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‘Destiny leadership’ in organisational change processes

Leadership based on a shared destiny

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In my projects, I often come across the question: “Who will drive this change process?” Senior executives frequently believe that the head of department – who is responsible for matters closely linked to the change issue in question – should be entrusted with this task. The head of department initiates a project. Experts from other departments are then added to the project team. This approach makes change difficult from the outset, because the existing hierarchical and functional network is asked to drive the process, whilst it is precisely this network that will almost certainly be affected by the necessary change.

To identify the right people to champion a change process, I use the following method: I ask senior executives who they see as ‘*process owners*’ who are personally capable of taking responsibility for the change process. I ask them to write down one or two names on a piece of paper. In most cases, they immediately name the same one or two people; individuals in whom the entire senior management team, or the majority of it, places its trust.

To me, it is clear: a person and a change process belong together.

Over the many years that we have been involved in organisational change processes as part of this ‘horizontal leadership’ approach, we have identified a number of *crucial conditions* for actually bringing about change.

Crucial conditions

Focus the change on interaction with the customer. Change processes that arise from interaction with the customer – and which are driven by external developments – have the greatest impact on the organisation and the way it operates. Change processes that, on the other hand, stem from internal problems or conflicts within the organisation often make management insensitive to the actual changes that are needed.

When developing organisations, it is more effective to take small steps and undertake actions that are directly related to the issues the customer experiences in their own process with the company.

Change processes require ‘process owners’ who steer the process from start to finish – from idea to implementation – based on their personal skills. Where necessary, they are supported by experts who understand the subject matter and can translate this knowledge into practical advice and workable systems.

The usual ways of managing change via steering groups, project groups or working groups often leave little scope for the desired change to actually take place.

Change processes require a different way of working together, with a different set of rules. It involves not only adapting organisational framework conditions; it also entails changing the way those involved work, and reviewing and redesigning the work processes themselves. This also calls for a renewal of the guiding vision and governing principles.

Case study

The head of department

Up to this point in his career, he had successfully managed his department. His team leaders hold him in high regard: he is always approachable, coaches them and offers sound, practical advice and solutions to their business challenges. They enjoy a relatively relaxed working life.

The company's managing director decides to change the organisational structure and transform the departments and teams into a series of independent units, each led by an enterprising unit manager. In his view, two hierarchical levels are sufficient. During the transition period, the managing director and the former department heads together form the management team. Fifteen unit managers are appointed, who report to this management team.

The department head, who has three years left until retirement, sees this change – in his role as process owner – not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity. He coaches various unit managers and helps them make progress in the areas of customer relations, financial management and human resources management. He supports them in putting their own ideas on these topics into practice; by reflecting together on their experiences, he in turn learns from them. Step by step, they are jointly developing a new management repertoire. The unit managers must think for themselves about customer-focused work processes; they lead their teams and involve their staff – who are also expected to take a step forward in their responsibilities by taking on projects independently. The results make it clear where management interventions are needed.

The head of department is pleasantly surprised by the way in which the various unit managers are fulfilling their new roles. As a result, in his role as process owner, he is able to focus more on policy issues and the development of new strategies and scenarios for the company, particularly now that competition in the market is intensifying. Together with his colleagues, he streamlines communication and information flows, sets the criteria for performance appraisals and speeds up the decision-making process.

Having successfully implemented the change alongside colleagues and staff, he regularly acts as deputy to the managing director at external meetings. He meets new people with whom he discusses strategic issues, and faces new challenges within his personal network – comprising influential figures at client organisations and research institutions.

Building on what I have outlined here, I would now like to discuss the desired implications of this perspective.

Values, morality and destiny leadership

If we allow ourselves to create new and different visions of organisations – and of our organised lives – we create the space for the core values and moral principles that we experience in our personal lives to also find a place within the organisational context.

In this way, we can link the meaning of 'serving one's neighbour' to the way in which we collaborate with our clients. It is then not the selfish ego that seeks to profit from the client, but one's own authentic personality that engages with the other person, collaborates with them and learns from them.

We can live in an organised world guided by human values such as freedom, love and respect – a world designed to help one another fulfil the mission of both the individual and the community.

Destiny Leadership Case Study

To his surprise, the managing director notices that the 'capitalists' and 'socialists' have emerged from their trenches. They have begun to exchange views more freely and are interacting in a more constructive manner; they have become better able to view matters from different angles and perspectives. Instead of fixating on the two polarised ideological positions – that of the managing director and other shareholders (focused on profit) versus the more idealistic vision of family members as co-owners – they are now focusing more on the customer journey and community development. These different dimensions – capital, work processes, customer focus and social development – can thus be better balanced and receive greater attention in day-to-day operations.

The managing director:

"I see this as an opportunity to approach my work in a slightly different way over the coming years. The next generation must be given the space to perform independently. I need to entrust them with operational responsibility. This will allow them to gain more experience in running the business and build their self-confidence. In turn, I will have more time to steer the group as a whole.

We can become more aware of who our company works with and how this shapes the way external stakeholders perceive us. A few examples:

For instance, every year we welcome hundreds of school pupils and students who undertake work placements or work-based learning programmes at our companies.

We are strengthening our ties with customers. I am already seeing excellent examples emerge of how different parts of our group interact with their customers in their own, specific ways.

We have started conducting more experiments in the field of nature conservation, utilising a range of soil treatment techniques.

At the same time, the social dimension is being given a new impetus. We now have process managers who proactively tackle challenging issues within the group. They must manage to

combine this responsibility with their day-to-day operational tasks. I am well aware that this is no easy task.

Our staff now work in self-managing teams in which they formulate their own values and objectives and, with the help of performance indicators, achieve their results together. This gives everyone the chance to make their mark within our community. All of this has meaning and fulfils me."