

Introduction to Magic in The Middle

By Finn Voldtofte, march 2005

The magic in the middle begins with a shift in awareness, from *parts* to *relations between parts*.

Imagine a circle of people in conversation. When we are interested in understanding the processes that take place in the conversation, we can pay attention to the individual in the circle, to the circle as a whole (group or team), or to the relations between the participants. All three realities coexist at once, but we can choose to let one of them come in the foreground.

To pay attention to the *field* of relations is not the same as paying attention to the *whole*. The parts are still important. The whole is still important. But we are particularly interested in what goes on in the interaction between the parts, and let that reality come in the foreground.

“Magic in the middle” may be found everywhere, where we choose to pay attention to the relations between the parts.

Example: Ants are the parts. The anthill is the whole. The ability of the anthill to maintain itself emerges as a magic in the middle of the ants, when they relate to each other. For instance, ants interact by leaving scent trails of their activity while they search for food.

Magic in the middle is an *emerging* or arising phenomenon. “Emergence” is used when hitherto isolated elements begin to interact, and lead to qualitative new properties, that could not be predicted from the knowledge of the elements seen by themselves.

Example: Oxygen and hydrogen together form water. The wetness of water is a new property that cannot be predicted by knowledge of oxygen and hydrogen. Anthillness, ability to think, consciousness and traffic jams are other examples of emergent entities.

Magic in the middle is in a way just a “code word” for emergence. The word “magic” indicates that we are not necessarily able to explain how the emergent emerges, but that we can ascertain that it happens.

Magic in the middle is thus a more general term that we can make use of in the situations where it makes sense to distinguish between whether we pay attention to the *parts*, to the *whole*, or to *the relations between the parts*.

Magic in the middle when people meet

It is the examination of that magic in the middle that may arise when people meet that interests me. I believe that it may be helpful to look at the wider concept of magic in the middle in order to understand the magic in the middle of a meeting of people.

So now we shift from paying attention to the *individual* in the meeting, not to *the group* or *the team*, but to *what happens between people* that meet.

To meet here means some kind of interaction. *Talking* is just one of these forms. Everything that people can do with each other contain the possibility of a meeting. But it is also possible to have, for instance, a conversation, without actually meeting. In my examination of what happens between people, I assume that it is possible for a real meeting to come about. It is not an unimportant prerequisite – sometimes it can be hard to fulfil.

The network of relations and interactions that come about in the meeting of people create a *field*. This field *emerges*, it is magic in the midst of the people that meet.

A field transmits impulses to an extended area. The influence of the field is not limited and local. The field transmits influences from one place in the field to all other places in the field. Contrary to this, it is a local and limited influence, when one billiard ball bumps into another billiard ball.

This field, this magic in the middle of people, is not “just” an abstract idea. The magic in the middle can be experienced, felt, and recognised. Practices can be trained, so that I become more firmly based in my experience with the magic in the middle. The magic in the middle has power to transform.

Collective intelligence – collective wisdom

Intelligence here simply means the *ability to think* – that is to reflect, consider, examine, learn, be absorbed, distinguish....

The shift in awareness, from the individual to the magic in the middle of a group of people, is also a shift towards paying attention to the emerging ability to think together, the *collective intelligence* of the group.

A collective intelligence has *the possibility* of thinking at a different level than we can individually. The characteristics of a collective intelligence can be described intuitively with the words higher, deeper, broader, bigger....

What we gain by making use of this ability to think together, we could call *collective wisdom*. *Collective* wisdom is thus a form of knowledge that we, in principle, do not have access to individually, but that can only arise in our common field. As such it is not knowledge that we have in *common*; it is knowledge that only emerges in *communities*.

Transformative power

To be in a field with magic in the middle transforms those that make up the field. In principle two things are transformed: My ability to be myself, and my ability to be completely present in a meeting with other people. It is always possible to become better at being myself, and it is always possible to become better at meeting with others. Maybe the two are prerequisites for each other.

The transformation takes shape as a gradual degeneration of whatever keeps me from being myself completely, and whatever keeps me from being completely present in a meeting. What that might be for the individual, and how it is gradually degenerated, dissolved and overcome, I do not know - I only claim that it happens.

The power to transform may reach further than to the people that make up the field, *if* we place the ability to think together for a cause, *and* something wise results from it. To be able to engage the magic in the middle of people in an organization is a means to transform that organization.

Practices to engage the magic in the middle

It is essential to understand that the magic in the middle is more than an idea. It is a reality that can be experienced, and which I may have a poorer or a better ability to recognise, participate in and possibly to take leadership of engaging in my organisation. As such it is very appropriate to ask: Which practices can help me and my people to engage the magic in the middle?

With a *practice* I think of something that has been established through a mixture of attitude, behaviour and experienced ability to act. It is more than just a good idea that I might take up some time; more concrete than an ideal or a behavioural norm. I point to nine practices, that each contributes to engage the magic in the middle:

Inquiry

To be able to go to the edge of ones knowledge and to stand being in a field of not-knowing.

To be able to leave ones field of "already-knowing", including opting out on making everything fit or not fit with mental models that I carry with me.

To let go of the need to pass the judgement "right" or "wrong".

To be able to wait and see what happens, rather than making "what is this useful for?" a criteria for evaluation.

It is easy enough to say, "to be inquiring", it is harder to do – it takes experience, self-insight, social skills and more to master inquiry as a practice.

Stretch

To take steps that reach further.

To go beyond what I already know or dare.

To stretch takes courage, because there is always a risk of not being met, understood, wanted, or of not succeeding.

Each now, each situation I am in, contain a possibility for stretching. I need not wait for a particularly good opportunity to practice stretch.

Reflection on process

To be able to, and to dare reflect on, what is between us right now.

When you do that, you risk feeding on yourselves – conversation about conversation... But there is also a possibility for uplifting the meeting.

Listening to what is emerging

Collective wisdom is an emerging entity.

The more we have the ability to listen to what is emerging, the more we can help it surge with our attention.

Ego understanding

The ego feels threatened, when I step into a field with magic. To be able to recognize and understand ego reactions is helpful in *choosing* to let go of them.

Experience with the difference between individual and collective

What arises in the field, we might loose when we leave the field again. Knowledge is structured in consciousness. Knowledge that has arisen in a collective consciousness, cannot be contained fully by individual consciousness.

The more we understand the phenomenon, the better we can contain that there is a difference between what we can know together, and what we can know individually.

Warm up

What can I do in advance in order to improve my ability to be completely present in a meeting?

How can I prepare myself, so that I can contribute to the inquiry?

Commitment

The decision to close the "backdoors", and thus make myself completely available for being in the field.

Magic-meter

To have ability and experience with measuring the magic in the meeting, in order to learn from the variations. The ability can become a reliable evaluation in unison, of the level of magic.

Authentic leadership

Each of the nine practices can be learned, trained and improved, so that I can grow in my ability to *contribute* to the magic in the middle.

If I am to take an authentic *leadership* on me that engages the magic in the middle of my organisation, it requires competence within the nine practices at three levels: Personal experience, process design and process guidance.

Metaphorically seen, magic in the middle can be understood as social technology at *the level of the operating system*. If I want to use a computer to write a letter or make a budget, I need to know some targeted *applications*, as Word or Excel. But I also need to know the operating system of the computer, which is the *platform* for the applications.

In the same way: If I want to achieve robustness and community around idea and intention in an organisation, I have to make use of targeted processes for realising strategy. If it happens on a *platform of process* that engages magic in the middle, it is possible to create results that to a higher degree draw upon the collective intelligence of the organisation.

I believe that many of the processes we make use of today, in order to lead and transform organisations, could get a radical lift by engaging magic in the middle of the organisation.