agile work culture, a higher degree of team-working, less detailed governance and more trust-based leadership. It is also encouraging a more creative work culture, where people are not afraid to raise their hands and suggest new and radical solutions to problems. And it is migrating towards more digital solutions, including Artificial Intelligence, to create more efficient and effective management of resources.

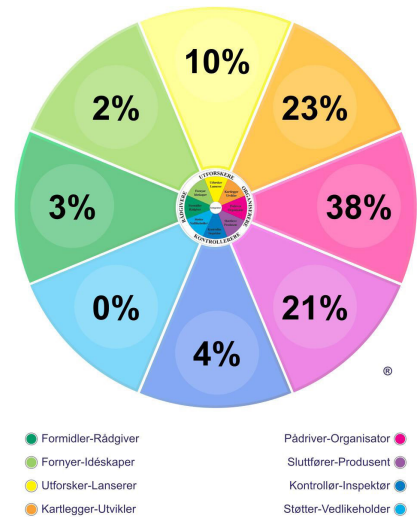
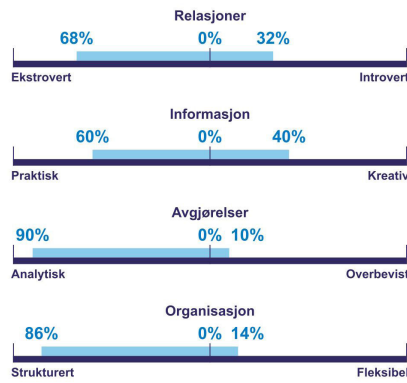
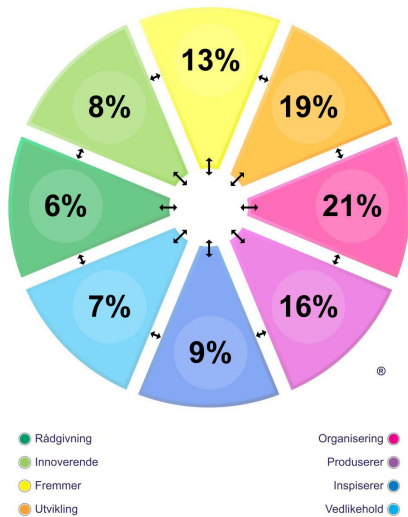
Midttun recognised that employees needed to find solutions themselves, working in their own units – "because they know how the work gets done." The employee-led approach is also

favoured by the unions – "so we needed them on our side. We need to collaborate." The Norwegian leadership and governance model is based on collaboration between unions, managers and employees. Fredrikstad, whose growth was based on sawmill and shipbuilding industries, has a long tradition as an 'industry worker city', and there remains a strong union presence in the municipality. Around 100 union representatives represent the organisation's 220 healthcare work locations, and each location, says Midttun, "is a subculture."

The 220 different subcultures meant there was a raft of different union representatives, policies and employers, all with their own approaches and interests. "To us, 'success' would be more people working full time, lower absence rates, a willingness to invest in hiring for full-time roles, lower staff turnover, and leaders who have the capacity to lead rather than being over-burdened with administrative duties," she continues. She explains that the part-time culture means that a typical leader in the organisation leads 40-80 people – significantly higher than the organisation's best-practice 20-30, which in itself is higher than some professions. Other ambitions include more staff with formal education, and fewer people working with each patient.

In the spring of 2017, she spent six weeks working with a change team, comprising herself, another OD consultant, an occupational health representative and six union members. "The idea was to create change agents, and teach them how to build awareness, understanding, acceptance and commitment to change throughout the different parts of the organisation," she says.

Midttun recalls this early period of the team development as very frustrating. "There were lots of arguments," she recalls. "They would debate and debate and switch between different issues faster than I could keep track of them. It was exhausting to listen to, and I couldn't get them to stop, think and listen to each other. Everyone had their own personal



agendas, hypotheses about the root of the problem, and solutions. It was like standing in the middle of a fast and furious table tennis game with nine other people. We quickly reached an impasse. I knew I needed to introduce something that would interrupt the communication pattern and I wanted them to be interested in each other's and the group's strengths and differences. I wanted them to start to listen to me, to leaders and to their members. Rather than being fixated on the past, we needed to move forward into the new and unknown territory of possibilities and change."

Breaking through the impasse

The 'something' that Midttun chose to break through the impasse was the Team Management Profile.

"I was familiar with the Team Management Profile, and I'd worked in great teams before. But they'd never had that here at the Kommune," says Midttun. "I asked the change team if they would be willing to try something new. Just one of the nine wasn't interested. The rest did the Questionnaire, and it was a breakthrough."

As people read through their Profiles, they were smiling, she recalls. "They definitely recognised themselves, and each other, and there were lots of 'aha' moments. They were suddenly engaged with the dialogue process – it was fun. That was such a relief for me. They did not stop debating, but I was able to point out to them that when they did so, they were reverting to their old behaviour, and I got them to analyse what was working and what wasn't. What I was trying to move them towards was being able to disagree constructively and then co-operate more when in challenging situations. Part of that was learning how to listen properly to others' perspectives, rather than using that listening time just to prepare their next argument."

The Team Management Profile "disturbed people's communication patterns," says

Midttun. "They immediately started exploring themselves and each other with a new interest, and we started to take a helicopter view – even a supersonic-view – of what was happening in the group in the 'here and now'. We were also able to step into the employer's and leaders' shoes and look at the challenge from their perspective. It was extremely helpful."

It wasn't that people hadn't been friendly towards each other previously; they'd just not been effective at delivering things together, explains Midttun. "Understanding their own and others' preferences created more acceptance of 'difference'," she says. "It changed the atmosphere in the group."

“One of the biggest benefits of the Profile was the evidence it provided to convince C-Suite leaders of the need for the extensive interventions required to change the culture”

Even this small initial change team needed many workshops to reinforce awareness of the need for culture change and how that change might happen. "It was all designed to build understanding of 'the full-time challenge' and why employees themselves needed to find solutions, together with the municipality's political and administrative leaders," she says. The change team decided to call the workshops 'Talkshops'. "We chose the name deliberately," says Midttun. "We needed to start to talk, and, therefore, to listen. This led to a process where we could listen to each other, and have good quality conversations and contact with each other. I even took away people's phones, tablets and computers, in order to encourage very solid process work designed to ensure there was proper dialogue and that people could understand and accept how others think."

Midttun based the Talkshops on the classic field theory work of organisational psychologist

Kurt Lewin, who demonstrated that individuals and groups are more likely to change their behaviour if they are able to discuss and reflect on an issue among themselves, than if they have to listen to a presentation. "And that is the case whether or not members of the group know each other – which, here in this organisation, they often don't," she says. "It is our experience that if you bring people together to discuss an issue, they start to change immediately and believe that change will happen. That builds trust, and people continue to listen and believe in the change, and things do change. It's a virtuous circle."

The Talkshop structure became the new modus operandi in the municipality, with conversations designed to accelerate change through the four stages of awareness, understanding, acceptance and commitment. They created a very different atmosphere from the initial approach, where proper dialogue seemed impossible, resulting in what Midttun calls "a lot of unfinished business."

In spring 2018 the change team began to plan how to roll out the Talkshops to the rest of the organisation, and the roll-out began in late summer of that year, with the first large-scale intervention, for 116 of the 145 leaders in the health and welfare sector of the municipality, taking place in November 2018.

The leadership Profile

The group's Team Management Profiles were interesting: people fell overwhelmingly into the Thruster-Organiser, Assessor-Developer, Concluder-Producer and Explorer-Promoter half of the Wheel.

Midttun points out that the strong representation on the right-hand side of the Wheel (82% had preferences here) suggests the leaders are ideally placed to weather a crisis like Coronavirus – "they are very action-oriented, focused on fixing, and good at continuous improvement." The Explorer-Promoter category did need strengthening, she points out, but the biggest concern was the

low representation on the left-hand side of the Wheel. The distribution looked better when related roles were taken into account, but there were obvious areas that required 'further development'.

The Work Preference Measures among these leaders were also interesting. On the Organisation scale, they leaned heavily towards a more Structured preference – 86%, compared to just 14% who had a more Flexible preference. They were also very Analytical in their preferences – 90% compared to just 10% who had a preference to make decisions based on beliefs. There were more with an Extrovert preference than a more Introvert one – 68%, compared with 32% – and there was a bias towards a Practical (60%) rather than a Creative (40%) preference in the way they use and gather information. Again, notes Midttun, given the sector and the current crisis, "this looks like a good profile."

However, she continues, with the return of 'business as a-bit-more-normal' – not to mention the ongoing cultural shift from tradition to innovation – new solutions will be required, pointing to an urgent need to populate the left-hand side of the Wheel. And, given the number of people adversely affected by the pandemic and in need of support, values may also come more to the fore.

But you've only to look at the Wheel and the Work Preference Measures of this large group of leaders to see why tensions arise, adds Midttun. "There is a lot of polarisation," she points out. "When people come at things with such completely different points of view, it's no wonder there are frustrations."

During the crisis, people have had to 'improvise', she says: "We've all had to do things that aren't our preference; there's less time to think before acting." But she hopes that in 'peacetime' what people have been forced to do during the crisis will reinforce what they have learned through the Team Management Profile, thus sustaining behaviour change. "What we do notice is that our leaders have started organising units in fixed teams due to the coronavirus. We also notice an increased interest in how to use the Team Management Profile for further team exploration and development."

One of the biggest benefits of the Team Management Profile exercise for the leadership group was the evidence it provided for Midttun to convince C-Suite leaders at the organisation of the need for the extensive interventions required to change the culture, and to win their support. She says: "Most people were working with continuous improvement, but we needed to take that to the next level and activate a whole new set of skills if we were to drive the innovation we need. The data from the Team Management Profile exercise provided insight into the truth of the situation, which was

different from the assumptions we had all been living with. The exercise also demonstrated, of course, that the tool and the process make change happen."

Organisational restructure

In the spring of 2019 the municipality as a whole restructured itself in order to better facilitate some of the changes it was pursuing – notably, more effective use of resources, increased collaboration and co-ordinated change initiatives. Hege Iversen, who leads an organisational unit in Fredrikstad municipality that provides healthcare to people with severe mental illnesses, participated in Talkshops related to this restructuring, and also did the Team Management Profile.

She recalls: "The Talkshop was a completely new OD approach for me. I found it very thorough and enlightening. It is the kind of process where you might feel vulnerable, but Beate and her colleague Anita Bolghaug have the personalities and knowledge such that we all felt really well taken care of." But as well as finding the content of the Talkshops and Team Management Profile sessions "really exciting, and useful to our future work," Iversen also says that being forced to take the time to reflect is invaluable in itself. "Every day is so busy and hectic that most of the time you don't get the chance, or don't give yourself the time, to really have 'long thoughts'," she says. "You also get to really listen to what other people think."

The Team Management Profile provided, says Iversen, "a real opportunity for self-evaluation." She wasn't surprised at her Profile analysis, but she was impressed that it was so detailed. "It revealed elements about myself that I had not previously thought about, but I recognised them as being part of my personality. For example, I came out as having a more Extrovert preference than I thought I had, but I also recognised that when I have lots of meetings I get tired and need to recharge my batteries, and that I maybe need to pace myself better. It also gave me important knowledge about aspects I should be more aware of in terms of personal development."

Among the 'aha moments' were two valuable pieces of advice. One was to consider the preferences of people she works with to see where they can complement each other and bring out the best in each other. The other was to involve others more in decision-making: "I realised I could be too quick to make decisions." She has made an effort to change her approach in both areas.

Two years in, things are already changing – despite the Covid-19 crisis – says Iversen. "Our experience with departments where most people already work full time is that employees are more satisfied, there is less absence and patients get more stability in their care," she says. "Many of our employees want to work

full time – we know that. Our challenge is that in healthcare at Fredrikstad we don't get financial support to encourage people to increase their hours. We therefore have to be creative and willing to accept that this may take a long time. One way we are trying to make it happen is that when someone leaves, we divide their work among other employees. We are also experimenting with different shift patterns."



The Team Management Profile work is helping us deal with the Covid crisis

It will take time, she admits, but the collaboration and mutual understanding that has come from the Team Management Profile work and Talkshops have definitely helped the change process, not least by building leadership capability. She also believes the work helped even during the Covid-19 crisis, as she explains.

"At the beginning, when the crisis hit and everyone was so busy, people reverted to their default behaviours. However, we did seek advice from each other and made plans in a cross-functional way, which we might not have done before. As we moved out of the acute phase, we started focusing again on expanding our organisational development. The Team Management Profile and Talkshop work is helping us deal with the Covid crisis, because we have to reflect more on our leadership, and that makes us more aware of how we handle things."

Business as more normal

To date, Midttun and her original change team have conducted around 220 Talkshops (some of them with groups as big as 150), covering some 3,600 people. Although the Team Management Profile is, she says, "an entry point to behaviour change," financial constraints have meant that not all the workshops started with the Profile. However, as the municipality continues to emerge from the acute phase of the Covid-19 crisis, and as the change team shifts from the preparatory stages towards the main change programme, use of the Team Management Profile is increasing. Ten new Team Management Profile process leaders are currently being accredited, and, thanks to the head of HR, Liv Kubberød, embracing the tool, 40 head union leaders will be offered Team Management Profile workshops this autumn.

Everyone has been receptive to the Team Management Profile, she says. "People really like it: they seem energised, curious and engaged when they read their Profiles and do the different exercises. We have built on the interventions with coaching and other development work, both among employees as a whole and the leadership groups. The

work has led to really interesting conversations about who we are, how we see ourselves, both as individuals and groups, and what our challenges are."

Even people who knew each other well and have worked together for many years were surprised when they read each other's Profiles, suddenly realising why relationships and situations had sometimes been challenging, she says. "One person said: 'They want us to change and they don't give us the tools. Now we have a tool. It's amazingly effective.'"

Midttun points out that once people are aware of these things, they can choose new ways of interacting. "And the Team Management Profile is most effective when you use it in real teams as a collaborative team development process."

To date, there has been a lot of focus on the unions, and the changes here are clear, says Midttun. Pål Christiansen, union representative from the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees, and a member of the initial change team, agrees. He says: "It is obvious to me that my awareness of my own competence and preferences, knowing myself and knowing the group, is important. Without this knowledge of ourselves and our group we are less likely to create great results together."



the tool and the process make change happen

Before the pandemic hit in March, there had been good progress, says Midttun: "We had built awareness and understanding of the challenge we face in moving from a traditional to a more innovative culture." But while acceptance of the need to change was not as high as she would have liked ("though we were moving in the right direction"), she believes the crisis itself has forced a greater acceptance, "because we have had to work effectively as one team in order to deal with it."

Now the initial crisis has passed, she is setting up the next phase – that is, Talkshops for the HR department, from where the programme will extend to the entire organisation –

schools, kindergartens, and so on, as well as healthcare. The original intention was to have leaders deliver Talkshops to their teams, but while some leaders were enthusiastic, others were less comfortable about the idea, and Midttun plans to run a separate programme for leaders to build their capacity in this area – again using the Team Management Profile as an entry point. "I am optimistic we will get to the stage where we have the leaders cascading the programme through the organisation," she says. In the meantime, she and her change team, which will be expanded with the new Team Management Profile process leaders, will continue the Talkshop work, with a greater focus on the Profile and design thinking.

Some levels of leadership are proving harder to convince of the need for change than others. Level 4, the lowest level, is, says Midttun, "ready to go"; and Level 1, the highest level, is "setting direction and eager to go." At levels 2 and 3, however – middle management – "we notice frustrations, impatience and various other signs of resistance." It's frustrating, but understandable, says Midttun: "In a work culture where high standards are important, where people might die if something goes wrong, I have a notion that middle management traditionally are 'in control' and are expected to be in control rather than let go and trust lower management to work within directional frames, clear goals and standards."

She continues: "Experimenting with new ways of working is at the opposite end of the spectrum from what they are used to," adding that she and her team will attempt to break this impasse by "spending more time trying to understand them, their culture, their education, their responsibilities." Ultimately, however, they may be forced to change because of a combination of staff shortages and growing

pressure on them, she adds. After all, many of these people are the overworked women (lots of them nurses) who first alerted Midttun to the systemic problem within the municipality.

Any culture change process is inherently a work in progress, says Midttun. "To sustain behaviour we have to communicate, communicate, communicate, in all channels; you can't see what we've done so far as a single event. It's all about the conversation."



But she is encouraged by what's been achieved so far, and heartened by a letter she received just before Norway's lockdown on March 12th from the Research Council of Norway "telling us that what we had done so far was the best change process they had ever seen." On the strength of this, the municipality has been awarded a grant of 5.3m Norwegian Kroner [£450,000] to research six different culture change processes in Fredrikstad, in another city, Drammen, and in a region of the city of Oslo. In addition, Fafo, an independent researcher in work, political and societal issues, which has been studying the part-time problem for over 30 years, will follow the municipality for the next three years to determine how successful the new way of working is in changing its culture. The government is funding the study.

"We are surfing!" Midttun concludes.



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