

## How about Listening?

An article in the Tagesanzeiger newspaper on October 11th left me speechless.

Actually, I just wanted to add this article to the collection for my December blog, where I traditionally share a few funny and absurd things that I came across at the end of the year. But then I realized that the more I think about it, I don't find it just absurd and not funny at all. And that's why it's now getting a whole page here.

Let me take you through it: Baloise has developed a laughter detector. It is equipped with microphones that register everything that employees say and uses artificial intelligence to filter out the laughs. The device then counts whether people are laughing enough at work. And if not, they receive an e-mail with funny cat videos and the like.

No, it's not a joke. The inventor is explicitly asked about this and denies it. What a shame, really, because that would have been her chance to get out of it. She missed it.

Then I thought: "Slow down a bit, read carefully and keep an open mind to give it a chance." I tried, but it didn't get any better:

Since an adult person laughs about fifteen times a week on average, there should be two laughs in every hour. "Anything less is too little," said the interviewee. Quite apart from the fact that she obviously assumes that all of the day's laughter belongs in the office and that the family at home has no claim to part of this quota, I think it's bold to set a performance target for laughter. After all, the statement that the email with the cat videos is intended to give employees the chance to "catch up on their laughter" is reminiscent of nothing else. As if that were something like a minus in the flexitime balance.

Are there any sanctions if someone fails to do this? I won't go into the really weird ideas that come to mind at this point.

The explanation that the whole thing is an attempt to draw attention to the fact that there is still too little talk about mental health problems in a non-boring way doesn't make it any better. Would you have guessed that this was supposed to draw attention to mental health issues? Not me.

And then I think of employees, of whom I unfortunately meet too many at the moment, who really don't feel like laughing because they're not having much fun in their company at the moment. If I imagine them getting a cat video email now - well, I think it would backfire. They wouldn't enjoy managers who delegate listening to a laugh detector.

Between you and me: if you have the impression that there is too little laughter in your company, then I think it's fine if you take this seriously, but in my opinion, there are better ways than a laughter detector to make it plausible that you care about the well-being of your employees.

And I don't know of any of these ways that don't involve things like presence, dialog, listening, transparency and proof of good intentions.

I think the focus should be less on new fancy gadgets, methods and promises of salvation and more on down-to-earth qualities simply be present in the company, take an interest in what people are doing and what they have to say, and integrate it into your decisions.

And that way there will be enough laughter, anyway.