

The  
Pragmatic  
Programmers

# Guiding Star OKRs

A New Approach to  
Setting and Achieving Goals



Staffan Nöteberg  
*edited by Katharine Dvorak*

This extract shows the online version of this title, and may contain features (such as hyperlinks and colors) that are not available in the print version.

For more information, or to purchase a paperback or ebook copy, please visit <https://www.pragprog.com>.

Copyright © The Pragmatic Programmers, LLC.

# Cross-Pollination: Everyone's Ears, Insights, and Ideas

---

*Cross-pollination* is the necessary companion of the calibration session (see [Chapter 6, Calibration: Fine-Tuning Guiding Stars, on page ?](#)). Cross-pollination makes the Guiding Star OKR framework fluid, natural, and life-like. During this session, novel ideas emerge and are quickly adopted by the organization, with the strengthening of your informal network being a valuable side effect.



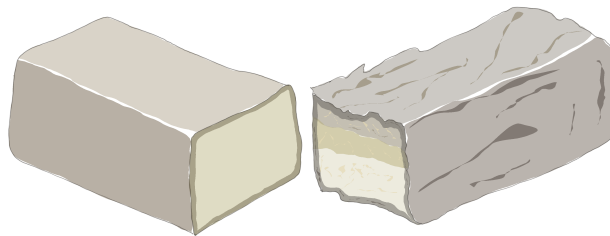
In this chapter, you'll discover how the cross-pollination session is structured and why it's essential for strategic execution. You'll also understand how cross-pollination differs from calibration, encourages the concept of quenched disorder, and fosters intrinsic motivation within your team.

## Embrace Quenched Disorder

Imagine two chocolate bars that look identical at first glance. Although both are delicious, dissimilar manufacturing processes hide differences inside the bars.

In the first chocolate bar, the ingredients were carefully mixed and then cooled slowly, allowing air bubbles and unevenness to disperse evenly. The result is a bar with a smooth and pleasant texture.

The second bar was hastily mixed together by an impatient chef. The mixture was cooled immediately, trapping air bubbles and unevenness. The result was a chocolate bar with an uneven and unexpected disorder—a surprise in every bite.



Now imagine you run a business and want your strategy to lead to tangible results. You have defined clear strategic guidelines and have regular calibration sessions. But despite this, you find that the strategy isn't reaching its full potential. Why? Part of the problem may be the lack of *quenched disorder* in your organization's ways of working. To understand why quenched disorder is so important, let's first delve into the concept.

Quenched disorder is a phenomenon borrowed from physics that describes what happens when a material is cooled very rapidly. This rapid cooling creates a random disorder in its crystal structure. In an organizational context, we can see quenched disorder when we orchestrate impromptu encounters between diverse and exceptional colleagues. Novel ideas and innovation are born in this ambiguous environment. This is different from formal meetings with fixed agendas and established roles.

If the chocolate bar with rapid cooling is quenched disorder, then the slowly cooled one is annealed disorder. In a meeting with an annealed disorder, we decide in advance what we'll talk about, who the expert is on what, and what

we'll decide on. And so it turns out that we go through what we think is important together and then make decisions in a structured way. These types of meetings are necessary and valuable—no doubt about that. But they need to be complemented by quenched disorder meetings, at least if we want unexpected encounters, collective intelligence, and innovation.

In the Guiding Star OKR framework, the calibration session represents annealing, while cross-pollination takes care of the need for quenching. The combination of calibration and cross-pollination is a delicious two-course meal.

## What Is Cross-Pollination?

Let's take a look at an example. Cross-pollination is an event that happens every Friday for all employees of the company—regardless of organizational level, area of expertise, or job description. The session always starts at nine o'clock and is no longer than 55 minutes. The format is inspired by Open Space Technology (OST), a self-organizing session in which participants create and manage the agenda around a central theme or question in real time.

In cross-pollination, participants spontaneously decide at the last minute what topics will be discussed. This means that conversations may vary from time to time. The only common property of all topics is that they have a connection to your current guiding stars.

Parallel discussions take place in several different rooms. Each room is dedicated to a unique topic. Participants decide which discussion they want to participate in. Plus, if, during the discussion in one room, they notice that they're neither learning anything nor contributing, they can leave that room for one of the other rooms. The latter is called “the law of mobility” in OST.

Cross-pollination also emphasizes two principles from OST as outlined in Harrison Owen's [\*Open Space Technology: A User's Guide \[Owe97\]\*](#):

- “Whoever comes is the right people.” (Everyone is welcome and appreciated.)
- “Whatever happens is the only thing that could have [happened].” (The freedom to explore a topic.)

A more detailed example with tips for the person facilitating the event and sending out the invitation can be found in [Facilitating a Cross-Pollination Session, on page ?](#).

## Agila Sverige's Minimalist Recipe for Success

by: Ola Ellnestam, Software Coach, Agical

"Let's do a conference!" "A conference?" "Yes, wouldn't it be cool to have a local Agile conference that reinforces the Swedish community?"

"You're crazy!" "How are we going to manage that?" "We're only a handful of people who see one another regularly."

"I think I know how we can spread the work, reduce risks, and increase the commitment."

"How?"

"The conference format will be Lightning Talks<sup>1</sup> and Open Space."

This is pretty much how the conversation went when an industry colleague of mine pitched the idea of a Swedish Agile conference. In the end, the proposal turned out to be exactly what we needed to dare to try organizing our own conference.

Therefore, three months later, we completed the first edition of Agila Sverige (Agile Sweden).<sup>2</sup>

Over two days, 150 people gathered and talked about Agile. That was three times as many participants as we originally thought.

Before lunch, we were inspired by lightning talks, and in the afternoons we talked in Open Space sessions. By the end of the conference, we had listened to 40 lightning talks and had chosen roughly the same number of Open Space sessions.

Today, almost twenty years later, the conference still runs annually. Using the same format: Lightning talks and Open Space Technology. I believe that this is the key to the success of Agila Sverige. Its permissive format allows and encourages grassroots involvement, which in turn gives the conference its unique sense of participation and an inclusive atmosphere.

## Cross-Pollination Is as Necessary as Calibration

Cross-pollination sessions are as necessary as calibration sessions for several reasons:

### *Stimulates unexpected encounters*

Since participants spontaneously choose topics, cross-pollination breaks down hierarchies and silos. You get new connections and unexpected encounters between ideas and people.

### *Freedom to explore*

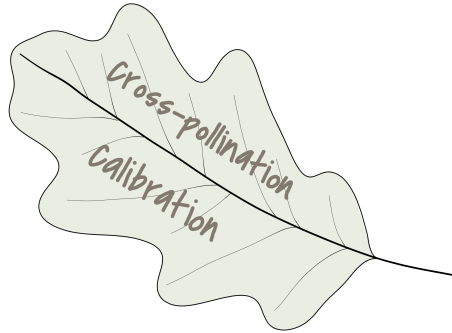
The freedom to delve into issues that are currently engaging participants leads to creative dialogs and new perspectives that you might never have seen in a more structured environment.

1. <https://www.forbes.com/2010/01/14/presentations-pecha-kucha-technology-breakthroughs-oreilly.html>

2. <https://agilasverige.se>

### *Quick response to new challenges*

The flexibility of choosing discussion topics in cross-pollination enables the organization to quickly respond to new challenges and opportunities in a changing world.



It's impossible to overstate how important cross-pollination is for making strategic execution the transformation engine you all hope for. The effects of cross-pollination that I've personally observed vary between companies and industries, but they're always just as amazing:

### *Intrinsic motivation*

Both the employee's engagement and their intrinsic drive increase when they have the opportunity to actively participate in discussions about the current guiding stars. Purpose, growth, and social interactions are important factors in creating intrinsic motivation. You'll get a more dedicated and productive workforce.

### *Increased innovation*

When insights and perspectives from different levels and teams meet, that leads to unexpected connections, new perspectives, and creative solutions that no one could have come up with on their own. It's like seeds from different plants are combined to create new, unique, and stronger plants.

### *Broader perspective*

Cross-pollination gathers insights and ideas from across the organization. It provides a more nuanced and broader picture of the challenges and opportunities in working toward the guiding stars.

### *Improved communication*

In addition to documented decisions made in formal forums, a modern organization wants many small insights to be spread efficiently, be borderless, and be individually adapted. The same specific detailed information is vital for some and, at the same time, annoying noise for many others. The

dialogue that arises in small, mixed sessions will automatically be about what's relevant to those who are talking to each other.

### *Continuous alignment*

Open communication between levels, departments, and teams in cross-pollination helps you to continuously agree on your latest insights and understanding of everything that you associate with your current guiding stars.

### *Faster decision-making processes*

Although cross-pollination itself isn't a decision-making meeting, participants will leave the session with new concrete ideas and discover potential issues that might otherwise have been missed or uncovered later. These findings are crucial inputs for formal decision-making meetings, helping the organization make quick, well-informed decisions about strategy execution.

### *Strategy focus*

The lifeblood of a strategy is that it's top of mind for many of your colleagues. If everyone is working on different—admittedly interesting and valuable—things, then what you have is organizational multitasking, not an executed strategy. Recent thoughts and conversations have a greater chance of popping up again than older ones. The high frequency (weekly) of cross-pollination reminds everyone of which guiding stars they're working toward right now.

### *Strengthens the informal networks*

By talking to and about trusted people, early humans were able to build cooperation on a larger and larger scale (see [\*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind\* \[Har15\]](#) by Yuval N. Harari). This resulted in adaptability and the development of complex organizations, which are important aspects, even in today's business world. Let's examine that scaffolding mechanism further.