

Axel Weber and the Emotions

On May 12, 2014, an interview with Axel Weber, chairman of the board of UBS, was printed in the swiss daily paper „Tagesanzeiger“. In that interview he answers, being asked whether he never gets angry about messes bankers make: „I don't tend to emotions, I work off defined programs in a disciplined manner.“

One could argue about this type of attitude to work, but that's an other topic. A few sentences later, Axel Weber says about the reorganization of UBS: „What you need there ist not emotionality, but a clear mind.“

Now I'm not looking to step on Mr. Weber's toes. I have no reason whatsoever to assume that he might not be a person of high ability, to make this clear. But as he did say it...I take it as a the representative expression for the very distant relation of many managers to emotionality – at least when you listen to them talking about emotionality.

Most managers would say that emotions just disturb. Being emotional is being unprofessional („Now let's not get emotional here...“). A clear mind and emotionality are perceived as contrary, separated, and mutually excluding concepts, with a clear favorite: emotion is bad – a clear mind is good. This goes hand in hand with the arithmetic idea that you get a clear mind when you take a person and subtract emotion. I consider this a fatal and potentially dangerous fallacy.

That is because emotionality can't be subtracted, in the first place. There is plenty of proof that decision processes are highly emotional processes – ratio just provides the proper text for decisions already made. Do the test: when you observe yourself carefully when deciding, you will find that you don't make a single decision if it doesn't **feel** right, even if you meticulously went through scientific decision matrixes before. Emotion always gets the last word. The only choice you have is to involve emotions unconsciously or consciously, and I strongly advise to do the latter.

From the psychodynamic perspective of Gestalt Therapy: growing up we all draw our conclusions about other people and the world in highly emotional situations. Some of these conclusions condense to permanent emotional structures that are activated unduly often, even in situations where they're not the best choice (anymore). This means that if you don't know yourself well in this regard, you risk to take decisions that are dominated by these emotional structures, aimed at short-term benefit, and not very helpful – you are highjacked by your emotions and loose yourself in knee-jerk stereotypes instead of reacting adequately to the actual situation. It is totally right to be sceptic about this type of unprocessed emotionality in a management context, because it is a source of bias for perception, discernment, decision-making, and action. That's what Axel Weber probably meant, anyway.

But locking out is not the solution, first beause emotionality operates anyway, and second because you lose a wealth of information potentially available. The thing is that even very rational experiences flow into the famous gut feeling. If you forgo emotionality, you also forgo a good part of your intellectual achievements that have sunk into the sediment of your gut feeling.

Therefore it is essential to know your own emotionality and it's story if you are in a leader's position and have to make wise decisions. To suppress emotionality in order to mitigate it's risks is highly dangerous, because if you do it you remain unpractised in dealing with it, and when it breaks through, you are at their mercy. The key word is integration: I advocate an integrated emotionality. If you can access this source of information and orientation, you can rely on a wealth of condensed information – you get the clearest mind, when you allow emotionality to have it's room.

Interestingly, managers and psychotherapists –in different contexts – in some way need similar abilities, namely the ability to perceive their emotions in a sophisticated way and at the same time step back to be able to use the rich information stored in them, without reacting impulsively out of a state of emotional flooding. In that process they have to be able to distinguish between emotional information concerning the actual situation and emotions concerning „just“ their biographically rooted habits. Psychotherapists learn this at a professional level, managers have to see to it themselves – I can only highly recommend it.

If you want to take over responsibility in a company, especially in the highest ranks, I recommend that you address your emotionality and its story. It is worth it – your mind will become clearer.