

FOUR LEGS ON A LEAD OR COMMUNICATION BRIDGES

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"Buy yourself a dog and notice how many more people talk to you", remarked a well-known Swiss TV-interviewer to us recently. Apparently, the "four-legs-on-a-lead" syndrome acts as a bridge between people, who would otherwise probably not find it appropriate to exchange words. Such bridges are, of course, particularly necessary when communication is of vital importance, e.g. to a company selling its own products or services.

Widely used communication bridges include Public Relations (recommendations by third-parties), Synectics (the search for analogies in research and development) or the use of a Company Mission (to give common purpose to otherwise independent departments). Despite the increased application of such refined bridging instruments, poor communication quality still cripples many an organization, leading to conflicts, criticism of management-policies, insular thinking, misguided product development, poor attitude, low productivity, worsening image and declining sales. Other companies seem to flourish and are credited for their high market-orientation, high creativity in the form of fast adaptability to market needs and high internal awareness and backing of company-strategies. Such symptoms are reliable indicators of the communication quality of an organization.

A new communication bridge

In solving in-house conflicts between individuals and/or groups, we have come to recognize that the solution process, which involves building a new communication bridge, is often faster and easier in Switzerland than in some other countries.

An example: The head of data-processing of a Swiss airline was on the point of resigning midst in the installation of a new computer system. The loss of this person would have had disastrous consequences for the company: to stay, however, meant an intolerable psychic stress for the person concerned, being the centre of entrenched conflicts and lack of support all round. The intention to resign is in most cases as much an irreversible mental state as is the scapegoat-thinking of others. Nevertheless the building of a new communication bridge resolved the mental states on each side, restored reciprocal trust in a new and deeper form and created a positive working basis for the future. One year later, the team is more content and productive than ever.

So what is this bridge? It is a bridge which finds its expression in communication quality on at least the first two of three levels, the levels of social, communicative and ethical competence. And why is this bridge relatively easy to build in the Swiss and similar environments? Switzerland is renowned for 1) its basic respect for itself and others and for 2) its multilingual and 3) its multi-culture composition (relating to the three levels of competence). These characteristics form the potential for good communication quality and for building a communication bridge.

Malignations of these same characteristics, on the other hand, frequently constitute the underlying causes for poor communication quality.

For example, the characteristic of personal identification and respect (social competence) differ-

entiates the world's best communicators from the worst. The former are at peace with their self-image (cf. Switzerland until recent times), in a way which bad communicators fail to understand. The latter see a greater need to project their own image. They are often busier rehearsing their own next lines than showing interest for other people.

The most serious malformation

The most serious malformation is the sort of high personal identification which leads to separative thinking and isolation, i.e. non-communication. This process often takes place between employees with key functions, between company-departments, between cantons, between ethnic groups and between countries.

To revert the process requires, depending on the underlying culture, between two and five days' intensive training in the three levels of competence, reaching in each case proficiency at the "meta-level". Experience shows that once proficiency in communication quality has been acquired it is irreversible, making future attendance on many management and sales training-courses superfluous. Most important of all, conflicts which later arise can be solved autonomously; secondly, they tend only to be conflicts of a crucial type, those which lend themselves to exploitation for dynamic change.

The meta-level of social competence means that individuals are genuinely interested in other people and their opinions.

The meta-level of communicative competence means that individuals are able to see beyond their own interpretations of what others have said in order to find out what was really meant and why.

The meta-level of ethical competence means that individuals are able to stand above the belief- and value-systems of others and treat them as equal in value to their own. □