

Leadership and Responsibility.

I am responsible for myself. Every one of us will probably agree with this. For us, this statement is so self-evident that we hardly think about responsibility any more. However, it is quite rewarding to ask oneself how exactly responsibility can be demonstrated. Unfortunately, we often simply delegate responsibility. During the last two years, quite a few people delegated the responsibility for the financial and economical crisis to only one social group: the bankers. The responsibility for overcoming the crisis was then delegated to our politicians.

We will always find someone who takes responsibility for us. The Lord will look after it; the circumstances were against us, the boss, the market, the customers. Success has many fathers, failure has none.

Yet I witness people taking responsibility, instead of shunning it. If you really show responsibility, you, for instance, will not look for excuses, you will not hide. Strictly spoken, an excuse is nothing other than the small sister of a lie. There is a certain charm to excuses: they are convenient and they elegantly catapult you out of harm's way. To be sure, some excuses also pay tribute to politeness or diplomacy.

Those are not the excuses I mean. The excuses I mean are those that only serve to pull the wool over our and other people's eyes. This is where the life lies start. We say it is not our sphere of influence or publicly declare that we cannot do anything about it, anyway, nothing will change. These are the kinds of excuses that try to assign the blame to others. Instead of solving problems, they cement them.

In finding excuses, we show a fake concern. Today, we no longer discern exactly between "I am concerned" and "I feel consternation". To feel consternation means you can feel pity for circumstances in a state of powerlessness. You can organize candle-lit demonstrations and lament the state of affairs along with others. However, if you are concerned, something else is happening: now it is your duty to get active, you have some responsibility.

If you actually show that you feel responsible, you promote clarity in your decisions, in your sphere of influence and in accepting the foreseeable consequences of your actions. People who are prepared to take responsibility and say that they are concerned act.

Taking responsibility is something that happens both actively and passively. Let me say something about the inter-relatedness between responsibility and leadership. Here are some examples:

- Responsibility and trust. Meaning I have to answer the question: How do you have to live responsibility in order to breed trust?
- Responsibility and conflict handling: What will responsibility have to look like in practice so conflicts will not escalate or be brushed under the carpet, but instead be solved?

- Responsibility and sustainability: What will responsibility have to look like in practice in order to ensure the survival of a community or an enterprise in the long run?
- Responsibility and consistency: How about responsibility in order to make certain that all behaviour is consistent?
- Responsibility and efficiency: What about responsibility in the context of orders being executed correctly?
- Responsibility and elite: How can we live responsibility and belong to the elite?

Elite awareness

The fact that the Federal Republic of Germany is now number 23 among the international economic elite shows clearly how little elite awareness we have!! If you promote or even constitute an enterprise climate in which top achievement is no longer appreciated, sometimes even looked down upon, then you cannot be surprised at a lack of elite awareness and consequently sinking productivity, declining importance and a reduced readiness to accept responsibility.

Unfortunately, mediocrity is more and more accepted as the general standard. Today, you can almost say: "I am not mediocre enough to be a success". Let us put a stop to this! A good friend of mine said: "The villain is not the villain – mediocrity is the villain!"

We will probably have to put an end to equalization bred from envy! It is the death of all exceptional achievement and responsibility. Consequently I demand: we should get back to rewarding elite and promote the awareness of the achievement elite and responsibility even more. It might give us the chance not to remain behind when everybody is looking for extraordinary achievements. Maybe we could show some extraordinary achievement ourselves, instead.

The consequence is: if you are elite, you cannot divide responsibility. If you are elite, you know that he who is responsible makes the decisions and he who makes the decisions is responsible.

There is a huge advantage to this. Here is a list of all the advantages gained by taking responsibility in this manner:

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- You get even more independent.
- You advance your knowledge.
- You become even more of a leader.
- You will show even more disciplined consequence.
- You will show even more self-responsible behaviour.

Leadership and behaviour

There are three types of operative behaviour. You can either operate, behave or/and decide. A responsible person operates, instead of just behaving in a certain way.

Where is the difference? If we talk about operating, five principles should be met in order to distinguish between operating and behaviour:

1. The contingency principle/alternative principle: I might have acted differently.
2. The finality principle: my operations are goal-oriented
3. The efficiency principle: something must change, there must be a result.
4. The responsibility principle: there must be a good reason
5. The acceptance of consequences as a principle: I must be prepared to accept the foreseeable consequences of my operative behaviour.

We have seen that a responsible person operates, instead of just behaving in a certain way. The question of responsibility is a natural consequence of this. Please note that there are always two directions of responsibility. Firstly, there is the responsibility for something you have done. Did I think about the possible consequences of my actions before I started, am I aware of possible repercussions? Secondly, there is the responsibility after something has happened. Am I prepared to accept the foreseeable consequences of what I do?

After a lost state election, one of our former Federal Chancellors told his party members: "I take full responsibility". Unfortunately, at the time none of the journalists thought to ask: "Mr. Chancellor, how exactly do you plan to show us what you mean by taking full responsibility?" Someone is taking responsibility if he is prepared to accept the foreseeable detrimental consequences of his actions.

If taking the responsibility is not accompanied by adequate actions, the statement: "I take full responsibility" is nothing but word acrobatics. Responsibility is derived from "response". The question is: who do you have to give a response to? What is the authority you have to answer to? For me, the most important authorities are:

1. Responsibility towards myself.

If I want to determine my responsible behaviour, I have to look into how I treat others, what forms of interaction I offer and how I deal with interaction opportunities. So the approach towards self-responsibility by thinking is wrong. Instead, you have to analyse how you interact with other people. A potentially continued communication that has lasted long enough may put you in a position to come close to analysing yourself.

2. Responsibility towards another or several other specified persons.
3. Responsibility towards the future – what future changes will I initiate now?
4. Responsibility towards the state.
5. Responsibility towards laws.
6. Responsibility towards the enterprise.

Responsibility clearly defines the admissibility or necessity for getting active. Questions are derived from a person's values, and the actions of a person are the answers to those questions. That means responsibility is a response. The question is: what exactly do we have to respond to or take responsibility for? What I mean is not those moments when we are called to take responsibility for having broken a law or such like. What I am talking is the responsibility towards myself, towards my ethical conscience and my duty. I have to be able to answer the question: "What extent of responsibility am I prepared to take?"

There are three ways of taking responsibility:

1. The consequences of my actions, i.e. an ethics of consequences.
2. The intent of my actions, i.e. an ethics of attitudes.
3. The activity itself, i.e. a behavioural ethics.

Where the ethics of attitude and the ethics of consequences are mistaken

The misconception of ethics of attitude lies in the fact that my own attitude is the only thing that matters. Unfortunately, the ancient proverb is still true: “Good intentions are the opposite of good deeds”. The ethics of consequences, on the other hand, is based on: “The end justifies the means”. In the end, this would potentially be an excuse for any behaviour, as long as the result is a good one and ethically acceptable. It contains the great danger that you hide behind a result.

The ethical quality of a decision, however, is in the action itself. It is not inherent in the consequences, nor in the good intentions. Consequently, the only orientation of ethics a responsibility-aware person can accept is that of behavioural ethics. Following it, you do not hide behind intentions or results. Instead, you will take responsibility for all foreseeable consequences of your actions.

All responsibility must aim at clarifying what each individual person has to be answerable for at the rate of a hundred per cent. In order to do that, we first have to clarify what the term means. The leaders in some of the enterprises I counsel agreed on the following definition: “Responsibility is the negotiated agreement to act according to and lend support to a system of values”. In addition, I would say: “Answer for the foreseeable consequences of all actions”.

According to this definition, refraining from actions, too, is an action! “Act according to the maxim by which you could also wish for it to become law” is known as the categorical (unconditioned) imperative by Kant. “Act in such a way as to promote rather than minimize both your own and other people’s lives”, is what Prof. Dr. Rupert Lay postulated.

In connection with this, let me also discuss the aspect of economics and our responsibility towards economics. I am sure we all agree that neither employer nor employee ever aim at being a failure or finishing the budget with a loss. Budget losses endanger the living of the employees in the same way as they endanger the enterprise.

Assuming that all employees represent a family of 2.15, the “total responsibility” of an enterprise with 1,000 employees is for around 2,150 people. They all have hopes, wishes and dreams of living a life according to their very personal orientations. That covers more than just work life. Clearly, a responsible, diligent treatment of financial resources is also immensely important for the future.

For many entrepreneurs, it is a constant challenge to make a calculation that answers to serving the aforementioned duties and still remain competitive, as well as leave enough money for investing in measures that ensure the future survival – also because of the dynamics of very fickle tax legislation. Consequently, what matters is

how we understand responsibility. In that area, Hans Jonas did real pioneer work with his book “Das Prinzip Verantwortung (The Responsibility Principle)”.

The sadly missing acceptance of responsibility in our society made irresponsibility quite respectable. It is a common phenomenon that people make themselves scarce and invisible when they should stand up for their beliefs. But what is the reason for this? As I see it, irresponsibility mostly grows where no conscience is nurtured. Conscience is replaced by the normative power of the factual. You do what you have to do. Since, due to the circumstances, there is less and less room for asking your conscience, it gets less and less important. Eventually, it is replaced by the normative power of the factual.

Irresponsibility, in particular, is nothing other than following the normative power of the factual. Now is the time to free you from this. If you want to escape from irresponsibility, you will have to practice the balancing of value. Value balancing is a method of evaluating various goods and balancing them against each other in a way that makes sure your behaviour and decisions render in the best possible total result under the circumstances. A responsible person will therefore never hide behind practical constraints or inherent necessities he discredits by distancing himself from them.

The ethical proposition

In the end, what remains is the question: what is the denominating factor for ethically motivated behaviour and ethically motivated responsibility? Well, the ethical proposition for responsible behaviour is part of the self-perception of every single leader and every single entrepreneur. It is the proposition of freedom.

Every entrepreneur, every leader prefers to find himself in a world where actions are interpreted like something that might as well not have happened and actions that did not happen are interpreted like something that might have happened. Consequently, no entrepreneur or responsible person wants to live in a world determined by sheer necessitarianism and where the only role left for him to play is that of the one who pulls the chestnuts out of the fire for destiny.

That is why the basic ethical requirement grows from our self-perception: because of the need to see ourselves as free persons, we have to look for ways to design our environment consciously. Otherwise, everything will be left to blind necessity, practical constraints, the accidental law of the stronger, arbitrariness and chaos.

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