

Beyond Leadership

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Work and the workplace are experiencing one of the most fundamental changes since the Industrial Revolution. The visible aspect of this transformation is the digitalization allowing completely new technical opportunities for communication and collaboration. Less visible, but just as important are the new structures and processes being created that require a new understanding of leadership. Traditional management methods rely heavily on clear reporting lines and the physical presence of the managers and the managed. Modern organizations, however, are saying farewell to hierarchical structures and are instead relying on agile networks. And other concepts are needed for effective leadership in such organizations. Consequently, there has been a significant shift in leadership research in recent years from the vertical relationship between superiors and employees to a more horizontal concept of collaboration and have begun to develop new concepts for this.

One of the most promising approaches is Beyond Leadership, an instrument proposed by Patrick Cowden which exactly fills the vacuum in management methods for network organizations. Patrick Cowden, former CEO of Dell Germany and former European head for Hitachi, left the rat race of the traditional CEO's career because he realized that the management of large companies could not continue in the same way. ¹ He had seen how many corporate leaders were at their wits' end after decades of budget cuts, restructuring, job cuts, and motivation campaigns and were no longer able to mobilize their employees to put in their best efforts at planning and implementing long-term goals. Instead, more and more time and energy are being invested in ever more narrow budget details, process optimizations, and delineating departmental boundaries, while actually achieving the exact opposite.

Patrick Cowden personally experienced what happens if you focus more on tools and processes than on people. That's why his book, the management book of the year in 2013, was called 'Neustart' ('Restart') in German. Those who still have doubts that we need a new start in management in order to continue to be successful, need to read this book. His solution is based on the idea that people achieve more together if they are not working next to each other or with each other, but instead FOR one another, if they feel connected to each other, and if they are committed to jointly agreed goals. The traditional power struggles and jealousy guarded fiefdoms within an organization do not stand a chance if participants are connected with each other. Cowden calls it 'the power of connect'.

This is not a novel thought. We are already aware of it from the various team-building tools, such as exercises to get to know one another through rappelling on zip lines. All of these methods work well but are not really sustainable in most cases because they are not sufficiently integrated into the actual day-to-day work life. Beyond Leadership combines the lessons learned from good team-building approaches with the concepts of trust-based management and positive leadership. It is based on a basic module called 'connect' that can also be applied on its own. The term 'connect' already suggests that it provides an instrument which people seeking to develop and implement a strategy, manage change, collaborate very intensively or solve a difficult task can use to connect with one another.

How does Beyond Leadership function? No matter how big the group is, it is initially divided into sub-groups, ideally of two or three persons each. These sub-groups sit as close together as they

¹ Patrick Cowden: www.beyond-leadership.de

feel comfortable, almost knee to knee, preferably without a table between them. Each subgroup is then given the same question which they then address separately. The following rules for group discussion are important: Before the discussion, each group determines who will begin. Then the question is asked, and the first person has two minutes (measured with a stopwatch) to answer the question or comment. This is entirely their personal opinion. The other person(s) in the sub-group may not speak or otherwise influence the person speaking during those two minutes. When the two minutes are up, the other person(s) who were previously only allowed to listen, are given one minute each to give positive, appreciative and grateful feedback. Critical feedback, even if it is meant to be constructive, is not allowed. Immediately after the two minutes of feedback, the next person is up. They, too, have two minutes to answer the question and are then given positive, appreciative and grateful feedback by the other person(s). In case of a sub-group of 3, the round is finished with the third person. The entire exercise therefore lasts exactly 6 (two persons) or 12 minutes (three persons).

The key question to be answered by all is: 'Who am I and why am I here?' It is very important to note that this is not the question 'What am I?' It is instead, 'Who am I?' This involves fundamental beliefs, values, life goals, etc., and is not a description of one's career or professional achievements. The question is therefore simple, yet extremely challenging. Almost everyone sees it as unusual and surprising, and it forces them out of their usual comfort zone of business small talk. When the group realizes how good it feels to receive positive feedback for leaving your comfort zone, the dams of restraint will break, and even colleagues who have worked on the same team for many years will discover things about the others that they have never before addressed. Another aspect is that this round is not about praising performance or behavior, but instead people as individuals with their most important values. At the end, almost 100% of all participants report that after the exercise they feel a stronger and more lasting connection to their colleagues and have a deeper understanding for each other. One even put it this way: 'After the 'Connect' exercise, I will never be able to work with these two people in the same way again. Absolutely amazing!'

At the HWZ Zurich University of Applied Sciences, the Beyond Leadership approach has been scientifically studied, scrutinized, and tested with various groups. The results clearly indicate that Beyond Leadership is an effective concept that translates the recent findings of leadership research from positive psychology and from the practice of team building into a very simple, pragmatic exercise. Every test conducted in organizations of all sizes and sectors with groups as small as 20 and as large as several hundred have all confirmed the effectiveness of the Beyond Leadership concept, without exception.

Depending on the objective, the basic 'connect' module can be supplemented with additional modules to create an activation circle, which runs along the same lines in sub-groups of two or three, but in which other problems can be addressed. 'Align', the first supplementary module, focuses on team spirit, i.e. the shared values as perceived by the team. In this way, the group develops a common identity and becomes aware of what connects them as an organization. Many organizations ignore this important aspect and try to tackle questions such as defining a vision or purpose head-on. Without first being aware of their shared values and shared experience, these exercises have a decisive lack of substance with the corresponding consequences in the implementation. At Beyond Leadership, however, this common identity plays a very important role.

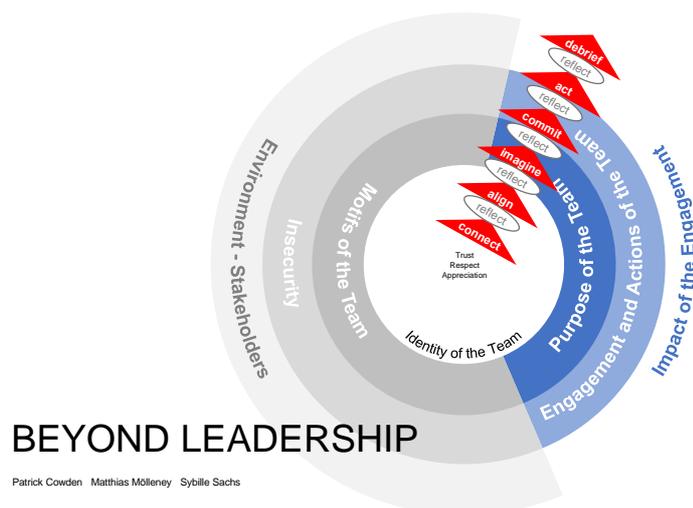
In the third stage, 'imagine', we build on these shared values to develop the wishes of the sub-groups, i.e. defining common goals and priorities. The concrete question at this third stage is particularly important: if it is too general, if there is a risk that the results are too non-binding, if they are too specific, the potential of the flow within the group will be squandered and the exercise will end in disappointment. Questions about a future strategy become possible, for

example, 'What can we achieve together as a team?' or finding solutions for specific, important questions, for example: 'How can we make our company/department fit for digitalization?'

The fourth stage, 'commit', then switches from the 'we' perspective to a personal perspective and asks what each person will contribute to achieving the defined goals: 'What am I going to do in a very concrete and personal way from tomorrow, so that what we developed together in the 'Imagine' stage can be realized?' An important characteristic of Beyond Leadership becomes particularly clear in this phase: unlike conventional workshop formats, in which the participants contribute different degrees of intensity and activity, each participant here has exactly the same amount of input in the results of the workshop and all of them have received equal appreciation for their input. This significantly increases the quality and the consistency of the implementation. Ideally, the implementation should already begin during the Beyond Leadership workshop in a next stage called 'Act'. Depending on the topic and setting, this is not possible or only possible to a limited extent, but where the momentum from levels one to four can be used directly and converted into concrete measures and initiatives, this improves the conditions for effective implementation.

Of particular importance are the reflections between the individual steps. The sub-groups are disbanded, all participants return to the big group or to several larger groups, and exchange views on what they have just discussed and worked on in the groups of three, but also on how they have experienced the discussion. The aim of these reflection rounds is for everyone to have a say and to contribute their own impressions to the group as a whole. After the reflections, new groups of three are formed and the next step can begin. The Beyond Leadership activation circle is concluded with a special debriefing. This debriefing, in which everyone has their say, deals with the question of what has been learned in the workshop, what participants would like to take away from it, and also what they will do better next time.

Overall, the "Beyond Leadership" concept looks like this:



Here is an example of how a "Beyond Leadership" workshop could run:

8:00 – 8:30	Welcome and introduction, explanation of the "Beyond Leadership" concept
8:30 – 9:00	Divide into sub-groups of two or three for the "Connect" exercise
9:00 – 9:30	Reflection on "Connect" (whole group)
9:30 – 9:45	"Align" exercise (new sub-groups)
9:45 – 10:15	Reflection on "Align" (whole group)
10:15 – 10:30	Break
10:30 – 10:45	"Imagine" exercise (new sub-groups)
10:45 – 11:15	Reflection on "Imagine" (whole group)
11:15 – 11:30	"Commit" exercise (new sub-groups)
11:30 – 11:45	Reflection on "Commit" (whole group)
11:45 – 12:00	Debriefing (whole group) If implementation ("Act") can be defined directly, this level is used before the debriefing.

Depending on the size of the group, the reflections will take longer or shorter to complete. The example described above is based on a typical total group size of 20-25 persons.

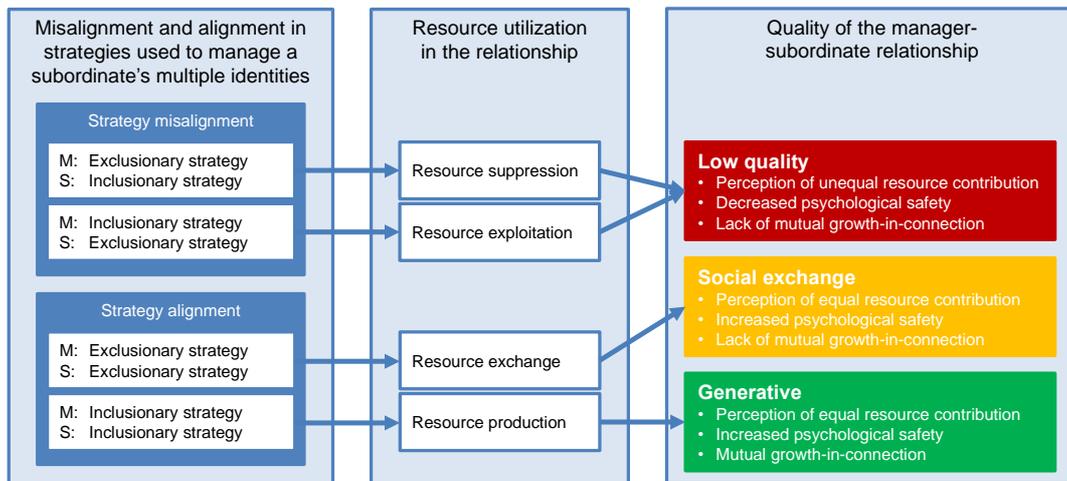
If you are even more interested in the reasons why Beyond Leadership works so well, you will find a good description in the article published by Creary, Caza and Roberts 'Out of the box? How managing a subordinate's multiple identities affects the quality of a Manager-Subordinate relationship.'² They investigated the impact of considering different identities on the quality of the superior-employee relationship. By different identities, they mean that all people have other identities in addition to their identity as employees or superiors, for example, as family members, officials in a sports club or party, and so on. Approaches that consciously integrate these different identities in the relationship between superiors and employees and perceive the other as a person with facets outside of the job are called 'inclusive strategies'. The contrary model, namely to restrict oneself exclusively to the job aspect of the individual, are 'exclusive'.

Fig. 1 (below) shows what it means when managers and employees decide to opt to either be inclusive or exclusive. Genuine added value is only created if both managers and employees agree that they perceive each other as multi-faceted personalities and want to cooperate on this basis.

In this context, the concept of 'psychological safety' is particularly important and is mentioned several times in the study by Creary et al. The point is that teams always perform very well when team members feel psychologically secure. It is not so much about security against attacks, but about the feeling of familiarity within the group and this familiarity can be created in different ways. Be it certain rituals in meetings, unwritten or written rules of internal communication, or transparent and fair criteria for promotion, people need the feeling that they can rely on each other and pursue common goals so that they can make full use of their performance potential.

² Creary, Caza und Roberts 'Out of the box? How managing a subordinate's multiple identities affects the quality of a manager-subordinate relationship', *Academy of Management Review*, 2015, Vol. 40, No. 4, 538-562.

Multiple Identities and the Quality of a Manager-Subordinate Relationship



Source: Creary, Caza and Roberts, «Out of the box? How managing a subordinate's multiple identities affects the quality of a manager-subordinate relationship», *Academy of Management Review* 2015, Vol. 40, No. 4, 538-562.

Fig. 1: The Effects of exclusive and inclusive strategies in the superior-employee relationship, Source: Creary, Caza and Roberts, *Academy of Management Review* 2015, Vol. 40, No. 4, 538-562.

Recently, this was also impressively confirmed by Google in an internal study, which looked at the reasons why some teams were functioning better than others. The usual suspects among the possible reasons, such as the leadership of superiors or the intellectual capacity of team members, had proved to be insufficient explanatory models. In the end, the decisive factor was 'psychological safety', i.e. the feeling of familiarity, mutual attentiveness, and an inclusive approach which integrated the different identities of the individuals on the team. A good description of the Google study was published by the *New York Times*: 'What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team'³

The experiences of the HWZ in Zurich in the research project Leadership 3.0 have confirmed the previous studies on the significance of psychological safety and have shown that the Beyond Leadership concept is reliably able to build up connections between employees regardless of hierarchy and area of responsibility when applied correctly. Particularly for companies with network-like, fluid, and holocratic structures, it is a very suitable method for establishing new management structures. It is, so to speak, the most important tool for turning traditional superiors into modern *networked leaders*.

It is important to recognize that Beyond Leadership is not a typical consulting model which may be applied by especially certified consultants and trainers only. Instead, it aims at the participants regarding it as their own tool, taking the ownership and integrate Beyond Leadership in their day-to-day work. In order to support this, a workshop as described above, always contains a train-the-trainer component.

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³ Charles Duhigg 'What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team', *NY Times*, The Work Issue: Reimagining the Office, 25. Februar 2016, Ch. 1

