

NEXT CULTURE WORK:

4 Essential Components for More Liberty in the Workplace

In the hallway of a company the following dialog recently took place: „Hi, how are you?“ – „Thanks, now I’m feeling great. I am on my way home taking a vacation. So I am free.“ This is a sentence you hear quite often in one or the other way. It seems as if people were longing for freedom they don’t find at work and thus mainly chalk it up to leisure time and vacation. Liberty in the workplace seems to be a paradox in itself in modern business. Although some employees experience a kind of freedom in the way that they can act and decide rather autonomous in their scope of work, most of the employees don’t feel free at work.

Yet the freedom of being and creating is our human temper. Human beings are designed to fly, create ideas, form visions, try new things and “play”. However this is mostly suppressed in the business world. Those who would like to express themselves in such a way fit neither into the norm, nor in clearly defined job descriptions, time measurement systems or target settings of top management. The ideal employee is *flexible and adaptable*, which mainly means that they should behave adaptive. Adaptive behavior shows in the way that a person fits to rules and specifications, giving away their powerful authority, i. e. their so called center, in order to feel safe.

Giving away the center is the cornerstone for loosing liberty. To function in a context of hierarchical rules is opposed to liberty, creativity and empowerment of employees. Upon starting to work in a seemingly monetary safe job, the level of freedom and creativity degrades considerably so that the passion, enthusiasm and motivation lack in the end as well.

Sir Ken Robinson, an English author, speaker and international advisor on education in the arts to government, non-profits, education and arts bodies, investigated deeper into this topic. In a long-term study he found out that the level of genius decreases massively from childhood to adulthood. According to his study, 98% of the children are born gifted, they are child genius. After school, the amount of child genius has dropped to 2% and upon entering into the business world the number decreases to less than 1% (Film tip: Alphabet).

Since the focus in economy is on profit and competition the first answer of many HR directors to the question „What should the ideal candidate for your company be like?“ is mostly very short “performance-oriented”. If you want to stand your ground in an organization you have to effect performance, but at which price?

Ofentimes the price employees pay is the one of liberty, creativity, passion and enthusiasm. In modern society it is top priority to have a job which is bearable and acceptably paid in order to fit into the society image of a proper citizen and to be able to afford the things the media make us believe we should to possess. If the job is on top kind of fun, then this is really great. It is therefore not surprising that many employees don’t feel free and try to compensate the missing liberty and creativity at the end of the day through sports, painting, dancing, singing or other activities (supposed they still have enough energy for that). Some people at a certain point even

take several weeks or months off – so called sabbaticals – to recover and be free at least during this time. Yet you have to earn this vacation the hard way. It seems to be necessary to make sacrifices in order to feel free for some weeks.

The patriarchal, hierarchical business world with the focus on performance and competition does in fact promote that the level of freedom at work increases the higher you get on the job ladder. Yet, this is an illusion which perfectly serves the purpose to stoke the competition thinking among employees. Companies also try to offer a certain kind of freedom in the form of monetary or material incentives, such as bonuses, company cars, gliding times, company shares etc. In the end however, these kinds of incentives are rather regarded by many employees as „damages for pain and suffering“ for the lost, free lifetime and the lost creativity.



Today liberty often means to be free from work, free from rules and control and to have the possibility to do what you want to do. Since liberty and creativity are mainly suppressed in the workplace, the freedom many employees are looking for in their leisure time is to a certain degree irresponsible, since it is totally egoistic and mostly regarded as compensation for a performance oriented job. The purpose is to finally be free, break free and leave the job behind. However, with regard to this kind of freedom people in daily life – i. e. while they

are at work – are mostly so called victims of circumstances and accept that they are cut back, standardized and limited. Thus the phenomenon of employees doing something really wild, sensational, great and extraordinary during their vacations is widespread. The idea is to hook into the experience of freedom as much as possible. The interesting thing to consider is that this kind of freedom is a pseudo freedom. People surrender to the illusion of being free during their vacations, but it is in fact just a short-term escape. As soon as the vacation is over they go back to „prison“, i. e. back to work.

What if more liberty in the workplace was really possible? What if you would not have to wait for your next vacation in order to feel free?

To dig deeper it is interesting to think about what liberty actually means. According to the German Wikipedia liberty is *the possibility of choosing and deciding among different options without constraints. The term defines (...) in general a state of autonomy of a subject.*

If you translate this, it means that a human being who is free is

1. centered,
2. authentically in the Now,
3. uses the power of choosing,
4. takes over radical responsibility.

When taking a closer look, it becomes pretty clear that these four components are rarely supported in companies. The crux is in fact that employees taking these components to heart turn into a threat for the hierarchical leaders. As soon as employees revive these qualities they become „dangerous“, because they no longer fit into a standardized system and can no longer be manipulated.

What do these four components mean in particular?

1. Being centered

As mentioned before the cornerstone of losing liberty is that many employees give their center away, i. e. their authority and power. What actually is the center? On the one hand we have a physical center, which is situated in the middle of our body. It is not movable and helps us to keep the balance. On the other hand we have a so called being center. It originally has the size of a grapefruit and is movable (you can imagine your being center like an energetic round ball). In daily life many people put their being center into their head. They think about e. g. a certain problem, what they still have to buy, whom they still have to call and which appointments they have. Our working world is pretty much top-heavy. Giving the center away means that a person gives their being center to another assumed authority, e. g. the boss, the colleague, the customer, etc. Why would they do this? Well, because it is comfortable, they don't have to take responsibility or make decisions and the other person takes care of them and doesn't become dangerous.

The thing is this: Nobody can steal your center. Another person can invite you to give them your center, but giving it to them is a thing that only you can do. And this mainly happens unconsciously. In the modern business world focusing on performance and competition, there are ongoing invitations, especially from leaders or colleagues, who like to surround themselves with followers so that nobody can oust them (these are so called Gremlin leaders, i. e. people serving unconsciously shadow principles like competition, manipulation, degradation and arrogance). You probably know situations where a boss enters the office door and all present employees stop what they are doing and look up to him. Maybe you have also experienced that somebody did not take a clear stand, although something was obviously not okay. There are many examples for situations in which people give their center away. You can also give your center away to the time, a project, the circumstances, to the future or to past events. You even give your center away when you automatically smile to a person passing you in the hallway (probably just to be nice although you don't feel like being nice).

Employees can get back part of their freedom by learning how to be centered. Being centered means that you use first of all your attention to figure out where your being center is and then consciously use your intention to bring it down onto the physical center. This takes a certain practice, but is really worth it. Centered, grounded employees keep their authority and thus their full power. They don't behave adaptive anymore. True leaders (in contrast to Gremlin leaders) would actually not allow anybody to give them their center, because their purpose is to empower employees so that they can responsibly make decisions on their own.

2. Being authentic in the Now

A second essential component to conquer natural liberty again includes being authentic in the NOW. Being authentic includes two aspects.

On the one hand it means to become authentic about your own inauthenticity. There are things or situations, which are totally acceptable for us and those, which are clearly not acceptable at all. However, between these two clear poles there is a vast gray area, where many people are not authentic. This means that they say YES although they mean NO and the other way round, mostly because of fear of the other person's reaction to an authentic answer. In this case you also give your center away to the other person. In order to gain your freedom and personal power back it is essential that you become authentic about your own inauthenticity. When, how often and with whom do you tend to not be authentic (and give your center away)?

On the other hand authenticity means to access the power of conscious feelings. In the working world feelings are a taboo topic. Modern society has been training people in assuming that feelings are not okay, especially not at work. Feelings are unprofessional. Anger is considered to be e. g. destructive, sadness drags others down, fear is weak and too much joy is childish. Fact is though that feelings are neutral energy and information that serve you in life and also at work. To dig into this topic would go beyond the scope of this article. (*You find more about this topic in the book „Edgeworker: Leadership is over – it is Time for the Management (R)Evolution“ from Nicola Nagel und Patrizia Servidio or in the book “The Power of Conscious Feelings” by Clinton Callahan*). To regain your freedom definitely includes accessing the power of conscious feelings to be able to authentically be in the NOW. As soon as you learn to be centered, you automatically start feeling more, because you become present in your body in the very moment.

3. Using the Power of Choosing

Another step along the way towards more liberty lies in using the power of choosing. Most of the people are not aware of the fact that this is a true power. Choosing also means deciding. Yet, employees are often denied especially this aspect. Instead they are restricted in the way that they can only choose within a very small scope of duties or the decision is left to the top managers. In many companies patriarchal management styles have lead to the fact that employees actually don't dare anymore to make decisions on their own, but instead adapt and knuckle down (which again means that they give their center away). How often have you for example heard from employees the sentence “I don't have any other choice”. In fact you have a choice. Nobody can take away your power of choosing. You can choose any time for no reason and you can even choose from what is not offered (just think about your next visit in a restaurant. You could pick something that is not on the menu). This is powerful. Employees who have unlearned to choose and make powerful decisions become victims of the circumstances and thus very easy to manipulate.

4. Taking Over Radical Responsibility

The fourth essential component for more liberty in the workplace refers to taking over radical responsibility. When you take over radical responsibility you can no longer be a victim of circumstances, because then everything that you find in your surroundings or what happens in your office or project is your responsibility. If you are a victim of circumstances you again behave

adaptive (and thus give your center away). As soon as you take radical responsibility you become flexible, movable, and free. Taking radical responsibility does not mean that you take the guilt of all failed actions of others on your shoulders. It is about changing perspectives. When you take responsibility for a situation then you can also change it. As a victim of circumstances you are trapped and cannot bring about change.

If for example something is going wrong in a project, because the customer made a mistake then you can take radical responsibility by asking yourself what your part is in this and whether you could give the customer more clarity to avoid such a mistake in the future. Or when you are in a meeting and the CEO obviously asks something from the employees which is not acceptable, you could take radical responsibility by trusting your anger (or sadness, or fear), keeping your center and making a boundary to the CEO (and bear the consequences). Take a look at your working life (or at your life in general). If there is something that is not the way you would like it to be, ask yourself the question how you arranged it that this could happen and what the benefit is (probably it is comfortable, you don't have to take responsibility or make decisions, you get attention, etc.). Radical responsibility at first doesn't seem to be fair, but it gives you a probably unknown degree of liberty and power, because with this attitude you can no longer be victim of the circumstances.

If employees conquered these four components for more liberty in the workplace again, a great shift in the working world would be possible. With more liberty also creativity, enthusiasm and motivation to go new ways comes back; new ways to a more humane, sustainable economy in which the human being counts again. Are you in?

Best wishes,
Yours Nicola Nagel