

When the Traffic Light goes Blue

Heinz von Förster said that we can only really decide what is undecidable, and that is where ethics begins.

Not bad as an introduction, is it? I think that would be enough in itself, but I'll carry on anyway.

It makes sense: if a decision can be solved logically and unambiguously, we don't have to decide, but simply follow the rule - a no-brainer, so to speak. Only where no clear and objectively correct answer is possible, where everything becomes blurred, are real decisions and human responsibility required.

And let's be honest: the number of decisions for which there is an objectively correct answer is constantly decreasing. Binary, black and white, whatever you call it - hardly works any more. Increasingly, we find ourselves in fields of tension that we can no longer resolve, but only balance.

In order to remain capable of action and act with integrity in these situations, we need a final authority for making decisions, and this can be found at the core of our own identity, values and norms.

If all else fails, we are left with norms; and if an organization does not provide any clear norms, the individual will fall back on their own individual norms in case of doubt.

This is precisely why, when it comes to corporate management and organizational development, dealing with dimensions such as purpose, values and standards is neither a phenomenon of the zeitgeist nor an annoying compulsory exercise, but is absolutely necessary because standards have an indispensable systemic function: they make it possible to decide the undecidable. Only sufficiently clarified norms ensure that collective action in an organization is sufficiently aligned. Without these norms, an organization will fail where it gets down to the crunch. But that's exactly where you don't want to fail, right?

So what do you do when the traffic light is blue?

Shared norms are the ultimate signposts and are therefore invaluable when it comes to establishing autonomous action, empowerment, agility or whatever you want to call it. If everyone agrees on the ultimate authority, nothing fundamentally wrong can happen.

Such certainty makes it easier for managers or those responsible externally and upwards to let go. You won't do that if you don't feel sufficiently secure. So make sure that everyone knows what applies in case of doubt.

If guiding standards are available and usable, you don't necessarily need a boss to point the way. This is also one of the limits of traditional leadership: leaders are not scalable. But shared values certainly are.

So firstly: do it. Think about it, discuss it, share it, communalize it. Secondly: don't just leave it on the website and let it starve, but actively refer to it in everyday life and use it as a binding, ultimate decision-making aid.

And where does that land us? Probably with something like value-driven Corporate Management. Sounds attractive, doesn't it? Should be very popular, especially in the current times.

By the way, I thought the blue traffic lights were my invention for a long time and that I was pretty clever - until I heard Jimi Hendrix: "The traffic lights turn blue tomorrow...". Well, that's how you become demystified: he was ahead of me. Cool kid, I'll have to hand it to him.