

Friends and Foes of Cooperation

More and more, team work and interdisciplinary work will be critical factors for the success of organizations – and, of course, agility. Although this term already risks being worn out to death: under the cover of agility, diverse headless experiments are justified that create massive chaos in no time...so let's stick to less exhilarated terms, like that of cooperation.

The quality of internal cooperation will decisively influence efficiency, innovation capability, and attraction of companies. The best like to go where collaboration is fun and makes sense. Without cooperation no teamwork, without teamwork no efficiency and innovation, without these slow death is looming (Darwin-frog model), or even the fast one (dinosaur model).

Given this situation it makes sense to examine what cooperation depends on, after all:

Cooperating means to show yourself. Showing yourself means to open up, and opening up is a risk. The friends of martial arts know this perfectly well, but it is a risk at the psychological level as well.

Under which conditions will you take this risk? Two factors are core:

- Trust and psychological safety: inwards, by giving yourself and your opinions enough self-esteem, so that you do not depend on the approval of others, because else you will avoid possible differences. And outwards, toward your vis-à-vis, by attributing good will to your environment and relying that your opening will not be abused.
- The connection to a common or higher interest, that you will allow to tip the scale.

That leads to the according complementary thesis: if cooperation is impaired, it can be tracked down to two core factors: fear and predominant self-interests. Fear, of course, will appear in different clothes, for example in the clothes of cynicism, which contains the fear of (further) disappointments.

Systemically the calamity can be stabilized by structures that will boost fear and predominant self-interests, or by simply putting concrete obstacles in the way, like communication barriers or tangible construction measures. In some companies you really have to struggle to meet your colleagues face to face: "How to build silos – do it yourself!"...

Follow the Money? A good advice; when cooperation declines, I say: follow the fear and the predominant self-interests, and follow the structures that will boost fear and predominant self-interests. There much work is awaiting, but it is worth the effort, because the lever is huge.

Competitive advantages will more and more be found in the quality of cooperation; that makes the inner conditions of employees more important, as they are called to show more of themselves. It is the duty of leaders to address this with care and respect, and that raises the required standards for the integrity of leaders. At this point, lateral, vertical, and corporate leadership meet, and if they chime together, extraordinary things can happen.

When we speak of successful and admired companies, we will be talking more and more about deeply human dimensions, in the midst of digitalization.