

Book Review

The Boss is Dead

Leadership between Perfection and Explosion – A Psychological Study

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PREFACE

The authors consider themselves organizational and leadership developers. They have been active in the corporate world for a long time, working and consulting. Their work is based on morphological psychology, a psychological approach developed by Wilhelm Salber, that aims at understanding behavior as it is in constant state of change. It is not about measuring and explaining, but about describing and understanding how things interact and change. With its comprehensive approach in describing everyday life, morphological psychology is an excellent tool for examining and understanding corporate culture. In this book, the authors examine what constitutes leadership in the corporate work environment psychologically, how “change” is managed, and what happens between “perfection” and “explosion” in leadership.

THE BOSS IS DEAD

Every year, about 16 billion dollars are spent on “leadership” in 74 countries.¹ Simultaneously, it is common to see the collapse of carefully planned projects, silo thinking, hyperactive strategy management, and “burn-out” of the people involved. Extensive and, meaningless activity ends in exhaustion, and potential profits remain unexploited, while industrial establishments and financial managers expect salvation from real “leadership.” The authors examine questions such as what difference can leadership really make in times of automated processes? How does leadership work today? How do managers lead in practice? What problems do they encounter? What strategies can and cannot support organizations?

The following explorations are based on 20 in-depth interviews with leading managers from different levels (managing boards, BU managers, executives, team leaders, division managers), as well as on approximately 250 intensive examinations of organizational projects that team Steffenhagen consulting GmbH has conducted over the years.

CAUGHT IN SIMPLE IMAGES

The conceptual abstraction of “leadership” is usually connected to unspoken images of people and things interacting within a company and the work environment. These images work like

secret whisperers for managers and employees, just like a “small man in your ear”.

First image: The person being led is being used “rationally” like an object to guarantee “profit” and “yield” as noted in “*Handbuch Führung – Der Werkzeugkasten für Vorgesetzte*” [transl: “*Handbook Leadership – The Toolbox for Bosses*”]. It is based on linear mechanics. Human beings turn into “instruments” for producing yield. This image becomes evident quite graphically in the shareholder value approach.

Second image: The “other” is seen as a “creature led by self-interest” that is categorically not to be trusted in a “social arena”. “Leadership” in this image means assertion by the strongest on the social battlefield. This image is reflected well in the principal agent model.

These images imply a desperate search for leaders that come as close as possible to the respective “ideals” characterized in terms of mechanics or dominance. The search is for leader “heroes” who personify the abstract ideals by their outstanding characteristics, who know which of the employees’ buttons to push in order to optimize yield, or how best to manipulate their self-interests. Some examples of leadership training programs that look for this “ideal” leader include “*Leadership Qualities: 16 traits of the world’s most successful people*”² or “*Die 7 Wege zur Effektivität*” [transl: “*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*”] or “*Die 7 Seiten des*

*perfekten Managers*⁵ [transl: “*The 7 Sides of the Perfect Manager*”]. Such programs feed a huge assessment center industry and simultaneously support the belief in “*the powers that be*” that have to select the leaders. Such efforts project the association between mechanistic ignorance and belief in miracles.

Systemic psychology has come up with a nice buzzword for this: They call it a necessary new approach, the “*post-heroic management*”. Unfortunately, this notion can only describe the new, just like the post-modern, in a negative way: non-heroic, non-modern that is neither familiar nor old-fashioned.

LEADERSHIP AS CO-OPERATION

Since neither ideological nor nihilistic concepts lead anywhere, a thorough examination of the “*individual and the genuine*” (Nietzsche) is in order.⁶ What really happens in “leading” today? The analysis of in-depth interviews with leading managers shows that leading is not a solitary act of commanding but acting within the framework of a whole that humans create. A leading manager only exists if there are employees, and both only exist if there is a comprehensive entity, such as a business. Leading and being led both happen in shared common enterprises where people and things create a productive work environment (“*business is people*”).

In the framework of common enterprises, the business of “leading” initially seems to be being able to “dictate” other people.

BLINDING “BEING-ABLE-TO-DICTATE”

The search for ideas in situations of leading quickly prompts the notion of “instrumental-rational” approach. Leaders are expected to exert themselves to emphasize and advertise the dictating character of their doing; as if calling the shots and control were the only things that matter. In this notion the images of the “*captain on the boat-bridge*” or “*pilot in the cockpit*”, which imply speed, height, direction and so on, are evoked. .

“The leading manager is the pilot.”

“The captain sets direction, speed and destination.”

“Leading means providing the direction.”

“Leading means showing how things work.”

The task of implementing one’s own corporate mandate then means to make one’s own will the will of the others. This requires manipulative tricks:

“Making someone think that my idea was theirs, selling things, that is what leading is all about.”

“I must succeed in making my own will the will of the others.”

“Leading often means making people do things against their own notions.”

SHUTTING “BEING LED” OUT

The appealing hope of being able to make forces and resistance by “the others” disappear with tricks or pressure is accompanied by a not-so-obvious feature of leadership today: The leader forgets that she or he is also always being led. Being led appears as an embarrassing weakness, indicating a breakdown of one’s power and sense of perfection where one’s own actions and decisions are being dictated by others, others who are “above”, “next to” and “under” the leading manager. “Leaders” are often less aware of their imprinting through biographical or societal mandates, conditions and expectations. By forgetting their own “humanness” and finiteness, they tend to overburden themselves as autonomous super humans which often leads to emotional exhaustions, burnout, and even to mental illness.

Those who are in supervisory and leadership positions are often initially confronted, influenced and indirectly “led” by demanding and cumbersome employees. To their regret, they soon realize that they cannot entirely control their supervisees as well as what they themselves can and should do. A good example that illustrates the dynamic tension between leading and being led is the young inexperienced young leader who, in an effort to assert himself or herself, gives numerous orders right on the first day without taking into account that every order will come back to its sender with numerous requirements, like a boomerang.

Leaders are also unavoidably being dictated “from above”:

“When my boss sets the direction and starts going there, I am happy to go along, then it is clear where to go and what to do.”

“Then come the orders from the management board, who have the authority, and then everybody responds.”

Even though “all good things come from above”, in the long run the dictating will be experienced as aggravating and embarrassing. As a consequence the “captain” tries to get his or her lost or diminished authority back by trying to squirm free from higher orders just as cunningly as his or her own employees and supervisees. Such attempts, however, cannot be avoided or hidden completely and would come back to haunt them eventually during coaching or “on the couch”.

This ongoing yet typically overlooked dynamic relationship between dictating and being dictated, between leading and being led, creates a whole lot of tension, friction and conflict in everyday work life. To reconcile and manage this dynamic relationship, the author describe four common strategies that are commonly utilized. Since leadership always takes place in a cultural framework, these leadership styles and strategies mirror and reflect the unspoken and often not-so-obvious requirements, demands and ideals of the “global” techno-financial culture.

The “Submission Gesturers”

“Leadership” is often practiced as something that “gets things under control”. Any resistances are to be smoothed out, everything

edged to be made round. With the gesture of willing submission, leaders project the virtual image of a “super human” who can serve everybody and conduct their duties fully. They are supposed to be “perfect”, they want to “*take everybody along*”, “*get everyone on board*”, “*not lose anybody*”, “*not let anybody fall by the wayside*” or “*not hurt anybody*,” and all of this, lo and behold, while trying to make their own will the will of the others!

The gesture of one’s own submission aims to enforce everybody else’s joyful and voluntary submission. This resembles the idea of competing in a football game and expecting the opposing team to score own goals. Friction, confrontation, aggression, risks, or enduring resistances no longer appear in the attempt to set the business in a completely corrected direction through compliance and smooth operation.

“My boss always says: capture the people so that afterwards there is only a YES.”

“I want everyone to like me.”

The submission gesture even goes so far as to deny that human beings are different; everybody must receive the same treatment. The current vernacular expression of “*turning affected parties into participants*” is part of the list of virtues of a leader without invoking guilt or ominous consequences. “Aggression” and assertive leadership strategies are avoided noticeably, by the leader, and often left to the receptionist or the administrative assistant to “*show their teeth*.”

“Networking is fun. If you combine together, something good comes out of it.”

“In the end, we are a big XYZ family.” “I’m not a biter.”

“I have always been in favor of co-operation.”

The boss is dead. Leading without leading; that is what the whole “*leadership suppressing industry*” builds on today which is characterized by “political correctness”, “philosophy of equality”, “*delegates of the General Equal Treatment Act*”, “CSR” or “codes of ethics,” even though nobody asks for the contents of “ethics” any longer. Leaders want to look decent and avoid feeling guilty. They practice “*meeting instead of leading*”. The authors believe that this is the predominant goal of quite a few HR departments. Submission gesturers may come close to the cultural ideal of a clean superman or a superwoman that has lost any semblance of decisiveness. “*If you want everything, you cannot decide for anything*.” Perfectionism becomes the freezing point where leadership of humans gets frozen and paralyzed.

However, under the cover of equalizing and smoothing, incredible pressure builds up. The submission gesturer wants (and has) to “*kiss the others’ ass*” even though secretly every now and then. Such acts of course must not be expressed or openly displayed which amounts to repression or labeled as hypocrisy. Gradually, the flawless “leaders” lose sight of their own identity, they vanish, or lose themselves in the mix. Doubts regarding their own

significance, and role in the wheelwork of the business arise, leading to depression and burnout. Anger, outrage, and disappointment break free explosively, often off the record, which is like a mysterious turnaround from virtuous Dr. Jekyll to darksome Mr. Hyde.

The “Bulldozers”

The realization that perfect leadership beyond reproach is impossible it abruptly turns into “abrasiveness”, “ruthless reigning”, and “*bluntness regardless of the consequences*.” The exploding leader blindly butts into others’ assignments and spheres (“*bypass management*”). Power is demonstrated for the sake of power, followed by employees feeling “flooded”. Quite often that is the moment when McKinsey is brought into the company.⁷

“Then it is enough. Then I pound the table!”

A smart form of flooring is the simple use of bare figures and numbers instead of human interaction to achieve a specified goal. Excessive demands are imposed dictated by figures “from above”. This is usually done quite politely, which only hides the relentless abrasiveness of the excessive demands imposed on the parties involved. Leadership perfectionists can save their virtuous image by blaming the abrasiveness on the (God-given) figures and goals “from above” that others need to achieve. The authors noted that some companies have realized that something about this approach is fundamentally wrong: “*Wie Zahlen Manager in die Irre führen*”⁸ [transl: “*How numbers mislead managers*”].

Frequently, the ruthless reigning and flooring periodically revert to gestures of submission. Through mediation efforts, to alleviate the disruption of trust, fear of a damaged organizational image and personal remorse the return to a mode of smoothing and equalizing is used.

“As a leader, you won’t get far by yourself?”

Some leading managers seem to never grow up; they tilt and rotate without measure between the extremes of submission gesture and explosion of dominance. Anna Freud described this tilting strategy as “*asceticism of puberty*”. The parties involved frequently talk of a “loony bin” set up by perfectionists who shy away from feeling guilty, avoid taking risks or working through anything stressful.

The “Trench Fighters”

While tilting between submission gesture and explosion of dominance still aims to balance everything, a third style of leading takes the opposite direction; Rip apart, trench, and split. The strategy of “*divide et impera*” is making a name for itself as “silo thinking” today. Human enterprises are split into “good” and “evil”. “*Those up there – us down here*” or “*I am good – the others are bad*” or “*them there – us here*”. Such oppositional dispositions lead to confrontations where people build alternating “rope teams”, “take stands”, have “trench fights”. In such an environment, double standards, hypocrisy, spies and cliques become an indispensable part of the company culture.

Trench fighters are in full cry beyond the hierarchically ordered everyday business in what has been excessively celebrated for 20-years: It is called "Project work." This mode of working offers everybody who's tired of perfection the opportunity to fall back into their rude "primitive state" of thinking and acting where clubbing and stabbing become daily occurrences. Flat hierarchies are the tiger cages for the dog-eat-dog fight. Project work turns into the arena of social Darwinism replacing the pubertal figure of a "leader." It also releases leadership of guilt and risks. If something goes wrong, it is "the team's" fault. This atmosphere manifests itself in the processes happening around the annual budgeting exercise involving deals, buffers, deceits, and delays. "Everybody knows it, nobody says it."

In almost all of the interviews, the author found a significant complaints about the lack of "worthwhile goals." The practical work of an enterprise, for which one works, is lost, leading to feelings of "never really getting anything done", and feeling "hounded." Leading managers lose their connection to reality, they float in abstract spaces. of the "Global" reign of numbers, mechanical exploitation of counterparts, and leading without goal and passion with destructive impact. Sabotaging the business, inner quitting, "burn-out" and shortage of time are experiences that reflect on the shareholder value machines. Complete submission, and functioning in a cash machine reinforce the need for equalizing and smoothing efforts.

Farmer's Handcraft

The three styles of leading described above are all geared to the cultural ideal of the perfect super-human who rules the world with digital technology and without guilt. In times of global "techno-financial management", many managers believe they can make huge profits with minimal effort, resoluteness or personal commitment. It is just like one can find the mate of one's dreams by swiping a thumb on a smart phone. Such a worldview of business can lead to entirely unwanted and disastrous results. Such realization directs some leading managers to choose an entirely different approach. Instead of using the digital machine culture as a role model, they adopt the image and perspective of a farmer, and the skills of a gardener, patiently plowing the soil, where dictating and being dictated to helps create and sustain a unifying and productive culture of work.

"Leading is like gardening."

"You have to take care of things, you get annoyed, you still take care of things and reach your goal together."

"Leading is also about cultivating and shaping."

"There is a time for everything, and you cannot influence the weather."

"Grass will not grow faster if you yank it."

Leading a company like a gardener is about developing productive common work, that could involve quarreling, becoming guilty, allowing remainders, having stamina, persevering and

sticking to goals. Such an approach conveys influences so that they lead to something worthwhile, chafing, driving people, dealing with setbacks, being able to wait, allowing and using things unknown, taking risks, and ultimately developing in ways that allows humans and things to "make something of it," even though it sometimes may lead to failure.

This way of leading contrasts with the ideal of perfection leadership. The "Süddeutsche" newspaper praised failure saying, "Striking out, and failure is relative, subjective and good. It's about time for the performance-oriented Germans to realize that. It is a pity and dangerous how they are afraid of defeat, from an economic point of view".⁹ As a pure reversal of the rigor of perfectionistic leadership, the willingness to fail does not provide a standard for leadership but comes with the territory if one is to consider leadership realistically.

OUTLOOK ON REALISM

Leading means acting within the framework of clearly understood work environment. Goals and expected outcomes need to be clearly articulated and explained. However, these may not be well understood by employees, and could involved resistance, silent or expressed. Means and actions to achieve the goals may not be readily accepted or acted upon by those who are being led. Leader's responsibility is to acknowledge such uncertainties in a realistic context and act accordingly.

The realistic connection to the work environment is crucial for the development of leaders. Leadership trainings usually happens in a "work vacuum" where leadership processes are talked about in abstract form and are not tied to concrete processes in one's own business. The subsequent "transfer of learning" is left to the trainees as they are immersed into the work place. This is like board a plane after being reassured that the pilot has participated in several flight trainings and will now convey those insights and findings to the upcoming flight on a plane he or she does not fully understand?

Courage is required in leadership. This means willingness to take risks. A company may be a yield warrant, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it may also be a place where lasting work is maintained in a risky world where risks cannot be eliminated. This requires courage on the part of the leading managers, especially the executive manager, if a business strives to develop and change. This requires saying goodbye to calculating and safety thinking, and embracing uncertainty and constant change.

"Knowledge" is the second cornerstone for good leadership. This does not mean "information" (of which we have more than enough), but genuine knowledge and comprehensive understanding of context. Businesses quite often do not really look closely when it comes to the perception of market potentials and the dynamic interactions between the work environment and the outside world. Bare figures "do not tell" always what is real. Only meaningful knowledge in context tells us things that, of course could involve facts and figures.

Finally, something like "humbleness" should be required

in order to understand that a leader, and by extension the company, cannot have all they need and want at the same time in the real world. Humbleness, is not meant to imply asceticism or being well-behaved, but accepting human reality, acknowledging its imperfections, and embracing risks and uncertainties while engaging in the process of achievable goals realistically. Humbleness is also the attitude of the farmers who do not consider themselves the master, but the keeper of life in a changing world.

The authors of this book have addressed significant issues dealing with leadership in the work environment that take into consideration the evolving nature of work and its dynamic relationship to the techno-financial world as well as human nature. The implications for preparation and training of current and future leaders in the work and corporate environment are valuable and long lasting.

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