

Escaping the rut of bland professionalism

Executives always want their companies to become even better, even more productive, even more efficient. In short – they are perfecting it. But is that really the best recipe for success? An invitation to contemplate efficiency, soundness, empowered employees and the breaking of established patterns.

By Dr Stefan Kaduk and Dr Dirk Osmetz

We are certified, have put up with all the requisite audits, but you know the real reason why we are so successful?' the manager of a car industry supply company asked us when we happened to meet at a conference: 'Because our staff usually don't keep to the rules!' That was probably said with a good deal of cynicism, but still, we often hear managers telling us of the 'everyday lunacy' that prevails in organisations and their upper echelons. We get to hear about strange role playing games, disempowerment by control freaks, anxieties and uncertainty. The question is obvious: do organisations still apply their energy to the things that really matter?

Although corporate visions like to give houseroom to buzzwords such as 'permanence' and 'long-term', it is a sad fact that most company managers nevertheless still focus primarily on short-term efficiency, as inefficiency is equated with unprofessionalism. Of course we are not saying that this constant striving for efficiency is something fundamentally bad. Any control and any reporting system can be improved ad infinitum in order to obtain ever more detailed figures even faster. But what if these kind of figures are ultimately not actually conducive to business? What if no-one actually reads these figures with the future in mind?

Work within the system?

Anyone who focuses only on optimising or accelerating company structures and processes or making them more precise is working within the system. The system itself is unassailable, even if it turns out to be ineffectual. In that case, the only aim is to improve the existing. When managers think about what rules to set for customer visits or how to adapt the incentive system, all they are doing is working within the system. They do not ask the fundamental question of whether customer visits actually make sense and, even worse, whether it is a worthwhile effort to lay down rules for them. Does an incentive system



Pattern-break at Cologne Cathedral: Anyone wanting to climb the towers must first descend.

Good to know

The 'pattern-breakers'

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really do lead to increased productivity on the part of the workforce? After a decade of research and consultancy work, we know that managers – independent of industry and department – invest around 80 percent of their time and energy into working within the system.

Another management dimension is often completely neglected: managers dedicate only 20 percent of their efforts to working on the system. Working on the system means putting the existing system itself to the test. It is about reviewing something that has become such a given that an alternative has become inconceivable.

Working on the system is tedious. And it is easy to keep on avoiding the issue due to an overwhelming lack of time and – real or imagined – practical constraints. This neglect of much-needed reflexion is usually justified with any number of set phrases: 'We have no time for navel-gazing!' – or: 'At the end of the day, the EBIT is our only benchmark.'

They are both important! Modern leadership demands working within the system as well as working on the system – in equal measure. But then managers are no longer the mere guardians of professional-

ism in the traditional sense, in other words, they are questioning the established concept of professionalism. Admittedly, the whole thing sounds pretty abstract. Where should we start to 'work on the system'? Well, by taking a close look at what is at the very core of any company – its people, how they are perceived and treated. Simplified, the present maxim is this: you have to keep on motivating employees in order for them to perform to the maximum of their capabilities. They tend to be incapable of self-rule and are able to co-ordinate themselves only up to a certain extent. Their actions are primarily fuelled



Anyone clinging to established patterns will be left high and dry.

by opportunism. Of course, nobody would really dare to put it quite like that, but what other explanation is there for the fact that trust-based working hours are usually reserved for senior management, or that often, whole departments are kept busy with designing an efficient motivation system?

And that despite the fact that there is ample proof that these endeavours miss their mark. The Göttingen-based neuroscientist Gerald Hüther, for example, has reached the conclusion that extrinsic motivation is 'total rubbish, from a brain-technical point of view'. So motivation, or what it means

to most companies these days, is therefore a purely fictitious concept. It is also based on a very superficial image of people that allows for one angle only, the economic-rational one.

Escaping the rut of bland professionalism is worth it! It is not particularly smart to respond to recurrent diagnoses of failure with an increased dose of the same inefficacious medication. In other words: instead of trying to improve the systems by following the same old 'expert logic' year in, year out, managers could also start to work on the system by first of all taking a long hard look at themselves. Or, as Götz Werner, founder of the drugstore chain DM put it so succinctly, why do we always subscribe to two different concepts of man? The way we see ourselves – and the way we see others ...

The decisive benchmark for managers has so far always been whether they have proven strategic skills, and whether they have been able to give their company the competitive edge. A pattern-breaking management in times of growing uncertainty, on the other hand, aims at utilising the collective intelligence of staff and colleagues for looking at a problem from a wide range of different angles and allows them active participation in shaping the company. The focus is therefore no longer on 'optimum use of resources', but on encouraging the workforce to develop their potential.

The management energy is applied to creating framework conditions under which the collective's existing knowledge and the individual worker's skills can actually be incorporated to the benefit of the company. This is the ethos at W. L. Gore & Associates, for example: the well-known American company, manufacturers of the brands GORE-TEX® and Windstopper®, has stood out from the crowd ever since the late 1950s, when it introduced a back then completely new concept of corporate culture based on 'commitment'. It describes a principle whereby all Gore employees are given the chance of dedicating themselves to issues they really care about. The logic behind it: people perform better if they are also given a free reign to take on responsibilities they really feel passionate about, rather than others having to put in the effort of laboriously inspiring a passion for certain responsibilities in them by external definition. At Gore, something is revealed that can be observed in many of the companies we like to refer to as 'pattern-breakers': on the one hand, they work on the assumption that their staff are mature, responsible people who can be trusted with empowerment – in reality, not just on paper in a high-gloss corporate mission statement. And they give their work-

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force maximum scope. On the other hand, though, every voluntary engagement counts towards their assessment. So these 'commitments' are no inconsequential walk in the park; they are binding self-commitments. Most of the resultant energy is invested in allowing the benefits of improved co-operation to emerge through the consistent utilisation of collective intelligence, which in turn 'automatically' leads to the discovery of previously unknown advantages that give the company the competitive edge. Gore has applied this approach very successfully for over 50 years, is generally acknowledged to be one of the best employers – and, so far, the company has never been in the red. ■



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