

## **Introduction**

The Round table dialogue, as we work with it and understand it was specifically developed in connection with method development within the sickness benefit area in 3 small municipalities in Denmark at the beginning of the 1990s.

The Round table dialogue is specific execution of social work, but must also be seen and understood as an approach – a superior perspective as basis for the social work, both theoretically and ethically.

At first I will explain the organisation and the principles of the round table dialogue illustrated by a sickness benefit context. After that I will discuss some theoretical approaches and finish off with some general views on the model.

### **Organising the Round table dialogue:**

The round table dialogue exists as concept on several different levels which all play a decisive role in the execution of the work:

- A political level where lines and goal for the cooperation are marked out
- An institutional level where partnership deals are signed about the concrete execution of the cooperation and where cases of a more general character are discussed
- A specific executing level where the work is carried out

All meetings on all levels can be held according to the principles of the round table dialogue, but there is a difference in the character of the meetings on the different levels. The round table dialogue is a perspective, a model and a method in including processes in whichever context you want to use it. It requires voluntariness and common interest in working with inclusion and bottom up processes

#### **The political level:**

The labour market is organized in local employment councils with representatives from the labour market partners (trade unions and employers), local government, medical practitioner's organisation, users organisations (i.e. the disabled organisations) and the public employment services. The purpose of the local employment councils is among other things to promote inclusive processes and avoid exclusion. The employment councils mark out record areas in relation to the labour market. Among other things work retention is record area for most labour councils.

An essential method in relation to work retention is "the round table dialogue". The employment councils will thus facilitate this work by forwarding it in their respective organisations and institutions, and they can initiate and implement including projects in the area. Possible barriers in the work can be discussed and overcome at this level. On this level "the round table dialogue" is both a method in cooperation and an inclusive perspective on the work on other levels.

#### **Institutional level:**

When the labour councils have created a basis for work retention and round table dialogue, specific partnership agreements are made between the relevant partners containing agreements on goals, means, contents and initiative.

The specific cooperation might be in relation to individual cases, working environment, mentor arrangements and so on.

An example of implementation of cooperation on this level is sickness profiles, where you for instance follow the notifications of illness or sickness notes related to a certain firm in order to point out special risks in the work environment<sup>1</sup> or other things of general interest.

This provides the labour councils with information that makes it possible to work preventive in another level and maybe lower the amount of sickness among people.

#### The specific round table dialogue:

The main point is that no meeting is held without the participation in the whole process by the person on sickness leave. He must agree in the purpose and arrangement of the meeting. The person on sickness leave is a partner of the deliberator in the process. The participants will most often be employer representative, trade union representative, trade union representative from the firm, medical practitioner, social worker and the person on sickness leave.

#### **The principles of the round table dialogue:**

1. The solution of the task is the central focus
2. The difference among the participants and the different perspectives is necessary according to the solution of the task, and defines their presence
3. No perspective is more important than the other, however the perspective from "within" plays a special role. The difference makes the difference.
4. The agenda is open and the solution is deliberated from the inputs visible for everybody and revealed (displayed) on the "table"

#### **1st. Principle: The solution of the task is the central focus**

The round table dialogue can be illustrated like this:

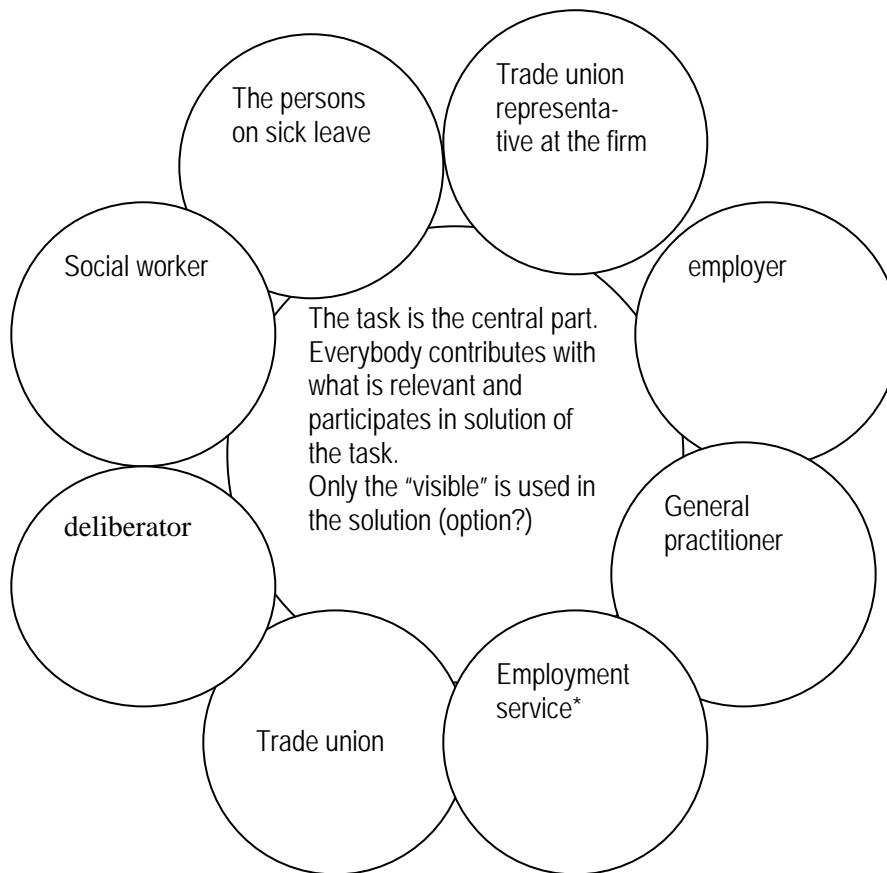
Model 1<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Sickness profiles can be worked out from the information sent to the local government in case of absence from work requiring sickness benefits. You can agree that more information is sent to the municipality than appears in the standardized notification forms. That information is typed and you can make profiles of the single firms, their sickness absence and patterns of sickness.

You are able to detect firms producing bad backs, many cancer diseases or many depressions and discuss it on a more general level.

<sup>2</sup> Source: "Socialrådgiveren og Rummeligheden" dec. 2001



\*Others might be: the (Danish) Working Environment Authority, Therapists and so on

All relevant partners are gathered around "the round table" with attention to the solution of the task. Despite the difference and the different maybe conflicting interests outside "the round table" you are here gathered around a common task and have a common interest in solving it. Solving the task is the common link which unite – or the common third.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Principle: The difference among the participants and the different perspectives is necessary according to the solution of the task, and defines their presence**

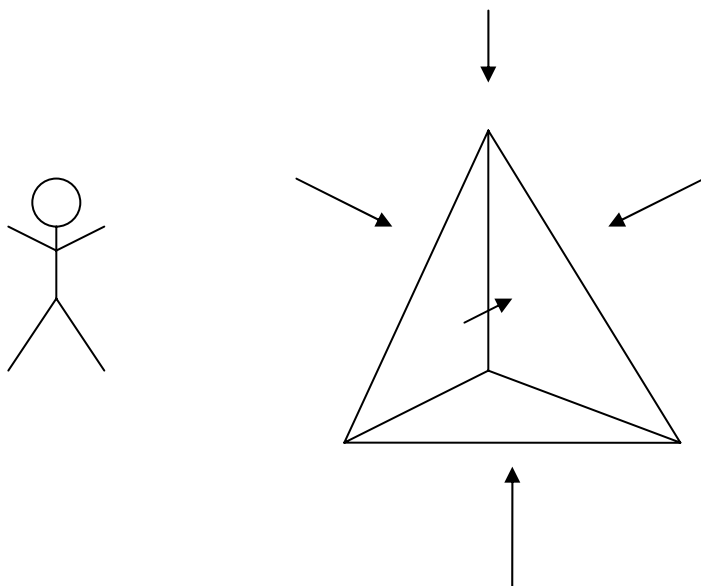
It is the different participant's different perspectives on the task which is the key to solution or clarification of the matter. They are all defined by their role according to the solution of the matter/task – a role according to the clarification of the matter. Everybody speaks from his perspective and contributes with what is relevant. Focus is on the matter/task. All conditions that might influence the solution of the matter is laid forward on the table so the premises are evident for everybody. All perspectives are important for the solution of the matter and it is the difference in the perspectives that make the solution possible.

The deliberator plays an important role as he has to make sure, that the principles of the round table dialogue is maintained.



**3rd Principle: No perspective is more important than the other, however the perspective from “within” plays a special role. The difference makes the difference.**

Model 2



This figure shows that everybody is looking at the subject from his angle. Together they ideally are able to create the whole picture. This models the idea of the round table of the importance of difference and of different perspectives. This way of seeing things provides us ideally with the best possible basis for developing sustainable solutions.

It is obvious, that as many relevant perspectives have to be represented, but also, that all perspectives have to be part of the subject and willing to play its part.

Characteristic for the round table dialogue in this model is that most of the participants look at the subject with an outside perspective, as the person on sick leave look at the subject from the inside. From the outside the perspectives are coordinated.

The inside perspective can mirror all other perspectives and becomes the most central person. He becomes the most vulnerable person as well, as his perspective is the only one, which is mirrored of all other perspectives all together.

**4<sup>th</sup> Principle: The agenda is open and the solution is deliberated from the inputs visible for everybody and revealed (displayed) on the “table”**

The agenda of the round table dialogue has to be open and agreed by everybody. That means, that a goal is not to obtain a specific solution, but to let the solution emerge from the process.

The matter/task is solved from the inputs laid forward and visible on the table. No information or conditions are implicit, and nobody has information or positions they do not expose, but which influence their views. The solution is deliberated with the idea of the art of the possible. That means, that the same matter/task might have different outcome depending on participating perspectives and context.

All participants are able to make deals on behalf of their respective institutions and forward and implement the deals there.

## **Theoretical approaches:**

### Habermas:

Habermas draws a line between strategic actions and communicative actions.

In strategic actions everybody follows his own special interests; you might make your wishes come through using promises of reward or threats of using force. Symbols of these actions are money and power.

Communicative actions are carried out on a basis of mutual understanding. The argumentation is carried out referring to phenomena in the physical world (Truth) (symptoms, diagnoses, job functions), in the social world (Righteousness) (mental working environment, firm policy, local government policy) and the partners' inner world (Sincerity) (wish to return to the workplace, wish to have the sick person back)

The goal of the description of the physical objective, the social and the inner world is to bring forward a common understanding of the situation, which can constitute the basis for coordinated action.

The vision is the democratic discourse – or 'herrschaftsfrei' (power-free) communication.

### Power:

In the round table dialogue you don't have a power-free space, but the power to act is important. We understand power as power, strength and energy – to exert influence, to speak and to be heard – not to use it as force to suppress others.<sup>3</sup>

Power is everywhere and it is not a constant amount, but if others have more power you will not have less.<sup>4</sup>

At the round table you have to make your power visible and use it to forward the process. The vision is still, as in Habermas, the democratic discourse, but communication based on evident power.

The chairman of the round table is called a deliberator and you are not negotiating a solution, but you are deliberating. In deliberation there are elements of convincing and you might have a winning perspective and you reach consensus. In deliberation you have the democratic discourse and you act on what is possible to agree on with respect of everybody's involvement, autonomy and integrity, especially the person representing the inside perspective and you have room for disagreements and diversity.

## **General aspects:**

The round table dialogue can be understood both as a perspective, as a model and as a specific method.

### Perspective:

The round table dialogue can be seen and understood as a way of cooperation between partners. It is a way of thinking this partnership and understanding partners and their role and relevance in the cooperation. The cooperation might be separated in time and space. The main thing is, that the principles for the round table dialogue is held, and that the deliberator leads the cooperation according to the principles, and that so many relevant perspectives is represented as possible, i.e. the perspective from inside.

### Model:

The round table dialogue is a model for cooperation as well as a perspective. The model gives the frames and principals for cooperation on more levels. To make cooperation work

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<sup>3</sup> Empowerment i storbyens rum, John Andersen et al.

<sup>4</sup> Freely according to Foucault



# Regional Key Competencies

- a way to manage structural changes (AT6)

on one level you might have to facilitate on another level. This could be a model for different sorts of cooperation between public and private partners bringing users groups as well – everywhere you want to promote and enhance democratic processes.

## Method:

The round table is a method as well in specific arrangement of democratic meetings. See the paper "The round table meeting"

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