



# Crossing the Rubicon

The Role of Willpower in Leadership

## Introduction

In his pioneering essay "What makes a leader?" (HBR 1998) Daniel Goleman elaborated on the five cornerstones of effective leadership.

While "empathy" and "social competence" relate to interaction with others, "self-awareness", "self-control" and "motivation" describe the inner qualities that a manager must acquire in order to be able to lead himself and others. The focus here is on one's own feelings and the question of how to recognize and control these feelings.

## Thoughts and feelings form a single whole

Thoughts and feelings always go hand in hand; they are a couple that cannot be separated. Yet all of us have already experienced just how far apart they can drift in terms of their content. The heart says "yes", but the brain says "no" – to paraphrase a popular saying that encapsulates how our feelings sometimes try to pull us in a direction that we do not consider sensible.

What is the role of feelings when it comes to taking decisions? Are they a nuisance, do they always just interfere and block smart decisions, or do they also have a positive function?

Psychologists long ignored the importance of emotions in our life. "Totally unquantifiable", asserted the behavioural scientists, "too vague and too complex", claimed the cognitive psychologists. And in the early days of the emerging neurosciences emotions did not play any appreciable role either.

Twentieth-century science<sup>1</sup> conceived

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted in the Soviet Union, such as that of A.N. Leontev, is an exception in this regard. Emotions always had an evaluative function

of emotions as the extreme opposite to reason, and sensible decisions had to be taken without regard to feelings. They were to be arrived at "without emotion".

It was only towards the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century that both the neurosciences and cognitive psychology finally began to address emotions. The work of Antonio Damasio, in particular, showed that emotions are an integral component of thought and decision processes. It is clear from the tragic fates of individuals who have suffered neurological damage to certain areas of the brain following an accident that the loss of emotions may in some circumstances prove a heavier burden than the opposite, i.e. having excessively strong emotions that hamper "rational" decisions. Modern brain research has thus confirmed something that the Romantic definition of feelings would never have considered possible:

## Rational thought is not possible without the influence of emotions.

Emotions handle the evaluation of thoughts and check them against individual and social criteria. Without this prior emotional evaluation of our own actions, we are unable to take decisions that serve our survival and advancement in private and professional life alike. Only in a pathological state, in case of severe mental disorders or where there are injuries to certain areas of the brain, are thoughts and feelings separated from one another. Rational decisions are then no longer possible.

Yet how should we proceed when thoughts and feelings – despite their coexistence – run contrary to one another? And how should we behave when our thoughts diverge in various directions or contradictory emotions make themselves felt?

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here.

## Thoughts and feelings at odds with one another

People in business life often experience conflicts between thoughts and feelings. Yet the solution to such conflicts can by no means be taken for granted – and above all not by decision makers.

This was particularly evident in a coaching that I conducted at the beginning of the year in Nuremberg, Germany, with Max, the owner of a medium-sized business.

In order to lead the company – a toy factory in Bavaria – back into the black, Max wanted to close the loss-making part of the business: the production of hand-painted children's dolls.

The entrepreneur's problem was that it was with precisely these dolls that his grandfather had founded the company at the start of the twentieth century.

In other words, the manufacturing of this product line was a key pillar of the company's identity.

A constant struggle between the need to lead the company into the future with new products, on the one hand, and an exceptionally strong sense of responsibility towards the legacy of his father and grandfather, on the other, blocked much of his energy and to some extent rendered the entrepreneur incapable of decision making.

We embarked on a process of clarification that began by restoring the harmony between feelings and thoughts. In so doing, we pursued three different strategies<sup>2</sup> that for the most part we handled thematically on a parallel basis.

## Restoring harmony between thoughts and feelings

### Issue 1: Mobilizing feelings in support of the goal

The first and decisive step in the process of clarifying thoughts and feelings as part of decision making is to develop a strong target scenario and to review this with an eye to its emotional qualities.

Here are some illustrative questions that can help with clarification:

*What will I feel when I accomplish the goal? What will I be able to say to myself when I reach the goal? What will others say about it?*

*What would happen if I gave up on the goal? How would I feel in that case? How would others look on it?*

*What obstacles do I expect on the way to the goal? What feelings are triggered when I think about them?*

In the case of Max, it became clear during this step that giving up on the goal of closing this product line was entirely unacceptable to him in emotional terms. What is more, in a simulated dialogue with his father and grandfather – who were already dead – he experienced the support of both of them for his intention to save the company by sacrificing the original unit dating back to its foundation.

The impressive closing scenes between father (Burt Ives) and son (Paul Newman) in the film "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"<sup>3</sup> – which we looked at together as part of the coaching session – played a vital part in the emotional clarification of the entrepreneur's goals. He realized that what counted were the messages that his grandfather and father wanted to convey to him, i.e. the spirit rather than the individual concrete legacies.

<sup>2</sup> Bruch and Goshal 2004 also described these three strategies.

<sup>3</sup> produced in 1958, directed by Richard Brooks

## Issue 2: Clarifying feelings that detract from the goal

Uncomfortable emotional tensions cannot be resolved without an intensive examination of one's own, often conflicting feelings. Studies show that numerous projects are never seen through to an end because those responsible fail to confront their clashes of emotions<sup>4</sup>.

Key questions to be clarified:

*What "alternative goals" suddenly appear?*

*For what reasons are they charged with heavily positive emotional responses?*

*How can emotionally negative responses be transformed into positive ones?*

I remember Ricardo, who was seconded to Portugal in 2007 as the representative of an international insurance company; he was charged with putting sales there onto a solid footing. When markets in the Iberian Peninsula slumped - as they did around the world - in the midst of the financial crisis, he lost the support of his head office back in Germany. At the same time he received an unusually attractive offer from a competitor that would have promoted him into a different league - financially speaking.

At a stroke his feelings towards his original task were transformed and took on an increasingly negative color.

We were able to clarify that for Ricardo the sales organization in Portugal represented a personal challenge of such importance that - come what may - he was determined to face up to it. It was now possible to begin with a reframing that put the loss of support from head office in a fresh context. Ricardo defined his task

as pioneering work and came to view himself as an explorer and discoverer of uncharted territory. The negative tone of his feelings consequently changed, and he was able to refocus on his original mission.

In Max's case, the tremendously positively charged idea of making a radical change in his life suddenly came to mind. He wanted to put the factory and his entire entrepreneurial past behind him so as to start afresh again.

The temptation to make a new start was all the more appealing to him because at virtually the same time he was getting divorced from his wife after 26 years of marriage.

Such "flight alternatives" are not uncommon when we find ourselves in emotionally conflicted situations. Here, too, it is vital to identify the feelings involved and explore their significance.

In a process extending over several coaching sessions it ultimately became clear to the entrepreneur that he would unendingly miss his current job. This cleared the way for him to recognize the enthusiasm with which he was still leading his company. Not only that, the more obstacles appeared on his path to the goal, the more vigorously he was able to gather his energies.

## Issue 3: Alignment and flow

In order to achieve complete inner release, to dissolve all blockages and to apply one's own available skills with considerable energy, it is not enough to be aware of one's thoughts and feelings, to clarify them and influence them in a targeted manner.

The decisive factor in the release of unbridled motivation and unshakeable willpower lies in the synchronization of one's own dreams, values and desires, ideas and goals - and in the uncovering of one's very own mission that gives life purpose and meaning.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bruch and Goshal 2004.

In this process of aligning the levels<sup>5</sup> of "environment", "behaviour", "abilities", "values and belief systems", "identity" and "belonging", every energy is geared towards realizing one's own mission and vision. Only in this way do the individual action goals acquire their purpose and meaning and thereby become embedded in a larger higher-order context that extends far beyond just one person.

The most important prerequisite for clarifying and consciously influencing the feelings that emerged in the coaching sessions with both, Ricardo and Max, proved to be systematic reflection on one's deepest and most intensely personal desires. These could then be classified according to the hierarchical system of change levels until all significant conflicts had been resolved.

For Ricardo, the conflict was between his dominant need for challenging situations and his role as a model family man. He resolved the conflict by wanting to set an example for his children in a difficult - indeed critical - situation, in which many others would give up and stop chasing their goals. He felt so at ease in this role as a model warrior that even in the most difficult of times he was able to successfully push through the profitable restructuring of his sales organization - not only in Portugal but also subsequently for the entire Iberian Peninsula.

Max succeeded to reconcile the contradictory values of "maintaining tradition" and "flexibility" because we strengthened the forward-looking role (identity level) of the entrepreneur and his social responsibility towards the employees. In this way, Max was able

to align himself with the ranks of his predecessors (belonging), who provided for others with an eye to their future security.

From this moment on, the entrepreneur reports that he has regained "an immeasurable pleasure" in his work. His own enthusiasm immediately carried over to his employees, who succeeded in overcoming even the most difficult obstacles in the company's reorganization. To this day, managers and staff still speak in absolute astonishment of the utterly inexhaustible energy with which Max handled the initial and most challenging phase of the restructuring.

### **Willpower beyond the Rubicon<sup>6</sup>**

The motivation that comes from within, that does not stop even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, is what we call willpower.

It is a motivation that is not depleted after just a few unsuccessful attempts; rather, over years or even decades it does not allow an individual to lose sight of their stated objective.

<sup>5</sup> These (neuro-logical) levels are taken from Robert Dilts, based on previous work by Gregory Bateson and Alfred N. Whitehead. The alignment of these levels of learning and change constitutes a central element of content for the Gen Re Management and Leadership Course.

<sup>6</sup> In 49 B.C. Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the boundary river for Roman generals, and marched on Rome with his army against Pompey.

Throughout history figures from the most diverse spheres of life and cultures have delivered impressive examples of this type of motivation: we may think, for example, of Nelson Mandela (political leadership), Soichiro Honda (motor industry), the inventors Thomas Edison (light bulb) and Konrad Zuse (computer) or indeed the painter Vincent van Gogh and the composer J.S. Bach.

What all these figures have in common is that they did not let anything or anyone come between them and the attainment of their

dreams and goals.

Willpower comes about when an individual

1. has a crystal-clear mental image of the goal that they want to achieve,
2. takes a conscious decision to pursue this goal until it has been accomplished, and
3. develops strategies to shield their energy and focus from distraction and frustration.

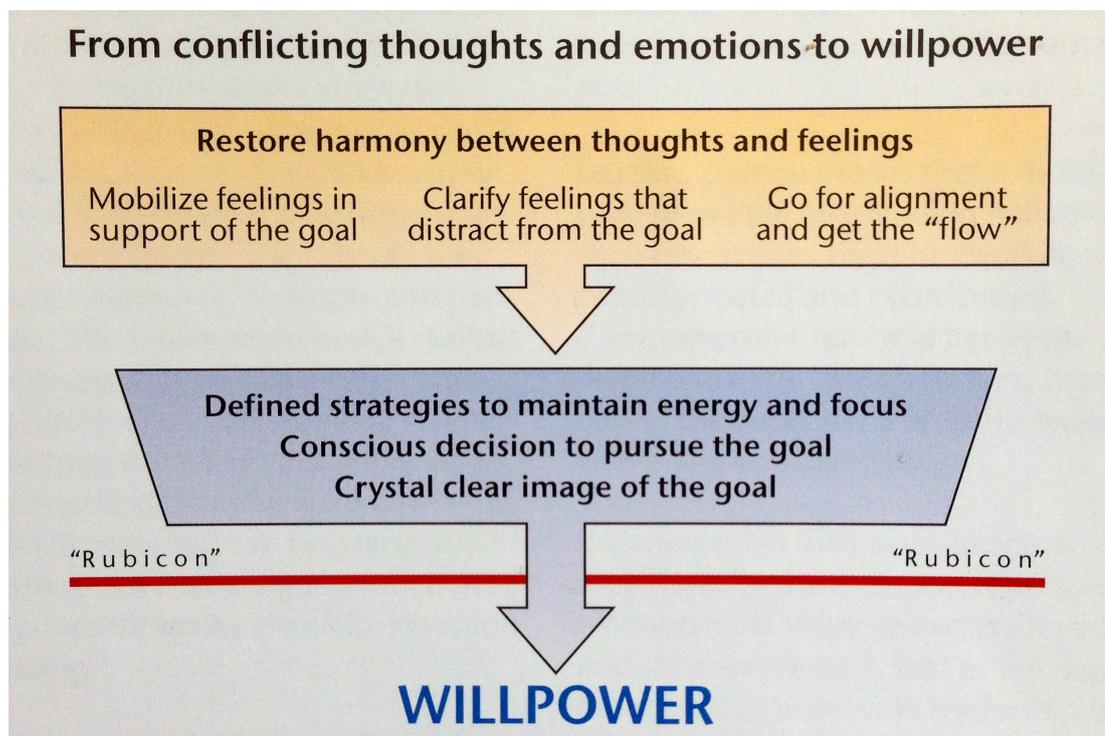


Figure 1: From conflicting thoughts and emotions to willpower based on Bruch and Goshal 2004

### **Willpower as a leader's virtue**

This is the willpower that we expect of managers and leaders if they are to solve the problems of the day and tap into the opportunities of the future.

Unconditional personal commitment to the defined goal means inwardly crossing the Rubicon and leaving behind all other conceivable goal alternatives.

Yet, as we have seen, "alea iacta est" ("the die has been cast") is less a playful process than it is one entailing innumerable internal struggles, in which decisions are made possible by clarifying thoughts and feelings and examining them with an eye to their concordance with one's own core moral values.

In this way self-awareness, self-control and motivation become the basic preconditions of goal-oriented action, the hallmark of which is the special willpower of the actor.

We assess the quality of managers and leaders not least by whether and how well they are able to live up to this.

### **Recommended readings:**

Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal: A Bias for Action. HBS Press 2004.  
Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal: Beware the Busy Manager. HBR 2002.

Antonio Damasio: Descartes' Error. New York 1994.  
Robert Dilts: Strategies of Genius. Capitula 1994.  
Daniel Goleman: What Makes a Leader? HBR 1998.



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