Swarm stupidity – why you should urgently reconsider your teams, meetings and working environment – part one

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Swarm stupidity – what a brilliant book by Gunter Dueck, showing why groups/teams in companies often fail at finding intelligent solutions. For me an eye opener to start having a deeper look behind teams and groups and their environment – just like a friend mentioned – **a milestone of a book.**

With this post series I'll try to summarize my key takeaways. In part one I start to address **meetings**, **brilliant simplicity vs. stupid simple** things and **dangerous unrealistic targets**. A lot of important content – so more more posts about will follow soon.

Maybe it's a teaser for you to go on that journey too?!

- **swarm stupidity is killing energy** – listen to: "we are walking in circles", "We fight another instead of work together", "We are not moving forward even though we're running all the time"
- **management is not allowed to show vulnerability and despondency** – they have to show optimism and enthusiasm (even if that feels silly)
- **the whole is more stupid than the sum of the intelligence of every individual** (in the case of an already poisoned environment)
- Why do companies often operate in the just enough mode?
    - because **they don't understand excellence**, what it means to produce really good results
    - manager are not interested if the work is meaningful and in how to enable flow – they just strive to reach (short term) goals
- scaling is not simple – number relations are changing and it has to be considered, often it has to get something completely different

- **through speeding up** work, one has to work much more carefully because more stress means more errors. **If a team "just" has to work faster it will change the team dynamics** – **it does not stay normal good work but erodes** under stress to just enough work … and that leads to more controlling, reviews, sanctions… **CHAOS**
- **companies often don't provide a meaningful shape** – everyone just has a workplace and has to do her work – faster, more concentrated and without much energy flowing back from the company to the employee (beside the money compensation)
- many companies aim to grow more, often more than double the market growth … what is impossible if seen in a broader picture
- **middle management – lost in the middle, without real power to protest up the hierarchy and pacify statements down the hierarchy.**

Swarm intelligence

- a team of **people who share a common purpose** and **joy of working together** towards their common goal – it is a changing swarm of enthusiasts (who would like to leave – leaves … who would like to join – joins)
- no side interests, no personal fights
- when the original problem is solved – the swarm dissolves and everyone goes their own way – new problem – new swarm
- **everyone can see the elephant** (see below)
- (seeing) **the whole is giving power** to everyone involved

Brilliant simplicity (not stupid simple)
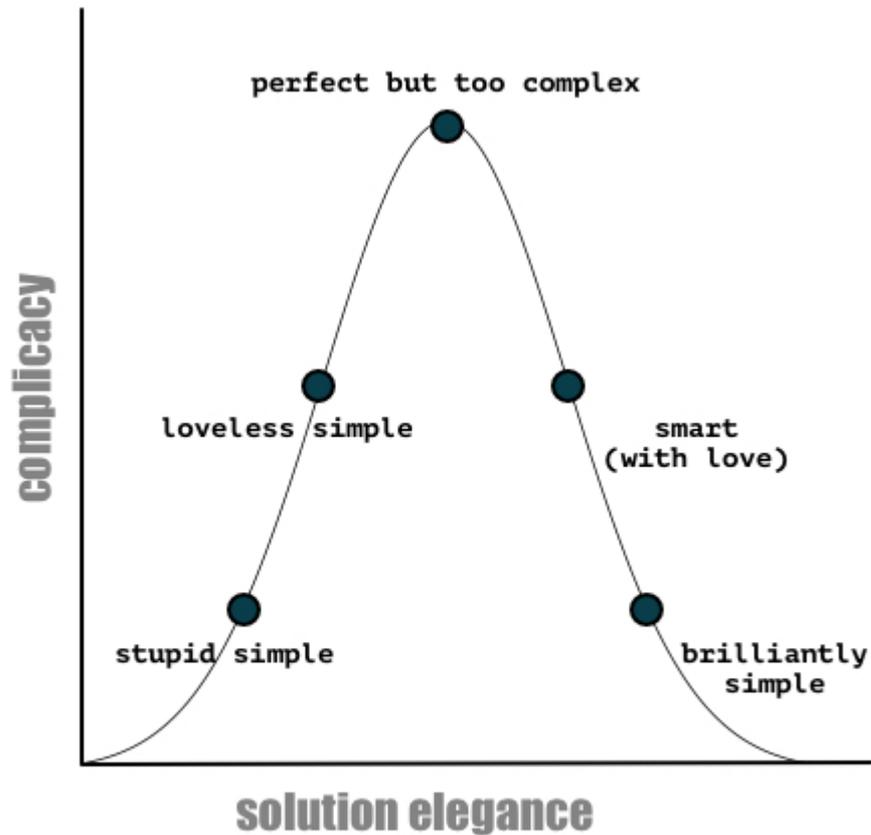
- **to explain** something one can **either dumb it down** OR **use examples and explaining pictures** to describe it in a brilliant simple way
- **clarity needs hard work** (and time)
- 5 steps to brilliant simplicity of a solution – (1) **stupid simple** – (2) **good enough (loveless simple)** – (3) **perfect but to complex** – (4) **smart (with love)** – (5) **brilliantly simple** – lets consider a product for example
    - stupid simple – the product is primitive, just usable for some use cases, it still has a lot of flaws and errors
    - loveless simple – the product is already usable for more but already more complicated too. Often it nerves and we don't understand it. Design did not follow the users perspective.
    - too complex – the product can do everything someone *could* need but one needs to be an expert to use it. The learning time is far too high
    - smart – simple to use and with rich functionality
    - brilliantly simple – it does what it should and everyone is happy
- the **brilliantly simple is beautiful and clear**. It is simple to explain. It stands for honesty, openness, unsuspiciousness, innocence, straightness and missing unnecessary redundancy.

Meetings

There are heavy flaws in todays meeting culture

- **we rarely talk about work** but just coordinate who does what and until when (and everyone is nerved)
- there is an **increasing amount of meetings** that take more and more time from our "real" work, leading to even more stress doing our work
- the number of participants and topics discussed are **often not of real interest for everyone participating** (and it adds to the fact of not doing the real work that is waiting)
- meetings **with blaming aspects – it consumes time and poisons relationships** – making working together afterwards even more harmful
- through their daily stress in their regular work **meeting participants often are not prepared** (or just rushed in creating a presentation by paste and copy using previously held presentations)
- the **brilliantly simple nearly never gets a chance in rushed meetings** – the **simple stupid wins against the simple excellent solutions** – SWARM STUPIDITY
- conflict of interests, positioning, regulations, reporting needs, documentation needs, quality controls and status
- **all stay in their narrowed perspective** on the picture fragment and the group does not see the whole picture (see the picture below and the nice story – 6 blind men and the elephant) – good companies discuss WHAT is an elephant? And what is a bigger, faster elephant?

- who knows what is the goal of that meeting?

- **often meetings are stupid complicated** – get tangled in rules, not focussed on a beautiful result but defocussed by detailed questions about Who/Until/Who pays/Whom is it using…
- in opposition to swarm intelligence – **not the experts and best in an area get together** but often the same recurring people in middle class level regarding the problem to solve

Unrealistic targets

- **too tough (and unrealistic) targets create stress, pressure, conflicts, errors and chaos** – in the end one is even not achieving far more simpler goals
- If one tries to reach something that is far out of range (and one is blind seeing that it is)
    - one often tries to do more of the same
    - using over hours, too much actions and effort.
    - resulting frustrations lead to escape plans, blaming, excuses
    - notification for change are treated as hostility
    - one is losing a clear view and perspective on the whole – more and more

Dunning-Kruger-Effect

metacognitive

- don't see superior abilities of others
- cannot see the extent of their own incompetene
- it's forbidden to question an unrealistic utopia – they suffer from the utopia syndrome (see Change by Watzlawik, Weakland, Fisch) … and other become victims of a foreign utopia

Unrealistic targets lead to:

- some employees that openly protest (but often to the powerless middle management … that starts to pacify)
- some engaged employees that applause (and know or hope that the less engaged will earn the blame later on)
- many resigning – and they do what is just possible and leave the boss alone
-
- more hours … more stress … one is getting the victim of the problem

Too high load

- **don't aim for full resource utilization**

- simple formula from <u>queueing theory</u>: expected number [customers|people] = utilization / (1-utilization) … if you e.g. aim for 92% utilization you get 0,92/ (1-0,92) = 11,5 people on average in the queue and expected length of waiting people = utilization * expected number of people = 0,92 * 11,5 = 10,58 people waiting on average. (in opposition to 4,81 people waiting when utilization goes down to 85%).
- that means – **the more important a position (measured by their involvement in important decisions) – the less it has to be utilized!!!** (please compare that to your current environment). With e.g. 60% utilization leading to one person waiting on average.
- **too high load (starting with 85%) even leads to more work** as you have to handle with additional stress, complaints and dissatisfaction (like compared to computer networks).
- **all above 85% leads to trouble and often to catastrophes – as the load jumps to more than 100%** through all the administrative overhead to manage the high load (best compensated by over hours 😉
- **overloaded management leads to stalling decisions**
- **overload leads to more errors** as people start to reduce quality
- **the daily load starts eating everything else**
  - we stop visiting fairs and learning sessions
  - no time for innovation
  - leadership erodes to just running instead of doing coaching
  - it first kills the climate, later on the sustainable and not urgently important until everything else

Control points everywhere

- the more the environment goes down through too much overload (see previous section) the more **companies start to introduce controlling everywhere** – things like weekly results, check for customer contacts, contract correctness, quality, project handovers, security, health of employees, overtime hours,… all important but usually working in healthy environments become subject of more intense monitoring
- Reviews, assessments, compliance, governance, risk management, budget regulations and reporting plus justifications (sorry I meant excuses)
- **that monitoring eats additional time** (and we jump to more than 100% utilization) – and even worse – that kind of work to aggregate numbers is something most people hate to do
- **mostly dominated top down** – that new kind of work leads to a shift to finding numbers and excuses – instead of working on something meaningful for the product

Let's stop for today – there is much more to write about it in the next post. What do you think about it – did it sound familiar to your environment? Did you already read the book – what is you opinion? I'm looking forward for your comment 😉

Follow up

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