

## Operating Figures and their Anaesthetic Potential

Dashboard, Cockpit, Houston Control, Traffic Light Logic – how ever it is called, it is meant to facilitate navigation and to provide managers with basics for decision making in situations that can't and shouldn't be judged by rule of thumb. The names of these systems often come from the world of the transport sector – nautics, aviation, aerospace, road traffic. That implies that it's all about steering and about reaching your destination safely and quickly. So far, so good.

As it is, there are a number of problems. In the first place, an operating figure normally is only taken seriously when it appears as a number. As a consequence even the most analog data is transformed into numbers: „On a scale of 1 to 4, how satisfied are you with our services?“, with a target of 3,4. The whole film unfolding in the customer's mind before he makes his mark plays in an empty cinema –the persons asking the questions are not in the audience, anyway; and the deeper meaning of the mark is almost completely eroded by the radical reduction.

You can deal with this problem – for example by using even more operating figures...the staff sometimes hardly has the force to collect all the numbers, let alone to do something with them. I may be exaggerating a bit – maybe. Anyway it is worthwhile to watch for this kind of inner anaesthesia, it can weaken an entire organisation, and to top it you don't even have a real gain.

Without a doubt there are cleverly designed operating figures, but no matter how sophisticated and elaborate they may be, by definition they still remain abstractions of reality. Not uncommonly people's bonuses are linked to them. Understandably, this makes them peer at the figures in everyday work and use their energy to act in ways that make the figures develop as requested. In this situation there is a big risk that people will not focus on the market and the customers anymore but on their abstraction. In the best case this abstraction is quite accurate; even then the nuances are lost. You don't even want to imagine the worst case. Figures have the potential to anaesthetise the most abundant source of innovation and trend information. Than an external anaesthesia is added to the internal one. If you continue this analogy you can assume that death by asphyxiation will be inevitable.

Furthermore, every profession possesses it's own folklore in a sociological sense, and hence their handed down standard operating figures. As they are handed down and therefore not young, exactly, they sometimes relate to things easy to measure, and not to specific goals of the organisation, and with a good probability they are not aligned with figures of other parts of the organisation. To change the measurement system is considered very difficult by their promoters, who claim that with a change you loose comparability with previous years. And so the figures are kept alive for the figures' sake, and they begin to spin around themselves.

It is popular, for example, to measure training by the amount of cash and/or time per employee invested in training. Unfortunately, this gives you hardly any statement other than „we try very hard“. The advantage is that this statement fits any goal...what would be really interesting is the outcome in the long run.

Abstraction and reduction are necessary, for individuals as much as vor organisations: you cannot escape the necessity to build a model that will necessarily reduce reality. It becomes problematic when this reduction escapes consciousness, is not surveyed regularly, and finally takes the place of reality in your perception. Then the model will act as an anaesthetic, both in inward and outward direction, in particular you miss the weak signals from the organisation's environment, and you risk to have a blind flight.

The best way to avoid this is direct communication with people who on their part have a direct communication with the environment – no matter whether it takes the form of an elaborate internal

conference or if you do it in an informal way. Everything stimulating exchange has a preventive effect against anaesthesia; the antennas to the outside have to stay sensitive, and their information must reach the management.

With this in mind: do measure, do reduce, do abstract, it's all fine, just, for goodness' sake, be careful not to anaesthetize your organisation – not even the Titanic survived that.