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Edition 194, 28 October 2008

## How do you become a Head of Unit?

Mr Marc-My-Words

Do not be misled in reading this deliberately ambiguous and, I must admit, very eye-catching headline.

We are not going to give you career advice so that one day you find yourself in that position of middle management otherwise known as Head of Unit (HoU).

No, we are going to give you an overview of what you should – and should not – do if one day you find yourself in this distinguished position of responsibility. It is the **European Administrative School** (EAS) that lovingly prepared a training course ambitiously entitled '**Succeeding as a new HoU**'.

This training course has to be taken by new HoUs. When? As soon as possible after appointment.

'Why?' you may ask with a sceptical air. Well, quite simply, because although you may well be a Head of Unit formally and officially, you may have some difficulty getting into character and feeling at home with the role when you start the job, as if you were wearing an ill-fitting suit.

### A Head of Unit, a bit of a mongrel

To put it in a word, the new head of unit is a bit of a mongrel!

But let's start at the beginning.

There were eight of us, a mix of institutions (Commission 5, Parliament 3), a mix of genders (6 men, 2 women), a mix of masculine style (4 ties, 2 open-necked shirts) and a mix of nationalities (6).

Admittedly, the broad outlines of the training apply to all, but the differences between the Commission culture and the Parliament culture were noticeable. Hard to define, but they were definitely there nevertheless, fuelling the dialogue between the trainees.

Margorzata, otherwise known as Margot, half Polish, half French and an expert on cartels at the Commission, was also there, well and truly so. She gave great moral support throughout with her sharp sense of humour and irony. I give her two years to transform the atmosphere at DG Competition...

### Don't do anything, make everything happen, let nothing just happen!

Immediately, a 'slogan' strikes me (strikes us?). It could be the motto of HoUs: '*don't do anything, make everything happen, let nothing just happen!*'

Marc, our highly competent and well-liked consultant/trainer, keeps trotting it out. It isn't an original phrase from him, but a quotation from French Field Marshal Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey, if you please, who was able to try it out at his leisure during the Great War. If Mr Jourdain was creating prose



Field Marshal Louis  
Hubert Gonzalve  
Lyautey

without knowing it, good old Louis Hubert was in management without knowing it!

By drumming this phrase into us, Marc wants to get a very important point across: the HoU has to forget their know-how (just a bit) in order to delegate. And yes, there has to be a degree of letting go. You have to measure out expertise and leadership. Don't be too task-oriented. Delegate while maintaining control.

In any case, if you don't delegate, you will invariably be submerged by urgent and important tasks which means you will neglect some other tasks that are also important but less urgent. In other words, you will have your nose to the grindstone!

### Does it make sense?

Delegating is an excellent idea, agreed. However, the team as a whole and each person in it has to be aware of the mission and of the objective. Starting with the Head of Unit, of course. This is the condition sine qua non for motivating colleagues. We have to know that what we are doing, what we have to do makes SENSE. And what if the instructions are vague, both those coming down from above and those being passed on down the line?

If the instructions from on high are incomplete then the team will more or less invent what work needs to be done. Commendable, but not really efficient.

### The IKEA complex

You don't believe it? Judge for yourself. There are four of us. Bits of Phantoka, a type of robot warrior, are put on the desk in front of us. 'Off you go'. Instructions? None! Never mind. Everyone gets involved and tries to put the innumerable pieces of this thing together. Well, everyone except me, it being understood that at best my partners could count on my moral support. I warn you: if you need advice to put together some IKEA furniture, DON'T EVEN THINK about asking me.

I am beginning to feel guilty: have I fallen short of my duties? I didn't tell them that I was useless at putting together IKEA furniture. Or even a small plastic robot. That said, I have to say that the guys (used as a generic plural as Margot joined in on putting it together with great enthusiasm) did extremely well without me. All the same, it took the late arrival of the instructions to make it possible to finish the task.

But on my left, my neighbour's eyes shine with excitement (and he isn't a teenager any more). In fact, I don't have to feel guilty. Am I not simply... delegating?! Come to that, am I not delegating delegating?!

### 'Doing something is good, letting people know you have done it is better!'

Let us come back for a moment to that well-known concept, communication. Short-circuits in communication are one of the traps that the HoU must avoid. This is tricky, because everyone who passes on a piece of information has the impression that they are being clear. Because they know it, it seems clear to them. Maybe so, but not to others!

To prove this, why not a bit of role-playing? A 'Director' has two 'Heads of Unit' behind him, who have their 'colleagues' behind them. The Director and the HoUs have instructions, but they're not exactly the same. No one is allowed to speak. We have to communicate in writing instructions and questions separately for each person.



Soon the HoUs are caught in the crossfire of instructions coming from above and questions coming from below. Panic stations. Those at the bottom of the pile are frustrated: 'What are we meant to be doing?' The HoUs have no idea. They are submerged under bits of paper with instructions and questions that

they don't have time to sort out. The Director is no longer directing anything...

All of which goes to show that it is difficult to understand and to make something understood, that the lack of a clear objective and clear instructions can cause havoc and that vertical leadership without horizontal communication and contacts has a detrimental impact. Well done!

And we've also put our finger on something else: the loneliness that the middle manager may feel from time to time, sandwiched between the high management and those being managed.

Conclusion: you have to **COM-MU-NI -CATE**. Because if *'doing something is good, letting people know you have done it is better!'*

Next, we take on coaching exercises, an Anglo-Saxon concept which arouses the suspicions of the Latins. You could call this an exercise in maieutics. In pairs, we play at being Socrates, delving into our mutual 'discomfort zones'. *'Help, I need somebody's help. Another pair, close to me, help me!'* This is because we all have tasks with which we feel less at ease and which require more effort from us. So don't knock the support that can come from one pair or another.

### Moving on to OPERA

OPERA can also help. But for us this doesn't mean launching in unison into an air from *Rigoletto*. **OPERA** – Own Thoughts, Pair's Thoughts, Exhibition, Ranking, Arranging – contributes to **finding collective solutions to a common problem**. In short, it works like this: based on a question asked to everyone (for example, *'What should we be developing this year?'*, (1) you get into small groups and each person writes down their own ideas; (2) each of the small groups chooses a few common ideas; (3) the common ideas of the different groups are put together; (4) each group ticks the ideas they prefer; (5) the large group as a whole identifies 3 or 4 main themes.

All of this is well and good on one condition: that every one of us draws up an **action plan** once the training is over and sticks to it. In other words, that we **make a commitment**. If not, nothing will come out of it!

Finally we reach the end of the training session, with a few last conclusions from Marc Roure, our consultant-trainer, and Isabelle Demuynck, the Training and Development Advisor at EAS. A follow-up workshop is arranged for November. There are handshakes all round; the trainees have grown to like each other and to understand each other. We promise to meet up again outside the training course (we're rejuvenated, you'd think we were demob happy).

### Verdi or Albinoni?

I leave the EAS premises. It's a lovely day. I'm whistling... *La donna è mobile... 'I don't do anything, I make everything happen, life is good... 'La donna è mobile... 'I don't do anything, I delegate, life is wonderful... 'La donna è mobile... 'I don't do anything, I delegate, I let nothing just happen, ah, that's where it goes wrong a bit... I don't do anything, I delegate, I have to be in control, oh, wait, life isn't that wonderful...'*

*La donna è mobile* slowly becomes the Adagio by Albinoni...

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