

Lead Yourself First

In times of change, middle management is particularly challenged as the mediator between management and employees – and is thus a crucial lever for successfully shaping transformation. But this requires the right tools. For this reason, the electrical wholesaler Sonepar has offered self-development workshops and coaching for the middle management level, thereby strengthening their personal initiative during times of change

Revue of April 2022: At a specially convened meeting of all sales division managers of the electrical wholesaler Sonepar in Frankfurt, HR and management presented a new format for personnel development: so-called Self Development Workshops, or SEWs. Sonepar initially planned to offer ten spots for this measure – tailored to the personality and situation of each leader – were to those sales managers who were willing to actively shape the transformation. They were given the opportunity to work with a senior consultant from Twist Consulting Group on both current challenges and their future capabilities. Sonepar invested in each SEW participant with two half-day coaching sessions and covered travel expenses to Munich. Anyone interested in one of the ten coveted SEW spots could apply in writing within the next three weeks, stating their reasons.

After the launch event of Sonepar in Frankfurt, the organizers were curious: Given the current workload, in the midst of restructuring the sales organization, will ten division managers actually volunteer?



They were pleasantly surprised: just one day after the event, the first written applications arrive in the HR department.

One application, submitted in PowerPoint, was titled: "Doing is like wanting- just better and cooler!" In it, a division manager convincingly explained why he was motivated and well-suited to contribute to the change and prepare himself for it. The presentation concluded with: "I want to help build the best Sonepar there has ever been!" By the deadline, applications from 27 division managers were on the organizers' desks. Following the pilot with ten participants,

Sonepar's management also decided to offer a SEW to the remaining 17 applicants and a few latecomers starting in the first quarter of 2023. Apparently, the company succeeded in offering an HR initiative at exactly the right moment - one that precisely met the needs of the target audience.

In a welcome letter, all participants were informed about the key steps of their personal SEW and explicitly told that from now on, everything would be entirely their responsibility. Shortly after this letter was sent, the phone in Twist Consulting's Munich office did not stop ringing. Within two weeks, all managers had scheduled their individual appointments for two half-day coaching sessions.

The core idea of the SEWs – relying entirely on self-responsibility from the very beginning, is working. Neither HR nor the external Twist consultants had to follow up with the 30 registered participants (including the three latecomers in early 2024) about appointments or travel arrangements

The high motivation of the participants suggests that middle management, as the central link between employees, customers, and company leadership, is particularly challenged and sometimes even overwhelmed by change. They are expected to loyally support and drive the implementation of all strategic projects. At the same time, they are close enough to employees and customers to feel their fears and frustrations directly and must respond to them sensitively and encouragingly. Some questions still have no clear answers, as signs of upheaval are present both within and outside the company.

Transformation within and outside of Sonepar

Overall, the electrical wholesale industry proves to be challenging due to constantly changing customer demands,

as well as current political conflicts, a lack of energy policy orientation, and the resulting rising energy costs. Supply bottlenecks and price increases among manufacturers are adding to the pressure. In addition to this difficult market environment, Sonepar is facing internal challenges: Sonepar is in the midst of a strategic innovation process. Uniform structures, intelligent processes, and the ongoing expansion of digitalization and automation will achieve greater efficiency and a rapid response to changing market and customer needs. The further developments implemented by Sonepar focus on intensive customer relationships. To achieve this, sales roles are being redefined.

Sonepar's management and HR departments are aware that middle management is particularly challenged in change processes and, at the same time, a crucial lever for successful transformation. Sonepar in Austria was a pioneer in the use of SEWs in 2021.

"If the organization changes, then everyone has to change!" explained the then newly appointed CEO Uwe Klingsbigl, conducting initial self-development projects with the Munich-based Twist Consulting Group.



Self-development workshops (SEW)

To prepare managers for the challenges of middle management during organizational changes, Sonepar offered self-development workshops. These are based on the Sonepar competency model for middle management.

Target Group	Middle management: selected division heads, branch managers, central warehouse managers, authorized signatories, and similar positions
When Suitable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → During changes in strategic priorities, structures, or processes (change support) → As a follow-up to a previously completed assessment centre or audit → When employees show strong motivation to develop independently → As preparation for a new position
Process/Scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Box Stop 1: Half-day coaching at Twist; guided self-assessment using the Sonepar competency model; practical tips → Between Stops: Reality check of self-assessment and applying the tips in daily work → Box Stop 2: What worked, what didn't, and why? Case work on leadership challenges in everyday management
Cost	Currently 1.75 daily rates per participant, plus testing fees

Workshops were conducted. Six authorized officers from the extended executive circle participated in the pilot SEWs. A few months later, they evaluated the initiative in a written follow-up survey as so positive and helpful that Stefan Stegemann (then President of Sonepar Central & Nordic Europe) decided to also offer SEWs as a change management support measure to the sales division managers in Germany.

Additional skills needed for change

To identify the gap between current and required skills during change, it must first be determined what the “ideal division manager” should do differently or learn additionally in the context of transformation. The foundation for this initiative is the leadership model of the Sonepar Group. This model must now be expanded and adapted to current challenges. Three competencies in particular are being significantly extended:

Developing a customer-centric strategy: It is especially important during the change process that each division manager knows, understands, and translates the key strategic cornerstones of the reorganization into their own area of responsibility. The company also aims to further evolve in terms of service and customer proximity, which have always been part of Sonepar's DNA. This includes demonstrating to customers the benefits of new tools and services.

Driving organizational efficiency: To ensure more efficient processes, management expects quick, flexible shifts in thinking and decision-making, as well as the willingness of division managers to familiarize themselves thoroughly with new IT tools (e.g., SAP New, online shop). A new expectation is for them to actively coordinate with colleagues from other departments on process optimization, develop cross-functional analyses and proposals, and jointly report back to management.

Leadership and communication: In times of change, dealing with questions requires the ability to clearly explain the purpose of structural and procedural changes - whether in person or remotely - while providing direction and motivating others.

Before the first pit stop: two online self-assessment questionnaires

Before the manager develops their own strengths-and-weaknesses profile during the first SEW session, the accompanying senior consultant from Twist must be able to take on the role of a critical devil's advocate during the initial meeting. Their task is to help each manager begin the coaching process with a realistic self-assessment.

But how is that possible when the manager and coach have not yet met and only have two half-day sessions (Box Stop 1 and 2) available? That's why, prior to the first pit stop, the manager completes two online psychometric questionnaires. The Twist consultant uses the results to form a rough assessment of strengths and weaknesses before the coach and manager

meet for the first time. One tool used is the Bochum Inventory for Occupational Personality Description (BIP), which highlights various job-relevant personality traits and is well-suited for determining one's current standing. As a second method, the participant completes the “Hofstede Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire” (CWQ), which reveals deeply rooted personal values that often unconsciously influence workplace behaviour throughout life.

Pit Stop 1: What do I need to learn to be a pioneer in the transformation?

The focus of the first pit stop is a guided self-assessment based on the revised Sonepar competencies for division managers. At this point, the consultant takes on the role of a corrective devil's advocate. She might say, for example: “You rated yourself with the highest score of 5 for the competency ‘Decision-Making’ because you believe you decide quickly and flexibly. Yes, your high CWQ values for ambiguity tolerance and your above-average scores for flexibility and action orientation on the BIP support that. But the ‘Decision-Making’ competency also requires involving those affected by the decision - either by including them in advance or at least making the reasoning transparent. Couldn't your low sensitivity and interpersonal skills, which you acknowledged in the BIP, get in the way here? Have there been any recent issues where someone felt overlooked by one of your decisions?”

It's not uncommon for the Twist consultants to hear the phrase: “You're right - now that you mention it...” The manager's rating is then mutually adjusted down to a 3, and a first behavioural tip is recorded in writing in the “Takeaway list” for Pit Stop 1 noted: When making important decisions-even when they need to be made quickly-pause and seek advice on who should be involved beforehand and how, or at the very least, who should be personally informed. Ideally, this insight is transferred into practical application by reviewing an upcoming decision to check whether all key stakeholders are truly on board.

In the end, a flipchart is created, which each manager either takes home or photographs: the so-called “SEW Takeaway List 1,” which contains all new behaviours and tips that can be implemented immediately after returning.

Between the Pit Stops: Gather Feedback and Try Out New Behaviours

For the roughly eight weeks leading up to the second pit stop, each division manager has two assignments to carry out. First, each manager is to conduct a reality check of their self-assessment. Here too, the SEW concept relies on self-responsibility. The manager must choose suitable individuals who can provide concrete feedback on the key issues in their personal strengths-and-weaknesses profile, drawing on everyday experiences and observations.

The immediate supervisor is the first person to be approached for feedback. For competencies related to leadership or cross-departmental collaboration, it may be more appropriate to ask employees or colleagues from other departments. Quite often, even family members provide valuable feedback that brings one's self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses to life.

At the same time, the SEW participants begin trying out new behaviours right after the first pit stop and implement tips from their compiled action list. For example, the intention to tackle conflicts head-on. One harmony-seeking division manager, for instance, asks his harshest critic for honest feedback on his cross-departmental collaboration. In doing so, he personally transforms the interaction within a mutually difficult business relationship. "Just imagine," he tells the consultant at the second pit stop, "I invited Ms. X from Procurement for a coffee. We had an open conversation and agreed that from now on, we'll first try to find a solution ourselves before sending long, exhausting emails and escalating everything to senior management!"

As it quickly becomes clear, the time between the pit stops is just as important as the pit stops themselves. Through the reflection on one's own behavioural patterns and the feedback brings movement into the system: the manager engages more deeply with their environment, changes their behaviour, and in doing so initiates positive change in those around them.



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Consulting in the spring.



IRIS PIEPER is Head of Talent Management. Since 2023, she has been responsible not only for the SEW program but also for all other talent development initiatives at Sonepar Deutschland GmbH.



DR. CLAUDIA HARSS is the owner of the Twist Consulting Group. Together with her colleagues Sonja Nitsch and Mona Maertins, she has been conducting self-development workshops since 2021.

Pit Stop 2: Where is the pressure greatest?

While the first pit stop focused on changing one's own behaviour patterns and skills and aligning them with the realities of change, the current emphasis is on the topics in daily work that currently demand the most time and energy from the manager. The perspective thus shifts from inward reflection to the external environment. After reviewing experiences from implementing the first takeaway list and the reality check of personal strengths and weaknesses at the start of the second session, the Twist consultant turns attention to the most pressing challenges in the area of responsibility. In doing so, she follows the neurodidactic principle: where there is strong emotion, learning happens fastest and most deeply. So, the first question posed is "What is currently causing you the biggest headache at work?". The responses clearly show how important it is not to offer a one-size-fits-all solution for managers undergoing change. In fact, the challenges reported by the division managers are quite diverse, as the following issues illustrate:

- Tension is brewing in the team: How do I address an unsettled workforce?
- Optimal use of resources in my team: Should we serve the customer we know best and longest, or the one with the highest customer value for us?
- Use of AI: Is AI replacing our jobs? How can I present AI and automation as an opportunity?
- A key client is threatening to switch to a competitor: What can I do to retain them?
- A distinguished manager is retiring in the coming months: What support does the young successor need so that nothing goes wrong and everything doesn't fall on my plate?
- Task management and self-care: My desk is so full; I don't even know where to start. How can I organize better and set priorities? And where do my own needs fit in?

Given the wide range of topics each leader brings to the table, it is essential to work individually with each one to determine which decisions and actions are most effective in supporting the change process - while also maintaining their own energy and motivation. In the process, they continue working on their personal strengths and weaknesses.

A manager who dislikes speaking in front of groups is grateful when the SEW provides concrete practice in delivering a short address to all branch managers - and is given the tool "5 Persuasion Strategies" to help. Another manager who struggles with structured work benefits more from, for example, using an organizational chart or role descriptions to work out how tasks, responsibilities, and communication channels can be improved within their area of responsibility.



Sometimes it helps to look at everything from a distance. That's why the Twist consultant invited a participant for a walk in the English Garden. From the Monopteros, they look out over the wide landscape and imagine all their questions lying far below on the grass.

From time to time, it also helps to take a step back and look at everything from a bird's-eye view. The Twist consultant invites a stressed SEW participant for a walk in the English Garden. From the Monopteros, the two look out over the vast grounds and imagine that all the questions and issues lie far below them on the grass. "The most important thing now is that I take care of my team," the division manager suddenly says with determination, pointing to a group of young trees by the Eisbach stream.

The individually developed insights, tips, and ideas are also recorded after the second pit stop in the form of a "SEW Checklist 2."

Nothing but expenses?

"I looked forward to every appointment in Munich!" "It was important to have a sparring partner during the crucial phase of the transformation!" These are two comments frequently heard at the end of the second pit stop. But there are also reports of positive change in the environment: "My branch managers now feel much more confident in making decisions themselves and provide me with a decision proposal and clear recommendation in borderline cases." When you ask the 30 sales division managers who participated in a SEW in 2023 and 2024 about the success of the initiative, the answer is unanimously positive.

This is also confirmed by the written feedback on the SEW: the questions about the extent to which the program helped participants personally,

whether any changes were noticed in everyday work, and the professional competence of the three Twist senior consultants were consistently rated as good – or, more often, very good. In addition, the program achieved a 100% recommendation rate in the written evaluations. As a result, the Purchasing and Finance departments have also decided to offer SEWs to their leadership teams.

But are the division managers actually coordinating their efforts in the change process? During the pit stops, several ideas had emerged - for example, optimizing cost efficiency and margins, improving communication around strategy, or standardizing the assignment of employees to the newly created divisions. Had any of that actually reached executive management?

We asked Manuel Haber. He was one of the first ten SEW candidates and already on the verge of becoming a regional manager at the time. He now serves as Managing Director of Sonepar Germany, with responsibilities including sales, and has enabled several candidates to participate in the SEWs at Twist himself. He therefore knows the SEWs both as a participant and as a sponsor. His comment: "Among the many colleagues I have nominated for the SEW, I observe a noticeably increased willingness afterward to engage with change and to adopt the appropriate role as implementers. From my time as a participant, I still value the thoughtful introduction to organizational culture and leadership dimensions in the first part, as well as the precise focus on personal leadership and management challenges in the second part of the program. The lean yet intensive format also makes it possible to use the SEW at short notice."

