



## **Interview changeX | Sebastian Purps-Pardigol**

**Mr Purps-Pardigol, “Leading with Brain”, the title of your book, provokes the reverse conclusion: Leading without brain, is that even possible?**

You don't need the reverse conclusion – the title itself is a provocation. Back then I suggested to my publisher “Boss meets Brain” but that was a bit too briskly for the editors. The title, matching the content would have been “Brain-friendly leadership,” but that sounds a little boring and leaves you with the impression

this book is only a collection of methods, which is not the case. This book points towards the realisation that a human-centered leadership not only creates healthier, happier employees but also leads to greater economic success. This can be described with the means of modern brain research, and is supported by the experience of many companies, which already successfully apply these patterns. Leading without brain – in other words, dismissing the neurobiological needs of people – works only conditionally. This will not develop the potential of individuals, teams and entire organisations.

**“Leading without Brain”, can that be understood as the diagnosis of the condition of the current management culture?**

This applies to many companies. There are still those bosses around who believe that stress and anxiety are an effective way to achieve better results. Sometimes, it might get short time success. Volkswagen is a good example, which demonstrates the long-term consequences of such a culture. The voices of employees are getting louder, and the open criticism of the management could have fatal consequences. We need a leadership culture that enables a better quality of the relationship between individuals. Genuine cooperation and appreciation are just some of the elements, through which challenges can be overcome – in the middle- and long-term. The human and economic turmoil of a management culture that leads “without brain” are evident. You don't even have to think of the Wolfsburg billion disaster. Take a look at the current German „stress report“ and the publications of many health insurances is all you need to do: Mentally related illnesses have become a major reason of early retirement. Companies such as Unilever underpin those findings with their insights: They calculated that just at the corporate headquarters with its 1.100 employees, a cost of seven million euros will arise and that from mental illness alone. Executives who lead “with brain”, have healthier employees. In the hotel chain Upstalsboom – one of the companies, which I have studied, their sick days have reduced by 80 percent after the management consciously decided to a human-centered leadership.

**What concretely do you mean by „human-centered“ leading“?**

It means to stop seeing people as a commodity, as a company's resources. The term Human Resources expresses this already in an unfavourable way. It is rather about what you as a company ask yourself: “How are my employees? How do they feel? And: „What do they need to feel well so they can develop their full potential?“

The 14,000-employee company Phoenix Contact showed this wonderfully: It took the automation engineer 84 years to achieve an annual turnover of 1 billion euros. Then they put their employees at the focus of their company strategy, and within five years, the company increased to 1.6 billion.

Upstalsboom doubled its sales after the company consistently asked itself for several years “What do our employees need to be happy?”

**You interpret the stories of successful companies and their management culture in light of the results of modern brain research. How important is brain research to your argument?**

Many leaders, with whom I have worked, experience the explanation on the level of brain research as very helpful. I think that neuroscience only explains something, which deep down we know all along. However, we might have forgotten or repressed it. Science makes old wisdom visible once again. Science encourages executives to dare to do something they did not believe possible in the business world. For example, to pursue human’s need for connectedness and belonging. In my practice in working with companies, I experienced times over again, that sometimes it is those hard-competing “alpha guys” which after a few days in a joint workshop admit to one another, “Somehow, we have a sense of connectedness and belonging again.” Many of those “silverbacks” would have never admitted that previously. However, since I repeatedly talked to them about the basic neurobiological need of connectedness, it became possible for them. Brain research makes it possible, that forgotten needs – in a business context – become socially acceptable once again.

**What can brain research contribute to a better understanding of leadership?**

It can help us to understand, the pattern which makes us tick. For example, it is useful to understand, that the human brain interprets the loss of connectedness as physical pain. Some executives are just not aware of what they are doing to the minds of their employees with their many reorganisation processes. Through their behaviour, they are limiting people’s access to their full potential. Whether this is done ignorantly or unintentionally, does not matter ... both hurt the company. The findings of modern brain research help us to understand what you, as a manager, have done so far – both in a helpful and the not so helpful manner. Then, as a boss, I can make an informed decision which of my favourable behaviour I could apply more while making changes where I am not doing that well.

**“The” Brain Research is a broad research field – what are the findings and results, you are focussing at?**

Prof. Dr Gerald Hüther, Germany’s most well-known neuroscientist, who wrote the preface, to the publication of my book, stated that many findings I used were new even to him. That answers the question in part: I have done my homework. I focused on other researchers whose humanistic attitude excites me. For example, Dan Siegel, Richard Davidson, Sara Lazar or Britta Hölzel, who has a very significant part to play in the exploration of the subject of mindfulness and neuroscience.

**Are these research findings or just a popularised narrative that relates to research?**

Both. At some stages of the book, I dive deeply into scientific studies, providing you with the place, time and name of the leading researchers. In its preparation for the book, I worked through some 400 scientific articles, and had many conversations and Skype sessions, with researchers. At the same time, I presented those findings in a popularised manner. My goal was that the book could be read as easily and quickly as a work of fiction. That’s why I have lot’s of different stories and protagonists in this book.

**What are they about?**

Some are captivating, like the general manager, who was kidnapped. But there is also the quite “normal” boss who talks of his many sleepless nights when his revenues went down for a third in the crisis year of 2008/2009. Right down to a German neuroscientist who made powerful meditation

experiences in Asia which she incorporated years later in her work in pioneering studies at Harvard Medical School in Boston. And all those other people helped me to realise that by only a few minutes of different thinking, we can change the structure of our brain.

After the delivery of the manuscript, I did the maths: There are over 50 messages you can take away from the book. If I just listed them one by one, the book would have been quite boring. However, to make this book an easy and enjoyable read, and most of all, to remember the essence, it needs the (background) stories. Contextualised knowledge is easier to memorise.

### **Why then your formulation, brain research is „proving“ certain things?**

Sometimes you have to be bold. Particularly then, when it comes to change traditional beliefs. Most people still believe in the old saying: “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” If you hold this belief, then you have a problem. Particularly if the boss’s viewpoint is, “With the older employees, there is nothing to achieve anymore.” Here, it would help to enlist modern brain research, which will quickly prove that rewiring of the brain is possible for your entire lifetime.

I get a lot of mails from readers who write stating that they are glad because what they thought and felt along can now scientifically be substantiated. It seems the term “brain research” is important for some people so they can trust themselves more. However, I use this term rather sporadically; I am well aware that this would get me closer to the border of populism.

### **Paraphrasing the last question: Can brain research contribute to the implementation of better management?**

Brain research can have an important part in it. However, I have little time for catchwords such as “neuro-leadership,” which tries to make the reader believe, all you need to do is to implement specific methods to achieve better results in employees.

In my opinion, brain research can help us to understand the deep patterns responsible for developing our human potential. Simultaneously – and I have already worked that out in the first chapter of my book – that will only happen if executives work on their attitude.

### **With which goals in mind should they go about? What is the importance here?**

The goal should always be to become a better version of oneself – so that, by means of personal development one becomes a role model, an avant-garde of change and growing-beyond-oneself for the entire workforce.

A few years ago, I was invited to a Head of Exam in a federal ministry. At the end of my lecture, the participating men and women asked me, with a somewhat strange inner detachment – what they should change within their ministry to achieve. Personally, I feel this described human-centered culture. Above all, I recommended honest self-reflection; because, the way I experienced them, no one would have followed them enthusiastically. A few months later, I learned from an amused secretary, that my recommendation did not hit a particularly fertile ground. For me, that was an excellent example of why bosses fail at a cultural change within the organisation.

However, some executives I mentioned in my book initially hit a brick wall as well. “He can tell me whatever he wants,” was the statement of some employees during the early stages of change. In many companies, a lot of water has gone under the bridge, and the employees have learned how to wait it out.

If managers want to inspire people to grow beyond themselves, it might be easier for them to succeed when employees can experience a boss who managed that himself. To put it in a metaphor: Who’s

advice in a gym would you rather follow: A fat fitness trainer with a beer gut or rather a fitness trainer with a well-toned figure?

**You have done many interviews and spoken with many entrepreneurs and business leaders.**

**Have you found similarities?**

Yes – there are recurring patterns of success. Whether it is the just mentioned “work on yourself” for executives or the framework in which employees (once more) can feel connected to one another. You could take the Frisian Hotel Chain Upstalsboom for example. I could have taken this company as a thread throughout my seventh chapter. Ultimately, however, it is much more credible to the reader telling the story of a dozen different companies. I integrate them in one or the other chapter as a successful example to enrich the scientific knowledge with authentic, practical experience.

However, you can get it down to three designate elements that people in these companies experienced: Connectedness, co-creation and strong internal pictures. However, the latter are so diverse that I worked through all their aspects over five chapters.

**What are those internal pictures?**

In simple terms, those internal pictures are the meanings that people ascertain to particular events of their lives. Those pictures can be influenced by things such as a boss who believes in his workers.

For instance, think of the Austrian special machine manufacturer Hammerschmid, whose team has developed a revolutionary electric motorcycle. Employees told me about a boss who “showered them with confidence.” Especially during difficult times of failure, the belief of the boss in his staff helped them not to lose faith in themselves.

Something similar happened to the students of the natural cosmetics manufacturer Weleda: They could establish their own junior company with its product. And almost incidentally they improved the business relationship with a major trading partner of the parent company. All employees noticeably increased their self-confidence.

There are several more effective ways to change these pictures: For example, the experience of meaningfulness or experiences, where you can grow or the boss mentioned above who role models that “change is possible.” The “freestyle” is mindfulness, to which I dedicated the seventh chapter. For example, I found a company through which mindfulness training achieved not only stress-free employees but also made a productivity gain of 30 million euros. Or the well-known company Klosterfrau, which distributes the „Melisengeist“: Not a single participant of the company’s internal mindfulness workshops suffered from mental illnesses in all those years – people just stay healthier.

**Is there such a thing as common knowledge: What is required, which must be a given, for the company to undergo a change in its management culture?**

The realisation may sound simple, the implementation, however, is sometimes a little challenging: It needs a critical mass of executives willing to work honestly and consistently on the cultural change, but above all are willing to walk their talk.

At first, it takes time and energy – but then the results go far beyond the initial investment. The sick days are decreased, the employees are loyal; they are measurably more satisfied, and the economic indicators move steeply upward. I have seen that times over in the companies I studied for my book.

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