

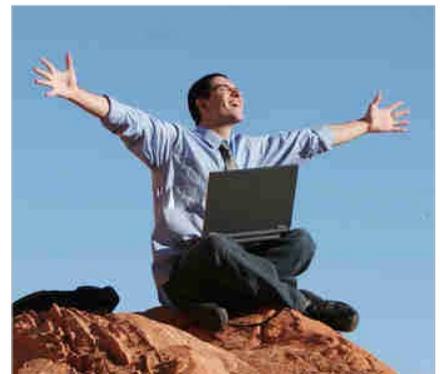
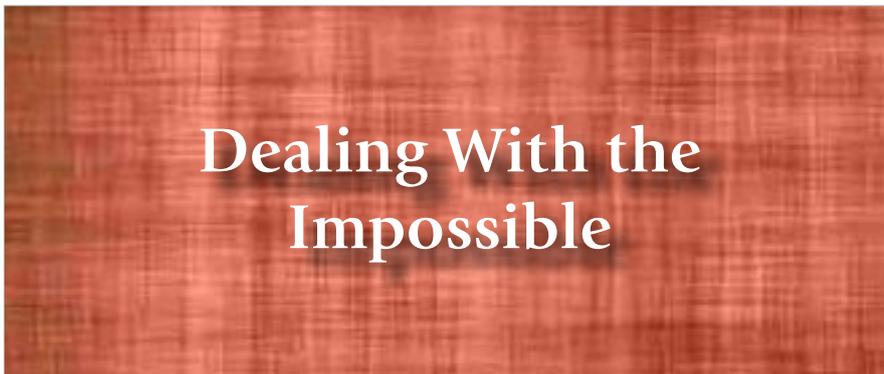


# MANDAT GR WTH LETTER®

Growth Focus: The Impossible

# CEO-Tip *of the Month*

by Guido Quelle



## Dealing With the Impossible

“We can’t do that, boss!” As a CEO it’s not uncommon for you to hear that, is it? You have a new idea, mention it to your team and ask them to implement it. But caught up in – or rather, tied up by – their daily routine, they see the present situation rather than the strategic future and their first reaction is to resist.

You probably don’t have the same problems as those attributed to John F. Kennedy, whose vision in 1961 was to put a man on the moon and bring him back again safely by the end of the decade. The scientists said this was impossible. The gist of his response was, “That may well be, ladies and gentlemen, but you have a problem: That is still my vision.”

If you’re regularly faced with this killer contention, “impossible,” you already have a leadership issue to address, but more about that later. More important at this point is how you, as CEO, can quickly make clear to yourself what “impossible” means.

Here are some possible interpretations of “impossible.” All of them will help you get to the bottom of: “What exactly do you mean by ‘impossible?’”

### “I can’t imagine that”

You can help employees who don’t have the imagination to think about something you have asked of them in a completely new way by describing the goal as precisely as possible. Here, you don’t have to fight operative doubts (yet); instead it is your job to accompany them on the path to your “impossible” goal.

### “I don’t know how I’m going to do that”

Here a time component is meant. Alternatively – and probably more seriously – you also hear, “I don’t know how we’re going to do that,” or “We’re never going to get that done.” The “we” makes it more difficult for you to talk with a single person. Ask: “Who are ‘we’?” If the employee talks in the first person, ask whether they’re aware of how much work is involved, and if they know what can be left out, and make it clear that they don’t have to work on this “impossible” goal alone.

### “I don’t have the skills to do that”

This is good news, since skills are trainable. Willingness, on the other hand, isn’t trainable. Anyone who brings skills into play is basically prepared to apply themselves. This is the simplest scenario, because you can ask your employee what they need in order to acquire the (allegedly) necessary skills as quickly as possible. If you realize together that perhaps the skills aren’t there today, but tomorrow they definitely will be, things will be easier. The common killer phrases such as: “We’ve never done it like that before,” “That won’t work,” “That can’t work” etc. aren’t answers to your question: “What exactly do you mean by ‘impossible?’” So here you can simply repeat your original question.

Calling something “impossible” is often a reflex, because your employees see more work coming their way. In addition to that, there is the subconscious assumption that you might think that they don’t have enough work and have endless spare capacity. Even if that’s the case, you are well advised to come to that conclusion together with your employees and not to confront them with it. All in good time.

# Strategy & Leadership

by Guido Quelle

## Making the Impossible Possible – Leadership and Self-leadership



At some time, each one of us has probably said something was “impossible,” by which we meant it was “not doable.” This isn’t a problem as long as the “impossible” stance doesn’t become a pattern or a standard attitude.

### The background of personal experience

When people categorize something as “impossible” (“that’s impossible”), then it’s initially against the background of personal experience. This means that the judgment is not as objective as the phrase “that is” would suggest. More correct would probably be, “I can’t imagine that” or “I have no idea how that will work.” Now, we don’t always speak mathematically correctly; that would be horrible, but sometimes it’s worth taking a look behind a formulation. Especially when there are things that some of us are really unable to imagine, but that are nevertheless possible.

Can you remember a number with a few hundred digits? At the moment, probably not, but there are people who can. Could you climb the north face of the Eiger without ropes in a couple of hours? Maybe not, but it’s possible, as has been proved more than once. Are you able to accurately recite the contents of thousands of books? At least one person in the world can – but he pays a high price for this: he’s autistic.

In my opinion, we should be more careful with the phrase “impossible.”

### Not everything is possible

On the other hand, there are those who claim that anything is possible. “You can do it! Anything is possible,” cry some so-called motivation trainers to their clients, although this often ignores reality. Not everything is possible. I can’t climb Everest while writing this article. I can’t fly at the speed of light and I’m not going to be world golf champion, because I’ve never even held a golf club. But I can fairly quickly write books and articles that are well received. But not everything is possible. The self-titled motivation trainers who preach that everything is possible are acting dangerously and irresponsibly. At the latest when the enthused worker returns to the business world he or she will be confronted by reality, and will run the risk of falling into a hole that really didn’t need to be there.

### Separating what and how

Nevertheless, we can see that it can be a good feeling to approach things that are considered impossible positively, and to deal with them constructively – both personally and especially in a business. The positive association with the impossible begins in our head, between our ears. Dealing with the “impossible” in a structured way means, above all, separating WHAT and HOW. Initially you have to understand what the situation is. Only when the situation has been clearly defined is it worth thinking about solutions and worrying about what is

available and what isn't in terms of resources, prerequisites and skills. This is the only way to ensure a meaningful approach to something that appears impossible at first sight.

### **Old standard or new territory?**

In business we need to ask the following fundamental question in this context: "Will this seemingly impossible task lead us to reaching a standard that we have already reached in the past, or will it lead us to reaching a new one?" The first scenario could be a reorganization or turnaround situation: The business has reached a certain performance level, but this level has dropped over a period of time and the aim is to bring the performance back up to that standard. This can seem "impossible" from the current standpoint, but the target standard has been reached in the past. So what do we have to do to get back to where we were?

In the second scenario we are talking about innovation, reaching a level of performance that hasn't been reached before, which no one is sure is actually possible, or if so what form it will take and what will happen afterwards. Here the art of management lies in allowing employees to realize the advantages for themselves and in making the goals as concrete and vivid as possible. Naturally, this takes time, but it is time well spent if the HOW can later be achieved more efficiently.

### **Leadership**

A good manager is able to embrace the "impossible" quickly (self-leadership) and help others to discover the impossible for themselves (leadership). Let's not forget that success is usually only felt when an obstacle has been overcome. We don't usually consider achieving a matter of course to be a success. But it is exactly these positive, seemingly insurmountable obstacles that allow us to measure ourselves and to excel. Leaders who are experienced in creating growth must ascertain the following:

- o Is the "impossible" justified from the employees' point of view or not? Can you justify it? Do we need to work together to narrow down what has to be done to find ways to make the impossible possible? If it isn't justified, the reasons for the hasty judgment have to be found.

- o Is "impossible" a pattern? If so, there is the obvious risk of hindrance to growth that isn't factually based. The task is to recognize the emotional blocks that are preventing employees from seeing the seemingly impossible as something exciting.
- o Is it always the same people who claim things are "impossible?" Then talk with these people first of all and make the effects of their attitude clear. Talk with those who don't automatically switch to "impossible" mode, too. Make it perfectly clear that you won't tolerate blockades. If people won't rid themselves of their "impossible" attitude and behavior patterns, then you have to consider parting company with them.

Growth isn't usually linear; usually it requires achieving something "impossible" to reach the next level. Consequently, it is precisely this creative confrontation with something that appears impossible to us today that makes creating something completely new a major part of the growth process. Interestingly, this is also a feature that makes the difference between a company with strong growth and one with weak growth.

Managers have to devote considerable attention to the number of "impossibilities" that have to be achieved. Every organization can only cope with a certain (small) number of major challenges if it wants to continue operating successfully. Here, less is more.

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