

Interview: Information

Interviewer: Svein Andersen

Interviewee: Ingelin Killengreen

Information

How do you succeed with information in bipartite cooperation? In this text, Director General of the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi) Ingelin Killengreen tells about her experiences with information and how she communicates with employee representatives.

About Ingelin Killengreen

Ingelin Killengreen is educated as a lawyer. She has been Director General and Secretary General in the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Chief of Police in Oslo, Director General of Police, Secretary General in the Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs and Director General of the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi).

Podcast conversation translated from Norwegian to English

Interviewer: Welcome to this podcast on the value of providing information. Today we are speaking with Ingelin Killengreen, Director General of the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi). Killengreen, you got your first management position in 1981. Impressive. It'll be your 35th anniversary next year.

Ingelin Killengreen: Yes, I don't know how impressive I'd say that is. Actually, I think it may not be such a good thing that I've been an executive for so many years. I still have quite a lot to learn.

Interviewer: But don't you know just about everything there is to know about being a leader, how people should be treated, managed and not least informed?

Ingelin Killengreen: You can feel like you know it all, only to discover that you don't after all. It is important to remember that if you move to a new organisation, if you start working somewhere else, then you are basically back to square one because you can't just be yourself, you have to understand your organisation as well.

Interviewer: But you keep getting new executive positions, you can't be too bad at it?

Ingelin Killengreen: Let's hope not. On the other hand, in every executive position, if you are not regularly exposed to criticism, or occasionally receive harsh feedback, you have not

really done your job properly. I think many managers should console themselves with that fact, because you will never be perfect and you will never go through life as a manager and only receive praise.

Interviewer: What do you think about when you are going to present information to your organisation, to the employees?

Ingelin Killengreen: I believe that you can't really have too much information. You have to constantly try to put yourself in the shoes of the people working on the ground because there really is a lot of information. There are many things that may seem clear when you're sitting in management, but if you don't understand that the organisation's need for information is unlimited, then you have failed at the outset. You can never provide too much information – and your people can never really be too informed.

Interviewer: No doubt good leaders recognise themselves in what you are saying. It makes sense. But isn't it a bit idealistic? I suppose you have also been involved in conflicts over the years as well?

Ingelin Killengreen: Yes, I have been involved in some pretty intense conflicts. I don't think they come from a lack of information, but because organisations are difficult, because there is strong commitment and interest among the employees. That is an asset, but also a challenge. I have also worked in organisations under intense political scrutiny. You're really sticking your neck out in that kind of position, and there are many challenges, but that's what makes it exciting.

Interviewer: We heard that you invited State Secretary Paul Chaffey to a lunch seminar a while back. That sounds like it was a good idea.

Ingelin Killengreen: I thought it was a very good idea. But it was one of those times I failed to provide the right information. I announced that Paul Chaffey was coming to give us a talk. Then I found out that the staff were confused. They didn't understand why Paul Chaffey was coming. There must be something up. Maybe a new Director General for DIFI? Maybe something more drastic? Maybe the organisation was going to be dismantled? All kinds of worries bubbled to the surface in the organisation, when I thought I had sent out a happy message about a little "pep talk" prior to the holidays.

Interviewer: What did you learn from that?

Ingelin Killengreen: It reminded me that the organisation really has an unlimited need for information. I learned that I had been thinking as a manager, but I wasn't thinking as part of the organisation that was just informed of an event but was left wondering why.

Interviewer: How would you describe the role of an employee representative in an organisation?

Ingelin Killengreen: Employee representatives play a crucial role. I don't think it is possible to run an organisation if you don't work closely and constructively with employee representatives. That doesn't mean that you should always agree with them. You have to

have kind of an “open line”, you must always be sure to provide each other with information. Also in this case, I am of the opinion that the need for information is unlimited. Much of the secret is to involve employee representatives in all processes, regardless of whether they have the right to be included. It pays off in the long run.

Interviewer: You want to involve them?

Ingelin Killengreen: Yes, I do. It's because I've learned that it can often be a good idea to think out loud at an early stage together with employee representatives. Have informal, regular meetings. Explain what management is currently working on, what we see happening ahead. It is also my experience that employee representatives reciprocate by telling me what they are up to. That way you can signal an impending development, you get immediate feedback through their reactions, and you can make adjustments accordingly. You can see early on if an issue will end up in conflict. Do you need to keep a hard line, or can you change your approach? In other words, this trust that you constantly generate makes it clear that we all generally agree that we are working towards the same positive result. The way you get to that point can vary, but you have the opportunity to adapt your approach along the way.

Interviewer: So it is kind of like giving yourself an alibi, then?

Ingelin Killengreen: I don't see it like that because having close contact with employee representatives means that you have the chance to make changes that help you do a better job. I've worked like this for many years. I held high level positions in the police force for years. During that time, I had monthly information meetings with the leaders of all the police organisations, and I made many adjustments as a result of those meetings. But there were certain ground rules. The first rule was that we had to be able to speak openly at the table. The second was that our discussions would not be binding. There could be matters that later became the subject of consultations or negotiations. The last rule was that we also had to be able to discuss things that were not necessarily intended to be followed up, but where we could simply bounce ideas off each other. I felt that both parties liked that approach. Even so, we had a number of major conflicts within the police force. However, I am quite certain that it helped us avoid even more conflicts, because large organisations often have to deal with difficult and serious issues, where management and employee representatives have a rather different perspective.

Interviewer: It sounds like a good idea to have a way to gauge the situation. At the same time, what can you say to employee representatives that you can't say to other employees? Where do you draw the line?

Ingelin Killengreen: I believe you should be able to say the same things both to employee representatives and to other employees. However, I follow an important principle. Namely, when it comes to information about the organisation, about changes, plans, or what you are working on, you should never tell the organisation before you have notified or spoken with the employee representatives. Simply because if you do not, then you can easily undermine the representative's job. There are, of course, things you can talk about that are not binding, but if you talk about a field of activity or area of responsibility where the employee

representatives actually have a job to do, they must be informed first. I know people in leadership positions who don't work like this, and who think that the best approach is to talk to everyone at once so that everyone can hear it directly. I think that the benefits of that approach are pretty short-term. Because then you "bypass" the employee representatives, and when they don't get to do a good job, you don't get a very positive negotiating climate, and they don't support management. It really is a matter of cooperation. I have held leadership positions since 1981. I have been through some very tough negotiations. Back then, with the Ministry of Justice and the police organisation. I remember that part of the way our negotiations, or meetings, worked, it was not a good meeting unless either management or the employee representatives threw books on the floor, slammed the door and left the room furious. That's how it was supposed to be. We had conflicts continuously and we did not get good results. I am very glad that we do things differently today.

Interviewer: You emphasise informal discussions, also perhaps with what you're saying now. But that requires a certain personal chemistry. What kind of person is your ideal employee representative?

Ingelin Killengreen: I don't really have an ideal employee representative in mind. I do have an example, because some of the biggest and most serious conflicts I have been involved in were negotiations on working hours with the police organisation. Actually, the police reform that took place in 2000, and was the first major police reform, was really quite difficult. There were so many things that had to fall into place. Of course, in the media, I was portrayed as being on the one side and Arne Johannessen, who at the time was head of the Norwegian Police Federation, was on the other side – and the feedback was relatively harsh. They basically declared war on me. I was quite impossible. I wouldn't see reason and all that sort of things. But behind the facade, we were good friends. We still are and we have always had very good chemistry. That tells me something about how you must be able to distinguish between the role and the person, and I've never thought that was difficult. I have never experienced employee representatives that I have not been able to have a good conversation with, where there was no chemistry. But then you have to respect their role and make sure you stay professional.

Interviewer: As much information as possible, you say. Can there be too much? Are there any situations where you should keep things back?

Ingelin Killengreen: Essentially, I believe that there can never really be too much, but there is a small "but". For example, if you are in a leadership role in an organisation that generates strong political interest, and you find out that the political leadership or others are thinking about making significant changes and you start telling everyone "I've heard this" or "someone thinks that", you can generate considerable unrest and a feeling of unease that may actually be unjustified because nothing has even happened. So there are some cases where you need to ask yourself if the time is right to broadcast certain information. Actually, I think the best thing to do in that sort of situation is to find out as much as you can as quickly as you can, to see what it is really all about before you tell anyone about it. But there is another small "but", and that is the organisation itself. I am not as careful with the employee representatives. Because this is one of those situations where you must be able to say, "I think something is going on". They are entitled to know. However, you must also have

an understanding that we can talk about this together now, but it may not be a good idea to tell everyone and create an unnecessary atmosphere of fear and anxiety. So there are some situations, which mean I cannot say absolutely.

Interviewer: There are certainly enough examples of hints and rumours that have created lots of turmoil.

Ingelin Killengreen: Yes, there are.

Interviewer: Do you have any experiences that you can share with us here and now?

Ingelin Killengreen: No. Well, not really, but I have some experience from my current organisation. Difi has undergone an evaluation, and we have been waiting quite a long time not to find out if whether the organisation will continue as it is or we will be split up. With all this waiting, there have been quite a few rumours and a lot of feedback here and there. It has taught me quite a bit about how uncertainty can cause massive and unfounded unease. I guess I've also been a little careful not to convey unconfirmed rumours. When you always inform your organisation about what is going on, I believe you should also keep the employees informed even if you have nothing to tell them. Even if you tell everyone "I have nothing new to say", "we are talking about this or that" or "you have nothing to worry about", it calms the organisation. This is true for many organisations. They are, in a way, constantly in a process of change and it creates unrest if you do not constantly inform the organisation about what is happening – even when there is nothing to say. At the same time, you must watch out not to convey unfounded rumours.

Interviewer: And people are different.

Ingelin Killengreen: Yes.

Interviewer: Some are anxious. Some can handle pretty much anything. Groups. Middle management etc., employees in different departments. How do you think in relation to different target groups?

Ingelin Killengreen: There are two groups that are important to involve. Managers are never alone; they have management teams. This means that there must be good processes in management teams for how to handle this type of problem, on the one hand. There must also be good processes together with the employee representatives. So the key people are not only the senior managers, but all the managers together, and all the managers together with the employee representatives, with all the dynamics this entails. And as you say, organisations are different and people are different. That means there is no definitive answer. But again, I'm back to my idea of the unlimited need for information, and information that is not really new information is actually better than not saying anything.

Interviewer: If you are going to sum up with one piece of advice, what is the best advice for successful communication between the parties?

Ingelin Killengreen: Know your role. Know what you are responsible for and be able to distinguish between the issue and the person.