

Corporate Culture in the Orphanage

„We have to develop culture.“ „We have to install a culture of innovation.“ „We have to enforce a culture of agility.“ Have you heard that before?

That sounds as plausible as „we have to thump parental love into our children“: this will fail right from the start.

The critical turnoff is in the linguistic detail, the differentiation between subject and object: „We develop culture.“ This creates a subtle distance, and from there it's a short mental step to assume that „me“ and „culture“ are completely separated. If everyone thinks so, culture becomes a complete orphan.

Only then one can get the idea to delegate culture, preferably to HR. In the better case, HR will delegate back, in the worse case a collective experience of frustration is unleashed that can very well last for a couple of years.

Because there is a next separation lurking: that of leaders versus employees, which is very popular. „We have to enable our employees...“ – well, how about yourself, in the first place? And who exactly is supposed to do what with whom? The separation between oneself and culture or between supervisors and employees is about as absurd as the neuro-concept of „me and my brain“...Fritz Perls would turn in his grave. Not a trace of self responsibility and co-creation in sight.

When employees get the impression that they are culturally worked on by management, they tend to withdraw very quickly into the dugout, shouting classical paroles like „up there they should live our values in the first place“, „nothing will change anyway“, „this, too, shall pass“. Paroles heard hundreds of times, all very unproductive and tiring.

Culture, among other things, is coagulated attitude that after some time will sustain itself by systemic tendency of persistence. That is why attitude is the the medium that can influence culture. And this at the end of the day will throw management as well as employees back to themselves, because attitude is required from every single person.

Developing culture is always a collective undertaking. It can only happen in dialogue, or even better in multilogue, arguing jointly about how one wants to deal with oneself and others and how collaboration should be organised and shaped. Such a process is sustained by the example that the involved persons set in their everyday behaviour.

That's why developing culture always means developing oneself at the same time. In such a matter there is no place for dividing into camps, for separation between involved and affected, between architects and toy blocks. „We have to develop culture“ shifts to „we have to develop culturally.“ This may be nitpicking on the linguistic level – attitude-wise it's a difference in class.

One thing you have to kiss goodbye then is pointing at other people. Employees complaining about the culture have to ask themselves how they contribute to sustaining that culture. Who is IBM? Every single person working for IBM. „We are the people“? Of course.

Leaders are especially in demand in this situation as they have a disproportionately high influence, and there will never be a corporate culture that is more advanced than the culture of their leaders. But if a mature culture flourishes, on the other hand, it can make people entering that culture grow as a person. And then the prospects are rosy for everybody involved, and for the future, too.