

Building a reflective leadership

The importance of asking questions (before)

by Andrea Vitullo and Francesco Tomba

FOREWORD

What makes me "unique"?

Does being more self-aware make a difference?

Are obstacles truly real?

Do I know I have a daemon?

Do I finish what I've started?

Am I leaving-up to myself?

Does time at work belong to me?

Can I make my project breathe?

Do I know I could be brave?

What to get rid of and what to keep?

*What is the difference between being noticed
and seeing your results noticed?*

What is missing when work seems without sense?

What can I do for the freedom of my work-mates?

Do I remember why I am doing this?

Is the little bit I do enough for me?

Is there space for this kind of questions inside organizations? Is reflective leadership possible? Can organizational well-being exist in isolation from personal well-being? How can ethics and awareness, hope and emotions become a part of corporate organizational and remunerative paradigms? Is it possible to free ourselves from the "terrorism of consensus"?

A critical analysis of the leader in the technical age shows the reasons why philosophical reflection which focuses on *individuals/persons/human beings* might prove to be inevitable for organizations in the near future.

THE TECHNICAL ERA:**THE TIRED AND OLD MANAGER**

The world of work has changed almost beyond recognition. There is no 9am to 5pm. No job for life. No guarantees. A paradigm has reached its end and the old idea of the manager focused on long-term forecasts, rationalism and method, is over. How could it be otherwise with managers overwhelmed by anxiety, fear and uncertainty, and ignorant of the importance of emotions and the irrational? The work/life balance paradigm is over.

While the disciplines of the self and the use of psychology have helped organizations come to terms with the everyday language of inter-personal relations, the limits of attempting to ensure that personal development coincides with the development of the organization have not been overcome and remains tied to an outdated idea of improving the individual only in order to improve performance.

A possible way to overcome the dichotomy between personal and corporate development is to create a space for reflection, where the issue is not the manager, or the leader, but the individual.

WHAT'S HAPPENING:**REDEFINITION OF WORK**

Work has clearly absorbed all of those human values that were once pertinent to one's friends, family and leisure activities. We have gone from work as a "productive activity" to work as an "activity that defines who we are".

Ideas of urgency and immediacy, a sort of anxiety, permeate all areas of organizational life and corporate operations. Contemporary management practice does not even contemplate the possibility of stopping to think before acting, or even not acting, but suspending, breathing and reflecting is becoming fundamental. We need to create a breathing space so that we can humanize both work. and the management process. To do this we need to start by recognizing the person, replacing the *resumé* with the biography.

Tomorrow's leader is a new Socrates: who doesn't teach, but helps those who think they know to re-examine their opinions so that they can walk with their own legs, or fall down, on their effective merit.

Tomorrow's leader never stops asking questions; challenges answers; inspires, and is comfortable with doubt and uncertainty.

Tomorrow's leader encourages calm, breaks, silence. Never stops thinking when in the company.

Tomorrow's leader has the courage to make mistakes; is self-aware, and honestly asks "how do I feel"?

Tomorrow's leader talks of strength rather than power.

The real leader in an organization is first and foremost someone who listens, is a communicator, an educator and, from an emotional point of view, is an expressive and inspiring person, able to create an atmosphere in which, rather than taking all the decisions, gives the necessary space for others to use their talent and empower themselves.



Up to now the "hero" has been the technological man, able to anticipate the most effective solution; or the politician who has the answer to questions that nobody has asked yet; or the manager who can only reproduce what already exists or propose pre-packaged solutions. But in the future the "hero" will increasingly be a *person*, with the courage to act as a catalyser for the energies of others, creating relationships among equals and building networks that can deal with the "don't knows" and uncertainties by promoting creativity and innovation. Someone able to listen, to him/herself and to others, before acting; to stop and "feel" before doing.

WHEN PHILOSOPHY ENTERS THE COMPANY

We might call a “philosophical” approach to life, business and coaching that which involves the continuous re-interpretation of oneself and the world, as a way of analyzing needs, calling them into question, cultivating them and not merely satisfying them.

Philosophy provide individuals with a practice of looking at the world from alternative points of view that “illuminate”, or better, “amplify” one’s own preconceived ideas and consolidated views, allowing creativity to “infect” the construction of one’s interior being, challenging it and re-examining the formation and development of ideas. The aim of a philosophical approach is therefore the creation of a space where ideas can be freely nurtured through questioning.

A number of changes occur when a company adopts a philosophical approach. The space given to reflection redefines relationships inside the organization, because what we are now dealing with is the whole person and each individual is given the possibility to express their own uniqueness as a person.

The uncertainty dominating the world which we live in demands a different approach, but above all it requires a different way of looking for answers. Where are you going if you don’t know where you are? What we need is a project for life and work.

The idea of a space for reflection can be realized and immediately gives a sense of possibility. The idea itself of a space for reflection generates a sense of wellbeing. The philosophical approach, which leads towards acting after reflecting, results in a healthier decision making process.

The possibility of examining issues and problems without necessarily having to find a solution may initially be discomforting, before a sense of freedom, which is lacking in today’s corporate world, kicks in.

Given that the community has always been the place where the individual evolves, the organizational community (the company) could become a privileged site for personal evolution. The philosophical approach is concerned first and foremost with the individual, also when the individual is the leader. But it is also a holistic approach that takes account of the body, the mind and the spirit of the individual, encouraging each person to learn to listen, to themselves and to others, and to find the courage to change.

To live philosophically means reintegrating life and work, both inside and outside the organisation.

WHAT IS A “BREATHING ROOM”?

“Breathing rooms” are such spaces where individuals inside organizations allow themselves to stop and indulge in a question rather than following the urge to quickly find some answer.

They obviously are not physical spaces; neither are they mental training setups which we are trained at in order to improve our “reflective” performance.

In fact, if we thought of “reflection” in terms of performance, we would be on the wrong way.

Similarly, it would be a misunderstanding to think of a “breathing room” in terms of some *format* that we can produce and reproduce.

Working with philosophy and breathing rooms involves giving up most assumption of consultancy practice.

1. The method doesn't exist! The breathing room doesn't exist either!

There is no such thing as a “philosophical training”. In other words there is not such a thing as “the” philosophical way, or “the” philosophical method. Implementing “breathing rooms” also means to seriously take into account these philosophical conditions of possibility for any sound philosophical practice inside and outside organizations.

2. There are many different breathing rooms

“Designing” breathing rooms paradoxically means to let the output surprise ourselves each and every time. Breathing rooms can be many different things, just as many can be the different personal experiences lived by each individual that inhabits the breathing room. Biography here is essential. Breathing rooms are built around a personal history and a concrete individual body.

This also means that Achenbach's Philosophical Counselling, or Lipman's Community of Enquiry, or Nelson's Socratic Dialogue are a way, not “the” way. Doing philosophy is getting away with philosophy!

This philosophical foundation to philosophy practice is rooted in a general understanding of philosophy which is best summarized in proposition 6.54 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: “*My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.*”

Which brings us to the third condition for a breathing room:

3. The breathing room is a place for the person, not the consultant

Breathing rooms come to existence when the leader is not thinking of him/herself as a leader, but as a person: therefore the coach/counsellor who works “in” the breathing room cannot exist as a consultant, but as a person too. We have to work as persons with persons.

The same thing applies to the philosopher who is in a relationship with another individual inside a breathing room: he has to “throw away the ladder”, to “surmount” his/her being-a-philosopher and to become a person.

The reasons for that are self-evident in the very “rules” of coaching and counselling. In particular, let us think of the **expectation set-up**. Any coach should know how expectation devour the coachee. Therefore the coach has to possibility:

- 1) taking profit of his client expectations and build an addictive relationship, or
- 2) lowering the expectation of the client, which is the first step from seeing things, as we would like them to be, to seeing things as they are.

If I don't lower the expectations, I am obliged to enter the relationship as a consultant, that is giving answers!

Weakening the consultant's truth and power is the only way to breathing rooms, and to philosophy in practice as we understand it. “Weakening” itself creates automatically the *space* for reflection, questions, and self-awareness. This commitment to “weakening” truths directly point to the italian contemporary philosophical approach that is most akin to our practice: Gianni Vattimo's and Aldo Rovatti's “*weak thought*”.

“CLIENT-GURU” MODEL

the client has big expectations
on the **expert/consultant**

“PERSON-PERSON” MODEL

the philosopher has big
expectations on the client

A consequence becomes clear already. Philosophical coaching/counselling paves the way to self-coaching and peer-to-peer counselling.

In fact an expert cannot aim to make his client become an expert too. On the contrary, making his “client” a philosopher is exactly the highest goal of the philosopher.

WHAT WE DO AT INSPIRE

At Inspire our mission is to enable managers to independently implement sound reflective practices in the workflow. We therefore help them to build their own breathing rooms.

Most of the time that simply means enabling them to exercise questions on a daily basis. Through one-to-one executive coaching, life coaching, and philosophical group practices, we help them discover the power of self-coaching, i.e. the power of a questioning approach before taking actions and before starting projects. We let managers confront with the importance of this preliminary dialogic and reflective practice. Sometimes the client realizes the power and freedom generated by the simple practice of stopping and asking some questions before; then he falls in love with the very existence of a possibility that most of the time was impossible even to imagine before.

Soggettive | breathing room | self coaching

Breathing Room

L'importanza di farsi delle domande (prima...)

> di Andrea Vitullo

Breathing Room è una nuova rubrica di *In-spire* (www.in-spire.biz) per 7th floor. Una conversazione con se stessi, uno spazio di riflessione prima di affrontare alcune tipiche situazioni organizzative. Una sorta di self coaching per dare un "senso" più personale a ciò che ci apprestiamo a fare, per immettere se stessi in quanto persone al di là del ruolo, dell'obiettivo immediato, della soluzione o del risultato promesso. Ogni mese dal giornale verranno lanciate due situazioni tipo, che poi saranno approfondite sul sito di 7th floor attraverso una batteria di domande da porsi. Ogni situazione verrà approfondita anche grazie alle risposte e ai commenti dei lettori.

Sei stato finalmente convocato dall'AD per parlare del tuo progetto. Sei sicuro di esserti fatto tutte le domande giuste? Quanto tempo hai a disposizione? Come pensi di utilizzarlo? Riuscirai ad avere del tempo utile per parlare d'altro? E se sì, di cosa? Hai mai pensato ad esporti e di parlare di un tuo talento personale che lui non conosce? Vorresti che lui sapesse qualcosa in più di te? Stai per affrontare una riunione con colleghi o fornitori. Hai mai pensato di raccontare qualcosa fuori ordine del giorno? Di iniziare con uno spunto personale? Qualcosa che ti ha colpito, un libro, una mostra, un fatto che hai vissuto, una citazione o una poesia? Hai mai pensato -una volta seduto- di provocare un cambiamento? Ad esempio cambiando di posto intorno al tavolo della riunione?

La stanza del respiro di In-spire e 7th floor: perché

- mette in circolo delle domande
- rende possibile l'impossibile
- distende l'apnea del pensiero compulsivo
- è un luogo protetto che ti ricorda il tuo ritmo "personale"
- è una soglia tra mondo esterno e mondo interno
- è una dimensione di "respiro sostenibile"
- è uno spazio di esperienza sgombrato dagli esperti
- è una metafora dell'urgente bisogno di riconoscimento delle persone
- immette energie positive in me e negli altri
- cambia gli output delle situazioni
- mi ricorda di portare ciò che sono o che posso essere anche sul lavoro

Oggi diventa sempre più importante un approccio più umanistico al business, un'etica della responsabilità individuale e, semplicemente, un allargamento della visione su "come" facciamo le cose. In pratica un coaching filosofico, un self-coaching per portare di più chi siamo nel ruolo che ricopriamo.

Vogliamo fornire ai lettori di 7th floor alcuni spunti di riflessione: delle semplici domande-stimolo da "farsi" o da buttare sul tavolo prima di iniziare una conversazione sul piano di marketing, sulla nuova campagna, sul "canvas" da decidere, sul rilancio della comunicazione interna per aiutare a creare un'atmosfera di condivisione, di comunità.

Un modo per riappropriarsi del fine ultimo in ciò che facciamo, per ricordarsi che tutto può dipendere anche da me!

Gli spunti, le domande in più, quelle che sembrano un po' filosofiche e poco pertinenti sono proprio quelle che sollevano il dubbio che si possa fare diversamente, le domande possono cambiare il "corso" di un incontro o di una riunione, il focus mio o delle persone con cui comunico, o semplicemente far entrare tutti più consapevoli e saggi nelle cose che ci sono da fare.

Una conversazione con se stessi e con gli altri "possibile" e "utile" prima e durante la messa in onda dell'oggetto dell'incontro.

Breathing Room: ovvero rifletti su queste domande, tienitele per te o proponile a chi vuoi tu, con il tuo stile, il tuo ritmo, il tuo respiro.



LE DOMANDE

1) Sei stato finalmente convocato dall'AD per parlare del tuo progetto. Sei sicuro di esserti fatte tutte le domande giuste?

2) Stai per affrontare una riunione con colleghi o fornitori

- Quanto tempo hai a disposizione? Come pensi di utilizzarlo? Riuscirai ad avere del tempo utile per parlare d'altro? E se sì, di cosa?
- Se potessi dargli una consulenza, di cosa gli parleresti?
- Pensando al tuo progetto, ricordi cosa te ne ha fatto innamorare?
- Hai mai pensato ad esporti e di parlare di un tuo talento personale che lui non conosce? Vorresti che lui sapesse qualcosa in più di te?
- Hai mai riflettuto a ciò che potete avere in comune tu e l'AD?
- Hai pensato a come dare all'incontro il tuo ritmo?
- Sai perché hai scelto proprio un certo vestito, un particolare colore, cosa dicono di te?
- Immaginati che l'AD ti chieda cosa migliorare in azienda. Tu cosa diresti?
- Immagina che ti chieda di partecipare ad uno dei progetti chiave in questo momento, a quale vorresti partecipare e perché?
- Che espressione immagini lui abbia e tu come pensi di riuscire a fargliela cambiare?

- Hai mai pensato di portare qualcuno con te? A prescindere dai ruoli attendali chi vorresti fosse presente e perché?
- Immagina che improvvisamente intervenga un collega di un altro paese: prova a fare con 5 parole o immagini chiave -massimo- il punto sintetico della situazione.
- Oggi puoi scegliere un colore che ti rappresenta durante la riunione: bianco=apertura ed ascolto, rosso=raffia, nero=pessimismo, blu=assertività, verde=speranza, giallo=ottimismo, arancio=energia. Che colore scegli?
- Hai mai pensato di raccontare qualcosa fuori ordine del giorno? Di iniziare con uno spunto personale? Qualcosa che ti ha colpito, un libro, una mostra, un fatto che hai vissuto, una citazione o una poesia?
- Con quali parole vorresti che i tuoi colleghi ti descrivessero alla fine della riunione (ad esempio pragmatico e problem solver, ispiratore, simpatico e pieno di humour...etc)?
- Hai mai pensato -una volta seduto- di provocare un cambiamento? Ad esempio cambiando di posto intorno al tavolo della riunione?

(Breathing rooms explained in Italian Press)