



20HERTZ

Deeper Understanding
of Leadership

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The Art of Separation

Strangely enough, a termination often feels like a disenchanting love. When separation seems inevitable we ask ourselves: *"How do you hold onto someone who won't stay? And how do you get rid of someone who won't go?"* (Danny DeVito in *"The War of the Roses"*)

When separation is in the air, emotions boil up - on both sides. The psychological consequences of a broken love have been sufficiently studied. Either we withdraw and drown in fear and depression. Or anger and aggression force us to wage war. The same happens in our heads when we are confronted with a termination.

The movie "The War of the Roses" with Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas as Barbara and Oliver Rose shows with pleasure how the conflict gradually escalates to a devastating final.

Friedrich Glasl has dissected the three levels of conflict escalation scientifically. Level 1: Tension grows, differences of opinion become increasingly fundamental and the pressure on the partner is mounting. A face-saving conflict resolution is still possible, even though the house blessing is crooked. Level 2: When the original cause takes a back seat, attacks below the belt are launched and power is exercised through threats, loss of face is inevitable. The conflict resolution produces the first victim: the precious porcelain. Level 3: If values and moral are finally stripped away and the defeat of the opponent is targeted even at the price of self-destruction, the battle can no longer have any winner. Just like the Roses, who are finally buried by the chandelier.

If separation is imminent, in a private or a professional relationship, it should be considered carefully whether to wage war. Once escalation is reached, de-escalation will be difficult or even impossible, because

*"The War of the Roses is the battle in which the petals fall
and the thorns turn into spears."
Manfred Poisel*

1) Separation from the Perspective of a Manager

Every executive is aware that his or her career can abruptly be disrupted by a termination. However, if the separation is executed unprofessionally or even unfairly, personal injuries occur quickly.

That's understandable. Often executives have invested years of their working life in a company without paying attention to their health or work-life balance. If a separation then feels like a kick in the ass, frustration and anger are inevitable.

Sadly, in situations of separation, many companies seem to operate according to Murphy's Law. Everything that can go wrong happens: The notification of the termination is given by phone or email, sometimes with copies to other colleagues, and often just before weekends, holidays or vacations. To enforce an unfair severance offer quickly, immense pressure is built up or, with the transfer to a "death room", demoralization is intended.

When a separation runs its course without respectful discussions and solution-oriented negotiations do not take place, the person affected quickly feels provoked. Like Oliver Rose, who, angered by the uncompromising attitude of his still-wife, decides: *"Now, I guess I'm going to go piss on the fish."*

Once the separation process has reached this level of escalation, Mr. Rose would advise every executive: *"And you better get yourself a damn good lawyer!"* The resolution of the conflict without outside professional guidance is now off the table.

In Newplacement I regularly observe executives who are deeply injured following a separation. Anyone who, after suddenly losing their job, wanders through the valley of disappointment as a perceived loser, regularly experiences a damage to their self-esteem. Such a serious fate has to be dealt with. That requires thorough analysis and honest self-reflection. This process takes at least three months, often longer. The heart just needs a lot more time to accept what the head has already understood.

Not until the psychological wounds have healed a sustainable, goal-oriented reorientation can start. Then, however, many people experience the previous separation even as liberation. The ability to completely reinvent oneself and to decide with unprecedented degrees of flexibility how to spend the years to come gives new meaning to life.

Those who conclude this reorientation process with the appropriate depth will also be able to develop a viable perspective for themselves. After successful completion of the reorientation process, almost all who have initially experienced their termination as a crisis are happier and more satisfied than ever before. Anyone who has gone through this process will realize that the yardstick for happiness and fulfilment is not money.

It is fascinating to observe the passion that people develop as soon as they perceive a break in their professional career as an incredible opportunity and then take charge of their own lives again.

2) Separation from the Perspective of a Company

Restructuring as well as job cuts and separations are perfectly normal processes in any company. Digitization, electro-mobility and artificial intelligence will lead to fundamental structural changes in the next decade. Especially in the financial sector or in the automotive industry this will cause many thousands of job losses. Dealing with terminations is part of the job description of every manager and HR employee.

In daily life, downsizing programs are usually under immense pressure to be executed. Board decisions have to be implemented quickly because the company has already announced headcount targets, implementation deadlines and cost-cutting potential to analysts. At the same time, redundancy plans and in-house agreements are hastily renegotiated with workers' councils and spokesman committees. Often, "cost-to-achieve" budgets are approved that do not even come close to covering the financial consequences of in-house agreements. Conflicting objectives and implementation deficits then repeatedly result in problems, delays and escalations that could easily be avoided.

70% of 400 managers and HR professionals of large German companies surveyed in 2016 in a Kienbaum study, stated that there was no separation culture in their company. 66% claimed that managers were not adequately prepared to communicate a termination.

As a matter of fact, in numerous companies there are still managers who act according to the motto: Why waste resources on employees and managers who are leaving anyway! Barbara Rose would say: „*You really expect me to keep on reassuring you sexually even now when we disgust each other?*”

This however is as cynical as it is short-sighted! A bad separation culture entails immense costs! Neglecting the psychological aspects of a separation is reflected just as much in the bottom line as economic and labor law factors.

In the face of the skilled labor shortage, companies are increasingly investing in employer branding - with the aim of making the company more attractive to potential employees and executives. But companies are less interesting for young and talented employees if the ratings on relevant portals such as *kununu* or *glassdoor* reveal a lousy separation culture.

Every employee who leaves may leave the organization, but not his network within the company. Unfair separations will be transparent for the entire workforce. Employees have a keen sense of what fairness means and wonder what will happen to them when they fall out of favor or when restructuring is imminent. A lack of fairness leads to dwindling loyalty and poor motivation of the workforce.

This is precisely where the "Survivor Syndrome" kicks in. High-performing employees are by no means happy that they have been spared from restructuring. If they experience an unworthy separation culture, they proactively look for a better environment.

If departing employees perceive their separation process as unfair, they demand "compensation for pain and suffering" to make up for injuries and annoyance. In addition to a higher severance payment, lengthy litigation not only generates internal and external legal costs, but also blocks immense capacities of managers and HR personnel. The opportunity costs, caused by bad processes or demotivation of the workforce, are not budgeted anywhere.

As the divorce lawyer for the Roses, Danny DeVito states: "*There is no winning! Only degrees of losing!*" Companies should keep that in mind.

3) A Good Separation Requires Culture - Separation Culture

Any company that considers respectful separation management an integral part of its corporate culture will define fair separation strategies and communicate them

transparently. In this case, effective training for managers and a closely coordinated interaction between managers and HR in separation situations will become a matter of course. As a result, conflicts of objectives can be eliminated as far as possible and escalations will be reduced.

When the workforce experiences a fair separation culture and professional separation management, motivation and loyalty remain intact, especially when employees who leave the company are given the opportunity for an appreciative farewell.

When companies use external advice to implement a modern separation culture, they not only observe a positive effect on employee motivation and loyalty, but also a high return on investment.

An appreciative separation culture is both morally imperative and economically sensible, as it prevents wars of the roses, which no one can win anyway.

If the honeymoon is not supposed to be followed by a war of the roses in case of a separation, executives and companies as well as couples might want to consider a different approach:

*"Before we venture into a War of the Roses,
I think we should start with violets or snowdrops."
Martin Gerhard Reisenberg*

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I am grateful for your comments, suggestions and questions. Please contact me at: wetwitschka@20hertz.de

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