

# Well functioning groups render A BETTER WORLD

People are happier and business fairs better. Schoolchildren receive better grades and more people survive on the operating table. All this happens only if work groups function optimally, maintains Susan Wheelan, one of the world's leading researchers in the field of group dynamics in connection to productivity.

**S**usan Wheelan is a bright-eyed and charming woman who throughout the duration of the interview often comments on her own research results with "that's pretty cool stuff, isn't it?" What is cool, she believes, is the connection between functional group dynamics and high productivity.

Last summer Susan Wheelan visited Sweden in order, among other things, to be the keynote speaker at a research conference about group dynamics. But she has other ties to Sweden as well. For a long time she has been working together with Swedish consulting firms and it is her theories which are behind the transformation of The Swedish National Defense College's group dynamic leadership course UGL, Development of Group and Leader (see article in P&L, issue 4, 2008).

**Her message is very clear** and is based on 40 years of research, her own as well as a number of meta-studies. First of all she declares that group dynamics is something eternal. "We have this in our DNA. We have to adapt in order to survive and to not be expelled from our groups and communities". Questioned about whether there are any differences between the past and now, differences between men and women, or between cultures, the answer remains the same. No, no, no, she has not found any differences worth mentioning. Us human beings function similarly when we end up in a group. The phases that the group goes through always look the same even if they are expressed with varying emphasis.

For a great many years she has been doing basic research; studying groups with the aid of a video camera. When she began her studies there was not much research in the area of group dynamics and Susan Wheelan believes that this was due to the lack of technical resources at that time.

In order to study what is happening in a group you require cameras that are easy to manage as well as computers to process the data. This is necessary in order to find out what happens in the group, she points out. The connection between productivity and well functioning teams is found in Susan Wheelan's research as well as in the research of others. For example – if the surgical team functions well, mortality is reduced in the operating theater. If the teaching team is not disrupted by conflicts, then schoolchildren perform better. And if the management team is cohesive, productivity increases.

Susan Wheelan is irritated at the lack of understanding concerning the time it takes to build a team. She is often asked to quickly fix teams and send the bill. "But it takes three to four months, at least, for a group to go through the phases that are required in order to become a

high performing team". Plenty of time and an understanding of the basics of the theory of group dynamics, as well as the possibility to call in professional help if problems arise - this is the recipe for turning a new group into a high functioning team, Susan Wheelan believes.

"Instead of trying to create a functioning team in two weeks, hand the task over to an already cohesive high performing group and they will solve it in three days". She believes that there is far too much focus on leadership and far too little focus on coworkers and group development. Susan Wheelan has sometimes offered companies the service of free coworker training. But no, they have ever only wanted leadership training.

When problems arise within the group it is often the leader that is fired or removed. "Keep the leader and help the team instead", says Susan Wheelan. You can either work with the group dynamic or change at least six out of ten members of the group at the same time. If you change them one by one the dynamic will not change. I came into contact with a group that had been performing poorly for 19 years. All the members were changed, but one at a time..."

Being a well functioning team does not mean there are no conflicts. "Task conflict is good but interpersonal conflicts kill the group". "Get away from each other and focus on to the task", encourages Susan Wheelan.

**According to Susan Wheelan there are** four phases on the road to the well functioning team.

The first phase is characterized by issues of belonging and safety. After that comes phase two, with opposition, conflict and questioning of the leadership. "Everybody then thinks that the leader is an idiot" summarizes Susan Wheelan. Phase three brings trust and structure and moves the group a bit closer to phase four, which gives room to work and productivity.

But how do you compose the optimal team that will quickly and elegantly sail through the four phases? "Seek out people who know how to do the job that needs to be done, who know the content of the task", says Susan Wheelan, who believes that too much energy is focused on searching personality factors. "I have seen teams that were composed according to Myers-Briggs personality tests, but where no one knew how to do the job. •

#### *PERSONAL OCH LEDARSKAP 7/8 2008*

*"If the computer is not functioning you can often get immediate help, if the team is not functioning you should have the right to similar immediate help", is the opinion of **Susan Wheelan**, a leading figure in the research on group dynamics.*

#### **Four phases on the road to high-performance**

##### **1. Dependency and inclusion**

The leader needs to provide structure and make decisions. You know that the group is at phase one when the leader asks a question and nobody answers — everything the leaders says seems to disappear into the Bermuda triangle.

##### **2. Counterdependency and fight**

The challenge that a leader faces is not to oppose and attack on a personal level. You know

that the group is at phase two when you would rather pull out all your teeth without an anesthetic than to go along to the next group meeting.

### **3. Trust and structure**

The role of the leader is to be consultative and delegating; the challenge is to listen and coach. You know that the group is at phase three when you notice that you want to smile broadly at the colleague who drove you crazy last month.

### **4. Work and productivity**

The leader needs to facilitate, support and develop; the challenge is to stand back and let go of the control. You know that the group is at phase four when you can't imagine anything better than being part of this particular group.

*Group dynamics is eternal and unchangeable, Susan Wheelan believes. She does not see any great changes over time; neither does she see any difference between men and women or between people from different cultural backgrounds.*

**Name:** Susan Wheelan.

**Age:** 61.

**Roots:** Scotland.

**Residence:** Cape Cod outside Boston.

**Career:** Teacher, researcher and professor of psychology at Temple University, Pennsylvania. Has written a long series of books, as well as innumerable scientific articles on group dynamics. Working presently as a consultant.

**Leisure:** Crazy about tennis. "I began playing when I was 40 and each time I'm like an eleven year old who is going off to have fun with pals"

**Dream:** To get to live to see aliens "Only then will people stop fighting on the earth".

### **READING TIPS**

CREATING EFFECTIVE TEAMS — a guide for members and leaders, Susan A Wheelan  
Sage publications ISBN: 141 29 1376 4

### **SUSAN WHEELAN'S MESSAGE**

- The group dynamic is the same, regardless of historical era, gender or culture. • It is much more effective to invest in group development than leader development.
- It takes between three to four months for a team to go through the phases that are necessary if it is to function optimally.
- Putting money on superficial team-building activities is the same as throwing it into the sea.

*PERSONAL & LEDARSKAP 7/8 2008*