

Personality matters

Years ago, I sat in front of the head of internal organizational development of a large industrial company and suggested that the development of leadership qualities was primarily a question of personality development. The look on his face made it clear that our lunch date was soon about to end. In his view, it was all about teaching the craft, which had "dearly little to do with personality development."

I'm not usually like that, but with all due respect, I was right.

Extreme examples always make such things particularly clear. Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on which end of the spectrum - they are very rare by definition. Who would have thought that a man with the emotional maturity of a three-year-old would become president of the United States and thus get far more than a rattle in his hand to make a mess?

But it happened, and it made at least one thing drastically clear: filling the top leadership position with a person with massive personal deficits is a disaster. And if party comrades hesitate to distance themselves from such a figure for reasons of power calculation, it's another disaster right along with it. "Servant leadership?" Miles away.

What we have witnessed here in grotesque exaggeration certainly happens in a weakened form in many organizations: A leader causes massive psychological and cultural damage, but there are always defenders who put forward arguments like "but he delivers his numbers, you have to hand it to him" or "yes, but he has also achieved some very good things that are much too little appreciated" or "yes, but we can't afford for him to go."

Well, it depends on what you're trying to accomplish. Of course, a workforce can somehow come to terms with such a leader, albeit often in a less than productive way: people take shelter, retreat into trenches, practice resigned contentment, develop a leisurely easygoing attitude, avoid certain topics, etc.

Of course, your company won't go down because of one toxic executive, but between you and me: that's a lousy criterion for doing nothing. "The main thing is that we don't go broke" is rather a modest ambition after all. The road to the Champions League is then blocked. However, if your mission statement still says that you want to get into the Champions League, then the credibility of the top management among the workforce will also crumble. This in turn triggers countless small weakenings like those described above that add up, and you may not even realize how far your organization is operating below its potential.

In this regard, it's like bee stings: you can usually survive one, but if there are enough, they can even kill a horse.

Meanwhile, it is a consensus: a central factor for good, cooperative, constructive, inspiring and productive collaboration is psychological safety, i.e. an atmosphere that allows you to take interpersonal risks, for example, to express yourself critically or – go wild – to reveal your own limitations without being jeopardized because of it.

Try thinking "Trump" and "psychological safety" at the same time. An absurd exercise, isn't it? Just won't work.

So, if you have a toxic leader: separate. In the long run, it's worth paying almost any short-term price for it. That's true for Republicans, it's true for corporate executives, it's true for any small company. Only healthy horses run fast in the long term.