

## When the King Fights the Crown Prince

By Thomas Moller and Inger Anneberg



Thomas Moller, chief consultant with TMI, is an inspiring learning consultant with many years' experience. He is unusually gifted at communicating with the audience and making people relax and open towards the training.

Thomas Moller has an extensive educational background. He was first educated in 1973 from the Teacher Training College of Aalborg, Denmark, and continued his studies to complete a BA degree in educational research (music and pedagogy) in 1984. Before being employed with TMI, he was a language, literature and music teacher for several years. Thomas Moller has been a project manager for a number of training projects in the Danish education system, which has benefited greatly from his skills and ideas.

Thomas Moller is trained to conduct all TMI's education programmes and has specialised in long-term business development. He is also in charge of TMI's department for training materials and works internationally on instructor training and quality.

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For the past three years, Thomas Moller (TM), chief consultant of Time Manager International A/S, has done some intensive research into the challenges faced by organisations when integrating different generations in the same workplace. As a business consultant, he has gathered a fair amount of experience from Polish and Danish organisations - and they all point in the same direction:

- There is a growing interest in how an organisation can achieve good cooperation between various generations. One reason for this is that the generations that take over now are smaller in number, which means that the fight for human resources has increased proportionally; another reason is that in many organisations, the take-over of the next generation is imminent.

*"The generation problem is particularly pronounced at present, because everything that used to be a formal and safe area of authority is now a subject for discussion. The title of manager in itself is not enough to be able to communicate and make oneself respected. The formal authority does not automatically bring acceptance or approval of what you say - and more than ever before, the young generation questions the manager's competence and insight", says Thomas Moller.*

He personally knows about the generations' different behaviour patterns through his work as a business consultant and through his private life. In his spare time, he is the choirmaster and conductor of the local girls' choir in Svenstrup, Denmark, and thus has had frequent contact with the young generation over the years.

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TM describes himself as the typical baby-boomer, born in 1948 – into a period when work became a prominent part of one's identity. He belongs to a generation to whom self-realisation is extremely important, and indeed he followed up his Teacher's Certificate Exam from 1973 with a Cand. Phil. degree in musical science. At a later stage, he made another quantum leap in his working life by leaving his teacher's job for the benefit of a far more solo-type of job as a consultant with TMI. His own grown-up children are defined as belonging to Generation X, and today both his own children and their partners make some decisions that really make him jump, since he has been used to giving his work top priority:

*"I frequently find that my son and daughter and their partners are critical and hesitant towards job offers that my own generation would have accepted on the spot!"*

*Certain generation problems are inherent in the general urge to be free and independent. It comes naturally to all of us to have certain clashes with our parents' generation. But the inherent biological liberation urge that comes with puberty is nowadays postponed endlessly,"* says TM:

*"The school-leaving age is a lot higher than it used to be - and the period of education for young people is getting longer and longer. Previously, there was a clear distinction between those who went to college and became "intellectuals" and those who took more practical training and became post office clerks, craftsmen or bakers. This distinction is becoming blurred today, because there is a demand for further education in all fields, so young people's level of consciousness has reached new heights. At the same time, the polarisation between those with a higher education and those without any education at all is even more poisonous.*

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*The increased level of consciousness may have contributed to the fact that Generation X, who are now in their twenties and thirties make different demands on business managers. Additionally, they expect to be involved in the decision-making process far more than the previous generations. On one hand, they want a manager who can demand respect, and on the other hand, they want involvement. This is a very difficult balance that places further demands on the choice of middle managers."*

This touches on a central question, i.e. an organisation's ability to handle the co-operation between the various generations:

TM: *"If a group of employees have the impression that the middle manager is able to make his/her mark on the organisation, this will no doubt help to earn their natural respect. This is not just about the middle manager speaking up for certain groups. It is more about the middle manager being a person who is listened to. He/she is able to influence the organisation as a whole. In order for a company to achieve a dialogue between the generations, a well-functioning middle manager is a must. A capable middle manager knows the tone that is necessary to involve the employees.*

*On a critical note, I do believe that the recruitment of middle managers is done far too haphazardly in many organisations. The organisations put professional qualifications first and thus risk getting the wrong manager for the job. They do not choose the person with the best qualities to be a manager, perhaps because it is difficult for many organisations to define exactly what they need and want."*

Thomas Moller thinks that the recruitment of middle managers in itself is very important to an organisation that wants to manage the co-operation between the various generations. He uses an example from the world of music - and of the family:

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Similarly, many organisations ask themselves: "How come we haven't found the right manager? After all, we asked the right questions!"

*"I do believe that many business managers make a formal mistake in thinking that they can employ the right middle managers by means of tough questions and various tests. How can you catch something soft by means of hard questions? How can you find the right people to lead the co-operation within the organisation into other and new directions? The aspect that organisations overlook when employing middle managers is employee involvement, especially involvement of young employees. Formally, it is usually the top managers of the headquarters that make all the decisions with respect to the choice of managers. They overlook the option of involvement. The result is not just the wrong middle managers, but also that young employees are being kept down - the very generation for whom it is a must to be involved in the decision-making from the start; otherwise, they will lose the inclination to work for the organisation."*

*"Sending managers to attend learning programmes outside the organisation is not the best solution when it comes to co-operation," says Thomas Moller. Once again he uses a metaphor from the world of music:*

*"A conductor obviously has to have certain basic skills, but it is not until he or she is in front of the choir that it becomes interesting. If I cannot conduct my choir in such a way that they get the feeling that we are getting somewhere together, we shall accomplish nothing, no matter how many skills I may have. In that case the most talented singers would no longer be interested in being on the choir. The conductor may dictate to people what to do, but if a tight rein is kept on the musicians, everything will end up being forced and unnatural".*

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This is also true for a modern business organisation: If a manager only gets his/her training and education outside the organisation and very rarely while in action in the organisation itself, it is difficult to progress. For this reason, on-the-job coaching of managers and employees is very important.

Today, there is an increasing interest in team-building, and we have long since moved away from the idea that a manager can make do by issuing orders. No matter to which generation you belong, the key words are involvement and dialogue. It is all about getting people to pull together, to help each other, to speak the same language.

Positive, visible support, coaching and much response are some of the very qualities that the Generation X's expect from their employers.

### **The lack of Polish princes**

In 1997, Thomas Moller was involved as a consultant in Polish management training. The ABB group who had a very specific problem in one of their large business groups in Poland had consulted him:

The senior managers needed some inspiration to find their successors in their own companies. Popularly speaking: It was time for the kings to start looking for a crown prince. In connection with the management development programme "Leading Change", ABB had discovered that they would otherwise find themselves in a vacuum in a few years' time. When the old managers retired, there was nobody to take their place.

How did this happen? The explanation lies in the history of Poland: The lack of crown princes was a problem which Polish organisations had overlooked, because they had previously focused exclusively on the coordination of systems, the introduction of IT, etc. Then suddenly - after the change of system - the problem became quite clear: A vast number of employees between the ages of 30- 45 chose new careers and disappeared from the old, traditional, Polish production companies. They looked for jobs abroad, set up their own businesses or applied for jobs in some of the minor, newly established organisations.

ABB had taken over a number of existing Polish organisations in the electric industry and were now facing a very special problem in the Polish heavy industry: the lack of crown princes. The consequence was a polarisation between the generations left in the organisations. The gradual transition from one generation to the next, which is normally a necessity, was not possible. For this reason, ABB had to focus specially on how to bridge the generation gaps.

TM: *"The new, young employees under 30 were not accepted by the old managers at all. They were looked upon as the "young lions", who were just making unreasonable demands - the types that the older managers could just not imagine as potential crown princes. After all, senior managers in Poland had started working with the company when they were boys. Some of them had even helped to build up a power station from the start - and they could only see young people through their own eyes: "The only way to build a career is to do it the "hard way". It takes the education of a lifetime to reach the top, etc. etc.*

The attitude to young people in Poland was very hard: *"They are unrealistic in their demands and expectations in respect of both salary and education. They are not loyal; they will probably leave the company as soon as we have trained them. In other words: Total lack of trust."*

Even if the Polish situation is extreme, it is easy to find similarities in the West when it comes to the senior generation of managers and their view of young people:

TM: *"Our generation may have a certain resentment against the suggestions for improvement that come from young people between the ages of 20 and 30. We easily end up in a position of defence instead of listening to the suggestions. However, young people do not imagine that all their suggestions will be implemented, but it is often difficult for senior managers to understand how young people can display such confidence in themselves. After all, they are so young! How can they be so constructive? A gap arises between the generations if the senior managers believe that only accumulated learning is interesting, whilst the experience of the young is worth nothing in itself, simply because they are young! At the same time, young people are obviously extremely frustrated by the senior managers. In Poland, they very clearly felt that the senior managers held things back when they were with them - the young employees were not informed of the decisions made by the management."*

However, if an organisation does not take the problem between the generations seriously, it could very easily end up as stereotype ideas of each other, the way you saw it in Poland:

- He/she is too young to know
- Isn't it typical for young people to react like that?
- When you have reached my age, you will see it differently
- He's just a little old-fashioned
- He/she is too old to start a career
- I think it's time he retired!

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In Poland, Thomas Moller was given the assignment of developing a dialogue between the senior and junior employees in order to reach the following goal: to elect some crown princes while improving on the co-operation and changing the approach so that the two generations were no longer on either side of the gap:

*"My starting point was to get both parties to make an effort. I was a kind of catalyst - and the aim was a change of attitude in both generations. In practice it was clear that there was no existing dialogue when the project was initiated. Mutual negative accusations were flying in the air. The young Polish employees criticised the senior employees for not being sufficiently quick when undertaking the necessary changes. They saw the senior staff members as obstacles to introducing new IT systems. After the system change, marketing and sales were unknown concepts in traditional Polish industrial organisations, because that side of the organisations had been entirely controlled by the party through five-year plans, followed by severe control on the organisations. A kind of double company culture had existed, where the results that the party wanted to see were shown externally, while internally, there was an entirely different agenda."*

TM: *"Young Polish employees are allergic to this system - and with good reason. After the system change, they were extremely disappointed when they discovered that this duplicity still existed to a certain degree. They were very quick to catch on when somebody spoke or behaved as people did in the old days. I remember a workshop where a senior manager made a presentation - while a young employee whispered into my ear that the way he spoke was exactly the way you would speak if there was a party representative present! There was a game going on that was not appropriate for the present time."*

Discussion teams for making decisions on central issues like values, responsibilities and mutual involvement were set up. Workshops were held, where everybody focused on the strong, professional aspects in addition to human qualities. All of this has helped to clarify the model by which the ABB organisations are to be run in the future.

The result has been that several young employees have been assigned central positions in the organisations, because they are keen to reorganise the production. The senior managers have been assigned other tasks, because the many discussions also led to the recognition that the problems could not be solved by pushing senior staff into the cold. Instead of being occupied with the reorganisation of the company, several senior employees have become senior consultants who ensure that the knowledge within the organisation related to the production system itself will not be lost. Many senior employees have a knowledge that the organisation cannot afford to lose, because this knowledge is often prerequisite to preserving valuables like the patents that belong to the company.

The idea of placing senior staff with special resources in consulting functions, while the "young lions" are allowed to go and experiment with the methods of work, has become a great success in quite a few of the ABB factories.

But there is still a great deal of work to be done, because the next step is to bring about the new management approach to the workers on the factory floors:

*"The major schism - also in western industries - is to convey this change of the cooperation methods to the production itself. There may be lots of movements and trends amongst the senior management and in operations, but in production, the reality is often very far behind. I myself see the greatest change happening in organisations where they dare let a middle manager loose, who causes the new reality to become visible on the factory floor. But this method can often take a long time. You often see examples of a management attitude being frozen in the top layer of the organisation. In fact, it may be frozen so solid that*

*nothing at all is happening in the next links. This has been typical of the Polish heavy industry, but obviously it looks differently in the newer Greenfield organisations. Here the idea of good management is often a bit less fixed although they may also suffer under the old, mental ideas of management and co-operation.*

## **Danish patterns**

In Denmark, Thomas Moller has just been working on teamwork and employee involvement in a traditional, illustrious production company. The reason was that the company opened a whole new division, where they decided from the start that a new co-operation approach was to prevail. The vision was to establish a new production line with highly autonomous groups. The inspiration was found in the TMI Employeeship-model, which is focused on teamwork and involvement - and management for everyone. In the new division the staff members allocate the work, they themselves set up development teams and they do their own problem solving. The role of the management is to coordinate and communicate:

TM: *"It is clear that this approach to co-operation is just right for Generation X and the even younger employees. For a period of time, I have been following the process by interviewing the employees, and the young generations are very positive. Some of the frequent statements were:*

- We are not detail-managed, we are asked about solutions
- We are not controlled
- We are taken seriously
- We find that we can do more together than alone
- The working method reduces travel activities - the young generations see this as an advantage because it leaves them more time for their families. Senior generations see this as the loss of some fringe benefits they used to have.

However, the interviews have also shown that there has been a great deal of uncertainty at times, both amongst the senior and junior employees. How far can you actually take a working principle with a high degree of autonomy? It's easy to fall into the trap of waiting for someone to decide what to do next!

The result of the new approach has been that some employees find it more interesting than others do. We have no statistics of how many do not care for the method and therefore look for jobs elsewhere, but my general impression is that it has been more difficult for people who have grown up with the old foreman system. The younger generations see it as a relief to work with a high degree of involvement, while senior generations find it difficult to accept. The criticism most often voiced is:

- Everything's a mess
- One hand does not know what the other is doing
- Nobody takes a firm stand and makes things clear
- We need direction and guidelines

Thomas Moller points out that recruitment in the organisation in question is easy when it comes to hiring young staff. The schism is elsewhere:

– Should the system be applied to the other departments of the organisation?

*"This idea causes some anxiety and nervousness. The shop stewards agree that other divisions could use this perspective, but for the time being, the organisation has decided to wait until there is a specific demand from the employees to introduce this method in other*

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*departments too. I think that's wise. It means that the organisation opens up the possibility of having several scenarios, i.e. various ways of working. It does not behave like a militant organisation that simply dictates how things will be for everyone from now on."*

## **Genuine involvement**

*"The employees in an organisation may, however, find it difficult to see whether the management wants true employee involvement or whether it is a question of pseudo-involvement of the employees where the manager just happens to remember that "it might be a good idea to ask the staff what they think".*

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*In order to achieve genuine involvement, it is necessary to go deeply into the principle I call management by participation, i.e. management by employee involvement. As a manager, you must also realise that involvement is not just a management activity. It is inherent in the principle itself that the one who is to be involved is truly involved. This is a mutual principle, and it is the heart of my work, no matter where I am, in Poland or Denmark."*

It's about improving the quality of the dialogue everywhere in the organisation. TMI has described the process in the book "Heart Work" where personal development is combined with teamwork.

*"I think progress has been made if you can introduce some of the concepts of personality psychology into the organisations. If you can focus on what it means to learn to listen, to understand and involve people, not just as a mechanical superficial function, but as a genuine involvement. It always puzzles me when a manager says: "I must have a dialogue with my staff!" Clearly he/she has not understood the essence of involvement and has not realised that it is a very demanding task."*

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