The Boss is Dead

Leadership between perfection and explosion

*A psychological study
by Olaf Lange and Daniel Salber*

About the authors

Olaf Lange

Olaf Lange is a certified psychologist and managing partner at *team steffenhagen consulting*. For 20 years he has been working as a consultant in the chemical, automotive and mechanical engineering industries. He lectures at *Business School Berlin* on a regular basis.

His projects are focused on leadership and organizational development, change management and strategy development.

Prof. Dr. Daniel Salber

Daniel Salber is an analytical consultant, founder of the *Salber Institut für tiefenpsychologische Beratung* (Salber Institute for Counselling, based on depth psychology) and got his doctorate from *RWTH Aachen University*. He is a professor for media psychology at *Business School Berlin* and has been active as a consultant in different sectors for 20 years.

Among his core competencies are interpretive psychology, strategy development and implementation, coaching and analyzing societal developments.

Preface

The authors consider themselves organizational and leadership developers. They have been operating in the world of enterprises for a long time, marveling and consulting. Their work is based on Morphological Psychology, a folk psychology developed by Wilhelm Salber, that aims at the unconscious whole. It is not about measuring and explaining, but about describing and understanding how things interact. With its comprehensive approach in daily business, Morphological Psychology is an exquisite tool for understanding companies and treating them successfully.

With their study, the two of them intended to find out what constitutes the often required leading in enterprises psychologically and where approaches to "change" can be found. What happens between "perfection" and "explosion" in leadership, this is what the following is about.

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Every year, about 16 billion dollars are spent on "leadership" in 74 countries (1). Simultaneously, we see carefully planned projects collapse, silo thinking, hyperactive strategy management, "burn-out", and "bore-out" of the people involved. An enormous, strangely empty activity ends in exhaustion, and potential profits remain unexploited.

Industrial establishments and financial managers expect salvation from real "leadership" – but 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? Which strategies can support organizations – and which cannot?

The following contemplations 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 approximately 250 intensive questionings from organizational projects that team steffenhagen consulting GmbH has conducted over the years.

Caught in simple images

The conceptual abstraction "leadership" is usually connected to unspoken images of people and things interacting within a company. These images work like secret reciters 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 standing opposite in order to guarantee "profit" and "yield". This is expressed in "Handbuch Führung – Der Werkzeugkasten für Vorgesetzte" (2) *[transl: "Handbook Leadership – The Toolbox for Bosses"]*. It is based on linear mechanics. Human beings turn into "instruments" for producing yield in this image. This becomes evident quite graphically in the shareholder value approach.

Second image: the other one is being seen as a "creature led by self-interest" that is categorically not to be trusted in a "social arena". "Leadership" then means assertion of the strongest on the social battle field. This understanding appears in the principal agent model.

Under the spell of these images, there is a desperate search going on for leaders that come as close as possible to the respective ideal (mechanics or dominance). They are looking for "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 interests. Some examples: "Leadership Qualities: 16 traits of the world's most successful people" (3) or "Die 7 Wege zur Effektivität" (4) *[transl: "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People"]* or "Die 7 Seiten des perfekten Managers" (5) *[transl: "The 7 Sides of the Perfect Manager"]*. This energizes a huge assessment center industry and simultaneously supports the belief in "the powers that be". As so often before, mechanistic ignorance and belief in miracles lie closely together.

Our colleagues from Systemic Psychology have come up with a nice buzzword for this: they call it a necessary new approach, the "post-heroic management". Unfortunately, they can only describe the new, just like the post-modern, in a negative way: non-heroic, non-modern – but of course not familial or old-fashioned either.

Leadership as co-operation

Since neither ideological nor nihilistic concepts lead anywhere, a thorough contemplation of the "individual and the genuine" (Nietzsche) is in order. What really happens in "leading" today? The analysis of in-depth interviews with leading managers shows that leading is not solitary 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 entirety, such as a business. Leading and being led both happen in common enterprises in which 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 request for ideas in situations of leading quickly puts the moment of "instrumental-rational" dictating forward. Leaders 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. The images of the "captain on the boat bridge" or "pilot in the cockpit", which imply speed, height, direction and so on, get utilized.

"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 your 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 pretty hope of being able to make forces and resistance by "the others" disappear with tricks or even pressure leads to a second main feature of leadership today: it forgets that it is also always being led. Being led appears as an embarrassing weakness, as the breaking down of one's power perfection. During interviews, only inquiring shows that one's own doing is always being dictated by others – by others "above", "next to" and "under" the leading manager. "The leaders" are even less aware of their imprinting through biographical or societal mandates. By forgetting their own "thrownness" and finiteness, they tend to overburden themselves as autonomous supermen – which then often leads to illness.

Superiors often initially experience that they are being led by cumbersome employees. To their regret, they cannot entirely control the other one as well as themselves. A good example for the unity of leading and being led are young leaders who, in a mood to dictate, place numerous orders with people right on their 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. Then the "captain" tries to get his lost authority back by squirming free from higher orders – just as cunningly as his own employees. He cannot, however, elude his secret – or better yet, his unconscious – requirements as easily. Those small demons will at best become visible during coaching or "on the couch".

This ongoing yet typically overlooked conflict 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 the reluctant forces, leaders nowadays develop four common strategies. Since leadership always takes place in a cultural framework, these leadership styles simultaneously mirror the handling of the unspoken requirements and ideals of the "global" techno-financial culture.

(1) 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, the leader raises himself to the virtuous superman who preferably serves everybody and everything completely. It's 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. That equals the idea of competing in a football tournament 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 rectified motion through compliance and smoothing everything.

"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. The current vernacular expression of "turning affected parties into participants" is part of the list of virtues of a leader without guilt or shadow. "Aggressions" are being avoided ostentatiously – or left for the receptionist who then has 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 a whole "leadership-suppressing industry" builds on today which produces "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. But: people want to be decent and come out innocent from a game with guilt. They practice "meeting instead of leading". We believe that this is the single goal of quite a few

HR departments. Submission gesturers may come close to the cultural ideal of a clean superman, but they lose any 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, an incredible pressure builds up. The submission gesturer wants (and has) to "kiss the others' ass" secretly every now and then – which of course must not be expressed, which must be called repression or hypocrisy. Gradually, the flawless "leader" loses sight of his own identity, he vanishes, loses himself in the mix. Doubts regarding his own significance, his role in the wheelwork of the business arise, causing depression and burn-out. Anger, outrage, disappointment break free explosively, often off the record – which for the fellow men appear like a mysterious turnaround from virtuous Dr. Jekyll to darksome Mr. Hyde.

(2) The "bulldozers"

The realization that perfect leadership beyond reproach is impossible abruptly turns into "abrasiveness", "ruthless reigning", "bluntness regardless of the consequences". The exploding leader blindly butts into others' assignments and spheres ("bypass management"). Quite often that is the moment when McKinsey is brought into the company. Power is being demonstrated for the sake of power, followed by exposure, the other one is being "floored".

"Then it is enough. Then I pound the table!"

A smart form of flooring is the simple specification of bare figures instead of human interaction. Excessive demands are being brought into the company as a figure "from above". Usually even quite politely, which only hides the relentless abrasiveness of the often nonsensical demands towards the parties involved. Leadership perfectionists can save their virtuous act by blaming the abrasiveness on the (God-given) fig-

ures that others need to achieve. In the meantime, some companies have realized that something about this is going fundamentally wrong: "Wie Zahlen Manager in die Irre führen" (8) *[transl: "How numbers mislead managers"]*.

Frequently, the ruthless reigning and flooring periodically reverts to gestures of submission again. Missing mediation skills, disruption of trust, fear of a damaged image and remorse enforce the return to a mode of smoothing and equalizing.

"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 that are shy of becoming guilty, taking risks and working through anything stressful.

(3) 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, 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". This creates an overview. However, opinions are being changed daily, just like underwear. People build alternating "rope teams", "take stands", have "trench fights". In order to still keep a common business running, double standards, hypocrisy, spies and claqueurs 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: "project work". This mode of working offers everybody who's tired of perfection the opportunity to fall back into their rude "primitive state". Clubbing and stabbing are daily occurrences. Flat hierarchies are the tiger cage for the dog eat dog fight. Project work as the arena of social Darwinism takes the place of the pubertal figure of "leading". It also releases leadership of guilt and risks – if something goes wrong, it was "the team's" fault. Just think of all the processes happening around the annual budgeting process: deals, buffers, deceits, delays. And: everybody knows it, nobody says it.

In almost all of the interviews, a significant lack of "worthwhile goals" was complained about. The practical work of an enterprise, for which you work, is lost. You describe the feeling of "never really getting anything done", and feeling "hounded". Leading managers lose their connection to reality, they float in abstract rooms. "Global" reign of numbers, mechanical exploitation of counterparts and leading without goal and passion have destructive impact. Resistance up to sabotaging the business, inner quitting, "burn-out" and shortage of time are expressions of the reversal of enterprises into shareholder value machines. The complete submission, the functioning in a cash machine, then reinforces the equalizing and smoothing. No wonder that the demand for support in implementation keeps growing.

(4) Farmer's handcraft

The styles of leading described before are all geared to the cultural ideal of the perfect superman who rules the world with digital technology and without guilt. In times of global "techno-financial management", lots of managers believe they can make huge profits without any effort, resoluteness or personal commitment – just like you can find the woman of your dreams by swiping your thumb on a smart phone. As everybody knows, this can lead to entirely unwanted and disastrous results. That is

why some leading managers by now (or still) choose an entirely different approach. They do not use the digital machine without history and character as a role model, but the image of the farmer, the handcraft of the gardener. In the patient ploughing of the soil, dictating and being dictated fall into place as unified 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 in a company like a gardener is about developing productive common work, quarreling, becoming guilty, allowing remainders, having stamina, persevering and sticking to things, conveying influences so that they lead to something, chafing, driving people, dealing with setbacks, being able to wait, allowing and using things unknown, taking risks, ultimately developing in a way that allows humans and things to "make something of it".

This way of leading opposes the ideal of perfection. The "Süddeutsche" newspaper made a praise of failure of this: "Striking out – 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, also from an economical point of view." (9) As a pure reversal of the rigor of perfection, failure does not offer orientation for leadership as well – but it comes with the territory if you contemplate leadership realistically.

Outlook on realism

Leading means acting within the framework of a distinct work, a distinct enterprise which you must have comprehended beforehand. Leading humans requires a concrete idea, an image of what needs to be done. If, for example, you would like to increase sales of a product in, let's say the Brazilian market, then this purpose needs an interpretation: this is our work and this is how our work operates – and how it does not. This concrete (and always risky) interpretation may at first cause a lack of understanding and resistance with the employees – but it is still necessary!

The realistic connection to the common work is crucial for the development of leaders. Leadership trainings usually work in a "work vacuum" – as the topic of leadership does not tie in with concrete processes in one's own business – but "train" abstract findings; the subsequent question of the "transfer of learning" is left to the participating leading managers. Honestly, would you 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 does not comprehend?

Courage is required: if a company is not supposed to be a yield warrantor, but a place where humans are to create lasting work in a risky world in order to survive there, then risks cannot be eliminated, then the courage of the leading managers – and especially the executive management – is required if a business strives to develop and change. This requires saying goodbye to calculating and safety thinking.

"Knowledge" is the second cornerstone, and by this we do not mean "information" (of which we have more than enough), but genuine knowledge, comprehensive understanding of context. Businesses quite often do not really look closely when it comes to the perception of market potentials. Bare figures "do not tell": only meanings tell us things.

Finally, something like "humbleness" will be required in order to under-
stand that you cannot have everything at the same time in this world. By
humbleness, we do not mean asceticism or being well-behaved, but
turning towards human reality, acknowledging its finiteness. Practically
achievable goals say more than abstract idols (facts & figures). Hum-
bleness is also the attitude of the farmer who does not consider himself
the master, but the keeper of live developments.

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