

Down the Abyss with Startups?

Startups are considered very fresh because the people who work there are inspired by an idea and exhilarated by entrepreneurial freedom. Everything is still possible and many things are still open, which in turn leaves room for innovative ideas and unorthodox solutions.

If you interview founders of start-ups that have survived (the start-ups, not the founders), you often hear statements like "we had no idea about anything, we just started and often didn't know if we'd live to see the next month. It was nerve wracking, it was daring, but we were convinced we were doing the right thing. I wouldn't want to miss that experience."

There is this freshness, this verve, this confidence that distinguishes the employees of such companies and allows their potential to blossom. And that is indeed inspiring. It's no wonder that aging companies would like to see some of this vital start-up spirit in their businesses. That's why "learning from startups" is so very popular.

Now it is as true that there are other sides to startups. This is more about the "we-had-no-idea-about-anything" part of the above quote. There are many things that startups really have no clue about and run into walls that you could have seen coming. Leadership, balance of energies, organizational design – in these subjects sometimes experiments are done light-heartedly, but the light-heartedness is only at the beginning.

The time bombs in these topics unfortunately tend to go off in stressful situations where they are least needed: When it comes to the next round of financing; in the relationship between the founders and the other employees; within the founders' group when decisive decisions have to be made.

If one adds to this the entrepreneurial risks, it is not surprising that start-ups have roughly the survival rate of tadpoles. Of course, you look at the successful ones, but how much can really be copied is questionable.

In any case, just don't take the wrong approach to startups, otherwise you are importing the mortality risk rather than the drive. If Siemens suddenly attracted venture investors, the other shareholders would probably get rather nervous...

Maybe it's not so different from your private life: Would you like to go through puberty again? No. Do you as an organization want to make the same mistake as people in their fifties who practice teenage language or crash Zumba lessons in tank tops? Perhaps even with a headband? Exactly. Will you earn great euphoria when you rename your HR boss "Happiness Officer"? Hardly. An organization just can't pretend that it only exists since yesterday.

There's nothing wrong with vital aging. That's the whole point. Don't get me wrong: I think it makes a lot of sense to periodically reflect on whether an established organization has become somewhat fossilized at certain points, or whether it has lost sight of its original goal, or whether the soulful energy of the past has been lost. Tidying up, dusting off, renewing, spring cleaning, rethinking things, returning to ideals: it all makes a lot of sense. But please make it age appropriate.

Let startups swirl around in your head, it releases creativity. But then don't pant after their solutions. Find your own ones, find those that suit you. That is then really vital.