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Felix Frei

Another

33 Leadership Letters



Another
33 Leadership Letters

Wenn Sie den Text auf Deutsch bevorzugen – wenden Sie einfach das Buch.

The Book

Leadership Letters are not the same as leadership theory. They do not offer a collection of recipes of how to lead people correctly either. Instead, they are meant to activate reflection on the topic. This book offers another 33 stations of self-reflection – in succession to the first volume entitled *33 Leadership Letters* (2010) – all of which can be approached individually and in any order.

The Cartoonist

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Felix Frei also wrote: *Voodoo-Management. Reflexionen zum Wandel und zur Führung* (2006), published by Leutner, Berlin; and: *33 Leadership Letters* (2010), Pabst Science Publishers, Lengerich.

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A Methodological Foreword

We, the partners of the AOC group, have been active in the field of leadership development 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, requires a certain openness and readiness to learn – and 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 managers addressed take the letters as a reason to meet up monthly in small 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 or her opinions on the given topic and share personal experiences with colleagues. Leadership development takes continuous efforts and such round table discussions of about one to two hours monthly on the respective topic given in the letter have proven to be helpful and of value to the participants. Needless to say, the author’s opinions as expressed in the various letters are not the only valid opinions one could hold 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/she can, in turn, get an idea of how his/her 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.

What was suggested in the first volume, also applies – *mutatis mutandis* – to the second. Here are four possible ways to work with this book:

1) The texts are accessible to *individual* readings and reflection as and are compiled in a handy format.

2) 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) 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, for companies 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 for a summer break in July). That way, the executives of this company could continuously work on their leadership development for three whole years without expensive seminar arrangements. 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 if this kind of debate colloquium became a tradition within an enterprise.

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Preface

Dear Managers

The methodological concept of the Leadership Letters has, over the past few years, proven to be fruitful. Because of that, *Another 33 Leadership Letters* have now been compiled in this second volume.

I am very happy about that and believe that it shows just how diverse the reality of leadership is, how many different facets it incorporates, and how many issues and challenges it truly holds. It also proves that a considerable number of managers today are ready to reflect upon their profession and main job – i.e. leadership – in a self-critical way.

I have the same wishes for *Another 33 Leadership Letters* as I did for those in Volume 1: Namely 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 put difference in our opinions or my ignorance down to 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 by Silvio Erni's cartoons, but that they help you to keep the topics and your personal thoughts about them in mind – thus enabling you to put what you have learned into practice where it matters, i.e. in everyday management situations.

Finally, I hope that you enjoy reading my book.

Best regards, 

Zurich, 1 June 2011

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34 | Personal Leadership

Leading is not everything a manager does. In a narrow sense, leading people incorporates all the things the manager is personally held responsible for. The scope of this *personal* leadership, however, has shrunk considerably in recent years. There are two main reasons for this:

10 First of all, there are more and more tasks that are part of leadership that have been taken away from managers. Such tasks are being replaced, for example, by formally defined HR processes and are executed by top management for all the subordinate managers once and for all, or, they are being standardized to such an extent that they leave no room for individual style.

Secondly, there are an increasing number of non-managerial tasks that fill up managers' schedules and leave less and less room for *personal* leadership. Such tasks are often part of reporting or projects, due to staff absences, or simply the result of too much e-mail traffic per day. The pressure of these other tasks can sometimes even lead to an inner readiness to have some of the managerial tasks taken away.

But, a person who really wants to be a leader should not give up his core territory all that quickly. And the very core is *personal* leadership.

Even though I am certainly not promoting subversion, I nevertheless ask you to re-conquer at least part of that original territory:

- Stop by your workers' offices every once in a while; don't limit contact to scheduled meetings.
- Talk to your staff about what you expect from them and how you will evaluate their achievements. Do this outside of the regular goal-defining and evaluation processes, for example, when assigning or discussing tasks.
- Don't write an e-mail when a phone call would work too. Misunderstandings can be avoided and it gives you a chance to engage in some small talk.
- Make sure you have all the information necessary to judge a situation. However, also allow yourself to follow your gut every once in a while – but be honest about it if you do.
- Take the risk of causing conflicts; leadership is not a popularity contest.

- Hire people who don't fit the standard profile, who maybe have a few rough edges and may act unconventionally sometimes.
- Take some time to think: without a meeting, without a pad, with your hand away from the mouse, the keyboard and the mobile phone. Put your feet on the table or take a walk; do nothing but think.
- Try doing without PowerPoint for a change. Speak to the audience from memory or keyword notes; it will help you connect to your audience. Encourage others to do the same.
- Accept your personality with all its flaws and be yourself. Do try, however, to make it easier for others to live with those flaws, in particular, by respecting their dignity at all times.
- Take the blame if a member of your staff makes a mistake. You are responsible for their results.
- Don't try to control your career. Be ready to be fired at any given moment. Those who lack courage should not be leaders anyway.
- Show your likes and dislikes; anyone who always reacts the same way to everyone and everything loses credibility in the end, as it seems they don't really care about anyone or anything.
- Allow yourself to have emotions; you're not made of steel. But be sure to apologise if your getting emotional hurts someone else.
- Master the modern work and management tools at your disposal – but don't let them master you.
- Speak your own language. Leave it to the consultants to try to impress people with “management speak”.

Now you're probably thinking: “If I do all that, I'm going to get in trouble.” True. What you will also get is standing, more respect and a distinctive image. You will be perceived as an individual with his/her own leadership style. At this point, I have to add a remark: If you are following the current literature on leadership, you'll know that some old rules of leadership psychology are being celebrated again. Charismatic leadership is now the answer again, and people are claiming that charisma is what makes a person a good leader. Fortunately, that is not true. What is true is that personal charisma can make it a lot easier for a manager, provided he/she has more than just charisma, to get away with the things listed above, especially if doing so brings results. The trouble will

thus be less and the gain somewhat larger. But, charisma is not a skill; it is a gift that renders social interaction smoother – and it's a good excuse.

The point is the following: True leadership is *personal* and it incorporates all kinds of things not subject to regulation, processes or even laws. There is, in fact, a good deal of choice involved in leadership, which depends largely on the personality of the manager (and I do not mean that it depends on random and inconsiderate decisions!). A manager does something because he/she is convinced it is the right thing to do; somebody else, however, might have done something completely different. This breadth of potential action leads to a certain pressure to justify one's own actions and remain credible. Remember, where there are leaders, there are followers! (Allow me to ask at this point: Why should they follow *you*?)

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Personal charisma, an appealing personality, the art of seduction and other similar individual gifts undeservedly distributed by the gods, reduce the pressure to justify. Great! For those who have been blessed. But for those less gifted, implementing a *personal* form of leadership can only be accomplished if they can develop relationships that are stable enough to allow for respect and acceptance even in situations where they have to do things that do not exactly ask for applause.

If you do not want to take the risk of developing a *personal* form of leadership, then you'll remain a king without a country. And then, what good is wearing a crown?



My Watch Items:

1.

2.

3.

35 | Commitment

Of all the values that are listed nowadays in the vision statements of company cultures, the one I personally find the most important is *commitment*.

And of all the “diseases” that contemporary management often suffers from, the one that bothers me most of all is the *lack of commitment*.

Whenever I have a conversation with a manager about the strengths and weaknesses of their team, whenever I help identify company values that might ensure its future, whenever I interview subordinates about their boss – the one thing lamented most is a prevailing lack of commitment. They all wish for more commitment in leadership. So, we all agree.

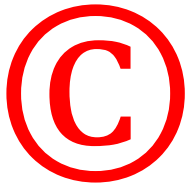
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Why then have I never met a manager who would describe him- or herself as being without commitment? Maybe somebody might say something like “In our company, we are just not quite committed enough in our leadership!” Of course, that person would never include him- or herself in that statement. The quest for those individuals really lacking commitment reminds me of the story where a guest lecturer holds a speech on world overpopulation in the church hall of a village. Dramatically, he cries, “Just imagine! Every second, a woman on this planet gives birth to another child! What can we do about that?” A weak-spirited voice from the back suggests: “First, we probably have to find that woman.”

We often overlook the fact that a lack of commitment brings a number of considerable advantages (at least for one side). As long as I remain vague, I do not commit to anything and cannot be held responsible either. I can leave my options open and wait until I have a better basis for a decision.

Being non-committal is something we only lament in others. We, on the other hand, prefer to be committed and binding *or* non-committal as we please and as the situation requires. No need to point out that there is a logical error in this calculation.

My thesis is that “being non-committal” is not necessarily an attribute of a person or personality, but rather the description of a certain kind of leadership relationship. As with anything interpersonal, no *one* person can be held responsible. As you know, it takes two to tango! For my part in this kind of relationship, there are two things I can do to improve it: Firstly, I have to be committed and binding in my own statements. Secondly, I have to make clear



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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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