

## CHRONIC CHANGE FATIGUE SYNDROME

*Change, the much praised corporate mantra for survival, turns into a problem when change never stops. Today's corporations are dominated by meaningless activity and unremitting pressure for success. That certainly establishes lofty targets, but fails to define routes for achieving them. The main thing is to be seen to be doing something. Pressure builds up, as do fear and mistrust. Betty Zucker shows how this vicious circle leads to chronic tiredness right up into the top levels of management, and prescribes antidotes to stay fresh and awake.*

For a long time many people hoped that: "after the umpteenth reorganisation things were going to settle down". There would be time to look after one's clients, those being handled by a call centre based somewhere on the Scottish Moors. Back to reality: these hopes were just fantasies, reality is different. States of exceptions aren't exceptions, it's now the rule. Forget about the business of business being business: the business appears to be change, continuous change. And how this influences corporate stability is illustrated by the examples of billions of dollars invested in highly ambitious plans.

As a change consultant, I'm finding myself more and more applying the brakes. I look for keystones that maintain stability, so that the system doesn't keel over. Early symptoms of instability are to be found in Zero-Content Communication, where reading between the lines becomes a core competence for employees: "Management must set itself new challenges" or "We perceive the opportunities, but need to keep an eye on the risks". Weasel words and phrases such as "one", "maybe", "in fact" or "perhaps" pop up with increasing frequency. There's no time for thought, nobody takes a stand, everything becomes relative, and when it comes to future strategy everybody's telling a different story.

## CORPORATE QUICKSILVER

The results of this instability are substantial. Pointless activity spread over several months leads to week-ends without a break, and exhausted, and often resigned, managers. The customers of a firm – which parades under the claim "High-Speed" – switch over in the click of a mouse to the competition, because it takes 3 months to get a reply. Potential investors ask themselves whether they have put their money into a trading company, a bank, a hedge fund or just into a write-off. Corporate quicksilver.

That mirrors a fundamental loss of orientation. What remains is pressure for success, which certainly sets out lofty targets, but fails to define pathways for achieving them. Managers, customers, investors, the media, the public all demand more: higher salaries, increased output, more growth, more networking, more global responsibility. Success is defined as doing something faster and better than others. "It doesn't matter what the result is, the most important thing is to achieve milestones", was a complaint I recently heard from a team leader. Owing to the fear of failure, fear of missing opportunities, corners get taken too fast, tasks get done superficially, but always faster. The main issue is "doing something". That calms the conscience, proves initiative and can-do qualities and earns brownie points.

Nobody asks what has *not* been done, or what the costs of not doing things are. Are people aware of what they haven't done? Or what they so brilliantly avoided doing? Like really clarifying strategy and goals or properly finishing off and evaluating projects? But that becomes ever more difficult. Overlapping projects hinder measurability. Accountability, assigning results to individuals, taking responsibility for yourself and others, all these fall by the wayside. Not always to the disadvantage of the the change manager.

Work pressure builds up, as do fear and mistrust. A vicious circle. When success isn't immediately to hand, which rarely happens, empty verbiage replaces content. Which leaves unanswered questions looming ever more menacingly.

**HEAD DOWN AND GO!**

Head down and go! The young swiss middle distance champion Anita Weyermann won spectators' hearts and the winner's medal with this simple phrase. But later she collapsed. In the long run she simply wasn't capable continuously to spur herself on to more and more success. Some top managers experience the same thing after their first successes: the excitement, the adrenalin and the highly regarded "wow-factor" of a start-up burns out. They rub their glassy eyes. They're tired, chronically tired. From chronic change.

"Wanting to be the best" is insufficient for sustainable top performance. "Creating the future" – who's still wants to hear this in today's corporation? Communication from top management is perceived as

“opportunistic” or “untruthful”, and their ever-so-carefully crafted PR wording is rumbled and revealed. The result: demotivation, managers putting the brakes on. The rhetoric of power, setting ever higher demands when face with powerlessness or indecisiveness, adopts ever more elegant language while becoming less and less convincing.

Priorities change by the hour. A phone call here, an e-mail there, then a megadeal, and the power constellation looks different. At the next strategy review, where participants are asked to “reinvent themselves” old headaches emerge: the merger with the competitor that that never got properly digested, the hole in the pension funding, the exodus of the brilliant IT team, the death of the visionary chief shareholder, or the end-year bonuses drowned in options. Efficiency trends toward zero. “Meetingitis” takes over. Power Point Presentations are power pointed, of course in landscape format, and they go the way presentations usually go. Projects follow each other like one autumn storm after the other, new ideas get thrown up, but the damage caused by the previous projects first has to be cleared up. Is the result really in line with expectation?

#### A QUICK TOUCH-UP

Too many things have gone wrong, too many losers still wend their way through the corridors for us to assume that change is always positive. Another “re-presentation”? Another façade, another logo? One more disillusion? “A quick touch-up” was what a CEO called it: what the second hand car salesman does to magic an old banger into looking like a smart saloon. But who cares? So that the change machine keeps on running, you do your best, you do what others do. Me too. The result is what you see on the late evening flight to London, Paris or Frankfurt. Grey men talking with grey ladies, discussing grey products. They’ve borrowed their identity from the same corporate identity firms who’ve been busy serving up their clients with the same key words and the same logo (with that dynamic upswing at the end of course). If only one would be the right one.

The increased need for reassurance slows down the processes. When everything has been discussed and compromised, when all those outdated structures have been updated and re-introduced, they’re all out of date again. Maybe corporations use these paralysing toxins as a kind of self-preservation. When for example, after Enron, Moody’s decided

to review a firm's credit rating, the cost of finance goes up. Or when the logistic magic bullet of "Just in Time" gets transformed into "Just in Case" to take account of new security measures, stocking and transport costs go rocketing up: for the US it's going to cost an extra \$65 billion in 2002. Heavily touted "Economies of Scale" mutate into "Diseconomies of Change".

"I'M JUST FED UP TO THE BACK TEETH!"

The permanent sprint into the future leads to confusion today. Not least the morale in the corporation has changed: changes don't fail because of "resistance amongst the middle managers", they fail because of the people doing the change. Because experience tells that tomorrow yet another new direction will be announced, the energy needed for change dries up, well before the driver has set the course for the next chicane. "I'm just fed up to the back teeth!" is what you hear from all sides. People develop backache and become unable to read a book from cover to cover or even complete an article in the newspaper. At home, they become dead-end couch potatoes, unloved by their spouses. The gap between expectation and reality, between doing what you can, and doing what you know you ought to, irritates, drains. Insidiously. Till sleep is disturbed and finally comes the rude awakening: "What am I doing?"

In bottom-line oriented corporations greed - or more often a seemingly irresistible pressure for success - overcomes fear, the guardian of conscience. Even instinct. Common sense no longer functions sensibly. Business at any price? - "we've got to do that, to keep revenues in line". Pushing the envelope on data protection or compliance? - "you have no choice". The collective tranquilliser is well-known: "everybody else is doing it". And does it really pay - from a sense of loyalty and corporate identification - to put your finger on a sensitive spot? "You must be nuts, you can't do that" is what many husbands hear from their wives. Whistle blowers rarely climb the corporate ladder, their glory potential is limited. "Many get stuck on the sidelines and then get outsourced. First they lose their jobs, then their wives," commented a director of a large insurance corporation.

People know intuitively where the red line is drawn. It signals missteps, but many no longer pay attention to the signal. Like the high performance sportsman on drugs. Continuing to play the game, crossing

the red line without a murmur, runs the risk of obscuring the difference between deed and result, between importance and urgency, between creativity and criminality. There remains the hope that not everything will go wrong, as a CEO recently said: "... that your kids ask you later, Dad, why did you do that?" That saps confidence, it costs energy. No wonder that retirement beckons longingly, preferably at 45. Or a second career, "in which you're finally free", as the ex-CEO of a bank, who'd just bade goodbye, recently said to me with a sigh of relief.

Necessary – certainly not. Consolidation, implementation and reliability are often more important than "new visions". People yearn after a clear line that permits projects to be taken to visible conclusions, enduring achievements. They long for sustainable results.

"The soul walks". The old saying has found a home in the top levels. We work twice as hard as ten years ago, and at least once a week are told to "buckle up your safety belts and stow your tables in an upright position" and the New York Stock Exchange is handling a million transactions every minute of the day. It's not the fastest technology, nor the most efficient form of project management, which spurs the soul. A researcher told the "global leaders" gathered, limply exhausted from all corners of the world, at the World Economic Forum that receptivity declines by up to 90% after a long haul flight. Lasting developments need time. Executing decisions can't be done between a couple of meetings. What is required are determination, persistence and presence.

## "TIPPEX" MANAGEMENT

Management that concentrates on the essential is neither "lean management" nor "management by love" nor "management by objective". The latest title or craze can be tippexed away. It's precisely what's simple – leadership – that's so difficult. Simple, because leadership begins at home: by what goes on in the real world, beyond spreadsheets and overheads. On the floor, in production or in the store. A department store manager observed: "our directors couldn't do a decent job of filling the shelves with black socks, they never go shopping themselves, they haven't got the faintest idea how things look here"

So that both object and people don't collide with each other, they've got to fit to each other. Consistency is needed more than ever. Whoever

isn't completely exhausted senses immediately whether "it makes sense". Making sense makes sense. What's self-evident becomes more important than ever: following a path, not always saying something different, calling people in the office by their names, saying "hi" to them, recognising their contribution to success, and certainly without a "hidden agenda". Or in a discussion with a customer saying a word about their kids or sport without keeping an eye on the watch.

But be careful: top management is carefully observed, whether by other managers or by customers. Does the CEO's body language match his words? From communication to conception? Style and content? Does the strategy fit the structure, the people their allotted boxes in the organisation chart, do the bonuses and the demands fit the results, and does the corporate identity match the product? And not least: does what's self-evident to each member of staff, does that fit his or her job function? Should the private banker become a product pusher, an investment adviser or a comprehensive financial adviser? Does the bank see that in the same way as the individual. Does the job fit the profile?

Put otherwise: more reality, less simulation, please. Two simple words belong: yes and no.

NYET

We all know from which political corner "nyet" came from, but I still plead for the magic word: "no". Make it a cooperative "no": always uphold your self-respect. Resistance is important for survival, resistance generates friction and energy. Say "no" to excessive work load which makes it impossible to complete a job. Say "no" to quick agreement to lazy compromises or to simple explanations for aberrations, "no" to hallucinatory synergies from reorganisations. Say "no" to okaying that new product or packaging when you know it's going to bomb. Above all say "no" to decisions that run counter to your intuition. Acknowledge those red lines your inner self tells you not to cross.

Those red lines can be based on various reasons: they show where knowledge and competence don't stretch. They show unambiguously when you can't trust a client, a credit, a so-called specialist or anybody who overrates himself. Or they show you when you haven't yet done this or that for whatever very good but difficult to express reason. Or that you've tried it and it hadn't worked. Sure: a "no" like these can be

dismissed as “creativity killers”. In the past, they often were. But we need to reconsider these “creativity killers”: these voices are heard too rarely now. People at work are getting younger and younger and the length of time on a given job ever shorter. There’s always a new after-shave fragrance wafting about the top management floor. Only few know what has been tried, with what success, and now under different flags the same mistakes get made. Of course “asap”.

Show the style of the Style Investor, who’ll reject, often for completely irrational reasons, a proposed investment. Or say “no” like Porsche which has never built a volume car, and refuses to publish quarterly results. Just say “no” when you feel a lump in your throat which tells you something “isn’t right”. “Who can afford that?” I get asked by slightly resigned executives. Let’s be blunt: who can afford *not* to do that? But apart from the fact that you don’t want to become the subject of your own observation, and falling victim to your own self-fulfilling prophesy, you should first say “no” where you can afford it the easiest. Keep it sweet and low, in small groups. Test drive the track. You might find it bigger than you think.

## “YES”

A good start is half the battle. But nevertheless the qualified “yes” is difficult enough because, in spite of careful preparation, you don’t know how decisions will work out in practice – just like the marathon runner: three quarters of the way through, it feels as if there’s still half way to go. You need confidence in your own intuition, in your inner conviction, the spark in your eye, which makes the effort for the “yes” worthwhile, to get things going. Only when things still make sense a couple of days later does the process of orientation start, because everybody understands and can stick with the approach. That also means saying “yes” to clear responsibilities, so that it’s clear who’s saying “yes”. Accept also that saying “yes” doesn’t exclude failure. Without falling into depression or self-pity or deviating from the goal. Only those who are able to lose can win.

Defining attitude requires clarity. That’s risky. Clarity requires thought and personal integrity: a personal sovereignty, a personal declaration of independence. A clear awareness of what you are, what you want and what you can do. That provides the strength to evaluate things according to your private standards, to set your own milestones,

undeterred by contrary winds or changing weather. To decide what change makes sense, what change doesn't, and where it pays to invest effort. Because you know that there are no free lunches and nobody gets everything. Your solid groundwork, your vigilance and your consequent approach gives shape, orientation and focus for the necessary energy to be generated and used.

Now there are opportunities to take up a position. A unique position. The fatigue is gone.