NEXT CULTURE WORK:
How the Fear of Making Mistakes Blocks Companies!

There is a very human topic in companies that is oftentimes tabooed due to the existing hierarchical structures and the connected power struggles. It is the topic of ‚making mistakes'. There are a lot of beliefs around this topic, both on employer and employee side. It is interesting though that this topic often includes a paradox in companies. If you ask people on a rather high level in the hierarchy whether there is a ‚mistake culture', meaning that mistakes are regarded as human nature and as valuable learning opportunities, they often confirm this in order to present the company as being exemplary and human. Yet behind the curtains it becomes pretty clear that employees are consciously or unconsciously competing with each other, working against each other and ousting each other based on mistakes that are being made.

In small and medium sized companies as well as in big corporations employees are very much afraid of making mistakes. The fear of being punished is big. In small and medium sized companies, which are mainly led by private families, it is oftentimes the fear of the old, long-time ruling patriarchs, who – out of their power position – tend to give their employees strict specifications with regard to how things should work in the company. There are companies where employees feel fear every morning when going to work just because of patriarchal leaders. In big corporations it is instead mainly the fear of not getting any further on the job ladder, not getting recognition and probably risking salary reductions or even the loss of the job.

Due to the incredible competition in companies there is a lot of pressure on the employees. It is not only about the presumably big topics like e. g. getting a certain job, bonus or reaching the annual goals. The rat-race already starts in ordinary meetings with the fight for words and time allotted for speaking. It is permanently about asserting oneself, conveying competence and having a clean slate. It is about justification, better-knowing and power struggles. The repeating yet not spoken questions ruling the events are the following:

- Who has the most power?
- Who has more to say
- Who can assert themselves?
- Who is presumably competent and has the cleanest slate?

In a well-known global IT corporation – as well as in other corporations - the competition game has by now reached dimensions that people of the top management board are fighting against insomnia, burnout and other psychosomatic diseases, but would never dare to officially admit this for fear of being uncovered as being human and fallible. At these hierarchical levels the job is at risk much faster than at the operative levels. The belief that it is much more relaxed at the top end of the hierarchy just because the top managers simply delegate the jobs to the people of lower levels is a complete illusion. The opposite is actually the case. The higher you get in hierarchy the more adamant the fight gets and thus the pressure of making the job in a perfect and faultless way so that nobody can harm you and undermine your position.

A fear that is very much present at the level of middle management is the one of being held responsible for mistakes that assigned employees make. This is one of the main blocks with regard to delegating

tasks. Especially people of the middle management have oftentimes problems with forwarding tasks to their team members for fear that they could make a mistake and that they – the managers – then have to pay for it. This leads to the fact that a lot of managers rather do things themselves, have far too many tasks and projects and finally end up with burnout.

At the operative level the fear of employees is mainly about not being good enough, not being able to cope with the hard requirements, losing the job or not reaching the annual goals and thus probably not getting the necessary bonus they had counted on. There are employees who have been scared stiff and only focus on not making any mistakes. This attitude sucks their energy and also their time so that they get less and less tasks done and become more and more stressed and finally ill.

Game #1: I Win – You Lose (Low Drama)

The entire game based on competition and on avoiding mistakes is called *Low Drama*. The motto of low drama is 'I Win – You Lose'. It is the most known game on the planet, which is especially played in the business world in a very massive way, regardless of the consequences. The entire, global economy is based on this game. As soon as you open the newspaper this sad game jumps at you from each page. It is a persecutor-rescuer-victim game that serves unconscious shadow purposes such as greed, envy, misuse of power, being right, better-knowing, manipulation, mobbing, competition, revenge, arrogance, superiority and ignorance. It is a game that is based on scarcity (e. g. in this game there are not enough jobs, not enough recognition, not enough money, not enough vacation, not enough market share, etc.). It is about status, positions, power and prestige and so on being regarded as things that can be won or lost. Above all it is a game that is focused on avoiding responsibility and creating separation between people. The result of this game is that each employee fights for survival in the company.

Let's get to the point: the business world is sick. The company cultures are sick. The economic life based on hierarchy, competition and profit makes people collapse more and more, not mentioning planet Earth. As a result employees and companies stagnate instead of thriving and unfolding. The game using pressure and competition so that people are scared of making mistakes is not only an irresponsible game but a suicidal paradigm.

But how could a sane mistake culture look like? To get there, it is first of all necessary to change the context of the game. If a company plays the game 'I win – you lose' (no matter how subtle it is), the attempt of establishing a new mistake culture will certainly backfire. It is therefore important to first commit to a different game.

Game #2: I win – you win

Some might have heard of the game *I win – You win* (short: win-win). This game is based on cooperation, but oftentimes implies a compromise so that it turns into an *'I lose – you lose'* game. In addition this game can be very deceiving. The purpose might be noble at first, but this game can very quickly turn into game #1 'I win – you lose'. Behind closed doors the deal is oftentimes "It is okay for me that you win as long as I win just a tiny little bit more" and then you are back to game #1. A sane mistake culture can therefore only be implemented if a completely new game is played.

Game #3: Winning Happening

The third kind of game is called *Winning Happening*. Most of the people have never heard of this game, because it is so little known - not to mention being played - in companies as well as in our society in general. When you take a look at the name of the game you might realize that it already has

a different spin, because it doesn't contain 'I' or 'You' in the title. This game is based on creative collaboration. While in game #2 colleagues work in the best case with each other, game #3 is goes even further. In this kind of game people do not only work with each other, but <u>for</u> each other. That means that e. g. a person does something for a colleague or supports them without seemingly having a benefit. The person wins by the colleague winning. The game 'Winning Happening' is actually less of a game than rather a so called bright principle. When winning happening is practiced then you can oftentimes also sense inspiration, teamwork, being with, fun and creativity. In addition this game implies abundance of resources, i. e. when there are not enough resources you take radical responsibility for sourcing the resources instead of being victim of the circumstances.

If the context of the game *Winning Happening* is established in a company it also implies the necessary shift of perspectives with regard to mistakes. For decades the word 'mistake' has been judged as bad and negative in our society. This doesn't come as a surprise, because in early years we already get punished in school for assumed mistakes by getting low grades. This belief is deep in our nervous cells. The fact that we entitle something as a mistake includes in itself an evaluation and is thus a shadow principle. Against whose scale do you actually measure yourself or whether something is good/bad or a mistake or not? Who sets the scale? The measuring against an evaluation scale is in itself insane. What if there were no mistakes? What if everything that happened was just neutral? It is as it is and the result is nothing else but clear feedback. Either something worked or something didn't work.

A healthy mistake culture in companies is directly connected to the perception of feedback. Many employees connect feedback with criticism. For them feedback is negative, destructive, not nice, dangerous, uncomfortable, scary or it is a personal attack. This is also due to the way of communication in companies. Since the focus has been so far on finding the culprit in case something didn't work the way it was supposed to, it oftentimes happens that so called 'you messages' are used and the assumed culprit is attacked. Instead of expressing neutrally what happened and finding out together how things could work differently in the future, employees oftentimes pull out the word machete and – consciously or unconsciously – blame the colleague or even chop their heads off (at this point just answer the dangerous question how many times you have blamed somebody for a mistake or made them small, just to be right or demonstrate unconsciously that you are superior). What follows in a second step is no neutral coaching either, but instead better-knowing about how the person should do things differently in the future. Coaching is therefore easily connected with smart advice, manipulation, criticism and a kind of 'trimming' so that the employee functions as desired in the future.

In order to create a new kind of working together and being with where mistakes are allowed and actually welcomed as great learning opportunities, it is first of all necessary to shift to a new perspective with regard to feedback and coaching. From the new perspective feedback is absolutely neutral. It is about the past and says precisely what exactly worked and what didn't work. Just this! The crucial thing when giving feedback is that you give it from your point of view, which means that you stay completely in your own world (e. g. "I perceived that…" or "What I observed is…"). Thus it becomes clear that it is not a personal attack, but a sharing about your perception.

The new perspective with regard to coaching is that coaching is about the future and includes a valuable distinction. A distinction gives the employee new clarity and thus new possibilities for acting. For example, the above mentioned 3 kinds of games are a distinction, which gives you new clarity for your daily business life so that you can now detect which kind of game is on at work. Then you have the possibility of creating something different than ordinary low drama.

If a new feedback and coaching culture is established then mistakes actually result in inspiration, evolution, creativity, ideas and development. However, establishing the new perspective of feedback and coaching in a company can't happen instantly but might rather take some time. It is not about telling the employees on an intellectual level that the new perspective is valid from now on and that they should follow it. Take into consideration that there are employees that got fired for giving feedback and making suggestions that would have saved their companies a lot of money. The scars with regard to mistakes, feedback and coaching are deep. It takes time to win the trust of the employees again. Attentive and continuous practicing of feedback and coaching in everyday business life is necessary so that the employees get a new experience in their bodies. Thus they get a new reference point that feedback and coaching are gold that serves them and others (even though they might give or receive a feedback about what probably didn't work). With the old understanding and experience in their bodies employees will continue to be afraid of feedback and coaching. It is therefore crucial to establish the new context in an attentive way so that the employees can experience that their feedback and coaching is appreciated. One challenge for many employees will be to give feedback and coaching to their bosses. From past experience the fear of being punished is deep in their bones and can only be changed through the new, repeating experience that the boss thanks them for their feedback and encourages them to give him/her feedback and coaching. One person has to go first, set the new context and bring the colleagues on board.

Fortunately there are already companies on the path of changing the context and the game in the way that mistakes and feedback are welcome and are considered to be a great learning opportunities. First steps – next to daily practicing of feedback and coaching (according to the new view) – could be e. g. the introduction of a suggestion system, which allows employees to make suggestion for improvement for different topics in the company. Thus they learn that their neutral and constructive feedback is welcome and serves the company or the colleagues.

When it comes to human topics, the biggest excuse in companies oftentimes is: "Yes, when we have more time then we can think about implementing a new feedback and coaching culture and change the view on mistakes. But right now we have different things to do." This is exactly the problem. Most of the companies regard their employees as resource, figures, things that have to function in order to guarantee the company profit. There are only few companies where the employees can be authentically human and make mistakes without risking the resentment of the boss or their own head.

When is it enough? How big must the pain still get? How long do you want to keep tolerating the irresponsible game of low drama, competition, avoiding mistakes, scarcity and inauthentic, professional masquerade? It is time to focus again on the human beings in companies, on their potential and the development of their talents, on teamwork and community. For employees and thus companies to develop and thrive it is necessary to make authentically human mistakes in order to get to the next level through clear and attentive feedback and coaching. Many employees are longing for exactly this different kind of community and teamwork than what they currently find in their companies. Are you ready to start?

Authentic human wishes,
Yours Nicola Nagel