

John Lechleiter and The Order of Things

On June 23, 2014, the Swiss Newspaper Tagesanzeiger featured an interview with John Lechleiter, Chairman and CEO of Eli Lilly. When the interviewer addressed progress in medicine and pharmacy, he stated: „First you have to find a target in the body that a drug can block or treat.“ After the discovery of such a target, clinical studies would follow, which today can be started much earlier than in the past.

Interesting order of things.

This triggers an absurd film in my mind's eye, starting with a scene of scientists' every day life: in the coffee break, a scientist (John Cleese) asks his totally stiff colleagues with his mouth full, waving about with a test tube: „What the hell could there be more in the body that we could block?“ That kind of sentence could just as well come from a meeting of radicalized Greenpeace activists looking for labour: where the hell could we make any kind of mess – excuse me, impact?

Once such a target in the body is found, clinical studies are started in search of a drug that will affect the target in some way – even if it is not clear at all why it does that and what else it does. (decide for yourself whether you want to know for how many of the existing drugs the actual mode of action is unknown.)

At long last, when the drug is found, all you need is a disease that it cures – in case of need, a new one. No wonder that when the diagnostic manuals are revised – ICD 10 as a worldwide medical standard, DSM-V in the States for mental disorders -, the attempts to influence the process are so strong.

Just imagine the analogy for management: First we look for things that could basically be decided or addressed in some other way. Then we look for ways to accomplish that, and when we have done that we try to figure out which problem we have just solved.

Reportedly it has actually happened that employees have described their management exactly in this way...but looking at that with irony, satire or cynicism is of course not enough, because the tasks in upper management are so complex, the economical, political, ethical, and moral conflicts in goals so demanding, the pressure on quarterly performance so immense, that there is quite a high risk for the order of things to be confused.

Of course this is no reason not to pay attention to it. „Are we confident about the order of things?“ might actually be a good control question for leaders and leadership teams when it comes to governance or to returning to the meaningful original purpose of their company. Or you engage an external coach who helps you to light your blind spots. What do you actually do, and for what purpose? What do you put first? What second? And is this always the same?

It could happen that companies neglecting a good order of things will increasingly come under pressure. Are you confident about the order of things?