

Self Organisation doesn't come just like That

But still many seem to believe that. Time and again we hear about experiments whose announcement goes something like this: "Dear employees, from this moment on you are self-organized. Your superiors are still there, but now they are coaches. Happy work and good luck. See you."

That's brave.

But also kind of clueless.

In my opinion, there are many things on the shelf of agile self-organization that can be confidently ignored, either because they been around for a long time anyway, or because they cause more chaos than benefits. But at least one pearl is clearly among them, and it is so valuable that one could say it is worth all the bling bling around it: the systematically built in reflection of one's own work and organization.

This reflection is so neglected in most organisations that it would be a huge gain if this aspect alone were to be widely used in practice.

But why is reflection actually so neglected? I think you can get closer to this if you take self-organization at its word, and especially its counterpart: that would be called "foreign organization". It could be that this is where problem lies: if I work in "foreign organization", this means in plain language: somebody else has already thought about organization for me. Who could blame me for concluding that I am not in charge of this? Obviously, I simply have to make sure that I operate as successfully as possible within this framework.

In other words: an average organisation has zero incentive to reflect on the organisation (and to be clear right off: the suggestion box for improvement is not an answer). And everybody has enough to do anyway, right? Recently I heard from a feedback from an employee: "After a hard day, I have neither the time, energy nor the desire to sit down for a governance meeting. I want my bosses to do that!" Which also answers the question of whether everyone is just waiting to become agile.

But fine. If we stay close to the word, self-organization in its shortest form could be defined like this: "Think about your organization yourself and adapt it if necessary."

This leads to three important consequences if this is to work: first, I must feel explicitly called upon to do so. Secondly, one must not assume that this will not take time. A team that goes into self-organisation is therefore likely to need more rather than less capacity for the time being. Maybe you could save something at the next higher level. Which in turn could be partly self-evident, because not everyone's superiors will be able to shift their role anyway (one of the bold assumptions you find in this area)...Thirdly, if I think that the organization needs to be spruced up, I must also have a permission to do so. "License to spruce" so to speak.

So, it won't get cheaper for the time being. Then it should at least get better. But the hurdles are not so minor: previous superiors have to endure a loss of power and control. Team members have to be willing and able to do what may be a new aspect of meta-work. So maybe it won't get any faster in the first moment, either. And then it doesn't sound as sparkling and is not so much fairy dust and magic wand anymore. Too bad.

But never mind once this disappointment is digested, there's still a lot of potential waiting to be unlocked. Self-organisation can be extremely powerful and effective – but you have to organise it yourself.