



Agenda dictatorship

You enter the supermarket and you can't find the sugar. They've moved it. Again. You look for someone to help you, but all the staff have disappeared. You're fed up, and it's the supermarket's fault.

Frans van der Reep
Manager, Strategy and
Architecture,
KPN EnterCom,
Netherlands

But think about it from the supermarket's point of view. Directing customers to the sugar is a repetitive and low-reward task that ties up staff who could be more profitably engaged re-stocking shelves or thinking up new ways to sell potatoes. Of course, if there are enough requests, the supermarket management will recognise a need and try to solve the problem. Should it hire more staff? That will squeeze profits. Put a sign at the entrance saying 'Sugar in aisle 10'? That might solve the problem in the short term, but it takes up space and inconveniences customers who don't need sugar. In the end, it will drive them away. And what about flour, chips and raisins? Do they need signs too?

If the supermarket goes for the signs solution, it will have to appoint a 'sign manager' – someone who is not involved in selling products to customers and who soaks up staff time (since they have to tell the sign manager every time a product location moves) and whose chief priority is putting up lots of signs. The solution has introduced competing personal agendas, communications problems and misunderstandings. The outcome is lower sales and higher cost per sale.

Every business has to overcome local problems like this every day in the best way it can, but efforts like this to solve local problems often cause larger problems, especially in big companies. And it's a vicious circle: the solutions to simple problems themselves require more and further-reaching solutions.

The vicious circle cannot be broken by changing only the structure of the organisation, or by describing then

improving processes. Everyone still has their own agenda and their own problems, so the circle will start up again. The only way to change the culture of an organisation is to change your own behaviour – by *acting differently, starting now*.

If you want to change the world, start with yourself. Don't curse the people who moved the sugar or the bureaucracy down the hall. Changing yourself costs nothing; you can start on it today, and you don't need anyone else. You just need to put the change on your own agenda.

But putting it on the agenda isn't enough. The trouble is that we find full agendas comforting; they are a sign that we are needed. An empty agenda is disquieting. That's why we go from meeting to meeting but don't get any further than 'sign management'.

We need to dare to trust more in ourselves. Self-reliance is where co-operation and efficiency begin. Organisationally, making the company strategy explicit helps focus people on the task in hand, rather than on filling their own agendas. Then if everyone takes the first step towards changing their behaviour, personal agendas will disappear and everyone will be busy simply doing the work. This will also create the right conditions for true collaboration, in which people have the trust to be truly dependent on each other. As a result, the organisation will be more flexible and more resolute. Its services to customers will be better, its processes more economic, and working for it will be (even) more fun!