Summary

Leadership as a service: less hierarchy more co-creation

Leadership is apparently concerned in vain with its self-abolition by pushing self-organisation and digitalisation of decision-making processes, because the unanimous finding is that leadership remains important or is becoming more important (Hofmann & Wienken 2020; Weber et al. 2018). Against the background of a application-oriented national research project focussing on „Good Leadership and Labour in the socio-digital transformation" (www.elle-viernull.de) we want to discuss some conceptual results, showing why leadership is passing a functional change in which its service character is gaining in importance over its instructional character. Furthermore we discuss the implications for the role, the tasks and the need of competencies.

Looking at the descriptions of the "new" challenges of leadership, however, one predominantly find " well-known" aspects. The often cited VUCA world in which the framework conditions of organisations are characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity and the first leadership concepts related to this can almost celebrate thirty years of existence (Bennis & Nanus 1996). The increasing importance of knowledge management, hybrid value creation concepts, horizontal and vertical networking tendencies, the decentralisation of knowledge, projectification, teamwork, self-organisation and control, agility, "leading at a distance" and many more are no novelties.

Leadership in digitalised working environments therefore does not require fundamentally new approaches, but rather "allows and requires (...) some adjustments and further developments caused by the changed handling of information and the possibilities of technology-based communication and work design" (Hill 2016: 247). Subsequently, the thesis will be put forward that increasing digitalisation (in the area of production and beyond) mainly reinforces trends that have already been observed for a long time and that are contradictory in their effects on employees (between control and self-organisation). However, the more the company has to work together across departmental boundaries in decentralised teams in the form of networks, the more the traditionally hierarchical, asymmetrical patterns of interaction between managers and supervisors come under pressure to change or are transformed by trust-based forms of symmetrical interaction. These forms have in many cases still to be developed, established and made compatible with existing forms of coordination. The function and understanding of the role of leadership are directly affected by this. Managers become service providers who ensure the necessary information, qualifications, competences and motivation and basic orientation in order to enable employees to organise themselves (Krokowski/González Ocanto 2021).

In the context of leadership, a fundamental distinction can be made between asymmetrical and symmetrical forms of interaction. Traditional hierarchies are characterised by asymmetrical forms of interaction. In the context of specific framework conditions (f.e. low change dynamics, low feedback intensity, high plannability/predictability of processes, concentration of knowledge in the headquarters, strong organisational boundaries, tight-meshed instructions and control of excecution) this coordination pattern was succesful for many decades and definitely it has a number of strengths (cf. Kühl 1994, 2015). It is associated with authoritarian and transactional leadership concepts (Hinkelmann/Enzweiler 2018, 21 f.). In authoritarian leadership, a leader's power and status derive from his position in the hierarchy. Demands for obedience from employees are legitimised by the hierarchically higher position. Leadership takes place via unidi-rectional instructions "top down". The leader makes decisions individually without broader and systematic consultation of the workers. The concept of transactional leadership, on the other hand, assumes a stable and rational exchange relationship between manager and employees in the sense of a give-and-take (Franken 2016, 39 f.; Lippold 2021, 7 f.). It is a "benefit-oriented exchange of performance and reward" (Franken 2016, 39). The manager sets targets that are to be achieved by the employees through specific behaviour or performance. The employees' behaviour is motivated through target agreements and extrinsic incentives (rewards or sanctions).Transactional leadership addresses "above all the homo oeco-nomicus in the employee" (ibid., 40) and less the whole personality and its demands for personal development and meaningful employment.

Traditional leadership concepts with their idea of the "rule of an (all-)knowing, self-confident manager over non- or low-skilled workers" (ibid., 36) were successful in the "old" world of work (mechanised production on the assembly line), but early came under criticism because of the negative image of people and bad working conditions associated with them. Initially against the background of a humanisation of working life, later also as a functional requirement in the context of changed framework conditions, alternative models of empowering and negotiation-based leadership have developed for a long time (and became increasingly important in connection with digitalisation): "What is needed are more supportive framework conditions, intrinsic motivation and the support of employees' ideas". (ibid.) This changes the understanding of leadership: away from a rather one-sided influence of the manager towards a two-sided, more symmetrical relationship between leaders and employees. These concepts rely on empowerment and negotiation processes. In those areas where self-organised network communication and cooperation processes already determine everyday work, the zones of uncertainty for leadership are widening.The ability of leadership to instruct and enforce employees is undermined or becomes dysfunctional. The development of symmetrical forms of interaction, or in other words "leadership at eye level", becomes a central challenge. The necessary changes are not superficially limited to a more friendly atmosphere, but require a profound change in organisational structure and culture. Charles Handy sums up the direction of the needed change: "Whereas the heroic manager of the past knew all, could do all, and could solve every problem, the postheroic manager asks how every problem can be solved in a way that develops other people's capacity to handle it. (Handy 1999, 166)

The more self-organisation and network cooperation is progressing, the less leadership is in a position to give instructions (even if it remains authorised to do so). If leadership wants to remain functionally legitimised (not least because of its usually higher gratification), the question must be clarified which added value it can still provide for the organisation or for the employees. As mentioned above, the simultaneous increase in self-organisation and standardisation paradoxically leads to a simultaneous increase of the importance of leadership. According to our experience, this can be explained by the fact that the ongoing modernisation of hierarchies (more decentralised, flatter, distributed, more occasional and temporal) and the establishment of more compatible forms of interaction in networks, in other words the emergence of organisational ambidextry (Tushman/O'Reilly 1996). This affords the strengthening of the service function and co-creative performance aspects of leadership. These include, for example:

- Developing decentralised decision-making structures and processes that ensure the efficient and effective involvement of all relevant stakeholders (participative orientation).
- Enabling orientation and behavioural certainty in self-organisation: This implies a broad field of activity in corporate culture (sense-making, values, mission statements, principles, attitudes, establishment of agile rules and mindsets, promotion of an appreciative feedback culture, etc.).
- Promotion of self-organisation capabilities, skills and competencies
- Establishing adequate communication infrastructures.
- In the course of Corona, the need to work and lead at a distance has gained enormous importance. Nevertheless, this was not breaking new ground, as it was already part of everyday work in many project teams.

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