

# Dare to Care: Leading through Rapport and Bonding

Professor **George Kohlrieser** from IMD in Lausanne outlines how the cycle of bonding provides an opportunity for goodbyes, loss and dealing with grief, and claims that leaders should not be held hostage by their past experiences if they want to bond with their employees.

Interview by **Riet Fiddelaers-Jaspers, Jakob van Wielink and Leo Wilhelm.**

Leaders, according to Professor George Kohlrieser, are only able to challenge – in other words to dare their employees to reach their maximum potential – when their caring for those employees is high enough. In 2014 we met Professor George Kohlrieser in Lausanne, at the High Performance Leadership (HPL) programme he directs at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD). From his bestselling *Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance* and *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential Through Secure Base Leadership* (Kohlrieser, 2006, 2012), we got to know George as someone who places bonding between leaders and employees at the core of his work on leadership.

## **BONDING AND LOSSES: A CHALLENGE FOR LEADERS**

‘Caring’, in Kohlrieser’s view, involves more than just ‘taking care of’, in the sense of providing the right conditions. He really means the care stemming from emotional engagement, i.e. based on rapport and bonding. The ‘cycle of bonding’ that George works with is the foundation of the *transition circle* or *cycle of bonding* that we ourselves also use (Fiddelaers-Jaspers, 2011; Fiddelaers-Jaspers & Wielink, 2012; Wielink & Wilhelm, 2012). To be able to engage in these bonds, every leader may be confronted with their personal bonding history which determines how they can become a ‘secure base’ for someone else.

*A secure base is ‘a person, place, object or goal that provides a sense of protection, safety and caring and offers a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk-taking and seeking challenge’ to someone. (Kohlrieser, 2012, page 8).*

‘Grief’ is much broader than covering the loss of a loved one: it also encompasses our emotional reaction to other significant losses, including those at work. Grief – allowing emotional reactions – gives room for new bonds. The HPL leadership programme that we observed has the ‘cycle of bonding’ running through it as a central thread. In the ‘grief’ session within the programme, Kohlrieser takes the group of executives through the phases of the cycle, enabling them to draw leadership lessons from their own experience of grief.

## **TAKEN HOSTAGE**

George Kohlrieser is an American clinical and organisational psychologist. He has spent years as a hostage negotiator for the police and was himself taken hostage four times in the line of duty. When Kohlrieser talks about his hostage negotiations, it brings the adrenalin of those moments right into the room. In his leadership programme Kohlrieser draws on the hostage situation to teach the negotiation skills and the relationships you have to build – in a very short time and under high pressure. This is not just an exciting illustration, but also demonstrates that we always have a choice: between positioning ourselves as a victim of circumstances, or trying to overcome those



circumstances for the benefit of personal growth.

In this process, 'bonding' plays a major role and is perhaps the most critical factor in the 95% success rate of Kohlrieser's hostage negotiations. While you would definitely not invite a hostage-taker to your dinner table, you still have to create a bond with them. Kohlrieser draws a parallel with the people on your team: *you do not have to like someone to bond with them*. He challenges leaders to ask themselves what past experiences are holding them hostage personally? How does this keep them from getting the best out of themselves and the organisation?

### TEMPTING LEADERS TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE

It struck us that in communicating about the leadership programme, no publicity is given to the underlying theme of loss and grief. Kohlrieser says 'The programme has been running for more than ten years, with the theme of grief always at its core. Indeed, we don't particularly advertise the grief aspect. Through word of mouth, everyone who registers has already heard that something special happens on the programme, something that you have to join in and experience for yourself. People do not tell others what this is, so the content remains a surprise.

'Besides that, IMD is a strong brand, and we mostly promote the program as being based on emotional intelligence as the foundation of personal leadership. We bring people back to themselves. Within the program, we always provide the safety that facilitates such a process. This is done in small groups, each with their own coach. Participants are always being offered a choice as to how far they want to go in the process. Through loss and grief, we offer people a way back to joy and pleasure. The program always has a waiting list.'

### WHAT DOES THE PROGRAMME STILL BRING HIM, NOW THAT IT HAS BEEN RUNNING FOR SO LONG?

Kohlrieser comments 'My reward is knowing that there are "better" people and, consequently, better leaders coming out of the program, as a matter of fact even the quality of their parenting improves. I experience this when people are able to get back to their own happiness; by letting them work with their loss experiences. I have suffered losses and I am able to live without regrets. Even though there

are things I could or should have done differently with respect to my family, my children, where I'm coming from. Despite that, I am 100% happy.

'My friendship with Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross\* helped me tremendously in the period when my son died. I was working with her and a personal



friendship was born out of this. My work is based and builds on her insights. I have expanded the phases around loss and grief she identified and I use them for my leadership program in addition to the "cycle of bonding." All programme participants eventually embrace the theme of loss and grief, although the extent and depth differs from person to person. Yet participants consistently evaluate the topic of "secure base leadership" as the centrepiece of the program.'

### DEVELOPMENTS IN THE US AND EUROPE

It seems strange to us that new insights on loss and grief at work are coming from the US, where the practice of dealing with those insights is often contentious; their work culture remains hard and emotion is easily dismissed. So how does that fit into the message that we should create personal relationships and bond at work?

Kohlrieser reflects 'Americans bond easier and also more loosely. They have an attitude more focused on mobility. Socially speaking, people are much more close-knit in Europe and grief digs deeper when bonding is deeper. This can also be explained historically; because US immigration has been a huge movement where people were both geographically and socially tremendously mobile. There was simply no time

\*Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is the renowned author of *On Death and Dying* (Routledge 1969). Through her work with the dying she created a taxonomy of loss and the grieving process.

to grieve what people were leaving behind; they had to work hard “the American way” to achieve the “American dream.”

‘This development is also reflected in the change of “lifetime employment” to “lifetime employability.” This development is not necessarily negative. The cycle is becoming shorter, one runs through it faster. But that’s a development that also has something positive. The “bonding” in the circle is not about the length of time, but about the ability to be truly present.

‘High performance leaders’ ideal is to inspire the people around them to become leaders as well, and saying goodbye is always part of that. When we say leaders need *secure bases*, it does not mean that they should be overly caring. The balance between caring and daring is always meant to fuel “daring.” When nowadays the cycle is being run through quicker, this does not mean the “bonding” is shallower. That is the challenge of our time with changing labour and psychological contracts: –

to continue developing and keeping up relationships at work without loss of depth.’

### THE EXECUTIVE AS THERAPIST?

Finally, we asked Kohlrieser if he had executives who want to work with this theme from a therapeutic perspective? His view was ‘I do not work as a therapist when I do work on grief. The point is that things such as “unfinished business” become visible and can be discussed. I am a clinical psychologist, but that is not where I am coming from when I work with grief in organizations. Leaders are not therapists, but they have to take the time to get in touch with their people when losses are surfacing, and speak with them.

Over time, it is about the choice they have to hold up to their people: you can either get started with your loss and make the transition from victim to survivor, or stay in your loss. However, a secure base leader does truly bond with their employee, and a choice then arises for real.’



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Riet Fiddelaers-Jaspers specialises in loss and works as a trainer, consultant, coach and therapist. She is CEO of a family business. She has authored many books and is a highly sought-after speaker. Riet is affiliated with the Center of Excellence ‘Dealing with Loss’ and with Land of Grief Academy/Opleidingen Land van Rouw.

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### REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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