



Project report: International Management Potential Program at Sennheiser electronic

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From “Study Learning” to “Personality Learning”

A report on a Management-Potential-Program at Sennheiser electronics

The program-design for Junior-Management-Programs is often overrated; the deciding factor is how the third dimension (Personality Learning) is stimulated. Most junior managers have mastered the art of “Study Learning”, as they would have learned to do so, i.e. at university. A manager however must focus on Personality Learning. Only then is it possible for him to make responsible managerial decisions in highly complex environments.

Sennheiser at a glance

For more than 50 years, the name Sennheiser has stood for top-quality products and tailor-made solutions in all areas of sound recording, transmission and reproduction. Microphones and headphones of every kind, RF transmission equipment ranging from vocals microphones to complete systems for musicals, conference and visitor guidance systems, products for the hearing impaired and headsets for aviation - Sennheiser products have become firmly established at the pinnacle of audio technology throughout the world.

The medium-sized company is managed by its owners and employs about 1500 people throughout the world from its headquarters in Wedemark near Hanover, Germany. Sennheiser has a total of four production sites in Germany, Ireland and the USA. Its world-wide network of sales subsidiaries and long-term sales partners established over many years ensure that the company remains close to its customers and always has its finger on the pulse of the market. A large research and development department in Germany and an R&D office in California guarantee that the company maintains the technical lead that it has always enjoyed. A large number of patents and awards, including an Oscar, an Emmy, a Grammy and two German Industry Innovation Awards, are evidence of Sennheiser's innovative power.

A “state of the art” potential program

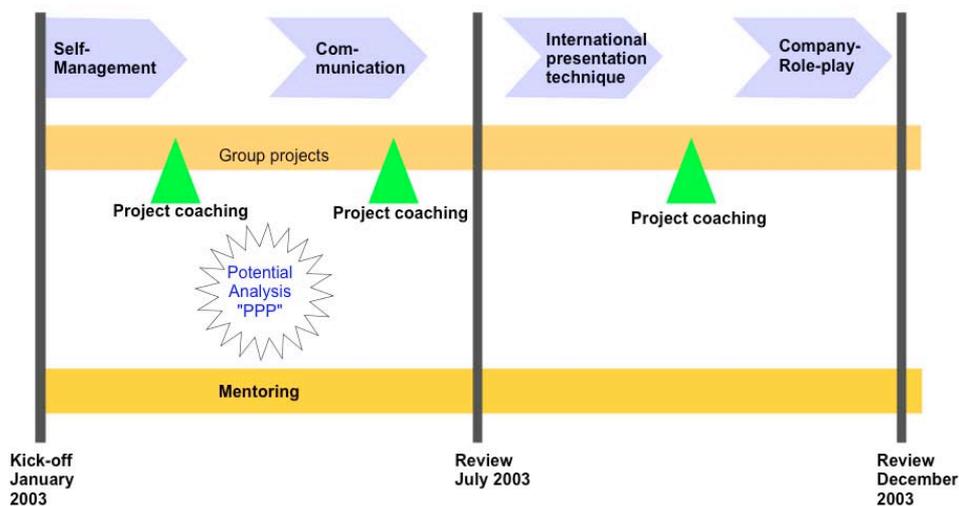
In order to retain their technical leadership, Sennheiser electronics also pay detailed attention to the highest quality and professionalism when employing and developing personnel. With the objective to ensure the development of potential managers in a systematical framework, a Management-Potential-Program was implemented in 2003. The goal was to retain, promote and develop good staff. It was a matter of course that “state of the art” criteria had to be met for such a program.

- Tailored seminar modules with experience-character.
- Intensive leadership-potential-analysis
- Project learning in high quality group projects
- Accompaniment by project coaches



- Support through internal mentors
- Project and program reviews with the executives

Many of the readers will more than likely know these design elements from similar programs in other companies. A good program design that fulfils these criteria is a indispensable requirement for successful learning, yet that alone is not sufficient. The crucial factor is to give the right learn impulses, to learn from experience, to self-observe, to reflect ones own behaviour. Whether or not this is being accomplished can only be determined during the process and fine-adjustments need to be made accordingly.



The program design of the Management-Potential-Program at Sennheiser

Why Personality Learning?

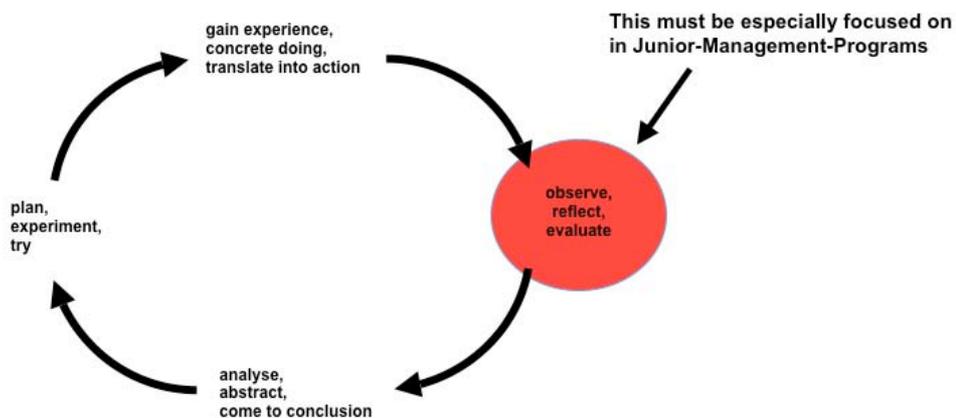
A high energy potential in the participants is typical for Management-Potential-programs. They have volunteered or have been asked if they would like to attend this kind of program. Due to this they are deemed “special” in the “goldfish pond”. The Participants generally assume to be offered better chances within the company, in general they have high expectations and are willing to learn as much as possible. And they want success. What often happens from such a starting position? The group falls into a consumption and/or action orientation.

If the group falls into a consumption orientation the tutorials will be judged with a distanced attitude. Instead of getting involved with the contents, trying the exercise or reflecting on their own behaviour, they question; Do I find the contents, this exercise or this question good or bad? This inhibits real learning. Participants need to be able to make new experiences, gain new insights and convey these to their own personality. A consumptive orientation hinders this, creates a too great a distance. The reflection only happens on the “analysing level” of the program but not on the level of personal behaviour.



If the group falls into an action orientation the learn-projects for example are picked up with great energy, the input from the workshops are conceived quickly and analysed for practical relevance. The group might reach a high learning level at the first order learning: that is the group sees the success they are steering for in a project, try to correct mistakes immediately to bring the project back on track. They expand their new action competencies very quickly by using their new tools. This heavy learning can stand in the way of personal learning, because the focus is only on the success of actions and not on the conditions or difficulties therein.

Personality learning on the other hand is; questioning ones own behaviour, putting things into the greater context, finding typical patterns that are transferable and weighing up the rationality. What patterns underlie the mistakes? What areas of my self do I need to work on? That means each participant reflects on his own learning behaviour. Retrospect the participants can transfer these patterns to other situations and reap the benefits. They can measure the reasonableness of actions. They not only learn to find solutions to a single problem but also to identify the overall connections. From our point of view this learning of the second order is essential for the development of managers and junior managers. This is only possible by observing what happens whilst learning. The program design can be supportive of this but it is essential, that the accompanying persons are able to encourage the reflective impulse over and over again.



Learning Cycle according to Kolb

At Sennheiser this insight was a decisive step: When must the action impulse of the group be stopped and the necessary reflection impulse given?

Initially this was done by the project coaches, further into the program persons within the group were nominated to continuously entreat this reflection.



Knowledge Learning and Personality Learning

By knowledge learning (or learning of the first order) a problem is recognised and one tries to solve it.

For example: During the presentation on the progress of the project it becomes noticeable, that the introduced ideas are not greeted with enthusiasm. Later discussions reveal that important decision making units, i.e. the branch manager, were not previously asked for their opinion in on the project. This was caught up on and short interviews were held with each individual. Some of the suggestions were adapted, some of the branch managers were won over by the direct approach and were happy to go along.

What happened here can be compared to the thermostat on a heating. The thermostat is set at 20 degrees (project objective), cold air comes in through an open door (resistance to the project ideas) and the thermostat recognises this and adjusts the flow of hot water circulation (one to one discussions with branch managers). The temperature rises back to 20 degrees (project results are accepted).

With personality learning (or learning of the second order) the thermostat would have to learn what setting is most appropriate (i.e. 20 degrees) and then regulate this itself. In order to do this, the following questions would need to be answered: Is 20 degrees adequate? Could it be that today 20 degrees is enough, but we might need it to be 22 degrees tomorrow? Do only certain people need 20 degrees yet other people need 22 degrees? Or these questions: Does the door open every Monday between 9 and 10 o'clock and should I therefore have the heating adjusted by 8.30 every Monday? Or was the cold air on this Monday morning an exception to the rule?

By applying this method of learning, one doesn't only have two dimensions in mind (error and correction of error), but rather one starts to think about the objectives, identify patterns, detect correlations and influencing factors and from this work out the solution - that is, to take into consideration a third dimension. System theorists call this the induction of the observer into a social system. The learning group begins to observe itself and its actions, categorising these and assessing the environment. In doing so, they are enabled to learn in a manor that helps them transfer performance to other situations. In the example of the project, this could mean: The group recognises that a difficult situation has arisen (branch managers don't want to go along with them). Now they reflect on why this happened and what is typical about it. Whether or not it is reasonable to become preoccupied with the resistance or if the resistance is of ones own making. Now the group is able to recognise what part they played in the situation arising. It could be that a) the resistance was unavoidable or was it even desirable, to provoke the branch managers into confrontation and hence incur discussion. Or b) perhaps the participants' fixation on the resolution, results in involved parties being neglected. Maybe this is a problem that arises regularly. A pattern is identified, which helps to develop long-term solutions, or to initiate a development that does not only help the project, but also enables managers to see the problem coming, to intervene and to take appropriate action.



Group reflection by means of the Power-Potential-Profile

Next to the classical kick-off-event for the Sennheiser Management-Potential-Program, the Power-Potential-Profile was carried out. This analysis combines three feedback perspectives and enables a deep reflection which supports personality learning. Insight into ones typical tendencies (part 1: C.G.Jung-Profile) is combined with self-estimation of ones perception of authority and responsibility (part 2: Power-Profile) and the own abilities in specific leadership competences (part 3: Skill-Profile), which is then combined with the external observation of a selected manager. Due to this multidimensional perspective, the Power-Potential-Profile® differentiates itself from conventional development tools. The deciding factor here is that in addition to the individual feedback, a group profile is also generated. This group profile visualized the potentials strengths and deficiencies of the learning group. It showed the groups tendency toward action- and competence-orientation, while at the same time pointing out their lack of "reflection". Due to this, the subsequent experiences in working together could be categorised and solutions quickly became visible. Over and above this, everyone in the group could see for himself where his own typical patterns, strengths and contraptions lie in comparison to those of the group. The comparison with the group profile, enhances outline of ones own learn profile.

Exchange of experience and conclusions

The evaluation of the program with the participants and mentors, labelled the success factors and difficulties. A positive side effect of the program was the network development within the group. The communication across different areas of responsibility was intensively promoted. This strengthens the performance and speed of the organisation. The seminar modules were stimulating and found supported from the highest executive level. The seminar modules were of stimulating quality and the feedback for the individual and the group through the Power-Potential-Profile was helpful. The Company dynamic required flexibility from all participants, i.e. due to unexpected international operations not every participant could attend every module. Enhanced commitment, quick arrangements and alternating project management on the part of the group member, mastered this difficulty. From 20 participants that started 19 continued through to the end. In a dynamic environment this is a very good quota. Each and every participant took home an important learning experience that enhanced his performance for an expert professional occupation or managerial role. Self-learning abilities were developed that set a good starting point for continuous development.

After this program in the first year the work does not come to a halt. The projects are implemented on the line. Some participants of this program will coach the implementing and in some cases hold the operational responsibility. The junior management staff will receive further individual development options, for example challenging roles in projects and measures targeting the subject of leadership. In the next learning group, supply the project coach is not supplied by an external consultant but is supplied internally, by appointing a participant from this class and in doing so the participant is given the chance to employ everything he has learned. When installing the second group, it will be made sure to integrate the



mentors more intensely. Furthermore participants from international branches are to be incorporated into the program. This will additionally promote the networking abilities, not only across departments but also across countries. The aspect of intercultural competencies that play a major role at Sennheiser can thus be encouraged even more.

Observing the learning circle, giving the right learning impulses and stimulating personality learning is not only restricted to the 1-year-program. At Sennheiser this is a continuous activity for personnel development. Sennheiser continuously strengthens its quality of personnel and managers and secures innovation leadership.

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