

Experiences with Spiral Dynamics Development Projects in Eastern Europe

An interview with Henrik Bjørnstorp¹

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Summary

Danish environmental development consultant Henrik Bjørnstorp talks about his experiences in working with development projects in Eastern Europe where he is using Spiral Dynamics to better understand the complex dynamics at play within and between different cultures who are centred at different levels on the spiral. While Denmark may be centred in the ORANGE and GREEN memes he works a lot with people and cultures making the transition from PURPLE to RED to BLUE to ORANGE.

Henrik recounts a typical meeting with an organisational leader in Ukraine where he changed from a GREEN "Good friend" to a RED "Big Boss" way of motivating. *"He was a big man, talked very loudly. His office was twice as big as my apartment, very big and spacious, with big furniture, a very nice looking young secretary. His "Work Bosses" were looking very serious when he was around. We had a meeting with him and I remember thinking that if I was to request his assistance politely, as I would have done in Denmark and expressing that we would be very pleased, we wouldn't have won. So I took a chance, talked RED and threatened him!"*

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1. To make change happen you have to understanding what motivates people

ND: Could you give a brief background about yourself and your interest in Spiral Dynamics?

HB: I have professional background as a mechanical engineer and as a NLP trainer. I started my own company two and half years ago with the objective of better using my knowledge in civil issues. I've been working as a quality manager with the ISO 9000 system and as a Human Resources manager, and I've also been working abroad with both private companies as well as governmental aid agencies in Europe and Asia.

As a lot of my work involves working in different cultures I've learnt that if you really want to make changes then you have to understand what motivates people and what their values are. The values of company employees in Denmark are not the same as those in Malta.

In 2002 I did the SD I and II certification course led by Chris Cowen and gained a whole new vocabulary for better understanding why certain change processes that I had been involved in where more successful than others. The model has been extremely valuable in my work both abroad and in Denmark.

Since 2002 I've been working in Denmark as a consultant for several Danish companies as well as international development projects in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia, and Malta where I've been introducing a Spiral Dynamics perspective to international project management. My work involves training management and staff, as well as quality management and project management.

2. Recognizing a conflict in values

HB: Directly after my training in SD in 2002 I went to Kiev to help out in a development project that was having a lot of problems at the time. Our Kiev counterpart was not motivated and interested in cooperating. I remember in my first meeting with them, no matter what I asked them to do they all replied, "No." But I learned something very interesting. I recognized these guys as being very much centered in the BLUE meme, used to receiving and following orders. I also understood that our GREEN Danish perspective was asking, "Okay how do we work together?" So in effect we were completely unaware of the underlying codes behind the conflict. Instead of realizing that we should be meeting them on their level, ie BLUE, and that they should agree with all we said, it was mistakenly felt more appropriate from our GREEN anti-authoritarian perspective that they instead find out that we actually were the authority in this project. It's absurd! I realized that it's not a question of whether we like to have the authority or not, in order to help everybody we had to take over the authority of the project.

ND: Unhealthy GREEN doesn't like BLUE authority.

HB: Exactly. We called a new meeting and changed our style of communication. We described what they had to do, and every time they said, "It's not possible", or, "We don't like to do that", we replied with, "Okay we'll take the responsibility." So after a two hour meeting I was taking responsibility for everything, from whether or not the weather would be nice to whether the major of Kiev would agree. From this meeting they found out that someone was taking responsibility, and they started to relax. They began to change their focus; they asked how they could make this successful.

For me it's important to say that once we're working here we're doing it because we want to achieve something. So what's in it for me, and what's in it for them? And starting this way saying, "I have the authority, I'm the one who decides, I'm the one who's in charge, and I'm the one to take the blame if everything goes wrong." It became much easier to work when this perspective was made clear.

Also, it's very important in this RED and BLUE work environment to know that if you agree upon something, don't expect that they do it when you're not looking! RED works the way you tell them and they don't work when you're not around unless there is another authority to take over.

3. Facilitating a shift from BLUE to ORANGE

ND: What did you learn for this?

HB: That to motivate BLUE you have to have rules and guidelines and make sure that they feel comfortable and that someone else is taking the responsibility. And the next part is support, support, and more support. Every time they are in doubt, to help them find the questions. Normally the GREEN consultant will say, "If you're in doubt I'll coach you to find the answers in yourself. But don't try to do that in BLUE, because if you say, "What do you think?" too many times they feel uncertain and insecure, whether you're an expert or not.

I remember in particular a group of young people working on a project. They were always asking me if this was okay or that was okay. When you ask BLUE to make some calculations and estimate something; you get given figures with seven digits. You ask, "Is it between one and ten?" And you get "2.33645." It's impossible for them to give an estimate [laughter].

Interestingly after two to three months on the project they started to argue with me, with my perspective. So this indicated a shift. They said, "Maybe we could do this and this" and I said, "No, I think you should do that." And they said, "No, we think our way is better." I recognise that they were becoming comfortable in the BLUE zone and were now moving to ORANGE, starting to question my authority, starting to have their own ideas and opinions and ideas as to how to do it. And once they started this I knew I was on the right track.

ND: That's fascinating. How did your leadership style change?

HB: Their motivation changed from wanting guidelines to wanting success, so I gave them more and more responsibility for the project. We talked about how they could achieve and learn from this project.

ND: Were they looking for different rewards?

HB: Yes, they now felt it important to have a mobile phone, although they didn't have use for it, and the rewards became much more materialistic. They started discussing how much money they were making for being a part of the project.

ND: They wanted to compare themselves?

HB: Of course, they knew how much I was making and the salary difference between the Danish consultants and local employees.

ND: How did you help them in their shift from BLUE to ORANGE?

HB: I had to change my leadership style. They were now motivating by wanting to experience success for themselves, so leadership meant chasing results and putting them up in front. In the BLUE meme I was making all the decisions, whereas now I had to move back and ask, how do I train them to do these things? They ended up doing seminars, producing material and training other people. One lady experienced a lot of success and is now moving to Germany to work in a private company.

4. The emergence of ORANGE entrepreneurs

ND: Did you see many good BLUE leaders?

HB: The problem in Eastern Europe is that when BLUE in the form of communist leadership disappeared it left a huge gap. The society was split. Many of them waited for some alternative BLUE leadership to take over, and not necessarily healthy BLUE. In this vacuum one could see RED leadership taking over in the form of the mafia. But there was also another group of people moving into ORANGE, Eastern European entrepreneurs being very successful in making a lot of money. I've talked with many of them how they got started and what was their incentive and I find that they have always been entrepreneurs, but that the heavy BLUE environment under communism was stopping them. Under it they become experts in manoeuvring around formalities and bureaucracy. So when BLUE communism disappeared it became very easy for them to move into ORANGE. They would say things like, "We have been working so hard all these years, so for us, everything is so easy now. It's so easy to do what we've always wanted to do." So that's interesting that this ORANGE system was already there ready to emerge, it just needed the heavy BLUE that was blocking it to be removed.

5. From RED to BLUE to ORANGE

HB: I've also been talking to some colleagues about development work in Belgrade in Serbia, where you also experience a society that lacks healthy BLUE in its societal, business and political structures. One of them commented that the same conditions were present in the United States during the 20's. There were a lot of RED mafia activities going on, and yet at the same time there was this shift into BLUE and ORANGE.

In Bulgaria the mafia owns whole cities. You see small cafes where you can buy a cup of coffee for say 25 cents. These cafes are built by the mob, and maybe they've spent some one million Euros on first class stainless steel and leather furnishings, and people go there to buy a cup of coffee for nothing [laughter]. So you see them investing all their money from their other businesses in the city, and they find out how to share the city between them. Now they start to think: "How do we turn into businessmen?"

My own opinion is that as the environment changes some of the RED will disappear or get killed, another group will start to get family and think: "Okay there's more to life than just being on the road." And when they raise children near the bright lights of Europe, which is offering a future, they don't want them to grow up in a RED society. And this gives them a sense of purpose.

ND: How easy is it to find RED in these societies?

HB: Well it's quiet easy to spot when you see 200 cm tall guys wearing leather jackets, driving Audis, looking very macho and tough and young women on their arms. They also carry weapons, though these are mostly not so visible. You know which places you shouldn't go into. But I don't feel threatened by them.

ND: What forms of healthy BLUE do you see that can help RED's transition into BLUE?

HB: That's a problem, because the police in these countries lack healthy BLUE. For example they often stop you if you drive alone in a car. And if you drive too fast you have to pay them money. Because they are not paid so much they find other ways to earn money. So if you want a licence you'll probably have to pay somebody from the municipality or the government. One finds a lot of corruption instead of a healthy BLUE system. It's often a symptom of having to survive. From our perspective it's corruption, but seen from their perspective, because they earn so little, it's accepted as a legitimate part of their salary. And this is one problem when financing development projects. Incomes for police have to be increased in order to stop a lot of this corruption, but importantly BLUE law and order has to be made healthy.

6. A PURPLE – RED world

ND: What kind of experience have you had in working with RED?

HB: Part of my job, especially when working with environmental issues, is meeting people at all levels on the Spiral. At the top of the leadership pyramid I work with politicians, ministry people and government discussing strategies and where to move forward. In the middle I also talk to the companies who will carry out our plans, and then at the bottom of the pyramid the waste collectors, where you often find Gypsies doing the task of waste collecting in Eastern Europe. This group are often living in a PURPLE – RED world. They're very nice people and often we need their knowledge and input to find out what they're doing and what they see. These guys like to show that they are good workers and the best way of leading them is to show that you respect their work. I start off by working with them for half a day or a day. I dress properly so that I can work with them. You comment and praise them on their work, ask questions about what they do and they become interested. They like to see if you can work hard, and then they work even harder. They love to hear about Denmark and I tell them what people do in Denmark and how things are organised. "Do you have big trucks in Demark?" "Yes we have Mercedes and Volvo." "Wow" they say. So you talk their language and show that you're not afraid of doing the things they are doing. Sometimes waste can smell, and if you go there in your shirt and tie and look at them from ten meters distance you won't have any kind of cooperation with them. You have to join and be part of the gang. Hanging out with these guys for one or two days is a lot of fun and probably the best part of my job. They also like to show that they are in control and you find a natural hierarchy in the crew. The boss in the team drives the truck, there is a number two who is permanent and then there are two more people at the bottom who have to show that they are good enough otherwise they're off the crew.

These guys have their ways to make some extra income and goods on the road. From one place they get some bread, and from another they get some coffee.

ND: What about RED being impulsive and needing to be rewarded immediately?

HB: It's very rare that the society rewards RED and if it doesn't then they will reward themselves by having all these extra illegal deals. For example if the customer doesn't do as they say, then they won't get rid of their waste. As well if they don't earn that much they actually go through the waste to find valuables, paper, glass, and plastic, which to sell in their own business on the side.

So recognising the value codes is important in order to motivate change. If we compare this to a modern waste system, the system in Denmark is very different. In these less modern societies they are much more dependent on the customers doing the work, because if they do it the wrong way, the waste collectors aren't being motivated to sort it. But now using Spiral Dynamics we can recognise the PURPLE code and actually use it to motivate people. In PURPLE relationship is strong. The customer might say, "I don't care what the government says about recycling," but they do care about their own waste collectors. Unlike in Denmark, when they see him they might have a long talk with him. When the waste collector has a dialogue with the people saying, "Well we think it's good that you do the sorting and you're helping the environment," then they will do it, because if they don't do it they know the person who will have the mess and the problem, so in this way they help each other.

So in this way we are bringing more complexity into the RED system. It's not enough to be RED and just drive around in the truck, do whatever you want and come back. You need to have these rules to follow; you need to have a clearly defined route, and you provide incentives. "What's in it for me if I do this and this?" It's not that difficult because one simple step for going from RED to BLUE in the waste collection system is first of all to accept their work, secondly to make sure that they have a proper uniform and working cloths, give them some guidelines on how to do the work. Then thirdly have them measure how well the work is being done and if people are doing it right or wrong. Reward them for doing what is right. And involve them. I've seen it many times that if people think that they are taken seriously – if you prevent them from being injured and hurt, for example sometimes it's very unhealthy conditions with syringes and other hospital waste mixed in – then you have opened up for positive communication. For example we had the Red Cross give a first aid seminar for these waste collectors and they said, "Wow, this we can use with our friends and in our family." So all this together gave them a sense of importance in doing their job properly. They could see that they were part of a larger system and that they had clearly defined roles that fitted in. So this was a very positive hierarchy.

7. From BLUE bureaucracy to ORANGE

HB: The first time I went there I say, "We shouldn't have too much bureaucracy, not too much for them to fill in." But they really love to have all these formulas and note books that they can write in, in fact the more the better! When they start getting centred in BLUE it's time to ask, "What is the exact objective? What do we want to achieve? How do we measure things to show whether we have reached our results or not?"

So instead of having a lot of unnecessary formulas to fill in we find out what is necessary in order to fulfil our job. Often when you introduce things that are more complicated they don't have time to do all this BLUE stuff, so they have to change something. And when they find out that the person at the top prefers to have exact data rather than hundreds of pages that nobody reads, then they become motivated in creating a more simple procedure.

In Bulgaria we worked to introduce a waste management plan. The previous one was made in 1998 and was based on guidelines from another European country. And as they had never

formulated such a strategy themselves, the result was typically BLUE in that everything had to be in specific order and documented. They were writing over two hundred pages and going into extreme detail like the size of the eggs. So the result was not that interesting if terms of creating a waste management plan based on the future. The way we work is asking, "We don't have that much money, so what do you want to achieve?" So you have to be very specific on what you want to achieve. We talk about objectives that can be measured, and in order to promote BLUE into ORANGE we talk about the future and how we can improve and change what is happening just now in order to get there. A good way of starting is saying, "We don't know how the future is going to be in Bulgaria, but in Denmark it looks like this..."

The people who change from BLUE to ORANGE are those who can give the best data and the ones who are dealing most successfully with the problems and doing the task most efficiently. So the message to those stuck in BLUE is, "If we keep doing what we've always been doing, we might not have a job in the future." And without scaring them that much it could be an incentive for those moving into ORANGE by asking, "How do we work with evaluation measures for the future?" Then I introduce quality management by saying, "How do we make sure that the customers are satisfied? Remember the customers can be citizens and politicians." So we do surveys and questionnaires to find out how people think things are now and what they hope for the future. And this works as an incentive for them to become customer oriented, see their role in relationship to that and make necessary changes.

8. Using PURPLE to build confidence

HB: In these projects it's important to have a good relationship with the people I work with. A good way to get into contact with people is to get into contact with their PURPLE, to find the PURPLE in their society. Recognising what they would want me to see in their local society and culture. You turn to their past, their customs and traditions. Visit some of their old churches; learn about their food and wine. Take part in traditional celebrations, like in Bulgaria they have some very important dates in winter to make sure that the wine will be good in following autumn. So on the 15th of January they make a special sacrifice and afterwards drink a lot of wine! Recognising their PURPLE values is a very good way of building confidence; look at their office and see what is of value to them, like pictures of family. I also use this knowledge when giving seminars. "It's similar to the place I visited on the weekend where I saw this and this." Likewise if you're able to learn a few words from their language, it really shows that it means a lot to people as a lot of identity is in the language.

Often when we talk to only one level, like ORANGE focusing on how to make profit, it can result in people taking a distance and the grounds for cooperation not being established. They often believe that when you come from abroad, and you're called an expert, that you're someone very very important. So it's a good idea to begin at a human level.

9. Talking RED with RED

HB: I also look at the commercial advertising being used. Many places in southern Europe use a lot of RED, as well as ORANGE, in their advertising. For example you'll find small satchels of sugar used in hotels and restaurants with pictures of lightly clothed women. I mean if you served this in Denmark or Sweden you'd get a lot of problems. But it's accepted there and works in the RED macho culture mindset, enjoying fast cars and women, living for today and not giving a damn about tomorrow.

In Ukraine one of the projects I worked with involved a partly private, partly public company with the guy leading not wanting to cooperate. They had between 2000 and 3000 employees with one boss at the top. The organisational leadership was very RED. He had some vice managing directors but they weren't able to decide anything, every decision had to go through the Big Boss. We called on them because we needed some assistance with a project that had been approved but he didn't want to give us what we wanted. He was a big man, talked very loudly. His office was twice as big as my apartment, very big and spacious, with big furniture, a very nice looking young secretary. His "Work Bosses" were looking very serious when he was around. We had a meeting with him and I remember thinking that if I was to request his assistance politely, as I would have done in Denmark and expressing that we would be very pleased, we wouldn't have won. So I took a chance, talked RED and threatened him!

I said, "I hope that we can use some of these funds in Ukraine", we had some 200 000 Euros, "but if you don't want to cooperate I will take it to a project we have in Bulgaria." It was a simple yes or no. Then he replied, "That was not nice to say. Okay, accepted, no problems." I won because I had a bigger trump, but I won in a way that he could still look good, it was very simple. I had a better argument than he had and I got what I wanted, and we parted good friends, no problems. You should have seen his face though; he turned around to talk a lot of very loud Russian to his guys, then smiled to me, gave me a big handshake and said, "Okay." I'll never forget it.

10. GREEN has trouble talking to RED

HB: When I spoke to my colleagues about which strategy I felt was needed in order to bring about a result, I was strongly apposed as you might appreciate. Seen from our GREEN Danish perspective what I did was not the way to treat this guy, or any guy. They wanted me to be much more open and friendly in finding a way, but I knew this would not work in heavy RED. I had to talk to his level of development very directly, "If you don't cooperate you have a problem."

We couldn't trust him; we had to have regular meetings. And we would phase it like, "We are really please to have your cooperation, your guys are doing a good job. But we think we have a small misunderstanding here so could we also have this and this by the end of the week." Normally he would answer yes. So we had to be very careful, deals made in RED have short use by dates.

My interpreter remarked to me that it was the first time anybody ever talked straight to this guy. Everybody in the project was waiting for somebody to talk straight to him. All previous efforts in trying to get him to cooperate had failed. So I can see that some of my colleagues were talking on one level while he was talking on another. And because RED doesn't respect GREEN they gave him a lot of power. I learned that power is a key factor when working with RED, and if you have power you should show it.

11. Reaching BLUE, ORANGE and GREEN at the same time

HB: Another country I've been working in is Malta. Malta has just joined the EU, it has a population of 400 000 people and with 1,2 million visitors every year has the highest population density in Europe. So they are faced with an environmental problem and have to do something. We have been working with the Government in their responsibility for implementing waste management plans as well as the public. We have conducted surveys and questionnaires concerning values in regards to this topic and different themes.

For many people it is very important to have rules. "I want to follow the rules but if my neighbour doesn't he should be punished." So BLUE absolutistic right and wrong. The second theme that motivates them is ORANGE: "Okay how do I benefit from it? What's in it for me? Can I save money?" And the third theme is GREEN: "If we don't do something for Malta we'll end up being one big dumpsite. It's important for society to be involved in recycling." The young people I work with have a very strong GREEN value system. Their incentive to work in this field is because they want to do something for Malta. When I work with these young people I also help them appreciate that they accept and recognise the other colours: for example that there have to be rules, without rules there is no law and order. Malta has a strong BLUE history, as it was once an English colony, and has inherited good BLUE elements. There have to be ORANGE incentives: What's in it for me? Because not everybody cares about the environment. So when we make a campaign such as leaflets and advertising, we have to have elements that communicate to BLUE, ORANGE and GREEN. We recognise that each value system will be motivated differently.

We don't advertise to motivate RED. The only way to motivate RED is if the punishment is too much or appeal to their identity. You might word it like, "Only real men can sort!" PURPLE is more alive in smaller premodern societies where much of the recycling is a part of their ecological system. We see this in small villages in Bulgaria where the EU says they now have to have formal waste collection systems, and when you talk to them nothing is wasted. Cloths are reused. Bottles are reused. Newspapers are used for wrapping or burnt to get heat, and organic waste goes to the chickens or pigs.

12. Dealing with complexity

ND: How important is knowledge of verticality when working with development projects?

HB: Very important. A real problem arises when we don't recognise that people in other countries and cultures have different perspectives about what is important in their lives. You're on thin-ice when you come from Denmark and think that everyone else thinks like you do. A lot of private companies have made a lot of mistakes in Russia and Asia because they didn't appreciate differences in thinking. They didn't recognise the culture still being centred in RED and heavy BLUE and tried superimposing their own ORANGE systems with bad results. When you are a manager of a project in these settings it's very important that you don't impose your favourite style of leadership but that you recognise the style of leadership they need. It will mean using very different leadership styles for different individuals and groups, depending on what their need is. If you don't recognise that RED-BLUE needs a tough respected boss around then you waste a lot of time and resources. You may think that because they're not working they don't care, but if you are not around guiding, helping them and assisting them nothing happens. Unfortunately this is not normally considered; initiatives are started to move BLUE into ORANGE, but because they forget the level of leadership that is necessary they end up wasting a lot of time.

ND: What does GREEN do in these situations?

HB: The problem for GREEN is its belief that consensus must be reached; that everybody has to agree, everybody should be heard and listened to. But this won't work when people are still much less individuated in their thinking. They want to be told what to discuss and want the right answer is. Whereas in Denmark, where individuation is part of the mainstream culture, everybody has their own opinion of what the right answer is and one has difficulty getting them to stop talking.

When GREEN comes to Bulgaria and wants people to participate and be heard, they don't get the answers and the cooperation they want. Everybody is considered an equal member of the project; I'm not better just because I come from Denmark. So every time they look for someone to take authority, responsibility, and action GREEN will deny that he is any kind of authority. If you get business a card from Asian it's usually in gold and you see all their qualifications, whereas a Danish business card is normally very humble by comparison, just name and address. So I have two very different business cards, one for GREEN in Denmark and one for BLUE and ORANGE when working abroad.

Sometimes a problem is the language bandwidth we use. What we say needs to be recodified. So when we talk about GREEN sustainability and involvement of NGOS we change the message to talk about BLUE rules.

GREEN cannot generate the solutions that work in a BLUE society or setting. In these settings you have to generate BLUE solutions; these can of course include GREEN values, such as rules that benefit society and the environment but they have to be rooted in the BLUE meme. The next problem is that GREEN has difficulty making environmental projects profitable and is more concerned in dividing the prosperity that already exists. While ORANGE wants to achieve ever more prosperity and is not so concerned with whether to the world is better off or not as a result of its actions. In Denmark we know that to have a good environment and clean drinking water you have to pay money.

It's also important to recognise and reward ORANGE by using incentives like being able to work abroad, having a trip to Denmark, bonuses like extra money or having a computer. Rewarding BLUE by having them recognised by influential leaders in their own system, like at municipality level it is very important that the mayor or governor do something to reward them, like giving them a better position. Our way of working abroad lacks understanding of how to motivate people and get them involved. For us in a GREEN world it makes sense to do something for the environment, in a BLUE world it doesn't make sense, but something else does. So you have to translate our GREEN message into ORANGE, BLUE, RED and PURPLE. BLUE here is expressed as rules and guidelines for the right way to do things while ORANGE meanings having entrepreneurs say, "What's in it for me and how can I benefit from this work. Can I earn money from this? Can I get a better position?" For RED you have to be very clear and tough. For PURPLE you have to recognise them and their values.

GREEN has a difficulty recognising and handling this level complexity, but our life conditions are changing faster and faster and I feel we quite simply have to find better ways of leading in order to find solutions that work.

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