

Interview: Local Cooperation

Interviewer: Svein Tore Andersen

Interviewees: Bård Knutzen and Jahn Thomas Lind

Local Cooperation

What goes on in meetings between employers and employee representatives? In this text, Jahn Thomas Lind and Bard Knutzen discuss their experiences from local bipartite cooperation. Both have experience from the roles of employer and employee representative. They share experiences and give advice on how to succeed through good bipartite cooperation.

About Bård Knutzen

Bård Knutzen, HR Section of the Storting. The Storting is the Norwegian Parliament.

About Jahn Thomas Lind

Jahn Thomas Lind, Senior Adviser at the Correctional Service's Employees Association (KY), an employee organisation under the umbrella of the Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS).

Podcast conversation translated from Norwegian to English:

Interviewer: Hello, and welcome to this podcast about local bipartite cooperation. What really goes on in meetings between employers and employees? What is it like? And what can you expect as an employee representative and as a representative of the employer? With us in the studio, we have Jahn Thomas Lind, Senior Adviser at the Correctional Service's Employees Association (KY), and Bård Knutzen from the HR Section of the Storting. Jahn Thomas, let's start with you. Last time you were in a meeting with employer representatives, what did you discuss?

Jahn Thomas Lind: We discussed quite ordinary issues that arise from time to time in this kind of cooperation. Purely informational. We were informed about a restructuring process, which is very common. We experience restructuring processes at least once a year. There was information about some accounting matters. We also had a couple of other matters up for discussion. One of which was a regular discussion related to work plans, and then there was a negotiation about regulations concerning uniforms. So, you can see we have a wide variety of topics on our agenda.

Interviewer: Bård Knutzen, you are from the HR Section of the Storting, I expect that you recognise these types of issues and discussions?

Bård Knutzen: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you pleased with the outcome of your last meeting with employee representatives?

Bård Knutzen: Yes, I would say so. We had a matter up for discussion that was quite similar to what Jahn Thomas mentioned. It was about restructuring and organisational change. We needed to discuss the creation of a new unit, a new section, which is quite a complex issue. We need to look at everything from working conditions to the distribution of tasks, to organisational structure, etc. Yes, organisational changes have become a regular item on the agenda. It can be challenging both for management and for employee representatives to collaborate to find good solutions for change processes. Precisely because it is such a complex issue.

Interviewer: Can you give us a little “insider” insight into the workings of the Storting? The first time you were involved in negotiations, was that in the Storting?

Bård Knutzen: No, it wasn't.

Interviewer: But do you remember the first time you were involved in a negotiation meeting?

Bård Knutzen: Yes, I was an employee representative at the time.

Interviewer: As an employee representative, you say? Do tell.

Bård Knutzen: It was quite a big meeting. I just had to jump right in after being given the job to represent an organisation. It was in a ministry. There were people from many different organisations, and also quite a few ministry executives. My experience was basically “I just have to do my best” but also be honest that “I'm new and I don't know very much about this”. My task was primarily to try to orientate myself and understand the setting. And to be honest about it, employer representatives are mostly focused on everyone experiencing the meeting as positive. Whether you are new or experienced, it should be a good meeting, and they want to help to facilitate that outcome. They also try help those who are new to understand the matters on the agenda and the process of a collaborative meeting.

Interviewer: Do you remember your first meeting, Jahn Thomas?

Jahn Thomas Lind: Yes, I remember it very well. I was the employer's representative in my first meeting. Looking back, I realise how little I knew compared to now. For bipartite cooperation to work, both parties must respect the fact that there may be new people involved, who don't have much experience. To achieve a good climate of cooperation, you have to bring each other up to speed. Employer representatives must teach employee representatives how it works, and vice versa. You never stop learning about positive cooperation. In order to live up to the purpose and intentions of the Basic Agreement, you need to have some experience under your belt.

Interviewer: What's the worst that could happen at that kind of meeting?

Jahn Thomas Lind: The worst that can happen is that the parties just start quoting clauses from the agreement at each other. In other words, now you are in breach of this or not in compliance with that. When you start threatening each other about being in breach of rights and obligations, I think things have gotten a bit out of hand. Another thing that can be unpleasant is when you sit in a meeting and then go your separate ways, and you don't talk to each other in the meantime. That is also a terribly negative signal.

Bård Knutzen: I think that's right. Often, as I said, you can be a little too concerned with the process than what you are actually trying to achieve. As it turns out, we can often agree on many points as long as we stay on track.

Interviewer: What is the worst thing you've experienced in that kind of meeting? Do you have any experiences you can share?

Bård Knutzen: I have experienced that people have just stood up and walked out. But I guess sometimes it is OK to be human, and it can be challenging on an emotional level. You can feel like crying, laughing or just get angry. I suppose sometimes you must be allowed to let it out. However, I've never experienced that it has lasted. We always return to the table and continue. I guess having a bit of an outburst once in a while can sometimes help get us back on track.

Interviewer: What would you say is the role of informal discussions?

Bård Knutzen: I think it is also an important arena for cooperation. You need to be able to get to know each other in a slightly different setting than just at formal meetings. I think, on a personal level, you need to have some understanding of the counterpart's thoughts and response pattern. You also need to be able to speak a little more openly sometimes, so private conversations can be useful. It can help us understand each other correctly, and come to meetings better informed about each other's goals, intentions, agendas etc. than if contact is restricted to more formal settings.

Interviewer: Is that also your experience, Jahn Thomas?

Jahn Thomas Lind: Yes, we can clearly see that after these annual cooperation seminars, which take place at multiple levels, there is an immediate improvement in communication patterns. In other words, developing personal relationships, both professionally and socially, also contributes to an immediate improvement in the formal bipartite cooperation.

Bård Knutzen: And it doesn't affect the roles people have, we make a point of that. We have respect for each other, that we are not there for our own sake, but that we represent something. Informal contact is also important for the enterprise, there must be a culture for it.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be an employee representative? Jahn Thomas, can you tell us a bit about that?

Jahn Thomas Lind: You get to be part of the decision-making process. As an employee representative, some people may think of you as part of an extended management group. I also support what Bård said about informal arenas. It is important to emphasise that a certain amount of groundwork for decision-making also happens in informal contexts. Of course, the formal decisions are made by formal bodies. Nevertheless, the climate of cooperation can benefit greatly when you are free to meet over a cup of coffee and discuss an issue, on a general level. I think many employee representatives appreciate and do not see any major problems with meeting outside formal discussions. But you always need to be clear on your role at any given time.

Interviewer: Yes, and what are the key success criteria?

Jahn Thomas Lind: I would say establishing a good climate of cooperation, and that participants develop personal relationships with each other. You don't need to be best friends, but you need to be able to act professionally, and you have to respect each other's roles. Employee representatives must respect the fact that the employer has a mandate, and they want to achieve certain outcomes. The employer must respect the fact that the employee representatives are there because they were elected to an office. They are there to represent the point of view of their union members. When I come to a meeting as a representative of my organisation, it is not to present my own opinions about a particular matter. In other words, I may fundamentally disagree with the point of view of my organisation. However, as a representative of the organisation, you are there by virtue of that position of trust. So I think that having a good climate of cooperation is exceptionally important, and then you need to have respect for each other's roles. You also need to have time to prepare and do the follow-up work. That is the most important for me.

Interviewer: Bård, what do you think are the key success criteria?

Bård Knutzen: I would say the same as Jahn Thomas, but from an employer's point of view. The same things are important. Trust and respect are fundamental. That you have an understanding of each other's roles. The fact is that employers are actually interested in seeing employee representatives do as good a job as possible. It is very difficult to have meetings with people who do not understand the matter at hand or who don't know the rules of the game. So it is also important to us to help train employee representatives and give them the information they need to be able to do their job. I often say that employee representatives are an important necessity – also for us. How else would we do it if we didn't have employee representatives to communicate back and forth with the employees? They are absolutely necessary if we are to have a decent corporate democracy.

Interviewer: What would you say that this work has given you, Jahn Thomas?

Jahn Thomas Lind: It has given me motivation. With the work that I've done on both sides, both as an employer representative and later as an employee representative, you get great insight into company operations at different levels. You get to take part in many decisions

that ordinary employees don't. Of course, it also gives you great knowledge about bipartite cooperation, professional concerns and organisational matters. It is very rewarding to be involved in bipartite cooperation processes. If you have the opportunity to take on a position of trust you should seize the opportunity. So many doors open up when you get involved.

Interviewer: Bård, what has being a representative in this bipartite cooperation given you?

Bård Knutzen: Everything I learned through my experience as an employee representative also put me in a position to be able to represent the other side of the table. It led to the opportunity to be the head of the HR Section. That I am currently working in the Storting, and that I have also done so previously, is a result of all my experiences – also as an employee representative. Absolutely priceless. Also, as an employer representative, through such an important forum as the bipartite cooperation, you have the privilege of gaining a very good overview of most of what goes on in the enterprise. A unique perspective, I would say. You know most of what goes on in the entire enterprise because a good deal of it is linked to bipartite cooperation, and you can help make a difference.

Jahn Thomas Lind: Not to mention that employee representatives receive very good training. It is also important to communicate that the vast majority of unions have very good training programmes for their employee representatives. As a new employee representative, you are very rarely completely alone. You usually receive both theoretical training and mentoring. You are not just thrown to the lions right away. You will always have backing and support.

Bård Knutzen: I would also like to say that it's fun. Having a sense of humour is often an asset. It is not like everyone is walking around all serious all the time. You can have fun and use humour. And the value of humour is perhaps underestimated, also in these contexts, as a good way to have positive discussions, as partners.