

# **When the Boss Requests Team Coaching But Needs Help Himself: Multi-Level Coaching**

By Alexander Schuster

## **Publishers' Note**

This article by Alexander Schuster describes a situation that would be familiar to many coaches. The company hires an external consultant to work with or help develop a team, yet when clarifying what is needed, the consultant uncovers another more urgent need that must first be attended to: the development potential of the manager himself. Strategic coaching, with its clear conceptual framework, sustainability-oriented approach, and system-theoretical compatibility demonstrates its particular advantages here as the method of choice. The development process outlined here will first focus on helping the manager achieve equilibrium himself and establishing an understanding of his own management style. The first sessions between the consultant and the manager aim to formulate the manager's responsibilities in clear terms, define personal resources and competencies, but also discuss constrictive behavioral tendencies of the client. More than two months after these personal development plans for the manager have begun to be implemented, the team development process is also initiated. The author of this article guides this process as well, but now in the role of external consultant and moderator. This double role of personal coach and team moderator is critically analyzed in practice with good reason. The excursus that concludes this coaching report demonstrates that a clear separation of roles is crucial so that the results of the process can achieve the desired synergy effects.

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## **1. Introduction**

The subject of the following case study is John, a 41-year-old American, married with two sons (three months and three years old). After obtaining his degree in electrical engineering, John first worked for three very successful years in the American development department of a German electronics manufacturer before moving to Germany with his family to work at the company's headquarters. His new position involved establishing strategic cost-benefit analyses for product development. He did his job brilliantly, and at the same time discovered his excellent feel for the market. Two years later, in recognition of his achievements, John was asked to create a globally operating business unit. The strategic goal of the business unit was to create an international network of developers, marketing specialists, and wholesalers so that new developments could be better geared toward the needs of the customer. As an English native speaker, John was predestined for this task, but his German was also already fairly good at this point.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The Getting to Know You Meeting**

Six months after starting his current position, John sought external support for developing and creating his new business unit. Upon recommendation, he invited me as a consultant for an initial informal chat at the company. Two of his employees were also present at this session. He presented his business unit which consisted of ten employees at the time. Five of them were from other departments, some of whom had worked for the company for many years. The other five were added to the team with apparent haste—the decision to hire them was

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<sup>1</sup> The coaching sessions were held in English.

based more on a gut feeling than on clearly defined requirements. There were few defined processes and structures in place and communication was spontaneous and unsystematic. They claimed, however, that they would more than make up for that with passion for the job and a high level of personal commitment. Consequently, the number of hours worked were long and those present at the session described the business unit culture with the following words: *"everyone contributes"*, or *"we all help one another"*, and *"no one is too good for any task."* Once I had pointed out the type of support I could offer, we parted ways in a positive mood and intended to define concrete steps for the process in the next few days.

But even before I arrived home, John called me to find out more about the personal coaching that I had mentioned in passing. He felt a great deal of pressure but did not want to mention this earlier in the session in front of his employees. As I discovered later, coaching had never been used by the company as a well-established method of personal development, but only in individual cases where damage control was needed for those who could not manage on their own. Two days later we met again for our first personal session.

### 3. The First Session

At this session John was much more relaxed and explained his personal situation with a great deal of openness. He felt an enormous amount of performance pressure from the company, in particular from his boss and also from his "colleagues", the term he emphatically used to refer to his employees. He stated that he was currently responsible for everything himself, since he first had to gain recognition by becoming an expert in his area. I discovered that for this reason, he worked late at night, on weekends from home, and rarely delegated tasks. Furthermore, he commuted a total of three hours a day from his house in the countryside to his office and hardly slept at night because of his crying infant son. In addition, he had a long list of household chores to do and private matters to attend to, which his wife, Mary, could not manage alone because her German was poor and she had to care for the children. He stated that he was extremely exhausted, could hardly concentrate and was even worried that he would lose his job. For some time he had desperately needed support but had absolutely no idea where to start. He felt as if he were locked in a dark room and could not find the light switch, and that each day he was losing strength.

At this point it became clear that a multi-level approach was needed: before we could start developing his business unit, the client had to first reach a minimum level of personal equilibrium. Based on this information I identified three strategic axes that could be implemented at different times. Figure 1 shows their actual chronological sequence, and Figure 2 shows the phases of the concrete goals of our sessions and actions to be taken. The strategic coaching approach<sup>2</sup> is extremely suitable for an integrated process of this nature.

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to strategic coaching, see the article by Serge K. D. Sulz and Sabine Burkhardt and the article by Gernot Hauke in this volume.

Since strategic coaching involves understanding the entire personality, the broad range of acquired knowledge makes it possible to approach various aspects of a complex problem with the client at the ideal point in time depending on the progress made.

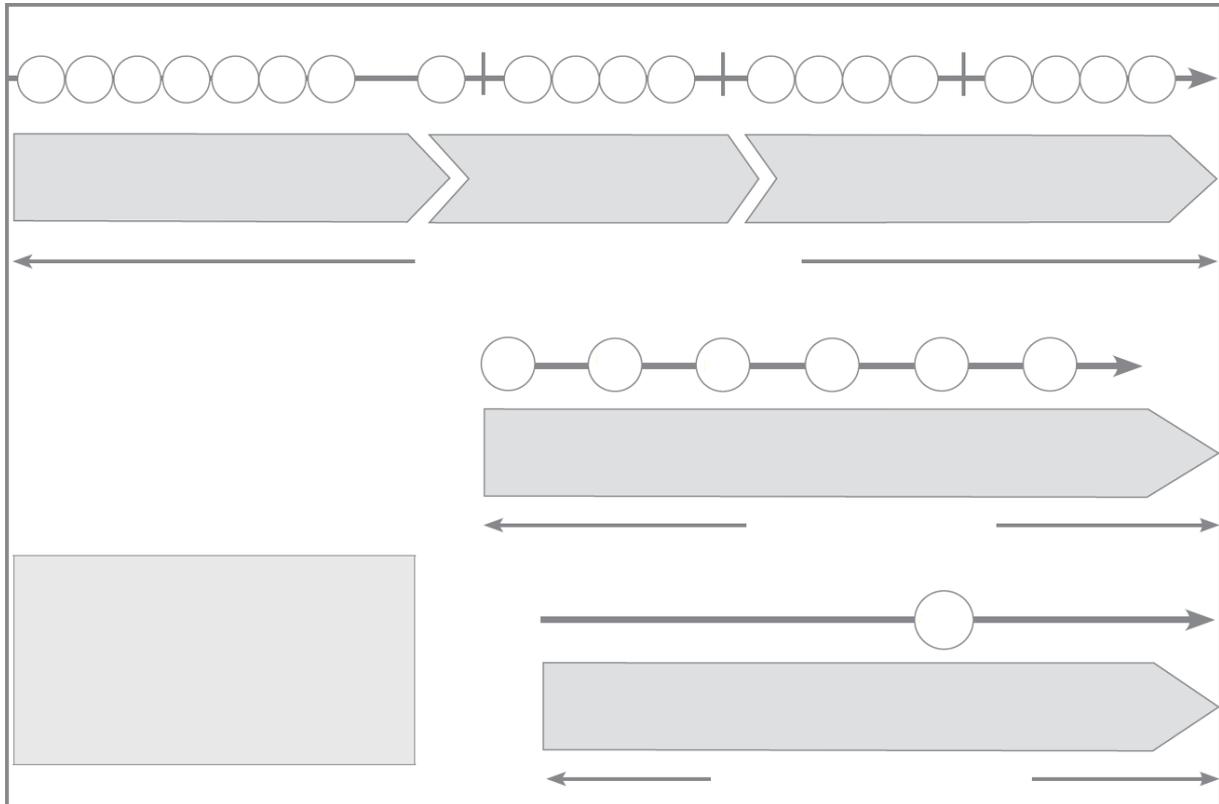


Fig. 1: Strategic axes

John was able to schedule only one hour for today's session, but he was apparently very interested in starting with the coaching. The next session took place just two days later. From this point on, we met in remote meeting rooms at one of the company's subsidiaries in the same city, away from day-to-day business, where John had always felt very comfortable. For the time being and because of his intense level of psychological stress we scheduled one entire afternoon per week for our meetings.

	<b>Analyses</b>	<b>Actions to Be Taken</b>
<b>Getting to Know You Meeting</b>	Initial reason for consultation: development of a new business unit	
<b>First session</b>	First personal consultation Problem description	Decision to take a multi-level approach

<b>Second session</b>	Troubleshooting Energy boosters/energy drainers	E-mail rules
<b>Third session</b>	Life curve Life review Self-image/external image assignment	The building of existence Open door policy Blocks of time for strategic work
<b>Fourth session</b>	Family environment Self-image/external image Rule of survival	Preparation for talk with wife
<b>Fifth session</b>	PAR method "An ideal day"	Violate the rule of survival (follow-up talk with wife)
<b>Sixth session</b>	Sociogram Value domains TMS	Assignment of management team members, kickoff process, prepare for meeting with assistant
<b>Seventh session</b>	A look back at vacation, "Selbstorganisation für Führungskräfte" (Self-Organization for Managers) worksheet	My top 5 priorities
<b>Eighth session</b>	100 days of management	Operative improvements

Fig. 2: Phases of the described methods

## 4. The Second Session

In order to obtain a detailed overview of the initial situation, I started by troubleshooting with the client. John explained that after only a few weeks at his new job he began to feel drained and hounded. Until this point in his career he had never experienced excessive demands or too much work; everything went smoothly and was successful, his abilities were always enough to help him handle challenges that arose by working overtime for a while. Now everything was different. For the first time he was afraid of failing, disappointing his social environment, losing his job, and therefore no longer being able to sustain his family. Even though he hardly had any time to relax, he continued to work harder; this way he could say that at least he tried everything. At the same time he felt increasingly guilty for neglecting his family. The client was in a downright vicious circle.

His primary impulse<sup>3</sup> in this situation was to pick up the pace and work even longer hours, which was something that increased the tension at home. That is why he was working "*up to the point of exhaustion*" or until conflict with his wife arose.

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<sup>3</sup> See Sulz 2012.

Ironically, at the same time he had a very hard time delegating tasks and projects to his employees. For him, successes were only those things he had "achieved on his own" and at least in this regard he did not want anyone to say he did not do a good job.

## **Energy Boosters/Energy Drainers**

To help the client relieve some of the stress he was experiencing over the short term, we carried out an exercise called "Energy Boosters/Energy Drainers" together. The client jotted down personal motivators (energy boosters) and stressors (energy drainers) with arrows pointing toward or away from him. The length of the arrow indicated its current level of impact. This visualization quickly made the client's situation comprehensible to him. It enabled him to initiate urgent equalizing actions without getting ahead of himself with other methods such as a more in-depth life review. A comparison of the target/actual situation is simple to conduct and thus easily reproducible; furthermore, by using arrows with modifiable lengths, the exercise serves as an excellent indicator of the client's development and progress in the coaching process.

John named the following as energy boosters: his family (in particular the baby), time with relatives, vacation, strategic tasks and responsibilities, his new team, friends, playing music, taking time for himself. He named the following as energy drainers: his in-laws and unread e-mails (the constant fear of possible time bombs). When explaining why he chose his family, the baby, and relatives as energy boosters, John suddenly came to a halt until he could no longer speak and we had to interrupt the session for a few minutes. Visibly emotionally charged, he then began to explain that his in-laws were constantly offering well-meaning advice and had high expectations of him to be a good father and successful businessman. They made subtle comments about how they would do things differently if they were in his shoes, and so on. What upset him even more was the fact that even his own family had been draining him of more energy than they had been giving for quite some time now. It became suddenly clear to him that for many years now he had been glossing over problems because of what is seen as the social norm. Even vacation, which was spent mostly with his in-laws in the U.S., was not a real break and he always returned from it exhausted. He felt he had to make everyone happy, especially his wife Mary, whom he perceived as positioned between him and her parents.

Despite his agitated state, John forged on to the next step with remarkable energy. In this step we first looked at the length of the energy-draining arrows. The first thing he wanted to do was correct how the family, relatives, and vacation were represented. He seemed to draw full-fledged energy from the new picture. Without a doubt he wanted to change things "at home" and he looked at me questioningly as if hoping I would offer him a magical recipe. In order to prevent John from taking any rash or hasty steps, we turned to the other energy drainers first. There was enough potential here to make immediate small changes that John could implement before our next session. One noticeable item was the long arrow for the energy drainer labeled

"unread e-mails." Of course there were some deeper issues behind this item, however we agreed to take a pragmatic approach to immediately reduce the high number of e-mails. For this purpose we drafted a notification e-mail that John sent during our session: he notified recipients that in the future, he would read only those e-mails directly addressed to him.<sup>4</sup>

E-mails with his name on the cc: line (currently approximately 60% of his inbox) would now be forwarded automatically to the archive and possibly read later or deleted after a month. Furthermore, he gave examples of how individual e-mails could be transformed into efficient informational packets or bundled for upcoming meetings. He concluded his notification e-mail with the statement, *"The best way to receive fewer e-mails is to send fewer e-mails."* John and I agreed that from now on he would reduce the number of e-mails he sent by 50%.

## 5. The Third Session

### The Building of Existence

John entered the room with much more energy this time and started the conversation himself. His new e-mail rules were working. He was excited to report that he was receiving approximately 70% fewer e-mails and did not notice any loss of information; instead he was experiencing increased efficiency and more attentive communication. He reported that after our last session he was at first worried about how his colleagues would react and prepared himself mentally for lengthy discussions. However, none of this came true and he even perceived a certain amount of gained respect that relieved him immensely. Yet he still felt he could not really enjoy the extra time he now had in the evenings because since our last meeting there was even more to take care of at home. He did not have any idea how to approach this subject with his wife and would have preferred to work longer some evenings. I asked him what he would rather do during this extra time. An almost embarrassed silence followed my question, and finally John admitted that he did not have a clear idea.

As long as the client was not able to create a concrete positive image of the concept of "having more time" he would not be able to muster up any energy for it. Therefore we took a step back and looked at the energy boosters, where the arrows labeled "friends" and "play music" were rather short.

Since John is a very analytical thinker, I presented the concept of the "building of existence" to facilitate better thought organization. This model, which is based on the Five Pillars of Identity<sup>5</sup> describes five areas of one's existence (work and performance, material security,

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, the client also requested that senders add a label to the subject line, namely a word such as "urgent", "action", or "info", so that he would not have to open unimportant e-mails, and he requested that senders clearly specify what action was needed (what exactly is being requested and by when?) at the very top of the e-mail, even before the greeting.

<sup>5</sup> See Petzold 2003.

social network and relationships, body and health, values and meaning) that should be as balanced as possible to ensure a good work-life balance. This concept spoke to John right away and he suddenly recalled how he used to enjoy playing the piano with friends. When I asked him why he stopped, he could not immediately give me a clear answer. After a brief pause he said almost stubbornly that such things were no longer important because with a job and family now he did not have time for them anyway. As John spoke, his eyes lingered on the pillar model. He corrected himself with a smile and added, "*What I mean is that it is very hard...*" When I asked him if it would be worthwhile to at least try, he responded quietly but decisively after a few moments with a clear "yes." We agreed that by our next session he would play the piano at least twice in the coming week—the piano that was still playable and stood standing in his living room. During this time he also wanted to spend time with two colleagues from different departments who had asked him to do something with them a number of times.

## Life Curve and Life Review

John was very open from the very beginning. He saw this coaching work as a great opportunity to develop personally. What impressed me the most was how willing and able he was at this early stage to think abstractly and above all, reflect on himself. He was always able to think on the meta-level and often made constructive suggestions for the process himself. He had remembered the key word "life curve" that I mentioned at the very beginning, and he asked me about it just as I was about to transition into a more in-depth life review.

When beginning life review, I like to use a form of the "life line" or "life curve" that I have adapted based on my own experiences; it allows the client to freely decide which events and experiences he wants to mention. This enables the client to gradually open up and also creates a level of trust during the process. On a flip chart, the client enters shifts in his personal well-being on a time axis representing the time in his life he can remember. He may choose whether he wants to discuss the curve while drawing or once it is done. The goal is to have one single curve for all areas of the client's life, if possible.<sup>6</sup> In the first step of this exercise we discuss chronologically and in detail stressful times from childhood, later successes or failures, and life events such as a wedding, divorce, death, relocation, and loss of job. In the second step these events are brought together in context; in this way clients are often able to recognize some of their behavioral patterns.

In John's case, the peaks of the curve were primarily when he traveled and spent time abroad, or when he took on new professional responsibilities. Everything that implied new

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<sup>6</sup> In the case of very divergent events, such as the birth of a child accompanied by job loss, it may be useful to make two separate sections of the curve, one for private life, one for professional life. This should be done only if the client requests it, so as not to separate professional and private development from the start.

experiences and responsibilities had always stimulated him. The valleys of the curve were marked by losses, such as the time after a six-week university internship in Germany, when John got the feeling in just a short amount of time that he belonged there. He loved the mentality, the way people wanted to get to the bottom of things, and treasured the more honest and less superficial way people interacted. After returning to the U.S. he felt as if he had lost his friends "at home." He stated that moving to Germany many years later was merely a coincidence after receiving a good offer. He himself would have never initiated the move. When I asked him whether working for a German company was also a coincidence and if he thought that perhaps he signaled a greater willingness than others to take such a step, John answered after pausing with a sparkle in his eye, *"Well, maybe it wasn't sheer coincidence..."* From this point on, the client described his experiences and decisions with much more self-confidence; he now felt with much more certainty that he had been in charge of his life's path.

## **Actions for Improving Time Management**

In order to help immediately relieve stress in John's operative business sphere, we concluded the session by discussing the open door policy. Until now, anyone could enter John's office whenever he or she wished. Employees presented him with poorly prepared questions, colleagues from other departments wanted to discuss all kinds of issues directly with the boss, and John took care of all of these issues more or less as they were brought to his attention so that he had hardly any time for any conceptual or strategic work. John eagerly took my suggestion to start by setting aside two hours each day, in the late morning if possible, for himself. This would enable him to figure out at the beginning of each day what was in store for him, and he could take care of the most urgent tasks and then work until noon on concepts and think-tank work. Furthermore he would encourage his employees to gather all of their questions together and present them all at once, each with two proposals for a solution.

## **6. The Fourth Session**

I arrived at our meeting room a little earlier than expected where John greeted me happily. He had been there for two hours already working in peace and quiet on a concept for a new testing process. The new rule he had implemented for setting aside blocks of time was not only creating more time for important things, but also drastically reducing the constant disturbances, making life seem less hectic. The number of visits by employees with questions had been reduced to a minimum and the visits themselves were much more productive. He could now act as more of a consultant, which he preferred and therefore expend less energy. On this day he scheduled time for himself with a clear conscience directly before our meeting since he also felt particularly comfortable in this environment.

<b>Self-image Questionnaire</b>	
What are the 3 things you particularly like about yourself?	Intelligence, astuteness, commitment
How would you describe yourself in a few words?	Always looking for ways to improve things
What do you believe you are good at?	Setting and achieving goals
What things do you need to work on?	Discipline, work-life balance, taking time for myself
If you had to start a new life for yourself, what 3 jobs could you imagine yourself doing?	Heart surgeon (extremely demanding), plastic surgeon (good salary), lawyer (a good opportunity to bring forward arguments)
What 3 things would you change about yourself?	Laziness, procrastination, showing more interest in people
What character from a book, fairy tale, or the theater are you most like? Why?	Chris Knight from "Real Genius". He was the smartest of them all, even at an elite school. He figured out how to enjoy life and ignore the rules as long as you perform well. He is a role model because he didn't take work too seriously.

Figure 3: John's self-image

Since our last meeting, John had spent an unusual amount of time working on the self-image/external image assessment questionnaire, which I had introduced to him at the end of the previous session so that we could begin discussing significant findings already today.<sup>7</sup> For this exercise, the client had asked various people in his life to fill out a prepared questionnaire. The various external images provided span a wide range, which significantly increases the level of acceptance of feedback by the client and takes the coach out of the role of the sole feedback provider.<sup>8</sup> Since the client has already filled out the questionnaire himself first, he also receives important information about the congruence between the self-image and external image.

<sup>7</sup> This method is my own compilation and expansion on conceptual elements from various sources.

<sup>8</sup> The eight to ten external images (minimum) should come from the most different persons possible and should include past and current friends and colleagues, including those with whom there were once conflicts or with whom conflicts currently exist. If at all possible, I suggest including even parents since their statements contain valuable information about past expectations, reward mechanisms, and guiding principles.

## John's External Images: How Relevant Attachment Figures See the Client

Using the same system, it is possible to gather external images. When evaluating the results with the client, we group duplicate responses together to obtain the most concise picture possible. Twelve questionnaires were completed in John's case: by his parents, three friends, his wife, three past colleagues and one current colleague with whom he was rather at odds, and two members of his own management team.<sup>9</sup> The following chart is an excerpt from John's external images (see Figure 4):

All addressed persons<sup>10</sup> were willing to provide feedback. John was almost surprised at the consistently appreciative and positive type of feedback he received. When discussing the questionnaire with his father and wife, he experienced such a meaningful exchange of information as he had never experienced before; he was particularly moved by their openness and profundity: *"Since completing this questionnaire we now talk about things that were simply not a topic of conversation before."* John was able to accept all of the points made, and the requests from his colleagues and employees for stronger leadership made him on the one hand reflective and on the other side gave him courage.

When interpreting the feedback we noticed first and foremost how congruent the self-image and external image were. However, for item 5 ("new life") John named jobs that were largely related to performance, intellect, and prestige, whereas the external images obtained focused more on non-work-related skills and high personal ideals. Even for item 6 ("things to change") John felt that he needed to step things up a bit while the others suggested that he relax a little more. We were able to effectively use this point for the *rule of survival* (see below) as well as item 7 ("character from a book, fairy tale, or the theater"), where the client interprets high performance as a tool for achieving personal freedom and at the same time admires how one can achieve that without having to work too hard for it.

External Image Questionnaire	
What are the 3 things you particularly like about me?	Honesty, sincerity, drive, goal-oriented approach, presence, intelligence, willingness to accept challenges, humor, curiosity for new things (...)
How would you describe me in a few words?	It's amazing how calm he appears despite having so much to do, hard worker (3), thinks about work even during breaks (...)

<sup>9</sup> Here is where the foundation for the business unit-wide 360° feedback was laid (see the excursus on page 371).

<sup>10</sup> John's boss was not one of the participants since it was not clear what he thought of coaching.

What do you believe I am good at?	Getting the best results from the available resources, happy to be the best in a particular area, excellent judge of character (2), good instinct, able to see the big picture (...)
What things do I need to work on?	Less self-control, patience, show your human side more; make alliances even when it seems self-serving or negative, less overdemocratizing (...)
If I had to start a new life for myself, what 3 jobs could you imagine me doing?	Fundamental research and start your own company, any position with profit and loss responsibility, political consultancy, priest, strategic consultant (...)
What 3 things would you change about me?	Laugh more, take work less seriously, enjoy life more, discover your spiritual side, express yourself more (...)
What character from a book, fairy tale, or the theater am I most like? Why?	Robin Hood, Caesar (be first in the province rather than second in Rome), Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy (...)

Figure 4: John's External Images

## The Rule of Survival

Using these results and in particular the external images we had just discussed, it was an ideal time to develop the "rule of survival"<sup>11</sup> with the client, which is a fundamental part of strategic coaching. I had already explained this rule to John in the Getting to Know You meeting, which made him more open to more in-depth analyses and methods. The rule of survival describes strategies developed early in life to cope with emotional obstacles. These strategies often remain unchecked as people grow older and they can even stand in the client's way (dysfunctional rule of survival).<sup>12</sup> If a child receives affection from his parents only if he does something particularly well, he inevitably learns that "I am a valuable human being and I will be loved only if I am successful." A person shaped in this way will tend to place personal success over everything else and continue to do so until he or she comes close to reaching one's personal limits ("success at any price").

The family and the relationship with parents provide important clues to identifying the rule of survival. As an only child, John requires even to this day a lot of alone time to properly refuel. His parents owned and ran a mid-size office supply company and he grew up in a financially stable home. John was never driven academically or in other ways. However he noticed early on that he was awarded a large degree of freedom and the rules that otherwise applied were relaxed when he came home with good grades or achieved in other ways (see self-image on

<sup>11</sup> See Sulz 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See Sulz 2012. From my experience, some clients reject the term "rule of survival" as too harsh a term. In these cases it is useful to find a customized term together with the client for the behavioral pattern in question.

page 13). His parents were never particularly interested in what exactly he was doing in school or at work. To them it was more important that he made his way up the ladder and that he was popular among "his people." With regard to the rule of survival used by the client, I documented typical doctrines from the start, such as "you have to..." or "you just can't simply..." as well as quotes from both parents. These were used in today's session together with the results from the external/self-image to create the first draft of a rule of survival:

<b>If I always ...</b> (dysfunctional behavior)	exhibit excellent performance by working visibly hard, take care of many things myself, and exceed expectations
<b>and if I never ...</b> (suppressed desire/anger impulse)	dominate others by giving instructions but rather wait until people see the necessity themselves
<b>then I preserve my ...</b> (main need)	freedom within the confining rules
<b>and prevent ...</b> (main anxiety inclination)	rejection and conflict.

In general, this step was rather difficult despite my good rapport with John and was shaped mostly by linguistic details at first.

This changed significantly when we consciously decided to violate this rule of survival for the first time after drafting many interim versions. This was the beginning of the actual change process and suddenly John was brim-full of energy. Now the challenge was identifying a concrete situation in which he would consciously behave differently than usual and contrary to his initial behavioral impulse. What was decisive was the degree of the violation, which should on the one hand present a certain degree of challenge, but on the other hand, not overextend him. For this exercise we agreed that by our next session John would speak with his wife about the issue of "household chores", which were causing him a lot of grief. Using the momentum from his positive discussions about external images, he decided to broach the issue of the never-ending evening chores. He wanted to suggest that they lump them together and that he take care of them one or two nights per week. Instead of cooking every evening they could go to a restaurant once in a while or order in food from a catering service. This would be a first step in reducing his stress level without having to raise the issue of a babysitter.

## 7. The Fifth Session

Like the last time, John was already in our meeting room long before our scheduled time and was able to work very efficiently on conceptual tasks. He spontaneously opened the discussion by asking me how I was and how my week was going so far. After I answered, he explained that he had taken to heart in particular one piece of feedback from the external images: In the future he wanted to show more interest in other people. This was an honest effort because now he had the energy to really listen. After this positive start he continued on cheerfully and explained that his wife really liked his suggestions about household chores. She thought the idea of lumping them together was a good idea and she had nothing against eating out at a swanky restaurant once in a while. I acknowledged this successful step and then, with John's rule of survival in mind, raised the question of whether some of these household chores might arise from this behavioral pattern: namely, exceeding expectations in order to supposedly secure more freedom. He looked at me bewildered and replied that this had developed as such over the years and now his wife asked him to take care of them in a nonverbal way. But before he could finish his sentence he laughed out loud and conceded that he had taken the point.

### **An Ideal Day: An Exercise of the Imagination to Develop an Ideal Image**

From a process-oriented and emotional point of view it was now the right time to define goals. So that the client can mobilize the energy for changes required to achieve his goals, a consistent approach is essential in this step.

Since John was very open to creative approaches I decided to conduct an exercise of the imagination called "An ideal day"—an idea he was willing to try. For this exercise the client makes himself comfortable and closes his eyes. After taking the client through a brief relaxation exercise, the coach guides the client through an imaginary day for a few minutes, presenting various images and ideas. The client starts to imagine this day and completes or puts into concrete terms his ideal image using the open-ended and stimulating questions posed by the coach. The result is then either visualized or verbalized.<sup>13</sup>

After this exercise of the imagination John was full of energy and wanted to express his images and ideas before he forgot them. He described his ideal day very clearly as an extremely diverse business day at the company's headquarters: he would first work without interruptions in his office followed by several brief meetings on a wide variety of topics with various people. The meetings would be prepared by his assistant. He would not have to send the invitations and bother with technical details as before, but rather show up a few minutes before the meeting begins and have time to exchange a few words with those in attendance.

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<sup>13</sup> This exercise is described by various authors. See for example Sher 2009.

This meant he would not be rushed or even have to excuse himself for arriving late. It was impressive how relaxed the client was as he described the more relaxed and less hostile atmosphere of his ideal day. He saw himself acting as a confident coordinator and consultant to whom the others presented their interim results and whom they asked respectfully for strategic advice. With a feeling that he had set many significant things in motion he makes his way home around 5 p.m. On the train he answers a few remaining e-mails and reads a book or enjoys the landscape as it whizzes by. Upon arriving home, his family would be happy to see him "simply because he was there."

When I inquired, the client confirmed that he sometimes felt that people were only happy to see him because he usually took care of the things that had not been done yet (see rule of survival). In his ideal world he would first take half an hour for himself to go jogging or play the piano. Then he would be rested and in the moment so he could cook with friends who had joined them for dinner. After the friends had gone home, he would talk to his wife for half an hour about the day and then go to bed without thinking about work.

## Implementing Personal Goals

I asked John what was preventing him from living his ideal day as he described it? One key factor here was his rule of survival. He always worked extremely hard and made this visible so that he could "fight for" certain freedoms (see above). When I asked him if it always had to be a *fight*, the client erupted. He said that he was actually completely exhausted from fighting for his everyday needs and was aware of how he ran out of energy. In turn, that made him more fearful of losing his freedoms completely. We will now move our attention to the last part of the rule of survival: avoiding conflicts. When asked if expressing personal needs must always automatically lead to a conflict and in what instances this might not have been the case, John was unable to think of one single attempt. When I asked him whether it would be worthwhile to try just once, John looked at me stunned and interjected that if he did so he would risk "everything" (above all, the peace in his marriage where he had just secured a little more freedom).

John looked discouraged again for a moment and sat in his chair with his head propped up by his arms. That was why I reminded him that he didn't have to fight with his wife in the first place. As we then activated the positive images from the exercise of the imagination again, the client quickly regained his resolve. He even wrote down that this fear had actually never ever materialized.

## Activating Resources

In order to activate the resources available to John on his path to achieving his personal goals we looked at the peaks of his life curve again. By doing so, John became aware that he had always been able to draw a lot of strength and energy from exploring uncharted territory and he now viewed this personal goal as uncharted territory as well. He was now able to formulate

in concrete terms his strengths that he had used in past situations to solve problems. John's predominant approach to problem solving used to be creating "more favorable" circumstances that would make problem solving easier or speed it up—however, without directly addressing issues or even confronting someone about something. A typical example was his reaction to shortcomings that had arisen due to an unclear allocation of roles in the team. Instead of addressing these openly and establishing rules, he preferred to allow the psychological stress in the team to grow until the team itself realized rules were needed and demanded them. In this way he avoided the alleged risk that the team could reject his rules and he would lose face.

## Developing Behavioral Options

The example we discussed spurred the client to question the approach to problem solving he had used in the past almost exclusively; it should not serve as a template for future challenges. Instead, the strategic goal in the next step of our process would be a well-dosed step-by-step violation of the rule of survival, in both a private and professional context. This would primarily involve welcoming his own wishes and needs, taking them seriously, and expressing them clearly. John was almost relieved when he was "*finally given permission*" to express his own needs and he realized that it might even be worth entering into a conflict for them. With this in mind he decided to take the following steps by our next meeting:

- He would start playing the piano again. As we ran through the pretend dialog with his wife, John offered her a whole list of unsolicited "favors in return." We had to run through the situation multiple times until John felt ready to simply express and verbalize his wishes without immediately wanting to do something in return.
- In addition, he would spend the night once a week somewhere near the office so that he could stay at the office until 6 or 7 p.m. This would also increase his visibility at the company, which was often limited by time and relieve the pressure he felt every evening to catch his train on time. He would have an entire evening to himself or to go out with colleagues who had already agreed to his suggestion of spending time together outside of work.

John liked the idea of reaching a formal agreement with his wife to define a time frame and specific blocks of time during which both partners wanted to spend time with each other and/or the family. In light of the fact that they were now lumping household chores together, it was also the ideal opportunity to discuss how they were assigned. At the same time he wanted to address the idea of drawing on external resources (babysitter, cleaning services, relocation services dealing with the local authorities, etc.). Since his wife was vehemently against these suggestions in the past, John had to prepare for a possible conflict and once again violate his rule of survival.

## The Back-Up: Telephone Coaching

The systematic, step-by-step process used to achieve the successes as per the schedule must not blind us to the fact that John was in a highly critical phase on many levels. For this reason, from the second session on I offered him additional support over the phone as a way to bridge the gap between coaching phases. John soon took advantage of this option regularly. We discussed critical issues in his operative work and behavioral options in unclear situations.

In today's telephone session, the client seemed exhilarated and opened the conversation with a long list of possible projects for change that impacted all areas of his life. He wanted to take these on as quickly as possible since everything that he had attempted thus far had gone so well. It took some time until we could even start talking about successes he had been experiencing in an orderly way. His wife had been unexpectedly open to their discussion the previous day. The mere fact that the difficult situation of the past months was now up for discussion added a new dynamic to their relationship once more. The two talked about unspoken expectations for the first time and also broached the subject of the in-laws and the never-ending list of household chores. The latter apparently gave his wife a feeling of security and confirmation that John was truly committed to his family. Along with providing practical support, these gestures were also symbolic. She could also gather this from other gestures but she continued to reject external help since she did not want to humiliate the socially deprived with menial labor. John agreed immediately that he would continue to work on this issue since he also recognized this as a key to solving the dilemma of the lack of time. Furthermore, the previous conversation with his wife proved hopeful.

We agreed that we needed to approach the topic of external help again by presenting some arguments that supported the advantages. He wanted to show his wife how it would benefit the children if their parents had more time for them.<sup>14</sup> One option we discussed was that John could suggest they employ a highly qualified caregiver from a well-paying company specifically trained for foreign families.<sup>15</sup>

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14 The fact that the client subconsciously adopted elements from the guided exercise of the imagination substantiates once again the impact of the exercise.

15 The caregivers referred to are managed by professional agencies and also take care of visits to the local authorities and administrative correspondence; they coordinate handymen and landscapers, and take children to school or daycare, etc.

## 8. The Sixth Session

### The Family: From an Energy Drainer to an Energy Booster

In a good mood, John reported that his wife was quite enthusiastic about hiring support through a special agency. She could imagine employing a well-paid professional any time, especially if this person was also available to take care of administrative tasks now and then. This topic is discussed in such detail here because finding the solution was a major breakthrough for John: he was now able to get a handle on a situation that had bogged him down for years. Now his family had been transformed from a very burdensome energy drainer (never-ending evening chores for the family) into a vitally important energy booster (once again). During the extra time they now had, caring for the children was divided between the two of them; however, they still retained the blocks of time they had set aside for the family.

### Developing One's Own Management Role

John was very confident now and could finally put all his energy into the business side of things. Therefore we decided to use today's session mainly for developing his own management role.

To do so, the client first created a sociogram<sup>16</sup> for his area used to visually analyze the interaction of the relationships of members of a group or department. Noticeable in this process step was John's inability to place himself in the graphic representation. After hesitating a number of times he added himself as the last person, like an intruder, at his team's side. He first explained this by stating he was very reluctant to dominate other people with formal power. Later he added that most of the others had worked for the company much longer than he had. As a "latecomer" he first had to find his own place.

Since creating his rule of survival, if not earlier, John saw his high level of ambition in a much more refined light and distanced himself from it explicitly as we spoke about his personal values. In this context he emphasized several times that he did not know what to do when it came to power and he preferred to convince people, even if it involved waiting patiently. I asked John flat out if he really wanted to be a team leader? He answered automatically with a cautious "yes", but started thinking since he was familiar with similar questions and feedback from the past, for example as part of the Leadership 360° Development Feedback and Team Management System (TMS) by Margerison-McCann tools.<sup>17</sup> Within these frameworks,

<sup>16</sup> See Moreno 1954.

<sup>17</sup> The client showed me his evaluation from Leadership 360° Development Feedback (Wildenmann Tools & Services) and TMS (Margerison-McCann) on his computer. John learned about these tools when he worked as a project manager and attended a management training course, and he asked to discuss the results. His main role was as an explorer/promoter; he looked for new approaches and opportunities in line with the testing system and successfully campaigned for them. His preferred work methods were exploring, advising, and organizing (creating channels for implementation). He was diametrically opposed to inspecting and controlling, which

project members had requested more structured rules from him. Calling on the Schwartz value circle<sup>18</sup>, we put this under the umbrella of "leadership and exerting power". John's analytical side found this concept very interesting and he was seriously ready to take on both topics step-by-step using specific examples. We therefore agreed that he would create a management team before he left for his vacation. With him at the top, this team would help him lead the business unit. Selecting the five team members was a matter of course. John named them the next day and already set a date for the first meeting to be held in six weeks. This was also the starting point for a multiple-month team development program.

For the upcoming four-week vacation with his family and relatives in the U.S. we agreed that he would read his e-mails only once each week and would be reachable only through his assistant in the event of an emergency. The first day after he returned would be free of meetings except for two hours with his assistant first thing in the morning.

## 9. The Seventh Session

John returned well rested from his vacation; this was the first time in years that he had not worked regularly during his vacation and he was not contacted once, which made him uneasy at first. But over time he stopped thinking about work altogether. He complied with all of our "agreements" and noticed less and less resistance the more confidently he expressed his needs, especially to the family. We returned once again in this session to his role as a manager. It became clear throughout the course of the coaching process that John accepted the task of creating a new business unit without ever having received a list of specific expectations and goals. He had a matter-of-fact, distanced working relationship with his boss and he was never guided or given instructions. He also believed that his boss thought he was too young and (thus) underqualified. However much his boss may have neglected his duties, it was the client's passiveness that was most noticeable. He literally resigned himself to his fate and saw himself first and foremost as a victim of unfavorable circumstances and bad managers. When I asked John about his personal responsibility, which is an essential requirement for someone at his level, he admitted that he was actually quite happy not to have any detailed requirements. In this way he would not have to meet them and would have more freedom (see John's rule of survival above). In fact he was afraid of managers who micromanage.

### Top Priorities As a Manager

After working intensely with John to help him find personal equilibrium, he now had firm footing and I could finally push the topic of his own managerial responsibilities. For this manifested itself in insufficient demands for results.

18 See Hauke 2013.

exercise I asked John to name three to five main tasks on the flip chart that belonged to his position. At first these were tasks such as "respond to e-mails" or "go to meetings." Now it was time to directly challenge the client and I asked him to think about whether he really thought that one of his job's main responsibilities included responding to e-mails. I asked him to consider which tasks only he himself could complete or information only he and not his employees could provide. I asked him if 15 minutes were enough for this task and I left the room. In the second step it was possible for him to name five strategic goals:

- Getting to know important internal interfaces personally
- Creating and developing a management team
- Filling open key positions
- Getting to know some key customers personally
- Developing a strategy for the new business unit

As John's next assignment, we agreed that he would discuss and agree upon these five core responsibilities with his boss and ask for feedback and support. This was once again a clearly noticeable violation of his rule of survival. We ran through this conversation a few times, and over time John became less questioning and hesitant, transforming into a convincing dialog partner. Emphatically he requested another meeting within five work days and was able to have all of the goals added to his individual Management by Objectives Program (MBO). He described his boss as interested and at times almost relieved that the MBO goals now had substance. To increase his inner strength, we developed the important notion that for managerial work, clear goals also ultimately translate into security and create an essential foundation for daily operative decisions. They are indispensable to the meaningful assignment of resources and the pertinent prioritizing of projects. It also became clear to John that in this way the non-implementation or rejection of certain requests made by internal customers is made on a strategic level, taking him as a person out of the spotlight.

## **The First 100 Days**

When starting management coaching with a client I often use a comprehensive questionnaire that allows me to find out from the operative point of view how the client organizes himself, which management tools he uses, which experience he has, and if he has any weak points (see Figure 5).

At the same time, the answers help me identify the client's values and doctrines.

After focusing on the issues of "annual goals and top priorities" we took on the task of creating a buffer of time each day, each week, and, for strategic topics, each month and quarter. John would delegate the task of scheduling meetings to his assistant more often and discuss clear guidelines for time windows, buffers, and inquiring about concerns that might require meetings. For these matters, John immediately set up a daily 30-minute coordination meeting with his assistant. Finally, we outlined a basic agenda for the management team kickoff meeting that would take place in three weeks.

## 10. The Eighth Session

John entered the room for the next session with visible satisfaction on his face and started to report, without any introduction, the results he had achieved. He admitted that he had an uneasy feeling prior to the meeting with his assistant; he was unsure how she would react and if he was demanding too much. However, their meeting more than exceeded his expectations. Not only did his "colleague" take his "suggestions" (he placed a great deal of emphasis on both terms, as before), but she was clearly very happy about her more precisely defined role and the new responsibilities that went with it. In the days that followed she even approached him with some of her own suggestions. John was very moved by this development and no longer found his work environment to be hostile, but felt accepted by it for the first time.

In today's session we gradually identified a long list of additional organizational improvements, such as active time management, increasing the level of standardization for issues that arose consistently, better positioning of one's own successes, the Pareto principle, also known as the 80-20 rule, the implementation of the Eisenhower principle, and so on.

John had made so much progress in his personal development that he was able to seamlessly implement agreements from our personal sessions in his operative daily work. The strategy of first creating equilibrium on a personal level and implementing supportive actions in daily work was a success. The successes experienced in his leadership skills and organizational methods proved sustainable and gave John the footing he needed to now tackle team development. As before, he could still take advantage of the telephone support I had offered if he encountered problems—something that he rarely needed at this point in time, however.

### **Checklist: Self-organization for managers**

#### **Top three annual goals:**

- Also boss's priority?/Volume (%)/Employees informed?
- Departmental goals?/Phases/Road map/Gantt chart

#### **Expectations (verbalized and unspoken):**

- Supervisors/Colleagues/Employees/Predecessors/Customers

#### **Critical relationships clarified?**

- Rejected applicants for the managerial position/internal competitors
- Predecessor (role/image? Still with the company? Own boundaries?)

#### **Tasks:**

- Preferred tasks/Disliked tasks/Project pipeline?/Pending projects?/Self-gratification?

#### **Responsible persons:**

- Right hand? Assistant role and authority?/Who may read e-mails? Access to e-mail?/
- How often will they be read?/Response, cc:, bcc:/Replacement for or in addition to telephone call, face-to-face

#### **Meetings:**

- Regular meetings (team meetings, face-to-face, internal training courses)
- Portfolio development in the management team?/Meetings, time blocked for oneself?
- Who must request meetings, who attends spontaneously?
- Open door policy? Instead of prepared meetings?
- When, how, and why do employees attend?

#### **Time management:**

- Microcycles, mesocycles, macrocycles/blocks of time for strategy, team development, off-site?
- What percentage of working time is planned? Scope for creativity?/Buffer or spillover principle?

#### **How are things delegated?**

- How does follow-up occur? Actions for implementation?
- Time/priorities actively managed? (Eisenhower, Pareto, ABC, ALPEN, etc.)

#### **Team/department meetings:**

- Meeting culture? Team charter?/Daily rhythm considered?/Follow-up
- Preparation/agenda/topics/moderation, minutes/guests?

#### **Vacation:**

- Handovers for vacation/stand-in guidelines

#### **Personnel:**

- Systematic employee feedback?/HR support?
- Departments (promotions, training, rotation, etc.)/linked to annual targets, bonus?
- Standard reporting: weekly or monthly? Assessment/degree of standardization

#### **Assessment of business culture:**

- Customs/history/symbols/rituals
- Networks/information/power/guidelines/insignias

#### **Own personal development:**

- Actions/training/coaching

#### **Own management style:**

- Experience, values, successes, failures/handling conflicts?

#### **Vision/mission for the organization/business unit/department?**

Fig. 5: Mentavis questionnaire "Selbstorganisation für Führungskräfte" ("Self-Organization for Managers")

## 11. Excursus: Creating and Coaching a Management Team Including the Long-Term Development of a Modern Business Unit Culture

Ten weeks after beginning our work we were able to look at the original reason for this consultancy task: the creation and development of a new business unit. This excursus briefly describes the fundamental steps of this process. It demonstrates how the results from the personal coaching played an implicit and explicit role in the successful team development, as well as the change in culture within the entire organization.

For me, this was accompanied by a change in roles, which I spoke about openly with the client. Quickly and amicably we decided that John would position himself in the first meetings as *primus inter pares* of the management team and my assignment for him was to represent the interests of the entire team, irrespective of his own ideas. The fact that he had participated in personal coaching would be communicated actively at the start. We agreed to give each other brief feedback on the team dynamics and our compliance with the strategic direction only during long breaks, otherwise we would not sit next to each other so that we could improve contact with the other team members. He was so keen on reaching a result achieved by the whole team that at no time did it come to a conflict of roles or misunderstandings.

### Kickoff Meeting for the Management Team

As the basis for a functioning management structure, the newly named six-member management team consisting of John and five department heads were invited to a two-day kickoff meeting in a quiet and low-key seminar center.

**The first day** was designated for arriving and getting to know one another. After his welcome speech, John intentionally positioned himself among the others as a normal team member during this phase. Each team member presented a personal item he or she had brought—something that was meaningful or explained something about the person. Then the other participants provided feedback on each presentation. In my role as moderator I made sure that the participants complied with the rules of professional feedback and over the course of the workshop, I derived the first rules applicable to interacting and communicating within the team. These were documented on a separate flip chart and served as the foundation for the team charter that was being created.

**The second day** was devoted to defining the vision of the new business unit. In two groups of three, the team created photo collages that were then interpreted by the other group. The key words, topics, and values collected were written down on cards. Then two different teams of three each created a rough draft of a vision.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Stolzenberg/Heberle 2006 for this section.

It was apparent that John felt comfortable in the presence of his team colleagues. He was particularly happy about the creation of a team charter as a living document. No later than their first meeting for a development program, they planned to define some very concrete action items which would then be documented on a separate to-do list (who does what and by when?) and these would be followed up consistently.

## Follow-up Meeting I

Two weeks later the first follow-up meeting took place at the same location. In contrast to the kickoff meeting, this time John was to present himself more notably as the boss. By noon of the first day the participants had agreed on the wording of the vision, one which all participants liked and found motivating. This was the first feeling of accomplishing something as a team. As the meeting progressed, the group defined the most important strategic requirements for the successful implementation of their vision's 3-year framework. Furthermore, they defined concrete examples of actions they could take to give the vision life. To do this, the role of the management team as a whole was first defined. By the evening of the first day the participants were in agreement that the strategic tasks had top priority and constituted the original added-value of the team.<sup>20</sup>

John felt in his element on this workshop day; he contributed more and more to these topics, increasingly voiced his own ideas, and now displayed leadership when it came to the content. He was very happy to hear this when I mentioned my observations to him that evening. On the next day the participants were to build a bridge to roles and responsibilities within the team. This transition was more difficult for John because he was afraid they might reject his "suggestions" on the open stage. What would happen then? Furthermore, he was no classical leader. For this reason we discussed the rule of survival and his successes up to this point again and reactivated in his mind the meeting with his assistant that went so well. The client felt significantly stronger and encouraged. On the second day the group would discuss general rules for e-mail communication, a cross-departmental meeting architecture, and a common meeting culture. John felt very secure with this agenda since it would be possible for the moderator to jump in at any time and offer support with these topics. In the meeting itself the client violated his rule of survival a few times—after first making eye contact with me—and, for example, requested certain information channels he defined himself (something he had seen as the task of the moderator on the previous day). After the meeting he clearly felt that

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<sup>20</sup> This result may sound obvious, but in my experience it is often paid only lip service or is an inadequate self-perception in management teams. Therefore we also conducted a more in-depth exercise in which each person documented on a flip chart how much time he or she spent on which topic. With this overview, it quickly became clear to the team that the priorities must become much more strategic in nature and thus less operative than before.

the team did not question him as their leader. The opposite was true: *the stronger he presented his image, the more secure the team felt because it obviously needed leadership and orientation.* The fact that John was able to recognize this during the event contributed significantly to the fact that he developed little by little a positive dynamic in his role as manager.

In the following six months there were four additional off-site meetings to discuss key topics such as business unit culture, leadership, the system of values, communication, and personnel matters. As the team developed, methods such as appreciative inquiry, story telling, life curves, and sociograms were used. John gradually took over as the leader and the moderator of the group. The results achieved between meetings were measured using a change barometer that had been developed by the group, the mood within the team was measured using scalable methods usually at the beginning of the meeting. Emerging issues, open items or deficits were either tackled on site or collected in an issue box and introduced one at a time at the management team's monthly meetings. The group defined concrete metrics for leadership and business culture elements that were anchored in the management team's annual goals and the lower tiers of management. This new team culture cascaded down and became the new business unit culture. Deviations from the desired behavior within the entire unit were recorded as critical incidents and systematically evaluated, making the degree of implementation of the business unit culture definable and measurable. In order to implement the business unit culture, change agents were selected. Their role was to identify anonymously the mood of the business unit and positive examples of this, but also fears and resistance from the periphery. The management team responded accordingly using a platform they created themselves, in which the change agents in turn played an important role.

John became more and more confident with each team meeting. Between the off-site meetings he continued to attend monthly personal coaching sessions to help him refine his managerial work and develop the business unit as a whole.

During regular operative management team meetings John established, on my recommendation, an intervision according the "peer consulting" principle<sup>21</sup>. The off-site meetings were held at the express request of the team once a quarter for another year. These team retreats became a company-wide well-known institution that was introduced in most of the other business units as well.

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21 See Lippmann 2009.

## 12. Conclusion

Within three months John was able to find personal equilibrium again and became increasingly happy with his role as a manager and the growing responsibilities that accompanied it. Consultation sessions are held from time to time for sparring purposes and for safeguarding positive results. The focus here lies on nearly eliminating feelings of powerlessness when delegating tasks and ensuring they are completed.

John can recall his rule of survival even in complex and acute situations and shape his reactions in a way that is more appropriate to the situation instead of reverting to automatic behavior patterns.

Due to his apparent success the client could convincingly solidify his position in the company. His area of responsibility was expanded significantly in the following year; today John is responsible for global development with 350 employees. He is sought in the company for advice on topics such as self-management, employee coaching, and business/business unit culture and is a mentor to junior managers.

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