

THE ADVENTURE OF WORKING LIVE

“Guess what? When it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you wind up doing, that’s what you’ve wound up doing. Whatever you are thinking right now, *that’s* what’s on your mind. Whatever has happened to you, has already happened. The important question is, how are you going to handle it. In other words, what’s next? (...) In every moment, we find ourselves at the crossroad of here and now. But when the cloud of forgetfulness over where we are now sets in, in that very moment we get lost. “Now what?” becomes a real problem.” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994 p. xiii, his emphasis) (1)

Imagine an airline pilot taking-off in heavy winds or a tennis player serving a match point at Wimbledon or a manager taking a vital decision effecting the livelihood of many people. Whenever you find yourself in a decisive situation that you need to handle as well as humanly possible, you need to fully address what is actually going on at that moment. It wouldn’t help the pilot taking off while at the same time having a difficult argument with her co-pilot nor Roger Federer trying to serve an ace while at the same time thinking about his bank balance nor the manager taking a fateful decision while at the same time composing an angry email to a coworker. They all have to be completely *here now* with all their concentration, motivation and capability in order to achieve the best possible outcome in a situation they consider to be crucially important.

Everyone in an organization can make gestures and moves and at the same time cannot predict, design or control how others understand and respond to these gestures and moves. Although you might act with the intent to create a certain outcome, at the same time you have no ability to control that this outcome will actually emerge. All anyone can ever do is to work with what is really emerging as a response to your gesture in any given moment. All of the above, of course, is true for managers or CEOs as well. Their gestures (be they a new strategic direction, vision, or organizational structure) have possibly more visibility than those of other participants who have a lower hierarchical position, but they, too, cannot design the responses their gestures will create. They are simply, along with everybody else, participants.

The impossibility to predict responses and outcomes, however, does not mean that people should not act with the intent to create specific results. It simply means that we always need to work with the actual response to our moves rather than with our expectation of what we wanted to see. Just like the pilot or Roger Federer, we have to be fully *here now* to work with what is actually happening in order to make the most appropriate next move.

Understanding thoroughly what is actually going on in a specific, critical moment and then acting on this understanding as best as you possibly can is what we are calling the practice

of *working live*. Like us, you have probably experienced countless times the opposite of working live, of facing reality head-on. Based on our experience of organizational life it is very likely that you, too, have participated in one of those typical management team meetings in which everyone was going through the motions instead of addressing the famous elephant, the real and difficult issue that you all knew you should address but did not!

Now you might wonder if we can consciously and thoroughly attend to everything within and around us all of the time? No, that is impossible. There are simply too many sensations, questions, problems, and decisions that assault us at any given moment. We simply do not have sufficient mental and bodily energy to fully concentrate on everything that happens to us in any given moment. Furthermore, the brain is designed to be energy-efficient and therefore likes to avoid doing any heavy work but prefers to use shortcuts, established routines and pre-configured concepts and conclusions.

This means that we must be able to distinguish between those simple tasks that don't need much conscious attention and that are executed well enough by the 'automatic' operation of the brain(2) (like ordering a cup of coffee) and those that we identify as vital or difficult (like deciding on significant workforce reductions) and thus require our absolute conscious attention in order to get them right. *Working live*, thus, is an 'effortful' activity (3) that takes considerable and sustained bodily and mental energy, skill and practice to perform well.

In our experience the fundamental skills needed in order to *work live* well are:

- being present
- being visionary
- being courageous
- being competent

Being present means being aware of what is happening with(-in) us, others and the situation while it is happening no matter what it is without jumping to prejudiced judgments or premature conclusions.

Being visionary means being able to see and express something that isn't there yet but, in your view, could and should be (within the near or far future).

Being courageous means making a deviant move with the intend to 'make things better' that has the considerable risk of uncertain outcomes and/or negative consequences for the acting person.

Being competent means that (in addition to the technical subject matter of your particular job) you are proficient in the following social skills: listening well, asking the right questions, reflecting, thinking together, raising difficult issues well, improvising, and holding your own and others' anxiety.

Working live is adventurous and can be scary because it is a conscious, improvisational and paradoxical moment-to-moment activity of being intentional while at the same time being spontaneous. In short, "No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force." (4) When *working live*, we realize that we have much more latitude in each moment as to what to do next than we often realize. We believe this is so because the continuous and self-organizing processes of our interacting with others have neither fixed steps nor pre-determined outcomes. The movement from one moment to the next is only conditioned to a limited degree by what has gone on before and therefore *working live* is exciting and liberating in experiencing our future as much more open to our creating it.

(1) Jon Kabat-Zinn; Wherever you go, there you are

(2) + (3): Daniel Kahnemann; Thinking, fast and slow

(4) 19th Century Prussian military commander Helmuth van Moltke

All rights reserved (c) 2019 Silke Natschke & Hartmut Stuelten