

CEO Tip November 2013 – For Growth, Focus on Results, Not Methods

by Guido Quelle

Let's get one thing straight from the start: a good methodology that allows you to approach an issue in a structured way is worth its weight in gold. In our line of work, clients often procure our services because they assume we use an established procedure—or "methodology"—to address their growth-related concerns instead of just shooting from the hip, and that we therefore more quickly produce results than they could on their own. But: in our talks with clients, the focus is never on methodology; we're hardly ever asked what methods we use. Instead, over 90 percent of the time we spend on analyzing a client as precisely as possible goes to discussing what results we're supposed to achieve. They simply assume—correctly—that there is a method to what we do.

And that brings us to the real point, namely that the methodology used isn't that important: it's far more essential to focus on what goals you want to achieve. We very often see, especially in talks between companies and (potential) consultants, that the discussion very quickly turn to methods, i.e., to the HOW level; in fact, this usually happens far too quickly. The same phenomenon can also be seen in everyday business, in discussions between managers and their employees, between department heads and the Senior Management. By the way, discussions of methods are a favorite in Marketing departments and even more so in Human Resources. This can lead to some remarkable mistakes because the spotlight far too quickly turns to the HOW before agreement has been reached on the WHAT, i.e., on the goals.

Example 1: A company discovers that it has leadership problems. Before even starting to discuss what exactly these problems are all about—whether there is a recognizable pattern or just sporadic hiccups, whether there is objectively observable problematic behavior (evidence), what the effects of this alleged lack of leadership are and, above all, what the ideal resolution would look like and what goals it would entail—the Human Resources department, with which the dialogue on this topic has to happen, has already whipped out a veritable arsenal of methods: structured leadership interviews, 360-degree feedback, and leadership trainings. It's not hard to predict that this won't go well.

Example 2: Another company wants to better understand its market. Before discussing what exactly an "understood market" looks like or what the concrete objectives are, the Marketing department has already pulled out all the stops: contacting market research institutes, starting mystery shopping, conducting cash register-tape analyses, measuring shopping frequency, and analyzing the competition. This, too, is the wrong way to go.

As the CEO, don't let yourself be dazzled by the supposed effects of a given methodology. After all, you wouldn't ask a butcher how much they like vegetarian food. Don't let yourself get sidetracked from the essential task of defining your goals, and don't waste your time with anyone who's too quick to promise a cure-all method for solving your problem, bearing in mind the tried but true saying: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." True partners choose the method that most effectively helps them reach their goals, and don't have just one tool, but a whole toolbox.

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