

Interview with Peter Heilmeyer, EADS

Peter Heilmeyer holds a degree as industrial engineer. He is currently heading the department for Human Resources Development at the EADS Military Aircraft Business Unit. At EADS a ChallengeX Leadership Program has been offered since last year. The Program ran for half a year with three modules. This year the Program will be offered again.

What differentiates ChallengeX from other programs?

It seems that the era of trainings where a one time seminar with a smart professor who lectures about his experiences about time management or communication with a few exercises in between is coming to an end. Participants were momentarily thrilled but after five days the learnings were gone and could not be transferred into their daily routine. This is why we switched to seminars with modular structures that allow participants to reflect experiences made between the modules. The main difference of ChallengeX is that there is no upfront agenda. It is the participants who bring in their own agenda which means there are x agendas per participant that are mirrored by their natural common aspects. It is an extremely flexible structure and, if you will, extremely customer oriented.

What do you consider sustainable results?

There were a lot of changes that I was able to observe during the review module which followed the first three modules. I saw that a number of colleagues showed a much higher level of activity in regard to issues that they used to avoid.

Participants began to act and think in a much more entrepreneurial fashion. They now take much greater responsibility. We remarked how their attitude shifted from expecting changes to be driven from above to a much more active attitude of how can I become actively involved, how can my behavior and my input affect certain necessary changes.

Let me give you one example: A colleague of mine who participated in the Program is now much more flexible when she faces difficulties. She used to withdraw and then to counteract very suddenly. Now she confronts problems much more resolutely and looks for innovative ways how to proceed. This is very interesting. Our CEO strives for an organization that reacts in a quicker and more flexible way and this is exactly what I notice with colleagues who participated in the ChallengeX Program.

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What was your own experience?

The course of the seminar is determined by individual challenges. There is a clear structure in terms of the process but not in terms of content. This is not easy at the beginning. One is very determined by timeframes which are tough to get used to. Sometimes one thinks that there is nothing more to say, but this is exactly when the most important aspects suddenly emerge. If one focuses on his own issues the motivation of attending such a seminar is much higher. We see these trainings as an investment and not as an incentive and for our personnel development department it is essential that there is a strong transfer of learnings into the participants' everyday life. With ChallengeX this transfer rate is much higher than with traditional trainings and also higher than with other modular seminars.

What was your own experience?

I participated in an Open Course to get to know the structure and the method. The most impressive aspect was how my own problems were mirrored by other perspectives. My own challenges were put into a relation that I did not have before. Sometimes a challenge seemed extremely important to me but then I talked to a children's nurse who works in a hospital and who wondered why I was even worrying about this special issue. This helped to put the intensity of some challenges into perspective and to expand my viewpoint. It also created new options to tackle a certain problem. Those discussions were very interesting.

The creative work with colors was very unusual and being an engineer I was tempted to put words or numbers on paper. But then something emerged that someone else was able to understand and interpret. There was a guy completely different than I am, much more relaxed and easy going, who told me things that I only became aware of once he uttered them, although I had not even intended to put them into the picture. This was a great experience. I also found it amazing how it is possible to create an atmosphere of trust in such short time.