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*Challenge and Response: Rescue from Pitfall—
A Case Study Coaching a Leader
Through a Corporation Crisis*

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CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

Rescue from Pitfall: A Case Study Coaching a Leader Through a Corporation Crisis

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This article represents the first in a new series of IJCO articles concerned with distinctive coaching responses to the unique challenges facing contemporary organizations. In the future we will be offered many other articles which exemplify the many faces of organizational coaching. Clearly, no one strategy will fit all organizational contexts or will be effective in responding to the diverse needs and interests of organizational coaching clients. We have always intended IJCO to be a source of new ideas about coaching in organizations and to be a venue in which to celebrate the ongoing expansion and maturation of this human service field.

This article uses a case study concerning the director of communications of a large, services corporation in crisis to illustrate a coaching approach that focuses on overcoming the pitfalls commonly experienced by leaders in crisis. Two pitfalls, the inability to answer the question “What is at stake?” and the “Ego Trap”, are addressed in the case study. Laurent Carrel offers a four step process to prepare the client for the coaching intervention, as well as a useful tool of evaluation called the “Sextant of Crisis Navigation.” He also identifies ways in which to work with the concept of separate realities.

SUMMARY

Based on longstanding experience in crisis management training, coaching leaders in crises, and research, I have identified ten themes that surface regularly across the various coaching situations. In each theme I have observed a variety of pitfalls into which leaders tend to fall. They may be different according to one’s personality traits, values, leadership style, experience, personal knowledge and skills and, of course, according to the specific crisis situation. They nonetheless all demand from the leader a conscious awareness of what is going on, as well as a willingness to stop blaming the circumstances and take responsibility for finding solutions. Both are often lacking and it is with the help of a coach that a turnaround can be brought about in a speedy and effective way.

For this article I have selected two themes and for each one, one pitfall. These will be explored using the example of a client in a large organization in charge of leading a crisis team in a highly complex and emotionally charged crisis situation. My first theme is embodied in the questions “What kind of crisis do we face? What is at issue?” The pitfall, quite simply, is the inability to formulate a reasonable answer. Here, the coaching goals are to help the client restore some order in the chaos, gain a better perspective and some distance from the events, to regain emotional control and to quiet the mind in order to be resourceful in making a first assessment of the situation. In the end, the client is enabled to answer the question, as it is said in French, “de quoi s’agit-il?” (“What is the issue?”)

The second theme is best defined in German, “Die persönliche Standortbestimmung”, meaning a realistic analysis of where one stands in this crisis. The associated pitfall is called the “Ego Trap”. In dealing with this theme, the coach questions how authentic the client can remain, how she handles the fact of “separate realities”, how she can protect her self-esteem in face of a difficult CEO and board of directors as well as mounting media criticism, and how she defines success in a no-win situation.

BACKGROUND

For more than 20 years I have been training leaders to prepare for crises, to lead successfully in crises and to pinpoint the lessons learned. Among my clients have been military generals, corporation directors, and organizational crisis teams. For ten years I was training the top echelon of the Swiss government and its crisis teams.¹ While this training focused primarily on what to do before, in and after a crisis, my observations over the years led me to question more and more what leaders at the top repeatedly told me: “All we need is your expertise to teach us knowledge and skills to successfully deal with a crisis - after all, we are on the top due to our experience and extraordinary leadership talent” (Carrel, 2000, p. 192). At the end of the 90’s, I began to systematically evaluate over 500 actual crisis situations for my book *Leadership in Krisen. Ein Handbuch für die Praxis* (Carrel, 2004), using the following questions: (1) What constitutes a crisis? (2) What should we do before, in and after a crisis? (3) What are the necessary leadership qualities in a crisis? (4) Can leadership in crises be learned?

Turning to the leaders in crisis situation themselves and asking what are the major themes they grapple with, I found that only a small minority fall clearly into the category of knowledge and skills, while the majority are from the category comprising emotional (Goleman, 1997), spiritual (Zohar & Marshall, 2000)

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¹ *Crisis Management Training* by Laurent F. Carrel, www.carrel-partner.ch.

and social intelligence (Goleman 2007; Albrecht, 2006). To hone my skill and competence in coaching these leaders, I identified the major pitfalls associated with each theme, permitting me to pose questions that moved a client more efficiently through the coaching process. As mentioned above, I chose for the article two themes from different categories and explore one pitfall per theme.²

CASE STUDY: THE STORY OF PETRA³

Petra is director of communications of a large corporation that provides vital services to the entire country of Switzerland, with subsidiaries in neighbouring European countries. An accomplished professional with an academic background and an Executive MBA, Petra has high expectations of herself and others, and sets a priority on having the respect and loyalty of her boss and her subordinates. She is the mother of a teenage daughter.

A crisis has hit the corporation on different fronts. In the context of economic liberalization across the country, the corporation – once a government agency – has become gradually independent. While a major restructuring was supposed to make the company leaner and more efficient, in fact the opposite appears to be true. Consumer demands and complaints are rising, service breakdowns and annoying supply delays are becoming more frequent. The media begins to pull the company's troubles into the limelight, with critics pointing the finger at rapid reforms, too many personnel layoffs, and bad management on the operational level. Criticism has also mounted on the political front, largely orchestrated by unions and some political parties. The company's management brushes off the stories as mere rumours.

As head of communications, Petra is increasingly under pressure, both internal and external. Every time something goes wrong, she is in the forefront, having to answer to the public and quell the rumours. Her resentment of the CEO grows, as he has long practiced the annoying habit of stepping into the media light only when there were accomplishments to celebrate. Born a farmer's kid, he has fulfilled the Swiss dream of making it to the top, and fiercely protects his image as media darling.

As things turn for the worse, the CEO asks Petra to lead a newly formed crisis team--an offer which she accepts as a personal challenge and as a career opportunity. In retrospect, she is doubtful this was a wise decision because it seems to make her

² I will talk in detail about all ten themes and pitfalls in a forthcoming book on coaching leaders in crisis situations.

³ This case is exclusively illustrative. Any resemblance to reality is purely accidental.

life even more complicated. Although she holds an important position in the company, Petra has little real power. She sits on the board with a voice but no right to vote on decisions. While her suggestions have seldom carried weight, she now finds herself, as leader of the crisis team, in a position where she must submit options to her board, only to have these turned down for reasons with which she disagrees. The relationship with her colleagues on the board, all male, has grown tense. Petra thinks of resigning, but views such a move as failure.

The story was lengthy and became more and more emotional as I repeatedly asked the question: what else? Petra finally admitted that she receives no support from her husband, who not long ago confessed to an affair. Her daughter is in a rebellious state, has dyed her hair green, and refuses contact with her dad who is seldom at home.

In summary, the crisis Petra was experiencing contained many of the elements common to crises: an escalating and complex series of events; intense criticism from outside as well as from inside. Important interests of the company and from the individual are at stake; intense pressure is being placed on decision-makers; there are time constraints; significant insecurity and uncertainty is to be found in abundance. The risk is great. The situation may deteriorate or escalate if the wrong decisions are taken. There is a toxic mix of business and personal stress factors. It is a complex situation and from Petra's perspective it is also a chaotic situation.

My client was unable to look at the situation with any distance; she took the problems very personally, her emotional shock was deep, and she felt personally threatened by a disloyal CEO and by a situation in which she felt victimized and alone. Her fear about the future was such that she could not sleep at night. Petra was constantly worried about having to solve everything herself. Although her mind ran around a racetrack, the incertitude weighed as heavily as did the fear of making a wrong decision. These fears nearly paralysed her into inaction.

Theme One: What is at Issue?

When Petra finished her story I asked her whether she could tell me in two or three sentences what this was really all about. She looked quite surprised and inquired if I wanted more details. I replied no, I would like to know what for her is pivotal in this crisis.

Working with leaders and crisis teams at the onset of a crisis, I have observed that the hardest question to answer is always and practically without exception: what is at issue? Although many can recount the maddening events and disparaging details,

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few are able to “condense a wild buffalo herd into a bouillon cube,” my phrase for the process of distilling out the critical factors and priority issues in the eyes of the client(s). Experience has shown me that the same crisis can be viewed differently by members of a board, a team or group of stakeholders, i.e., there would be more than one resultant “bouillon cube”. Naturally these differing (mis)understandings of what the crisis is can fuel confusion and sabotage finding a resolution. Breaking a crisis into component parts and identifying the priorities helps the people involved re-establish their footing, gain a better perspective, and regain control.

In Petra’s situation, it was imperative to help create order in the midst of chaos, to help her quiet her mind and reduce the lap time on her mental racetrack. In such situations, I lead my client through a four step process.

Step one. We first carry out a provisional analysis of the crisis situation, which means to obtain an overview of the situation and its essential elements, define the problems and clarify the unknowns and uncertainties, and place the client’s experience squarely in the center. Questions I use to stimulate the exchange include the following: What triggered the chain of events? What fuels the crisis situation? Who is affected? What is the possible harm? Is it material or immaterial? Who is indeed responsible and for what? How much do you really know? What do you assume? How are the competencies for problem-solving and decision-making settled? Were the events a surprise to you? Did they occur suddenly or stealthy? Did they happen before? What did you do then? Do you think they will repeat themselves? What are open questions in this situation that have to be clarified?

If there are too many unknowns at this stage, it may be necessary to obtain additional information. Together with the client we develop a plan, labelled our “intelligence gathering plan” to inject a bit of humour into the situation. This often overlooked phase of collecting good information may be an eye-opener by itself.

Step two. After the information pertinent to the crisis has been assembled with as much accuracy as possible, we make a provisional synthesis and try to break the problem down into component parts, which in this case are many. There are external components, indicated by disappointed customers, declining confidence of the market, dropping stock prices, media criticisms, defiant politicians, angry unions and unreliable suppliers. Additionally, there are internal components such as alienated cadre,

movement of top labour, overextended credit limits, excessive indebtedness, a slow decision-making process, and an ineffective communication process. Petra was especially affected by what she saw as mounting personal frictions in the leadership crew, mistrust and disloyalty. These were compounded by the additional tensions created at home by an absentee husband and a rebellious daughter.

As we worked to identify components of the crisis, I encouraged Petra to examine the relative importance of the differing issues, to see where there were possible interactions. I asked her to set priorities in order to decide in which sequence to deal with them, keeping in mind that a crisis is often a fast developing phenomenon. We will have to keep up with its evolving parts. It has been said that the human mind is simply unfit to deal with more than four variables at the same time (Szpiro, 2006, p. 81; “NZZ”, 2006). Stress makes it even more demanding to juggle all the impinging factors--which tend to interact with each other and, at the same time, continuously mutate (Carrel, 2004, pp. 57-58).

Step three. We examine the implications of our provisional assessment to determine how to move forward towards an eventual in-depth, systematic problem-solving. Our “quick and dirty” analysis brings a semblance of order and structure which allows us to see if there are factors –such as a specific damage incurred or impending escalation – which may influence how to proceed. We also examine the following:

a. Are there job requirements, duties, or mandates which will affect the procedure? Are there goals to be respected? Are there guiding principles, a value statement or ethical guidelines?

b. What organizational support is available? I asked Petra how she will organize herself to move ahead: Who is in charge of which decision? How do you handle your own decision-making process, and do you need others? How and to whom do you communicate during the coming period of time? What do you say immediately, later or not at all? Do you inform the CEO, the crisis team, your family about your personal plans? What do you tell yourself?

c. We make an assessment of timing, a consideration that often is forgotten, asking: What is the most urgent part of the problem? Do you plan immediate measures in order to avert an escalation of the situation? What measures can you take to augment your freedom of action? Can appropriate measures furnish additional needed information? How and how soon can you find additional resources and support?

The next step requires that Petra agree to address her more personal issues. If this is premature, we return and repeat Steps 1 to 3, expecting to get different answers than the first time around.

Step four. We address the personal situation of Petra. The questions may be: Tell me on a scale from 1 to 10 what your own concerns are about the situation in the company? About the critical media? And about the family that comes apart? What do you fear most? What stresses you most? How would you describe your mood? How are you contributing to the problem? If you are honest and self-critical, can you see something in your own behaviour which contributes to a worsening of the situation? How do your weaknesses under stress aggravate the situation? How do you see your personal responsibility?

The goal here is not to dwell on the client's weaknesses or her own contribution to the problem, but to help the client become aware of them. As John Whitmore eloquently stated in his book *Coaching for Performance*, "I am able to control only that of which I am aware. That of which I am unaware controls me. Awareness empowers me" (Whitmore, 2003, p. 33). In Step four it may be necessary, therefore, to combine this line of inquiry with questions that illuminate options the client can choose immediately to buoy herself. (As mentioned above, the crisis situation *per se* will have to be analyzed further in a more systematic way in order to find final options for solutions.)

Examples of these personally-oriented questions include these:

- How can you improve your knowledge about the situation further in order to reduce your uncertainty and to improve your decision making capability?
- How much of this crisis situation do you feel is within your control?
- What kind of help, alliances, friends, or other support can you find in order not to stand alone in the storm?
- What can you change in terms of attitude and behaviour that will contribute to a better solution of the situation? Are you familiar with the affirmation and visualization process?
- How can you make sure that your energy level will not be exhausted in a short period of time? Do you eat properly? Do you get enough sleep? What can you do to get better sleep?
- What options do you have for changing things?

Out of the Pitfall of "What is at issue?"

I have mentioned that the pitfall here is quite simply the inability to formulate a reasonable answer. After going through the four step process, Petra held in her hand the following "bouillon cube":

“To be effective in this crisis, I must move on two fronts immediately:

1. My relationship to the CEO has to improve dramatically. This is my priority number one. If I succeed in forming a win-win team with the boss, much of this unbearable situation will change. If I have the backing of the boss, my opinion would be listened to at the board meetings, I would be treated by my colleagues with more respect, and I could expect more loyalty in the crisis team. Having said that my highest priority in the business world is loyalty, I need to live by my own values and show my boss that I am loyal to him during this difficult time. I must develop more empathy towards him and his expectations of me. Maybe I have to become more flexible in what I consider “not being heard” and allow him to “hear differently”. Professionally, I am convinced that I can handle the media and lead a crisis team if my issues with the boss are resolved.

2. I also have to address the situation at home immediately. Because things have not been dealt with, the family situation is in shambles. I see that my loss of self-esteem has its roots there. I deserve respect from my boss but also from my family and ultimately from myself. I see a number of actions I can take immediately like speaking openly about the situation to my husband and encouraging us to seek marital therapy.

I am not a person to quit and give in. I am willing to turn things around and to start with myself. I have many strengths but I recognize that one of my weakness is in being led because I take things too personally.”

These answers serve to defuse the situation enough that we can start working in a focused way on finding solutions out of the crisis. Petra took charge of looking the storm in the eye; she took responsibility to find solutions and to use her full potential to turn things around. It was to her advantage that on her private and professional journey she had always worked on her social competencies and thus understood immediately the urgency to examine how her personal issues contributed to the total chaos. My analogy is, that often when a storm hits, it is too late for a tree to grow its roots (Carrel, 2004, p. 222). People who are thrown unexpectedly into a crisis have to live with what they have in store. Additionally, the resourcefulness and Petra’s ability to unlock her personal potential increased the positive benefit of coaching. Ultimately, the crisis team and the company would profit from her success too and emerge stronger out of the crisis.

Leading the Crisis Team: What is at Issue?

The first question a crisis team has to face is exactly the same as for Petra: “What kind of crisis do we face? What is it all about?”

My analogy is, that often when a storm hits, it is too late for a tree to grow its roots.

As leader of the crisis team, Petra can therefore use the same four step process, reformulating the suggested questions for the team. However, if the CEO or the board of directors has given the crisis team a precise and binding mandate, then the first priority must be to analyze and interpret the team's mission.

Training crisis teams in corporations and in government has shown me that the pitfall is identical-- namely, the inability to formulate a clear and reasonable answer to the question, as expressed in French, "*De quoi s'agit-il?*"

After presenting a crisis team with a training scenario, I like to walk among the working groups casually asking the group leaders: Can you tell me in two or three sentences what is at issue here? When I get different, confusing or lengthy answers - as is often the case - it is obvious that the crisis team has steamed ahead without having a "unity of doctrine". When a group tries to solve a complex problem without a common understanding among its members of what kind of crisis they face, the outcome is inevitably a disaster. It is like missing the first button on one of those old fashioned dresses with an endless row of tiny buttons in the back: you work your way diligently to the end, only to realize you have no other solution than to start anew. A goal-oriented crisis team with a common understanding of the true nature of the crisis will organize itself accordingly into appropriate working groups and get the right people on board.

In the case study, Petra and the crisis team may arrive at very different answers to the question "what is it all about?" Team members may conclude that:

1. Priority number one is to address the reputation crisis the company faces to restore trust of the many stakeholders. To accomplish that we have to explore all possible ways of rectifying the image problem.
2. Secondly, we have to find ways to become more productive and increase our performance. We have to find ways to strengthen the confidence and motivation of the employees within the company.
3. Our information and communication within and to the outside have to be consistent and be backed up by deeds of the leadership team.

I could offer many case studies of crisis management that illustrate what happens if an organisation or company at the outset of a situation incorrectly answers the question "What is at issue?" Their failure inevitably evolves into a reputation crisis. Well known examples are the Royal Dutch/Shell Group in the case of Brent Spar, the Intel Corporation crisis, the Swissair crisis, and the UBS reputation crises (Augustine, 2000, p. 16; Carrel, 2004, p. 164; Carrel, 2008, p. 21).

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SECOND THEME: WHERE DO I STAND?

A second theme to be addressed when one is coaching leaders through crises is aptly called in German, *Die persönliche Standortbestimmung*. This phrase refers to an objective assessment of where one stands and who one is in this crisis. For the leader, this demands a realistic perception of self and the ability to turn a cool eye of reflection on oneself in the challenging context of a crisis. What strengths and weaknesses do I bring to this situation? What is the status of my emotional stability? Is my common sense operational? Can I preserve a natural curiosity and inquisitiveness? Do I have the self confidence to try new ways out of the crisis without fear of failure? What old habits and beliefs may interfere with my ability to adapt?

The importance of examining oneself has been expressed by many writers on leadership:

Leaders must know themselves thoroughly before they can hope to lead others. This self-knowledge comes through listening to your inner voice, accepting responsibility for who you are, learning in greater depth than the average person, and reflecting on the unique experiences you have had throughout your life (Bennis, 1989, p. 1).

The first step to becoming an effective leader is to look in the mirror. Master the art of leading yourself and you will lay the foundation for helping others to do the same (Manz, 1998, p. 10).

Perhaps the greatest benefit to be gained from objective introspection is the resulting enhancement of executive performance. A leader who knows who he or she is, who recognizes and maximizes strengths, and who understands and compensates for weaknesses performs much better than a leader who does not (or cannot) understand himself or herself The introspection process should be accomplished systematically, regularly, and with the help of someone else (Smith, 1998, p. 113).

***Gnoti Seauton* – Know Thyself**

As inscribed in Greek on a temple in Delphi (Brantschen, 1999, p. 91). Socrates' admonishment *gnoti seauton* teaches us to learn about ourselves, and has particular relevance when life challenges us. A real crisis is an opportunity for transformation, a catalyst for personal development and growth. A realistic analysis of where one stands in a crisis is the first stepping stone to change. After all, "You can't change what you don't acknowledge. Your strategy: Get real with yourself about your life and everybody in it. Be truthful about what isn't working in your life. Stop making excuses and start making results" (McGraw, 2000, p. 62). In the study, Petra's relationship to the CEO or to her husband

will never be the same as before. The crisis offered her the chance to face herself and to know herself in her uniqueness and full authenticity. What she perceived at the onset as a most threatening situation led to a breakthrough moment in her life to which she may look back gratefully. "Know thyself... no tool can help a leader who lacks self-knowledge. That's part of what we mean when we say that breakthrough leadership is personal" (Collingwood, 2001, p. 8).

The idea that a crisis may be an opportunity for self-growth is one that can be applied to lift the negative spell of a crisis. However, in my experience, this has no more effect than pointing to the Chinese symbol for crisis, a double sign meaning both *danger* and *opportunity*. A desperate client who sees himself as the victim of hostile circumstances may feel misunderstood or even insulted. An elder coach who has observed, as well as experienced, the changes that occur after crises may have an advantage. He may be able to help his client see past the moment's pain, with some examples ready to spark the client's interest "to look into the mirror" and accept the unvarnished picture you see as the real key to a breakthrough (Carrel, 2004, p. 294). A coach may employ an instrument such as the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to jump start this process.

Wheel of Life and Sextant of Crisis Navigation

I use a simple evaluation tool which I call the "sextant of crisis navigation" (Carrel, 2004, p. 239) which consists of a "Wheel of Life" with an inner hub representing the "core person" surrounded by six spokes denoting the directions in which a self-actualizing person develops: (1) mental and educational development, (2) physical well-being and health, (3) social and cultural ties, (4) spiritual and ethical maturity, (5) strength of family life, and (6) financial and career security. (See also Meyer, 1996.) Superimposed over the Wheel of Life is the Sextant of Crisis Navigation which delineates – in my view – the six most important qualities a leader in crisis must possess: (1) a positive self-image and self-confidence, (2) clear thinking and calmness, (3) selected competencies in the field of emotional intelligence, (4) courage and decisiveness, (5) capacity for open communication, and (6) knowledge and skills to handle a crisis.

To assist Petra in her self-assessment of where she stands, I ask that for each spoke on the Wheel, as well as for the spokes of the sextant, she mark her perceived position on a scale of 1 to 10 with a little cross. This exercise yields a snapshot of her personal development and sparks questions like: How important is each spoke to you? What would have to happen that you can rate your position on the most important spoke a 10? Let's look into the future and imagine that you are very effective in handling this crisis. What would your ideal "Wheel of Life" look like? What

would have to change? What could you do to change that? What would be the benefits of this? In a second round, Petra marks the spokes with a dot indicating where she hopes to develop herself.

One advantage of using the “Wheel of Life-Sextant” tool is that it is in constant movement, and is thus a good metaphor for a leader in the midst of a developing crisis. As a youngster in Latin class, I was given a learning tip for remembering what a hexameter is: *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*, meaning “times are changing and we change with them.” It defines well what we are experiencing in a crisis. When I meet Petra again, the snapshot on the “Wheel of Life” may give a different picture and thus spark new questions.

Pitfall: Ego Trap

The pitfall of the second theme is the Ego Trap—which is most often experienced by leaders who are caught in a web of their own realities. When I meet clients in tough crisis situations, it is striking to see how victimised they feel. All the odds are against them; they feel defensive, tense, hurt, disappointed and quite often in a down mood. Their attention is seldom focused in the present moment; they mull over past events incessantly and are consumed by worries about the future. Body language demonstrates that all the evil is “out there, ready to get them”.

The dialogue and questions sparked by the first theme – what is at issue? – are intended to make them aware that a complex crisis situation inevitably has many aspects. I introduce the second theme to show that the different aspects can be viewed in a different light, according to where the client stands. Returning to the example of Petra and her goal to improve the relationship with her difficult boss, I might ask: Have you met the wife of your boss or his children? What do you imagine they think and feel about him? Let’s assume that they think positively about him. They obviously see him through quite different lens than you do. Which “reality” represents the true man? Do you think you know how the CEO sees you and the crisis situation you are both in? What does he expect from you? What does he listen for when he is communicating with you? Is it imaginable that the CEO shares with you the very same thoughts, the same expectations, and the same feelings and lives in the same reality?

What we try to do here is raise awareness of several related phenomena: it is our own thoughts that bring meaning to the events, and likewise our thoughts and emotions that turn an event into “a crisis”. I encourage Petra to return to our earlier conversation and review all the negative thoughts she has about the CEO which alarm her and make her feel so badly: “try to see them from another angle.” What if, just for moment, we

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replace the negative statements she made with positive or neutral thoughts? Petra is encouraged to formulate her thoughts in another way: Maybe the CEO is “not out to get me”, but he is just terribly scared like me to lose his position? Maybe he too has sleepless nights because of all the bad press. Maybe he fears being a failure in the eyes of his wife and children who see the headlines that the leadership of company XY is incapable of handling the latest crisis? Could it be that he shoves responsibilities over to his communications director because he wrongly hopes the blame will ultimately not fall on him if the turnaround fails? Does he surely know deep inside that this is wishful thinking and that the time has come for him as CEO to face the media? How could you help him to take this difficult step?

We are not just talking about “empathy”; we have started to introduce the most liberating concept of “separate realities”. It was during this conversation that I noticed the changing mood of Petra. All of a sudden she shifted her position in the chair, starting to look more determined and curious about where the discussion would go next. For the first time she displayed a spark of creativity as she started dreaming up all the possible “what ifs...”. What if the CEO is just waiting for my proposals? What if he has a totally different perspective on the crisis? What if he desperately needs my help because he is totally shocked that the press, which once coddled him, has turned against him? What if this crisis is indeed an opportunity for me to show my professionalism?

I saw her first smile of the day--a clear sign of the mood change which had altered her perspective and opened her to new possibilities. Although nothing about the crisis situation had factually changed from when we started the conversation, we were miles away from the gloomy mood Petra exhibited at the start. Everything looked different; we were underway.

Separate Realities of Petra and the CEO

Richard Carlson writes a chapter on the principle of separate realities in his delightful book *You Can Be Happy No Matter What* (Carlson, 2007, pp. 47–55). The phenomenon is as old as Greek philosophy: none of us questions – and neither does Petra – our own version of reality. We never question our version because to us it always seems to be true. Everywhere we look, we see examples to continually prove ourselves right.

The Greek poet Aesop told the story of a man resting on the side of a road leading to Athens. A foreign traveller came by and asked Aesop, “What kinds of people live in Athens?” Aesop replied, “Tell me first, from where you are and what kinds of people live there?” The man answered, “I am from Argos. People

there are worth nothing, and they are liars, stealers, unfair and quarrelsome. I was glad to leave.” Aesop replied, “What a pity that you will find the people in Athens to be just the same.” Shortly thereafter came a second traveller with the same question and when Aesop asked him from where he came and what kind of people lived there the man said, “I am from Argos where everybody is kind, reputable and honest, I left reluctantly.” Aesop smiled. “Friend, I am so glad for you and I can assure you that you will find the people in Athens to be exactly the same”.⁴

In the words of Richard Carlson,

Problems in relationships come about in essentially two ways. We either think that others actually *do* see things as we do, so we can't understand or are upset by their actions – or we believe that others *should* see things the way we do because we see reality as it really is. When we understand the principle of separate realities, we are free from these categories of relationship problems. Others not only shouldn't see things our way, but in fact they cannot. The nature of individual thought systems makes it impossible for us to see anything the way someone else does – or for others to see things precisely as we do (Carlson, 2007, pp. 48-49).

As Petra began to understand that *her* thoughts are her ability to shape *her* reality from inside out, she was able to examine the crisis in a different light. She began to alter her opinion of the CEO's past decisions, as well as to recast her bluntly negative outlook and interpretation of the crisis. Rather than expecting to change the CEO (a futile exercise), Petra shifted her priority to changing the situation for her benefit.

The Inner Coach

From my own personal experience with crises and from the leaders I have coached, I have concluded that in these moments of testing, human beings need to tap the guidance of the “core you”, with the strengths and resources that essentially stem from a force higher than themselves. This is true not only for the tested client but also for the coach trying to help. Those who are unable or unwilling to tap into such a force are most often broken by the storm or win what in Greek mythology is called a “Pyrrhic victory”, meaning an apparent success with devastating costs to the victor.⁵

Returning to the “Wheel of Life”, in its centre we find a hub representing the “core you” or “inner centre”. This centre is

⁴ Aesop's fable is reported on a historical board posted on the shoreline of Lake Biel-Bienne near the Aare-Büren canal in Ipsach, Switzerland.

⁵ The phrase is an allusion to King Pyrrhus of Epirus, whose army suffered irreplaceable casualties in defeating the Romans at Heraclea in 280 BC and Asculum in 279 BC during the Pyrrhic War.

often described as the “intelligence of the soul”, the “canal to our intuition, creativity or vision”, or “the inner compass”. A number of positive character traits are associated with the inner core of a human being such as sincerity, integrity, character, willpower, trustworthiness, a sense of responsibility, humility, and commitment, and a desire to serve and to contribute. These are all leadership qualities we often bitterly miss from leaders in crisis situations (Collins, 2001, p. 66). These values are needed to clarify positions, form the basis for decision-making and steer priority setting--especially in times of uncertainty, high risk and conflict.

When we connect to the inner centre, we are responding to the highest level of human need. According to the humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow, this highest need is self-actualization or the fulfilment of one’s unique potential. There is no other time that the need and motivation to have meaning and purpose in our lives is higher than in crises. (See also Whitmore, 2003, p. 125.)

To raise Petra’s interest in accessing what I like to call ‘the inner coach,’ I asked her: What do you think Einstein meant when he said, “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them”? How can you go beyond thinking about your problems and allow new solutions to surface? How helpful would it be to have access to your inner compass and get guidance from the inner voice? Her reaction showed me that I met doubts and disbelief.

John Whitmore writes that a coach’s job is

helping people to clear away their defensive shields and self-imposed blockages, so they can more readily experience their own inner guidance. Hearing and obeying the still small voice within early enough may be a good way to avert a crisis, and coaching can certainly contribute to this (Whitmore, 2003, p. 125).

How can Petra connect to her inner centre, hear the voice, guide or coach within, if the crisis escalates and gets uglier, or if she has to face temporary setbacks? How could she access her inner strengths in a daring moment with nobody to turn to for advice? How can the outside coach help the client to connect to the inside coach?

Help by the Coach

Help by the outside coach in this most personal area is a delicate endeavour and demands the utmost tactfulness and sensitivity. It is to my advantage that I myself follow a spiritual practice. Faced with the apparent reluctance yet curiosity of Petra, I proposed that she take three very simple practical steps:

(1) Find a moment of tranquility every day. The more hectic the circumstances, the more important it is that Petra finds some quiet time in a calm place where answers and solutions can

grow and develop. It may be only a small chunk of time, but it must be a moment of silence and rest; we simply can not hear the voice within a noisy and hectic environment. “We do this not to avoid facing the problems but to make room for solutions to grow” (Carlson, 2007, p. 126). For that reason we have to calm our mind. When are we best equipped to solve any problem – when we feel good or depressed? We look at some practical questions like, When do you think the best time is for you? Where would you do this or where could you go? How can you make sure to be undisturbed? How long could it be? When do you start? What obstacle might you meet? And by the way, how powerful do you think it is to lead in a state of calmness?

(2) Live in the present moment. Next we ask ourselves how to focus on the present moment. What kind of mind do we need in order to have access to wisdom and common sense? How do we leave behind for a moment our worries, anxiety, fear and expectations? How can we refresh ourselves to live just for a brief time in the present moment? How can we focus on the rhythm of our breath (the most present moment)? How many times can we concentrate on our breathing without interference by a thought? Let’s begin by observing where our thoughts are focused. Do they take us into a state of calm or do they take us back into the state of turmoil? Can we just look at our thoughts and let them go? How do we empty the mind in order to be receptive for the wisdom of the inner voice? And by the way, when do we get the best insights for creative solutions?

(3) Develop self-discipline, resolve, and patience. To keep leading, keep learning. We all know that leadership is developed daily, not in a day (Maxwell, 1998, p. 27; Manske, 1990, p. 147). We need practice and patience because results will come slowly, but they will show little by little. As coach I might say: Rate on a 1 – 10 scale the degree of certainty you have that you will persist in reserving time, resting and reflecting in a calm place. What prevents it from being a 10? What support do you need? How do you think this practice will alter the way you lead the crisis team? And by the way, if you succeed in having access to your inner coach or guide, how do you think you will define for yourself success in this crisis?

Values May Clash

It is also precisely during crises that values clash and difficult questions arise: What do you do when you lose your trust in the leadership? What happens if the crisis team doubts the integrity, sincerity and truthfulness of the CEO? Do members of the crisis team compromise if they discover that they hold opposite values than Petra as team leader? What does Petra do if she is faced with split loyalty in the crisis team? What if the board of directors holds to values which in the eyes of the followers need to be

questioned or replaced? What can be done if personal interests are at odds with the company's interest? What does Petra do if asked to communicate decisions she can not support?

Regarding her crisis team, Petra knows that

Of course in the midst of a crisis, you often don't have supporters. No one wants to sign up with you until they know you are the winner. So you are alone with the problems, which is for the best.... A person knows he is a leader when he realizes there is no one who can answer his questions. He has to answer them himself – alone....You need an inner compass to indicate the way (Hill, 2000, pp. 182, 192).

CONCLUSIONS

Petra's definition of success and failure in crisis had been shaped pretty much by the popular concept of winner and loser, black and white, victim or culprit. "In almost all human caused crises, there are only two major outcomes. You will either be perceived as a victim or cast as a villain" (Mitroff, 2001, p. 83). The problem remains that the outcome of a crisis is risky and unpredictable. You can do your best to make many smart decisions and still have things go wrong, leaving you as a "loser"; or you can make some errors in judgment, betray all your values and still have a turn of events that allows you to bathe in the sunshine of "success". Every leader giving his best in a crisis faces the risk of failing. To measure the outcome solely on outside benchmarks is incomplete and can be devastating to you. Possibly worse, this concept cast its shadow into the present moment, paralyses you with fear, undermines your resilience in case of a temporary setback, and weakens your positive outlook. Petra acknowledged the following: "The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joys of leadership without experiencing the pain as well" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 65).

Petra therefore set her own, internal benchmarks for "success" or "failure" for the difficult times ahead. This is an extract of the questions we used: Have I surpassed myself by taking on this challenging responsibility to be the leader of the crisis team? How do I pass the test of leading this most diverse team with determination to reach a common goal? Regarding the crisis team, do I share the glory and accept the blame? How do I respond to the risks of my leadership responsibility? Do I stand up for and do I follow my deepest convictions and values when controversial decisions are at stake? Do I live up to my personal vision and mission in this demanding situation? Have I mobilized my full potential and given my best for the whole cause? Have I demonstrated courage and resolve by implementing decisions? Faced with temporary setbacks, have I followed my conviction to never quit? Have I kept my calmness in crisis?

POSTSCRIPT

By her own standards and for the outside observer, Petra was very successful in leading her crisis team through this crisis. The process she entered through coaching also helped her eventually realize it was time to move on, leave the company, and take on an even more challenging job.

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