

# Selected Writings



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# WELCOME

In our frazzled day and age, people don't take the time to read stuff they actually have to think about, I often hear from marketing people. They inform me that, today, people want easy reading, and something that promises instant rewards. I am sure there is some truth to that. But it's not the whole story.

New insights, attitude changes, or opening up to something unfamiliar don't happen by one click on "rich and beautiful in 10 easy steps" or "the 7 best tips and tricks how to quickly...". And it is simply not how I think and work.

I went down another road and put together a selection of articles that contain worthy ideas – messages that I believe bear repeating. The result is not easy reading; one of the reasons I've decided to put them into print.

The articles in this selection have something in common: they generated feedback from people who had me on their radar, and some part of the message "struck": they got in touch to see if it made sense to work together. In all instances, this was the case. So – I'm not changing my style!

I'd be happy if you found some of the thoughts valuable and inspirational for your life in the year ahead!

Please accept this little booklet with my best wishes.

Yours,



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# CHRISTMAS TIME

Christmas is the time of the year to give credit to where we have come from, individually and culturally, and to where some deeply held values have their origin. Irrespective of whether we are practicing Christians or not, our Christian heritage is a heavy influence. Other deeply held beliefs originate from more personal sources: our families of origin, meaningful others, and the circles we move in.



We are seeing out a year that has brought unsettling experiences in many parts of the world, including our own for a change, and has set the course for even deeper shifts. No doubt about it, collective security seems to be harder to come by these days. As a result, we can be unsure what to expect from the New Year; it may well bring more challenges to our deeply held beliefs. Whatever informs our expectations, we still can't quite make out what the epochal changes at our doorstep will require from us, let alone find out if and how to use them to our advantage.

This presents a challenge in itself: when our need to understand what is happening around us is frustrated, it's hard to resist feelings of anxiety, helplessness, or blame (which are actually pretty related). All are subtle debilitators that influence how we deal with change. So how do we keep

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looking for opportunities to make a difference in the world, and hold ourselves, and those around us, accountable – in view of the many things we cannot influence?

It seems a good idea to filter out media influences that blow things out of proportion (it is still more likely to drown in one's own bathtub than to fall victim of a terrorist attack, as *The Economist* noted after Berlin), to avoid having our morale erode. For example, staring at the news waiting for the next disturbed, testosterone-laden young men to commit brutal acts of folly (now, irritatingly and misleadingly, all called “terrorist attacks”) isn't just an act of witnessing: it helps making such events happen more often. I can't help feeling reminded of the teenage school shoot-outs in America a few years ago, with the media busy playing to our basest instincts – voyeurism, sensationalism, cruelty – which then encouraged copycats...

So, rather than lament about the end of Western values and civilisation (whatever that might be exactly), I'd like to propose to focus on how we carry ourselves in the world we best understand: Let's nurture a sense of security and belonging in our family, our circle of friends, team, and small community.

To do that, it is extremely important that we are well in our own skin. In my profession, this comes up regularly because change processes that “work” usually require some psychological preparation. So I've decided, as a New Year's gift, to put together some powerful ideas and resources to boost your balance and improve how comfortable you are around change. Using what comes your way to your advantage makes much more sense to me than iterating “how things should be” although they clearly aren't...

This is what I will tackle in a series of articles entitled “Happy New Year: Become the change you want to see in the world”.

- How to focus on what we have control over – and experience a sense of achievement
- How to keep our anxiety in check – and increase our impact as a result
- How to bring a sense of purpose back into our lives, for our sake and that of those around us

Till then, I wish you a relaxed, merry, inspired and inspirational Christmas!!

*Change-induced suffering  
is part of the conditio humana.*



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# HAPPY NEW YEAR PART 1

## FOCUS ON WHAT YOU HAVE CONTROL OVER

In my Christmas Letter, I announced I'd share some ideas and resources to boost balance and leading the way "emotionally" in our times that require frequent readjustments and thus clearly favour people who embrace change effortlessly. Thank you for your email reactions that encouraged me to start working immediately... they definitely kept me off the streets!

I mentioned that I'd tackle these three points:

- How to focus on what we have control over,
- How to keep our anxiety in check, and
- How to bring a sense of purpose back into our lives.

Let me start out with a quote: Socrates (in „*The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*“) remarked “*If you don't get what you want, you suffer; if you get what you don't want, you suffer; even when you get exactly what you want, you still suffer because you can't hold on to it forever. Your mind is your predicament. It wants to be free of change. Free of pain, free of the obligations of life and death. But change is law and no amount of pretending will alter that reality.*” Very wise words indeed. So much for believing that a negative experience of change is somehow linked to our present times!

Change-induced suffering is part of the *conditio humana*. Even if we lived in a boringly stable environment, we'd still grow older and would thus see our possibilities, our capabilities, needs and tastes change... not always for the better. So no matter how we dice it, reflecting on our attitude towards change seems like a good idea. When we focus on what we can influence, it is easier to accept the many things that look totally out of our reach.

You probably know what's coming: the part you can control (and even that takes intention and training) is your personal experience of life,



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and your (re)actions... I will look into the reaction and action bits in parts 2 and 3 of this series. In this article, I'd like to focus on reflecting more deeply about the **conversations** we engage in, and especially, the ones we initiate.

## Focus on how you communicate first – six ideas to try out for a week

I want to start out by giving you a communication exercise that lets you experiment with the influence you actually have on conversations – without even trying to convince anyone.

- Be mindful of when you make a judgment, as opposed to a statement of fact. We are often a bit careless about distinguishing the two, in and outside work contexts.
- Engage in exploring “root causes” with children... Adults can ask six times “why” too, it can be a fun game – this isn't limited to shop-floor root cause analysis workshops ☺
- Just notice your reaction to, and willingness to engage in blame speech/scapegoating around you (your choice: “those politicians”; “corporations”, “populists”, “the upper classes” etc.);
- Try and encourage others to explore the core issues by first talking about YOUR experiences – so not “you are wrong/you should(n't)...” but “I often observe that...”;
- Handle the sources of news you expose yourself to with care (cf. my 2014 LinkedIn on “Telling the noise from the signal”, long before I knew about companies producing fake news [or propaganda, as this used to be called] with the sole aim to post them on social media platforms);
- If you want to go one step further, ask yourself and others, what you can do at your level of influence, to promote better, more reflected, or more mature conversations that can lead into better actions. What does this mean for how you engage in discussions, what behaviours you encourage, or question into...? The point here is to observe what actually works, not just to reiterate existing beliefs.

*For a lot of the issues we are dealing with today, mapping out the influencers gets very complex, so we cannot just roll up our sleeves and “go fix things”.*



This little exercise is surprisingly difficult for a variety of reasons. And these reasons have a lot to do with what is so wrong with how we communicate.

**For one, we like to arrive at, and then address, a root cause.** Yet for a lot of the issues we are dealing with today, linear causal relationships are an oversimplification, and mapping out the influencers gets very complex, and is again beyond our sphere of influence. So we cannot just roll up our sleeves, and “go fix things”. This can be highly frustrating. If it helps, systemic theorists say that today's problems mostly constitute the side effects of earlier solutions... and they have a point!

Secondly, chances are we come to a point in our analysis where “I don't know” is the most likely answer. But that's not something we like to say – we much prefer to come from a position of knowing. **Whether we like it or not, we have to become more comfortable around “not-knowing”**, and admitting to it, in order to free space in and around us: Only when we are truly interested in new information, skills and strategies, rather than pretend together that we need just more of the same, we

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can actually learn. All else just triggers “yes, but” responses, no matter how elusive and gripping the learning context – we won’t go for it unless we WANT to know. This requires us giving ourselves permission to be imperfect. No small feat, and it is often especially difficult for people who have a huge knowledge base that has served them just fine up until just now. So, clearly, this requires that we hold our egos at bay...! Now in our context here, we “just” talk about communication, but this is also one of the reasons why innovation is often problematic: for something truly innovative to happen, we also need to be exceptionally good at curiosity-based questioning, unlearning and relearning. Uncomfortable? Yes, sometimes. Unavoidable? Absolutely!

Even more complicated are things when we cannot understand “why they are the way they are”. **This frustrates our need to make sense of our experiences – one of the main characteristics that make us human**, as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (“people are meaning-creating machines”), and doubtlessly innumerable many others, noted.

### That sixth dimension – and a powerful resource

I’ve promised some useful resources, so here is the first: Marshal Rosenberg’s book *Non-Violent Communication – a Language of Life*. The great thing about Marshal’s book is that his techniques are really simple, and work as well when applied to our self-talk, as they do in interaction with others. The above bullet points are the bare minimum; for my coaching clients, I’ve compiled a hand-out with the most powerful thoughts on 10 pages, which, as a New Year’s gift, I’ll share with you upon request. Just drop me an email. While not all ideas will be self-explanatory, you’ll definitely get a good idea, and perhaps decide to read the entire book later. Cannot recommend it enough.



On to another point. Being human means having moral character – and “honesty-humility” is one of the six key personality dimensions that modern psychological research distinguishes. This dimension was actually overlooked in the old 5 dimensions (acronym “OCEAN”), which has been widely in use since the 1990s, based on 1960s lexical research. Thanks to today’s statistical computing power, the old data could be re-run to consistently produce this 6th dimension, as Scientific American Mind reports in its Jan/Feb 2017 issue. So in face of what you cannot change, I strongly advise to accept-and-acknowledge using your sixth dimension. This isn’t the same as “agreeing” – yet when we fail to accept and acknowledge, it’s just a stone’s throw to denial: the cognitive dissonance becomes just too painful.

Let me end with a more classic Socrates quote: *“I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.”* That’s the whole point.

After all the recommended reading in this post, let me announce that the next article will be more visual: on top of some more thoughts, I’ll share two powerful videos on how to keep our anxiety in check, so that we can ultimately make a difference in the life of others...

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# HAPPY NEW YEAR PART 2

## HOW TO KEEP ANXIETY IN CHECK

How well people keep their anxiety in check is informed by a variety of things – personality, attitudes, skill sets, but also neurochemical factors that we have no control over – just like gender (*yes!*). Proneness to anxiety is an area where it makes no sense to compare ourselves with others. Keeping track of our states, and acting early on perceived imbalances, is a much wiser option.

Anxiety is usually fear-related; while fear cannot prevent suffering, or death, it will prevent life. Speaking of life: Dieter Nuhr, a popular German comedian, said in a recent show that he was tired of nationalistic talk of *making the respective people great again*, which abounded in 2016 – because this type of rhetoric just always ended in war. He went on: “But life isn’t *great* – it’s actually quite small: you are born, you live, you procreate, and then you die. Truly *accepting* that... *that’s great!*”

What does make our experience of life great is noticing and celebrating its special moments. This means being on the lookout for them, sharing them, and encouraging those around you to do the same. In a nutshell, it’s about re-wiring our anxiety-driven reaction to one of excitement – as in “look what I found!”. It was our discoveries that made our childhood so precious! Today, we share “news”: other people’s stories (or catastrophes) that have little to do with our direct experience of life. When we were children, we were able to become so enraptured with our own little world that we’d effortlessly filter out instructions or educational commentary, and focus solely on “what was truly important” ☺. Mindfulness practices today remind us to live in the moment, but we’ve long since become much more detached, worldlier, and also settled in our opinions.

*Anxiety is usually fear-related; while fear cannot prevent suffering, or death, it will prevent life.*



Speaking of opinions: one of mine is that looking out to others and trying to make everything that is uncertain certain is the road to hell. **Brené Brown**, a famous researcher into human connectiveness, shares very worthy messages in her outstanding 2010 TEDx talk **The Power of Vulnerability**: “*Religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certainty. I’m right, you’re wrong. Shut up! The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the more afraid we are. This is what politics looks like today. There is no discourse any more. There is no conversation. There’s just blame. You know how blame is described in my research? A way to discharge pain and discomfort. We perfect.*”



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Brené spent years refining her message of “I am imperfect, and I am enough”. This is not the *enough* as in, “I don’t need to change and in fact am no longer curious about my impact on others” (which is a very insecure stance), but “since I am enough in my own eyes, I have permission to be imperfect, so I can keep learning.” If you have an allergy to the genre of the TED talk, which is more chatty than many Europeans appreciate, just ask me to send you my 2-page write-up of that talk with the essentials.

Secure personalities accept that they are imperfect and wired for struggle, and believe they are worthy of good things. There is probably a considerable overlap with those who withstand temptations and immoral propositions, while others are having a hard time resisting promises of power, status, and influence. Even though they may come at a high price, their real cost to the human being (much like credit card interest) is often discovered only in hindsight. Disillusionment triggers bitter moments, of which I am sometimes a live witness.



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An invaluable trait highly effective people share is the ability to focus on the things they can change, and to limit their exposure to others – at least until they have a mandate to tackle those, as well. In fact, people often work with me to do precisely that: get that mandate, i.e. become a trusted advisor. By extension, this is a hugely important task for anyone, and perhaps most of all around young people: we no longer have “all the answers”, not even all the questions, but we can all do, and teach, some little things to shape our immediate surroundings – like I mentioned in my last *post*, improving the communication patterns we engage in.

One highly effective communication technique is listening for strengths – focusing on your own strengths and on those of the people around you, and thus encouraging them to become the best version of themselves. We all sometimes need to hear what others appreciate about us – in the workplace, in the family, in our circle of friends. Try and see for yourself!

Spending time to actually enjoy and develop your strengths is the single most important factor to leading a happier life. Spending time on a *shared* strength is even more effective in terms of increasing your well-being.

I know some families that do a lot right; some are my generation, some almost my parents’ generation. They all acknowledged their strengths as well as those of their children, and spent time developing them together. Imagine finding something everyone involved is curious to learn about, something so rich that everyone can be interested in a different aspect, and then share their findings. And now compare that to educational trips to what Mom and Dad think the kids should know about... That’s just well-intentioned nudging; very likely, kids will see straight through that anyway, and will have to be coaxed to even stay the course... A perfect example of content that can be



enjoyed with the whole family, because it is rich enough for everyone to pick a favourite idea, is **Ben Zander's** talk **Giving Yourself an A** – one of the visual resources I announced in my last post. One thought I'd like you to notice in our present context pertains to his perspective on downward-spiral thinking – and how to keep it in check.

Benjamin Zander leads the way to more examples of people who are so fascinated by learning that they don't need "nudging", or external motivation. Artists devote unending hours not necessarily to becoming better and better, but to becoming more and more "one" with the subject of their passion. But even they, in order to be so open to learning forever, need to free themselves from the inner voice that focuses on mistakes, challenges, or any variation of not being good enough. I am not convinced that only students of the performing arts suffer from that :)! Ben's highly instructive as well as very entertaining talk is full of valuable cues around how to create (or "invent", as he says) a world that makes your eyes shine. Extremely worth your while, I should think!

BTW There is also a 1:32h version of "The Art of Possibility HD" available on youtube.

To close, I'd like to mention the wisdom of 25-year old pianist-extraordinaire **Daniil Trifonov** – another favourite. He recently said in a TV interview that we cannot take unlimited amounts of energy from ourselves, and that we therefore have to find other sources. *"For me, this source is the music itself. What helps, I believe, is losing myself in the music. As you work on a piece you associate yourself with everything that happens in the piece; it's not that you are trying to make the piece sound like you want it to be, you yourself have to be what the piece wants you to be."*



If music isn't your thing, try science. How about Carl Sagan's

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*“My parents were not scientists. They knew almost nothing about science. But in introducing me simultaneously to scepticism and to wonder, they taught me the two uneasily cohabiting modes of thought that are central to the scientific method.”*

Nothing can replace the positive energy we generate ourselves, whatever our concrete source of inspiration may be. Awe, wonder and curiosity are definitely real boosters of wellbeing. And gratitude for being alive at this amazing time, living with and in unprecedented choice, freedom, comfort and abundance could also be a good start...!

If you only take away one message from this: at the end of the day, it boils down to how well we recover after we, or the beliefs we are identified with, take a blow. To do this, we need to tap into resources like the ones discussed here, as well as a personal support network truly deserving of that name.

I wish you many exciting discoveries of resources within and around you that you can access if and when you need to quickly regain your balance, creativity, judgment, and energy.

Have a “great” year.

*“Our legacy doesn’t magically appear at death. We are writing it every day. Some don’t know it, and some barely improve it. But some rejoice in the existential journey as it occurs.”*

*Alan Weiss*

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# TOWARDS TAKING ACTION IN THE WORLD AROUND US PART 3

As this year is unfolding, it is certainly presenting us with experiences that can take us out of our comfort zone, so it still seems relevant to advocate some steps towards a happier New Year. First, I'd like you to note that if you are reading this, you are likely to be better equipped to deal with ambiguity and complexity than most people around you. How is that?

It has a lot to do with your brain... Brains like stable environments; and while change is its everyday business, it is not something the brain is particularly fond of. Grossly simplified, the basic interest of brains is to keep things the same, its basic concern being energy efficiency: 90% of the processes our brain is constantly busy with are about keeping a stable internal environment. All this is completely independent of our control, and requires zero input from "us", i.e. our prefrontal cortex. The biochemistry gets pretty complex, but you get the idea.



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There has been a lot of talk in recent years about how “being out of our comfort zone” is actually a good thing. In reality, this state is the very thing our brain is working to avoid – which is why it will revert to its “old ways of doing things” when it is off-balance, if given half a chance. **So: for the simple reason that it costs more energy, brains don’t like change.** Time after time, they look for the most effective, energy-saving way of operating – which happens to be what they already know.

There is, however, one powerful and under-appreciated exception: **we can outsmart this natural and very useful mechanism simply by connecting to a higher idea(l):** a self-concept, an aspiration of who we want to be, values, or goals. In short: **As brains go, meaning beats efficiency.**

People who feel in charge of their lives tend to have that higher ideal, and most of those tend to be leaders, if not necessarily in business. Only people who have in practice connected events and personal experiences to bigger goals (or better still, to their individual ambitions) can help others tone down their feelings of losing balance, and keep making an impact. It requires some translating, and before that, some hard thinking (plus having noticed things about other people in the first place!) but none of this will come as a surprise to leaders.

*Only human beings can outsmart the natural energy-efficient but change-avoiding mechanism: it can be done simply by connecting to a higher idea or ideal.*



Having a personal ideal to live up to, and working in ways that feed this ideal, or on projects in which these ideas materialize is a powerful antidote to experiencing helplessness and anxiety. But when we are in panic mode, we lose sight of our long-term, deeper ambitions, and crude, cave-man-esque instincts take over. This is when we need to actively reconnect with the deeper fibres to regain our balance. This is a practice that requires exactly that: practice, i.e. repetition. There is ample evidence that mental exercise and visualisation exercise alone can produce dramatic effects, and these work also when we can’t be “out there doing things”.

Now “balanced” just like “centred” may not sound a very sexy ambition in view of current frazzled lingo of complexity, transformation, disruption, and volatility. Yet it bears remembering that the centre is no longer the boring, comfortable place for beige-clad people. It is the place between all chairs; and it is a little harder to be the voice of reason that carries responsibility, than producing ready-made opinions and slogans. As German comedian Dieter Nuhr puts it: “*Now that the bullying mainstream is gathering at the edges, perhaps rational people have to meet in the centre: The place where things are not so simple, because from there, one can see both sides and has to make careful evaluations. If more people embraced this extra effort next year, it could indeed become a better year.*”

While what we have in our part of the world is pretty good, and definitely by comparison to other parts of the world, it is also in need of a major overhaul. We somehow know that what our times ask from the systems we have managed to create cannot be achieved by fine-tuning. This is true almost regardless of whatever system we (dare to) look into: education, healthcare, pensions... to mention just a few that concern us all. We have a chance to renew our commitment to some

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fundamental tenets, and find out if we are willing to embrace systemic change. This means facing our insecurities, controversial debate, tough negotiations and, ultimately, real decisions (not all of them “both-and”, but real “either-or”!).

This would be greatly aided by higher level of debate, and a political class that was more interested in taking a lead and actively shaping the future, instead of merely administering and problem solving (which sounds better than trouble shooting or fire-fighting, but is just the same...). What we observe in debates today is what happens when a scarcity mind-set takes over: simplistic, conflict-oriented binary *mine-yours, us-them* thinking, with a fear-driven, caveman-esque disqualification of “them”. This isn’t what will allow us to successfully address the challenges of our times. We need to replace these narratives with alternatives aligned with the natural complex world in which we live.



But it’s difficult to let go of the comfortable “*more of everything, if possible for everyone but certainly for us, thank you very much*” that seems to have become our default expectation. Especially since this tenet is related to economic growth, but at 8 bn people, hardly a sustainable model for the whole world. What we have and treasure today (and the next generation, for lack of comparison, often doesn’t even “get”) are not our birth-rights – the social contract that brought wealth and peace to Western Europe for over three generations is an amazing and complex accomplishment, and it is upon us to pass on the message that it might be time to “entitlement mode” for “engagement mode”, and actually contribute to what we want to see in the world.

Just a little bit, and close to “home” already makes a difference, so tone down expectations. While the world out there felt safe, and things were working just fine, nothing required our constant

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attention and personal involvement. Yet failing to actually engage in activities together with others to make our world a better place makes us prone to losing the precious social fabric and cohesion that people need to feel “part of something bigger” – not just at work, where people need to understand their personal contribution in order to perform at their best, but also in local, communal and national politics. This is even truer of even more abstract entities.

Yes, we have come to take a lot for granted: that freedom came “free”, or that we no longer needed protective systems like unions, government regulations, or even quality standards because they limited our freedom... As a society, we are standing on the shoulders of giants, people who, often at great risk and always effort, have built the systems we benefit from today. And now, we need to do a better job at starting deeper conversations, especially in our closest circles, and address the deep disruptions of our times. Once we allow the masks of human decency to fall, and have no supporting values to renew standards, human dealings look sordid. Below that veneer, things haven't changed much since the Thirty Years' War...

*This is what personal leadership is about; holding up the mirror takes courage, but it's our actions, as Albert Schweitzer famously observed, that inspire others.*



This is what personal leadership is about; holding up the mirror can be uncomfortable, and takes courage, but it's our actions, as Albert Schweitzer famously observed, that inspire others: “Leading by example isn't the most important way of influencing others. It's the only one.” Over the years, I've met my share of people who were deeply ashamed of some of the things they did or supported, or just turned a blind eye to. On the other hand, those who decide to face adversity and stand up to bad things, pay the price for not giving up on the demands on their self-realisation. The alternative to paying that price – of standing up for their values, beliefs, and interests – is numbing our feelings. Numbing is great for consumption, because people “reward themselves” by throwing money at needs that are just stand-ins. So no doubt about it, guilt and shame can be excellent growth drivers of the economy – certainly much better ones than personal growth!

Coming back to what leadership means for normal behaviour in everyday situations. It's simply this: Before you act, you can step back and think: “Is what I'm about to do a reflection of who I am, and who I want to be?” We all get easily distracted, but we can choose to stop a moment and remember that whenever we act, we are exercising choice about what we send into this world, whether we like it or not. Why not practice some joy and gratitude? Be in awe of all those amazing things we can still experience each and every day – right where we are now...!

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# WHAT TO READ DURING THE HOLIDAYS...

Holidays – time with your near and dear, often travelling to delightful places. This means fine weather, delicious food, yet also crowds, noise and queues for ridiculously overpriced items. A good idea to take some stuff that help you create your own internal universe – like powerful ideas, ideally coming in stories!

For holidays come with big chunks of unstructured time; even the most ambitious hikers, sightseers, as well as divers, sunbathers or skiers occasionally get bad weather, or a day when their dear entourage can not be coaxed into any activity...

Lots of free time is not always a gift in times when only few of us fully disconnect from the news. No doubt about it – the world in which we are hoping to unfold our possibilities is not getting easier to manoeuvre, and it is sometimes challenging to observe things with equanimity. Which comes with our human nature, as neurobiology teaches us: everything we perceive has some feelings thrown in. This has benefits too: among other things, it helps us dramatically improve our memory.

I find solace in bigger perspectives, which is where music and good books come in. But not all books are suitable holiday reads. For example, one of my favourites, Egon Friedell's classic "The Cultural History of the Modern Age – the Crisis of the European Soul" is much better suited for evenings by the fireplace than on the beach.

My book tips are authored by exceptional storytellers, and are inspiring, enjoyable as well as informative. You will have heard of some of them, especially of Yuval Noah Harari's books, all NYT bestsellers, and rightfully so. I'll start with his first book, **Sapiens**. This is a sweeping history of 70,000 years of human life, almost up to today, where, as he said in an *IntelligenceSquared* interview, we lost our story. One of the many powerful thoughts I recommend mulling over for a moment.

**Sapiens** had already made me curious when I first read this teaser which gave me something to chew on during my entire journey home:

*FIRE gave us power*

*GOSSIP helped us cooperate*





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*AGRICULTURE made us hungry for more*  
*MYTHOLOGY maintained law and order*  
*MONEY gave us something we can really trust*  
*CONTRADICTIONS created culture*  
*SCIENCE made us deadly*

**Sapiens – Brief History of Humankind** is an erudite and provocative, if elegantly written book. It spans no less than the story of our species from hunter-gatherer to the present problematic search for happiness in view of our essentially unchanged biochemistry. I found it quite unput-downable! If the following quotes don't make you curious, it probably isn't the book for you.

- Most top predators of the planet are majestic creatures. Millions of years of dominion has filled them with self-confidence. Sapiens by contrast is more like a banana-republic dictator. Having so recently been one of the underdogs of the savannah, we are full of fears and anxieties over our position, which makes us doubly cruel and dangerous. (p. 12–13)
- Perhaps this is exactly why our ancestors wiped out the Neanderthals – they were too familiar to ignore, but too different to tolerate. (p. 20)
- A second theory agrees that our unique language evolved as a means of sharing information about the world. But the most important information that needed to be conveyed was about humans, not about lions and bison. Our language evolved as a way of gossiping. (p. 25)
- Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths. (...) yet none of those things (laws, justice, human rights) exist outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, money no human rights, laws or justice outside the common imagination of human beings. (p.30–31)
- Trade may seem a very pragmatic activity, one that needs no fictive basis. Yet the fact is that no other animal other than Sapiens engages in it, and all the Sapiens trade networks about which we have detailed evidence were based on fictions. Trade cannot exist without trust, and it is very difficult to trust in strangers. The global trade network of today is based on our trust in such fictional entities as the dollar, the Federal reserve bank, and the totemic trademarks of corporations. (p. 39–40)

If you have a chance to browse **Sapiens**, do read a few pages in the chapter *History's Biggest Fraud: The Agricultural Revolution*. No bookstore in sight? Email me for the 2-page scan!

## Neurobiology? Epigenetics!

Neurobiology is currently a big buzzword – right up there with behavioural economics. Beloved romantic notions like the unconditional free will, regulated by our morality, rightfully got a severe beating, as did the illusion of our ever-increasing happiness that also Harari criticizes. On the other hand, another illusion is often replacing those: that we only need to choose the right nudges, convert them into algorithms, and package them into wearables – and all our troubles (minus perhaps privacy) will end... We should beware of scientific fantasies of omnipotence. Like all others, they can quickly turn totalitarian, even if they only exist in someone's imagination. The totalitarian acts they then purport to legitimize, by contrast, can be frighteningly real...

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Back to neurobiology for coaches, chock-full of shallow and oversimplifying books and seminars... One might think that there was hardly anything that wasn't revolutionized by neurobiological knowledge. For someone like me who has been interested in neurophysiology since her studies, it is disturbing how recklessly causal connections are postulated where one should speak of correlations instead. Of course, there are undisputed results; so if you are looking for a scientific explanation of what we all suspect – that open space offices are complete nonsense, and unsuitable for concentrated, efficient work, look to neurobiology. There is excellent proof ☺.

British virologist and molecular biologist Nessa Carey's **The Epigenetics Revolution-Rewriting and Understanding Inheritance** provides the background in an area where revolutions have truly happened over the past decades: the role of DNA, and the question of nature vs. nurture in determining our lives (hint: the right answer is “both-and, plus” :)). If only our biology teachers had explained things so well at the time, more of the complex cell biology would have stuck; Carey fills in the blanks, jargon free, and with a clear focus on the essentials. But is this relevant for adults, except for “secondary educational purposes” – ie overseeing homework of the next generation? See for yourself at pages 2–6 in the preview available on Amazon!

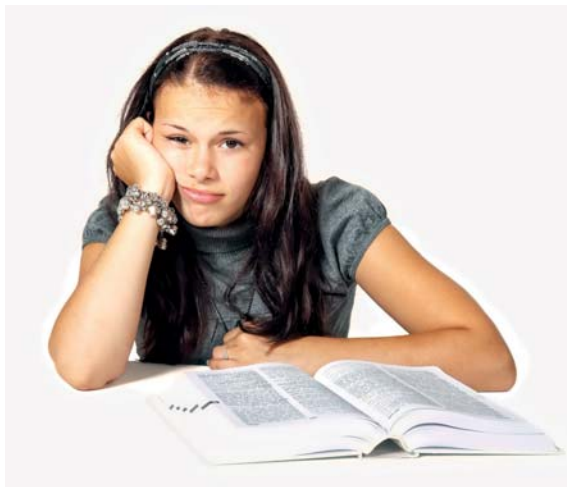
### Wow! Shriver's Finest!

And now to the most unusual recommendation of these three – I even hesitate how to classify Lionel Shriver's latest work. The Economist called it a social satire in their recommendation before Christmas. This is certainly true, but for a long stretch the book shows distinctly dystopian features. Shriver's *magnum opus* **The Mandibles – Story of a Family 2029–2047** is a magnificent, courageous and awfully plausible work. Some images are quite unforgettable – some sombre, others decidedly comical. What on earth does the woman want to write next? (yes, this Lionel is a woman!).

### You don't read on holiday?

Still a pretty recent discovery for me are podcasts –my favourites are conversations between educated, eloquent people. Podcasts are also great during the less enjoyable activities that come with life on vacation: waiting for late connections, trips to airports, ships, queuing at counters. Even better, of course, on long walks, where you can linger on interesting thoughts for a moment. For the podcast tip here I definitely recommend hitting the pause button frequently!

I am often awed by the breadth and depth of topics that philosopher, neuroscientist and writer **Sam Harris** covers in his writings and podcasts. His *Waking Up* podcast typically has 90 minute in-depth, ad-free conversations with



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exciting guests from various fields of science and academia, literature and politics. Take a look at his list of guests – which btw includes Yuval Harari on March 19, 2017, and I can recommend this interview especially. If you don't have 90 minutes, start in the 57th minute! Time well spent indeed.

There is another reason why I am happy to recommend Sam Harris: he rejects sponsorship and advertising in his media to ensure his independence, and asks supporters of his free podcasts for a voluntary contribution. After a few tasters, I accepted his proposition. You don't have to, as there is no such thing as a “free trial”.

## My issues with professional and personal development

I obviously spend a lot of time on *professional development*, to use this uninspiring term. I constantly receive invitations to high-calibre conferences, workshops, seminars, and most recently, master classes. Some still come in print – those that take place in exclusive locations or with very high-ranking speakers. Yet make no mistake: even these often don't meet my expectations. Of course this isn't just my problem – we have all already seen quite a lot and know what we want as a result. Expectations tend to grow with experience. And I'm not happy to come away with just two good quotes, a reading tip and three business cards, as many people told me they were...

Now I am in the fortunate position to choose the events I attend, but that doesn't make things easier! I am interested in a variety of topics but when I chose to be in learning situations with other people, I am looking for insights, not just in-



formation; after all, there are better ways for studying facts. More than anything else, I expect perspective, and opportunities to benefit from the experience of others. This requires rich discussions, impulses that raise new questions and refine the ones participants have already. In order to move in a space where things connect, and new ideas are forming, the layout actually has to allow for this to happen.

For me, it doesn't stop at content quality and methodology; it extends to the people who present their thoughts. Since everything is said by a concrete person, I want to engage with the observer behind the observation. So when someone attempts some sort of synthesis, and combines almost banal bits of information into something that makes me think or say “how interesting, I've never thought about that” – this is when I truly wake up.

Many events for coaches, consultants and facilitators leave me with mixed feelings. On one hand, I am interested in how they work and want to learn. There are excellent colleagues out there who have amazing concepts. But the mainstream still consists of speakers and facilitators who are very well versed in the content they present, but don't encourage thinking across boundaries – after

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all, their primary concern is the content they have to share... Encouraging deep interaction between participants is their very least concern. I am sure I'm not the only person who most enjoys the discussions with other participants, triggered by what has just happened. Too bad this is limited to the breaks. If however, I find no such person, and/or there is no real opportunity to connect and talk during the day, I'll lose interest.

Sometimes I and a few others in the group find the competence and relevance of experience of our colleagues seriously lacking, and inappropriate for moving in the complex realms of change, and individual and team development. This isn't hubris and self-importance on our part ("*we*" are better than "*them*"), but real concern; wearing the "participant hat" helps us connect to the concerns of those involved in change processes who have to take such workshops, with mixed feelings.



Many facilitator trainings are covering the basics for people for who training and facilitation is a second career, and one quite outside their original expertise and skillsets. It is easy to see why – in the crammed space of a few days at the time, there is no room for depth.

Lots of trainers come from marketing careers, lots of coaches from HR positions, and only a fraction of them have ever managed teams of anywhere near the complexity of the people they now have as participants... Similarly, participants easily outshine their experience, knowledge and interest in leadership, power, formal and informal structures in firms, and effective influencing skills. I find it most irritating when there is no awareness of the blind spots such gaps generate. *I don't know what I don't know* is not a problem limited to Trump. Depending on the assignment, it can endanger the entire process, and do real damage.

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*Only a fraction of coaches or trainers have ever managed people, or teams of anywhere near the complexity of those they now have as participants, or clients.*



In the last four months, I sampled a neuroscience seminar for coaches that was nice, if far too basic, then at the end of June the Economist Innovation Summit in Berlin, which only scratched the surface and left every opportunity for critical classification of new buzzwords untouched. A waste of time and money, and above all a missed chance: having such a distinguished crowd in one place, and then puzzling them to a degree that they just stand around during the breaks...

To close, a three-day workshop in some open-space methodology in July also left a bad aftertaste. At least, I met a very competent and inspiring colleague. But what an investment for meeting just one person! Yet learning and inspiration is a need that is inextricably linked to my profession, and I am always looking for opportunities to complement and develop my ideas together with others. So what is the solution? Become more conservative and listen to recommendations from my environment? This limits the risk, but on the other hand also caps my possibilities for discovery. If you have an inspiring event to recommend, don't hesitate – since the premature death of one of my Cambridge mentors, John Shotter, my beloved summer schools no longer happen, which leaves a real gap.

### Ria Verlinden in Prague

So eventually, my disappointments generated a positive impulse: I invited one of my personal sources of growth and inspiration, the Belgian facilitator and coach Ria Verlinden, to Prague for a 2-day workshop in November 2017. The title: **Your First Team**. Participants could look deeper into the dynamics on how they functioned in teams – a truly breathtaking experience. I don't intend to enter the market of workshop organizers, but Ria's work and her gifts are so special that I will offer this opportunity primarily to my clients next year as well. If you would like to hear what this year's participants had to say, and see the full details, just pop me an email. This time, Ria's invitation was around building blocks:

Your building blocks for your roles as husband, wife, parent, team member, co-worker, partner, boss, entrepreneur are constructed in the very first group we are born into: our family. How this first connection serves as a platform for all the other teams and systems we will join later in life is an interesting and revealing line of enquiry.

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# BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER...

You know the energizing feeling that a truly meaningful exchange generates – where one question leads to another, ideas emerge, things appear in a different light, which in turn creates fresh insights and brings strands of thought together in new ways. This can create a flow state; unfortunately, it happens rarely enough. So we already feel lucky to experience this state occasionally during an engaging discussion. But it gets much more exciting when you throw a serious chunk of time on precisely the topics that you care most about – and give them some new oxygen.

This is what I do for a living, and creating such flow moments is a role I have played in the lives of many entrepreneurs and top managers over the last 17 years. Clients appreciate the clarity and focus with which they come away from our sessions, and work with renewed energy until our next session – sometimes only weeks, sometimes months later.



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Many clients have suggested I should think of a different name for my services, because they feel it is more than what they associate with coaching. I am aware of the term having become diluted over the past years, to often smack more of quick-fix transactional techniques, than deep human encounters that touch the essence of what, and why, people want what they want.

*Spend half a day with me, including an excellent lunch that zeros in on your interests exclusively. For the price of a one-day group event.*



So here is the challenge I present to you today: Why spend a whole day on a high-level workshop, seminar or conference that will only mildly inspire you, when you can invest the same amount of money and work on what you are really interested in shifting? Spend half a day with me that zeros in on your interests exclusively. For the price of a one-day event, including an excellent lunch. You also get some high-profile business cards, if not right away; I host regular cocktails for my clients, and you'd be welcome to attend one if you take me up on this offer.

I work in Prague, Berlin and Hamburg, in English, German and Czech. If you are pondering whether your topic is suitable for such a half-day, do give me a call or send a message; that's definitely something we can clarify. I'm not going to bore you with amazing success stories, I think the references on the following pages speak for themselves. Especially since their authors are all managers and business owners on your level who you can actually contact on LinkedIn – which is where you can also see the unabbreviated versions of those references.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS



*I worked with Annette soon after moving abroad and beginning my international career. Her guidance helped me a lot to take my thinking to a new level and to observe “layers of reality” I didn’t know existed. Even today, almost 5 years after our sessions, I often recall some of our discussions and take inspiration from it.*

*I highly appreciated Annette’s international perspective and deep understanding of people. She understood very fast where I stood in my personal development which allowed her to tailor the sessions in a way that suited me.*

*Annette is clearly the best personal coach I have worked with so far in my career and would gladly recommend her to anybody. It was a privilege working with her.*

**Otto Paulovics**, *Change Manager in Transformation Division, CSOB Prague*

*For many years, Annette is my guide during my career at KPMG and beyond. After 7 years in audit, from a hard-skills perspective, I felt I knew it all. At the same time, I started noticing the effects of office politics. Thanks to Annette I discovered that it wasn’t the right time to exit at that time; there were still lessons to be learnt.*

*In the following years, and thanks to our collaboration, I managed to filter quite well what was going on in internal and external battlefields, while staying focused on what I believe(d) is the right way of doing things: with passion, curiosity, responsibility, using common sense, being fair and helpful to others. Even though, many times I got to what looked like frustrating dead-end situation, in my sessions with Annette I realised I was either caught in a loop, or at crossroads in heavy fog, or there was a chance to go back with no need to feel guilty. Simply put, thanks to her I learnt to see my options and make choices – not necessarily the best ones, but the right ones at the time and under the circumstances.*

*If you are brave and willing to accept that things can be seen from different angles (not just your own), if you like to experiment and you are patient with yourself, Annette is a great fit for you.*

**Lenka Velehradská**, *Head of Group Reporting and Consolidation, Rockaway*

*I worked with Annette for several years as my position developed from Plant Operation Manager to Plant Manager in Doosan Bobcat Plant in Dobris, to becoming a member of the European executive team.*

*I appreciated Annette’s reliability, professionalism and accountability which she showed in our work. Her professional approach enabled us to establish a mutually trustful relationship. She used to challenge me with tough questions in order to open my mind on one hand, and was very supportive at the same time. She helped me understand and finally demonstrate leading through questions and respecting people at all levels as a consequence. It was a huge pleasure to work with her. Thank you Annette!*

**Rostislav Khyr**, *Plant Manager, Magna International*



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*I've had the pleasure of working with Annette for the past year as I've embarked on my first international assignment. It has indeed been a journey, we have evolved the coaching from acute and reactive coaching that addressed the common day-to-day challenges to a more beneficial holistic treatment of opportunities and challenges working in a large global organization. This evolution has allowed us to focus on developing more meaningful long-term strategies around my own career development.*

*I have thoroughly benefited professionally and personally from my time with Annette and I feel like I'm able to apply much of what I have learned to my day to day interactions with professionals around the globe.*

**John Koch**, *Director, Global Strategy and Operations, MSD*

*Každý člověk se dostane v soukromém i profesionálním životě do fáze, kdy přemýšlí jak dál, jaké jsou další cesty ke zlepšení a osobnímu růstu. Po více než dvaceti letech kariéry ve výrobní sféře, strávených na různých úrovních řízení, nastal pro mne tento okamžik v roce 2007... Po prvním setkání s paní Reissfelder jsme se vzájemně ujistili, že oba vidíme v budoucí spolupráci vysokou přidanou hodnotu. Pro udržení dynamiky osobního i profesního růstu je samozřejmě nezbytné nejen chtít, ale využít i příležitostí a zdrojů, které jsou k dispozici.*

*Zodpovědně mohu prohlásit, že naše spolupráce v následujících letech měla významný podíl na mém osobním i kariérním růstu. Mimo její nezpochybnitelné profesionální dovednosti je to též dané schopností poznat a přesně se přizpůsobit osobnosti a hodnotám koučovaného. A následně toto nenásilně a velice účelně propojit s kontextem zadání i s kulturou společnosti, ve které koučovaný pracuje. Na základě osobní hluboké zkušenosti mohu služby paní Annette Reissfelder vřele doporučit každému, kdo se nebojí vydat se na cestu sebepoznání a tím i trvalého osobního rozvoje a zlepšování.*

**Milan Jeřábek**, *Operations Director, DANONE JAPAN CO., LTD.*

*I am very passionate about my work. My coaching sessions with Annette help me to keep that passion, and to grow it further along my career path. Back in 2007 when I first worked with Annette I was moving from a management to an executive position. The transition was smooth for me, as she taught me to be aware of my management style, and especially, to look at what was happening around me in my team, among my peers, and management. We created a very solid basis for my further career, which subsequently led me abroad.*

*In my next career planning, I on purpose included coaching sessions with Annette again. This time I brought with me questions related to how can I make my future jobs even better, without losing balance in my life. In our discussions, Annette brings a lot of insight, experience, knowledge, addressing my specific needs, customizing to my specific background, to my professional values, while setting them in broader international business and cultural perspectives. I appreciate her well calibrated feedback to sensitive topics. I found it each time hard to explain to other colleagues why coaching with Annette is so valuable for my professional achievements, and a recommendation in writing is even harder. That is why I simply recommend to meet Annette in person to understand.*

**Jana Lässlerová**, *Focus Factory Manager, Continental Automotive, Regensburg*

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Po více než 19 letech v manažerské pozici u stejné mezinárodní společnosti jsem najednou měla pocit, jako když dítěti berou nejoblíbenější hračku. Vlivem personálních změn v lokálním i mezinárodním vedení se výrazně změnila kultura společnosti i požadavky na moji pozici. S touto situací jsem si nevěděla rady a byla jí velmi stresována. Rozhodla jsem se vyhledat pomoc profesionálního kouče a to nejlépe někoho, kdo není rodilý Čech a umí se dobře orientovat v prostředí mezinárodních společností. Od první chvíle Annette rozpoznala hlavní příčinu mých problémů a velmi otevřeně mi vysvětlila, co bych měla dělat jinak. Spolupráce s ní mi pomohla opět získat tolik potřebný nadhled a to i v situacích, které svádí k rychlému úsudku bez předchozího zvážení všech aspektů. Díky našim sezením se mi vrátil vnitřní klid a vyrovnanost, stejně jako chuť a síla se pustit do něčeho nového. Na Annette si cením její vysoké profesionality v kombinaci s velice přátelským osobním přístupem a smyslem pro humor, který dokáže mnoho situací odlehčit, aniž by diskutovaná problematika ztratila na vážnosti.

**Ivana Holá, Finanční ředitel, PaperlinX Europe,**

Annette is an amazing coach and psychologist. Her insights and creativity allowed me quickly to trust her intellectually as a professional, her personality and style allowed us to build a relaxed client-coach relationship. She helped me bring into bright daylight, from the depths of my subconscious mind, various aspects of what motivates me in life. What I learned in discussions with her about myself, about my values and my priorities, helped me make decisions which I know I will not regret.

**Karel Pleva, Vice President, AT Kearney**

I have known Annette for many years and highly recommend her as an executive coach. As a coach, Annette challenges senior executives to think in different ways to find better solutions. She directs people to excellent resources that with her personal input answers the questions executives may be uncomfortable asking at work but are essential to further develop their career and personal success. For most executives there is no one to challenge them or to ask non business related questions since their bosses have enough on their plate.

**Carlyse Evans, Chief Operating Officer, Baker & McKenzie Toronto**

Koučing s Annette Reissfelder mi pomohl v několika klíčových oblastech. Během naší spolupráce jsem se dokázal s odstupem podívat na sebe a svoji práci. Mohl jsem bez zábran hovořit o všech problémech a otázkách, které mě trápí v řízení firmy a lidí. Ve své práci přirozeně nemám takového partnera, kterému bych se mohl svěřit a konzultovat s ním možná řešení. A kvalitní kouč, kterým Annette bezesporu je, takového partnera představuje. Během našich sezení jsem také dokázal správně vyhodnotit svůj největší personální problém a radikálně jej vyřešit. Bylo to jedno z mých nejtěžších rozhodnutí v profesionální kariéře, ale dnes s odstupem několika měsíců ho hodnotím velmi pozitivně.

Koučing s Annette mi také pomohl ujasnit si, jak dál pokračovat ve své kariéře. Byl to pro mě velmi důležitý impuls, který jsem po téměř 20-ti letech profesionální kariéry „uprostřed“ své produktivní etapy života potřeboval.

**Tomáš Tkačík, CEO, Business Media CZ**

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Annette was very helpful during my transition... She helped me to understand how my words & actions will make an impact in a different culture.

**Stacy Meyer**, General Manager, Poland & Baltics, Johnson & Johnson

Working with Annette on a difficult consulting assignment, I have appreciated her serious and professional approach to people and issues they are facing. Respecting and supporting others she manages to stay herself: a strong personality with original views on life and work, that challenges and inspires people who want something more than just live an 'ordinary life'.

**Jana Martinova**, Owner, Accord Group Czech Republic

S Annette jsem se setkala před několika lety, jen krátce poté jsem s ní začala pracovat jako s koučem. Její zkušenosti, přístup i nadhled mi pomohly posunout se o značný kus dále, a to nejen v profesní kariéře. Velmi oceňuji její aktivitu a pravidelnou organizaci příjemných setkání, kde je možné poznat další zajímavé lidi. Je mi potěšením, že jsme stále v kontaktu a Annette přeji hodně dalších úspěšných let v její práci.

**Hana Hovorkova**, finanční ředitelka, Český národní podnik s.r.o. - MANUFAKTURA

J'ai eu l'occasion de travailler pendant deux années avec Annette alors que j'étais Directeur Général de notre filiale Edenred en République Tchèque. J'ai fait appel à elle lorsque nous étions en train de réaliser l'acquisition 14 entreprises concurrentes. J'ai demandé à Annette de m'accompagner dans l'intégration de ces entreprises qui faisait croître notre entreprise 50% en revenue et en effectifs alors que je conservais la même Equipe de Direction.

Annette m'a apporté son aide:

- Pour mieux définir les attentes de chacun de mes collaborateurs dans leur relation avec leur manager;
- Adapter mon discours et ma relation managériale à leurs besoins,
- Tirer le meilleur partie de l'équipe en place alors que nous devons faire face à un énorme challenge managérial sur une période de temps très courte.

Cette collaboration m'a permis de négocier cette transformation d'entreprise avec succès. Deux ans Edenred est devenu le leader sur le marché des titres Restaurant en RT. J'ai beaucoup apprécié l'esprit d'écoute d'Annette, sa capacité à me faire dire et comprendre quelles étaient les enjeux pour chacun d'entre nous, ses conseils précieux pour décider comment aborder les étapes clés pour moi de ce projet avec mes collaborateurs et et avec mon management.

**Bruno Berthier**, Regional Director Scandinavia, GM Sweden at Edenred

Annette Reissfelder is a professional analyst with a lot of personal experience, which allows her to deliver valuable input and helps the client to develop her/his personal profile. Very good to work with.

**Kay Biebler**, Director Rolling Stock, Solaris Bus & Coach, Poland



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