

Appropriate Disturbances: Team Development in Sports and Business

Kasper Pape Helligsøe, Rikke Rønnau, and Peter Bredsdorff-Larsen

Abstract

In this article, we will present an anthropological research project that explores possible benefits of comparing a professional handball club and a software company. More specifically, we turn our attention to the phenomenon of “disturbances.” In workplace contexts, disturbances are most often experienced as hindering focus and immersion, thus having a negative impact on job performance. However, by exploring everyday practices in the Danish professional handball club Bjerringbro-Silkeborg Handball, it becomes apparent that (former) head coach Peter Bredsdorff Larsen deliberately uses what he calls “appropriate disturbances” to provoke change and give direction to processes of team development. This causes us to ask one of the fundamental questions of our overall research project: what form would such appropriate disturbances take in a software company? In an effort to explore this question, we describe our experiments with the concept of “reflection time” as an appropriate disturbance to team development in the software company Systematic. We argue that such disturbances can create moments and spaces in which the potential for improvement and development emerges through a temporary destabilization of everyday life in the workplace.

Page 1 of 21

JBA 11(2): 195-215
Fall 2022

© The Author(s) 2022
ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v11i2.6779>

Keywords

Leadership, teamwork, team development, disturbances, temporality, comparison.

Introduction

Most people know the feeling of being disturbed at work. Notifications, phone calls, meetings, social media, questions from colleagues, and a multitude of other disturbances demand our attention on a regular basis. Depending on the nature and context of the disturbance, our reaction can be one of relief, frustration, stimulation, or discouragement. As one of us argues elsewhere (Helligsøe and Frederiksen forthcoming), workplace disturbances can often be experienced as hindering focus and immersion in specific tasks, and consequently as having a negative impact on job performance. In this article, however, we wish to argue for the inclusion of deliberate and appropriate disturbances for team development in team-based organizations.¹ In doing so, we aim to show how small-scale disturbances in the form of various kinds of stop-and-think-practices, questions, or tasks can create moments and spaces in which the potential for improvement and development emerges through a temporary destabilization of everyday life in the workplace.

Professionally, we, the authors, are an anthropologist, a professional handball coach, and a C-level executive.² For nearly three years, we have worked together to explore, through anthropological methods of participant observation, interviews, and comparisons, whether sports and business can inspire each other in the practice of doing leadership, team development, and workplace culture. Our collaboration centers around the juxtaposition of the professional handball club Bjerringbro-Silkeborg Handball (BSH), where Peter Bredsdorff-Larsen was the head coach in 2014-2021, and the software company Systematic, where Rikke Rønnau is currently a Group Senior Vice President of People and Culture (HR). As a part of his PhD project, Kasper Pape Helligsøe has conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork in both organizations.³

¹ Here, the term “team development” refers to deliberate acts of giving direction to social processes in a workplace team.

² A C-level leader holds a top executive position in a company and has impact on company-wide decisions.

³ The fieldwork took place between May 2019 and December 2021 and consisted of one year of full-time fieldwork and a year of more loosely affiliated fieldwork. Kasper spent the better part of this time at Systematic where he participated in a host of activities connected to the work of the People & Culture (HR) unit. During his fieldwork, he conducted a total of 26 interviews of approximately one hour’s duration.

We begin the article by considering the corporate interest in organizing its workforce in, and understanding the dynamics of, workplace teams. We then move on to examine some challenges and practices of working with team development through the concept of appropriate disturbances before finally discussing the generative potential of this concept in the context of Systematic and team-based organizations as such. First, however, we introduce the two organizations – the handball club and the software company – and the collaborative framework through which we consider these organizations in light of each other.

The Handball Club and the Software Company

Bjerringbro-Silkeborg Handball, commonly referred to as BSH, is a professional handball club based in Silkeborg, Denmark. The club was founded in 2005 and competes in the Danish Handball League, the top tier of Danish handball. In 2016, shortly after Peter took over as head coach, they won their first and only Danish championship thus far. They finished second in the league in 2018 and 2021, the latter of which was Peter's last season at BSH. In addition to the handball team, BSH consists of just a handful of administrative workers, making the organization quite small compared to Systematic.

Systematic was founded in 1985 in Aarhus, Denmark, by current owner and CEO, Michael Holm. Today, the company consists of approximately 1,000 employees distributed in 11 countries, making Systematic the biggest privately owned software company in Denmark. The company produces software for industries such as the defense, healthcare, digitalization, intelligence, and national security. Every day, more than one million soldiers, nurses, doctors, police officers, librarians, teachers, offshore coordinators, and public administrative employees use Systematics' solutions throughout the world.

The collaboration between BSH and Systematic started with a conversation between Peter and Michael in which they found that, in spite of the obvious differences, there were many similarities between running a handball team and running a software company. They decided to dig deeper into the comparison and initiated Kasper's PhD project as one way to do so. Rikke and Peter quickly became heavily involved in the project as main representatives from the two organizations. At the intersection of anthropology, sports, and business, we found a new lens through which to explore organizational development in a light that illuminated new perspectives on practices such as, in the case of this article, teamwork, team leadership, and team development. Drawing on George Marcus' writings (1997), we thus think of our collaboration as creating a "third" space in which we have explored themes of common interests together.

We do not think of our juxtaposition of BSH and Systematic as a one-to-one comparison in which practices from one domain are simply transferred to the other. Instead, our intention has been to use this comparison to foster new ideas and perspectives by considering the two organizations “through” each other. In this endeavor, we take inspiration in George Marcus and Michael Fischer who, in their book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), argue that the traditional interest of anthropologists in foreign cultures creates a productive defamiliarization. In other words, by looking at “ourselves” through the eyes of “the Other,” our taken-for-granted practices and understandings are defamiliarized and exposed to critical self-reflection, which not only deepens our understanding of “the Other,” but also of “ourselves” (1986: 138). Inspired by this line of thinking, we explore what leadership and team development looks like at Systematic when viewed through the lens of BSH – and vice versa (for an elaboration of this approach, see Helligsøe and Vangkilde 2021). In this article, and the project as such, we primarily focus on bringing insights from the handball club into play at the software company, although the opposite move is just as interesting in principle.

Working in Teams

In most industries today, working in teams is widely recognized as a desirable way of organizing a workforce (Kaplan et al. 2016; Cross et al. 2016). This is, not least, the case in the software industry in which frameworks such as “Lean,” “Kanban,” or “Scrum” are often utilized to organize the work of a project team. Bestselling books such as *The Power of a Positive Team* (Gordon 2018) and *The Best Team Wins* (Gostick and Elton 2018) are just a few examples of the wealth of literature on how to assemble, manage, and work in teams that have been published within recent years. To an increasing degree, employees are urged to become “team players” and act in the best interest of the team. For this, one can find guidance in popular books such as *The 17 Essential Qualities of a Team Player* (Maxwell 2006) or simply *The Ideal Team Player* (Lencioni 2016).

Outside of popular literature, some of the biggest companies have even developed their own approaches to teamwork. For instance, Jeff Bezos introduced a simple rule in the early days of Amazon: every team should be no larger than can be fed by two pizzas. Like almost everything else at Amazon, this “two-pizza team rule” was instituted with the aim of enhancing efficiency and scalability and has, by commentators on the tech industry, been emphasized as the “secret sauce” in Amazon’s success (Hern 2018). Amazon, however, is not the only tech giant to recognize the importance of teams. In 2012, Google launched their own research project with the aim to find out why some teams worked better than others and, ultimately, how to build the perfect team. Although Google is usually quite

good at finding patterns, for a long time, they could not identify any common traits among the teams that performed well. That changed when they stumbled upon the concept of “psychological safety” (Edmondson 1999), which denotes the condition that team members trust that their colleagues in the team will not embarrass or judge them for speaking their minds. As such, Google simply found that trust, mutual respect, and an environment in which people did not fear to be ridiculed because of their opinions, ideas, or missteps, more than anything else, characterized the teams that performed well. As Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Charles Duhigg (2016) notes in his article on the matter, Google’s intense data collection and years of research have let them to “...the same conclusions that good managers have always known. In the best teams, members listen to one another and show sensitivity to feelings and needs.”

Although not quite a tech giant, the top management at Systematic has likewise increased its attention on social relations and teamwork following their rapid growth in the number of employees within the last decade. The first time Kasper spoke with the founder and CEO at Systematic, Michael Holm, Michael mentioned his interest in gaining a deeper understanding of well-functioning teams:

We want to find out how we can create that kind of team spirit where we deliver every time and improve each other [...] In a team, you must learn to fight together, to receive a message as a team, improve as a team while remaining individualists [...] That is where I think we can learn from handball.

An obvious explanation for the interest in teams, at Systematic and beyond, is that managers and commentators believe that teamwork increases productivity, efficiency, innovation, and commitment. In other words, that people perform better when working together than they do working alone.

Although teams, teamwork, and team development have received surprisingly little attention in anthropology, other disciplines such as psychology, organizational research, and management studies have explored many different aspects of working in and with teams. Among these are the optimum size of a team (Hackman 2002), the situations in which teams will add value (Critchley and Casey 1984), the composition of teams (Mathieu et al. 2014), and the factors that influence group members’ perception of themselves as a team (Higgs and Rowland 1992). An often-cited definition of “team” in this field of research is that provided by Katzenbach and Smith (1993: 45) who state that “a team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”

For an anthropologist reading some of this literature, it quickly becomes evident that, more often than not, the focus is on size, skills,

composition, purpose, and goals, rather than on an in-depth social and psychological understanding of the relation between the individual and the team (however, with notable exceptions such as Diamond 1993 and Edmondson 1999). In our project, we have found that such understanding is key in working with and comprehending teams. To reflect further on this matter, and to qualify our understanding of a team (what it is and, perhaps, what it ought to be), we have found the American-German political philosopher Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) theory on "the public space" to be a useful point of departure.

The Team as Arendt's "Public Space"

In the renowned book *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt conceives of the public, with inspiration from the city-state or "polis" in ancient Greek, as a space characterized by openness and communality where people meet and talk about shared causes and common issues. As philosopher Anne Marie Pahuus (2003) describes, the openness of the public space, in Arendt's theory, provides the individual with the opportunity to take her place and "unfold" as a person. Only when individuals are seen and heard by others, they emerge as acting persons who can acquire a sense of reality; that is, the perception that others experience the same world they do. The world thus becomes a place which individuals share with others, lending it a sense of stability. Although there might be a sense of joy in melting together and practically becoming one unit – as one, for instance, can sometimes experience in teams or groups – it is important, according to Arendt, to be connected as distinguishable persons who act, behave, and position themselves in the public space. It is equally important to have something to talk about in the sense of a shared problem or objective. This is a precondition, Pahuus stresses, for forming opinions and testing those opinions in relation to the opinions of others. In sum, the public space is where individuals emerge as acting persons who are seen, heard, and recognized by others, and where they return that recognition by partaking in the community, taking seriously and living up to the social relations, agreements, and promises that emerge in it. In addition, this shapes their sense of reality and actions while remaining distinguishable as persons capable of making up their own mind and acting freely (Pahuus 2003: 65-69).

Arendt's theory of the public space resembles Peter's ideas of a handball team, Rikke's conception of a workplace team, and Kasper's experiences with being part of the team at BSH and several teams at Systematic. During Kasper's fieldwork, he noticed how being recognized as part of a team allowed him to break free from the role of the passive observer of unfolding events and, using Arendt's terminology, emerge as a person with thoughts, opinions, and presence. This happened in various ways in the different teams he visited, for example when one of the senior

players at BSH, Jesper Nøddesbo, gave a high five to each of his team members before a match and included Kasper in the ritual, or when a team at Systematic who drew lots to determine who would lead the morning meetings included Kasper in the draw. Situations like these, in which we are being seen and heard, make us feel part of the team and allow us to take our place in it.

Arendt's theory of the public space and its interpersonal relations inspires our understanding of what constitutes the ideal team in an organization. That is, a community in which individuals are being seen and heard (and in turn see and hear others), and in which the recognition from being seen and heard provides them with a sense of reality, of sharing the world with their teammates. This, in turn, empowers their ability to emerge in the team as distinguishable persons with independent thoughts, ideas, and actions.

“All Upper Body – No Legs”

According to Rikke, who takes part in the day-to-day discussions among the top managers at Systematic, there are, however, several reasons why working with social relations and team dynamics in an organizational setting can be difficult. At Systematic, and probably in many similar organizations, the direct purpose of the organization is to deliver high-quality products and projects on time and at the agreed price. Therefore, it is easy to end up focusing on aspects that are, or seem to be, more directly related to producing the desired outcome, such as the most efficient work processes or tools. According to Rikke, at Systematic, they are excellent at working with and improving processes related to software development and testing. These processes are proven, well-described, and built into the regular Scrum practices that guide the workflow of most teams at the company.⁴ Although there are some processes in place for working to improve teams and social relations at Systematic (for instance, in the form of employee satisfaction surveys and “team operating agreements”), they are not as comprehensive, proactive, and well-documented as the processes related to software development. Rikke and her colleagues in the People and Culture unit sometimes jokingly refer to this state as “all upper body – no legs,” comparing their organization to a gym-goer who only works on her upper body muscles and neglects to build “the foundation of strong legs,” as Rikke puts it. In this hardly flattering image, the processes directly related to software development – that is, creating the company's products – are the upper body, and the processes related to working with team development and social relations are the legs. Systematic's collaboration with BSH and

⁴ “Scrum” is an agile software development framework followed at Systematic and many other software development companies (see Fowler and Highsmith 2001).

Kasper's PhD project are among the things initiated by Systematic to stop skipping "leg day" and become a more balanced "athlete."

Despite articulating team development and social relations as "the foundation of strong legs," the difficulties with prioritizing the "training" of them was indeed apparent to Kasper during his fieldwork. Busyness was a common theme in the organization, and while some employees claimed to thrive in such fast-paced environments, others observed that the lack of time to do their work properly hindered their ability to perform at the level they aspired to, which resulted in frustrations and sometimes a lack of engagement. As an example, one of the rare meetings on internal roles and social dynamics that Kasper was to participate in had to be rescheduled because the employee who was supposed to facilitate the meeting did not have enough time to plan it properly. When questioned about this by his project leader, he raised his arms in a gesture of powerlessness saying: "there is just too much to do right now." When release deadlines (deadlines for delivering a piece of software to a customer) and the expectations of customers put the team under pressure, the employee later explained, the internal processes are the first things to be sacrificed: "when you have an important release deadline and some internal problems in the team, what do you prioritize?"

With their striking image of "all upper body – no legs," Rikke and her colleagues in the People and Culture unit acknowledge this problem and stress the need to prioritize working with team development and social relations. However, as just described, this is not a straightforward matter. Our intention with the collaboration between BSH and Systematic is, therefore, to explore whether a juxtaposition of the two organizations can foster new ideas and perspectives that may give some direction to the development of certain areas in the two organizations; for example, a strengthened focus on team development at Systematic. In line with the main idea of considering the two organizations through each other, we devote the rest of this article to the concept of appropriate disturbances as one proposed way to work with team development at Systematic. To do so, let us look into the everyday life at BSH to explore what "leg day" might look like.

Disturbing "The System"

In Peter's work as a manager and coach for professional handball teams in several top clubs in Denmark as well as the national men's teams of Denmark and the Faroe Islands, he is immensely aware that the development of players and teams is a daily task. According to Peter, many of the components that make up their daily life in the handball club are in constant motion, which means that he, as the leader, must keep his finger on the pulse and always display curiosity, interest, and closeness in

his primary tasks of facilitating and ensuring the team's positive development. The guiding principle is to create the best possible circumstances for the team to perform well and ultimately get the best possible results on the court. Appropriate disturbances are key to Peter's thoughts on developing teams and creating such circumstances.⁵

In the handball club, Peter deliberately utilizes disturbances to initiate development. Ideally, appropriate disturbances should "push" the individual and/or the team in desirable directions, but this requires a finely tuned awareness of the individual or the team that one wishes to "push." If the disturbance is too small, it will likely go unnoticed and will not change anything, and if it is too big, the recipient will likely reject it as inappropriate or undesirable. The disturbances take place in various settings, including scheduled meetings, informal meetings on the way to a game, evaluations of training and matches, tactical meetings before a game, and many more. An important point in working with this approach is, according to Peter, that it does not have to take away a lot of time from the everyday practices and tasks of the team: "you do not have to go away on a two-day seminar once a year at some fancy hotel to work with team development. It is actually much better to make that work a part of your everyday life." Following this line of thought, appropriate disturbances initiated by Peter often materialize as small-scale disturbances in the form of questions, practices, or tasks that create moments and spaces in which the potential for improvement and development emerges through a temporary destabilization of the everyday life in the workplace.

During Kasper's fieldwork at BSH, he witnessed several examples of how Peter deliberately introduced disturbances in his work with the players and the team. The first time Kasper witnessed this approach was in Peter's coaching of one of the young and promising players in the squad, Johan Hansen, who was considered one of the best in his position in the Danish league. However, looking at some data, Peter found that Johan's "shooting percentage" (a measurement of how many of his shots resulted in a goal) was still too low to match Johan's ambition of playing for the Danish men's national team and a top club in Europe. Peter challenged – or disturbed – Johan by asking him to watch all his shots from the prior season on video to evaluate his success rate for different types of shots. Johan had to get back to Peter with an assessment of what

⁵ The concept of "appropriate disturbances" was originally coined by Chilean biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana who, along with Francisco Varela, is mostly known for having introduced the concept of "autopoiesis" to define the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells (Varela and Maturana 2012 [1972]). Maturana used the term "appropriate disturbances" to explain how disturbances from outside forces can make autopoietic systems react in a way that leads to structural change and alters the future behavior of that system (Leyland 1988: 361-362); that is, if they are "appropriate." The appropriateness of the disturbance, according to Maturana, is determined by the effect it has on the system.

he needed to work on in practice to improve his shooting percentage. After having assessed his shots from the past season, Johan decided to reduce his shot variations and focus on perfecting specific variations. Speaking with Kasper after his meeting with Peter, Johan explained that watching the video clips had been a great reality check for him.

I had this idea that a certain type of shot was much worse than it actually turned out to be when looking through the clips. I think that was because I missed a couple of important chances with that type of shot, and then that just had a strong presence in my mind. On the other hand, I thought that my shooting percentage when trying to shoot through the legs of the goalkeeper was pretty good, but it was only a hit 50 percent of the time, which is not great at all.

All in all, Johan told Kasper that he became much more aware of the kinds of shot variations he had to work on to evolve as a player. Though by no means implying that his success was caused by this or other specific disturbances, within a couple of years, Johan went on to win the world championship with Denmark and sign with one of the top clubs in Europe.

Creating Coordinated Understandings

In the hunt for “the perfect performance,” Peter introduced the concept of the “finals level” at BSH as a standard measure for a level of performance that the team strives to reach. The term has also been introduced to selected teams at Systematic in workshops on those teams’ conception of their own “finals level.” The underlying idea of the term is simply that if the handball team regularly succeeds in playing on the “finals level,” they improve their chances of reaching new finals and, ultimately, winning more matches, which is the overall objective of the club. As Peter stresses, in team sports, there are several different understandings of what constitutes the “finals level,” making it important continuously to work on formulating a coordinated understanding to work toward common goals.

To this end, Peter has introduced what he calls a “performance analysis” in the form of an exercise meant to expose the individual understandings of the “finals level” and make them available to common discussion in the team. In this recurrent exercise, Peter presents the team members with ten carefully selected video clips from the most recent match. They watch every situation two or three times. After each situation, players are asked to assess individually whether they think the situation is at the “finals level,” or whether it could have been handled in a better way. After the individual players have assessed this question, Peter facilitates a team discussion in which the players are asked to explain why they assessed the situation as they did. More often than not, this leads to discussions that enhance the players’ understanding of each other’s points of views. The premise is that there are no correct answers, only

opinions and discussions. According to Nikolaj Øris, one of the senior players at BSH, this specific exercise is “among the best things Peter brought to the club.” In an interview with Kasper, he explained:

I think we get a better mutual understanding of what we want and what we do not want on the court [...] [The exercise] contributes to the fact that hopefully we all, along the way, will see situations in similar ways and work towards the kinds of situations that we all believe can make us reach new finals [...] At the same time, it gives the individual player a chance to confirm whether his decisions are right or wrong in the eyes of the team. Sometimes, I can think that I did the right thing in a situation but then half of my teammates might think that I should have done something else. That is nice to know as well.

According to Peter and Nikolaj, such performance analyses facilitates detailed and nuanced team discussions of specific situations, which contribute to creating coordinated understandings of, borrowing Nikolaj’s words, what they want and do not want as a team. As an appropriate disturbance, the exercise thus creates a space of reflection and critical evaluation of the team’s performance, which sometimes exposes differences of opinion. These differences, according to Nikolaj, present an opportunity to develop their mutual understanding of playing style, roles, responsibilities, and untapped potential.

Whether or not a disturbance works as intended is obviously difficult to know, as its effect is not immediately available for evaluation. Sometimes, as in the case of Johan who watched all his shots from the last season and arrived at new realizations, the disturbance seems to be successful in temporarily destabilizing his own understanding of his shot variations in order for him to improve and develop these. In other cases, the effect of the disturbance can be more subtle and less visible, as when Nikolaj realizes that his teammates disagree with his decision in a match. It is hard to know whether that newfound realization changes Nikolaj’s future decisions, but, at the very least, it has made him more aware of the general viewpoints of his teammates, which, as he notes, is nice to know as well.

In a short while, we will address the pressing question of what makes a disturbance appropriate. But before we begin to theorize on this matter, let us first turn to the empirical reality of Systematic to consider how the concept of appropriate disturbances has inspired their way of working with team development.

Reflection Time as an Appropriate Disturbance at Systematic

Coming up with a way to enhance the focus on team development at Systematic without taking away too much time or focus from the work

processes that contribute more directly to the end products (that is, the actual practice of developing software), we came up with a concept that would later be named “reflection time.”

The idea arose at a meeting with a couple of key stakeholders in Kasper’s PhD project, including his supervisors at Aarhus University, as well as Rikke, Peter, and the founder and CEO of Systematic, Michael. In this meeting, Kasper presented some fieldwork findings from BSH and Systematic concerning the fact that employees in both organizations expressed that they found it valuable to have a break from the dominating focus on productivity and results to reflect on the direction and purpose of their work. We discussed these findings in the group, and Michael suggested that it might make sense to have a separate meeting form at Systematic that would allow teams to take some time out of their busy schedules to create clarity on their direction and purpose and arrive at some mutual understanding concerning their specific situation as a team. A few iterations later, Peter, Rikke, and Kasper came up with the idea of “reflection time” as a recurrent meeting form in which teams got a break from their productivity to consider their social connectivity. Systematic’s approach to the integration of new processes in their work methods is experimental, which means that they test to see how a concept such as reflection time works in what is sometimes referred to as a beta-version,⁶ before spending a lot of time discussing how it should be conceptualized. The idea, which is also common in software development, is to test the concept and get some feedback on it before developing it in detail. We decided to use the same mode of operation.

Peter and Kasper met with team leaders from three of the teams in which Kasper had previously conducted fieldwork and presented their thoughts. Two of the team leaders accepted to test the concept in their teams and help develop it further. One of the team leaders, Gauri Varma Heise, looked pleasantly surprised after Peter and Kasper’s pitch and remarked that this way of considering social relations and team dynamics was very different from their usual way of thinking and working: “we are used to cutting off all feelings and communicating as fact-based as possible. This is a completely new discourse. I mean, the sheer fact that it is called ‘reflection time’!” At the time, Gauri was starting up a new team and was very eager to get an opportunity to, as she put it, “establish common ground,” and figure out how to define themselves as a team. She wanted to get started with the implementation of reflection time right away. The other team leader who accepted to test reflection time managed a team who had been together for several years and who, in his own words, had “a very high level of maturity.” He stressed how, in his

⁶ The term “beta-version” is often used in software development to denote an early version of an application that is sometimes released to a select group of people for testing and feedback.

opinion, a team's performance is dependent on strong relations among team members and employee satisfaction: "when you experience that the mutual understanding is strengthened in a team," he explained, "it will have a positive effect on performance. Success is driven by employee satisfaction!" His reason for committing to testing reflection time was, thus, to see if it would contribute to strengthen relations and maintain a high degree of satisfaction among his team members. Unfortunately, the team leader resigned from his job at Systematic before reflection time was properly implemented, but his views on the importance of team relations in light of his many years of team management experience underline the potentials of the project.

A few months after Gauri initiated the "reflection time" meetings, Kasper met up with her to get a sense of whether she and her team members benefited from the new concept. What really appealed to her about reflection time, she told Kasper, was the opportunity to dig deeper into why they do as they do in the team. Having just started up a new team, she wanted to establish a culture in which the team not only talked about concrete challenges and how to overcome them, but also about the foundation on which the team was built. Since their kick-off meeting, they had held three reflection time meetings in which they focused on who they wanted to be as a team, and how to deal with the fact that half of the team's members were working from home due to the pandemic. Kasper asked whether the kinds of conversations they had during reflection time meetings differed from the conversations they had in other meetings. "Definitely!" Gauri replied and continued:

We do not have other meetings in which we have the time to sit and talk about these things, like how we want to communicate as a team. We have our short morning Scrum meetings three times a week, but they are devoted to concrete tasks in a dedicated task board. When we talk about these concrete tasks, we each have our own role in the team, but when we are sitting in a reflection time meeting, it is like we are all equal. You know, it's just you and me. I can say, "I feel uncomfortable not having you around the office. What do we do about that?" It is funny, now that we talk about it, I realize that the biggest difference is probably that now [in reflection time meetings], I am exposing myself. Saying "*I feel...*," you know, "*I feel* that the current situation is difficult for me to be in. How can we help each other fix that?" [...] Reflection time provides us with a framework for talking about these things. Before, you had to pull your boss aside to say that "I feel left out when you do not keep me informed while I work from home!" Whereas now, there is a meeting dedicated to those kinds of conversations.

This excerpt illustrates how the concept of reflection time, according to Gauri, works as an appropriate disturbance in her team. She stresses how

this new meeting form has provided the team with the time and space to address questions of a social character; for example, who they want to be as a team and how they want to communicate, which was not a part of their work processes before. Furthermore, she notes that they now have a space where it is acceptable (and encouraged) to make an argument based on how they feel, which contrasts the meetings in which the team tries to “communicate as fact-based as possible.” In Gauri’s words, reflection time has given them “a whole new discourse.”

Going back to our prior description of the challenges of working with social relations and team development at Systematic, we begin to see how considerate use of appropriate disturbances can serve as a useful approach in addressing and working with team development. At least, the introduction of reflection time in Gauri’s team has managed to disturb their usual way of working and has provoked a change in their way of communicating with each other by providing them with a (new) space to address questions of a social character. In this specific instance, relying on Gauri’s account, the disturbance has been appropriate and has given rise to a desirable change. Subsequently, the question is how team leaders will know how and when a disturbance is appropriate. In the remaining parts of this article, we will elaborate on the logic of the concept of appropriate disturbances in team development.

Appropriate Disturbances as Generative Events

In recent years, the dual aspect of events, a term first introduced in Victor Turner’s analysis of rituals as simultaneously characterized by discontinuity and renewal (1991 [1969]), has enjoyed some renewed attention in anthropological writings (for instance, Meinert and Kapferer 2015; Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019). In Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma’s edited volume *Ruptures* (2019), the authors focus on the dual aspect of a rupture as an inherently negative moment with the potential to act as a positive impulse towards renewal. They define ruptures as “moments at which value emerges through a break with something” (2019: 1). Although appropriate disturbances, as we apply the concept, can hardly be termed “ruptures” in the sense of radical and forceful forms of discontinuity (2019: 1), we take inspiration from the approach of Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma in viewing appropriate disturbances as events in which value emerges through a break with everyday practices of the workplace.

We argue that appropriate disturbances as carried out at BSH and Systematic can be perceived as small ruptures, stop-and-think events, in that they introduce a change or variation that draws the team out of line with their expected patterns, making them see or experience things anew. In the case of Gauri’s team, we saw how the introduction of reflection time commenced a change in team members’ way of communicating.

Reflection time introduced some variation into their existing patterns of communication by providing a space where emotional, non-fact-based arguments are accepted and encouraged. This emotional reorganization or questioning of in-built standards might not lead to revolutions or radical change, but prejudgments and ingrained habits can be removed, making room for renewal and new ideas. It is too soon to tell whether this will lead to a general change in the team's way of communicating or strengthen the relations and mutual understanding amongst team members. However, it remains clear at this point that reflection time has set in motion new ways of thinking and speaking about the social relations, structures, and dynamics shared in the team.

Improvising, Giving Direction, and Foreseeing the Future

The purpose of applying appropriate disturbances, as Peter does at BSH and Gauri does at Systematic, is to develop the team in new directions. The intent is to change or refine something by intentional design in order to improve as a team. We illustrated this with a few examples from BSH above, showing how one disturbance made a player develop new insights on the quality of his shot variants, and how another disturbance in the form of a performance analysis contributed to developing the team's mutual understanding. Peter and the players experienced a positive impact by these disturbances. It is, however, difficult to know exactly how the disturbances influence the overall performance of the team, as it is impossible to dissect and evaluate the multiplicity of causes that feed into a particular performance. In other words, we cannot draw a strict line between the cause and the effect. As Pahuus (2003: 67) writes in her reading of Arendt's work, the initiative (in our case taken by Peter and Gauri) is merely the beginning of change or new situations that the acting party cannot readily control because the people we act towards are free to seize the multiple opportunities that lie in a situation.

According to anthropologist Edward Bruner (1993), no system of codes, rules, and norms can anticipate every possible outcome of a situation. This makes him observe that "improvisation is a cultural imperative" (1993: 322). Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam build on Bruner in their introduction to *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (2007) in which they argue that it is precisely in the gap between non-specific cultural guidelines and specific conditions of an ever-changing world that the space for improvisation emerges. In our case, the people who are subject to a staged workplace disturbance thus depend on their ability to improvise in order to respond with intent and precision to the multiple opportunities that the non-specific guidelines of the disturbance open up. Such improvisation is creative as it depends on the ability of the imagination to construct a response, and it is relational, as it considers and adapts to the responses of the other team members along the way.

The disturbance creates a space in which the intent of the facilitator meets the improvisational ability of the team, and it is precisely in this coming together that new perspectives are likely to emerge – as they did at BSH and Systematic. Although a product of intentional design, the appropriate disturbance must be flexible and able to accommodate the unpredictable. It does not determine the future; it opens up pathways into several futures that the team can seize through their improvised response to the change in conditions induced by the disturbance.

The future – including the effects of a disturbance – cannot be predicted with any kind of certainty. Attempting intentionally to design the future is a practice of giving direction rather than of specifying endpoints. As a consequence, designing team development through the use of appropriate disturbances is more a matter of running ahead of things while trying to pull the team along behind you than of predicting specific outcomes by an extrapolation of the present (Gatt and Ingold 2013: 145). In other words, because the future cannot be controlled, one can only try to give direction through careful design and facilitation of the movements that are set in motion by any given disturbance.

How to successfully give direction to a team development process will always be situational. The desired direction and the best way to “push” the team and its members will depend on the specific context. In other words, the same disturbance may benefit one team and hinder another depending on the specific situation. Regardless, we believe that successfully giving direction to team development through appropriate disturbances depends on the acting party’s ability to *foresee* potential futures (Gatt and Ingold 2013: 145). Here, we use the notion of foresight, not in the sense of prediction, but as the ability to imagine pathways to potential futures that a specific disturbance may open up. Exercising such imagination, being able to somewhat anticipate the possible outcomes before they occur, resembles what Pierre Bourdieu has termed a “feel for the game”; that is, the ability of the good player to place oneself “not where the ball is but where it is about to land” (2000: 169).⁷ This “feel for the game” is developed through the acquisition of specialized knowledge in a given field. The acquisition of knowledge is tied to the past, as the past informs the ability to foresee, or, in the words of philosopher Henri Bergson (1911), the past is always with us “...leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside” (1911: 11). In sum, while the future remains uncertain, the ability to foresee is what enables Peter, Gauri, and others to imagine pathways to potential futures and chart a course forward.

⁷ Bourdieu uses the term “feel for the game” as a metaphor to describe his concept of habitus (or *sens pratique*), which is a “practical sense for what is to be done in any given situation” (1998: 25).

The Ethics of Appropriate Disturbances

In principle, appropriate disturbances can just as well be initiated by members of the team. In most cases, however, they will be initiated by the leader of the team as presented in the cases of Peter's and Gauri's teams. As such, it may prove helpful to see appropriate disturbances through the concept of social technologies (Jöhncke et al. 2004: 88-90) to illuminate the fact that these disturbances are not neutral, but embedded in existing power structures. Appropriate disturbances are technologies or methods used with the intention of shaping social formations and relations. As a social technology, appropriate disturbances concern "doing something to someone" (Jöhncke et al. 2004: 390, our translation). Such intervention into other people's lives, at the workplace or elsewhere, obviously requires ethical awareness and responsibility on the part of the acting party. Using appropriate disturbances with the intention to improve or develop teams requires an awareness of when and how to disturb in a way that might push people and teams in desired directions, but, critically, will not push them over the edge. During his fieldwork at Systematic, an experienced software developer told Kasper that "for disturbances to be productive, I think you need to have the energy to be disturbed." When and how to apply appropriate disturbances, then, always depends on the particular situation.

This point resonates with what Kasper and Martin Demant Frederiksen (forthcoming) emphasize in a recent article in which they argue for the value of workplace spaces completely free of disturbances. Along with the ability to *foresee* mentioned above, we suggest that the skill to empathically "read" the members of the team and sense when the conditions are right for a specific disturbance is key to successfully push the "stop button" and introduce time for reflection. In doing so, the acting party (most often a team leader) relies on her "feel for the game" or, in Pahuus' (2003) reading of Arendt, her ability to judge in the sense of being emotionally and sensory open to the differences between right and wrong, while also being able to imagine and consider how other people will relate to the judgements made. This is important in order to avoid negative impacts or interventions that add to already uneven distributed openness towards change, as well as for the disturbance to have the intended positive impact on the team. As Marshall Sahlins emphasizes in his work on Hawaii, events only gain their importance and generative impact through the meaning that people attach to them (Kapferer 2010: 17). In other words, events such as appropriate disturbances must be meaningful to the people and the teams that are exposed to them if they are to generate improvement or development. Thus, the appropriateness of disturbances depends not only on the effect they have on the team, but also on the ethical sensitivity with which they are initiated and the degree of meaningfulness experienced by the team members.

As a final note, it seems highly possible that this is currently more important than ever as people are returning to their physical workplace after the perhaps biggest workplace disturbance in recent history: COVID-19. Although by no means appropriate, the outbreak of the pandemic and the following lockdown all over the globe certainly provided a stop-and-think moment for all of us. At Systematic, like so many other workplaces, everyday life changed from one day to the other as people transitioned from working at the office to working from home. Although the overall productivity of the company did not change, several employees noted that they missed the in-person interaction and the energy that emerges from bumping into one another by the coffee machine. A few employees even said that they were more easily annoyed with their team members when only interacting with them online. At Systematic, it seems that, during the lockdown, social relations and employees' well-being, rather than their productivity, suffered.

This is a tendency also observed in more general terms by Rae Ringel (2021) in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article. In the latest "pandemic issue" of *Journal of Business Anthropology*, anthropologist Timothy de Waal Malefyt (2021) notes that one of the consequences of moving online is that you cannot react to non-verbal communication to the same extent, making it difficult to adjust and stay in sync with your co-workers (2021: 49). Thinking back to Arendt, it is likely more difficult to create a space online in which individuals are being seen and heard and where the recognition from being seen and heard empowers their ability to emerge in the team. As Malefyt contends, however, it is not impossible. Based on anthropological theories of place, he argues that the spaces we inhabit are created and sustained through our social interactions and relations, "irrespective of where place is actually located" (2021: 53). It seems to us that if remote work has come to stay to some extent, it may be more important than ever for individual teams to work actively on their social relations, coordinated understandings, and what they want and need from the team itself. Working with appropriate disturbances, as suggested in this article, is one way to do so. Disturbances are bound to happen; their appropriateness is a question of teamwork.

References

- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Bergson, H. 1911. *Creative Evolution*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.166289>
- Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. and Rafalko, R. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Somerset, United Kingdom: Polity Press.

Bruner, E. M. 1993. "Epilogue: Creative Persona and the Problem of Authenticity." In Lavie, S., Narayan, K., and Rosaldo, R. (eds.), *Creativity/Anthropology* (pp. 321-334). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501726033-015>

Critchley, B. and Casey, D. 1984. "Second Thoughts on Team Building." *Management Education and Development* 15(2): 163-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050768401500210>

Cross, R., Rebele, R., and Grant, A. 2016. "Collaborative Overload." *Harvard Business Review* 94: 74-79.

Malefyt, T. d. W. 2022. "What is Our Sense of Place in the Time of the Pandemic?" *Journal of Business Anthropology* 11(1): 45-53. <https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v11i1.6615>

Diamond, M. A. 1993. *The Unconscious Life of Organizations: Interpreting Organizational Identity*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.

Duhigg, C. 2016. "What Google Learned From its Quest to Build the Perfect Team." *The New York Times Magazine* 26, Feb. 25.

Edmondson, A. 1999. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(2): 350-383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>

Fowler, M. and Highsmith, J. 2001. "The Agile Manifesto." *Software Development* 9(8): 28-35.

Gatt, C. and Ingold, T. 2013. "From Description to Correspondence: Anthropology in Real Time." In Gunn, W., Otto, T., and Smith, R. C. (eds.), *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp. 139-158). London & New York: Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085195-11>

Gordon, J. 2018. *The Power of a Positive Team: Proven Principles and Practices that Make Great Teams Great*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Gostick, A. and Elton, C. 2018. *The Best Team Wins: The New Science of High Performance*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hackman, J. R. 2002. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Helligsøe, K. P. and Vangkilde, K. T. 2021. "Fra håndboldbanen til erhvervslivet: Nye antropologiske perspektiver på ledelse og præstation." *Økonomi & Politik* 94(1): 50-61. <https://doi.org/10.7146/okonomiopolitik.v94i1.126065>

Helligsøe, K. P. and Frederiksen, M. D. Forthcoming. "High Performance and the Near Future."

- Hern, A. 2018. "The two-pizza rule and the secret of Amazon's success." *The Guardian*, Apr. 24.
- Higgs, M. and Rowland, D. 1992. "All pigs are equal?" *Management Education and Development* 23(4): 349-362.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/135050769202300408>
- Holbraad, M., Kapferer, B., and Sauma, J. 2019. *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*. London: UCL Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvf3w1v4>
- Ingold, T. and Hallam, E. 2007. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. New York: Routledge.
- Jöhncke, S., Svendsen, M. N., and Whyte, S. R. 2004. "Løsningsmodeller: Sociale teknologier som antropologisk arbejdsfelt." In Hastrup, K (ed.), *Viden om verden: En grundbog i antropologisk analyse* (pp. 385-407). Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Kapferer, B. 2010. "Introduction: in the event – toward an anthropology of generic moments." *Social Analysis* 54(3): 1-27.
<https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2010.540301>
- Kaplan, M., Dollar, B., Melian, V., Van Durme, Y., and Wong, J. 2016. *Human Capital Trends 2016 survey*. Oakland, CA: Deloitte University Press.
Retrieved from
<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/HumanCapital/gx-dup-global-human-capital-trends-2016.pdf>
- Katzenbach, J. and Smith, D. 1993. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lencioni, P. M. 2016. *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate the Three Essential Virtues*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Leyland, M. L. 1988. "An introduction to some of the ideas of Humberto Maturana." *Journal of Family Therapy* 10(4): 357-374.
<https://doi.org/10.1046/j..1988.00323.x>
- Marcus, G. E. 1997. "The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-En-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork." *Representations* 59: 85-108.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928816>
- Marcus, G. E. and Fischer, M. M. J. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Maturana, H. R. and Varela, F. J. 2012. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Mathieu, J. E., Tannenbaum, S. I., Donsbach, J. S., and Alliger, G. M. 2014. "A review and integration of team composition models: Moving toward a

dynamic and temporal framework." *Journal of Management* 40(1): 130-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206313503014>

Maxwell, J. C. 2006. *The 17 Essential Qualities of a Team Player: Becoming the Kind of Person Every Team Wants*. New York: HarperCollins Leadership.

Meinert, L. and Kapferer, B. 2015. *In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13wwzdi>

Pahuus, A. M. 2003. "Hannah Arendts teori om offentlighed og dømmekraft." *Slagmark – Tidsskrift for idéhistorie* 37: 63-78.

Ringel, R. 2021. "When Do We Actually Need to Meet in Person." *Harvard Business Review*, July 26.

Turner, V. 1991. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kasper Pape Helligsøe is a Ph.D. fellow at the Department of Anthropology, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. In his current project, he explores issues of leadership, team development, collaboration, and organizational culture through a comparison of a professional handball club and a software company in Denmark. In an effort to make key findings from this project accessible for wider application, he has, among other things, engaged in team trainings, inspirational talks, and podcast productions with his collaborative partners from the handball club and the software company.

Rikke Rønnau is an HR business leader with experience from large international organizations. As a Chief People Officer, she has worked extensively with the development of people, leadership, and organizations at both strategic and conceptual levels. At a more hands-on level, she has run training and workshops with leaders and employees around feedback, collaboration, empowerment, and much more. She is passionate about contemporary HR concepts such as neuroscience, self-management, teal organizations, and regenerative leadership. Rikke has an MA in Psychology and an MSc. in Business Administration.

Peter Bredsdorff-Larsen holds a Master in Learning and Organizational Coaching. As a professional handball coach, he has contributed as leader and coach to developing teams, organizations, and cultures that have delivered long-term top performances; for instance, successfully winning the first gold medals to the Danish National Team, Aalborg Handball, and Bjerringbro-Silkeborg Handball. Peter has a passion for developing cultures that give people, teams, and organizations the best possible conditions to succeed.