



Felix Frei

The Final

# 33 Leadership Letters

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The Final  
33 Leadership Letters

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

### **The Book**

These Leadership Letters do not constitute leadership theory. Nor do they represent a collection of recipes of how to lead people correctly. Instead, they are meant to stimulate reflection on the topics raised. This book offers the final 33 stations of self-reflection – in succession to the first volume entitled *33 Leadership Letters* (2010) and the second volume entitled *Another 33 Leadership Letters* (2011) – all of which can be approached individually and in any order.

### **The Cartoonist**

Silvio L. Erni is a cartoonist and an entrepreneur. He studied economics at the University of Basel and focused, in practice and theory, on personnel management and organizational development. Moreover, he founded the art label *Casa Borsani*, which is based on the idea of finding a bridge between art and economics. In this concept, the creative elements of art and cartoons constitute inherent parts of his activity in consulting and communication. [www.casaborsani.com](http://www.casaborsani.com)

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Felix Frei has also written: *Voodoo-Management. Reflexionen zum Wandel und zur Führung* (2006), published by Leutner, Berlin, which also appeared as an e-book entitled *Vom Mythos der Machbarkeit. Ein Blick hinter die Kulissen von Führung in Veränderungsprozessen* (2011); *33 Leadership Letters* (2010) and *Another 33 Leadership Letters* (2011), 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-seven 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 the *Leadership Letters*, a tool has been developed 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 issues raised 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 effort 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 superiors’ 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 and the second volume also applies – *mutatis mutandis* – to the third. Here are four possible ways to work with this book:

1) The texts are accessible to *individual* readings and reflection 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 that 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 the need for expensive seminars. 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.

It can easily be imagined that it could even be fun if this kind of debate colloquium became a tradition within an enterprise.



# Preface

Dear Managers

The methodological concept of the Leadership Letters has, over the past few years, proven to be fruitful. Now, *The Final 33 Leadership Letters* have been compiled in this third volume and complete the trilogy.

The whole project lasted for 99 months. Apart from the fact that 99 is a satisfying number, there is no particular reason to conclude the series at this point. There is a lack neither of potential new themes, nor desire on my part to keep writing. However, that makes it perhaps an appropriate time to stop, before exhaustion sets in.

I have the same wishes for *The Final 33 Leadership Letters* as I did for those in Volume 1 and 2: Namely that you read one or the other of these letters every once in a while. That you think about the issues raised and form your own opinion about them. That, if you disagree with a point I have made, you don't think of this disagreement in terms of ignorance or wisdom, but as a reason to reflect on how you deal with the issue discussed on a daily basis. 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 March 2014



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## 67 | Platitudes

In the old days, there used to be farmers. And country sayings such as “Red sky at night, shepherds’ delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherds’ warning”. Platitudes, to be sure, but often true nevertheless.

Today there are managers. And while there may not be “manager sayings” as such, if you keep your ears open, it’s astonishing to hear how many platitudes are served up by seemingly well-educated managers wanting to put into a nutshell a “truth”, “benchmark”, “insight” or a “belief”. And such platitudes are often recycled without the slightest critical reassessment.

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Would you like a few examples?

- *Anyone working with me can make a mistake – as long as it’s not the same mistake twice!* On the one hand, I wouldn’t be very amused if, after having had a lung removed instead of an appendix, the head doctor used these wise words to excuse his/her assistant. On the other hand, it’s obvious, actually, that we all make the same mistakes repeatedly; because the things one gets wrong once and then never again are slip-ups rather than real mistakes. In order to learn from our mistakes, we have to work hard on replacing unsuitable models with suitable ones. That is usually an arduous task and rarely the result of a unique insight.
- *My biggest weakness is my impatience!* If there were a translation service for this platitude, it would read as follows in English: “I’m sooo much shrewder, tougher and faster than those around me that they can never hold a candle to me. They’re panting around after me, the poor things. That makes me very impatient. But apart from this trifling matter I really don’t believe by any stretch of the imagination that I have any other weaknesses”. (Except for a practically non-existent reflective faculty, one can’t help wanting to add.)
- *We only want the best talent possible!* Oh, really? Can you offer your employees the most interesting tasks possible? Do you reward them with the best conditions and salaries possible? Is your company really the greatest one around? And are you the best possible boss? One can’t help recalling Willy Brandt when he asked: “Haven’t you got it one size smaller?” Wouldn’t it suffice to have employees that were simply adequately qualified for their positions, and did their work well and with pleasure?

- *There are no problems, only challenges!* If you're really simple-minded enough to be taken in by such nonsense, good luck to you. But please refrain from inflicting such garbage (if you'll allow me to speak plainly) on others – especially your employees. Someone with a real problem – one that keeps him/her awake at night, and one that cannot in any way be regarded as a nice little challenge – should not be required on top of that to “drink the cocoa (s)he's just been dragged through”, to loosely paraphrase Erich Kästner.
- *Anything's possible if you really want it!* That might well be the case. Or rather, there is a certain degree of truth in this statement, as a person with an iron will can indeed accomplish a great deal. The only problem is that such advice doesn't always help in practice because you can't simply want to want, as it were. It's cynical to imply that someone who fails does so merely because of a lack of determination. Apart from that, I doubt that a lack of will is the only thing that prevents most of us from becoming Nobel Prize winners, tennis champions and Hollywood stars.
- *Everyone who works with us must have the ability to think and act entrepreneurially.* Everyone? Personally, I'm happy if this criterion is fulfilled just by a company's management board members. Given the degree of autonomy allowed to most employees, and the responsibilities allocated to them, many cannot begin to behave in an entrepreneurial manner. Actually, one should be grateful if they all think before they act. But even when they think first, they generally don't do so as entrepreneurs (otherwise that's what they'd be), nor do they do so just to serve the interests of the company (which would not require them to think, but merely to be obedient). However, it does fall to the management to clarify entrepreneurial ideas sufficiently clearly that people are convinced by them and that the majority orient their actions accordingly. Simply appealing to people's moral conscience isn't enough to relieve oneself of this managerial responsibility.
- *We're all in the same boat.* Definitely. But have some of us booked first-class tickets and others second-class tickets? Are the lifeboats the same for all the passengers? Is everyone really pulling his/her weight at the oars? Are we all still in the same boat when it comes to the crunch? And have we all got the same sort of parking spaces?
- *People are central to our company's culture.* (Which is why they're always in the way, say the cynics.) – Which explains how so many people actually listen to / read those pithy words of wisdom that managers come up with.

You could of course counter that there's something pernicky about my line of reasoning, as there's a grain of truth in each of the sentences cited above. And you'd be right, without a doubt! Except that the same holds for sentences such as "The earth is flat" or "One plus one is three" or "Men are insensitive". But that's not the point. The point here is that the morsels of wisdom quoted above are produced not by anybody, but by people holding positions at a managerial level. And such opinions are consequently taken seriously. However, while the Pope makes *ex cathedra* pronouncements, statements made by managers are not actually infallible.

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You can never be sure with managers if their "words of wisdom" are intended merely as a little tease or rhetorical exaggeration, or whether they really mean it. It precisely this uncertainty that makes one reluctant to contradict them, which in turn results in the managers starting to believe their own platitudes. The damage caused by such ill-considered statements affects, as always, primarily other people: Please read through the pronouncements cited above once again, and ask yourself which barely hidden, enigmatic message you might understand if it was your boss speaking and if you had to assume that he was being serious.

Unpleasant, no?

Do me a favour. If your boss comes up with one of the aforementioned platitudes, please have a screaming fit on the spot. And should you think of producing language like that yourself, please choke on the words before they leave your mouth. Thank you.



My Watch Items:

1.

2.

3.

## 68 | Unsatisfactory

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A spectre is haunting management: *the war for talent!* One hears the same thing everywhere: Only those businesses employing the *crème de la crème* can survive nowadays. But is that really true? Is there a wonderful world waiting for us, populated only with the most talented employees? Fantastic! I have my doubts, however: Do you really believe that those businesses wanting to employ only the best of the best are also capable of offering the very best tasks and responsibilities? In any case, it is amusing to imagine one highly qualified salesperson politely asking another highly qualified salesperson: “So, when did *you* last turn down the Nobel Prize?”

Of course companies need good, that is, suitable employees – suitable for coping with the tasks at hand and pursuing the stated objectives, suitable for the desired corporate culture, suitable for the teams in which they should become constructive participants. But if the suitably talented individual decides after a year or less to make his/her next carrier jump, this will not further the company’s long-term staffing aims. The result would rather resemble a wild internal job hopping and an intense struggle for jobs when the bottleneck gets narrower towards the top. In other words, it would end up as a fight *between* talented individuals.

Don’t forget what most employees – who know what they are and are not capable of – deduce when their top boss announces that for him/her only the very best talent is good enough: It’s time to look at the job ads...

However, the call for the best talent is not only going out to new employees. Actually, everyone – including long-standing and diligent employees – is to be assessed continually, and those whose performance levels are unsatisfactory must be either helped (via leadership or training) to improve their performance as soon as possible, or, if this cannot be achieved fairly rapidly, replaced. In my opinion, this belligerent call does not correspond in any way to a corporate culture that I consider healthy and sustainable, but I’ll keep quiet about my preferences for now.

What really concerns me, however, is an argument one hears again and again that employees’ performance is distributed according to the famous bell curve, which statisticians refer to as *normal distribution*, i.e. there are a few employees who are top performers, a large number of employees whose performance





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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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