

Leadership – How Does Successful Leadership Work in Times of Change?

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Challenges for Leaders in Today's World

The digital revolution has changed our world – 'VUCA' – the conditions which now shape the lives of many people worldwide. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. In order to competently master challenges related to work structures and health, the increase in mental illnesses, the shortage of skilled workers or taking responsibility for one's health, healthy leadership is considered a key factor.

In addition to the conditions just described, there are countless ecological, economic, political and health challenges. How can managers remain strong or be strengthened in the VUCA world? How can one lead successfully in a time of permanent change, and how can one meet the current challenges as a manager?

In the context of these developments, work contexts are increasingly becoming a playing field characterised by an 'atmosphere of survival mode'. One component of this everyday struggle for survival is the occasional verbal gaffe by managers, which are not only or exclusively directed at employees but also includes themselves. In particular, the traditional understanding of leadership does not allow for weaknesses, uncertainties or even unpleasant emotions, and managers are often their own harshest critics in silent self-talk.

Self-leadership dialogues express themselves, for example, in the form of harsh self-criticism, doubts about one's own abilities, fears about the future, an exaggerated sense of responsibility or even constant competition-like comparisons with other colleagues. Who likes to make mistakes voluntarily, even if a culture of failure is now officially propagated as good manners in companies in the sense of an innovative learning atmosphere? Research shows that Germany ranks second to last in terms of error culture in an international comparison with 60 other countries. According to the study results, how a person deals with themselves and others

when mistakes are made is crucial. Constant self-criticism can work in the short term in individual cases, but in the medium and long term, the person runs the risk of massively undermining their self-confidence and developing fears of loss and failure (Moore et al., 2018).

Particularly in today's VUCA world, where change is the only constant and new challenges are constantly arising, this does not appear to be an effective prerequisite for successfully dealing with or surviving in a leadership context. The reasons why the human brain tends towards perceptual distortions and self-criticism are evolutionary. If a person feels threatened or in danger, they will attack themselves or others to save their own skin. This reaction is controlled by the limbic system, which is evolutionarily one of the oldest parts of the human brain. As the centre of emotions, this system usually acts unconsciously and at lightning speed. In conjunction with the release of various messenger substances, such as noradrenaline, adrenaline and cortisol, this system ensures human survival in the face of existential threats (Gilbert, 2013).

In today's working world, however, threats are rarely of a physical nature; rather, they are directed against one's own self-concept, which in today's transformative times must repeatedly be called into question. Unconscious reactions such as self-exploitation (= fight mode), avoiding contact or issues or sitting out (= flight mode), or permanently putting yourself in a catastrophic scenario (= freezing mode) are quite common among managers today.

In times of constant change, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a manager to recover and thus to sufficiently shut down and calm down the brain and the entire nervous system. The fight mode, in the sense of harsh self-criticism, represents a protective mechanism to secure one's own place in society or to defend one's position in the company. Attacking oneself is often accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame. The fear of making a mistake is more forgivable for the person concerned than feelings of shame, which massively attack one's own self-concept. In particular,



leaders with narcissistic traits tend to use maladaptive stress management or coping strategies compared to people with lower expression levels. Studies show that one's own vulnerable tendencies can cause leaders to react to failure with suppression or aggression. If this form of stress management becomes a habit, such behaviour can make you ill in the long run.

Why (Self-)Compassion Makes Sense in the Leadership Context

Jon Kabat-Zinn has made mindfulness socially acceptable in the West with the development of the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) training concept (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). However, despite its many positive health effects, according to numerous researchers, mindfulness alone is not enough to break out of the daily stress trance. If you want to take effective action as a manager, you need another component in addition to mindfulness as a foundation, namely kindness. A study shows that only the combination of cognitive and affective reactions to individual stress experiences forms an emotionally motivating effect as a prerequisite for effective action (Bornemann & Singer, 2013).

In the context of stressful situations, it is important to first consciously perceive them in order to then not unconsciously switch to autopilot mode but to enter into a friendly dialogue with oneself and calm down. In concrete terms, this means putting yourself in a good state in order to enable effective action. Since the positive effects of emotion regulation are undisputed, according to research, it must become indispensable in the future for the rationally oriented world of work and management to include feelings in the (self-) dialogue (Neff, 2003). In connection with self-compassion, which can be described as a form of conscious and friendly treatment of oneself when experiencing unpleasant feelings or conditions, such as pain, worry or stress, three core elements of self-compassion can be identified according to Neff (2003):

1. **Mindfulness** (cognitive level). At this level, it is about observing thoughts and feelings in a non-judgmental way, without suppressing or exaggerating them. Regular practice enables you to adopt a balanced attitude of open and non-judgmental attention towards yourself and others.
2. **Kindness** (self-kindness) (affective level). Instead of condemning yourself in difficult situations, you should try to be warm. This is characterised by friendly acceptance rather than self-criticism and anger.
3. **Common humanity** (relational level). At the relational level, the primary focus is on creating a sense of connection and recognising uncomfortable feelings instead of isolation.

Leadership Messages in Times of Change

The studies conducted in recent years show that leadership with (self-)compassion has significant positive effects in relation to the demands of modern leadership in the VUCA world. (Self-)compassion is, therefore, a better motivator than self-criticism and offers the necessary prerequisite for change. According to science, leadership with compassion can be seen as a compatible alternative to the struggle for survival at the management level (Heretani, 2023).

Regular practice of (self-)compassion, practising the ability to deal with one's own feelings as well as with the feelings of others in a mindful, friendly and integrating way, and thus helping to alleviate one's own self-critical experience, creates the conditions for effective action, more resilience, more authenticity, more modesty, a higher degree of interconnectedness and more creativity.

Compassionate leadership can, therefore, be seen as the basis for healthy and viable ecosystems. Unlike leadership models and theories of the past, leadership with (self-)compassion includes unambiguous leadership messages in the sense of an orientation aid without playing down or ignoring the stress experienced.

The duality of the (self-)leadership messages makes them particularly interesting for practical use in the context of leadership development, as they focus on both alleviating suffering and creating well-being and offer an integrated practical approach. Consequently, compassionate (self-)leadership offers clear and practical leadership messages that can be directly implemented in practice as a guide for positively oriented interventions without ignoring the emotional stress experienced.



Outlook

In conclusion, it is to be hoped that companies and organisations will also take up the (self-)compassion concept and implement it in the context of leadership development. In addition, in the context of the VUCA world, modern leadership ties in with various topics such as flexibilisation, the blurring of boundaries through conscious regeneration management, for example, or co-determination in decision-making

This means that the prevailing cultural, social or organisational conditions in the respective work areas must be taken into account, and, in some cases, essential changes must be made. Successful and healthy leadership can, therefore, essentially be understood as a modern corporate or organisational development strategy with the aim of strengthening health in the workplace, improving the well-being of employees and preventing illness (Blattner & Mayer 2018, p. 22).

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Dr Barbara Nuetzel obtained a Diploma in Business Administration at the University of Augsburg and continued at the European Business School Munich, where she obtained the degree of Diplom-Betriebswirtin (EMA). In addition to completing yoga teacher training in 2005, Dr Nuetzel obtained a Bachelor's degree from the Deutsche Hochschule für Prävention und Gesundheitsmanagement (DHfPG) in 2009 and a Master's degree in Health Management in 2013. In 2023, Dr Nuetzel completed her doctorate at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences of the Eberhard-Karls University of Tübingen on the topic of 'Stress and its impact on the mental health of elite athletes – an analytical overview'. Dr Nuetzel's current research focuses on mental fitness, health management, stress management, and coaching.



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