



Westerdals

# conflicting experience

/ kən'fliktɪŋ ɪk'spɪəriəns /

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*Exam in International Event Management / Autumn 2014 / WEE2IEM*

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## 1.1 Introduction

Experience & Event 3 at Westerdals Oslo ACT was, in the subjects International Event Management and International Event Design, given the task to create a brand awareness event for the high-end duvet company Norvegr. The event were to be held somewhere in London, UK on the 7th-9th of October 2014. The classes were divided in to two separate group and were to create two separate events within the same three-days timespan in the same city.

# 1 Assignment

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Specifically, the client wanted a event that:

- Attracted national and international press
- Conveyed the brand identity through all of its aspects
- Would include the products
- Would be a visual experience

## 1.1 Client

In describing the client, the Marketing Plan for the project states that '[the client] is a Norwegian heritage duvet brand that works with the craft and care of traditions and high quality down. The exclusive brand is built around continuing an ancient Norwegian tradition of trading down with the royal and noble of Europe. A tradition that stems all the way back to the Viking ages.'<sup>1</sup>

“*At Norvegr we continue to pursue the time-honoured tradition of creating superlative bedding for an exclusive, international clientele*

— CLIENT WEBSITE

## 1.2 **Market position**

The research done in within the project did not reveal exactly which position the client holds within it's market, primarily due to the lack of online information and statistics on the subject.<sup>2</sup> What we did find is that the company is very small, and extremely anonymous.

### 1.2.1 **Aspirations**

The current leadership of the client company aspire to take the long-lived family business to the next level by entering the UK retail market in order to then make heads in Norway—and hopefully further expand to release in both New York and Tokyo. Our event would therefore play a crucial part in helping the client to accomplish its current market strategy,

## 1.3 **Project production and execution process**

The production of the event was conducted over a, almost two months, period in which the two separate Management and Design groups named NESW and FAMS worked to create two events. After a meeting between the teachers and the client it was, to a certain degree, decided that the two groups would be merging and only produce one event.<sup>3</sup> This meant that the words of the respective Marketing Plans, with their respective set out strategies(though somewhat overlapping) would both fragment into the Design team(s).

In a better world these, and all other plans, would be merged and bringing the best of two worlds onto one table, but as there was not enough time, this did not happen.

The Management and Design teams had both their respective lectures and were, for a large portion of the production separated during the daytime. Not being able to follow or control neither communication nor process, this caused for a lot of the smaller conflicts and internal friction that faced the production.

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2 Attachment A, 10.

3 Attachment B

### 1.3.1 Internal conflicts and disagreements

Although the final result of the project proved to be satisfying for the audience and for the client<sup>4</sup>, the production did not go without any internal conflicts or severe frictions.<sup>5</sup> Without going into details about the internal conflicts, most of the conflicts that occurred contained one or more of the following elements:

- The nature of the conflict was in the spectrum of someone not doing their delegated task
- The nature of the conflict was in the spectrum of late task completion
- The nature of the conflict was in the spectrum of micromanagement
- Little project engagement by one or more parties
- Unclear task delegation
- Personal friction between parties

### 1.4 Research Question

Looking at the aforementioned elements we can easily see the outlines of an unhealthy project environment. Again, this is not to say that the overall project results was dissatisfying, but that the internal project climate could have been better.

With the elements of our internal conflicts and disagreements in mind, I want to take a closer look at the how these came to be, how we wanted to prevent them, and how we could've done things differently. My research question is therefore:

“ *How can we, by focusing on the experience, help tackle and prevent internal conflicts?* ”

### 1.5 Methods

To answer the question at hand, I have chosen to discuss it in the following manner and order:

- ① Which measures was put in place to prevent conflicts?
- ② How did these measures—*measure*?
- ③ How can we dissect a conflict situation into tangible components?
- ④ What methods can we use to resolve a internal project conflict?
- ⑤ Learning from this, how can we best prevent a conflict situation?
- ⑥ Which limitations are we (as a school project) under?

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4 Attachment D

5 Attachment E

- ⑦ Is it possible to work around these limitations?

Before we can further look into conflicts, we need to get a solid definition of the term.

Oxford Dictionaries defines conflict as 'a state of mind in which a person *experiences* a clash of *opposing* feelings or *needs*'. And as 'a *prolonged* armed struggle'.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Results

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### 2.1 Prevention

In our project, most of the strategies put in place to prevent conflict situations and to ensure good project progression was defined in the project's Team Contract and Marketing Plan. For example, a direct quotation from the Team Contract states that 'Its expected that the team will act respectfully, be punctual and open-minded.' and that '[t]he team is to be engaged in the project, show up to scheduled appointments at set time, notify the rest of the team in advance if they can't make it, and do their best to keep updated if they miss a meeting'.<sup>7</sup>

The Marketing Plan did put in place even more to-the-point strategies for ensuring good involvement and progression. For example:<sup>8</sup>

- Tidy workspace, focus on breaks, complimenting each other (*Engagement*)
- Try to place people in work situations/give them tasks they find interesting (*Engagement*)
- Single communication platform, Podio (*Process*)
- Three meetings a day for follow up and coordination (*Process*)

### 2.2 Project findings

As already disclosed, all of these strategies did not ensure that the production went without any hassles. This is also apparent in several of the minutes from the production meetings, and from the internal evaluation.<sup>9,10</sup> Primarily most of our issues can be described as disrespect rather than lack of time or resources.

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6 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. «Conflict». 16.10.2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/conflict>

7 Attachment C

8 Attachment A, 22-24.

9 Attachment D

10 Attachment E

It is safe to assume that this tendency is directly related to the project being a school project, and that we therefore have no direct sanctioning possibilities: we can not sack one person from the project, nor can we promote or demote someone. Although we might want it to be different, in the absolute, there is a flat structure.

Furthermore, it can be argued that better management follow-up and -through on the set strategies would have had a large impact on the team dynamics and motivation. This again comes back to the fact that the management team did not possess any real authority, and that every directive or strategy would get weaker in correlation with the number of mentions and attempts to enforce. It is safe to say that there were different mentalities in every corner and team of the project, though, this is natural in a school project.

## 2.3 Dissection

In order to better ourselves and find better ways for preventing and tackling conflict situations, we need to dissect the situations into tangible components that we can implement into our operational plans and strategies.<sup>11</sup> A good starting place for this will be to look deeper into the definition of conflict from Oxford Dictionaries, and focus on the key points and takeaways:

### 2.3.1 Needs

The parties of the conflict have different needs, interests or connected feelings defining their individual standpoints. This is the obvious and self-implicit meaning of a conflict situation.

### 2.3.2 Opposition

These differing properties (needs, interests, feelings) creates distanced and opposed parties: disagreeing heavily on one or more subjects. This distance can generate friction between the parties: neither one can, or want to, understand the values of the opposition.

### 2.3.3 Prolonged

A conflicting situation also tends to be a prolonged issue: this is not something that pops up and is resolved or compromised to everyone's liking at once.

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11 Bowdin et. al, *Events Management*, 132-134.

#### 2.3.4 Experience

The opposing parties, with their both subjective and objective interests, experience the conflict differently. The experience of a conflicting situation heavily influences how we approach and how we end up resolving the issue.<sup>12</sup> The *experience* embodies all of the senses, it embodies how we perceive, but not necessarily how an argument or message was meant to be perceived.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

We all experience differently and we all both communicate and perceive differently: how can we then be expected to see the potentially objective differences that underlie the conflicting situation, without being tangled up in the interpersonal aspects of an conflicting situation?<sup>16</sup>

As Fisher and Ury(2012) states, we as humans have a tendency to link the conflicting situation with the person on the other side: that the person is the problem.<sup>17</sup> They argue that in order to best resolve a conflicting issue, we need to see past the person and separate the person from the problem.<sup>18</sup> We need to focus on the interests of the parties, rather than the apparent held positions.

They argue that ‘[u]nderstanding the other side’s thinking is not simply a useful activity that will help you solve the problem. Their thinking is the problem.’

The *experience* of the conflict is both part of, and a result of their thinking.<sup>19</sup>

#### 2.4 Methods for resolution

So how can we, by focusing on the experience of a conflict, improve the strategies we use to prevent such incidents?

First of all, we need to look at the definition and aspects of the term *experience* itself. Oxford

12 Pine et. al, *The Experience Economy*, 199.

13 Fisher et. al, *Getting to Yes*, 82-83.

14 Ibid., 35.

15 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. «Experience». 15.10.2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/experience>

16 Fisher et. al, *Getting to Yes*, 42-43.

17 Ibid., 19.

18 Ibid., 19-40.

19 Ibid., 24-31.



Dictionaries defines it as 'An event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone'.<sup>20</sup> The Norwegian encyclopedia SNL defines it as 'the content of a person's subjective experience, whether it's related to external sensory impact (perception), emotional state (emotion), thought processes, motivation, etc'.<sup>21</sup>

Both these definitions correlates nicely with the arguments of Fisher and Ury that an experience is *subjective* and that it is therefore coherently difficult to actually see the underlying *objective criteria* of the differing parties when negotiating a conflict or disagreement. The definitions also states that the subjectivity is related to differing *perception, emotions, thoughts* and *motivation*.

#### 2.4.1 Senses

In focusing on improving the experience, the sensory aspect is really interesting. Berridge(2007) argue—in the context of designing events—that every decision made to fill an empty, four walled and bare space is a design-based decision as every choice made will affect the experience.<sup>22</sup>

Pine & Gilmore(1999) argues further that experiences is not about entertainment, it's about engagement, and that which aspect of the sensory impacts people find the most and least rewarding is subjective.<sup>23</sup>

Is it then safe to say that every word, every facial expression, every gesture and every detail, object and person in the room is part of shaping or promoting either conflict or resolution?

Yes.<sup>24</sup>

And then, a term that can embody all of these properties is the surrounding *environment*.<sup>25</sup> The surrounding environment is, as we can see from Berridge, crucial for how we respond to situations.<sup>26</sup>

20 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. «Experience». 15.10.2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/experience>

21 Store Norske Leksikon, s.v. «Opplevelse». 15.10.2014. <http://www.snl.no/opplevelse>

22 Berridge, *Events Design and Experience*, 30-31.

23 Pine et. al, *The Experience Economy*, 29-31.

24 Following Berridge(2007) and Pine & Gilmore(1999) these aspects seem to correlate and overlap.

25 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. «Environment». 15.10.2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/environment>

26 Pine et. al, *The Experience Economy*, 27-43.

#### 2.4.2 **Surrounding Environment**

But are we just back to common knowledge? That in order to avoid conflict, we need an environment that communicates resolution, co-operation and understanding?<sup>27</sup>

Yes, and no.

Common knowledge is arguably not the same as a well-found focus on the matter. Leibling(2012) and Lilley(2010) talks of personal experience on how to handle people and argues for a list of different types and how to handle them. But what we've set out to do—and what we have discovered is that in our case, the right focus in the prevention has been missing. In order to best prevent we need to design the environment in such a manner that everyone feels included, that everyone can be open and where people understand each other as they communicate.<sup>28,29</sup>

Looking back at the production at hand, we used a number of different locations when working together, and they all affected the way we worked and communicated. Reflecting on these gives an even better ground for where things worked, and why:

#### 2.4.3 **Westerdals, Bellona**

One of the first spaces we used was the classrooms at the Bellona complex at Vulkan. These few classrooms are of the highest energy standard, light, white and open. There's no disturbance and fewer late comings.

This was in the first phase of the production in which we were mostly separated from the Design team, so though the space itself is clean, neutral and open, this is not where we did the majority of our work. Nor had the majority of the discussions.

#### 2.4.4 **Westerdals, 406**

The 406-room at Westerdals is our usual classroom, and a place we're very used to work in. There isn't much disturbance, nor a bad atmosphere. But it can get very small and insufficient when more than one group, and up to 19 people try to work and discuss at the same time.

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27 Fisher et. al, *Getting to Yes*, 149-150.

28 Leibling, *How People Tick*, 1.

29 Lilley, *Dealing with Difficult People*, 1-5.

This can easily heat discussions, and bad A/C combined with a sunny sky have probably never helped to reduce the tension in an overcrowded room.

#### 2.4.5 **Westerdals, "Headquarters"**

After some time, we established a headquarters for the production. Initially for the NESW group, but as the merger progressed, the FAMS group joined in. The headquarters was set in one of the open workspaces of the 4th floor at Westerdals and consisted of a two large tables, a whiteboard, partition walls between the tables, a couch and plans on the walls. And last but not least; it also had express coffee, tea and hot water readily available for everyone.

After a while, as everybody got accustomed to the space, this got us to work close—but not too close. It got us to communicate—and listen in. We had quicker turnover on decisions—and a better dynamic in general.

#### 2.4.6 **Royal Festival Hall**

We also needed a space to work in, while in London, and we ended up using The Royal Festival Hall, or Southbank Centre. The space is filled with tables and chairs(not in proportion with the number of power outlets) and it stretches over several floors. It's an OK environment, and you can not expect too much when choosing a public space for a project workspace. If it just hadn't doubled as a conference/auditorium venue. At some points, the noise was unbearable, and people had severe difficulties with hearing each other.

At this point of the process, everyone had a bigger respect for the process, everyone was getting tired, and everyone respected everyone else. The space was open, it was easier to come and go as one had to or pleased—but it was difficult to have production meetings due to all of the surrounding distractions and disturbances.

### 2.5 **Prevention**

From both the findings in our production and the definitions of the terms, we can fathom out a general understanding of how we can prevent these situations and better our strategies.

We've seen that focusing on the experience of the surrounding environment, and all that it entails, can potentially have a profound effect on the resolute energy in the respective parties

of a conflicting situation.<sup>30,31</sup>

So in order to better our strategies and operational plans we will need to find a way to implement these aspects HSE-procedures:<sup>32</sup>

- Ensure that every working environment is suitable for that the work that needs to be done
- Ensure that meetings can be held in rooms that all, or none of the parties feel accustomed
- Promote the importance of a good working environment

Further, the experience of an actual conflicting situation needs to be enhanced, to prevent further conflict and promote resolution:

- Promote a focus on the interests of the parties, rather than the held positions
- Help promoting the respective objective criteria
- Help invent options for mutual gain

## 2.6 Limitations

As already disclosed and discussed, the project is under a heavy constraint: by being a school project. There are definitely positive aspects by being a school project, but it does give some very apparent limitations:

- No sanctioning possibilities
- No real structure
- No direct authority
- Too many resources and members for project size, at select times

## 2.7 Work-arounds

Are these limitations even possible to work around, or will the team dynamics of a school project, in the end, all be dependant of luck?

*We can, per the data we can attain at the moment, only speculate on the answer of this.*

The deduced answer is regretfully; no. Without clearly defined and accepted structure, real resource management or gut-felt internal green lights we can not really control some of the

30 Fisher et. al, *Getting to Yes*, 24-31.

31 Pine et. al, *The Experience Economy*, 29-43.

32 Bowdin et. al, *Events Management*, 147-152.

most important aspects of a well-functioning production.<sup>33,34,35,36,37</sup>

## 3 Conclusion

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“ *How can we, by focusing on the experience, help tackle and prevent internal conflicts?* ”

To answer this, we have looked closer at the core of a conflict situation and dissected its elements. What we have found is that the experience can be a major part of both the psychological and sociological aspects of both preventing, tackling and resolving a conflict situation. We can ascertain that every element in a space can affect the experience each of the conflicting parties have towards the conflict, and towards the other side.

Therefore, by focusing on the experience, we can in fact potentially drastically alter the outcome of a heated, ill-matched or incompatible discussion.

These conclusions are not the result of anyone's rocket science, but are really interesting nonetheless. And might very well be the starting point for a bigger bachelor thesis.

## 4 Attachments

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(A) Marketing Plan E	ATTACHMENTS/MARKETING PLAN E.PDF
(B) Production Meeting: Merger	ATTACHMENTS/MERGER.PDF
(C) Team Contract	ATTACHMENTS/TEAM CONTRACT.PDF
(D) Production Meeting: Evaluation #1	ATTACHMENTS/EVALUATION #1.PDF
(E) Production Meeting: Evaluation #2	ATTACHMENTS/EVALUATION #2.PDF

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33 Ibid., 144-145.

34 Ibid., 163-171.

35 Ibid., 294-300.

36 Berkun, *Making things Happen*, 245-246.

37 Lock, *Project Management*, 115-148.

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