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Courage is Humbleness

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Let's not fool ourselves!

Those who demand humbleness in management today have the applause on their side – and reality against them. Especially in top management, there is a deep gap between propagating and practicing humbleness. Overcoming this gap would require above all one thing: Courage! Why? Because humbleness is too easily and mistakenly confused with a lack of ambition and weak decision-making – a devastating judgement for every manager.

The diagnosis is clear: In our time, which is characterized by disruption and uncertainty, it is a fundamental mistake to counter the loss of old certainties with false self-assurance. Twenty years ago, management researcher Jim Collins developed the leadership formula that ensures long-term corporate success: the paradoxical combination of immodesty in professional ambition and personal humbleness. It is not self-confident, heroic leadership that is the answer to our disruptive times – but the courage to take on a self-confident "immodest humbleness".

What does courage to be humble in management mean – in action?

It means a deep change in self-perception – the conscious abandonment of perceiving oneself the measure of all things. Our times of disruption require...

- Courage to not know and to unlearn the fast, routine judgement;
- Courage to attribute success to others and failures or mistakes to oneself;
- Courage to create followership for a purpose, not for oneself;
- Courage to understand oneself as a learning experiment and to leave the personal comfort zone;
- Courage to take off the armour of self-protection, to allow doubts and vulnerability.

For the CEO, this means an "inner parting" from the traditional claim to superiority and a fundamental transformational step from the dominant Chief EXECUTIVE Officer to the serving Chief ENABLING Officer.

"Humble people are admired – if you ever hear of them," essayist E.W. Howe concluded cynically.

And rightly so: personal humbleness does develop its relentless power only in combination with immodesty in ambition – that is a fierce will. Thus, the VUCCA world requires also...

- Courage to formulate bold disruptive ambitions – without clear forecasts;
- Courage to question business models fundamentally – especially the successful ones;
- Courage to endure innovative experiments – with an open outcome;
- Courage to focus on long-term success – not short-term results;
- Courage to test new forms of cooperation and partnerships – internally and externally.

But do they really exist, these "immodest humble ones"?

Are they again just such a homunculus from the laboratory of management thinkers with little practical experience? One of the most successful CEOs of recent years is an outstanding example – and even in management circles not everyone knows him. Within four years, Satya Nadella has transformed Microsoft from a stumbling software dinosaur to a global leader in cloud-based, AI-driven business models – with a market capitalization of more than 1 trillion US-Dollar. His recipe? Humbleness and empathy as a person paired with immodesty in his ambitious thrive to innovate and transform the company.

Learning from Satya Nadella: Being a "Humble Revolutionary" – that could be the attitude of the successful manager of the future. Without courage this won't be possible: "Deep down, many people believe that if you don't win, you will lose," says management thinker Edgar Schein. And he's right: "I'm not opening a flank – others are only taking advantage of it," we hear again and again. In the belief that there is constant competition between managers, humbleness is often perceived as a flaw. In the eyes of most managers, it makes them look weak and vulnerable where demonstrative strength seems to be required. It is the personal courage that decides, especially in the top management: Are you self-confident enough to meet your own fear? Dare to act with a fierce will while acknowledging your own vulnerability – be courageous!

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Kai W. Dierke and Anke Houben work as a duo in leadership consulting for the C-suites of leading corporations in Europe. They are “panoramic” senior professionals: Building on 20+ years in the business, they embody a unique blend of experience in executive positions, knowing the boardroom from within, strategy consulting expertise, and coaching + leadership development practice. They founded DierkeHouben Leadership Partners in 2003, a Premier Leadership Coaching and Development Boutique for C-suite leaders and top talents stepping up to highest leadership roles. Their clients in coaching and consultation on leadership, team performance and culture transformation are board members and top teams of Euro Stoxx 50/ Dax 30 companies as well as mid-cap companies – covering a broad range of sectors like financial services, telecommunications, technology, pharmaceutical industry, transportation, consulting, and public sector. As a quality leader in their field, they do not limit themselves to any single school of thought or method but provide multiple lenses and leverage their access to latest academic and empirical research for the benefit of their clients. Both are Adjunct Professors on Leadership Experience at the international HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management. They publish regularly in Harvard Business Manager and other professional Management Journals. Their recent book: *Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt*. To be published in English in 2020: *EXECUTIVE RIVALS. How to build Great Leadership Teams where Collaboration is hard*.

Prior Kai was Member of the Board of Winterthur Group, being responsible for European Marketing + Sales, as well as Member of the Executive Board of Credit Suisse E-Business. He started his career as a consultant with McKinsey, focusing on Financial Services and Strategy + Organization.

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Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt, Campus

«This book sets new standards: It not only gives access and offers a deeper view on the top management level of corporations. Beyond that, it is written in an appreciative style describing top managers with their deeply human strengths and weaknesses. Top decision-makers will recognize themselves with great benefit. Based on real life case studies, DierkeHouben illustrate how their approach serves to analyze highly complex leadership challenges and to find a productive way forward. With their profound knowledge of the state-of-the-art literature on management and group dynamics as well as their know-how of the daily reality in top management – a rare asset – they provide vivid insights into cases of success and failure.»
Review: «Erfolgreich in eisigen Höhen», *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*