



Felix Frei

33 Leadership Letters



33 Leadership Letters

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The Book

33 Leadership Letters do not make a new leadership theory. They do not, however, offer a collection of recipes of how to lead people correctly either. Instead, they are meant to activate reflection on the topic. Divided into 33 separate sections, each dealing with a chosen issue related to the main topic, and all of which can be reflected upon individually, this book offers a guide to thinking about leadership.

The Cartoonist

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Felix Frei also wrote: *Voodoo-Management. Reflexionen zum Wandel und zur Führung* (2006), published by Leutner, Berlin.

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A Methodological Foreword

We, the partners of the AOC group, have been active in the field of leadership development and change management for twenty years now. Before that, we worked academically for over ten years doing research on industrial psychology.

These many years of experience have taught us that leadership development primarily depends on self-critical reflection. That, however, is only possible if a certain openness and readiness to learn is provided – but self-reflection is not always easy.

“High gloss seminars” on the proper way to lead do not replace reflection. Neither do adventurous events of any kind. Both options may be interesting, but they mostly serve the affirmation of pre-existing convictions and hardly ever lead to qualitative advancement.

With his *Leadership Letters*, our colleague Felix Frei has developed a tool that may not be able to replace critical self-reflection either, but can certainly contribute to it by stimulating thought.

Wherever customers of ours receive such a letter every month, the development of leadership is constantly an issue in the back of people’s heads. The best effects are achieved in those companies where the addressed managers take the letters as a cause to meet up monthly in smaller groups and discuss the suggested issues in a round table moderated by a superior. Within such discussions, every executive should be able to state his opinions on the given topic and share his personal experience with his colleagues. Leadership development takes continuous efforts and such round table discussions of about 1 to 2 hours monthly on the respective topic given in the letter have proven to be helpful and of value to the participants. Needless to say that the author’s opinions as expressed in the various letters are not supposed to be the only right ones on the given issues. On the contrary: Amicable debates on various viewpoints are often much more fruitful than simple agreement.

What is especially attractive (to both sides) about this kind of setting is that the various managers learn something about their superior’s self-assessment and understanding of leadership, and that he can, in turn, get an idea of how his employees conceive their own role as superiors to others. It is most probably this kind of exchange and the collective opening to the questions raised in the letters that stimulate personal reflection and self-criticism in the individual executives and thereby further the development of their leadership.

Now that the first 33 of these Leadership Letters have been collected in a book, some more options have opened up. Here are just four:

1) This way, the texts are accessible to *individual* readings and reflection as well, and compiled in one handy format.

2) Moreover, those of you who have already read the electronic versions of the letters before can easily re-read them as you please. And, as the book is designed as a kind of *personal exercise book* and provides space for your own notes (What are the three most important things I learned about this topic?), it can be used as a logbook documenting your leadership development.

3) Also, the bilingual form of this book gives you a chance to – if you feel like it or have to do so for your job – approach the issues in both German and English.

4) And finally, to a company where the Leadership Letters have not been used so far, this book provides *a useful starting point for the suggested kind of collective, continuous and constructive leadership development*: Let us assume, for instance, the company would provide all of its executives with a copy of this book. And let us assume, a rhythm is established where the managers of other divisions are invited to a reception in one division (which alternates each time) in order to discuss a chosen issue related to leadership. Let us assume that the respective host division chooses one of the letters in the book and prepares the discussion on it by reflecting upon the way the given topic is handled in the company in their view. And, let us assume that this kind of round table takes place regularly – say, for example, every second Thursday of the month from 5 to 6.30 p.m. (except in July for a summer break). That way, the executives of this company could continuously work on their leadership development during three whole years without expensive seminar settings. It is hard to believe that this kind of debate – provided, of course, that the meetings are held regularly and seen as binding – would have no effect on the leadership culture of the company.

We imagine that it could even be fun when this kind of debate colloquium becomes a tradition within an enterprise.

Andreas Alioth, Christoph Clases & Felix Frei, AOC AG Zurich

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Preface

Dear Managers

This is how my Leadership Letters have always begun so far. This form of address is not only a polite way of beginning letters (but who still writes letters today?), it also signals a certain familiarity with the addressee. Whenever I get feedback of the following kind: “How do you know so much about our everyday work?”, I can only reply: Through you, my dear managers. I thank you for that.

In over thirty years of research, schooling and consulting I have met a great number of people in leadership positions. The variety of their styles is astonishing and I would never want to present one or the other of them as a role model to all others. Nevertheless, when it comes to leadership, there are some remarkable issues that can be thought about regardless of personal style. That’s what these 33 letters are meant to provoke.

What I hope for, is the following: That you read one or the other of these letters every once in a while. That you think about the suggested issues and form your own opinion about them. That you don’t simply base a possible difference in our opinions on my ignorance and your wisdom and just leave it at that, but that you see this disagreement as a reason to think about how you deal with the given issue in your daily work. That you are not just happy when you agree with me, but ask yourself, in these cases too, what small steps you could still take to improve your leadership in that respect. That you not only read this book, but discuss it too. That, after every letter you read, you stop and think of three things you learned or that are especially important to you – there is space to write them down at the end of every letter. And, that you are not only entertained or amused by Silvio Erni’s cartoons, but that they help you to keep the topics and your personal thoughts about them in mind – only that way can you put what you learned into practice.

Finally, I hope that you enjoy reading my book.

Best regards, 

Zurich, 1 May 2010

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01 | Intention and Effect

As a manager, one feels just a little alone every once in a while. You watch your employees, see their performance, recognize problems or conflicts – and then you think: What is there to do now? When you then have an idea, you act accordingly. Maybe it is necessary to have a talk, to make a decision, to get a piece of information or maybe it is necessary *not* to do any of those things.

10 Behind these actions there is, of course, a certain *intention*. Managers usually do want to achieve a specific effect. Usually, it is their task to prepare the conditions for themselves or their employees to achieve certain goals of the enterprise in an efficient (and thus economical) and effective (and thereby efficacious) way.

However, there is a difficulty: After considering and reconsidering what to do and finally deciding to one's best knowledge to do or not to do something or another in order to achieve a specific *effect* – it all turns out differently after all. For example, you may have shown a special interest in an employee's project in order to motivate him, and the effect is, instead, that this employee loses his motivation more and more thinking that his boss might as well do the job himself if he is going to control every single detail of the work anyway. Or you are trying to show your employee some trust by letting him work completely independently, which in turn leads him to assume that his boss does not really care about him or his work. Or you immediately set an appointment with employees who have complained about a colleague because you want to hear their criticism directly and then discuss the problems with the concerned employee in person, which then leads the complaining employees to tell their colleagues that their boss does not appreciate criticism at all because he immediately arranges a meeting about it. And so on...

Maybe one of the biggest sins in daily management is mistaking effect and intention. Or in different words: assuming that one's intentions are the same as the effects achieved. Because, when the facts – for example, the reactions of employees – contradict this assumption in the end, one is usually a bit confused: "But I did this intentionally to achieve X!"

Behind such incidents lies the nature of being human: As opposed to animals, we as human beings begin at a very early stage of childhood to understand other people as being just as *intentionally active* as we understand ourselves. The human capability of acting with a purpose in mind, however, leads us to

an incorrect assumption – namely to think that the other people around us “function” exactly the same way we do. People tend to consider their own way of thinking as the “logical” one.

This means: My own way of thinking and acting seems completely logical *to me*. I do this or that because I want to achieve X. As I expect other people to act logically as well, I assume that they follow the same kind of logic that I am following. The truth is, however, that they *do* follow a kind of logic too, but it may just not be the same logic. They are following *their own* logic! Let’s not fool ourselves: There are *many* different kinds of logic. We should never assume that *our own* idea of logical action is the one logic that God has chosen to be the only right one.

Unfortunately, this insight gets us even deeper into trouble. Because: How are we to know how other people function? We may, of course, be able to get to know one person and his logic well enough to know what to expect from him. But what if we are forced – as is usually the case in management positions – to get to know several or even many people at the same time who all function according to a different kind of logic? There are no rules that apply to all. There are, however, some tips that may help in dealing with this diversity:

- Whenever possible, it is worthwhile to attach a kind of *explanatory cover letter* to your decisions explaining the logic on which your actions are based. Not only state what is being done and what has been decided, but explain *why*. This is not about justification but about comprehension of one’s intentions. It is especially necessary to attach such an explanatory letter when you, yourself, find your decisions completely logical and not in need of explanation.
- Moreover, it is necessary to *know your team members* very well. The more attention you pay to how your team – not only your employees, but also your colleagues and boss – react to your actions, the more you learn to understand how they “tick” and in what areas dangerous misunderstandings are the most likely. Do not just wish these problems away but deal with them! If my boss does not like surprises, for example, it doesn’t hurt to inform him prior to my actions about my intentions.
- In medicine, there is a diagnosis called *ex juvantibus* (Latin: out of the effects). This means that the doctor makes his diagnosis based on the effects of his treatment. If the symptom goes away after the patient receives a drug that treats an illness X, it *must have been* illness X. If I, as a manager, pay close attention to the effects of my actions and the reactions to them, I can learn a lot about how the other people concerned function and how I must deal with their kind of logic.

One thing is especially important: Leading is not like teaching, where the teacher knows the answers the students still have to learn. It is not about teaching your employees to understand *you* better. The goal is, instead, to

achieve a way to make the *sense* coming out of *their* logic coincide with the sense coming out of *mine*. I can only achieve this by respecting their ways of thinking, being interested in how they work, being able to listen and not making assumptions about how other people function too quickly. *Communication* seems to be the only solution to solve such problems – if there is any solution at all.

I have to make one *objection*, however. Everything I have said so far supposes that the problem only lies in achieving intended effects. Behind this lies the assumption that the intentions behind one's actions are always clear from the beginning. I seriously doubt that, however. I believe instead, that managers very often do what seems to be the most obvious or fashionable thing to do, or whatever they did the last time, or they do the only thing they can think of – they do not always act according to a clear plan and intention. You devise a budget because everyone does. You have talks with your employees because that has to be done once a year. Or you reduce costs because that's always good. I doubt that there is always a clear and reasonable intention *at the beginning* of every action. Of course, the intelligence of managers is usually enough to invent such an intention afterwards. But whether or not that really was the intention from the beginning is hard to say.

Nevertheless, someone who acts without intention should not be surprised when he does not like the effects of these actions in the end.



My Watch Items:

1.

2.

3.

02 | Continuous-Flow Heaters

Let's for once divide the world into two simple categories: There are people who *work* and people who *lead*. The products we can sell to our customers always result from work. We cannot sell the service of leadership. Leadership only costs money. So how do we justify these costs?

Just as an aside: The fact that we cannot sell the work directly to customers also applies to the work of those people who solely work (and do not lead) because, in many cases, their efforts are a service to others or part of the preparation of other people's work whose products we can finally sell. Examples for this kind of work are the nice ladies at the reception or the precise work of accountants. Their efforts are very important, even though they cannot be sold directly. In this letter, however, leadership is our main concern.

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Among managers – and to these I count *all* people who have at least one person underneath them in the hierarchy – the main task is leadership. Most of them work as well, of course, and in these cases, the same rule applies as to non-leading workers: A part of their work cannot be sold directly (such as direct counselling of customers), another part only serves internal customers (such as their collaboration in process optimizing projects).

For our further reflections, let us block out the issue of work for a while and concentrate exclusively on the part of a manager's job that has to do with leadership alone.

What justifies the pure leadership part of our job – which, as we just saw, only costs and does not earn money directly?

Leadership can be justified when it constitutes an *added value*. It cannot be justified when it merely functions as a *continuous-flow heater*. Let me illustrate this comparison by offering a negative example. Managers who act like continuous-flow heaters do not become active in their leading without input from outside – neither vis-à-vis their employees, nor vis-à-vis their bosses. They only react when they are requested to do so from either top or bottom:

- The classic case in which a continuous-flow heater acts is by an *order from the top*. This can be an aim or task given by the boss, a project or an instruction concerning behaviour. Sometimes it is merely an assumption or expectation read between the lines of what the boss may want to see. This instruction or expectation is then passed on to the manager's team as precisely as possible. By this action, the manager certainly believes to have acted loyally and correctly. Maybe he or she will even add to his or her instruction that the boss wants it that way. That's all good and well. The question remains, however, what this



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Die Führungsbriefe-Trilogie

Führung ist schwieriger geworden. Die Geführten werden anspruchsvoller. Führungskräfte „wissen“ wohl, was sie zu tun hätten – und alle Mitarbeiter sehen, dass sie das dennoch oft nicht tun. Die 3x33 Führungsbriefe von Felix Frei reflektieren Führung im Alltag, im Zusammenwirken vieler, und geben – humorvoll und mitunter provokativ – vielerlei Anregungen.

Was dieser Führungsbriefe-Trilogie fehlt, sind zeitgeistiges Managementgeschwätz und beeindruckende Anglizismen; nicht einmal berühmte Führungshelden werden als leuchtendes Beispiel zur Nachahmung empfohlen. Doch als kritischer Spiegel für Ihre Führung sind die 99 Führungsbriefe inspirierend. Selbst wo sie vorschnelle Antworten vermeiden – die Fragen lohnen Ihnen das Nachdenken.

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Finally, it is thanks to the abundance of experiences in leadership that our clients share with me that I never run out of ideas and issues. For their trust in our work over the past twenty years, I thank them.

Zurich, 1 May 2010

Felix Frei

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