

NEXT CULTURE WORK: Time for Deceleration – A Shift to *Being With*

Living and working in modern society increasingly seems to amount to insanity. Never before did modern economy face that many sick days of employees caused by stress or burnout. A big impact has in that case modern communication, which has by now reached scary dimensions. About 25 years ago, when the age of the Internet just started, the purpose was to simplify the communication and data processing by the help of digital media. However, the “simplify” has turned into an acceleration in communication that has by now become questionable and actually has noxious effects on health and society. The original idea of exchanging information efficiently in order to make life easier and disburden people has vanished. Instead an email madness and ongoing social media contact stress has developed. This is neither good nor bad, it just produces certain results.

Many people have literally turned into slaves of modern communication or make themselves slaves and can no longer live without smart phone or laptop. Time saving has turned into time stress. People mail, chat, post and skype. Thanks to Internet, email and smart phone almost every person is available at any time. The exchange of information has massively intensified and electronic media are used to an extent that each individual has less time than before. Recently a man returned from a 4 week long burnout cure and was supposed to return to his regular job a couple of days later. He said: “I am already afraid of returning. When I get back to work there will be approximately 1200 emails waiting for me. If I answer them all, I’ll be ready for the next burnout treatment”.

Since it is so easy to quickly send an email or WhatsApp, it is as easy to put several people in copy. Especially in strict hierarchical structures – like most modern companies have – it is common to measure the importance and significance of a person based on the fact whether they are in copy or not and at which position they are named in the copy list. Another phenomenon is that emails are widely used to make sure to “have a clean slate” and safeguard everything in order to avoid a conflict afterwards or protect oneself from colleagues and customers pretending that things were agreed differently. Very popular are in addition those kind of emails, in which 2 two people have a ping-pong conversation and put 20 more people in copy so that it is ensured that the others know exactly about the reactions and words of the 2 players. Another very smart strategy consists of putting oneself in perspective. Recently the director of a small company mentioned that he regularly prepares emails in the evening to then send them early in the morning at around 6.30 a.m. when his alarm clock rings. Upon seeing the sending time the colleagues get the impression that he is very active and diligent and already working that early.

However, not only the flood of messages is a problem. What oftentimes goes along with the distribution of messages is the tacit expectation that the recipient answers immediately. We live in the electronic age, don’t we? It actually happens regularly that people collect resentment, when a person does not answer immediately. In numerous companies this expectation has even expanded so that employees have to be reachable during their holidays or at least answer all emails within 2 days after their return. To actually avoid such a message flood after their holidays employees

voluntarily pay the price of having their laptops and smart phones available during their holidays. In this case the status of a person is also measured by the number of calls they get from colleagues during their holidays. Those who have to be contacted often are so important that they are indispensable.

This is exactly the vicious circle: Those who get and send many messages and are constantly available seem to be important and consequently get recognition and attention from their fellow human beings. If they in addition look stressed and act accordingly, they usually get even more attention. Therefore it has become desirable in modern society to be as stressed as possible. Consequently many people work even harder, send even more emails and post even more on Facebook and Co. so that they get assumed attention. And – just as a side note – only when you are stressed you are „allowed“ to get sick and take a break. However, when you look behind the façade, it is about nothing else but fear; the fear of not being recognized and not being seen. When you start breaking this even further down it is last but not least about not getting enough love and not being part of a community. To frame it drastically, you could say that behind all this is the fear of dying, because this is exactly what happened in former times, when people did not belong to a tribe and were not surrounded by tribe brothers and sisters.

Over and over again it is about the topics of attention, recognition, appreciation, love and being part of something. It is a basic instinct to be part of a community.

Yet, the feeling of being important and getting attention by permanently being available and in contact with many other people via email or social media is an illusion. It is an illusion, because real intimacy and contact are avoided. The personal, nourishing and fulfilling time with other people gets lost. It is true that due to the social media many people have the impression to be in contact with many other people, but what kind of contact is this? No matter whether you take a look at people's working life or private life, in meetings or in restaurants, people are busy with their laptops and smart phones instead of being in contact with people sitting across from them. However, an electronic contact is no substitute for direct personal contact. It is therefore of no surprise that more and more people feel cut off, not only at work, but also generally in life. As big as the benefit of electronic communication is, it brings us more and more away from ourselves, other people and the Earth.

So now what? How can we proceed from there?

Think about this: In the past it took a week to send a letter to a recipient. Times were much calmer, slower and people talked more with each other and spent time together. This is not supposed to be a pleading for abolishing electronic communication. However, it is worthwhile to consciously consider the following questions:

1. What is your true purpose when communicating electronically via email and smart phone and
2. Which feeling comes up when you think about drastically reducing the communication or even no longer being able to use electronic media?

Two frequent answers are these:

- If I reduced my electronic communication drastically I would be afraid of no longer being important, missing something or no longer being part of society.
- I would be afraid that others could have a problem if I they didn't get message back from me or only days later and that they could consider me as not professional or trustworthy.

To antagonize mental illnesses, superficial quickness and arbitrary laissez-faire a new kind of working in companies could include a massive deceleration and a reorientation towards collaboration and being with in the sense of physically, direct, personal, authentically vulnerable. Interesting enough this is exactly what frightens people, although they have a deep longing for that at the same time; the longing for being in contact and being with each other in an authentic, human way. Ostensibly, it is of course much easier to quickly write an email or WhatsApp instead of calling someone or even meet them in person, especially because you don't have to face the reactions of your counterpart. The paradox is however, that emails, WhatsApps and Posts leave much more room for misunderstandings and conflicts than a personal conversation where you look somebody in the eyes. In addition you experience nourishing connection. And yes, authentic intimacy and connection can be frightening, because if you allow this, it might well happen that the other person actually sees you and appreciates your being qualities. However, fear is just fear, a wonderful feelings power that – instead of blocking or paralyzing you (which is the old perspective in our society) – can be a wonderful signpost that you enter new territory with regard to authentic, personal contact and do the experiment to exit the electronic fast life.

The one or the other might say now: “Yes, but it is not that easy. My entire environment is focused on fast communication.” Yes, and the question is whether YOU are willing to exit this game. Are you ready to bring more humaneness back to the business world, put the focus on authentic human connection and to decelerate and equalize the communication in favor of the quality and the wellbeing of the entire team?

At this point a distinction with regard to the so called *Problem Ownership* might be helpful. We oftentimes do not decide to change things or to set a boundary (e. g. when there is too much work or superficial conversation), because we think the other person could have a problem with that. Let us take a look what problem ownership is about.

As the below map shows, there are only 3 options when you ask the question „Who can have a problem?“ :

1. I have a problem

When you have a problem then you can do with it whatever you want. You can keep it, make it bigger, let it stay there, ignore it or simply solve it. It is your problem.

2. The other person has a problem

If another person has a problem, then please let them have their problem. They worked hard to have that problem. When you now solve the problem of the other person, they have to go and get a new problem in order to learn what they have to learn. In addition you rather harm yourself, because you take on a problem that is not yours and might suddenly get difficulties with regard to your health or whatsoever.

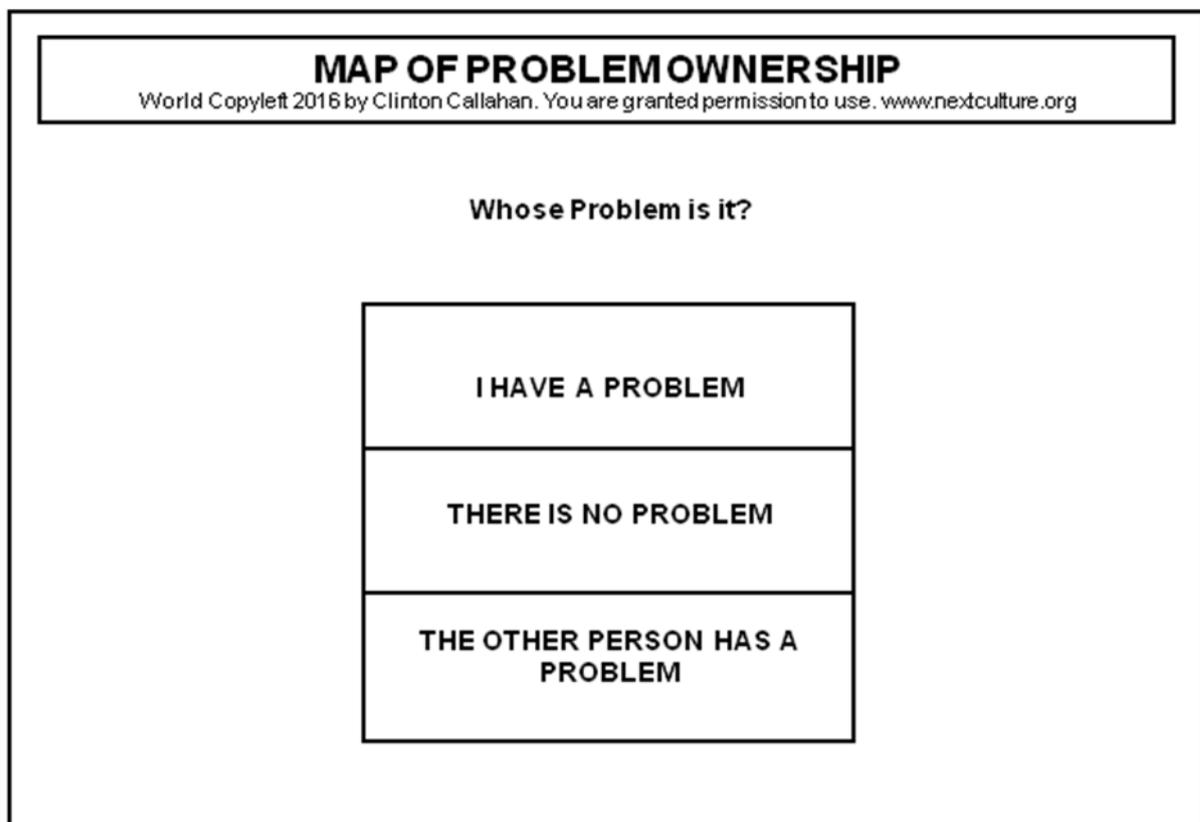
Now it gets interesting with regard to the third option. One might assume that the third option of problem ownership is “We have a problem”. But honestly, when you are in a meeting or at home and say “Yes, we have to do this.”, who actually does it? Correct, nobody does it. This is because there is no WE when it comes to responsibility. Either you have a problem or the other person has a problem. It might well happen, that you both have the same problem, but only each of you can take their part of responsibility and contribute their individual part. Therefore the option “We have a problem” does not exist.

The third option is as obvious as far:

3. There is no problem

Can you imagine that there is no problem? This is the time of the so called *basic goodness*, when you can simply enjoy the time with each other. However, there is a part inside of us – or so called Gremlin, i. e. one’s weaker self or shadow part in each person - that can hardly stand this, because if there is no problem, sincere, authentic encounter becomes possible. This is why this Gremlin part is very smart in creating a new problem in light speed, and if it is simply the problem that there are still 15 emails and 5 WhatsApp messages waiting to be answered.

So whose problem is it, when you partly exit the high speed of electronic communication and people in your surroundings are irritated that you are no longer available or online at any time?



Take into consideration that in the context of Next Culture Work – that means a new kind of working – exactly those people are become a role model who do exactly that: decelerate and

making authentic contact with fellow human beings. When you decide to shift from a slave of communication to a creator of collaboration and being with, your colleagues – and also the people in your private life – will notice that. As soon as the relationships and encounters no longer fall prey to daily hectic and daily logistics, the people with whom you make contact will be nourished and so will you.

Give the following thought 1% chance: What you subliminally communicate to your colleagues and fellow human beings when you consciously decide to play a new game is: *I take care of myself!* If you allow yourself to no longer engage that much in electronic communication, it has a lot to do with self respect. The message is that you value yourself and your health higher than work, speed and the very common arbitrary laissez-fair of electronic communication. In that moment you put the value of a human being back into focus and thus become a role model, an *Edgeworker* remembering human values.

In a new context of human economics authentic and vulnerable collaboration would again have a high significance and thereof courageous people are needed, who are willing to take the first step. *Edgeworkers* are needed who recognize the necessity to break the current pattern of communication and thus stimulus satiation and bethink themselves of essential aspects of humaneness, heartiness, connection, contact, authenticity, love, appreciation and *being with*.

Experiment 1:

When you hold a meeting, ask your colleagues that they switch off all laptops and smart phones or don't even bring them to the meeting. Some might protest, arguing that they all have so much to do. Just stay clear in your experiment. Some colleagues might not join the meeting, but those who come are in the end those, who are committed to put 100% of their attention on the constructive collaboration of the team. Let yourself be surprised by how different the meeting will be.

Experiment 2:

During your lunch break, disconnect from any kind of electronic communication and make authentic contact with your colleagues. Try to not talk about business.

Experiment 3:

Start spending the next weekend without any kind of electronic communication. This is part of healing the so called *Technopenuriaphobia* (fear of losing technology) and reconnecting to Earth. Switch off your smart phone, don't open your laptop, neither surf in the Internet nor answer emails or WhatsApp messages. It will work best if you switch off your phone completely. It could happen that your mind goes kind of crazy on the first day and keeps telling you that you could miss something. Let the mind talk and don't listen to it. On the second day you will already realize that the voices get less. Then consider expanding this experiment for e. g. 1 to 2 weeks during your next holiday.

Use then the conquered free time to consciously get in deep contact with the people in your surroundings.

By the way, the man from the example at the beginning of the article, who was scared of the 1200 emails did – based on the humorous advice of a friend – the following: He went into the office and deleted ALL emails without reading them. He felt a lot of fear doing this daring experiment and expected the worst. And what happened then? ... NOTHING!!! Absolutely nothing! Those colleagues, who urgently needed something from him, simply sent a new email request, and when he was missing important information, he asked his colleagues accordingly to send him the email one more time. It was more important to him to be in contact with the colleagues than succumb to the illusion of importance and attention measured by the number of emails. The latter one would have brought him right back into a burnout.

Are you ready to exit the information flood and create more time for authentic connection?

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