

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT COOPERATION



The conflict has no name. It's called "voting". And precisely because it sounds so harmless, it's dangerous.

The customer portal has been stuck between IT and Operations for three months. Not because anyone is incompetent, but because both sides are fiercely defending their version of events. It's one of those situations that looks like a purely technical issue from the outside, but has long since become a relationship problem internally.

I've been sitting in the office since 7:30, on my second coffee, staring at the status report. Yellow-red. Again. "Decision pending," it says. "Dependencies not resolved." When a project dies this way, it doesn't die from dependencies. It dies from a lack of cooperation.

The group meets at 9:00 a.m.: the IT manager, the operations manager, and two project managers. The room is pleasantly furnished, but the atmosphere is tense.

I immediately recognize the body language: chest forward, chin slightly raised, arms close to the body – everyone ready to defend their position.

"We need the final data structure before we go live," the IT manager begins. She speaks calmly, but with that sharp precision that says: You haven't understood this yet.

"And we need a firm live date before we commit resources," the operations manager replied. The implication was clear: You want to put us at risk again.

Ping pong.

"Without stable data, we risk system crashes." "Without binding deadlines, we risk people getting sidetracked by other issues." "Then you need to formulate your requirements more clearly." "Then you need to take our operational reality more seriously."

I'll listen for five minutes. That's all I need. Not because I'm impatient, but because I can see us falling back into the same old cycle otherwise.

"Stop," I say.

They fell silent faster than I expected. Perhaps because they themselves realized how deadlocked the situation was.

"I hear two things," I begin. "First, real professional dependencies. Second, a relationship issue. And the second one overshadows the first."

The IT manager exhales as if to object, but pauses. Operations looks slightly to the side. No one objects. That, too, is a kind of agreement.

"We're going to do something different now," I say. "We'll define a common goal that's bigger than your departmental logic. Then we'll establish three common success criteria. Only after that will we talk about deadlines and structure."

I go to the whiteboard and write in capital letters: Goal: Customer portal live in Q2 with stable customer guidance and minimal rework.

"What does stable mean to you?" I ask, and look first at the IT department.

"No system crashes in the ordering process," she says immediately. "And clean interfaces, so we don't get stuck in emergency loops at night." "And for you?" I ask Operations.

"No hotline explosion after go-live," he says. "And a clear process for the back office, otherwise we'll collapse."

I nod. "Good. These are common criteria. Not an IT criterion and not an operations criterion. They are criteria for success."

I'll write down three points:

Ordering process without system interruptions in pilot region.

Internal processes can function without additional staff.

Customer feedback after four weeks is at least "satisfied".

"Agreed?", I ask.

Hesitant nods. It's the first moment when both sides say "yes" simultaneously, without adding a "but" afterwards.

"Then let's move on to the next step." I turn to them. "Cooperation doesn't mean you have to agree. Cooperation means you share responsibility. That's why I want a tandem." They look at me.

"A tandem of IT and Operations teams jointly assumes responsibility for the portal. No more separate reporting. No more emails in distribution list format. You come to me together weekly, with a status update and decision-making templates. If you disagree, you come with options, not blame."

The two project managers glance briefly at their cables. That's the risk of working in tandem:

Independence. And sharing power.

"Jonas," the IT manager finally says, nodding to her project manager.

Operations hesitates for a moment, then: "Miriam."

Jonas and Miriam look like they've just been given a new role without being asked. They're both strong people. But they're also both products of their respective fields. I know that doesn't happen automatically.

"You two," I say calmly. "From today on, you are jointly responsible. Not for your individual areas – for the goal. In case of doubt, you decide in favor of the portal, not the area."

Jonas swallows. "And what if we have opposing priorities?"

"Then you work them out openly," I say. "And if you can't solve them, come to me. And do it early."

Operations looks skeptical. "That sounds like extra work."

"It's extra work," I say without shame. "But working hard together is less expensive than working comfortably against each other."

The IT manager smiles briefly, almost defiantly. Operations looks at me as if to test whether I'll really go through with this. I hold his gaze.

We're still discussing organizational details: weekly meeting slots, how decisions will be documented, and what minimum information should be included in status reports. I'm deliberately keeping it concise. Cooperation isn't a bureaucratic program. Cooperation is a leadership philosophy.

As the round ends, Operations pauses briefly. "Kathi," he says more quietly, "I'm worried that my people will be neglected if I put too much into the tandem."

I nod. "I understand. And that's precisely why you need leadership that's strong enough to let go sometimes. Your people will benefit in the long run if this portal is successful."

He looks thoughtful. "And what if it doesn't work?"

"Then we share the responsibility," I say. "Not you alone."

Two weeks later, I'm sitting with Jonas and Miriam again on Status. They arrive together, not one after the other. It's a small detail, but it's a sign. They have a shared story: what's going well, what's holding them back, what options are available.

"We have reduced the data structure to three patterns," says Jonas. "This makes the ordering process more stable."

"And we've adjusted the internal workflow so that it works without special roles," Miriam adds. "People are more relaxed."

I feel a quiet "finally" rising within me. Not because all problems have been solved, but because responsibility now lies where it belongs: between the areas, not against them.

Cooperation is not a feeling. Cooperation is a decision that is made structurally possible.



Takeaway inspiration

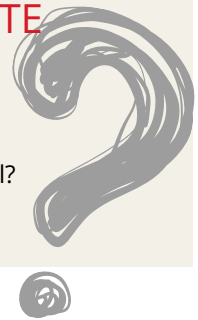
Cooperation skills

The ability to cooperate is more than good intentions—it requires shared goals and shared responsibility that are stronger than departmental silos. When leadership structurally enables cooperation, adversaries become genuine co-responsible parties.

When areas are stuck, ask the question: "What is our common goal that transcends our individual responsibilities?" Write it down and make it visible. Cooperation begins as soon as a shared "why" becomes stronger than the "who is to blame."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR ABILITY TO COOPERATE

1. Where does a "professional" conflict actually become a relationship issue?
2. What departmental logic are we currently defending at the expense of the common goal?
3. Where is a true tandem approach needed, instead of parallel responsibilities?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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