

No baby without a mother, no leader without a context

Jakob van Wielink and Sijtze de Roos interview Professor Manfred Kets de Vries of INSEAD business school on what makes a good leader in organisations.



“I have seen too many organisations like concentration camps and as Thoreau once said: the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”. Drawing on his background as psychotherapist, Kets de Vries writes about what seems most elusive in working with leaders: the irrationality of decision making in organizations. To

demystify this and to gain insight into what makes leaders tick, Kets de Vries studied what he calls the ‘inner theatre’ of leadership.

Manfred Kets de Vries is one of the most influential management thinkers of all time and is visiting professor at several universities worldwide, including Harvard Business School, McGill University and École des Hautes Études Commerciales in Montreal. From economics Kets de Vries moved through organisational sciences to psychoanalysis. Using psychoanalytic insights, he focuses mainly on the relationship between leadership and organisational dynamics.

He responds to our question about good leadership with a smile: “No baby without a mother, no leader without a context. Sure, we do have images and beliefs about the kind of leaders we would like to see, but the leadership style you often find is not at all the style you would prefer. The question we should ask ourselves is simply where - in which organisation – would we like to see our children work?” This basic question can also prompt reflection in leadership development programmes.

The value of coaching to leaders

How about coaching? Could it be useful? Kets de Vries says: “Executive coaching may help to develop a certain openness to express oneself. The coach, therefore, automatically resembles a psychologist. However, should we go deeper into possible distinctions between coaching and psychotherapy, we run the danger of entangling ourselves in a murky mess of conflicting definitions. Strict distinctions between coaching and therapy will lead us nowhere, because these really have much more to do with border management by the coach and with the demarcation of his or her comfort zone”.

“The exciting thing about our profession is that we often simply do not know how the people we are confronted with perceive and experience reality.

What is going on in her head? How does he experience the world? I remember a situation in which I found myself looking for ways to get to know more about a client. I decided to meet his wife. A classic psychotherapist would never do that, but I found I needed a reality check. How true is what this man tells me and, more importantly, what about the *sustainability of his context?* After all, no baby without a mother ...”

The need to know yourself

“To get this far with your client, you need to be *credible*. You have to know about organisational structures, how organisations work. Yet, in coaching executives it is just as important to be able to discuss their dreams and ideals with them. This also means that a coach should be clear about his own. What is my vision, what brings me into this business, what do I want to achieve? All in all, we cannot do other than turn to our own sources of inspiration.”

Sources of inspiration for Kets de Vries are, among others, Henry V as he emerges from Shakespeare’s famous play; Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy; and Nelson Mandela’s appearance in the film ‘Invictus’ (2009). He vividly recalls, for instance, one particular scene from that movie in which Mandela visits a training session of the national rugby team of South Africa - the Springboks - to wish them success. Mandela climbs out of the helicopter and knows each of the (mostly white) team members by name. He shows genuine personal interest in and pays ample attention to, each and every one of them. In doing so, he demonstrates the importance of symbolic leadership. The Springboks subsequently won the 1995 Rugby World Cup Tournament and thus made a significant contribution to regaining national pride.

What makes a reliable executive coach?

Kets de Vries responds “However simple it may sound, the most important factor is the ‘click’ between the client and his coach. The coach should be able to make his or her client enthusiastic, to enrapture and arouse them to a higher level of awareness. At the same time the coach should avoid too much eagerness. Here I refer to the financial interests of the coach, which may very easily cloud his or her perceptive abilities. Also, they should be aware of their own ideals”.

Working with teams

In recent years Kets de Vries has begun to work more and more with teams. He sees this as possibly one of

the most important ways to achieve healthier organisations. “Team coaching,” he explains, “is a choice methodology to help people move from vision to action. Vision without action is a hallucination. The bottleneck in far too many organisations is lack of action. There are also, of course, economic reasons: it simply pays to work with teams. However, of more importance is the fact that teams retain their status as groups on average longer than leaders retain their function as manager”.

According to Kets de Vries, most teams fail to reach their targets because of the predominant idea that “Humans are rational beings. On top of that, when they form teams, managers generally do not sufficiently account for the subtle influences of complex group dynamics on human behaviour. Let us look at the hedgehog: an animal that, just like us, feels the need for company yet wants to keep proper distance at the same time. This tension is the main reason why teams so often fail to cooperate successfully. Team coaching may help team members to show themselves more vulnerable and approachable, and so understand each other better and to cooperate more effectively. In many cases, top executive teams are *unnatural acts*”.

Leadership requires an increased level of sense-making

When it comes to leadership, there are other developments to consider. “We have entered the internet era” Kets de Vries continues, “and that demands even more from leaders. They urgently need a firewall, a *Cerberus* to contain, for instance, the ever-growing stream of emails. The sheer overload of information makes it more than ever necessary to delegate, to rely on employees and to ensure that the team can perform well. This requires an increased level of *sense-making*. Leadership certainly includes enabling and enhancing team-spirit. And let me just add - as I have repeatedly said before - that six-figure ‘top salaries’ tend to seriously undermine team spirit.”

Lessons for leaders and coaches

What does Kets de Vries learn from his executive coaching practice? “It does not look very well, I fear.”

I still see many CEO’s who are self-destructive and who generate very little real team spirit. As for coaching, I generally do not have any answer whatsoever to the questions clients pose, which is why I let these rest. It is far more fruitful to find the right questions than the right answers. When I coach teams, it regularly happens that I look around and ask myself ‘What in heaven is going on here?’ Then I just wait. Waiting is the art of letting the answers come up”.

We inevitably arrive at the subject of narcissistic leaders; a topic on which Kets de Vries has written several highly-successful books. Since becoming a grandfather he enjoys observing the behaviour of babies. “Babies,” he says, “already show full-size narcissism. It is the task of parents, teachers and educators to properly channel this narcissism and lead it in the right direction, for instance by encouraging experiments and rebelliousness. If we transfer this insight to learning in classrooms and training retreats, we can put this vision into action by creating a *transitional space* in which participants are tempted and stimulated to venture out of their comfort zone.

“To create such a *transitional space*, it is always important to let your client set the agenda. It then comes down to creating sufficient space to make a ‘*rapprochement des fantaisies*’ possible. The fantasies of client and coach meet each other”. In this way we enter the *inner theatre* of the client, as Kets de Vries so aptly calls it. This ‘inner theatre’ includes our dreams, drives, motivations, perceptions and expectations as well as our ideas, hopes and scenarios about our relations with others and the world around us. “Most people are strangers to themselves” he says.

At the close of our conversation we speak of the *meta-values* we need to shape our profession as coaches and to support leadership. Which meta-value is important to Kets de Vries? His answer is “Hope. Hope that we can be free, open up, do something worthwhile, that we can love somebody”.

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