

On the impossibility of leadership

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Who has not heard about the several thousand leaders in our companies and organisations? According to common definitions of “leader”, there are indeed a great many people in leading positions. For instance those who can make decisions that apply to others. Or people who are officially authorised to instruct others. But what does leadership mean in the first place? Do common textbook definitions still hold true when they understand leadership as prompting people to adopt a certain behaviour in order to accomplish a given aim?

Higher mutual dependencies

In a more and more complex world the possibility to influence others is indeed growing. Due to the mere fact of division of labour, one individual's decision has an impact on many other people in the process chain. There are different reasons for this complex interdependency. Apart from the division of labour there is also the high degree of dynamics in social groups, the participants of which do influence each other. This dynamic is further increased by the growing number of temporary project teams, which reflects one type of organising cooperation. Although this form of mutual influence cannot be linked to the concept of leadership yet, one thing is getting very clear: whether a certain action is preceded by an immediate instruction or not, mutual dependencies do exist and have become more complex in the last years.

Is leadership possible?

Even if you try to prompt your employees to adopt a certain behaviour with the best of your intentions and according to the textbook, it remains open whether this is possible at all. In a complex world predicting the consequences of our actions is almost impossible. Therefore it is an essential feature of complexity that a system, for instance a group of people, can describe the status quo at best. But it is not possible to predict an exact future state the group will enter, because there is a high reciprocity between its members inside and outside this system. In other words: the consequences of whatever I do as a leader cannot be predicted, or at least not sufficiently so far.

Given this systemic understanding, a justified and very basic question can be raised: How can I control something which is essentially uncontrollable?

Leadership is about providing orientation

It is paradoxically. The more unpredictable and complex the world becomes, the more leadership is needed. At the same time the possibility of direct leadership is diminishing, as the effects of my actions are unpredictable. The end of leadership seems nigh. Yet maybe this conclusion is premature. It is also possible to redefine leadership under the condition of complexity. If we completely refrained from target-oriented action, we would fall victim to a comprehensive arbitrariness, hoping it would all work out somehow. It is therefore better to provide orientation than retreating to fatalism. Up to date leadership has to think from the end by showing where the company is supposed to be at a given time in the future. The leader cannot determine the behaviour that is necessary for this, but the employees themselves have to develop it. In other words: the employees need to be led towards self-guidance with regard to the desired target.

Organic instead of mechanical thinking and acting

A much deeper insight underlies this transition in the understanding of leadership. It is the insight that neither a company nor the (global) economy works like a machine. Such mechanistic thinking is based on the idea of a controllable environment, which means that flipping the right switch will produce the right result. From what has been said so far, we can tell that this thinking does not work and that it is not enough to assign your employees correctly in order to get a clear result. (By the way: this would not be leading but operating people, just like a machine is operated.)

An organic thinking is more suitable. It means to forego defining exact requirements and to create an environment that helps employees to grow. Metaphorically speaking, it is the same procedure as fertilising, watering and putting a plant into the light in order to make it grow. Nobody would think that pulling it would make it grow faster. The growth of the plant comes from within. Then an environment would be needed to channel this growth into the desired direction.

However, some uncertainty will always remain. It is therefore better to speak of a target corridor, which is widening as time goes by and within which things develop, than of an exact target state which has to be met. It might be irritating, yet still a correct conclusion that the target is changing while it is being pursued.

Exact targets are misleading

To determine a target according to the textbook, three dimensions have to be clarified. These are the content (what?), the extent (how much?) and time (when?). They can be used to define hard targets and to lead and control employees according to management by objectives. If we take seriously the ideas sketched above, it is evident that this type of leadership is nonsense. Eventually, it is not able to take account of changes in the environment that have occurred after the target was formulated. To put it bluntly, we could also say: "The more detailed the planning, the more accident-prone it is." This sentence is particularly true, as we venture deeper into the knowledge-based and little standardised ways in which a company generates performance. If exact targets seem to be wrong per se, yet management should always be thought from the target, we are trapped in a contradiction. Or we have to develop a different understanding of targets, which seems to be the better and more constructive approach. The target corridor mentioned above points to the right direction, but is not enough to solve the dilemma of leadership. What is still missing is the point of reference, towards which a target corridor can be directed or from which it can start and widen, respectively.

Attitude is king

If it is impossible to lead a company in the traditional way and if it is necessary to motivate employees to develop self-guidance, then there is still the question how to do that. First, employees need space to unfold in a positive way. As plausible as this condition may seem at first glance, an objection pops up immediately: how can arbitrariness and abuse by the employees be prevented? The best way should be in the development of an attitude; the leaders' attitude and the company's attitude as a whole, but also the employees' attitude regarding the company and their tasks within the corporate environment. To rephrase this conclusion: in a dynamic and principally uncontrollable environment, we ourselves are the first point of reference for acting.

Tensions are part of the game

It is obvious that not only leaders have and need their own point of reference, based on which they make decisions. Each and every employee generally needs such a point of reference as well. Just like people differ, so do their points of references, both in variation and intensity. Their values, which are related to the points of reference, are also diverse. Leaders are inevitably faced with this plurality of values. Tensions are a natural corollary and

have to be endured for a start. The central challenge for leadership is to resolve these persisting value-based tensions and to carefully offer orientation instead of giving firm instructions. Thus we can say: a sustainable leadership is understood as providing “better” orientation to employees in order to achieve the company’s targets.

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