When it matters most

Leadership communication in critical situations

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When do members of staff most need leadership? What role does communication play in this regard?

In his article on leadership in critical situations leadership trainer and coach Ulrich Geuther outlines the importance of leadership communication in those situations in which success and failure diverge and only the "communication" leadership competence is of any further assistance.
In this regard, as examples he primarily selects communication situations from the cockpits of commercial aircraft in order to clearly demonstrate the consequences of unsuccessful leadership communication.

On 25 January 1990 an aircraft of the Columbian airline Avianca crashed 25 km from its destination of New York Airport[1]. Of the 158 people on board 85 survived due to the fact that no explosion occurred during the crash. The aircraft did not have one more drop of fuel on board.

An analysis of the communication between the pilots and the tower reveals that the Avianca co-pilot did not succeed in making it clear that they were running out of fuel. After Kennedy Airport tower had instructed for the aircraft to circle the east coast for eighty-nine minutes due to bad weather and numerous delays flight 052 was finally granted permission to land. However, strong and unpredictably changeable winds prevented the landing at the last moment. In order to prevent the aircraft from losing altitude the pilot revved the engines and thus exhausted the last fuel reserves. The aircraft crashed shortly afterwards.

During the dramatic final half hour the captain, physically and mentally exhausted by the preceding 1 1/2 hours of flight manoeuvres, launched despairing verbal attacks against his co-pilot. "Didn't you tell them we have an emergency?" he asked on repeated occasions.
However, at no time did the co-pilot, who was responsible for communication with

the tower, mention the word "emergency" to the New York flight controllers, who are well known for their gruff style of communication.
However, the analysis of the voice recorder reveals one circumstance in particular:
A leaden silence reigned in the cockpit for several minutes as if the pilots were resigned to their fate.

The catastrophe of flight 502, which has entered the annals of aircraft crashes resulting from human error, strongly reminds me of the situation of the CEO of a pharmaceutical company who hired me as a coach when the enterprise was staring into the abyss and practically insolvent. He urgently needed help since he – physically and mentally exhausted – was no longer able to rescue his company from the crisis.
The most important features of the crisis meetings between the directors and the heads of departments which had been convened too late and then were never-ending were vehement mutual attacks and then helpless silence. Leadership was no longer in evidence due to the fact that effective communication was absent. Only radical changes in leadership communication made eventually the turnaround possible.

Leadership communication is the key tool at the disposal of managers for ensuring that, in critical situations, everyone remains in the picture and refrains from ceasing to search for solutions, with the result that managers succeed in keeping

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[1] For excellent descriptions of this and the subsequent aviation occurrences see Malcom Gladwell: Outliers, 2008 and P.K. Brandl: Crash Kommunikation, 2010.

the company on course in perilous and turbulent situations.

Let us take a somewhat closer look at the special situations and features of successful leadership communication. Three points emerge as areas for action:

1. Say what's what
2. Define roles precisely
3. Do not lose sight of the overall goal.

1. Say what you mean and mean what you say

This rule of communication sounds banal. Nevertheless, for successful communication it is far and away the most important - and that in both directions: from manager to members of staff and from members of staff to manager.

Candidly and clearly stating what is what does not constitute a positive behavioural trait in all cultures. In cultures featuring a large power distance[2] in which seniority and authority demand explicit respect it is frequently the case that plain-speaking to someone who occupies a higher hierarchical position is deliberately avoided.

However, in critical situations it is essential to state what is what in explicit terms. This applies to both pilots and managers. What distinguishes the conditions in a cockpit from the situation at companies is largely the time perspective. Rarely is it a matter of minutes or seconds at companies.

However, the logic and dynamics of catastrophic developments are virtually identical:

- Changes of perspective no longer occur.
- No one on the management team dares voice objections.

- The decision-maker becomes increasingly isolated, loses track of the situation and ceases using the available resources.
- Communication in the team consists mainly in veiled and open attacks and everyone heads for disaster with their eyes open.

The example of flight 801 of Korean Airlines (now Korean Air and one of the safest airlines in the world) has become notorious. On 5 August 1997 this jumbo jet carrying 258 passengers approached its destination of Guam (a Pacific island belonging to the United States) and prepared to land. Despite bad weather and poor visibility the exhausted captain wanted to undertake a visual approach and landing. The co-pilot and the flight engineer responsible for weather information warned him against doing so.
Co-pilot: "Don't you think it rains more, here in this area?"
What he probably wanted to say was: "The weather here is even worse than before. No way to make a visual approach."
The flight engineer encouraged him and said: "Captain, the weather radar has helped us a lot". What he probably meant to say was: "Without radar, no chance."

A few minutes later the aircraft, three miles from the airport, flew into a hillside and was smashed to pieces. Until the end the captain had hoped that the runway would appear before him.

The captain, who had opted for a visual approach at an early point in time, was not explicitly confronted with other points of view. He only received suggestions, and while it is certainly the case that they can be interpreted as hints in the relevant culture, in an extreme situation in which the primary player has already explicitly opted for an objective mitigated speech no longer has an effect.
We know from perception psychology research and practice that in such situations people systematically block out information which is at odds with their own fixed objectives.
If a crew or team members have not learned to make their perspectives heard and intervene if necessary in order to prevent a catastrophe the actions of the

[2] Geert Hofstede first coined the term power distance. His Power Distance Index (PDI) indicates to which extent a particular culture values and respects authority.
See, for example: Geert Hofstede: Culture's Consequences - Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations, 2001

entire team remain restricted to the captain's perspective.

Thus, a deliberately established communication system featuring clearly defined standards and rules is required to counteract this and encourage team members to voice objections. Such a system exists in those sectors in which it is necessary to put a rapid end to courses of action which are identified or presumed to be false. It is called crew resource management (see box) and is deployed in, for example, the aviation industry, at hospitals and in the fire service.

Thus, for instance, in operation teams at hospitals all the team members are authorized to immediately stop an operation on a patient via a pre-defined formula. If, for instance, a nurse exclaims: "I need some clarity!" (because she thinks that the patient is in the process of having the wrong leg amputated) the surgeon interrupts the operation immediately and the entire team clarifies the situation.

It is now one of the most important leadership tasks to ensure that independently thinking and assertive individuals are assembled in a management team and not yes men or "clones" of the boss who are unable to lend a new perspective to the assessment of a critical situation.

However, exploiting all the relevant skills of team members in order to exhaust a team's overall solution potential during day-to-day operations, and particularly in critical situations, primarily depends on the communicative abilities of the manager. The communicative techniques for this are universally known: listen, ask questions and encourage.

2. Define your role clearly

Managers perform a wide variety of roles every day, e.g. as company spokesman, chief negotiator or an expert for a certain sector.

We have been familiar with the difference between the role of a leader and that of a manager since the management versus leadership discussion at the end of the 20th century[3].

One role allocation of great interest for understanding leadership takes place in cockpits where, the hierarchy notwithstanding, a distinction is made between the pilot flying (PF) and the

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Communication in critical situations: Crew resource management (CRM)

Crew resource management trains the member of a team in clear and assertive communication with the objective of enabling all team members to abort a hazardous operation in critical situations. Crew resource management is grounded on standardized statements which express at various levels that a team member is concerned about the course of events. The following example demonstrates the application of CRM in a cockpit.

The captain is the pilot flying (PF) and the co-pilot is the pilot non flying (PNF).

1. Captain, I'm concerned with...
2. Captain, I'm uncomfortable with...
3. Captain, I think the situation is unsafe...
4. Captain, my control...

If, as the PF, the captain has not reacted after the third level the co-pilot takes over by stating "My control" or "I'm in control". And he is not only authorized, but obliged, to do so.

A level system exists in the cockpit (see box) which enables the pilot non flying; see below) to voice his concerns. And if these concerns are not heard he is authorized and required to take control of the aircraft.

pilot non flying (PNF). As the term indicates the PF flies the aircraft while the PNF communicates with the relevant

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[3] See, for example: Zeleznik 1977; Kotter, 1990 and 1995.

tower (air traffic control) or performs the standard operational procedures (SPOs) by using a checklist to inspect the aircraft's systems with the PF in a fixed sequence.

Who is the ideal player in which role? Or, put differently: when is an aircraft safer – when the co-pilot is flying it or the captain himself? There is a great deal to indicate that we all fly more safely if the co-pilot is the pilot flying. What are the reasons for this?
One important reason has already been explained in the previous section: it is far easier for the captain to assume control from the first officer in dangerous situations than vice-versa.

However, a second reason, which will be analysed in greater detail in the following section, also plays a key safety role in aircraft and at companies: the captain, the CEO, the leader assumes the function of the person who acquires and retains an overview of the situation. The officers can fly and run an aircraft, sail and run a ship and manage and run a company. The captain concentrates on his most important task of determining the course and ensuring that the destination is reached safely.

3. The goal-means distinction: recognize what is really important!

What happens if managers pursue sub-goals as their own favourite goals to the bitter end is revealed by numerous examples from a wide variety of sectors. In the automobile industry the spectacularly failed intention of Daimler to found a global company in conjunction with Chrysler and the attempt on the part of Volkswagen to launch a top-of-the-range model are impressive. Both goals were the favourite goals of those in overall charge: Jürgen Schrempp at Daimler and Ferdinand Piëch at Volkswagen. And nobody was able to stop them (see 1.).
The outcome is common knowledge: it was not until 2008 that Daimler was able to withdraw from the merger, which had cost the German company losses running into billions.

And the Volkswagen Phaeton is still not selling, this despite huge efforts and massive investment (e.g. the "Transparent Factory" in Dresden).

Tragic examples of a fixation with goals which continue to be pursued despite the fact that this course of action increasingly jeopardizes the overall goal can also be found in the airline industry.
On 29 December 1976 an Eastern Airlines Lockheed L 1011-1 Tristar crashed into the Everglades in Florida killing 107 people.
The reconstruction of the disaster revealed the unbelievable: the entire crew (flight captain, first officer and flight engineer) spent a fruitless ten minutes attempting to repair a lamp. It was a signal lamp that indicates whether or not the nose wheel has been lowered. In the process they all failed to hear a warning signal indicating that the prescribed flight altitude had changed and numerous altitude alarm warning signals. One of the pilots accidently collided with the steering column, thus unintentionally deactivating the autopilot facility. The aircraft veered off course and continually lost altitude. When the co-pilot finally noticed that the altitude was not right it was already too late.

You think that that could not happen to you at your company?
Then please recall your most recent management meeting. How was it when, once again, everyone became obsessed with their favourite goals and, subsequently, with detailed questions?

In the case of my coachee, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company in Portugal, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this article, his favourite goal was an extremely expensive administrative building just outside Lisbon. For months on end he devoted his entire attention to the building in order to make it reality against huge resistance. And in the process he failed to notice how the economic and financial crisis was causing him to continually "lose altitude" until, finally, he was on the brink of crashing.
A radical redefinition of tasks and roles at the company was needed to rescue it. Although he did not find it easy, in the end

he did manage to leave the responsibility for the company's sub-sectors where they belonged, namely, in the hands of the departmental heads. He was thus able to focus wholly on moderating the overall processes, the strategic decisions and the important negotiations with the banks.

The changes were assisted by the following measures which were developed during the course of the coaching commission:

- **Establishment of a communication system which was predicated upon the basic rule that all the management team members are entitled and obliged to voice misgivings in explicit terms.** This facilitated the candid exchange of different views. It soon proved possible to generate a plurality of options as to how the company could overcome its financial crisis.
- **Extension to the scope of the decision-making authority of the heads of department.** Systematic empowerment ensured that the transfer of responsibility did not remain an empty shell. All heads of department continually reviewed their departmental goals from the standpoint of the company's overall goal.
- **The CEO undertook to share his own misgivings, fears and all strategically relevant decisions with the management team.** With this voluntary undertaking the CEO left his self-imposed isolation and regularly obtained feedback from his fellow directors and the heads of departments. In consequence, not only were the management team members excellently informed, a basis of trust gradually formed which was also able to withstand threatening and troublesome situations.

Summary

It has become clear that in critical situations leadership is needed which is grounded on effective leadership communication.
The cornerstones of this leadership are open communication, clear awareness of one's own leadership role and responsibility and a goal orientation which never loses sight of the overall goal. Communicative measures ensure that the full extent of the resources of all the team members is invariably utilized. In critical situations leaders demonstrate presence and take the final decision (captain's decision). However, this only functions if all those involved fulfil their tasks and afford consideration to all the important viewpoints beforehand and possible options have been elaborated in advance. A self-confident and assertive management team is necessary for this purpose.
Today, in increasingly complex, dynamic and non-transparent situations, installing all this and maintaining it by means of solution-oriented communication constitutes one of the most important leadership tasks.

The fact that this leadership task can also be performed non-verbally is demonstrated by a final example of an incident which occurred in an aircraft.
It is said of Nelson Mandela[4] that on his election campaigns he used to travel in a small propeller-driven aircraft. On the return flight from an election rally in the country the two-engined aircraft encountered severe turbulence and one o the engines failed. Fear spread through the aircraft, also gripping the pilot. The pilot and co-pilot took it in turns to leave the cockpit and look to Nelson Mandela for help.
He was sat rooted to his chair reading a newspaper and smiling calmly.

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[4] Richard Stengel: Mandela's Way, 2009.

The pilots eventually managed to bring the aircraft under control and land safely. Members of Nelson Mandela's staff collected him from the aircraft after it had landed and asked him if he had had a pleasant flight. Nelson Mandela's face turned ashen and barely able to stand, he declared that the violent turbulence during the flight had made him more frightened than he had ever been in his entire life.

However, he continued by stating that he had regarded it as his duty to refrain from showing his fear in order to avoid unsettling the pilots even more. He had also wanted his conduct to signal that he had the fullest confidence in their abilities.

Leadership communication at its best - and when it matters most.

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